Death and the Impersonality of Style in John Banville's *The Infinities*

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Abstract: Death is the principal thematic concern throughout Banville's late period. All of his late protagonists must come to accept grief and loss and ultimately confront their own mortality. Considered at face value, this seems to perpetuate the subjectivist concerns of earlier novels, but Banville's concern with mortality is allied to an aesthetic of self-loss and an emphasis on the artwork as an arena for the transmission of energies that are not integral to subjects, an arena where individual subjectivity is placed under erasure. This article focuses on how Banville's use of aesthetic strategies that foreground the impersonal, presubjective forces at play in the artistic encounter relates to the thematic of death in his 2009 novel *The Infinities.* Exploring his interest in the contract between the reader and the text and his use of humour and paradox, it shows how he directs attention away from content towards the literary event and the affective qualities of language. It argues that this marks a departure from earlier concerns with the consciousness of the individual subject towards a broader concept of being that is essentially impersonal and that is integral to the art experience.

Keywords: Mortality, paradox, irony, humour, affect.

Extinguishing the Self

John Banville's penchant for the lyric voice and the monstrous solipsism of his protagonists would seem to place his fiction within the tradition of a subject-centred aesthetics. Throughout the oeuvre, his mostly first-person narrators are plagued by self-division and doubt, their quests for authenticity repeatedly thwarted by that quintessentially modern condition, 'an over-consciousness of self'.[1] In an interview for *The Paris Review*, conducted just prior to the publication of *The Infinities* (2009), Banville comments: 'I suspect that the reason I don't really believe in the third-person mode is due to the fact that I'm such an egomaniac. Unless it's me speaking, it's not convincing – to me, that is'.[2] Of course, there is a good deal of self-ironising here, and outside of his fiction he seems ill at ease in the first person. His recently published *Time Pieces* (2016), ostensibly a

Dublin 'memoir', is, he acknowledges in *The Irish Times*, 'rather short on facts about myself. [. . .] I'm not interested in myself. [. . .] All life is going on inside my head, but it's invisible. Also, I'm not very interesting myself'. Much of the book is deflected away from the self and even the 'facts' about his life are, he reveals, mostly fictional, which is not to say false – his first love, for instance, is 'an amalgam of many people'.[3] The personal anecdotes that are offered, whether they are 'real' or not, are all recognisable from the novels, and in comparison to their previous incarnations in the fiction, they feel somewhat wrung out and used up. There is more at stake here than a writer guarding his privacy, because the very essence of Banville's art is to liberate life from the prosaic particulars of living and extract from commonplace human transactions the pulses and intensities of existence, the very vibrations of life itself.

The purgation of the personal and the liberation of the sensation of living from the life of the self are integral to Banville's aesthetics. One suspects that he does not see the point of a memoir that is not distilled to the point of almost extinguishing the self, and, by the same token, one realises that all of his novels are memoirs in this sense. He writes in *Time Pieces* that art 'is a constant effort to strike past the mere daily doings of humankind in order to arrive at, or at least to approach as closely as possible to, the essence of what it is, simply, to be'.[4] Banville's books deliberately downplay plot and controvert the kind of pathos that rests on easy empathy and the rise and fall of climax, denouement and peripeteia. This is not to say that they are not affecting, but rather that they are so in such a way as to transcend character and situation. Their affects are distilled so as to be almost entirely purged of the specificities of personality and action. This should not be mistaken for idealism or metaphysical classicism. On the contrary, Banville is more interested in physics than metaphysics. It is precisely the commonplace, phenomenal, corporeal and transient elements of life that concern him in his art, not momentous events or the miscellany of the subjective psyche, but the dust motes of the everyday, the tremors of life in the phenomena close at hand.

It is ironic that Banville addresses the question of what it is 'simply, to be' by way of a prolonged meditation across his late period on what it might mean, in fact, not to be. All of his postmillennial novels are concerned with the challenge that mortal awareness poses to the self-positedness of the subject and, despite their elegiac notes and their themes of grief and loss, the antagonisms and epistemological imbroglios that characterise his earlier work defer to a more affirmative aesthetic in his late fictions. Critical responses to Banville's work written prior to the publication of *The Infinities* tend to emphasise the unity of his oeuvre and

to describe an aesthetic of failure, centred on a continual confrontation with limits and a positing of the real as painfully out of reach. Elke D'hoker finds in the novels up to and including *The Sea* (2005) a fundamental opposition 'between a romantic quest for wholeness and an ironic awareness that such harmony does not exist'.[5] Derek Hand, whose study covers the novels up to *Eclipse* (2000), notes that Banville 'has been telling the same story for many years [. . .]. The story he tells is one in which his protagonists come to understand the limitations of the human imagination's engagement with the real world'.[6] Writing on *Eclipse*, Peter Boxall claims that Banville inherits from Beckett an aesthetic premised on a 'continuing failure of the utopian imagination', in which unity remains an 'unspoken possibility',[7] and Brendan McNamee in his 2006 study finds that 'a central concern of Banville's entire corpus' is his 'investigation of the nature of this magic cloak of fiction that will somehow delineate, without defining, the perennial absence, the ghost, of the real'.[8] By contrast, several critics discern a sense of optimism in *The Infinities*, and a closing of the chasm that separates self and other, word and world. Hedwig Schwall suggests that the novel exhibits aspects of the fantastic that 'picture the place where subjective and objective, word and world, combine in strange ways'.[9] Approaching the novel from an ethical perspective, Mark O'Connell describes the overcoming of an 'insuperable division' between self and world.[10] He remarks on 'a redirection of attention away from the subject and towards the object' which he sees 'reflected in the atypical warmth and lightness of the novel'.[11] It is not insignificant that this newfound affirmation is most apparent in the novel that comprises Banville's most intense meditation on death. In fact, the death, or more precisely the dying, at the centre of *The Infinities* stages a liberation from the impasse of the 'I' persecuted by its own sense of inauthenticity, and procures a renunciation of the rehearsals of failed transcendence that characterise earlier works.

In a 1987 book review, Banville remarks on the relation between writing and death: 'Every artist knows the song which Thanatos's sirens sing [. . .]. Indeed, art may be essentially no more than a barrier erected against that terrible, sweet music'.[12] But in later years this conception of death as art's antagonist gives way to a creative affiliation that has quite a different character. In the late novels, death is not primarily an end to be forestalled but something that is implicit in, and concurrent with, life, and that can, however fleetingly, in rapturous moments, be apprehended through the art experience. This alliance of writing and death is directly signalled in *The Sea* when the writer protagonist, Max Morden, whose name connotes the novel's morbid preoccupations, finds 'in moments of inexplicable transport, in my study, perhaps, at my desk, immersed in

words [. . .] I was neither alive nor the other thing'.[13] Banville's late novels are replete with moments such as this, in which characters edge towards oblivion, instances where they are absent from themselves or overpowered by extraneous forces, as well as moments of self-expansion when boundaries between subjects and their surroundings dissolve.

By the postmillennial period, Banville establishes himself a master of ambiguity and his work increasingly moves towards a Flaubertian acme of pure style. Far from designating self-expression, style here, should be understood, in the light of Banville's significant Nietzschean heritage, as expression purged of the personal, as the expression of being itself. Style, in the Nietzschean account, is the transformation of oceanic nature into works of art. It is important to distinguish this from a dualism of form and content; style is not form but *per*forming, what Nietzsche calls 'an art of gesture'.[14] It is a dynamic force. Style invites admiration. It has a communicative content that is not captured in the architecture of form. '*Communicating* a state, an inner tension of pathos through signs, including the tempo of these signs – that is the point of every style', writes Nietzsche.[15] Style, in this sense, is the liberation of life, a pure *joie de vivre*. It is in making manifest this substratum of life from which everything emerges and into which all things pass that the art experience relates to death. Characterised by this dynamic of dying into life, Banville's late style is inherently affirmative, even celebratory.

Dying into Life

In an interview for Charlie McCarthy's documentary 'Being John Banville', which was filmed while he was working on *The Infinities*, Banville broached the subject of his own mortality. 'I would like to live forever', he claimed:

> I find the prospect of leaving this exquisite world… I find it devastating. I find it infuriating. I keep thinking what kind of day would I like to die on. Would it be one of those beautiful, pearl grey, slightly mauve days in June? Or would it be one of those days in September with those Poussin skies? Would it be the depths of winter? You know those bleak midwinter days. None of them suits me. I don't want to go on any day. [. . .] I know that I'll have to leave, but it's just so good. It's so beautiful. It's so exquisitely beautiful being here.[16]

The catch, as Banville well knows and with which he is much concerned in *The Infinities*, is that were it indeed possible to live forever, life would be drained of this exquisite, transient beauty. It is the very passing of the seasons, the passage of time itself, which makes life so spectacularly

precious. This is what old Adam Godley, the eminent theoretical physicist of Banville's novel, finds when his equations unveil the infinity of time. After the initial euphoria, apprehension set in:

> The sigh of dead, dank air that wafted back in our faces from the yawning doorway out of what had been our only world was not the breath of new life, as we expected, but a last gasp. [. . .] This is what we discovered, to our chagrin and shame: that we had enough, more than enough, already, in the bewildering diversities of our old and overabundant world'.[17]

It is not immortality that Adam, now on his deathbed, wants but the abundance of the living world that he is about to depart.

Set over the course of one midsummer's day in the environs of Arden House, where Adam lies in death's very anteroom, *The Infinities* adheres to the classical unities, but it also plays a game with time. The dream world of the novel is a sanctuary of grace where the subjective synthesis of time as succession with death as its telos is suspended in an expansion of the rapturous moment so essential to Banville's aesthetics. Here the grace period of rapture and the reprieve from temporal consciousness occupies all of the narrative space. Crucially, this self-overcoming is not an overcoming of mortal existence but an immersion into the untimely flux at its core. It is about prising open caverns in the ostensibly still and solid world, and revealing the pulsing life in its midst. Much as Joyce set out to do in *Ulysses* or Woolf in *Mrs Dalloway*, Banville wants, in *The Infinities*, to fit the infinite into a single day, to fill it with a plenitude of life as if it were the last day of time, which it is for Adam.

In order to understand how the novel's experiments with narrative voice thematise the evacuation of the self in the work of writing it is necessary to appreciate the extent to which, like each of Banville's novels, *The Infinities* is an interrogation of its own creation. The rhetorical conceit that establishes the narrator as the inventor – thus a cognate for the author – rather than the reporter of the story is announced with aplomb in the opening sentence: 'Of the things we fashioned for them that they might be comforted, dawn is the one that works'.[18] The narrator is in complete control here, both in sense and syntax. The iambic rhythm and calibrated cadences reflect a piece of divinely perfected handiwork, and the pragmatic efficiency of 'that works' humorously posits the sun's rising as the outcome of the gods' tinkering and a mere compensatory measure for the human travail of having to die. The author-god is overtly invoked and speaking is Hermes, the patron of orators, an apt figure for the high rhetorical style of the book. He is also the psychopomp of Greek

mythology, whose task it is to escort the souls of the dead to the afterlife. It is in this capacity that he attends the bedside of Adam, who has recently been felled by a near-fatal stroke. In Scheherazade fashion, Hermes's task is delayed by the other immortal presences in the novel. Zeus, father of Hermes and chief of all the gods, is besotted with Adam's daughter-in-law Helen, an actress who is rehearsing for the part of Alcmene in a production of Kleist's *Amphitryon*. In a *mise en abyme* that mirrors the action of the play, Zeus transforms himself into her husband, Adam junior, and seduces her. His eagerness to repeat the performance postpones the departure of the gods, thereby prolonging the duration of the novel. A further distraction, later in the day, arrives in the form of the appropriately named Benny Grace, an old colleague of Adam's, aka the god Pan, who, as personifier of Adam's eleventh-hour panic at the prospect of dying, affords a further grace period.

The novel draws on *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and just as Shakespeare's fairies manipulate the mechanicals, the action of *The Infinities* is driven by the gods' interventions into the lives of the human cast who have gathered at Adam's deathbed: his wife, Ursula; daughter, Petra; young Adam and Helen; Petra's reluctant boyfriend and acolyte of old Adam, Roddy Wagstaff; Ivy Blount, the dispossessed heiress of Arden and servant to the Godley's; and Duffy the cowman. As well as Hermes's first-person accounts, much of the book is narrated in a third-person free indirect style that drifts from one character to another, as Hermes eavesdrops on the thoughts of young Adam, Ursula, Helen, Petra and even Rex, the family labrador. This underlines the fact that the human characters are not self-determining subjects but are moved by external forces. Thoughts and sensations are externalised; they take shape in the air between characters, making the limits of identity loose and permeable. Furthermore, as the novel progresses, Hermes's voice begins to merge with that of old Adam, at first with a grammatical slip: 'I have – *he* has, *he*, I must stick to the third person'.[19] At around the halfway mark, ostensibly while Hermes sleeps, Adam's voice breaks through in the first person. The distinction between man and god becomes increasingly blurred as the entire narrative begins to figure as the eschatological reverie of the old man.

Lying supine in 'the Sky Room', old Adam's Attic perspective is an eminent conceit for the writer in command of his material, artfully inventing, marshalling the plot and mastering the flux of time into an ordered unity.[20] The audacious nomenclative allusions to divinity and to the progenitor, possessor of the power of naming, augment the correlation between the author and his character, and the arrival of Benny, referred to by Adam as 'my shadow, my double, my incorrigible daemon',

humorously alludes to Banville's adoption of the pen name Benjamin Black under which he has published crime fiction since 2006.[21] 'He – I say he when I think I mean I', says Adam of Benny.[22] But the novel's comic self-referential playfulness in relation to the Banville / Black dualism is only one portion of its elaborate skein of bifurcations and shapeshifting. In conceiving the narrative as all a dream, old Adam figures not only as Hermes and Benny, but also as Zeus, through whom he plays out his desire for Helen, assuming the identities of his son and Roddy Wagstaff. As Hermes, he metamorphoses into Duffy and, for his amusement, seduces Ivy Blount.

All of these interventions comically figure the writer as demigod, plotting, weaving and shaping the narrative. But the fractal dynamic of duplications, substitutions and polyphony also underlines the prosopopoeial character of the narrative voice, which is not representative of a subject but of the dissolving of subjectivity in the dreamwork of art. Even figuring the narrative as Adam's dream, it is not he – lying in 'the celestial dentist's chair' in a state of 'life-in-death' – but the gods who are moving the plot along, injecting colour into the human lives.[23] But they, in turn, are mere masks for the impersonal, oceanic energies at play in creative work. 'Think, if you can', commands Hermes, 'of a sea of eternal potential and of us as the shapes the waters make, surging and swaying; think of the air moulded by weather into transparent forms; think of ice; think of flame—so we are, at once eternal and evanescent'.[24] In this reading, the gods are figures for the warring forces of the text: the psychopompic will to death personified by Hermes, the panic change of heart in the form of Benny, and, above all, the powerful lust for life in the erotic force that is Zeus. In the slow transfiguring of the novel's events into the diaphanous fabric of the dream, the weight of content falls away, liberating the imponderable forces underlying the work of art.

However, the ambiguities of this polyphonic maze cannot be resolved so neatly. The introduction of an ostensibly metadiegetic level of narration which would place Adam in a vertical relation to Hermes cannot be sustained, because it is impossible to definitively place the diegetic levels of Adam and Hermes in hierarchical order. Like a Möbius strip, they slide into each other: on the one hand, Adam is contriving Hermes, while, on the other hand, Hermes is reporting on Adam. It is never clarified whether the gods are figments of Adam's dream, ministering to his desires, or whether Adam is in the hands of the gods, so that both readings must be entertained at once. This is a more sophisticated version of the trap that Banville deploys at the end of *The Sea*, a plot device borrowed from Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*. In the earlier novel, the reader is invited to read

Max Morden's recollections of a summer fifty years prior as an imaginative displacement of traumatic grief in the wake of his wife's recent death. However, the novel's closing section disrupts this reading by positing the events of the far past as real, thereby entrapping the reader in an unresolvable ambiguity. With this twist, Banville ties a Gordian knot, shattering the realist illusion, while at the same time disrupting an allegorical reading. This has the effect of shutting down any clear distinction between real and imaginary, shifting everything onto a single aesthetic plane. In his essay 'Fiction and the Dream', Banville asserts that in dreams as in works of art 'cracking the code is not important, [. . .] the code itself is the meaning'.[25] In both *The Sea* and *The Infinities*, the suspension of the holographic dualities of the text draws the reader out of the events depicted in the work to the event of the work itself.

A Paradoxical World

Banville's avowed disbelief in the third person is in keeping with his use of it in *The Infinities*, where he wants to push the credulity of the reader as far as possible in order to emphasise the 'unreally real' nature of the narrative.[26] The only sense in which the fiction is incontrovertibly real is on the level of the aesthetic event, which is precisely the level that Banville wants to draw attention to. The gradual twist into equivocality and paradox foregrounds the paradoxical nature of the contract between the reader and the fiction. We know that the events described in the text are not real, and yet – the 'and yet' that is ubiquitous in Banville's novels – on the level of the art event, the intensities that it brings alive for us are quite possibly stronger and more ontologically unsettling than those afforded by the 'real' experiences of everyday life. It is this distillation of experience to pure intensities in the art event rather than the representation of events that Banville wants to accentuate in *The Sea* and even more so in *The Infinities*.

The novel is replete with iterations of the real / unreal paradox: old Adam is 'sleeplessly sleeping', 'present and at the same time not', 'himself and yet not', and when he wakes, 'what he wakes to is not waking';[27] the 'essence' of the gods, like that of Adam's infinities, is 'essentially inessential';[28] and while the gods dwell in 'the infinite here, which is a kind of not-here', all of the humans will die, 'in the fullness, in the emptiness of time'.[29] Such contradictory statements do not possess a force of negation or self-cancelling irony, but that of a nonsensical humour. Their purpose is not merely to underline the real / unreal paradox in order to draw attention to the fictionality of the fiction; it is the reality of the art event that Banville wants to emphasise rather than the unreality of the events described within it. A distinction must be made from the kind of metafiction that attests to

the self-referential nature of language and articulates a distance from the real through irony. Banville's eschewal of a diegetic hierarchy through his deployment of the Möbius strip narrative structure collapses ironic distance in the Adam / Hermes pairing and establishes the nonreflexive duality of the paradox, thus eliminating the negativity of infinite regress in favour of the positive value of simultaneity.

If, in *The Sea*, Max Morden was 'neither alive nor the other thing', in *The Infinities*, which represents another limit space, we find the opposite side of the paradox (which is paradoxically the same – the other side of the Möbius strip) where the artistic avatar of Adam / Hermes, like Schrödinger's cat, is both alive and dead at the same time.[30] In neither novel is the circularity vicious, but there is a subtle difference nonetheless. Whereas Max Morden's narrative of mourning collapses the life / death dichotomy so as to commune with the dead beloved, Adam Godley's story of dying does so in order to reach out to the living loved ones he is leaving behind. The two novels are twinned in this respect, as paradoxical reflections of each other, like the masks of tragedy and comedy back-to-back.

The reflexive structure of ironic metafiction is usefully envisaged as two interfacing mirrors that reflect each other infinitely in a closed circuit, the eminent motif of the self-conscious subject and of language as a self-referential system. The subject turned back on itself in the *mise en abyme* of the ironic consciousness is an infinite structure and the double is a mirage that promises immortality. This infinity is played out in the vertiginous madness of linguistic play in which the distance between self and world, that is between the self as uttered and the empirical self, can be construed as a willed distance, a wish-fulfillment tactic rather than a painfully borne obstacle to authenticity. Irony thus configured procures a safe enclave from the reality of time and death, a suspension of the self in the artifice of language conceived as a set of self-referential tropes. Considered in this light, the ironic consciousness appears both death denying and life negating, sustaining the illusion of immortality, while at the same time alienating the self from a putative unmediated relation to the world. The Adam / Hermes duality, on the other hand, has the structure of two sides of the same mirror, where it is possible to see infinitely outwards in two different directions at the same time and to uphold the coexistence of two fictional worlds. This procures an interval of grace, in which life and death inhere simultaneously. As Hermes explains, the human world and the realm of the gods never really intersect, but nevertheless coexist on the same mirrored surface, that is, the same fictional plane: 'To us your world is what the world in mirrors is to you. A burnished, crystalline palace,

sparkling and clear, with everything just as it is on this side, only reversed, and infinitely unreachable. A looking-glass world, indeed, and only that'.[31] Paradox is the novel's central motif, and Banville's 'looking-glass world' bears resemblance to Lewis Carroll's mathematically inspired novels *Alice* and *Through the Looking Glass*. In *The Logic of Sense*, Gilles Deleuze draws prolifically on Carroll's novels to describe his concept of becoming, arguing for a 'secret dualism hidden in sensible and material bodies', a 'mad element' beneath things that pulls in two directions at the same time.[32] This same simultaneity characterises the dualities in Banville's novel, finding apposite expression in the implicit positing of Adam as alive and dead at the same time. By disrupting the passage by which language posits a world outside itself, a reality that remains painfully out of reach, the nonsensical paradoxes of *The Infinities* awaken the reader to the event of language and to the sensation of being pulled in opposing directions at the same time. These linguistic events draw attention to the texture and tempo of language, to sonority and sensation over signification and sense. They awaken us to the pure potential that draws all matter towards life and towards death. It is this contradictory force of becoming that sustains the living world, without which the 'dead, dank air' of infinite death would descend. Adam's 'exquisite and unimpeachable paradoxes', like the paradoxes of Banville's novel, express the essential paradox at the core of being, that there can be no life without death.[33]

Just as in Carroll's work, the paradoxes of the text foreground the surface of language, its opposing movements and rhythms and its hallucinatory imagery. The paradoxical aspects of *The Infinities* direct us away from the activity of sense-making and towards an immersion in the textual event. The events depicted in the text – the rival powers of the gods permeating the human lives and Adam's comatose state where he is both dead and alive at the same time – allegorise the event of the text itself, its affects, the pulses and rhythms and tempo, which are the creative and entropic rhythms of becoming, that is, of being itself. This is what Banville means by an art that exceeds human doings in order to approach what it is to be.

Pure Style

It is with *The Infinities* that Banville comes closest to his aim of emptying his fiction of content and writing a work of pure style, where style is the Nietzschean gesture, a pure folly that makes manifest the generative and destructive forces at the heart of matter, the contradictory forces of becoming. Style, as Deleuze and Guattari write, is 'the moment when language is no longer defined by what it says, even less by what makes it a

signifying thing, but by what causes it to move, to flow, and to explode – desire'.[34] Old Adam's apotheosis to a state of 'pure mind, [. . .] pure thought' is no apogee of Cartesian idealism, and his release from the earthly body is not a disavowal of corporeality, but instead figures a liberation of life energy – the force of Eros – from the bound body.[35] This is audaciously allegorised in Banville's appropriation of Kleist's *Amphitryon* as a framing story, where it is Zeus's (and Adam's) carnal desire that sustains the action. And it is death that Zeus covets: 'Each time he dips his beak into the essence of a girl he takes, so he believes, another enchanting sip of death, pure and precious'.[36] The force of desire is also the force of destruction. On the looking-glass surface of *The Infinities*, everything runs to paradox, which is a generative principle that cleaves apart the crevices of experience to reveal the power of becoming at its heart, rather than closing them off with a vicious circular irony.

The novel's complicated sexual game playing and burlesque humour thematise the erotic currents that animate the text, as when Hermes ponders the mysteries of human love: 'But lo! see what they made of this mess of frottage. It is as if a fractious child had been handed a few timber shavings and a bucket of mud to keep him quiet only for him promptly to erect a cathedral, complete with baptistry, steeple, weathercock and all'.[37] The phrase 'mess of frottage' fuses the artistic sense of a rubbing as the foundation for a work of art with the sexual meaning of the word, and this lewd Shakespearean suggestiveness carries over in 'erect' and 'weathercock' and in the rising rhythm of the next sentence. The provocative humour that plays on the texture of language, the surging cadence and the burgeoning of the image from the 'timber shavings' and 'mud' of words into the cathedral of a sentence exemplifies the sense of celebration and vitality that characterises this novel. Its eroticism is not all, or even primarily, sexual. Rather, it is about bringing alive an affective experience, about liberating the forces of becoming, of desire and destruction, by manipulating the sensuous capacities of language. 'Art is suffused with the erotic', claims Banville. 'All art, in a way, comes back to the body, and if you make a real work of art it will be at a level of eroticism which is very high'.[38] The novel's pathos is corporeal, erogenous, and is evoked through elaborate imagery, fine-grained descriptions of the sensuous texture of experience and, crucially, poetic tempo.

It is the rhythms and cadences of the prose, its distensions and contractions, the multiple becomings it brings alive, forming and reforming in miniature geneses and expirations, and the blooming and receding of metaphor and simile, that afford an experience of the pulses of pure becoming. This rhythmic pulsing and abating features at various levels,

from the short paradoxical phrases to the book as a whole, which begins with the invention of the dawn and ends in dusk and death. It is exemplified in a set piece towards the centre of the novel, which describes a trip that Adam took to Venice shortly after the suicide of his first wife Dorothy. The episode begins, like the novel itself, with Hermes, paired at this point with Adam, inventing a world: 'on a blast of divine afflatus, I am wafting Adam the elder across the seas to where together we shall invent Venice'. This is not a recollection but a genesis, narrated in the present tense so that the orientation is towards a world coming into being. He continues: 'Forty years ago, more'. The word order is vital here. Had this read 'more than forty years ago', the direction of the entire passage would be retrograde, casting the action into the far past with 'ago' shutting off potential. With the intensifier coming at the end, the sentence carries the force of a creative becoming. 'More' has a forward momentum that drives the prose on to the slightly longer sentence that follows. 'It is wintertime, and the city's vaunted charms are all crazed over by the cold'.[39] This is another propulsive sentence that leads from the flatly factual to the airy bluster of 'vaunted' and onto 'all crazed over', which demands an image upon which to project its icy fissures. The prose acquires a buoyancy, beginning to swell into longer, more saturated sentences:

> He is sitting in a restaurant, upstairs, at a corner table, with a view across the canal to where the wedding-cake façade of a white church, which he knows he should know the name of, gleams phantasmally through the midday murk. In some corner of the low-slung sky a weak sun is shining and each wavelet of the leaden canal waters is tipped with a spur of sullen, silver-yellow light.[40]

The eye of the imagination is directed out from the vanishing point of a corner to the lavish vision with its nuances of light and texture. Everything distends, bulging in excess and abundance. Shortly into the episode, Adam is approached by a pimp, aptly named Zeno, who escorts him to a brothel. In drifts of postcoital melancholy and grieving reminiscences of Dorothy, the tense changes to the past and the tone becomes sombre, and the little genesis that began the episode is matched at the end by a dying cessation: 'he went on standing there in the lemony sunlight of the Italian noon, and saw again Venice in winter, the grimy air and the wheeling gulls, and gnarled old Charon the boatman crooning for his coin'.[41]

It is through tempo, and particularly through comic timing, that Banville manipulates time in the novel, stretching and contracting it with comic digressions and bloated imagery. Banville's funniest book since *The Book of Evidence* (1989), its humour is very different from Freddie

Montgomery's blithe causticity and detached sceptical irony. Writing on comedy in *The Infinities*, Bryan Radley rightly remarks that 'matters of death, lust, love, and birth' are central to this novel, which he argues has 'materiality at its heart'.[42] However, this material humour of the body is not only a matter of the bawdy corporeality depicted in the novel and Radley's appraisal of the novel's comedy as 'pitiless black humour' does not account for the physical nature of the comic effects produced by the rhythms of the prose.[43] For instance, when Ursula awakes from a tipsy sleep to the news that Adam has spoken, the tempo suddenly switches from sluggish, swollen lassitude to frenzied acceleration:

> Great consternation and commotion now, of course, voices calling from room to room, running footsteps in the hall, the telephone fairly dancing on its doilied table beside the potted palm, and Ursula's dressing-gown ballooning around her as she comes flying down the stairs like Hera herself alighting out of air intent on burning the daidala and claiming back her aberrant spouse.[44]

The humour here arises out of the slapstick rapidity of the sentence with its proliferation of gerunds and the staccato rhythms giving way to the breakneck momentum of the long final clause. It elicits a visceral pleasure that is life-affirming because it heightens the senses and quickens the pulse. The novel's closing scene provides a supreme example of this physical comedy. The family are gathered around in stilled anticipation, as in a tableau vivant, 'dying as they may be and yet fixed for ever in a luminous, unending instant'. The joke, the sublime last laugh, is in the perfect poetic concord between form and content when the pregnant pause is broken by Helen's 'Oh!' as she feels the first signs of her literal pregnancy at the precise moment, we are given to presume, of old Adam's demise.[45] This is a corporeal comedy of the indrawn breath and the beating heart, a humour that is pleasurable because it intensifies the sensation of being alive and thus of being subject to death.

The high rhetorical tone of this late work is not that of a subject unable to transcend his own solipsistic and all too human perspective. Here the voice is liberated from the constraints of personhood and the reflexive dualism. The ironic perspective that views the world at a sceptical distance is replaced by a life-affirming humour. Ironic comedy is about the individual, the reflexive self and the doubleness of language. The humour of *The Infinities* is the paradoxical humour of nonsense, where language is all surface, where the duality of the subject is not reflexive but indicative of the contradictory forces of being. The Möbius strip structure eradicates depth in favour of an art of the surface. Its humour is that of the

somersaulting gesture and the joyous release of life from the bounds of individuality. It is about the expulsion of life in laughter, shorn of the weight of sense and of the subject. This humour holds no truck with the troubles of the individual, but is about the communal and the family. It is the essence of the social because it concerns the subterranean, presubjective forces that draw people together and pull them apart. The extension of the rapturous moment of self-overcoming is a postponement of the rebound into the reflexive consciousness of the individual subject. It opens up a space of grace, granting for a little while the limitless perspective of a god. In his book *On Humour*, the philosopher Simon Critchley compares the temporality of the joke to stretching an elastic band: 'We know that the elastic will snap, we just do not know when, and we find that anticipation rather pleasurable. It snaps with the punchline, which is a sudden acceleration of time, where the digressive stretching of the joke suddenly contracts into a heightened experience of the instant'.[46] The distensile space of *The Infinities* creates precisely this kind of pleasurable tension, a luxuriant tumescence that is all the sweeter for the inevitability of the morbid climax. The transcendence of time that the novel affords is not a transcendence of life but of the tragic predicament through comic elasticity. Its limber linguistic acrobatics awaken us to the sense of life's energies inflating the body and leaving in laughter, like a burst balloon, a sneeze, an orgasm or, in comic parentheses, death itself.

Notes and References

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3 Kathy Sheridan, 'John Banville: "I have not been a good father. No writer is"', *The Irish Times*, 22 Oct. 2016, web, 22 Oct. 2016, <http://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/john-banville-i-have-not-been-a-good-father-no-writer-is-1.2837008>.
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12 John Banville, 'The Mystery and the Madness', rev. of *Hemingway* by Kenneth S Lynn, *The Irish Times* 10 Oct. 1987, web, ProQuest, 12 Sep 2014.
13 John Banville, *The Sea* (London: Picador, 2006) 97-98.
14 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo: How to Become What You Are*, trans. Duncan Large (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007) 41.
15 Nietzsche 40-41.
16 Charlie McCarthy, director, 'Being John Banville', *Arts Lives*, RTÉ 1, 17 Jan. 2008.
17 John Banville, *The Infinities* (London: Picador, 2009) 216-17.
18 Banville, *The Infinities* 3.
19 Banville, *The Infinities* 33.
20 Banville, *The Infinities* 14.
21 Banville, *The Infinities* 160.
22 Banville, *The Infinities* 172. Banville is fond of playing on his dual identity as a writer, even publishing an interview between Banville and Black on his Benjamin Black website. In Charlie McCarthy's documentary 'Being John Banville', which was filmed while he was working on *The Infinities*, Banville refers to this 'dark twin' as a dangerous figure: 'Benjamin Black could seep into the pores of John Banville's skin and invade him and Benjamin Black could say to John Banville in that Faustian way, that Mephistophelean way, look how easy it is, why don't you relax, why don't you write easier books? The public would love you. [. . .] You'd make a fortune'. This resonates comically with the character of Benny Grace, Adam's slightly sordid sidekick, the money man who acts as go-between for Adam's mysterious benefactress Madame Mac.
23 Banville, *The Infinities* 31, 18.
24 Banville, *The Infinities* 206.
25 John Banville, 'Fiction and the Dream', *Possessed of a Past: A John Banville Reader*, ed. Raymond Bell (London: Picador, 2012) 365.
26 Banville, *The Infinities* 8.
27 Banville, *The Infinities* 11, 44, 58, 62.
28 Banville, *The Infinities* 144.
29 Banville, *The Infinities* 16, 209-10.
30 Banville, *The Sea* 98.
31 Banville, *The Infinities* 260-61.
32 Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, trans. Mark Lester, ed. Constantin V. Boundas (London: The Athlone Press, 1990) 2.
33 Banville, *The Infinities* 216.
34 Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003) 133.
35 Banville, *The Infinities* 31-32.
36 Banville, *The Infinities* 73.

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38 McCarthy, 'Being John Banville'.
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43 Radley 14.
44 Banville, *The Infinities* 285-86.
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46 Simon Critchley, *On Humour* (London: Routledge, 2002) 7.