

“*The Problematics of Authenticity*”:¹ *John Banville’s Shroud*

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Abstract: John Banville’s *Shroud* makes use of certain facts in the lives of Paul de Man and Louis Althusser. The novel focuses on a character who has dissembled all his life; he has never ceased to lie and play roles in order to escape self. He says he has never believed in the self, and yet he appears to seek authenticity. Who can say, though, Alex Vander being the most unreliable of narrators? He sees himself in various guises, most notably that of Christ. *Shroud* deals with self-effacement and the death of the divine in Man. The account alternates between third-person and first-person, which seems to be one of several aspects it shares with *Hypertomachia Poliphili*.

In a sense, *Shroud* is about the death of the divine in Man. The protagonist of the novel is a negative Christ-figure, one who brings not salvation and redemption, but death and destruction. Significantly, Alex Vander, whose name sounds so strikingly like Alexander, for what that may be worth, is rescued by a Mephistophelian *deus* in Antwerp during the war. The rescuer is not *deus* proper, but a *deus ex machina*. His name is Max Schaudleine. Cass Cleave is all but certain whether the name of the man who disclosed Vander’s murky past to her was “Scheindiene, Schaudleine, something like that, I cannot remember” (p. 149). Recounting the events which led to his uncanny escape as a Jew from the clutches of the Nazi occupants in Belgium during the Second World War, Alex Vander quotes the man he encountered in his parents’ flat as having said: “The name is Schaudleine [...] You might call me Max, if you wish” (p. 254). “Max Schaudleine” is exactly correct. For “Max Schaudleine” is an anagram of “*deus ex machina*”. Many things in *Shroud* are turned into their mirror opposites: not just Alex Vander as negative, diabolical Christ-figure. Another instance, as will be shown, concerns the concept, or idea, of Arcady, most obviously the name of the town in the States where Vander resided before coming to Turin, “this arcaded city” (p. 4).

One of the most extensive discussions of *Shroud* so far is Andrew O’Hagan’s in *The New York Review of Books*.² As O’Hagan sees it, “[i]t was only a matter of time before words themselves – writing, the memory of words used and inhabited, abandoned, dangling in history – became the central subject of a Banville novel, and so it is with *Shroud* [...]”.³ Moreover, he states:

[...] *Shroud* becomes a very handsomely sustained piece of writing about the unsustainability of writing. It is, in any event, a novel about the uncertainty of words and their meanings, a book about the very performance of language itself, about the recording of history, the syntax of memory, and the traps of authorship.⁴

Of course, in every piece of literature, words and writing become the central subject. But *Shroud*, arguably, is not about the unsustainability of writing; it is not about the uncertainty of words and their meanings. The narrator in the novel is imperiously certain about words and their meanings. True, the book is about the performance of language, but, then, so is every other book. O'Hagan, it would appear, has given in to, quite often ill-conceived, postmodernist cant. A profound misconception leads him to bark up the wrong tree. The misconception becomes apparent in this quotation:

But what really surprises you in *Shroud* is the novel's complete effectiveness as a love story, for Cass Cleave is a girl whom the so-called Axel Vander can love: this man who lectures on "the inexistence of the self", this multiplicity of selfhoods, this invention, comes to embrace his Cass, his fate. Cass offers him back to himself, and this true relationship with Cass may constitute the one, late, salient reality in Vander's confected world.⁵

Admittedly, at one point Vander notes: "This is the second line of evidence for my defence and the source of my embarrassment: the fact, simply, that I loved her" (p. 323). Admittedly, too, he remarks: "she was my last chance to be me" (p. 330). Furthermore, we learn: "It was to do with him, he was at the centre of it, he was that centre itself. Was it that she was meant to save him?" (pp. 195f.). And of course, being fully cognizant of his terrible past, she is his "guarantor of authenticity" (p. 400). His wife, Magda, was another guarantor, or so Vander suspects. She kept silent about it, and thus she was his "silent guarantor of authenticity". The trouble, however, is that we have only Vander's own words for all this, and I, for one, would not trust Vander as far as I could throw him.

Reviewers, such as Andrew O'Hagan and others, have noted the biographical impact of Paul de Man and Louis Althusser and certain aspects of Alex Vander's own "life" and character. This represents anything but an analytical masterstroke. For Banville himself states in his "Acknowledgements" that he has adapted a passage from Althusser's autobiography *The Future Lasts a Long Time*. He goes on to observe: "Other themes in that book have been alluded to and employed elsewhere in the text, as have themes in the life and various works of Paul de Man" (p. 407). That Paul de Man and Louis Althusser figure, as it were, in Banville's *Shroud* will be heartily welcomed by all Banville critics of a post-structuralist persuasion. Yet, *Shroud* is essentially not a novel about either de Man or Althusser, let alone both of these philosophers. The case is similar to *The Untouchable*, which essentially is not about either Louis MacNeice or Anthony

Blunt. The point is that *Shroud* only makes use of certain aspects of de Man's and Althusser's lives.

Althusser, on the very first page of his confessional text, admits to having strangled his wife, H  l  ne, while massaging the front of her neck.⁶ The entire autobiographical account, of course, represents an attempt to explain and, by doing so, justify, his deed. Interestingly and only by the way, he does so in terms reminiscent of the way in which Freddie Montgomery offers the *raison d'  tre* for his "book of evidence".⁷ What is of greater relevance to the point in hand, Althusser refers to his desire to seduce his mother, as he puts it:

[...] in seducing her I always had the impression I was not myself, that I didn't really exist, that my existence depended solely *on pretence* [italics in the text], indeed was pretence.⁸

This notion of basing a life on pretence occurs several times throughout the book. Here he is talking about seducing his teacher:

This I came to understand [...] that I only resorted to deception, in exactly the same way as someone might "work a fiddle" to get into a sports ground [...], in order to *seduce* my teacher and get him to like me precisely by practising that deception. What do I mean by this? Having no authentic existence of my own [...]; ultimately I was an impostor.

Since I did not really exist, I was simply a creature of artifice, a non-being who could only love and be loved by means of artifice and deception which mimicked those whose love I sought and whom I tried to love by seducing them.⁹

This sounds pretty much like Alex Vander and his "problematics of authenticity".

Althusser also mentions, at some length, his "entanglement with women". "Doubtless", he writes,

I "needed" these women as erotic extras, to supply what poor H  l  ne herself could not give me: a youthful body which had not suffered and that profile which I endlessly dreamt of finding.¹⁰

One should, probably, take Althusser's references to the multitude of women with whom he had affairs with a necessary grain of salt, as Douglas Johnson, who knew Althusser quite well, suggests in his "Introduction". But be that as it may. Alex Vander equals Althusser by trying to make us believe that he copulated left, right and centre. Moreover, he, too, like Althusser, was in the habit of soon tiring of his *inamoratas*.

Alex Vander prides himself on having been able to hold forth at considerable length about books and other people's theories he practically knew next to nothing about, or at best only had a smattering of.

Already I had made myself adept at appearing deeply learned in a range of subjects by the skilful employment of certain key concepts, gleaned from the work of others [...] I could discourse with convincing familiarity on texts I had not got round to reading, philosophers I had not yet studied, great men I had never met. (pp. 60f.)

Althusser claims as much for himself.

I should point out that in both the written and oral exams I knew very little about most of the topics I dealt with. But I did know how to “construct” an essay and suitably disguise my ignorance by arguing *a priori* whatever the subject.¹¹

Furthermore, Althusser deals with his compulsive predilection for shoplifting. “which [he] naturally found very easy”.¹² This would seem to find its counterpart in Vander’s propensity for stealing things, including Mama Vander’s pill box. At one point, Althusser, referring to his wife and his relationship with her, argues:

From that moment on I was filled with a powerful desire to serve her: to save her and help her live! Throughout our life together, right to the very end, I never abandoned this supreme mission which gave my life its meaning until the final moment.¹³

This idea is very reminiscent of what is said in *Shroud* about Cass’s role *vis-à-vis* Vander: to save him. And might it be that Cass’s illness, Mandelbaum syndrome, which Vander rightly defines as “three-quarters of the way toward the bad end of the scale between manic depression and full-blown dementia” (p. 317), owes something to the fact that Althusser was a manic depressive?

As for the passage mentioned by Banville in his “Acknowledgements”, the main part of it concerns Althusser’s youthful experience together with his grandfather at the time of harvest, when the wheat and oats and rye were brought in from the fields to the threshing shed. It can be found in *The Future Lasts a Long Time* on pages 79 to 81. What is remarkable about it is that at the end of his reverie Alex admits: “All this I remembered even though it had never happened [...]. It was all a dream [...].” (p. 74). Althusser, in turn, concludes his comments:

I was not inside the great kitchen and therefore did not experience the wine drinking and the chaotic singing at first hand [...]. I dreamt it, that is to say I simply had an intense desire for it to be real [...]: a sort of hallucination of my intense desire [...] but hallucinations are also facts.¹⁴

This very idea, namely that hallucinations are also facts, informs much in *Shroud*, mainly as a consequence of Vander’s extreme unreliability.

Of Paul de Man, there are various traces, the most notably one concerning the anti-Semitic articles which de Man wrote during the war. In 1987, it was discovered that between 1940 and 1942 de Man had written about 180 short pieces for the Brussels newspapers *Le Soir* and *Het Vlaamsche Land*, which had at that time been controlled by collaborators. One piece, headed “Les Juff dans la littérature actuelle”, is straightforwardly anti-Semitic, making an argument for the continuing sanctity of European literature despite the contaminating efforts of the Jews. Another article condemns Freudianism as Jewish decadence, and yet another bemoans the influence of Jewish dealers on French painting between 1912 and 1932.¹⁵ In Part II of *Shroud*, Vander remarks about the work that the real Alex Vander wrote for *De Vlaamsche Gazet*, run by the collaborator Hendriks and his “knuckle-duster nationalists” (p. 211), in which Vander called for “the *aestheticisation of national life*” and suggested to “*escape the plight of the self by sublimation in the totalitarian ethic*” (p. 214). When Vander notes about his own work:

Mine is the kind of commentary in which frequently the comment will claim an equal rank with that which is supposedly its object; equal, and sometimes superior. (p. 62)

he may be characterising de Man’s writing style. Furthermore, Alex mentions his first major piece of work, “that essay, ‘Shelley Defaced’” (p. 290). De Man also wrote on Shelley, from whose poem “The Triumph of Life” Franco Bartoli quotes: “*A shape all light [...]*” (p. 341). The poem, like *Shroud*, is about self-knowledge. The Shelley article de Man wrote bears the near-identical title “Shelley Disfigured”. It forms chapter 6 of de Man’s *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*¹⁶ and appeared first in *Deconstruction and Criticism*¹⁷. Vander specifies the reason for his going to America in these terms:

I would be pure existence there, an affectless point moving through time, nihilism’s silver bullet, penetrating clean through every obstacle, shooting holes in the flanks of every moth-eaten monument of so-called civilisation. Negative faith! That was to be the foundation of my new religion. (p. 289)

It may be inappropriate, even downright wrong, to assert that de Man moved to America for a similar reason. Yet, “shooting holes in the flanks of every moth-eaten monument of so-called civilisation” was part of de Man’s post-structuralist religion, too.

Vander has come from Arcady in California to Turin, “this arcaded city” (p. 4). Arcady is originally, of course, a rustic paradise, but Vander’s Arcady is all but that. “The place”, he notes, “was always alien to me, or at least I was alien to it. The fact is, I was never there, not really. I took no part in town life, such as it was” (p. 90). Instead, he was all the time thinking of Flanders. Interestingly, in Arcady “everyone had previously been someone else, at some time, in some entirely different existence” (p. 91), just like

Vander himself. A strange place, then, where everyone is playing at being someone else – a place of deception, in which Vander’s wife, Magda, felt even more displaced. No peace-loving shepherds lived in Arcady, but lean, tall types with greying curls and a bandit’s drooping moustache. When he espied one of them – upon leaving his flat on his way to the airport – he wondered “if the fellow might be a Hebrew” (p. 23). Why should he be a Hebrew? One answer to this question is that half the population of Arcady and its environs seemed to be of the Chosen, “though not the kind that I was once used to; these *Luftmenschen* were altogether too sure of themselves, too pushy and uncomplaining” (p. 24). This is not what one would expect in Arcady; in fact, all points to the reverse. By comparison, the Turin Alex has come to stay in, certain he will never leave it, is the same: a place where people are dying, like Kristina Kovacs or the young woman who gets run over by a lorry (cf. p. 52), or are very nearly dying, like Alex himself, where people have gone mad, like poor old Nietzsche, an almost Dantéesque place – as we shall see later – or one reminiscent of Hieronymus Bosch’s paintings, where there are creatures like

an emaciated, gape-mouthed figure, stooped and naked, running with uplifted arms through a landscape of burning red earth, bearing another figure, its own double, lashed to it tightly back to back. (p. 53)

“Who speaks?” (p. 3), thus Alex opens his account. It is quite obvious that he is responsible for all of it, in spite of the fact that some parts are rendered from an I-perspective and others from a third-person point-of-view. Vander meanders between being what post-structuralist narratologists call an extradiegetic-homodiegetic narrator, *i.e.* a narrator in the first degree who tells his own story, and an intradiegetic-homodiegetic narrator, *i.e.* a narrator in the second degree who tells a story he is part of. He also oscillates between non-focalisation in the Cass or third-person sections, knowing and saying more than Cass knows or perceives, and internal focalisation in the first-person sections, where he says only what he knows. That the entire account is from Alex’s pen is made clear by the remark: “One day at the card table in Franco Bartoli’s garden room I was writing the opening pages of this record [...]” (p. 396). And he wrote the record after Cass’s suicide. “If you had exposed me to the world [...]” (p. 237), he remarks at one point, signalling that now, since she is dead, she is no longer capable of doing so.

But why should he tell the Cass parts, those parts in which Cass figures prominently, from a third-person perspective and suggest, through a change in pronoun from “he” to “I” within the same sentence, that he is in narratorial charge after all?

He, I, I saw again the empty bottle [...] I listened to the wind washing over the rooftops. The girl rose and came forward and knelt beside the bed and took my hand in both of hers and brought it to her lips and kissed it. I. (p. 193)

He, as it were, fictionalises Cass's sections, and he can do so, because he is in the habit of experiencing moments in which he steps outside of himself, observing what is going on from a vantage-point. Thus, quite early on, he states:

I seem to separate from my body and float upward, and hang aloft, looking down on the spectacle of myself with disinterested attention. (p. 8f.)

Later on, he has "the sensation [...] of shifting slightly aside from myself, as if I were going out of focus and separating into two" (p. 68). The incident during which he was beaten up and maimed for life by Laura's thugs he recalls "from outside, as if I had not been part of it, but a witness, rather, a bad Samaritan hanging back in the bushes" (p. 290). Goethe, he informs us, somewhere calls this phenomenon "*der Fall nach oben*" (p. 256). It is for this reason that he can imagine what Cass might have thought, for instance, when spending part of the night in the hotel foyer, while he was sleeping in his hotel room, – for all we know without her having told him about it. Moreover, he fictionalises Cass's sections so that he is able to invest Cass's actions with motives that may not be true, but that suit his own devices.

The point, notably, is that Alex Vander, whether speaking in his own or a third-person's voice, is the most unreliable of narrators imaginable. This is a fact which should never be forgotten when dealing with the story and which makes it excruciatingly and vexingly difficult to come to terms with it. "All my life I have lied" (p. 12), he writes. So, why should he now be telling the truth? "I became a virtuoso of the lie" (p. 284), he comments,

making my instrument sing so sweetly that none could doubt the veracity of its song. Such grace-notes I achieved, such cadenzas! I lied about everything [...] (p. 284)

There is talk about "lifelong habits of dissembling [that] die hard" (p. 401). Lastly, Vander admits: "I cannot believe a word out of my own mouth" (p. 329). If he himself cannot, how can we believe a word he utters, or writes? The whole record, then, is shrouded in a mist of uncertainty. Cass may indeed have realised that her role was to save Alex. And yet again, that may only be the fruit of Alex's imaginings, his wishful thinking, call it what you like, call it just another lie, a result of his lifelong habits of dissembling. Reading the fictionalised Cass sections, the reader should remember that all fictions are lies. Why, for example, are we not told in Cass's own words that she came to believe it was her role to save him? There's the rub.

"Who speaks? It is her voice, in my head. I fear it will not stop until I stop" (p. 3). This is a quintessentially Beckettian discourse situation, whose aim is specified thus: "I am going to explain myself, to myself, and to you, my dear [...]" (p. 5). Alex alleges he is haunted by the notion that he is "being given one last chance to redeem

something of [himself]" (p. 6). That is a rather surprising notion, since all his adult life Vander has refused to believe in the self. He has been a stalwart advocate of "the inexistence of the self" (p. 193). It may be of interest – and then, again, why should it be and in what sense? – that in a recently published interview Banville has admitted to sharing Vander's notion:

The inauthentic self, essentially the inauthenticity of the self, the so called self. Because, you know, I find that there is no self; I don't believe there is a kind of private self that we call a soul. I don't know, you have to tell me what they call it nowadays; psychologists and psychiatrists have a name they use for it. But I don't believe that there is, that we have any single coherence. I mean, Nietzsche has, among others, but Nietzsche especially has pointed out that you know, "there is no being: there is only becoming". There is no point at which we can stop ourselves or take a cross-section of ourselves and say, "that's me". There is no point.¹⁸

Furthermore, he has confessed being an actor, like we all are, in our sweet, sinister ways:

Even as I'm giving you this answer, I'm changing because I'm, in very tiny ways like one of those space aims, making tiny, tiny, tiny adjustments all the time. So, there's never a point of rest, as I say, there's never a point until the last moment arrives. I think that, you know. I often look at the books and think, God almighty, I keep hammering away at this bloody cliché. Everybody knows it's a cliché, everybody knows we're all actors. Why do we keep on with the masks?¹⁹

Time and time again Vander has insisted that "there is no essential singular self" (p. 286). Consequently, he could write a book entitled "*The Alias as Salient Fact: The Nominative Case in the Quest for Identity*" (p. 100) and likes to quote Nietzsche's axiom: "*There exists neither "spirit", nor reason, nor thinking, nor consciousness, nor soul, nor will, nor truth: all are fictions [...]"* (p. 6). Feeling at one moment "an overconsciousness of self", he instantly queries: "*What self?"*" (p. 41). "[N]o ego, no precious individual spark breathed into each one of us by a bearded patriarch in the sky, who does not exist either" (p. 27), he comments. And yet he cannot rid himself "of the conviction of an enduring core of selfhood amid the welter of the world" (p. 27). We may believe Vander when he contends that there is no self; nonetheless he appears intensely preoccupied with the quintessential nature of people and things. Why else, for example, should he ruminate on the question at what stage of its yearly cycle a tree would say "now, *now* I am what I am, now at last I am in my treeness" (p. 51).

He may, for most of his life, have been a dissembler, he may have assumed another identity, yet after Schaudene had helped him make his escape from Antwerp,

adrift and homeless, without family or friend, he realised – whether then or now in retrospect when penning his record – that he “could at last become that most elusive thing, namely – namely! – myself” (p. 260). Somewhat paradoxically, he continues:

I sometimes surmise that this might be the real and only reason that I took on Axel’s identity. If you think this a paradox you know nothing about the problematics of authenticity. (p. 260)

The whole constellation falls short of paradox only if the Axel’s motivation was to avoid becoming himself, to shun authenticity, which would be in line with the kind of existence he has in fact led.

Banville has prefaced his novel with this quotation from Nietzsche’s *Will to Power*:

We set up a word at the point at which our ignorance begins, at which we can see no further, e.g. the word “I” the word “do”, the word “suffer”: – these are perhaps the horizon of our knowledge, but not “truths”.

Language marks the limits of our worlds, as Wittgenstein also knew. It is the act of naming that forces things into existence, for example the world Vander conjures up in and through his record. But that world does not constitute “truths”. Truth for ever eludes our grasp. And so it is with all that Vander asserts, including his claim that Cass’s real purpose was to offer him “the possibility of redemption” (p. 6). The question is whether Vander has genuinely ever been seeking redemption. The picture that he paints of himself is seriously tainted by self-pity – a feeling he experiences, for instance, when looking out of the glass wall in the building in which he has just given his lecture, and significantly Vander describes the experience thus: “*Once more* [my emphasis] I experienced a burning, bile-like rush of self-pity [...]” (p. 77). Furthermore, at one point he imagines (and that “imagines” is vital) Cass looking at him, as he is lying on his bed, and he does so in terms replete with self-pity:

She had never seen anyone so huge, so naked and so defenceless. [...] Soon, in a very few years, a decade at most, surely, he would be gone, all that he had been and was now would be no more. (p. 190)

True enough, he maintains: “I seized on her to be my authenticity itself. [...] she was my last chance to be me” (p. 330). Well, yes, but as Hamlet has it: “words, words, words”, and, again, no truth.

Vander remarks that what essentially attracted him to Cass was “the otherness of her”:

Who was she, what was she, this unknowable creature [...]? Yet it was that very she, in all the impenetrable mysteriousness of her being entirely other, that I

suddenly desired, with an intensity that made my heart constrict. I am not speaking of the flesh, I do not mean that kind of desire. What I lusted after and longed to bury myself in up to the hilt was the fact of her being her own being, of her being, for me, unreachable beyond. (p. 335)

He seems to have met in Cass, or so at least he says, an authentic person, and one could think that this experience has made him strive to achieve his own authenticity. Yet Vander himself scotches the idea by adding: “Deep down it is all I have ever wanted really, to step out of myself and clamber bodily into someone else” (p. 335). What is truth here, is anyone’s guess.

For Axel Vander has always been an inveterate role-player. He knows that “[t]o name another is somehow to unname oneself” (p. 141), and he has continuously named another, “on countless occasions [stepped] effortlessly into other selves” (p. 284). He has been adept at making himself over (cf. p. 9). The first role he assumes in the book is that of Harlequin:

Perhaps what appeals to them [*i.e.* the people in Turin] is the suggestion of the commedia dell’arte in my appearance, the one-eyed glare and comically spavined gait, the stick and hat in place of Harlequin’s club and mask. (p. 4)

Cass called him Harlequin (p. 304). The figure of Harlequin in Italian comedy is characterised by a mixture of childlike ignorance, wit and grace, always in love, always in trouble, easily despairing, easily consoled. The Italian word is possibly the same as the old French “Hellequin”, or “Hennequin”, denoting one of a troop of demon horsemen riding by night.

In *Shroud*, Harlequin is characterised in noteworthy different terms. Cass jots down in her notebook:

H. the headman, his mask and bat. Maistre, on the executioner: “who is this inexplicable being [...]?” Rip the mask from his face to find – another mask. (p. 84)

This characterisation applies to Vander to a “t”. He is an inexplicable being and if you rib the one mask from his face you will be sure to find another. But why should he be an “executioner”? There is, in *Shroud*, another description, quite a lengthy description, too lengthy in fact to quote here in full, of Harlequin (pp. 379-80). Banville notes in his “Acknowledgements” that this is a combined adaptation of passages from *The Italian Comedy*, by Pierre Louis Ducharte, and *St. Petersburg Dialogues*, by Joseph de Maistre. Again, many of the features and characteristics attributed to him fit Vander closely. He, too, is “*the most individual and the most enigmatic*” of men. He, too, is “*called by many names*”. At least, in his own assessment, Vander is “*without doubt of divine essence*”. As we shall see in a minute, another role he sees himself in is that of Christ. But for the

moment, Harlequin is said to be “*Mercury himself, god of twilight [...], the patron of thieves and panders*”. Vander is a twilight figure and his propensity for stealing things makes him something of a patron of thieves. His habit of assuming many different roles makes him into a “*Proteus*” figure. Significantly, Harlequin, in this extended passage, is called “*an executioner*” once again, and he is described in the act of executing someone. Vander is also an executioner, having poisoned his wife, Magda, and holding himself responsible for Cass’s suicide. The former fact is variously alluded to in the text. Early on one learns of “*Magda’s going*” (p. 17) and of his “*widowed life*” (p. 18). He cannot recall at what point exactly he realised “*that her mind was decaying*” (p. 92). Yet one morning she walked into the kitchen leaving behind her across the floor a trail of little turds as flat as fishes, and he knew the time had come when she must go (cf. p. 93). And so he fed her the tablets, telling her they “*were a special kind of candy*” (p. 111). His taking responsibility for Cass’s death we shall consider in due course. Of Harlequin, the lengthy passage in question finally notes:

No moral praise seems appropriate for him, since this would suppose a relation with other human beings, and he has none. He has none, this Harlequin.
(p. 381)

Of course, Vander has no genuine relation with other human beings, not even (*pace* Andrew O’Hagan) with Cass. Because of this state of affairs, because his life as Axel Vander has been utterly devoid of true relationship, he is constrained to spend his present time going out and strolling the winter streets, “*my daily harlequinade*” (p. 405). Vander’s record, so-called, is framed by references to this harlequinade (cf. pp. 4 & 405), thus encapsulating an existence based on lies, deceit and role-playing. A harlequinade is, of course, a play in which a harlequin or buffoon stars. Vander is something of a buffoon, or makes himself out as one. Did Alexander Cleave not proffer the advice: “*When in difficulty, act*”?²⁰ Moreover, Cleave remarks: “*I would be anyone but myself*”.²¹ Alex Vander is Alexander’s kith and kin.

Vander comments: “[...] *I was always more than myself*” (p. 13). He is also more than Harlequin. Thus he sees himself as a Christ figure. He, too, had his Magdalene. Mary Magdalene is, in the New Testament, a woman from Magdala, a town near Tiberinas (now in Israel). Jesus healed her of evil spirits (Luke 8, p. 2) and, following her vigil at the foot of the cross (Mark 15, p. 40), appeared to her after his Resurrection (Matthew 28, p. 9). Mary Magdalene has been identified from the earliest times with a sinning woman described as having anointed the Lord’s feet (Luke 7, p. 37-8). Vander’s Magdalene is a woman with heavy braids coiled against her head like two outsized earphones, callused feet and a brooding, inexpectant gaze (p. 15), whom he derided in public for “*her incongruous, ill-attired, mute presence by [his] side*” (p. 19). In the end, he poisoned her. After his bath on the morning of Cass’s arrival in Turin, Vander describes himself as standing on the marble floor of his hotel room and seeing his reflection “*in*

end-on perspective [...], like that bronzen [*sic*] portrait of the dead Christ by what's-his-name" (p. 38). On another morning, he found Magda leaning over him, touching a fingertip to the pulpy lid of his bad eye and murmuring, "*And I only am escaped alone to tell thee*" (p. 60), a quotation from *The Book of Job* (1:19) – not exactly a reference to Christ, though a Biblical one and one that is of some significance for Magda's role as a "silent guarantor of [Vander's] authenticity".

After his collapse Vander is brought back to his hotel room. Kristina and Cass stand by Vander's bed.

Suddenly shadowed, the room took on a *devotional* [my emphasis] aspect, and Vander's form supine on the bed and the two spectral people standing by him might have been [...] the figures at the centre of an altar-piece. (p. 178)

Christ would be taking up the middle position, just as Vander does here. Cass, on another occasion, studying the curiously tranquil face of the crucified Saviour on the reproduction of the Shroud, says to Vander's back: "It looks like you [...]. Just like you" (p. 312). Alex, at one point, refers to his "shady, not to say shrouded, past" (p. 338). Lying yet again on his bed under a humid sheet with his hands folded on his chest, he finds that he was like "the dead Christ in his shroud" (p. 362). At another time, Vander finds himself in the bathroom of his room in the hotel:

Then I returned to the basin [he remarks] and bathed my brow; lifting the towel away, I would not have been surprised to find the bloody image of my face imprinted on it. (p. 390)

This is another reference to the Shroud, but could equally well be an allusion to Veronica's cloth, with which she wiped the Lord's face on the way to Calvary. Finally, there is the curious admission on Vander's part that the young man who accompanied him to Cass's hotel was not called Mario, but "Angelo; the emissaries of Heaven take the most unlikely forms. *Adio, Angelo*" (p. 394). Why should he surround himself with emissaries of Heaven, unless he considered himself some kind of Christ figure? Moreover, why should he pen the following sentences?

One of the unimaginably complex coils in the hollow heart of the blastula I had set swelling in her belly there had already sprung the new beginnings of my people, my lost people. It was as simple as that. My gentle mother, my melancholy father, my siblings put to summary death before they had lived, all would find their tiny share in this new life. (p. 378)

Why, indeed, should he imagine that, by impregnating Cass, he had become the saviour of his people, the Jews who were exterminated by the Nazis during the war and

whom he would have been prepared to denounce, just as the real Alex Vander did, unless of course he should consider himself equal to Christ, the Saviour?

Even so, it all sounds strange, little short of incredible, considering that in Antwerp during the war, he could have sold his people for one sustained moment of the public's attention that was showered on the real Alex Vander's articles (cf. p. 212). Of course, the fake, vainglorious Vander was an anti-Semite, entertaining "the beautiful dream of a Europe cleansed and free" (p. 162). Disclosing his "deepest, dirtiest secret", he owns up that in his heart he too "wanted to see the stage cleared, the boards swept clean, the audience cowed and aghast" (p. 223).

There are a number of parallels between Axel and Nietzsche, which make it quite likely that Vander fancies himself embodying a Nietzsche figure. Naturally enough, he too is a philosopher. Nietzsche stayed in Turin and went off his head there, thinking himself a king and the father of kings and stopping in the street to embrace a cabman's nag. Vander also comes to Turin; he does not exactly go off his head in the place, but he fears he will not be able to leave the city again. Nietzsche once lost his luggage, which was sent to Sampierdarena when he was headed in the opposite direction (p. 5). Having arrived at his hotel in Turin, Vander is told his suitcase cannot be found and must have been sent on to somewhere else (p. 33). Like Nietzsche, Vander is certain of possessing genius, though "not the kind that it has pretended all those years to be" (p. 62). In the final months before his collapse, Nietzsche scribbled crazed letters, signing them "*Dionysus, The Crucified, Nietzsche Caesar*" (p. 67). Vander may not have signed himself in this fashion, but in a way he considers himself The Crucified. The doctor whom Axel comes to befriend in Turin and who takes care of the dying Kristina is called Zoroaster, possessing an "Assyrian swarthy" (p. 402). "Zoroaster" is the Greek form of Zarathustra, a Persian who is believed to have lived in the 6th century B.C. and the founder of the Magian system of religion. Zoroaster's, or Zarathustra's doctrine concerning the conflict of good and evil made Nietzsche call one of his most famous books *Also Sprach Zarathustra (Thus Spoke Zarathustra 1883-1885)*. Somewhat strangely perhaps, Zoroaster, in *Shroud*, is a Jew. He has "numbers tattooed on his wrist" (p. 348), having been in a concentration camp, and he met the real Vander in a place in a forest, a sort of way station, while they and he were awaiting transportation elsewhere (pp. 403f.).

All this role-playing is coupled in Alex Vander with an indomitable propensity to fabulate. "What a fabulist I was" (p. 66), he admits. Not even to his own wife did he tell "the real, the whole, the tawdry truth" (p. 66). Quite appropriate, then, that someone should say of his writing that its most striking characteristic was "moral shiftiness" (p. 102). In short, in all he has said, felt and done, he has turned his coat so often "it has grown threadbare" (p. 103). But why has he so extensively engaged in role-playing? Why has he lied so much? It is not easy to say. One main reason, though, may be contained in his explanation of why he assumed Axel Vander's identity:

It must be, simply, that it was not so much that I wanted to be him – although I did, I did want to be him – but that I wanted so much more not to be me. (p. 285)

A flight, then, an escape from his own self, from his own authenticity. Vander goes on to say:

[...] I desired to escape my own individuality, the here-ness of my self, not the there-ness of my world, the world of my lost, poor people. This seems to matter much. (p. 285)

Why he should drag in his lost people and why his desire not to escape the world of his lost people should matter much is not at all clear and is never made clear by him. The whole undertaking, possibly, represents a case of vain self-justification, another act of dissembling. For, after all, Vander would have had no qualms about denouncing his people, and he exalted at his fortunate escape from Antwerp. Ruthless characters, such as he, are seldom plagued by guilt or a bad conscience. A leopard never changes its spots, and Vander never ceased striking poses in order to escape being himself.

“Why had I come to this city?”, he queries (p. 68).

I was too old and worn to travel so far for the sake of a whim. I could have made the writer of that letter come to me in Arcady, that would have tested her resolve. (p. 68)

Yes, indeed, that would have been the obvious solution. But following Alexander Cleave’s maxim, Vander, sensing that he might be in difficulty, resorted to acting. He staged the entire scene of confrontation in Turin, fully resolved that he would “lie to her, of course; mendacity [being] second, no, [...] first nature to [him]” (p. 12). He was, moreover, resolved that, if she succeeded in exposing him, it would be “at a cost, and what a cost [...], I would make sure of that” (p. 95). Meeting Cass for the first time, he does not need long to realise that she is a highly vulnerable person, “a rare and high-strung creature of the wild” (p. 95), driven, clever, cunning and helpless, “prey to secret hungers, nameless distresses” (p. 103). Not surprisingly at all, from the first he is determined not to let a “half-demented girl” (p. 103) bring his life, “this hard-won triumph of risk and daring and mendacity” (p. 103), to nothing. Quite importantly, fury and fear are the fuels that drive him, “fury at being what I am not, fear of being found out for what I am” (p. 106). Vander consumes a copious amount of alcohol. Could this, in the final analysis, possibly be an attempt to flee the world, himself and his fear? It is a distinct possibility.

Alex nicknames Cass “Cassandra” (p. 223). Cassandra was the daughter of Priam, King of Troy. She received the gift of prophecy from Apollo, who was enamoured of her. But as she slighted him, the god contrived that no trust should be placed in her predictions. After the fall of Troy she fell to the lot of Agamemnon. Cass says to Vander, if she is Cassandra then he is Agamemnon, and Vander quips: “Gagamemnon” (p. 305).

Agamemnon took Cassandra back to Greece, and she foretold the calamities that would await him. She was murdered by Clytemnestra. Cass hears voices in her head that tell her what to do (cf. p. 83). Alex asserts at one point:

It was all so simple, so simple and so clear. She should have seen it from the start. The signs had been there all along, or rather, all along everything had been a sign [...] (p. 193)

It is not, at first, obvious why it should all have been so simple and so clear from Cass's angle. But things become clearer if one takes into account that Vander says of her: "She had an almost sanctified sense of purpose" (p. 299). And further:

In her version of the world everything was connected; she could trace the dissolution of empires to the bending of a blade of grass, with herself at the fulcrum of the process. All things attended her. The farthest-off events had a direct effect on her, or she had an effect on them. The force of her will, and all her considerable intellect, were fixed upon the necessity of keeping reality in order. (p. 319)

Finally, this is said of her:

It might be that what she did, every smallest action, was in fact precisely what was necessary, without her knowing it [...] Everything had a meaning, a function, a place in the pattern, and nothing was lost. (p. 195)

Order and purpose, then, are alleged to have been the principles governing her world view. This is the Cassandra side of her being, if she genuinely possessed such a side. This may also account for the idea that her purpose was to save Vander, that he "was her vocation" (p. 302).

It is a bit odd that Cass should have gone to bed with an old, decrepit and maimed man, such as Vander, and do so hours after she saw him for the first time in her life. Unless, that is, Cass did really believe that everything was connected and part of the pattern, "that all this had been preordained, the room, the bed, the sliver of burning afternoon light between the curtains" (p. 125). Vander maintains that he loved Cass (p. 323). But that, in short, is just another of his infernal lies. He rightly assumes his admission is being met with "laughter, [...] jeers and [...] catcalls" (p. 324). At any rate, "the word love, in [his] mouth, has acquired a blasphemous overtone" (p. 364). What seems to come nearer the truth is that he kept her beside him, "under surveillance", because "that was the only safe and sensible strategy to adopt" (p. 327). Moreover, it is highly likely that Vander is fuelled not only by fury and fear, but by self-love into the bargain. On a rare occasion, Alex may be speaking the truth when he admits: "The object of my true regard was not

her, the so-called loved one, but myself, the one who loved, so-called” (p. 329). If he truly loved her, why did he kick her into the narrow space between the bed and the wall, grinning horribly at her and twisting her arm past the level of her shoulder blade and threatening to break it (cf. p. 338f.)? His relationship with Cass seems to have been motivated by “the old vile beast” in him: lust (p. 354). Kristina is probably right, when she tells him after Cass has left: “Oh, Alex, [...] only someone incapable of love could love so selflessly” (p. 367) And she should know what she is talking about, having had a brief affair with him.

Alex’s relationship with women holds very little, not to say nothing, to substantiate the claim that he was, or is, capable of love. “In the land of women”, he asserts, “I am always a traveller lately arrived” (p. 113). If that is what he is, then he can have little knowledge of women. With regard to them, he has only ever been interested in sex and exploit. During his flight from Antwerp, the French girl was just a quick sexual adventure while they were checking the oil and the water, as it were. In England, Laura, whose name evokes Petrarch’s Laura, provided carnal love and had him spend himself “against the burning bud of her epiglottis” (p. 277), and, instead of leading him to praise her in a long series of love-poems, she exploited him just as he exploited her by stealing some of her belongings. “[W]here lust and its easements are concerned”, he remarks, “I am and always was beyond good and evil” (p. 323). Little wonder that, when Montale manoeuvres himself and Cass through the doorway and he is afforded a fleeting sight under her dress of the undersides of her long, glimmering thighs and at the top of them a taut triangle of white cotton, the vile old beast in him stirs itself and lifts up its questing snout (cf. pp. 353f.).

There are three incidents which occur early on during Vander’s sojourn in Turin and which seem especially salient. On his first walk through the city, Alex comes upon a blind flower seller. She is a young pregnant woman, but her face is the face of an old woman. When she offers him a spray of lily-of-the-valley, Vander hands her a bank note in an absurdly enormous denomination. She stores the note swiftly in an inner recess of her beaded bodice and offers no change. Vander hurries on and dodges into the first caffè that he comes to. In this caffè, he encounters a man with red hair, Carrot Head. Here is how Carrot Head is described:

He had a large, round, high-coloured face, with a sprinkling of ginger bristles on cheeks and chin that glittered in the sunlight falling through the glass. That awful blazer was far too big for him, as were his trousers, and he wore a pair of incongruous, once-white plimsolls with soiled laces and thick rubber soles. (p. 47)

He accosts Vander; but the only word Vander is able to make out sounds like *signore*, which is repeated over and over, while Carrot Head nods vehemently and points to his own face (cf. p. 48), as if he were trying to convey the message: “Look me in the face. You ought to recognise me.”

Red-headed men are mentioned on several occasions throughout the book. The next one puts in an appearance in one of those fake old-fashioned pubs near the cathedral in Antwerp in which Cass is sitting. He soon turns out to be none other than Max Schaudéine, who then uncovers Alex Vander's true identity, or rather he tells Cass: "He was not Axel Vander then" (p. 146) and offers her that newspaper photograph showing the genuine Alex Vander and his friend, who later took over his name and identity. After returning from his mysterious train journey to Brussels, Alex goes to his parents' flat, where he comes upon a thin – remarkably thin – man, with a narrow, long white face and crinkled red hair (p. 253), who introduces himself in this manner: "The name is Schaudéine. [...] You might call me Max, if you wish" (p. 254), and it is shortly later that whatever one should call him says: "My name is Axel Vander" (p. 255). On their way to see the Shroud at the Duomo, Vander and Cass see a "man with carrot-coloured hair" (p. 309) going past:

He was wearing a blazer and a dirty yellow shirt and soiled running shoes; he looked, she thought, like an off-duty clown. Vander seemed to know him, and tried to say something to him, but the fellow hurried on, glancing back nervously over his shoulder. (p. 309)

He is, to all intents and purposes, the Carrot Head first mentioned, who said something to Vander that sounded like *signore*, and which he later comes to identify as *sindone* when Kristina asks Cass: "And have you seen the Shroud? [...] Our famous *Sindone*" (p. 156). At once, Vander's memory snaps its fingers: "*Sindone*, not *signore*". Carrot Head Schaudéine, and there can be little doubt that the red-headed man in the caffè and the one outside the Duomo are the same person, has permeated Axel Vander's life, or at any rate a sizeable part of it. It is, in fact, as if he had been "manipulating the strings from up in the flies" (pp. 242f.). Now, in the word of Banville's fiction, whenever a man with red hair appears, Mephistopheles is not far off. One need only think of the Felix figure in *Mefisto* and *Ghosts*. Our *deus ex machina* Max Schaudéine – no proper *deus*, he – is another such Mephistopheles who holds sway over a corrupt world.

The third incident concerns what Vander idiosyncratically calls "the fallen girl" (p. 53). He notices a girl on the corner opposite to where he himself is standing. When she steps forward into the street, Vander fears that she might be coming to accost him. Seconds later she is struck by a lorry. She falls back and is draped against the side of one of the parked cars with her arms flung wide. There is blood in her hair, and a glistening, innocent-looking trickle of blood coming out of her left ear. That these three events carry some saliency is made apparent by the attention Vander spends on them. "Who are all these people", he asks, "the flower seller, Carrot Head, now this girl, and what did they want with me?" (p. 52). What significance should they be allotted? Vander offers a suggestion himself:

A half-formed image came to my mind – from Bosch, was it, or Dante? – of an emaciated, gape-mouthed figure, stooped and naked, running with uplifted arms through a landscape of burning red earth, bearing another figure, its own double, lashed to it tightly back to back. (p. 53)

It is possible that in this picture, with the gape-mouthed figure and its own double lashed to it tightly back to back, Vander sees himself in a Dantéesque hell. A hell of his own creation, where the devil has come among us having great wrath? But that would not account for the flower seller and “the fallen girl”. To call the young woman involved in the accident a “fallen girl” rather than the girl who fell, would make sense, however, if she was seen by Vander in terms of a Mary Magdalene figure, a sinning woman, who haunts the Christ figure, Vander.

Shortly after this, Alex suggests that “it was not the girl [he] was thinking of, it was Magda” (p. 54). When she was alive he could hardly be said to have given her a second thought. Now, however, she is constantly on his mind. “Only in death has she begun to live fully, for me” (p. 55). Cass also reminds him of Magda. In the so-called Cass sections in the third-person, where he fictionalises what he experienced with the girl, he repeatedly returns to Magda and his life with her. Thus, after delineating how he made love to Cass for the first time, he – without any transition – comes to speak of Magda, their mutual life in the house in Cedar Street and how he fed her those fatal tablets (cf. pp. 110f.).²² Furthermore, while having sex with Cass, he whispers “Magda” in her ear (p. 161). That he should associate Magda with Cass and vice versa is most probably a result of his conviction that Magda, like Cass, “had been privy to [his] secret” (p. 399). Both women were his guarantors of authenticity. However, so is Schaudleine, and so is Zoroaster.

Vander did not care about the living Magda, or so he says; nor did he really care about the living Cass. We learn, for instance, that she was not his type (p. 160), and yet he claims he loved her. He is convinced she is mad (p. 165), and despite the sensible advice which President Frost gave him: “But go careful, and remember: never screw a nut” (p. 316), he gets sexually entangled with the girl. Every time he mentions her ailment, he makes derisively light of the problem, referring to a visit Mr Mandelbaum has been paying her. “*Mandel*: almond” (p. 135), or offering “Doctor Vander’s opinion”, according to which “Mr Mandelbaum occupies a redoubt three-quarters of the way toward the bad end of the scale between manic depression and full-blown dementia” (p. 317). Nor did, or does, Vander care about Kristina Kovacs. “What was she to me”, he asks at one point, “but an afternoon of mostly simulated passion in an overheated hotel room in a snowbound city [whose name he cannot recall] I would never return to?” (p. 77). However, it is Kristina, whose name is perhaps not accidentally reminiscent of Christ’s, who alone cares for Cass. After Cass’s major seizure, she asks Vander: “What are you doing with her?”, and she goes on to say: “You can see she is sick”, to which, telling, he retorts: “Sick [...], sick?” “Yes [...] sick”, Kristina insists. “And she

has shown me the bruises”, to which Vander reacts: “Bruises, bruises, what bruises?” (p. 358), his only fear being that Cass may have spilled the beans to her. Kristina, not Vander, stays with Cass and takes care of her. She is the only character to show compassion, but she is dying. The Christian principle, the divine is dying in Vander’s world. The sinister Schaudleine has for long been in charge.

The title of the novel “Shroud” refers, obviously enough, to the Turin Shroud, the *Sindone*; but the word has other connotations. Kristina says: “[...] the Shroud: effacement, you see [...] They say it is the first self-portrait” (p. 156). There are two outstanding moments of effacement, or absent-mindedness, on Vander’s part, during which he is, so to speak, there and not there, moments that mimic his adult life, moments of reverie or vision during which he ceases being himself. Kristina, talking about the Shroud, remarks: “I always think it was the Magdalene who held the cloth not Veronica. But Magdalene was hair, is that not so?” (pp. 156f.). This makes Vander recall a scene involving Magda, his Magdalene, kneeling beside the bathtub. Suddenly he is brought to the present by someone asking him something. For a moment, he had stopped being his present self (no matter that he does not believe in the self). Then he sees Cass standing before him, and he squirms his shoulder free of her touch and becomes his present self again. “All these damned women, passing me from hand to hand!” (p. 57). The second such moment involves his seeing a bloated, faceless thing with horrid head and straining shoulders and dripping chest coming up through the top of the table (p. 351). The thing he sees is as faceless as he has wished all his adult life to be and as horrid as himself: his own double.

Shroud forms a unit together with *Eclipse*, and for more reasons than one. One of the most obvious is that Cass Cleave figures in both books. To name but a few others, in *Eclipse* Cass phones her mother; in *Shroud* this telephone call is referred to (p. 183). In both novels, the eclipse of the sun is mentioned and Cass’s suicide is described. More importantly, though, certain parallels between Alexander Cleave and Alex Vander are worked out. Cleave is, to do his name honour, a cloven personality, just as much of a role-player as Alex is. After the arrival of Cass’s letter, Vander, notably, finds himself “cloven in two [...]. On one side there was the I I had been before the letter arrived, and now there was this new I [...]” (p. 13). After Magda’s death, Vander, sitting on the sofa in his lounge, all of a sudden hears a loud report, sharp as a gunshot. It takes him much fruitless peering and searching before at last he discovers that the vase he had given Magda as a present has shattered, not into fragments, but into two almost equal halves, vertically and remarkably cleanly (cf. p. 173). The recollection of this occurrence makes him think of Cass Cleave: “For that is how it was with her, too, she was another tall, tense, fissile vessel waiting to be cloven in two” (p. 173). When Alex refers to Cass’s work in terms such as these:

Her enthusiasms were brief, her conclusions inconclusive. Worse, she had no detachment, could not divide herself from her subject – how should she, since she was the one true subject? (p. 320)

and mentions her investigations of Kleist's last, fraught hours on earth, he talks of her in the manner of Alexander Cleave in *Eclipse*. Then, there is the almost complete similarity in the two protagonists's names: Alexander and Alex Vander. Most tellingly of all, however, is the fact that Alex himself construes a connection between himself and Alexander Cleave, remarking: "I fear that between us we destroyed her, old Thespis and I" (p. 395), adding: "I am sure we would have many things in common, he and I. After all, I am an actor too, though only an inspired amateur" (p. 396). They destroyed Cass between them because she became the victim of two similarly eccentric, egomaniacal role-players and liars. Or *are* they really two equally inauthentic men? There is no telling. As the Cretan said, all Cretans are liars.

What about the ending of *Shroud*? Does it mean anything that at the close of the narrative Vander has taken charge of the dying Kristina in the flat which he has rented? Could that be interpreted as a redeeming feature? He says Franco, and poor Kristina, the Doctor, he himself are "a gallimaufry", a hotchpotch, a jumble, nothing that genuinely belongs together, and, after all, he is, in the end, on his "daily harlequinade" and, as we know, as Harlequin he has no relation with other human beings. By finishing his record with the question: "Why should I have life and she none? She. She" (p. 405), he could be admitting failure. His life has largely been a failure, and his attempt to set the record straight – by his record – has ended in failure too. There is no redemption for Axel Vander: last chance to be himself missed (cf. p. 330). Yet, in the end, there remain too many questions about Vander and his story, which is quite in order given his extreme unreliability as a guarantor of authenticity. There is, for example, this question: what is Vander poking at on the ground with his stick? The text makes out that it is a white plastic bag with something soft in it which is plump and vaguely heart-shaped and wobbles and flops under his proddings. Eventually he gets the bag partly open and something dark comes oozing out, a thick, dark liquid (cf. p. 149). Is it a bleeding heart, another reference to the Christ association throughout the text?

Why, of all books, should Vander be inspecting the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, mentioned quite conspicuously twice in the text (pp. 358 & 359)? The book, written by Francesco Colonia,²³ was originally published in 1499, and quite recently, in 1999, it was translated into English by Joscelyn Godwin.²⁴ Part fictional narrative and part scholarly treatise, *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* is an extreme expression of erotic furor, aimed at virtually everything, especially architecture, that the protagonist, Poliphilo, encounters in his quest for his beloved Polia, whose name translated from the Greek means "many things". The book is also a political manifesto defending the right of women to express their own sexuality and the superiority of Eros, beauty and knowledge over aggression and war. It has been called the first stream-of-consciousness novel and is modelled on the idyllic, pastoral, bucolic *romanzo d'amore*, a tradition that had reached its peak over a century earlier with its universally acknowledged master Giovanni Boccaccio, whose works include *Filostrato* (1333), *Teseida* (1339-1340), *Ninfae Tiesolano* (1340s) and *Amorosa Visione* (1342). The book in question brings together

all the stereotypical characters traditionally associated with what was by then a highly stylised genre: the enamoured hero and the indifferent heroine, attended by scores of stock characters – nymphs, naiads, satyrs, gods, goddesses, and demi-gods – who, all too predictably, sing, dance, make merry, advise an in general eagerly officiate whenever the opportunity arises for the lovers to engage in one rite of union or another. Its settings bow to the invariable formula of verdant glades, babbling brooks and enclosed gardens. As for the plot, it too conforms to the genre's time-worn topoi – the lover's unrequited love, his quest to win the heart of the heroine, love's triumph, the illusion dashed.

The action of *Hyperotomachia Poliphili* takes place in a dream. The book opens on the hero, Poliphilo, who has spent a restless night because his beloved, Polia, has shunned him. At break of day, he finally falls into a deep slumber and his "Hypnerotomachia", or, as it can be roughly translated, "struggle for love in a dream", begins. The action is particularly absurd, however, even by the standards of the genre. Poliphilo is transported into a wild forest. He gets lost, escapes, and falls asleep once more. He then awakens in a second dream, dreamed inside the first. Within it, he is taken by some nymphs to meet their queen. There he is asked to declare his love for Polia, which he does. He is then directed by two nymphs to three gates. He chooses the third gate, and there he discovers his beloved. They are taken by some more nymphs to a temple to be engaged. Along the way they come across no less than five triumphal processions celebrating the union of the lovers. Then they are taken to the island of Cythera by barge, with Cupid as the boatswain. There they see another triumphal procession celebrating their union. The narrative is uninterrupted, and a second voice takes over, as Polia describes the erotomachia from her own point of view. This takes up one fifth of the book, after which the hero resumes his narrative. They are blissfully wed, but Polia vanishes into thin air, as Poliphilo is about to take her into his arms.

There are easily detectable parallels between *Hyperotomachia Poliphili* and *Shroud*, but they are parallels that mostly point in the opposite, negative direction: the arcadia setting, the enamoured hero and the indifferent heroine; in a way Cass is an indifferent heroine, entering into the affair because that is part of the pattern and making noises during their love-making not out of passion but because she has a seizure. The two different points-of-view adopted in *Shroud* could be indebted to the two different voices in *Hyperotomachia Poliphili*. There are no verdant glades, babbling brooks and enclosed gardens in Vander's arcaded Turin, but a blind flower-seller, sinister Mephistophelian Carrot Head, a fallen girl, drunkenness, sickness and death. Vander, like Poliphilo, has a number of dreams and visions, but being of a rather nightmarish kind, they are completely devoid of bliss. Thus, waking up in his hotel room, he thinks it is still dawn and "that everything that had happened since [his] arrival [the flower seller, Carrot Head, the girl run over by a lorry] had been a dream" (p. 97). Or in the marquee, where they have come to see the Shroud, the light under the canvas is "like the light in a dream" (p. 310). Vander's love, so-called, remains basically unrequited. He

declares his love, but in the end his Polia, Cass, vanishes, not into thin air, but into the sea.²⁵ *Shroud* is a dark, negative *romanzo d'amore* – apart from everything else.

Finally, what thematic implications may the myriad contrastive references to shadows, darkness and light possess which permeate the text, but which, for lack of peace, we must forbear to consider here?²⁶ The world delineated in *Shroud* is a world divided between light and darkness. “I feel”, says Vander, “I have been alive for aeons. When I look back I see what seems a primordial darkness, scattered with points of cold, hard light, immensely distant, each from each, and from me” (p. 4). There is no doubt on which side Vander sees himself – on that of darkness and chaos. Whereas Cass’s worldview was grounded in the belief in preordained order and patterning, Vander is convinced of “the random nature of reality” (p. 261). For him, there is no possibility of redemption.

Notes

- 1 John Banville, *Shroud*. London: Picador, 2002, p. 260. All further references are to this edition and will be included in the text.
- 2 Andrew O’Hagan, “The Wonder of Irishness”, *The New York Review of Books*, L, 12 (July 17, 2003), pp. 18-20.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 18.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 19.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 19.
- 6 Louis Althusser, *The Future Lasts a Long Time*. London: Vintage, 1994, p. 15.
- 7 Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 13
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 58.
- 9 *Ibid.*, pp. 88f.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 141.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 162.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 155.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 116.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 81.
- 15 Cf. O’Hagan, p. 19. See also Ortwin de Graef, *Serenity in Chaos: A Preface to Paul de Man, 1939-1960*. Lincoln 6 London: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1993, ch. 1, pp. 5-26.
- 16 New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1984, pp. 93-123.
- 17 Ed. Harold Bloom *et al.*, New York: Seabury Press, 1979, pp. 39-73.
- 18 Laura P.Z. Izarra, “Interviewing John Banville”, in: Munira H. Mutran & Laura P.Z. Izarra (eds.). *Kaleidoscopic Views of Ireland*. São Paulo: Humanitas, 2003, p. 244.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 244.
- 20 John Banville, *Eclipse*. London: Picador, 2000, p. 16.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 33.
- 22 It may be pure coincidence, but Beckett’s Krapp once lived in Kedar Street with a woman called Bianca. On his thirty-ninth birthday he listened to the tape he had recorded when twenty-seven or twenty-nine and heard himself then say: “Well out of that, Jesus yes! Hopeless business.” This marks another case in his life where love came to an end. Cf. S. Beckett, *The Complete Dramatic Works*. London, Boston: Faber & Faber, 1986, p. 218.

- 23 Liane Lefaivre, in her *Leon Battista Alberti's "Hypnerotomachia Poliphili"*, is the first to attribute this strange, dreamlike manifesto in defence of humanism to Leon Battista Alberti, cf. <http://mitpress.mit.edu/e-books/HP/>.
- 24 Thames & Hudson.
- 25 Cf. <http://www.bk.tudelft.nl/dks/hp/hyptext0.htm>.
- 26 Examples may be found on the following pages: 28, 42, 48, 66, 67, 72, 105, 123, 155, 179, 186, 194, 228, 238f., 248f., 254, 276, 279, 284, 310, 337, 341, 350, 351, 353, 356, 359, 365, 366, 370, 387. An eclipse is mentioned on pp. 371, 385 and 388.