

Familiar/Familial Strangeness: The Place of Narration in John Banville's Eclipse and The Sea and Mike McCormack's Solar Bones

O Estranhamento Familiar: O Lugar da Narração em Eclipse e The Sea, de John Banville, e em Solar Bones, de Mike McCormack

Adel Cheong

Abstract: *The trope of returning back to the childhood home, in middle age, after some kind of tragedy has struck is central to both the plot and act of narration in John Banville's Eclipse (2000) and The Sea (2005). This withdrawal to the past is not simply a thematic element, but also a narrative strategy through which Banville casts an indirect gaze at the world as he describes it. Reality is, thus, never what is simply before your eyes but layered with echoes of the past, more specifically what we remember or imagine to be the past. The return home is also central to Mike McCormack's Solar Bones (2016), in which Marcus Conway, the ghost-narrator finds himself back at his kitchen table where he reminisces about the past. What unites these novels is the act of narration, or the act of writing, that is carried out in these childhood spaces and places that are key to the ways in which these protagonists understand and confront their sense of identity although this notion of return is met with resistance or not fully understood by oneself. Extending this idea of what the house could symbolize in the context of Banville's artistic aims, I examine the relationship between past and present, the act of writing for an imagined audience in one's childhood home, and how the spatial dimensions of the house itself relate to or reveal the aesthetics of these novels. Mike McCormack, whose writing has recently gained increasing critical attention, is one Irish author who makes an interesting counterpoint to Banville, in that similar concerns about identity and memory are reflected in the space of the home but in markedly different ways. This essay, hence, will demonstrate certain commonalities between these three novels while distinguishing how each engages with representations of space and place, particularly in the context of identity and the idea of home.*

Keywords: *Memory; identity; the house; defamiliarisation; places of narration.*

Resumo: *O tropo do retorno ao lar da infância, na meia-idade, após algum tipo de tragédia é central para a trama e para o ato de narrar em Eclipse (2000) e The Sea (2005), de John Banville. Revisitar o passado não é apenas um elemento temático, mas também uma estratégia narrativa por meio da qual Banville lança um olhar indireto para o mundo como ele o descreve. A realidade nunca é, portanto, o que parece diante de seus olhos, pois está mergulhada em ecos do passado, mais especificamente do que lembramos ou imaginamos ser o passado. A volta para casa também é central para Solar Bones (2016), de Mike McCormack, em que Marcus Conway, o narrador-fantasma, vê-se novamente sentado à mesa da cozinha, onde relembra o passado. O que une esses romances é o ato de narrar, ou o ato de escrever, realizado nesses espaços e lugares da infância que*

são fundamentais para a maneira pela qual esses protagonistas entendem e confrontam seu senso de identidade, embora essa noção de retorno seja não só percebida com resistência, como também mal compreendida em sua totalidade. Ampliando a ideia do que a casa poderia simbolizar no contexto dos objetivos artísticos de Banville, examino a relação entre passado e presente, o ato de escrever para um público imaginado na casa de infância e como as dimensões espaciais da casa se relacionam ou revelam a estética desses romances. Mike McCormack, cuja escrita tem recebido crescente atenção crítica, é um autor irlandês que faz um contraponto interessante a Banville, na medida em que preocupações semelhantes sobre identidade e memória são refletidas no espaço da casa, mas de maneiras marcadamente diferentes. Este ensaio, portanto, demonstrará certas semelhanças entre esses três romances, enquanto distingue como cada um se envolve com representações de espaço e lugar, particularmente no contexto da identidade e da ideia de lar.

Palavras-chave: *Memória; identidade; casa; desfamiliarização; locais de narração.*

The places from which Alexander Cleave and Max Morden, the protagonists of *Eclipse* (2000) and *The Sea* (2005) respectively, narrate or write the story that we are reading are spaces in which their childhood or a summer, at the very least, was spent. This return to a space spent in childhood is typically set into motion by some kind of traumatic event that these protagonists are still grappling with: Cleave has a breakdown on stage which marks the end of his acting career, and Morden has returned to The Cedars a year after his wife's demise. The motif of the ageing narrator who looks back on the past in order to make sense of how he has arrived at the present moment, in Banville's mature work, recurs in *Ancient Light* (2012), where Cleave is once again the protagonist, and *The Blue Guitar* (2015). But *Eclipse* is where the introspective gaze that has always been present in his writing is, I suggest, first focalized in a middle-aged narrator who fully recognises the necessary fictions we create when we remember the past even as he continues to narrate his stories. But the space in which they tell their stories is just as pertinent as the motif of the return home undertaken by these narrators. Kersti Tarien Powell (2006) rightly points out that “[w]hile the frequent use of mirrors in Banville's work is a common focus in Banville criticism, a more thorough examination of his concept of place and its evolution is still lacking” (39). The house is one such space that deserves more critical attention, in that Cleave and Morden both, at moments of self-reflexivity, make it explicitly known that they have withdrawn into rooms, for the very purpose of writing, as they struggle to attend to the project that they seemingly wish to complete, while also hiding away from others. These rooms are not described in great detail, but the need to write or narrate in solitude, where the world is kept at a distance and where there is no one around to refute what they have said, is seemingly key to the retrospective stories they tell. The motif of the return home is also central to Mike McCormack's *Solar Bones* (2016), another twenty-first century Irish novel, in which its protagonist, Marcus Conway, who is in fact a ghost, relates his memories. Although McCormack is not a novelist whose work many will see as similar to Banville's, there are many thematic concerns that these three novels share, particularly the inquiry of man's place in the world that is most emphatic in the ways in which binary categories such as order and chaos are negotiated. By analysing the space of the house, both metaphorically and in literal terms, this essay examines the relationships that the protagonists in *Eclipse*, *The Sea*, and *Solar Bones** have with these spaces, particularly in the context of the act of narration and how

their identities are constructed around these places.

The solipsistic nature of Banville's narrators and the stories that they cannot help but tell is an enduring feature of his novels but, I suggest, from *Eclipse* onwards, this sense of introspection and self-doubt is amplified in the middle-aged narrator who, has the ability to look back on the past with the benefit of the intervening years, but is yet incapable of arriving at a meaningful or coherent understanding of his past. Cleave makes it clear that, as a child, the childhood home felt more like a transitory space, suitable for different types of temporary existences, that he would leave and probably never return to, and yet he does: "I was never fully at home here. If the lodgers led unreal lives, so too did we, the permanent inhabitants, so called" (*E* 49). It is worth noting that both childhood spaces in *Eclipse* and *The Sea* are not traditional family homes; Cleave's childhood home was formerly a lodging house that his mother ran, while The Cedars was a holiday home that the Graces, a family that Morden had befriended as a child, had rented for a summer. But both spaces can be considered as sites where these protagonists first crossed the threshold from a familiar space into the outside world, which, in Banville's novels, is typically regarded as chaotic and a source of bewilderment for these characters as they struggle to arrive at some sense of order or beauty. The return home is arguably linked to a larger yearning that can never be fully fulfilled, as Joseph McMinn (1991) points out, "[a]ll of his narrators look back to their origins and their immediate past for some clue to their sense of tragic and farcical confusion. The underlying and enabling myth is, of course, one of lost innocence" (5). But this idealistic desire, particularly from *Eclipse* onwards, is tempered by a sense of cynicism that is now part of these protagonists' natures by the time they have reached middle age. Hence, even if there may be a 'lost innocence' that these protagonists might wish to gain access or return to, their attempts are accompanied by a sense of conviction that these very attempts will end only in further disillusionment. Despite being somewhat aware of this, these narrators find themselves unable to resist the desire to return to these spaces, even if the particular space at present, as in *The Sea*, is emptied of all physical links with the past, in that it "has retained hardly anything of the past, of the part of the past that I knew here"; yet as Morden puts it: "Amazed, and disappointed, I would go so far as to say appalled, for reasons that are obscure to me, since why should I desire change, I who have come back to live amidst the rubble of the past? (*TS* 4)" In a rather similar fashion, Cleave's need to live in his childhood home again is not fully understood even to himself, although his wife, Lydia seems to know why, yet it is somehow connected to a dream he has about a plastic chicken toy that he receives on a particular Easter day and a near accident with an unidentified animal while on the road. The house appears to have some power or hold over Cleave whereby the act of returning home is not evidently an act of volition, partly because he seems to be obeying some larger forces at work: "The house itself it was that drew me back, sent out its secret summoners to bid me come ... *home*, I was going to say" (*E* 4). But what exactly is the nature of the relationships these protagonists have with these spaces? The return home enacts a spatial representation, or journey, of retreating to the past, but precisely because the past does not exist, the return home is marked by a sense of loss and futility despite the power of imagination and memory to retrieve or conjure images and details of the past. The sense of familiar strangeness of once again living in these childhood spaces, which seem to never change and yet are utterly transformed over the years, felt by these narrators goes back to the central question of what home means. On a linguistic level, there is a sense too that these narrators do not feel quite at home with language, a tendency that is distinctly postmodernist, because of its inadequacies at representing the world.¹

The return home is also a central event that is linked to the act of narration in Mike McCormack's *Solar Bones* even if it is not immediately apparent while its protagonist, Marcus Conway reminisces about the past from his kitchen table. This act of narration and the memories that Marcus relates, namely *how* it is narrated and *what* is narrated, seeming conventional and ordinary in many ways, however ultimately instance what Brian Richardson (2006) calls unnatural narration. Near the end of the novel it becomes evident that Marcus is, in fact, a ghost when he describes his own death, which had occurred a couple of months prior to this moment of narration, and this problematizes everything that we may have assumed about the nature of its narrator and his stories up till that point. What is also undermined, at a stroke, is the portrayal of the world, which until that very moment, appears as a conventional realist depiction of external reality where the rules of its world appear not different from the physical world outside the book. As Brian Richardson puts it:

by moving beyond merely human narrators, texts begin to tamper with or destroy outright the 'mimetic contract' that had governed conventional fiction for centuries: no more can one assume that a first person narrator would resemble a normal human being, with all its abilities and limitations. (1)

The only explanation suggested for this ghostly phenomenon, of Marcus's return home from beyond the grave, is the superstitious belief, rooted in Ireland's pagan history, that the dead may return to the world of the living to visit their families on 2nd November, known as All Souls' Day. On this day, the boundaries between worlds are blurred and even though things may appear unchanged outwardly, but as a consequence, what is deemed as 'reality' is slightly altered, in that beyond the surface things may take forms different to what is accustomed: "the light is awash with ghouls and ghosts and the mearing between this world and the next is so blurred we might easily find ourselves standing shoulder to shoulder with the dead, the world fuller than at any other time of the year" (*SB* 92). This blurring of boundaries does not carry out an inversion of rules and structures of power that govern everyday existence as with Bakhtin's *carnavalesque*, but by bringing together the spheres of religion, folklore and science, which is emphasised by Marcus's profession as an engineer, the novel engages with the merging of worlds, physical and non-physical, and systems of knowledge to powerfully suggest that diametrically opposing worldviews and binary categories are to be renegotiated in relation to each other in vastly different ways.

Marcus does not speak about what had become of him in the time since his death on 21 March 2008 or how he came to be at his kitchen table, and for this one hour, the memories he relates chiefly revolve around three temporal zones: the events that occurred a few weeks prior to his death such as his daughter's first solo art exhibition and the cryptosporidium outbreak which debilitates his wife, Mairead, the years when he meets Mairead and starts a family, and the childhood memories of his father. The novel is essentially a ghost story that is centred around an epistemological inquiry into man's relationship with the world, even if it is defamiliarised through an example of what some might call post-human consciousness, that curiously is not quite so different from how a 'living' character would appear. The highly solipsistic nature of Marcus's account is most evident in the absence of other voices; there is no one at home besides Marcus while he speaks about the past. In the face of the unreliability of memory and precisely because there is no chance of accessing another version of the events Marcus recounts, there are certainly gaps in the narrative, both metaphorical and literal

(from its typological format), but these gaps of meaning are irresolvable from the first. What is consistent in his relationships with his father, wife, and children is the perplexity that Marcus often feels when he is confronted by their worldviews and the ways in which they appear to simply be, which he sees as communicated through their actions. For instance, Marcus appears incapable of comprehending the motivations behind his children's career choices; his shock at Agnes's use of her own blood as an artistic medium is turned inwards as he questions if he has lived up to his responsibilities as a father, while he has little patience with what he regards as his son's lack of commitment to a vocation. Marcus's character flaws are not very dissimilar from those of Banville's protagonists, particularly in terms of their inward gaze and solipsism. This engagement with the limits of what can be known to us, particularly in the context of human connection and relationships, recalls the modernist anxiety around language and the systems of knowledge that make the world known to us, which continues to be a prevailing theme in twenty-first century fiction.

The return home, in a rather similar fashion to *Cleave*, is not shown as an active decision that Marcus makes. Hence, it is just as possible an interpretation that the house may have summoned him, even as we speculate on whether ghosts are free to come and go in places that we might regard as haunted or if they are somehow, as typically figured in popular imagination, trapped in particular locations, caught between two worlds, due to perhaps an improper burial or for various other reasons. Although the house he returns to is not his childhood home, it is a space in which he and Mairead started their lives together upon getting married and where their children were born and raised. As an engineer, it is Marcus's business to ensure that building standards are met, and the family home is another project that he has successfully overseen:

the house
this same house
in which I've lived the best part of three decades and put together all those
habits and rituals which have made up my marriage and family life and where now, for
some reason, this day has given me pause to dwell on these things
sitting here at the kitchen table with my sandwich and paper where... (156)

The materiality of the house embodies the stability of the life that Marcus has built, the cohesion of his family and, of course, it also mirrors the identity that he has constructed for himself. For Gaston Bachelard (1994), the house is not merely a physical structure, rather it encompasses the experiences that one may have within this space, which ultimately changes the nature of the house and one's relationship with it:

For, in point of fact, a house is first and foremost a geometrical object, one which we are tempted to analyze rationally. Its prime reality is visible and tangible, made of well hewn solids and well fitted framework ... A geometrical object of this kind ought to resist metaphors that welcome the human body and the human soul. But transposition to the human plane takes place immediately whenever a house is considered as a space for cheer and intimacy, a space that is supposed to condense and defend intimacy. (47-8)

In this, the house is irreducible to its physical structure or shelter it provides, when understood primarily in terms of function. This house has served as a way for Marcus to anchor himself to the world or it has been, at times, a refuge from the world. The sense of one's identity as intricately interwoven with the place that one is from is played out on multiple levels, such as in public and private spheres, where one's relationship to one's country, county, or in other words community, and even one's own house is each a link that ties an individual to a much larger network or collective. These relationships, which encompass the political and economic structures that one is raised in and familiar with, take precedence in the way in which Marcus conceives of his identity, particularly in terms of the roles he performs as "man and boy, father and son, husband and engineer" (*SB* 262). Yet what is perhaps best carried across by the novel's fragmentary structure is the emphasis on the multiple selves that comprise Marcus's identity at any one point and throughout the different points of his life, selves that stand in contradiction with each other where he is both a family man but also, at one point, an adulterer. This conception of identity stands in marked contrast to Banville's protagonists who often feel or speak as if the people that they are at present are simply older, and no wiser, versions of their younger selves. But in *Solar Bones*, a pluralistic notion of identity, as opposed to the idea of identity as having a monadic structure even as it develops and undergoes change with time, is foregrounded through the anachronies, to borrow Gérard Genette's term, in the novel's structure that mirror the free association of images and ideas as we move from one memory or thought to the next.

In Banville, the relationship between man and house, regardless of whether it is his childhood home, is more complex and multilayered than it is in *Solar Bones* and it extends far beyond any sense of identity that is rooted in the experiences and memories that he has of this particular space. Precisely because these motifs, images, and symbols are part of a dense web of resonance and associations, the metaphor of the house also extends to the sense of selfhood in these narrators, which is inextricably linked to the crises or traumatic events they have undergone or are undergoing. This link between the house and one's identity, as Robin Wilkinson (2003) notes, goes back to the middle period of Banville's oeuvre: "The narrator of *The Book of Evidence* (1989) uses the word 'unhoused' ... to describe his own lack of presence, an image that matches Cleave's feeling that he has been expelled from his self" (358). This association of one's selfhood with a house, or rather with being housed, implies a sense of containment that has to do with boundaries that protect one from the world. But as to what kind of protection this brings about and if this sheltering is essential to establishing a coherent sense of self, although in a rather self-delusional manner, are questions that come with no easy answers in Banville's fiction. This same metaphor is employed in *Eclipse*. Cleave's withdrawal to his childhood home is marked by a point in his life where he finds himself no longer able to act on the stage, his acting career now ended:

Now, that essential self has been pushed to the side with savage insouciance, and I am as a house walked up and down in by an irresistibly proprietorial stranger. I am all inwardness, gazing out in ever intensifying perplexity upon a world in which nothing is exactly plausible, nothing is exactly what it is. (15)

Outside of his profession as an actor, Cleave has struggled with establishing an authentic sense of self, where the disparity between acting and being, or "action and acting", now takes on a new significance since he no longer is able to act on stage (208). While looking

back on the past, what is revealed, to the reader and not necessarily to Cleave himself, in his relationships with his mother, wife, and daughter is the gulf that separates one from the next man or woman in that we can never fully know another just as we are ultimately unknowable to ourselves. This identity crisis in middle age, which is linked to his breakdown in the middle of his performance as Amphitryon, is played out in semi-seclusion, in “this little room, my hidey-hole and refuge” as he turns to writing (130). His spiraling interiority, which is mirrored by his physical withdrawal from people and the world at large, is but a heightened state of the inward gaze that he has always trained on himself, when perhaps he should have tried harder at seeing those around him. Likewise, Morden comments on a change in his sense of selfhood that his knowing Chloe brings into effect: “Before, I had been housed, now I was in the open, in the clearing, with no shelter in sight”. This sense of being ‘unhoused’ recalls the motif of twins, which embodies the idea of the split self, in Banville’s fiction. Cleave, like all of Banville’s other creations, yearns to reach a fullness of being that in our post-Enlightenment age is an idea that is now typically treated with suspicion:

For is this not what I am after, the pure conjunction, the union of self with sundered self? I am weary of division, of being always torn. I shut my eyes and in a sort of rapture see myself stepping backward slowly into the cloven shell, and the two halves of it, still moist with glair, closing round me. (70)

This image of ‘two halves’ implicitly recognises the multiplicity of selves that we each encompass, but instead of celebrating this, it is an attribute to overcome in order to achieve the romantic ideal of the unified self. “If Banville’s myth of art is the endurance of art,” as Eoghan Smith (2013) suggests, “then *Eclipse*, as *The Sea* will also be, is an act of self-mythologizing” (138). Perhaps the only way for these protagonists to arrive at a stable, coherent sense of self is if they will, via the power of imagination, themselves into being. But this would be another supreme fiction constructed by these protagonists that they paradoxically cling onto in spite of their conviction that the coherent self is ultimately a transcendental ideal.

Cleave’s description of his childhood home, in acknowledging his evasiveness when speaking about it, is mostly confined to doorways and the assortment of furniture in various rooms, particularly his mother’s: “See how I parry and duck, like an outclassed boxer? I begin to speak of the ancestral home and within a sentence of two I have moved next door. This is me all over” (*E* 12). This reference to the ancestral home alludes to the big house in Birchwood, which can be understood both literally and metaphorically. The “topographical space of the house”, Neil Murphy (2006) writes, is one of three motifs that Banville’s engagement with the meaning of art is centred around in *Long Lankin to Birchwood* (9). Murphy further suggests that in *Birchwood* “[t]he house comes to symbolize not just the big house genre but realist fiction in general” (21).² Extending this idea of the house as representative of Banville’s artistic aims, the architectural layout of The Cedars, where we are provided a more panoramic view as compared to Cleave’s childhood home, can perhaps be understood as a metaphor for the evolution of Banville’s aesthetics in his later work. The Cedars, which is described as a “cottage” in its early days, gradually evolves as modifications are “added on to haphazardly over the years [t]hat would account for the jumbled look of the place, with small rooms giving on to bigger ones, and windows facing blank walls, and low ceilings throughout” (*TS* 4). The design of the house, a mish-mash of styles that come together to form a cohesive

unit, can be a metaphor for the pastiche of styles and traditions, in the form of intertextual allusions to works by poets, artists, philosophers, and even to Banville's own body of fiction, in his novels. The unconventional assemblage of this house, seemingly 'haphazardly' put together, may appear shambolic but there is a certain structure and logic of its own. The image of these doors and windows that open to nothing, which nullify the very purpose of these architectural elements, exemplify a certain logic of failure, that is most emphatic in the slipperiness of language. These narrators suffer a sense of loss from a deep awareness of the disparity between image and world, which runs throughout Banville's body of work, but nevertheless they still desire to express the strangeness of the world and human condition through language. If the image of the house and its changing façade is a reflection of Banville's evolution as an author, the 'original' structure of the house then can be considered as the voice he has developed over the years, and going further back, the influences on his writing which can be traced to earlier authors who may be seen as his precursors. "John Banville, then, very consciously inherits these twin traditions of Irish writing and Irish society, as represented by James Joyce and Samuel Beckett", as Derek Hand (2002) proposes, although he makes the caveat that "[a]ll of this is argued, of course, in direct opposition to Banville's own stated beliefs on this subject" (15). This observation is echoed by McMinn (1999), in that Banville's body of fiction "depends utterly on the drama of the voice, a consciousness which feeds off its own imagination and memory, and which consoles itself with its own fictions" (162). Elke D'hoker (2006), likewise, acknowledges these observations that she extends on in her analysis of the Beckettian influence in Banville's writing (69). Apart from the voice that Banville has refined over the years, there are definitely a number of themes and tropes that Banville consistently returns to in his novels. Other critics have also noted this strain towards silence in Banville's writing which is paradoxically evoked by his eloquence, but there is another underlying idea that arguably becomes more prominent in the mature period of Banville's writing: that of making strange.

The first mention of making strange appears in *Eclipse* when Cleave sets about trying to resist the "deadening force of custom" in order to perceive reality in ways that one may register the singularity of what surrounds us: "*Making strange*, people hereabouts say when a child wails at the sudden appearance of a visitor; how was I to make strange now, and not stop making strange? (46)" Cleave's desire to access the real by acquiring a different perspective, as Elke D'hoker (2004) points out, recalls the Russian Formalist theory of defamiliarisation (222-3). The presence of these ghosts, whether they are in fact supernatural presences or psychological projections, recall Avery Gordon's (2008) definition of "the term *haunting* to describe those singular yet repetitive instances when home becomes unfamiliar, when your bearings on the world lose direction, when the over-and-done-with comes alive, when what's been in your blind spot comes into view" (xvi). Although Gordon takes a sociological approach, her focus on specters and haunting is centred on the idea of transformation, and defamiliarisation, in which the thingness, or reality, of the things around us may be revealed. Here, too, the presence of ghosts, which leaves Cleave feeling like his house has been invaded, has an alienating effect on what we must call the real:

If the ghostly scene has a chair in it, say, that the woman is sitting on, and that occupies the same space as a real chair in the real kitchen, and is superimposed on it, however ill the fit, the result will be that when the scene vanishes the real chair will retain a sort of aura, will blush, almost, in the surprise of being singled out and fixed upon, of being lighted upon, in this fashion. (*E* 48)

These two orders of being, the real world and ghost world, would lend themselves well to an investigation into the ontological dimensions of these fictional worlds, but nonetheless this overlapping of worlds leads to the meeting of multiple temporal moments, thus evoking a highly textured sense of reality. In other words, this scene gestures at the ways in which we continually make sense of the past and present in light of each other, and also in how we anticipate the future. These efforts stem from our need for meaning and coherence despite the post-Enlightenment recognition that, as a result of the epistemological crisis that led to postmodernism and postmodernity, meaning is never stable. In some ways, this ‘aura’ is reflective of the desire to arrive at some kind of transcendent meaning via imagination even if every attempt to bring this about only reinforces the futility of the attempt. Yet the ability to make apparent a quality of the world, in which it appears to blush, is, in Banville’s view, unique to art (Piñeiro 60). This sense of dislocation that arises from a different way of being in the world, where the world appears to shift before our eyes to momentarily lose its ordinariness, is also observed by Morden:

Bright light of midday streamed in at the kitchen window and everything had a glassy, hard-edged radiance as if I was scanning the room through a camera lens. There was an impression of general, tight-lipped awkwardness, of all these homely things—jars on shelves, saucepans on the stove, that bread-board with its jagged knife—averting their gaze from our all at once unfamiliar, afflicted presence in their midst. (*TS* 14)

This moment occurs when Morden and his wife return home after receiving her cancer diagnosis, and their knowledge of this new fact that will upend their lives casts a new light on even the most ordinary of things such as the objects in their kitchen. Regardless of whether this transformation is effected by a psychological or emotional state, this new perceptive state reveals the infinite strangeness of that which we have grown accustomed to in our daily lives. The horror lies not just in such moments of acute awareness of our mortality, that dawns on the Mordens here, but also, for Banville, it is borne from our failure to detect the singularity of the ordinary or of, at least, certain moments of our prosaic lives as we move among people and things other than ourselves. But this sensation, which is perhaps similar to a moment in *Eclipse* where Cleave notes that “[t]he world seemed tilted slightly out of true”, cannot be simply be attributed to a projection of one’s psychological state onto one’s physical surroundings (45). While trying to rationalise these ghostly encounters, to understand what might be conveyed through them, Cleave wonders: “So if the purpose of the appearance of this ghost is to dislocate me and keep me thrown off balance, am I indeed projecting it out of my own fancy, or does it come from some outside source? (46)” There are diverse interpretations that can be considered on even the most surface of levels: these ghosts could be figments of his imagination, or there were no ghosts at all instead Cleave had intuited that his caretaker, Quirke and his daughter, Lily were living in secret in his house, or whether these ghosts are perhaps harbingers of Cass’s eventual suicide and the death of her unborn child. What indeed might these ghosts be? There may perhaps be a rational explanation for these ghostly apparitions but to preserve their quality of strangeness, which leaves a trace on the space of the house itself, Banville does not provide his reader with one possible interpretation but several.

Even the house, familiar and ordinary as it may appear to those living there, can evoke a sense of strangeness or otherness if looked at from a different perspective in *Solar Bones*.

Before his death, another dimension of existence or the world, would reveal itself to Marcus when “drifting in that state between sleep and waking it is easy to believe I inhabit a monochrome X-ray world from which I might have evaporated, flesh and bone gone” (*SB* 150). In this liminal state of consciousness, that somewhat parallels his current state as a ghost returned from beyond the pale to the world of the living, the house appears almost as a living thing:

I've always believed gets up to some foolishness during the night, whenever I fall asleep or turn my back on it, that's when the ghost house beneath the paint and fittings asserts itself, flickering like an X-ray with that neurological twitch and spasm which is imbedded in the concrete... (150)

This suggestion of intramural activity presupposes an inner/outer dichotomy, which extends to the material and immaterial, and the seen and unseen, which are key themes that are explored on various levels, most explicitly in the context of chaos and order in relation to man's place in the world. It is the liminal space between these two qualities or states that is celebrated in the novel, as McCormack attempts to deconstruct such binary opposites. Perhaps what is most effectively carried out through this image of the 'ghost house' is the subversion of Conway's realist depiction of the actual world as it runs counter to the material structures and objects that comprise external reality. This 'ghost house' ultimately problematizes traditional conceptions of physical space, premised on scientific principles, even though the 'ghost house' is less a supernatural phenomenon than it is an invocation of the immaterial in, once again, suggesting that the boundaries between worlds are not as distinct as we might assume. This 'ghost house' ultimately stands in direct contradistinction to conventional ideas about the traditional family home and, by extension, family life as well. As with mimetic representation, the world of the novel is recognizable to us because according to the principle of minimum departure, as termed by Marie-Laure Ryan (2012) in her discussion of naturalising techniques employed during the reading process, readers “construct fictional worlds as the closest possible to their model of reality, amending this model only when it is overruled by the text” (376). If this 'ghost house' is a metaphor for the merging or doubling of worlds, then perhaps it cannot be framed in terms of a 'real'/'unreal' dichotomy but that there are, at least, multiple modes of existence and ontologies that coexist. When looked at from a different perspective, even the most ordinary can appear transformed, and thus defamiliarised:

something different about moving through the house today a feeling of dislocation as if some imp had got in during the night and shifted things around just enough to disorientate me, tables, chairs and other stuff just marginally out of place by a centimeter or two, enough to throw me... (*SB* 33)

These disturbances of order can be looked at as symptomatic again of a psychological or emotional state, but this is, after all, a book with a ghost for a narrator. Rather, it is the quality of mutability from the slippages from one mode of existence to another, or from one frame of reference to another that may be its polar opposite, that is stressed by both the subjectivities of its different characters and the external occurrences – such as the economic collapse in 2008 and the cryptosporidium outbreak – that unsettle the prevailing ways in which

we inhabit the world.³ Whether it may be the result of imagined or actual ghosts, or due to this particular ‘imp’, this texture of reality as both simultaneously familiar and alien, in being made strange, is an attribute of modernist fiction that still addresses the need for new perspectives and ways of looking in order to reflect the complexities of human existence in twenty-first century literature and, more specifically, in the work of these two authors.

Place in Banville’s novels, particularly their link to actual spaces in the real world, is often difficult to pin down. On the one hand, the location and landscapes in Banville’s novels are always, in one way or another, based on Wexford, as Banville puts it: “All the landscapes of my books are in some way imbued with wexfordness, even when they are supposed to be modern Greece, or medieval Prussia. When I needed to paint a picture of Copernicus’s Torun, or Kepler’s Weilderstadt, it was Wexford that I conjured up” (“Wexford” 200). With *Eclipse*, Cleave’s house finds its source in the house into which Banville was born, where the representation of this particular space enacts a sort of return home for Banville himself too even if it only takes place imaginatively (“Oblique”). But on the other hand, the relationship between what we call real and its image in Banville’s novels is never as straightforward as holding up a mirror to reality. For instance, from the dislocation, or rather transformation, of actual space in the act of naming this seaside village “Ballyless” in *The Sea* it is apparent that verifiable reality is not crucial to the depiction of these spaces because, ultimately, it is a representation even though it is indeed based on Rosslare (7). Banville’s landscapes aren’t exactly wholly fictive or imagined and yet the traces they bear of the real do not allow us to fully map out the lay of the land in the ways that one might with Dublin in Joyce’s *Ulysses* or *Mrs Dalloway*’s London. These narrative maneuvers may perhaps be explained by Banville’s resistance to being understood in the context of an Irish writer and having his novels read primarily from an Irish context. But it appears that Banville is more concerned with the evocation of certain textures of reality that correspond to certain types of lived experience, rather than representing places as how they actually are in external reality. For instance, memory is chiefly the lens through which reality is perceived in Banville’s mature work, where this negotiation with past, present and future and the duplicity of memory renders the subjectivity and representation of lived experience as something that can ever only be troubled by gaps and incongruences. In contrast, the setting of McCormack’s novels and short stories is typically situated in the West of Ireland, specifically Louisburgh, County Mayo where McCormack himself is from. McCormack (2019) acknowledges this somewhat subconscious proclivity for writing stories that take place in this part of Ireland (“Conversation” 108-9). A strong correlation between the representation of certain kinds of landscapes and what we call ‘Irishness’ in general have been proliferated by certain novels in the past. These stereotypes that such novels perpetuate ultimately reify the assumption that the rural, untamed country is an authentic representation of Ireland. In turn, this decision to set his fiction in the west of Ireland, unwittingly or not, stems in part from a reaction against stereotypical depictions of rural Ireland. Some of the geographical locations or landmarks that Marcus identifies as part of his world are Croagh Patrick, Clew Bay, or, further from home, when traveling to Mairead’s parents, they pass “through Newport and Mulranny and up through the badlands of North Mayo, crossing the terra incognita of Ballcroy with its sweeping bogland” (*SB* 161). Forming a visible backdrop for the significant and trivial events that comprise the contemporary lives of these characters, these geographical bearings lend to their lives an implied historical and social significance, even such significance is not overt. It is worthwhile noting that Marcus dies from a heart attack, while taking the “sea road once more along the coast” that overlooks Clew Bay,

in the midst of his journey home (*SB* 257). Even when it is not explicit, the ways in which our environments are organised and their impact on our lives play a large part in Marcus's stories: "greater circum-terrestrial grid of services which draws the world into community, pinching it into villages, towns and cities" (150). The world reconstructed in the text is fundamentally a realist one despite the 'ghost house' and its ghost narrator, and beyond its representation of physical surroundings the novel stresses the idea of interconnectedness through the idea of community. This sense of rootedness and connection to place, and community, with its intricate links to identity, in McCormack's novels marks a crucial difference from Banville's work. However, in spite of the vastly dissimilar ways in which place is represented in their stories, and how these representations may have some bearing on these authors' relationships with the landscapes and spaces around which their childhoods and adult lives were spent, place is always central to the stories that they tell. This difference is therefore also the thing that unites these two authors. After giving Lily the deed to his childhood home, Cleave mentions the possibility of putting together another version of his story, or perhaps simply another story, one which Banville himself might write, where maybe it would be one where its relationship with external reality could be more direct but no less inventive and crucial to the story told: "I might write something about the town, a history, a topography, learn the place names at last" (*E* 213).

Notes

* References to *The Sea*, *Eclipse* and *Solar Bones* will appear as *TS*, *E* and *SB*.

- 1 If Banville is identified as an Irish author, whose work is primarily read in an Irish context, then language can mean specifically, the English language. Interpretation focused on the 'Irishness' of Banville's fiction, for its commentary on explicit Irish subject matter are, however, at odds with Banville's views on art and his resistance towards being understood as an Irish writer. Hence, this issue around how to situate Banville's body of work has been attended to by many critics, some of which who share his view, while others, more interested in his contributions to the genre of Irish literature, take an oppositional perspective.
- 2 This metaphor of the "house of fiction", and its significance as a symbol for various literary traditions and genres – as part of an extensive self-reflexive commentary on aesthetics and artistic ambition – throughout Banville's body of work, is more fully developed in Neil Murphy's monograph, John Banville.
- 3 Although the cryptosporidium outbreak happened in West Ireland, these two actual events disrupted thousands, if not millions, of lives in Ireland.

Works Cited

- Bachelard, Gaston. *The Poetics of Space*. Translated by Maria Jolas, Beacon Press, 1994.
- Banville, John. *Eclipse*. Picador, 2000.
- . *The Sea*. Vintage Books, 2006.
- . "The Evidential Artist: A Conversation with John Banville." By Aurora Piñeiro. *Nordic Irish Studies*, Vol. 14 (2015), pp. 55-69. Accessed 15 November 2019.
- D'Hoker, Elke, *Visions of Alterity*. Rodopi, 2004.
- . "Self-Consciousness, Solipsism, and Storytelling: John Banville's Debt to Samuel Beckett." *Irish University Review*, Vol. 36, No. 1, Special Issue: John Banville (Spring - Summer, 2006), pp. 68-80. Accessed 15 November 2019.
- Gordon, Avery F. *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*. University of Minnesota

- Press, 2008.
- Hand, Derek. *John Banville: Exploring Fictions*. The Liffey Press. 2002.
- McCormack, Mike. *Solar Bones*. Canongate, 2017.
- . "...a tiny part of that greater circum-terrestrial grid": A Conversation with Mike McCormack." By Treasa De Loughry. *Irish University Review: A Journal of Irish Studies Food, Energy, Climate: Irish Culture and World-Ecology*. Special Issue Spring/Summer 2019. Edinburgh University Press. pp. 105-116.
- McMinn, Joseph. *John Banville: A Critical Study*. Gill and Macmillan, 1991.
- . *The Supreme Fictions of John Banville*. Manchester University Press, 1999.
- Murphy, Neil. "From 'Long Lankin' to 'Birchwood': The Genesis of John Banville's Architectural Space." *Irish University Review*, Vol. 36, No. 1, Special Issue: John Banville (Spring – Summer 2006). Accessed 3 November 2014.
- . *John Banville*. Bucknell University Press, 2018.
- Powell, Kersti Tarien. "The Lighted Windows: Place in John Banville's Novels." *Irish University Review*, Vol. 36, No. 1, Special Issue: John Banville (Spring – Summer, 2006). pp. 39-51. Accessed 15 November 2019.
- Richardson, Brian. *Unnatural Voices: Extreme Narration in Modern and Contemporary Fiction*. The Ohio State University Press, 2006.
- Ryan, Marie-Laure. "Impossible worlds." *The Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature*, edited by Joe Bray, Alison Gibbons and Brian McHale, Routledge, 2012.
- Smith, Eoghan. *John Banville: Art and Authenticity*. Peter Lang, 2013.
- Wilkinson, Robin. "Echo and Coincidence in John Banville's Eclipse". *Irish University Review*, Vol. 33, No. 2 (Autumn - Winter, 2003), pp. 356-370. Accessed 15 November 2019.
- Wylie, Donovan, and Martin Secker & Warburg, 'Wexford', *32 Counties – Photographs of Ireland*. London, 1989, p. 200.
- "Oblique Dreamer: Interview with John Banville." *The Observer* (17 September 2000), <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2000/sep/17/fiction.johnbanville>. Accessed December 3, 2019.