1 Introduction

No other literature is so botanical as English, so seeded with delight and melancholy in the seasons. [...] Boundless as its empire became, England remained an island, a manageable garden to its poets, every one of whom is a pastoralist.

— Derek Walcott, “The Garden Path”

This study is driven by the dialectic of two paradoxical truths: first, that “Arcadia has always been a pretty lie” (Schama, *Landscape and Memory* 297), and second, that despite this, the pastoral mode has always been relevant. Indeed, pastoral acquaints literature with strange bedfellows; it is “a piece of cultural equipment that, for more than two millennia, Western thought and literature has been unable to do without” (Buell, *Environmental Imagination* 32). Texts as different in design and concern as Virgil’s *Eclogues*, Shakespeare’s *As You Like It* or John Banville’s *Ghosts* are taken in by its generic embrace. Each has a sort of pastoralism in common: Virgil’s poems stand as a timeless testimony to Leo Marx’s aphorism “No shepherd, no pastoral” (*The Machine in the Garden* 45); *As You Like It* is a classic instance of Renaissance pastoral drama, and *Ghosts* attempts no less a task than to rewrite the perennial human aspiration for a ‘golden world’ as a poetically imagined if distinctly postmodern Arcadia. To place side by side Virgil’s poems, Shakespeare’s play and Banville’s novel is also to admit that pastoral is neither a genre, nor formally restricted to its traditional beginnings in which, as deriving from early Greek and Roman poetry set in an idealised bucolic landscape, shepherds declaim pentameters about work, love and the world.

Seamus Heaney, arguably one of Ireland’s foremost Twentieth-century pastoralists, celebrates the mode’s astonishing staying power and flexibility in his “Eclogues in *Extremis*”: “What keeps a literary kind viable,” Heaney declares, “is its ability to measure up to the challenges offered by new historical circumstances, and pastoral has been confronted with this challenge from very early on” (“Eclogues in *Extremis*” 2). Similarly, Hans-Ulrich Seeber ascribes pastoral’s continued presence in literature to its semantic versatility: “The pastoral idyll is conditioned by great semantic potential and ambivalence; its structure is remarkably adaptable and can be used for many different purposes” (*Idylls and Modernisation* [Idylls and Modernisation] 10, translation my own). One could argue at this point, albeit with a certain amount of world-weariness, that anyone
who has attempted to write the literary history of the pastoral mode may as well have attempted to write a history of English-language literature. Nevertheless, too much by way of pioneering insight and analysis would be lost without such pastoral devotees as William Empson, Peter Marinelli, John Alpers and Terry Gifford, to name but a few. It is also due to their thorough contributions that the pastoral has been experiencing somewhat of a renaissance today, for the mode has returned to contemporary fictions, and returned with a vengeance:

[T]he modernization and rationalization of modern Western societies has initiated a revival of primitivist and mythical configurations in literature, art and film. Therefore, a massive return of idyllic motifs and themes can be observed, albeit in transformations, permutations and subversions. (Heiler, “Transformations of the Pastoral” 331)

Pastoralists abound, among present-day authors and critics alike. This revival of the mode in contemporary literature should not be deemed as a “primitivist,” sentimental regression, however, but as a progressive diversification of the mode into a cornucopia of new writings, readings and interpretations. Consequently, the return of the pastoral mode may be viewed as the expression of a broader phenomenon, namely that of a growing need for reorientation in the literary landscapes of the modern and the postmodern, where all is blurred, borderland, and where even such fundamental categories as time and space are falling prey to relentless scrutiny and interrogation.

**Pastoral as Identity Discourse**

Pastoral is a mode used to question the complex relation between self, the other(s) and our place in the world, whether in political, socio-cultural or historical contexts. Thus, it is always already identity discourse. Though the precise nature of this impulse changes continually, pastoral represents social orders in complex, carefully constructed ways, “providing an imagined ideal as an outlet for fantasy onto which a society’s ideals can be projected, but also subtly harmonising and enabling social processes” (Hess, “Postmodern Pastoral” 75). Though Virgil modelled his *Eclogues* on Theocritus’ *Idylls*, for example, he introduced political turmoil largely absent from the latter. There runs an eviction theme through the first part of the *Eclogues*, for example, that evokes the pastoral as a poetics of resistance against the big land confiscations organised in order to resettle Julius Caesar’s legionaries after the civil war with Pompey, and to which Virgil’s family also fell victim (Heaney, “Eclogues in Extremis” 3). The title *Eclogues*, moreover, can be translated variously as “selections” or “reckoning.” Shakespeare’s Forest of Arden, likewise, is a space both concurrent with and contrary to the historical pastoral conventions of the time. It is at once an
idyll removed from the realities of the court and a testing ground for previously accepted social codes of proper comportment and human interaction. Thus using the flexibility of the pastoral mode as both an ‘enabler of social processes’ and a poetics of resistance, Virgil’s Eclogues and Shakespeare’s As You Like It hold up a mirror to the political power relations and to the cultural conventions of their age.

Pastoral becomes a particularly interesting mode for identity discourse in post-/modern and contemporary literature. To construct a story or a narrative in such contexts after all, is to transform language into a landscape of Lacanian lacunae, to labour endlessly in Baudrillard’s labyrinths of self-referentiality or to focus like Foucault, on ‘technologies of self’ and on heterotopias of crisis, deviance, and disorientation. Thus “[i]t can sometimes happen,” Brian Friel warns in Translations (1980), “that a civilization becomes imprisoned in a linguistic contour that no longer matches the landscape of […] fact” (43). A renewed search in literature for Arcadia is not surprising in the light of such overbearing cultural abstraction and literary theorization: pastoral offers an aesthetic response to a prevailing mood of discontent and disorientation. The bucolic backdrop, moreover, can function as an idyllic escape from the ever-increasing complexities and differentiations of the postmodern condition.

Placed side by side, the terms pastoral and the postmodern do indeed evoke a fundamental paradox. After all, the pastoral is a literary form with a long historical tradition as “a landscape of the human spirit, where love, history, politics, religion, work, poetry, and power converge and live” (Okri, In Arcadia 207). As for postmodernism, it can be summarised as the liberation movement of a Western culture that mistrusts the inherited metanarratives and overarching mythologies that once structured human interaction and comportment (Worthington, Self as Narrative 2), and pastoral must, to an extent, be regarded as such a metanarrative. On second thoughts – and this acknowledgement is quintessential to understanding this study’s approach – pastoral should be considered a far broader term, one that moves beyond specific literary forms, recurrent throughout literary history, encompassing many areas of content, including the postmodern.

To put it differently, the pastoral mode and the postmodern mood are consilient on several levels. Firstly, pastoral can in many ways be seen as a defining precursor, or at least harbinger, of post-/modern self-reflexivity and metafiction. “As a mode of writing,” Heaney reminds us, “the pastoral requires at least a

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1 I henceforth use the spelling post-/modern to refer simultaneously to modernist and postmodernist theory, culture and literature.
minimal awareness of tradition on the part of both the poet and the audience” (“Eclogues in Extremis” 1). On the one hand, the mode is all literariness, all allegory and illusion; it is an escapist “discourse of retreat” from the various complexities, problems and tensions of reality (Gifford, Pastoral 46). If pastoral “is concerned with appearance,” on the other hand, “that is only because it wants to show up or to get behind other appearances” (Heaney 4). Thus, Virgil’s Eclogues can be read as much as a celebration of the bucolic viva contemplativa as a cultural critique of the social and political passivity of the Roman zeitgeist. As You Like It may be said to pioneer the development of the pastoral from a previously conventional literature about natural beauty and timeless harmony, accordingly, to a self-reflexive mode critical of the self-same elements that constitute its own literariness. John Banville’s novels and fiction, in particular, use the pastoral as a kaleidoscopic lens through which the postmodern formation of a narcissistic personality and identity can be read (and re-read) in a mode designed to construct – and simultaneously deconstruct – an Arcadian landscape contoured by the nature of language, identities in crisis, and narrativity.

Second, and to reiterate, the pastoral mode offers postmodern writers a plethora of constructs and contexts for identity discourse. As previously stated, political, cultural and social questions of identity are inherent to many writings within the mode. Twentieth-century pastoralists, however, are much more concerned with constructing a ‘secularised pastoral’ in survey of such concepts as the self, other and identity. Indeed, pastoral and postmodernism both facilitated the rise to supremacy of the self as a nucleus inherent to all narrative, fiction and literature. Postmodern texts celebrate the formation of a narcissistic self, yet at the same time the postmodernist author also feels duty-bound to question, test and subvert the authenticity of such a self. The “narcissistic self, is, above all, uncertain of its own outlines, longing either to remake the world in its own image or to merge into its environment in blissful union” (Lasch, The Minimal Self 19). Similarly, the pastoral of post-/modern fiction can function as a narcissistic retreat into counterworlds, as a quasi-paradise of the mind and the imagination where an Arcadian landscape is constructed as an artifice in order to “escape” from the complexities that appear to be governing current modes of thinking and being. It can, however, also be used to explore and gain insight into the complex maps, topographies, and countless other scapes that make up one’s atlas of self, others, and the world.

A considerable body of recent and contemporary literature provides ample evidence of a postmodern pastoral. Where some writers have been directly inspired by the mode – Tom Stoppard, Ben Okri and Jim Crace are three of the better known examples – others, such as Ireland’s foremost living author, John
Banville, harness the mode’s potential in more subtle and complex ways. In contrast to Stoppard, Okri or Crace, each of whom has published an *Arcadia* to call their own, it may at first glance be difficult to see how the bucolic tradition, established in classical culture by the *Idylls* of Theocritus and Virgil’s *Eclogues* is cogent for John Banville’s fiction. Yet, I contend that the pastoral mode and the postmodern come together, in his later writing especially, as a canon of identity discourse, where one voice explores such post-/modern perennials as the question of self and authenticity in relation the other, and another voice pastoralizes the attendant findings into a quest that leads through the narrator’s eye, constructing fictional counterworlds and idylls, ever vulnerable to a human condition in purgatory between modern doubt and postmodern disingenuousness.

**Always Already Elsewhere**

Lastly, pastoral is always already set in the past, bereft of reality and imbued with nostalgia; the mode, then, is always already elsewhere. It is difficult if not futile to argue against pastoral as a construct of nostalgia and retreat; the idealised countryside of the pastoral text is, after all, an Arcadia that uses language to create a world different from what is perceived to be real. This retreat, however, may function simply as an escape from the complexities of urban life, society, and even the reality of the present, or it may be used as a means of exploration (Gifford, *Pastoral* 46). Similarly, nostalgia is not simply a feeling that urges one to look back at void, an absence of something or someone, an elsewhere or an-other. More than a feeling, rather, nostalgia is an impulse, a thrust that involves an act, and what nostalgia acts out, or causes to be enacted, is *nostos*, the act of return. This desire to return home, moreover, is brought about by *algos*, or extreme pain, grief, and distress (Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* xiii).

Nostalgia, then, as a literary device saturated in the pain of longing and the attendant (re-)enactment of *nostos*, is driven towards a point of origin, situated both in a space and a time where the protagonist used to *be*. Pastoral also always points to something that is elsewhere, at a condition of absence that comes into being in its narrative landscapes, in the lacunae of the resultant crises of identity, and in the architectonics of Arcadia. Nostalgia thus also conditions pastoral with a subtext of crisis, a crisis of identity, authenticity, and narrative. In pastoral narratives, the longing for what one no longer has becomes a question of belonging, a quest-like return to what one used to ‘be.’ Post-/modern iterations of

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2 I am referring to Jim Crace’s *Arcadia* (1992), Tom Stoppard’s *Arcadia* (1993) and Ben Okri’s *In Arcadia* (2002).
the pastoral mode thus often turn this self-same quest onto its head and inside-out, resulting in a text where the enactment of return, and the desire for a self one thought one used to be, is itself questioned and emplotted into the narrative.

To re-iterate, questions of time, place and identity all meld in pastoral to create versions of the mode so versatile that it continues to influence and provide impulses for fictions today. No contemporary author demonstrates this more iconically than John Banville. He is seen in equal terms as an old-fashioned modernist and a newfangled postmodernist (McNamee, A Postmodern Spirituality) as much “a man with nothing to say” as an author with “too much to write” (Kenny, John Banville). Banville’s oeuvre wavers indecisively between modernism and postmodernism; his fiction embodies the viewpoint that “the anxiety of contamination in modernism is concerned with preserving the integrity of the autonomous art work so that it can conceptually counterbalance the potential senselessness and chaos of our world” (Kenny, John Banville).

In many ways, all this makes Banville a present-day pastoralist, for pastoral too has survived as an autonomous mode that spotlights the significance of the construction of an aesthetic literary form, even when it is deemed equally important that the stability of such constructions be called into question (and often within the same body of writing). Pastoral, albeit in its various post-/modern transformations, is well suited to John Banville’s works because both author and mode are prone to query their (meta-)narrative constructions in a self-conscious discourse that swings back and forth between pastoral regression and post-/modern reflexion.

Freddie Montgomery, Alexander Cleave, Max Morden, Gabriel Godkin, Adam Godley and Oliver Orme: Banville’s protagonists are all “possessed of a past” (Bell, A Banville Reader) which they paint in the post-card colours of a postmodern pastoral. Variously as writers, historians, actors, mathematicians, literary critics, con-artists, criminals and spies, they are all characters in search of a grand narrative with which they can impose some sense and meaning onto the world. Their obsession with the past is only matched by their fixation on memory: “all thinking is in a sense remembering” (Birchwood). To remember, in this sense, is to try to return to one’s past its constitutive elements in order to stabilize one’s sense of self in a crisis-ridden and conflicted now. Thus, Banville’s novels transform the pastoral mode from a vehicle of socio-cultural, public identity discourse to one that encompasses the private process of re-identification located in the individual subject as a result of continuous interpellation. In doing so, the Irish author shows that identity discourse can build a bridge of consilience between postmodern literature and a seemingly outdated, irrelevant
mode – between two seemingly paradoxical cultural tools that have shaped countless literary and cultural texts. As a result, the pastoral mode has greatly enriched and diversified the postmodern survey of the processes of identity formation, deconstruction and reification.

Although not applicable to reading all of Banville’s works, the pastoral mode opens new vistas of analysis for his central concerns, namely the collaboration of ethics and aesthetics in art and the topography of the mind as subject to the literary concomitance of narrative, imagination, and memory. In contrast to traditional forms, Banville’s pastoral contexts manifest themselves more within than without, be it in the construction of imaginative otherworlds and idylls, or as narrative meditations on the power games of fiction, reality, and illusion. This narrative thrust of Banville’s fictions is elegantly mirrored and summarised in St. Augustine’s elaborations on the soul’s turn inward to discover external truths: “ab exterioribus ad interiora, ab inferioribus ad superiort [from the outer to the inner, from the lower to the higher]” (Augustinus, Enarrationes in Psalmos, XL, p. 2108). Ultimately, Banville’s protagonists often harbour an Arcadia of the unconscious conditioned by a subtext of childhood nostalgia and a desire to return to a state of innocence. Brought to the surface by a moment of crisis, the attendant process of narrative emplotment results in a pastoral retreat, sojourn and return, in search of a higher, metanarrative or truth. Banville’s resultant fictions explore, subvert, and transform the pastoral mode into an ambiguous landscape and a quest for a stable self-identity.

Finally, I would like to cite Harold Toliver’s Pastoral Forms and Attitudes (1984): “Whether or not the texts examined here need all be considered ‘pastoral’ is not as important as our discovering something in them through this lens that would be less noticeable through another” (vii). While the classification of Banville as a pastoralist, accordingly, is by no means a straightforward endeavour, it is not the aim of this study to examine his works as pastoral in an overdetermined and exhaustive fashion. I do not wish to cast the net of this study too wide, in other words, only to discover that not all in it is fish. Thus, I exclude from my survey Banville’s first novel Nightspawn (1971), his foray into short stories, Long Lankin (1970), the novels The Untouchable (2000) and Shroud (2002), most of his plays as well as his novel Ancient Light (2013).