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This phantom gibbet: writing through/as melancholy

Abstract:

In *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia* (1989), Julia Kristeva suggests that melancholy – an experience of 'object loss' (effectively, when a sign fails to correspond to its meaning, as established by Freud) – is a language which requires learning in order for this state of being (or 'nonbeing') to be understood. Melancholy affect, Kristeva argues, can thus be transposed into art where the 'symbolic' is represented through the 'sign'; she states: 'Artifice, as sublime meaning for and on behalf of the underlying, implicit nonbeing replaces the ephemeral' (Kristeva 1989: 99). In other words, in the experience of 'object loss' we look toward the imagination and the construction of signs to fill the void and make meaning – absence evoked by a presence. Accepting these ideas, this paper explores the paradoxical nature of narrative writing (via poetry by Keats, memoir by Malouf, and fiction by Banville) as a process which not only removes the melancholic from the object of their experience, but constructs a container for the melancholy object, to which the writer is inherently bound.

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> If I were asked what is the essence of story-telling, I would say it is a simple thing: the relating of something strange. Somewhere behind any work of fiction, long or short, is a voice quietly insisting, 'Isn't it strange? This life we thought so familiar and straightforward, it isn't really so familiar and straightforward at all'. – Graham Swift 'Postscriptive therapy' in *The agony and the ego*: 23
>
> I write entirely to find out what I'm thinking, what I'm looking at and what it means. – Joan Didion 'Why I Write' in *The writer on her work*: 20

Isn't it strange?

The town was so unpopulated that we did not validate the employment of a postman to deliver our mail. This meant a daily walk along the bay foreshore to and from the general store to collect mail, past a wrecked vessel and rundown boat sheds where I would sit and go through what correspondence had arrived; most often, not a lot. In that town I was far away from familiarity. And the expansive bay didn't help, my isolation made more apparent by the upright reach of city to the far north, and a glinting peninsula unavoidable to the east. That is what I was 'looking at', and I continued to look naively out across the surface of things for almost two months. Evidently, I had forgotten.

But I did remember, at last, the past buoyed by the recollection of a simple fact – 'a gleam, amidst the shadows of what is gone', as Banville writes in *The Sea* (2006: 118) – which brought a strange presence to a much loved absentee, and caused that place to take on a new and melancholy meaning. I remembered that the ashes of my mother's mother were cast from that opposing peninsula into that sombre bay; because that body of water, beyond topography, had shaped her internal landscape. So much so that she wished to be returned to that place, bodily, in ashen form, upon her death.

The surface ruptured.

How strange it is that her familiar body, a corporeal object, should be burned then dissolved in the sea. What meaning is to be made of this amorphous presence, the sea, signifying some definite thing that is now absent? What does one do with this absent/present existential reminder that all objects must eventually lapse; a kind of mortal anxiety? In what form can this comprehension be contained? And what other writers have related this strangeness in texts which contribute to my own processes and products of meaning-making?

I now live in a town far from that bay. We have a postman. But eliciting objects endure. *Aides-memoire*. Photographs, abalone shells … cathectic objects of metonymic significance. And I also have a body of creative work, not unlike a body of water, collecting all things formerly lost; this page functioning as a cabinet, of sorts; a container of lost loved objects … Or is it a phantom gibbet – a hanging gallows for my dead, to which I inescapably bind myself?

Morbid jottings

In *A Grief Observed*, a written response to his wife's (Helen Joy) death, C.S. Lewis writes:

> Are these jottings morbid? I once read the sentence 'I lay awake all night with toothache, thinking about toothache and about lying awake.' That's true to life. Part of every misery is, so to speak, the misery's shadow or reflection: the fact that you don't merely suffer but have to keep on thinking about the fact that you suffer. I not only live each endless day in grief, but live each day thinking about living each day in grief. Do these notes merely aggravate that side of it? Merely confirm the monotonous, tread-mill march of the mind round one subject? But what am I to do? I must have some drug, and reading isn't a strong enough drug now. By writing it all down (all? – no: one thought in a hundred) I believe I get a little outside it. (Lewis 1989: 22)

What does Lewis mean by, 'I get a little outside it?' What is 'it', exactly – memory; the amorphous experience of knowing loss and in this loss recognising one's own mortality? A 'Thing' that is unnameable, as Kristeva suggests (1989: 13)? And how does the act of writing, the construction of poetic artifice, allow the melancholic individual to comprehend and contain this 'it'?

I have found no match for Kristeva in describing the defining characteristic of melancholy. She states:

> if my existence is on the verge of collapsing, its lack of meaning is not tragic – it appears obvious to me, glaring and inescapable. […] I live a living death, my flesh is wounded, bleeding, cadaverized, my rhythm slowed down or interrupted, time has been erased or bloated, absorbed into sorrow. […] Absent from other people's meaning, alien, accidental with respect to naïve happiness, I owe a supreme, metaphysical lucidity to my [melancholy]. On the frontiers of life and death, occasionally I have the arrogant feeling of being witness to the meaninglessness of Being, or revealing the absurdity of bonds and beings. […] My [melancholy] points to my not knowing how to lose – I have perhaps been unable to find a valid compensation for the loss? It follows that any loss entails the loss of my being – and of Being itself. (Kristeva 1989: 3-5; note that for consistency I have replaced Kristeva's 'depression' with 'melancholy' [synonymous in her use: see 9-11])

In *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, Kristeva suggests that melancholy – an experience of 'object loss' (effectively, when a sign fails to correspond to its meaning, as established by Freud) – is a language which requires learning in order for this state of being (or 'nonbeing') to be understood. Melancholy affect, Kristeva argues, can thus be transposed into art where the symbolic is represented through the sign: 'Artifice, as sublime meaning for and on behalf of the underlying, implicit nonbeing replaces the ephemeral' (1989: 99). In the experience of 'object loss' we look toward the imagination and the construction of signs to fill the void and make meaning – absence evoked by a presence.

In the Romantic ideal of melancholy, the 'melancholy man' (typically a male artist or scholar) was constructed as one 'who felt more deeply, saw more clearly, and came closer to the sublime than ordinary mortals' and that 'exalted pleasures were reserved

for those subject to the suffering of melancholy' (Radden 2000: 15). Regardless of contemporary thought perpetuating such notions of the artist's melancholy – 'the ancient, persistent belief that there exists such a thing as a "fine madness"' (Jamison: 4) – the notion of pleasure is reflective of Edmund Burke's foundational writing on the Gothic sublime, of which he states:

> It is the nature of grief to keep its object perpetually in its eye, to present it in its most pleasurable views, to repeat all the circumstances that attend it, even to the last minuteness; to go back to every particular enjoyment, to dwell upon each, and to find a thousand new perfections in all, that were not sufficiently understood before; in grief, the pleasure is still uppermost; and the affliction we suffer has no resemblance to absolute pain, which is always odious, and which we endeavor to shake off as soon as possible. (Burke 2014 [1756]).

As Bruhm points out, Burke's work on the Gothic sublime sought to 'collapse the distance' we typically place between pleasure and pain (1994: 2), to which catharsis is integral; a purging yet also, importantly, the *extension* of energies associated with melancholy. These ideas are central to C.S. Lewis's morbid jottings. Balus quotes Petrarch in this regard: 'what brings all pain to a climax is the fact that with a kind of secret delight I always feed on my tears, reluctantly freeing myself from them' (1998: 414). Balus considers such release to be a 'positive element [which] turns melancholy away from the path leading to despair'; 'The melancholy 'joy of grief',' claims Balus, 'removes a man [sic] from the object of his experience, allowing him to contemplate his own state but at the same time eliminating all commitment' (1998: 414). Although I agree with this claim to a certain degree, I propose that the intersection of the 'joy of grief' and catharsis is precisely where poetic artifice finds function for the melancholic (with both poetry and prose narrative forms existing beneath this banner of 'poetic artifice') in that the cathartic practice of writing not only 'removes' the melancholic from the 'object' of their experience, the poetic artifice *becomes the container* of their 'object of melancholy experience', to which the writer as object is inherently bound (in both senses of the word). In order to exemplify these concepts, this paper establishes its foundations in John Keats's seminal 'Ode on Melancholy' (1819), then explores David Malouf's *12 Edmondstone Street* and John Banville's *The Sea* as contemporary exemplars of melancholy as both a practice and an aesthetic.

Romantic Keats and 'trophied' objects

1. No, no, go not to Lethe, neither twist
  Wolf's-bane, tight-rooted, for its poisonous wine;
Nor suffer thy pale forehead to be kiss'd
  By nightshade, ruby grape of Proserpine;
Make not your rosary of yew-berries,
  Nor let the beetle, nor the death-moth be
    Your mournful Psyche, nor the downy owl
A partner in your sorrow's mysteries;
  For shade to shade will come too drowsily,

And drown the wakeful anguish of the soul. [10]
2.
But when the melancholy fit shall fall
Sudden from heaven like a weeping cloud,
That fosters the droop-headed flowers all,
And hides the green hill in an April shroud;
Then glut thy sorrow on a morning rose, [15]
Or on the rainbow of the salt sand-wave,
Or on the wealth of globed peonies;
Or if thy mistress some rich anger shows,
Emprison her soft hand, and let her rave,
And feed deep, deep upon her peerless eyes. [20]
3.
She dwells with Beauty – Beauty that must die;
And Joy, whose hand is ever is at his lips
Bidding adieu; and aching Pleasure nigh,
Turning to poison while the bee-mouth sips:
Ay, in the very temple of Delight [25]
Veil'd Melancholy has her sovran shrine,
Though seen of none save him whose strenuous tongue
Can burst Joy's grape against his palate fine;
His soul shall taste the sadness of her might,
And be among her cloudy trophies hung. [30]
('Ode on Melancholy' by John Keats, in Leonard 1994: 250)

In 'Sorrow's Mysteries: Keats's "Ode on Melancholy"', Barbara Herrnstein Smith suggests that the premise of the ode is based on 'a conceptual metaphor: namely, that the speaker is describing the appropriate route by which one must travel in order to find where Melancholy dwells' (1966: 682). Smith accounts for the hypotheses which align Keats (in this instance only, as a curious exception) with Romanticism. Smith paraphrases such suggestions: 'whereas Keats is not usually a victim of the worst excesses of the Romantic sensibility, this ode demonstrates his tendencies in that direction, if not his total capitulation [due to] its apparent celebration and advocacy of sorrow, anguish, and pain' (1966: 679; interestingly, Keats has also been noted to have suffered from 'many a bitter fit of hypochondriasm', once considered to be a form of melancholia (Jamison 1994: 70). Keats's Gothic trumpeting of the 'joy of grief' is not refuted by Smith; in fact, she subscribes to it when she states: 'It is not the charnel-house horrors of death that produce melancholy, but the contemplation and acute recognition of the mortality of beauty, of joy forever bidding adieu in a world of mutability' (1966: 687). However, she does go to significant lengths to qualify (on somewhat Freudian grounds) that in respect of Keats's subject matter he is conceptually constrained to such 'celebration' – or at least aesthetic gratification – of 'wakeful anguish' (line 10), citing his use of allusion in the third stanza to conclude that melancholy is the response to the dichotomous conjunctions 'of shade and brightness, of mortality and beauty or joy' (Smith 1966: 686); 'Ay, in the very temple of Delight / Veil'd Melancholy has her sovran shrine' (lines 25-26).

However, despite an abundance of scholarship devoted to the ode, it is the ambiguity of Keats's possible intention and the meaning one may derive from particular ambiguities of structure, syntax, and signifiers which encourages debate. The ambiguity exists predominantly in relation to the addressee(s), ultimately situating the poem as ironic.

Who is the addressee of Keats's ode? Throughout the first and second stanzas, the apparent recipient of the ode is consistently addressed 'thy' or 'your', thus signifying an abstract other. This abstract 'you' addressee may be initially thought synonymous with the implied reader, constructing the ode as what Smith calls a 'report' on 'the nature and sources of melancholy' (1966: 680). To make sense of Keats's choice, Smith compares the ode to the convention established by the poet's other odes, suggesting that in 'Ode to a Nightingale', for example, the implied narrator 'reports' the affectations 'to the object which is inspiring them: the nightingale', and that the implied reader is 'out of the picture' (1966: 680-681). Interestingly, the original (later omitted) first stanza of 'Ode on Melancholy' establishes a kind of quest narrative for mythological 'Melancholy' (Smith 1966: 683-684), indicating that Keats's intention may have been a kind of inversion of the 'Nightingale' convention. The 'cancelled' stanza:

> Though you should build a bark of dead men's bones,
> And rear a phantom gibbet for a mast,
> Stitch shrouds together for a sail, with groans
> To fill it out, blood-stained and aghast;
> Although your rudder be a dragon's tail
> Long sever'd, yet still hard with agony,
> Your cordage large uprootings from the skull
> Of bald Medusa, certes you would fail
> To find the Melancholy – whether she
> Dreameth in any isle of Lethe dull (cited in Smith 1966: 683).

This (arguably redundant, though still influential) stanza seemingly maintains the addressee as an ambiguous 'you', most likely the implied reader, or indeed Keats or his implied narrator addressing a split ego object. In her article, Smith goes on to say that, in comparison to 'Nightingale', Keats's 'Ode on Melancholy' is:

> neither an intimate narration nor an invocation, but rather an exposition. It does not address melancholy; it *apparently* addresses us, the readers, on the subject of melancholy. The title thus functions more like Bacon's 'On Love' or 'On Truth' than like Keats's own 'On a Grecian Urn.' The statements within this ode are to be read as proceeding from a neutral (but knowing) speaker (1966: 681; my emphasis).

Smith even suggests that 'someone is being dissuaded from an on-going activity: "Stop doing what you are doing." We may imagine this person to be the typical melancholic figure sitting in doleful apathy midst death's-heads and hour-glasses,' she states, in reference to Dürer's winged melancholy (1966: 689). However, this interpretation is somewhat limited as it does not open the ode to further layers of meaning and, furthermore, is undermined by the non-existence of this 'you' in the third stanza.

Haverkamp takes us forward, contributing that 'Melancholy', in a mythological and subsequently rendered allegorical sense, is in fact 'the avoided addressee of the ode', thus abstracting the 'muse' concept (spoken of in Smith) into 'a loss, a loss that in this case the muse is unable to account for' (Haverkamp 1990: 700). To support and further this idea, Haverkamp refers to two lines from Shakespeare's 'Sonnet 31' which not only share Keats's adopted metaphor but connect in terms of thematic meaning-making: 'Thou art the grave where buried love doth live, / Hung with the trophies of my lovers gone' (Shakespeare, lines 9-10; in Haverkamp 1990: 700-701). In conjunction with Keats's ode these lines ultimately signify the irony that in composing the poetic artifice ('Thou art'), one's lost loved object is both buried and immortalised through 'trophy' commemoration; crucially, 'an assembly of 'trophies' not of success but of failure' (Haverkamp 1990: 703). Poetic artifice 'gives a face to the lost object and presents a voice from beyond the grave. As a withdrawal symptom it manifests itself in an almost hallucinatory way' (702). The poem becomes a 'ghost dance' (704), the lost object a suspended spectre; not unlike the photograph of a now deceased loved one, contained by the work of a camera's eye.

Walter Benjamin points out 'that the baroque melancholy eye presupposes, even entails, the death of the contemplated object in order to save it eternally and thereby achieve salvation for the subject as well' (qtd. in Haverkamp 1990: 703-704). The loss itself, then, is contained and therefore *salvaged* by way of the writer's process and subsequent subjective signification – what it means for the work's author. This is precisely C.S. Lewis's concern in *A Grief Observed* when he states:

> I am thinking about her nearly always. Thinking of the H. facts – real words, looks, laughs, and actions of hers. But it is my own mind that selects and groups them. […] But won't the composition inevitably become more and more my own? (1989: 30).

Yet while the poetic artifice memorialises the loss, or 'failure', through representation (the 'trophy' as memento), as a result the writer is ironically also made the object of melancholy: 'To be capable of discovering her […] is to become her victim', writes Smith (1966: 689); and 'Every loss […] is also some kind of loss of our own ego', writes Balus (1998: 415). To clarify this idea, Haverkamp says this of Keats's ode:

> The melancholy poet consciously digs his own grave, or, rather, in writing he tries to escape it; and in not addressing it properly, as the genre and the model of Shakespeare would have required, he holds back, pretending, in fact, to be someone else [implied through the persona and addressee], shifting from 'feed deep' to [the more objective third person pronoun use] 'His soul' in an ironic splitting of his lyrical voice. No lyrical 'I' is left, only a lyrical 'eye' observing itself as an other on whom to blame the consequential 'shall,' the future 'trophy,' the poem that is left on the page and came to terms with what remains now inaccessible, the poet 'saved from drowning' […] in 'the wakeful anguish of the soul'. [… Thus,] the imprisoned object of desire shall make you the subject matter of your own disposition (as Shakespeare had, in a memorable way, symbolized the narcissistic constitution of the writing subjectivity) (1990: 701).

To synthesise: if I photographed my mother's mother, who has since passed away, not only does the photograph function as a melancholy object due to its visual

representation of her (I look at it longingly in recollection of who she was to me and thereby what I have lost), but because my presence is inevitably implied as the photographer I also become my own object of melancholy through the temporal split between the photographer in the act of taking the picture (a former state of self), and the present-time viewer of the photograph. And this is where the melancholic gaze exists: in the abstract tense shift that comes to encapsulate the loss, as signified by the photograph.

Objective presence, subjective past in Malouf and Banville

In Malouf's memoir *12 Edmondstone Street*, the role of architecture (the childhood house) in the formation of the self is his central thematic concern. Malouf declares in the opening paragraph: 'The house I lived in as a child is no longer there. Like most of old South Brisbane it has been torn down and a factory stands on the site' (1985: 3). This statement is fundamental not only to his premise, but also to understanding the function absence plays in the meaning-making process for both Malouf and his reader.

As constituents of a 'household', Malouf emphasises the importance of objects in a child's comprehension of what is 'other', and hence a child's realisation of their own mortal object-ness. To epitomize these ideas, the most noteworthy exploration of objective presence standing in for some kind of subjective absence is, without doubt, contained within Malouf's clinging to the 'Brass Jardiniere', of which there were two that stood on either end of the piano. 'They are identical,' he states, 'but only the one on the left has a name. This is the Brass Jardiniere, and it is the focus of such passionate attention on my part that I think of it as shining brighter than the other (as if my thoughts had power just in themselves to burnish by contact)' (1985: 30). The fact that this left jardiniere is his 'favourite object in the house' (30) is a telling statement considering the similitude of the objects; the difference, he admits, is due to its collection function and, consequently, his own subjectivities:

> A deep mystery hovers about it, and if anyone were to remind me that it is in fact indistinguishable from the other I would deny it.
>
> The right-hand jardiniere is utterly mundane. Anyone can see that. The left-hand one is transfigured by its contents. I would know it blindfold. I would be drawn to it infallibly by the heat of my own passionate fingerprints.
>
> It is the place in our house where a thing is put (and searched for) when there is nowhere else for it to go, a general repository of the half-lost, the half-found, the useless-for-the-time-being-but-not-quite-rejected, and all those bits and pieces, and odd things and marvels that have no formal category […] all things that the other half will turn up and make a pair. The spirit of accidental separation hovers over the jardiniere, but in so far as it is itself part of a pair, it speaks for completeness, for final restitution.
>
> I lay all the objects out in their kinds, then check for the hundredth time that no mistake has been made. It is a game that is never finished, since who knows, next time some change may have occurred – not in the objects themselves but in the relationship between them (40-42).

Perhaps most importantly for both Malouf and his reader is the utterly striking recognition of his 'source of commitment' to this object; the epistemological rupture at the root of his perceived difference between jardinieres, and why and how the named Brass Jardiniere 'speaks for' both absence and the *potential* for 'completeness' and 'final restitution':

> I imagine going through life with the jardiniere invisibly in my arms, a heavy burden; which is why I have begun the long business of committing its contents to memory. This is a secret. But the real secret is the source of my commitment. As a smaller child than I am now I had an invisible friend, a lost twin of my own. I cling to the jardiniere in the belief that one day we too may be united: that he (or is it I?) will be found (42).

Although not redolent with what may be generally regarded as a 'melancholy tone', the content here is deeply resonant in that the object which is a literal container for 'half-lost' objects symbolises a further 'lost half' for Malouf. The Brass Jardiniere is a burdensome *symbolic substitute* for his lost 'twin' (a projection of self) in his melancholy; the object is something he can figuratively 'hold' or possess so that what is lost is memorialised, even connoting hope for completion. Essentially, Malouf is trapped within his own 'melancholy gaze'; to revisit Haverkamp, 'the imprisoned object of desire shall make you the subject matter of your own disposition' (1990: 701). And the text itself, as a palpable, published object, is a further, concrete object functioning as his melancholy 'container' (Malouf's 'trophy'). This exemplifies both Kristeva's 'poetic counterpoise' function, and Bal's three-levelled narrative-object paradox – that text is a container of 'subjectively inventorized' objects, yet a narrative text exists as a palpable object which is subjectively rendered by writer and reader (1994: 98-99).

In John Banville's fiction novel *The Sea*, grieving protagonist Max Morden similarly returns to a coastal house of childhood summers 'to live amidst the rubble of the past' (2006: 4) – certainly a Gothic aesthetic. With the loss of his wife to cancer, Max is compelled to revisit the site where he befriended the Grace family, referred to as 'the gods' and who possess a kind of curious magnetism for young Max. Yet with the drowning of the Grace twins Chloe and Myles, a trauma which looms over the narrative voice until the event's climactic revelation, it is the juncture of distant and recent losses which launches Banville's melancholy narrator into a deep exploration of the past.

It is arguable that the central narrative conflict of Banville's novel is located in Max's reconciliation with not only the incidents of distant and recent loss, but with the past itself and the role memory plays (or re-plays) in the memorialisation of such traumas. Max is therefore an ideal exemplar of a melancholy narrator: in mourning for the lost objects of what he could 'hold' (Anna, his wife, in a matrimonial sense) and could never 'hold' (the drowned Chloe and Myles, and indeed the enigmatic Connie and Carlo Grace who never returned and found their own fates), Max garners a narcissistic pleasure – indeed, the 'joy of grief' – by lodging at the memory-laden 'Cedars' holiday house as a deliberate prompt for traumatic memory. Such a decision also exemplifies Schiesari's statement on melancholy as the 'ego's warring over the object of loss, such that the loss itself becomes the dominant feature and not the lost object' (Schiesari in Radden 2000: 44).

For Max, the past provides divergent qualities. At first, upon his return Max is willing to immerse himself in the 'rubble of the past', which quickly becomes an intimate space when he states: 'The past beats inside me like a second heart' (Banville 2006: 13). Yet in his desire to revisit, reclaim and generate meaning from the past via self-reflexive narration, Max also concedes that, '[t]here are moments when the past has a force so strong it seems one might be annihilated by it' (47). With this, Banville evokes the melancholy pleasure of nostalgia while simultaneously questioning its validity and accepting its phenomenological 'affective 'truth' beyond accuracy and rational explanation' (Sharrad 2000: 765):

> […] the past is just such a retreat for me, I go there eagerly, rubbing my hands and shaking off the cold present and colder future. And yet, what existence, really, does it have, the past? After all, it is only what the present was, once, the present that is gone, no more than that. And yet (Banville 2006: 61).

It is the resonant 'And yet', after which an ellipses might follow to signify the uncommunicable, which indicates the melancholy of Max's circumstance: knowing the redundancy of the past as simply the passage of time with which nothing can be done, and yet so enmeshed within the past that it continues to hold sway over his present consciousness. Such is the conflict of his reconciliation between self and the significant events of loss which must appear inevitable in retrospect.

Again, in melancholy the individual's own transient corporeality is revealed by loss, and Banville invests in this concept with reference to not only the presence of material objects signifying a subjective past, but indicates the capacity of language to signify the unnameable 'Thing' which Kristeva suggests the melancholic perpetually 'wanders in pursuit of' (1989: 13). These ideas are portrayed in the following passage, a recollection of Anna's progressive decline and Max's progressive figurative isolation, particularly experienced in Mr Todd's consultancy clinic where he undergoes his own death journey in hypothesis:

> On all sides there were portents of mortality. I was plagued by coincidences; long-forgotten things were suddenly remembered; objects turned up that for years had been lost. My life seemed to be passing before me, not in a flash as it is said to do for those about to drown, but in a sort of leisurely convulsion, emptying itself of its secrets and its quotidian mysteries in preparation for the moment when I must step into the black boat on the shadowed river with the coin of passage in my already coldening hand. Strange as it was, however, this imagined place of pre-departure was not entirely unfamiliar to me. On occasion in the past, in moments of inexplicable transport, in my study, perhaps, at my desk, immersed in words, paltry as they may be, for even the second-rater is sometimes inspired, I had felt myself break through the membrane of mere consciousness into another state, one which had no name, where ordinary laws did not operate, where time moved differently if it moved at all, where I was neither alive nor the other thing and yet more vividly present than ever I could be in what we call, because we must, the real world. And even years before that again, standing for instance with Mrs Grace in that sunlit living room, or sitting with Chloe in the dark of the picture-house, I was there and not there, myself and revenant, immured in the moment and yet hovering somehow

> on the point of departure. Perhaps all of life is no more than a long preparation for the leaving of it. (Banville 2006: 97-98)

Much of Max's melancholy originates in the acknowledgement of what Gibson calls 'the metamorphosis of [one's] own and [an] other's material existence' through aging and being witness to death (2004: 291). This knowledge is intensified especially when the other's death occurs over an extended period of time. In this case, Gibson notes, the 'wasting away of the dying is often an indelible and dominant memory image for the grieving' (2004: 291). And so it is for Max as witness to Anna's protracted failing. Reminiscent of Tennyson's *Tears, idle tears*, with its emotive final utterance: 'O Death in Life, the days that are no more' (qtd. in Leonard 1996: 233; line 20), Banville offers an equally despondent meditation: 'We carry the dead with us only until we die too,' he writes, 'and then it is we who are borne along for a little while, and then our bearers in their turn drop, and so on into the unimaginable generations' (2006: 119).

This phantom gibbet

Kristeva writes:

> Naming suffering, exalting it, dissecting it into its smallest components – that is doubtless a way to curb mourning. To revel in it at times, but also to go beyond it, moving on to another form, not so scorching, more and more perfunctory… Nevertheless, art seems to point to a few devices that bypass complacency and, without simply turning mourning into mania, secure for the artist and the connoisseur a sublimatory hold over the lost Thing […] by means of the polyvalence of sign and symbol, which unsettles naming and, by building up a plurality of connotations around the sign, affords the subject a chance to imagine the nonmeaning, or the true meaning, of the Thing (1989: 97).

Narrative is suggestive. It is a kind of restoration through accumulation; the gathering of word objects in a design which collectively signifies the imaginary, the real yet intangible; the 'Thing'. Disillusion and illusion; the lost and the collected; the re-collected and dispersed:

> This is a survival of idealization – the imaginary constitutes a miracle, but it is at the same time its shattering: a self-illusion, nothing but dreams and words, words, words… It affirms the almightiness of temporary subjectivity – the one that knows enough to speak until death comes (Kristeva 1989: 103).

With poetic artifice we build a gibbet for what we loved, and within this construction we inexorably rope our selves. I am here, as is my grandmother, despite the fact that her body has long since been cast into the sea.

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