events and experiences that the self can hope to be represented to others. The past, however, consists of a set of selectively chosen and appropriated memories and discourses, which makes the act of recollection—and hence the process of identification—something equally ephemeral, discontinuous and fragmented. Once again, it is the pastoral mode with its linguistic landscapes and attendant constructs of Arcadia that provides a space within which identity can at least hope to move towards a reconciliation with this temporally fragmented kaleidoscope of the self. In John Banville’s later works, for example, the narrative self (“I am therefore I think”) is re-invoked, reversed and re-inscribed as into an anti-Cartesian Arcadian self.

Towards a Post-/Modern Pastoral: John Banville’s Narrative Identities

For John Banville as well as other post-/modern authors, the self-reflexive narrator of the first-person novel is not enough. Relentlessly, Banville’s writing is looking for ways to accommodate the self-reflexive, personalised narrator of the first-person novel without giving up completely the idea of an existential relationship between narrator and character. Traditionally, the first-person novel links narrator to character in an ‘existential’ way as opposed to the ‘functional’ way found in the third-person novel: “The personal narrator is embodied in the world of the characters,” and both a narrating self and an experiencing self are characterised by this “corporeality” (Edmiston, “Focalisation and the First-Person Narrator” 735).

This in turn implies certain characteristics of the first-person narrator. The first-person narrator, for instance, tells a story he calls his own, not someone else’s, and does so in the first person. Such a narrative voice is also “restricted” spatially, temporally and psychologically “to what a fictional human being could logically know”. Furthermore, where the traditional first-person narrator is placed in the here-and-now of the narrating of the story, the character is placed in the here-and-now of the story told. These two loci are connected in time. A standard way to overcome this issue is to distinguish between a ‘narrating I’ (the narrator as narrator) and the ‘experiencing I’ (the narrator as character) (Edmiston 734, 736).

The structuralist treatments of narrative reject such a ‘personal narrator’, however. This tenet of literary theory places the emphasis instead on narrative agents or functions rather than fictional human beings. Character is assigned to the story level and narrator is assigned to the discourse level, and neither story and discourse nor character and narrator should be confused with one another, which is precisely what the idea of a ‘personal narrator’ does. The functions of
the first and third-person narrator, from this point of view, are identical: “There is the same difference between narrator and character, and the same functional relationship between them” (Edmiston, “Focalisation and the First-Person Narrator” 734). Consequently, the first-person novel loses its singularity and unique position in narrative theory.

To return to Banville, by putting the narrator centre stage, he constructs another character in such a way as can perhaps be best explained using Paul Ricoeur’s concept of “narrative identity”. Ricoeur develops the notion of narrative identity from the idea that life is equal to the story (or stories) one can tell about it: “life ... appears to us as the field of a constructive activity ... through which we attempt to recover ... the narrative identity which constitutes us” (Ricoeur, “Life: A Story in Search of a Narrator” 130).

The notions of subjectivity that characterise Ricoeur’s narrative identity call to mind the obsession for a ‘new’ kind of subjectivity relentlessly driving the various—and yet clearly connected—narrative voices of Banville’s novels: “that which we call subjectivity is neither an incoherent succession of occurrences nor an immutable substance incapable of becoming. It is exactly the kind of identity which the narrative composition alone, by means of its dynamism, can create.” To do this, narrative identity mediates between two disparate forms of identity: idem identity (“identity understood in the sense of being the same”) and ipse identity (“identity understood in the sense of oneself as self-same [soi-même].” Identity as ‘same’ relies on a set of strict and objective criteria of identification which remain immutable through time. Self-same identity, on the other hand, proves more flexible and develops with or in the temporal becoming of personal identity (Ricoeur, “Life: A Story in Search of a Narrator” 437, 439).

Furthermore, Ricoeur develops the concept of “emplotment” as that aspect of narrative which can not only integrate what appears to be the contrary to idem identity (diversity, variability, discontinuity and instability), but can also produce a “dialectic of character which is quite clearly a dialectic of sameness and selfhood” (Ricoeur, “The Self and Narrative Identity” 141). Ricoeur describes the resulting dialectic as a “discordant concordance,” where “concordance” refers to “the principal of order that presides over what Aristotle calls the ‘arrangement of facts’ and “discordance” implies ‘the reversals of fortune that make the plot an ordered transformation from an initial situation to a terminal situation’” (“The Self and Narrative Identity” 142).

In Self as Narrative, Kim Worthington provides a crisp synopsis of how Ricoeur’s concept of emplotment, its dialectic of “discordant concordance” in particular, constitutes narrative as a process of identification:
The construction of a subject’s sense of selfhood should be understood as a creative narrative process achieved within a plurality of intersubjective communicative protocols. In the act of conceptualizing one’s selfhood, one writes a narrative of personal continuity through time. That is, in thinking myself, I remember myself: I draw together my multiple members—past and other subject positions—into a coherent narrative of selfhood which is more or less readable by myself and others. (Worthington, *Self as Narrative* 13)

Worthington’s illuminations also help clarify how Banville’s novels are themselves the “emplotment” of Ricoeur’s concepts *par excellence*. For the Banvillean oeuvre “depends utterly on the drama of voice, a consciousness which feeds off its own imagination and memory, and which consoles itself with its own fictions” (D’hoker, “Self-Consciousness, Solipsism, and Storytelling” 69). His protagonists, first scientists, then art historians or actors, or distinguished academics, are solitary heroes constantly in survey of the self. As the narrative drives towards an established identity, plot is created from and within its characters. The main characters, one could say, are themselves the plots.

Freddie Montgomery lives “amongst ghosts and absences … hungering after other worlds” so that he can “fill them up … with imaginings” (*Ghosts* 75). Alexander Cleave is “after nothing less than a total transformation … into a miraculous, bright new being” (*Eclipse* 37). And Max Morden, seeking to assuage the “heaviness of heart” haunting him since the death of his wife, moves within “the waxworks of memory” in search of a narrative to call his own, “if only [he] could make a sufficient effort of recollection” (*The Sea* 160). The writer, for Banville, “is not a priest, not a shaman, not a holy dreamer. Yet his work is dragged up out of that darksome well where the essential self cowers” (“Fiction and Dream: An Interview” 26). Banville’s characters are themselves such writers, authoring mainly meta-fictional memoirs or autobiographies, to bring into light a self in purgatory, hovering between texts and fictions, between the authenticity of the real and the art of existence.

In monologues of “monotonous murmur” – Banville “is not much interested in dialogue” ("John Banville and Derek Hand in Conversation” 201, 210) – the characters ruminate on ideas that haunt them, speaking in narrative voices that seem to transcend time. For each book represents a “progression from the past to the following one … it’s an absolute logical progression from one to the other” ("Interviewing John Banville” 235). The narrative effectively haunts the characters as perceived within a threefold present: that of the past, that of the present, and that of the future. What is principally at stake, however, is not time, but truth, and through truth, the self. By resorting to first person narratives, in particular, the author’s act of representation is mirrored in the narrator’s adamant
attempt to frame his life in a story of significance. To reflect on the self, after all, is to reflect on the first-person novel as a genre, and to reflect on the first-person novel as a genre is to question the self.

These notions of narrative (as) identity evoked by “I am, therefore I think” are re-invoked and re-inscribed in Banville as a post-/modern pastoral of the unconscious. This process might best be described as a re-writing of the narrative self into an Arcadian self. Especially in his early texts, Banville stages narrative identities saturated in Beckettian poetics, supreme stylists whose primary “concern [is] with language,” incessantly trying (but ultimately failing) “to find forms that will accommodate the chaos” (Banville, “A Great Tradition” 7). The early Banvillean narrator was a “scientist-like manipulator … ‘the devised deviser devising it all’” (“Fiction and Dream: An Interview” 26). In his later novels, Banville begins to let things happen on the page; the narrative voice returns to a prelapsarian, dreamlike state, invoking a retreat to “childhood, to those Arcadian fields where memory and imagination merge” (Eclipse 137). Banville asserts, accordingly, that “as you sit down to write … it’s important that you get it just right. Then the language starts to do its own thing, it starts to write itself – it starts to write you!” (“John Banville and Derek Hand in Conversation” 208).

This dreamlike way of writing, this “getting it just right,” permeates the his works not only in mode of narration and content, but also in the way they are written. It persists throughout the ‘art trilogy’—The Book of Evidence (1989), Ghosts (1993), and Athena (1995)—The Untouchable (1997), the chiastic duo Eclipse (2002) and Shroud (2003), Booker-Prize Winning novel The Sea (2005), The Infinities (2009) as well as his latest novel The Blue Guitar (2015).

Each Banville protagonist, his identity thrown into crisis, embarks on an Arcadian sojourn which “usually entails some psychological adjustment in the characters” (Young, The Heart of the Forest 20) to find and re-write the self. This Arcadian sojourn takes place on various levels; it is a storied process that moves between the various focalisations, fictions, narrative identities and meta-fictional texts Banville and his ‘authors’ present to the reader. Banville’s protagonists—as is the case in many first-person novels—narrate what one might call a peregrination through the courtyards of the brain, the countryside of the mind, or, to quote Axel Vander in Shroud, “the topography of the mind” (Shroud 25). Banville’s literary artifice is a means of representing the narrative self as meditating on the way modern spaces and the space of imagination (itself an Arcadia of the (un)conscious) are interdependent.

Intimate registers and narratives betoken Banville’s protagonists with a “biofictional” space where a metafictional reconfiguration of contemporary subjectivity and authenticity takes place. The protagonists thus experience a search
for “totality without completeness,” a perfect state of prelapsarian innocence moving towards that “infinite proximity” of the mind to a metaphysical knowledge of existence and self (Izarra, “Disrupting Social and Cultural Identities” 184). Banville uses constant recapitulations of self-disrupting identities to lead his readers towards an awareness of the quintessential inauthenticity that cuts through narrative and self: “There exists neither ‘spirit’, nor reason, nor thinking, nor consciousness, nor soul, nor will, nor truth: all are fictions” (Shroud 6). These recapitulations, moreover, are localised in places and times, feelings and affections that are constantly re-interpreted, re-placed and re-written.

Every location in Banville’s later novels is highly symbolic and resonant of the character’s search for an almost-Arcadian space of metaphysical understanding. Freddie Montgomery, upon his release from prison, immediately seeks out an island, “a place of seclusion and tranquility,” he says, “where I could begin the long process of readjustment to the world” (Ghosts 20). Max Morden suddenly finds himself “in that Edenic moment at what was suddenly the centre of the world, with that shaft of sunlight and those vestigial flowers” (The Sea 90). And Alexander Cleave, before entering Hotel Halcyon, “imagined behind that revolving door a secret world of greenery and plashing water and sultry murmurings” (Eclipse 35). On the one hand, these recurrent pastoral settings act “as a mirror to the action” and as “symbol[s] of the social and psychological harmonies aimed at and attained” (Young, The Heart of the Forest 20–1). On the other hand, Banville simultaneously juxtaposes elements disharmonious to these Arcadianisms, thereby creating a parallel discourse that drives towards discordance, disenchantment and deconstruction.

Banville’s novels often oscillate between postmodernist and modernist concerns, for his writing utilises language as a “kind of fictional liberation movement” (Worthington, Self as Narrative 4). One must, nonetheless, also recognise “the deep sense of critical sympathy in Banville for those ... who dreamed of metanarratives and unifying visions” (McMinn, John Banville: A Critical Study 7). Most of his characters wish there were a convincing master narrative that could explain their place in the world. The rupture thus created in the relationship between human imagination and reality is central to any understanding of John Banville’s art, and the notions of Arcadia and the pastoral sojourn betoken the narrative voice with a means to both meditate on and mediate between these issues. All this, in order to overcome the postmodern rift between narrative and

15 Axel Vander is citing Nietzsche, but the citation is incomplete: “There exists neither ‘spirit’, nor reason, nor thinking, nor consciousness, nor soul, nor will, nor truth: all are fictions that are of no use” (The Will to Power 480).
experience, reality and fiction, self and other, and “to find forms that will accommodate the chaos” (Banville, “A Great Tradition” 7).