John Banville's "Overman": Intertextual dialogues with Friedrich Nietzsche in *Shroud*

Mehdi Ghassemi

Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/etudesirlandaises/5826>
DOI: 10.4000/etudesirlandaises.5826
ISSN: 2259-8863

Publisher

Presses universitaires de Caen

Printed version

Date of publication: 18 December 2018
Number of pages: 159-181
ISBN: 978-2-7535-7693-3
ISSN: 0183-973X

Electronic reference

Mehdi Ghassemi, « John Banville's "Overman": Intertextual dialogues with Friedrich Nietzsche in *Shroud* », *Études irlandaises* [Online], 43-2 | 2018, Online since 01 November 2018, connection on 22 September 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/etudesirlandaises/5826> ; DOI : 10.4000/etudesirlandaises.5826

John Banville's "Overman": Intertextual dialogues with Friedrich Nietzsche in *Shroud*

Mehdi GHASSEMI

Université de Lille

Résumé

Cet article propose de lire *Shroud* (2003) de John Banville comme exemple qui illustre le mieux le dialogue de l'écrivain avec la philosophie de Friedrich Nietzsche. Cette étude tente de retracer les manières dont le narrateur incorpore et ensuite réinvente la notion Nietzscheenne de l'homme (*Übermensch*) à travers de ses métaphores élaborées. Ce projet soutient également que c'est bien Nietzsche qui fournit finalement au narrateur banvillean l'outil nécessaire pour encadrer une conception du "moi" qui serait immune à la crise linguistique proposée par la déconstruction.

Mots clés: Banville, *Shroud*, Nietzsche, authenticité, déconstruction

Abstract

This paper proposes to read John Banville's Shroud (2003) as an example that most aptly illustrates the writer's dialogue with the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche. It traces the ways in which Banville's narrator incorporates Nietzsche's conception of self and demonstrates how Banville reinvents Nietzsche's idea of the Overman through elaborate metaphors. It argues that it is Nietzsche who ultimately provides Banville's narrator with the necessary tool to frame a sense of selfhood that lies outside the linguistic predicament posited by deconstruction.

Keywords: Banville, *Shroud*, Nietzsche, authenticity, deconstruction

■ Introduction

A defining aspect of John Banville's fiction is his narrators' preoccupation with the nature of their subjective experience as well as the (in)authenticity of their perceptions and representations. Often staged as first-person autobiographers, these narrators strive to find a way to explore and simultaneously enhance knowing and being. These concerns turn their narratives into extended interrogations of the relation between reality and imagination, on the one hand, and explorations of the (im)possibility of authentic subjective experience. Among the more recent publications, notably, Eoghan Smith's *John Banville: Art and Authen-*

ticity (2013) and Elke D'hoker's *Visions of Alterity* (2004), deal with these issues extensively. At the same time, the Banvillian narrator is fully aware that there is no way out of language, that he is forever imprisoned by it, that language, as a system in its own right, imposes its rules, out of which there is no meaning. In the absence of direct access to "reality" these narrators embark on a journey of subjectivity in search of reality and stable self through writing and reminiscence. This, too, of course has been recognized by the majority of Banville scholars. Laura Izzara, for instance, rightly considers Banville a "critical writer" whose fiction "lies on the border between two genres, the novel and critical theory"¹. Moreover, far from indulging a "postmodern" sense of liberation following the deconstruction of truth and stable self, Banville's protagonists seem to demonstrate a feeling of disappointment, if not disillusionment. To put it in Joseph McMinn's words, although "Banville can deconstruct with the best of them," "the exposure of constructed myths about identity and nature" is never "a simple cause for celebration"². Rather, as John Kenny has it, it is a "modernist nostalgia misplaced in a postmodernist chaotic world"³.

Banville's fiction, in this sense, is in constant search for an aesthetic expression that can adequately match his narrators' epistemological crisis. It is an evolving philosophical fiction that, ever since Gabriel Godkin's struggle with finding "the thing in itself"⁴ in *Birchwood*, has gone through various phases of concern. Although these questions have stayed constant throughout Banville's oeuvre in one way or another, his fiction has very broadly moved from language and science in the seventies and metaphysics, art and ethics in the eighties to poststructuralist literary theory in his later period. Over the years, these shifts have resulted in an extraordinary number of perspectives and the quantity of the scholarly work devoted to Banville's fiction alone is a testimony to how fertile these perspectives have been.

The aim of the present study is to examine *Shroud* as a key text from Banville's later period in which the writer offers his most vivid engagement with deconstruction, on the one hand, and the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche, on the other. As the second book of a trilogy (together with *Eclipse* and *Ancient Light*) *Shroud* features Axel Vander, an aging literary theorist residing in the United States, grappling with his wife's death as well as his difficult past. After receiving a letter from Cass Cleave who threatens to expose his "true" identity as an imposter, Vander leaves for Europe to meet his exposer during a conference in Italy. His life, work,

1. Laura Patricia Zuntini Izarra, *Mirrors and Holographic Labyrinths: the Process of a "New" Aesthetic Synthesis in The Novels of John Banville*, International Scholars Publications, 1999, p. 159.

2. Joseph McMinn, *The Supreme Fictions of John Banville*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1999, p. 7.

3. John Kenny, *John Banville*, Dublin, Irish Academic Press, 2009, p. 15.

4. John Banville, *Birchwood*, London, Picador, 1998, p. 13.

and controversial past are informed by that of Paul de Man's—one of the founders of deconstruction. Yet, Banville's *mise en scene* of de Man's life in *Shroud* is at best very loose. Unlike de Man, Vander's past is not revealed posthumously, but during his lifetime. Moreover, Vander and de Man do not entirely share the same secret. While de Man's reputation has been tarnished by his anti-Semitic articles written at a young age under Nazi occupation, Axel's ultimate secret is that he had purloined the identity of the person who wrote the problematic articles. Most significantly, perhaps, Vander openly confesses his secret in his narrative—something de Man never did (at least directly) in his lifetime.

Alongside de Man, Friedrich Nietzsche is the other strong presence in *Shroud*. Turin, where much of *Shroud* takes place is also the city where Nietzsche lived and finally went mad. What is more, Vander and Cass Cleave visit the philosopher's house during their stay in the city. Indeed, Nietzsche's philosophy has long appealed to Banville's narrators, at least since Freddie Montgomery's Nietzschean extra-moral stance in *The Book of Evidence*.⁵ Yet, this paper argues, it is in *Shroud* that Banville articulates his most sophisticated version of Nietzsche's Overman. Through elaborate metaphors Banville creates an intertextual dialogue with Nietzsche's conception of the self, one that ultimately provides his narrator with the necessary tool to capture (or frame) a sense of selfhood that lies outside the linguistic predicament posited by de Man. It starts by examining the way in which the discourse of autobiography fails to produce a coherent sense of self in Vander's narrative and, instead deprives him of a sense of "presence" and reduces him to a spectre. Moreover, in this section, Jacques Lacan's conception of Symbolic existence is mobilized to aid us in understanding Vander's problematic identity. As such, the first part sets the scene for Vander's two-fold recourse to Nietzsche in order to salvage a sense of self. The second part of the paper thus traces the ways in which Vander, following Nietzsche, incorporates the body as part and parcel of his project to capture the ever-elusive self. Finally, the third section demonstrates how Banville reinvents Nietzsche's conception of the Overman as a being located at an "edge" via complex and creative tropes. Here, Lacan's crucial distinction between reality and the Real will also prove fruitful as it enables us to elaborate on the significance of Banville's Nietzschean move in its complexity, ambition and scope.

5. In a recent interview Banville confirms: "Nietzsche is my philosopher—is my poet. I can find few things in his work, and I've read most of it, that I disagree with" (Hedwig Schwall, "Interview of John Banville with Hedwig Schwall", *The ESSE Messenger*, 26 (2), 2017, p. 74).

■ Inauthenticity, lack of presence

Axel explains the aim of his narrative in the opening pages of his narrative: “I am going to explain myself, to myself”⁶, echoing Nietzsche’s announcement “And so I tell my life to myself” in the semi-autobiographical *Ecce Homo*⁷. Jacques Derrida reads the latter in his *Otobiographies* according to which the autobiographer first and foremost “tells *himself* this life and he is the narration’s first, if not its only, addressee and destination—within the text”⁸. As Robert Smith comments, autobiography is related to “auto-affection” as a process of solipsistic self-containment achieved in “hearing oneself speak”⁹. The latter entails a process via which the subject creates a close circuit between the mouth and the ear, resulting in a “solipsistic umbilicus of completion”¹⁰. The most “categorical” by-product of hearing oneself speak, says Smith, is the sense of self-presence¹¹. Nevertheless, for the process of *hearing oneself speak* to be effective in producing presence one must inevitably produce speech from the mouth to ear. In other words, utterances must be verbalized, expressed as well as ex-pressed (pushed outside), so they can be heard. The message has to be first “detached at large” for it to be received by the ear. In this sense, the process cannot be an entirely closed circuit, but instead, always partly open and exposed¹². It is exposed to what Derrida calls the “aleatory or chance elements at work in every kind of message”¹³. That is to say, for subjectivity to exist, a discourse of exchange must be established through verbalization, one that is never fully self-contained but irrevocably mediated. The self-unity solipsistic umbilicus solipsistic umbilicus of the speaking/writing “I” is marred precisely because by uttering, *I* exposes itself to the other, the *you*, the generic interlocutor. Consequently, the self can no longer be the sole proprietor of the message. Rather, by addressing oneself, the *I* also addresses “an antecedent you”, a “not yet anthropomorphized you”, an irreducible otherness whose existence provides the very condition of possibility of the *I*’s verbal auto-correspondence¹⁴. According to Derrida, in autobiography the “text is signed only much later by the other”, “it is the ear of the other that signs”¹⁵. This is why autobiography is in fact “*Otobiographie*”, a text destined to be received and endorsed by the other’s ear

6. John Banville, *Shroud*, London, Picador, 2002, p. 5.

7. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, trad. R. J. Hollingdale, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1992, p. 74.

8. Jacques Derrida, *The Ear of the Other: Otobiography, Transference, Translation*, Peggy Kamuf (trans.), New York, Schocken Books, 1985, p. 13.

9. Robert Smith, *Derrida and Autobiography*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995, p. 76.

10. *Ibid.*

11. *Ibid.*

12. *Ibid.*, p. 78.

13. Jacques Derrida, *op. cit.*, p. 108.

14. Robert Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 78.

15. Jacques Derrida, *op. cit.*, p. 50-1.

(*Oto*). The latter provides the ground on which the autobiographical signature takes hold, the agent for whom the process of signing is performed.

In *Shroud*, the narrator hears himself breathe rather than speak: "I heard myself breathing in the mouthpiece"¹⁶; "I could hear myself breathe"¹⁷. It is not so much his speech Axel hears, not a textual message, not even a voice, but a shadowy sound of air. The process of hearing-oneself-speak in Axel's narrative does very little in creating a subjective loop, a closed circuit between mouth and ear as a result of which he can achieve self-presence. In fact, presence is precisely what he lacks. Like the air he breathes, he is transparent: Cass is depicted as "looking through me as though I were not there"¹⁸ and his "presence did nothing to tone down the rabid talk"¹⁹. In parallel, after admitting to having stolen the name "Axel Vander", the narrator never discloses his real name throughout the novel. From a psychoanalytic viewpoint, the proper name functions as a signifier that guarantees the subject a unique space in the Symbolic order, that is, according to Lacan, "the locus of the signifier"²⁰, the register that guaranties the possibility of any meaningful signification. The proper name thus serves as a singular point, which defines one's singularity as a speaking (existing) subject. Nevertheless, adopting a Symbolic identity entails giving up something irreducible to the Symbolic because the latter is not a complete system. In fact, one can never be reduced to his/her Symbolic "existenceexistence". Therefore, adopting a Symbolic identity always involves a splitting that divides the subject into his/her Symbolic existence, on the one hand, and the Real, the aspect of his/her being that lies beyond Symbolization²¹. The subject is thus required to make a sacrifice with regards to his/her (Real) "substance". S/he has to give away "something" so that s/he can have a place in/through the SymbolicOther. This is why his/her (Symbolic) existence will always be marked by a lack, a negativity.

Therefore, one can postulate, by not giving his "true" name, *Shroud's* narrator aims at resisting the name's Symbolic splitting. Insofar as he is unnamed, the narrator aims at positing himself as the *hors texte* (to use Derrida's famous phrase), as that which is outside the process of symbolization. By remaining an

16. John Banville, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 167.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 110.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 211-12.

20. Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, Bruce Fink, (trans.), New York, Norton, 2006, p. 688.

21. Lacan defines the Real as "that which subsists outside of symbolization" (*Ibid.*, p. 324). It is the realm of the impossible, because it is impossible to signify yet it paradoxically underlies all aspects of our reality. It is the unknown kernel of *jouissance* that needs to be repressed, excluded, so that "reality" becomes possible. In this sense, in Lacan's terminology the Real is distinct from reality. The Imaginary is the third register of the Lacanian triadic model and consists of images, ones that regulate one's sense of self by mediating his/her interactions with the self as well as others.

unnamed entity that lacks positive existence—so long as existence is only possible via the Symbolic—the narrator seeks unmediated being, but the price he has to pay is that he becomes a spectre. This is illustrated very well by Axel’s counterpart, Alexander Cleave in *Eclipse* where Cleave notices Axel’s paradoxically absent presence: “at the core of it all there is an absence, an empty space where once there was something, or someone, who has removed himself”²². In what follows, I attempt to examine the strategies Axel Vander implements to resolve the predicament of his lack of presence through a creative recourse to Friedrich Nietzsche’s philosophy.

■ The Nietzschean option

I have begun to feel that I am falling off myself, that my suety old flesh is melting off my skeleton and soon will all be gone. I shall not mind; I shall be glad; I shall rise up then, bared of inessentials, all gleaming bone and sinew smooth as candle wax, new, unknown, my real self at last²³.

This key passage illustrates how Axel’s quest for a stable core of selfhood independent from his incompatible body leads to a dualism of body and mind reminiscent of Descartes’s cogito. In contrast to the depiction of the body as a troublesome extension, the “I” is emphatically reiterated several times, rendering the dualism all the more explicit. For Descartes, while the nature of corporeal substance is constituted by material extension, the mind is made of non-physical substance. However, while Descartes famously uses the example of wax²⁴ to demonstrate the necessity for an independent mind to ascertain its “nature”, Axel takes wax as an analogy for both his body as well as his self. On the one hand, his disintegrating body, his flesh, is “melting” like candle wax. By melting the wax of corporeality, then, Axel hopes to rid himself of the inessentiality that it represents in an attempt to attain the true essence of his self beyond (or beneath the cover of) the body. On the other hand, he considers the formlessness of melted wax as a metaphor for the self he is hoping to find, the original “smooth” self that has not been yet hardened into a shape. In this sense, although Axel distances himself from deconstruction by assuming the existence of the essential self, he does not fully subscribe to a fully-fledged Cartesian dualism in order to ascertain its nature. Instead, by using the same metaphor for both (the self and the body) he arguably seeks to redefine the relationship between the two, to find a relationship that is not based on a binary opposition (mind/body) but, rather, based on the inter-rela-

22. John Banville, *Eclipse*, London, Picador, 2000, p. 211.

23. John Banville, *Shroud*, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

24. René Descartes, *Méditations Métaphysiques*, Marc Soriano (eds.), Paris, Larousse, 1950, p. 39-41.

tability of the two. This adds a new dimension to Axel's perception of his body as it is no longer viewed as merely dysfunctional and incompatible, but, instead, it reveals a potential for the disclosure of the self.

This is arguably a Nietzschean move on Axel's part. In *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, Nietzsche's prophet defines the self as "a mighty commander, an unknown wise man", an entity stemming from the body and not an abstract consciousness above it: "'I,' you say, and are proud of this word. But the greater thing [...] is your body and its big reason: it does not say 'I,' it does 'I'"²⁵. The self for Nietzsche has the capacity to transcend the ego precisely because it does not discard the body, but embraces it. The form of selfhood Nietzsche vouches for is not a metaphysical "I" or a transcendental subject. In other words, it is not a True self that can be excavated from underneath false appearances. In fact, the "I" and the self for Nietzsche do not constitute the same thing. The former is an illusion, which comes to be created as an effect of the processes of perception and interpretation (which are not mutually exclusive for Nietzsche). The "I," says Nietzsche, "only contains an *interpretation* of the event and does not belong to the event itself"²⁶. The self, in contrast, is constituted as a result of one's acknowledgement and exploration of a potential creativity. It is, for Nietzsche, not the equivalent of the mind but rather a conglomeration of one's physiological perceptions that are constantly subject to change not to say transformation. It is not solely based on a set of mental activity that produces consciousness, nor is it an essential, unique core of selfhood, but "is, rather, a multiplicity", "an assemblage of heterogeneous elements for which the word 'body' must stand as a rather attenuated and insufficient summary"²⁷. Axel, on the one hand, "believe[s]," "insist[s]" that "there is no essential, singular self"²⁸. On the other hand, he is unable to "rid [himself] of the conviction of an enduring core of selfhood"²⁹. In this sense, Nietzsche's idea (that relying on one's ability of creativity, the self can be formed, made, by incorporating the bodily dimension) provides Axel with a way out of the deadlock. Smith remarks that "[b]ehind the pose, Vander truly yearns for the restoration of the essential value," and his narrative is the "fetishization of the 'Idea' that is asserted in *Shroud*, as the assertion of the ideal over the corporal"³⁰. Yet, in parallel to his idealization of the self over the body, I argue, in likening his "real self" as well

25. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*, Thomas Wayne (trans.), New York, Algora Publishing, 2003, p. 25.

26. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, R. J. Hollingdale (trans.), Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1990, p. 48.

27. Peter. R Sedgwick, *Nietzsche: The Key Concepts*, London, Routledge, 2009, p. 140.

28. John Banville, *op. cit.*, p. 286.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 27.

30. Eoghan Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 128.

as his “bone and sinew” to the smoothness (i.e. malleability) of “candle wax”³¹ Axel effectuates a transition from the quest for the ideal self to an exploration of selfhood accessible only through corporeality: Cass observes how Axel smells of “candle wax”³², evoking the idea that his body is literally transformed into it.

Axel uses a similar set of adjectives to describe the “enduring” resilience of his self³³, on the one hand, and the resilience of the eye as a bodily organ: “the eyeball is one of the toughest, most resilient muscles in the human body”³⁴. In this light one can discern the interrelation of the body and the self in a rereading of the actor’s mask in Attic drama:

The white clay from which [the mask] was fashioned has turned to the shade and texture of bone [...] He takes to wearing the mask at home, when no one is there. It is a comfort, it sustains him; he finds it wonderfully restful, it is like being asleep and yet conscious. Then one day he comes to the table wearing it. His wife makes no remark, his children stare for a moment, then shrug and go back to their accustomed bickering. He has achieved his apotheosis. Man and mask are one³⁵.

The white colour of clay merges with the similar colour of bone and the mask acquires the contours, the shape of the face, becoming indistinguishable from it. Traditionally, the function of a mask is to conceal a discrepancy, a difference that, albeit temporarily hidden, remains. Yet, what is evoked in the imagery above is a sense in which the mask and the face (the body) merge. That is to say, insofar as one takes the mask as Axel’s metaphor for his identity, this means he is aiming at bridging the gap between the Symbolic (identity) and the Real (of the body), hoping to resolve the incongruence between the two. In fact, this passage in part stages the way Nietzsche relates mask and truth:

there is not only deceit behind a mask – there is so much goodness in craft [...] A man who has depths in his shame meets his destiny and his delicate decisions upon paths which few ever reach, and with regard to the existence of which his nearest and most intimate friends may be ignorant [...] [He] insists that a mask of himself shall occupy his place in the hearts and heads of his friends [...] Every profound spirit needs a mask³⁶.

Nietzsche’s seemingly paradoxical claim—that the mask does not so much hide a truthful self as offers the possibility of creating a profoundness of self

31. John Banville, *Shroud*, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 185.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 27.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 292.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 286-7.

36. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, *op. cit.*, p. 34-5.

through simulation—is part of his overall toppling of the traditional privileging of truthful reality over apparent superficiality. In Nietzsche's terms, there is no truth to be discovered by unveiling the shroud, or the mask, but rather, all one can peer through it is another mask, another shroud. Truth is but the effect of the masking act, posited as a result of it. Profundity of selfhood, then, is not to be sought in removing the mask but, on the contrary, in elaborating it: "around every profound spirit there continually grows a mask, owing to the constantly false, that is to say, SUPERFICIAL [*sic*] interpretation of every word he utters, every step he takes, every sign of life he manifests"³⁷. Axel admittedly engages in the Nietzschean celebration of the façade: "I had made myself adept at appearing deeply learned"³⁸. In his writing as a literary critic he always demonstrates an elaborate "prose style" rather than "grasp of theory" and "scholarship"³⁹. What is more, after admitting to having stolen the name "Axel Vander," the narrator never discloses his real name throughout the novel. His reluctance in disclosing his real name is to be read as his attempt to make his mask, that is, his artistic poses and articulate style, his signature.

According to John Kenny, by evoking the Shroud on multiple occasions Axel seeks to "identif[y] himself directly with Christ and Nietzsche" "through the Shroud"⁴⁰. I claim it is not so much Christ that Axel wants to identify with as it is with the Shroud (of Turin) itself. This is emphasized when a mysterious "red-haired fellow"⁴¹ repeatedly says to him something that "sounded like *signore*"⁴². He later refigures, again calling him "*signore*"⁴³. At the same time, reminded by Kristina that the Shroud's other name is *sindone*, Axel's memory readjusts and he realizes that what the red-haired man had actually said was "*sindone*, not *signore*"⁴⁴. Axel refers to the man as "the punster"⁴⁵, emphasizing the way in which *signore* (mister) becomes a pun for *sindone* (the shroud). The equation of the two in Axel's perception evokes a sense in which he is one and the same as the shroud (mask). In other words, like the Attic thespian, he too achieves his "apotheosis", the culmination of his aesthetic self-recreation. Elsewhere, Axel admits: "There is not a sincere bone in the entire body of my text"⁴⁶. The metaphor of the text as a body underlines two points. Firstly, it illustrates the textuality of the body, that is, just as the text can be likened to a body, the body itself is constructed tex-

37. *Ibid.*, p. 35.

38. John Banville, *Shroud*, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 61.

40. John Kenny, *op. cit.*, p. 174.

41. John Banville, *Shroud*, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

42. *Ibid.*, p. 48.

43. *Ibid.*, p. 287.

44. *Ibid.*, p. 156.

45. *Ibid.*, p. 287.

46. *Ibid.*, p. 329.

tually (linguistically, metaphorically). Secondly, the text as a body (and the body as a text) highlights Axel's own role as the writer of the body-text. That is to say, insofar as he is the writer of his self-representation, his function is irreducible in the type of body-text that is represented in his account. He is its creator.

Under the Nietzschean imperative, Axel heeds his bodily calls: "Headaches, stomach cramps, a constant churning in the gut, these were the body's protests at the insupportable strain of living always in fear"⁴⁷. The word "protests" indicates Axel's view of his body as an entity to be reckoned with, as a force that exerts a power on him that he cannot neglect. What is more, Axel's immediate relationship with the world is regulated by sensory feelings rather than intellectual reasoning. He speaks of experiencing "the sense of being sealed off from the world"⁴⁸, he has "the sense of [Cass] spinning on her toes"⁴⁹, and feels "a sense of splendour and communion"⁵⁰. He further emphasizes the physical, sensory nature of his experience when he links the word "sense" to smell: "I have a sense of something torpid, brownish, exhausted; the smell is the smell of re-breathed air"⁵¹. Axel's emphasis on the senses (as the faculty by which the body perceives an external stimulus and not the faculty of meaning and understanding) resonates with Nietzsche's attack of the ascetic ideal. The latter, says Nietzsche, is opposed to the world of becoming governed by bodily senses that should be favoured over "reason" since the senses "do not lie at all"⁵². That which lies is what one "make[s] of their testimony", a "falsification" that could lead "the lie of unity, the lie of thinghood, of substance, of permanence"⁵³.

The Nietzschean overtones of Axel's enunciations are in congruence with the philosopher's presence throughout the novel. Pier Paolo Piciucco gives a detailed account of the relationship between Axel's narrative and the city of Turin where "the figure of Frederick Nietzsche" presents a "powerful picture that contributes to both the making of Axel Vander and to his strong connection with the city of Turin" and sees *Shroud* as "a fertile soil where allusions, references and connections with the German philosopher mushroom"⁵⁴. Kenny, in his turn, proposes

47. *Ibid.*, p. 224-5.

48. *Ibid.*, p. 36.

49. *Ibid.*, p. 52.

50. *Ibid.*, p. 73.

51. *Ibid.*, p. 205.

52. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols, The Antichrist*. R. J. Hollingdale, Harmondsworth (Trans.), London, Penguin, 1990, p. 2.

53. *Ibid.*, "Reason", says Nietzsche, "is the cause of our falsification of the testimony of the senses" (*Ibid.*). Nietzsche, here, is making a case for his idea that "The 'apparent' world is the only one; the 'true' world is merely added by a lie" By emphasizing sensuality over reason Nietzsche directs his attack on Platonic metaphysics that fundamentally distinguishes between appearance and reality (*Ibid.*).

54. Pier Pao Piciucco, "Thus Spoke Axel Vander. Pictures of Turin in John Banville's *Shroud*", in *L'immagine dell'Italia nelle Letterature Angloamericane e Postcoloniali*, Paolo Bertinetti (Eds.), Trauben, Edizioni Trauben, 2014, p. 57-72.

that the fact Axel is "one-eyed" "may be a partial reference to 'the Cyclops of culture,' the frightful energies that Friedrich Nietzsche, the ghost that haunts the novel, argued were the innovators for humanity [*sic*]"⁵⁵. Piciuccio convincingly links Kenny's observation to the way Axel represents his uncommonly large "size and stature" that at times transforms him into "a gigantic creature of mythical dimensions"⁵⁶. Axel's unusually large mass, Piciuccio notes, is reminiscent of, or a variation on, Nietzsche's famous *Übermensch*. Yet, despite his sound analyses, Piciuccio's emphasis on other aspects of the relationship between *Shroud* and Turin limits his analysis of the significance of Nietzsche's Overman in Banville's novel.

■ Overman as going over

Axel meets a "doctor" in Turin whose name "sounded like Zoroaster"⁵⁷, a reference to Nietzsche's text, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, in which the philosopher introduces and discusses in detail the idea of the Overman as the culmination of his life-affirmative philosophy, a being free from reactive beliefs and *ressentiment*⁵⁸. As Lee Spinks remarks, *Übermensch*, on the one hand, signifies Overman "in the sense of height and self-transformation," that is, "the elevation of mankind's highest self into an experience of being that has no trace of moralism or the fiction of free will"⁵⁹. On the other hand, Over- "can also suggest 'across' or 'beyond' and Nietzsche employs this second resonance to characterize 'man' as a bridge we must pass across toward a life free of *ressentiment* and negativity"⁶⁰. This is why the Overman's key feature, according to Nietzsche, lies in crossing, "going over":

Man is a rope suspended between animal and Superman—a rope over an abyss. A dangerous going-over, a dangerous on-the-way, a dangerous looking-back, a dangerous shuddering and standing still. What is great about man is that he is a bridge, not an end: what can be loved about man is that he is a *going-over* and a *going-under*⁶¹.

55. John Kenny, *op. cit.*, p. 163.

56. Pier Pao Piciuccio, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

57. John Banville, *Shroud*, *op. cit.*, p. 288.

58. *Ressentiment* is Nietzsche's term for the nihilistic, rancorous attitude manifested by the weak as a result of their incapability to punish the strong. The weak (or the slave, as Nietzsche liked to put it), in turn, engage in "imaginary revenge" in order to make up for their incompetence (*On the Genealogy of Morality: A Polemic*, Carol Diethe (trans.), Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 21). For Nietzsche, the figure of the priest is the ultimate manifestation of *ressentiment* that incessantly propagates *Sklavenmoral* (slave morality).

59. Lee Spinks, *Friedrich Nietzsche*, London, Routledge, 2003, p. 120.

60. *Ibid.*

61. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

Nietzsche's idea of the self's crossing over is evident in Axel's narrative on multiple occasions. At the beginning of his narrative, on the day he receives Cass's premonitory letter, he

had the certain sense of having crossed, of having been forced to cross, an invisible frontier, and of being in a state that forever more would be post-something, would be forever an afterwards. The letter, of course, was the crossing point⁶².

Though the words "afterwards" and "post-something" conjure up the Nietzschean transformation in which man moves forward, advances to the Overman, the fact that it is the content of Cass's letter threatening to reveal his rogue past that causes the crossing over, the movement is rather backwards. That is to say, he crosses over to the realm of the spectral past in which his old demons come back to haunt him. As a result of this passage, he is "cloven" between what "I had been before the letter arrived" and "this new I, a singular capital standing at a tilt to all the known things that had suddenly become unfamiliar"⁶³. The transformation results, not only in his uncanny bifurcation, but in the tilting, sloping, hence, a destabilized sense of self emphasized by the italicization (i.e. the literal tilt) of the second "I." Elsewhere, "[t]he corner of the square with the plane trees", Axel's says, "was the crossing point from my world into" the world of the real Vander⁶⁴. What is emphasized in the description is not so much the process of the self's crossing over, nor is it the other side, as it is the very site where the crossing takes place: "When I think of that *spot* the weather in it is always grey, the luminous, quicksilver grey of an early northern spring, the colour for me of the past itself [emphasis added]"⁶⁵.

In the description above, the passage from the narrator's identity to that of Vander takes place "on the corner." The word "corner" intriguingly figures repetitively throughout the narrative. To cite a few examples, Axel sees someone "sitting hunched at the corner of a table"⁶⁶; he goes to a "flower seller" located "at the sunlit corner"⁶⁷; he "had to stop at a street corner to consult the crumpled map" while he "registered the girl, on the corner opposite, looking in my direction"⁶⁸; and in his youth, he used to live a "corner basement room"⁶⁹. Even Cass is depicted as

62. John Banville, *Shroud*, *op. cit.*, p. 12-13.

63. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

64. *Ibid.*, p. 201.

65. *Ibid.*

66. *Ibid.*, p. 42.

67. *Ibid.*, p. 43.

68. *Ibid.*, p. 52.

69. *Ibid.*, p. 55.

"hiding in the corner of a couch"⁷⁰ and "sitting at a table in a cramped corner by the window"⁷¹. Insofar as a corner is seen as an angle where two sides or edges meet, it connotes a spatial border, a crossing point from one space into another. Therefore, by systematically representing himself—as well as his perceptual field—taking place at a corner, Axel shows how he is liminally stuck between two spaces, at the very edge of two worlds without quite pertaining to either. "For the most part," Axel says, "I was kept firmly off at the outer edge of things"⁷². The passive voice Axel uses in his enunciation evokes the sense of him being forced into the marginal position, as if a force was keeping him "firmly" at bay, away from accessing "things." The sense of being forced is further emphasized when Axel uses the word *edge* as a verb again in the passive voice when he remembers his late wife Magda: "I felt I was being edged around by a large, wary ruminant"⁷³. Indeed, the very word *corner* can evoke such a sense as in *to be cornered*, that is, to be pushed into a position by force. In a sense, one can argue, Axel's metaphors of liminality primarily highlight his lack of direct access to the "real" thing, indicating that his access to truth is barred by a force beyond him. Being cornered to the edge, so to speak, illustrates his perceptual (and representational) predicament. In this sense, Axel transforms Nietzsche's metaphors for man as "rope" and "bridge" into man in corners and edges. Banville arguably provides a variation on the philosopher's idea of Overman, presenting an in-between-man. As to what this move on Banville's part represents in terms of his overall aesthetics, a brief detour through Alenka Zupančič's reading of Nietzsche is illuminating.

In *The Shortest Shadow*, Zupančič identifies two fundamental, philosophical positions with regards to the Real. On the one hand, there is "the classical or metaphysical position," according to which, the Real is posited as "the material basis or a touchstone" for speech⁷⁴. On the other hand, there is "the so-called 'sophistic' position" that aims at dismissing "the very notion of the Real," advocating the idea that "'speech is all,' that the Real does not exist, that it all comes down to a question of conventions, different language games, different perspectives and interpretations"⁷⁵. Nietzsche's writing, says Zupančič, offers a third stance that surpasses the aforementioned "couple"; it is based on "a specific duality"⁷⁶, one that is "perhaps best articulated in the topology of the edge as

70. *Ibid.*, p. 93.

71. *Ibid.*, p. 144.

72. *Ibid.*, p. 211.

73. *Ibid.*, p. 18.

74. Alenka Zupančič, *The Shortest Shadow: Nietzsche's Philosophy of the Two*, Cambridge, The MIT Press, 2003, p. 12.

75. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

76. Zupančič emphasizes, it is "a duality that has nothing to do with the dichotomies between complementary oppositional terms (which are ultimately always two sides of the One): this duality is not (yet) multiplicity either" (*Ibid.*, p. 12).

the thing whose sole substantiality consists in its simultaneously separating and linking two surfaces”⁷⁷. Zupančič claims that Nietzsche’s specific articulation of duality as edge distinguishes his thinking from both the “realist” and “nominalist” positions in that it proposes a fresh position regarding the relationship between representation and reality since it brings to the equation the role of the Lacanian Real. Insofar as the Real is not reducible to reality, and insofar as reality itself is constituted through a fantasmatic scenario, that is, as a specific configuration of the Real-Symbolic-Imaginary, the traditional binary opposition between reality and illusion no longer presents a sufficient framework to distinguish truth from untruth. At the same time, insofar as the Real does exist, or, rather, subsists (though as an impossibility, as a limit), total dismissal of anything beyond textuality (and linguistic construction) misses the role of the Real. Nietzsche’s conception of duality as edge, according to Zupančič, “suggests that the Real exists as the internal fracture or split of representation, as its intrinsic edge on account of which representation never fully coincides, not simply with its object, but with itself”⁷⁸. Ultimately, “what is designated as ‘beyond good and evil’” is located at this edge. It is “a beyond that is not really a realm, and is thus not a ‘beyond’ in the common sense of this term, but rather, has the structure of an edge”⁷⁹.

If one agrees with Zupančič’s reading, one can postulate that Banville’s Nietzschean turn in *Shroud* does not so much lie in his multifarious, anecdotal references to the philosopher throughout the novel (and throughout his oeuvre), but it arguably lies in constantly situating his narrator on edge, at an edge, that is, within a specific distance from the Real where he periodically comes across the impossibility of a truthful self-representation while simultaneously insisting on the existence of truth. *Shroud* is a sophisticated dialogue with the deadlock outlined by deconstruction, a dialogue supplemented by a Nietzschean subtext in order to locate, to lay bare, the inherent points of impossibility at the heart of representation rather than a mere illustration of that impossibility. The edges and corners at which Axel constantly finds himself are, in a way, the contours of his subjective frame. They are the spatial tropes for Banville’s *mise en scene* of his narrator’s perceptual as well as representational crisis.

77. *Ibid.*

78. *Ibid.*, p. 28.

79. *Ibid.*, p. 17.

The Queen's two bodies: Panti at the Abbey

Alexandra POULAIN

Sorbonne nouvelle – laboratoire Prismes (EA4398)

Abstract

This article reads Panti's Noble Call at the Abbey theatre on 1 February 2014 in the light of Didier Eribon's work on the experience of insult as constitutive of gay subjectivity. However, it goes on to argue that Panti's narrated experience of stigma, internalised shame and failed self-discipline also reflects the young Irish postcolonial nation's self-imposed task of performing heteronormative modernity. The drag queen's performance, turning shame into exhibitionism, points to alternative ways of performing Irishness which reconnect with traditional, non-modern forms of Irish performative practices.

Keywords: Panti, Abbey, shame, insult, performance, body.

Résumé

Cet article propose une lecture de la performance de Panti sur la scène de l'Abbey Theatre le 1er février 2014 à la lumière du travail de Didier Eribon sur l'insulte comme expérience constitutive de la subjectivité gay. Il suggère que l'histoire de Panti, qui parle de stigmatisation, de honte intériorisée et de son échec à discipliner son corps selon la norme hétérosexuelle, ne reflète pas seulement une expérience spécifiquement homosexuelle, mais fait aussi écho à la performance de la modernité hétéronormative à laquelle est confrontée l'ensemble des membres de la jeune nation irlandaise post-coloniale. La performance de la drag queen, qui renverse la honte en exhibitionnisme, montre qu'il existe d'autres manières de jouer l'Irlandicité, et renoue ainsi avec des pratiques performatives irlandaises traditionnelles qui n'ont pas trouvé leur place dans la modernité hétéronormée.

Mots-clés : Panti, Abbey, honte, insulte, performance, corps.

This article is part of a fledgling project that tries to connect notions of shame, queer identities, postcolonial identities and performance. It is grounded in the substantial and growing body of queer theory and queer activism which has been engaged in an effort to resignify shame not just as a normative force of social regulation and censorship, but also as a potentially liberating emotion capable of releasing creativity and of providing an impetus for theatrical self-(re)construction. One point of origin was Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's oft-quoted article "Shame, Theatricality, and Queer Performativity: Henry James' *The Art of the Novel*",

first published in 1993 in *GLQ: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies*¹ and republished in David Halperin and Valerie Traub's 2009 edited volume *Gay Shame*. Other landmark publications which look at a specifically Irish context include Sally Munt's *Queer Attachments: The Cultural Politics of Shame* (2009)², and more recently Joe Valente's article "Self-Queering Ireland" in the "Queering Ireland" issue of the *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* in 2010³. In this article I return to a well-known piece of queer Irish autobiographical performance, one which occurred on the stage of the national theatre but was captured on video and, as the hackneyed phrase goes, "went viral" in 2014: Panti's "Noble call" at the Abbey theatre⁴, in the wake of the public scandal known as "Pantigate". What, I ask, is the particular significance of this queer Irish autobiographical performance? What work does it perform within Irish culture? To continue with clichés, I suggest that the drag queen's performance on the Abbey stage holds a (facetiously distorting) mirror to the nation, that under cover of being "about" the intimate, subjective experience of internalised shame which is constitutive of queer identity, it also says something both disturbing and liberating about the performative nature of heterosexuality.

The context of Panti's performance needs to be recalled briefly. In January 2014, in the midst of the campaign for marriage equality, Rory O'Neill, performer and gay rights "accidental activist", as he defines himself, best known as his drag persona Panti, was invited to appear on RTE's popular talk-show *Saturday Night Live*, hosted by Brendan O'Connor. When asked to comment on his experience as a gay man in contemporary Ireland, O'Neill said he considered certain prominent people in the media and political circles to be homophobic. After the show those who had been named, including high profile *Irish Times* reporter John Waters, threatened both RTE and O'Neill with legal action, prompting RTE to edit that part of the interview from the RTE archive, to issue a public apology and to pay out some 85000 € to offended parties, thus, as Fintan Walsh comments, "effectively imply[ing] that homophobia could not be called out in public"⁵. While traditional media in Ireland barely documented the event, the story was widely shared by the social media and evolved into a global furore which became known as "Pantigate". These events, in January 2014, coincided with the begin-

1. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Shame, Theatricality, and Queer Performativity: Henry James' *The Art of the Novel*", *GLQ: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies*, Vol. 1-1, 1993, p. 1-16. Republished in David. M. Halperin and Valerie Traub (eds.), *Gay Shame*, Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 2009, p. 49-62.

2. Sally Munt, *Queer Attachments: The Cultural Politics of Shame*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2007.

3. Joseph Valente: "Self-Queering Ireland", *Queering Ireland*, special issue of *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, Sean Kennedy (ed.), 2010, p. 25-44.

4. The performance can be seen online at [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WXYahUzWnl0>]. Accessed 18 February 2018.

5. Fintan Walsh, *Queer Performance and Contemporary Ireland: Dissent and Disorientation*, Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2016, ebook [1043].

ning of the decade of commemorations of the revolutionary events which led to the independence of Ireland a hundred years ago. One early celebration was the production at the Abbey of James Plunkett's 1958 play *The Risen People* which chronicles the Dublin Lockout of 1913. After each performance, the cast invited a surprise guest to give a "Noble Call" in the form of a short address reflecting on the play's relevance to the state of contemporary Ireland. On the night of the play's final performance on 1 February 2014, three weeks after Rory O'Neil's appearance on *Saturday Night Live*, Panti was invited to give her Noble Call, and she gave a resonant speech in response to "Pantigate", drawing on her own experience of homophobia in Ireland and exposing the redoubled violence inherent in the attempt to silence anyone who dares to speak of homophobia in the public sphere. The speech was greeted with a standing ovation, and the video hit the internet and achieved instant, massive success. How instrumental it was to the eventual success of the Equality campaign can only be a matter of speculation; but I want to suggest that it also works at another level, not just as a (brilliantly effective) piece of gay rights activism, but also as a sympathetic comment on the performative nature of what has become known, after Adrienne Rich, as "compulsory heterosexuality"⁶.

When she is called on the stage at the end of the performance, Panti appears in a fur-lined, high-necked burgundy dress in the usual high heels and curly blonde wig, towering above the rest of the cast who stand behind her on the Abbey stage in their 1913 workers' costumes. She then introduces herself, redundantly making sure that everyone in the audience is aware of the constructed nature of her gender: "Hello, my name is Panti, and for the benefice of the visually impaired or incredibly naïve, I am a drag-queen". What produces both a certain epistemological anxiety and the unique performative strength of the Noble Call is that the rest of the performance proceeds as if this was Rory, rather than Panti, telling very intimate stories of his experience of homophobia as a gay man in contemporary Ireland. Though she is, in her own words, "painfully middle class" and has never experienced the "abject, grinding poverty" represented in the play, she feels legitimate to give a speech about "oppression" because, she says, "I do know what it feels like to be put in my place"—an important phrase that I'll return to shortly.

The speech starts with the evocation of a foundational, traumatic yet banal event, to which Panti relentlessly returns subsequently—the story of how she once stood at a pedestrian crossing and was abused by a "bunch of lads" in a passing car:

6. Cf. Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence", in *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose 1979-1985*, New York, Norton, 1986, p. 23-75.

Have you ever been standing at a pedestrian crossing when a car goes by, and in it are a bunch of lads, and they lean out of the window as they go by, and they shout “Fag!” and throw a milk carton at you? Now, it doesn’t really hurt. I mean, it’s just a wet carton, and in many ways, they’re right: I *am* a fag. So it doesn’t hurt, but it feels oppressive. And when it really does hurt is afterwards. Because it’s afterwards that I wonder and worry and obsess over, what was it about me? What did they see in me? What was it that gave me away? And I hate myself for wondering that. It feels oppressive. And the next time I’m standing at a pedestrian crossing, I hate myself for it, but I check myself to see what is it about me that gives the gay away. And I check myself to make sure that I’m not doing it this time.

Then she goes on to evoke other banal experiences of homophobia, but always returns to this crucial moment: “but the next time I stand at a pedestrian crossing, I hate myself for it, but I check myself.” The pedestrian crossing thus becomes the metonymic space of trauma, instantly inducing feelings of fear, shame and internalised self-hate, and a reflex of self-discipline. In his 1999 book *Insult and the Making of the Gay Self* (transl. 2004)⁷, Didier Eribon argues that the experience of being insulted is an inevitable and crucial part of the identity-making process of gays and lesbians; that it is in fact, by necessity, a foundational experience: “It all begins with an insult”, he claims (15). An insult, he goes on to argue, does not aim to convey any informative content, to tell me anything about myself, but aims only “to hurt me, to mark my consciousness with that hurt, inscribing shame in the deepest levels of my mind.” (16) In doing this the insult pins me down and tells me where I belong in the social hierarchy: “Insult is a linguistic act — or a series of repeated linguistic acts by which a particular place in the world is assigned to the person at whom the acts are directed.” (16) Panti’s speech captures both the foundational character of insult and its performative, place-assigning power: “I do know what it feels like to be put in my place”. The scene is made brilliantly real with a few, vivid touches: the vulnerable space of the pedestrian crossing, the untroubled masculinity of the “young lads” in the car, the grotesque choice of projectile—a “wet carton of milk”—with its humiliating connotations of abject femininity, limpness and wasted fluids, and the monosyllabic insult that defines and confines: “Fag!” But the reason why the speech is so resonant is that the isolated incident is metonymic of the constant exposure to insult which LGBT people suffer. As Eribon points out, “Insult can be found anywhere: linguists have expanded this category of performative utterances to include allusions,

7. Didier Eribon: *Insult and the Making of the Gay Self*, transl. Michael Lucey, Durham (NC): Duke University Press, 2004.

insinuations, irony, metaphor, and so on.” (16) In fact, he argues persuasively, the stigmatising, place-assigning power of insult pervades the whole structure of language, which is always already shaped by heterosexual prejudice:

Thus do gay people live in a world of insults. They are surrounded by a language that hems them in and points them out. The world insults them; it speaks of them and of what is said about them. The words of day-to-day life as well as of psychiatric, juridical, and political discourse assign each of them individually and all of them collectively to an inferior place within the social order. And yet this very language preceded them: the world of insults preexisted them, and it takes hold of them even before they know what they are. (56)

Insult is foundational in the constitution of LGBT identity because it precedes the emergence of the self: it is always already there, in the very texture of the language with which I will apprehend the world around me and articulate a sense of who I am. Having related the “pedestrian crossing” incident Panti goes on to give other instances of feeling “oppressed.” Each story starts with the anaphoric phrase “Have you ever”, which makes the point that the experience of an audience which can reasonably be assumed to be largely straight, however sympathetic to LGBT people, diverges radically from the lived experience of insult which is constitutive of LGBT subjectivity. Her other examples include being the object of a whole range of “expert” discourses and uninformed yet publicly expressed opinion, travelling on a crowded bus with her best friend and cringing because he is “being so gay”, and being aware at all times that in other countries LGBT people may be beaten up, imprisoned and even killed for being what she is. Every story thus reveals the homophobic violence at work in the very fabric of LGBT experience, a violence of which the foundational incident of the pedestrian crossing is only the most visible and quintessential manifestation.

Obsessively, Panti returns to the traumatic incident, and to her subsequent attempt to fend off the violence of insult by normalising herself: “I check myself” (in both senses: inspect, and restrain). Life as a gay man is described as a poignantly ineffective struggle to act straight. Like a Method actor, she submits her body to constant training, but the body refuses to be disciplined and always threatens to “give the gay away”. There is one particularly interesting moment in the performance, when she is talking about her distressed self-inspection after the incident: “what did they see in me, what was it that gave me away?”, and a few people in the audience laugh, but with a split second’s lag, and she looks briefly unsettled, as if she hadn’t anticipated the laughs here, hadn’t intended this to be funny—and indeed it isn’t funny as such: she is talking about a moment of extreme anxiety. The reason why some people do laugh, I argue, has to do not

with what she is saying but with who is saying it: the man who is telling us that he is constantly trying to look as straight as possible, as inconspicuous as possible, is wearing high heels, a fur-lined burgundy dress, a Dolly Parton-style wig and enough lipstick to paint the Abbey building red. The radical dissonance between the performing body and the spoken body, neither of which is a more authentic version of Panti/Rory than the other, is a striking metaphor of the impossibility of self-adequation which Eribon sees as a characteristic of gay subjectivity. This inevitable split is induced by heterosexual domination and the way it pervades all social relations and institutions, proclaiming that civilisation itself rests on the principle of “sexual difference” and thus relegating same-sex relations out of juridical institutions and of cultural intelligibility itself⁸. Social institutions thus “work to establish and to reproduce an uncrossable divide between the norm and homosexuality—and another form of self-division within a gay person.” (116) Being divided from themselves, LGBT people must therefore strive towards the unreachable goal of identity, and embark on a lifelong course of self-fashioning. This was perhaps most flamboyantly expressed in Wilde’s determination to make his life a work of art, a project taken up by Panti who in her earlier, eloquently titled show *A Woman in Progress*, defined herself as “a big, drunk, devastatingly attractive, theatrical device,” adding in true Wildean fashion: “I am my own life’s work. The fruit of my own creative endeavours⁹.” The buried pun on “fruit” facetiously drives home the point that you can never be a “fruit” unless you have grown it yourself. Eribon’s analysis of the paradoxically creative effect of insult intersects with Sedgwick’s reading of shame as a transformative force intrinsically linked with performance:

Shame turns itself skin side out; shame and pride, shame and dignity, shame and self-display, shame and exhibitionism are different interlinings of the same glove. Shame, it might finally be said, transformational shame, is performance. I mean theatrical performance. Performance interlines shame as more than just its result or a way of warding it off, though, importantly, it is those things. Shame is the affect that mantles the threshold between introversion and extroversion, between absorption and theatricality, between performativity and—performativity. (*Gay Shame*, 51-52)

The performativity of insult, encapsulated in the stigmatising phrase “Shame on you!”, makes me cast down my eyes and turn away my face in shame—

8. French edition: *Réflexions sur la question gay* (1999), Paris, Flammarion, 2012, p. 176. The passage is omitted in English.

9. Panti, *A Woman in Progress*, in *Queer Notions. New Plays and Performances from Ireland*, Fintan Walsh (ed.), Cork, Cork University Press, 2010, p. 245.

it makes me lose face. But in the process it invites me to recreate my face, my persona, to perform my chosen, ever inchoate version of who I am or will be. As both Sedgwick and Eribon point out, queer identities, anchored as they are in the experience of shame, are bound to emerge theatrically, as invisibility is reversed into exhibitionism (Eribon 106).

However, what Panti's Noble Call makes poignantly clear is that there is no alternative to theatricality: "Panti" may be a gloriously histrionic "theatrical device", but the other body she conjures up in her speech, the body of the gay man who is desperate to act straight, is no less the product of a performance—if a failed one. As I suggested earlier, the act of "checking himself" evokes the discipline of the Stanislavski tradition, or indeed of the sort of restrained naturalism which the Fay brothers cultivated in the early days of the Irish Literary Theatre. As Adrian Frazier has shown, what became known as "the Abbey style of acting" evolved largely as an attempt to counter the perceived vulgarity of the English acting tradition, which gave free rein to star actors and tended to encourage over-acting and facile, emphatic effects. By contrast, the Fays cultivated ensemble rather than solo performances, and imposed a form of gestural minimalism on their actors. Frazier quotes the English critic E. C. Montague:

Throughout one half of Lady Gregory's *Rising of the Moon* there is scarcely a movement: merely that no-one should strut or fret tickles you. Miss Maire O'Neill, as Nora, in *The Shadow of the Glen*, stands almost stock still through a scene where most English actresses would pace the stage like lionesses in a zoo. The result is that when she does move you can see the passion propel her like a screw. In Mr Yeats's *Kathleen ni Houlihan* the average stage-manager would have thought everything under-acted¹⁰.

However, as Lionel Pilkington has argued, this self-imposed discipline contrasts not just with English histrionics, but also with alternative Irish performative practices which were perceived as incompatible with the modern norms of bodily restraint that the Abbey embraced as part of its modernising agenda:

One valuable effect of the naturalistic style of acting championed in the 1900s by the Fay brothers, Frank and William, and for which the Abbey theatre was so famous, was its presentation of Irish actions and forms of behaviour as decorously familiar. [...] In striking contrast, for example, to the weird gesticulations of a ululating funeral keener, the straw-masked performances of a mummer or the grotesque and often

10. C.E. Montague, qtd. by Adrian Frazier, "Irish Acting in the Early Twentieth Century", in *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish Theatre*, Nicholas Grene and Chris Morash (eds.), Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016, 231-45, p. 236.

crudely sexual and violent indecorousness of a wake game, acting in the institutional theatre rendered behaviour that was reassuringly and instantly recognisable as modern¹¹.

As it achieved a hegemonic status, the Abbey's embrace of modern norms delegitimised and marginalised those alternative performative traditions which remained, in David Lloyd's felicitous phrase, "recalcitrant to modernity". The bodies that were allowed on the Abbey stage were bodies that did not "strut or fret"—restrained, disciplined bodies, modern bodies—normal bodies. In conjuring up her repeatedly failed performance of heterosexuality, however, Panti denaturalises the norm and exposes it for what it is: another performance, which depends on the painstaking internalisation of dominant codes. Her failed performance, and the shame that attends to it, nevertheless produces in return the flamboyant drag queen who struts and frets upon the Abbey stage. If "queer" is, as Michael Warner defines it, "resistance to regimes of the normal"¹², then it could be argued that Panti metonymically performs the return of the repressed queer. Inviting the Abbey audience to recognise that their (assumed) normality is a performance like hers (and one which is just as susceptible to failure), she queers the institutional space of the national theatre, and metonymically revives the repressed performative traditions which resisted absorption into the normalised idioms of modernity.

There is something openly confrontational about the performance: this is not confessional theatre, as in most autobiographical performances which rely on the creation of a special intimacy between performer and audience (the size of the Abbey stage, and the presence of the whole cast of *The Risen People*, would make this very difficult anyway). Rather, at the end of her speech Panti states her belief that "almost all of you are probably homophobes" and, evoking yet again her self-loathing for "checking herself" at pedestrian crossings, she blurts out, "and sometimes I hate you for doing this to me." However I would argue that in confronting the audience with her painful story of stigma and internalised shame, she offers an empathetic mirror-image of their own perpetual endeavour to perform the norm, a task inherent in the project of heterosexuality everywhere but perhaps particularly mandatory in a postcolonial context, where the narrative of the young nation still needs to be stabilised by an on-going process of policing of bodies. As Helen Munt comments in the context of Irish-American nationalism:

The concept or figure of a nation depends upon an account of 'oneness' that requires by default compulsory heterosexuality. Because heterosexuality is naturalised and assumed, accordingly homosexuality is read

11. Lionel Pilkington, *Theatre and Ireland*, Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2010, p. 67.

12. Michael Warner, "Introduction", in *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*, Michael Warner (ed.), Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, p. xxvii.

as antithetical to the nation and its political embodiment within nationalism¹³.

Finding one's place within the national narrative is thus dependent on one's ability to perform the heterosexual norm, an arduous task of constant self-policing to which everyone, not just the impossibly conspicuous gay boy, must submit themselves. Yet in confronting the audience not with the shamed body who fails to achieve invisibility, but with the most conspicuous body of the drag queen born out of this shame, she ushers them, too, towards a liberating performativity which needs not be perceived as antithetical to the national narrative, but rather reconnects metonymically with a whole body of repressed Irish performative traditions.

13. *Op. cit.*, p. 56.