

Visions of Women

Through the Lens of Banville's Male Protagonist

A study of the narcissist's representation of women in Banville's oeuvre with a focus on mothers

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Abstract

De representatie van de vrouw in Banvilles oeuvre door de ogen van de mannelijke ik-verteller vormt de thematische kern van deze thesis. Aan de hand van een tekstuele analyse van vijf romans uit diverse periodes, namelijk *Mefisto* (1986), *The Book of Evidence* (1989), *Eclipse* (2000), *Ancient Light* (2012) en *The Blue Guitar* (2015), wordt het thema van de moeder en, bij uitbreiding, de vrouw onder de loep genomen. Wat allereerst opvalt tijdens de lezing van die boeken is de inherente paradox in Banvilles fictie: enerzijds is er een afwezigheid van vrouwelijke hoofdpersonages, stemmen en psychologische karaktertekeningen, anderzijds is de mannelijke verteller geobsedeerd door het fenomeen ‘Vrouw’. De tekstuele analyse wordt aangevuld met bestaand onderzoek omtrent Banvilles vrouwen en erotiek en O’Connells studie over de narcistische inborst van diens protagonisten. Bovendien wordt, waar dat relevant is, naar de psychoanalyse verwezen om verschillende aspecten van het narcisme, meer bepaald met betrekking tot vrouwen toe te lichten. In het eerste hoofdstuk wordt de moeder als kernthema in Banvilles romans naar voren geschoven met aandacht voor intertekstuele verwijzingen naar mythes waarin vrouwen, zoals Leda en Alkmene, een goddelijk kind baren van een gespleten vaderfiguur. Bovendien wordt toegelicht hoe de devotie tot de Maagd Maria een rode draad is in Banvilles oeuvre, waardoor de moeder op een transcendentiaal niveau alomtegenwoordig is in alle besproken boeken. Het tweede hoofdstuk beschrijft hoe de narcistische verteller vrouwen reduceert tot spiegels. Vervolgens wordt in hoofdstuk drie de dreiging van de alteriteit van de vrouw, gevat in haar blik en lichaam, besproken aan de hand van een veel voorkomend symptoom bij narcisten, namelijk schaamte, tevens een belangrijk thema in Banvilles oeuvre. Hoofdstuk vier belicht het egoïstische en infantiele gedrag van de verteller met de nadruk op hoe hij de vrouw gebruikt als pronkstuk en op het preoedipale karakter van zijn relaties met moeder- en dochterfiguren. In hoofdstuk vijf worden de verschillende defensiemechanismen tegen de verschijning van de vrouw uit de doeken gedaan, namelijk hoe de mannelijke verteller de vrouwelijke personages in zijn omgeving reduceert tot een abstract gegeven en een (lust)object door haar in te bedden in de beeldtaal van kunst, theater en poëzie. Ten slotte wordt ook kort ingegaan op de vraag of de objectivering van vrouwen Banvilles oeuvre antifeministisch kleurt door een beknopt overzicht te geven van het bestaand debat. Samengevat wil deze masterscriptie het belang van het thema van de vrouw en meer

bepaald de moeder in Banvilles oeuvre aantonen en een alternatieve leessleutel aanreiken om zijn werk anders en vollediger te benaderen.

Introduction

Banville, a widely acclaimed contemporary Irish writer, is not only known for his baroque style, but also for the recurring philosophical themes in his novels: the unreliability of memories; the philosophical and aesthetical questions on life, science and art; the rich density of intertextual allusions and the (post)modernist questioning of the authenticity of identity, to name a few of them. So far, though, Banville's female characters and the erotic aspect of his oeuvre have received comparatively little attention, whereas Banville himself claimed in an interview that "[a]rt is infused with the erotic ... All art, in a way, comes back to the body and if you make a real work of art then it will be at a level of eroticism which is very high"¹, thereby implicitly testifying that eroticism is an important theme in his opus. A handful of critics, such as Coughlan, Dell'Amico, D'hoker, Ghassemi and Müller have discussed several aspects of the representation of women in Banville's oeuvre. They all emphasize that Banville's "fundamentally masculinist author" (Dell'Amico 109) objectifies women. It is the goal of this paper to enrich existing research on Banville's female characters by providing an elaborate analysis of the narrator's representation of mothers, wives, mistresses and daughters throughout the Irish writer's oeuvre. Based on O'Connell's observation that "almost all of [Banville's] protagonists are narcissists in work" (O'Connell 21), several aspects of the narcissistic treatment of women will be dealt with and, where relevant, the narcissistic character traits will be briefly clarified by Anglo-Saxon psychoanalysis, which, unlike Freudian and Lacanian theories, focuses on the mother-son relationship and its influence on the male treatment and depiction of women.

For the textual study, a selection of five novels from different periods will be analyzed, however not in a chronological order. The first novel that will be discussed is *Mefisto* (1986) from Banville's Science Tetralogy, which "explores the connections between literature and science" (Müller 185). The second novel, *The Book of Evidence* (1989), is part of the Frame Trilogy, where Banville's writing "shifted from an epistemological perspective to more overt ethical concerns" (D'hoker "Portrait of the Other as a Woman with Gloves" 23). Thirdly, the two novels *Eclipse* (2000) and

¹ Taken from an interview with Banville in the documentary 'Art Lives – Being John Banville'.

Ancient Light (2012), which belong to a third trilogy together with *Shroud* (2002), will be analyzed. The reason why two books from the same trilogy are discussed is because they both contain very interesting examples of the narrator's narcissistic treatment of women. Lastly, Banville's latest novel *The Blue Guitar* (2015) is included in the analysis in order to discern whether there is a chronological development in Banville's representation of women. In the first chapter, Banville's references to myths of divinely abused women, to the devotion to Mother Mary, his use of uncanny elements and the motif of the mother's house will be discussed. The second chapter will highlight the narrator's reduction of women to an extension of the self, namely a glorifying mirror. The third chapter will illustrate the female threat that subjects the narrator to shame. The fourth chapter zooms in on the narrator's infantile, manipulative and pre-Oedipal behaviour, both in his familial and love attachments. The fifth chapter discusses how women are abstracted, recreated and artified. Finally, chapter six provides an overview of the debate on whether or not Banville's fiction is anti-feminist.

Overall, this paper aims to target relatively undiscovered territory in the study of Banville's fiction, namely the role of women and mothers in particular, while proving that a detailed study of the representation of women in Banville's novels provides a new 'reading key' to read the texts in all their richness.

1. The Conundrum of Motherhood in Banville's Fiction

1.1. Leda and Alcmenes: Divine Impregnation, Adultery and Unknown Fathers

In this chapter Banville's fascination for stories about divine impregnation, in particular for the myths of Leda and Alcmena², will be highlighted. Both myths have a similar plot: they relate Zeus' disguised visit, either as a majestic swan or as Alcmena's husband Amphitryon, to the mortal women Leda and Alcmena and the twins that stem from those divine love affairs, namely Castor and Polydeuces (Leda) and Iphicles and Hercules (Alcmena). Thus, both myths share themes of divine impregnation or "[p]aternal uncertainty" (Weineck 37), adultery and the women's injection of godliness. This chapter will illustrate Banville's use of these three themes in the novels discussed, with a specific focus on their impact on the male narrator and his mother.

To begin with, notions of divine visitations and immortal offspring are key themes in *Mefisto*, Banville's Faustian and gothic inspired novel. To begin with, the first pages of the novel reveal that Gabriel's mother was pregnant of twins as a result of "an outlandish visitation" (*Mefisto* 5). In addition, Gabriel compares himself with "Castor", Zeus' offspring in the Leda myth, and his weaker twin brother, who died during childbirth, with "Polydeuces" (*Mefisto* 3), the mortal son. Schwall states that "it is indeed inferred throughout the novel that Gabriel's mother shared the fate of Leda, who was raped by Zeus, "Jove", disguised as a swan" (Schwall "Signs and signets" 17), which the following quote illustrates.

- No. Sir. Swan.
- Aha. A cygnet, by Jove.
(*Mefisto* 36)

² In the year 2000 Banville wrote the play *God's Gift*, an adaptation of Kleist's *Amphitryon*, and his novel *The Infinities* (2009) is steeped with references to the Amphitryon myth. An interesting study conducted on this topic is Sasja Reynders' paper "The Other Self", which focusses on the problematic concept of identity in Kleist's *Amphitryon*, Banville's play *God's Gift* and his novel *The Infinities*.

Another allusion to the Leda myth is the protagonist's name: his first name 'Gabriel', a reference to the archangel Gabriel, insinuates his immortality and his last name 'Swan' refers to Zeus' disguise. Moreover, Felix, Gabriel's companion endowed with Mephistophelian features and stereotypes, attributes different nicknames to Gabriel, all linked to the bird isotopy, such as "bird-boy" (*Mefisto* 37) and "Sweetsir Swansir" (*Mefisto* 48). Another reason to assume that Gabriel is indeed immortal is his unlikely survival of an explosion, which resembles Dante's inferno, in his mother's parental home, aptly called 'Ashburn'. During that passage, Gabriel describes how "[a] red roar came up out of the hole, and [he] flew on flaming wings (...) through smoke and dust and splintering glass, into the huge, cold air" (*Mefisto* 120). Another passage in the novel, as Schwall already remarked in her article "Mirror on Mirror Mirrored is all the show", appears to insinuate that Gabriel was the product of incest. For example, when his mother and Gabriel meet "Miss Kitty, the last of the Ashburns [the family of Gabriel's mother] of Ashburn park", her physical appearance is reminiscent of the anatomy of a swan as she had "a great beaked nose" (*Mefisto* 11).

The theme of a doubled or 'eclipsed' fatherhood is also central to the storyline of *Eclipse*. In this novel, the professional actor Alex Cleave, has a mental breakdown while playing the role of Amphitryon. While declaring the line "Who, if not I, then, is Amphitryon?" (*Eclipse* 20), his very being is suddenly 'cleaved' in two, which is illustrated by Schwall in the following quote.

The power of his role, wherein he must play a man in whom another notices a weird discrepancy, is so strong that he becomes the divided man, which eclipses his acting powers. Simultaneously, the loss of his artistic control makes Alex a dual person, whose perception loses its contours so that his subjectivity can range over different planes (Schwall "Mirror on mirror is all the show" 123)

Afterwards, Alex becomes a double or divided father figure in more than one respect. In *Eclipse*, he plans to adopt Lilly, who lives in his parental house with her father Quirke, as a "surrogate daughter" (*Eclipse* 157) for his biological child Cass. After he received the news of Cass's suicide, Alex accepts the main role in a movie about Axel Vander, not knowing that this man was his daughter's lover and the father of his unborn grandchild. In that sense, Alex, whose name is an anagram of Axel, merges with Cass' partner and the father of her unborn child. Alex, who is frequently visited

by the ghosts of a woman and a baby, whom he will later identify as Cass and her embryonic child, imagines himself to be the father of this ghostly duo: “We were a little family together, the three of us, the woman, the child, and me the surrogate father[,] [a]nd what fatherhood it was, absolute and unquestioned” (*Eclipse* 167). Thus, both on a theatrical and on a paranormal level Alex is ‘eclipsed’ by Axel, the father of his daughter’s child.

In *Ancient Light*, the third novel of this trilogy that has postmodern literary theory as its theme, Alex meets another symbolic daughter, namely his co-player Dawn Devonport in the movie *Inventions of the Past*. The link between Dawn and Cass is established in the novel as Dawn is cast as Cora, which is a fictional name for Cass, made up for the biopic. Dawn Devonport, who recently lost her father and tried to commit suicide, failing where Cass succeeded, describes how “[she] feel[s] as if [she’s] falling all the time” (*AL* 213), a metaphorical reference to Cass who literally fell off a cliff. She asks Alex: “ ‘Imagine I’m your daughter’, she said. ‘Pretend I am.’ ” (*AL* 213). The link between Dawn and Cass is strengthened by the fact that, first, Alex and Dawn undertake a trip to Italy to the very place where Cass committed suicide and second by the fact that upon their return Alex’s wife “Lydia took her [Dawn] in without a word (...) as if the thing had been ordained” (*AL* 231) and as if she understood the likeness between Dawn Devonport and her own daughter.

Secondly, the theme of adultery, another key theme in the myths of Amphitryon and Leda, is a central aspect of all of the narrators’ relationships. First of all, the narrators all cheat on their women³, which in *The Blue Guitar* is even the central storyline. The narrators’ parents also often have extramarital relationships. In *The Book of Evidence*, Freddie’s mother supposedly had an affair as she “called [him] a bastard” (*TBE* 60) and his “father had kept a mistress” (*TBE* 154) as well. In *The Blue Guitar*, Oliver’s mother is said to be “seductive in her dealings with men” (*TBG* 19). According to his sister Olive, their mother had several extramarital relationships. Oliver himself becomes the adoptive father of a child that is not his own. He is the

³ Freddie cheats on his wife Daphne with “Marian” (*TBE* 183), Alex has had several flings during his acting career with “women who have been drawn into the orbit of [his] life over the years” (*Eclipse* 8) and Oliver betrays his wife Gloria with “Anneliese” (*TBG* 69) and Polly.

head of a new family consisting of “the three of [them], Daddy, Mummy and Mummy’s Little Surprise” (*TBG* 239).⁴

Thirdly, myths of divinely abused women imply that the woman who is impregnated by Zeus receives an injection of godliness and is thereby elevated above the mere mortals. In Banville’s fiction this is represented by the women’s superior knowledge over the narrator since in the end, he always appears to be blind to everything that doesn’t concern him, a notion that will be discussed in chapter three and four.

In short, the three themes featured in the myths of Leda and Alcmene shed an interesting light on the problematic concepts of ‘mother’ and ‘father’ in Banville’s fiction.

1.2. The Devotion to the Holy Mother and Ghostly Encounters

The cult of Mother Mary is a recurring intertextual element in Banville’s novels, and, as this chapter will argue, the narrator’s attempt to experience his mother on a transcendental level. In fact, not only religious symbolism, but also paranormal or uncanny experiences pervade Banville’s novels and are the preferable medium through which the narcissistic narrator reaches out to others. This chapter will discuss the narrator’s devotion to Mother Mary, his description of his loved ones in religious terminology, his encounters with the ghosts of his parents and daughter and the maternal house as a place where these uncanny experiences are staged.

To begin with, the devotion to Mother Mary is explicitly mentioned in *Eclipse*. In this novel, the protagonist Alex, “a solemn child, prone to bouts of religious fervour”, testifies that “[o]ne Maytime (...) when [he] was a boy [he] built a shrine to the Virgin Mary” because “[s]ome visionary moment must have been granted [him], some glimpse of matutinal blue” (*Eclipse* 29). This devotion to the mother Mary cannot be disconnected from Alex’s experience of his mother, as he testifies that in his eyes his mother was a manifestation of the Holy Virgin.

⁴ Since there are no clues whatsoever regarding the origins of this baby, a divine fatherhood, a theme Banville often includes in his novels, cannot be excluded.

I have remained a devotee of the goddess, and she in turn has been attentive to me, in the various forms in which she has been manifest in my life. First of course there was my mother (*Eclipse* 30)

When Alex's mother is mortally ill, he describes her lying on the hospital bed as "a more than life-sized statue of herself" (*Eclipse* 59), probably a reference to a statue of the Virgin, and testifies that "[s]he unnerved [him as] [s]he seemed no longer human, she seemed something more than that, ancient and elemental [so that he] tended her like a priest at a shrine" (*Eclipse* 60). The comparison of his mother with Holy Mary is confirmed in the following description: "Look at us there, a deposition scene in reverse, the dying hunched old woman cradled in the arm of her living son, in our dome of candlelight, lapped in our noisome, ancient warmth" (*Eclipse* 62). In *Ancient Light*, the second novel that features Alex as a narrator, the latter, in his prime years, has an affair with Mrs Gray, the mother of Billy, his best friend in high school. When he first saw Mrs Gray, he describes how she drove by with her bike as if she were descending from heaven with flapping wings, adorned with the colours of Mother Mary, so that "[he] thought of her as a vision of the goddess herself" (*AL* 5).

There were for me two initial manifestations of Mrs Gray (...) The first woman (...) may have been only an annunciation of her (...) I had turned in at the gates of the Church of Mary Our Mother Immaculate (...) The church stood on a rise, and when I looked up and saw her approaching with the steeple beetling at her back it seemed thrillingly that she had come swooping down out of the sky at just that moment, and that what I had heard was not the sound of tyres on the tarmac but of rapid wings beating the air. (...) She wore a gaberdine raincoat, the tails of it flapping behind to right and left of her like, yes, like wings, and a blue jumper over a blouse with a white collar. (*AL* 4)

Mrs Gray's affection for him is described as the Mother's love for her son, the image of their embraces are blasphemously compared to Madonna and her child: "We must have made a striking composition there, the two of us, a profane *pietà*, the troubled woman nursing in her embrace a heartsick young male animal who was not and yet somehow was her son" (*AL* 60).

In *Mefisto*, Gabriel's mother, who, as was illustrated in the previous chapter, received a divine visitation, is furthermore described by her son as "a dark Madonna in the brownish sea-light of some old painting" (*Mefisto* 5). Moreover, towards the end of the novel, Banville stages an interesting scene in "mammy's room" (*Mefisto*

224).⁵ Banville's critics, who locate the novel's turning point in the passage about Adele's death, so far have neglected this scene. The mother featured in this passage, who "fell into flesh" (*Mefisto* 224) appears as a counter image of the elevated and spiritual Mother Mary and represents 'mater-iality' instead of spirituality. Moreover, there is no personal link between her and Gabriel as she is someone else's mother. Gabriel remarks that "[s]he signified something, no, she signified nothing. She had no meaning. She was simply there, waiting, in that fetid little room, forever" (*Mefisto* 229 - 230). Gabriel who had previously fostered the belief that "chaos is nothing but an infinite number of ordered things" (*Mefisto* 183), is now confronted with a meaningless symbol, carnal instead of abstract, which embodies everything he has so far been revolting against. Whereas the miscarriage of his twin brother in the beginning of the novel was explained by "chance" (*Mefisto* 3), an imbalance Gabriel wants to restore by cracking "the mystery of the unit" (*Mefisto* 18); the last sentence of the novel reveals that Gabriel "will try to leave things, to chance" (*Mefisto* 234). I would like to argue that this central shift in the novel from order to chance, stressed by the strategic placement of 'chance' as the first and last word of the novel, is located in the passage of "Mammy" (*Mefisto* 228), which is a negative revelation, namely that in life there is no hidden order or overarching meaning.

Aside from references to the cult of Mother Mary, Alex frequently describes his family members in religious terms, thereby steering away from their human aspects and recoding them in transcendental images. In *Eclipse*, a novel that zooms in on Alex's relationship with his daughter Cass, Alex elevates Cass to a religious messenger. He interprets the voices she hears in her head as "the voice of an oracle" (*Eclipse* 72), thereby giving her mental condition of paranoia a religious connotation. Furthermore, according to Alex "there is a touch of the nun to [their] Cass" (*Eclipse* 73). Later on in the story, when Alex is informed about his daughter's tragic suicide, he uses religious vocabulary to describe his and his wife Lydia's predicament: "We felt like priest and priestess officiating at the place of veneration, receiving the sacrifices of the faithful (...). But it all came too late, the muttered invocations, the

⁵ "The room was small and filled with things. A banked-up coke fire throbbed in the grate. By the fire, in a vast armchair, a vast woman sat. She had a great round head, like the head of a stone statue, and ragged sparse white hair. Her bloated face glistened in the glare of the coals like a glazed mask that had begun to melt. She wore a sort of gown of some heavy shiny black stuff, and a knitted jacket draped over her shoulders like a cape. -This, Dan said, is Mammy." (*Mefisto* 228)

promised prayers, the funeral baked meats, for the maiden had already gone to the sacrifice” (*Eclipse* 197). Probably this “maiden” refers to Cass who threw herself off a cliff. In a similar fashion, Alex uses religious vocabulary to describe Lily, a stand-in for his daughter: he says she has an “unearthly aura”, which “reminds [him] of Cass” (*Eclipse* 96) and that her posture was “like that of one of the women at the foot of the cross” (*Eclipse* 184). In the following sentence, Alex voices his belief that Cass, as a religious messenger or even as Mother Mary herself will be reborn in Lily.

I await the moment, which is bound to come, when she [Cass] will exactly coincide with Lily, will descend on her like the annunciatory angel, like the goddess herself, and illumine her with the momentary benison of her supernatural presence. (*Eclipse* 124)

Moreover, Alex compares Dawn Devonport, another daughter-like figure, to an oracle as he did with Cass: “There is a touch of the sibyl to Dawn Devonport. But then, does not every woman, to my enchanted eye, possess something of the prophetess?” (*AL* 114). By Alex’s use of religious vocabulary to describe Cass, Lily and Dawn, he symbolically ties them together as three daughter figures.

Alex’s fascination with supernatural phenomena reaches beyond attributing divine features to his loved ones, as he even engages with the ghosts of his deceased family. Alex’s first encounter with a ghost was of “[his] dead father, standing in the open doorway, as real as in life, dressed in striped pyjamas and shoes without laces and an old wheat-coloured cardigan, the same attire that he had worn every day in the long last months of his dying” (*Eclipse* 44). Alex explains how “[his] father (...) is more alive to [him] now than when he was living” and that “[e]ven [his] mother was not wholly there for [him] until she had safely become a memory” (*Eclipse* 50). Note the use of the word “safely”, which suggests that his mother was too confronting during his lifetime, and that as a ghost she has now lost her voice, opinion and otherness and can be admired by the narrator from a distance. Moreover, none of the narrators, who are all deprived of their parents in the course of the novels, ever mourn this loss and seem to be more intimately connected with them after they have passed since “what makes for presence if not absence? I mean the presence of oneself as a remembered other” (*Eclipse* 46). The second apparition Alex saw was of a mother and child, whom he first saw haunting his parental house in a dream. These ghosts again appear

as a depiction of Magdalena: “the figure of a woman (...) [with] a seated child [, an image that] was (...) inexplicably, achingly familiar” (*Eclipse* 43).

Like Alex, the other narrators also have ghostly or uncanny experiences, which are generally situated in the narrator’s parental home, a recurring literary motif in Banville’s oeuvre. In all five novels discussed, the narrators retreat to their childhood home, always an abandoned, strangely animate house, which bears resemblances to the abandoned castles featured in gothic novels. Banville uses these houses to stage the narrator’s ‘uncanny’ and supernatural experiences. Schwall, in an article about *Eclipse*, explains that Alex’s childhood home represents the mother’s womb and that the narrator’s retreat to his childhood house thus symbolizes his desire to return to his mother’s safe haven “like a child who has had a fright and wants its mama” (*Eclipse* 5 – 6).

[T]he narrator drops so many hints that his return to his mother’s house is a womb-phantasy that we get an overkill of crude Freudian thought: not only does the narrator want to withdraw to his mother’s house but also to his mother’s bed (p. 28). Moreover, he finds there two half-burnt books, the titles of which are conveniently kept legible ‘*The Revenant, My Mother’s House*’ (p. 15). So Freud’s point that a failure to repress castration fears from childhood make the subject give in to the ‘lascivious ... phantasy ... of intra-uterine existence’ is ridiculed by the sheer insistence on it. (Schwall “Mirror on Mirror Mirrored is all the show” 125 - 126)

Wilkinson suggests a similar interpretation of Alex’s parental house; only he claims that the house symbolizes the mother in her entirety: “[h]e [Alex] withdraws into the ‘cloven shell’ of a house which embodies a dead mother” (Wilkinson 259). Wilkinson also suggests that his mother’s home is a projection of Alex’s unconscious feelings towards his mother and daughter so that the gothic house is an opening to new levels of experience, hence the uncanny encounters with ghosts.

Banville uses the big house as an image of pure subjectivity –the house acts as mind, a projection of self. With its attics and arched doors, its sealed chamber and overgrown garden, Cleave’s childhood home alludes to heavy-duty gothic in the vein of Sheridan Le Fanu as well as to the Anglo-Irish houses of Yeats and Elizabeth Bowen. Framed in windows and doorways, the characters float across thresholds between reality and dream to define forms from another stage. (Wilkinson 359)

In *The Book of Evidence*, Freddie's return to his childhood house, which "was rotting, in places so badly, and so rapidly, that even she [his mother] was startled (...) [with] damp walls and sagging floors and mouldering window-frames" (*TBE* 45), is described as a physical transgression, namely "through the membrane of time itself" (*TBE* 43). Freddie has another uncanny experience, where his perception fails him as "[he] felt vaguely as if something momentous had happened, as if in the blink of an eye everything around [him] had been whipped away and replaced instantly with an exact replica" (*TBE* 43). In other words, the house, which seems to be animate, has a significant physical effect on Freddie. Similarly, *Mefisto's* protagonist Gabriel testifies that "[a] rapt, intent silence surrounded [him], as if everything were watching [him]"⁶ when he "stood amid the ruins of the cottage where [his] mother was born" (*Mefisto* 34). In *Ancient Light*, "Cotter's old house in the woods" (*AL* 62), the meeting place of the enamoured Alex and Mrs Gray, also resembles a gothic house and symbolizes the womb-fantasy as it is the location where Alex has sex with the mother-figure Mrs Gray. In *The Blue Guitar*, Oliver also returns to his decayed childhood house as a "wounded rabbit dragging itself back to the burrow" (*TBG* 25). Oliver's wife Gloria remarked how his retreat to his childhood house is a childish and immature flight to his mother's safe cocoon: "'You're such a coward,' Gloria said, still amused, 'running home to Mother' " (*TBG* 46).

Several of these abandoned and neglected houses are described as holy places: Felix calls Mr Kasserl's room in Ashburn "the temple" (*Mefisto* 79), Alex describes his and Mrs Gray's meeting place in the forest where "there were holes in the ceilings, and in the bedroom ceilings above, too, and in the roof above that again, so that when [he] looked up [he] could see clear through two storeys and the attic to the sky" (*AL* 63), in other words a linear view towards heaven, as if "[they] might have been in church" (*AL* 64). In fact, perhaps these childhood houses are instrumental in directing the narrator's focus to the past, which in many books results in confessions about his negligence of his parents. In *Eclipse*, Alex starts to write his memoirs in his childhood house, as a sort of 'book of evidence' with confessions about his wrongdoings towards women, and especially towards his parents. Alex confesses that "[s]o many people [he] ha[s] betrayed in [his] life, starting with her [his mother], the

⁶ Apart from "divinising" people Banville's narrators also detract from their interlocutors' humanity by transferring the human qualities to things.

first casualty” (*AL* 186) and that he feels that he ought to regret his wrongdoings towards them.

When they [Alex’s parents] died I did not grieve for them. And so I ask myself, are these hauntings now their revenge, a forcing on me of some part of a lost life I did not attend properly to when I had the chance? Are they demanding the due of mourning that I did not pay? For there is a sense of sorrow here, and of regret; of promises unkept, of promise unfulfilled. (*Eclipse* 50)

Like Alex, Freddie in *The Book of Evidence*, also starts to contemplate his deplorable behaviour towards and neglect of his mother after her death.

Poor Ma. I can’t believe that she’s gone. (...) They’ll read the will without me, which is only right. The last time I saw her I fought with her. (...) She did not visit me in jail. I don’t blame her. I never even brought the child for her to see. She was not as tough as I imagined. Did I destroy her life, too? All these dead women. (*TBE* 101)

In *The Blue Guitar*, Oliver similarly asks himself: “Do other people, remembering their parents, feel, as I do, a sense of having inadvertently done some small though significant, irreversible wrong? (...) No forgiveness? None. (...) I’m not permitted to absolve myself. No crime, no charge, aye, and no acquittal, either” (*TBG* 79). The choice of words, namely “absolve” and “forgiveness” suggests that Oliver’s testimony is one long confession of every inexplicable sin he has committed towards others and his parents in particular.⁷

Thus, all of Banville’s narrators are stuck in the past, which is embodied by their childhood house, a place where they reconnect with the ghosts, artefacts and memories of their parents or, in the case of Alex, their daughter, whom they neglected during their lifetime, and they recode their loved ones in religious symbolism in order to keep them at bay.

⁷ Note that the theme of confession is important in *The Blue Guitar*, where Oliver starts with a confession of his habit of thieving in the opening pages of the novel: “Now, as to the subject of thieving (...) I confess I was a little embarrassed (...) and frankly I don’t know why I’m owning up to it, to you, my inexistent confessor. The moral question here is ticklish” (*TBG* 16).

2. Women as Glorious Mirrors: the Absence of a Female Voice

So far several studies have highlighted the importance of mirroring surfaces in Banville's novels and their function for the narrative. However, this chapter will focus on the mirroring other, more concretely on how women serve as instruments, or rather self-objects⁸, for the narrator's self-enhancement. Moreover, the subsequent reduction of women to surface phenomena and the absence of their inner lives will be discussed.

First of all, In his book *John Banville's Narcissistic Fictions*, O'Connell has already mentioned that Banville's narrators, due to their "lack[∅] of a coherent and solidly anchored sense of self" (O'Connell 28), display an incessant "need for mirroring surfaces, human and otherwise, to reinstate a sense of self" (O'Connell 37). In "Precarious Subjectivity in the Work of John Banville", Ghassemi also remarked that "the narrators "use" the figure of "the woman" to heal the rift between them and the natural world and to reinstate their precarious sense of self" (Ghassemi 204). Indeed, in *Eclipse* and *Ancient Light*, the protagonist Alex typically uses women as mirroring surfaces. In *Eclipse*, Alex's wife Lydia "had seemed the one capable of concentrating sufficient attention on [him] to make [him] shine out into the world with a flickering intensity such that even [he] might believe [he] was real" (*Eclipse* 33). Thus, through Lydia's focused attention and confirmation, her eyes were bright mirrors, which reflected Alex's exalted image back at him. O'Connell writes that "[b]oth Cleave's relationship with Lydia and his career on stage (...) enable him to construct – to forge (...) – an identity for himself out of the incoherence and absence of his inner life" (O'Connell 32). However, Alex reduces Lydia to "an enigma of [his] own making" (*AL* 139), to a "a part of [him], a part of what is the greatest of all [his] enigmas, namely, [him]self" (*AL* 139). As a result, Alex neglects Lydia's otherness and perceives her as a continuation of himself. The discovery that Lydia is not really within his reach and control, but rather an incomprehensible and impenetrable other, causes Alex's love for her to evaporate.

⁸ Kohut describes the self-object as "the mirroring other upon whom the formation of a coherent self depends" (Kohut qt. in O'Connell 30).

I date the inauguration of a significant shift in my attitude toward Lydia from the moment (...) I realized (...) her absolute otherness. Up to then and, indeed, as I had done most of the time since, (...) I had conceived her, as I did so much else, to be a part of me. (*Eclipse* 159)

In *Ancient Light*, Alex's memories of his childhood lover Mrs Gray bear many resemblances with his descriptions of Lydia. Alex says how "when [he] looked at her it was [him] that [he] saw first, reflected in the glorious mirror that [he] made of her" (*AL* 12) and that their love resembles "how it is, when one discovers oneself through another" (*AL* 42) because "[f]or [him], there are two modes of otherness only, that of the loved one or of the stranger, and the former is hardly other, but more an extension of [him]self" (*AL* 165). In *The Book of Evidence*, Daphne, who "was not nice, she was not good", "suited [Freddie]" (*TBE* 7) as she was probably one of his kind, namely a narcissist in whom he saw himself reflected. In *The Blue Guitar*, Oliver claims to know that "[m]aybe that's where love begins, not in sudden seizures of passion but in the recognition and simple acceptance of (...) something or other" (*TBG* 7). Nevertheless, when "at last she [Polly] had broken through the casing that [his] fantasies had moulded around her and had become, at last, at last had become, for [him] (...) [h]er real self" (*TBG* 175), Oliver's love for Polly quickly vanishes, similar to Alex who discovers that Lydia is an unaccountable other.

Secondly, the narrator pays few heed to the inner lives of women and is highly uncomfortable when confronted with their emotional distress. O'Connell remarked that "[t]he self-directed nature of love is a major theme of Banville's work, and it is one that is linked with the profound difficulty of making real and empathic connections with others" (O'Connell 35). In fact, Banville believes that "on the surface, that's where the real depth is" (Banville qt. in Delistraty 1) and, similarly, his narrators focus on the external appearance of women instead of their psyche. In *Eclipse* for instance, Alex relates his first encounters with Lydia by referring to her physical body language, her *presence* or bodily charm: "[he] loved to watch her as she walked to meet [him], with that heavy-hipped slouch and that distracted, always vaguely dissatisfied smile" (*Eclipse* 35). Alex mistakes these surface phenomena for the true Lydia and he "decided at once, without having to think about it, that [he] would marry her" (*Eclipse* 35). Moreover, Lydia's mannerisms are given so much weight that they are almost enough to break up their marriage. For instance, when Lydia was "doing that tuneless whistling she claims to be unconscious of (...) that

nearly brought [their] marriage to an end before the honeymoon was over” (*Eclipse* 152). In contrast, Alex knows little about Lydia’s inner life: “of all the women I have known in my life, I know Lydia the least” (*AL* 139). Furthermore, Lydia’s emotions are too confronting for Alex who “[is] not good with other people’s distress”: “How often in our life together had I stood like this, watching her dissolve in grief (...) I know I have been a trial to her, in one way or another – indeed, in many ways [but] [t]he fact is, I have never understood her, what she wants, what she expects” (*Eclipse* 139).

In *Ancient Light*, Alex also does not have a clue about Mrs Gray’s emotions. Alex says that “[i]n all of the time [they] were together [he] never knew what was going on in her [Mrs Gray’s] head, not in any real or empathetic way, and hardly bothered to try to find out” (*AL* 110). This complete disregard of his lover’s emotions reveals Alex’s apathy towards others and his pre-occupation with his own needs. When later on, it is revealed that “[s]he had been mortally sick for a long time, [his] Mrs Gray, and [he was] without an inkling” (*AL* 240), it becomes clear just how little Alex knew of her, which is illustrated in the following passage.

There were occasions when she would go silent and turn away from me and seem to be looking at something approaching that was still far off yet not so distant that she could not make it out in all its awfulness. And on those occasions did I offer solace, try to divert her, draw her away from that dreadful vista? I did not. I went into a huff at being neglected, or made a cutting remark and flung myself from that mattress on the rotted floorboards and stamped off to another part of the house. (*AL* 65)

O’Connell remarks that Mrs Gray “is going to die very soon, but he [Alex] has no notion that this is the case because he has no interest in her internal life – no real concern for her at all beyond the erotic (and curiously infantile) desire for her flesh” (O’Connell 35).

Alex does not only neglect his lovers Lydia and Mrs Gray, but also his daughter Cass. After Cass’ suicide, different facts about her life start to seep through. Alex remarks that “[t]hey made another version of [their] daughter, one [he] did not recognise: the international scholar” and that he “should have paid more attention to what [he] always winced at when [he] heard her refer to it as her *work*” (*Eclipse* 201). He has “begun to realise fully at last how little [he] know[s] about [his] daughter” (*Eclipse* 201). However, instead of learning from the past, Alex makes the same

mistake with another girl Lily, who lives in Alex's parental house together with her father Quirke. He says that "[s]he reminds [him] of Cass, naturally; in every daughter [he] see[s] [his] own" (*Eclipse* 96). Shortly afterwards he realizes that this identification of Lily falls short with who she really is and realizes that he "must bethink [him]self and stop these generalizations into which [he has] always fallen too easily [because] [i]t is not a girl like Lily [he is] dealing with [but] Lily herself, unique and mysterious, for all her ordinariness" (*Eclipse* 122-123). Nevertheless, this moment of epiphany doesn't last long as Alex soon wants to adopt Lily so that "[s]he could be [his] – [his and Lydia's]" (*Eclipse* 136). Thus, he immediately reduces her to an object of his possession, similar to Freddie who stole the painting of the *Woman in Gloves* and kidnapped Josie Bell (chapter 3.1.), without taking the girl's wishes into account. He doesn't ask Lilly, but rather informs her about their plan: " 'Mrs Cleave and I would like to adopt you' (...) and turn you into a little princess" (*Eclipse* 138), a pet name which shows he has not outgrown his childishness. Moreover, he makes a public announcement in front of a full circus tent, claiming her as his child: " 'My name is Alexander Cleave', I said, in a loud, firm voice, 'and this is my daughter' " (*Eclipse* 187), an example of his acting skills. Furthermore, Alex treats Dawn Devonport, who is like a daughter to him, in a similar fashion and he is unable to soothe her after her attempt at suicide: "The sound of a woman sobbing to herself in the darkness is a terrible thing. What was I to do? How was I to console her – was I required to console her? Was anything at all to be asked of me?" (*AL* 202).

Freddie Montgomery, the protagonist of *The Book of Evidence*, "only pays full heed to the outside world to the extent that it either reflects him favourably or threatens his image of himself" (O'Connell 60). Freddie explains that his relationship with his wife was only possible because they each "maintained the essential secretness of [their] inner selves" (*TBE* 9). When Freddie is imprisoned, Daphne visits him and reveals to him how unhappy she has been all along: "She went back over the years. What I had done, and not done. How little I knew, how little I understood" so that Freddie asks himself "[h]ow [it was] possible, that [he] could not have seen that behind her reticence there was all this passion, this pain?" (*TBE* 216). Like Alex, Freddie appears to pay a lot of attention to Daphne's external appearance and her habitual way of doing things. He says that he loved to watch his wife going about the ordinary business of life and that these moments solidified his love for her.

I do not know that I loved Daphne in the manner that the world understands by that word, but I do know that I loved her ways. Will it seem strange, cold, perhaps even inhuman, if I say I was only interested really in what she was on the surface? (...) This is the only way another creature can be known: on the surface, that's where there is depth.⁹ (*TBE* 72)

In Banville's latest novel, *The Blue Guitar*, Oliver confesses that he does not really know his wife: "I wish I understood my wife a little better than I do, I mean I wish I knew her better" (*TBG* 91). Moreover, Polly's distress after the affair between her and Oliver has come out, makes Oliver extremely uncomfortable.

I should have gathered her in my arms to comfort her, but I didn't know how to manage it, so amorphous a shape she seemed, crouching there, her shoulders heaving (...) Escape, yes, escape was all I could think of. Where now was all that reinvigorated tenderness for my darling girl (...)? Where indeed. I felt paralyzed. A weeping woman is a terrible spectacle. (*TBG* 134)

Polly criticizes Oliver's self-centredness by saying that "[he] never notice[s] anything that's not [him]self" (*TBG* 174). Oliver's inability to feel empathy for others makes him a prototypical Banvillian narrator who is insensitive, egoistic and unable to love since "Love [is] [t]he secret ingredient [he] always forget[s] about and leave[s] out" (*TBG* 107). Moreover, Oliver remarks that "an inner, barren plain, an Empty Quarter; where cold indifference reigns (...) [is] in [him], the seat of what is popularly called the heart" (*TBG* 192). Oliver admits that he is only able to feel pity and empathy for himself: "For what or whom would I weep? For myself, of course, for whom else do I ever weep?" (*TBG* 219).

Thus, Banville's fictional women are reduced to self-objects, used as mirroring surfaces with no emotional input of their own. The following chapter will discuss how a lack of mirroring and the confrontation with the other's alterity result in the narrator's shame.

⁹ This is also a reference to Nietzsche, who is often, though implicitly, quoted in the *The Book of Evidence*.

3. The Other in the Form of Shame: The Female Gaze and Threatening Corporeality

3.1. Eyes of Shame

Shame is a central theme in Banville's novels and it is, as this chapter will illustrate, closely linked to the narcissist's confrontation with the (female) other. This chapter will build on D'hoker's study *Visions of Alterity* in which she argues that "the representation of alterity in terms of physicality or materiality [is something] which [Banville's] protagonists always seek to evade" (D'hoker *Visions of Alterity* 217). This chapter will provide textual examples from the novels *The Book of Evidence*, in which eyes are the main catalysers for Freddie's murder; *Eclipse*, in which Alex's shame causes him to quit his acting career and *The Blue Guitar*, in which Oliver claims to be immune to shame, which will be nuanced¹⁰.

First of all, shame is an important aspect in the research of narcissism: "Clinical psychologists have long noted the central role of shame in narcissism, calling it the "key-stone affect" of the disorder" (Robins, Tracy & Shaver 232). O'Connell has also discussed shame in his book *John Banville's Narcissistic Fictions* as an important aspect of narcissism: "For Reich, narcissism is a matter of drastic extremes and rapid reversals: "unsublimated, erotized, manic self-inflation easily shifts to a feeling of utter dejection, of worthlessness, and to hypochondriacal anxieties (O'Connell 59). For the narcissist, the confrontation with the other is unsettling because his identity is not sufficiently anchored. O'Connell writes that "what the narcissistic wishes never to have to face, but inevitably must [is] the largely repressed *other* self which he imagines himself to have transcended through careful self-sculpting, but which inevitably returns in the form of shame" (O'Connell 43). Moreover, the psychoanalyst Mary Ayers connects shame with the scrutinizing eyes of the other. In her book *Mother-Infant Attachment and Psychoanalysis – The Eyes of Shame*, her central argument is that "an insufficiency of [the mother's] responsiveness to the need of

¹⁰ In this chapter, *Mefisto* is not included in the analysis as shame is not a central theme in that novel.

mirroring, affirmation, merger and idealization¹¹ (...) leads to a primary internal shaming eye focussed on the depleted, fragmented self with its failures and inadequacies (Ayers 30). Ayers explains that “[f]or the person who suffers from the earliest dimensions of shame, the evocative power of eyes and faces is massively amplified” (Ayers 40), of which Banville’s *The Book of Evidence* is a good illustration.

O’Connell wrote that “[p]erhaps more than any other of Banville’s protagonists, [Freddie] is given to alternate extremes of narcissism and shame” as “[h]is rather grandiose image of himself is repeatedly undercut, often in the most visceral of language, by his sense of self-loathing” (O’Connell 52). Indeed, in his testimony, Freddie presents himself favourably to the reader as “thirty-eight, a man of parts, with a wife and a son and an impressive Mediterranean tan” and says that he “carried [him]self with gravitas and a certain faint air of menace” (*TBE* 42). However, Freddie immediately adds to this description how his mother saw through his pretence: “and [my mother], what did she do? – she pinched my belly and laughed her phlegmy laugh. Is it any wonder I have ended up in jail?” (*TBE* 42). Freddie’s image of himself is undermined by the image his mother has of him, which causes his ego to deflate, a narcissistic affront which, so he claims, is the reason why he ended up in jail. On another occasion, as O’Connell remarked, Freddie writes that he and his wife Daphne “were heroes” (*TBE* 11) and when he “looked in their [other people’s] eyes [he] saw [him]self enobled there” (*TBE* 11). Nevertheless, Freddie suspects that others are perpetually scrutinizing him. For example, when Freddie was still unemployed, Charlie French, an acquaintance of the family, offered him an office job. As Freddie recalls his three-year long employment there, he tells his reader that “[he] ha[s] the feeling of having done something ridiculous by taking that job”, which was “unworthy of [him], of course, of [his] talent” (*TBE* 135). He reflects on that job offer saying that “[he] just felt, and feel[s] (...) a little ridiculous, a little embarrassed” and that he “never quite forgave Charlie French” (*TBE* 136). Freddie still silently holds a grudge against his friend Charlie, as if offering that job was a way to humiliate him instead of a kind offer. Several years later, when Freddie piled up a large sum of debt,

¹¹ Ayers explains this process of mirroring as follows: “[t]he mother’s face is the infant’s first reflection of her inner self, and it is through her mother’s mirroring and responsiveness that the child begins to develop a sense of being and integrate intense emotions and instincts” (Ayers 61).

he starts self-shaming himself for his failure: “I felt as much foolishness as fear. I felt ridiculous. It was unreal, the fix I had got myself into. (...) there would well up in me a hot flush of terror and shame – shame, that is, for my own stupidity (...) that had landed me in such a deal of soup” (*TBE* 20 – 21). Moreover, when Freddie is in the company of women he suspects that in his absence they are “lobbing remarks at each other in a comically solemn version of [his] voice and laughing softly, in that jaded way they had, as if the joke were not really funny, just ridiculous” (*TBE* 66).

In the hours leading up to his crime, Freddie’s paranoia for scrutinizing eyes increases drastically and he is prey to violent outbursts of shame, which are disproportional to their affects. For instance, when Freddie orders a cab to take him to what will later be known as the crime scene, “the driver was watching [him] in the mirror now with rapt expectancy” so that he “mounted the steps pursued by an unshakable sensation of general mockery” (*TBE* 76). A few moments later, when Freddie gets out of the cab, he describes how the windows of a house turned into mocking eyes: “When I looked back at the house the windows were ablaze, and seemed to be laughing fatly in derision” (*TBE* 80).¹² After committing the crime, this feeling is even more aggravated: not only people and objects, but also the air itself seems to fix its eyes on him. Freddie describes how “at [Charlie’s] back [i.e. the window] [was] a white, impenetrable glare (...) [,] this searing, inescapable light [and that] [he] looked at [him]self and [he] found [he] was naked” (*TBE* 138). His nakedness here is not to be taken literally: it is rather the narcissist’s sense of being unmasked, exposed to the world. These examples clearly illustrate Freddie’s increased paranoia in the form of a “free-floating gaze” (Bonomi 118) from which he cannot hide.

When Freddie visits the family that has bought his mother’s valuable paintings in the hope of retrieving them, his attention is drawn to a mysterious woman in a Dutch painting.¹³ Freddie describes how “[f]rom the depths of the room a pair of eyes looked out, dark, calm, unseeing” (*TBE* 83) so that “[a] sort of shyness made [him] keep [his]

¹² O’Connell links the narcissist’s feeling of being constantly watched with Kleist’s essay ‘The Puppet Theatre’ (1810), an interesting point of view which goes beyond the scope of this paper.

¹³ In her article “You Have Been Framed”, Müller writes that “critics assume that the respective passages in the novel refer to a painting that is exhibited under the title *Portrait of a Lady in Dark Blue* in the Budapest Museum of Fine Arts” (Müller 188) by Willem Drost.

eyes averted from the other end of the room, where the picture leaned out a little from the wall, as if listening intently” (*TBE* 82). These eyes and the “fortitude and pathos of her presence” (*TBE* 79) deeply affect Freddie who testifies that “[t]here is something in the way the woman regards [him], the querulous, mute insistence of her eyes, which [he] can neither escape nor assuage[, he] squirm[s] in the grasp of her gaze” (*TBE* 105). Held captive by the painted woman’s stare, Freddie is subjected to an overwhelming wave of shame.

I stood there staring, for what seemed a long time, and gradually a kind of embarrassment took hold of me, a hot, shamefaced awareness of myself, as if somehow I, this soiled sack of flesh, were the one who was being scrutinised, with careful, cold attention” (*TBE* 79). It was not just the woman’s painted stare that watched me. Everything in the picture that brooch, those gloves, the flocculent darkness at her back, every spot on the canvas was an eye fixed on me unblinkingly. (*TBE* 79)¹⁴

D’hoker argues that the power of the eyes of the painted woman lies in their ethical call: “Emmanuel Levinas’s ethical perspective in which the face of the other – here represented in the strong gaze of a woman – challenges the self to respect the alterity of the other, to let the other live, as other” (D’hoker “Portrait of the Other as a Woman in Gloves” 24). Freddie seems to correctly interpret the meaning of the Dutch lady’s eyes as he remarks that “it was as if she were asking [him] to let her live” (*TBE* 105). As a response to his ‘ethical responsibility’, Freddie now proceeds to invent a fictional account of the woman’s life. This fictional woman bears many resemblances with Freddie: she is “thirty-five, thirty-six” (*TBE* 105), which is about the same age as him, and she also “did not like her mother” (*TBE* 105). Moreover, Freddie projects his own sensation of being penetrated by the painted woman’s eyes by imagining how the painter’s glare exposed the posing Dutch lady: “No one has ever looked at her [the painted woman] like this before. So this is what it is to be known! It is almost

¹⁴ Remarkably, Freddie has the sensation that not only the painted woman’s eyes, but also inanimate objects seem to fix their eye on him. This phenomenon might be explained by a quote featured in Ghassemi’s doctorate study: “Antonio Quinet [who] observes that while the gaze as object *a¹⁴* “has no consistency, no substance”, it can be “represented” as “a beam of light, a glint in someone’s eye, a reflection in someone’s hair,” even “a jewel, which shines can represent a gaze” ” (Ghassemi 153).

indecent” (*TBE* 107). D’hoker describes Freddie’s use of projection and mirroring to represent the Dutch lady in the painting and his failure to respond to her ethical call.

Thus, Freddie, far from understanding the woman in the portrait, simply creates the woman as a mirror image of himself. By projecting his own thoughts and feelings on the painting, he reduces the woman to his own plans and purposes, effectively destroying her singularity and difference. (D’hoker “Portrait of the Other as a Woman in Gloves” 28)

Freddie, unsettled by her demanding gaze, not only decides to make up a fictional life for this painted personality, but also wants to steal her. This is again a complete disregard for the woman’s otherness, because she, as “[*his*] picture” (*TBE* 109), is reduced to an object of possession. Coughlan states that “Freddie’s immediate wish to possess the painting and the subsequent theft literally (...) enact what is often merely figuratively—termed as the male desire to possess the female body” (Coughlan 190). The painting is not the only woman he steals: he also kidnaps Josie Bell, who caught him in the act of stealing.

Josie Bell, another “wide-eyed” “presence, watching [him]” (*TBE* 110) had the most extraordinary pale, violet eyes, [which] seemed transparent, [and] when [he] looked into them [he] felt [he] was seeing clear through her head (*TBE* 111), which mirrors the description of the painter who looked straight through the *Woman with Gloves*. According to D’hoker, Josie Bell imposes a second ethical call on Freddie, which increases his sense of being watched as he describes how the world seemed like a “universe of eyes” (Ayers 17) full of “phantom spectators”.

What I felt most strongly (...) [was] a grievous sense of embarrassment. I was mortified. I had never been so exposed in all my life. People were looking at me – she in the back seat, and the tourists up there jostling at the window, but also, it seemed, a host of others, of phantom spectators. (*TBE* 112)

When he kidnaps Josie Bell in his car, she revolts against him, both physically and verbally. O’Connell writes that “her mere otherness, her recalcitrance in the face of his will, is an intolerable affront to [Freddie’s] narcissism” (O’Connell 66), who has “never felt another’s presence so immediately and with such raw force” (*TBE* 113). This overwhelming manifestation of another’s alterity gives Freddie the final push to murder Josie Bell: he crushes her skull with a hammer, first hitting “above her left

eye” but, as she was still “looking at [him] with eyes that would not focus properly” (*TBE* 113) and tried once more to attack him, he hit a final blow until at last she “closed her eyes and turned away from [him]” (*TBE* 114). By killing her, the threat of the other, manifested in the girl’s gaze and body, is destroyed and he subsequently fails in responding to the girl’s ‘ethical call’. Instead, as with the painting, he projects his own feelings and thoughts on to Josie Bell. D’hoker illustrates how “[i]nstead of imaginatively and thoroughly reconstructing the life, thoughts, and feelings of Josie Bell, Freddie furnishes her with a few servant stereotypes” (D’hoker “Portrait of the Other as a Woman with Gloves” 29).¹⁵ In addition, Freddie also claims that when he struck the final blow, Josie Bell murmured the following words: “Mammy was what she said, that was the word, not Tommy, I’ve just this moment realized it. Mammy, and then: love” (*TBE* 148). This, rather than a veritable representation of the maid’s words, sounds more like a slip of the tongue by Freddie, who is haunted by his bad relationship with his mother.

After Freddie has destroyed the servant girl, he can no longer bear the shaming condemning eye of the painting and dumps it. He says that “[t]he woman with the gloves gave [him] a last, dismissive stare” and that “[s]he had expected no better of [him]” (*TBE* 119). Nevertheless, Freddie still has a replica of the painting in his prison cell and describes how “that Dutch figure in the picture (...) gazed at [him], sceptical, inquisitive and calm” (*TBE* 92). When Freddie is imprisoned, he is perhaps able to experience the therapeutic powers of the gaze. When the date of his trial advances, all eyes of the media are focused on him. Freddie says that he “had never in [his] life been so entirely the centre of attention” and that “[f]rom now on [he] would be watched over, [he] would be tended and fed and listened to, like a big, dangerous babe” (*TBE* 193). His choice of words here refer directly to the infantile stage where the “babe” is dependent on the mother for “being tended and fed and listened to”, perhaps an indication that his existential shame can be traced back to his infantile years. To end with, the final sentences of the book sum up Freddie’s pathological shame and provide clear evidence that shame is indeed one of the central themes of the novel.

¹⁵ D’hoker writes that “Freddie (...) invokes this image – almost stereotypical in Irish literature – of the shy, discreet, obedient country girl who has gone to serve in the Big House” (D’hoker “Portrait of the Other as a Woman in Gloves” 29)

It's my story, I said, and I'm sticking to it.

[Inspector Haslet] laughed at that. Come on, Freddie, he said, how much of it is true?

True, Inspector? I said. All of it. None of it. Only the shame.

(*TBE* 220)

Comparable to Freddie, Alex, the protagonist of *Eclipse* and *Ancient Light*, is prey to increased self-awareness and shame caused by his feeling of being constantly observed by an external eye. Alex explains how “[f]rom the earliest days life for [him] was a perpetual state of being watched” and he “imagine[d] the world [to be] possessed of a single, avid eye fixed solely and always on him” (*Eclipse* 10). This can be interpreted as a symptom of existential shame as “[t]o the person who suffers shame, the world is full of eyes, crowded with things and people that can see” (Ayers 1). These external eyes are internalized, as Lydia aptly calls Alex a “monster of self regard” (*Eclipse* 150) and cause him to be increasingly self-aware, or suffer from a “malady of selfness” (*Eclipse* 90). As a result, Alex has an increased sensitivity for the eyes of the others. His second lover Dora, for instance, has a very arrogant and hard stare, which at the same time appears to mock Alex, causing him to blush in shame and avert his gaze.

As I sought out to catch the barman's eye I was aware of Dora's candid gaze roaming over my face, my hands, my clothes. When I turned back to her, she did not look away, only lifted her chin and gave me a hard, brazen, smiling stare. (...) She was still looking into my face with that challenging, half-mocking smile, and I grew flustered and kept trying to avoid her eye. (*Eclipse* 85)

The essence of this paragraph is her dominant female stare, which at the same time never acknowledged him as “[he] never felt [he] had [Dora's] full attention” (*Eclipse* 86). For Alex, a narcissistic actor who has learned to master his visibility, not being acknowledged by the other is a personal affront, which one of his nightmares illustrates. In that dream, he is a torturer who fails to have impact on his victim, which he experiences as the ultimate humiliation: “I was irresistible, not to be withstood; all succumbed, sooner or later, under my terrible ministrations. All, that is, except this bearded hero, who was defeating me simply by not paying me sufficient attention, by

not acknowledging me” (*Eclipse* 110). Alex’s “mastered visibility” (Bonomi 118) also fails when he is playing the role of Amphitryon and “sees [himself] doubly reflected [in the eyes of his co-player], two tiny, bulbous Amphitryons” (*Eclipse* 89). After Alex’s collapse on stage, he quit his acting career and “hid [his] head in shame” because “[h]ow could [he] show [his] face in public, to [his] public, after the mask had so spectacularly slipped?” (*Eclipse* 91). Thus, his mask of superiority, the narcissist’s primal defence against the internal and external shaming eye, had dropped: “indeed, this is the very essence of the nightmare, that all theatrical presence has been stripped away, and with it all protection” (*AL* 163). Remarkably, like Freddie who refers to himself as a dangerous babe, Alex also uses a vocabulary attached to childhood in order to describe his feeling of shame and increased self-awareness. He says that he “feel[s] at once newborn and immensely old[,] (...) helpless as an infant” and that he “marvel[s] at the matter [his] body produces, the stools, the crusts of snot, the infinitesimal creep of fingernails and hair” (*Eclipse* 52). Thus, the excruciating feeling of shame is associated with the infantile years of complete dependence on the mother, which, as with Freddie, might be linked to Ayers’ assumption that existential shame originates from a troubled mother-infant relationship.

In *The Blue Guitar*, Oliver strikes an interesting line: “Maybe I’m incapable of true shame” (*TBG* 150). And indeed, when his wife Gloria confronts him with his affair, Oliver seems to be rather disinterested and bored than ashamed. However, when his mistress Polly finds out about his thieving, Oliver, the narcissistic painter, is shamefully confronted with an unfavourable reflection of himself.

But that I should have been found out by Polly, that indeed she should have known all along about my thieving, that was a great shock and humiliation, though humiliation and shock are inadequate terms in which to describe my state. I seemed to have suffered a physical attack; it was as if a stick had been stuck into my innards and waggled violently about, and I thought for a second I might be sick on the spot. Something had been taken from me, something secret and precious. (*TBG* 177)

In addition, Oliver shares Alex’s and Freddie’s increased sensitivity for eyes and believes that “[t]he world’s final task, as [he] knew well, a task it never relaxed from, was to undo [him]” (*TBG* 139). His vulnerability to everything that is not himself feeds his paranoia so that he even suspects that animals are mocking him: “They don’t

fool me, animals, with their pretence of dullness: I see the look in their eye that they try to hide but can't; they all know something about me that I don't" (*TBG* 155). Thus, like Freddie and Alex who imagine that the world is fixing its eyes on them, in *The Blue Guitar* "the gaze is (...) experienced as a disembodied force" (Bonomi 110).

To conclude with, Banville's protagonists, when confronted with the eyes of the (female) other, are prey to existential shame. The following chapter will focus on another threatening aspect of women, namely their sexual dominance.

3.2. Female Bodies, Sexual Agency and Conspiracy

Critics such as D'hoker, Ghassemi and Müller have already noted the dichotomy in Banville's fiction between corpulent and more "elusive" (Müller 198) women. D'hoker enriched this argument by noting that "it is especially the fascinating and threatening corporeality of the "whores" which drives Banville's protagonist to platonic love for the "virgins" " (D'Hoker *Visions of Alterity* 144). Even though the women's corporeality is at times overwhelming, I would like to argue that it is their female agency the narrator finds especially threatening. This chapter will first briefly illustrate the existing binary division between the more mature, full-figured wives and mistresses and the skinny, "shadowy or insubstantial" (Ghassemi 206) girls, which often resemble the narrator's daughter. Secondly, the narrator's fear of female agency and his subsequent fantasies of weak and controllable women will be illustrated. Lastly, this chapter will give examples of the narrator's fear of female conspiracy, staged in the novels by real or imaginative *ménages à trois*.

First of all, Banville's women can be subdivided into more stout and substantial women and more skinny and airy girls.¹⁶ D'hoker has already remarked that in *Mefisto* "Sophie clearly functions as the gay, natural and fleshy counterpart of the skinny, absent, and mysterious Adele" (D'hoker *Visions of Alterity* 140). In the other books, the narrator's wives and mistresses are mostly full-figured, whereas the daughter-like figures are often more skinny. In *The Book of Evidence*, Freddie's wife

¹⁶ Even though this binary division is clearly detectable in Banville's novels, sometimes women can possess both opulent and airy qualities. For instance, in *Ancient Light*, Alex says that "[a]s well as fleshiness she [Mrs Gray] possessed too a quality of lightness, of grace, that not the daintiest slip of a girl could match" (*AL* 127).

Daphne “was a big woman, not fat, not heavy, even, but yet weighty” (*TBE* 8). In *Eclipse*, Alex’s Lydia, whose “name bespoke for [him] a physical opulence”, is characterized by her “fullness, the sense she gave of filling whatever she wore” (*Eclipse* 35). In *Ancient Light*, Ghassemi also discerned an opposition between heavy and weightless women “manifest in the descriptio of Mrs Gray’s “buxom” built (7) on the one hand, and Dawn Davenport’s “little and seemingly weightless body” (91), on the other” (Ghassemi 205). Dawn Devonport, “a slight person” and “impossibly thin” (*AL* 90), reminds Alex of Cass: “There was something about her, about the combination in her of frailty and faint mannishness, that was a sharp reminder of my daughter” (*AL* 96). In *The Blue Guitar*, Oliver’s Gloria, “[a]t thirty-five (...) had attained the full glory of splendour of maturity” (*TBG* 9), his lover Polly is “full-figured, biggish in the beam” (*TBG* 7) and his previous mistress Anneliese was “a thick-set girl, with a nice roll of puppy-fat around the waist” (*TBG* 70). Indeed, D’hoker’s argument that Banville’s narrators sleep with more corporeal women and have platonic relationships with more bony women is predominantly veritable, however leaves the threat of female agency undiscussed.

Secondly, the narrator is not necessarily put off by a woman’s body of flesh and blood, but rather eschews women as sexual agents. Coughlan already wrote that “[i]n Banville’s whole work, where female characters are endowed with agency it is predominantly figured as sexual and manipulative” (Coughlan 96). Banville’s novels *Eclipse* and *Ancient Light* provide solid illustrations for the threat of female dominance. In these novels, the protagonist Alex prefers it when his wife Lydia is “helpless[Ø]” (*Eclipse* 38) during sexual intercourse and remembers that his teenage lover Mrs Gray “was never so desirable to [him] as in (...) moments of reluctant surrender” (*AL* 125). In fact the mature and maternal Mrs Gray, who initiated their affair, seemed to him “a giantess looming over [him], a figure of unassailable erotic power” (*AL* 126). The impression her sexuality made on young Alex can be illustrated by one of his nightmares. In this nightmare Alex dreams about “a crocodile” (*AL* 116) that metamorphosed into “a darkly lovely young woman” who “was waiting impatiently and in some irritation for [him] to do something for her” which caused him to be “burdened beyond [his] years with cares and responsibilities” (*AL* 117). Perhaps this dream denotes Alex’s fear to “surrender” (*AL* 117) to Mrs Gray’s seduction.

In contrast, Alex frequently entertains cruel fantasies about women in his power, one of which is his doll Megg. He testifies that “[t]here was something about the doll’s lightness, its hollowness – (...) – that made [him] feel protective and at the same time appealed to a nascent streak of erotic cruelty in [him]” (*AL* 153). The doll is the epitome of a woman that lacks any initiative and will of her own and is completely subjected to Alex’s own desires. Similarly, as “a boy [Alex] had in [his] mind’s eye the platonically perfect girl, a creature bland as a manikin that did not sweat or go to the lavatory, that was docile, adoring and fabulously compliant” (*AL* 126). A few things are noteworthy here: Alex’s fantasy girl is not only a “perfect” “manikin” with “bland” features, she is also inhuman, deprived of an organic body and “fabulously compliant” or servile. Furthermore, Alex’s “ideal of mature womanhood was the Kayser Bondor lady, a foot-high, cut-out cardboard beauty” (*AL* 29), again a two-dimensional image deprived of a human body.

In *The Book of Evidence*, Freddie, while having sexual intercourse with his wife Daphne, liked her “soft grey gaze staring helplessly”, “that pained, defenceless look” on her face and he even tried “to have her wear her spectacles when [they] were in bed like this, so she would seem even more lost, more defenceless” (*TBE* 8 - 9). Similarly to Freddie, Gabriel, the protagonist of *Mefisto*, prefers weak and vulnerable women. Gabriel strikes a deal with Adele, a junkie, to trade sex with drugs and, when she refuses to return her part of the bargain, childishly manipulates her: “You promised, I said. You promised” (*Mefisto* 210). The following paragraph illustrates how Gabriel uses Adele’s lifeless body for his own sexual pleasure, while highlighting his blatant indifference to her feelings.

I lifted her up and walked her to the door, and made her stand with her back to it (...) Her thighs were cold. I listened in vague wonder to my own hoarse quickening gasps. The back of her head beat dully against the door. She was laughing, or crying, I don’t know which. (*Mefisto* 210)

In *The Blue Guitar*, Oliver also prefers women who are not aggressive in their sexuality: “I’ve always found women most interesting, most fascinating, most, yes, desirable, precisely when the circumstances in which I encounter them are least appropriate of promising” (*TBG* 112). Moreover, he reveals that a woman’s absence of the sexual symbol of the phallus, was precisely what aroused him.

The first time I got a girl into my arms and rubbed myself against her (...) what startled me and excited me deeply, however paradoxical it may sound, was the absence at the apex of her leg of anything except a more or less smooth, bony bump. (...) Somehow, though, it was the very lack that seemed a promise of hitherto unimagined and delightful explorations, insubstantial transports. (*TBG* 75)

Thirdly, the female agency is especially threatening when two women team up against the male narrator in a troilism. In her article “Banville, the Feminine, and the Scenes of Eros”, Coughlan discussed Banville’s “insistent recurrence of threesomes (...) usually constituted (...) of a male and two female characters” (Coughlan 82).¹⁷ For *The Book of Evidence*, Coughlan discussed the trio between Freddie, his future wife Daphne and her friend Anna Behrens. About this *ménage à trois*, Freddie relates that “[i]t was a strange encounter, never to be repeated” (*TBE* 70) since he had the feeling of being “irresistibly penetrated” and of being used as “a mere prop (...) [as] [t]hey wielded [him] like a stone phallus” (*TBE* 70). And indeed Freddie is used as “the link along which the two of them [Daphne and Anna] had negotiated their way, hand over hand, into each other’s arms” (*TBE* 70). Coughlan notes that there are “many other Banville scenarios, in which the male figure feels himself to be an extra or a prop, or the instrument or channel of desires which pass over his essential self” (Coughlan 86). Moreover, the reference to a “stone phallus” is a strong image of Freddie’s emasculation by the dominant women who, with Medusa-like eyes, turn the narrator’s most important sexual symbol into stone. Freddie’s descriptions of their sexual encounter illustrate this threat: he says that during his climax he had a “choking sense of transgression” “[a]s if [he] had suffered a heart attack, which [he] suppose[s] [he] had, in a way” and that he “fell upon them, exultant and afraid” (*TBE* 69). A second discernable triangle in *The Book of Evidence* is the trio between Freddie, his mother and the stable girl Joanne. Coughlan claims that what these two trios have in common is Freddie’s infantile, perhaps pre-Oedipal envy: “[l]ike a jealous infant, [Freddie] feels excluded from the closed, quasi-hermetic converse of the two women [Daphne and Anna], whose prior relationship he (...) belatedly

¹⁷ In her article, Coughlan also discusses trios between two men and one woman, which is not specifically relevant for this chapter. Moreover, in *The Blue Guitar*, Oliver discerns the following links “between Polly and [him] and Marcus, between Polly and [him] and Marcus and Gloria” (*TBG* 114), which will also not be discussed in this chapter.

discovers [and] [h]e later finds his mother and the girl Joanne similarly turned to each other, to his further chagrin” (Coughlan 88).¹⁸ In *Ancient Light*, Alex displays the same jealousy and fear of female conspiracy with his wife Lydia and the movie recruiter Billy Striker, whose name already suggests that she will ‘strike’. He wonders: “[w]hat can they have talked about, those two?” (AL 74) and “what had Lydia been up to with her [Billy Striker] in that long interval they had spent together downstairs?” (AL 76). This paranoia with regard to women is vivified in “a dream [he] had [the previous] night in which [his] wife had left [him] for another [butch] woman” (AL 8), from which he “woke up with an oppressive sense of loss and deprivation and all-pervading sadness” (AL 8). In *Eclipse*, Alex is also frustrated that “Cass was good with [his] mother” and that “there was something between them, a complicity, from which [he] was irritated to find [him]self excluded” (*Eclipse* 115). Alex testifies that “[t]here are times when [he] feel[s] [him]self caught up in a definite, concerted and yet seemingly aimless conspiracy run by women” (AL 76).

To conclude with, Banville’s narrators have a deep-seated fear of powerful women who team up against him. Instead, he fantasizes about women who are deprived of their own sexual agency, as weak, helpless and submissive creatures in his power. The narrator’s premature jealous, egoistic and possessive behaviour towards women will be further discussed in the following chapter.

4. The Narrator’s Pre-Oedipal Behaviour

4.1. Mothers, Fathers and Siblings

This chapter will discuss the narrator’s struggle for his mother’s attention, his pre-Oedipal behaviour towards his father and the other siblings and his inability to acknowledge transgenerational boundaries. This infantile competitive mentality is typical for the narcissist, with whom the Oedipal castration usually failed so that he never learned to respect his father’s authority and to share his mother’s love and attention with others.

¹⁸ Coughlan discerns a third trio in *The Book of Evidence*, namely between Freddie, Josie Bell and the *Woman in Gloves*. However, since this has already been elaborately discussed in chapter three (3.1.), it will not be repeated here.

To begin with, the narrator's demand for attention is so high, that he often represents himself as the neglected child whose mother was remote, absent and mysterious because she can never be fully controlled or possessed by the narrator. For example, in *The Book of Evidence*, Freddie's description of his mother encompasses the idea of distance: "I recall her from my childhood as a constant but remote presence, statuesque, (...) like a marble figure at the far side of a lawn" (*TBE* 41). The following reveals the unreliability of Freddie's memories as his mother, only quoted in the indirect mode, relates his neglect of her.

Demanded, did I? – I, who had gone off and abandoned my widowed mother, who had skipped off to America and married without even informing her, who had never once brought my child, her grandson, to see her – I, who for ten years had stravaiged the world like a tinker, never doing a hand's turn of work, living off my dead father's few pounds and bleeding the estate dry – what right, she shripped, what right had I to demand anything here? (*TBE* 59)¹⁹

Freddie's descriptions of his childhood are projections of his own emotions. In a similar fashion, Freddie claims that his wife Daphne was a bad mother for their handicapped son, thereby projecting his negative feelings towards his own mother on to her: "She neglected our son, not because she was not fond of him, in her way, but simply because his needs did not really interest her" (*TBE* 7). In the end, Daphne reveals that it was not she, but Freddie who neglected his son since "[he] *knew nothing about [them], nothing*" (*TBE* 213).

In *Eclipse* and *Ancient Light*, Alex's descriptions of his mother also mirror his own attitude: "she [his mother] was a querulous, distracted person, given to worries and vague agitations, always labouring under unspecified grievances, always waiting, it seemed, tight-lipped and patiently sorrowing, for a general apology from the world" (*Eclipse* 30). Alex claims that his mother did not give him the attention he deserved as "[s]he tried but could not understand [him], her changeling" (*Eclipse* 30). The following paragraph reveals the narrator's pathological narcissism as he, instead of asking himself what his mother wanted from him, which would reveal a child's natural desire to please its parents, turns the question around and reverses the hierarchy between child and parent: "All of her dealings with me then became a kind

¹⁹ This is in character with the historical murderer Macarthur, whose murder on a young nurse inspired Banville for his novel *The Book of Evidence*.

of ceaseless pleading, by turns piteous and angry[,] [w]hat she wanted from me was for me to explain myself to her, to account for what I was, and why I differed so from her” (*Eclipse* 37). Moreover, Alex felt superior towards his mother: he had behaved towards her as he had towards Lydia, namely “with impatience, resentment, and that tight-lipped, ironical forbearance”, and had “treat[ed] her like a child (*Eclipse* 139-140). Furthermore, as in *The Book of Evidence*, Alex’s wife Lydia, whose words, like those of Freddie’s mother, are only represented indirectly, reveals that Alex’s childhood memories are unreliable.

Did I lead a lonely and puzzled childhood, shocked by the early loss of my father and subject thereafter to the unmeetable emotional demands of a bitterly disappointed mother? No, no: I was the little prince, showered with love, praise, gifts, who quickly saw off a resented father and spent the rest of his widowed mother’s life blaming her for all the things she could not be or do. (*Eclipse* 141)

In *Mefisto*, Gabriel appears to have been smothered as well by his mother as he recalls that “[s]he nursed [him] with a kind of vehemence, willing [him] to live (...) [and] would not let [him] out of her sight” (*Mefisto* 9). Nevertheless, her attention is insufficient for the narcissist’s demands and Gabriel remembers her as “a stranger, silent and enigmatic, disconsolately smiling” (*Mefisto* 5). In *The Blue Guitar*, Oliver also portrays his mother as very absent-minded: “[m]other always displayed a distraught and ever slightly dazed manner, and was generally inadequate to the ordinary business of life” (*TBG* 17). Oliver reveals that he, “her favourite” (*TBG* 18), was smothered by his mother since “her boy must have the best” (*TBG* 18). Oliver remembers how his mother placed him at the centre of attention: “I would watch her [his mother] watching me intently, with bright-eyed expectation, as if at any moment I might do something amazing, perform some marvellous trick” (*TBG* 18). This overdose of love and attention results in a surprisingly positive description of his mother: “in [his] eyes everything she was and did was as near to perfection as it was humanly possible to be” (*TBG* 17). Nevertheless, Oliver cannot help to remark that he is “for ever the disappointed, disenchanting child” (*TBG* 102), probably because of the, especially for a narcissist, “astounding (...) discovery (...) that in the world there is not just [him], but other people as well, uncountable, and unaccountable, numbers of them, a

teeming horde of strangers” (*TBG* 145), with whom he has to share his mother’s attention.²⁰

Secondly, the narrator’s unwillingness to share his mother’s love with anyone else colours the depiction of his childhood, which places the mother and him at the centre of his memories, his father and siblings on the periphery. First of all, fathers in Banville’s fiction are always fleetingly absent and insubstantial, which is strengthened by Banville’s allusions to the myths of Leda and Alcmene (chapter 1.1.), in which the legitimacy of the father is questioned. Moreover, in the few occasions that the father is mentioned, however never by name²¹, the son defies his father’s authority and depicts him as a ridiculous and inferior figure. In addition, in all of the novels discussed, the father dies early on in the protagonist’s life so that he never learned to step aside in the competition for his mother.

To illustrate this, in *Mefisto*, Gabriel describes his father as a “remote, enigmatic and yet peculiarly vivid figure [whose] presence [was] diffident and fleeting” (*Mefisto* 13), thereby suggesting that he did not convey authority. Gabriel’s depiction of his father’s poor appearance, namely “[h]e smelled of chaff, dust, jute, all dry things”, and physical decline, id est “[h]e had asthma, and a bad leg” (*Mefisto* 13), further underscores his wavering power. His father’s profession, “a tallyman for a grain merchant” (*Mefisto* 13), which involves keeping a score of the goods he sold, is inferior to Gabriel’s mathematical enterprise. In the following paragraph, Gabriel stresses his father’s primitive appearance, as well as his insignificance as he was just “stalk[ing] the far borders of history”, whereas Gabriel was attempting to unveil the meaning of life by the means of a calculating machine, which, had he been successful, would undoubtedly have granted him a place in history books.

He was a short man, with long arms and bowed legs. His head was small, which made his trunk seem weightier than it was. With those limbs, that sharp face, the close-set dark eyes, he had something of those stunted little warriors, Pict or Firbolg, I don’t know, who stalk the far borders of history. I can see him, in pelts and pointed shoon, limping at twilight through the bracken. A small man, whom the vengeful gods have overlooked. A survivor. (*Mefisto* 14)

²⁰ Note that in a way all of Banville’s narrators steal from others, be it attention and love, a painting (*TBE*), a lover (*TBG*) or everyday objects (*TBG*), which can be interpreted as a sign of a failed Oedipal phase.

²¹ One could argue that this literal absence of the father’s name symbolizes the absence of Lacan’s concept of the Name-of-the-Father.

In *The Book of Evidence*, Freddie also describes his father as a pathetic figure, “a coward (...) [who] felt sorry for himself” (*TBE* 28), against whom he feels superior. He remembers his father as the pubertal son, himself as the grown-up adult, which marks a total reversal of the family hierarchy, which is ubiquitous in all novels: “Indeed, there was something of the eternal boy about him [his father], something tentative and pubertal [so that] [w]hen I think of us together I see him as impossibly young and me already grown-up, weary, embittered [and] I suspect he was a little afraid of me” (*TBE* 28). Furthermore, Freddie ridicules his father, who is depicted as clumsy and compliant, in a daydream about him: “I picture him on those Sunday afternoons with his mistress (...), before whom he kneels, poised trembling on one knee, (...) his moist red mouth open in supplication (...) Oh but I must not mock him like this” (*TBE* 29 - 30). Freddie admits that “[he] did not think unkindly of him [his father] - apart, that is, from wanting deep down to kill him, so that [he] might marry [his] mother, a novel and compelling notion which [his] counsel urges on [him] frequently, with a meaning look in his eye (*TBE* 29-30).

In *The Blue Guitar*, Oliver’s descriptions of his father’s physical appearance are also a complete farce since they stress the latter’s awkwardness, his disproportionate and “primitive” body and his ‘insect-like’ movements.

My father. Must I make a sketch of him, too? (...) He was an unassuming man, lanky, thin to the point of emaciation (...) with stooped shoulders and a long narrow head, like the carved blade of a primitive axe. (...) My father moved in a peculiar, mantis-like fashion, as if all his joints were not quite attached to each other and he had to hold his skeleton together inside his skin with great care and difficulty. (*TBG* 22)

Oliver also stresses the difference between their professions: whereas Oliver was once a successful painter, “[his] father”, who merely worked in a printing shop, “too made his living in or on the periphery of the art business” (*TBG* 22). Note the strategic use of the word “periphery”, similar to Gabriel’s description of his father as a Pict who “stalk[s] the far borders of history” (*Mefisto* 14): both narrators place their father in marginal positions. Instead of looking up to his father, a normal reaction of a son, Oliver relates that “[e]very time [he] had to go into his [father’s] shop [his] lip would curl in contempt, instantly and all by itself” for “his [father’s] execrable taste” (*TBG* 23). Oliver reverses the normal hierarchy between father and son by claiming that his

father was the one who admired him: “Gloria told me, long after he was dead, that one day he had turned to her without warning or cause and had said, forcefully, angrily, even, that he, too, could have been a painter, like me, had there been the means for him to be educated and trained” (*TBG* 166). And, whereas a child normally needs confirmation from his father, Oliver regrets that he never paid enough heed to his father: “Poor old dad. I must have loved him, in my way, whatever that might have been” (*TBG* 26).

Likewise, Banville’s narrators almost never mention their siblings. Is the reader to assume that Freddie (*TBE*), Alex (*Eclipse, AL*) and Gabriel (*Mefisto*) have no siblings, or does the narrator systematically erase them from his memories? *The Book of Evidence* does feature Joanne, a stable girl who “is like a son to [his mother], the son [she] never had” (*TBE* 75) and who is more ‘stable’ than him because she stays with his mother. In order to let her and his reader know how insignificant she is to him, Freddie always ‘accidentally’ messes up Joanne’s name, calling her alternatively “Joan or Jean – I’ll compromise, and call her Jane” (*TBE* 49) and “Jenny” (*TBE* 212). *The Blue Guitar* is the only novel where the protagonist mentions his siblings, namely a deceased brother Oswald and a sister Olive. Nevertheless, it is striking how Oliver systematically deletes his siblings from his childhood memories. He claims that his mother and him were “conspirators together” (*TBG* 155) and when he talks about his family he speaks of “my mother and me and the other children” (*TBG* 23), instead of ‘my mother and us’. Thus, if the narrator’s memories were a theatre setting, Oliver casts his siblings, as well as his father, as supporting actors with himself and his mother in the starring role: “When I was little we were never less than happy in each other’s company, and I wouldn’t have minded, and I suspect she wouldn’t either, if there had been only the two of us, without my father or my other siblings to crowd the scene” (*TBG* 18). The following dialogue, spread over several pages, between Oliver and his sister Olive, whose name is not only derived from Oliver but even a less significant copy without the ‘r’, reveals Oliver’s self-centredness and grandiose self-image, his selective and unreliable memory and his complete blindness to anything that doesn’t concern him.

‘Well Well, if it isn’t the genius of the family,’ she said. (...) ‘What brings you among the common folk?’ (*TBG* 207)

I know you, you only remember what suits you. (...) ‘Ah, yes’, she said, ‘you’ve forgotten who took care of you when you were little and our Ma was off gallivanting.’ (TBG 212)

‘You didn’t know about that, did you, about Ma and her fellas? There’s a lot you didn’t know, and don’t, though you think you’re such a clever-boots.’ (TBG 213)

Is all that gone, all the work I did for you, all forgotten? You’re lucky – I wish I had a memory like yours.’ (TBG 216)

‘You never knew, did you, how you were loved’, she said, ‘not in all the years, and now look at you.’ (TBG 221)

Thirdly, neither of Banville’s narrators really acknowledges the transgenerational aspect of existence. The Banvillian narrator hardly ever talks about his grandparents and when he does, only in a diminishing way. For instance, in *Mefisto*, Gabriel talks about his grandfather Jack Kay as “an intermittent drunkard” (*Mefisto* 12) who married “Martha somebody” (*Mefisto* 12). Older people are for him interchangeable: “[s]he and Granny Swan (...) blur into each other, two put-upon old women, somehow not quite life-sized, dropsical, dressed in black, always unwell, always complaining” (*Mefisto* 12). Moreover, when “[s]omeone had told [him] [his] granny was dead[,t]he news, far from being sad, was strangely exhilarating and (...) suddenly [he] was filled with a snug excitement” (*Mefisto* 13), a sign that he wants to detach himself from his ancestry. In a similar fashion, the other narrators dwell on the irreconcilable differences between mothers, daughters and lovers, as if they would prefer to isolate a woman from her familial attachments. For instance, Alex is perplexed to hear that his maternal lover Mrs Gray is herself a daughter: “The news that Mrs Gray had a mother was so amazing as to divert me for a moment from my anguish” (*AL* 221). Similarly, in *The Blue Guitar*, when Oliver, his mistress Polly and her daughter Pip visit her parents, he fails to see her as his mistress: “engaged as she was in the tricky task of being at once a mother and a daughter” (TBG 154), she “was all daughter now (...) [so that] [he] could hardly see in her the wantonly excellent creature who of an afternoon not so long ago (...) would cry out in [his] arms and dig her fingers into [his] shoulder-blades (TBG 131). In *Eclipse*, when Lydia wonders why Alex, who “already ha[s] a daughter”, wants to adopt Lily, his response is: “I had, (...) [t]hen she grew up[,] [a] woman can’t be a daughter” (*Eclipse* 137), which

expresses his denial of the fact that his daughter Cass will outgrow their family triangle to possibly create a family of her own.

In short, the Banvillian narrator's excessive demand for his mother's attention, his competition against the father and, especially in *The Blue Guitar*, the other siblings and his neglect of generational boundaries is detectable in the highly subjective account of his family and his deformed childhood memories.

4.2. The Maternal Mistress in *Ancient Light*

Not only in his familial attachments, but also in his love affairs we see how the Banvillian narrator behaves as a self-centred baby crying out for attention. The most interesting pre-Oedipal relationship is the affair between Alex and Mrs Gray in *Ancient Light*, which mirrors Alex's familial situation. Alex's infantile behaviour towards Mrs Gray, his competitive streak against her husband and children and his use of her as a prize-object for the ego will be discussed.

To begin with, Alex reveals how his older lover Mrs Gray, the mother of his best friend Billy, was like a mother figure to him. He says: "I do think she thought of me (...) as somehow a sort of long-lost son (...) in need of her womanly, indeed matronly, attentions to soothe and civilize him" (*AL* 57).²² Alex interacts with her as a manipulative child as he "confess[es] that sulking was [his] chief weapon against her (*AL* 106) and that he "often (...) found [him]self fibbing to her like this, as [he] would to [his] mother" (*AL* 61). Alex's chagrin when he doesn't have Mrs Gray's full attention is illustrated by the following quote in which Alex spies on Mrs Gray in the cinema: "How terrible it was to witness Mrs Gray caught up in such innocent enjoyment – (...) lost as she was in blissful forgetfulness, of self, of surroundings, and, most piercingly, of *me*" (*AL* 122). After the affair ended, Alex "clung to [his] mother as [he] had not done since [he] was an infant" (*AL* 224) and retreats to his "mother's room" (*AL* 245)²³, similar to his retreat to the house of his mother in *Eclipse*.

²² The motif of adoption, this time crossed with the failed Oedipus phase, is a common theme in Banville's novels.

²³ As in *Mefisto*, which refers to "mammy's room" (*Mefisto* 224) in the final pages of the novel, *Ancient Light* also ends with a reference to "mother's room" (*AL* 245). In fact, all of the novels, except *Eclipse*, include a synonym for 'mother' in their final pages, namely "Mother" (*Mefisto* 231), "my

Secondly, Alex's relationship with Mrs Gray is a re-enactment of the Oedipal competition in his family, characterized by his rivalry towards her husband and children. Alex relates how he "felt superior and more grown-up than not only Billy and his sister but than their father, too" (*AL* 39), which reveals his infantile wish to be Mrs Gray's 'everything' or 'the one and only', both her husband and her son. As with his own father, Alex does not respect Mr Gray's authority, whom he claims "had about him an air of troubled inadequacy, seeming incompetent to deal with the practicalities of everyday life" (*AL* 103). Alex also resents Mrs Gray's last name, which for him is a symbol of Mr Gray's mark on her, in fact, "[w]omen's married names never sound right, in [his] opinion" (*AL* 6). Even though Celia Gray's "husband sometimes called her Lily", Alex "do[es] not think [he] had a pet-name, a love-name, for her" (*AL* 15), thereby refusing to mimic Mr Gray's abbreviation of his wife's name. Moreover, Alex wants exclusive access to Mrs Gray's body and the thought that Mr Gray, a rival he "had made it [his] business to hate and despise", was still in the picture was for him a "hard blow to the solar plexus".

I remember what she said one day when I complacently remarked that of course she and Mr Gray could no longer be doing together what she and I so frequently did. (...) 'But I'm married to him', she said. and it was as if this simple statement should tell me all I needed to know about her relations with a man whom I had made it my business to hate and despise. I felt as if I had been delivered a haphazard yet swift, hard blow to the solar plexus. First I sulked, then I sobbed. She held me like a baby to her breast, murmuring *ssh, ssh* against my temple and rocking us both gently from side to side. (*AL* 59 - 60)

Alex's rivalry against Mrs Gray's husband reaches a climax when he indulges in the fantasy of Mr Gray's mortal illness, which mirrors Alex's victory after his father died: "The possibility that her husband was mortally ill had been taking an ever-strengthening hold on my imagination, with a consequent bolstering of my hopes of securing Mrs Gray on a long-term basis" (*AL* 210). However, "even then there would be obstacles, Kitty and [his] mother not the least of them (...) [and] Billy" (*AL* 210). These "obstacles", namely Mrs Gray's children, are a great source of agony for Alex, who envies the love and attention they receive from their mother, which the following quote illustrates.

mother" (*TBE* 212), "Poor Ma" (*AL* 244), "My mother" (*TBG* 249), which is an interesting side note to illustrate the narrator's preoccupation with his mother.

Then she [Mrs Gray] lifted a hand and laid it on his [Billy's] shoulder. This gesture too was absent-minded, but for that reason all the more shocking, to me. I was outraged, outraged to see the two of them together there, she with her hand resting so lightly on his shoulder, in the midst of all that homeliness, that shared, familiar world, while I stood by as if forgotten. Whatever liberties Mrs Gray might grant me I would never be as near to her as Billy was at that moment, as he always had been and always would be, at every moment. (*AL* 101)

Even when Mrs Gray tells Alex about her miscarriage, instead of comforting her, he can only think about Mrs Gray's love going to waste on that unborn baby instead of him: "It made me uneasy to hear of this creature [Mrs Gray's miscarried daughter], who for her mother was a vividly lingering presence, idealized and adored" (*AL* 71).

Thirdly, Alex sees Mrs Gray as a prize-object for the ego, which he wants to control and possess: "every advantage I got of her represented a nasty, miniature victory for my self-esteem and sense of lordship over her" (*AL* 149). Alex even "told her [Mrs Gray] of [his] intention to make her pregnant", something he "heard [him]self announce (...) aloud and quite as if it were a thing in need only of being accomplished" (*AL* 70), whereby he reduces her to a walking womb, a clear example of female objectification. This need to possess a woman might be explained from a psychoanalytic point of view, specifically aimed at narcissists who use women to boost their ego. Minsky notes that "[t]he problem with relationships based on love-objects who carry projected parts of the self is that there is a constant need to control the object and, conversely a persistent fear of being controlled by it" (Minsky 86 – 87). The following paragraph sums up Alex's infantile behaviour towards women: his need to have a woman all to himself, who is always available, never denies him anything and whom he can "show off boldly to the world".

[M]y childhood dream of having not a bald and inarticulated doll to cuddle and care for and operate on, but a full-sized, warm-blooded, safely widowed woman all of my own, accessible to me all day and every day, and more momentously, every night, too, a prized possession that I might show off boldly to the world, whenever and wherever I pleased. (*AL* 211)

Alex's desire to possess Mrs Gray's body is perverse: he wants her to be both his mother and his lover, an infantile and pre-Oedipal desire to have access to the "innermost secrets of [the mother's] flesh".

Yet that Mrs Gray should love me I took entirely for granted, as if it were a thing ordained within the natural order of things. Mothers were put on earth to love sons, and although I was not her son Mrs Gray was a mother, so how would she deny me anything, even the innermost secrets of her flesh? (*AL* 109)

Alex relates how he, during sex, confuses Mrs Gray for his mother: “I have a suspicion, which will not be dismissed, that on more than one occasion, in the throes of passion, I cried out the word *Mother!* Oh, dear” (*AL* 15).

The next chapter will analyze the narrator’s complete disregard for Oedipal boundaries between mothers, lovers and daughters in the novels *The Book of Evidence*, *Eclipse*, *Ancient Light* and *The Blue Guitar*.²⁴

4.3. Womanhood Eclipsed from *Eclipse* onwards

Banville’s novels contain many examples where a woman, in the narrator’s perception, can shift on the spectrum of womanhood from lover to mother and vice versa. Coughlan stated that Banville uses “the familiar binary schema of mother *versus* wife/spouse/partner or, especially in the later work, daughter-figure” (Coughlan 92). However, I would like to argue that these categories, due to the narrator’s failed Oedipal castration, often fuse into a more complex image of women. The depiction of lovers as mother figures, the confusion of mothers with lovers and, from *Eclipse* onwards, the Oedipal tension between fathers and daughters will be discussed.

To begin with, women are often described as mothers, with a focus on their capacity to give birth to the narcissistic narrator. Moreover, the narrator’s sexual encounters with his women are sometimes described as a return to the mother’s safe womb or to their childhood years. For example, Alex reflects how “[w]omen (...) fell into [him], thinking to fill [him] with all they had to give” and that “[he] was a challenge to them, their urge to create, to make life” (*Eclipse* 33).²⁵ He describes his

²⁴ The novel *Mefisto* will not be discussed in the following chapter since it contains no explicit allusions to incestuous fantasies.

²⁵ This has to do with the frustrated creativity of each protagonist, which will be further discussed in chapter five (5.2.).

sexual intercourse with Lydia as if he was “clasped in her familiar warmth like a marsupial in its mother’s pouch” (*Eclipse* 151). *Ancient Light* provides another good example of the complicated boundaries between mothers and mistresses in the form of Mrs Gray. In that novel Alex testifies that since his affair with Mrs Gray “[he] would not look at any woman, even Ma, in quite the same way ever again [and] [w]here before there had been girls and mothers, now there was something that was neither, and [he] hardly knew what to make of it” (*AL* 47). The following paragraph further illustrates how Alex believes Mrs Gray to be “of a gender all to herself”, as well as the epitome of “womanhood in its essence”, which shows how women are abstracted in Banville’s fiction, which will be the main topic in chapter five.

And she [Mrs Gray] was, for me, unique. I did not know where in the human scale to place her. Not really a woman, like my mother, and certainly not like the girls of my acquaintance, she was, as I think I have already said, of a gender all to herself. At the same time, of course, she was womanhood in its essence, the very standard by which, unconsciously or otherwise, I measured all the women who came after her in my life. (*AL* 127)

In *The Blue Guitar*, Oliver also takes it for granted that “[t]hat was what womenfolk did, they took care of [him]” (*TBG* 31), whereby he confuses women for mothers. Furthermore, Oliver experiences his sexual intercourse with Polly as a return to his childhood: “when I was with her [his mistress Polly], I (...) seemed to stray again in the midst of my own earliest days” (*TBG* 39).

Secondly, the novels *The Book of Evidence* and *Eclipse* contain passages in which the mother is eroticized. In *The Book of Evidence*, Freddie relates that during his teenage years he both felt curiosity and aversion for his mother’s body “with a big backside and slim legs, a contrast which, when [he] was an adolescent and morbidly interested in such things, led [him] to speculate on the complicated architecture that must be necessary to bridge the gap under her skirt between those shapely knees and that thick waist” (*TBE* 42). In his prison cell, Freddie also fantasizes about all the women he encountered in his life, including his mother, which reveals his perverse sexual desire for his mother’s body.

I masturbated repeatedly (...) What a motley little band of manikins I conjured up to join me in these melancholy frotings. Daphne was there, of course, and Anna Behrens (...) and poor Foxy as well (...) But there were others, too, whom I would not have expected: Madge’s niece, for

instance – (...) and the big girl with the red neck I had followed through the city streets (...) and even, God forgive me, my mother and the stable-girl. (*TBE* 203 – 204)

In *Eclipse*, Alex finds his mother sitting on the toilet with her pants on her knees after she had suffered a small stroke. Alex, who relates that “[s]he was warm and flaccid and faintly atremble”, was “shocked to find [him]self thinking of Lydia as she would be at the climax of love-making” (*Eclipse* 59).²⁶

Thirdly, from *Eclipse* onwards, the theme of the (dead) daughter is introduced, which gives rise to a new Oedipal threat, namely between the narrator and his daughter. In *Eclipse*, the hierarchy in Alex’s family is unnatural, as Alex has a tendency to conspire with his daughter against his wife. For instance, Alex remarks that it was “always, always the two of [them] [him and Cass] against poor Lydia (*Eclipse* 135). Cass in turn also alludes to a relationship with her father since even as “a little girl she used to say that as soon as she was grown-up she would marry [her father] and [they] would have a child just like her so that if she died [he] would not miss her and be lonely” (*AL* 236). Moreover, in *Shroud*, the novel following *Eclipse*, Cass dates Axel Vander, who is several years older than her, which possibly reveals her unconscious desire to date her own father. This transgression between father and daughter, never realized in real life, is made possible on a transcendental level, as was briefly remarked in the first chapter of this paper (1.2.). In his article “Echo and Coincidence in John Banville’s *Eclipse*”, Wilkinson argues that “[a]s creator and procreator of the ‘ghost trio’, Cleave casts himself as incestuous paterfamilias, a role both desired and held at bay by half denial” (Wilkinson 361). Furthermore, Wilkinson gives a new dimension to the relationship between Alex and Cass, stating that Alex’s desire for his daughter’s exclusive love is in fact a projection of his longing for his dead mother’s love: “The insistent underlying scenario is that of the adored daughter standing in for the dead mother in an exclusive relationship between father and offspring” (Wilkinson 360). Even though this is an interesting argument, Wilkinson gives no arguments, aside from the fact that Cass’ ghost appears in the mother’s house, to prove this comparison.

Moreover, in *Eclipse* and *Ancient Light* the different daughter figures Cass, Lily and Dawn are tied together, both on a stylistic level as on the level of the plot, which

²⁶ This quote illustrates that Freddie also has anal fantasies, which is a possible sign of a failed Oedipus phase.

was already mentioned in chapter one (1.2.). Moreover, they are also connected to Alex's wives and mistresses, which again blurs the distinction between daughter and partner. For instance, *Ancient Light* establishes many links between Mrs Gray and Cass. First of all, both are compared to the cult of Venus: Alex calls Mrs Gray "the Lady Venus" (*AL* 6) and Cass committed suicide at the "Portus Veneris (...) [where] long ago there was a shrine to that charming goddess" (*AL* 23). Secondly, both Mrs Gray and Cass lost their child: the first had a miscarriage and the latter was pregnant as she threw herself off a cliff. Thirdly, Alex calls Mrs Gray and Cass "[his] two lost loves" (*AL* 126). Likewise, there is a connection between Dawn Devonport and Mrs Gray: Alex remarks that Mrs Gray is "of a gender all to herself" and Dawn Devonport too leaves the impression "of being a third gender, overmastering and impregnable" (*AL* 91). Lydia, "a desert princess" (*Eclipse* 7) with the "eyes of a desert daughter" (*AL* 18) is in turn connected to her daughter Cass, whom Alex calls a "daughter of the desert" (*AL* 118).

In *The Blue Guitar*, Banville reuses the motive of the dead daughter, however Oliver's daughter only "[l]ived three years, seven months, two weeks and four days" (*TBG* 69). Like Alex, Oliver has "visitations" (*TBG* 115) at night of his deceased daughter: "My own little one, my lost Olivia, comes to me in dreams sometimes, not as she was, but as she would be now, a grown girl" (*TBG* 115). Even though Olivia never grew up to be a woman so that there was never any sexual tension between the two of them, Oliver does sleep with girls that are much younger than him. For instance, his former mistress Anneliese was "hardly more than a girl" (*TBG* 69) and Oliver uses the same diction to describe his current mistress Polly, who "seemed hardly more than a girl" (*TBG* 9) and "on whom (...) [he] had nearly a good twenty years in age" (*TBG* 154). The link between Polly and Olivia is strengthened by Oliver's epiphany "that the person lying beside [him] (...) might be [his] daughter. Yes, [his] lost daughter" (*TBG* 148). Oliver also links his wife Gloria to his younger mistress Polly by a contamination of their names: "Oh, Polly. Oh, Gloria. Oh, Poloria!" (*TBG* 152). So, even though the theme of the lost daughter is less prominent in *The Blue Guitar* because the daughter dies when she is still a child, the narrator's affairs with younger women might be interpreted as a suppressed desire for his daughter's love.

In short, this chapter revealed how Banville's novels, especially since *Eclipse*, diversify the categories of mothers, women and daughters.

5. Women Artified : Different Ways of Seeing and Creating²⁷

5.1. Women Abstracted in Images: The *Ewig-weibliche*

Critics have already noted that Banville's writing style is rich with "pictorial vocabulary and motives" (Kenny "Well Said Well Seen" 56) and that one of his signature stylistic tropes is *ekphrasis*, which is "a verbal representation of a visual representation" (Müller 186). In her article "You Have Been Framed", Müller argues that in Banville's novels "ekphrasis is used as a framing technique that is supposed to capture the elusive construct "woman" with which the narrator is so obsessed" (Müller 187). Ghassemi already linked the narrator's fascination for 'the essential woman' with the narcissistic quest for identity: "the protagonist's obsession with finding the true nature of their self and reality is seemingly intertwined with the mystery of femininity" (Ghassemi 206). This ties in with a common theme in European art, namely that "[s]eeing woman as other is [in Western art traditions] necessary to truth about the self" (Brooks qt. in Coughlan 84). This chapter will give examples from *The Book of Evidence*, *Ancient Light* and *The Blue Guitar* to analyze how the Banvillian narrator uses the ocular paradigm to abstract women and thereby attempts to capture their essence in a distilled image.

Firstly, the narrator fixes women in his mind with his "photographic gaze" (Ghassemi 211). Kenny remarked that Banville's fiction draws from the "[t]he photographic ideal of the mind's eye" (Kenny "Well Said Well Seen" 57) with "the camera [which] freezes with its cold eye" (Kenny "Well Said Well Seen" 58) the image of a woman. In doing so, the narrator wants to grasp the mystery of womanhood, which in Banville's novels is always linked with sight. The obsession with pictures and women is first introduced in *The Book of Evidence*, the first novel in the 'Frame Trilogy', which relates Freddie's encounter with the painted *Woman in*

²⁷ Critics argue that since the Frame Trilogy, Banville starts to focus on the different techniques to frame women. Since *Mefisto*, which appeared in the Science Tetralogy, is concerned with scientific riddles and less occupied with the mystery of femininity, examples from this novel will be less prominent in chapter five.

Gloves (chapter 3.1.). In *Ancient Light*, Alex's memory is strongly visual and he tries to "fix her [Mrs Gray] fully in [his] mind and make her of a piece" (*AL* 47). Moreover, Alex says that he "had the sense (...) of having been granted a glimpse into the world of womanhood itself, of having been let in, if only for a second or two, on the great secret" after he saw a woman's "shapely legs and fascinatingly complicated underthings" (*AL* 6) as the wind blew under her skirt. Alex's obsession to unravel the mystery of womanhood is illustrated by his childhood fantasy about a generic woman: "I used to entertain a recurring fantasy in which I was required to attend to certain cosmetic requirements of a grown-up woman[, who] was never specific, but generic, woman in the abstract, I suppose, the celebrated *Ewigweibliche*" (*AL* 166).

Oliver, the narrator of Banville's most recent novel, also links the mystery of women to sight as "[i]t is for [him] one of the secular miracles (...) that women are as they are", and "[he] [doesn't] speak here of their minds, their intellects, their sensibilities (...) [but of] the visible, the tactile, the graspable fact of womanly flesh" (*TBG* 112). To illustrate this, Oliver explains how taking a woman's body in through his eyes is for him the most tactile sensation: "[A] woman's body has more to say than that of any other creature, infinitely more, to my ear, at any rate, or to my eye" because "[l]ooking and listening, listening and looking, these, for one such as I, are the intensest ways of touching, of caressing, of possessing" (*TBG* 112). In the following quote Oliver describes his desire to let his painter's eye float over women's exterior bodies in order to capture them as his images.

It strikes me that what I have always done was to let my eye play over the whole world like weather, thinking I was making it mine, more, making it me, while in truth I had no more effect than sunlight or rain (...) All in vain. The world, and women, are what they always were and will be, despite my most insistent efforts. (*TBG* 184)

As the novel advances, Oliver has "a breathtaking revelation [, namely] that there is no such thing as woman" and that "Woman (...) is a thing of a legend, a phantasm who flies through the world, settling here and there on this or that suspecting mortal female, whom she turns, briefly but momentarily, into an object of yearning, veneration and terror" (*TBG* 131). Oliver's choice of words, namely "yearning" and "terror" is intriguing and suggests, as chapter three has elaborately illustrated, that for

Banville's narrators the longing and fear for women is always intertwined. Moreover, this quote clearly illustrates the narrator's obsession with the entity of the 'Woman'.

Nevertheless, by distilling a woman to a superficial image, the narrator does not relate to her in a subjective mode; rather, as the psychoanalyst Mary Ayers notes, "[t]he image of objectification is a camera which 'looks always at and never into what it sees'" (Barfield qt. in Ayers 31). In fact, Ghassemi argues that it is impossible to grasp the woman in her totality as the "imaginary body, [according to] Brooks, is knowable 'only partially, metonymically, and fetishistically' (100)" (Ghassemi 212). Indeed, the narrator's mental collages of women are too often focussed on different body parts and zoom in on details of their external appearance. For instance, in *The Book of Evidence*, Freddie "mainly focuses on the highlighted visible parts of the [painted] woman's body (i.e. her hands, head, hair and face)" (Müller 189). Whereas Freddie metaphorically disassembles the portrait of the *Woman in Gloves*, he literally dismembers Josie Bell by brutally killing her with a hammer. In *Ancient Light*, a novel about Alex's recollections of his childhood love Mrs Gray, Alex says that "of Mrs Gray herself [he] was unable to call up a satisfactory clear and coherent image" and that he "could remember her, certainly [he] could, but only as a series of disparate and dispersed parts" (AL 46). He recalls her as "a body as it were dismembered, or should [he] say disassembled" (AL 30), "a fragmented woman" (AL 31) but "the woman herself, the total she, that was what [he] could not have over again, in [his] mind" (AL 46 - 47). Again, the use of the word "disassembled" illustrates how Alex's mental processes metaphorically fragment the image of Mrs Gray. In *The Blue Guitar*, Oliver is faced with a similar ordeal, namely to recall a coherent image of his mistress Polly: "I could recall, and can recall, every tiniest thing about her [Polly], in vividest and achingmost detail (...) but of the essential she only a wraith remained, ungraspable as a woman in a dream" (TBG 188).

Thus, all narrators picture women with their photographic eye, which results in an objectified, abstracted and fragmented representation of women. In the following chapter, another mechanism of abstraction will be discussed, namely the recreation of women as *objects d'art*.

5.2. Recreated women: Paintings, Sculptures and Theatre

Women in Banville's fiction are represented as paintings, sculptures and theatrical scenes, which are often erotic in nature. In recreating women in his fantasy, the narrator aspires to be a divine magician who creates a world of his own to keep the real one at bay. The narrators, aspiring Prosperos, Adams and Pygmalions, aim to provide a male alternative for the female archcreativity of giving birth. Their frustrated creativity can be explained by their womb-envy or the jealousy of a woman's faculty to give birth, the ultimate creative output. In her book *Psychoanalysis and Gender*, Minsky writes that "Klein's concept of womb-envy is very important for our understanding of male misogyny" (Minsky 100).

From a Kleinian perspective, patriarchal power and control may be seen as fuelled substantially by male envy of 'femininity', of what is perceived as the creative, life-giving power that 'woman' originally symbolizes for the infant. (Minsky 100)

This chapter will discuss the different types of Banvillian creators, namely mathematicians, painters and actors who use their imagination, linguistic constructions and paint to recreate the women in their *milieu*.

To begin with, in Banville's scientific novel *Mefisto*, the mathematical "prodigy" (*Mefisto* 52) Gabriel is employed on an international project financed by the minister to discover a formula to unveil "the meaning of life" (*Mefisto* 170). Gabriel, however, has his own personal agenda: he wants to bring his deceased twin brother, who died in childbirth, back to life with this scientific formula.²⁸

It was here, in the big world, that I would meet what I was waiting for, that perfect simple, ravishing, unchallengeable formula (...) At times I felt it would burst out into being by its own force. And with it, surely would come everything else, that dead half of me I had hauled around always at my side would somehow tremble into life, and I would be made whole, I don't know how, I don't know, but I believed it, I wanted to believe it. (*Mefisto* 186)

²⁸ Gabriel "was obsessed with the mystery of the unit" (*Mefisto* 18), which can symbolize his obsession to restore the lost union of him and his twin brother.

In *The Book of Evidence*, Freddie, unlike the other narrators, does not master a creative skill, but is an ardent admirer of the arts, a fascination triggered by his encounter with the painting of a Dutch woman. In her article about framing techniques in the Frame Trilogy, Müller writes that Freddie gives three different accounts of the *Woman in Gloves*, which reveal three different ‘ways of seeing’: first he focuses on her different body parts, secondly he gives an objective account of the facts and figures of the painting and thirdly he fantasizes about the circumstances in which the lady’s portrait was taken. Chapter three (3.1.) already illustrated Freddie’s imaginative construction of the *Woman in Gloves*, which was his attempt to bring the painted woman to life. In contrast, Freddie “killed” a woman of flesh and blood “because for [him] she was not alive” (*TBE* 215), for which he believes his failed imagination is to blame: “This is the worst, the essential sin, I think, the one for which there will be no forgiveness: that I never imagined her vividly enough, that I never made her be there sufficiently, that I did not make her live” (*TBE* 215).

The protagonist of *Eclipse* and *Ancient Light* is an actor whose desire it is to infuse life into his characters, namely “to be them, the voiceless ones” (*Eclipse* 11). In fact, Alex also imagines new lives and storylines for women in his environment. For instance, before he knew Lydia he “made up lives for her”, namely that “[s]he was foreign, of course, the runaway daughter of an aristocratic family” (*Eclipse* 34). An even more striking example is his mental creation of a ghost trio featuring his dead daughter, her unborn child and himself, visions his mind conjured up “for everything, their very existence, depended on [him]” (*Eclipse* 167). In addition, Alex frequently uses cinematic or theatrical elements as well as references to art and literature to describe his women. For example, when Alex sees his wife Lydia sleepwalking he is “reminded of one of those tragic queens in the Greek drama” (*AL* 19). He further refers to Lydia in terms of colours by describing her “thick dark hair [through which] a broad plume of silver flows up from the left temple, a starting silver frame” (*Eclipse* 7). Furthermore, Alex describes Mrs Gray’s naked body by a range of greyish colours, a clear allusion to her name: “[h]er colours, for me, were grey, naturally, but a particular lilac-grey, and umber, and rose, and another tint, hard to name –dark tea? bruised honeysuckle?” (*AL* 127). In the following quote Alex also seems to mentally paint Mrs Gray in a variety of colours and shades.

Rubens has a lot to answer for – her [Mrs Gray’s] body displayed, disconcertingly, a range of muted tints from magnesium white to silver and tin, a scumbled sort of yellow, pale ochre, and even in places a faint greenishness and, in the hollows, a shadowing of mossy mauve. (*AL* 30)

According to Ghassemi, who analysed the *Eclipse-Shroud* trilogy in his PhD, “[w]hat is invoked is the idea that the narrator imposes his colours on the woman as a clean slate, so to speak, the woman as a “pale”, uncoloured canvas” where “[h]e is not so much interested in representing her as he is obsessed with presenting his own – painted – versions of her” (Ghassemi 230). In other words, Alex displaces the mother’s giving life by a male kind of creation, which to him is more intense than ‘normal’ life.

In Banville’s latest novel, *The Blue Guitar*, Oliver is a painter and perhaps in that respect the most prototypical Banvillian narrator as he does not only mentally, but also literally distil women on canvas.²⁹ Painting is for him an attempt “to take the world into [him]self and make it over, to make something new of it, something vivid and vital” (*TBG* 58) like “[a] boa constrictor [with] a huge, wide-open mouth slowly, slowly swallowing, trying to swallow, gagging on enormity (*TBG* 58).³⁰ Oliver constantly envisions women as paintings, both in colour and composition “[since] [that]’s what [he] do[es], [he] transform everything into a scene and frame[s] it” (*TBG* 116). For instance, his mistress “Polly in a white summer dress” reminds him of “Manet’s *Déjeuner sur l’herbe*” (*TBG* 9) and when she “sat with her fists pressed to her cheek, gazing starkly before her, [she reminded him of] that oddly blurry angel in Dürer’s *Melencolia*” (*TBG* 114). Oliver’s wife Gloria, on the other hand is more of a “Tiepolo” type, whom he describes by various colours and metallic shades.

I think of her in terms of various metals, gold, of course, because of her hair, and silver for her skin, but there is something in her too of the opulence of brass and bronze: she has a wonderful shine to her, a stately glow. In fact, she is a Tiepolo type rather than a Manet type, one of the Venetian master’s Cleopatras, say, or his Beatrice of Burgundy. (*TBG* 9)

²⁹ Oliver also made a painting of his mother on her deathbed: it was “like a sacred relic, the portrait I did of my mother when she was dying” (*TBG* 249).

³⁰ This is an image of the dangerous, smothering and child-devouring mother.

Another female character, “Miss Vandeleur[,] (...) had the look of a ravaged version of the flower-strewing Flora to the left of the central figure in Sandro Boticelli’s much admired if slightly saccharine *Primavera*” (TBG 32). Moreover, Oliver’s descriptions of women also contain references to the theatre. For example, Oliver’s wife Gloria is “such a wonderfully old-fashioned creature, both chilly and warm, like one of those vamps in the old movies” (TBG 192). Moreover, Oliver imagines that his wife will reveal herself to him by performing a striptease, a mix of theatre and corporality: “Despite the time that we have been together I still feel like an old-style bridegroom on his wedding night, waiting with burning impatience and not a little trepidation for his brand-new bride to let fall her chemise and loose her stays and at last reveal herself in all her blushing bareness” (TBG 91). Nevertheless, Oliver, as all the other narrators, quits his artistic profession.³¹

Aside from framing women as paintings, narrators like to give women different names, which satisfies their fantasy to be endowed with Adam’s power of nomenclature. First of all, it is important to note that the names Banville attributes to his characters, are never coincidental but that the “naming of characters is one of Banville’s favourite stylistic games, a kind of shorthand or poetic code” (McMinn 183).³² In an interview with Haughton and Radley, Banville remarked: “I think every novelist knows this, that once you’ve got the names, you’ve got the thing beaten; you’ve wrestled it to the ground” (Banville qt. in Haughton and Radley 858). Secondly, the male narrators either exploit the names of the female characters to underscore their objectifying meaning, or they adorn their women with new nicknames, labelling them as mythological figures or as animals.

For example, in *The Book of Evidence*, Freddie rejoices in his wife Daphne’s name because it refers to a myth in which a woman is objectified: the nymph Daphne, a daughter of the river god Pineios and the goddess of the earth Gaia, is turned into a laurel tree by her father to secure her from the furious embraces of the love-struck

³¹ Gabriel has stopped his quest for the mathematical formula to decipher life and “will leave things (...) to chance” (*Mefisto* 234). Alex’s acting career in the theatre stopped after he played the role of Amphitryon, however in *Ancient Light* he features in a movie about Axel Vander. The “last thing [Oliver] was working on, the unfinished piece that finished [him] for good [was] the blimp-coloured guitar” (TBG 103).

³² Either Banville’s names can be taken literally, or they are anagrams which can be deciphered.

Apollo. Freddie's preference for fantasy names is further illustrated in the passage where he calls his one-night stand, whose real name is "Marian" (*TBE* 183), "[his] Gretchen" (*TBE* 183) because "[s]he smelled the blood and the horror and did not recoil" (*TBE* 182) and is thus prepared to temporarily submerge herself in his darkness in the same way Gretchen betrayed her morals to be with Faust. Afterwards, Freddie calls his one-night stand "a ravaged Nefertiti" (*TBE* 183), which, aside from her beauty, describes how she is used, besmirched and "ravaged" by their brief sexual encounter.

In *Eclipse*, Alex's pet names for Cass, namely "Joan of Arc" (*Eclipse* 74), Zephyr (*Eclipse* 203) and "My Marina, my Miranda, oh, my Perdita" (*Eclipse* 214)³³ are borrowed from literary and historic sources, whereby she is stripped from her individuality and embedded in an overarching cultural tradition. Alex also uses several mythical names to describe Mrs Gray, of which "Sheherazade and Penelope" (*AL* 124), "Danaë"³⁴ and "Rembrand's Saskia" (*AL* 148) are a few striking examples. Moreover, Lydia's name is "a mishearing of [his] that stuck" (*AL* 17) because Alex prefers the elegant name Lydia over her "real, or given, name (...) Leah" (*Eclipse* 35), whereby she is reduced to an acoustic figure in his mental poetry. Alex also claims that "this surrender and substitution of names", namely the shift from Leah which in "in Hebrew (...) means cow" (*Eclipse* 36) to the more elegant and refined name Lydia, "worked a deeper change in her than one of mere nomenclature [because] [f]rom Leah to Lydia is no small journey" (*Eclipse* 35). This assumes a literal interpretation of names, which can be frequently detected in *Eclipse* and *Ancient Light*, as if Lydia literally metamorphosed from a 'cow' into a 'princess'. Some striking examples, among many more, are "Miss Flushing, Mr Gray's assistant" (*AL* 182) whose cheeks appear to be permanently 'flushed' as she "gave a sense of all-over fairness and pinkness, and there was a faint, delicate shine, like that on the inner whorl of a seashell, along the edges of her nostrils and the rims of her slightly starting eyes" (*AL* 183). Another example is "Miss Kettle" (*Eclipse* 196) who is described as a "secret tenant of the house", who is "wearing [his] mother's apron", "poured the tea" and "prepared one of those quintessential, archaic meals of childhood" (*Eclipse* 196).

³³ Wilkinson writes that "early in his tale, Cleave refers to his daughter as Miranda, invoking *The Tempest* and Prospero's jealous attachment to his only daughter" (Wilkinson 367).

³⁴ Danaë, like Leda, was one of Zeus' abused women.

Next to mythological and literary names, the narrators also attribute names and adjectives to the female characters that refer to animals. Interestingly, women are often described by isotopies of birds, which is a striking inversion of the Leda myth: while Leda was raped by Zeus disguised as a swan, she is the one who is turned into a bird here. Leda is one of those divinely abused women, and in that sense vintage Banville, whose narrators always abuse women by either re-codifying them in Classic mythology or by traditional European (male) paintings. Alex, for instance, describes how having sexual intercourse with Lydia was “like clasping in [his] arms a big marvellous flustered bird that cooed and cawed and thrashed wild wings and shuddered at the end and sank down beneath [him] helplessly with faint woeful-sounding cries” (*Eclipse* 38). Dawn Devonport is in turn described as “a plucked chicken” (*AL* 90) whose “hand (...) [resembles] a bird’s claw” (*AL* 213). Cass has a nickname borrowed from the animal world, namely “Hedgehog (...) because of the tiny snuffling noises she made” (*Eclipse* 42). Moreover, Alex found Kitty’s name quite soothing as she was a “little monster” (*AL* 100) and “there was something feline in the way she would slit her eyes when she smiled at [him]” (*AL* 13).

Lastly, the narrator’s dream of conception is also present in his desire to give birth to his daughter. For instance, Alex calls his daughter Cass “My Minerva” (*Eclipse* 125), referring to “[t]he myth of Jupiter and Minerva, Cleave’s dream of paternal conception” (Wilkinson 367). Wilkinson writes that “[e]lsewhere, Cass is linked to Minerva, the virgin goddess (Greek Athena) who emerged fully armed from the head of her father, Jupiter” (Wilkinson 367). Likewise, Oliver self-importantly boosts that “Olivia, [their] daughter was called, after [him], obviously” (*TBG* 69), as if he is excluding his wife Gloria from their daughter’s conception. Furthermore, the narrator’s womb-envy extends even further as their male imagination needs the destruction of their parents so that they can be their own parent, a typical narcissistic character trait.³⁵ For example, on the final page of *Mefisto*, Gabriel declares: “I want no protectors now. I want to be, to be, what, I don’t know. Naked. Flayed. A howling babe, waving furious fists. I don’t know” (*Mefisto* 234). Oliver, in *The Blue Guitar*, similarly remarks: “it was the death of my parents I secretly looked forward to,

³⁵ This is closely connected to the narrator’s inability to acknowledge transgenerational boundaries, which was discussed in chapter four (4.1.).

thinking it must be the birth of me, a delivery into my true state of selfhood” (*TBG* 201 - 202).

Thus, the narrator’s innate urge to (re)create women by representing them as tableaux and sculptures or with references to the theatre and by attributing names to them, borrowed from literary and mythological references or from isotopies of animals, is not only a means of abstraction, but also a way to deal with their womb-envy and overall paranoia. Nevertheless, one could argue that they appear as reversed Pygmalions who turn women into *objects d’art* instead of the other way around.

5.3. Male Voyeurism and Female Exhibitionism: The Convention of The Nude

Women are not only painted by the narrator’s ‘imaginative pencil’, they are, at the same time, submitted to the pictorial traditions of the nude in Western oil painting, where the supposed observer and owner of the painting is male, the depicted subject a naked woman. Müller wrote that Banville’s “women are constructed – in the narrator’s imagination – along the line of a painterly tradition that represents them as objects of the male imagination and of the gaze” (Müller 187). Ghassemi has a similar opinion as Müller; he writes that “women are assigned in the “exhibitionist role” wherein their appearance becomes “coded for strong visual and erotic impact” (Ghassemi 208). This chapter will briefly show how, since the Frame Trilogy, the male gaze of Banville’s narrators transforms the female characters into nudes, with explanations from John Berger’s *Ways of Seeing*.

Indeed, voyeuristic fantasies are common phenomena in Banville’s novels. Freddie, for instance, fantasizes about the “big girl with the red neck he had followed through the streets” (*TBE* 204) and Alex is “a secret stalker” who “follow[s] people, pick[s] them out at random in the street and shadow[s] them” (*Eclipse* 100). Alex, who has been spying on a red-haired woman in her bathroom, says that “[i]nnocent of being watched, she was naked; aware of [his] eye on her, she would have turned into a nude” (*Eclipse* 101). Alex’s description reveals his knowledge of the pictorial nude, which John Berger has elaborated on in his book *Ways of Seeing*. Berger claims that “[a] naked body has to be seen as an object in order to become a nude” and that “[n]akedness reveals itself [,whereas] [n]udity is placed on display” (Berger 54). In

fact, Alex's descriptions of his lover Mrs Gray are strongly determined by this painterly tradition of the nude as Mrs Gray's body is often strategically posed in order to display her nudity to Alex. For example, Alex's first view of Mrs Gray's body was through "the central panel of the mirror on the dressing-table (...), [which] framed her torso, breasts and belly and that smudge of darkness lower down, while the panels at either side showed her arms and her elbows" and he saw her "single eye, somewhere at the top, fixed on [him] levelly and with the hint of a challenge, as if to say *Yes, here I am, what do you make of me?*" (AL 30). Alex even takes this pictorial tradition to another level when he imagines himself to transcend from his human body in order to watch him and Mrs Gray making love.

[A]nd then –it was the strangest thing –then I saw us there, actually saw us, as if I were standing in the doorway looking into the room, saw me hunched against her, canted a little to the left with my shoulder lifted, saw the shirt wet between my shoulder-blades and the seat of my wet trousers sagging, saw my hands on her, and one of her glossy knees flexed, and her face paling above my left shoulder and her eyes staring. (AL 219 - 220)

Similarly, Alex has a dream in which he is allowed "only a three-quarters view" of "a woman (...) lying back, young, ample, impossibly pale-skinned, her naked arms lifted and hiding her face in abandonment and shame" and a "slave [who] turned her head and looked at [him] over her shoulder with a broad, jaunty grin and for [his] benefit joggled her mistress's gaping flesh" (*Eclipse* 25). Alex's dream is reminiscent of Berger's analysis of the painting *Allegory of Time and Love* by Bronzino in which "[h]er [the nude's] body is the way it is, to display it to the man looking at the picture[,] (...) to appeal to his sexuality[, whereas] [i]t has nothing to do with her sexuality" (Berger 55).

In her analysis of *The Book of Evidence*, Müller wrote that "Freddie represents his own obsession with the *Woman with Gloves* within a conventional, cultural and ideological framework of gendered roles within the field of vision that supposes that looking is a "male" activity while the object of looking is gendered as "female" " (Müller 190).³⁶ Furthermore, Freddie's wife Daphne is described as a nymph who is

³⁶ Chapter three analyzed the impact of the painted woman's defiant gaze in *The Book of Evidence*, which reverses these gender roles and in turn gives Freddie the feeling that he is the one who is being watched.

“looking away with a small frown, while some minor god in the shape of a faun (...) vainly playing his heart out for her” (*TBE* 7): the theme of the faun spying on a beautiful naked, often sleeping woman who is either a nymph or a goddess, is another thematic variation of Western nudes.

Thus, Banville’s women are subjected to an objectifying male gaze, which transforms them into nudes. The following chapter will discuss another convention in Western art, namely the depiction of nudes as divine creatures.

5.4. *Femmes Fatales, Witches and Goddesses*

This chapter will discuss the narrator’s tendency to idolize or despise women, which will be linked to his womb-envy and narcissistic character. Banville’s women are either represented as divine goddesses, often linked with the cult of Mother Mary (chapter 1.2.), or as stereotypical witches or whores, with allusions to the amorous goddess Venus or to the seductive Eve. In his book *John Banville*, Kenny links these references to divine women to the pictorial tradition: “Banville’s idealized Woman is the contemporary fetishized and idolized version of the beautiful women lyrically described in the idylls of classical Greek poetry, the original examples of pictorial obsession” (Kenny *John Banville* 158). This chapter will give examples from the novels *The Book of Evidence*, *Eclipse*, *Ancient Light* and *The Blue Guitar* to illustrate how the narrator elevates or castigates the female characters.

Firstly, the binary image of women can be linked to the narrator’s womb envy. In her book *Psychoanalysis and Gender*, Minsky writes that “[t]he cultural representation of women by patriarchal men as ‘Madonna’, ‘goddess’, ‘whore’, ‘chick’ or ‘witch’ as either infinitely powerful or utterly helpless, suggests the presence of idealisation and denigration and an ambivalent relationship between patriarchal men and women which is saturated with male dependency projected unto women” (Minsky 93 – 94). Moreover, Minsky links these radical shifts between adoration and abjection to the narrator’s narcissism. She explains that “[t]he idealisation of someone else, as with the mother, inevitably involves a parallel idealisation of the self; it enables those who idealize to introject or fill themselves up with a good reflection of the self” (Minsky 93). Therefore, a narcissist falls in love with his own enhanced self-image reflected in his lover’s eyes, but shies away from

the relationship once the spell is broken because his lover's human flaws inevitably remind him of his own, which explains why Banville's narrators always run away when their relationships become challenging or why they embark on extramarital relationships to boost their ego.

In *Eclipse* and *Ancient Light*, for instance, Alex either elevates or detests his wives and mistresses. For example, Alex alternatively represents his wife Lydia as a "desert princess, striding amidst a sea of sand" (*Eclipse* 7), a maternal figure or "home-maker" (*Eclipse* 157) and a whore who was "swaying her meagre hips, the little slut" (*Eclipse* 156). She is also described as a feline, seductress as he "did not like that smile, complicit, feline, expressive of that primitive conspiracy of the flesh [they] had entered upon again in the night" (*Eclipse* 153). Moreover, Alex "often think[s] that in another age [his] Lydia might have been taken for a witch" (*AL* 77). Furthermore, Alex's lover Dora was "[his] first manifestation of the muse" (*AL* 84), and is described as "a sort of inverted mother, carnal and profane" (*Eclipse* 84). Similarly, Mrs Gray is both a maternal and a seductive woman, which was already remarked by O'Connell: "From his [Alex's] first glimpse of her, he fabricates an idealized version of her as a kind of sexualized maternal figure ('My Venus Domestica'), a composite embodiment of feminine ideals" (O'Connell 34). Indeed, Mrs Gray is compared to "the Lady Venus" (*AL* 10) or "the amatory goddess" (*AL* 33) and her birth month is situated in April, which is the month of Venus. Moreover, Mrs Gray is also compared to the seductive Eve: Alex describes her and Mrs Gray after their sexual intercourse as "bashful (...) as Adam and Eve in the garden after the apple was eaten" (*AL* 43). Nevertheless, when Mrs Gray releases an "abrupt soft fart", her divine aura is shattered and Alex finds her "thoroughly, inescapably, at times dismayingly, human, with all a human's frailties and failings" (*AL* 126). In Banville's latest book, Oliver's image of women similarly shifts drastically from "adoration [to] abjection" (*TBG* 148), especially with his mistress Polly, who after the initial butterflies had vanished, "had lost something essential" so that she was "unavoidably herself (...) and not what [he] had made of her" (*TBG* 175). When Polly falls off her pedestal, she becomes terrifyingly human.

As a deity, the deity of my own desiring, she had been perfectly comprehensible, my very own little Venus reclining in the crook of my arm; now, as what she really was, herself and nothing more, a human creature made of flesh and blood and bone, she was terrifying. (*TBG* 178)

In short, in Banville's fiction the narrator's perspective on women shifts from idealization to abjection. Similar to his quest for the essence of womanhood, the stereotypical representation of women as either saints or whores shows his childishness as well as his fear for women and his subsequent desire to embed them in abstract categories in order to keep them at a less threatening distance.

6. Is Banville an Anti-feminist Writer or not?

So far, this paper has illustrated the several ways in which the female characters in Banville's oeuvre are silenced, transformed into abstract entities and reduced to the narrator's imagination and creativity. This raises the question of whether or not Banville is an anti-feminist writer. This chapter will provide an overview of the opinions of the critics discussed in this paper as a starting point for a meaningful debate.

Some critics argue that Banville uses the convention of the male gaze and the pictorial nude to adapt or even uncover the framing techniques commonly used in Western art. Kenny, for instance, argues that "[t]he concept of the male gaze (predatory, lustful, idealizing) is just that: a concept, a literary and artistic figure or trope" (Kenny *John Banville* 150) and that "[d]esire and the object of desire operate as a union in Banville, but [that] this must be thought of not in terms of any discussions about real or accurate characterizations of women but as a symbolic enactment of the concept of the sublime" (Kenny *John Banville* 163). Anja Müller also claims that in the Frame Trilogy "[o]n a metatextual level, the very idea of the frame is challenged as an instrument that guides our perception and presents us with an immediate sign" (Müller 201). She writes that "Banville's excessive play with frames thus shifts the reader's attention away from the represented women within the frame to the very mechanisms of representation itself" (Müller 201). On the other hand, Coughlan argues that rather than exposing the frames, Banville's postmodern fictions do not question, let alone subvert the existing conventions of female objectification.

But can we argue that these fictions of Banville, while putting so much in question epistemologically, ideologically, even ontologically, do other than leave the gender system untouched? And if not, is it a flaw in his art? (...) Despite the irony, satiric representation of solipsism, and postmodern de-substantiating, do these texts continue to ‘project the [feminine] other as an outside, as a space of ideological escape from Western rationality’? (Foster qt. in Coughlan 97 - 98)

In contrast, D’hoker says that since Banville’s vision of art is summarized in the poetical idea of *l’art pour l’art*, the question whether Banville’s representations of women are ethical is redundant. D’hoker’s arguments are founded on “Banville’s depreciative statements about the political and personal content of art” (D’hoker *Visions of Alterity* 77) and his statement in an interview with Fintan O’Toole that “Art is amoral, that is neither moral nor immoral” (Banville qt. in D’Hoker *Visions of Alterity* 77). Ghassemi also claims that the representation of women does not necessarily reflect the narrator’s view on women, but rather reveals the male protagonist’s narcissistic need to find his authentic identity through the (female) other. He argues that “Banville’s fiction is an exploration of the alterity at the heart of any subjectivity, of the fact that the self is never self-contained” (Ghassemi 236).

In short, this brief overview illustrates that there is no consensus on whether or not Banville’s fiction is anti-feminist and that there is still room for discussion.

7. Conclusion

In this paper I investigated the representation of women, with a particular focus on mothers, in five novels from different periods in Banville’s oeuvre, drawing from existing articles on femininity and erotica in Banville’s work and Anglo-Saxon psychoanalysis specifically targeted on the narcissist’s behaviour towards the (female) other. The first chapter illustrated Banville’s fascination for divinely abused women and its implications on the paternal uncertainty and divine maternity in his novels. Moreover, this chapter zoomed in on the devotion to Mother Mary, which can be linked to the narrator’s fascination for his mother, as a recurring theme in Banville’s fiction. In addition, I illustrated how the narrator uses religious symbolism and the ghosts of his dead family members to come to terms with his past and to keep his parents and/or daughter at a safer distance than in real life. Moreover, I have proved

that the mother's home, the locus of these uncanny encounters and the place to which every narrator retreats, is an important motif in all of the novels discussed and functions as a magnified version of the deceased mother's womb. The main topic in chapter two is the narcissist's perception of women as an extension of himself, his reduction of them to mirroring surfaces and his avoidance of emotional confrontations. Especially Oliver, the protagonist of Banville's most recent novel, is a prototype of the heartless, insensitive and egoistic Banvillian narrator. Chapter three elaborates on how the narrator is afflicted by the other's alterity, manifested in their eyes and corporeality, which results in shame. Moreover, I argued that it is not only the physical presence of women the narrators find disconcerting, but also their sexual agency, especially when two women conspire against the male protagonist. In the fourth chapter, I argued that the pre-Oedipal competitive behaviour of the narcissist towards male authorities and his high demand for his mother's attention causes him to give a highly subjective description of his memories, in which he minimizes the impact of father figures and siblings. Moreover, his infantile behaviour towards women and his manipulation, use and abuse of women for his own pleasure was discussed. Furthermore, I discussed the narrator's disrespect for Oedipal boundaries, which become increasingly complicated towards Banville's more recent novels: whereas *The Book of Evidence* already included Freddie's sexual fantasies of his mother, *Eclipse* introduces a new incestuous fantasy, namely that of the father-daughter relationship. In *Ancient Light*, the Banvillian narrator fulfils his fantasy to sleep with a mother figure, namely Mrs Gray. Thus, the distinction between wives, mothers and daughters becomes increasingly blurred, except for *The Blue Guitar*, in which the narrator's obsession with his dead daughter is less prominent than in *Eclipse*. In chapter five, I described the common defence mechanisms the narrator uses to neutralize the female threat. First, the narrator's obsession to capture the mystery of womanhood in a mental photograph, which results in fragmented collages of the female characters, is discussed. Secondly, the narrator's attempt to (re)create women as an alternative for the female giving birth was examined with a focus on how women are described by isotopies linked to art, literature and theatre and on how they are labelled with new mythological or animalistic names. Oliver, the protagonist of *The Blue Guitar*, a painter who not only mentally but also literally transforms women into painted subjects, turned out to be the personification of the typical creative Banvillian narrator. Furthermore, the narrator's ultimate desire to give birth

to his daughter and, more radically even, to himself was discussed. I concluded that Banville's narrators are rather reversed Pygmalions who, instead of infusing inanimate paintings or sculptures with life, turn women into lifeless *objects d'art*. Thirdly, Banville's women are not only described as tableaux, but also submitted to the pictorial tradition of the nude, which means that they are subjected to the narrator's male objectifying gaze. Fourthly, the narrator's radical shifts from adoration to abjection and the binary image of women as both goddesses and whores were illustrated. In the sixth chapter I gave a brief overview of the current debate on the possible anti-feminist nature of Banville's fiction. I agree with Müller that, whether Banville's novels are anti-feminist or not, they provide interesting illustrations on the many ways in which women can be framed and objectified.

Overall, this thesis has tried to reveal an essential paradox in Banville's oeuvre, namely the contrast between the absence and neglect of a female voice on the one hand and the overwhelming, all-encompassing, threatening and mysterious presence of women that pervades all of the novels discussed on the other. Banville's narrators, even though they neglect the women in their *milieu*, are obsessed with "womanhood in its essence" (*AL* 127) and the "conundrum" of "motherhood" (*TBG* 117). For that reason I believe that additional research in different novels on the role of women and mothers will be a valuable addition, not only to this thesis, but also to the study of Banville's oeuvre in general.

8. Use of Sigla

The abbreviations used for the novels discussed are: *Mefisto* (*Mefisto*), *The Book of Evidence* (*TBE*), *Eclipse* (*Eclipse*), *Ancient Light* (*AL*), *The Blue Guitar* (*TBG*).

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