"I Really Am a Stranger to Myself":

A Lacanian Reading of Identity in John Banville’s

Eclipse

Ulla Kerren
Abstract

This essay engages in a Lacanian reading of identity in John Banville’s *Eclipse* and argues that the protagonist Alex Cleave illustrates certain of Jacques Lacan’s ideas concerning subjectivity and the subject. Alex Cleave has a fragmented sense of identity and experiences alienation as well as loss and lack of authenticity. He is an actor and tries to create identity within his roles. Alex’s confusion about himself is played out in his relationships. Alex Cleave is a self-absorbed character who does not care for other people but only for himself. He uses other people, his family, ghosts and his stalking victims, as sources for an ideal ego and as a contrast to himself. The essay argues further that the novel suggests that identity is unstable and constructed within language. Alex Cleave tries to actively create identity by incorporating characteristics he has studied in his roles as well as other people, and he writes down his story, giving himself an identity in a book, *Eclipse*. To support its claims, the essay draws upon theories of Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida. Derrida’s concept of différance is used to explain the instability of identity. Lacan’s ideas about the development of identity in the course of the mirror stage and the Oedipal crisis are drawn upon. Furthermore, Lacan’s ideas about the unconscious, the Other and the imaginary and the symbolic order are employed.
Table of Contents

1 Introduction – Banville Meets Lacan ........................................... 4

2 Analytical Framework .......................................................................... 7

3 Identity in Eclipse .............................................................................. 17

   Identity and the Unconscious ................................................................. 17

   Identity and the Other ........................................................................ 35

4 Conclusion ............................................................................................ 52

Works Cited ............................................................................................. 54
1 Introduction – Banville Meets Lacan

John Banville’s work is known for its discussion of identity. All of his novels *Eclipse*, *Shroud* and *Ancient Light*, forming a trilogy, negotiate identity issues. In *Eclipse*, Alex Cleave takes us with him on the search for his self. Alex is a fifty-year-old actor who retires to his childhood home after having experienced a breakdown on stage. Here, he contemplates his life, writing down his story, which we have in front of us as a first-person narration. His writing is highly self-absorbed. Indeed, he is obsessed by thinking about himself, and in his writings he intermingles scenes of the presence and the past, memories and dreams just as they come into his mind. His sense of identity is as disjointed as his texts, making it an interesting subject for a literary analysis.

Banville’s novels correspond well to the zeitgeist, as questions of identity have been highly discussed within the human and social sciences during the recent years. Considering the fact that there is a plenitude of current publications dealing with identity, it might seem surprising that I choose to engage in a Lacanian reading of *Eclipse*. There are a number of good reasons to do so, however. It is not only that Alex is looking for his real self like Poe’s officer G- for the purloined letter, which has been famously analysed by Lacan (“Purloined”). Lacan also gives language a central position in psychological processes as well as in psychoanalytic theory, which makes his ideas especially interesting for literary analysis. The most important reason for choosing Lacanian theory, however, is that Alex’s ponderings reveal a sense of identity that exhibits analogies to Lacan’s concepts. I do not attempt a psychoanalytical analysis of the character Alex Cleave, but using Lacanian theory in reading *Eclipse* enriches the text and opens new ways of understanding the dilemma in which Alex finds himself. The novel’s complexity becomes even more evident when we also use Jacques Derrida’s concept of différance for the
analysis. Derrida, like Lacan, builds much of his conceptual world on the understanding of language as a system of differences, which makes a complementary use of their ideas possible. While Lacan as a psychoanalyst has explicitly formulated theories around the individual, the subject, the vast majority of Derrida’s, the philosopher’s, texts stay at a more abstract level.

My aim with this essay is to investigate the discussion of identity in *Eclipse* and particularly what sense of identity Alex Cleave reveals. I claim that Alex’s sense of self illustrates Lacan’s ideas about the subject, that Alex experiences himself as an alienated, fragmented person trying to compensate for feelings of lack and loss. These experiences are played out in his relationships with other people. Furthermore, the novel represents identity as constructed within language and therefore unstable because it is subjected to the play of differences. The analysis is limited to the investigation of Alex’s personal identity as presented in *Eclipse*, leaving other forms of identity like social identity or cultural identity aside. An investigation of these too would go beyond the scope of this thesis.

In the following, a separate theory chapter outlines the crucial concepts I use in the analysis. Jacques Lacan’s ideas about the mirror stage and the Oedipal crisis as well as about the imaginary and the symbolic order are introduced. Also his ideas about the unconscious as structured like a language are outlined. These are what I consider the most important concepts for the analysis of the character Alex Cleave. They explain the first development of identity in childhood and they are apparent throughout the novel. With these concepts as analytical tools, we can make more sense of Alex’s musings. I also outline Jacques Derrida’s concept of différance, which explains more explicitly the instability of identity as well as the necessity for the adult to redefine identity again and again.

The analysis chapter, “Identity in *Eclipse*,” is divided into two parts, the first of which is titled “Identity and the Unconscious.” As we will see, the unconscious is of high significance in
Lacanian theory. The coming-into-existence of the unconscious has far-reaching consequences for the subject, and these consequences or rather their illustration in the novel is discussed here. Thus, I analyse how Alex experiences fragmentation, alienation and loss and lack. The second part, “Identity and the Other,” discusses how other people both willingly and unwillingly and both consciously and unconsciously contribute to Alex’s personal identity. In fact, “other people” does not only mean living people, but ghosts also have their place in this analysis. Other persons are important for identity creation in Lacanian theory as well as in the application of Derrida’s différance to identity. Nevertheless, the importance of the unconscious and Others in the theories applied is but one reason for this structure of the analysis. The other reason is that Alex contemplates identity in relation to the unconscious and to other people. Thus, the novel suggests this structure as much as the theories. However, before I present my reading of *Eclipse*, it is necessary to turn to the theoretical concepts.
2 Analytical Framework

In Lacanian theory, there are two important moments in the development of the subject, the mirror stage and the Oedipal crisis. In the mirror stage, the child gets a first idea of the “I” and enters the imaginary order. With the Oedipal crisis then, the child enters the symbolic order. Simultaneously, language acquisition and the coming-into-existence of subjectivity and the unconscious take place. The Lacanian subject undergoes splitting and alienation and has no stable self. In the following, these concepts will be discussed in more detail. Furthermore, I will outline Jacques Derrida’s concept of différance, according to which the subject defines itself through its differences to others. For the sake of legibility, I will refer to the subject as “it” throughout the essay, in order to avoid the use of two personal pronouns.

According to James Mellard, the genesis of the Lacanian subject “can be outlined best in notions of a pre-mirror phase, a mirror phase, and a post-mirror phase” (27). Before the mirror stage, the child has no idea of itself as a “separate unit,” but exists undifferentiated from the mother’s body and the sensual world around it (Williams 65). The mirror stage is described famously by Lacan in his essay “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I” from 1949. Lacan explains how the child, at the age of six months, through identification with its image in the mirror comes to a first understanding of itself as not just existing of a fragmented body but as a whole individual, an “I,” which is separated from the world, “[t]he mirror stage is a drama . . . which manufactures for the subject . . . the succession of phantasies that extends from a fragmented body-image to a form of its totality” (Lacan, “Mirror” 47). The most important

---

1 Although Lacan’s "stade du miroir" is usually referred to as "mirror stage," some theorists remark that the term should best be translated as "mirror phase," since it describes a turning point in the development of the child, not a distinct period (Williams 67).
2 In his later works, Lacan writes that the mirror stage occurs between the ages of 6 and 18 months (“Remarks” 565).
function of the mirror stage is the development of a unified body image. However, this experience involves misrecognition and alienation, since the child identifies with an image, or rather with “the very reflection of a reflection” (LeGaufy 275): the child looks at its image in the mirror, ascribes certain characteristics to this image and transfers these characteristics to itself. According to David van Bunder and Gertrudis van de Vijer, “[b]y considering [the mirror stage] as an identification it is first and foremost an identification of an altered relation with the other and with oneself. The identification with the image is an identification with the other” (262) and therefore involves alienation. According to Mellard’s reading of Lacan, the unified body image the child develops in the mirror stage does not result from its own mirror image but from the unified body image of its mother, “the subject finds itself in its other, the mother who signifies for the child a totality introjected by the child, who before this moment was a congeries of parts that remained unsignified” (13). Toril Moi interprets Lacan in a similar way, arguing that the alienation involved in the mirror stage comes from the fact that “[t]he child, when looking at itself in the mirror – or at itself on its mother’s arm, or simply another child – only perceives another human being with whom it identifies” (98).

Nonetheless, Lacan emphasises the constitutive role of the image in the development of subjectivity:

This jubilant assumption of his specular image by the child at the infans stage, still sunk in his motor incapacity and nursling dependence, would seem to exhibit in an exemplary situation the symbolic matrix in which the I is precipitated in a primordial form . . . This form would have to be called the Ideal-I, . . . the important point is that this form situates the agency of the ego, before its social determination, in a fictional direction, which will always remain irreducible for the individual alone, or rather, which will only rejoin the coming-into-being (le
devenir) of the subject asymptotically, whatever the success of the dialectical syntheses by which he must resolve as I his discordance with his own reality.

(Lacan, “Mirror” 45)

Hence, the child develops or rather invents an ideal image of itself which it is going to aspire towards throughout its life. In later works, Lacan calls this image the ideal ego. The development of the ideal ego involves a split of identity into two parts, an I and an image of the I, the other. Later in life, the image does not necessarily have to be an image of the subject itself, but anybody who the subject wants to emulate may serve as an ideal ego. Stin Vanheule and Paul Verhaege, who distinguish between three phases of Lacanian thinking, come to the conclusion that “Lacan qualifies [adult] humans as agents who actively identify with elements from others by considering others as mirrors of themselves. Consequently, the experience of subjective identity is fundamentally alienated, inevitably constituted by alien elements derived from the other” (402).

It needs to be explained that Lacan differentiates between the other spelled with a lowercase ‘o’ and the Other with a capital ‘O’. The other is used “to refer to the other . . . of the imaginary dyad” (Lacan, “Remarks” 568), that is, to refer to the image the subject identifies with and aspires towards. The concept of the Other, however, is much more complex: “The most important usages of the Other are,” according to Moi, “those in which the Other represents language, the site of the signifier, the Symbolic Order or any third party in a triangular structure” (98). When I use the term Other in my analysis of Eclipse, I refer to the third party and thus to any person who stands outside the imaginary dyad, to a radically Other.

Let us now return to the child in the mirror stage. With the mirror stage, when the child is capable of identification, it enters the order of the imaginary (Mellard 16; Moi 98; Williams 59). Mellard calls the imaginary and the symbolic “the cognitive registers” (15), which will be
explained later in this chapter, and quotes Anika Lemaire, who explains that “Lacan defines the essence of the imaginary as a dual relationship, a reduplication in the mirror, an immediate opposition between consciousness and its other in which each term becomes its opposite and is lost in the play of reflections” (Mellard 16). The imaginary, then, is an “essentially narcissistic space” (Williams 59), where the child considers everything as images of itself and thus experiences unity, its own unity and unity with the world, especially with the mother. Put differently, the child is able to differentiate between the I and the other, but not between the other and the Other. As Moi puts it, “[i]n the Imaginary there is no difference and no absence, only identity and presence” (97). Lacan himself remarks that the imaginary order “is particularly satisfying for the subject, connoted in psycho-analytic experience by the term narcissism” (Concepts 74). The development of the subject has only begun with the entry into the imaginary. Now, the child has a first idea of an I, but only with the entry into the symbolic will the child experience subjectivity, that is, a sense of identity. It is important to remember that the subject does not leave the imaginary behind when it enters the symbolic but that both registers are coexistent.

The child enters the symbolic with the Oedipal crisis (Moi 97; Mellard 16). In order to do so, the child must be capable of symbolisation. The acquisition of symbolisation goes hand in hand with language acquisition. Language plays an important role in Lacanian theory, not at least when it comes to the unconscious, which, according to Lacan, is structured like a language. As Lacan famously puts it in “The Insistence of the Letter in the Unconscious,” “what the psycho-analytic experience discovers in the unconscious is the whole structure of language” (“Unconscious” 187). Lacan’s ideas about language are highly influenced by the work of Ferdinand de Saussure, the father of structuralism and first to argue for the arbitrariness of the sign. But whereas for Saussure the sign (signifier) is subordinated to the concept (signified),
Lacan inverts this relationship, writing it as a fraction and putting the signifier (S) over the signified (s): \( \frac{S}{s} \) (Lacan, "Unconscious" 189; Mellard 9).

The fraction line illustrates the idea that signifiers and signifieds exist in different realms, above respectively below the line. Since there is no natural relationship between the signifier and the signified, “no meaning is sustained by anything other than reference to another meaning” (Lacan, "Unconscious" 188). In addition, the relationship between the signifier and the signified is not a stable one. To illustrate this, Lacan uses the image of two doors above which the words “Ladies” respectively “Gentlemen” are written “to show how in fact the signifier intrudes into the signified, namely in a form, which . . . raises the very question of its place in reality” (190). In other words, the signifiers “Ladies” and “Gentlemen” may refer to other signifieds and carry other connotations depending on the context in which they occur. As Lacan puts it in “The Function and the Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis,” “[i]t is the world of words that creates the world of things” (“Function” 229). This is what distinguishes human language from for example bee communication. Whereas in bee communication we have a “fixed correlation between . . . signs and the reality they signify” (245), in human language the meaning of signs depends on their relation to other signs and their place in a particular sentence (“Ulla reads Lacan” is not the same as “Lacan reads Ulla”). Human language has a life of its own and is “detached from external reality” (Barry 107).

The child begins to understand these mechanisms early, before it has fully acquired language, by playing the Fort!Da! game. Here, the child, who really wants to be with the mother, contents itself with a spool, rolling it out of sight and back again, saying “Fort” when the spool is out of sight and “Da” when it is back. In so doing, the child substitutes in a first step a signifier (the spool) for the signified (the mother) and in a second step one signifier (the word) for another
With this second step the child experiences how “words come to signify meanings in themselves” (Mellard 15). “And from this articulated couple of presence and absence . . . a language’s . . . world of meaning is born, in which the world of things will situate itself” (Lacan, “Function” 228).

What does this imply for the subject and the unconscious? The unconscious is, according to Lacan, the “censored chapter” (“Functions” 215) of the subject’s history, which the subject cannot access. Nevertheless, a psychoanalyst can trace the unconscious for example in the subject’s body or its words or its recollection of childhood memories. A famous method to trace the unconscious is Freud’s dream-work. Two important mechanisms at work in dreams are displacement and condensation, which, according to Lacan, correspond to metonymy and metaphor, the basic poles of language (“Function” 221-22; “Unconscious” 196-97). This gives evidence to Lacan’s claim that the unconscious is structured like a language and that the “locus of the unconscious,” its topography, is “defined by the formula S/s” (“Unconscious” 199). As Mellard reads Lacan, this is also true for the subject, “in fact the algorithm is a monad or synecdoche of both the subject itself and the unconscious” (11). At the level of the subject, the algorithm represents the subject’s division into the conscious and the unconscious, which cannot be surmounted and thus shows “the alienation of the subject from itself.” The fraction line is interpreted as a marker of the gap between the conscious and the unconscious. “The sense of gap or lack or absence of the subject is,” according to Mellard (11), “very important to Lacan and sets his theory apart from most American theories of the subject.”

Lacan argues further that Descartes’s “cogito ergo sum” must be re-phrased into “I am not, wherever I am the plaything of my thought; I think of what I am wherever I don’t think I am thinking” (“Unconscious” 200). That is, when we think of ourselves we think about a self that is already constructed by this very thinking. We “are” nowhere but in the unconscious, which is the
nucleus of our being but which we do not have access to. This is what Lacan means when he speaks about the “self”s radical ex-centricity to itself” (204) and asks “who is this other to whom I am more attached than to myself, since, at the heart of my assent to my own identity it is still he who wags me?” (205). “Its presence,” he answers himself, “can only be understood at a second degree of otherness which puts it in the position of mediating between me and the double of myself, as if it were my neighbour” (205). This second degree of otherness refers to the Other with a capital O, which, as mentioned, can stand for language, for the Symbolic order or for the unconscious itself. Here, it refers to the unconscious, but the unconscious itself is created in language as “the unconscious is the discourse of the Other” (205). We can conclude that identity is constructed in language, which in turn means that there is no stable self. Consequently, Lacan’s claim that “the world of words creates the world of things” (“Function” 229) is true for the subject.

To return to the child, language acquisition is the prerequisite for the child’s entry into the symbolic order. The child is only “able to make this entrance by passing through the radical defile of speech, a genetic moment of which we have seen in the child’s game, but which, in its complete form, is reproduced each time the subject addresses the Other as absolute” (Lacan, “Purloined” 40). In other words, it is language as a system of differences that structures human society. Lacan uses partner-choice as an example to illustrate that human society is structured by language order. We choose our partner according to a law regulating marriage ties that prevents us from incest. This law is dependent on terms of kinship relations and thus “reveals itself . . . as identical to a language order” (“Function” 229). The name of the father is of particular importance in this context, “[i]t is in the name of the father that we must recognize the basis of the symbolic function which . . . identifie[s] his person with the figure of the law” (230).

The child understands this when it experiences the Oedipal crisis, in the course of which
the father breaks up the imaginary dyad of the mother and the child. The child learns that the mother has another object of desire, the father. Since the child, now able of symbolisation, recognises that the father has the phallus, signifying power, and the mother not, it develops a castration complex and therefore represses its desire for the mother. As a consequence, the child experiences loss (of the mother) and lack (of the phallus and of the mother’s body). The repression of its desire for the mother involves the coming-into-existence of the unconscious (Moi 97; Mellard 27-31; Williams 59-60). This is the second splitting of the subject. Whereas the mirror stage leads to the splitting of the subject into an I and an other, the Oedipal crisis leads to the development of the unconscious.\(^3\) With the entry into the symbolic, the child gives up the imaginary dyad with the mother and gains a place in the social order. This process involves that the child accepts the name-of-the-father, the phallus or the father’s authority. Note that both the father and the phallus have to be understood symbolically. What the child really learns in the Oedipal crisis is that it has to fit into social structures that are ruled by language and consist of a “self” in relation to “Others.” Hence, the child experiences subjectivity, since it is now able to define its identity through differences to other people. However, this also shows that the subject can always be rephrased and newly created, since the subject is nothing but a product in language. In Lacan’s words, “[m]an . . . speaks, but it is because the symbol has made him man” (“Function” 229).

It has become clear that the subject defines itself first through identification with the mirror image and then in and through language and by its place in the social order. Hence, we can explain with the help of Lacanian theory how differences regarding status and one’s place in society establish subjectivity. In this context it is relevant to introduce Jacques Derrida’s

---

\(^3\) Precisely, the development of an ego ideal and the unconscious, but the introduction of the ego ideal would go too far here.
discussion of the role of differences in the creation of meaning and therefore in the creation of identity.

For Derrida, as for Lacan, identity is constructed within language. In Derrida’s words, “the subject . . . is inscribed in language, is a ‘function’ of language” (“Différance” 91). Derrida, too, denies a stable relationship between the signifier and the signified, since this would imply the existence of a given centre around which this relationship is organised. In his essay “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” however, Derrida declares that “it was necessary to begin thinking that there was no centre” (“Structure” 213). Like Lacan, Derrida understands language as a system of signifiers referring to each other. A word gains meaning only in relation to other words, which again can be explained only by other words, as “the signified always already functions as a signifier” (Derrida, *Grammatology* 7). There is no end to this process, as “the absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the play of signification infinitely” (“Structure” 213). This is where the term *différance*, coined by Derrida, comes in.

*Différance* is French and homophonous with *différence*, meaning difference. In order to understand the concept, it is important to know that the French verb *différer* means both *to defer* and *to differ*. Both these meanings are essential for the concept of différance. For Derrida, “the sign is deferred presence,” since “the sign represents the present in its absence” (“Différance” 87; the latter is also what the child, according to Lacan, learns in the Fort!Da! game). In other words, we use words to name something that is not here, which makes the very thing we speak of present although it is absent. The fact that the thing is physically absent turns its presence into a deferred presence. Furthermore, signs are arbitrary and differential, “the elements of signification function . . . through the network of oppositions that distinguishes them and then relates them to each other” (88). As I have explained before, signifiers gain meaning only in their relation to other
signifiers. According to Derrida, this is true not only for the signifier but also for the signified, and therefore also the signified, or concept, is subjected to the “play of differences” and is “never present in and on itself” (89). For us, this means that identity is not present in itself, and therefore not stable or fixed. Identity is constructed in language, that is, within a system of differences.

Peter Redman formulates the consequences for identity as follows:

[I]dentities take their meaning from the signifying practices: that is, from relations to language and other cultural codes. This suggests that identities take their definition only from that which they are not, implying, for example, that the identity of the supposedly ‘civilized European’ is constructed in relation to a range of ‘different others’. . . . Disturbingly, this forces us to think of these identities as inherently unstable. (12)

With these concepts of Lacan and Derrida in mind, we can now turn to the analysis of *Eclipse.*
3 Identity in *Eclipse*

It has been explained that, according to Lacan, the subject does not have direct access to the unconscious and that the coming-into-existence of the unconscious involves the experience of loss and lack as well as increasing alienation and fragmentation of the subject. Contemplating his identity, Alex too expresses sensations of fragmentation and alienation as well as of loss and lack. These are analysed in the first part of this chapter in this order and looked at under the lens of Lacanian theory. I will use the term *fragmentation* for the division of Alex’s personality. This has nothing to do with the fragmentation of the body the Lacanian subject experiences before the mirror stage.

In the second part of the analysis I investigate the role of Others in the construction of identity in *Eclipse*. The Other, here, is understood as another person. Thus, I discuss how far Alex’s relationships contribute to his sense of identity, focusing on the question in what way other people influence Alex’s personal identity or subjectivity.

**Identity and the Unconscious**

In the discussion of Alex’s fragmented sense of self, it is interesting to note that even his name – a marker of identity – signals split. Alex’s surname is *Cleave*. Hence, he has the split already in his name, as Elke D’hoker remarks in *Visions of Alterity* (224) respectively Hedwig Schwall in “‘Mirror on Mirror Mirrored is All the Show’: Aspects of the Uncanny in Banville’s Work with a Focus on *Eclipse*” (116). The name is also an allusion to Alexander the Great. Legend has it that Alexander the Great was able to untie the Gordian knot simply by cutting it into two halves and
thus by *cleaving* it. Today, the expression *cutting the Gordian knot* is used as a metaphor for *vigorously solving an intricate problem*. Alex is working on the intricate problem of finding his real self. As this essay will show, he does not go ahead vigorously like Alexander the Great, and instead of solving the problem he is rather making it worse, which gives the choice of his name an ironic touch.

It is in the nature of things that Alex’s situation gets worse rather than better. Brendan McNamee, who investigates “The Human Moment: Self, Other and Suspension in John Banville’s *Ghosts*,” explains that “[s]elf-obsession goes hand in hand with self-division: a self looking, a self being looked at” (76). With this, he says nearly the same as Lacan, who claims that “I am not, wherever I am the plaything of my thought” (“Unconscious” 200). What McNamee means is that someone who is looking at himself is subject and object at the same time, and thus the one who is looking at himself is automatically divided. The only possible solution is not to look at or think about oneself, “[t]he disappearance of the ‘I’, or better say, the disappearance of the ‘I’ looking at the ‘I’, is the dissolving of self-division” (McNamee 77). But looking at themselves is exactly what Banville’s characters do. As Laura P.Z. Izarra puts it in her article “Disrupting Social and Cultural Identities: A Critique of the Ever- Changing Self,” Banville’s “main focus throughout his work is the exploration of the inner self . . . to show the complexity of the human subject, and how thought endlessly makes its way through concatenations of causes and effects” (182-83). In *Eclipse*, Alex thinks endlessly about himself, and thus it is not surprising that he cannot solve his problems of self-division and – consequently – of alienation. Note also that Alex, by formulating his thoughts about himself, is actively creating his identity, the more as he writes down his thoughts as a story, *Eclipse*.

Alex *Cleave* has a *split* personality. Once he tells his wife Lydia about a dream he has had about a plastic chicken that lays a yellow plastic egg “made of two hollow halves glued together
slightly out of true, I could feel with my dreaming fingertips the twin sharp ridges at either side.” (6). This dream holds many ideas about the subject. One of them is that as long as the egg is in the mother’s body it is whole, even if it is glued together. Only when the egg leaves the mother’s protecting body may it fall into two halves along a predetermined breaking point. That is, to be whole you need another person. Perhaps this other person has to be a woman, like the mother who carries the foetus. This dream is an allusion to the imaginary, as the child in the womb literally is a unit with the mother. The image supports the idea that we need perfect harmony with the mother in the imaginary to experience wholeness, whereas the probability that we might fall apart grows when we enter the symbolic. Hence, when the unconscious comes into existence we are exposed to fragmentation. When it comes to Alex, we will see in the next part of this essay, “Identity and the Other,” that his wife Lydia has the power to give him experiences of wholeness and authenticity at least in the beginning of their relationship. Nevertheless, one may think about whether these other persons one needs to experience wholeness need to be real people. Alex is an actor and perhaps his roles can substitute other persons and give him sensations of wholeness.

However, the hollowness of the two halves expresses that there is no essence to the individual, no real self, and the egg’s division into two halves represents the divided, split self. Furthermore, the egg’s form is not perfect and its ridges are sharp, which means you can cut yourself and the ridges may cleave your skin. Of course, chicken and eggs are associated with Easter, where Christ died so the humans may be redeemed from sin. Thus, they stand for a new beginning, as one has the possibility to become a better person after Easter, after the appearance of chicken and eggs, so to say. In this sense, the dream shows that personality is not stable but may change. Nonetheless, there is also the old question of “which came first,” the chicken or the egg, which shows that there is no true beginning but that we are caught in a never-ending cycle and build identity only to rebuild it again and again.
Later in the novel, Alex recounts a memory of his father coming home from a journey at the time when Alex was four or five years old, “It was Eastertime. My father had brought me a present. What was it? Some kind of bird, a plastic thing, yellow” (56). This yellow plastic thing supposedly is the chicken with the egg inside Alex sees in his dream. It has been explained that, according to Lacan, the father helps the child enter the symbolic. As the toy is highly symbolic, this scene can be read as the father giving symbolism to the son. Besides, after Alex has got the toy from his father, he can play with it and make the chicken lay the egg, which then may fall apart into two halves, just as the child experiences the split into the conscious and the unconscious with the entry into the symbolic.

However, we cannot be sure that the yellow bird from the memory and the chicken from the dream are the same object, that the two signifiers “[s]ome kind of bird, a plastic thing, yellow” (56) and “the [chicken] bird and the yellow egg” (6) refer to the same signified. In other words, there is diﬀerance in the bird. The signifier “bird” has no stable relationship to a signified and we would need more information, additional signifiers, in order to find out what “[s]ome kind of bird, a plastic thing, yellow” (56) really refers to. As it stands, it can refer to many different birds. Note also that Alex has this memory after he has dreamt about the plastic chicken. It is not clear whether he remembers a real incident or whether he remembers his dream, mistaking it for a real memory. This means that the memory, too, is a signifier that has no stable relationship to a signified; does it refer to a dream or to something that really has happened? The question is which came first, the memory or the dream? Does he dream about the chicken because he had such a toy when he was a child? Or does he dream about the chicken out of the blue, and the dream makes him construct a memory around the dream? These questions are impossible to answer, just like the question of the chicken and the egg. Nevertheless, they illustrate how complex the production of meaning/identity is and how many different
interpretations signifiers allow.

The image of two halves reoccurs throughout novel. Once when Alex is going for a walk, he finds a hut and sits down inside it. Here, he broods:

[P]erhaps this is what I need to do . . . rid myself of every last thing and come and live in some such unconsidered spot like this. . . . I might be able at last to confront myself without shock or shrinking. For is this not what I am after, the pure conjunction, the union of self with sundered self? I am weary of division, of being always torn. I shut my eyes and in a sort of rapture see myself stepping backward slowly into the cloven shell, and the two halves of it, still moist with glair, closing around me ... (70)

The idea of personality as split into two halves is repeated here. Firstly, it is repeated explicitly, as Alex thinks about stepping into the halves of the, again, “cloven shell” (70; emphasis added). He anticipates the shell closing around him like the mother’s womb, evoking associations to the imaginary. Being in the inside of a shell “moist with glair” (70) is analogous to being in the uterus. He expresses his wish to leave the symbolic order by which he is “torn” (70) and divided and longs for protection and harmony in the imaginary. Secondly, there are at least two selves in him, the “self” (70) and the “sundered self” (70). The sundered self might of course be fragmented into even more parts. Thirdly, this quote is an example of how his split personality influences what he thinks and writes. He thinks of himself as a star who actually should live in the big places where the audience may admire him, and contrasts this with “some such unconsidered spot” (70) where he would not be in the spotlight. At the same time he is afraid that he might be shocked when he would come to see his real self, and a small, closed place might have a reassuring effect. That is, on the one hand, he is a narcissist who wants to be celebrated by his fans, but on the other hand, he is a poor wretch who is afraid both of himself
and of losing his belief in his own grandeur, of “shrinking” (70). Thus, he is split into two halves.

Alex expresses repeatedly sensations of being divided into two or more parts. He may “feel at once newborn and immensely old” (52) and hence divided into two parts, but also have the feeling that there are many parts within him, “[a] myriad of voices struggled within me for expression. I seemed to myself a multitude” (11). Note that “multitude” can mean both fragmentation and accumulation. We do not know whether “multitude” (11) here means that his personality is fragmented into many small parts or that he gains additional personalities. Alex’s profession – he is an actor – raises the same question. As an actor he has to embody other personalities when he is on stage. But Alex would not stop acting when he is off stage and takes on personalities in “real life,” too. It is then possible that he cleaves and divides his personality, distributing it to different roles, but it could also be the other way around; the roles might be added to his personality, giving him more modes of being. In ”’Ah, This Plethora of Metaphors! I am Like Everything Except Myself’: The Art of Analogy in Banville’s Fiction,” Joseph McMinn argues that in Banville’s work in general, ”the metaphor of performance captures . . . the divide in the individual between the natural and the contrived, between the social mask and the inner self” (144). Regarding Eclipse, Robin Wilkinson states in “Echo and Coincidence in John Banville’s Eclipse” that the theatre stands “as a metaphor for the divided self” (356). He speaks of “the actor’s fragmented personae” (356), emphasising the fragmenting aspect of acting. On the other hand, Wilkinson stresses that Alex’s “ambition is to be his own creator” (358) and “to assemble his personae in a single form” (358), which supports the idea of accumulation.

However, the division of a whole into two parts is repeated at another level, too. Alex muses,

I think of the world beneath the ocean, the obverse of ours, the negative of ours, with its sandy plains and silent valleys and great sunken mountain ranges, and
something fails me in myself, something that is mine draws away from me in horror. Water is uncanny . . ., single-minded and uncontrollable, . . . the inhuman constant levelling, and the two-dimensional, angled aspect which we see of it, these are the characteristics of the water that unnerve us. (67-68)

Also the world is divided into two parts then, land and water. Usually, we see the land mirrored on the water surface and when we look at the ocean, we see ourselves. Alex sees the water as the negative of the land. Thus, what is on land is evil and what is under water is good, as it is the Alex on land that causes horror. If he looks at his image that is mirrored on the water surface, he sees the good Alex, which is an analogy to the mirror stage, where the child identifies with an image that has more capacities than itself. The scene illustrates the idea that identity is created, since he ascribes certain characteristics to his image. Then he defines himself as the opposite to the image, its “obverse” (67), illustrating the idea that identity is structured by and within the play of differences.

The scene evokes associations to the Narcissus myth. The handsome Narcissus fell in love with his reflection in a pool and died, unable to leave his reflection (Burgess 233-34). The allusion to Narcissus underlines Alex’s narcissistic character traits, his self-obsession and his need for constant attention and confirmation. According to Schwall, “[f]or this theatrical man, the optic aspect is even more important than for [Banville’s earlier main characters]” (122), even if “[t]he narcissistic over-evaluation (of the self and its optical powers) is blatantly clear in all protagonists’ failures to assess their reality” (118). Alex’s frustration that he can look at the water only from a “two-dimensional, angled aspect” (68) mirrors his frustration that he cannot get a good perspective on himself. He cannot find his real self that he assumes is deep inside him, but he can only see the surface of himself and that only from a given point of view.

Returning to the individual, here we can see a division not only within the psyche, but
Alex also expresses his belief in the division of body and mind. For him, the subject is divided into a psychological and a physical part. Sometimes when acting, he tells us, he feels “a terror of the self, of letting the self go so far free that one night it might break away, detach entirely and become another, leaving behind it only a talking shell, an empty costume standing there aghast, topped by an eyeless mask” (186). Thus, when he is acting, his mind/self leaves the body, which stays on stage. Interesting is that, for Alex, the eyes belong to the mind/self and not to the body, as the body is “an eyeless mask” (186). The mouth, on the other hand, belongs to the body, “the talking shell” (186). It is our minds/selves that see, but our bodies that speak then. This cannot be true, as he remembers that, when he had his breakdown, he stood on the stage and suddenly could not utter one more word, “I had not forgotten my lines – in fact, I could clearly see them before me . . . – only I could not speak them” (89). That is, when he has sent his mind/self away to be able to take on another role, his body was able to see but not to speak. This is but one of the many instances in the novel in which Alex contradicts himself.

All in all, Alex keeps at a distance from his body. He does think about his body too, but he is not so eager to get to know his body as he is to learn more about his self. He knows of the body’s importance for acting, though, “[s]tance, and tone, these are the important things; once you have the tone and the stance the part plays itself” (81). Again we see that acting means to leave the body and to hand it over to the role. Note that he describes his breakdown as “I dried onstage” (23). When someone “dries,” you would imagine that all his body fluids go dry. Then, he cannot act anymore because his body makes him stop. This proves in the reverse how important the body is for acting.

Also, during the months before the breakdown, he experiences increasing alienation from his body, “I would involuntarily fix on a bit of myself, a finger, a foot, and gape at it in kind of horror, paralysed, unable to understand how it made its movements, what force was guiding it”
(88). This means that he is totally separated from his body at the moment of his breakdown.
Fingers and feet are signifiers that do not carry meaning for him. Looking at his body parts he
does not understand that they signify his presence. They signify alienation rather than presence.
Like Lacan asks “who is this other to whom I am more attached than to myself, since, at the heart
of my assent to my own identity it is still he who wags me?” (“Unconscious” 205), Alex asks, in
my words, “who is this other who moves this finger and this foot which I know are my finger and
my foot?” He lacks a unified body image and his body has nothing to do with him as a person.
On the one hand, this resembles what the Lacanian subject experiences before the mirror stage, as
there is a fragmented body (bits of him) and no idea of a unified self. On the other hand, the
Lacanian infant exists undifferentiated from the sensual world around it, and Alex experiences
the very contrary. His body parts are set apart from himself and the world around and there is
nothing that holds him together.

During the stay at his childhood home, Alex comes to look at his body as an object more
and more. First, he comes into closer contact with his body, but only by neglecting it, “I marvel at
the matter my body produces, the stools, the crusts of snot, the infinitesimal creep of fingernails
and hair. I have as good as given up shaving. I like the scratchy feel of my face . . . when I run a
hand along the line of my jaw” (52). His body is alien to him, but he likes the sensations the body
provides. He gives in to the “well-defined if no less shameful pleasures” (52) of masturbation,
although it is “in guilty” (53) that he takes out the pictures he uses for this purpose. Nonetheless,
in the beginning he listens to his body’s sexual needs and his body provides him pleasure. Later,
he ignores these needs, “I think I have at last cured myself of sex; certainly the symptoms are
clearing up nicely” (97). Thus, he works on his body, treating it as an object with symptoms and
sexual needs as an illness. At the same time he neglects personal hygiene, and therefore he shows
a contradictory attitude towards his body. The more he tries to find his self, the less he takes care
of his body. This carelessness, however, might also be a way to prove himself that he is still alive and that there is something inside him after all; something that can grow and produce waste. He is not only a hard shell, but he is living, changing and in movement. His body is not standing still like his thoughts that circulate around the same matter over and over. This way, his body shows him that he is real and anchors him in the material world.

Nevertheless, there is one moment in which he comes near an experience of wholeness and oneness. Once when he is sitting on the sofa and thinking of Lydia, everything becomes silent, "[n]o sound at all, except for a faint, a very faint hissing, that might have been no more than the sound of my own self, blood, lymph, labouring organs, making its low susurrus in my ears" (43). Here, he acknowledges the sounds of his organs as the sound of the self and therefore accepts the idea that his body is his self. But he does so only to a certain degree, as it is still "its susurrus" (43), the susurrus of the organs he hears in "[his] ears" (43), which means the organs do not really belong to him whereas the ears do. A possible explanation is that the ears belong to the outside of his body, the image he can see of himself in the mirror, whereas the organs belong to the inside, which he cannot see. This indicates that he believes in what he sees. He knows what he looks like, so there is no need to think about that. But he cannot see his inside, his nature or his kernel and this is why he does not know who he really is.

So far we have seen that Alex’s musings express the possibility of a fragmentation of the self as well as of an accumulation of personalities. It has become obvious that he contradicts himself while he is brooding over his true identity. The only thing that seems to be clear is that he tries to analyse himself objectively but cannot leave subjectivity behind and loses himself in contradictions. He is nearly obsessed with the idea of a real, essential self he has to find and he has a split personality longing for wholeness and authenticity.

It has been said before that Alex does not stop acting when he is off stage. Even when he
was a child, “[a]cting was inevitable” (10) for him. If he is always acting and taking on other personae, one might ask, how is he supposed to accomplish wholeness and authenticity then? It stands to reason that he does not really try but choses an easier way. “I made a living from shaping; indeed, I made a life. It is not reality, I know, but for me it was the next best thing – at times, the only thing, more real than the real” (10), he admits. Hedda Friberg argues in ”’[P]assing through Ourselves and Finding Ourselves in the Beyond’: The Rites of Passage of Cass Cleave in John Banville’s Eclipse and Shroud” that this quote holds “a suggestion of Baudrillardian hyperreality . . . particularly Baudrillard’s idea of the individual’s presumed desire to become a three-dimensional copy – a hologram – of herself” (152). This would mean that Alex aspires to overcome reality and to exist at a different level. In my reading, though, he does not try to overcome but to find reality. It is because he does not experience reality or authenticity in his “real life” that he is hiding behind his roles. Alex fits into McMinn’s description, according to which many of Banville’s theatrical characters are “being forced to adopt a mask for want of any authentic, or ‘natural’ character of their own. Some of these characters . . . much prefer their assumed identity to their normal one” (143). When Alex embodies a stage character, he gets in the character’s mind-set and thus has the possibility to experience authenticity and wholeness in the role of another person.

However, not being able to experience authenticity in real life renders him a deeply alienated person. By acting, by playing somebody who is authentic, he can create sensations of reality and authenticity and banish feelings of alienation. He can simply forget his problems while being another person. Hence, acting is a means against alienation. Yet, acting intensifies his experience of alienation in the long term, since each time he is playing a role, he loses contact with his self. As we have seen, his mind/self steps out of his body and leaves the body to the role, while it still must be somewhere around. Acting has a disintegrating effect then. Alex is not the
only one of Banville’s characters who tries to find authenticity in acting while at the same time acting increases the lack of authenticity. D’hoker writes about the character Maskell from The Untouchable, “[t]his is the paradox of Maskell’s predicament: experiencing a lack of authenticity and seriousness, Maskell wants to veil this by putting on masks, which in themselves are responsible for the aggravation of the lack they sought to remedy” (206). Of course, our discussion is about fictional characters becoming other fictional characters, which underlines the idea that identity is constructed within language. Moreover, we are talking about a fictional character (Alex) telling us the story of one fictional character becoming another fictional character. There are many layers, then, where meaning/identity is produced, but after all, what D’hoker says about Maskell is true for Alex, too: by attempting to “control his identity, . . . he fails to recognise that his identity is in the end only constituted by the reader” (206).

Nevertheless, Alex does not only seek refuge in acting, but also tries to combine acting with the search for his self. When he studies his roles, he searches for character traits or behaviour to internalise, “I studied . . . the role of being others while at the same time striving to achieve my authentic self” (36). His search is rather active and he tries to put together an image of a self like a collage. Wilkinson points out that Alex’s “ambition is to be self-made” (358). As D’hoker puts it, “Cleave constantly fashions for himself new masks, aiming for ‘a making-over of all [he] was into a miraculous, bright new being’ (36-73)” (218). Thus, Alex engages in creating identity. Nevertheless, he does not succeed, “I was after nothing less than a total transformation . . . But it was impossible. . . . I learned to act, that was all” (37). He gives up then and acting becomes more and more a refuge only; he makes a life “from shaping” (10). With

---

4 In "Powers of Misrecognition": Masculinity and the Politics of the Aesthetic in the Fiction of John Banville, Christopher Thomson discusses Eclipse's connection to Luis Althusser's work. Thomson argues that "Axel's seemingly contradictory position – that there is no 'singular self,' but that by impersonating an other such a self can be invented – is a practical elaboration of the anti-humanist perspective sought by Alex Cleave" (273).
“shaping” (10) he associates making a show of oneself, and thus his life consists of pretending to be someone he is not. He substitutes his roles for an ideal ego. Instead of aspiring towards an integrated image of himself, he steps into his roles which he can change whenever the situation requires. This way he flees from alienation and deepens it at the same time, as I have explained. However, if he can take on roles as he wishes and make them his reality, this supports the argument that acting leads to an accumulation of personalities instead of one personality’s fragmentation. At least, he has many personalities and calls himself his mother’s “changeling” (30). On the other hand, he has no personality at all, as acting is his only reality.

Later, when he cannot act anymore, when the actor has “died in the middle of the last act” (11), he cannot hide behind his roles any longer and has to resume the search for his real self. He still thinks of life in terms of acting, calling his stay at his childhood home “a brief respite from life, an interval between the acts” (13). For him, to live has always been synonymous with to act. He, who has “always had the greatest difficulty distinguishing between action and acting” (208), has a certain aim with coming to his childhood home, “I would catch myself, red-handed, in the act of living; alone, without an audience of any kind, I would cease from performing and simply be” (46). However, this proves difficult for him. Not only is it hard for him to leave behind acting as the formulation “act of living” (46) reveals, but this seems to be impossible for him who does not know what he himself is like. This becomes clear when he is about to visit a psychiatrist and makes following experience: “my heart racing and my palms wet, as if I were about to go onstage in the most difficult part I had ever played, which was the case, I suppose, since the part I must play was myself, and I had no lines learned” (91).

At this point, when he is no longer able to act, the sensation of alienation hits him with full intensity. Having no lines to concentrate on, he feels, “I really am a stranger to myself” (135). This experience of alienation extends and affects everything around him, as when he realises that
“something had changed, that I had crossed over into a different place. First there had been me, then me and the phantoms, then me and Quirke and Quirke’s girl and now – I did not know what now except that this now was new” (137-38). Of course there has not been any crossing over to different places but in his mind. What has changed is who is with him in his childhood home. Changes to his surroundings affect him deeply then, leaving him in a state where he feels lost and alienated.

Being on his own, without a role to play, Alex senses something alien inside him, “[a]t first it was a form. . . . It was as if someone had fallen silently . . . inside me” (3). Then, he sets “off over the uneven ground . . . with this other, my invader, walking steadily inside me” (3). This is the very beginning of the novel, putting extra weight on these words. Thus, the novel starts with Alex feeling that there is something inside him that does not belong to him, and throughout the novel, he tries to figure out what or who this something is. There are clear parallels between this alien something and Lacan’s idea of the unconscious as inaccessible. The alien Alex feels inside him might be his unconscious whose existence can be felt but which cannot be accessed. That is, Alex’s self-consciousness may signify the existence of the unconscious. The journey to the self goes over “uneven ground” (3), which means that it is not easy to find out about oneself. The only thing that is stable is “this other” (3) Alex has inside him. The other with a small ‘o’ stands in Lacanian theory for the ideal ego, the idealised image of oneself, and the ideal ego is of course always present. We may therefore draw the preliminary conclusion that “the alien” in Alex could be either his unconscious or his ideal ego. In the latter case this would mean that it is possible to experience our ideal egos as aliens inside us. As the original establishment of the ideal ego brings about alienation, this process might be characterised as the realisation of the development one has undergone until the present moment. The subject, Alex, realises that he has always thought of an image as himself – an image outside
him, something that does not belong to him and therefore is alien to him —, even if he does not consciously recognise this here. But it could also be the other way. Perhaps Alex has lost his ideal ego in his breakdown and is now able to feel the existence of another part of his self, his unconscious, not recognising it as such and describing it as alien.

Alex himself thinks of this alien as “real alien,” as a part that does not belong to him,

I still felt invaded. . . . I feel I am pregnant; . . . Before, what I contained was the blastomere of myself, the coiled hot core of all I was and might be. Now, that essential self has been pushed to the side with savage insouciance, and I am as a house walked up and down in by an irresistibly proprietorial stranger. (15)

Again, Alex contradicts himself. He expresses that he has never known himself, since before the day of the invasion he was a blastomere. This would mean that his self has never developed, but he has still been waiting for his self to unfold. If his real self has never unfolded, then how can it have been pushed away? Alex feels a loss of something he has never had. The fact that he feels walked up and down is a bodily sensation and underlines the idea of the self as separate from and enclosed by the body. If the body is like a house that accommodates the mind/self, these two are separate entities. I will come back to Alex’s comparison of himself with the house later in this essay, when dealing with the notions of lack and loss.

Later in the novel, after Alex has got to know about Cass’s death, the image of the alien inside him reoccurs. He is afraid of the evil that dwells inside him, “I take everything very slowly . . . avoiding all sudden movements, afraid that something inside me might be stirred, or shattered, even, that sealed flask in which the demon lurks, raging to get at me” (191). Here, we understand that the demon is a part of him, his grief for his daughter. It becomes clear that he objectifies and personifies feelings and that his feelings are not an integrated part of him. His feelings are a stranger inside him, which supports the thesis that the alien inside him corresponds
to the Lacanian unconscious.

We have seen that Alex suffers from experiences of alienation. Before his breakdown, acting is a way to escape sensations of alienation and to actively create a reality, but it does not help Alex to find his self. In the long term, acting increases alienation, as Alex has to let his self/mind go when he is acting. Not being able to act anymore he is a deeply alienated person, a lonely wretch left with a great loss opening up a lack inside him he does not know how to fill.

It is these notions of loss and lack, which also are crucial concepts in Lacanian theory, I want to discuss now. I have cited Alex’s dream about the plastic chicken (6) before, emphasising the two hollow halves of the egg that are glued together. The fact that the egg is divided into two halves corresponds to the idea of the split subject. The fact that the two halves lack contents, however, corresponds to the idea that there is no such thing as a stable personality.

In Lacanian theory, the child experiences loss and lack when it learns that it is the father who has the phallus, meaning power, and when it gives up the imaginary dyad with the mother. Like the child, Alex is powerless. Like the child after the loss of the motherly body and the coming-into-existence of the unconscious Alex is left with a felt hole inside. Alex experiences lack, “[a]t the site of what was supposed to be myself was only a vacancy, an ecstatic hollow” (33). Using the term “vacancy” (33) for an empty space suggests that it is waiting to be filled, and this is what Alex is trying to do throughout the novel. Note the formulation “ecstatic hollow” (33). Ecstatic, according to the Online Etymology Dictionary, comes from Greek ekstatikos, meaning unstable (“ecstatic”). Then, nothing is stable, not even that which is not there (a hollow). We are reminded of the concept of différence here. According to Derrida, the signifier “represents the signified in its absence” (“Différence” 87), that is, it represents the absent or that which is not there. Like the signifier, the (absent) signified is subjected to the play of differences, which means exactly what I said above: not even that which is not there is stable.
Nevertheless, Alex has no identity, no content, which also becomes clear when he thinks of his name as the “label . . . my mother pinned on me” (35). Usually, people identify with their names and their names are something that belongs to them. The fact that Alex talks about his name as a label proves once more that he has no defined identity but feels like an empty jar on which you stick a label. Again we are reminded of the arbitrariness of the sign. A name is something one’s parents choose according their liking, arbitrarily. Even if the saying goes that “nomen est omen,” we can easily see the “sliding of the signified under the signifier” (Lacan, “Unconscious” 191) when it comes to names, as there are so many different people (signifieds) having the same name (signifier).

Let us return to Alex. As mentioned, Alex feels “as a house walked up and down by an irresistibly proprietorial stranger” (15). Wilkinson points out that “Banville uses the Big House as an image of pure subjectivity – the house acts as mind, a projection of self” (359). Alex’s childhood home can be read as a metaphor for Alex. When Alex goes in search for his self, he comes to the house. By this token, investigating the house means investigating himself, and in the same way as he “pick[s] [him]self from room to room” (16) he tries to look at the rooms within himself, hoping to find his self. When he first approaches the house, he stays in the car, turning off the lights and stopping “before the house standing in its darkness, deserted, its windows all unlit” (5). Like his self, the house is dark and cannot be seen clearly. Note the ambiguity in the relative clause “standing in its darkness” (5). The subject is omitted in this relative clause and so we do not know whether we should interpret it as the house itself standing in darkness or as Alex in the car standing in the house’s darkness. In my reading, the two, Alex and the house, belong together and both stand in darkness. Alex thinks the house is deserted, that there is no one in the house exactly as there is no one in him. Both are vacuums. This passage recalls the image of the “empty costume . . . topped by an eyeless mask” (186), which I discussed in the context of
fragmentation. When the windows of the house are unlit although it is dark, the house supposedly stands empty. An uninhabited house is like an empty costume: both are made to accommodate people but they do not. This description matches also Alex, having an “ecstatic hollow” (33) inside. Furthermore, the house with unlit windows resembles a face having holes instead of eyes, “an eyeless mask” (186), evoking two associations: firstly hollowness, as there are no eyeballs in the eye sockets, and secondly blindness. Again both associations lead us back to Alex, who is hollow and cannot see his self.

Nonetheless, as soon as Alex enters the house, he notices that “[t]he house too has been invaded, someone had got in and had been living here” (15). The “too” reveals that he identifies with the house, as what he means is that the house has been invaded, just like him. Towards the end of the novel, when Lily has come to stay with him, we can see this too, “‘Lily takes care of me,’ I said. ‘Of the house, that is . . .’” (132).

There are more parallels. In the beginning, when Lydia has dropped him at the house and they have parted, he “turn[s] back to the house” (17). This turning back to the house is accompanied by his turning to himself, to the search for his self, as he can begin with his introspection only when Lydia has gone. Furthermore, in the same way as he is “a stranger to [him]self” (135), it feels strange for him to stay at his childhood home, “[i]t is a strange sensation, being once more among the surroundings of my growing up. I was never fully at home here” (49). Nor is he at home in himself, as we have seen. He is the stranger with strange sensations, asking himself, “[w]here am I here, boy, youth, young man, broken-down actor? This is the place that I should know, the place where I grew up, but I am a stranger, no one can put a name to my face, I cannot even do it myself” (77). Again, we can see that what applies for him applies for the house, too. One would expect him to know the house and the surroundings exactly as one would expect him to know himself, but he does not. Besides, we are reminded of the
“empty costume” (186) and the “eyeless mask” (186) once more. When people do not recognise him, then he is nothing but an “empty costume” (186) for them, they see his body but do not know who he is and what he is like. Neither does he know these people or the area and thus he is an “eyeless mask” (186), not seeing his surroundings. However, even if he feels that he is alone and that nobody knows him or cares about him, there are Others who are important for him.

Identity and the Other

The discussion of these Others is divided into two parts. The first part concentrates on two (of the many) functions of the Other. As mentioned in the theory chapter, the Other, understood as any third person, can function as an other, an ideal ego or image one can identify with and aspire towards. This is the first function of the Other I am interested in, which is, as we will see, very important for Alex. The second function of the Other is to serve as a contrast: we formulate our identities by analysing in what way we differ from Others. Of the Others occurring in the novel I have chosen Lydia, the ghosts and Alex’s stalking victims for the analysis.

The second part of the discussion focuses on situations where Alex is looked at by an Other and this being looked at, the gaze of the Other, marks the beginning of a new phase in Alex’s life. These gazes stand in analogy to the mirror stage, where the gaze of the child at its mirror image is the first step to the development of an “I.” Of course, the gaze is also important for the different functions of the Other. Without gaze, identification is not possible and neither is the establishment of differences to Others.

I start the analysis with the investigation of the roles Lydia plays in Alex’s life. I put “roles” in the plural, because the split that characterises Alex’s personality is mirrored in his relationship with his wife Lydia, as Lydia has multiple and contradictory functions for Alex. In
one way, as Schwall remarks, Alex “often reminds us of the other narcissists in Banville’s novels. He sees himself as the central planet of his system, in which his wife is but a satellite” (122). That is, he does not really need Lydia and considers her small and mediocre compared to him. At other moments, however, he does need her, “clasped in her familiar warmth like a marsupial in its mother’s pouch, I seemed more nearly sane that I have felt since I cannot remember when” (151), just like he has needed other women to get acknowledgment,

I am wondering to what extent my histrionic looks might explain the indulgence, the tenderness, the unfailing and largely undeserved loving kindness, shown me by the . . . women who have been drawn into the orbit of my life over the years. (8)

Thus, he knows that he looks good or did so when he was young, and he is in love with his looks, showing us the narcissist in him. Interesting is that, for him, his looks are the very reason for women to take interest in him and therefore they are the beginnings of his relationships. This parallels the mirror stage, where the child identifies first with its body image. The body is the starting point both to the “relationship with oneself” and to relationships with others. In addition, he says that, beyond his looks, there is nothing about him that is worth being loved and taken care of, as the women’s kindness was “largely undeserved” (8). As everything about Alex, this experience is ambiguous, as “indulgence” (8) can mean both, intemperateness or leniency (“indulgence”). Is he the one who needs women to make allowances for him or is he the seducer who makes women forget themselves, exerting a pull comparable to a planet’s gravity? Both interpretations are possible and in Alex’s case we do not have to choose between them. He is both strong and weak, and he lacks confidence when it comes to his relationships. Besides, he obviously regards women as mothers and lovers, since “loving kindness” (8) is rather motherly and since he wants to be in the “mother’s pouch” (151) like a “marsupial” (151). In other words, he desires a relationship that may be compared to the one with the mother in the imaginary. The
fact that he confesses this wish shows us his non-narcissistic side, the Alex who is helpless like a
child and does not understand life/the symbolic order.

Until now it has been said that Alex sees Lydia as an attachment, a “satellite” (159), and
that he does not need her at some moments but that he does need her very much at other
moments. Furthermore, there are instances where he tells us about his admiration for Lydia, “I
admired her fullness, the sense she gave of filling whatever she wore” (35), but he also looks
down on her, calling her ironically “my tender-eyed wife” (35) or “poor Lydia” (135). Therefore,
in his relationship to her, his attitude towards himself – the fact that he is both a narcissist and an
alien to himself and that he has to take on roles – is mirrored. The same way he takes on different
roles as an actor, he also gives a role to Lydia. Being “Lydia” is her role, because her real name is
“Leah” (35). When they first meet he understands wrong and later “Lydia” becomes established.
Hence, he is not only her husband and her “marsupial” (151), her child, but also her father, as it
was he who named her. The latter plays on him as a narcissist again, as originally it was God who
gave names. According to D’hoker, the name giving is one example of Alex “constantly shaping
people according to his own private dreams and desires” (219). “His extended first-person
narrative,” D’hoker argues, “is a means of achieving a coherent self-representation” (218). In
other words, Alex gives Lydia the role he wants her to have. He does not try to really see her, but
presses her into his own scheme.

In terms of differences, Lydia is characterised by fullness, whereas Alex, as we have seen,
is characterised by hollowness. Thus, Lydia’s existence helps him to define himself as different
from her. When she is the one who is filled with herself, then he is the one who is hollow. On the
one hand, the fact that he uses the word “admire” (35) illustrates that he strives to achieve
fullness as well. Lydia is therefore a role model too, an image he aspires towards. On the other
hand, his attempts to achieve fullness are not very convincing; he is a narcissist who likes to
contemplate his life and he spends more time pitying himself than trying to actively do something about the situation. During the stay at his childhood home, he wants to be alone and to be left alone by Lydia, “I fear she is planning a long stay” (154). Here, she does not serve as an ideal ego but as an Other to differ from. He uses her to heighten himself. He, the famous actor, hates “when she is trying to act, it is embarrassing” (133), meaning she should leave acting to him who is good at it. Furthermore, he fantasises, “[s]ometimes . . . I allow myself the notion that for all her strengths she is a little afraid of me. I confess I like to keep her on her toes. I am unpredictable” (135). Hence, at least in his thoughts, he subordinates Lydia. Once more he proves himself an unreliable narrator. As we have seen he is acting not only on stage, but also off stage, something that Lydia is fully aware of, accusing him, “[y]ou’re never off the stage, we’re just the audience” (140). Thus, he is absolutely predictable, as what would be more predictable than the next line in a play? Alex is unpredictable mostly for himself. Whereas he does not know who he is and what he is like, the people in his surroundings might know very well what to expect from him.

In all probability, Lydia would describe their relationship completely differently. Nevertheless, we have seen that Alex’s confusion about his self is mirrored in the relationship with his wife. His thoughts about Lydia are as paradox as his thoughts about himself. Furthermore, Lydia functions as an ideal ego, that is, he admires her and tries to emulate her, but she functions as a contrast too, a minor planet next to whom the big star can shine.

Also when Alex writes about his stalking activities, it becomes evident that he is looking for an image to aspire towards. Likewise, stalking is a way for him to gain control. He calls himself a stalker, “I have always been a secret stalker” (100), but he might even be called a voyeur. According to Laura Mulvey, voyeurism is an extreme of scopophilia, which is, for Freud, associated “with taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze” (835; emphasis added) that involves erotic pleasure. The notion that victims of voyeurism
are treated as objects is present in Alex’s account, too, “human beings have a scant sense of themselves as objects of speculation in the world outside their heads, and will rarely notice a stranger’s interest in them” (100). Speculation etymologically derives from the Latin verb specere, meaning to look at (“speculation”). Thus, Alex admits that he uses strangers as objects to look at – which gives him control over the situation, something he does not have over his own life –, even if he insists that “[he is] no Peeping Tom, hunched over in a hot sweat with throbbing eye glued to keyhole” (101). Again, he proves himself unreliable, as, at least for a few months, he found pleasure in looking at a naked woman each morning, “I would glimpse a naked girl getting herself ready for her day. Through a whole spring and summer I watched for her there each morning, one knee pressed tremblingly on the lavatory seat and my tortoise neck straining; I might have been an Attic shepherd and she a nymph at her toilet” (101). Alex tries to free himself from the accusation of voyeurism by giving his activities a mythological touch. He pretends, in front of the reader but also himself, that he studies these people in order to improve his acting, “I used to tell myself that I was gathering material – a walk, a stance . . . – some bit of real-life business I could transfer raw on to the stage” (100). However, he knows this is not the whole truth, as he actually is “not sure what [he] hope[s] to find, peering hungrily like this into other lives” (100).

What he is really looking for is the fullness he admires in Lydia: authenticity and, again, identity. To be able to see that in other people, they must not notice that they are looked at, he claims, “[i]n watching someone who is unaware of being watched one glimpses a state of being that is beyond, or behind, what we think of as the human; it is to behold, however ungraspsably, the unmasked self itself” (102). For him then, the self lies beyond the human. For Alex, we do not have access to our real selves, just like we do not have access to the unconscious according to Lacan. But Alex thinks that he is able to see the “real selves” of Others while they
are not aware of him watching. What is more, he tries to make their "real selves" his own,

You see, as long as I only watch them without their knowing, I am in some sense intimately in touch with them, they are in some sense mine, whereas if they were to become aware of me dogging their steps, that which in them is of interest to me – their lack of awareness, their freedom from self-consciousness, their wonderful, vacant ease – would instantly vanish. (103)

Alex contradicts himself again, expressing at once superiority and inferiority. He feels superior to his stalking victims and believes to be in control over them, as "they are in some sense [his]" (103). At the same time, the use of the verb to dog illustrates that he envies these people their authenticity or rather what he perceives as their authenticity. He compares himself to a panting dog trying to keep pace with a human and thus expresses inferiority.

For him, these moments are repetitions of the moment the child experiences in the mirror stage. He sees a person, an image, who has abilities that he himself does not have. The person gives him an image to aspire towards, whereby his attempts to reach such "vacant ease" (103) can be disguised as an actor’s exercises. The moment of looking is destroyed when the person returns a look. Once it happens that one of his victims notices him and awaits him. “Despite the fellow’s fierce appearance there had been something cloyingly intimate in the encounter, something from which my mind’s eye insisted on averting its gaze” (105), Alex recalls. Again, he is unable to come into contact with the image he aspires towards. He is not able to find his own self and neither is he able to get involved with the people he stalks in search for an ideal ego. If finding one’s identity is about reducing alienation, then he accomplishes the very contrary of what he is looking for. The further away from himself he is looking for identification, the more alienation will increase in him. This has consequences for his relationships. The analysing distance he establishes to himself he establishes to other people too, always being interested in their bearing
and what he could learn from them. Lydia knows about his habits, accusing him, “[y]ou want to study them . . . take them apart, like a watch, to see how they work” (160).

Thus, Alex watches other people from a distance, the way he keeps distance to himself. As with his roles, he uses Others as objects of study, trying to create an ideal ego and identity. At the same time, he does not want to be looked at by Others, “[w]hen I am in the garden and a person goes by on the road, a farmer on his tractor or the postman on his bike, I will turn aside hurriedly, hunching a shoulder, poor Quasimodo” (54). As a Quasimodo, he wants to hide from the world. The fact that he compares himself to Quasimodo here proves once more how unstable his personality is or rather how fluctuating is thoughts about himself are. In other instances, as we have seen, he describes himself as a good-looking man with “histrionic looks” (8) who does not deserve affection. Quasimodo, however, is known for his ugly looks but his affectionate nature.

Notably, it is the ghosts Alex identifies most with. The mere presence of ghosts in the novel supports the idea of a split identity. Ghosts are neither definitely living nor definitely dead. They belong to the world of the living and to the world of the dead but cannot finally be assigned to one of these worlds. According to the American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, a ghost is “the spirit of a dead person, especially one believed to appear in bodily likeness to living persons” (“ghost”). Thus, ghosts are split persons whose material bodies are already in the afterworld but whose spirits are still on earth. In terms of Lacanian theory – where, as we have seen, the topography of the subject is described by the algorithm S/s, the signifier over the signified (Mellard 11) – the ghost could be described as what is left when the signifier has vanished, as the signified: according to Cartesian tradition, the real self is situated in the mind, “cogito ergo sum.” It is the mind that is important; the mind is “the real thing” and therefore the signified. The body is only a shell around the self, a signifier signifying that the essential self is inside. Hence, a ghost is a person minus the signifier (material body) and thus a signified
Kerren

42

(mind/spirit). When we think of the ghosts as signifieds, it becomes clear why Alex is fascinated by them. He, who is looking for his own essential self, the signified, is confronted with beings that are nothing but the signified, self, mind, unconscious or whatever one may call it.

Nonetheless, one could also come to the opposite conclusion that the spirit/ghost, which stays in our world, is the signifier and the material body, which has left our world, is the signified. Remember that, according to Derrida, “the sign [signifier] represents the present in its absence” (“Différance” 87). Of course, a ghost can be interpreted as something that represents a person in her absence. The corporeal person is not on earth anymore, but she is represented by the ghost, a signifier. Seen this way, the material body is the signified.

When it comes to ghosts, then, the signifier and the signified can change places. Earlier, I have outlined Derrida’s concept of différance. It has been said that signifiers and signifieds belong to two different levels within which they are dependent on relating signifiers respectively signifieds to gain meaning. In other words, meaning is gliding within the levels. With ghosts, meaning becomes still more unstable, as ghosts also jump between the levels. A ghost can be signifier and signified. A ghost both is and is not both the signifier and the signified at the same time.

In “The New Purism,” David James (695) points out that Banville pays tribute to Samuel Beckett in both Eclipse and Shroud. Considering the fact that one of Beckett’s most famous lines reads “Nothing is more real than nothing” (Beckett 177), we can clearly see a connection here. If the meaning of words is as unstable as shown above and “the world of words creates the world of things” (Lacan, “Function” 229), what consequences does this have for the world we live in? Is there anything stable in a world created by words? Is there anything real? Nothing is real/stable, one is tempted to answer, but everything is a matter of différance. On the other hand, everything is real, but we may have different realities.
But let us return to the novel. From the very beginning, Alex describes himself in terms one may use to describe a ghost. When he has newly arrived at his childhood home, he asks himself, “[w]as I there at all? I seemed to be fading . . . a watcher outside the window would hardly see me now, a shadow only” (18). He is a shadow, like a ghost that is there but at the same time is not there, that has no corporeality. He believes himself to be in some kind of waiting position, just like a ghost who is waiting to be released so that it can go on to the world of the dead, “[w]hen I searched inside myself I found nothing finished, only a permanent potential, a waiting to go on” (33). The image of Alex’s inside not being finished connects to the image of the “blastomere” (15) I have discussed earlier. He feels that he has not fully developed.

Furthermore, Alex has decided against a stage name, as “there was already so little of [him] that was real” (35). More than once he expresses that he feels nearer the dead than the living, “perhaps the living are not my kind, any more” (120). He, who is looking for his real essential self feels drawn to the ghosts, meditating on questions as “[h]ave they . . . on their side, an intimation of my presence? Am I to them what they are to me, a fleeting brightness glimpsed out of the corner of the eye, through a doorway, or pausing for a second on the stairs and then vanishing with a noiseless sigh?” (47). Typical for Alex, he is more interested in what he is to the ghosts than in the ghosts themselves. In the centre of his musing stands the question “[a]m I?” (47). He needs their presence and their noticing him to affirm his own existence; he wants to be seen. At the same time, he becomes more and more like them and identifies with them, “[f]or although I speak of them appearing outside of me, a moving spectacle, like figures on a stage, in fact – in fact! – I am amongst them, I am of them, and they are of me, my familiairs” (47-48). This illustrates as that Alex thinks of the ghosts not as signifieds but as signifiers. For him, they are “spectacles,” meaning that he can look at them, not knowing who or what they really are.

Nevertheless, he is conscious of the fact that he identifies with them, celebrating that he has
found familiars. He does not know yet that they really are his family, his daughter pregnant with his grandchild. According to Schwall, “he does not recognize [Cass] as an individual, but as a present absence” (124), that is, as a signifier. He is thankful that the ghosts are “lending to this or that piece of the humble appurtenances of [his] life a passing spectral significance” (48). Here we can see that, for him, the sense of sight is very important, “spectral” referring both to the ghosts and to the sight. Note also that the mirror image the child identifies with in Lacanian theory sometimes is referred to as the “spectral other.” Alex identifies with the ghosts and is happy about their bringing light into his life.

Thus, he identifies with something or someone whose mode of being is unstable, as we have seen that ghosts both are and are not both signifiers and signifieds at the same time. Alex’s identification with them can only increase his confusion about himself. Since the ghosts are mirror images for Alex, he aspires towards them. He, who already is a signifier without a signified, a sign without meaning, tries to become more like the ghosts, which means he would give up the last “safety” he has. If he manages to become like a ghost, he will not only be unstable at the level of the signifier, but he will destabilise himself completely and be gliding even between the two levels of the signifiers and the signifieds. In other words, he will know less than ever who he really is.

So far, the analysis of Alex and his Others has shown that Alex uses Others to study them, in order to find material for his ideal ego and in order to experience control. He is not interested in Others for the Others’ sake but for his own sake. He needs Others as a source for identification and as a contrast to himself, to find out about his identity. Put differently, so far I have looked at Alex gazing at Others. In the following, I look at Others gazing at Alex. In so doing, I concentrate on gazes that mark new beginnings in analogy to the mirror stage. There are also other gazes in *Eclipse*, corresponding to the gaze Lacan talks about in his later works, the feeling
Generally is to say that, as an actor, Alex likes to be looked at. He is fully aware of that:

From earliest days life for me was a perpetual state of being watched. Even when alone I carried myself with covert circumspection, keeping up a front, putting on a performance. This is the actor’s hubris, to imagine the world possessed of a single, avid eye fixed solely and always on him. And he, of course, acting, thinks himself the only real one, the most substantial shadow in a world of shades. (10)

Hence, Alex believes himself to be the centre of the world. At the same time, he is not in the world as Alex himself, but only as Alex in the role of Alex. The quote above illustrates that he does not believe in stable or authentic personalities, as at least all actors if not all humans are “shades” (10) and the maximum you can achieve is to become “the most substantial shadow” (10). The quote reveals what I think of as the one stable thing about Alex. He describes the world in oxymorons; a shadow can of course never be substantial. The question is, where is the “original” to these shadows? Is it the written text, the lines and stage directions an author puts down? Or perhaps the idea the author or the actor has in mind while writing respectively acting? Or is it the unconscious, as, if we remember Lacan, we are where we do not think, “I am where I think not” (“Unconscious” 200)? However, it becomes clear that Alex does not believe in authenticity, but at the same time this is exactly what he is looking for. Hence, he is looking for something that, he thinks, cannot be found.

Speaking of originals and shadows, we are reminded of the title of the novel, *Eclipse*. In a solar eclipse, as one is named in the novel (119), the moon passes the sun, totally obscuring it for one moment which we experience as a moment of total darkness on earth. The title is relevant for the novel in many ways. As Wilkinson remarks, “[t]his ‘chance celestial conjunction’ looks both forward and backward, structuring the numerous metaphors and poetic echoes of the actual
eclipse” (361). Here, it structures Alex’s contemplations, as he is at once looking into the past and the future of his life during his stay at his childhood home. He understands this stay as “a brief respite from life” (7), just like we experience that life is standing still when there is a solar eclipse. However, what is most important for this essay is the analogy to the discussion of shadows and originals above. As with the sun and the moon in an eclipse, the play of the shadow and its original is a question of perspective. Depending on where the observer is posited, he will see the shadow take different forms and he will also see more or less of the original. It is even possible that the observer can see the shadow only, without seeing the original. The existence of the shadow shows then at least that there must be an original somewhere. It is not an easy task, though, to reconstruct the original on the basis of the shadow, not at least because shadows look different at different times of the day and flicker in the light. During a solar eclipse, shadows change even faster than with an ordinary sunset. If then the existence of Alex as a shadow proves that there must be an original Alex, it is still hard to say what the real Alex would look like. This is what Alex tries to find out throughout the novel.

Nevertheless, we have seen that Alex likes to have the audience’s eye on him and that he would not stop acting when he is off stage, trying to surprise his audience constantly,

people when they glimpsed me at the stage door were always startled to find me . . . not the shambling shaggy heavyweight they were expecting, but a trim lithe person . . . I had mugged it up, you see, I had studied big men and understood that what defines them is not brawn . . . but an essential vulnerability. (9)

Again we can see that he works actively with the question what image he wants to embody and that he therefore observes other people. Furthermore, as long as he can act, both on stage and off stage, he is eager to be watched, although the audience may never see the real Alex but only certain studied versions of him, different shadows of his self. Only when he is not able to act
anymore after his breakdown does he want to avoid the look of the Other, as we have seen earlier. When Alex is at his childhood home, he considers himself a Quasimodo (54) and hides when people pass the premises.

Coming to the gazes that mark new beginnings, it is to say that the beginnings of Alex’s acting career are bound to the gaze. Firstly, there is the gaze of an old woman living in the same village. In his childhood days, he watches her coming, “[a]t each lurching step she shoots up sideways at me a sharp, speculative glance” (11). The woman tries to say something but all she brings about is a mumbling Alex cannot understand. This is when he decides to give such people a voice, “to be them, the voiceless ones! Thus was the actor born” (11). This means that after being looked at, he decides to spend his life as an actor, serving the voiceless. This happens when he is a child of course, and when he becomes an adult his motives for acting seem to change. These have been discussed in the previous part of this essay, but I want to add here that Alex already as a child, at least in his memories, acknowledges the woman’s “impenetrable thereness” (11). Hence, this woman without voice has a quality he is seeking, fullness and authenticity. It is her thereness he wants to articulate.

Another gaze that is important for Alex’s career comes from a woman, too. He gets to know Dora when he is seventeen, and he remembers her, who is about ten years older than he, as “a sort of inverted mother, carnal and profane” (84). She is his first love and with her he makes the first experiences of what it is like to be looked at by a woman, “I was aware of Dora’s candid gaze roaming over my face, my hands, my clothes. When I turned back to her she did not look away, only lifted her chin and gave me a hard, brazen, smiling stare” (85). More important for his career, though, is that “[i]t was for Dora, offstage, that I gave my first real performances, filled my first authentic roles. How I posed and preened in the mirror of her sceptical regard” (87). Again we can see a parallel to the mirror stage. Under the regard of a mother figure and looking
into a mirror, even if it is a figurative “mirror of sceptical regard” (87), he becomes an actor and so enters a new order. From now on he learns to act, to take on other personalities.

Like the beginnings of his career, his break-down and hence the end of his career and again the beginning of a new phase in his life are accompanied by the gaze of a woman who is his lover, “[a]t last, seeing in my face . . . something of what I was thinking, she let the text fall to her side and looked at me with a mixture of unconcealable pity, impatience and contempt” (90). Of course it is not only she who is watching him, but the whole audience is looking at him who is “at once there and not there” (89). Is he like a ghost already at the time of his breakdown then?

He has an experience of seeing himself in this situation, “I seemed to be onstage and at the same time looking down on myself from somewhere up in the flies” (89). He sees himself like an Other, which involves increasing alienation. According to D’hoker, scenes like this one are typical for Banville’s fiction. D’hoker analyses the image of the doppelgänger in Banville’s art trilogy and remarks that in seeing itself, “[t]he subject beholds its other self as object, which becomes the Doppelgänger of the beholder” (175-76). Quoting Andrew Webber, D’hoker points out that “[t]he autoscopic, or self-seeing, subject beholds its other self as another, as the visual object, or alternatively is beheld as object by its other self” (175). Put differently, with doppelgänger it is not clear which one is the original and which one the double. The question is, which Alex is the real Alex and which one is the doppelgänger in the scene quoted above. Or, which one is the signified and which one is the signifier? As Alex’s mind usually leaves the body on stage when acting, we must assume that the Alex in the flies is the real Alex, the signified. On the other hand, the body might be the signified as it is the body that is material and stays in the same place. As with the ghosts, we cannot answer the question after what is what. Like the ghosts, Alex both is and is not both signifier and signified at the same time here.

Paradoxically, it is in this moment of total confusion that he understands. He understands
that he does not know who he actually is and that he has been acting all his life. As a result, he cannot say the words he sees before his eyes, “I had not forgotten the lines – in fact, I could see them clearly before me . . . – only I could not speak them” (89). This moment, which marks the (at least preliminary) end of his career, is an inversion, a mirror image, of the episode with the old woman that started off his life as an actor. When he met the old woman, he admired her thereness and it was to this thereness he lent his voice. Now, he is there on the stages, self-conscious and seeing himself clearly, but he cannot utter a word.

Note also that Alex loses his ability to act and therefore his (bogus) identity right at the moment he is supposed to act the part of Amphitryon. Amphitryon is a character in an ancient myth whose identity must be clarified after Jupiter, in the guise of Amphitryon, has had sex with his wife (Burgess 152). According to Schwall, “[t]he power of [Alex’s] role, wherein he must play a man in whom another notices a weird discrepancy, is so strong that he becomes the divided man, which eclipses his acting powers” (123). In my reading, what happens here is not a division but the recognition of a division. Alex has had a split personality all along, but it is now that he recognises this. In any case, the Amphitryon myth raises the question whether something like identity exists at all. Why can Jupiter play Amphitryon and get away with it? Is it because there is no such thing as true identity, but identity is man-made (I am aware of the fact that Jupiter is a god, but he is a god with very human needs, indeed)? If we believe Lacan and Derrida, identity is constructed within language. Does this together with the Amphitryon myth express that you can be anyone you want to, if you are only good enough at writing your own lines? When we look at Alex and his attempts to make a life “from shaping” (10), the answer Eclipse provides to this question seems to be no.

After his breakdown, Alex decides for a timeout in his childhood home. When he first drives there, he is not aware of where he is going. On the way, he has to stop for an animal
standing on the road. “Such a fierceness in that stare, the electric eyes an unreal neon-red. What was it?” (4), he remembers the situation. The red eyes signify a change in his life. Red is the signal for stop, and in this case the gaze of the red eyes causes an interruption in his life, “a brief respite from life” (7), as Alex calls his stay in his childhood home. In analogy to the mirror stage, the gaze stands for the beginning of a new phase in life and here it also stands for the beginning of a story, Eclipse.

The gazes I have named so far draw parallels to the mirror stage in that they mark the beginnings of new phases in Alex’s life. According to D’hoker, some of these gazes make Alex realise that he lives in a parallel world created by himself through acting:

Cleave frequently meets with visions of alterity, which disrupt his representations and throw him off-balance. An encounter with an old woman, a near accident with an animal on a country road, the apparition of a ghost: these are all moments in which the ordinary is revealed as the strange and in which Cleave encounters the limits of his habitual representations. (221)

Another moment in which Alex meets a disrupting gaze is his encounter with Goodfellow, the hypnotist from the circus. This is an unsettling experience for Alex, who feels that Goodfellow can see Alex’s identity, “[y]es, yes, I think he knew me, I think he knew who I was, am. I saw myself reflected in his eyes” (187). This moment involves sensations of alienation not only because Alex thinks that Goodfellow knows him better than he knows himself, but also because Alex is looking at himself mirrored in Goodfellow’s eyes. We have seen before that the subject is split into a subject and an object in moments it thinks about or looks at itself. However, the subject can never look at itself like an Other can. Alex can see himself here, but he cannot see himself the way Goodfellow can. Alex can see himself only as a reflection. He can guess what he looks like, who he is, but he does not know for sure, as he cannot see himself without being
reflected somewhere. This is the only perspective on himself he can get. This is the perspective we all have. When we are inside ourselves, we cannot look at ourselves as we can look at other people or things, but we do need mirrors to try to get an outside perspective. These reflections have much in common with the shadows Alex speaks of in the context of what it means to be born as an actor. Both reflections and shadows are projected images of the body. Looking at them, we can guess what the real body looks like, what the original is like, but we cannot know for sure. This connects to the title of the novel, *Eclipse*, again. During a solar eclipse shadows change their shapes quickly and in fast approaching darkness it is hard to make out what you see.

Reflections and shadows are signifiers. They signify that there is an original, a self, an identity, but they only give hints on the nature of this identity. When Alex is looking for his real self, therefore, he tries to encircle his search by looking at a chain of signifiers. In the theory part I outlined Lacan’s loan from linguistic concepts. According to Lacan, “no meaning is sustained by anything other than reference to another meaning” and therefore “the object is found only at the level of concept, a very different thing from a single nominative” (“Unconscious” 188). Having this in mind, we understand that Alex cannot find an essential self, as his self is accessible only as a concept established in language. In trying to track down his identity, Alex analyses one signifier after the other, but as there are only signifiers to come, he will never get through to the signified. In addition, when he thinks about himself, he splits himself into a subject and an object and hence evokes increasing sensations of fragmentation and alienation.
4 Conclusion

This essay has suggested that the character of Alex Cleave illustrates certain of Jacques Lacan’s ideas concerning subjectivity and the subject. We have seen that Alex’s musings lead into a vicious circle. Alex Cleave is “cloven.” He has a fragmented sense of identity and he is weary of his self’s fragmentation. His brooding about himself increases fragmentation rather than it helps Alex to find answers about his self. He takes on personae both onstage and offstage, which suggests that there is accumulation at work as well as fragmentation. His different selves, however, are contradictory and he is in high confusion about himself and his self. This confusion adds to his alienation. In order to avoid sensations of alienation and to find authenticity he seeks refuge in acting. Also, he uses his roles as raw material to create an ideal ego. Yet, in the long run, acting increases alienation. Alex cannot come into contact with his self and experiences that he lacks authenticity. He stands in darkness in front of his self, which is eclipsed.

Alex’s confusion about his self affects his relationships with other people. In the same way as he cannot define his self, he cannot define his relations to other people. Nevertheless, he uses them – like his roles – as a contrast and as a source of identification, as raw material for an ideal ego. The Others he identifies most with are ghosts, beings who simultaneously belong to two different worlds and still to none of them. Alex shares the ghost’s dividedness and he experiences situations where he is signifier and signified at the same time, just like a ghost. Although he considers himself closer to the ghosts than to human Others, he is influenced by other people. There are a number of instances in which it is the gaze of an Other that leads to a new beginning in Alex’s life. Nonetheless, there are no true beginnings for Alex. He regularly goes on to adapt a new role to play, which again leads to fragmentation and alienation and thus to the next level in a spiral that leads him away from authentic experiences.
The character Alex Cleave suggests that there is no stable, essential self or at least none we have access to. The novel proposes that identity is something we create, something unstable. Alex creates his identity both in acting and also in writing down his story, which forms the novel *Eclipse*. In the end, of course, it is the reader who creates Alex’s identity. If we accept the idea that identity is created within language, then we must consider identity changeable. Identity, whether a ghost’s or a human’s, is subject to the play of differences. Nevertheless, Alex is obsessed by looking for a real self, but his search only leads him to new and deeper experiences of fragmentation and alienation. His search cannot be successful, since a self constructed within language is by its very nature always deferred and elusive.

If we understand the changeability of identity as an expression of postmodernity – which suggests itself, having introduced Derrida’s concept of différance –, then Alex illustrates that not accepting postmodern reality with its fast changes makes it even more difficult to cope with the situation. However, Alex also illustrates human longing for authenticity and stability. This is the last dilemma this essay points out. Alex has not shown us the way out of this spiral and whether we want to find a way out or whether we are happy with the situation, everybody must decide for him- or herself.
Works Cited


