

Banville and Lacan: The Matter of Emotions in The Infinities

Banville e Lacan: A Questão das Emoções em The Infinities

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Abstract: *Both Banville and Lacan are Freudian interpreters of the postmodern world. Both replace the classic physical-metaphysical dichotomy with a focus on the materiality of communication in an emophysical world. Both chart the ways in which libidinal streams combine parts of the self and link the self with other people and objects. These interactions take place in three bandwidths of perception, which are re-arranged by the uncanny object a. This ‘object’ reawakens the affects of the unconscious which infuse the identity formations with new energy. In this article we look briefly at how the object a is realised in The Book of Evidence, Ghosts and Eclipse to focus on how it works in The Infinities, especially in the relations between Adam Godley junior and senior, Helen and Hermes.*

Keywords: *Banville and Lacan; emotions; The Infinities; Object a; Scopie drive; the libidinal Real*

Resumo: *Banville e Lacan são intérpretes freudianos do mundo pós-moderno. Ambos substituem a dicotomia físico-metafísica clássica pelo foco na materialidade da comunicação em um mundo emofísico. Ambos traçam a diferentes maneiras pelas quais os fluxos libidinais combinam partes do eu e vinculam o eu a outras pessoas e objetos. Essas interações ocorrem em três larguras de banda da percepção, que são reorganizadas pelo objeto misterioso a. Esse “objeto” desperta os afetos do inconsciente que infundem as formações identitárias com nova energia. Neste artigo, veremos brevemente como o objeto a é percebido em The Book of Evidence, Ghosts e Eclipse, a fim de focar em como ele funciona em The Infinities, especialmente nas relações entre Adam Godley Júnior e Sênior, Helen e Hermes.*

Palavras-chave: *Banville e Lacan; emoções; The Infinities; objeto a; pulsão escópica; o real libidinal.*

Introduction

If Flaubert’s ideal was to write a novel about nothing, Banville gets pretty close to it – maybe most so in *Ghosts*, in *Eclipse* and in *The Infinities*.¹ All three are books about air, about mood changes between characters. All three show how perception is steered by different aspects of a self which are reshuffled by a fascinating object (a painting, a daughter, a formula which seems to offer a magical kind of hermeneutics). In this sense Banville’s work offers a curious parallel to Lacan’s thought. The psychoanalyst distinguishes three aspects of perception which constitute the psychic system: the affects of the unconscious, the emotions of the subconscious ego and the suprapersonal frames of reference of one’s culture and family. These three bandwidths of perception, the Real, the Imaginary and the Symbolic, are condensed by the fascinating object which Lacan calls “object a”, an object causing desire.

Likewise, Banville's characters are no "in-dividuals" but beehives of RIS activity. As a result, both the analyst and the novelist avoid the classic dichotomies between inner and outer world, between material and emotional phenomena. In this introduction I want to first show how Lacan and Banville's views converge and illustrate briefly how the RIS system works in *The Book of Evidence*, *Ghosts*, and *Eclipse*. The body of this article will focus on Banville's *The Infinities* and Lacan's *Seminar XI* (on the concept of object a) and comments thereon.

Banville and Lacan: converging interests

We could summarize the parallels between Banville and Lacan in four main points: the authentic self is a matter of constantly adjusted 'equilibido'; this can only be reached via language; and though this self and its models always retain an aspect of *unknowability*, the speaking self can transcend itself to reach some 'impure metaphysics'. First there is the regular change of one's inner makeup. This self-questioning is part of the main aim of a Lacanian analysis: to help people find their own desire as distinct from that which others want one to do.² A self is a living thing, a never-ending interaction of the unconscious, (pre)consciousness and culture, and as all three aspects change constantly each person must always search for a new equilibrium, an 'equilibido' – the very thing Banville's so-called solipsists are looking for. Second, both are confessed Freudians, Banville reluctantly, Lacan radically so, as he set himself the task to reread Freud, translating his work into postmodern thinking.³ This means that the focus is on language and literature. Indeed, for both Banville and Lacan, the unconscious is not an amorphous vague thing, but a matter to be filtered by language. "The world is not real for me until it has been pushed through the mesh of language", says Banville (qt. in O'Connell, "Empathic Paradox" 430), which matches one of Lacan's most insistently repeated lines, that the unconscious is structured like a language.⁴ Third, both the novelist and the psychoanalyst found their work on the unknowability of the world as Kant saw it: "Our knowledge ... is grounded in objects that are not themselves grounded" (Ragland 201). If Banville is the Kleist of twenty-first century literature, Lacan has that role in psychoanalysis, in the sense that he describes the human subject as suspended 'in an essential vacillation' (Ragland 194) within the RIS system, between libidinal drives, provisional identifications and negotiation of one's cultural forms. As a result, all understanding is partial and illusory. Fourth, both writers are interested in "impure metaphysics". They take the impact of the libido seriously, and find how it palpably effects human beings and their familiars. As a result, Lacan reacts against Merleau-Ponty and the whole (Platonic) Western philosophical tradition, seeing the boundaries between the invisible and visible not so much as that between a metaphysical and physical beings, but between unconscious and conscious energies. This seems to be the case also for Banville: "a work of literature must ... have a quality of the transcendent. I do not mean metaphysical transcendence, but a kind of heightening ... the artistic act is almost like the sexual act [where] ... the Other ... takes on a transcendent glow" (qt. O'Connell, "Empathic Paradox" 431). Lacan's study of literature (whether Greek drama, de Sade, Joyce or Flemish mystics) also revealed to him that "The reality of the unconscious is sexual reality".⁵ In what follows I hope to highlight how both Banville and Lacan's focus on libidinal flows allows them to overcome the dichotomy between the empirical and the transcendent. In their focus on *object a* both morph metaphysics into a kind of 'epi- or emophysics', a frame of thinking which focuses on human emotions, revealing they have more nuance and wider scope than expected.

RIS and object a in *The Book of Evidence, Ghosts and Eclipse*

When talking about the RIS system Lacanians first of all distinguish between the two kinds of Real, the primordial real (R1) and the routine real (R2). As the routine real is the ‘habitual’, encrusted way of perceiving, this is what Lacan wants his analysands to break out of, as it means that the subject has lost touch with his roots, the primordial real, which are the libidinal forms developed in childhood. The same goes for Banville’s protagonists: Freddie Montgomery, Alex Cleave, and later Adam Godley (both father and son) in *The Infinities* are, like most Banvillean protagonists, transported to childhood experiences.⁶

The human being, according to Lacan, consists of the ‘I’ who is surrounded and directed by ‘others’ (family, peers) and by ‘the Other’. The Other is written with capital O as it cannot be assimilated by the consciousness; it denotes both the culture which is too vast and complex for the I to comprehend, and the transgenerational material which is the unarticulated unconscious memory of a family which feeds at least three generations. Roughly speaking the ‘transgenerational Other’ feeds the Real, the ‘others’ have a strong impact on the formation of the I’s Imaginary perception, while the ‘cultural Other’ constitutes the Symbolic make-up of the self. In terms of energies the Real organizes the libido in ‘drives’. These are strong impulses which bring libido, which Lacan calls “jouissance”, enjoyment – in the British tradition considered ‘affects’. As they are palpable while remaining under the radar of normal articulation they can be scary; they make themselves felt when the subject is ‘passive’ or off-guard, open to the unconscious via dreams and lapses, or via the *object a*. In the Imaginary mode of perception, the I is strong and active; its narcissistic outlook filters only appealing objects and projects images on its experiences which please the self and filter affects into more recognizable emotions. In the Symbolic mode the laws and terms further articulate emotions in a hierarchy of values.

In the case of Freddie Montgomery, his ‘equilibido’ is profoundly disturbed: the Real hits him when he is captivated by a painting. His active, projecting Imaginary self is turned around: he is not looking at an ‘other’ who is equal or ‘similar’, but is looked at by some Other: “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” (*The Book of Evidence* 79). Throughout *Ghosts*, Freddie tries to ‘repair’ the tear the Other has made in his self. He uses his time in prison to restore his I with images and symbols: following his love of paintings he imagines himself in a couple of paintings by Vaublin, thus trying to paper over the trauma he caused others and himself. It is significant that one of the paintings that feeds his imagination is “the Embarkation (or Pilgrimage) for Cythera”: the Voyage to the island of love is a most appropriate title for an “object causing desire”. Yet his rich stores of self-love and learning cannot seal off the powers of the Real: “Evidently there is allegory here, and symbols seem to abound, yet the scene carries a weight of unaccountable significance that is disproportionate to any possible programme or hidden discourse” (*Ghosts* 227). In *Eclipse*, too, the self-confident actor Alex Cleave finds his neat RIS package being slashed open when he is in the middle of a performance, acting the role of Amphitryon: suddenly he loses the gift of acting, the gab becomes a gap.

In both cases the breach is caused by the *object a*, the “object causing desire”. “Object” is the term used in psychoanalysis to encompass anything that is not-I, so both persons and things are meant, in varying degrees of substance and imagination. “Causing desire” means that *object a* is supposed to function as a signpost toward desire; it is written with a small *a* as it is not the Other (*Autre* in French), but only a *messenger* of the unconscious (*autre*; hence often

called “the object of the Other”). In this sense Alex Cleave’s childhood home is an *object a*: “The house itself it was that drew me back, sent out its secret summoners to bid me come” (*Eclipse* 4). Being engendered in the Real makes this object scary; but it is also appealing, causing desire. In *The Book of Evidence*, the painting of the *Portrait of a Woman with Gloves* (104) functions as an *object a*: it breaks Freddie’s lethargy and splits his RIS system, but in a dramatic way: his unconscious floods his I so that all imaginative and social connections snap, with fatal result.⁷ It is worth noting that the *object a* always stands out as uncanny. As I argued elsewhere, this means it is connected to childhood experiences,⁸ but more specifically it is connected to what Lacan calls ‘the scopic drive’. While the term ‘drive’ denotes a libidinal force from the unconscious, scopic means that the subject feels how an object seems to gaze at them while the agent of the seeing remains invisible. This is how Alex experiences an uncanny gaze from his mother’s house: “The figure was motionless, gazing steadily in my direction but not directly at me. ...What was it she was seeing? I felt diminished briefly, an incidental in that gaze, dealt, as it were, a glancing blow” (*Eclipse* 3). The figure’s gaze, though it turns out to be hallucinated, sent out a palpable energy. In this sense *object a* is the “underside of consciousness ... irremediably limited” (Ragland 194). It is “[l]ike a vampire, whose menacing shadowy presence is disturbingly palpable and yet an invisible blank” (Johnston 253).

The Infinities

Discussing *The Infinities* Kinga Földvari notices “a more than commonly marked presence of nonhuman characters, the gods, or infinities, as he calls them” (213). This is probably why this novel is both Banville’s favourite (and my own): the book is all about more or less processed forms of libido, of scopic drives made palpable, while their origin remains hidden in the Other.⁹ But the charm of this novel is that it is comic, in the sense that it ‘shows’ the Other, the deeper layers of our psyche. Indeed this novel is “theory” in its purest sense: derived from the Greek “*theos-orein*”, god-seeing, this novel is indeed a god-goggling affair. Bryan Radley praises the novel’s “polyvocality” for being “the best medium for exploring humour”(15); I agree, but will understand ‘humour’ in the pre-eighteenth-century sense, as a psychic mode; and indeed as RIS brings at least three different kinds of moods, the novel needs that polyvocality. Mark O’Connell considers the narration “highly problematic”, and reads *The Infinities* with “Heinz Kohut’s theories about the relationship between narcissism and empathy”. That a perceptive critic like O’Connell uses ego-psychology like Kohut’s is surprising, as the American’s psychoanalyst plays down the forces of the unconscious, whereas Banville turns them up. Banville’s philosophical project seems not so much one of ego- but of emo-matters; his characters are no entities and definitely no ‘individuals’, but factors in interactions with aspects of other selves. This dynamic idea of a self is clear in Banville’s word choice when he proclaims himself to be “such an egomaniac” (qt. in O’Connell, *Emphatic Paradox* 427). The word “maniac” does not refer to some neat apollonian ego who understands himself and from that position can empathize with others; it is very much a ‘dionysian’ word, stressing the drive in one’s affects and emotions. In another article O’Connell uses Winnicott’s theories, rightly observing that “Banville’s work is peculiarly suited to a psychoanalytic critical approach” because this author has been “unswervingly concerned with the inscrutable forces and afflictions of personhood” (O’Connell, “Winnicottian Reading” 329). In what follows I hope to show how both Adam and his wife Helen’s confrontation with object a steeps them in the Real, which reshuffles their understanding of themselves and their place in society.¹⁰

The *object a* between Adam junior and Adam senior

Right from the start young Adam Godley is presented as one whose subjectivity is split by an *object a* which manifests itself in the form of a strong scopic drive originating in the “enormous eyes” of a boy on a passing train who looks into the house where Adam Godley junior is standing:

Shaken by thoughts of death and dying he forces himself to fix his attention ... he is being regarded ... by a small boy with ... enormous eyes. How intensely the child is staring at the house ... what is it he is seeking, what secret knowledge, what revelation? ... surely the window from outside is a black blank ... [the clock behind him] regards him with a monocular, blank glare (7-8).¹¹

Adam’s self-importance is diminished three times: by the house, to which he was called to bring support in the imminent danger of his father’s death (who is still in a coma); by the boy who is peering at an image that fascinates him – the house, not Adam; and the functionality of the clock is supplanted by the scopic drive’s “blank glare”. The moment reveals that Adam is not an ‘individual’: while his Imaginary self focuses on the boy his Real self may be with his wife: “A part of his mind knows what is happening but it is not the part that thinks” (5). The narrator refers here to the fact that Adam somehow knows that his wife is having an intense sexual experience without him (as we will see later). But Adam Godley junior also shares emotions with Adam senior. As Mark O’Connell pointed out, the son’s experience of the peering boy is the reverse of his father’s dream: as a boy, Adam senior also passed the house, thought it ‘out-standing’, would “dream of living here” (32) and ended up doing precisely that, since he became the house’s owner.¹² So when O’Connell observes that “the entire novel is the work of the staring boy’s imagination” this underscores three things: first, that Banville’s “solipsists” are paragons of in-betweenness; second, that transgenerational material (like Godley senior’s dream) feeds into the next generation’s “Real” dimension, and third, that, like in *Ghosts* and *Eclipse*, the *object a* is central, “a strange attractor” which initiates the novel’s action which is a matter of reimagining oneself.¹³

But we need to say something more about the form and nature of the *object a*. It has something quotidian, it has a recurrent form, and as it aims at reviving the affective dimension of the subject’s perception it brings about strange intersections between the empirical and the transcendental aspect of things. Indeed the object is not just reserved for magical times and spaces, but is part and parcel of the human being’s daily existence. The two most important *objects a* are the voice and the gaze. Both are themselves non-phenomenal (one cannot measure the emotional charge in a voice or a gaze) yet connected with physical phenomena (mouth and eye) which have a hole (the mouth and the pupil). It is paradoxical that a person is characterized by objects which are beyond their control: voice and gaze, as heard and seen by others, differ from what the sender knows (the difference becoming clear when one is confronted with a recording of oneself). So voice and gaze are unique to a subject, yet beyond the subject’s control, and so simultaneously most authentic and uncanny.

But not only do the *objects a* originate in every human body, they also have the ‘architecture’ of this origin. They consist of three elements: a *physical* point of support, a *hole* or strong sense of an absence, and strong exudings, which can feel like a palpable aura. In this sense the whole of the Godley’s house works as an *object a*. The house is outstanding in its physicality (especially to those who pass it in the train). It has a “hole”: all occupants of the

house are preoccupied with the “dying progenitor” (30), and all are “[s]haken by thoughts of death and dying” (7). Analogous to the difficulty of determining where the eye stops and the look starts, it is difficult to distinguish where the house’s physicality ends and its emotive associations start: “[t]he house seems to boost more than its share of corners, have you noticed?” (190). Its aura is clearly felt by Ursula when “Something brushes past her in the air, less than a draught, more than a thought” (21). This “invisible presence” explicitly breaks up her sense of herself as an ego as it “barges past her again, or through her, rather, and she feels it is she that is without substance, as if she and not this other were the ghost (23). Ursula seems rather gifted in perceiving the immaterial reality of libidinal activity: she ‘knows’ that her husband is still “thinking away”: “The elastic link between them has not been broken yet: she can feel still the old twanging tug” (19). So she seems to have found the right way of using her senses, which she calibrates neither with intentionality nor with denial, but in the mode Žižek says is needed to be aware of objects a, “looking awry”, a cautiously receptive, non-imaginary perception: “She has glimpses of figures that cease to be there when she tries to look at them directly, like floaters in the eye” (22).

That both Banville and Lacan focus on object a is what brings them to (what I consider) their major feat: to represent the “intersection of transcendental and empirical dimensions”, “short-circuit[ing]... this dichotomy and many of its permutations”, as Ellie Ragland observes in Lacan (92). While Radley observed that “the evanescent nature of the infinities” was at odds with the fact that it is “a novel with materiality at its heart” (13) it seems Banville agrees with Lacan’s “there is nothing more philosophical than materialism”.¹⁴ Indeed Banville loves ‘fleshing out’ the sensual side of events, like when Adam Godley *père* gets his stroke while straining “too strenuously in the effort of extruding a stool as hard as mahogany” (17); his daughter Petra has the habit of, when being introduced to someone, concentrating on disgusting aspects of the body: “she will picture him squatting on the lavatory ... underneath him all his awful puddingy things dangling over the steaming bowl” (119). Banville’s sensualism resounds with the postmodernism of David Lynch, whom Žižek characterizes as a master of the *object a* in that “over-proximity to reality ... brings about the loss of reality” in the extreme close-ups of the underside of things which are teeming with wriggly forms of life.¹⁵ The opening of *The Infinities* even echoes that of *Blue Velvet*, where the shot of the idyllic small American town focuses on a jet of water on the lawn which keeps going as the father figure got a stroke while watering the lawn. In their investigations of matter as a channel, a language of emotions, both Banville and Lacan are on Barthes’ wavelength: “Qu’est-ce que la signification? C’est le sens *en ce qu’il est produit sensuellement*” (Barthes 257). “How ... *object a*’s [are] ... transformed from the material of the world into subjective networks of meaning” (Ragland 189) in Banville’s novel is what we will look at now, first focusing on Hermes, then on Helen.

Hermes: the hermeneutics of the unconscious and *object a*

In Banville’s hermeneutics of the unconscious Hermes is, of course, the prime player. He is both son and messenger to Zeus, and in that sense closely linked to both the workings of the unconscious and the *object a*, message of the Other.

Of course Zeus’ reputation for fickle behaviour fits his role as the incarnation of libido. But Hermes too sports four aspects Freud distinguishes as characteristic of the unconscious: it is indifferent to the ego, contradictory in the impulses it gives, marked by delayed action and not subject to causal reflection, but *causing* desire instead. First, Hermes

admits his indifference: when he enters the body of the house's manservant, Duffy, he plays with the maid's feelings for Duffy: "I was just amusing myself, toying with one of my creatures, as so often is the way" (88). Later again he admits, "oh we are cold, cold" (262). This ties in with Feldstein's qualification where "[t]he Other insists on the alterity of the unconscious ... which can be understood as impersonal", thus also making the second point that it has "its own inconsistencies" (Feldstein 156). That certainly is the case with Hermes: though a god himself and so immortal, he is subject to Zeus' whims. Third, *The Infinities* teems with indications of unconscious time. Unlike conscious memory, the unconscious never loses anything: "This is the mortal world. It is a world where nothing is lost, where all is accounted for while yet the mystery of things is preserved" (300). Time is never singular, but always presenting experiences in loops and doubles, which Freud called "delayed action". Hermes notices "We are in the midst of an aftermath" (195). Likewise, all inhabitants of the Godley estate observe this looping: "that is the way with everything in this house, everything ... makes him feel as if he were a child again" (4). Unconscious memory is not lost, but it leaves a strange kind of hiatus in the consciousness, as Hermes whispers to one of the Godleys:

you will ... hear my voice. You'll think you have imagined it and yet, inside you, you will catch an answering cry ... your heart will shake, you'll weep for nothing, pine for what's not there. For you, this life will never be enough, there will forever be an emptiness, where once the god was all in all in you" (257).

The transgenerational image of the house is again interesting in this context of the achronological unconscious. Here Banville inverts the meaning of Hermes as the "psychopompos": while he is the one who carries souls to the "netherworld" (15) of the afterlife, this Hermes passes on thought material from the dying to the living. Focusing on this kind of (psychic) activities needs a narrator who can swirl his way into any characters' mind, from homodiegetic to omniscient and back. The fourth feature of the (Freudian) unconscious is that it is a-causal.¹⁶ Banville, always being allergic to causality, lets Hermes, together with Zeus and Pan, form a 'trinity' of forces which help bring about the resurrection of Adam Godley from his coma. That this outcome cannot be explained by any scientific perception of things is underscored by the family doctor's surprise at this turn of events. It seems to be a water-mark of all of Banville's epistemological novels to sabotage causal thinking: instead of single, reflecting, post-factum causality his narratives install multiple, future-oriented causing.¹⁷

But Hermes is also the unconscious' *messenger* and so the *object a* par excellence, of which Adrian Johnston observes that "while itself tending to remain in the shadows off-stage, [it] function[s] ... as the invisible transcendental condition of possibility (i.e., the cause of desire) for the visible parade of desired empirical objects" (259). Hermes definitely operates off-stage: as the incarnation of the optic gaze, he is palpably invisible, but only 'transcendental' in that he urges people to re-root in the Real and sense the libidinal aspects of the empirical world, i.e. the signposts of their desire. In true Lacanian way, Banville makes all realities in *The Infinities* never simply 'visible'(or invisible), but always 'over- or undervisible'; Hermes makes objects palpably present to Ursula, significantly to Ivy, uncannily to all.

Hermes also conforms to the 'architecture' of *object a*. First he appears as a physical presence in the real world: "The house ... is ... an impossible sort of folly, ... and that winged tin figure – ahem! – atop the single turret" (105). The weathervane is the perfect imaginary embodiment of Hermes, serial shape-shifter, as he turns with the wind, with moods.

Moreover, being on top of the turret of the house, he will be the one who steers things according to libidinal laws. But he is also marked by the second feature, the hole: “I should ... give some small account of myself, this voice speaking out of the void” (14), and so again characteristic of the Lacanian object in that he is a “‘vanishing mediator’ between seer and seen” (Johnston 253). And as eye and gaze belong together, “Lacan compares the place and function of object *a* to that of a window” (Johnston 254). Likewise Banville lets this mediator between matter and *e*/motion, souls and things, objects and libido, outside and inside worlds, dwell in doorways, frames and windows. “What a striking tableau we must have made, ... me in the bright doorway” Hermes observes (87), while acknowledging his roles as “keeper of the dawn, of twilight and the wind, ... the sweet-tongued one, ... guardian of crossroads” (15).

But ironically the Hermes figure shows us another vital thing about the *object a*: it cannot be reached. Lacan says the essence of the object is that one misses it, because it is only seeming anyway¹⁸ and Banville’s Hermes stresses this point:

To us your world is what the world in mirrors is to you.. ... infinitely unreachable. A looking-glass world, indeed, and only that. ... to put a fist to that blank pane and burst through to the other side! But all we would meet is mercury. Mercury! My other name, one of my other names (261).

Just like the human being who can never reach the Ding an sich, only the world in mirrors, the gods, embodying the unconscious drives, cannot directly reach the consciousness, but indirectly they do make it work. Like the tain of the mirror, a foil made of mercury, it is language which links human subjects both to the visible and invisible aspects of their world.

Helen: on the way to becoming an *object a*

Helen, wife to Adam Godley junior, likes nothing more than to embody language. She has come along to the house with her husband to support the family as her father-in-law is dying, but she is first and foremost an actress, and she has felt this to be her vocation since her earliest childhood:

She always wanted to be an actress, from when she was a little girl and dressed up in her mother’s clothes and mimed in front of the wardrobe mirror, preening and striking attitudes and stamping her foot. Later on she conceived of the stage as a place of ...self-fulfillment, ... she is convinced that by an accumulation of influence the parts that she plays ... will gradually mould and transform her into someone else, ... It is like putting on makeup, but makeup of a magically permanent kind, that she will ... only continue adding to, layer upon careful layer, until she has achieved her true look, her real face (251).

It seems that Helen has been realizing her ‘destiny’ following the “objects causing desire” which leave a trail in her life, like the props of “her mother’s clothes”, but also the “attitudes” to be mimed, like “stamping her foot”. Indeed *objects a* do not always have to be literally objects; Lacan also mentions the ‘Gestalt’, the body language which can convey strong emotions, is among the “sublimated objects in which bits and pieces of the Real dwell” (Ragland 189). Johnson’s characterization of Lacan’s *Gestalt*, a “seductive, specular *imago*” even echoes Helen’s programme, as it grounds a “series of identifications enveloping one another ... like the layers of a pearl, in the course of development of what is called the ego” (Johnston

259). While Lacan uses the image of an onion to describe the subject, Helen thinks of layers of a “magically permanent ... makeup” which is neither skin nor emotion, but something in between. This corresponds to Lacan’s “Surplus jouissance ... the objectal substance which remains after the object is sifted through the symbolic grid” (Feldstein 156).

Like Banville who said that “The world is not real for me until it has been pushed through the mesh of language” this is even more literally true for actors as they process text through their bodies. Alex Cleave seems very aware of this “objectal substance” which remains:

When an actor walks out of a performance no understudy can entirely fill his place. He leaves the shadow of something behind him, an aspect of the character that only he could have conjured, this singular creation, independent of mere lines. The rest of the cast feel it, the audience feels it too. (*Eclipse* 20)

But before Helen manages to integrate a rich RIS and turn into an object *a*, becoming the accomplished actress who causes desire for her ‘libidinal substance’ her Imaginary perception is enriched by an immersion in the Real via making love to Zeus. Upon her arrival at the Godley house Helen is preoccupied with her prospect of playing the role of Alcmene. This role strengthens her ego: “She cannot think ... why the play is called after Amphitryon, since Amphitryon’s wife Alcmene, her part, is surely the centre of it all” (192). In the play of Amphitryon Alcmene is the Greek general’s wife, who makes love to him twice in a short time span. The first time she is surprised to find her husband coming back from battle, but in reality it is the god Zeus, who could only seduce her taking the form of her husband. Briefly after their lovemaking the man himself arrives and they make love again. In *The Infinities* Helen’s husband has left the bed at dawn, but she has some experience of passionate love making. “Was it a dream? Surely something so intensely felt must have been real” (55). Her libido is certainly charged up: “the morning beats around her like a pulse ... the light out here in the country ... intenser” (56). Later, Adam comes back and they make love again. Helen is confused but happy enough: while she illustrates Lacan’s dictum about missing the object (she does not realize what happened), she makes her husband happy and enriches her perception of the role of Alcmene in its whole RIS range, especially as *object a* in her dream, in the Zeus-like form of an almost physical experience, will infuse her performance with the dimension of the Real. Helen clearly illustrates Marie-Hélène Brousse’s observation that “[y]ou are always involved in a new fantasy, a new bit or piece of desire, which is precisely the definition of *object a*” (Brousse 113). But not only is Helen renewed in her perception of her role as Alcmene, she may also have rediscovered the “lover” in her “husband” (76); and whereas Alcmene’s double lovemaking engendered one mortal and one immortal boy in the Greek version, Helen’s baby may be more perceived in a twenty-first-century way, alternatingly as just a baby (routine real), but sometimes maybe with a glimmer of the glory of his origin shining through.

In this way Helen may, as an accomplished actress, realize what Banville set himself to do in his “work of literature”: to reach “a kind of heightening... almost like the sexual act” which “takes on a transcendent glow”, confirming Lacan’s observation that the reality of the unconscious is a sexual reality.

Conclusion

Patricia Coughlan once observed of Banville that “visuality may be the distinctive characteristic of his writing’ (Coughlan 63). After reading *The Infinities*, I would specify that the author is a specialist in visualizing how a subject’s perception changes as its libidinal-cultural-identificatory modes mix in different ways. The main player in this book is the air, filled with affects, emotions and moods moulded by scopic drives. *The Infinities* is Banville’s Wonderland, and like Lewis Carroll he makes his readers break through the shell of routine perception by practising an “utter contempt for verisimilitude”. Like Lacan, Banville is most interested in “quasi-similitude”¹⁹: “everything is different – when the world looks like an imitation of itself, cunningly crafted yet discrepant in small but essential details” (13). Like “the Cheshire Cat and its grin in Wonderland” Hermes’ “appearance and disappearance is ... the conceptualization of the production of fantasy” (Feldstein 169). In Hermes Banville has found the perfect narrator to cross the chasm between word and world (leaving out empathy):

And these names - Zeus, ... Hermes ... are your constructions. We address each other, as it were, only as air, as light, as something like the quality of that deep, transparent blue you see when you peer into the highest vault of the empyrean (16).

But whether it is the unconscious or the gods inspiring a theorist or a novelist, neither Lacan nor Banville offer metaphysical kinds of consolation: “no salvation of the soul, ... no afterlife ... nothing ... except stories” (91-92). But it is these stories which are the life-blood of our perception, as they kindle the libidinal, imaginative and socializing aspects of it. These RIS aspects seem beautifully summarized in Banville’s soap bubble: “They seemed to be rotating inside themselves, ... and the iridescent surplus kept cascading down the sides. ... they were another kind of elsewhere”(66).

Notes

- 1 In a letter to his friend Louise Colet Flaubert writes “Ce qui me semble beau, ... c’est un livre sur rien, un livre sans attache extérieure, qui se tiendrait de lui-même par la force interne de son style, comme la terre sans être soutenue se tient en l’air ... où le sujet serait presque invisible ... le style étant à lui seul une manière absolue de voir les choses.” (16 January 1852) <https://www.etudes-litteraires.com/flaubert-art.php>. Likewise, Banville’s three novels have almost no exterior reference and hold themselves up by their sheer style; the subject is the almost-invisibility of interactions.
- 2 In *Seminar VII* Lacan wants to implant a basic rule in the minds of the young analysts in his class, and the thing they have to make sure is that their analysands have acted according to their own desire: “As-tu agi en conformité avec ton désir?” (359). The difficulty will be that this desire is hard to catch, the signifiers that hold it up always slip away: “en tant que ce désir ...[est] la métonymie de notre être” (371).
- 3 As O’Connell points out Banville repeatedly wrote about Freud in *The Irish Times*. “By now we are all Freudians,” as he has written, “whether we like it or not.” Especially in his article “Freud and Scrambled Egos” Banville praises the analyst as he managed “to dispel the ignorant pride that surrounded an idealized picture of mankind” (qt. in “A Winnicottian Reading of John Banville’s *Ghosts* and *Athena*” 329-330).
- 4 “l’inconscient est structuré comme un langage” (*Séminaire XI*, 23). This is such a basic line for Lacan

that he italicized it, as he wants to make clear that the unconscious is definitely not a matter of natural, animal instincts, but formed by cultural interaction, starting with the family. This does not only mean that unconscious content can be picked up and, to a certain extent, translated, but all libidinal satisfaction in daily life has to be negotiated in language. “One must negotiate in language for libidinal satisfaction” (Ragland 198). Again Lacan stresses that libidinal energies are at all levels mediated, interacting, with the kinds of languages we use in daily life, whether verbal, iconic, gestural, spatial or other.

- 5 La réalité de l'inconscient, c'est ... la réalité sexuelle.” (*Séminaire XI*, 138).
- 6 As neither Lacan nor Banville are interested in the routine real, we will leave out the specification 1 and 2 and refer to the primordial real as simply “Real”, but with a capital, to make the distinction with the common use of the word, i.e. being adapted to some functional reality.
- 7 Freddie will keep saying that in essence “that failure of imagination is my real crime” (*The Book of Evidence* 215). The Real was so strong it pushed away the Imaginary and the Symbolic, as a result of which he did not identify co-human beings as such, like the maid he killed. The fact that this “book of evidence” is narrated by someone whose perception is steered by affects and emotions rather than values makes the title all the more ironic.
- 8 As is argued in Schwall, “Aspects of the Uncanny in Banville's Work with a Focus on *Eclipse*”.
- 9 The few times that Banville admits being pleased with his own work it seems he can only allow himself using litotes, like when I asked, “Isn't *The Infinities* your favourite novel? “, his answer was “*The Infinities* is the one for which I feel the least disgust. In fact, the book I'm writing - trying to write - is a sort of sequel, both to *The Infinities* and *The Book of Evidence*” (private email, 16 May 2020).
- 10 It is worth noting that the biggest reshuffle in Adam and Helen's RIS, the fact that they become parents, is only revealed in the final pages of the story.
- 11 As quotes from here on will be from *The Infinities* this will not be further marked.
- 12 When an object *a* remains a fascination for life these images are called phantasms. As Mark O'Connell points out, Banville said in his own childhood he was fascinated by such a house, which became “the germ” of *The Infinities*. As the Big House recurs in many of Banville's novels this can be seen as one of the author's phantasms.
- 13 As Zizek puts it, the object *a* “is the form of an attractor drawing us into chaotic oscillation” (*Looking Awry* 38).
- 14 “Il n'y a rien de plus philosophique que le matérialisme” (*Séminaire XX*, 65)
- 15 Zizek, “Lamella” 207.
- 16 Following on Freud's idea of “overdetermination” Lacan insists on the “irreducible gap that separates an effect from its cause” (Zizek, “Lamella” 211): “a contingent external cause can trigger unforeseen catastrophic consequences by stirring up the trauma which always already glows under the ashes” (Zizek, “Lamella” 219). As we will see Hermes will explain this principle of delayed action, which means that a reaction is never caused by one event but by the chiming together of several experiences over time.
- 17 This is especially visible in *Eclipse* and the rest of that trilogy.
- 18 “L'essence de l'objet, c'est le ratage” (*Séminaire XX*, 55). This is in the nature of the thing, because “The *object a* is a semblant”, as Ragland observes (198).
- 19 Feldstein, “The Phallic gaze of Wonderland” 154.

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