The Aesthetics of the Flesh in John Banville's *The Book of Evidence, Eclipse* and *Shroud*

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> The entire comedy of art is neither performed for our betterment or education nor are we the true authors of this art world. On the contrary, we may assume that we are merely images and artistic projections for the true author, and that we have our highest dignity in our significance as works of art – for it is only as an *aesthetic phenomenon* that existence and the world are eternally *justified.*
>
> Friedrich Nietzsche[1]

Engaging with aesthetics in general is a thorny enterprise. Delving into this matter in literature is for me, as a contemporary literary scholar, oddly enough an even more difficult project. One explanation to this state of affairs might be that aesthetic experience is both a simple and a multifaceted phenomenon. This is simple, when we do not have to say anything about it, and complex when we do. In the postmodern or post-postmodern academic context it is most certainly regarded as an asinine mission to make pretentious claims in this area without presenting other factors complicating the issue. Such factors may, for instance, be the addition of an ethical dimension, or a clearly signalled awareness of how the aesthetic contentions may be further problematised by the component of discursive power. Thus, when we feel obliged to speak about aesthetics, the topic does not seem to be separable from a more general discourse, in which bird's eye perspectives quickly take over at the expense of a detailed analysis of the actual phenomenon as manifested in the primary texts exposed to analytic scrutiny. Therefore, it is often more convenient and safe for the modern literary scholar to let the aesthetic element of the study of literature be somehow implied and taken for granted. The critic seems to be locked in a position where the choice is to either remain silent or to veer away from the phenomenon itself.

However, as an alternative to the claustrophobic situation tentatively sketched above, there is a more profound aspect of this area that makes it far more fascinating. This aspect forces us to think more seriously about the actual phenomenon of aesthetics. Since the understanding of the ontology of human perception and experience has been fundamentally revised during the last century, the demand for reflective thinking about aesthetics has also become intensified. In view of the fact that we no longer conceptualise a stable subject that passively perceives a self-sufficient and static reality, we are encouraged to see experience as a more complex and multi-layered phenomenon. Given that any aesthetic theory inevitably has grown out of this dynamic experiential process, aesthetics too has come to constitute a highly captivating area that encompasses epistemological as well as ontological concerns. In the concise opening paragraph of the introduction to *The Continental Aesthetics Reader*, Clive Cazeaux formulates the situation in the following way:

> Aesthetics has undergone a radical transformation in the last hundred years. Traditionally, the subject has always occupied the margins of philosophy, for the simple reason that it deals with those aspects of experience which are the least amenable to categorization, i.e., art, beauty, emotion, and the ever-changing delights of the senses. However, the divisions imposed on reality by modern reason and changes brought about by the industrialization of experience have necessitated a rethinking of the relationship between the individual and reality. Gone are notions of a distinct self in receipt of a mind-independent world and, in their place, are theses to the effect that consciousness and reality are interconnected at a fundamental level. One consequence of this shift is that aesthetic experience is redefined. Far from being a mere adjunct to everyday perception, it is shown to be vital to an understanding of the relationship between mind and world. The aesthetic, formerly exiled from mainstream attention, assumes centre-stage as the region to which we can turn for new cognitive possibilities and a sensibility that is critical of the divisions exercised by modern thought.[2]

Thus, as indicated by Cazeaux, any contemporary attempt at an aesthetic analysis needs to explore the complex ontology of human experience. The persistent philosophic movement of phenomenology is without doubt among those branches of science that take human experience most seriously. Thereby, it automatically treats the theme of aesthetics as related to human experience in general as an intriguing topic of investigation. This is why phenomenology offers a suitable theoretical and methodological point of departure when we approach this issue in the highly poetic and elaborate prose of the Irish writer John Banville. Indeed, this particular writer's own attitude to the art of writing has itself been described as

phenomenological, both by the author himself and by the critic John Kenny in his recent monograph on Banville:

> The philosophy of phenomenology concentrates on existence as the experience of external reality. Rather than wondering whether things have an objective solidity, a *thereness*, the important question for a phenomenologist is: what is our conscious experience of these things that exist outside of consciousness? Banville's exploration of the power of consciousness to establish its own potentially autonomous reality or meaning can be readily recognised in his work. Yet his sense of himself as a phenomenologist means that he also wishes to explore the possibility that, on the contrary, it is the external world of phenomena that is the truly autonomous dimension in our experience of existence. In Banville's work, the existential position is combined with the phenomenological position to dynamic effect.[3]

What will eventually be the task in the present article is to examine more closely what might be meant by 'phenomenological position' when we engage with the primary texts themselves. An overarching principle here is that there is an important connection between aesthetic qualities and Banville's attention to experiential intricacies and details.[4]

When moving towards the issue of aesthetics in Banville's fiction, we first need to make some basic distinctions and outline four different categories in order to clarify what will be bracketed by means of the phenomenological reduction and what will be the main concern here: 1) Aesthetic ideals as formulated by the author himself in various contexts, such as interviews, his own reviews and other places in Banville's 'non-fiction; 2) Aesthetics as derived from holistic readings of the Banvillean oeuvre made by various critics; 3) Aesthetics as overtly thematised and/or problematised in the Irish writer's work, for instance when protagonists contemplate the beauty or strangeness of the world, which they quite frequently tend to do; 4) A phenomenological aesthetics, which can only be investigated and articulated by means of a careful inspection of certain moments in Banville's texts, i.e. textual loci in which the aesthetic dimension is 'covertly' at work without being commented upon. It is the fourth class of phenomena that will in due course be the focal point here, but first I would like to contextualise my discursive contribution by providing examples of the three other categories.

Scholars have dealt with the question of aesthetics in Banville's artistic work. For instance, any critic attempting an analysis of the art trilogy (*The Book of Evidence*, *Ghosts* and *Athena*) needs to address this topic, since it is thematised. A common way of approaching the theme is to

regard aesthetics as strongly related to Banville's preoccupation with the supremacy of the creative imagination in the science novels (*Doctor Copernicus*, *Kepler*, *The Newton Letter* and *Mefisto*), which precede the art trilogy. Even a superficial reading of the science tetralogy would notice that art as well as scientific discoveries are presented as 'constructs' of the creative imagination and that both domains involve some kind of beauty, something pristine, something aesthetic. Chronologically speaking, this construal makes sense, since large parts of the science tetralogy seem to point in this direction. The first book of the art trilogy, *The Book of Evidence*, is then the novel that from a diachronic perspective thematically problematises possible transcendental tenets that could be derived from readings of the science novels. Aesthetic experience thrives on the creative imagination, but if we add an ethical dimension to that neat order, other interesting things about the complexity of the human being are revealed. John Kenny suggests that '[t]he imagination is brought low in *The Book of Evidence*, to a depth that is all the more profound for its polar opposition to the stellar heights reached by the Tetralogy's theories of creativity'.[5] Kenny is perhaps the critic who most thoroughly has examined Banville's own aesthetic attitude. According to him a central and dominating idea is the belief in autonomy. This involves the autonomy of art itself as well as the autonomy of the artist. Kenny traces this aspect back to a modernist view on art and contends that Banville's writing aspires to be a continuation and elaboration of this tradition, since 'the revivifying, not the sterilizing, of the dogma of autonomous art is Banville's project':

> Most positively viewed – and this is the viewpoint Banville adopts – the aesthetic 'anxiety of contamination' in modernism is concerned with the integrity of the autonomous art work so that it can conceptually counterbalance the potential senselessness and chaos of our world. Modernism always remained convinced of the traditional notion of the autonomous art work and believed in the importance of the construction of artistic form and meaning even when it was deemed equally important that the safety of such constructions be called into doubt within the same art forms.[6]

Kenny substantiates this claim with a number of quotes and references to Banville's interview statements and places in his texts of 'non-fiction'. Therefore, the belief in autonomy may serve as a good example of the first category mentioned above. In the sense that this notion is also problematised or at least utilised as scaffolding for tensions in Banville's fiction, it is also an example of the third category, which is something that Kenny elucidates in his analysis. It is quite as ridiculous to claim that

Banville's work is essentially modernist as it is to contend that it is postmodernist, which comes out very clearly in Kenny's monograph. As becomes obvious to anyone who spends time reading Banville carefully, the Irish writer's literary achievement is both modernist and postmodernist, but it is also something altogether different, which is a peculiar fact that will be expounded in my analysis of the Banvillean aesthetics below.[7]

A pertinent example of the second category is Joseph McMinn's thoughts about the Banvillean aesthetic project in relation to Wallace Stevens's celebration of the imagination. In McMinn's view, Banville presents a humanistic aesthetics, which is problematised in the literary texts by the price human creators (artists, scientists) have to pay when placing themselves in the positions of small gods, attempting to construct supreme fictions. The only consolation seems to be the aesthetic achievements in themselves, both as concerns the protagonists' lives and Banville's own writing. McMinn claims that

> Banville is best approached as a poetic novelist for whom ideas are vital, but for whom metaphor is supreme. This is a postmodernist body of work, energised by its awareness of the history of narrative and representation, of the intimate and incestuous relation between theory and fiction, of the radical possibilities of the novel form. What is perhaps most remarkable about Banville's work is the way it depends upon such an awareness for its design and yet suggests that, ultimately, the quality of style in narrative performance is the real consolation, the only durable form of knowledge. It reads as a profoundly pessimistic fiction, dramatising a series of figures whose minds betray them, but whose accounts of that betrayal display exquisite imaginative power and invention.[8]

Evidently, McMinn has here efficiently summarised what Banvillean fiction to a great extent seems to be about. I partly agree, but I shall try to take the issue of aesthetics further by exploring details in Banville's artistic writing. It is quite possible that the propositions made below are fully compatible with those of Kenny and McMinn, but I hope to be able to add a dimension to the issue of aesthetic considerations in the fiction of John Banville.

To further clarify what will not be of primary concern in my phenomenological analysis, I need to highlight and explain the third category mentioned above more in detail. When Freddie Montgomery escapes from Whitewater with the painting and the shocked maid, he opens the trunk of his stolen Humber Hawk and is suddenly struck by one of the fairly frequent everyday-life epiphanies:

> We reached the car. The cavernous boot smelled strongly of fish. There was the usual jumble of mysterious implements, a jack, and spanners and things – I am not mechanically minded, or handed, have I mentioned that? – and a filthy old pullover, which I hardly noticed at the time, thrown in the corner with deceptive casualness by the hidden arranger of all these things.[9]

Even though this passage does not immediately remind us of the aesthetic dimension of Banville's fiction, it nevertheless draws attention to the phenomenon of revelation. It actually places it in front of the reader and the crucial markers are 'mysterious implements', 'deceptive casualness' and 'hidden arranger'. The choice of these words draws the reader in the direction of the fatal theme that Freddie entertains all through the narrative. Moreover, these word formations turn the reader towards a reflective reading mode. Freddie's comment invites the reader to take the path of contemplation, in which the strangeness of the ordinary is seen as something laid out purposefully by the god or perhaps the demiurge of the world. The astonishing beauty and mystery of the constitution of the experienced world is in the text subjected to intellectual examination, regardless of whether there is a god or nothing behind it. This is not the main focus of this investigation. Thus, in what follows the autobiographical, the thematised and the self-reflective aspects of aesthetics in Banville's authorship will be avoided, focusing on *The Book of Evidence*, *Eclipse* and *Shroud*.

In his article 'Reality and its Shadow', Emmanuel Levinas ponders the predicament of art criticism, which in his view 'enters into the artist's game with all the seriousness of science'.[10] Indeed, to try to formulate ideas about the aesthetic quality of a work of art appears to be a futile endeavour. Since the artist has the privilege of remaining in her 'game' world, the critic is at some form of disadvantage, because the interpreter has to try to conceptualise that which the artwork in a more or less playful fashion intimates. So for the critic, two distinct options seem to be available. Either she tries to reformulate the artwork in conceptual terms or she tries to reproduce the artistic quest for the ineffable.[11] In the former case, criticism reduces the aesthetic aspiration of the artwork, and in the latter, it runs the risk of creating a poor imitation of the much richer original. This analysis will balance between these possible pitfalls by introducing an aesthetic theory that has its ultimate source in the complexity of experience itself. Since Banville's fiction in general often halts at seemingly irrelevant aspects of the world, it also in a similar way lingers at experiential concentrations that explore the most subtle details of a possible life experience. Since I will below implicitly argue that *The Book of Evidence*, *Eclipse* and *Shroud* are all thorough studies of human experience, I shall

here espouse a phenomenological approach mainly derived from Maurice Merleau-Ponty's article 'The Intertwining – The Chiasm'.[12]

The fundamental insight that Merleau-Ponty formulates is that neither the observer of things nor the things are the most important elements when we engage with the mysteries of experience. Instead he introduces what he calls 'flesh'. Flesh is neither in the body nor in the world. It is the very prerequisite for both of these factors. Therefore, flesh denotes a particular type of ideality, a specific kind of conceptualisation that the human being cannot escape.[13] As Merleau-Ponty notes:

> There is a strict ideality in experiences that are experiences of the flesh: the moments of the sonata, the fragments of the luminous field, adhere to one another with a cohesion without concept, which is of the same type as the cohesion of the parts of my body, or the cohesion of my body with the world. Is my body a thing, is it an idea? It is neither, being the measurant of the things. We will therefore have to recognize an ideality that is not alien to the flesh, that gives it its axes, its depth, its dimensions.[14]

This ideality of the flesh pulls together the reading experience and the experiences pouring forth in for instance Freddie's narrative. As mentioned above, there are certain moments in *The Book of Evidence*, as in many other Banville novels, where this experiential eccentricity is explicitly commented upon, namely, instances where it becomes thematised. But there are also passages which do not bring the experiential oddity into the light of thematic scrutiny. At times, Freddie Montgomery's guilt ridden narrative does not contain a philosophic meta-discussion, but only tries to relate what happened in what I for lack of a better denotation call 'plain narration'. This 'plain narration' is of course not plain at all. It rather reveals the complexity and density of the prose much more clearly than sections that are appropriated by the dominating phenomenon of self-reflection. I claim that it is in such moments that we may best observe Banville's aesthetics at work. Towards the inevitable end of the tragic tale, Charlie French returns from the police station to have a final talk with Freddie before the policemen barge in to arrest the perpetrator:

> Something had happened to the silence around us. I realised that the rain had stopped. God almighty, Freddie, he said softly, what have you done? He seemed more bemused than shocked. I fetched another, half-full bottle of milk from the back of the fridge. Remember, Charlie, I said, those treats you used to stand me in Jammet's and the Paradiso? He shrugged. It was not clear if he was listening. The milk had turned. I drank it anyway.[15]

What I pursue here is revealed already in the first sentence. Since something can happen to the initial silence, it means that it was not silence at all in the first place. What we call silence is really a multi-layered experience of different degrees of sound. The rain had become familiar and therefore it had merged with a notion of silence. When the rain stops, it reveals a stratum of silence beneath what appeared to be silence.[16] The reading experience is fully intertwined with this unexpected perception and the reader has to become attuned to the phenomenology of silence together with the narrator. The first two sentences of the quote have at least two effects. Firstly, they draw the reader into the fictional ontology of familiarisation through defamiliarisation. Secondly, they immanently problematise a conventionalised understanding of silence and thereby highlight silence itself. By silence itself I do not refer to silence as a fixed concept, but as a phenomenon in the flesh.

Aesthetic experience here is not equivalent to something displayed or presented as an object before our gaze. It is rather a question of being-drawn-into the ideality of the flesh. The aesthetics of the flesh is further accentuated by the closing moment of the experiential sequence. Freddie realises that the milk has turned sour, but he drinks it anyway. This is clearly a manifestation of a deeply distressed and an extremely defiant protagonist. Milk is supposed to be pure nourishment, a white, life-giving liquid, poured out of the universal breast into the infants of the world. No sane person would drink sour milk, deceased milk, death and decay. But Freddie does. No longish elaboration on the behaviour of psychologically deranged people could fully capture what this is all about. As in the case of silence referred to above, the reader is drawn into a phenomenon in the flesh. This time it is about defiance and distress. Inevitably, an aspect of the aesthetics revealed here is of course about the economy and precision of writing, but these concepts are too feeble to fully capture what I focus on in this article. Another aspect of the sour milk phenomenon emphasises that the aesthetic element I elucidate here does not necessarily have anything to do with beauty in the sense of it being strictly distinct from that which is ugly and unpleasant. Drinking sour milk is presumably obnoxious, but the event of doing it in the narrative, at precisely this point, is aesthetics at its purest in the context of my argument.

To further accentuate the pervasiveness and impact of the flesh in Banville's fiction, I would like to draw attention to the frequently recurring light phenomena, which in said fiction fall into the category of perception in a unique way. Light is particularly interesting in relation to windows.[17] This is a very prominent characteristic of the Banvillean aesthetics, perhaps especially in the science tetralogy, but it is of pivotal relevance to stress

here that it stretches through the whole oeuvre. In *The Book of Evidence*, for instance, Freddie spends the night before the day of the murder in a rental room in the oddly benevolent taxi driver's mother's house. He cannot sleep and as usual in Banville-land, we are invited to participate in the phenomenology of sleeplessness:

> I did not sleep. The sheets were clammy and somehow slippery, and I was convinced I was not the first to have tossed and turned between them since their last laundering. I tried to lie, tensed as a spring, in such a way that as little of me as possible came in contact with them. The hours were marked by a distant churchbell with a peculiarly dull note. There was the usual barking of dogs and bellowing of cattle. The sound of my own fretful sighs infuriated me. Now and then a car or lorry passed by, and a box of lighted geometry slid rapidly over the ceiling and down the walls and poured away in a corner.[18]

The perception of primary interest here is the light coming from the window. Its movement across the ceiling and down the walls is not only an accurate linguistic manifestation of a visual perception; it is also an instantiation of something stable in the midst of the general experiential flux. All the bodily, tactile impressions are accompanied by the sounds and the experiential sequence is crowned by the geometry of light. Moreover, the moving box of light did not merely disappear, it 'poured away' in the corner of the room. The visual perception is suddenly a possibly tactile phenomenon, i.e. a liquid, which emphasises the sentient affinity of sense realms that from a naturalistic perspective would be regarded as clearly distinct categories. This would perhaps not be noteworthy if it occurred once or twice, but in Banville's fiction in general it is a dominating phenomenon, foregrounding the importance and complexity of perception. The use of the words 'lighted geometry' is crucial here. Neither experience nor geometry can be said to be completely haphazard and disorganised phenomena. Banvillean aesthetics is very much concerned with the exploration of the descriptive grammar of the flesh. In view of the authorship as a whole, the experiential stratum examined above is more than something belonging to the individual or the individual body.

Accordingly, from the perspective we have adopted here, flesh is not to be regarded as the physical body, but neither is it severed from the physical body and the physical world. When Freddie encounters a companion in the world of distress, desperation and guilt, it is as if they are both drawn into the same darkness on the hither side of the world of human beings and things. In the flesh, the ordinary sexual body barely exists. The sexual act is almost nothing. All that could have been exciting and sexually

arousing in the passage that follows have melted into something that the whole event revolves around. In his half-drunken haze, Freddie comes across a woman at the party in Charlie's house. She seems to be immersed in the same kind of deep angst that he is:

> Why are you sad? I said, and for a moment she did not know what to do with her hands, then she put them behind her back, and flexed one knee and briefly swayed her shoulders and her hips, like a schoolgirl playing the coquette. Who says I'm sad? she said. I'm not sad. And I thought she was going to cry. Did she see it in me, the terror and the shame, had she seen it from the first? For she had sought me out, I knew that. I reached behind her and opened a door, and we stepped suddenly on to bare floorboards in an empty room. There was a smell, dry and oniony, that was the smell of a certain attic room at Coolgrange. A parallelogram of moonlight was propped against one wall like a broken mirror. I am still holding these damned plates. I put them on the floor at our feet, and while I was still bending she touched my shoulder and said something which I did not catch. She laughed softly, in surprise, it seemed, as if the sound of her own voice were unexpected. Nothing, she said, nothing. She shook in my arms. She was all teeth, breath, clutching fingers. She held my head between her hands as if she would crush it. She had kicked off her shoes, they clattered where they fell. She raised one foot behind her and pressed it against the door, pressed and pressed. Her thighs were cold. She wept, her tears fell on my hands. I bit her throat. We were like – I don't know. We were like two messengers, meeting in the dark to exchange our terrible news. O God, she said, O God. She put her forehead against my shoulder. Our hands were smeared with each other. The room came back, the moonlight, the oniony smell. No thought, except: her white face, her hair. Forgive me, I said. I don't know why I laughed. Anyway, it wasn't really a laugh.[19]

Here we see the geometry of light again, the 'parallelogram of moonlight', as a slightly different variation of the furtive yet discernable logos of experience. Furthermore, it is as if the two entangled bodies become one single being, which presses, clutches, shakes, as if trying to squeeze some kind of deeper meaning out of the material world itself.[20] Upon closer inspection, it becomes clear that the fragmented narration revolves around something more than the sexual act. Freddie, who most of the time functions as an incarnation of the unreliable narrator, is all of a sudden drawn into this other world within the world. This is most clearly revealed in the sentence 'I am still holding these damned plates', which is in the present continuous tense. Evidently, the narrator is mesmerised by the narration itself and is pulled into the strength of its flow. Thereby, suddenly the complexity of experience itself has the upper hand. All these affects of

touching and holding: her holding his head as if trying to break it, him biting her throat, and the feeling of the coldness of her thighs, emphasise the oscillations between the touching and the touched that are fundamental in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the body. In my view, the messengers referred to are summoned to this exchange by something distinct but not separate from themselves, which is nothing other than the dark power of the flesh. It is no mere coincidence that Freddie feels that the woman possibly has sensed the 'terror' and the 'shame'. These are pure root-affects to which she obviously is equally attuned. The whole passage clearly illustrates that this situation is not chosen by the characters, but *it* selects them as momentary instantiations of *its* incessant dark energy.

The argument above reveals at least two things about Banville's aesthetics. First and foremost, the text itself problematises the thematised lamentations about the insufficiency of language, scattered here and there in Banville's work. To be thematised and discussed, this view of language needs to be and idea. But as mentioned above, the aesthetics of the flesh does not present an idea in the ordinary sense. John Kenny's suggestion that the idea of imagination is brought low in *The Book of Evidence* is also problematised from the perspective of the flesh. What breaks through is rather the unremitting force of the language–imagination–experience nexus. Secondly, the lack of a thematised idea does not mean that we do not speak of ideality here, but we speak of an ideality of a particular kind, i.e. the ideality of the flesh. This is why Merleau-Ponty's thinking in 'The Intertwining – The Chiasm' so clearly elucidates this aspect of Banvillean aesthetics. It should be noted that Merleau-Ponty regards the tangible as always already inscribed in the visible and vice versa.[21] Moreover, language itself springs from the complex bodily dynamics made possible by the resistance of the flesh:

> When the silent vision falls into speech, and when speech in turn, opening up a field of the nameable and the sayable, inscribes itself in that field, in its place, according to its truth – in short, when it metamorphoses the structures of the visible world and makes itself a gaze of the mind, *intuitus mentis* – this is always in virtue of the same fundamental phenomenon of reversibility which sustains both the mute perception and the speech and which manifests itself by an almost carnal existence of the idea, as well as a sublimation of the flesh. In a sense, if we were to make completely explicit the architectonics of the human body, its ontological framework, and how it sees itself and hears itself, we would see that the structure of its mute world is such that all the possibilities of language are already given in it.[22]

As is clearly stated here, we are dealing with a primordial reversibility. Literary language always already contains the mute perceptions that made it possible in the first place. In *The Book of Evidence*, Freddie's perceptions are often somewhat hazy and they are frequently accompanied by his own recurring reservations about their validity. On occasions, he even takes back what has been stated, which further accentuates the unreliability of the narrator and the narrative. But this trait is counter-balanced by the dimension I have tried to draw attention to here.

In *Eclipse*, Alexander Cleave's perceptions oscillate between past and present; dream and reality; and ghostly presences and more palpable entities. Waking up from a troubled sleep, Cleave sees, or thinks he sees, a figure in the room before him. As commonly is the case in Banville's fiction, we are not merely presented with a ghost – or which would probably be even worse, a representation of a ghost – but we are rather drawn into the phenomenology of ghostness. Make note of the fact that this incident is framed by an inability to speak and a very precise experientially grounded description of light. The perceptive indeterminacy is accompanied by a similar uncertainty as concerns the capacity to articulate:

> I tried to speak but could not, not because I was struck dumb with fear but because the mechanism of my voice could not be made to work in the otherworld between dream and waking in which I was suspended. Still the figure did not stir, nor give any sign, only stood in that pose of ambiguous extremity, waiting, it might be, for some desired response from me. I thought: *The Necessary* [. . .] and as I did, in *that momentary blink of the mind*, the figure faded. I was not aware of its going. There seemed no transition between its state of being seen and its invisibility, as if it had not departed but only changed its form, or refined itself into a frequency beyond the reach of my course senses. At once relieved and regretful at its going I closed my eyes, and when I unwillingly opened them again, no more than a moment later, so it seemed, *a streaming blade of sunlight had already made a deep slash through the parting in the curtains*. [the two last emphases mine][23]

The ghostly figure occurs and disappears in a 'momentary blink of the mind'. Considered from the perspective of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, this point is the never coinciding of the visible and the invisible; the seen and the seeing; and also the touched and the touching. Furthermore, as stated by the narrator, it is not a question of a perceivable point of disappearance, which indicates the fact that it is impossible to perceive the difference between the visible and the invisible itself, namely, the flesh. Phenomenologically speaking, we witness here a co-presence of the ghostly world, which essentially is a parallel possibility, like the reverse

side of a coin. The told Cleave and the Cleave of the telling oscillate between the impossibility of speech and pure eloquence. When the 'blade of sunlight' cuts through the air, the non-tangible becomes very palpable, drawing attention to the perceptive possibility of things seen actually appearing as things touched, which in my view is a clear indication of Banville's frequent use of the synaesthetic dimension of expression and perception.[24] Here again, the reader is pulled into the phenomenology of the flesh. To elaborate on the aesthetic aspects of this passage, we may say that Banville's prose both describes an intricate phenomenology of experience and is itself this experience. For the reader, the critic, the philosopher, there is no escape.

To contrast the whole discussion above with more general thoughts about aesthetics, we may bring in Levinas's notion of the meanwhile, introduced in his 'Reality and Its Shadow'. He conceives of the meanwhile as 'the eternal duration of the interval'.[25] According to Levinas, it is art's sad condition to be suspended in the meanwhile, in a state similar to the duration-in-fixity of a statue. But art also provides the very possibility of breaking free from the eternal duration. As is many times the case for Banville's characters, the critic or the philosopher must allow herself to be struck dumb when confronted with phenomena in the flesh. In that way, she will become 'conscious of the creative event itself, an event which eludes cognition, which goes from being to being by skipping over the intervals of the meanwhile'.[26] Banville's fiction tries to put this event on the stage, but I would argue that, however futile it may seem, it also has the aspiration to be the event that goes from being to being regardless of time and place.

As is well known, Banville's literary project recycles characters and names of characters. This is something that has not yet been thoroughly researched even though various critics have registered its existence.[27] In the light of my argument here, this recycling aims at proving the unimportance of names. The experience in the flesh is what takes the role of the creative event. What names are attached to this experiential core is not really important. If the lived events that seem to lack significance are the true creative moments, or at least the moments that spur artistic creativity, then Banville's aesthetics has more to do with authenticity than with its opposite. Authentic life involves art and vice versa and both life and art probably do their thing precisely by doing almost nothing. Alexander Cleave at one point contemplates the strange phenomenon of having to wait for his daughter when she took piano lessons. He finds it strange that he misses those moments of boredom. He puts it thus:

> What is it about such occasions of timeless time that afterwards makes them seem touched with such a precious melancholy sweetness? Sometimes it seems to me that it is in those vacant intervals, without my being aware of it, that my life has been most authentically lived.[28]

The paradoxical construction 'timeless time' is of crucial importance here. To make sense of it we need to distinguish between different layers of time. Obviously, 'time' means objectified calendar time, in which all seemingly important events take place. But 'timeless time' points to the region that has been under analysis here, namely, the flowing of experience itself or of life itself, which is always prior to calendar time. This is the zone of the flesh, where things come to be. Such groundlessness of authentic life may be the elusive source of creativity, something out of which the artist moulds her forms.

Similarly in *Shroud*, Alexander's daughter Cass Cleave lives through many strange moments that do not seem to mean anything. In any case, these occasions do not explain very much. The narrator and the focalised character just appear to be presented with an experiential clearing that suddenly makes itself manifest as something important, without overtly revealing its significance for the narrative as a whole. Cass is awake and wanders around in the hotel in Turin in the middle of the night while Axel Vander sleeps. She returns to their room. Vander is still asleep and she hears something in the corridor outside:

> What time it was when she heard the child singing she did not know, only that it was late, the middle of the night. Perhaps she had been asleep, after all, in a kind of sleep, sitting there by the bed, for certainly when she heard the child she thought that the sound had wakened her. And as sometimes when the dreamer is suddenly roused the dream vanishes, so now whatever it was that had been going through her head, dream or musings or memories, all vanished on the instant, leaving only this moment, in this room, in the lamplight, with the old man breathing on the bed and the sound from the corridor of the child, singing. It was not one of her voices, it was outside her, outside the room, real, a thin, high, wordless crooning. She sat and listened to it for a while, unafraid. It was not so much a sound as a part of the silence, a part of the night, there and not there, like darkness, or the air itself. [. . .] She walked to where the corridor turned. A faint breeze came from around the turn and put its ineffectual hands against her face, her bare arms.[29]

As in the case of Cleave's moments of waiting during Cass's piano lessons, the text here too focuses on a temporal phenomenon through the strong stress on 'this moment'. It indicates that spring of time that itself is

timeless. The sound that is barely more than silence has the power to pull Cass's consciousness into this moment of experiential concentration. The aesthetic quality is enhanced by the apt description of a phenomenon that is simultaneously there and not there 'like darkness, or the air itself'. In the Banvillean world, objects and perceptions of these objects are never in themselves trivial or redundant. Air and darkness possess the uncanny capacity to be there without drawing any attention to their being there, but suddenly they may take on life and form hands that, even though 'ineffectual', are nevertheless there as palpable and palpating entities. The synaesthetic dimension is again prominent: the sound as 'darkness' or 'air', as the barely perceivable perceived, but the perceived metaphorically takes shape as that which touches, namely, becomes that which perceives. Again, there seems to exist some form of oscillation between the invisible and the visible, the perceiving and the perceived, and, furthermore, the perceived can unexpectedly shift and become the perceiving, the 'hands'. As indicated above, this whole complex of experiences mark the phenomenology of the flesh. Cass is not really important here as a character. It might as well have been Vander who perceived the same thing, and indeed, the whole narrative shifts between Cass in the third person, Vander in the third person, and Vander in the first person. The flesh tends to take centre-stage. The characters are marionettes caught up in the ceaseless experiential fluctuations of the flesh.[30]

To illustrate this more clearly, we may turn to Vander's perceptions of a murky room in his home in Arcady, California, before he goes to Turin. It is important to make note of the fact that he refers to the visual atmosphere as being immersed in 'spectral rain-light':[31]

> Phantoms of shadow hung about, trying not to be noticed. A window streamed with rain, and opposite it in the room a patch of wall rippled like dark silk. I stopped still and peered into the gloom, seeking a focus; there were times when Magda was there, a palpable presence, but not now, and the shadows were shadows only. From the garden I could hear the rain beating on the leaves and into the clay, and I pictured it, falling down straight and shiny as wires through the windless dawn. The coffee machine was still at its diarrhoeal labours when the rain stopped abruptly.[32]

Initially, shadows are close to being something more than themselves since they seem to be animated and their appearance evokes thoughts about the spectre of Vander's deceased wife. The streaming water on the window distorts the light so that the opposite wall appears to be physically undulating. The sound of rainwater conjures up an image of falling rain congealing into 'wires'. Again, we see the close connection between the

actually seen and a 'parallel' world of great potential. A light reflection makes the solid wall ripple; something heard moves the imagination in the direction of something seen and something fluid may appear as something solid. The intimate nexus between different modes of perception indicates the between that always withdraws from perception, for instance, the resisting, imperceptible integument of the flesh, without which the experiential structure would collapse into an indistinct blur. The womb of perception is itself never perceived. The eye that sees is itself never seen. This is an intra-worldly enigma that Banville constantly returns to. Moreover, the perceptual play of the visible and the invisible opens up the possibility of the presence in absence of Magda.

When we as readers have been pulled through this perceptual pattern, we are confronted with an important detail in Banville's aesthetics, the expression 'diarrhoeal labours' of the coffee maker, which has at least two distinct functions. Firstly, it catches our attention by being a pertinent, unconventional and concise linguistic manifestation of this phenomenon. Secondly, it is not pleasant in itself, but as in the case of the turned milk in *The Book of Evidence*, the aptness of the metaphor concentrates the reading experience, which creates an aesthetic effect. With this in mind, I contend that Banvillean aesthetics does not presuppose any easily conceived ideal about beauty. The beauty, if that is the word, rather resides in the cohesion between linguistic and bodily experience.

In order to move towards some kind of concluding remarks, we may return to Alexander Cleave in *Eclipse*. He is remembering a particular moment with his daughter Cass, in which we can explore some of the aspects of Banvillean aesthetics that have been the focus of the present essay:

> She was never a gainly girl, and that day she was wearing rubber boots and a heavy padded coat that made the going all the harder, and when we were coming down a stony track between two walls of blue-black pines she tripped and fell over and cut her lip. The drops of her blood against the patchwork snow were a definition of redness. I snatched her up and held her to me, a bulky warm ball of woe, and one of her quicksilver tears ran into my mouth. I think of the two of us there, among the shivering trees, the birdsong, the gossipy swift whisperings of trickling water, and something sags in me, sags, and rebounds with a weary effort. What is happiness but a refined form of pain?[33]

The Banvillean aesthetics is made up of the cohesion of experiential and linguistic immediacy, in this passage first and foremost exemplified by 'bulky warm ball of woe'. We do not read: 'I lifted up a crying daughter',

or something like that. The construction 'bulky warm ball of woe' is the experience of lifting up a child in this certain affective atmosphere. Metaphor is here not a descriptive detour, but rather an affective snapshot that takes the reader directly 'there'. Something similar is the case with 'one of her quicksilver tears ran into my mouth'. The modifier 'quicksilver' evokes the experience of fluid metal that builds up into a drop and then rushes off with remarkable speed, leaving a shimmering (metallic) wetness in its trail, which is a very accurate description of how tears may behave. Furthermore, we have the perception of the blood in the snow, which through the sharp white–red contrast becomes a visual statement about 'redness'. In the entire sequence, vision, touch and sound connect and are summarised as the subtle distinction between happiness and pain. Perceptual details and the concise philosophical modifications of seemingly ordinary experiences are lucid indications of the Banvillean aesthetics. Again, I wish to stress that this does not only have to do with the economy and meticulousness of writing. It is also a manifestation of what I have called 'the aesthetics of the flesh'.

As we have seen, the aesthetics of the flesh in Banville's fiction materialises as a certain stylistic balance. The author's keen attention to experiential details indicates a textual cohesion that in moments is co-extensive with the bodily cohesion explored in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy. Even though Banville's oeuvre thematically seems to vehemently deny the existence of transcendental phenomena and any kind of strict identity, his aesthetics at work problematises that notion. If we allow ourselves to be carried along by the intricacies of experience itself when reading Banville, we may witness how the aesthetics of the flesh functions as a reiterated instantiation of what McMinn refers to as the 'only durable form of knowledge' in Banville's fiction.[34] Moreover, I think that it is quite possible to trace what Kenny alludes to as a 'phenomenological position' in the carefully crafted prose itself.

Even though it seems to be difficult to have anything to say about the issue of aesthetics, it is most probably the case that the critic has to take the path of many of Banville's characters and perhaps the path that he has chosen for himself as a writer: The Beckettian trial and error trail. It is impossible to go on, we must go on. The role of the critic is similar to the role of the writer, that is, to derive philosophic truth out of the 'untruth' of myth. Even if the belief in autonomy in Banville's work would indicate some form of irresponsibility on the part of the writer, Banville's preoccupation with the most subtle minutiae of human experience in itself constitutes an ethical position. The aesthetics of the flesh in Banville's fiction functions as a shelter from the 'industrialization of experience' in

our times.[35] Consequently, the flesh has the potential to become something even more important through the work of criticism. As formulated by Levinas:

> Criticism already detaches [art] from its irresponsibility by envisaging its technique. It treats the artist as a man at work. Already in inquiring after the influences he undergoes it links this disengaged and proud man to real history. Such criticism is still preliminary. It does not attack the artistic event as such, that obscuring of being in images, that stopping of being in the meanwhile. The value of images for philosophy lies in their position between two times and their ambiguity. Philosophy discovers, beyond the enchanted rock on which it stands, all its possibles swarming about it. It grasps them by interpretation. This is to say that the artwork can and must be treated as a myth: the immobile statue has to be put in movement and made to speak. Such an enterprise is not the same as a simple reconstruction of the original from the copy. Philosophical exegesis will measure the distance that separates myth from real being, and will become conscious of the creative event itself, an event which eludes cognition, which goes from being to being by skipping over the intervals of the meanwhile. Myth is then at the same time untruth and the source of philosophical truth, if indeed philosophical truth involves a dimension of intelligibility proper to it, not content with laws and causes which connect beings to one another, but searching for the work of being itself.[36]

Silence is not an option. Serious criticism is the link between the possible irresponsibility of the autonomous artist and the responsibility of philosophy. Thereby, it spells out that which becomes the bridge between reality and its shadow. The shadow in Banville's artistic work is the repeated attempts to formulate the aesthetics of the flesh, namely, 'the work of being itself'.

Notes and References

1 Friedrich Nietzsche, 'The Birth of Tragedy', *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. and ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Modern Library, 2000) 52.

2 Clive Cazeaux, ed., *The Continental Aesthetics Reader* (London: Routledge, 2000) xiii.

3 John Kenny, *John Banville. Visions and Revisions: Irish Writers in Their Time.* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2009) 86-87. As a phenomenologist, I would like to add here that the external-internal distinction is not really relevant. The proper

phenomenological terminology to use in order to avoid that troublesome dichotomy would be 'noetico-noematic correlations'.

4 As Kenny rightly points out, this perceptive or sensory aspect of Banville's writing is very far from the postmodern themes that have been strongly emphasised by some critics: 'This insistence on the solidity of the sensory is far removed from the underlying postmodernist assumption that our predominant contemporary experience of the world is a mediated or virtual one' (88).

5 Kenny 124.

6 Kenny 17.

7 Laura P. Zuntini de Izarra has suggested something in this direction in her analysis of Banville's fiction as a synthesis, pointing to a new path out of the modernist–postmodernist deadlock: 'Banville's aesthetic synthesis seeks to analyse the limits of representation, defending a fusion between the immobile, as represented by Philosophy (which denies chance) and the mobile, as represented by popular thought (which affirms the presence of chaos). It stands at the crossroads between 'time arrested', typical of philosophy, and 'time passing', typical of experience. Banville introduces his readers to an open art, which reflects upon the discontinuity of phenomena in a world that is unable to provide a unitary and definitive image of itself, as he explores the holographic labyrinths at the frontiers of imagination and perception'. *Mirrors and Holographic Labyrinths: The Process of a 'New' Aesthetic Synthesis in the Novels of John Banville* (San Francisco: International Scholars Publications, 1999) 162. What is of particular interest to me is the imagination-perception conjunction. However, I do think that a closer scrutiny of Banville's prose itself reveals a continuity rather than 'discontinuity of phenomena'.

8 Joseph McMinn, *The Supreme Fictions of John Banville* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999) 16.

9 John Banville, *The Book of Evidence* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1989) 111.

10 Emanuel Levinas, 'Reality and Its Shadow', *The Continental Aesthetics Reader*, ed. Clive Cazeaux (London: Routledge, 2000) 117.

11 Levinas puts it slightly differently, but essentially he says the same thing: 'In artworks [criticism] studies psychology, characters, environments, and landscapes – as though in an aesthetic event an object were by the microscope or telescope of artistic vision exposed for the curiosity of an investigator. But, alongside of difficult art, criticism seems to lead a parasitic existence. A depth of reality inaccessible to conceptual intelligence becomes its prey. Or else criticism substitutes itself for art' (117).

12 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'The Intertwining-The Chiasm', *The Visible and the Invisible* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968): 130-55.

13 This is a fundamental phenomenological insight that may be traced back to Heidegger, Husserl, and in its criticism of Cartesianism, also to Nietzsche. F. Joseph Smith formulates it very well in his treatise on phenomenology and music: 'Fundamental meaning grounds itself not in reason alone but in the living man as a whole, as ontological body, as logos. The bodily dimension is a phenomenological overcoming of the "dualism" of rational and corporeal, thus of the *res cogitans* and *res corporea* [. . .]. Phenomenological intentionality is in the bodily logos, as

primordial, rather than in abstract soul or reason'. *The Experiencing of Musical Sound: Prelude to a Phenomenology of Music* (New York: Gordon and Breach, 1979) 131.

14 Merleau-Ponty 152.

15 Banville, *The Book of Evidence* 188.

16 For a thorough and more general discussion of the aesthetics of silence in Banville's work, see Kenny 27-35.

17 Kersti Tarien Powell highlights this phenomenon in 'The Lighted Windows: Place in John Banville's Novels', *Irish University Review* 36.1 (2006): 39-51. But her take is that the windows themselves function as filters between the outside and the inside:

> *Doctor Copernicus* and *Kepler* also represent a longing, a longing for harmony and wholeness, and a desire to explain the world as it is. Ambivalence about the paradoxical relationship between reality and imagination, however, translates in these two novels into complex 'views' offered by the windows: while on the one hand the protagonists are seeking protection from the chaotic world, they are also yearning to be part of it. In that sense, windows can also function as mirrors in which the observer finds the reflection of his own (conflicting) desires'. (49)

In addition to this, we can also clearly see that the light and window phenomena reveal themselves in their own right. In all the variations there is at least one invariant: their persistent recurrence throughout the oeuvre. A few examples from *Kepler* (London: Picador, 1999): 'A beam of sunlight leaned against a tawny wall' (4), 'The calm greenish light from the garden soothed his ailing eyes' (12), 'Grey rain wept on the window, the smoke billowed' 23, 'A fly buzzed in the tall window, a rhomb of sunlight lay at his feet' (27), 'Drops of rain fingered the sunlit window' (60). We could go on almost *ad infinitum* with this novel and all the others, and if we did, surely we would find patterns in the variations. Discerning patterns is what all science ultimately is about.

18 Banville, *The Book of Evidence* 91.

19 Banville, *The Book of Evidence* 180.

20 Merleau-Ponty explains this possibility in the following way: 'Why would not the synergy exist among different organisms, if it is possible within each? Their landscapes interweave, their actions and their passions fit together exactly: this is possible as soon as we no longer make belongingness to one same "consciousness" the primordial definition of sensibility, and as soon as we rather understand it as the return of the visible upon itself, a carnal adherence of the sentient to the sensed and of the sensed to the sentient. For, as overlapping and fission, identity and difference, it brings to birth a ray of natural light that illuminates all flesh and not only my own' (142).

21 Merleau-Ponty: 'We must habituate ourselves to think that every visible is cut out in the tangible, every tactile being in some manner promised to visibility, and that there is encroachment, infringement, not only between the touched and the touching, but also between the tangible and the visible, which is encrusted in it, as,

conversely, the tangible itself is not a nothingness of visibility, is not without visual existence. Since the same body sees and touches, visible and tangible belong to the same world' (134).

22 Merleau-Ponty 154-55.

23 Banville, *Eclipse* (London: Picador, 2000) 27.

24 The phenomenon of synaesthesia is also clearly related to Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the body. Cazeaux points out that Merleau-Ponty regards synaesthetic perception to be the rule rather than the exception when it comes to human experience. In his book *Metaphor and Continental Philosophy: From Kant to Derrida*, Cazeaux argues that 'Merleau-Ponty is claiming the fused nature of the senses as a basic *ontological* condition of the body schema's being able to organize any meaningful experience at all' (London: Routledge, 2007) 64. From this perspective, Banville's writing is more than being clever with words. It is also about the intensity of very real experiences.

25 Levinas 125.

26 Levinas 127.

27 There is also a game of names in Banville's fiction. The conclusion might be similar to the one reached by Joseph McMinn: 'Whether it be the elevated challenge of naming the universe, or the fanciful one of naming the actors in that universe, Banville's fiction is deeply marked by its self-conscious fascination with Saussure's legacy, a sense of an alarming yet wonderful disjunction between language and Being'. 'Naming the World: Language and Experience in John Banville's Fiction', *Irish University Review* 23.2 (1993): 183. Thematically, this statement works very well, but there is also the level of the flesh in Banville's work, which does not care about the name of the character that happens to be engaged in a particular experience. For instance, in *Ghosts*, the reader has to guess that it is Freddie Montgomery who reappears in that novel. In *Mefisto*, it is quite unclear whether it is the same Gabriel in part II as in part I. As already mentioned, it is also significant that Kepler has similar experiences of light from windows as does Freddie Montgomery in *The Book of Evidence*. In all, this marks a tension in Banville's fiction, which most certainly is meant to remain unresolved. In Banville-land, language is thematically severed from Being, but this does not hold for Banville's literary language, which continuously becomes Being, namely, becomes a manifestation of the aesthetics of the flesh.

28 Banville, *Eclipse* 169.

29 Banville, *Shroud* (London: Picador, 2002) 185-86.

30 It is interesting to make note of the fact that the child singing in this scene in *Shroud* actually plays with a doll and that the child itself eventually is lifted into another room with 'its withered little legs, dangling jointlessly, like the useless nether parts of a ventriloquist's dummy as it is whisked away into the wings of its master's arm at the end of the act' (188).

31 Banville, *Shroud* 12.

32 Banville, *Shroud* 13.

33 Banville, *Eclipse* 76.

34 McMinn, *The Supreme Fictions of John Banville* 16.

35 Cazeaux, *The Continental Aesthetics Reader* xiii.
36 Levinas 126-27.