Overlooked and Better for It: Looking Twice at a Woman in John Banville's *Ancient Light*

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Abstract

John Banville established the narrative layout of a self-centred man rendering foolhardily self-assured and incomplete narrative representations of women as his preferred thought experiment early in his career. Nevertheless, he evinces an awareness of the history of repressive representations of women, and while he regularly falls into the trap of wielding them to achieve his texts' primary goals, and more often than not renders them secondary and peripheral, he does so in a way that announces limitation and failure. Billie Stryker, a female detective encountered as a minor character in his 2012 novel *Ancient Light* is not the object of the narrator Alexander Cleave's curiosity because her appearance does not inspire the epistemophilic interest, or erotically invested gaze, he and the majority of Banville's narrators cast on other women. She is therefore freer than most of Banville's women, and she looms larger than those who are confined to objects of desire. Cleave's relationship with her borders on what he himself calls "inattention." She passes through the primary narrator's unusually amplified disregard, and is therefore an object of curiosity to a reader, who is effectively instructed to look at her again. This article performs that second reading of a character that looms larger than most of Banville's women, precisely as a result of being less looked at and less desired than those whose role is more curtailed in Banville's work.

Keywords: John Banville; *Ancient Light*; women; gender; epistemophilia; Billie Stryker

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Ancient Light (2012) is the third and (to date) final book in the Alexander and Cass Cleave trilogy by John Banville. Alexander Cleave is this text's version of the stock-standard Banvillian narrator; that is, a solipsistic man rendering foolhardily self-assured, erotically invested, and incomplete narrative representations of the women around him. Casting women as unknowable and therefore as vacant placeholders for "the world" from which male narrators are alienated illustrates Banville's alignment with what Elisabeth Bronfen calls "our culture's need to ground theoretical and aesthetic representation on the displayed 'erasure' of the feminine" (1992, 40). His characterisation of women is something he can, as Derek Hand has said, be "taken to task" for (2002, 32). Nevertheless, dismissing him on these grounds is to overlook the nuance he layers into several of his female characters, which often problematise the representations from within. In her analysis of *The Book of Evidence* (Banville 1989), Elke D'hoker articulates something similar; she critiques an "attempt at closure" in analyses of the author's work because "it inevitably reduces the indeterminacy and resistance that occur in Banville's works of art" (2002, 35). The 1989 novel has the often-quoted words in which the narrator reflects on his crime of murdering a young woman: "I never imagined her vividly enough, […] I never made her be there sufficiently, […] I did not make her live" (215). This "failure of imagination" (215) features across Banville's oeuvre, and while women *are* instrumentalised, or repeatedly crafted to perform a function that serves the authors' primary aesthetic objectives, he nevertheless evinces an awareness of his own failure of imagination, and layers this awareness into some of his female characters, and this article seeks to unpack precisely this complexity in Banville's crafting of Billie Stryker, a peripheral character in his 2012 novel *Ancient Light*.

Before I begin this analysis, I must acknowledge that I seek to add to an existent and growing body of work on women crafted by Banville. The issue was not initially taken up by many critics, and it has proven to be one of the most challenging and controversial topics in scholarship devoted to this author. Joseph McMinn, an early and important Banville scholar, released *Banville: A Critical Study* in 1991, in which he dismissed gender as a secondary concern in Banville studies; however, his 1999 *The Supreme Fictions of John Banville* is a "completely revised version of [the] earlier work" (ix) which acknowledges the importance of gendered dynamics in many of the author's novels. Neil Murphy remarks that "[w]hile many critics of Banville have not closely analyzed the significance of his representation of female figures beyond a few cursory remarks, several have sought to address what is a clearly discernible pattern of representation" (2018, 11). This "pattern of representation" has been variously described by critics. Mark O'Connell has described "the stock female roles in Banville's fiction" as "frequently conceived of (sometimes in moments of self-recrimination, sometimes almost complacently) in terms of their specular functions; as facilitators and repositories of narcissistic self-images" (2013, 135). D'hoker argues that "Banville protagonists […] generally feel threatened and overwhelmed by large, corporeal, and overbearing women and are attracted to vague, distant, arty, artistic, or artificial females" (2002, 31). Her monograph, *Visions of Alterity: Representation in the Works*

of John Banville (2004), examines the dynamic. She has also written on *Mrs Osmond*, a novel that breaks with Banville's established pattern and presents an "elaborate portrait of an entirely sane, sympathetic and courageous female protagonist," and she has stated that by doing so, "Banville himself has strayed far in—for him—unfamiliar territory" (2019, 84). Vital additions to the conversation have been made by Ruth Frehner (2000), Carol Dell'Amico (2014), Patricia Coughlan (2006), and Mar Asensio Aróstegui (2018). Murphy argues that Banville's representation of women, and thus the gender politics of his fiction, has progressed in his later work:

> [T]here appears to be ample evidence of at least some progressive development both in his representation of women and in their direct significance for the development of a less masculinist aesthetic than had been evident, particularly in the Frames Trilogy. (2018, 14)

Eoghan Smith states that in Banville's work, "the lives and deaths of women […] are subjected to the control of the masculine imaginative order" (2014, 85), which corresponds with what Murphy calls a "masculinist aesthetic." In Smith's book on Banville's work prior to 2012 (which only just misses *Ancient Light*), he conveys his unease about "the degree to which the Banvillean motif of the artwork's 'presence' reinforces gender binaries rather than disturbs them" (112). Mehdi Ghassemi has recently remarked that "[t]he 'woman' [in the author's most recent trilogy] is represented simultaneously as an enigma, the site of 'truth', the guarantor of the narrators' authentic self, and the screen onto which the protagonists aim to inscribe their aesthetic signatures" (2018, 30). Like O'Connell, Ghassemi sets out to argue that "the representation of the 'woman', especially in the late trilogy (*Eclipse*, *Shroud*, *Ancient Light*), aptly illustrates Banville's ontological and epistemological vision of the self" (31). Ghassemi therefore examines the function that women in Banville's work perform, that is, the use to which they are put, and he critiques this utility. My own doctoral thesis (McCarthy 2022) performs a more extended critique, while also examining the complexity of these representations.

Ancient Light centres Alexander Cleave, who has been cast in a film about the life of Axel Vander, the narrator of an earlier instalment of the trilogy, *Shroud*. What connects the two men is Cass Cleave, Alex's daughter, who was driven to suicide in part by her disastrous relationship with Vander. This knowledge looms in front of Alex throughout the narrative, and is something which he fails, or more likely wilfully refuses, to see. *Ancient Light* is devoted to recounting the affair Cleave had with his best friend's mother, Mrs Gray, when he was 15. The words "[i]t seems I was mistaken about everything" (2012, 238), are penned by him near the end of the novel, and follow the revelation that Mrs Gray is dead, and that her terminal illness, pain, and sorrow escaped his notice for the duration of their relationship. This undermines his narrative, which is retroactively shot through with what D'hoker calls "aporia or misreadings," and these create, upon discovery, "an ironic double structure of unreliability, evident only on a second reading" (2018, 5). A second reading of the women in the novel (for example, a

reading of Mrs Gray informed by the knowledge that she is dying, and that what is relayed of her words have this weight and preoccupation that the reader is not informed of the first time they encounter her) is demanded by the text. A second reading, which calls for one to look again at what one has presumably inefficiently seen before, is built into the very structure of the book. The need for a first and second reading—and the inevitable failure of both—is carefully crafted by Banville. This second look is something the enthusiastic reader may embark on with all but explicit instruction that the narrator is not to be trusted, and indeed "mistaken about everything" (2012, 238). Rereading, rather than taking the form of an uncomplicated seeking of truth, manifests as a compulsion to return and an alluring but rigidly unattainable possibility of escape or moving forward that runs through all three of the Alexander and Cass Cleave novels.

What has interested me in the work of Banville is the ramifications of this plot structure, which is pervasive in his work, in relation to the representation of female characters. The women represented in the trilogy are generally considered beautiful, or at least captivating in some way if they are to be "looked at" or feature in the narrative as objects of sustained curiosity. Banville's narrators, particularly the ones in the Alexander and Cass Cleave books, produce narrative that is shaped by what Peter Brooks would call "epistemophilia" (1993, xiii). Brooks describes this feature (of male narration) as follows: "his drive to know expresses itself in, and is subtended by, his erotically invested gaze" (107). I specify male narration because as Brooks elsewhere states, "the point from which vision is directed at the world [has] largely throughout the Western tradition been assumed to be male […]. That which is to be looked at, denuded, unveiled, has been repeatedly personified as female: Truth as goddess, as sphinx, or as woman herself" (96). Brooks calls epistemophilia a "dynamic of curiosity" which in his analysis takes the form of "[narrators'] curiosity about the body, their explicit or implicit postulation that the body—another's or one's own holds the key not only to pleasure but as well to knowledge and power" (xiii).

Here, I perform the demanded "second reading," and focus specifically on the intriguing figure of Billie Stryker, a female detective. Billie Stryker passes through a few layers of Cleave's misrepresentation before the reader encounters her. Prior to meeting her, he makes numerous assumptions that are relayed in the text, and then, given that the narration is not omniscient, he sees her and must acknowledge in the present moment of narration that "[t]he scout from Pentagram Pictures turns out to be Billie, not Billy like my pal [his childhood best friend], and Stryker, not Striker […] and is a woman and emphatically not, as I had assumed, a man" (Banville 2012, 74). This is one of many corrections that occur in the "present" of the narrative, their mistaken prior form remaining pointedly unrevised. She has been sent by the studio that is to produce the film on Axel Vander's life and the reasons she is sent remain largely obscured. This obscuring is in part a function of her being unattractive, and resultantly not an object of curiosity for Cleave. The next sentences devoted to Billie's description, in which she is again being untangled from Cleave's mistaken preconceived ideas, read "I was up here in my attic as usual when I heard her preposterous little car come whining and coughing

into the square […] I paid no heed, thinking it must be someone to see [my wife]" (74). The description below constitutes Cleave's "first reading" of Billie Stryker, and I contend that the reader is invited by the jarring hyperbole to dismiss the content of this first impression as warped, if not entirely inaccurate. As is often the case with female characters, Billie Stryker is subjected to Cleave's merciless assessment of her physical appearance, which he writes as follows:

> As well as being a woman, Billie Stryker is not at all what I had expected. What did I expect? Someone smart and snappy and transatlantic, I suppose. Billie, however, is obviously a native of these parts, a short pudgy person in, I judge, her middle to late thirties. She really is of a remarkable shape, and might have been assembled from a collection of cardboard boxes of varying sizes that were first left out in the rain and then piled soggily any old way one on top of another. The general effect was not improved by the extremely tight jeans she was wearing, and the black polo-necked jumper that made her large head look like a rubber ball set squarely atop all those precariously stacked cartons. She has a tiny sweet face inset amid much surplus flesh, and her wrists are dimpled like a baby's and look as if they have been tied round with tight loops of thread at the junctures where her hands are attached to, or inserted into, as it might be, the ends of her arms. (74–75)

This relentlessly demeaning description sets Billie apart from the women who tend to play primary roles in Banville's fiction. In this passage, it is established that Billie is not going to inspire the "dynamic of curiosity" that animates much of Banville's narrative representations of women (Brooks 1993, xiii). Unlike other women, who are likened to works of art and therefore have a waiting category in which to fit, as well as a place (however undermined) in the narrative, Billie is simply given the designation of "not at all what I expected." His wife Lydia (in her youth) is likened to "one of Ingres's odalisques" (17); his co-star in a film, Dawn Devonport (before he picks apart her "flaws," as he calls them [91]), is "Diana of the Three Roads herself" (90). Even Mrs Gray is likened to some of the only art a 15-year-old Alex knew of, namely the "Kayser Bondor lady," his "ideal of mature womanhood" which was "a foot-high, cut-out cardboard beauty propped on the hosiery counter of Miss D'Arcy's haberdashery shop at the near end of [the] Main Street" (29). The category Cleave had waiting for Billie—or Billy, rather—namely, "[s]omeone smart and snappy and transatlantic," cannot accommodate "a short pudgy person," a female person, who is "a native of these parts." She is a diminutive Irish woman, and given that he has no category into which to place her, the elements he uses to assemble her image in the reader's mind are empty cardboard receptacles, rendered useless by being rained on, and then "piled soggily any one way one on top of another." Her "design" lacks the thought and care of the women whose descriptions emulate art.

The only description that approaches a positive one is that of her "tiny sweet face," which is diminutive and infantilised, and therefore deprived of erotic qualities. Indeed, all the flesh he is permitted to see that is not obscured by "extremely tight jeans" and a "black polo-necked jumper," like "wrists […] dimpled like a baby's," is described in a

manner that puts the reader in mind of a small child. We encounter here Alex's assumption that a body's description is a means of relaying truth. Alex's narration recalls Peter Brooks's description of a "knowing subject [who] postulates [a] woman's body as the object to be known, by way of an act of visual inspection which claims to reveal the truth or else makes that object into the ultimate enigma" (1993, 97). Patricia Coughlan finds a similar connection to Brooks's work in her article on women and the erotic in Banville (2006, 84). The rendering of an "ultimate enigma" is clearly not Alex's objective here. His plain and unflattering language appears designed to relay a final truth gained by way of disinterested visual inspection. Alex's description of Billie, which imbues her features with a child-like quality, appears, in his view, to legitimately demote her and render her a negligible figure.

The gratuitous detail of the description puts the reader in mind of realist conventions. Brooks remarks that realism "insistently makes the visual the master relation to the world, [… and t]o know, in realism, is to see, and to represent is to describe" (1993, 88). Of course, Brooks qualifies this by drawing the reader's attention to "the hostilities implicit in the exercise of vision on an objectified other" (90). He adds that "the gaze subtended by desire produces the work of the imagination, and with it the possibility of error, the illusions of desire" (89). Billie Stryker's representation has the clear marks of being warped by being an "objectified other" to whom Alex is "hostile," and his words elaborately assure the reader that she is someone he does *not* desire, but the "hostility" of objectifying representation is as prevalent in portrayals of the desired as the reviled. The representation Alex generates of Billie, which is inordinately hostile, creates a split between what he sees and what Banville would have us believe is there.

Banville is not a writer who can be accused of much traditional realism. His novel is one in which realism is wielded, not conformed to. Brooks observes of latter realisms, or modernisms, that "the frustrations of knowing produce a questioning of the epistemophilic project itself. The observer/knower is put into question" (106). Banville crafts a character whose narrative reeks of what Brooks calls "the desires inherent in realist vision—to appropriate the world, to exchange places with others—as well as the hostilities implicit in the exercise of vision on an objectified other" (90). I argue that Banville has therefore written Billie Stryker twice. He has inserted her as a reticent character, what D'hoker might call "a silent, mute other, placed outside of [the narrating] self-reflexive awareness" (2018, 10), and he has also funnelled her through the consciousness of Alex Cleave, whose soggy shaping of her is overtly disparaging, and suspiciously so. We are all but instructed not to view his description as accurate, and indeed not to trust his sight. Her likeness is therefore a misrepresentation, and, importantly, it is staged a such.

Billie's capacity to be overlooked is also the cornerstone of her skill as a sleuth and "researcher" (Banville 2012, 75). She is largely silent, but her silence is one those around her fill with their secrets. Cleave remarks when they first meet that "she seemed to know no more of why she was here than I did" (75) and, frustrated by her

unforthcoming manner, wonders why the producer of the film has sent "this taciturn and lumpish creature" his way (76). The charged silence she creates continues, and Cleave writes "[a]nd then, almost before I knew it, I had begun to talk about my daughter" (77). After she has left, he begins to understand what has happened:

> But wait, hang on—something has just struck me. I was the one whom Billie Stryker was researching today. That was the point of all that hedging and hesitating on her part, all those ponderous silences: it was all a stalling tactic while she waited patiently for me to start talking, as I inevitably would, into the vacuum she had carefully prepared. How subtle of her, not to say sly, not to say, indeed, underhand. (79)

Importantly, this passage begins with the jarring "[b]ut wait, hang on" as though there is a present moment Alex needs to usurp with something more important than whatever currently fills it. This achieves several things. It serves to cement his status as a limited narrator: one who is caught in a particular moment at the time of writing. His narration is not one that carries the knowledge of its conclusion as it is written, and therefore being "struck" with knowledge that had not occurred to him before is a regular feature of his writing. It also creates an instant in which the illusion of simultaneity is created between Alex's narration and a reader's reading. Both the phrases "[b]ut wait" and "hang on" are addressed to a reader whose attention needs to be drawn to a fact, which in turn is highlighted by the urgency of the twice-repeated imperative of "stop." A reader might, therefore, comprehend more than Alex is relaying in the narrative present, and the imperative to pause while Alex himself comprehends casts him as a hindrance to what there is to see, not a trustworthy relayer. He concludes his realisation with a sequence of descriptors: "[h]ow subtle of her, not to say sly, not to say, indeed, underhand." The words form a progression from impressed to suspicious. That such a shift of tone occurs within one sentence again draws the reader into a present tense of narration in which Alex is "thinking aloud": letting his thoughts unfold rather than imparting what he knows, in a limited present tense. The content of this progression is intriguing. A woman in his narrative has acted in a way that he did not immediately comprehend, and an initial flicker of admiration is quickly replaced with suspicion. It is as though a woman's choices that elude his understanding are suspect. They are not only suspect, they are "underhand" because even though they are unknown, his narcissistic impulse dictates that they must concern him directly. Nevertheless, Billie persists in the narrative, acting and knowing and existing outside of the reach of the bulk of Alex's narrative present tense.

What Alex shares with Billie is not rendered in the text. He asks "[w]hat did I say to her, what did I tell her?" (79) rhetorically, followed by questions regarding what he might have said. The actual content is therefore for Billie alone, and he wonders "[h]ow did Billie Stryker, seemingly without the least effort, get me to say so much? There must be more to her than meets the eye. As I should hope there is, for what meets the eye is less than prepossessing" (78). The result of this exchange is an investment of knowledge that is not laid bare in the text into a character whose appearance is "less than prepossessing." She is, it is once again confirmed, not the conventional object of the

epistemophilia that drives many of Banville's protagonists' pursuit of knowledge; and therefore while this particular narrating consciousness acknowledges that there is likely "more to her than meets the eye," that "more" will not form part of the narrative we are privy to. It will only be tacitly announced that knowledge that is not housed in a captivating-enough body will remain side-lined. Again, however, the reader is let in on this, and is invited to guess at the knowledge themselves. The reader is ensconced in the primary reading, in which they are instructed to "wait" and to "hang on" so as to be held up in Alex's limited perception, and they are also shown what exceeds his perception, and are thus equipped to perform a reading that looks for what exceeds his narration. The reader who has also read *Shroud* is informed enough to guess that Billie is privy to the fact that Axel Vander and Cass Cleave were lovers, or at least that they were ensconced in what Alex, without knowing the identity of Vander's lover, calls a "savage love" (136). She may also know that the brutality of this relationship, as Stephen Butler writes, "may [have contributed] as much as anything to Cass's eventual suicide" (2019, 204). Billie may well know that the daughter Alex mourns is the same woman Vander will mourn at the end of the story.

I will now turn my attention to an observation Alex makes towards the end of the novel, and then double back to perform more of the "second reading" of what is constructed of Billie Stryker in the text.

> I have begun to look at Billie under a new light. Languishing for so long in the shadow of my inattention she seemed herself a shadow. But she too has her aura. She is, after all, the link between so many of the figures that most closely concern me—Mrs Gray, my daughter, even Axel Vander. I ask myself if she might be more than merely a link, if she is, rather, in some way a co-ordinator. Co-ordinator. Odd word. I do not know what I mean, but I seem to mean something. I used to think, long ago, that despite all the evidence I was the one in charge of my own life. To be, I told myself, is to act. I missed the vital pun, though. Now I realise that I have been acted upon, by unacknowledged forces, hidden coercions. Billie is the latest in that line of dramaturgs who have guided from behind the scenes the poor production that I am, or am taken to be. Now what new twist of the plot has she uncovered? (Banville 2012, 236)

The framing of Billie as "[l]anguishing for so long in the shadow of [Alex's] inattention" is a description not of Billie but of Billie as Alex perceives her, or indeed fails to perceive her. As an element of the text, her figure takes on a kind of autonomy, given that the narrator acknowledges that there is much pertaining to her that he has failed to see. The word "inattention" is vital here, and it is a clue that what has been conveyed of Billie is diminished by a lack of perception, not an inherent inessential shadowiness or propensity to languish. It is a reminder to look at her more than once, and it is built into the text's structure. Alex's remark that Billie "too has her aura" can be linked to an earlier remark he made in the context of describing Dawn Devonport. "All women for me have an aura," he contends, "but the Dawn Devonports, scarce as they are, fairly flare" (96). The irony inherent in the original description is that it purports to be a representation of a startlingly unique and "scarce" woman, but upon second reading,

nothing that describes a single woman can be extracted from it, given that "*all* women" have an aura, and even Dawn Devonport herself, however much she may "fairly flare," is slotted into the unimaginatively named category of "Dawn Devonports." The characteristic of an "aura" is one Alex applies to all those whom he places in another of his categories unstrained by much sympathetic imagination: "women." What is interesting here is that Billie is only now being slotted into a category of women, which in Banville's work is a profoundly limited one. She has loomed larger and for longer because she did not slot into any of Alex's prepared categories, or representative traps. She has had the good fortune of "[l]anguishing for so long in the shadow of [his] inattention," and this acknowledgement, much like his earlier concession that there is "more to her than meets the eye" (79), encourages the reader to look at her again.

At first glance, it seems unlikely that Billie is "the link between so many of the figures that most closely concern" Alex, and him casting her as such appears to be a manifestation of his narcissistic impulse which places him at the fulcrum of everyone else's concern. She does however appear to be the guardian of information in the text, and a second reading illuminates this. After Alex has confided in her about Cass at their first meeting, he rhetorically asks "[b]ut what did she find out about me, except that I once had a daughter and she died?" (79). The reader, knowing that she is an investigator who has been sent by the producers of a film on the life of Axel Vander, can justifiably surmise that she now knows a great deal more than the mere fact that Alex "once had a daughter" who died. She knows a great deal, and her function in the text appears to coincide with information that Alex will not look directly at, but that nevertheless determines his trajectory as a character. The words "I ask myself if she might be more than merely a link, if she is, rather, in some way a co-ordinator" confirm that Alex is not entirely in control of the narrative. His statement "I seem to mean something" draws our attention to a strange echo chamber in which Banville has his narrator write without autonomous intent, and then note that he has written something beyond his control. The casting of Billie as a "co-ordinator" is a strange gesture, and it appears that Alex is, however obliquely, conflating her with the author of the text of which he merely forms a part. By writing "I used to think, long ago, that despite all the evidence I was the one in charge of my own life" he cedes this presumed control and acknowledges that he is not the one telling the story per se, but he is rather an actor in someone else's script.

There is a strange alignment between Banville and Billie, his own creation, and while she is hardly the "co-ordinator" Alex calls her here, Banville positions her as a seeker of knowledge, and what she finds propels the plot, and this is most clear upon second reading. She researches Vander, then Alex, and then Alex hires her to find the long-lost Mrs Gray. Billie is recognised as "the latest in that line of dramaturgs who have guided from behind the scenes the poor production that I am." The term "dramaturg" has a broad and shifting definition. Most who define it agree with something along the lines that "[d]ramaturgs are the intellectual catch-all of the theatre world" (Quirk 2015). If Billie's function in the text is that of a "dramaturg," then her role is to assemble knowledge that will enrich the staging of a play. If one looks at her a second time, it is

clear that the knowledge she has assembled is propelling the plot. Her research on Vander is what has resulted in the script of the film; her knowledge of Vander and Cass is likely behind the selection of Alex to play Vander, and it is she who puts him in contact with Mrs Gray's daughter, now a nun, and thus forges the link between the two portions of the narrative: one in which Alex knows what happened when he was 15, and one in which he does not. Billie's discoveries do indeed "shape" the narrative, and her role is therefore aligned with that of the author. Clark also describes her "function," and specifically her function in relation to the main character, which is "to enable him to talk about himself." This is not an activity with which the main character has any difficulty; however, it is the primary business of the narrative. Billie's "function," and indeed her utility, is both that she is entirely necessary and utterly disposable. Like the author himself, her presence in the text is a given, and also something that it is possible to ignore. In this way, her role is similar to that of other women in the text. She is a function, with utility that is clearest upon second reading. Only, unlike the other constructed women, she is not given a veneer of beauty to hold the narrator's attention which will in turn give her a more lingering presence in the narrative.

To return to the first meeting between Billie and Alex, when he dazedly apologises for having been too forthcoming about the loss of his daughter, he writes that in response "she shrugged and smiled […] and said it was all right, she did not mind, that it was her job to listen. 'That's me', she said, 'the human poultice'" (Banville 2012, 79). Billie speaks so rarely in the text, and her rare and therefore noteworthy words here liken her to an object used to draw out infection. In an interview with Banville, Hedwig Schwall astutely notices a similarity between Billie and Staines, a servant in *Mrs Osmond* (Schwall 2017). Staines's name alludes to her performing a similar role to Billie: She too holds the fetid secrets or character "stains" Billie does. Billie is positioned by Banville as a receptacle into which private, often fetid information is placed. She is indeed a "poultice," an object with a function that is put to tireless use in *Ancient Light*: She is in possession of knowledge; however, it is not her "place" to be foregrounded in the narrative.

Even when given the opportunity to speak, she does so with caution. Alex describes her as an interlocuter in this passage when he asks her to track down Mrs Gray:

> Billie, tactful as ever, did not enquire as to why I should be suddenly so eager to trace this woman from my past. It is hard to guess what Billie's opinion is on any matter. To talk to her is like dropping stones into a deep well; the response that comes back is long-delayed and muted. She has the wariness of a person much put-upon and menaced […] and before speaking seems to turn over every word carefully and examine it from all sides, testing its potential to displease and provoke. (Banville 2012, 142)

There is an implication here that the men with whom Billie is accustomed to speaking have required that she tread carefully, and not reply with anything that may "displease and provoke." The diction used to describe possible reasons for Billie's silence is striking: "wariness," "much put-upon," "menaced." Clearly, part of what keeps Billie

silent is fear. At the end of the elaborately unflattering description Alex relays upon having met her for the first time, he writes "[t]here was a purple and yellow shadow under her left eye, the remains of what a week or so ago must have been a real shiner—how or where did she come by that, I wonder? (75). Even a second reading of Billie does not yield a satisfactory and complete understanding of who she is. The origin of the bruise remains unknown, and all that is revealed to the reader is Alex's suspicions that Billie is in an abusive relationship. Banville thus deliberately imbues the character with narrative excess, her circumstances haunting the text rather than being laid bare in it. It is an interesting choice to have the excess that surrounds Billie consist, in part at least, of the violent abuse she presumably suffers at the hands of a man. While the elision of women is undeniably a pattern in Banville's novels, the inclusion of Billie is a fascinating contrivance. She is both a function of the text, and a woman who—as a result of not being conventionally beautiful—can loom larger in the text than a more statuesque figure may do.

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