Marcin Tereszewski
University of Wrocław

In-between Wor(l)ds: Spectrality in Banville's *Eclipse* and Beckett's Fiction

Abstract: This article examines the role of ghosts in John Banville's *Eclipse* and Samuel Beckett's fiction as it relates to the concept of hauntology coined by Derrida in *Specters of Marx*. Particular emphasis is placed on how spectrality destabilizes one of the most salient themes in both Banville's book and Beckett's fiction; namely, self-definition. In both Beckett's fiction and Banville's *Eclipse* the reader is presented with a protagonist whose solipsistic self-examination stages what is, in effect, the impossibility of self-expression. Among the many similarities between Banville's and Beckett's work, one other theme that is of primary interest for this article is related to the various images of ghosts who, as interstitial phenomena, bring to the fore the ontological, or, to use Derrida's homonym, hauntological ambiguity of literature. Hauntology brings to light the in-between, unfixed ontology of the self as a textual entity and is, therefore, a particularly fruitful theoretical backdrop to both Beckett's and Banville's conceptualizations of self-discovery.

Keywords: Banville, Beckett, Derrida, hauntology, liminality, spectrality

> Because every Irish writer has to take one of these two directions, you have to go into the Joycean direction or the Beckettian direction. And I go in a Beckettian direction.[1] (Schwall qtd. in D'hoker 2006: 68)

This epigraph is just one of the many references and acknowledgements John Banville has made in regard to Samuel Beckett's legacy. Indeed, Banville has never attempted to conceal his literary debt to Beckett and, although this debt had at times the effect of imitation, admittedly in his first book, *Nightspawn*,[2] he has successfully discarded this Bloomian anxiety of influence in his later works; however,

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[1] This epigraph is taken from an interview with Banville originally found in Hedwig Schwall's "An interview with John Banville." *The European English Messenger* 6.1 (1997).

[2] A complete analysis of *Nightspawn* in relation to Beckett's influence can be found in Rüdiger Inhof's *John Banville: A Critical Introduction* (1989).

there is still a noticeable Beckettian specter lingering in Banville's oeuvre. Aside from Beckett's influence, it is also clear that there are Nabokovian and Proustian echoes as well, though it would seem that Beckett's are the most audible, not so much in the style and language of Banville's fiction but in its thematics and mood.

Banville's style is anything but Beckettian; his intricate, lush and mellifluous sentences are written with Joycean assuredness and Proustian delicacy and are a long cry from the stammering asperity of Beckettian utterances one tends to find in his post-trilogy works (*Worstward Ho*, *Fizzles*). Beckett is known to have discarded language as a suitable medium for self-expression, staging as he has in the trilogy and later works failure as the only possible response to the artistic demand to express. However, regardless of style, it is still language that binds these two writers, albeit it is a bond that has sought the redemptive values of language in two separate stylistic paths. Whereas Beckett sought a language of emptying and stylistic ascetics, Banville puts on the mantle of the Proustian and Nabokovian legacy. In both these styles, however, it is the attention to minute linguistic details combined with an overarching consciousness of language that are the defining features of these two writers.

What further binds these two writers together is a particularly intense focus on language that is constantly haunted by the past and thus suffused with the ghostly images of possibilities untaken. This 'language of self' is, however, more involved with spectrality than the thematic content would indicate, as it is literature itself that is to be seen as ghostly and indeterminate. It is within this broader limit of literature that I would like to consider the question of how spectrality reflects not so much the nostalgia for other selves but how it destabilizes the very concept of the self. To this end, I will draw on the concept of hauntology, as it was developed by Jacques Derrida in *Specters of Marx*, and apply it to a reading of Banville's *Eclipse* in relation to Beckett's fiction, especially his trilogy.

This similarity between Beckett and Banville has not gone unnoticed by critics who have placed these two authors in a similar tradition. Elke D'hoker, for example, describes in detail the Beckettian influences on Banville's *Ghost*. Peter Boxall, in a chapter from *Since Beckett: Contemporary Writing in the Wake of Modernism*, undertakes the task of reading *Eclipse* against the backdrop of Beckett's landscapes, focusing primarily on its Irishness and how this heritage, with which Banville is admittedly reluctant to identify, nonetheless haunts the text with its imagery and melancholy. Not only are these Irish landscapes of importance in this comparison, but the theme of spectrality is also touched upon in Boxall's study, in which spectrality is seen as offering a means to unite the Irish past with the present. There are multiple references Banville makes not only to Beckett but also to such writers as Maria Edgeworth, W.B. Yeats and Elizabeth Bowen. In Banville's books these writers are "brought into a shared presence, returning each into an uncanny harmony with the others" (Boxall 2009: 47). The convergence of past with the present is enough to evoke spectrality as a major theme in Banville's work, but

what is of more interest in this article will be the way in which spectrality functions as a means of ontological destabilization. To this end it would be of considerable advantage to trace a modest theoretical context based on Derrida's thoughts on spectrality.

In *Gothic Pathologies*, David Punter asks us to imagine "What would it be like to inhabit a world, one of many possible ones, in which Gothic were seen "at the center?" (Punter 1998: 1). In other words, what would it be like to see the world from the perspective of the ghost, from the perspective of the past occupying a privileged position in relation to the present, and, finally, from the perspective of a type of writing in which the unsaid and unseen take precedence over language and vision. This would be a type of writing where silence bears more significance than words and the limits of the subject exceed his or her linguistic manifestation, a notion shared by Gothic literature and one which informed the work of such Modernist writers as Maurice Blanchot, Bataille, Beckett.

A very fertile avenue by which one can approach this topic of ghosts and spectrality in both Banville's and Beckett's work takes us through Derrida's concept of hauntology, coined and developed in his *Specters of Marx* in 1993. This new perspective on spectrality in literature and philosophy provides a basis from which to look at literature as a ghostly presence. Not only does Derrida attach this term to politics and history, but specifically to literature and masterpieces that "always move, by definition, in the manner of a ghost" (Derrida 1994: 18). What is meant by this can be understood by referring to other Derridian notions, such as *trace*, where in a similar ghostly manner, meaning is both present and absent, thereby bringing to the fore not the ontological aspects of concepts but the logical presuppositions underlying an always metaphysical bias towards conceptualization. The term itself is a homonym that plays on the association with ontology, thereby supplanting presence and being with ghostly absence or, as will be further developed, with the interstitial position between presence and absence, death and life. Derrida emphasizes this point that "To haunt does not mean to be present, and it is necessary to introduce haunting into the very construction of a concept. Of every concept, beginning with the concepts of being and time. That is what we would be calling here hauntology" (Derrida, 161). Hauntology, thus, describes the instability inhabiting this liminal space between the binary oppositions of life and death.

Twentieth century continental philosophy has been concerned with ontology as the science of everything that has existed, exists and will exist in relation to some elusive and inaccessible other. Ontology, in effect, became the study of this irreducible difference between Being and Nothingness (Sartre), presence and absence (Derrida). The fine line separating the two binary terms has constituted the basis for a poststructuralist reworking and undermining of the logic sustaining the validity of these terms. Chief among such approaches are to be found in theoretical concepts that often occupy the blurred interstitial space between being and

non-being, such as Blanchot's notion of neutrality, Derrida's *trace* and *différance*, as well as hauntology.

The topic of the past haunting the present was developed by Derrida in relation to Marx's legacy in contemporary philosophy as a means of providing a correlation between deconstruction and Marxism. Derrida developed this relation of the past haunting the present on the basis of psychoanalytical studies carried out by Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, though, as Colin Davis explains, there is a difference in the approach taken by Derrida as opposed to that of Abraham and Torok, who sought to analyze intergenerational influence on a psyche, i.e. the way in which past traumas of previous generations influence an unknowing subject; the phantom within was construed as inexpressible secret that nonetheless exerts force on the subject. Derrida, on the other hand, presents this secret as the very openness of literature and seeks to "encounter what is strange, unheard, other, about the ghosts" (13). Derrida further claims that "The figure of the ghost is not just one figure among others. It is perhaps the hidden figure of all figures (Derrida, 150). This conceptualization of the ghost would be in line with Maurice Blanchot's insistence that the grey neutral space beyond the possibilities of linguistic conceptualization is the source of literature, and, in a similar gesture, the figure of the ghost is elevated to the figure of all figures as only by means of its ontological instability can literature be conceived.

A cogent definition of spectrality is offered by Frederic Jameson:

> Spectrality is not difficult to circumscribe, as what makes the present waver: like the vibrations of a heat wave through which the massiveness of the object world — indeed of matter itself — now shimmers like a mirage. … Spectrality does not involve the conviction that ghosts exist or that the past (and maybe even the future they offer to prophesy) is still very much alive and at work, within the living present: all it says, if it can be thought to speak, is that the living present is scarcely as self-sufficient as it claims to be; that we would do well not to count on its density and solidity, which might under exceptional circumstances betray us. (Jameson 1999: 33–39)

Self-sufficiency and self-autonomy of the living present is under question due to the necessity of linguistic mediation. The emphasis, therefore, should be placed on language and its murderous effects on the materiality it seeks to represent. This connection between symbolization and haunting is mentioned by Slavoj Žižek in *Looking Awry:* "It is commonplace to state that symbolization as such equates to symbolic murder: When we speak about a thing, we suspend, place in parenthesis its reality" (1991: 23). The point here is that the reality that is excluded or eclipsed by language remains and lingers in the form of a dispossessed ghost. When applied to self-narration, as we see in Beckett's and Banville's texts, this approach leads to self-erasure. The moment one is given form in language, one is possessed by the inherited remainders, the ghosts haunting the symbolic system. These remainders are not part of the language, they are not incorporated into the conscious quiddity of ontological space, but occupy a place outside and yet inside the structural field.

Banville's and Beckett's unraveled subjects

Published in 2000, Banville's *Eclipse* follows a fifty-year-old actor on his journey back to his childhood house after his breakdown on stage. Upon arriving in his ancestral home, Cleave meets the caretaker, Quirke and a young runaway, Cass, who he eventually takes under his care much to the disapproval of his estranged wife, Lydia. Cleave's emotional absence and nostalgic wanderings make up the greater part of this narrative.

Anyone familiar with Beckett's work will recognize in *Eclipse* a disparate array of allusions to Beckett's stories, as if Banville is tipping his hat to Beckett, paying homage to his literary master. Some examples might include Beckett's penchant for bicycles in references to Quirke riding his old bicycle. The name, Cleave, the past tense of which is Clove, gives us a clear reference to *Endgame*. However, it is not in these borrowings and references that the Banville/Beckett relation is at its strongest and most interesting, but rather in the thematic similarities.

The brimming narcissism and solipsism with which Alex Cleave navigates through his familial and social setting take us on a journey not of the protagonist's self-discovery, but rather of his unraveling. In this protagonist we find the first resemblance to Beckett's protagonists whose solipsism and obsessive self-questioning determine much of what ultimately accounts for the unraveling of the narratives, beginning with his trilogy (*Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, and especially *The Unnamable*) onwards through *Texts for Nothing*, where we find a final dissolution of the narrative subject. Alex Cleave's self-narrative, although less extreme in its effects and less acerbic in its execution, nonetheless provides us with a character whose self-absorption becomes a focal point of the narrative.

Cleave's anguished self-narrative is a downward spiral of self-doubt and questioning propelled by the attempt to discover his "self" after his collapse on stage, a "self" which amounts to little more than an enigmatic and perpetually elusive non-concept. There is little Cleave can identify with; therefore, there is little that can confer identity onto him, a realization Banville makes his character aware of fully: "At the site of what was supposed to be my self was only vacancy, an ecstatic hollow" (Banville 2002: 33). This fundamental absence of self is the trigger for his solipsistic self-absorption. Cleave admittedly has no sense of selfhood; hence, his proficiency and predilection for acting, an activity which is meant to imbue his presence with substance or at least a semblance of identity. "I studied — oh, how I studied for the part, I mean the role of being others, while at the same time striving to achieve my authentic self" (Banville, 35). From a young age he discovered that the only way to "be" is to act, to pretend, to copy, to simulate. He is a simulacrum of other people and behaviors, lost in his headspace, drifting and lingering in his old childhood house, which of course leads to the association that he himself is a ghost — a conclusion pointed out to him by his wife, who responds to Cleave's account of the haunted house with the rather dismissive remark that "You are your

own ghost" (Banville, 42). He is a ghost, because, much like Beckett's subjects, his body is encasing a vacant sense of self. This is the position Cleave finds himself in as he pursues "under the jumble of discarded masks" (Banville, 50) a sense of his own identity.

In an effort to attain this *aletheia* of the self, Cleave embarks on a trip back to his childhood home, which makes for an almost stereotypical gothic setting, as we have a standard, derelict haunted house allegedly occupied by ghosts glimpsed only by Cleave. At this point Banville becomes the most Proustian in his writing, as the house prompts recollections and flashbacks in much the same way that a madeleine transported Proust's narrator to his childhood memories in Combray.

This same theme can be found in Beckett's *Molloy*, where the protagonist also journeys back to his home, specifically his mother's bedroom, "I am in my mother's room. It's I who live there now. I don't know how I got there" (Beckett 1973: 7). Both narrators start their oedipally charged journey lost on a road. "For miles I had been travelling in a kind of sleep and now I thought I was lost. I wanted to turn the car around and drive back the way I had come, but something would not let me go" (Banville, 5). This journey to the childhood home is also, in keeping with the Proustian theme, a journey to the past. At one point the narrator asks: "What is it about the past that makes the present by comparison seem so pallid and weightless?" (Banville, 48). Pallid and weightless, like specters, phantoms and ghosts that are here related not to the past, which is endowed with substance and weight, but to the present. It is in the present that Alex Cleave is not fully "present"; it is in the present that his ontology is haunted by the past in order to confer it with life. Viewed this way, *Eclipse* can be read as an inverted ghost story, where the past haunts the present in order to rescue it from nothingness.

Images of ghosts are present in many of Beckett's works, long before they became almost central thematic references, as in *Ghost Trio* or *Ill Seen Ill Said*, where the topic of the vacant self once again returns to the fore. In this television play and texts "The ghost becomes a concept pointing to the lack of identity of the self" (Rabaté 1996: 174). Rabaté's observation holds true for *Eclipse* as well as the ghosts found in Beckett's work, as in both cases we have the absence of the self as the defining characteristic of the protagonist and, therefore, in both cases, identity remains an ephemeral point of origin occupied by the ghostly and insubstantial.

As was mentioned earlier, ghosts are liminal beings, neither present nor absent, neither of the present nor of the past; they inhabit the perception of the subject bringing forth uncertainty and a redoubling of the limit they represent. As liminal beings, ghosts share a similarity to the color grey, which also occupies an interstitial space between two defined colors. The significance of this color has been addressed by Rabaté, who reminds us that this is a color that coincides with the ghostly characters inhabiting these worlds (Rabaté, 171). There is a resemblance between the color grey and the ontological positioning of ghosts, being that grey is situated somewhere between black and white, occupying an indistinct place between light

and darkness, which brings to mind the precarious placement of ghosts. A case in point is a short non-text, *Ghost Trio*, where the room in which we find the protagonist waiting is stripped bare, with no furniture and "The light: faint, omnipresent. No visible source. As if all luminous. Faintly luminous. No shadow. [Pause] No shadow. Color: none. All grey. Shades of grey" (Beckett 1984: 248). Alex Cleave's reminiscence of childhood also provides an allusion to the grey in-between space of the ghostly:

> As a boy I liked best those dead intervals of the year when one season had ended and the next had not begun, and all was grey and hushed and still, and out of the stillness and the hush something would seem to approach me, some small, soft, tentative thing, and offer itself to my attention. (Banville, 30–31)

The greyness and stillness of the passing of one season onto the next is not only an appropriate metaphor for the transition from life to death but also an indication of the passivity that characterizes Cleave. The world offers itself to his attention in much the same way that Beckett's environment acts upon the subject, who is often found suspended and waiting. This grey zone opens up a space of limbo, where the subject is held, where the images of the past meet the perceptions of the present.

Beckett's stages a quest for self-knowledge set in a purely linguistic environment, where the only tools at hand are words and names. Having only language at his disposal, the speaking "I" cannot affect a stable sense of identity and is, in effect, consigned to constantly phasing out from one "character" to another, unable to achieve anything resembling transcendental meaning.[3] At one point the speaking, nameless subject utters "I'm in words, made of words, others' words … I'm all these words, all these strangers, this dust of words, with no ground for their settling" (Beckett 1973: 390). All these efforts at grasping self-meaning inevitably fail and the self, as a linguistic phenomenon, dissolves amidst the babble of words realizing that he is "a wordless thing in an empty place" (Beckett 1973: 390).

One of the more visible differences between Banville's and Beckett's prose mentioned at the beginning of this paper is, of course, style. Whereas Beckett's narrative voice, with its oftentimes staccato sentences and unfinished thoughts, is in congruence with the fragmented self described above, the authorial voice narrating *Eclipse*, on the other hand, is far from fragmented; it is a voice of supreme confidence and control, not anything like the stammering and self-questioning voice narrating *The Unnamable*. Beckett's style enacts the self's disintegration and disappearance as an effect of language's impotence in the face of the imperative to say that last word; on the other hand, Banville's language, in a detached and impartial manner, describes this disappearance. In both cases, the protagonist is empty and ghostly, wandering aimlessly in between worlds.

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[3] It is not surprising that this fiction has received so much attention from poststructuralist critics, who construe this dissolution as evidence of textual identity being unhinged from meaning. For a more extensive elaboration, see Katz (1999) and Uhlmann (1999).

In both cases, thus, we are dealing with the self as a ghost in a process of self-discovery. In no way, however, is this a teleological quest which yields knowledge, but a meditation on the secret that is at the core of self-writing. This secret is, as Castricano notices, following Derrida, "the secret or, better yet, secrecy, [that] functions as the structural enigma which inaugurates the scene of writing" (Castricano 2001: 30). Both narratives can be construed as meta-narratives about writing the self, a concept that by default is a ghost brought to life by writing but also kept from being fully present by writing. This is what Rabaté was referring to when stating that "The ghostly apparatus becomes less mysterious if we assume that it metaphorizes the act of writing" (Rabaté, 174). Writing here would mean representation in the face of alterity that is always a secret.

Specters are central figurations in Beckett and by extension in Banville's *Eclipse* as they constitute the means of exploring and interrogating the conditions of possibility of representation and alterity. It is precisely because of the spectrality of the ghostly figures in Beckett that representation is at all possible. Lending any certainty and concreteness to the figments and imaginings would be tantamount to destroying the very fabric of representation, as it is through these ghosts that representation is at all possible. Instability, therefore, is a defining feature of both ghosts and language, a feature which dictates the terms by which identity is 'imagined' rather than discovered.

Because literature, as a privileged form of language production, does not have to refer to a determinable reality and can thus resist the traditional boundaries of being and non-being, it can be construed as ghost writing in so far as it is a negation of material being and phenomena. Writing itself creates an in-between, ghostly world, where meaning is neither fixed nor fully present and, therefore, the destabilizing force that spectrality bears on the text is of more significance than its ontological credentials. This ghosting is produced by the text itself, in its repetitions and doublings, in its fleeting insubstantiality and lack of semantic stability — the text itself along with the narrator or the speaking subject becomes the ghost. This form of spectrality is present in Banville's *Eclipse* and is a defining feature of Beckettian narratives, where the self is brought to bear witness to itself as an absence.

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