

Returning Home versus Movement without Return: A Levinasian Reading of John Banville's *The Sea*

MARTA CEREZO MORENO

Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia (UNED)

mcerezo@flog.uned.es

Taking as its starting point the contrast Emmanuel Levinas outlines between returning to consciousness as homecoming and the theory of the trace of the other as a movement towards alterity, or a movement without return, this paper analyses how the narrative configuration of John Banville's *The Sea* (2005) shows an internal dialectic between an inner and an outer movement. It centres on the study of Max and his wife Anna, the protagonists of the novel, as fictional impersonations of this dual dynamic. Framed within the Levinasian perception of totality as the reduction of the other to the same, this paper envisions Max's return home as a totalising journey that constitutes individuality. Parallel to Max's inner exploration, it regards Anna's photographs of her fellow patients during her stay at the hospital—as a terminal stomach cancer patient—as a representation of Levinas' conceptualisation of infinite responsibility for the other. By merging the philosopher's theory of the trace of the other with Walter Benjamin's theory of the optical unconscious and Roland Barthes' photographic concept of the *punctum*, it will be shown how Anna's pictures call for new social ethical narratives around terms of social integration and equality for disabled people that could dismantle restrictive, and in Levinas' terms, ontological conceptions of normality.

Keywords: John Banville; *The Sea*; Levinas; home; trace of the other; disability

El regreso al hogar frente al movimiento sin retorno: estudio de *El mar* de John Banville desde una perspectiva levinasiana

Partiendo de la oposición que establece Emmanuel Levinas entre la vuelta a la consciencia como regreso al hogar y la teoría de la huella del otro como movimiento hacia la alteridad o movimiento sin retorno, este artículo analiza el modo en que la configuración narrativa de *El*

mar (2005) de John Banville presenta una dialéctica interna entre dos movimientos opuestos, uno interno y otro externo. Basándome en la percepción por parte de Levinas de la totalidad como la reducción que el Mismo hace del Otro, realizaré un análisis de los protagonistas, Max y su esposa Anna, considerando la vuelta a casa de Max como un viaje totalizador que ensalza su propia individualidad en tanto que las fotografías que Anna, enferma terminal de cáncer de estómago, realiza de los pacientes que la acompañan durante su estancia en el hospital representan la conceptualización levinasiana de la responsabilidad infinita que el Mismo tiene hacia el Otro. Mediante la confluencia de las teorías de la huella del otro de Levinas, el inconsciente óptico de Walter Benjamin y el concepto fotográfico del *punctum* de Roland Barthes, mostraré cómo las imágenes tomadas por Anna destacan la necesidad de nuevas narrativas sociales de carácter ético que alienten aspectos de integración social y de igualdad en términos de discapacidad y desmantelen la percepción del concepto *normalidad* como un elemento restrictivo y, en términos levinasianos, ontológico.

Palabras clave: John Banville; *El mar*; Levinas; hogar; huella del otro; discapacidad

I. INTRODUCTION

Recent works by Şavkay (2011) and Wehrs (2013) prove the current importance of Emmanuel Levinas' ethic of alterity in the field of literary studies and, more particularly, in the critical analysis of contemporary fiction.¹ Following Şavkay and Wehrs' line of thought, the present study aims to show how the Levinasian ethical relation of the same with the other can enlighten literary criticism. By applying Levinas' tenets to John Banville's Man Booker Prize-winning *The Sea* (2005), this paper intends to contribute to the Levinas-oriented ethical and critical debate on Banville's oeuvre that has been taking place since the beginning of the twenty-first century in response to the emergence of the *ethical turn* in literary studies since the 1990s. This debate has been enriched by studies such as D'Hoker's (2002) analysis of the ethics of reading in *The Book of Evidence*; Palazzolo's (2005) article on sameness and alterity in *The Untouchable* and *Shroud* and O'Connell's (2011) insights on the relationship between narcissism and empathy in *The Infinities* and *Shroud*.

This article argues that the narrative configuration of *The Sea* shows an internal dialectic between an inner and an outer—or ecstatic—movement. It centres on the analysis of Max and his wife Anna, the protagonists of the novel, as fictional impersonations of this dual dynamic and takes as its theoretical frame Levinas' conceptualisation of the return to consciousness as a “returning home to itself” ([1963] 1986, 346), as opposed to his theory of the trace of the other, or what he calls “movement without return” (347) or movement towards the other.

In “The Trace of the Other” (1963) Levinas censures Western philosophy for depriving the other of its alterity, for having been “struck with a horror of the other that remains other.” He calls it “essentially a philosophy of being,” a philosophy of “immanence and of autonomy” as it considers the “comprehension of being” as “its last word, and the fundamental structure of man.” Levinas states that “[t]he God of the philosophers, from Aristotle to Leibniz, by way of the God of the scholastics, is a god adequate to reason, a comprehended god who could not trouble the autonomy of consciousness, which finds itself again in all its adventures, returning home to itself like Ulysses, who through all his peregrinations is only on the way to his native island” (1986, 346).

Levinas accuses this philosophy of “refusing every movement without return.” The critic claims that such a movement outwards, which implies the encounter of the same with the other, is a movement towards alterity. In order to substantiate his vision, he starts off by pondering the fact that “the philosophers bring us also the enigmatic message of the beyond being” (347). As he considers the Platonic One as a philosophical reflection of the beyond being, Levinas asks himself: “is there not an experience of it, an experience different from that in which the other is transmuted into the same? ... Can

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there be something as strange as an experience of the absolute exterior, as contradictory in its terms as a heteronomous experience?" Levinas considers that such experience does in fact exist and entails "a movement unto the other [which] is not recuperated in identification, [which] does not return to its point of departure." Levinas remarks that "*{a} work conceived radically is a movement of the same unto the other which never returns to the same.* To the myth of Ulysses returning to Ithaca, we wish to oppose the story of Abraham who leaves his fatherland forever for a yet unknown land, and forbids his servant to even bring back his son to the point of departure" (348).

In light of this reflection, I consider that, in *The Sea*, Banville symbolically presents an opposition between the myth of Ulysses, through Max's metaphorical attempt to return home, and the story of Abraham, through Anna's approach to the other through her photography. Framed within the Levinasian distinction between totality as the reduction of the other to the same, and infinity as the irreducibility of the other to the same, this paper analyses the narrative meaning of Max's return home as a totalising journey that constitutes the I. Parallel to the narrative configuration of Max's inner journey, this study regards Anna's pictures as a clear recognition of what Levinas conceptualises as infinite responsibility for the other, as a face to face encounter in which the act of welcoming the other portrays a different way of relating to the notion of home. In this respect, this paper analyses *The Sea* as a narrative dichotomy between an ontology of dwelling and Levinas' conception of ethics; an ethic of hospitality that calls for a same that welcomes and embraces the other.²

2. RETURNING HOME

Max's return to Ballyless is prompted by a dream in which he is on his way "somewhere, going home, it seemed, although I did not know what or where exactly home might be ... as well as being the age I am now I was a boy as well, a big awkward boy, yes, and on my way home, it must have been home, or somewhere that had been home, once, and that I would recognise again, when I got there" (Banville 2005, 24).³ When Max wakes up he immediately thinks of Ballyless—which etymologically, and significantly, means *placeless* (MacCarthy 2012, 91; Maddrell 2012, 62)—the Cedars and the Graces⁴ and decides to go back to the Irish seaside village where he spent his childhood holidays.⁵

² I appropriate the concepts of ontology of dwelling and ethic of hospitality from Eubanks and Gauthier (2011).

³ For a compelling analysis of the concept of home in *The Sea* from a stylistic point of view see Facchinello (2010).

⁴ After the death of his wife Anna from stomach cancer, Max retreats to the Cedars, a guest house in Ballyless where as a child he met the Graces, a wealthy middle-class family that used to rent the house during Max's childhood summer holidays.

⁵ As Peters states, "though fictitious, this is actually close to where Banville himself spent some of his holidays in his youth" (2008, 41). See Facchinello for a detailed account of the correspondences between Max's fictional life and Banville's childhood summer holidays (2010, 37).

The absence of traces on the snow in Max's dream signals that "no one had passed this way and no one would" (25), that is, this road home is exclusively reserved for the protagonist as it metaphorically represents a pathway to his inner self. Thus, Max's arrival at the Cedars constitutes an encounter with a past that helps him to look inwards. Only Max will be able to make such a journey "of surpassing but inexplicable importance" (24-25) in search of an ageless self, which contains all the stages of his life in this homecoming dream, where childhood and old age merge.

In the novel, Banville relates Max's feeling of homelessness and isolation with disease. The "special quality to the silence at night" at the Cedars reminds Max of "the silence that [he] knew in the sickrooms of [his] childhood" where he was isolated in a place apart "where no one else could enter" (71), not even his mother, or the doctor. Sickness is, then, viewed as a "place" where he felt, as he feels at the lodging house, "miles from anywhere, and anyone" (72). The doleful isolation and helpless vulnerability that sickness provoked in Max as a child is the self-same feeling that he experiences in the Cedars, a space invaded by memories of frailty, of solitude, of entry into a different stage in life where Max's process of individuation entails a metaphorical eviction. Despite this fact, however, the Cedars is also presented as a final destination towards which Max, "without knowing it," had been travelling "for a long time, for years" in order to evade his tedious reality while projecting upon it his fantasies of home as "the only possible place, the only possible refuge" (157). After the death of his wife Anna of stomach cancer, he envisions the Cedars as a comforting space of maternal protection. Max's dream-like journey home entails "a surprising, not to say a shocking, realisation" that the image he had constructed of himself "as something of a buccaneer, facing all-comers with a cutlass in [his] teeth" is just a "delusion" (60). He is now forced to acknowledge that his journey symbolises his lifetime and deep-rooted longing for and fantasy of a protective retreat: "To be concealed, protected, guarded, that is all I have ever truly wanted, to burrow down into a place of wombly warmth and cower there, hidden from the sky's indifferent gaze and the harsh air's damagings. That is why the past is just such a retreat for me" (60-61).

Max's returning to the past seems to evoke a sense of placeness that Levinas describes as "the true and primordial relation" ([1969] 2005, 37) between the individual and the world in which the "imperialism of the same" (39) rules and alterity is suspended. It is a space in which Levinas' concept of enjoyment as a site of inwardness, as "the existence at home with itself of an autochthonous I" (115) succeeds. To Levinas, enjoyment entails seclusiveness, detachment from the other and interiority (147), which is what Max is asking for when he calls for retreat, for security at an age and stage in his life in which he sees himself as "greyed o'er by the years, uncertain and astray and in need of consolation" (Banville 2005, 200). Thus, Max portrays himself as a vulnerable ageing human being who, like a child, needs protection. Childhood and old age come together in Banville's description of his protagonist once he is back in Ballyless as "the child of those days grown corpulent and half-grey and almost old" (53). After Anna's death, Max's nightly

retreats to the nursery, “where the bed was low and narrow, hardly more than a cot” (68), signal an “attempt to regress into the comfort of childhood” (Watkiss 2007).

The regression may however be fatal as the maternal image acquires an ambivalent nature in the novel. Max, for example, describes Anna’s cancerous lump in her stomach as “big baby De’Ath, burgeoning inside her” (Banville 2005, 18) and grotesquely depicts the prolapsed womb of an old woman with a “Medusa-head” that he sees in one of Anna’s hospital pictures (182). These descriptions present the womb as an image of death and illness, and point to Max’s wish to retreat to a maternal space as a reflection of his death drive (Brownell 2010, 69; McCarthy 2012, 7). Accordingly, the novel evokes Barbara Creed’s ([1993] 2007) concept of “the monstrous feminine” which must be necessarily linked to Max’s problematic relationship with his mother and therefore a dysfunctional process of individuation. In this respect, Max’s unconscious desire and fantasy to go back to a comforting and motherly early stage in his life, though he never enjoyed it, where he might finally attempt to culminate his own selfhood process, propels his return to the Cedars.

Despite the general interpretation that considers that the novel presents us with a double traumatic conflict that Max must come to terms with, that is, the twins’ suicide⁶ and Anna’s death (Watkiss 2007; Peters 2008, 41; Zamorano Llena 2010, 99; Maddrell 2012, 62), my contention is that Max’s disturbing relationship with his parents is also essential to the understanding of his return to Ballyless and his self-searching. As he describes the television room at the Cedars, he unexpectedly becomes conscious of what it reminds him of and of the ‘real reason’ why he has come back to this place: “what the whole house reminds me of, for that matter, and this must be the real reason I came here to hide in the first place, is the rented rooms my mother and I inhabited, were forced to inhabit, throughout my teenage years.” For years, after his father left them, he and his mother “shifted from place to place, from lodging house to lodging house ... They were all alike” (Banville 2005, 196). Though Max’s murky description of the rented rooms—where every night he could hear his mother weep—could be interpreted as a reinforcement of the image of the protagonist as a homeless man (Facchinello 2010, 36); I, however, consider that he now daydreams about them as a place to hide from suffering, the maternal shelter he never really had and that he had always wished for.

Thus, *The Sea*’s maternal image, though bleak and somber at times, appears too as the main symbol of Max’s craved protective home, evoking Levinas’ metaphorical link between home, inwardness and femininity. To the philosopher, the act of recollection, that is, a “coming to oneself, a retreat home with oneself as in a land of refuge” ([1969] 2005, 156) has female undertones. He conceptualises Woman as “the condition for recollection, the interiority of the Home, and inhabitation.” In this condition the same is encountered by an other, the Woman, whose presence “is discreetly an absence”

⁶ During the last summer they spent together in Ballyless Max witnessed how Mr and Mrs Grace’s children, Chloe and her twin brother Myles, deliberately walked into the sea and drowned.

that does not disturb the hegemony of the same or calls into question the I; that is, to Levinas, the home entails an absence or feminine self-effacement “with which is accomplished the primary hospitable welcome which describes the field of intimacy” (155).⁷ However, this dwelling does not have positive undertones for Levinas since it is ruled by enjoyment, possession, interiority and totalisation, which epitomise a Heideggerian ontology that Levinas rejects as it entails “the supremacy of the same over the other” (1987), that is, an egotistic isolation that discards infinity or an ethical encounter with alterity. Max’s encounter with Chloe disrupts this “ethically indifferent” (1987) maternal realm of totalisation as it signifies to him his “first experience of the absolute otherness of other people” (Banville 2005, 167), “the true origin in [him] of self-consciousness” as the world suddenly turns into an “objective entity” that leaves him ‘in the open’:

Before, there had been one thing and I was part of it, now there was me and all that was not me ... she expelled me from that sense of the immanence of all things, the all things that had included me, in which up to then I had dwelt, in more or less blissful ignorance. Before, I had been housed, now I was in the open, in the clearing, with no shelter in sight. (168)

As we can see, Max’s sense of immanence and enrooted and narcissistic dwelling are thwarted when he encounters the other. For the protagonist, meeting Chloe entails the disruption of the illusion of the imperialism of the same, or ontological freedom, understood as the reduction of the other (Levinas [1969] 2005, 42). Banville’s language evokes Levinas’ description of the same’s “*sojourn* [séjour] in the world” and existence “*at home with oneself* [sic]” (37) before the encounter with the other, which, to the French philosopher, however, constitutes metaphysics and ethics, that is, the ultimate liberating experience. To Levinas, ontological “[d]welling is the very mode of *maintaining oneself*” (37), since the I has the illusion that it is “in possession of what comes to [it] from the outside” (43). However, alterity, as Levinas asserts, “disturbs the being-at-home with oneself” (39) since the other escapes the grasp of the self. Max now understands that, as opposed to “the immanence of all things” (Banville 2005, 168), transcendence takes the lead as the other is irreducible and can no longer be incorporated within the same. Thus, transcendence and infinity, that is, the ungraspability of the other, triggers off in Max a sense of homelessness that he tries to counter by taking a journey inwards, which can be perceived as a “movement within the same before obligation of the other” (Levinas [1969] 2005, 47).

Max is, then, depicted by Banville as a homeless man in search of the sense of safety he lost during his childhood. As he remembers the first time Anna and himself went home to visit his mother, he states: “home: the word gives me a shove, and I stumble”

⁷ The Levinasian presentation of woman as absence has been considered a controversial issue by feminist approaches to Levinas’ conceptualisation of the home, such as those of Sanford (2002, 139-160), Katz (2003, 143-144) and Bevis (2007, 322-323).

(Banville 2005, 209). At this point it is relevant to say that I disagree with Facchinello's (2010) interpretation of Max as a character who is unable to replace his upbringing "with any solid-seeming fictional character, or mask of any kind" (Facchinello 2010, 36). In my view he struggles against his lifelong loss—the absence of a welcoming home—by constructing a self that hides an unsolved conflict rooted in the figures of both his parents. Max is ashamed of his origins (Banville 2005, 207), which he has striven to conceal precisely by modeling a new self (216, 218), a fantasy of himself (105, 215). His reiteration of the illusory nature of his identity matches his view of his life as a "continuous rehearsal ... with its so many misreadings" (184). However, it is in the Cedars that he is finally read and his real self deciphered. It is Bun, Max's landlady's friend, who, says Max, "had taken the measure of me, and, I was convinced, saw me clearly for what I was, in all my essentials" (206-207). Bun's scrutiny makes Max recognise those essentials which take him deep within himself such that he admits the provenance of his need to recreate a fantasy of himself: his desire to "scal[e] those Olympian heights" (207) made him reject his "shaming parents" (37) at an early stage in his life.⁸ Before his father left them for good, he remembers his parents' constant fights (72) and "their unhappiness" (35). He saw them as an obstacle to his future (35) and as the origin of the elements within himself that he disliked: "the congeries of affects, inclinations, received ideas, class tics, that my birth and upbringing had bestowed on me in place of a personality." He viewed himself as a "distinct no one" and did his best to become "an indistinct someone" (216).

Banville presents us with an insightful dialectic between being and knowing in his development of Max's reflections on the process of construction of what he wishes to be while he is at the same time immersing himself in a "drive toward unknowing," that is, within a "desired ignorance" (217) of whom he really is. Max's desired ignorance works as a reminder of that "blissful ignorance" (168) of those early stages in his life before he acquired a sense of the "absolute otherness of other people," (167) of "self-consciousness," (168) before he discovered alterity. Max's recognition of his willing ignorance thus portrays him as a man who never really stepped beyond those early stages in life where "comfort" and "cosiness" (60) prevailed, where he felt, in Levinasian terms, at home. In this sense, home in *The Sea* turns into an unethical space in which need, defined by Levinas as "the original form of identification which we have called egoism" prevails over "a desire for the other" ([1963] 1986, 350), "a desire without satisfaction which, precisely, *understands* {*entend*} the remoteness, the alterity, and the exteriority of the other" (Levinas [1969] 2005, 34).

His stay at the Cedars finally takes Max home in the sense that he is able to delve within himself and recognise the origins of an inner frustration which pushed him to have a close relationship with both the Graces and Anna, whom he considered "divinities" (Banville 2005, 107) and whose superior social position he always aspired

⁸ It is interesting to note, as O'Connell remarks in his accurate study on the issue of shame in Banville's works, that Max never examines "his guilt about his shame but his reticence seems to signal its problematic presence" (2013, 133).

to. But his eventual arrival home makes him conclude that it is difficult to discern the “paragons of authenticity against whom [his] concocted self might be measured” (218). Thus, Max atones for having lived in such a way, for having been, in a way, an “impostor” (203), for having constructed a self with the help of Anna, who was “the fairground mirror in which all [his] distortions would be made straight” (216),⁹ and for having “missed something” (218) unknown to him. Max’s final homecoming consists of coming to the realisation that these are all “insoluble equivocations” (219) with no closing answers that can relieve him. As Facchinello states, “Banville’s obsessive quest, however, is doomed. Sooner or later, all his protagonists come to the same conclusion, namely that there is no such home for them to be found. ‘There is no answer’, Banville said, to ‘these questions of identity and authenticity’: ‘[a]ll you can do is try to find new ways of posing the questions’ (2006)” (2010, 35).

Max’s recognition of this destroys his childhood view of an eventually “marvellously finished pavilion of the [adult] self” (Banville 2005, 144) which he had envisioned as “a kind of long indian summer, a state of tranquility, of calm incuriousness,” as a period “with nothing left of the barely bearable raw immediacy of childhood, all the things solved that had puzzled me when I was small, all mysteries settled, all questions answered, and the moments dripping away, unnoticed almost, drip by golden drip, towards the final, almost unnoticed, quietus” (94). Max’s movement inwards results in his understanding that the categorisation of adulthood and old age as stages of wisdom and contentedness is false. Throughout the life cycle, human beings encounter mysteries that always remain unsolved; Max’s desires to be sheltered, to go back home, show his need to feel protected from the “[l]oss, grief, the sombre days and the sleepless nights (95)” that affect human beings from birth to death, as he learns during Anna’s poignant last nights when she had looked at him “wide-eyed in the underwater glimmer of the nightlight with an expression of large and wary startlement” (238).

3. MOVEMENT WITHOUT RETURN

Anna’s gaze constitutes a crucial element in the formation of the other half of the binary opposition between Max’s movement inwards and Anna’s movement without return, which I see as being at the centre of Banville’s novel. My contention in this second part of the paper is that photography functions as the pivotal image around which the Levinasian journey from interiority to exteriority is presented. The inner mechanisms of Anna’s encounter with the other through her photographic lens will be analysed by merging Levinas’ theory of the trace of the other with Benjamin’s (1999) theory of the optical unconscious and Barthes’ ([1980] 2000) photographic concept of the *punctum*. The interconnection of these theories will reveal that, though Max’s totalising movement inwards prevails throughout the novel, his self-containment is momentarily disrupted

⁹ For an analysis of the *specular function* of Anna see O’Connell (2013, 135).

since, through Anna's pictures, he will find himself immersed within another space in which a movement towards alterity, imbued by a sense of ethical hospitality, is made possible.

Max views Anna's photography as an aggressive and intrusive act that during their youth "took" (Banville 2005, 173) something from him and "exposed" (174) him. He feels that Anna's photographs of him were "shockingly raw, shockingly revealing" (173). They showed a young and handsome Max. However, he saw himself as an "overgrown homunculus" (173) which revealed his moral weakness (O'Connell 2013, 137). The two terms *took* and *exposed* are worth specific consideration, since Banville, with his accurate use of language and his interest in its nature, very consciously uses them in the novel. The author states that "it is no accident that we speak of taking photographs, of making exposures. The primitive people were right: part of the soul is imprinted on the photographic plate" (cited in Izarra 2006, 195). Banville transposes this view of photography to *The Sea*. First, Max considers Anna's way of taking pictures invasive, a method that intrudes and violates his intimacy by exposing him. Second, such disclosure is the outcome of Anna's distinctive way of seeing the other, which entails an almost natural merging with alterity, oriented to capturing both her subject's inner self and her own in the photograph. Max paradoxically envisions Anna when behind the camera, as a "blind person, something in her eyes went dead, an essential light was extinguished;" she seems to be "peering inward, into herself" to find a "defining perspective, some essential point of view" from which she could "sightlessly" capture her subject's features (Banville 2005, 173). Max's allusion to Anna "thrust[ing] her raptor's head out sideways" (173) as she holds her camera focuses on his thoughts of the rapacious nature of his wife's photography, which, by her aiming at the subject and staring at it, seized her subject's features from a spatial realm outside the limits of the one she was physically confronting. However, it is interesting to note how despite Max's insistence on the invasive nature of Anna's photography, he also perceives her method as a photographic blindness lacking the aggressiveness and violence of the photographer's gaze.

Max's description of Anna's figurative blindness in search of her subjects' essence points to her ability to see beyond the material reality in front of her camera. In my view, Anna's sightless, lightless and peaceful photographic movement beyond the bounds of material space evokes Levinas' conception of vision and perception in his account of the face and the trace of the other. To the philosopher, "the face is not of the order of the seen" (Robbins 2001, 48); it is not a perceptible visage, or an empiric fact, it is an abstraction dissociated from any context, which refuses to be encompassed and reveals the humanity of the other to whom the same has an infinite responsibility. The encounter with the face "lose[s] the avidity proper to the gaze only by turning into generosity" (Levinas [1969] 2005, 50). It implies an eternal movement towards alterity, a "go[ing] forward without regard for oneself" ([1963] 1998, 354), a movement without return that dismantles totality and identification. According to Levinas, the face comes to the I from an abstract space that he calls "a beyond" (354) or "an absolutely absent" which "transcends all cognition" (355). That transcendence

signals an absolute humanity which emerges in the face of the other as a trace that is beyond the same's vision and perception, something which Levinas equates with a power relation between the I and the other: "Inasmuch as the access to beings concerns vision, it dominates those beings, exercises a power over them" ([1969] 2005, 194). Consequently, to Levinas, "vision moves into grasp" which leads to the oppression of the object. Thus, light, to the philosopher, annuls transcendence and the absolute nature of the other: "Light conditions the relations between data; it makes possible the signification of objects that border one another. It does not enable one to approach them face to face" (191). Therefore, Levinas equates vision with the "defacing" of the other, since, as he states, "if you conceive of the face as the object of a photographer, of course you are dealing with an object like any other object. But if you encounter the face, responsibility arises in the strangeness of the other and in his misery. The face offers itself to your compassion and to your obligation" (Robbins 2001, 48-49).

In this sense, Anna's photographic blindness embodies a face to face encounter with the other which, appropriating Levinas, "introduces a dimension of transcendence, and leads [her] to a relation totally different from experience in the sensible sense of the term, relative and egoist" ([1969] 2005, 193). Anna's photographic eye faces a dimension beyond the realm of material reality that is related to what Banville presents as the soul of the subjects portrayed in her images, and which I conceive of as Levinas' absolutely absent. This absolutely absent, as a Levinasian trace, is imprinted on the face of the other and reveals his/her humanity. Anna disregards the other's plastic image that paradoxically is not seen or grasped by her camera's objective, and, in turn, considers the other as an irreducible entity.

The significance of Anna's photographic blindness and absolutely absent is enlightened by Benjamin's conception of the optical unconscious as "another nature that speaks to the camera" rather than to the eye; it is a "space informed by the unconscious" that "reveals the secret" (1999, 510-512). Thus, photography may unveil a hidden significance not visible to human sight but available to perception through the photographic lens. As Elo states, "this 'second nature' speaking to the camera detaches the visible from the capacities of the eye" (2007). The camera catches sight of what Benjamin calls the "inconspicuous spot" (1999, 510), as it brings to the surface what the eye cannot see and "reveals entirely new structural formations of the subject" (Benjamin [1936] 1969, 236). At this point we should recall, as does Elo, Benjamin's allegory of "the cameraman as a surgeon penetrating the surface of the phenomenal with his instruments and thus raising the question of the constitution of reality" (2007). Anna's *blindness* allows her to penetrate the surface in search of a new space where reading the visible acquires a different meaning; a space that gives her access to, in Banville's words, Max's soul, in Levinas' terms, Max's face, and, in Benjamin's, Max's unconscious.

Therefore, Anna, by penetrating first her inner self in order to reach the essence of the other, evokes Levinas' concept of the same's opening of his/her home to alterity as

he/she “goes forth outside from an inwardness [intimité]” ([1969] 2005, 152). Anna thus exercises a movement from interiority to exteriority by leaving the realm of the I and welcoming the other. The notion of place now acquires a different dimension as the home of the same is opened to the other. Anna enters the terrain of Levinasian alterity and hospitality and captures an inconspicuous spot, a concealed structural formation of her husband’s self that Max as beholder is able to unveil, and which shockingly reveals to him inner aspects of himself—distant from any perceivable form—that are hidden to the people around him.

In this respect, Anna’s photography is deprived of any kind of totalitarian absorption of the other, or what Levinas calls possession, and achieves what the philosopher calls “total alterity” by comprising a blind photographic act that does not centre on the “*form* by which things are given to us” but looks beyond, “for beneath form things conceal themselves” ([1969] 2005, 192). This ecstatic movement symbolises the Levinasian welcoming of the other where, in order for the same to really see the other, dispossession is central: “in order that I be able to see things in themselves, that is, represent them to myself, I must know how to give what I possess. Only thus could I situate myself absolutely above my engagement with the non-I.” Dispossession will only take place by “welcom[ing] the Other who presents himself in my home by opening my home to him” (171).

It is crucial to apprehend the significance of the photographs she takes of her fellow patients during her stay at the hospital in order to understand the inner mechanisms that constitute the essence of Anna’s welcoming photographic impressions. The common interpretation of these photographs has death, pain and cruelty at its centre (Imhof 2006, 178; Izarra 2006, 195; Kenny 2006, 58-63; Peters 2008, 50; Siegel 2007, 113). Anna herself describes them as her “dossier,” her “indictment” of “everything” (Banville 2005, 183), of mortality, pain and life’s cruelty. Banville’s ghostly depiction of Anna at the moment she is taking the pictures, as though she is “in search of the more grievously marked and maimed among her fellow patients” (176), no doubt imbues the photographic act with deadliness and suffering. The final result is materialised in pictures that “might have been taken in a field hospital in wartime” (181) and whose description is excruciating. The transitory and suffering nature of human life is at the centre of Anna’s photographs. In Sontag’s words, we could envision photographs as a *memento mori* during which photographer and beholder participate “in another person’s (or thing’s) mortality, vulnerability, mutability” (1978, 15). In accordance with this view of photography, in Anna’s pictures the other’s transience, deadliness and pain prevail and time freezes to show us a misery which is external to ourselves.

However, this interpretation of Anna’s photographs needs expanding. Despite the nurses’ and relatives’ complaints about Anna taking pictures of other patients, no objections came from the patients themselves. They voluntarily and calmly displayed their wounds to the camera. Through her terminal illness, Anna as photographer can approach the subjects of her photos on an even level without violating the patients’

human dignity, as she herself is part of the “sorority of the afflicted” (Banville 2005, 183). Similar to Anna’s photographs of Max as a young man, the final result of the pictures of her fellow patients show two different levels of representation and interpretation. Anna respectfully captures the pain of the other but her eye also penetrates within herself, within a space that allows her to bring to light an optical unconscious which reveals that her photographs should also be envisioned, following a Barthesian perspective, as a reminder not just of the other’s but also of one’s own mortality. As Iversen states, “Barthes declares that every photograph contains an ‘imperious sign of my future death.’ Looking at old photographs one thinks simultaneously of a future—‘he is going to die’—and of an absolute past—‘he has died’—a collapse of time that seals one’s own fate” (1994, 451).

Time merges in Anna’s photographs in two different ways. Firstly, past, future, as well as present meet as Max remembers, long after Anna’s death, the two of them looking at her pictures: “Anna spread the photographs around her on the bed and pored over them avidly, her eyes alight, those eyes that by then had come to seem enormous, starting from the armature of the skull” (Banville 2005, 180). Mortality prevails in Max’s present memory of Anna’s past suffering and decease, and in his thoughts of a future in which decline and age await him. But secondly, time also comes together in these pictures in a different sense, since they represent the decaying bodies of people of all ages. By portraying the suffering of an old man, a middle-aged woman, a mother with her baby, an old woman and a boy, Anna’s photographs hold a clear message: suffering, pain, decrepitude and mortality are intrinsic elements of the human being, no matter their age or stage in life. That is, age, disease or mortality are not constituents of the other, but also of the same.

Anna’s photographs, then, show her vision of disability, illness, decline and age as something that “is not an exception, not a monstrosity but something that happens in the natural course of things” (Stiker [1999] 2009, 12). The stillness and muteness of the photographs speak to us about the definition of the terms *normative* and *difference*. Through Anna’s blind lens disease works as the ultimate example of the collision of time categories in the human life course, which should promote the vision of disability and age as spaces of integration where, as Stiker demands, we could “inscribe in our cultural models a view of difference as the law of the real” as opposed to what he calls the “law of the identical” (12) or the law or “fantasy of the normal” (viii). From this perspective, Anna’s photographs function as the ultimate ethical act of movement towards alterity, of responsibility for the other understood as the encompassing perception of the suffering of the other in relation to the suffering of the same.

The ethical quality of Anna’s photos reaches its peak through Max’s reaction to the pictures of her fellow patients, which entails, in my reading of *The Sea*, a subtle but crucial moment in the novel, when analysed from a Levinasian perspective, since it unsettles Max’s predominant unethical homecoming movement and self-absorption. As already anticipated at the beginning of this section, the ethical approach that I see in Anna’s

pictures is firmly revealed, if we merge Levinas' philosophical notions of alterity and the epiphany of the face of the other, Benjamin's theory of the optical unconscious and the Barthesian photographic concept of the *punctum*. In *Camera Lucida* (1980), Barthes coined two terms: *studium* and *punctum*. *Studium* is understood as the general pleasure or interest we can find in a picture from its main theme. As observers of a photograph, we acquire an active role, "invest[ing] the field of the *studium* with [our] sovereign consciousness" (2000, 26). The term implies closure since the picture with *studium* remains within its frame. However, a picture with a *punctum* breaks that closure, disturbs the sense of the image, bursts through the frame. Barthes describes the *punctum* as follows: "The second element will break (or punctuate) the *studium*. This time it is not I who seek it out (as I invest the field of the *studium* with my sovereign consciousness), it is this element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me" (26-27). It is now the photograph that actively invades the viewer and has power over him/her and the viewer is now the object of the photograph's gaze, he/she is now penetrated, touched, moved by it. Gallop presents an analysis of the *punctum* which links it to Levinas' face of the other, and which, in my view, should be applied to the analysis of Anna's photographs. Gallop relates Barthes' description of the *punctum* as a piercing arrow with "a tradition of a certain mystic discourse in which otherness enters you in some way that is ecstatic ... Ecstasy is when you are no longer within your own frame: some sort of going outside takes place ... The punctum which is not in all photography but is in his [Barthes'] favorite photographs, the ones that move him, produces something like a jouissance, an ecstasy" (1988, 152). Gallop points out Barthes' emphasis on the reciprocal relation between the picture and its viewer, and focuses on the latter's "openness to alterity" and active receptivity to "being overwhelmed by otherness" (155).

Anna's photographs do indeed possess a *punctum* that pierces Max. It opens up an optical unconscious that reveals the Barthesian reciprocal relation between the pictures and their viewers that calls for an encounter with the other in pain, for a contact with an alterity that again subverts the concepts of *normative* and *difference*. Max unveils the *punctum* of Anna's pictures in a moment in the novel which, to me, is pregnant with meaning. Max states: "What was most striking to me about the people pictured was the calmly smiling way in which they displayed their wounds, their stitches, their suppurations" (Banville 2005, 181). As mentioned above, Max recalls a picture "of a fat old wild-haired woman with her slack, blue veined legs lifted and knees splayed, showing off what I presumed was a prolapsed womb ... Despite the position in which it found itself the face was perfectly at ease, and might even have been smiling" (182). Physical deformity and pain are intertwined in the protagonist's words with a sense of calm and ease that dismantles the view of disease as something disruptive and beyond the margins of the normative. The *punctum* of Anna's images, that is, the smiles of the patients, disturb what we might consider their *studium*. Through the patients' smiles, the photographs rise out of their frames and pierce, prick, even bruise Max, the viewer, who is moved by their tranquil looks directed at him.

I see in Max's reaction to his wife's pictures of her fellow sufferers a sudden reflection of Levinas' "epiphany" or "apparition" of the face of other ([1963] 1986, 351) which turns to the same from the absolute beyond in its extreme "nudity disengaged from every from" asking for its infinite compassion and obligation. Levinas conceptualises that turning of the face to the same as a "gaze that supplicates and demands" ([1969] 2005, 75); it is a gaze that "mak(es) an entry" ([1963] 1986, 351) into the same, calling into question identification and starting the ethical dialogue ([1969] 2005, 171) that disrupts the ontological "reduction of the other to the same" (46). I consider that Max's perception of the patients' smiles shows how their gaze, their turning to him, triggers off his immediate response to their absolute otherness as he discards for a moment the forms of their decaying bodies and, instead, focuses his attention on an immaterial space reigned by an alterity that is beyond physical disabling attributes. Despite the fact that Max never abandons his narcissistic impulsion and intricate introversion, at this particular point of the novel he appropriates Anna's *blindness* as he enters a new dimension where a totalising vision is replaced by an absolute and ethical encounter with an alterity which, according to Levinas, "cannot be summarized in the fact that the other who resembles me has, in his characteristics, another attribute. Normally we say that a thing is other because it has other properties ... before any attribute, you are other than I, other otherwise, absolutely other! And it is this alterity, different from the one which is linked to attributes, that is your alterity" (Robbins 2001, 49). Thus, Levinasian alterity, as the ultimate and inherent condition of human beings, as a difference beyond attributes, dismantles the strangeness and stigmatising difference of the disabled person, as it likens all of us in our otherness. In this sense, we can join Smith in his conclusion that a person's Levinasian otherness "describes a difference that precedes what are generally thought of as differences ... it precedes such specific differences as gender, age, ethnicity, state of health or dis/ableness" (2009, 62). In this respect, Anna's images represent faces—in the literal and metaphorical Levinasian manner—whose arresting smiles signal a primary difference common to all human beings, that radically questions the image of the disabled other as a marginal social category. Therefore, Anna's pictures presuppose a movement outwards, a Levinasian ecstatic movement towards the other that opposes Max's dominant movement inwards and that at the same time interrupts it for an instant by causing a sudden encounter between the protagonist's self-contained inclinations and sheer otherness.

4. CONCLUSION

As this paper reveals, the application of both Levinas' rejection of Western philosophy as an unethical ontology of the same and his vindication of a tradition of the other—of infinity and an ethic of hospitality—sheds new light on the significance of a central aspect of John Banville's *The Sea*, i.e., Max's self-searching process, and of a much more peripheral aspect of the novel, Anna's pictures, which, in my view, hold, as we

have seen, important previously undisclosed implications. As I have tried to prove, going back to the Cedars, and thus returning home, helps Max to discover his lifelong attempt to become unknown through his sustaining of a delusive identity. As I have illustrated, Banville's construction of Max's inner journey and self-discovery in the course of the novel presents us with a character immersed within an ontological realm in which self-realisation prevails in his return to a wished-for and idealised comforting and motherly space, which he never enjoyed as a child and where the encounter with the other is absent. Returning home implies for Max, as it does for Levinas, isolation and an egotistic enrooted dwelling that involves totalisation, that is, a philosophy of the same where alterity is dissolved. However, as I have attempted to demonstrate, despite the fact that Max's introspective journey pervades the whole novel, at one crucial point it is disrupted by his memories of Anna's photographic affirming representation of disability. I consider that Max's perception of the patients' smiles as the most striking aspect of the pictures is one of the novel's excellences as it, paradoxically and brilliantly, allows the realm of alterity to take the lead at this particular moment of the story through a character whose solipsistic nature invades the entire narrative. By allowing Max to capture the pictures' *punctum*, Banville, momentarily but significantly, counteracts the narrative dominance of the protagonist's narcissistic experience in the Cedars through his appreciation of the patients' absolute otherness rather than their stigmatising excruciating presence. Thus, Levinas' philosophical tenets enlighten the analysis of the narrative interrelation between and counterbalance of both Max's returning home and Anna's photographic movement without return. If analysed from this Levinasian critical perspective, we might conclude that the narrative dual dynamic of *The Sea* incites the reader to envision literary space as a territory that is able to question ontological totalisation—in this case by a sudden and striking interruption of Max's prevailing introspection—and therefore represent otherness and participate in a complex deconstruction of social categorisations by focusing on ethical concerns that call for a welcoming movement of the same towards the alterity of the other.

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Marta Cerezo Moreno is Associate Professor of English Studies at the Spanish Distance Learning University (UNED). Her main areas of interest and main publications focus, first, on contemporary English narrative in relation to Gender Studies, Literary Gerontology and Disability Studies, and, second, on Early Modern British Literature, especially Shakespearean drama. Her current research is concerned with both the presence of aging and disability in contemporary English narrative and the commemorative acts of Shakespeare's Quartercentenary.

Address: Departamento de Filologías Extranjeras y sus Lingüísticas. Facultad de Filología. Edificio de Humanidades. Despacho 529. Paseo Senda del Rey, 7. 28040, Madrid, Spain. Tel.: +34 91 3988182.