

Writing, Land, Sea and Sand: The Littoral in John Banville's *The Sea*

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Abstract: Set primarily on the Irish coast, John Banville's *The Sea* (2005) abounds with depictions of seaside landscapes and features a narrator-writer who constantly combines stylised representations of the coastal landscape with his narrative of mortality, loss, and quest for selfhood. It is a novel in which Banville's narrator not only struggles with the inadequacy of language like his predecessors, but also strives to fuse the materiality of the land with the materiality of the ageing and dying body through style. Using Jacques Lacan's elaborations on 'the littoral' as a border space between the Real and the Symbolic, this article argues that this liminal space is precisely where *The Sea* points to. Through the analysis of key signifiers such as 'sand', 'gravel', and 'digging', this article proposes to read Banville's Man Booker Prize winning novel as an exploration of the littoral as a potential for self-expression, where the narrator's return to the childhood home at the seashore coincides with his linguistic (re)turn to the littoral condition of the letter. The seaside-littoral, therefore, provides an ideal spatial metaphor for Banville's project to write about loss and, simultaneously, to be able to retrieve some ontological 'substance' through the practice of writing.

Keywords: materiality, style, the littoral, John Banville, *The Sea*