admirably relentless in the pursuit of her central quarry, the nexus of scandal references and allusions within the Joycean texts and so her book has a focussed quality, helped by the side-lining of all tangential issues and debates to the notes. Overall Backus considers the literary implications for the legal, social, and economic factors that led to an intense interest in the idea of sex scandal over the course of the Irish Home Rule debates during James Joyce's childhood. Excellent on libel laws and on newspapers and politics, this book's main virtue is that it provides significant new contexts for Joyce's writings in a lively, engaging, and thoughtful manner.

EIBHEAR WALSH

University College Cork

DOI: 10.3366/iur.2015.0165

Mark O'Connell, *John Banville's Narcissistic Fictions*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. 233 pages. £50.00 GBP (hardback).

The notion that a new post-war personality type – a 'selfish' one worshipping, say, youth, consumerism, and ideas of individual self-realization – has sprung out of late capitalism is wide-spread, at least since Christopher Lasch's *The Culture of Narcissism* (1979) appeared. Narcissism is a commonly used term then, but it tends to be understood simply as vanity, or self-centredness. If understood, instead, as 'an exhaustive anxiety, or cluster of anxieties, about the self' – anxieties that may cause a, sometimes pathological, absorption with the self – as Mark O'Connell does in his new monograph *John Banville's Narcissistic Fictions*, the concept becomes a sharp theoretical tool with which to pry open the complex fiction of one of Ireland's foremost prose writers.

The business of Mark O'Connell's book is the application of the tool that the concept of narcissism constitutes to John Banville's novels (his first novel *Nightspawn* is not considered; neither are the Benjamin Black crime novels, or the early short story collection *Long Lankin*) with the troubled, male, first-person narrators at focus. The new tool is not intended to 'offer a reading of a single, isolated aspect of Banville's work'; rather, O'Connell's aim is to present narcissism as 'the key' to this writer, and as a means of pulling together the 'disparate strands – thematic, stylistic and formal – of his complex and enigmatic fiction' (p.14). O'Connell gives himself a tall order then, and, for the reviewer, the task at hand is to ascertain whether he fills it.

Let me say from the start that O'Connell's book, offering clarity and a steadily developing line of argumentation, is exceedingly well written. In fact, it is a delight to read. (It is well proofed, too; one of the rare typos is the misspelling of my name in the index!) It is scholarly sound, generally, and feisty enough in polemics, briefly taking on not just younger critics such as Elke D'Hoker, but a pioneer such as Rüdiger Imhof as well.

Consistent with his reader-friendly approach throughout the book, O'Connell provides the introductory chapter with a useful historical overview of the idea of narcissism. The longish next chapter, 'Banville's Narcissists', is the first of four that explore O'Connell's central concern – narcissism *in* the novels – by analyzing the representation of Banville's narrators, their 'inner lives and their interactions with one another' (p.143). Focusing, in 'Banville's Narcissists', primarily on Freddie Montgomery in *The Book of Evidence*, Alexander Cleave in *Eclipse*, and Axel Vander in *Shroud*, O'Connell shows that Banville's narrators are skeptical about the very reality of their own selves. They are simultaneously unsure of and utterly absorbed by themselves, frequently at the expense of family relationships. Moreover, O'Connell astutely suggests that the idea of 'the self as a slender simulacrum' motivates much of the 'ontological unease' of Banville's other narrators (p.41), and rightly sees the idea of character as 'an imitation of an imitation' (p.41) as central, especially in *Shroud*. Such important ideas could have been developed further.

The figure of the double and of the absent, idealized identical twin are at focus in 'Missing Twins'. Here, O'Connell convincingly argues that the abortive pursuits of lost twins that propel the narrative in *Birchwood* and *Mefisto*, are fundamentally narcissistic ones, aimed at reuniting self with self. The next chapter, 'The False Self', focuses on the deceptive, protean qualities of Banville's protagonists. They are masked shape-changers and actors – and this is true not just for Cleave, who *is* an actor, but for most of them. O'Connell argues that what links the three novels considered here – *Ghosts*, *Athena*, and *Shroud* – is their 'concern with the ways in which identities are performed' (p.112). To elucidate the tricky issue of the existence of an authentic self, O'Connell draws on psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott's notion of the 'false self' and finally suggests that the ultimate question these novels raise may be whether 'truth or falsehood are even applicable' to the issue of selfhood here (p.113). This is a crucial question, indeed.

The chapter 'Shame' argues that 'shame is a key issue in Banville's work' and one 'inseparable from that of narcissism' (p.114). The discussion of shame connected to a discrepancy between 'reality' and 'preferred image' is convincing. Especially interesting is the suggestion

that it is in the character's encounters with a background that fails to match the character's ideal self image – as with Victor Maskell in *The Untouchable* and Max Morden in *The Sea* – that his 'fraudulence seems most in danger of being revealed' (p.139).

In 'Narrative Narcissism' O'Connell abandons the strictly psychological use of the concept of narcissism and – aligning it with the self-conscious narrative strategies and devices known as metafiction and termed 'narrative narcissism' by Linda Hutcheon – turns to his secondary concern, narcissism of the novels, or textual narcissism. Focusing on *Doctor Copernicus*, *Kepler*, and *The Newton Letter*, he shows that the allusiveness and self-reflexivity of Banville's fiction is a textual narcissism which is akin to the self-absorption of the characters examined in previous chapters. Through analyses of *Ghosts*, *Athena*, and *Ancient Light*, O'Connell also explores Banville's use of *mise en abyme*. This device – which he sees as a means of narcissistic self-reflection – arguably allows Banville to create a 'fictional hall of mirrors' in which the reflections of author, narrator, and reader are 'artfully confused' (p.179).

In the final chapter, 'The Paradox of Empathy', O'Connell explores the relationship of empathy, narcissism, and narrativity. He suggests that an epistemological and ontological issue is the fundamental moral question in Banville's work: how can a narcissistic character, for example Freddie, radically unsure of his own identity and reality as he is, ever know the inner life of another person? O'Connell suggests that Banville's attempted solution to the problem is a shift from his customary first-person narrative mode to a third-person one, enabling a move into the perspective of the Other. This way, Banville's narrators attempt to transcend their obsessive self-absorption. As applied to the narrators of the novels discussed so far, I find the argumentation convincing. Reaching *The Infinities* though, I take issue with O'Connell's reading – or parts of it.

Appreciating much of O'Connell's analysis of *The Infinities*, I hesitate before the character Old Adam, the dying patriarch of Arden. Certainly, he can be seen as another Banvillean narrator – although, unlike others, he is presented primarily through third-person narration – struggling to explain himself to himself. His tale is an inner monologue, silently told as he lies comatose. As O'Connell brilliantly puts it, he is not just a solipsist, but 'a solipsist in a coma' (p.201).

So far, so good, then, but – and I may have missed something here – when O'Connell claims that the voice identifying itself as Hermes is in fact the inventions of the comatose Adam, I become uneasy. Not that I reject the possibility of Old Adam seeking to 'transcend his narcissism by attempting to project himself into the

minds' of family members (p.201), or to imagine himself a deity, but I find no textual support for that deity being Hermes. If Adam imagines himself a god, surely it is Zeus. O'Connell seems to disregard the fact that *The Infinities* is a novel based on Heinrich von Kleist's *Amphitryon*. Having published *Love in the Wars* – an English version of another Kleist play, *Penthesilea* – in 2005, Banville, sitting down with Derek Hand at a 2005 symposium in Härnösand, Sweden (see the *IUR* Banville Special Issue, 2006), discussed a planned novel. Banville said that his new novel would be 'loosely based' on Kleist's *Amphitryon* and narrated by the Mercury figure. The figure of Jupiter, he said, wants two things: 'to be loved', and 'to die'. To be loved for himself is hard for an immortal god, to die is impossible. When *The Infinities* appears in 2009, Mercury has become Hermes and Jupiter the weary figure of Zeus. Here, Old Adam may be seen as wishing to merge with Zeus – he desires Helen and 'pursues' her, perhaps, in his comatose state. As for Hermes, O'Connell states that this deity – who is, after all, *Psychopompos* – allows Old Adam to cross the borders between 'this world and whatever comes after it' (p.202). What *The Infinities* textually shows, though, is that Adam – who is ready to die – is prevented, presumably by the character Pan/Benny Grace (p.155), from crossing the border between life and death. Although Adam's imminent death hangs over the novel like a drop of water longing to fall, he regains consciousness and is present in the final scenes. He is hooked up to tubes, weak, and yearning for escape into the garden, but he is alive. He cannot die. Old Adam's ties to the Zeus figure are strong.

To conclude, the miss that I think flaws part of Mark O'Connell's reading of *The Infinities* does not greatly change my overall assessment of his book. His stated aim was to offer the concept of narcissism as a key to the understanding of John Banville's fiction – thematically, stylistically, and formally. This tall order he goes a long way toward filling. Moreover, O'Connell's reading of Banville's self-absorbed narrators through the concept of narcissism is the most exciting piece of Banville criticism I have read in a long time. Although undoubtedly more can and will be said about the art of Banville, Mark O'Connell's *John Banville's Narcissistic Fictions* is a major contribution to the field.

HEDDA FRIBERG-HARNESK
Mittuniversitetet, Sweden
DOI: 10.3366/iur.2015.0166