

THUS SPOKE AXEL VANDER:  
PICTURES OF TURIN  
IN JOHN BANVILLE'S *SHROUD*

*Pierpaolo Piciuccio*

Graham Greene's *The End of the Affair*, published in 1941, is focussed on the love-affair between the atheist writer Maurice Bendrix and the alluring Sarah Myles. Mesmerized by the sensual woman – a modern version of the *belle dame sans merci* – the male protagonist nearly loses his mental sanity when he suddenly knows that she has died surrounded by an aura of sanctity and surprisingly finds himself addressing to her in a sort of a prayer in the hope never to lose contact with her. The romantic effort at directly challenging afterlife is both tragic and pathetic at the same time with the result that the fiction he writes seems to be his extreme attempt at overcoming the tragic loss. John Banville's *Shroud*, published in 2002, although apparently an altogether different story, fares on a parallel trajectory. Like Maurice Bendrix, Axel Vander, the narrator and male protagonist of *Shroud*, is an unshakeable nonbeliever and a compulsive narcissist: in addition, with his former avatar he also shares a position in the world of education because if the former was a novelist, the latter is an ageing professor. For different reasons, their obsessive confrontation with God may seem to be a provocative strategy, almost ringing a blasphemous tune. The parallelism between the two literary works is also sustained by the association of the two main female characters, respectively Sarah Myles and Cassandra Cleave. Both in fact incarnate a role that mixes irresistible allure – as soon as the two love-stories start, the protagonists end up in bed with them – and a bizarre holiness, freely swinging among martyrdom, masochism and self-destructive impulses: in an uncanny way they represent both the temptation and the spiritual guide. The two stories, related by an egomaniac narrator, appear in strict relationship with the woman's final departure and record the male's consequent anguish. What however distances the two novels is the setting:

not only is Graham Greene's story set in London while John Banville's in Turin, but the weight that the Italian city gains in the general economy of the story proves to be unthinkable of in Greene's London. Of course, this contention validates within the restricted limits of Banville's canon, whereby places, characters and events are always functional to the life of the (male) narrators and protagonists around which they inevitably gravitate.

John Banville's Turin at the same time is and is not the Italian city crossed by the river Po that the guidebooks talk about. In a way, the Turin of *Shroud* can be said to have as many affinities with the real city as *Hamlet's* Denmark with the corresponding European nation. Yet, in another way, it also vividly portrays it, with its lively squares, the serious baroque architecture and the bohemian, vaguely decadent atmosphere off the central streets. It is a postmodern rendering where imagination and reality marvellously and inextricably blend in order to offer a composite, prismatic and at times trancelike vision. The subjective rather than the realistic perspective on the city, however, is that which mostly deserves attention in a novel by Banville because this sharply affects the overall atmosphere in the literary work under scrutiny. Turin in fact can as well be said to be an idea, a mood, a mindscape that is shaped by Vander's long shadow cast on his surroundings: the setting of *Shroud* in fact does not live an autonomous life but exists in symbiotic relationship with the "demonic, monstrous and clownish"<sup>1</sup> protagonist of the plot. Vander literally creates Turin in His own image, similarly to what he does with his supporting cast. In other words, the Italian city provides Alex Vander the appropriate stage where he can perform his own passionate, nasty, egomaniac, vicious and sorrowful tragedy. It will be very predictable therefore that any analysis of Turin in *Shroud* remain necessarily chained to a close study of its protagonist.

Axel Vander, fittingly described as "the most fascinatingly complex and repellingly narcissistic of Banville's fictional creations,"<sup>2</sup> is quite an elaborate product who convincingly amalgamates distinct literary threads and sources together. *Shroud's* main actor in fact derives his multifaceted and ambiguous sense of an identity by delicately combining various strata

<sup>1</sup> Adam Mars-Jones. "The Evil that Men Do" in *The Observer*, Sunday 13 October 2002.

<sup>2</sup> Mark O'Connell. *John Banville's Narcissistic Fictions: The Spectral Self*, 2013, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, p. 42.

of cultural elements concurring to craft his composite and tortuous nature. Although the plot enlists a relevant number of masks, roles and allusions to specific characters feeding his sense of self, I think that three of them stand out the most for their impact at the point of his construction: Paul de Man, the Shroud and Frederick Nietzsche. As for the first, “the Yale deconstructionist who was posthumously revealed to have written numerous anti-semitic articles for collaborationist Belgian newspapers in the early 1940s,”<sup>3</sup> he mainly partakes in Vander’s compound design as he shapes his past, his shady decision to shift identity and the present occupation: this side of his selfhood can be said to have a crucial importance in providing most of Vander’s biography. In fact with him the protagonist of *Shroud* also shares the place of origin, Antwerp. Statistically speaking, this has seemed to me to be Vander’s influencing factor that is most regularly detected and debated by critics in reviews and papers on *Shroud*, but I will drop it because it evades the boundaries of my argument.

The Shroud and Frederick Nietzsche, on the other hand, clearly emerge as the two cultural referents that visibly connect the life of the main character to the setting of the novel and it may soon be interesting to stress that both the Shroud in Turin’s Cathedral and Nietzsche’s Turin house in via Carlo Alberto 6 appear to be two touristic destinations that Axel and Cass seem to have in mind to visit during their stay: a number of reasons, including Axel’s general unconcern for religion, will then drive them to ditch the visit to the former, while a trip to the latter is accomplished as soon as they settle their mind on it. Furthermore, their combined analysis allows us to unearth the two main components affecting Axel Vander’s problematic relation with his identity: (a somewhat distorted) mysticism and philosophical existentialism.

Obviously, the Shroud is a powerful image that, although hardly present in the forefront of the novel, reveals its complete potential in the hands of John Banville: throughout the plot it works as a patent allusion to the mystery on identity, it invites a comparison between authenticity and counterfeit and it is also functional to a discussion on the importance of the representation – or self-representation? – in a postmodern context. Its sway is also felt by Axel Vander, a fierce non-believer, who nonetheless

<sup>3</sup> Alex Clark. “Dead Men Talking” in *The Guardian*, Saturday 5 October, 2002.

seems magnetically attracted by Turin, as well as by Cass. In a compelling bout he maps the borders of his own credo: “Negative faith! That was to be the foundation of my new religion. A passionate and all-consuming belief in nothing.”<sup>4</sup> Therefore, it does not strike us as a surprise that his feeling towards Turin religious relic brings to the fore his agnostic attitude, manifesting at the same time also his (self-)contempt and sarcasm. When the narration shifts to an external narrator, we read of a discussion between Cass and Axel in these terms: “He mocked her, and said the Shroud was a fake; he said he knew about fakes. Did she really think it was the image of the crucified Christ?” [Banville, 2002: 307] However Vander’s disregard for the authenticity of Turin religious relic of course also betrays his lack of faith in his own sense of self: the fact that in this paper I – like many other scholars elsewhere – discuss Axel Vander while perfectly aware that this is not his real name and identity is not an inconsiderable detail, and this should credit to Banville’s genius. Elke D’Hoker who examines the protagonist of *Shroud* in terms of a “an assumed identity only”<sup>5</sup> therefore hits the target: by extension we may say that Vander believes that the Shroud is an assumed identity, in the same way he believes he is one, stretching the analogy on which the plot lays his foundations.

Disdain towards the Shroud and self-contempt interestingly walk hand in hand in Banville’s fictional work and this clearly ushers in one of the running leit-motifs in *Shroud*, namely Vander’s self-representation through the Shroud and his consequent mirroring himself in Jesus Christ. A number of recurring images of Jesus’ death are evoked in the plot, and it should not escape the reader that in various situations – especially at the time he starts his affair with Cass in his hotel room – Axel goes to bed naked and covers his body with the bedsheets. Undercurrents of self-contempt and sarcasm at the analogy often provide a fitting frame to this context, also because the modesty of pose in the body of the Shroud is literally replaced by a sort of arrogance that nearly touches forms of boastful, and possibly pathetic exhibition. Of course, when Vander talks about the exhibition of the Shroud – “public display” [Banville, 2002: 306] is his phrase – the term has not quite the

<sup>4</sup> John Banville, *Shroud*, 2002, London, Picador, p. 289.

<sup>5</sup> Elke D’hoker. “John Banville’s Dualistic Universe” in *A Companion to Irish Literature*, Volume Two, edited by Julia M. Wright, 2010, Chichester, Blackwell, p. 357.

same meaning as his body's vainglorious exhibition. Furthermore, the Shroud's corpse that possesses a good balance and grace of proportions is transfigured into Vander's body that is not only disproportionate but, as a few detailed descriptions account for, appears to be utterly unattractive, if not disgusting at all. And for the same reason, the eerie association also highlights the transformation from the modest nakedness of the Shroud into Vander's ostentatious nudity. The trick is exposed if one thinks that the Shroud's nakedness is a tool to reveal the human and divine nature of the body of Jesus, whereas Vander has always avoided, if not dreaded at all, the revelatory act, favouring instead sheltering in the world of lies, as he in various circumstances proudly claims. In other words, if the Shroud's nakedness exposes the Truth, Vander's nudity bares his hollow and conceited existence. One cannot but agree with O'Connell as he claims that "Vander is a man living in fiction, a man who has become the embodiment of his own lies." [O'Connell, 2013: 48] The issue of truth exposure, in fact, clearly connects the Shroud to Turin, because Vander notices his contradictory, maybe dangerous, attraction to the Italian city and angrily records: "I asked myself bitterly again what had possessed me to come to Turin, what there could be here for me except confrontation, exposure, humiliation." [Banville, 2002: 69] A peculiar instinct for becoming the single protagonist in his own tragedy, may be the appropriate answer.

However, the dominant issue that on a metaphorical level the Shroud opens to discussion is possibly that of death, that we may view as one of Banville's favourite topics in his entire fictional output. In this specific case Vander seems to be always surrounded by dead or dying women and his strong connections with them do not allow him to divert his mind towards a different target, had he for a single moment chosen otherwise. Banville's ingenuous decision to have Axel's main partner Catherine be nicknamed Cassandra, as well as insisting on the lack of an identity of the protagonist, again stresses the tragic potential of the work, preparing the reader – should he/she still have different expectations – for a sad conclusion.

Interestingly, death patently leaves a mark on the city of Turin, in the very first pages defined "a vast, grandiose cemetery," [Banville, 2002: 5] and it is interesting that this concept becomes strictly associated with the Italian city, a little later called by Vander "the city of tombs." [Banville, 2002: 107] For the rest his Calvary chronicles a long sequel of dreadful

and painful episodes from which he appears to have shielded from time to time mostly with the use of indifference, such a recurrent defensive strategy in his case that we may start doubting whether that is one of his natural traits or his favourite mask. In *Shroud*, however, pain does not only hurt the soul of the main character. Like the corpse of Turin Shroud, also Vander's body shows the signs of violence that like an army officer consumed by warfare he shows with pride as if they were medals. When towards the end of the plot the reader becomes aware of the story of his missing eye and his dead leg, one suddenly understands why the narrator repeatedly talked about these physical losses using a self-derogatory rhetoric and a self-mocking tone.

If the issue of death can be said to be an evergreen in Banville's fictional canon, in tune with its religious/mystical drive *Shroud* also widens the traditional spectre of possibilities offered to Banville's readers, and associates it now at times with resurrection, too. In this perspective it may be interesting to record that one of the most ironic contradictions surfacing throughout the plot is that Banville's novel appears to be a fiction narrated by a non-believer who anyway mirrors himself in the dying-and-resurrecting Jesus. This incident happens twice: in the first case, it occurs when the real Axel Vander dies and the narrator assumes his identity bringing him back to life, as it were. The second episode takes place in Turin in one of the cafes of piazza Vittorio, when in the company of Franco Bartoli, Kristina Kovacs and Cass Cleave, he has a stroke and heavily abandons himself on to the table. What follows is the description of a critical period in-between life and death, resulting in a slow recovery that adopts a rhetoric and focuses on a few images that explicitly evoke Jesus' Passion. In particular, I am referring here to the beginning of Part III where Cass' compassion makes her incarnate Veronica's role. In a metaphorical sense, therefore, his terrible strike and consequent restoration of health clearly seem an allusion to Jesus' death and resurrection. Two observations are needed here: first, it is thought-provoking that whereas women die for real in the plot, Vander's death is invariably followed by resurrection. Second, the episode allows us to stretch an analogy between Jesus' Passion and Vander's comatose state in particular with reference to his relationships with both Magda and Cass because earlier in the plot the narrator raised the issue of whether it was Mary Magdalene or Veronica holding the cloth on the Calvary. O'Connell [O'Connell, 2013: 47] acutely observes

that the likeness of the names Magda and Magdalene suggests a possible link between the religious figure and Banville's fictional character and I may simply add here that possibly Cass seems to play the parallel role of Veronica during Axel's passion. In addition, the etymology of the name Kristina – the third of Axel's sweethearts in the plot – clearly sends us back to Christ, reinforcing the idea that women in this story deliberately play a mystical part, too. The parallelism between Axel Vander and the Shroud – and ultimately with Jesus – should however always be placed within a context of either a contradictory (counter-)religion, or an eerie mysticism, because to borrow from O'Connell, if "Banville continually invites the reader to cross-reference Vander against Christ," [O'Connell, 2013: 47] this seems to be simply a mask that his self-obsessed nature needs to satisfy his titanism. However, I cannot but agree with O'Connell when he alludes to other religious referents, namely Judas Iscariot [O'Connell, 2013: 47] and possibly Lucifer [O'Connell, 2013: 46], when the scholar moves to examine Vander's inner nature. The openly provocative contrast of form and content working in the association between Vander and Jesus gives *Shroud* a nearly blasphemous tinkle to some sections of the plot.

The figure of Frederick Nietzsche is, next to the Shroud, another powerful picture that contributes to both the making of Axel Vander and to his strong connection with the city of Turin. Exactly like the Shroud, that operates as a mystical image and provides Vander with a much-desired mirror, allowing the protagonist-narrator to freely enjoy himself by totally manipulating and distorting this mirror-image at his own will, also the icon of Nietzsche is whimsically warped by the narrator. Differently from the Shroud, however, this model works on a philosophical level. If on the one hand the Shroud is functional in establishing the relationship between the central figure and the thematic icon in the novel, on the other hand Nietzsche more specifically shapes Vander's mind and his movements in Turin.

It is soon interesting to stress here that fewer scholars have worked on the Nietzschean elements in *Shroud* but among them the name of John Kenny is one that shines the most. The Irish critic lays particular emphasis on Banville's knowledge of Nietzsche's philosophy assessing that, in the period preceding the writing of *Shroud*, "Banville has

reviewed more books on Nietzsche than on any other single author.”<sup>6</sup> As a consequence, this fictional work becomes a fertile soil where allusions, references and connections with the German philosopher mushroom. The first one appears as soon as we approach the reading of the novel: after having briefly introduced us to the place of the action, through Axel Vander’s voice Banville seems to indulge on to the reasons that drove him to set the story in Turin. Says Vander:

Turin resembles nothing so much as a vast, grandiose cemetery, with all this marble, these monuments, these gesturing statues; it is no wonder poor N. went off his head here, thinking himself a king and the father of kings and stopping in the street to embrace a cabman’s nag. They lost his luggage, too, as once they did mine, sent it to Sampierdarena when he was headed in the opposite direction; forever after he could not hear that melodious place-name without a snarl of rage. [Banville, 2002: 5]

By establishing the correspondence with Nietzsche through the common experience of the lost luggage, Banville prepares the reader with a subtle allusion regarding the development of the plot: Turin is a maddening place, and possibly *Shroud* narrates an exasperating story. Soon afterwards, after revealing that he seems to live in this city as a casual tourist, he shows his total neglect for any of the historical places that generally exert the visitors’ interest:

I find this city no more attractive or interesting than any other I have known. Customs, legends, tales of colourful characters and events, such stuff leaves me cold; the picturesque in particular I find revolting. I do not care what battles Emanuele Filiberto won or lost, or where Cavour liked to eat his dinner. [Banville, 2002: 49]

Nor does the Mole, Turin’s architectural symbol and landmark, seem to be more appealing to his hardly-pleasing eye, as he briefly liquidates the matter by arguing “[w]e passed under the Mole, absurd in its pagoda lines.” [Banville, 2002: 69] A tourist hardly concerned in touristic attractions, Vander however finds the visit to Nietzsche’s house particularly charming because it moves the old professor and enables him to come to terms with the memory of his dead wife. The parallelism between Vander and

<sup>6</sup> John Kenny. *John Banville*. 2009, Dublin, Irish Academic Press, p. 172.

Nietzsche however further develops into a form of cross-identification that becomes evident in different sections in the novel: like Mr. Bleaney and the narrator of the namesake poem by Philip Larkin, also Vander and Nietzsche overlap with one another stressing how the German philosopher functions as one of his doubles in the plot. The intersections of the narrator with Nietzsche become a constant trait: the tour of the German philosopher's house already displays such intention on the narrator's part, while in the following example Vander is in the company of a somewhat mysterious character and here the affinity between himself and Nietzsche is again possible on Turin's stage.

We went to that little caffè behind the church in the Piazza della Consolata and drank hot chocolate spiked with grappa, for the day was bitterly cold. He tells me the place is very old, and has always been owned and run exclusively by women. N., I am interested to learn, used to come here to drink his morning coffee and read the newspapers. I said I wondered if he brought his whip with him, and my new friend chuckled, and dropped cigarette ash on his lapel. [Banville, 2002: 287-88]

Shared details suggesting a possible association between protagonist and his philosopher ancestor however abound in the plot. Most evidently, the presence of a mysterious Turin character whose name "sounded like Zoroaster" [Banville, 2002: 288] and who appears to be another among Vander's doubles is further case in point. Nor can one overlook the fact that Vander at times speaks borrowing Nietzsche's voice, such as in "where lust and its easements are concerned I am and always was *beyond good and evil*." [emphasis added, Banville, 2002: 323] The breakdown that at a certain point affects Vander, while sitting at a café in one of Turin most emblematic squares provides a further element of affinity between the protagonist of *Shroud* and the biography of the German philosopher, because "in January 1889, Nietzsche collapsed in a public square in the Italian city of Turin."<sup>7</sup>

Important connections also stress how the philosophical visions of the fictional character and philosopher are part of Banville's agenda, and one should credit John Kenny with a brilliant intuition when he reminds us that

<sup>7</sup> Alexander Nehamas. "Nietzsche: Writings from the Early Notebooks." *Introductions to Nietzsche*, edited by Robert B. Pippin, 2012, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, p.18.

Axel Vander is one-eyed. This may be a partial reference to “the Cyclops of culture,” the frightful energies that Friedrich Nietzsche, the ghost that haunts the novel, argued were the innovators for humanity. [Kenny, 2009: 163]

This seems a good starting point for a discussion on Vander’s size and stature that, according to the narrator’s view, is totally uncommon, so that in a number of circumstances he talks about his body as belonging to a gigantic creature of mythical dimensions, especially when comparing himself to others. When remembering about his humble origins and his family, Vander writes that “[a]mong them I was too big, in all ways; I was the giant whose head threatened to knock a hole in their ceiling” [Banville, 2002: 205-06]: anyway, his mass appears most striking when the contrast with his miniature woman is evoked. Together they are a special couple because he is “the worried giant now, and she the tiny, hysterical princess,” [Banville, 2002: 281] while in another situation he turns to play the role of “her huge, ancient, peg-legged, Cyclopiian son.” [Banville, 2002: 331] From her point of view, “[s]he had never seen anyone so huge.” [Banville, 2002: 190] Exactly in the same ways as the projections of the Shroud on Vander put on view more distortions than copycat imitations, I suggest applying here the same flexible policy of adaptation and analyze Vander’s descriptions of his mammoth body in terms of a legacy from Nietzsche’s concept of the *Übermensch*, because in some situations Vander seems to incarnate that idea, albeit with appropriate adjustments. I would link Nietzsche’s philosophical theory to the making of Axel Vander with particular reference to the will of power, possibly the driving principle of both the *Übermensch* and the protagonist of *Shroud*, although one must soon add that Vander’s necessity to dominate should rather be seen as a consequence of his overwhelming narcissism than as a mere philosophical concept. In other words, we may say that Vander’s megalomaniac manners appear to be the fictional rendering of Nietzsche’s philosophical theory, “a representation of the most gloriously selfish creator-spirit, allied to what Nietzsche elsewhere refers to as the ‘Dionysian’ man.”<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, I contend that also the *Übermensch*’s famous imperative, “You shall become the person

<sup>8</sup> Peter R. Sedgwick. *Nietzsche: the Key Concepts*. 2009, Oxford, Routledge, p. 111.

you are,”<sup>9</sup> with its unmistakable existential ring, establishes a clear connection with relation to the biography of *Shroud*'s narrator. Existentialism and the narrator's loss of identity visibly dominate in the novel but what mostly seems to liken the Übermensch's maxim to the leading theme in *Shroud* is the narrator's climactic decision to assume Axel Vander's identity or, philosophically speaking, to 'become' Axel Vander. Banville's *Shroud* is in fact “the story of Axel Vander, who had died, and of this other one, who lived” [Banville, 2002: 148] and it pivots around the radical substitution of a personal identity. The narrator's switch of self is a clear consequence of his rejecting his own identity up to the extent that he resolves to transform into Axel Vander, an idol of his youth, and therefore to cross the line of Nazi discrimination. “A Jew hating-Jew,”<sup>10</sup> the narrator of *Shroud* becomes Alex Vander, after having erased every residual form of his original identity and having “opportunistically” [Coughlan, 2006: 94] appropriated the name and the identity of the original Vander. In that sense, Nietzsche's much-debated position with regard to anti-Semitism may be another clue examined by Banville at the time of his elaboration of Axel Vander.

Among the various affinities that Axel Vander possibly shares with Frederick Nietzsche, the attitude towards gender is another interesting case in point. The narcissistic protagonist of *Shroud* seems to be proud of his being removed from the world of women in general, when for instance he claims that “[i]n the land of women I am always a traveller lately arrived” [Banville, 2002: 113] a feeling that is echoed with a still more persuasive rhetoric a little later when addressing Cass he maintains: “[w]here women are concerned I have always been, as you can attest, the bull in the china shop.” [Banville, 2002: 169] His confessional mode – that, incidentally, is another distinctive trait of Nietzsche's writing<sup>11</sup> – repeatedly proves that his interest for women – at times he even ventures

<sup>9</sup> Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche. *The Gay Science*, 1974, New York, Vintage [trans. W. Kaufmann], p. 219.

<sup>10</sup> Patricia Coughlan. “Banville, the Feminine, and the Scene of Eros” in *Irish University Review*, Vol. 36, No. 1, Special Issue: John Banville (Spring - Summer, 2006), p. 94.

<sup>11</sup> Writing about the German philosopher, Eugen Fink contends that “[a]ll his books are written in the manner of confessions” [Eugen Fink, *Nietzsche's Philosophy*, 2003, Continuum, London, p. 4] showing a relevant point in common with a large bulk of Banville's fiction, and not only *Shroud*.

to employ the term ‘love’ – is fake, or, to use a delicate euphemism, partial. His total and provocatively tactless lack of understanding of the other sex fiercely marks the way in which his relationships eventually develop: in this sense the reader can hardly overlook the fact that both Magda and Cass die while in a relationship with the protagonist and, although in different ways, he seems to have had his own hand in both the calamities. Mark O’Connell persuasively tackles the issue when he writes about Cass that “[i]t is her unknowability as a woman that constitutes an intractable moral and emotional problem for Vander.” [O’Connell, 2013: 193] Vander’s distance, something that at times is shaped into utter disregard, from women drives him to construct a fiction in which feminine characters play assigned roles or have evident symbolic references<sup>12</sup> and this also appears to be one of Nietzsche’s distinctive elements in his writings because also he “is often tempted to resort to feminine metaphors in his writings.”<sup>13</sup> The German thinker’s views about women have however not worked within the range of philosophical aloofness only, because in some cases his opinions have shown open insolence for the so-called weak sex. One of the ever-quoted sentences by Nietzsche that manifests the German philosopher’s male-oriented attitude may as well seem to be the credo of Vander, or many of Banville’s protagonists: “When a woman has scholarly inclinations there is usually something wrong with her sexuality.”<sup>14</sup>

Finally, nihilism is the common terrain from which both Nietzsche and Axel Vander share a cheerless, austere perspective on life and the outside world. In this sense, the impact of the German philosopher indeed shows its weight in the design of the protagonist of *Shroud*, who not only – as we have already seen – exhibits his nihilism in terms of a “[n]egative faith” [Banville, 2002: 289] but also reveals how this approach has entirely hold control of his expression. A rhetoric evocatively dominated by negatives often paves the way to his discourse, creating on a textual level an appropriate pretext where lack of faith in a

<sup>12</sup> In the text, Cass alone is compared to Electra, the Cranach Venus, Veronica, Cassandra, Cathleen Ni Houlihan, Beatrice, Laura, Trilby, “a dreamy Columbine” [Banville, 2002: 333] and “the anatomically impossible Madonna”. [Banville, 2002: 333]

<sup>13</sup> Peter R. Sedgwick. *Nietzsche: the Key Concepts*, 2009, Routledge, London, p. 161.

<sup>14</sup> Frederick Nietzsche. *Beyond Good and Evil*, 1973 (1885), Harmondsworth, Penguin [trans. R. J. Hollingdale], p. 144.

religious, moral and social system be free to proliferate: America has proven to be the welcoming shelter for “the fugitive” [Banville, 2002: 250] Vander from Europe, but nonetheless the narrator describes it without any touch of emotion or, better, intentionally deflating expectations, and removing easy sentimentalisms: the list of negatives in the final section of this quotation is worth of note.

When I got to Arcady and looked back, however, I saw that everything I had done had been pushing me relentlessly toward it, as if the essays published, the addresses delivered, the honours won, had been so many zephyrs wafting me irresistibly westward, from Europe to Manhattan, to Pennsylvania, to the plains of Indiana, to bleak Nebraska – such harsh poetry in those names! – and then in a last, high leap, over the mountains and down to that narrow strip of sunlit coast where I came to rest with a soundless, dusty thump, like a spaceman stepping on to an unknown planet. Unknown, that is the apt word. The place was always alien to me, or at least I was an alien in it. The fact is, I was never there, not really. I took no part in town life, such as it was. I did not buy a car. I never went on that delicate, spindly, far-famed red bridge. [Banville, 2002: 90]

His lack of enthusiasm for the Mole in Turin finds here an equivalent indifferent reaction to San Francisco’s Golden Gate, possibly because his “longing to belong” [Banville, 2002: 74] makes him a “displaced” [Banville, 2002: 171] person everywhere he goes. By tackling the same issue from the perspective of psychology, O’Connell makes an insightful observation as he remarks:

[t]hough it may frequently seem to take the form of grandiose self-satisfaction and smugness, [narcissism] is, at bottom, a matter of endless lack and psychological privation. Narcissus never takes possession of the object of his desire, because that object is literally a false impression, the optical illusion created by light rays striking and reflecting off the water surface. [O’Connell, 2013: 19]

It is precisely from this context of a belief in nothingness that his justification and celebration of depravity proceeds. His faith in destruction rather than in creation, his credo in the negative rather than in the positive assumption, his religion of immorality and a disorienting lack of contact with his own self rather than a steady connection with it, all of these aspects directly stem from his deep psychological void. As a

consequence, we find him praising his having made falsehood – the negation of truth – his “first nature,” [Banville, 2002: 12] up to the extent that he does not indulge in re-phrasing his ability “art” [Banville, 2002: 12] but we also discover that he is “amused at [his] avidity,” [Banville, 2002: 211] and enjoying his having become a “virtuoso of the lie, making [his] instrument sing so sweetly that none could doubt the veracity of its song.” [Banville, 2002: 284] It is always his nihilistic approach to life that makes him – to borrow from Nietzsche – an Anti-Christ freely walking through the streets of Turin and that consequently drives him to avoid his visit to the Shroud. It is of course this negative principle dominating him, as well as the whole fiction, that makes him divert his attention from the Shroud in a novel itself entitled *Shroud*, while searching identification with Jesus after having glorified his nature as an impostor. Again, whereas nihilism in Nietzsche’s writings is a well-articulated philosophical subject ultimately explaining the death of God and the celebration of immorality as the only container of vital and positive values, in *Shroud* the focus seems to have been shifted on its possible effects and the sophisticated justifications to dissolution and moral decadence. Within this system, Vander is always self-assured, safe, at times overconfident: nihilism shields him from each external threat so that no signs of indecision are evident in his tale.

Turin, the backstage to the plot, becomes therefore the apt accessory enabling Banville’s edifice to properly count on a firm groundwork. On very rare situations does it occupy the forefront of the action but the Italian city seems to be a constantly elusive presence, perhaps vague and evocatively mysterious as the Shroud. The reader has constantly the feeling that Turin is devised as the appropriate arena for Vander’s-centred tragedy to fully develop its course, if for no other reason because the association with Frederick Nietzsche for the protagonist proves to be central: after establishing the connection with the nihilist philosopher, the narrator of *Shroud* in fact stresses that Nietzsche’s were “last, calamitous days here in Turin.” [Banville, 2002: 150]

## *Bibliography*

- BANVILLE, John. *Shroud*, 2002, London, Picador.
- CLARK, Alex. "Dead Men Talking," *The Guardian*, Saturday 5 October, 2002.
- COUGHLAN, Patricia. "Banville, the Feminine, and the Scene of Eros," *Irish University Review*, Vol. 36, No. 1, Special Issue: John Banville (Spring - Summer, 2006).
- D'HOKER, Elke. "John Banville's Dualistic Universe," *A Companion to Irish Literature*, Volume Two, edited by Julia M. Wright, 2010, Chichester, Blackwell.
- FINK, Eugen. *Nietzsche's Philosophy*, 2003, Continuum, London.
- KENNY, John. *John Banville*. 2009, Dublin, Irish Academic Press.
- MARS-JONES, Adam. "The Evil that Men Do," *The Observer*, Sunday 13 October 2002.
- NEHAMAS, Alexander. "Nietzsche: Writings from the Early Notebooks", *Introductions to Nietzsche*, edited by Robert B. Pippin, 2012, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- NIETZSCHE, Friedrich Wilhelm. *Beyond Good and Evil*, 1973 (1885), Harmondsworth, Penguin, [trans. R. J. Hollingdale].
- NIETZSCHE, Friedrich Wilhelm. *The Gay Science*, 1974, New York, Vintage, [trans. W. Kaufmann].
- O'CONNELL, Mark. *John Banville's Narcissistic Fictions: The Spectral Self*, 2013, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan .
- SEDGWICK, Peter R.. *Nietzsche: the Key Concepts*, 2009, Routledge, London.