

# Untangling Nemesis and Echo from John Banville's Narcissistic *Shroud*

**Karen Anne McCarthy**

## Summary

In this article, I attempt to untangle the conflated representations of the two dead women who haunt Axel Vander, the narrator of large portions of John Banville's 2002 novel, *Shroud*. The narrating protagonist has an inflated sense of his own centrality and a callous disregard for others. Cass Cleave and Magda are reduced to roles which bear striking resemblances to those of Nemesis and Echo in Ovid's rendition of the myth of Narcissus. The article first explores Vander's relationship with Cass, who is twice referred to as "Nemesis" in the text. It traces how Vander's attempt to forge a coherent version of himself comes at Cass's expense. While she is initially poised to bring justice, as Nemesis does, to the Narcissus-like figure by revealing who he actually is, their interaction costs her her life. The article then moves on to look at Magda, Vander's dead (and likely murdered) wife, who throughout her life played the only role permitted by her grandiose husband: that of a hapless Echo. The article concludes by an examination of Vander's belated regret, and doomed gesture of recompense.

## Opsomming

In hierdie artikel poog ek om die ineengestremde voorstellings van die twee dooie vroue wat by Axel Vander spook, te ontrafel. Vander is die verteller van groot gedeeltes van John Banville se roman *Shroud*, wat in 2002 gepubliseer is. Die protagonis-verteller word gekenmerk deur sy oordrewe oortuiging dat die wêreld om hom wentel en sy gewetenlose verontagsaming van ander mense. Cass Cleave en Magda word gereduseer tot rolle wat opvallende ooreenkomste toon met dié van Nemesis en Echo in Ovid se weergawe van die Narcissus-mite. Die artikel stel eerstens ondersoek in na Vander se verhouding met Cass, wat by twee geleenthede in die teks "Nemesis" genoem word. Daar word gekyk hoe Vander se poging om 'n geloofwaardige weergawe van homself te skep tot Cass se nadeel strek. Sy is aanvanklik oorgehaal om, soos Nemesis, geregtigheid vir die Narcissus-agtige figuur te bewerkstellig deur sy ware self te ontbloot, maar hulle wisselwerking kos haar haar lewe. Vervolgens kyk die artikel na Magda, Vander se oorlede (waarskynlik vermoorde) vrou. Regdeur haar lewe het sy slegs die enkele rol vervul wat deur haar grandiose man toegelaat is, naamlik dié van die ongelukkige Echo. Ter afsluiting stel die artikel ondersoek in na Vander se spyt wat te laat kom en sy gedoemde vergoedingsgebaar.

John Banville's *Shroud* begins with the words "[w]ho speaks? It is her voice, in my head. I fear it will not stop until I stop" (2002: 3). The line, which is spoken by Axel Vander, the narrator of large portions of the novel, refers to the voice of a woman who haunts him. As the events of the text unfold, it becomes impossible to distinguish which of the women he has known and lost is the one who "speaks". It could either be the wife he murdered, Magda, or Cass Cleave, the young researcher who, before her suicide, discovers he is not who he claims to be. His ability to callously merge the two women, in death, and create what Mark O'Connell has called an "abstract platonic category ('woman'), as opposed to – more mundanely and more significantly – [...] actual individual women" (2013: 198) illustrates his incapacity to appreciate the alterity of others, a quality which prevents him from forging meaningful connections with those around him. Vander's insistence that "there is no essential, singular self" (285) dooms him to remain a stranger to himself, but perhaps more significantly, it also dooms him to remain a stranger to others. Despite his professed disbelief in a coherent self, it is something that he nevertheless yearns for. His desire results in harmful relationships with the two women whose obedience, silence and ability to reflect a pleasing version of him have been co-opted to give him an admittedly fragile sense of self. This article will attempt to untangle the representations of the two women: a fraught enterprise which the text both demands and resists.

A disembodied voice speaking to so self-obsessed an individual calls for a comparison with Echo, the nymph doomed to die of love for Narcissus in Ovid's third book of *Metamorphoses*. As will be explored later in this article, the title of 'Echo' can fittingly be applied to Magda, and to the role she is obliged to play within a novel with Vander as the only first-person narrator. First, however, I would like to consider two instances in which Cass Cleave is referred to as "Nemesis" (35, 36), whose role in the myth is to distribute divine retribution to those who succumb to hubris, and whose name comes from the Greek word *nêmein*, which means "to give what is due" (*Nemesis*). Banville's novel spans several time strains, yet the one that occupies the most narrative space is Vander's retrospective account of Cass's brief appearance in his life.<sup>1</sup>

Cass has sent Vander a letter informing him that she knows of his deceit. It does not contain details, however he surmises that she knows he is not Axel Vander at all, and that the man whose name he stole wrote anti-Semitic articles in a pro-Nazi publication during World War II. The real Axel Vander died in the Holocaust from which his imposter-namesake escaped. In *Metamorphoses*, Nemesis is the one who draws Narcissus to the pool

---

1. I will refer to Cass Cleave by her first name in order to avoid confusion between her and her father, Alexander Cleave, who features briefly later on in this article.

alongside which he is held captive by a love for his own reflection. According to Gayatri Spivak, a youth previously rejected by Narcissus “brings Nemesis down upon [him]” by saying “[y]ou scorn us, know yourself” (1993: 25). The punishment Nemesis metes out for his hubris is a knowledge of himself, which leads to his death. Cass Cleave offers Vander a reflection too, one which contains an image contrary to the one he has spent a lifetime contriving. He describes the letter, or his Nemesis’s reflection, as “the crossing point” (13). “Now”, he writes, “I was cloven in two more thoroughly than ever, I who was always more than myself. On one side there was the I I had been before the letter arrived, and now there was this new *I*, a singular capital standing at a tilt to all the known things that had suddenly become unfamiliar” (13).

Like the mythological Nemesis, Cass does not introduce anything that is not already present; she merely draws two pre-existing elements of the story (the one prone to self-love, and his reflected image) into a relation with one another. What Vander calls two “I”s, one upright and one in uncomfortable italics, were always in existence. His phrasing, “I was cloven in two more thoroughly than ever”, implies that the split was always there, and is now exacerbated, or rather, is at risk of becoming public. “I pause in uncertainty”, he later states, “losing my way in this welter of personal, impersonal, impersonating pronouns” (285). The trap Vander’s reflection ensconces him in is rather deftly illustrated here with the sequential adding of a prefix and a suffix to the word “personal”. This word signifies what is closest to the self, and is with the mere addition of “im” made to signify the reverse. “I”, the pronoun, and its jaunty counterpart “*I*”, are both capricious, and neither of them, it can be argued, refer to Vander. They are simultaneously personal and impersonal pronouns. “[I]mpersonating”, a gerund which is formed with the addition of “ing” can be argued to signify Vander wilfully assuming the guise of one of the “I”s, although the aporetic fluctuation between the personal and impersonal pronouns, that is, his trap, is caused by his attempt to wield an “I” to which he has no authentic claim.

The jilted youth’s cry of “know yourself”, which thanks to Nemesis results in a trap from which Narcissus cannot escape with his life, takes a rather different form in *Shroud*. Within Banville’s invocation of the myth of Narcissus and Nemesis, the latter is a vulnerable woman who throws herself into a relationship with the former. Their interaction does not result in his death, but hers. Once their relationship takes an intimate turn, they coexist in a painful and temporary liaison, which ultimately results in her suicide. Before this, however, Banville places her one night in the lobby of the hotel beneath the room she and Vander have begun to share. She, like Nemesis, sits near a fountain.

The water in the fountain among the ferns had been switched off. She wondered again if the ferns were real, and thought of touching them to find out, but to do that she would have to stand up and go forward and get down

on her knees at the side of the pond. Stand, advance, kneel. It seemed, as she pictured it, as intricate and effortful as a gymnast's exercise or a complicated pass in ballet. She did not stir.

(121)

Every passage in the novel which provides a glimpse of Cass's inner world is rendered in third person, and in past tense. This form of narration forges a remove between the reader and a character who can no longer speak for herself, which is an appropriate illustration of the chasm between the individual and any representation of her the novel might attempt. In this scene, Vander's Nemesis sits alone near the fountain, wondering whether "the ferns were real". She envisions an endeavour to discern whether the image presented is artifice, which involves more effort than she feels capable of effecting, and she therefore "[does] not stir", and remains simultaneously unaware of whether the ferns are "real" or "not real". This uncertain reality echoes the state of her lover, one which would be rendered certain if she could "touch [him] to find out". To touch, in this instance, would be to connect and resultantly know the thing (or one) touched. Such connection is however beyond what either one of them can accomplish. The acts of "[s]tand, advance, kneel" require Cass to move through the world, and the simplicity with which others appear to do so eludes her. Her mind, Vander tells us, is "a battleground where uncontainable forces [wage] constant war" (317). Interestingly, the motion she imagines bears a striking resemblance to the one Narcissus performs in the myth, in which he kneels and peers into water. That this act would fall to her lot, had she the energy, foregrounds the fact that the trap forged by their interaction is not going to result in the death of the Narcissus figure, but her own, by drowning.

Referring to Cass midway through the novel, Vander writes "[s]till she said nothing, still she held her face turned aside, expressionless as a profile on a coin. It was, I was coming to see, her favourite pose; how transparent you were, my dear, after all" (159). The shift in address, from a projected reader to the "my dear", or indeed "my Cassandra" (223) occurs with some regularity in the text. He says "I am going to explain myself, to myself, and to you, my dear, for if you can talk to me then surely you can hear me, too" (4).<sup>2</sup> The reciprocity he longs for is least likely to come from the image of Cass he remembers, in which her pose reminds him of the profile on a coin. Such a profile is one-dimensional, with a bit of relief sculpture that does not account for the complexity of the individual. It is "expressionless" because that is the most economic form it can take. While it can be spent, and lost, it can never be gained, if what the possessor wishes to gain is the fullness of the individual embossed on the back. Vander states that she was "transparent", which can signify that she was easy to know. It is much more

---

2. The explaining of himself to himself echoes the uncomfortable relation between his two "I"s, the result of his cloven self.

likely, however, that he uses the term such that, when qualifying a material or article (or indeed an individual), it means “allowing light to pass through so that objects behind can be distinctly seen” (*Transparent*). Cass is now without substance, but given that she was the victim of his “inattention” (329) in life, she was without perceived substance (or alterity) then too.

One conversation with Cass which Vander recalls, in which he ends his relationship with her, reminds the reader of this economic notion of exchange:

“I shall have to go back to my life, and so must you go back to yours.” [...] “I have spent so much money here,” I said, “my agent in Arcady, who handles my financial affairs, believes I am being blackmailed – which,” with an archly frowning smile, “I am, in a way,” [...]. I said that of course I loved her, but love is only an urge to isolate and be in total possession of another human being. “By loving you,” I said, “I took you from the world, and now, I am giving you back. Do you see?” She listened to all this in silence, her head judiciously inclined [...].

(368)

The passage illustrates Vander’s inability to distinguish between “love” and “possession”; and much like the profile on a coin, with some predetermined monetary value, he has “taken [her] from the world” and must now “[give her] back”. His explanation of why he must return her, or, in plainer language, abandon her, is punctuated with references to how much money she has cost him. Vander’s failure to connect with her and potentially save her is lamented after her death as follows: “[t]he object of my true regard was not her, the so-called loved one, but myself, the one who loved, so-called. Is it not always thus? Is not love the mirror of burnished gold in which we contemplate our shining selves?” (328). Again, she is likened to a precious metal, the value of which is determined by its gloss, or ability to reflect. He valued her insofar as she could project a pleasing image of him. And, the act of “turn[ing] her face aside” (102) or “judiciously inclin[ing]” it comes to characterise her, or at least the version of her that Vander makes the reader privy to. It is when she is in this pose, that he considers her fascinating enough to be an object of sustained study, or conjecture. This is made clear in the following extract:

Cass Cleave had turned her face aside now and was looking out at the street. How much did she know? Beadily I studied her. [...] The afternoon sunlight had angled itself down past the high roofs into the street, and something from outside kept flashing through the window into my eyes, some reflection from glass or metal.

(102)

Vander’s “study” of the woman before him is severely curtailed by his question being “How much did she know?” The focus of this question is

Vander himself, and his motive for “[b]easily” studying her is a desire to know only what she knows about *him*. In this instance, the reflective surface whose light reaches his eyes is suggestive of blinding, or an incapacity to see correctly. Rather than seeing her, Vander sees only himself. Given that he comprises a split self as a result of his elaborate pretence, the self he sees passes through this blindness, and is never fully known.

After Cass’s death, he chastises himself with the words “It will not do; no, it will not do” (328). Structurally, this wording employs a kind of symmetry, in that the one half mirrors the other. This construct demonstrates Vander’s trap once again. The notion “it will not do”, expresses his dissatisfaction with his approach, and indeed his own inadequacy. Both “I”s that constitute Vander (too much time and too many lies have passed for either to be the “original”) mirror one another, and both are inadequate. They defy self-knowledge, and prevent him from knowing another.

Hedda Friberg remarks that “Cass suffers from an illness which in *Shroud* is called Mandelbaum’s syndrome” and she argues that “it is a seemingly schizophrenic condition which places her, like Nietzsche perhaps, ‘in a place where there is no one else’” (2006: 154).<sup>3</sup> According to Cass’s father, Alexander Cleave, who presents us with another portrait of her in the first instalment of the trilogy of which *Shroud* forms a part, *Eclipse*, the seizures associated with her illness leave her “always alone, always outside” (2000: 65). This aloneness is, ironically, what most attracts Vander to her. He confesses: “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, unreachably beyond. Do you see? Deep down it is all I have ever wanted, really, to step out of myself and clamber bodily into someone else” (335). Yet, it is precisely this alterity which Cass’s disease embodies that ensures she is forever beyond his grasp. Instead, and much like Echo, her isolation provides Vander with the opportunity for self-love, on which he helplessly capitalises. It cannot be overlooked that Vander’s conception of profound connection with someone else, to “clamber bodily” into them, would invariably result in that person’s death. Even his fantasies of ideal connection depend on inflicting harm.

I will now turn to Vander’s representation of the least loved and least missed of the two women, Magda, who I will show bears remarkable similarities to the figure of Echo in Ovid’s myth. Like Cass, Magda has a habit of fixing her gaze “slightly off to one side” (14). Vander writes that “she held her face turned away a little, at a characteristically watchful angle” (14). She too exists in profile for him, which indicates that the version of her the reader is made privy to is a limited representation. The two women are

---

3. It is no coincidence, I imagine, that Turin, the city where much of *Shroud* is set, is the place Nietzsche suffered the breakdown from which he never recovered.

often placed alongside one another in Vander's recollections. His mind shifts between them seamlessly. At one point, he whispers "Magda" into Cass's ear, which indicates that he is unable to differentiate the one woman from the other. It also suggests that what he wants from both is the same impossible thing: to experience their complete otherness while still affirming his centrality and worth.

Claire Nouvet, in her piece titled "An Impossible Response: The Disaster of Narcissus", writes that Ovid "links the two mythical narratives [of Echo and Narcissus], conceived by him to mirror each other and thus attract one another, in a single romance of unrequited love" (1991: 624). The two characters parallel one another quite neatly, and are drawn together because each actually offers what the other (either wittingly or unwittingly) desires. Echo occupies two narrative strains in Ovid's text. The first of these is that her mother Juno, after being tricked by her deceptive use of language, renders her unable to speak in her own words; she can only repeat those of others. The second is that after being rejected by Narcissus, she withers away and leaves only her voice, or an "echo", behind. I will return to the second strain later in the article. At this stage, I would like to consider the first, the result of which is that in order to forge a connection with another, what Echo requires is an other who expresses self-love, so that she can mimic it. Nouvet states that she is "condemned to utter a speech which is [...] severed from her intention, [and] her consciousness" (105). She needs to wait for someone she loves to say something that she can repeat in order to attempt to win his love. Fortuitously, Narcissus, the one Echo desires, also desires himself, and her mirroring ability would actually suit him quite well. Theoretically, she could co-opt his self-love and repeat it back to him in order to communicate her own affection. As is well known, however, no such communication or connection is established. The relationship between Echo and Narcissus is always cast as an aborted one, brought to an abrupt end by his rejection of her, when her call of "join me here", given added significance by her outstretched arms, is met with his contempt (Ovid 2009: 62). Rejection does not always result in the absence of relation, however, as is well-illustrated in Banville's novel.

Everyone is "baffled", Vander informs us, when he chooses the "sweet, silent, undemonstrative Magdalena" to be "[his] moll, [his] mate" (56). The intellectual "tough guy" that he fashions himself as needs "a companion [...], as tough as [he is] supposed to be" in order for the illusion to be complete (56). His persona requires an appendage or accessory, and while Magda may appear to those taken in by his act to be a strange choice, she is well equipped to fall in line with his vision, insofar as she will be "silent". Like Echo, she voices no contradiction (she does not appear to be capable of doing so, and is described by him as "unflagging in her obligingness", preferring "to watch and listen to all that went on from the shelter of anonymity" (57)). When out in company, he would invite "those unwise

enough to engage us in conversation to join in [his] amusement at her incongruous, ill-attired, mute presence at [his] side" (18). The "witticisms [...] at her expense" were, he writes, met with "happy tolerance" (18). Her compliance persists in her later years when he decides that "the time [has] come when she must go", and he dispatches her with an overdose of her medication (96).

Like Echo and Narcissus, Magda and Vander mirror one another. Structurally, their respective stories of survival form reflections of one another. Magda's escape from the death camps is a result of her name being mistakenly left off a list, or forgotten, and Vander's is the product of his name being one that he stole from someone who did not survive the Holocaust (and presumably died under another name). Their survival, and subsequent ability to come together, is therefore a result of the neglect of one by the Nazi authorities, and the illegitimate gain of the other. Their relationship mimics the dynamic set up in the myth quite closely, in that it is characterised by Vander's gain, and his neglect of Magda.

Her only direct speech in the entire novel is "*And I only am escaped alone to tell thee*" (59, original emphasis). Vander recalls that when she uttered these words, "the bristles stood up on the back of [his] neck, as if it were an oracle that had spoken. Who would have expected Magda, big, slow, flat-footed Magda, to come out with something so grave, so sonorous, so biblically apt to both our states?" (59-60).<sup>4</sup> The words are not her own, but in the tradition of Echo, she uses fragments of the speech of others in order to express herself. They are lifted from the book of Job in the King James Bible. The story of Job has long been excavated in attempts to grapple with the perennial mystery of innocent suffering, particularly in relation to the Holocaust. The phrase is echoed four times in Job itself, by each of the four of Job's servants who come to tell him of the death and ruin that has befallen his family, his livestock, and his home. Voiced by survivors of catastrophes, it is clear why Vander considers these words to be "so biblically apt" to both Magda and himself. I would like to take a closer look at them than he does, however. The only emphasis, or significance afforded to the four separate speakers of the line in the book of Job is as a result of the (rather unlikely) precise repetition of the words. The conflation of four unnamed individuals in this manner has a paradoxical effect. On the one hand, it erases their individuality in favour of that of the rather self-aggrandising central character; on the other, it eerily repeats the shared state of many, and the repetition actually *emphasises* the numerous instances of suffering that do not get much recognition in Job's eponymous book. To repeat is to mirror, and the four mirrors that are held up to Job are mistakenly used by him to

---

4. An oracle was traditionally a messenger of the gods, whose individual identity was erased in order for her to perform her role. Her words were also not considered her own.



reflect on his own anguish, as opposed to what they actually signify, which is the suffering of those around him. Together, they form something of an echo chamber, which is misjudged by Job to be empty, but is in fact filled with the pain of others. Vander is very like Job: the bulk of the novel is a reflection on his own suffering, and in a Job-esque flourish, he characterises one of the women he has lost, “the slow, flat-footed Magda”, in bovine terms, which if one were comparing the losses of the two men would put Magda into the category of lost cattle, not lost wives. At one point in the narrative, he reflects that living with her “was like living on intimate terms with a creature from another species; she was to me as remote and inaccessible as some large, harmless herbivore”, he says (60). His bereavement is cast as similar to that of Job: he has lost a wife and livestock. However, his conflation of the two severely undermines any sympathy the reader might be compelled to feel for him, and this is compounded when it comes to light that he killed her himself. Vander co-opts the words “*And I only am escaped alone to tell thee*” as a description of his own state, as Job does. As is the case with Narcissus, the prospect of the words being attached to another immeasurably complex consciousness, one other than his own, is too much to bear for Vander.

Subtly, however, Magda uses this single line to hauntingly insert herself into the text: not once, but twice. The tautological formulation of her utterance, that is, the seemingly unnecessary repetition of the concept “I only” with “alone” achieves two things. It repeats, or echoes, her presence twice, and also powerfully (over and over) conveys a sense of her own state: of her being profoundly alone. Again, this aligns Cass, who is similarly characterised, with Magda. That the statement is addressed to a “thee”, or an other, does not mitigate the doubly-emphasised state of isolation of the speaker. Being the “thee” to which this statement is addressed, Vander’s inflated sense of his own centrality prevents him from recognising what the words reflect about Magda herself, choosing instead to see only the customary shroud of silence he views in her place.

Magda’s choice of phrase has further significance, which adds insistence to her muted presence in the novel. The line was also used as the final words of Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick*. The character of Axel Vander is loosely based on Paul de Man, who “published [Melville’s novel] in Belgium in his own translation into Flemish in 1945, at the conclusion of the Second World War and three years before his emigration to the United States” (Felman 1989: 704). *Moby Dick* has at its core an obsessed captain of a ship with just as many secrets, perhaps, as Vander. The links between Vander and Paul de Man have been capably explored elsewhere (Kucala 2013; Brewster 2016), however those between Vander and the notorious Captain Ahab have not. That they both possess a dysfunctional leg is a surface connection. To delve deeper, Melville’s novel begins with an unnamed stranger warning Ishmael, the narrator of the text, that the captain he is poised to entrust his life to is

not worthy of that trust. This same lack of trust troubles the reader of *Shroud*. Vander is duplicitous, mendacious, and self-deceiving. Like readers of Melville's most famous work, one cannot be assured that Vander's centrality in the text is actually any indication of his knowledge of what is happening around him. That Paul de Man is also a figure who has come to be known for his deception makes the allusion to Melville all the more intriguing.<sup>5</sup> Of course, Ishmael survives, whereas Magda does not. Her survival is that of an echo.

The nature of an echo, though, is that it is not limited to two instances. Much like the acoustic phenomenon, particularly when it occurs in oppressive conditions, with limited space and boundaries off which it can bounce, the figure of Magda appears repeatedly throughout the text, reverberating, and growing in significance. Vander states:

While she was alive I could hardly be said to have given her a second thought, while now she was constantly on my mind, if only as a shadow, the solitary spectator sitting in the benches above the spotlight ring where the gaudy and increasingly chaotic performance of who and what I am pretending to be is carried without interval. [...] Only in death has she begun to live fully, for me.

(35-36)

The reverberation of Magda's presence, which Vander belatedly recognises as the ghostly remainder of what was once the fullness of her life, triggers the revelation that she knew of his deceit all along. She has only "begun to live fully" in death for him, and he finally affords her the credit of a complex consciousness who would, after a lifetime at his side, undoubtedly have been aware of his falsehood. However, "[h]er knowledge of my duplicity", he reflects, "ran deeper than mere detail, it reached far down into my very essence" (398). "What I marvel at", he continues, "is her silence. All those years when I thought I was preserving myself through deceit, it was really she who was keeping me whole, keeping me intact, by pretending to be deceived. She was my silent guarantor of authenticity. That was what I realised, [...] and one whole wall of my life fell down and I was afforded an entire vista of the world that I had never glimpsed before" (400). In death, Magda's echo seems to reverberate more strongly than it did in life, which implies that her profound absence reminds Vander of a fact he was loathe to concede while she was alive, namely that Magda was a whole and other person. Ironically, her passing makes her alterity more pronounced for him, and further, it issues a posthumous indictment of his neglect. When Vander

---

5. In 1988, five years after his death, it was discovered that while de Man lived in Belgium, he had written a column for *Le Soir*, a Nazi collaborationist journal, in 1941 and 1942. For more on the matter, see Shoshana Felman's article titled "Paul de Man's Silence" (1989).

claims that he is now able to see a vista which was obscured before, it implies development in his character. Yet, she was the guarantor of his authenticity, and his stable and inflated sense of self relied on her. Now that she is gone, in a sense, so is he. Neat conclusions would undermine Banville's project, which concerns itself with the impossibility of ethical connection. It must be emphasised that Vander's epiphany is limited, rooted in self-interest, and above all, too late.

The echo Magda sent back, that is, her construction of the illusion which convinced Vander that she was deceived, is – he realises – a result of a great deal more than a mere lack of originality on her part, and an inability to generate her own ideas. Of the mythological figure of Echo, Nouvet observes that she repeats “the words pronounced by Narcissus, pursuing him by following him, but in doing this she changes them, thus introducing not only deferral, but also difference, as if to compromise the (narcissistic) identification of the word with its acoustic image” (1991: 622). She continues, “The echo is not a distortion which affects the intended meaning of a statement. It marks the impossibility of determining any such intended meaning, that is, the impossibility of connecting a statement to the intention of a speaking consciousness” (627). To reiterate, now that Magda is dead, the impossibility of connecting her echo to the intention of a speaking consciousness is compounded. Magda mirrored Vander, in that she offered no contradiction to his deceit, but what he realises is that this mirroring comprises a complex and individual response. It implies choice, which is proof of her undeniable alterity. More than that, though, it reveals the limitations of the narcissist, his inability to control meaning and the world around him.

The sin of Narcissus, the one that dooms Echo to death, is that he does not respond. Nouvet argues that the myth of Narcissus and Echo is a “narrative about responsibility, a responsibility which it understands as it were etymologically (since responsibility comes from [the same root as] respond), as the duty of responding to the call of the other” (104). “Narcissus is indeed punished”, she reminds us, “because he failed to respond to the other; his drama is explicitly designated as the just retribution to a criminal unresponsiveness” (104). She adds, “Narcissus's unresponsiveness disembodies Echo but does not kill her; at least not completely. The failure to respond provokes the death of the body, a death that Echo nevertheless survives as the “*sonus*” which goes on living after the body has evaporated” (113). By playing Echo to his Narcissus, Magda actually formed a fundamental part of who Vander was. This is what enables her to remain, after death, as a “*sonus*”, as in the second strain of Echo's plot line in Ovid's narrative.

Of second-generation Holocaust survivors, or “children of Job”, as they are also interestingly known, Maurice Blanchot writes that they are guardians of an “absent meaning” (quoted in Friedländer 1992: 41). They do not have direct experience of the horrors of the Holocaust, only its dis-

embodied echoes, to contend with. Vander, too, has only Magda's disembodied voice as a legacy. He has become a guardian of absent meaning. To be a guardian implies some responsibility, or indeed response, although, he no longer has the option of responding to her. She remains, according to him, "contentedly isolated in the unfathomable depths of herself" (18).

In the concluding paragraph of *Shroud*, Vander observes that "[t]he city is quiet at this time of year. The dead, though, have their voice. The air through which I move is murmurous with absences. I shall soon be one of them. Good. Why should I have life and she have none?" (405). In the fashion of many of Banville's novels, *Shroud* circles back to where it began, with a reference to the unnamed "she" he alludes to at the beginning of the text. That the novel ends where it begins is an appropriate structural feature of a work that concerns itself with the impossible. To stage any progress would be disingenuous, given that Vander cannot reverse what he has done, and not even atone for it. His epiphany only shows him what he will never be able to do, which is to respond, to both women, as he ought to have done. He acknowledges that "the dead have their voice", or echo, and to reiterate what he states in the beginning of the novel, these voices "will not stop until [he stops]" (3). One thing he can, and inevitably will, do, is join them. While his death will certainly not result in the connection he failed to establish with Magda and Cass in life, it is an opportunity for him to echo them in a way that costs him something, it is the closest thing to a response that he can muster, and in fact, it will cost him everything.

The novel ends with the words "She. She" (405). Both women, it seems, occupy the final two sentences of the text. The references to them are in the third person, and do not specify their names. On the one hand, this could be yet another instance of the "impersonal pronouns" that Vander flounders in within the text; the pronouns used to refer to the women are identical, and therefore do nothing to evoke what is "personal" about them – this may be yet another of his confections of their identities, which he uses throughout the text to sustain the illusion of his own solidity. On the other hand, to end a novel which has pivoted primarily around Vander's troubled sense of self with a reference to the others he has deprived of their alterity could be considered an acknowledgement of the harm he has done. As readers of this text, being presented with the indeterminate (and therefore limitless) allusions to two women who have been imperfectly represented, places a demand on us to see more than has been conveyed. It could be interpreted as a blind tribute to the strangers, the women he has not managed to see, who we must attempt to see in his stead. We are required to take cognisance of what exceeds the impersonal pronouns of "She" and "*She*", and perhaps also what exceeds "I" and "*I*".

## References

- Banville, John  
2000 *Eclipse*. London: Picador.  
2002 *Shroud*. New York: Knopf.
- Brewster, Scott  
2016 A Few Words for Axel Vander: John Banville and the Pursuit of Deconstruction. *Irish Studies Review* 1: 1-16.
- Felman, Shoshana  
1989 Paul de Man's Silence. *Critical Inquiry* 15(4): 704-744.
- Friberg, Hedda  
2006 Passing Through Ourselves and Finding Ourselves in the Beyond: The Rites of Passage of Cass Cleave in John Banville's *Eclipse* and *Shroud*. *Irish University Review* 36(1): 151-164.
- Friedländer, Saul  
1992 Trauma, Transference, and "Working Through" in Writing the History of the Shoah. *History and Memory* 4(1): 39-59.
- Kučała, Bożena  
2013 John Banville's *Shroud*: A Deconstructionist's Confession. *Studia Anglica Posnaniensia* 48(2/3): 93-102.
- Nemesis*  
2016 Oxford English Dictionary. Online:  
<<https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/nemesis>> 5 August 2016.
- Nouvet, Claire  
1991 An Impossible Response: The Disaster of Narcissus. *Yale French Studies* 79(1): 103-134.
- O'Connell, Mark  
2013 *John Banville's Narcissistic Fictions*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Ovid  
2009 *Metamorphoses*, translated by A. D. Melville. Oxford: Oxford UP.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty  
1993 Echo. *New Literary History* 24(1): 17-43.
- Transparent*  
2016 Oxford English Dictionary. Online:  
<<https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/transparent>>. 5 August 2016.

**Karen Anne McCarthy**  
Rhodes University  
[karen.mccarthy@ru.ac.za](mailto:karen.mccarthy@ru.ac.za)