

# *“We Had the Experience But Missed The Meaning”: On The Relevance of Lacanian Categories in the Analysis of Fiction*

Hedwig Schwall

**Abstract:** *After having shown the three paradoxes of literature (the master being mastered by his literary tools, the reader’s identification versus her critical stance, the text combining thematic unity and vital inconsistencies) we look at how several Lacanian concepts have their impact on a narrator’s style: the twofold psychic system, three phases that mould our perception, the function of the father figure, the notion of the Other, the others and the “objects o”. It is in the relationship to the object o, where the two different energies of our psychic system meet, that we find out which type of person we are: neurotic, psychotic or perverse.*

*As it is mainly the hysteric neurotic and the paranoid psychotic type who figure most often as narrators in literature, we look at how the former type is realized in Banville’s *The Book of Evidence* and in Deane’s *Reading in the Dark* while the latter, the psychotic type, permeates the narrative of Banville’s *Mefisto*. Indeed, the protagonist’s pathological narcissism which steers him now into megalomania, now into a death wish (unification with the Other he lost at birth), make him utterly confuse inner and outer worlds, literal and metaphorical meanings.*

## **Texts and textures**

Some among us are slow eaters – me, for example. I am also a slow reader – apparently, those two actions are often analogous, as is shown by Peter Greenaway in his film *The Cook the Thief His Wife & Her Lover* (1989). Some people are said to “devour books” – metaphorically, of course. As slow readers have less time to read than others, they have to be choosy with their books. For me the first and foremost condition is that, regardless of the story, they have to be intriguing in their style. Take John Banville: with a style as wonderful as his, one does not need a story<sup>1</sup>. In some cases, however, both story and style are masterly, as in Seamus Deane’s *Reading in the Dark* – unfortunately he has only one novel so far. Anyhow, a good book is like a nice dish: you want to have it again and again and each time you enjoy it in a different way.

Now to relish certain dishes you need a certain technique. Enjoying the texture of artichokes, for example, demands some dexterity as you pick and suck the leaves. Just so, some texts can be more fully appreciated when the reader uses special techniques. Take the example of Patrick McCabe's *The Butcher Boy*. In the historical approach of his analysis of that novel, Tom Herron concentrates on the political events to which the protagonist-narrator refers (Herron 2000: 168-191). He thereby ignores the fact that the I-narrator is unreliable, and that his views on the world are the reader's only source of information. A reader, trained in Lacanian reading, will recognize a consistency in the tale which enables him to specify that the narrator's unreliability is due to a psychotic structure. This ties in with his family situation: his (illusory) union with his mother has never been severed by his father, and as a result he never doubts anything and thinks he controls the world, while his ego has to keep up grandiloquent images of himself to avoid seeing the desolation of his situation and the hole in himself. The references to a historical reality are actually few and far between: he merely mentions his identification with heroic figures on television and the threat of the atom bomb (whereby he fantasizes that he is in control of the button); on the local scene, he belittles the impact of the police but grandly paints the town's fascination with the apparition of the Virgin Mary. These observations to me seem more characteristic of the narrator's psychological make-up than of any historic reality, and in that sense the psychoanalytic method seems a better approach for this book, as it can reveal the specific consistency of this type of unreliability, thus highlighting the author's accomplishment<sup>2</sup>.

But I want to go further, and argue that a "psychoanalytically informed" attitude is a good tool for most literary texts, as they are always layered, and built around **three paradoxes**. First, style is intended by yet exceeds the writer's control and consciousness; second, we must suspend our disbelief, while remaining critical in our close reading; and third, though readers may be scrupulously empathic, the complexity of style will always make them re-adapt their interpretation .

First, there is the paradox of style which is the master's tool, yet not in his/her possession: s/he is possessed by it. W.B. Yeats often stressed the difference between the journalist who merely informs and thereby uses straightforward language, which he equated with "plate-glass window". The literary writer, however, invites to meditate and therefore uses style, the equivalent of "coloured glass" (Yeats, 438). Yeats further specifies that style does not belong to the author but to his work: "though the labour is very great, I seem to have used no faculty peculiar to myself"; and when, much later, he finds his work much praised by some people, "I am a little ashamed, as though somebody were to attribute to me a delicacy of feeling I should but *do not possess*. What came so easily at first, and amidst so much drama, and was written so laboriously at the last, *cannot be counted among my possessions*." (Yeats, 532-533 my emphasis) On the other hand, the poet maintains that style is the writer's most personal feature, the aspect which makes his work unique. Indeed, when great writers publish their works, they give humanity a kind of capital, which gathers interest with every new and convincing (i.e.

consistent) reading of it. And no matter which philosophy or other epistemological system we use, we have to subject our mind to the exercise of close reading first.

Second, there is the reader's double stance. It is but in close reading that several interpretations may become visible, but they may be at odds with each other. This may again be partly intended, as literature experiments with polyvalence to find new combinations of meaning. So on the one hand, literature invites us to "a willing suspension of disbelief", but on the other hand its opacity signals: don't stop at the first reading, there is more than one story here. This is especially true for Joyce, who is "scrupulously mean" (as he puts it himself): he gives us clues as to how to understand a story, and then suddenly throws in other clues which steer us in the opposite direction, as I hope to have shown in an analysis of his short story "Eveline", where a hysteric girl slides into a psychotic crisis<sup>3</sup>.

This difficulty of the reader to find the "truth" of a literary text brings us to the third paradox, which strongly divides contemporary literary criticism, and especially those who focus on the ethics of reading, splitting them in two groups: those who think that literature is *essentially* paradoxical, and those who see its double demand as merely incidental. The latter group, led by Martha Nussbaum, are very optimistic about the fact that literature can teach us how to live. If we identify with the figures represented, we can live lives which we would not have time to live<sup>4</sup>. If we read in empathy with characters who live in entirely different conditions, we extend our knowledge of the human being. The former group, philosophers like Richard Posner, Geoffrey Harpham and Derek Attridge<sup>5</sup> question a too-quick "understanding", and focus on peculiarity of form (the colouredness of the glass) rather than on familiarity of content (Yeats's plate glass). They concentrate not so much on the story and its psychology but on the style; they stress the fact that we should be careful in believing that we "understand" other people directly. These philosophers (along with writers like McEwan, Banville, Coetzee and others) stress the fact that the other person always remains an Other with capital O: like Levinas, these thinkers emphasize that our neighbour, our best friend even, always remains beyond our understanding. Whereas people like Nussbaum see the literary figure as someone *like* us, her opponents stress that we must be wary of our own complacency, and in order to see how easily misunderstandings and ambiguities creep in, we must concentrate on the literary form in which these figures are represented. So, in the ethics of reading, the question of story versus style reappears.

It is significant that critics like Attridge are heavily influenced by Lacanian psychoanalysis. As a discipline which stresses the power of that which escapes our conscious perception, Lacan makes us see that we do not only not quite understand the other, but we do not even understand ourselves, and therefore we must never stop to question ourselves. This may seem a little daunting, but it is very liberating. Whereas many rational systems have trained us to judge appearances in a linear, fixing, causal way, this often leads us to categorize people and "fix" them, like Eliot's Prufrock who

feels that society immobilized him: “formulated, sprawling on a pin, / When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall”. (Eliot 2365)

Lacanian psychoanalysis will refuse any kind of deterministic, biological thinking, to foreground the possibilities of renewal inherent in a conscientious use of language. Roddy Doyle’s *The Woman Who Walked into Doors* provides us with an excellent example of how a person, having suffered almost forty years of oppression through her own father, teachers and husband, is coaxed by her sisters to talk and write about her past, as she had always been creative with language. And indeed, their lively interaction revives the protagonist, Paula Spencer, who wants to liberate herself from a past that bogs her down into a repetition of the domestic violence she vaguely remembers. Paula very much wants to turn a “factual” past into a “pactical” past, in the sense that the “facts” of a violent family life should be reinterpreted: this time it is the beautiful moments which should be selected and agreed on. Paula needs this “pact” with her sisters on a more positive past as this can give her new perspectives and new chances in life.

In summary, one could say that we can read in two ways: either as *conquistadores*, people who want to “extend” their knowledge, to possess more ground which they reorganise according to their own habits; or we can read as *pilgrims*, people who want to “renew” themselves through contact with the Other, and to be questioned as to the mechanisms of our own perception. In order to account for the three paradoxes, Lacanians read texts at least three times: first, to explore the text and identify the themes; second, to see the consistency of the form, as it fits the content. In a third reading, they pay special attention to the inconsistencies, the insistent and halting passages. They are the eddies in the narrative flow: though one may merely see a slight movement on the surface of a sentence, this signals an obstacle underneath. This is also the case with the unconscious: it shows – not directly, but it is signalled in an irregularity, a slip, a repetition, an awkward sentence, a strange insertion, a special intertextual echo.

We will now present all the “ingredients” of a Lacanian reading, and in a third part illustrate this with examples from Banville and Deane.

### **Some basic concepts of the Lacanian system: the psychic system, three phases that mould our perception, the Other, others and the “objects o”**

Lacan’s representation of the psychic system may be complicated, but the “fundamentals” are simple: (1) the psychic system basically consists of **two** parts, the unconscious and the conscious one; (2) at birth the “individual” loses an imaginary wholeness and must come to terms with the fact that one is “divided”, and must constantly **reassess** one’s situation in relation to the others and the Other (3) this development reaches a kind of balance in the oedipal phase, when the child accepts the “castration”, term to indicate the frustration that we can only reach the world (the others) through the **mediation** of language, which is a never-ending task, as words always hover over the world but never coincide with it (4) the promise of wholeness is repeated in the

confrontation with the “**object o**”, message from the Other; (5) the ways in which human beings develop can all be reduced to **three basic types**: the neurotic way, the perverse way and the psychotic way.

The psychic system basically consists of two parts: the primary subsystem, that of the drives, the “hallucinatory” unconscious, and the secondary subsystem, which is that of the “reality principle”, the test of one’s own perception with that of others. The energy of the primary system is called *jouissance*, or enjoyment, which is an energy that is indifferent to the subject (people drink themselves to death) and is cyclical. The drives aim at only one thing, that is their own recurrence. We see this as children love to throw things away time and again, while adults’ lives clearly show repetitive patterns. This is why the secondary subsystem has to counteract the chaotic, hallucinatory repetition, bringing in a reality check and a demand for development.

From the child’s birth until his fifth year, the secondary subsystem is remoulded throughout the three main stages of the oral, anal and oedipal phase. At birth every child is castrated, in the sense that, from then on, the individual has to give up its illusion of being whole. The baby both “sexuated”, in being given either a girl’s or a boy’s name; and “interpreted”, in the sense that the child’s inarticulate behaviour (crying, sighs, ...) is met by words which it is to take up in due time. Yet throughout the first six months, the “oral phase”, the baby still regards the mother as an extension of himself, and he does not distinguish between subject and object, nor between inner and outer world: all is fusion in confusion. Yet through its interaction with others the child has to be cured of its idea that it is at the centre of the world. Apart from noticing that the mother is not the entire world, the child has to give up “*das Ding*”, a hallucinated entity, “unspeakable, and even less imaginable” (Libbrecht and Van de Vijver 1994, 61) that is connected to a primary urge to regain that paradise lost, where words were not necessary<sup>6</sup>. Lacan considers *das Ding* as “the absolute Other of the subject”, in the sense that it is the subject’s dream of not being “sub-ject” any more, not subordinate but only “ject”, thrown into a welter of *jouissance*. Yet the sense of loss, of one’s personal Atlantis, is the very energy which nudges the subject to make this or that choice, to take its own, individual, winding road (Lacan 5).<sup>7</sup>

That “winding road”, as I explained in an earlier issue of ABEI (Schwall 2003, 221-3) is somewhat channelled by society which socialises the child by inviting it to leave the oral stage and step into the anal phase. As the child is weaned and thus gives up his union with the mother, he finds compensation in the illusion that he can control himself: in his control of the anal muscle he can decide whether he is going to cooperate with the parents or not. It is but in the final, oedipal stage that the instalment of the “nom/n du Père”, the name and the “no” of the father must be realised. Again, with “father” no biological father, not even a male adult is meant, only the *function* of the person is essential: to convey the rules of the community, the culture, to the child – whether this is done by the (grand)mother, an uncle, a lesbian partner who adopted the child, etc. Of utmost importance is that, whereas the child saw no distinctions in the oral

phase and imposed his own definitions in the anal phase, the oedipal phase has him accept that the Other, culture, cuts boundaries in his *jouissance*, and thus transforms it into desire. The latter term differs from the former in that desire is basically metonymic: any aim one sets oneself is never ultimate, but leads to another. To realise the Name of the Father actually means that a subject finds the right distance between two “Others”: the one that informs his primary system and the one that rules his secondary system.

The term Other is always written with a capital, as in any case it exceeds the comprehension of the ego. On the one hand, “the Other” refers to the set of rules that governs a certain culture, which is the touchstone of the secondary system and so steers our perception from the outside; on the other hand, “the Other” also means the patterns in the unconscious that have formed themselves throughout the individual’s life, and which steer our perception from the inside, from the primary system. In finding our balance between these two systems the “others”, written in low caps as it refers to our co-human beings, our “familiar”, can help us to find our own way in setting examples we may choose to imitate.<sup>8</sup>

But apart from the others in small caps, who help the subject to explore a certain culture, there are the “objects o”, also in small caps, but they are “messages” from the Other which moulds the primary system; one could say they are echoes from the Thing. Indeed, the first “objects o” are the voice and the look, as they were the formative energetic signs of, respectively, the oral and the anal stage. Both voice and look are liminal phenomena in that they are concrete and can be heard and seen by everyone, yet one cannot situate them very precisely: they are emanated from the “holes” in our body, from mouth and eye, and the strange thing about them is that, though they do not send out a meaning, the signal they give cannot be ignored. A look can be there for all to see, yet it remains opaque in its interpretability. As Banville puts it in *Mefisto*: the protagonist is after these signs which are “indecipherable, yet graphic”.<sup>9</sup> Yet, as we will see, it is not just persons that can send out looks that hit another person in his primary system, thus affecting one as an “object o”: any thing can get a special significance, can look at us or appeal to us, and in that fascination leave us deeply puzzled.

So we see that the primary and secondary system are in constant interaction, an interaction which is intensified during an encounter with an “object o”. And it is in these moments that *jouissance* (reactivated by the object o) and desire (formed by one’s relation to authority, the Name of the Father) will interact, and reveal which structure a person’s psyche has: whether of a neurotic, psychotic or perverse type of psyche.

If neurotic, the person will accept authority but doubt it, i.e. it is acknowledged but very freely interpreted. Neurotics doubt everything (and therefore find it difficult to take an ultimate decision) but they want to remain in control. Three subdivisions can be made here. First there is the most frequent case (though more frequent among women than among men), the hysteric neurotic. The hysteric is histrionic and creative. She thinks herself an object o to the Other: though she recognizes authority, she sees that it is flawed and in need of fulfilment, which the hysteric believes s/he can provide. This is

the type which appears most in literature – so this will be the one we will concentrate on<sup>10</sup> The obsessive neurotic will stay in control through sticking to himself – this type is more frequent in men – and keeping control through thinking all things through till the last details. The phobic neurotic will control his fear by channelling it to certain objects (usually spiders, dogs or other animals).

While the neurotic type *represses* authority, the pervert will *disavow* it. Though he knows it exists “somewhere out there”, he ignores it completely and cannot free himself from the compulsion that he is the object o for his mother. In order to stem the flow of his *jouissance*, the subtypes of the pervert (fetishistic, masochistic, sadistic) will all try to push the partner so that he will finally set the law. As this type suffers from a lack of symbolisation, this law will never be firmly installed, and these people will repeatedly recur to challenge the other (by inducing either pleasure or anxiety) to set limits. The other has to function here as the Other: as the Law is not declared objectively, but induced by the pervert, this type’s communication is “dual”, pertaining only to the I and the other.

The psychotic type, finally, covers the schizophrenic and paranoid subtype. This figure has *foreclosed* the Law, he has no concept of it. Culture is one blur of accidental phenomena; as there are no instructions for use given to the psychotic he will order them in his own idiosyncratic way. As the sense of a common Law is even more alien to him than for the pervert, the psychotic will be even more at the mercy of the primary system, and the drives which want their own recurrence. Faced with the cultural phenomena around him, he can at best imitate them, but not assimilate them, as he lacks the tool to do that: language. The “No” of the father has not worked; as a result, the child cannot distinguish properly between inside and outside, hallucination and reality, literal and metaphorical use of language. Of the neurotic and psychotic type it is respectively the hysteric and the paranoid subtypes who figure most often as narrators in literature. Whereas the former is always in doubt, covering this up with a certain theatricality, the latter is a champion of certainties, always spontaneous, with his unconscious on show, and as a result, rather singular in his expressions<sup>11</sup>. It is significant that, while the pervert’s communication is “dual”, the psychotic’s is “monological”, singular, as he only takes his cues from his own primary system, while the neurotic’s is “triadic”: s/he always balances the positions of the other, the Other (or the Law) and himself, as we now hope to show.

### **The hysteric figure and his “object o”**

One could safely state that John Banville’s work in its entirety aims at representing protagonists who systematically single out “objects o”. Critics usually observe that Banville’s protagonists are incommunicative, but one should rather say they are deeply responsive. His heroes never listen to what people are telling them, because they want to obliterate the practicality of everyday utterance in order to concentrate on the things

that happen in the margin, details which throw a different light on “reality”<sup>12</sup>. Instead of engaging in the social interaction which produces meaning, they want to explore the significance of things, in contemplating the signals that touch upon the primary system. Therefore it is not surprising that his protagonists concentrate on things which are in-between the phenomenal and the noumenal, which are simultaneously present and absent. In *The Sea* Max goes back to the seaside to commemorate his recently deceased wife and the friends who died on that spot, in *Eclipse* Alex Cleave meets his absent daughter in a vision, the science trilogy focuses on the gaps between the phenomena and the laws that cannot account for them, while the art trilogy foregrounds the impact of painted people on real people. Let us look more closely at the last example. *The Book of Evidence* which opens the art trilogy hinges on a scene in which the impact of the “object o” on the protagonist will change his life for ever. In his confrontation with a painted woman, Freddie Montgomery feels how that thing looks at him in an uncanny way:

Things seemed not to recede as they should, ... as if they were not being looked at but were themselves looking, intent upon a vanishing-point here, inside the room. I turned then and saw myself turning as I turned, as I seem to myself to be turning still, as I sometimes imagine I shall be turning always, as if this might be my punishment, my damnation, just this breathless, blurred, eternal turning towards her ... 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. (Banville 1989, 78).

Instead of the “spectated” object, the lady becomes a spectator from another world: the Other makes itself felt and overpowers the subject. Freddie is suffused with *jouissance* and he will turn away from any reality check. As he tries to steal the painted woman, a real one blocks his way and he kills her, an event which he further dissociates from the rest of his emotions. In this sense Freddie shows himself to be a hysteric; as they are narcissistic, they want to keep a good image of themselves and are able to “compartmentalize” sets of memories so that the less attractive ones are shut out from their self-image. But later, when he writes his “book of evidence”, his hysteric structure becomes entirely evident, as he takes a very histrionic stance to the authorities. Aestheticizing his crime, he is dead keen to present his tale in the witness box. He studies his profile and all other theatrical details of his appearance, and constructs his tale with great care – ignoring that the law stipulates that a person who pleaded guilty is not to be heard further. Finally, the narcissistic protagonist despairs of the lost chance to sport his genius, and with an irony that characterizes the hysteric’s unsatisfiable desire Freddie’s *Book of Evidence* will plead that what is “evident” in one’s own psychic system cannot be so in another’s: “You do not know the fortitude and pathos of her presence” (Banville 1989, 79).

Another novelist who shares Banville’s tendency to focus on a protagonist-narrator who in turn focuses on the layeredness, the opacity of human communication

is Seamus Deane. In his novel of the telling title, *Reading in the Dark*, his narrator stands out because he discards “meaning”, the quick social understanding that is usually expected of us, and instead concentrates on the *significance* of things. All starts with the young protagonist’s sensitivity to the powerful signs coming from his father “knowing something about Eddie, not saying it, not talking but sometimes nearly talking, *signalling*. I felt we lived in an empty space with a *long cry from him ramifying* through it” (Deane 1996, 43, my emphasis). Again, getting in touch with that layer of communication means that the protagonist concentrates on the marginal details, the “eddies in the river” of tales he hears from his uncles and aunts. Eddies indeed: what is lacking, and therefore obsessing the narrator, is the true story of uncle Eddie’s life and death.

It is interesting in this context that the novel is really a prose version of a volume of poems called *Rumours* – something which is vague and yet powerful, like the force of the “object o”. As Deane puts it : “I wish I knew what they / Were saying. I’m never sure/ What it is I hear.” (Deane, 1977, “Rumours”). The narrator refuses to take people’s stories about Eddie at face value, because he realises that there is another layer of energies under the plotline. Due to a series of events, the boy finds out the horrible truth: it is his mother’s family who killed his father’s brother, a fact which his mother is aware of but his father isn’t. “It was worse than the breaking of the laws of consanguinity”( Deane, 134). It is in this very problematic oedipal context, where the boy and his mother are tied into a secret the father doesn’t share, that the protagonist is confronted with two “objects o” which show us how the outside world can suddenly hit upon truths hidden deep in us, even if we don’t understand them directly – like the figure in T.S. Eliot’s “The Dry Salvages”: “we had the experience but missed the meaning” (Eliot, 1974, 93).

Indeed Deane’s protagonist is confronted with two objects o, the slice of bread and the roses, of which the meaning will only later become more clear and richer. First there is the bread’s mute language which lights up when the “reader in the dark” asks his father again to tell him what happened to his uncle Eddie, and he is hit. Dazed by the blow, the boy’s blurred sight focuses on one detail only: how his mother is cutting a loaf of bread and stops doing that, so that one slice is sadly hanging out of the bread, neither quite cut off nor fully sticking to the loaf. Though it seems an inconsequential detail, this image hits him with a special force, and it is only later that the protagonist will understand it is the image that sums up the rest of his life: as he discovers the secret of the mother’s family, but cannot utter this as it would destroy his own, he will forever remain like the slice of bread: still in the family, but cut off from them.

Second, there are the red roses in the yard. They certainly are a layered motif. First, they are an old Irish symbol; since the seventeenth century, Dark Rosaleen had become a representation of Ireland, and since Patrick Pearse and Easter 1916 also one of the blood sacrifice that nationalists demanded. In this context they also become a symptom of the family’s secret: each time the protagonist asks his father about Uncle Eddie, the father evades the questions to go out and clip the roses. So the sensitive matter somehow attaches itself to the roses, who become saturated with the protagonist’s

frustration So they are not only associated with the nationalist sacrifice propaganda but also with his own family's unspeakable crime. Indeed, the red roses also hint at the laws of "consanguinity" that have been broken, and in a blind fury the narrator cuts them down, not knowing what he was doing. Here, the roses certainly carry intertextual echoes, and the motif of the redness will be repeated in the mother's tortures of remorse, which will drive her to become psychotic. At the beginning of the book, "the redness [is still] locked behind the bars of the range"(6), but later she will not be able to tell the hellish fires in her imagination from external fires in the past (the fire in which Eddie disappeared) and the present world (at some point the area's the rats have to be chased away with fire). Indeed, after her father has confessed to the protagonist's mother that he had Eddie killed, the Name of the Father does not work anymore: internal and external worlds merge into one chaos and the protagonist's mother turns into a schizophrenic psychotic. Her only defence against the shame of her own and her family's doings is to split her personality, which she underscores with a double voice: to her young children she speaks in a young voice, that of her old innocent self; to the older ones she uses her normal voice; the protagonist is cut off entirely, as it was prefigured in the slice of bread.

### **The psychotic figure and his "object o"**

The most frequently occurring psychotic figure, as we saw, was of the paranoiac subtype, and here again John Banville provides us with an interesting example, this time in *Mefisto*.

That the psychotic is entirely sure of himself is due to the fact that he has completely negated his castration, his father's "no"; as a result there are no differences but the ones he projects himself, thus sticking to an entirely self-made world. This is clearly a far more problematical structure than the neurotic one, as the non-acceptance of a power beyond oneself entails that the psychotic has no definitions in common with others, all delineations are his own. The individual is at the mercy of his primary system, his *jouissance*, which is not tested against any intersubjective reality. This becomes clear in *Mefisto* from the very beginning, where the language of the protagonist, Gabriel Swan, remains singular: "I developed a private language, a rapid, aquatic burbling, which made people uneasy. It sounded as if I were conversing with someone ..." (Banville 1993: 9). Because the boy refuses to take any outer authority into account, he remains stuck in the repetitive patterns of the drives. This is expressed on both the micro – and the macrolevel of this novel, as Gabriel's obsession with the binary structures of his "mathemadics" lead him to repeat the events of part one in part two<sup>13</sup>.

Indeed Gabriel's father cannot make an impact. He is constantly belittled by his son, who cannot stand to have his ego controlled by anyone. But not only his father is perceived as one of "those stunted little warriors... a small man" (14), all other father figures, like his teachers, have but "a bit-part" (23). Kasperl, his next teacher, has "short

legs”, and Kosok “shuffles” (188) and has “stubby arms” (187). Indeed, Kosok is always missing out, “turn(ing) away, muttering” (170). Gabriel thinks that he is the only one who is on to the right thing, and that he will be the master of the universe after all: “Number, line, angle, point, these were the secret co-ordinates of the world and everything in it” (32).

Language, to the psychotic, has only one function: to prop up his troubled ego, and to make it “whole” again. He believes that, through his fusion with the Thing, he can regain the paradise that was lost at birth. For Gabriel, this “Thing” takes the form of a lost twin, his brother who died at birth. And because the dead brother is the centre of Gabriel’s fundamental phantasm (the basic formula of one’s “interior grammar”), the objects o that will fascinate him will have something “dead” to them, a confusing sense of being present in absence: “I felt Mr Kasperl’s gaze ... I fancied I could see something stirring, like torpid fish, in the dead depths of his eyes.” (M 49)

But not only the difference between life and death, also that between inside and outside, male and female will become confused. In his search for the language that can bring his brother back, a string of “objects o” brings Gabriel Swan to the final one, Kasperl’s black book that is supposed to contain the “ultimate” mathematical formulas – ultimate in the sense that Gabriel believes that through them the difference between word and world will be abolished. Yet this black object further aggravates Gabriel’s condition, as he only conquers it at the expense of severe burns which make skin transplantations necessary, thus confusing his sense of inner and outer world even further: “I was Marsyas, lashed to my tree, the god busy about me with his knife... this was a place where I had never been before... It was inside me.” (M 124)

That the inside/outside boundaries are blurred in ways which are specific for the paranoid psychotic becomes clear in the figure of Felix, who led him to the black book and who is an “alter ego” of himself. Felix maintains he has to “recognise what it is ...(people) want...”: he has to “interpret” their desire (M 176) and so he tells Swan’s colleague Leitch that Gabriel is homosexual. However, when Leitch does make a pass at Gabriel it seems Felix hit on a sore point here, as Gabriel denies any homosexual tendencies, while, earlier on, he was not displeased when Felix had him wear a bridal dress and women’s apparel<sup>14</sup>. Here we do not only see the psychotic’s refusal of his being sexuuated, but the paranoid substructure, as a suppressed wish (Gabriel refusing to acknowledge any form of homosexuality) is projected into an exterior threat (it is Leitch who made overtures, in some secret link with Felix).

Yet the bottom line of psychosis, as Philip Bromberg puts it, is “pathological narcissism”. It is “one of the particular characterological tolls ... as he tries to deny his apprehension of non-being” (Bromberg 1986: 441). Alternating between under- and overestimation, the psychotic structure will throw the ego alternately in depression, delusions of persecution and megalomania.<sup>15</sup> This is exactly what Felix does: one the one hand he promises that he will make Gabriel whole, and thereby presents language as exactly that which the psychotic wants: a magic tool that will make all mediation

superfluous, as Kasperl's black book will help Gabriel to coincide with the Other, his brother:

I would meet what I was waiting for, that perfectly simple, ravishing, unchallengeable formula in the light of which the mask of mere contingency would melt. .. And with it surely would come.. that dead half of me I had hauled around always at my side... and I would be made whole...(M 186).

Felix is indeed Swan's alter ego and the projection of his inner self, in that he objectifies the very mechanism of psychosis, as he drives Gabriel to unify again with the Thing, and to do away with language. Only, in his search of the Thing, Gabriel vacillates between the belief to become *whole* or to acknowledge that he is nothing but a big *hole*. When he is recovering from his burns and his colleagues watch his disfigured face, Gabriel fears: "They might have been standing on the edge of a hole, peering in" (M 194). But the psychotic keeps ignoring any dependence<sup>16</sup>. This is expressed, on the one hand, by a show of indifference. So Gabriel does not show much emotion when his mother is killed and his whole family ruined. On the other hand, he aggrandizes calamities: when Kasperl's mine collapses this gets apocalyptic dimensions: "Something was happening underground. ... Gardeners turned up smoking clods of earth seething with ... ganglia of thick, pink worms" (M 110). Gabriel thrives on his own, dark world, and it has something divine about it, to match the importance of his ego. He often thinks of angels, but they are never of the "guardian angel" type, rather a "malin génie", a bad brOther. The "huge figure in white robes, with gold hair and thick gold wings", pointed out by the nuns, had a "look, that to me expressed not solicitude, but a hooded, speculative malevolence" (M 31).

Indeed, Gabriel's "Other" is always self-constructed: not only does he belittle all figures in authority that culture sends him, but the ones he has chosen himself are cast out by the Other, the Law: the mathematics teachers Gabriel seeks out are sent away from school, Kasperl's sciences destroy lives, even his own; Kosok and his lab are questioned by the government. But there is yet another father figure that helps to glorify the psychotic's universe, and this figure is introduced by Felix. He calls Gabriel Swan a "bird-boy", "by Jove" (M 36), and suggests that he was fathered by someone in the Big House. Gabriel combines these hints, confusing their literal and metaphorical implications: indeed, Jove fathered the twins Castor and Pollux while he had taken the form of a swan, so he conceived bird-boys; and as a result, young Swan goes through the pictures of the inhabitants of the Big House, looking for a "a beaked nose" (M 11): he takes myth literally. In his belief in his divine nature, Gabriel feels singled out by anOther of his own making. In this short-circuited kind of psyche, language is not sanctioned, and anything, literally any thing, can become a meaningful message; so Gabriel is constantly fascinated by the patterns the sun throws on the floor<sup>17</sup>.

## Conclusion

In this short article I tried to introduce some basic notions which psychoanalysis and literature have, I believe, in common: an interest in the layeredness and beauty which combine to make the opacity of stained glass. This fascinating complexity seems to be the fruit of writers who have mastered the paradox of letting their unconscious play, while sticking to the rules of narrative technique, thus letting the two instances of the Other – both in their deepest selves and in the culture in which they write – combine and intensify each other. But though I focused on the three types of psychic structures in this article, I want to stress very clearly that the idea is never to use Lacanian categories to make character analyses. Literature is no psychology, a literary figure no patient; if one uses psychoanalysis in literature it is for the analysis of style and structure.

When we look at the titles of the three books we briefly analysed, we see that each of the titles dealt with the relationship between writer and reader, and with the relationship between literature and knowledge. In *The Book of Evidence* the title refers to the very impossibility of the protagonist's enterprise: he cannot convey the evident power the "object o" has on him, and yet as a hysteric he wants nothing else than to say the ineffable, thus showing how the "object o" is at the heart of the novel. *Reading in the Dark* shows another kind of hysteric neurotic, this time one who realises very well that his reading, even though he manages to realize the paradox to suspend his disbelief in people's stories while remaining critical in his close hearing, will always remain a reading in the dark. And though one may identify with Gabriel Swan's sad story, it is important to look under the surface, which is already "advertised" in the novel's title, *Mefisto*. As a clever mixture of a literal and metaphorical translation of *Faust* (the English word "fist" is the literal translation of the German word "Faust"), we find the predicament of the protagonist prefigured in the title: in Banville's postmodern interpretation, Faust is a psychotic figure, as Gabriel combines Felix and himself, ego and alter ego, in himself, thus missing out entirely on the Other of the outside world<sup>18</sup>.

In their writings, both Banville and Deane are diametrically opposed to the psychotic's certainty: clearly siding with Posner, Harpham and Attridge, they know that they can never be sure of what they read or hear. And therein they seem to me not only the best authors, but the best readers as well.

## Notes

- 1 As a matter of fact, Banville does not so much drape his sentences over stories, but over mythical patterns and sometimes over psychological structures, as I hope to show.
- 2 It is only after I had given a talk on this novel that someone pointed out that McCabe wrote this novel just after he had worked for a year in an institution for disturbed children.
- 3 See "Mind the Gap: Possible uses of Psychoanalysis in the Study of English Literature with an Illustration from Joyce's 'Eveline'." *European Journal of English Studies* 6(3), 2002. 343-359.
- 4 See *Love's Knowledge: Essays on philosophy and literature*, OUP 1990.

- 5 The other “camp” is formed by Posner in “Against Ethical Criticism”, *Philosophy and Literature* 21: 1-27 (1997) with part two in 22.2: 343-365, 1998; by G.G. Harpham in *Shadows of Ethics: Criticism and the Just Society*. (Durham: Duke UP, 1999) and Derek Attridge (*The Singularity of Literature*, and “Innovation, Literature, Ethics: Relating to the Other” *PMLA* 114.1: 20-31.)
- 6 Instead of speaking of “the Thing”, Lacan prefers to keep the German term, as this reminds the readers of its Kantian origin. Indeed, Kant’s worldview stretches to the “fundamentals” beyond the phenomena, to factors which cannot be perceived except in their effects. We cannot think back to our time as a foetus, but we can only “reconstruct” that sensation, going by the urge especially psychotics have to regress to the illusory state of completeness where there was no need for mediation.
- 7 :“ce autour de quoi s’oriente tout le cheminement du sujet” Jacques Lacan, *Les Psychoses, Le Séminaire Livre III. Les Psychoses*. Paris: Seuil, 1981, 65.
- 8 In the first place, it is the parents who help the new-born to answer his basic question: “What do the others want from me?” or in other words, how am I to channel *jouissance*, pure energy, into socialised desire? (This is one of the main themes of Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*, the 1997 Booker Prize winner.)  
As we want to be loved, we want to please our parents and therefore try to read their attitudes, to see what they want from us. Conversely, parents try to read their babies’ needs: does he cry because he is hungry, or does he want another nappy, or does he just want to be held? That people’s expressions are muddled, opaque, layered, can be deduced from the fact that different siblings from the same parents develop in a different way, as each “interprets” her parents in her own special way. Again, this is clearly illustrated in Roddy Doyle’s *The Woman Who Walked into Doors* where the three daughters have a very different relationship with their parents, which is reflected in their own respective families.
- 9 Banville, John. *Mefisto*. London: Minerva, 1993, 30; henceforth abbreviated M. The fact that primary and secondary system mix in strange ways in our perception of the world can be noticed when one finds a person attractive though s/he is not beautiful: here the expression mixes with the physical aspect of the body.
- 10 Neurotic types abound in literature, especially the hysteric one; Joyce’s Stephen Daedalus is a typical example of a healthy hysteric, as his narcissistic, theatrical, ever-curious behaviour shows. For a full study of Stephen Daedalus see IUR, *A Journal of Irish Studies*: “Forms of Hysteria in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *Stephen Hero*.” pp. 281-293. Vol. 28/nr 2 Autumn/Winter 1998. Examples of female hysteria are to be found in the protagonists of Yeats’s *The Land of Heart’s Desire* (Mary Bruin) and *The Player Queen* (Decima), as well as in Elizabeth Bowen’s *The Last September* (Lois Farquar).  
In his book *A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis. Theory and Technique*, Bruce Fink explains the difference between the different neurotics in a very clear way, with many examples. Especially p.161 candidly sums up the differences between hysteric and obsessive neurotic.
- 11 Again for the description of the pervert see Fink, pages 165-202. This chapter is by far the shortest, which reflects the fact that perversion is, in its strictly Lacanian definition, not all that frequent.
- 12 It is significant that, for his book on “objects o”, Slavoj Zizek chose the title *Looking Awry*. This book is very accessible as he gives many examples from popular culture to show what the function of these awe-inspiring objects is.
- 13 Here again, Banville shows us his story-telling talent: we never hear anyone else apart from Gabriel, and thus become immersed in the psychotic perception, thus getting an inside-view of his condition. The end of the book remains open: whether the narrator is cured or not remains undecidable, as he merely sticks to the laws of consistency in story-telling, which is exactly what caused Gabriel to be short-circuited in his perception.

- 14 I ventured forward unsteadily in the spindly shoes, my calves atremble. ... A spasm of excitement rose in me that was part pleasure and part disgust. ... Each trembling step I took was like the fitful writhing of a captive whom I held pressed tightly to my pitiless heart.” (83)
- 15 This point, that psychosis is essentially a disturbance of the ego-functions, is shared by all authors, from Pinel in 1852 over Kraepelin (1909) to our day (Lacan, Postel, ...). For an excellent historical survey of the views which have been developed on the topic of paranoid psychosis, see *Dictionnaire de la Psychanalyse* (which offers an excellent complement to Laplanche et Pontalis, as each entry is treated more extensively than in their standard work, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*).
- 16 Bromberg stresses this: “What keeps the person going ... is ‘a grandiose self’. Its main job is to be perfect, ... to never be dependent...” (Bromberg 1986, 440).
- 17 Gabriel sees “the sun inching its complex geometry across the dusty floors” (M 63).
- 18 Banville points this out himself in an interview with Gerd Kampen, who asks why Mephistopheles is written with an “F” instead of “ph”: “Well, you get *Faust* and you get *Mephistopheles* in the same word. Everything is simple! [Laughs.]” (Kampen 2002, 347)

## Works Cited

- Banville, John. *The Book of Evidence*. London: Minerva, 1989.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Mefisto*. London: Minerva, 1993.
- Bromberg, Philip M. “The Mirror and the Mask: On Narcissism and Psychoanalytic Growth.” *Essential Papers on Narcissism*. Ed. Andrew P. Morrison. New York and London: NY UP, 1986, 438–466.
- Deane, Seamus. *Reading in the Dark*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1996.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Rumours: In memoriam Frank Deane (1905-75)*. Dublin: The Dolmen Press, 1977.
- T. S. Eliot “The Love Song of Alfred Prufrock” in M.H. Abrams and St. Greenblatt, eds. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature II*, 2365. New York/London: Norton, 2000.
- \_\_\_\_\_. The Dry Salvages II, in *Four Quartets*, vertaald, ingeleid en gecommeterieerd door Herman Servotte. Antwerpen/A’dam: De nederlandse Boekhandel, 1974.
- Fink, Bruce. *A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis. Theory and Technique*. Cambridge/London: Harvard University Press, 1997.
- Herron, Tom. “ContamiNation: Patrick McCabe and Colm Toibin’s Pathographies of the Republic.” *Contemporary Irish Fiction: Themes, Tropes, Theories*. Ed. Liam Harte and Michael Parker. London: Macmillan, 2000: 168-191.
- Kampen, Gerd. *Zwischen Welt und Text. Narratologische Studien zum irischen Gegenwartsroman am Beispiel von John McGahern und John Banville*. Schriftenreihe Literaturwissenschaft, Bd. 56, hg. Heinz Kosok, Heinz Rölleke. Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2002.
- Lacan, Jacques. *Les Psychoses, Le Séminaire Livre III. Les Psychoses*. Paris: Seuil, 1981, 65.
- Libbrecht, Katrien and Van de Vijver, Gertrudis. “Het Ding versus het object a. Naar aanleiding van Baas’ pleidooi voor een ‘Kritiek van het zuiver verlangen’”. *Psychoanalytische perspectieven 25* (1994), 61.
- Schwall, Hedwig. “Fatal Fathers and Sons in Tom Murphy’s *A Whistle in the Dark*.” *Interrelations*. A Special Issue of the *ABEI Journal*, the Brazilian Journal of Irish Studies; June 2003. Nr 5, University of Sao Paulo. 219-239, especially 221-3.
- Yeats, W. B. *Autobiographies*. London: Macmillan, 1981.
- Zizek, Slavoj. *Looking awry: an introduction to Jacques Lacan through popular culture*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991.