

# *Yeats, Beckett, Banville: Philosophical Idealism and Political Ideology in Modern Irish Writing*

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**Abstract:** *The philosophical nature of elements of Irish writing has been often remarked upon; the peculiarity of this phenomenon less so. In this article, the relation between idealist philosophy and the politics of writing in the work of W.B. Yeats, Samuel Beckett and John Banville is explored. Obliquely discernible only within certain strands of modern Irish literature, a philosophical obsessiveness has nonetheless developed in a culture devoid of significant philosophical achievement. Thomas Duddy's A History of Irish Thought is remarkable for making apparent the poverty of Irish philosophical traditions; the invisibility of philosophy in contemporary Irish cultural discourse is also notable by its absence in the recent Cambridge Companion to Modern Irish Culture, for example. Nevertheless, there exists a strong philosophically idealist tradition within Irish literature. This article traces that tradition within twentieth-century Irish writing, and examines how its ideological character may be considered as complicating the reception of Ireland in the work of these writers.*

To speak of an Irish philosophical tradition, as Thomas Duddy suggests in the preface to his 2006 *A History of Irish Thought* (xi-xii), is to immediately challenge conventional paradigms of modern European intellectual history. That there exists no such identifiable thing as a distinctively Irish tradition of systematic philosophical thought – as distinct from French, British or German philosophy – seems clear, because Ireland, given the economic, social and political vagaries of her history, was unable to support a developed intellectual culture over a sustained period of time. Yet, Duddy maintains, the idea should not be completely disbarred. There is a history of Irish thought, however historically disjointed, politically influenced and ethnically complex; features which themselves reflect the historicity of all thought, and the materiality of culture. The haphazard picture of Irish thought, Duddy says, is unique and peculiar, and must be analysed in terms of “the contingencies of history” (xiv). There is then, an accidental history of Irish thought: but efforts to find intellectual continuity are perilous, and tracing

the influence of what might be considered a “national” philosophy is prey not only to the fortunes of historical interpretation, but also to the more pressing problematics of the politics of cultural authenticity. Such difficulties are themselves an expression of the trauma of naming manifest modernity in Ireland; Duddy’s account accords with an embedded assumption of Irish history as one of fragmentation, discord and even backwardness in relation to an apparently more stable and progressive conception of European culture. This familiar dichotomy has been a marked feature of accounts of Irish culture, where it has found champions across many diverse fields and disciplines.

Yet in the twentieth century there emerged to various degrees in Irish literary modernism a recognizably philosophical character, one that is coloured by shades of idealist philosophies. With the oncoming decrepitude of his body it is predominantly Plato and Berkeley who feature in the work of the late WB Yeats; in James Joyce’s radiant streams of consciousness we find parallels with the setting forth of mental processes in Husserl’s phenomenological investigations. Samuel Beckett’s texts grapple with Descartes, Guelincx, and Schopenhauer, while in John Banville’s works, it is Kant, romantic idealism and various shades of existentialist thought which dominate. These influences have long been recognized, mostly as discreet phenomena, even as they have shaped the perception of these writers as sometime literary academicians. But such philosophical inflections, drawn from what is considered to be a wide European intellectual history, have also helped complicate the place of this strand of Irish literary production within a broader description of modernism.

Much of the first sustained criticism of Banville, for example, was concerned with distancing the writer from the Irish context altogether, because his work was sensitive to what Rüdiger Imhof (7) called “incontestably non-Irish subject matter.” Symptomatic of the politico-literary ideology of 1970s and 80s, many of the earlier debates about Banville’s “contexts” expended considerable amounts of energy during a degrading war between what was to be properly called Irish “national” literature or European modernism. Focusing primarily on superficial markers such as content and style, Irish writers found themselves caught in the crossfire between a number of corrosive theoretically binarist models based on stages of development, such as modern/traditional, experimentalist/naturalist, and most poisonous of all, Irish/European; Irish writing could be one or the other, but not both.

From our slightly later perspective, it is apparent that much of those debates were fuelled by both a suspicion of supposedly nationalist ideology and by underdeveloped critiques of modernism both inside and outside of Ireland. Considering the distressing birth of the Irish state, the conservative forces that kept it in check throughout much of the twentieth century, the outbreak of the Troubles in Northern Ireland, and a routinely ailing economy, much of the ambivalence towards Ireland and “Irish identity” expressed by both critics and writers is comprehensible.<sup>1</sup> Yet there persisted among theorists of modernism, for longer than was helpful, a repudiation that Irish writers such as Joyce and Beckett were not properly Irish writers by virtue of their commitment to European cosmopolitan

and modernist plurality and hence their escape from historical determinism and political motivation.<sup>2</sup> These well-worn arguments are themselves historically instructive; they have taken their place in the history of criticism and become a genealogical branch of Irish cultural disputation. Considering the disrepute that the stadial explanations of modernity upon which they so depended have now fallen into, the more immediate concern here is to provide instead a more nuanced understanding of the ideological, cultural and aesthetic significance of Irish philosophical literature.

Trying to locate Irish philosophical precursors to writers like Yeats, Joyce, Beckett and Banville is not immediately useful or necessary in any holistic sense, but tracing the ideological character of idealist philosophy in Irish writing reveals forms of aesthetic consciousness that may be constructive for critiques of modernity and Ireland. This is not to suggest that we are dealing with a robust tradition, but, instead, one with a faint pulse. What cannot be initially disputed is that philosophy in Ireland is a much undervalued discipline that has been treated with a considerable amount of indifference in Irish intellectual life. Beyond the various economic, political and social calamities that befell Ireland throughout much of her modern history, there are, naturally, other significant historical reasons related to the provision of education as to why philosophy remains an underdeveloped field in Ireland. The lack of a University in the Middle Ages when many other European countries had established important centres of learning is significant, and when Trinity College was later founded it catered only for a minority and remained largely inaccessible to much of the population. There has admittedly been a scholastic tradition in Catholic teaching through the seminaries that exists to this day, but only since the 1960s has the scope of philosophy in Irish universities been opened up to take in critical forms of thought that had already changed the landscape of Continental philosophy many decades before.<sup>3</sup> Despite many well known academic philosophers, such as Richard Kearney, who are widely published and internationally respected, Ireland's contribution to real philosophical innovation has been minimal. However, because we are talking in principle about an absence of specific modes of thought here, the effect this dearth of philosophy has had on the history of Irish intellectual life is entirely unquantifiable and in the realm of hypothesis. Consequently, it is vital not to relapse into a model of relative development in accounting for the presence or absence of Irish philosophy in modernity: what is called for is a more complex understanding of Irish philosophical literature situated within the disparate realm of European modernity. However, the ignoring of repeated calls for the inclusion of philosophy as part of the secondary school curriculum, most recently by Professor Michael Cronin of DCU in *The Irish Times*, bears further testament to the fact that there exists no appreciative culture of the value of philosophy in Irish public life (15). That successive Irish governments have disregarded these calls illustrates that the future for philosophy as an intellectual discipline in Ireland is bleak, even as further European integration gathers speed.

For all that, Ireland has by no means hitherto remained untouched by the collective philosophical achievements of its neighbours. Instead, whatever philosophical tradition in Ireland that has evolved has found expression, not in what would be commonly

understood as philosophical discourse, but in literature instead. During the Revival, for example, we see a variety of philosophically-inflected literature emerging. Considering that Irish modernism played its part in the much wider continental affair, this is perhaps not such an unusual occurrence, however limited and disorderly these philosophical engagements were. To take two obvious examples: Yeats was as widely read in the contemporary British analytical philosophy of G.E. Moore and Bertrand Russell as he was in Nietzsche. Joyce, as Timothy Mooney argues on the other hand, for all his classical references and knowledge of medieval aesthetics, demonstrates little actual understanding of modern and contemporary philosophy. In this sense, Joyce is discernibly less deliberately philosophically engaged than a writer such as J. M. Synge, for example, in whose work can be found a prefiguring of the Beckettian crisis of existence. Nevertheless, we can find performance in his work of Husserlian phenomenology in the stream of consciousness technique, and a “proximity” to Nietzschean historicism (Mooney 185).<sup>4</sup> These observations bring their own cultural politics where a view might be bolstered that philosophical sophistication elevates Irish modernists beyond their immediate locality. But to prove mathematically that the communion of abstract ideas within a shared historical era constitutes a supra-national movement is hazardous; for the influence of philosophy in Irish writing is still primarily a matter of cultural production, and whatever philosophical tradition exists in Irish literature, it is primarily of the idealist/neo-platonic variety.

The first most striking adherent of idealism in modern Irish literature was Yeats. While developing his extraordinary work, *A Vision*, the poet corresponded throughout 1926 with G. E. Moore’s brother, Sturge, about G. E.’s influential refutation of Yeats’ fellow Irishman George Berkeley’s idealism. Idealism had come under attack by the leading Cambridge analytical philosophers, Russell and Moore in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, both of whom were instrumental in developing a philosophy of logical analysis of language and reality based on mathematical precision. Yeats, whose early romanticism never quite burned out, regarded such positivism not only with an aesthete’s distaste of brute fact, but also with an intellectual scepticism. He had become increasingly interested in philosophy in his later career, and devoted much of his study to Berkeley, whose immaterialist doctrines increasingly appealed to him. During the course of the letters to Sturge Moore, Yeats complains that realist philosophers vulgarize the world, turning the mind into the “quicksilver at the back of a mirror” (Yeats & Moore 67) where perception, which occurs as a mental process, is rendered a pointless duplication of phenomena.

Yeats states that G. E. Moore’s attack on Berkeley was “extraordinarily obscure” (*Ibid.* 83), and the correspondence itself is not entirely philosophically rigorous. There appears, according to Grosvenor E. Powell (279-280), something of a misunderstanding on Yeats’s behalf of the precise nature of G. E. Moore’s argument, while, Sturge also seems to misinterpret Yeats’s own meaning of existence. Nonetheless, Yeats’s correspondence with Sturge was primarily of a philosophical character, and one in which he was compelled to make explicit his agreement with Berkeley’s most famous axiom –

*esse est percipi* (to be is to be perceived) – that the material world does not exist without perception. Although Yeats’s poetry underwent a significant stylistic and structural evolution over the course of his life, immaterialism can be found right throughout his work and is in part derived from his romantic and theosophical leanings.

Philosophically, Yeats found affinity with Berkeley, and found in his work an idea of the supreme intellect that gave form to the perceptible world. Berkeley’s targets, Newton and Locke, had conceived of matter as part of a mechanistic system that rendered it inert and senseless. This was problematic for Berkeley because the material universe would be lifeless and without agency, a potential cause, as he saw it, of atheism. While there are undoubted religious motivations in play in Berkeley’s thinking, it was at the same time philosophically important for Yeats that he prioritized mental activity over material substance. Chief among his ideas, common to all idealist thought, is a greater Absolute reality than is ordinarily perceptible, a more “authentic” existence. Berkeley’s universe is one in which being and consciousness are one and the same thing – a profound Unity of existence which is vital and innate rather than mechanistic as Locke, Newton and the followers of Descartes would have seen it. Yeats, too, was unwilling to conceive of an ultimate form of reality that did not have consciousness as its ground zero, claiming that “in so far as Time and Space are deduced from our sense-data we are the creators of Time and Space” (Yeats & Moore 82).

This Berkelian idealism finds its way into much of Yeats’s later poetry and into the arcane, geometric universe of *A Vision*. But, as we know, Yeats’s interest in Berkeley was not confined to the abstract. There is an important cultural element to his attraction to Berkeley. When he was younger, he had considered Berkeley, along with Jonathan Swift, not sufficiently Irish to be included on a list of great Irish figures; but later in his life he heroized them, along with Goldsmith and Burke, most famously in his poem “Blood and the Moon”:

I declare this tower is my symbol; I declare  
This winding, gyring, spiring treadmill of a stair is my  
ancestral stair;  
That Goldsmith and the Dean, Berkeley and Burke have  
travelled there. (Yeats 287)

His idealisation of these figures as the founders and epitome of the values of the eighteenth century Anglo-Irish meant that his interest could not be purely philosophical. Yeats would identify these four figures as central to an Irish Augustan tradition – a tradition that he placed himself firmly within – and the ideal image of Ireland that might emerge after the foundation of the State in 1922.

Of these four Augustan Irishmen, Berkeley represented a great intellectual ideal. While the pure metaphysics of immaterialism seems to be an antidote to the earthy materialism of nationalism, Yeats considered otherwise. For Yeats, Berkeley’s idealism

was not merely philosophical; it was also an inherently Irish consciousness. In 1930, Yeats contributed an introduction to Joseph Hone's and Mario Rossi's biography of Berkeley, where he wrote that those four idealised Augustan Irishmen "found in England the opposite that made their thought lucid or stung it into expression" (vi). Yeats refers enthusiastically in his introduction to Berkeley's retort that "we Irish" cannot think like the English empiricist John Locke, a repetition of a speech given in 1925 to the Irish Literary Society in which Yeats praised Berkeley in particular for his antagonism to British empiricism and the emphasis he laid on the primacy of the constitutive mind. He claimed:

The modern Irish intellect was born more than two hundred years ago when Berkeley defined in three or four sentences the mechanical philosophy of Newton, Locke and Hobbes, the philosophy of England in his day, and I think of England up to our day, and wrote after each: "We Irish do not hold with this", or some such sentence. (Pearce 172)

Consequently, Yeats's correspondence has the subtext of cultural and national protectiveness, and more importantly, the establishment of a culturally-specific kind of Irish identity revealed through opposition to the British mind. Berkeley was, as Yeats said, a figure "of the utmost importance" to Protestant Ireland in the new Irish Free State, an embodiment of the highest values of the eighteenth century Anglo Irish, an era which grew in Yeats's mind, as Roy Foster says, as a society which valued "style, intellect and aristocratic authority, an attitude reflected in literature, philosophy and architecture" (409; 426).

There is a good deal of creative invention of tradition on Yeats' behalf here, not least in his own eccentric sense of aristocratic destiny. As with most idealist artists, history is a servant of the mind: Yeats' revision of the Anglo-Irish tradition asserts the domination of the imagination over life. But there is an influential political ideology at work here too. In his admiration of Berkeley, we see in Yeats the association of a high-born colonial class culture with a philosophy that emphasises the importance of the subjective world as characteristically (Anglo) Irish. This fundamentally romantic ideology has influenced much of the working subject matter in Irish cultural production, where such historical romanticization of tradition has been a familiar experience and a highly contentious one. In much of the Irish writing that followed Yeats in the twentieth century, those works with similar idealist impulses have enacted a volatile relationship with the ideologies of cultural authenticity and the myths of the revival; this is the case in the works of Samuel Beckett and John Banville, for example. And if it is true that the fragmentary nature of philosophy in Ireland betrays the machinations of its own historical formation, then the literary forms that philosophy has taken carry traces of the political residue of its manipulation.

Leaving aside for the present the difficult question of the relation between a philosophical system and its representation or expression in literary form, the connection between philosophical idealism and cultural identification within certain strands of Irish literature reveals a fundamental concern with what is cryptically called in metaphysics the “Unity of Being”, or what might be alternatively termed “authentic” identity. In the work of Samuel Beckett, this ontological concern is pursued with carnivorous ruthlessness. In Beckett’s classic trilogy of novels written between 1947 and 1950, *Molloy*, *Malone Dies* and the *Unnamable*, for instance, the narrative – if it can be called that – broadly takes the form of the gradual degeneration of the body, a movement which represents the withdrawal from the physical world into the prison of pure consciousness. From *Molloy*, who can walk but eventually must crawl, to *Malone*, who is bedridden and dying, then to the *Unnamable*, who is merely a torso and head in a jar, the decline of the body serves as an image of the eradication of the world, the withdrawal into idealism, the slow descent towards solipsism and the determination to carry on until a core identity is found. As the narrators’ bodies disintegrate and the activities of the mind become the focus of the narrative, Beckett’s trilogy dramatizes the relentless torture of pure mental imprisonment. It can be argued here that there is a kind of perverse idealist impulse at work here in which the reality of the mind hellishly supersedes that of the body: the narrator attempts to come ever closer to his “authentic” identity by stripping away the external, material world, and in the process becoming ever more solipsistic. For this reason, Beckett has been described as a Cartesian. Language too plays its part in this game: the ultimate goal for the *Unnamable* is to fall into silence, through which he will become pure identity. But of course, as the *Unnamable* famously asserts, he must “go on” – the indestructible core of “authentic” identity cannot be ultimately found: he is, as the *Unnamable* asserts, always “at the threshold” of the door (418).

What is at stake here is the idea of what John Banville’s narrators frequently identify as “pure mind” or “pure form” – Beckett’s narrators are ultimately unable to find this essentiality. Ironically, this failure saves Beckett’s works from being the mouthpieces of doctrinal philosophy by preventing these heroic narrators from slipping completely into the realm of the abstract. Perhaps no philosophical text could live with such explicit failure, making modern literature the ideal medium for the expression of ignorance. For an idealist such as Kant, the transcendental ego existed prior to psychical phenomena; later, Husserl’s attempt to make the social world the site of all conscious acts would veer dangerously close to a transcendental solipsism. Beckett’s writing, emboldened through its literary form, ultimately disallows the fundamental ground of truth that idealist philosophy seeks. Least of all that is accepted in Beckett would appear to be Berkeley’s immaterialist doctrine. Consonantly, arguments have been made for Beckett as a materialist. Terry Eagleton (2006), for example, has argued that suffering in Beckett is surely physical not mental; the body dictates the condition of the mind. Hence, when in *Waiting for Godot* Lucky states: “since the death of Bishop Berkeley...in a word for reasons unknown no matter what matter the facts are there” (43), David Berman takes

this insistence on fact to be a “dismissal of Berkeley’s idealism” (43). But we might also add that this is Lucky’s speech and not Beckett’s; while it is the case that Berkeley’s immaterialism is potentially refuted in Beckett, the philosophical force of much his work is driven by an idealist fascination with an undiscoverable, yet potentially tangible ego. Ultimately, while the narratives in these texts are too unstable for any decisive dogmatic assertion, there is sufficient anxiety in Beckett’s texts to dismiss completely the possibility of an idealist core: his favourite word was, after all, perhaps.

Beckett’s inconclusive skirmish with idealism is significant in another sense, for the question of the relation between aesthetic representation of a philosophical idea and philosophy itself persists. Despite being steeped in philosophical reading, Beckett himself protested against the discipline’s language of ratiocination and rejected readings of his work presented in philosophical terms. This seems a curious paradox; for of all Irish writers, Beckett appears the most overtly philosophical, and superficially at least, a natural inheritor of the concerns behind Berkeley’s immaterialism. What makes these considerations of idealism in Beckett seem purely philosophical is the lack of specificity of place: the empty landscapes in his texts appear to remove cultural nuance from philosophical speculation. Unlike Yeats, Beckett’s treatment of the Irish philosopher seems unrelated to national politics. Yet this is not to state that there is no political dimension to Beckett’s treatment of philosophy. In postcolonial treatments of Beckett, for example, both David Lloyd (1993. 41-58) and Anna McMullan (89-109) have argued that the repudiation of definitive narrative in Beckett’s work is a disentanglement of the structures of political power that legitimized colonialism, for example. Beckett’s work is neither an overtly political or philosophical literature, but through the rejection of narrative to legitimize itself, the structures of knowledge which bolstered cultural and political authenticity are disentitled. If Yeats had thought Berkeley’s philosophical idealism a unique example of the Irish mind, the authenticity of that claim comes under pressure in Beckett because the positive identity of that mind remains elusive. So it is that David Lloyd (2010. 38) has recently suggested that Beckett’s “relentless deconstruction of the very terms of representation . . . presents an absolute difficulty for cultural studies of any kind”; Beckett’s work is a powerful riposte to the ideology of Irish cultural authenticity in philosophical impulses inherent in Yeats.

It was suggested at the outset of this article that whatever philosophical tradition in Ireland exists has found expression, not in philosophical discourse, but instead in literature. The obvious objection to this statement is that a philosophical literature can be considered a distinct phenomenon in itself rather than the superimposition onto, or engagement of one mode of expression with another. On the other hand, as Duddy would imply, philosophy in Ireland has developed in typically unrecognizable forms. Beckett sought to distinguish his art from the discipline of philosophy, but in the work of John Banville they are not necessarily separate forms of thought; Banville’s early work in particular is itself an idealist philosophy of art that at its most intense is revealed through its form. For example, in the Big House novel, *Birchwood*, which repeatedly likens itself



to the Kantian “thing in itself”, and again in novels such as *Kepler* and *Mefisto*, and to a more obscure extent, *Ghosts*, it is the form, and not the content, which strives to manifest itself as a purely literary entity. Taking as their starting point the Beckettian assertion that to be an artist is to fail, these novels attempt to show that any effort by the mind to order reality merely ends in failure. A succession of narrators, from scientists to art critics, and ultimately to the Gods themselves, discover that their “ordering systems” – Banville’s shorthand for the artistic project – are fraudulent or incomplete, an obvious critique, it would seem, of the Yeatsian claims of idealism to order time and space as the supreme reality, and one that aligns Banville close to Beckett. What we see in Banville is the supreme paradox of the assertion that all art ends in failure, but that the best art depends on a form which successfully demonstrates that failure. This works to greater or lesser degrees in his work, but this explicit tension, which must remain unresolved in his work, obscures the fact that Banville’s early formalism most certainly posited art as a supreme reality at the same time as those narratives superficially suggested otherwise.

Ostensibly, Banville’s work seems to be philosophically aware in so far as his narrators all share an introverted world-view that owes much to the idealist frameworks they draw from and which Banville himself is well versed in. At the same time, Beckett’s anti-rationalist ghost is ever present in Banville’s writing. Banville has also been attentive to Yeats, most significantly in his Big House novella, *The Newton Letter*. In that novella, Banville’s most political piece of all, the ideology of authenticity is lent a distinctly contemporary Irish air by linking the origin of a community with a romanticized history. The parallels with Yeats’s idealisation of Berkeley and Yeats veneration of the Augustan tradition are striking. The narrator, a failed historian, regards whom he mistakenly believes to be an aristocratic Anglo-Irish family as a “spectacle of pure refinement” (Banville 516). But when the family turns out to be Catholics, whose friends are sympathizers of the IRA, the narrator is shocked into rethinking his preconceptions. In the late 1970s and early 1980s when the book was written and published, romanticized history was seen as contributing to political violence on either side of the sectarian divide. Seamus Deane links the romanticization of history with two distinct historical figures, each revered as embodiments of their traditions, by claiming that

Yeats was indeed our last romantic as was Pearse in politics. They were men who asserted a coincidence between the destiny of the community and their own and believed that this coincidence had historical repercussion. (Deane 2003. 20)

Deane’s analysis of Yeats and Pearse as figures who aspired to both restore the origins and shape the destiny of their community is very close to the Heideggerian sense of the authentic, who, according to one critic, believed that “the resolute people discloses and acts on its destiny just as the resolute individual discloses and acts on his fate” (Zimmerman 173). The fate of the cultural politics of a nation lies in the hands of

individuals who resolutely embrace their history and transform it into an ideal. Pearse's violent nationalism is treated with grave suspicion in *The Newton Letter*; and what Banville sees in the Yeatsian ideal is the dangerous connections between authenticity and nationalism. In art, philosophy and politics, Yeats remains a figure indelibly associated with the pursuit of authenticity, attempting to seemingly embody and generate the origin and destiny of his tradition. With its references to Yeatsian landscapes and Big House grandeur, *The Newton Letter* plays on the romanticization of the Big House by depicting the integration of Anglo-Irish culture and aesthetics as an idealised form.

But here we are only thinking about the ironic potential in the *content* of Banville's work. What is perhaps of greater importance is the extent to which Banville's insistence that art should remain separate from politics is itself a political stance linked to an idealisation of art as a pure form. He has repeatedly asserted that politics and art are unwelcome bedfellows, and should avoid each other. "All one wants to do", he told Belinda McKeon (14), "is to make a small, finished, polished, burnished, beautiful object." While a work such as *The Newton Letter* demonstrates that there is no art that does not contain traces of the historical moment that produces it – "real life seeps in" as Banville says – the overwhelming feeling is of nostalgia and longing for a more perfect world, an Eden where the artist-God who controlled time and space had the ultimate power of individual creation; like a diminished version of Berkeley's God, Banville's ideal author brings his creatures into existence, moved by the agency of imagination alone. In this sense, Banville's skeptical treatment of the politics of Yeats' romanticizing of his Anglo-Irish forbears is a self-criticism, for he too is aware of his guilt in making the historical world a vassal of the absolute reality of the mind.

Berkeley could not accept a world of passive inanimate material; Banville's aesthetics entail the forlorn resurrection of that philosophy in literary form, particularly in novels such *Birchwood*, *The Science Tetralogy*, *Mefisto*, *Ghosts* and the duology of *Eclipse* and *Shroud*. These novels come closest to the exhibition of Banville's ideal of a totalized, unified, unspoiled "pure" form. While Banville's novels suggest themselves to be a progressive variation of Beckett, ultimately his work restores art as an ideal of itself, a discrete entity where the aestheticization of reality entails the domination of a pure art over the uncontrollability of life. In formal terms, Banville's is perhaps the clearest expression of an Irish philosophy in that regard; in Irish historico-cultural terms the yearning for some form of unity has in Banville's work, what has been termed "psychiatric accuracy" (Deane 1975. 337). The political character of Banville's writing has a distinct lineage to the Yeatsian synthesis of art and the man: in Banville both political ideology and art have the potential to see themselves as the incarnation of pure, authentic identity, which is why works such as *The Untouchable* and *Shroud*, for example, take political figures and events as their subject material. In this, Banville's aesthetics fall under the same pathos of authenticity that is at the heart of all idealist thought, and is a contemporary re-enactment of the extraordinary anxiety about ontological status that lay at the dynamic heart of Irish modernism. Yet Banville's work is curious in that for

all its innovation in the purest formal dramatization of philosophy in Irish writing, it is at the same time ideologically conservative in its persistent idealist nostalgia, while also, despite his claims, politically attuned, attentive to the denigrated status of art in contemporary culture.

## Notes

- 1 In his earlier years Banville routinely dissociated himself from the category of “Irish” writing. He has described Ireland as “a demilitarised and totalitarian state in which the lives of the citizens were to be controlled not by a system of coercive force and secret policing, but by a kind of applied spiritual paralysis maintained by an unofficial federation between the Catholic clergy, the Judiciary and the civil service.” John Banville, “Memory and Forgetting: The Ireland of de Valera and O’Faoláin”, in Dermot Keogh, Carmel Quinlan and Finbarr O’Shea, eds, *Ireland in the 1950s: The Lost Decade* (Cork: Mercier Press, 2004. 26).
- 2 Aided in no small part by those writers themselves, who all repeatedly rejected the nationalisation of their work.
- 3 The scholastic tradition is still healthy in many Irish colleges. To take an example: scholastic philosophy, a major part of the curriculum of Ireland’s main seminary, St Patrick’s College, Maynooth, also dominates the curriculum of its sister institution, NUI Maynooth, where more scholastic than continental or analytic philosophy continues to be taught to its humanities students.
- 4 It is ironic in this regard that Yeats could be seen as more “modern” than Joyce. Indeed, Yeats himself recorded after an early discussion with the younger man that Joyce naively believed that “everything has been settled by Thomas Aquinas”, a view that Yeats was dismissive of and which betrays something of the relative slightness of Joyce’s Jesuit education. “I have met so many like him”, Yeats said about Joyce’s youthful attraction to Aquinas. Quoted by Richard Ellman, “Joyce and Yeats”, *The Kenyon Review* 12. 4 (Autumn, 1950): 625.

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