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
I henceforth use the spelling post-/modern to refer simultaneously to modernist and postmodernist theory, culture and literature. 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.¹ 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 inTranslations (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