The Comic Uncanny in John Banville's *Eclipse*

In an article following the award of the 2005 Man Booker Prize, Boyd Tonkin contrasted a shortlist full of "riches and delights" with John Banville's "icy and over-controlled exercise in coterie aestheticism", describing *The Sea* as "lifeless, pallid work".[1] Although the virulence of this critique stands out, Tonkin was drawing on and perpetuating a longstanding caricature of Banville's writing as forbiddingly unfunny. Such mischaracterisation matters. Firstly, as I have argued elsewhere in relation to the strand of cruel comedy in his oeuvre, humour is a key facet of Banville's aesthetic.[2] Secondly, despite something of a comic turn in literary studies since the mid-2000s, humour is currently an under-researched facet of fiction not just within the Banvillean sub-field but also in academic writing on the contemporary Irish novel more generally. John Kenny's 2009 monograph therefore begins on an instructively sceptical note by questioning Banville's "reputation for incorrigible seriousness" both in person and on paper, later remarking that "Banville has regularly and rightfully complained that the different types of comedy in his work often seem passed over in the criticism".[3] Yet Kenny is still one of the few critics to devote even a paragraph to the role of comedy in Banville's prose. Most academic commentators pay lip service to humour before moving on to more starchily serious business. Bevin Doyle sums up the situation: "The comedic element in Banville's prose is widely acknowledged but largely overlooked".[4] This trend is particularly marked given the focus on forms of humour in, say, Irish modernist prose, and given that Vivien Mercier's *The Irish Comic Tradition* (1962) is among the foundational texts of Irish Studies. By contrast, the criticism offers frequent and substantive emphasis on the Banvillean uncanny, which is often presented as a defining feature of the writer's later work.[5] I propose here that Banville's fiction demonstrates the conjunction of the comic and the uncanny, exposing how they work as interrelated, mutually productive modes – especially when theatricality is also in play, as in *Eclipse* (2000). Sharing techniques,

effects, and concerns – doubling and double-takes, repetition, insinuation and implication, and defamiliarization, for example – the two combine to create a profoundly unsettling aesthetic. This approach emphasizes comedy's potential as a conceptual tool with which to approach the many strange and humorous dissonances of contemporary Irish writing and, more broadly, the novel now.

Sigmund Freud's 1919 essay 'The "Uncanny"' is frequently funny. Consider the psychoanalyst's anecdote of being lost in an insalubrious part of a 'small Italian town' – in 'a district about whose character [he] could not long remain in doubt'. Repeatedly attempting to leave, the hapless Freud keeps finding himself 'back in the same street, where [his] presence began to attract attention'.[6] His bumbling, embarrassed attempts to escape the prostitutes' gaze have all the hallmarks of farce, and the uncanny situation is fraught with incipient laughter. Indeed, in his influential study of the uncanny, Nicholas Royle remarks in a note that his own interest 'is intimately bound up with humour, laughter, and the threat or promise of non-seriousness'. Such awareness of Freud's 'openness to laughter' and 'unexpected lightness' can work as a springboard into examining how the uncanny and the comic are intertwined at a structural level.[7] Nowhere is this dynamic more clearly illustrated than in the work of Banville. *Eclipse*, for example, is a text centrally and overtly concerned with the uncanny, but it is also shot through with strange humour. The two modes are not separable; they are activated by the same tropes and mechanisms. Comedy and the uncanny work hand in glove, and in the same ways.

FAILING AND CLEAVING

The opening of *Eclipse* sees Alexander Cleave fleeing from Dublin to seek solace in the house where he grew up. This journey anticipates a more famous 'retreat' into 'the past' in *The Sea*: Max Morden's 'search for shelter' from 'the cold present and the colder future' in 'a place of womby warmth'.[8] Indeed, a male narrator's retreat to the nest is one of Banville's

characteristic tropes, another example being Oliver Orme in 2015's *The Blue Guitar*.[9] Moreover, *Eclipse* is a novel that itself treads strangely familiar ground. In doing so, even as this five-act text rehearses failure and tragedy – the suicide of Cass, Alex's troubled daughter, casts a pall over 'the last act' (p.191) – the comic potential of such an (*un*)*heimlich* trajectory is revealed.

Eclipse quits the domain of art that had predominated in Banville's previous four novels – the *Frames Trilogy* (1989-95) and *The Untouchable* (1997)[10] – but retains the theme of surveillance, of looking and being looked at, by choosing an actor as its protagonist: 'Acting was inevitable. From earliest days life for me was a perpetual state of being watched.'[11] In many respects, *Eclipse* also evolves from an emotion akin to the sense of belated amazement that accompanies Victor Maskell's discovery of betrayal in *The Untouchable*: 'The mystery of other people yawned before me … No accounting for people, no accounting.'[12] For the fifty-year old Cleave, however, a realisation of the mystery of others begins at the door of his childhood home, and his attempt to account for people begins with himself. He returns to his birthplace after an on-stage 'collapse' (p.89) that has derailed both his professional and private life in a moment of consummate bathos: 'he died in the middle of the last act and staggered off the stage in sweaty ignominy just when the action was coming to its climax' (p.11).

Banville has long been fascinated by traumatic, self-estranging crises of expression. For example, an endnote to 1982's *The Newton Letter*, featuring an unnamed historian of science with writer's block, states that Banville's '"second" Newton letter to John Locke is a fiction, the tone and some of the text of which is taken from Hugo von Hofmannsthal's *Ein Brief* ("The Letter of Lord Chandos")'.[13] Chandos's crisis, of course, centres on a failure of conceptual language: 'My case, in short, is this: I have lost completely the ability to think or

to speak of anything coherently.'[14] Such crises of expression evoke Julia Kristeva's triangulation of foreignness, reason, and speech: 'With Freud indeed, foreignness, an uncanny one, creeps into the tranquillity of reason itself, and … irrigates our very speaking-being … Henceforth, we know that we are foreigners to ourselves'.[15] As Christopher Murray has observed, 'dying' on stage is not a synonym for 'corpsing', as was assumed in *The Irish Times*'s interview-article on *Eclipse*.[16] Murray explained in a letter to the newspaper that 'corpsing' in turn should not be conflated with 'drying', which is an 'actor's failure to remember her or his lines'. Instead, corpsing is when one performer distracts another, causing the target to break character, a phenomenon that often involves laughter.[17] However, it remains significant that these three terms – corpsing, drying, and dying – are often conflated.[18] The speechless 'ignominy' of Cleave's d(r)ying is accompanied by the audience's 'jeers' and 'vast dark laughter' from the gods (p.90). The 'foreignness' that has crept in is a theatrical and cosmic joke.

Unsurprisingly, then, theatre studies can offer further critical insights into Cleave's 'shaping' (p.10), especially the 'sweaty ignominy' that he experiences when he staggers off stage mid-scene (p.11). Discussing the symptoms of contemporary performance, Patrick Duggan deliberately 'bracket[s]' corpsing and drying 'within one term', namely '*failing*',[19] in order to addresses trauma that 'is specific to the conditions of theatre':[20] 'These failures not only unravel the performance event but also impact repeatedly and violently on the performers themselves in an uncanny echoing of trauma-symptoms.'[21] Building on the concepts of 'face' and 'line' in the sociologist Erving Goffman's 1955 essay 'On Face-Work',[22] this astute terminological amalgamation allows Duggan to suggest that 'both laughing and forgetting lines are moments in which the presentation the performer is making is dislodged and … the line the performer is taking or pursuing is no longer aligned with the face in which they find themselves':[23]

the moment of failing produces a traumatic schism in which there is constant movement between what we might call character-self, actor/professional-self, and 'real'/personal-self. … In the moment of failing, each of these selves collapses and … the actor becomes caught in a dead space … As the actor becomes dislocated from all the selves they usually perform they have … 'no one to be'.[24]

By linking this theorisation of 'a fundamental, traumatic breach of self' to the excitement, glamour, and psychic risk implicit in life writing about 'the traumatic, isolating experience of actorly failure', Duggan presents the theatre as a profession 'in which the actor is always in danger of losing themselves … there exists the possibility of becoming traumatically *between* selves'.[25]

Such an approach opens up additional interpretive possibilities for *Eclipse* that go beyond a superficial insight into Cleave's much-discussed name and divided self, especially when the dislocating context of the environment in which Cleave finds himself and the resulting disruption to habitus is taken into account.[26] The 'falter[ing], collaps[ing], and crumbl[ing]' that Goffman suggests results from being '*out of face*' is an apt framework through which to consider both Cleave's vastation and the 'unmanageable, feathery gasps of laughter burbling out of' him and his haunted narrative (p.42; there are more than sixty other references to laughter).[27] Furthermore, Duggan's contention that theatrical failing can be 'thought of as an act of subversion on the part of the unconscious' explicitly links phenomena like corpsing and d(r)ying to the *unheimlich*: 'Being in role can be figured as a home away from home; however, the unconscious might be seen to turn in or subvert itself by making the actor aware of the unhomely nature of this home away from home.'[28] Cleave's description of the perilousness of his craft chimes with this account:

I learned to act, that was all, which really means I learned to act convincingly the part of an actor seeming not to act … The self-made man has no solid ground to stand on.

He who pulls himself up by his bootstraps is in a permanent state of somersault, and in his ear always is the world's laughter as, look! there he goes again, arse over tip. (p.37)

The theatrical failing that provides the impetus for Cleave's narration thus combines the traumatic uncanny with the comic; the two are bound together from the outset in this moment when 'a vacancy' is revealed at 'the site of what was supposed to be myself' (p.33).

The haunting sense of dislocation is amplified by the absence/presence of the most obvious and powerful intertext for *Eclipse*, the novel that succeeds it. *Shroud* (2002) can properly be called *Eclipse*'s textual twin.[29] Hedwig Schwall's excellent essay on the uncanny in *Eclipse* has helped to illuminate the disorienting crosscurrents that flow between these narratives. However, although humour merits brief acknowledgement in her Deleuzian reading, there is no sustained consideration of how comedy and laughter might relate to, or help to amplify, the uncanny tone of Cleave's narrative.[30] As is so often the case, the comic hovers in the background but only registers at the margins of critical attention. My reading of the relationship between the two texts refocuses attention on how the uncanny and the comic work with and through each other as a paradoxically destabilizing yet constitutive narrative force.

Catherine (Cass) Cleave, hauntingly absent from the first novel except through the memories of others, appears in *Shroud* in her own right. The narrative doubles back to re-tell Cass's story, focusing on her love affair in Turin with Axel Vander, a celebrity academic of dubious credentials who was originally her academic quarry. Mourning dominates the end of both texts, as Cleave and his wife Lydia make a pilgrimage to the site of Cass's death that is mirrored by Vander, *Shroud*'s narrator.[31] As Banville explains,

> *Eclipse* and *Shroud* started as one book. I spent a year or two writing it, and Axel Vander was in that book, in *Eclipse*. I just couldn't get anywhere and it was getting worse and worse and I was thinking of abandoning the whole thing and I suddenly realized there were two books[32]

The effects of intertextual reading here are disturbing and disorienting. The reader beginning *Shroud*, for example, probably already knows of Cass's death, colouring any response to her relationship with Vander. Each novel also fills in information missing from the other. But even taken together, we do not have all the puzzle pieces; some things remain hidden. After all, Cass's own account is, for the most part, troublingly absent.[33] There is also the instability caused by the fact that, as Cleave's auto-antonymic surname insinuates, the narrative is curiously cloven in two, divided between two books that still adhere to each other.

This sets up an intriguing formal similarity with Freud's own anxious, tentative commentary on 'Disquieting Strangeness' (the French translation of 'The "Uncanny"'). Hélène Cixous says of Freud's essay that, 'the sense of strangeness imposes its secret necessity everywhere … We are faced … with a text and its hesitating shadow, and their double escapade … what is brought together here is quickly undone, what asserts itself becomes suspect'.[34] This language could easily apply to the uncanny diptych formed by *Eclipse* and *Shroud* – and subsequently to the belated triptych formed by *Ancient Light* (2012): 'It is the *between* that is tainted with strangeness.'[35] Importantly, though, there is also a connection between Cixous's remarks and the formal features of much humour, including the bisociative procedures of joke scripts or types of comedy that rely on incongruity or cognitive shifts.

In Banville, the very existence of the other text forces awareness that there is always another version of events, that a cognitive recalibration may be required. That both titles refer to the obscured or hidden only increases this sense of obfuscation; another object (or text) is

always interpolated. The intertextual relation between the novels is arguably the strongest and most pervasive in the whole of Banville's corpus because of the uncanny way in which the texts destabilize each other, resisting resolution. The process of (re-)reading *Eclipse* comes to be mediated by the experience of the later *Shroud*, prompting reinterpretation of Cleave's shaky first-person narrative in the light of Vander's subsequent, even more dubious, account. *Eclipse* is explicitly haunted by its companion text, a novel that had not even been completed when it was published.[36] As Allan Gardner Lloyd Smith notes in another context:

> the generation of the uncanny in fiction is often at the point when writing bends back upon itself, to observe its own processes, or to dislocate the narrative by the inclusion of another writing within it. The uncanny frequently arises at the point where this writing emerges within the text, the point at which the text is alienated from itself.[37]

The twinning of the novels creates the cryptic sensation that Cleave's and Vander's narratives share more than just subject matter. Not only do their anagrammatic names – Alex and Axel – mirror each other, but the title of the later book echoes within *Eclipse* at significant moments (p.26, p.179, p.201). Metaphors, phrases, and images also recur, bringing with them a shock of (sometimes baffled) recognition. This often comic jolt is intensified when the characters make intertextual contact, as when Cleave receives an incomprehensible phone call after Cass's death (p.201), which one later realizes was from a grief-stricken, drunken Vander.[38] This is exactly the sort of uncanny effect that Freud said is uniquely literary.[39] The 'cleaving' relationship between the two books – the Joycean Janus word 'cleave' suggests both splitting *and* sticking together[40] – prompts reinterpretation of key episodes such as this phone call, or Cleave's seemingly irrational suspicion that some of Cass's papers are missing (p.211).[41] The change of emphasis and perspective necessitated by such re-reading, and the ensuing uncertainty, challenges easy assumptions. Adam Phillips

rightly observes of Banville's 'puzzling', 'strange soliloquies' that 'there is an uncanny sense in which, as readers, something is being asked of us that we can't work out … [he] is the great modern novelist of just how baffled people are about what they want from each other'.[42] Among its other effects, the uncanny intertext opens up a space in which one's own laughter at the protagonists' limited perspectives and mistaken assumptions becomes self-implicating. Ultimately, it places the unsuspecting reader on a par with a long line of Banvillean narrators, including Cleave, who are mocked for their pretentions to authority and understanding.

Hence, these twinned texts take to new heights a strain of self-aware, uncanny comedy that runs through Banville's oeuvre. And the vertiginous intertextuality does not stop there. Not only was Cleave's breakdown caused by acting in Kleist's *Amphitryon*, the play that both *God's Gift* (2000) and, later, *The Infinities* (2009) respond to, but *Ancient Light* returns to Cleave as he plays Vander in a biopic.[43] This intensifies the theme of doubling that resonates between these two haunted narratives: 'I was at once there and not there … I seemed to be onstage and at the same time looking down on myself from somewhere up in the flies' (p.88). Focusing on performativity and self-estrangement, these cloven novels work through the strange comedy and uncanny costs of impersonation.

REPETITION: THE HOMING INSTINCT

After the grotesquerie of his theatrical failure and collapse, Cleave's journey home is presented as an archetypally Freudian unintentional return, indicative of a '*compulsion to repeat*'.[44] It is the result of a night-time drive undertaken in a sort of trance: 'For miles I had been travelling in a kind of sleep … something would not let me go. Something.' (p.5) He only stops this seemingly aimless driving because an eerily silent 'animal appeared in front of the car'. Cleave remains fascinated by the indefinable numinosity of the unidentified creature's fierce, 'unreal neon-red' 'stare' (p.4): 'The incident with the animal on the road in

the wintry gloaming was definitive, though what it was that was being defined I could not tell.' (p.12) This liminal encounter is – again – teasingly indeterminate. He is thoroughly 'befuddled' until he realizes where he is: 'I knew where unknowingly I had come to.' (p.5) He is on the brow of the hill above the town in which he grew up: 'The house itself it was that drew me back, sent out its secret summoners to bid me come… *home*, I was going to say.' (p.4)

Significantly, Freud notes that the uncanny strangeness of unintentional return or repetition can also be transformed in literature 'into something irresistibly comic… by means of grotesque exaggeration'.[45] Accordingly, Banville pokes fun at the significance with which Cleave invests his return through the knowing titles of the half-burnt books he finds in the grate: '*The Revenant*' and '*My Mother's House*' (p.15). Similarly, Lydia finds cause for mockery in what she perceives as an infantile desire for home. She laughs contemptuously at his plans to live in the house: '"Is this how you think you'll cure whatever it is that's supposed to be wrong with you," she said, "by running back here like this, like a child who has had a fright and wants its mama?"' (pp.5-6) The image of the scorched books also has a secondary comic resonance, as a piece of self-deprecating metafictional mockery about the novel's literariness and crafted allusiveness. As Cleave ruefully notes later, there are 'Ashes, ashes everywhere' (p.138). Through the image of charring, Banville simultaneously activates a mournful association with the residues of loss and deploys a witty conceit about books being consumed to make other books. That the final text mentioned appears to be Wallace Stevens's *The Necessary Angel* explains Cleave's sly joke, 'Not your run-of-the-mill book-burner, evidently' (p.16). After all, the subtitle of Stevens's tome is *Essays on Reality and the Imagination*;[46] this spectral, half-submerged allusion ironizes Banville's own pretensions, undercutting the philosophically-inflected register of so much of his work's intertextuality.

The pay-off of this strategy becomes clear through *repetition*, a central mechanism of my two key modes. Cleave's initial return home is parodically restaged when he attempts to follow Quirke home one evening, only to find that the caretaker secretly returns to Cleave's own house (pp.107-16). He thereby discovers that Quirke and Lily have been living there all along, forcing a hilariously bathetic reappraisal of his assumptions about some of 'the phantoms' haunting the now 'transfigured house' (p.53, p.122). Cleave's earlier conclusions about his eerie experiences are satirically undermined and this realisation is itself explicitly framed in terms of the uncanny; seeing Quirke through the basement window, he remarks on the 'uncanny sight' (p.113). Through this comic framework, Cleave has been transformed into a bumbling doppelgänger looking into his own house, seeing a weird, unknown version of himself. Again, this moment is reminiscent of Kristeva's recognition that, 'Uncanny, foreignness is within us: we are our foreigners, we are divided.' [47] As Cleave later notes, with metatextual, onomastic irony, 'I am weary of division, of being always torn.' (p.70)

In the wake of this discovery, the house feels disorientingly altered. A novel sense of Lewis Carroll-like estrangement overcomes Cleave as he realizes that the familiar has once again become unfamiliar:

> What is most remarkable to me is the transformation my discovery has wrought in the house, or at least in my attitude toward it. That sense of goggle-eyed alienation … still persists. I have stepped through the looking-glass into another world where everything is exactly as it was and at the same time entirely transformed. It is a disconcerting sensation, but not, I discover, unwelcome – after all, this is exactly the kind of dislocated stance to things that I had hoped but failed to maintain by my own efforts. (p.121)

Indeed, Banville has identified such defamiliarizing, humorously transformative effects as central to his artistic vision. He remarked during a 2012 radio documentary that, 'all art is a

process of making the world uncanny […] so that we see it anew […] It *re-presents* the world to us in ways that are slightly tilted'.[48]

The incongruous discovery involving Cleave's 'uninvited house-guests' (p.131) also reveals that a more minor – but no less farcical – return has been repeated over and over: Quirke has made a nightly show of leave-taking on his 'increasingly anthropomorphic' bicycle, only to sneak back later (p.115).[49] Once, tipsy, he even produced a 'staggering' theatrical flourish, a mockery of Cleave's actorly pretensions: '[Quirke] struck his shoulder on the door jamb, swore, chuckled, liquidly coughed. "Good luck, then," he said, bowing under the low lintel and giving a stiff-armed salute behind him.' (p.24) His roguish comic instincts almost get the better of his Edgeworthian pose of slippery deference – Thady Quirke is a precursor – and 'unchallengable' 'sardonical composure' (p.20): '"Good luck," Quirke said again, loudly, and uttered a phrase of mournful laughter, as at some painful joke.' (p.25) This undertow of uncanny mockery, of unparsable laughter at Cleave's expense, resonates throughout the novel. The implication that Lily is performing a similar routine, for example, casts doubt over his more melodramatic visions of a ghostly female figure.

This potential for strange bathos involving repetition is implicit even in Cleave's dreams. He feels strongly that his dream of an Easter morning is significant. It is characterized by a child's heightened senses at the excitement of 'Easter presents':

> I could feel the cool of outdoors on my face, could smell from within the house the smells of the feast day morning: fusty bedclothes, tea smoke, the charry embers of last night's fire, and something redolent of my mother, some scent or soap, a woody tang (p.6)

However, when he recounts it, the 'palpable glow of happiness' that surrounds the house in the dream is punctured by Lydia's 'scornful, not unfond' response. The main target of her

arch mockery is the 'yellow plastic chicken' that lays 'eggs that [Cleave's] dream-mother had emptied and then filled somehow with chocolate'. (p.6) Smiling ironically, she asks how the egg gets back into the chicken and finds his response that it 'just … pushes back in' deliciously and hilariously psychoanalyzable. She quips, '"Well, what would Doctor Freud say." … "Sometimes a chicken is only a chicken – except when it's a hen."' (p.7)

Cleave is angered by the comic deflation that his wife's tendentious joking and 'sharply' derisive laughter produce (p.7). He feels that the dream is prophetic: '"It's something to do with the future," I said. "In the dream."' Lydia tetchily says that it sounds more like the past, leading Cleave to remark: 'The past, or the future, yes, I might have said – but whose?' The core experience of the dream is the vivid sense of 'I being I and also not': this is incontrovertibly uncanny (all p.8). Once again, uncertainty reigns as basic boundaries of temporality and subjectivity dissolve. The suggestion that this is a foreshadowing vision may refer to an imagined – soon to be impossible – future involving Cleave's unborn grandson; the past is, of course, present in the implication that the dream stems from a memory of Cleave's own childhood. In this way, it is a strange sort of premonition. There are two possible interpretations: in one, the dream's bizarreness is merely ridiculous, an ironic vehicle for mocking Cleave's pomposity and portentousness; in the other, it is genuinely significant, part of a repertoire of repeated signs whereby Cleave somehow '*knew*' his daughter's fate in advance (p.193). These two registers, the comic and the uncanny, compete and coalesce, making the dream *stranger* and causing it to linger.

INNUENDO AND ESTRANGEMENT: 'THE UNCANNY SENSATION'

The strangely weighted echoes of past and future are there from the start of Cleave's narrative, which begins with a description of an odd sensation 'that first day out in the fields' behind his childhood home. He has been 'assailed suddenly', burdened by 'an extra weight; a ballast'; in this moment, he becomes 'the haunted one'. He feels invaded by 'someone who

was else, another, and yet familiar'. Cleave wants to distinguish this experience from the emotional mutability of the quick-change artistry of theatrical role-playing. It is qualitatively different from 'putting on personae', as signalled by subtle changes in the atmosphere: 'a thickening in the air' and an 'infernal' or 'paradisal' cold. Most significantly, there is a momentary interruption of the light, which is a foretaste of the larger 'occlusion' to come, the eclipse that takes place on the day his daughter plunges to her death. Indeed, the object that casts a shadow is described in an image of a fatal fall, via a reference to Icarus (and perhaps to Auden's ekphrastic commentary on Breughel's depiction of the myth): 'as if something had plummeted past the sun, a winged boy, perhaps' (all p.3). The resonance of this dark proleptic irony is later amplified by Cass's androgynous appearance after she cuts her hair. The description of her 'fledgeling's ruffled feathers' links her to the 'dead fledgeling [that] must have fallen from the roof, or failed in flight and plummeted to earth' (p.168, p.66) – and, by extension, to Cleave's aforementioned 'feathery gasps' of traumatic laughter.

When Cleave thinks of the 'peculiar sensation' of becoming haunted, he does so in terms of a phantom pregnancy: 'I still felt invaded, as I had that day out in the fields: invaded, occupied, big with whatever it was that has entered me.' (p.15) The earlier religious imagery, such as the reference to a 'falling angel' and suggestion of wings flapping (p.3), seem to indicate that a perverse and mocking echo of the Annunciation is at work (as, indeed, does the later allusion to *The Necessary Angel* referred to above). By the end of the novel, there is a realisation that the 'someone' who has 'fallen silently into step beside [him]' (p.3) may be the doomed pregnant daughter who shares his tendency to anxiously 'pace and turn, pace and turn', 'muttering' (p.53).[50] As Brian Duffy notes, this is a recognisably Beckettian trope, recalling the classically uncanny *Footfalls* (1976) as it conveys 'in the heavy push-pull of the feet, the trouble and burden of some inner distress. Pacing in Beckett is as emblematic as the bowed body, the lowered head, or the fall to earth'.[51] A more immediate genealogy is also

suggested, in that Cleave's mother 'used to pace, unsubduably, night after long night, trying to die' (p.18). What is more, this peripatetic image forms another strand of uncanny connection between Alex and Cass and the restless, muttering doppelgänger Vander.[52]

Cleave is genuinely frightened by this invasive and uncanny assault by his 'little stranger' (p.15); therefore, it is no surprise that it occurs just prior to his seeing his first vision, a figure at the window of his mother's old room. 'The image in the window' is made to 'shimmer and slip' by the light's reflection on the glass (p.3). This description emphasizes the novel's central concern with appearance and reality, and slippage between the two. For the reader, like Cleave as he approaches the house, the ground is in danger of giving way:

> I set off over the uneven ground, retracing my steps, with this other, my invader, walking steadily inside me, like a knight in his armour. The going was treacherous. The grass clutched at my ankles and there were holes in the clay, under the grass, made by the hoofs of immemorial cattle when this edge of town was still open country, that would trip me up, perhaps break one of the myriad delicate bones it is said are in the foot. A gush of panic rose in me like gorge. (pp.3-4)

The possibility of a pratfall and bathetic laughter hover over this scene; the (mock-)chivalric simile is indicative of the straining overdetermination. Moreover, the 'panic' experienced by Cleave relates in part to his sense of being an interloper, a stranger in his own home. Like the unnamed historian in Banville's novella *The Newton Letter*, he is figured as a 'timid' city dweller (p.19) who is uncomfortable in the unfamiliar countryside (albeit this time at the margins of a small town), despite having grown up there. Childishly afraid of being left 'all alone' in the house, Cleave asks 'How could I have thought I could stay here'? (p.4) This fear is reawakened by the absence of 'human sound, as if everyone else in the world had gone away (*how can I stay here?*)' (p.17). The repeated italicized melodramatic reaction adds to a sense of Cleave as ridiculous: 'This is what I told myself, I murmured it aloud: *I shall have to*

go through with it, now.' (p.4) It opens up the possibility that the apparitions he sees are the product of self-indulgent, hysterical imaginings: instead of appearing to him, his mother would be, as Lydia suggests, 'laughing in her grave' (p.6).

The text even slyly rehearses a central question that confronts the reader throughout, 'was it she or just a shadow, woman-shaped?' Or, if we substitute the pronoun, 'What did [he] see? What was it [he] was seeing?' (p.3) This playing with Gothic conventions is qualitatively different from the use of the Irish 'Big House' genre in, say, *Birchwood* (1973); *Eclipse* does not simply draw on a repertoire of literary imagery, but instead pursues a strategy of ambiguity, disidentification, and irony even as it explores hallucinatory quasi-Gothic iconography. The narrative relies on a layer of uncanny, Gothic innuendo that is an intrinsic part of the novel's haunted atmosphere: a 'startled … suggestion of laughter' shadows each 'shock of fright' (p.20, p.19).

This shadowy quality is, in part, a product of Banville's imagery in *Eclipse*. One of the book's most striking features is the sheer number of times that things or people are described as 'strange'. This stretches from the 'strange animal' Cleave meets on the road at the beginning of the novel to his 'strange … dream' at the end (p.20, pp.208-209); from children '*Making strange*' at the appearance of a visitor to the discovery of Quirke's 'backstage' digs in the scullery ('Talk about making strange! Everything was askew') (p.46, p.114); from Cass's 'strange auras' to the 'strange spectacle' of 'the slumbering human' (p.72, p.126). There is even a reflection on the weirdness of witnessing a drowning, eerily foreshadowing the young Morden's experience at the end of *The Sea*: 'Water is uncanny … And drowning, of course, drowning is strange, I mean strange for those on shore' (pp.67-68). The link with the Freudian model is evoked explicitly throughout and this conspicuous Freudianism adds to the comic artificiality of the text: 'Familiars, yes – that is what is strangest, that I find it all not strange at all. Everything here is … half dream' (p.48). This

pervasive, attenuating language generates an underlying tissue of spectral imagery. In fact, the vocabulary is itself constitutive of the novel's 'uncanny element' (p.111) and is part of a wider tactic of estrangement (*ostranenie*), which Victor Shklovsky considered to be a satirical, moral ploy, a 'way of pricking the conscience'.[53] The alienating effect of the language of 'the uncanny sensation' (p.69) is therefore a vital ingredient in the novel's mode of unsettling irony.

The haunting of Cleave's narrative, and the dark ironies that it produces, is brought into focus by his musings on the imminent eclipse: 'Tens of thousands are said to be already on the move, flocking to the rocky coasts of the south, on which the full shadow will fall.' Cleave is sceptical about the significance of the event, although he admits that, 'I should like to believe in something'. He compares their journey to the pilgrimages of medieval (perhaps Chaucerian) penitents:

> I see them, of course, as a great band of pilgrims out of an old tale, trudging down the dusty roads with staff and bell, archaic faces alight with longing and hope. And I, I am the scoffer, lounging in doublet and hose in an upstairs window of some half-timbered inn, languidly spitting pomegranate seeds on their bowed heads as they pass below me. (all p.119)

However, Cleave's archly superior view of the yearning for meaning, 'for a sign, a light in the sky, a darkness, even, to tell them that things are intended', is savagely undercut on re-reading (pp.119-20). His daughter is among those on the road to 'the rocky coasts of the south'. She is a believer in signs – 'Every tiniest act, all adding up, bringing her to this' – and after her death Cleave, no longer a 'scoffer', will desperately re-enact her attempts to find meaning in minutiae.[54] He and Lydia will also make the same journey, like 'a pair of mendicant pilgrims', to collect Cass's body (p.202). When 'the full shadow … fall[s]', his daughter will be dead, driven to her end by a mania that insisted upon meaning in

everything.[55] This context ironizes Cleave's dismissal of the appetite for signs, acting as an indictment of his self-absorption and a presentiment of the tragedy to come: 'What would they not give for a glimpse of my ghosts? Now, there is a sign, there is a portent, of what, I am still not sure, although I am beginning to have my suspicions.' (p.120) Cleave's 'suspicions' are again focused in the wrong direction, relating not to his troubled daughter but instead to a distorted mirror-image: his surreptitious house-guests Quirke and Lily, who 'reminds [Cleave] of Cass' (p.96).[56]

The uncanny moves the familiar mockery of the narrator's blindnesses and pretensions unsettlingly close to tragedy. Nevertheless, there *is* irony in the fact that while Cleave claims to be scrutinizing his life, he myopically ignores the realm where he may indeed have been offered a sign; what is at stake seems to manifest in his dreams. In 'the otherworld between dream and waking' on his first night in the house, he sees a Beckettian apparition:

> I took it for a woman, or womanish old man, or even a child, of indeterminate gender. *Shrouded and still* it stood facing in my direction … The head was covered and I could make out no features. The hands were clasped at the breastbone in what seemed an attitude of beseeching (p.26; my emphasis).

The gender confusion is representative of the wider trope of indeterminacy that has dogged Cleave from the beginning, as with the mysterious figure in the window and the encounter with the strange creature (p.3, pp.4-5). He is unable to make even the most basic categorizations (man/woman, old/young), and the undecidability makes the uncanny figure at once fascinating and repulsively threatening. Read retrospectively, Cleave's vision appears to be his daughter's shrouded corpse arranged in the traditional attitude of repose. Eerily, his inability to discern its features foreshadows the fate of his 'poor damaged daughter, our eclipsed light', as revealed in the morgue at the novel's end: 'her face was not there, the rocks

and the sea had taken it' (p.204). It is precisely Cleave's egotism and inattention to his daughter's plight that leaves him feeling 'like a murderer leaving the scene of the crime'. He realizes at last that he is not just 'walking in her footsteps', but also that 'before, she had inhabited me, now I was inhabiting her' (p.207). At the site of her death he begins 'the painstaking trek back over our lives … searching for the pattern, the one I am searching for still, the set of clues laid out like the dots she used to join up with her crayon' (p.208). The full force of Lydia's instinctive accusation that he knew what was to come finally sinks home: 'For if I knew, if the ghosts were a premonition … why did I not act? But then, I have always had the greatest difficulty distinguishing between action and acting.' (p.208)

In an article on inside jokes, Brian Connery points out that 'defamiliarization acts simultaneously to illustrate the vices and follies of the satiric victims and to delay the victims' recognition of themselves until after they have unwittingly condemned themselves'.[57] For Cleave, the trope of estrangement has fulfilled its brutal satiric potential. To experience the uncanny, Banville suggests, is to feel 'the gods' vast dark laughter sh[ake] the scenery' of the self (p.90).

[1] Boyd Tonkin, 'The Wrong Choice in a List Packed with Delights', *Independent*, 11 October 2005.

[2] Bryan Radley, 'John Banville's Comedy of Cruelty', *Nordic Irish Studies* 9 (2010), 13-31.

[3] John Kenny, *John Banville* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2009), p.1, p.149. See also Banville's comments on comedy in Hugh Haughton and Bryan Radley, "An Interview with John Banville", *Modernism/modernity* 18.4 (2011), 855-69 (pp.858-61).

[4] Bevin Doyle, 'Indestructible Treasures: Art and the Ekphrastic Encounter in Selected Novels by John Banville', Unpublished PhD Dissertation, Dublin City University, 2015, p.30.

[5] Some prominent examples include: Hugh Haughton, 'The Ruinous House of Identity', *The Dublin Review* 1 (2000-1), 105-13; Hedwig Schwall, '"Mirror on Mirror Mirrored is all the Show": Aspects of the Uncanny in Banville's Work with a Focus on *Eclipse*', *Special Issue on John Banville*, ed. Derek Hand, *Irish University Review* 36.1 (2006), 116-33; Romain Nguyen Van, '"According to all the authorities": The Uncanny in John Banville's *The Sea*', *Études Anglaises* 65.4 (2012), 480-99; Neil Murphy, *John Banville* (Lanham, MD: Bucknell UP, 2018), esp. pp.188-9. Banville himself explicitly discusses the Freudian uncanny in a review entitled 'The Un-Heimlich Maneuver', *The New York Review of Books* 42.2 (1995), 25-7.

[6] Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, trans. David McLintock and introd. Hugh Haughton (London: Penguin, 2003), p.144.

[7] Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2003), p.31, n.41.

[8] Banville, *The Sea* (London: Picador, 2005), pp.60-1.

[9] Banville, *The Blue Guitar* (London: Viking Press, 2015).

[10] Banville, *Frames Trilogy: The Book of Evidence* [1989]*; Ghosts* [1993]; *Athena* [1995] (London: Picador, 2001), and *The Untouchable* (London: Picador, 1997).

[11] Banville, *Eclipse* (London: Picador, 2000). All future page references to this novel are given in brackets.

[12] Banville, *Untouchable*, pp.393-4, p.389.

[13] Banville, *The Newton Letter* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1982), p.82.

[14] Hugo von Hofmannsthal, 'The Letter of Lord Chandos', *The Whole Difference: Selected Writings of Hugo von Hofmannsthal*, ed. J. D. McClatchy (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2008), 69-79 (p.73). See also Elke D'hoker, *Visions of Alterity: Representation in the Works of John Banville*, Costerus New Series 151 (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004), pp.103-17, and Banville's introduction to *The Lord Chandos Letter and Other Writings*, trans. Joel Rotenberg (New York: NYRB Classics, 2005), vii-xii.

[15] Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia UP, 1991), p.170. In attempting to demonstrate that a psychoanalytic ethics centring on our (universal) strangeness implies a novel politics of cosmopolitanism and solidarity, she argues that 'our own foreignness' underpins any notion of universality (p.195).

[16] Arminta Wallace, 'A World Without People', *The Irish Times*, 21 September 2000.

[17] Christopher Murray, 'Alive And Corpsing', *The Irish Times*, 2 October 2000.

[18] See the related metacomic use of the word 'Corpsed' in Samuel Beckett's *Endgame* (London: Faber, 2009), p.20.

[19] Patrick Duggan, *Trauma-Tragedy: Symptoms of Contemporary Performance* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2012), p.165.

[20] Duggan, p.162.

[21] Duggan, p.12.

[22] Erving Goffman, 'On Face-Work: An Analysis of Ritual Elements in Social Interaction', rpt. in *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behavior* (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1967), 5-46.

[23] Duggan, p.165.

[24] Duggan, p.165, p.170.

[25] Duggan, pp.166-7; my emphasis.

[26] Cf. Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1977), 72-95.

[27] Goffman, *Interaction Ritual*, p.8.

[28] Duggan, p.12.

[29] Banville, *Shroud* (London: Picador, 2002).

[30] Schwall, p.124, p.130, p.132.

[31] *Shroud*, pp.387-96. Cf. Hedda Friberg, '"Passing through ourselves and finding ourselves in the beyond": The Rites of Passage of Cass Cleave in John Banville's *Eclipse* and *Shroud*', *Irish University Review* 36.1 (2006), 151-64.

[32] Banville, 'Ben Ehrenreich Talks with John Banville', *The Believer Book of Writers Talking to Writers*, ed. Vendela Vida (San Francisco, CA: Believer Books, rev. ed., 2007), 43-58 (p.56).

[33] D'hoker teases out the problematic implications of this dependence on a silent or mad woman in the three Cleave-Vander novels. '"Everything has to be qualified": Reading as Misreading in John Banville and Paul de Man', *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 59.5 (2018), 536-46.

[34] Hélène Cixous, 'Fiction and its Phantoms: A Reading of Freud's *Das Unheimliche* (The "Uncanny")', *New Literary History* 7.3 (1976), 525-48 (p.525).

[35] Cixous, p.543.

[36] Cf. Paddy Kehoe, untitled interview with John Banville, *RTE Guide*, 16 February 2001, p.69.

[37] Allan Gardner Lloyd Smith, *Uncanny American Fiction: Medusa's Face* (London: Macmillan, 1989), p.ix.

[38] *Shroud*, p.396.

[39] Freud, *The Uncanny*, p.156; original emphasis.

[40] Cf. James Joyce's double use of a butcher's 'cleaver' in relation to Mrs Mooney's separation in 'The Boarding House'. *Dubliners*, ed. Terence Brown (1914; Harmondsworth: Penguin, rpt. 2000), p.56, p.58.

[41] Cf. *Shroud*, p.392.

[42] Adam Phillips, 'Introduction' to *The Book of Evidence* and *The Sea* by John Banville (London: Everyman's Library, 2015), vii-xvi (p.viii).

[43] Banville, *God's Gift: A Version of Amphitryon by Heinrich von Kleist* (Oldcastle, Co. Meath: Gallery Press, 2000); *The Infinities* (London: Picador, 2009); *Ancient Light* (London: Viking Press, 2012). For more on Banville's – and Cleave's – 'intertextual identification', see Robin Wilkinson, 'Echo and Coincidence in John Banville's *Eclipse*', *Irish University Review* 33.2 (2003), 356-70 (p.369).

[44] Freud, p.145.

[45] Freud, p.144.

[46] Wallace Stevens, *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination* (London: Faber, 1960).

[47] Kristeva, p.181.

[48] Banville, contributor to 'The Uncanny' presented by Hugh Haughton, a Brook Lapping production for BBC Radio 4, 28 June 2012.

[49] Surely a comic nod to Flann O'Brien's *The Third Policeman* (completed 1940; published 1967).

[50] Cf. *Shroud*, p.391.

[51] Brian Duffy, 'Banville's Other Ghost: Samuel Beckett's Presence in John Banville's *Eclipse*', *Études Irlandaises* 28.1 (2003), 85-106 (p.89).

[52] Cf. *Shroud*, p.371.

[53] Cf. Victor Shklovsky, 'Art as Technique', *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*, ed. David Lodge (London: Longman, 1988), 16-30. The examples Shklovsky chooses from Tolstoy cement this impression.

[54] *Shroud*, p.386.

[55] Cass's quasi-illness is 'Mandelbaum's Syndrome, a rare defect of the mind' (*Ancient Light*, p. 23). Vander notes that it is frequently misdiagnosed as epilepsy or schizophrenia (*Shroud*, p.202).

[56] Cf. 'Lily, the caretaker's daughter' from 'The Dead'. Joyce, p.175.

[57] Brian A. Connery, 'Inside Jokes: Familiarity and Contempt in Academic Satire', in *University Fiction*, ed. David Bevan (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1990), 123-38 (p.126).