"Cloud's red, earth feeling, sky that thinks": John Banville's Aesth/ethics[1]

"Nuvem vermelha, terra sentindo, céu que pensa": Est/ética de John Banville

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Abstract: John Banville's long career can of course conventionally be viewed as a linearity, but it would be better seen as a form of spiral. This spiral is the hermeneutic process and concomitantly the movements of eternal recurrence in the oeuvre. In accordance with Nietzsche's concept, these recurrences are not to be construed as returns of the identical. Rather, this ethic and aesthetic dimension in Banville is explicated as an attunement to the overall force of becoming. In agreement with Wallace Stevens' poetics, Banville's aesthetic is seen primarily as process. Through the immediate access to metacognition and reflection in the intentional act, Banville, through his protagonists, maintains a sense of wonder as hope in a fictional world often permeated by loss, melancholy and despair. This fictional trait is argued to have been there since the debut up to Banville's more recent creative work.

Keywords: Stevens; Nietzsche; Deleuze; Husserl; intentionality; metacognition; eternal recurrence; becoming; aesthetic; hope; The Blue Guitar; Long Lankin.

Resumo: A longa carreira de John Banville pode, evidentemente, ser vista convencionalmente de modo linear, contudo seria melhor se fosse vista como uma forma de espiral. Essa espiral representa o processo hermenêutico e, concomitantemente, os movimentos de recorrência eterna na obra. De acordo com o conceito de Nietzsche, essas recorrências não devem ser interpretadas como retornos do idêntico. Em vez disso, essa dimensão ética e estética em Banville é explicada como uma sintonização com a força geral do devir. De acordo com a poética de Wallace Stevens, a estética de Banville é vista principalmente como processo. Por meio do acesso imediato à metacognição e reflexão no ato intencional, Banville, através de seus protagonistas, mantém um sentimento de admiração como esperança em um mundo fictício, muitas vezes permeado por perda, melancolia e desespero. Argumenta-se que esse traço ficcional está presente desde a sua estréia até a escrita mais recente de Banville.

Palavras-chave: Stevens; Nietzsche; Deleuze; Husserl; intencionalidade; metacognição; recorrência eterna; devir; estética; esperança; The Blue Guitar; Long Lankin.

John Banville's extensive work as a writer in the time-span of fifty years (1970–2020) would most certainly allow any scholar to highlight a plethora of themes and motifs that could be traced through the output of fiction. The attentive and zealous Banville reader could find roots of authorship foci already in the debut *Long Lankin* (1970). These would be semantic-experiential concentrations that come to blossom in opulent profusion later in the oeuvre, enhanced perchance by repetition and the relative clarity that the privilege of hindsight sometimes has the aptitude to endow its objects with. In the short story "A Death" from *Long Lankin*, the reader encounters a diminutive life sequence following the funeral of the protagonist's father. Narratologically, the piece displays many of the conventional short fiction characteristics: *in medias res*, limited focus and impressionist presentation of few characters and a strongly restricted setting. In brief, a minimalist technique, since the form determines that there is not much time-space to embellish the narrative with elaborate and extensive information. The short story illustrates the method of building up questions that are vaguely or only partly answered. More show than tell evidently. Indeed, as pointed out by Kersti Tarien, the spare style comes out as a conscious choice when Banville later revised the short stories and sought "to suggest by implication, rather than state the characters' emotions explicitly [...]" (394). However, the dimension we will be pursuing here transcends the different diachronic developments in Banville's writerly progression. The phenomenology of dwelling upon a certain phenomenon appears in different shapes, but the basic structure of their appearance is the same/similar throughout the ouevre.

Overall, in the scene we shall initially focus on, the atmosphere is darkened by the melancholy topic, but in addition by something larger, a zeitgeist of some form, with the weight of an almost physical presence, possibly *Long Lankin* as the unifying force of all the short stories (Tarien 390). As often is the case with Banville's fiction though, it is left open if the ambience is *Long Lankin*, Ireland, world politics, an individual existential crisis, or even a palimpsest of all of those. At home after the funeral, the protagonist Stephen is suddenly beset by a specific affective mood:

> He wandered restlessly about the room. The strange clarity of vision and thought which follows exhaustion now came over him. The things around him as he looked at them began to seem unreal in their extreme reality. Everything he touched gave to his fingers the very essence of itself. The table seemed to vibrate in the grains of its wood, the steel of the sink was cold and sharp as ice. It was as if he were looking down from a great height through some mysterious spiral. In the corner behind the stove a blackthorn stick leaned against the wall. When he saw it he stepped forward and put out his fingers to touch it, but halted, frowning. He stared at the knots, and they seemed to be whirling in the dark wood, each one a small, closed world. He moved back uncertainly, and dropped his hand. (*Lankin* 32–33)

The "blackthorn stick" presumably heightens the intensity of the Irish context, but more importantly we have the sudden clarity that is supposedly explained by fatigue. It is concomitantly an embodied experience of the tangible world that precipitously becomes "unreal" in its "extreme reality". Arguably, this paradox is actually a dynamic chiasm that lies at the heart of all of Banville's writing: the real is unreal and the unreal is real. However, an even more important detail to note is the small closed worlds in the spiralling or twirling wood of the blackthorn stick. The protagonist's experienced "mysterious spiral" is in our context the

hermeneutic access to the world that constitutes the filter we can never expect to transcend.[2] In any case, the interpretative mesh will be the only part of possible mediation that shall concern us here. The opening up of the closed worlds and that process regarded as a repeated aesthetic practice constitute the aspects of attention.

In all, this draws us into Banville's phenomenology and thereby into theoretical matters more generally. However, the kernel we shall seek in the analysis of *The Blue Guitar* (2015) is more specific within the phenomenology utilised by Banville and the type of experiential aesthetic that we examine. There are two central claims that I intend to substantiate below. Firstly, Banville's phenomenological aesthetic is basically about freedom, and secondly, Banville's writing style in itself encompasses an ethics of hope.[3] The concept of freedom refers to the liberty of imagination that is involved not only in direct artistic activity, but also in everyday experiences, perceptions, and contemplations of these experiences and perceptions. This level of metacognition is immediately available as a reflective realm connected to acts of intentionality in the Husserlian sense.[4] Banville's writing stages this activity, while the narration implicitly attempts to reach a greater clarity of any phenomenon that the fiction visits. The laments concerning the impossibility of a saturated givenness are simultaneously endowed with a sense of hope. The creative force that is central in the fiction writing method—and by many of the themes in this writing—is elucidated by the Nietzschean-Deleuzian concept of becoming.[5] We shall begin by looking more in detail at writerly methodology and continue through the connections between Wallace Stevens, Banville and the notion of eternal recurrence, which conceptually is intimately linked to becoming. This section illustrates how Stevens' poem "The Man with the Blue Guitar" and parts of Banville's fiction turn in on themselves, while at the same time avoiding solipsism by opening up for an artistically rendered 'reality.' Then the analysis turns back to *Long Lankin* to conclude that this attunement to becoming as a force has been there from the beginning of the oeuvre and that an ethical dimension of Banville's writing teaches the reader to adopt a certain aesthetic attitude.

"The maker of a thing yet to be made"

The implicit contrast between Banville's early and late work may be elucidated by form. It is obviously possible to conclude that since the novel form offers more space, Banville is allowed to elaborate and expand his style. Concisely put, to say more of the unsaid in "A Death". In any case, that possibility is not the main path explored here. Another initial objection may be that an overall affective atmosphere in Banville's writing—in "A Death" as well as in *The Blue Guitar* and in other works—would most certainly be that of doubt and despair rather than that of hope. However, as the protagonist is abruptly drawn into the enigmatic aspect of lived experience and perception of what we call reality, a different phenomenological universe is unveiled. As indicated above, the protagonist in "A Death" has the sense of perceiving the "very essence" of the objects (*Lankin* 32). Oliver Orme has similar affects when contemplating the perceived environment.

> The rain had stopped and the last big drops were dripping down the window-panes in glistening, zigzag runnels. The clouds were breaking, and craning forwards a little and looking high up I could see a patch of pure autumnal blue, the blue that Poussin loved, vibrant and delicate, and despite everything my heart lifted another notch or two, as it always lifts when the world opens wide its innocent blue gaze like that. I think the loss of my capacity to paint, let's call it that, was the result, in large part, of a

> burgeoning and irresistible and ultimately fatal regard for that world, I mean the objective day-to-day world of mere things. Before, I had always looked past things to get at the essence I knew was there, deeply hidden but not beyond access to one determined and clear-sighted enough to penetrate down to it. […] Don't mistake me, it wasn't spirit I was after, ideal forms, Euclidean lines, no, none of that. Essence is solid, as solid as the things it is the essence of. But it is essence. (Guitar 57)

The speaker thinks through a theme with the markedly metacognitive style that is characteristic of Banville's narrators and protagonists. Neil Murphy—commenting on Banville's early fiction—has identified this phenomenon as "deployment of metafictional self-reflexive devices and the use of subtle patterns of metaphors that generate a figurative doubling of expression" (27). The act and act-awareness pattern outlined here does not necessarily have the metafictional purpose that Murphy points at. In terms of Husserlian intentionality, the act of perceiving a sky immanently and immediately provides the reflective dimension that opens up the realm of the *how*. It is explicitly made clear that this is not an element of abstract meaning or something taken out of a Platonic realm of ideas. The "essence" is part of the perception itself as meaning-substance or experiential-sense. Orme as the pictorial artist, does not make up this image as a fantasy, but perceives it as something "solid." Similarly, in the protagonist's moment of affective intensity in "A Death," the concrete wood and steel are affects. Essence as affect. The minor autonomous domains as whirling concentrations of wood in the blackthorn stick are also densities of meaning and virtuality that can be unfolded in the thematised cognition of the artist and/or phenomenologist. The blending of literal and metaphorical is seemingly unproblematic in this context. For Orme the raindrops are liquid lines that, gathering weight and then momentum, run off in criss-crossing webs. Substance, affect, form, meaning, and pattern.

Furthermore, Orme goes on to conclude

> that there was no such thing as the thing itself, only effects of things, the generative swirl of relation. […] No things in themselves, only their effects! Such was my motto, my manifesto, my—forgive me—my aesthetic. But what a pickle it put me in, for what else was there to paint but the thing, as it stood before me, stolid, impenetrable, un-get-roundable? Abstraction wouldn't solve the problem. I tried it, and saw it was mere sleight of hand, meremost sleight of mind. And so it kept asserting itself, the inexpressible thing, kept pressing forwards, until it filled my vision and became as good as real. Now I realised that in seeking to strike through surfaces to get at the core, the essence, I had overlooked the fact that it is in the surface that essence resides: and there I was back to the start again. (Banville, *Guitar* 57–58)

The obsession with essence is central and Orme claims to have come to terms with it. It comments explicitly on aesthetic issues but it also implicitly shows the phenomenological dynamic that functions as a Nietzschean eternal recurrence in the oeuvre. The surface of an object serves as the phenomenological empirical basis. Affects, impressions, perceptions, or in Orme's terminology "effects," are of course germane to most literary worlds. Phenomenologically, these appear as meaning-substance that have a complex interaction with the something-factor they are the effects of, which is other than, and not reducible to, the perceiving pole of the intentional act. All consciousness is consciousness of something and

whatever enigma 'reality' presents is present already in the immediate encounter. As stated already by Edmund Husserl: "[A]ll mediate validation is ultimately based upon immediate validation, and the riddle is already contained in what is immediate" (28). As with the darkened wood-concentrations in the blackthorn stick, there seems to be an ample giving of effects or affects, but simultaneously a holding back, a refusal to give itself completely over to the epistemological realm, since the bulges in the wood are "each one a small, closed world" (Banville, *Lankin* 33). Orme's predicament circles around this phenomenon too and ultimately it gives energy to the narration. The painster's[6] dilemma becomes metacognition that thrives on this particular energy. Even a dead God keeps giving off the vitality of its absence.

"Between issue and return"

In order to understand what is at stake in Banville's writing methodology, we must look more closely at the Nietzschean concept of eternal recurrence. Nietzsche's overall presence and influence on Banville is so well known that it could almost be asserted without secondary support.[7] Hedda Friberg-Harnesk (2018) dwells on the topic of return in her monograph *Reading John Banville Through Jean Baudrillard*. She rightly points out a number of ways that one can trace Banville's circular movements throughout his output of novels. It contains numerous re-cyclings of characters, names and spaces, all similar within each category, but not exactly the same (Friberg-Harnesk 175–83). This is something that Pietra Palazzolo has analysed as "intra-textuality" in Banville's fiction as related to the context of Rilke's and Stevens' poetry and poetics (103). In terms of the phenomenological trace we outline here, I would like to develop the understanding of eternal recurrence as well as adding a slightly different philosophical aspect to the existing catalogue of scholarship. In doing so, I follow Gilles Deleuze's explication of the concept. Thereby I do not negate the Banvillean patterns that Friberg-Harnesk has uncovered, but rather move this insight to a different philosophical plane. Deleuze comments on central Nietzschean ideas:

> The eternal return is as badly misunderstood as the will to power. Every time we understand the eternal return as the return of a particular arrangement of things after all the other arrangements have been realised, every time we interpret the eternal return as the return of the identical or the same, we replace Nietzsche's thought with childish hypotheses. […] [O]nly that which becomes in the fullest sense of the word can return, is fit to return. Only action and affirmation return: becoming has being and only becoming has being. That which is opposed to becoming, the same or the identical, strictly speaking, is not. […] This is why Nietzsche says that the will to power is not wanting, coveting or seeking power, but only "giving" or "creating." (Deleuze 857–59)

Thus, the concept is related to Nietzsche's *amor fati* and the concept of *fatum* in Stoicism (other central thoughts in Banville's fiction)[8] and it is in addition intimately linked to the aesthetic in terms of creative force. The becoming in Banville always brings something new. It is possible to say that Orme, Morden and Cleave are similar, but they are not identical. The eternal recurrence is *becoming* in accordance with Deleuze's philosophical cognition, but the phenomenon has taken a specific fictional form. What Banville frequently stages is the difficulty of staying attuned to becoming in the Deleuzian sense and to create in accordance with this fundamental virtuality and energy,[9] which is denoted as "giving" or "creating" and

that has nothing to do with a subjective and reactive will to power. This explains the Banvillean preference to repeatedly utilise failed or blocked writers, scientists and/or artists as his protagonists.

In addition, eternal recurrence has relevance in at least two other important ways. Firstly, it can be said to highlight an aspect of Banville's aesthetic that partly overlaps with Orme's thinking. It is the artist's and the artwork's turning in upon themselves without isolating themselves entirely from 'reality.' We find something similar in the novel's most obvious intertext "The Man with the Blue Guitar." The motivation for introducing Wallace Stevens as a prominent influence and inspiration to Banville is self-evident in the context of *The Blue Guitar*.[10] Canto XXII is of specific interest in the present analysis.

> Poetry is the subject of the poem,
> From this the poem issues and
>
> To this returns. Between the two,
> Between issue and return, there is
>
> An absence in reality,
> Things as they are. Or so we say.
>
> But are these separate? Is it
> An absence for the poem, which acquires
>
> Its true appearances there, sun's green,
> Cloud's red, earth feeling, sky that thinks?
>
> From these it takes. Perhaps it gives,
> In the universal intercourse.
> (Stevens 176–77)

As we have seen in the intentional acts highlighted in Banville's prose above, we have continuously a metacognitive dimension. The speaker takes in and reflects on certain qualities of that taking in, thereby the metacognitive dynamic spirals in on itself.[11] The process is written into the artwork (poem or novel) and presumably mirrors Banville's own writing methodology, as has been suggested by Friberg-Harnesk (186).[12] In Stevens' poem, the theme of poetic ontology—analogously including certain 'poetic' forms of prose too—is explicitly commented upon. The poem turns in on itself and presumably cannot do anything about the "absence in reality."[13] The poetic speaker overtly contemplates whether this absence applies to the poem or not. It is suggested that the poem "takes," but does it give too? The poem definitely transforms: "sun's green, / Cloud's red, earth feeling, sky that thinks," but is that all? The aesthetic contemplation here becomes elaborate. Indeed, drawing on George Steiner, Cody Deitz suggests that this particular canto is deceptively simple and that it presents precisely an ontological problem (157). Deitz's argument helps to pinpoint the link to Banville and Deleuze's understanding of Nietzsche.

> [T]he subject of poetry is poetry, and within the process of the poem—a circular going out and coming in—there is an emptiness; this emptiness, or absence, is an integral part of this process, and of reality. There is, in other words, a kind of absent center on which poetry and art hinges. Poetry is thus defined not as product, but as process. (158)

This description could without much interpretative strain be applied to the oeuvre of Banville's prose fiction. Furthermore, the tautological threat (poetry is about poetry)—intimately linked to the hazard of *l'art pour l'art* in its negative sense—is challenged in Stevens' poetry as well as in Banville's prose fiction. In the Irish author's writing, the process is highlighted both as an explicit theme in the fictional worlds of the works and as an immanent part of the writing itself. In Banville, the speaker is confronted with the enigma of the world and the peculiar phenomenon of knowledge in its most basic sense. The speaker scrutinises this phenomenon and he investigates the process of the scrutiny as well. Turning in on itself does not mean closing oneself off from the world in any way. It rather means to open the world up from within. In analysing the canto, Deitz concludes that "it is both commentarial and performative: it enacts the event it ponders over" (158). This statement is equally applicable to Banville's prose fiction.

The next step is to illuminate what Banville's image of art and the art that surfaces in his writing methodology have to do with what can be denoted 'reality.' Do we only have the naïve option of the artist filling the void of the world with her words, clay, marble, video snippets, or paint? Part of a tentative response is Stevens' "sky that thinks." Recall the section of Poussin-blue sky in *The Blue Guitar*—which is concomitantly the "pure autumnal blue"—that Orme is exposed to. He does not completely manufacture this blue since it is both Poussin-blue and pure blue. It is always already an intermingling of artistic creativity and perceived reality. He finds *it* and in a way it finds *him*. Blue sky thinks Orme into being in a specific way, which immediately constitutes the cancellation of the notion of solipsism. In Deleuze's conceptualisation of *becoming*, this is creative activity as *involvement* in the overall becoming. Temporally, it does not last but is a momentary attunement to an ontological complexity that literature partakes in; an energetic limit that the natural sciences have excluded beforehand. Science has to be unambiguous, binary, and thus has to determine whether a particular statement about any *Sachverhalt* (state of affairs) is true or false, "the truth, Dichtung und Wahrheit, all / Confusion solved, as in a refrain / One keeps on playing year by year, / Concerning the nature of things as they are" (Stevens 177). Art and powerful forms of thinking magnify and expand reality; they set up a dialogue that allows for oscillation between the *alethic* and correspondence predication.[14]

This observation leads on to the second Banvillean trait that eternal recurrence sheds light on, which is the aforementioned immanent freedom of metacognitive reception and elaboration of the *how*.[15] As the artist has to put in an effort in decoding the closed worlds of givenness, the reader too has to learn to open up to the unfolding of phenomena. This gap that allows for contemplation is so frequent in Banville's fiction that the Banville reader is immanently *taught* how to approach art and literature. The phenomenon introduces the experience of art as an aesthetic of dynamic processing. For Orme this experiential connoisseurship has even overloaded and partly metamorphosed into his kleptomania, through which he seems to want to take objects out of the world in order to somehow preserve them, or at least to sustain their energy, reminiscent of the deed, an affective trace of the

transgression. What fascinates the protagonist is the impossibility of possessing certain moments as objects. Time as becoming changes the tunes on the blue guitar.

> The sky in the window was clouded yet all inside here was quick with a mercurial light that picked out the polished curves and sharp corners of things and gave to them a muted, steady shine: the handle of a knife on the table, the teapot's spout, a nicely rounded brass doorknob. The wintry air in the room was redolent of unremembered things, but there was, too, a quality of urgency, of immanence, a sense of momentous events in the offing. I had stood here as a boy, beside this same table, before this same window, in the same metallic light, dreaming of the unimaginable, illimitable state that was to come, which was the future, the future that for me, now, was the present and soon would fall away and become the past. How was it possible, that I had been there then and was here now? And yet it was so. This is the mundane and unaccountable conjuring trick wrought by time. (*Guitar* 110–11)

The experiential tinge is not solely bestowed onto things, since they have the capacity to shine by themselves, but the temporal dimension pushes *becoming* onto the same focus. The attunement to the becoming can only happen momentarily in the creative act and in the experiencing of the aesthetic object in its eternal becoming.[16] However, I suggest that Banville invites the reader into a generous understanding of becoming and creativity, which constitutes a kind of phenomenological hospitality. As well as the act of writing is obviously a synthesising of potential symbiosis, the readerly stratum is a similar co-creative practice. Recall how the sink was "cold and sharp as ice" in "A Death" and here the corners of things are "sharp." The "mercurial light" adds to this affectivity of metallic coldness, sharpness and perceptive astuteness. The metacognitive layer of Banville's style thus imparts an attitude while at the same time bestowing any act with a dimension of hope. That hope will be a mute "steady shine," which goes to show why it is labelled 'hope,' rather than something else, which could potentially be articulated in a more epistemologically precise way. We cannot go on, we will go on. There is no closure in "the universal intercourse" (Stevens 177).

"An absence in reality"

In a certain way hope feeds on absence. A fully saturated and complete reality and literary text would be next to meaningless. Absence is fertile. In Orme's narrative, this phenomenon is as mentioned paralleled by the pilfering activity. However, the engendering of creative freedom is actually intimately intertwined with stubborn resistance and absence. The ultimate nightmare for a kleptomaniac would probably be that stealing was suddenly not prohibited any longer. Similarly, the freedom of the *how* in Banville's fiction has a certain shade.

> When I left the town for the first time all those years ago, to seek my fortune—picture me, the classic venturer, my worldly possessions over my shoulder, in a handkerchief tied to a stick—I took certain choice things away with me, stored in my head, so that I might revisit them in after years on the wings of memory—the wings of imagination, more like—which I often did, especially when Gloria and I went to live in the far, bleached south, to keep myself from feeling homesick. One of those treasured items was a mental snapshot of a spot that had always been for me a totem, a talisman. It was nowhere remarkable, just a bend in a concrete road on the side of a hill leading up to a little square. It wasn't what could be called a place, really, only a way between

> places. No one would have thought to pause there and admire the view, since there wasn't one, unless you count a glimpse of the Ox river, more a trickle than a river, down at the foot of the hill, meandering along a railed-off culvert. There was a high stone wall, an old well, a leaning tree. The road widened as it rose, and had a tilt to it. In my recollection it's always not quite twilight there, and a greyish luminance suffuses the air. In this picture I see no people, no moving figures, just the spot itself, silent, guarded, secretive. There is a sense of its being removed, somehow, of its being turned away, with its real aspect facing elsewhere, as if it were the back of a stage set. The water in the well plashes among the mossed-over stones, and a bird hidden in the branches of the languishing tree essays a note or two and falls silent. A breeze arises, murmuring under its breath, vague and restless. Something seems about to happen, yet never does. (*Guitar* 73–74)

Even though the topos here is conceived as a non-place, it contains several objects that resonate phenomenologically, akin to the dark knots in the blackthorn stick. The unremarkable something that is the 'between-places' rather than a notable site—similar to the silence between words or the white space between words in a text—still has the capacity, through being "secretive," to become a mnemonic "talisman" of obvious significance.[17] The whole image thrives on a form of absence that builds up the expectations of an arrival of an event that never materialises. Again, the focus is on process rather than static endpoint, on absence rather than presence, on intensity without obvious structure.[18]

As a memory always has to be a blend of the contemporary position and the object of memory, any perception has a similar basic phenomenology. To perceive a tree means that the perceiver can never have 'the whole tree.' It will always contain concatenations of continuous temporary fulfilling with an overflow of sense, that is, something similar to imagination.[19] There obviously is an absence in reality, which can be philosophically dissected in different ways. Stevens' speaker wonders about the poem: "Perhaps it gives" (177). In the Banvillean discourse, the writing style merges with an aesthetic principle that draws the reader into the freedom of the how, but which is a liberty that only works under the pressure of constraints. The abundance of presence only appears as shaded and placed into relief by its paltry and starving twin of absence. Circling in on a certain givenness, Banville takes on an aesthetic attitude, similar to the one Stevens implements in "The Man with the Blue Guitar." In addition, it is this type of performative philosophical cognition that Deleuze is after in his interpretation of Nietzsche and in his own highly creative philosophy, encompassed by the concept of becoming. As formulated by Todd May in his tracing of this Deleuzian concept: "[T]he point of a philosophical perspective is not to tell us what the world is like—that is the point of science—but to create a perspective through which the world takes on a new significance" (142). That statement works perfectly well for Banville and Stevens too. If we return to "A Death," we see that the blackthorn stick becomes narratologically significant. Stephen claims to have a limited memory of his father, who hovers in the tale like a ghost: "All I can remember is his knuckles. They were white, you know, and they used to curl around his stick — like that" (33). This whiteness is perhaps reminding Stephen of his father's tenseness—something that might have made him recoil when essaying to touch the stick earlier—but it concomitantly heightens the sense of withholding when it occurs together with the stick. A new significance here is an absence of expected significance in the overall logic of becoming.

"The blue guitar / Becomes the place of things as they are"

In another *Long Lankin* story, the Hemingway-tinted "Island," the female character is anxious about her boyfriend leaving her. The couple resides in some southern sun-drenched clime trying to work out what kind of tension is ruining their relationship. By narratological default, the reader is invited to do the same, to interpret the scarce information into a converging meaning. However, in addition there is a moment of affective intervention in the ordinary flow of things similar to the one in "A Death." The female protagonist contemplates the relation that the male character does not seem to be as interested in doing. Perceptions reach a similar kind of concentration, as was the case for Stephen in the passage analysed at the beginning of this investigation.

> She looked down at the table where the shadows from the tree stirred on the wood. Soft sunlight touched the cups and plates, the bread and the small green grapes, extracting from each thing it touched a sense of the thing itself, a sense of the fragility of its existence. Then the leaves stirred, and the shadows changed, a new pattern formed, one that seemed held in place by a force from within the wood itself. Something came back to her of their life together, and she smiled. (*Lankin* 76)

In this play of light and shadow, the objects seem temporary and denoted by "fragility," as if the wind could suddenly eradicate their individuality and they might blur into nothingness or disappear in the overall *chaosmos*. Indeed, the "thing itself" is this very brittleness, its endless becoming, and its shape-shifting reality that language has to strain itself to keep up with. New patterns form in concatenations of becoming, but which are also held together by this "force" residing in their physical existence. To generalise slightly, we can say that this energy is what many of Banville's protagonists struggle to hold on to or to give scientific or artistic form. They seek to be carried along by a reality/virtuality that is often one step ahead, trying to continuously set up a creative dialogue so as to do justice to virtual intensities. Yet, at the same time as being forceful, this becoming-reality seems paradoxically to be delicate, as if it could drown in nothingness and absence. In other instances, the unnamed feeling of something felt, that the text circles around, has an affective shimmer of hope. For the character in the above passage, we see a smile when she recalls some treasured memory that the reader is excluded from. If there is something like 'things as they are,' presumably they would appear as in Banville's fiction: in an abundance of virtuality and becoming, albeit always with the tantalising saturation on the tip of the tongue or just beyond our reach, as Oliver Orme feels about the past that soars around him, "there and not there, like a word on the tip of [his] tongue" (*Guitar* 219).

Conclusion

As we have seen, there is a thematic and stylistic spiral running through Banville's authorship. It involves the Deleuzian–Nietzschean concept of eternal recurrence, which is strongly tied to the concept of becoming. Banville utilises this in his own writing by recycling and returning to similar situations and epistemological and ontological challenges. In all, the prose fiction develops a methodology that the reader has to engage with, which essentially is a thematisation of a certain experiential sphere that involves several strata of metacognition, for instance, the act of having a perceptual experience and reflections upon that act, the act of experiencing a similar act in fiction and reflecting upon that act, the act of putting these two experiential

layers together and reflecting on that etc., etc. The iterations of layered intentionality teach the reader to read and to engage with art. This dimension also involves a freedom of creativity and of 'giving' in the Nietzschean sense. However, such liberty is closely intertwined with constraints and a holding back in the way the world worlds. Similarly to the poetics of Wallace Stevens, Banville (and many of his protagonists) try to keep up with the force of creativity. This aesthetic does not stipulate an autonomous art that creates 'reality.' Rather, the artist and poet (and reader) co-create and revitalise 'reality,' while simultaneously turning in upon themselves in metacognitive contemplation. The kinds of meaning-zones required are theoretically pre-figured in Husserl's early phenomenology of intentionality. The ethics involved draws its dynamism from the hope of a complete givenness and wholeness that Banville's fiction suggests will never happen, which in turn constitutes the core-vitality of art, fiction and poetry. As has been shown above, this aesth/ethic had its seeds already in the debut *Long Lankin*.

Notes

1 The quote is from Wallace Stevens' poem "The Man with the Blue Guitar" as are all the subsection headings.

2 Laura P. Zuntini de Izarra has also used this circular and spiral-like metaphor: "Various images of the process of writing may be perceived through a critical reading of his novels. It may be seen as a spiral in which there is a perpetual return, though on higher planes" (158). Similarly, the protagonists return to perceptual and hermeneutic activity as if a closure would be possible. The claim here is that this process constitutes the basis for Banville's aesthetic.

3 'Hope' can here be understood as secular but is also fully compatible with a Christian construal. See for instance S:t Paul: "and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us" (ESV, Romans 5:5). In a more secular mould, this would be 'faith' or 'life' felt in any life lived, its enhancement accentuated in Banville's prose fiction and the aesth/ethic moments I refer to.

4 What is meant by Husserlian intentionality in relation to Banville's creative writing, is that the author (and often the protagonist too) becomes a phenomenologist in front of givenness. This entails a relinquishing of *the natural attitude*. As formulated by Husserl: "What appears to natural thinking as the matter-of-fact givenness of known objects within knowledge becomes a riddle" (17). Banville's aesthetic attitude contains the metacognition that ponders the riddle.

5 While the link between Nietzsche and Banville is relatively unproblematic, the conceptual relation between Deleuze and Husserl may seem complicated. I just want to make clear that I use Husserlian intentionality together with Deleuzian becoming because these processes best shed light on the aspects of Banville's fiction that I analyse. I am not interested in pursuing the philosophical complications that could be teased out of this conceptual combination.

6 Banville's neological merger of 'the painter's pains'.

7 Cf. for instance John Kenny 168–69; Rüdiger Imhof 158–59 and 176–77.

8 Cf. Imhof 160.

9 I prefer using the Deleuzian 'virtual' instead of 'potential' or 'possibility.' The creative force that is dominant in Banville's writing is closer to virtuality as explicated by Todd May: "The virtual is not the possible. The possible is that which does not exist but might; it is modeled on the real, parasitic upon it, but is not real. It is the real minus existence. If I think of a fence that I want to build, a white picket fence, that fence is possible, although not real. […] In contrast, the virtual is

real, it exists […]" (148).

10 Cf. for instance Kenny 99–100 and Pietra Palazzolo 87–109.

11 This spiralling in on itself is also used as an explicit method as concerns aesthetic form. When working on *Long Lankin*, Banville sought to create a 'world' that would hold the short stories together in a new way: "The enigmatic description of the book [*Long Lankin*] as a 'work of fiction' was to signify a new hybrid, which goes further in establishing coherence than a collection like *Dubliners*, but which falls short of an actual novel" (Tarien 396). It is not farfetched to suggest that Banville is attempting something similar with his full ouevre.

12 As a writer in an Irish context, it might be appropriate to distinguish Banville's project from fellow Irishmen such as Joyce and W. B. Yeats. In for instance Yeats' case, his poetic and philosophical vision takes the form of "historical cones" and time moves in a spiral-like fashion (DeForrest 137). However, Yeats presents a mythological thesis that displays some form of ideological vision. In contrast, Banville's version of eternal recurrence is immanent to his work and closely connected to phenomenology in general and hermeneutic phenomenology specifically. It would be difficult to dub it a meticulously conceived and articulated mythological system.

13 This phenomenon is of course widely commented upon in Stevens studies. For instance, very succinctly put by J. Hillis Miller: "The subject of the poem is the poem as an activity" (10). Similarly, Banville stages this as experience of the physical world, in which prose text expands reality which in turn expands the text and so on, potentially *ad infinitum*. However, the *alethic* dimension also displays a withdrawal that endlessly produces new attempts at pinning the phenomenon down. Instead of using Miller's definition of Stevens' poetry, as dominated by an "interplay between metaphor and reality," one could say that, in Banville, this interplay implies that metaphor is reality and vice versa (11). Whatever is reached is reached in language as language, but that language is always already connected to 'reality' through experience and cognition. In drawing together Heideggers' and Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, Clive Cazeaux states that "the world-disclosure performed by the senses is the ground or condition for a consciousness that always returns to and locates itself in the world through the senses" (95). The Banville reader has to learn this process and to be attuned to its expression.

14 This type of disclosure embedded in the swirl of the world's happening may be further elucidated by Heidegger's understanding of Nietzsche's concept of the "will to power". Heidegger clearly links this phenomenon to the activity of art: "The creating of possibilities for the will on the basis of which the will to power first frees itself to itself is for Nietzsche the essence of art. In keeping with this metaphysical concept, Nietzsche does not think under the heading 'art' solely or even primarily of the aesthetic realm of the artist. Art is the essence of all willing that opens up perspectives and takes possession of them […]" (Heidegger 85). It is the potential freedom for artist and art itself that Banville invites the reader to partake in. Arguably, in the prose fiction idea that Banville forwards, art spills over—or is already at least covertly a fundamental part of—any life lived, if we allow ourselves to perceive it or feel it.

15 Further elaboration of Banville's associative style can be found in Thierry Robin's book chapter "Liars, Similes and Story-Tellers in *The Blue Guitar* by John Banville". For instance, Robin draws attention to the descriptive level of language constructed as a maze of similes, which can be construed as Banville's prose fictional version of Derridean *différance*. In the context of the present essay, however, such similes actually draw attention to the importance of knowing 'the things themselves'. Such knowing demands a level of experiential dwelling that Banville returns to again and again.

16 A shortcut to an understanding of this process would be to turn to Michel Henry's explication of a

detail in Husserl's phenomenology: "For, at the heart of this continuum, a decisive split emerges between the primal impression on the one hand and the continuous production of modifications on the other. This distinction arises from the production of modifications' being taken in the strict sense of the word. It is a real production that is the feat of consciousness and owes everything to it, whereas the continual upsurge of the originary impression escapes from this production of modifications by consciousness and owes it nothing" (40). Banville's fiction continuously stages the phenomenology of this continuum/process. Any linguistic elaboration on a 'thing' still rests on the *alethic* presentation of that 'thing'.

17 Precisely this aspect of literature has been analysed by Roman Ingarden as the metaphysical events (and non-events): "In their unique form, they do not allow purely rational determination, and they cannot be 'grasped' (as, for example, one 'grasps' a mathematical theorem). Instead they merely allow themselves to be…" (291).

18 As Joakim Wrethed has pointed out, a comparable 'empty' place that should not have significance appears twice with a similar wording in *Mefisto* (158, 230) (Wrethed 287).

19 In Husserlian phenomenology this overflow of meaning has got to do with primal expectation, which in technical terminology is called 'protention' (similar to 'retention' that denotes primary memory). In any perception the perceiver must anticipate what comes next according to experiential habitual patterns. In its fictional form Ingarden calls it the "habitus of reality of represented objects" (220–22).

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