III Always Already Identity: Pastoral, Self, and Narrative

My garden, like my life, seems to me every year to want correction and require alteration.
– Alexander Pope

3.1 The Book of Evidence: In Search of a Grand Narrative (as) Identity

To write is to be. To write is to be read.
To write is to be read and to be re-read. To write is to be read and to be re-read is to be re-written.

I do not seek, my lord, to excuse my actions, only to explain them. That life, drifting from island to island, encouraged illusions. The sun, the salt air, leached the significance out of things, so that they lost their true weight. How could anything be dangerous, be wicked in such tender, blue, watercolour weather? – *The Book of Evidence* 11–12

Pastoral, Self, and Narrative Identity

To write is to be: most, if not all narrative identity theory builds upon this one apophthegm. The process of identification can be understood as a creative act of authoring “achieved within a plurality of intersubjective communicative protocols” (Worthington, *Self as Narrative* 13). The result, a storied self, can provide a subject with a sense of continuity and stability through time:

Narratives are a primary embodiment of our understanding of the world, of experience, and ultimately of ourselves. Narrative emplotment appears to yield a form of
understanding of human experience, both individual and collective, that is not directly attainable to other forms of exposition or analysis. (Kerby, Narrative and Self 3)

The concept and the value of narrativity as a means of ordering and understanding reality has undergone much debate among postmodern thinkers and essayists as they continue to draw from the deep well of wisdoms that constitute Paul Ricoeur’s three-volume magnum opus, Time and Narrative (1984–1988). As he concludes,

[S]elf-understanding is an interpretation; interpretation of the self, in turn, finds in the narrative, among other signs and symbols, a privileged form of mediation; the latter borrows from history as well as from fiction, making a life story a fictional story, or, if one prefers, a historical fiction, interweaving the historiographic style of biographies with the novelistic style of imaginary autobiographies. (Ricoeur, Oneself as Another 114)

Understanding, or perhaps more accurately, reading the self in this way offers the subject a myriad of possibilities. By leaving the narrative open to revision it acknowledges potential misreadings or misinterpretations (to write is to be read and to be re-read). At the same time, the subject can hope to acquire continuity and coherence of self, which in turn enables the projection of desires and intentions towards any number of imagined futures (to be re-read is to be re-written). In brief, though the act of authoring is by no means authoritative, it does authorise the subject to function as a purposive and morally responsible agent.

A subject authoring their functional identity within narrative holds great power. To command this power is also to wield a double-edged blade, however, where one edge represents the aforementioned wealth of possibilities, and the other a dangerous deferment of morality and agency that follows from – and still haunts – poststructuralist readings of narrative identity theory. Poststructuralists see subjectivity as something indefinite and always already deferred; it can always only be understood as an endlessly inconclusive ‘text,’ a hermeneutical endeavour eternally frustrated by linguistic structures which both pre-exist and further its construction. This leads to the conclusion that there can be no autonomy or individuality, because human beings must be understood as always vulnerable to or violated by the linguistic constructs in which they know themselves and are known by others (Worthington, Self as Narrative 12).

If, however, “texts (and selves understood as texts) are to remain readable [...] they must conform to certain intersubjective requirements of referentiality and expectation” (Worthington, “A Devious Narrative” 197). As Jacques Derrida writes in Of Grammatology, texts cannot be destroyed from the outside by re-
bellious acts or narratives; “they are not possible and effective, nor can they take accurate aim except by inhabiting those structures” (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 24). Again and again, the textual process is tethered to the dialectics of loss, absence, denial, destruction, homelessness, exile and, ultimately, oblivion. Roland Barthes places particular emphasis on the ‘text’ as something quintessentially non-identifiable and self-eradicating: the ‘text’ “is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away; the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing” (Barthes, “Death of the Author” 142). There is even something redemptive, according to Charles Scott, in the postmodern language in which “words might leave one without the book that they seem to compose, or with a non-word (e.g. *différance*) to which the words seem to give place” (Scott, “Postmodern Language” 33).

To get to the pith and core of things, such “purportedly revolutionary claims” lead to little more than “fallacious fiction[s] of heroic exile and self-erasure” (Worthington, “A Devious Narrative” 198). Their liberating value is questionable, for they seek to destroy what or the way human beings are. Textual or personal non-identity can have no redemptive meaning; there is no aesthetic worth to a notion that leaves the human subject “without books or a language that leaves us only with ‘non words’” (Worthington, “A Devious Narrative” 199). Any sense of identity and self must, after all, be placed (or at least orientate itself) in a physical space (a sense of where we are), even if the resulting sensations are ultimately conditioned by artificial, linguistic constructs. Consequently, though the postmodern yearns to acquire unqualified self-authorisation free of the tethers of judgment and morality, the self, especially in crisis, seeks a relation to communal frameworks of value and the vision of the good life.

In *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity*, Charles Taylor takes the notion that identity must be oriented within a physical space and time a step further. Physical placement, he argues, is not only analogous to moral orientation, but an intuition inherent to being: “To know who you are is to be oriented in moral space.” (*Sources of the Self* 27). This is not to say that a sense of mapped moral orientation restricts the prerogative of individual liberty or that it must necessitate a coercion to determined, objective constitutions. Choices within frameworks and their respective maps always remain possible. Though the human subject needs moral and discursive maps, its subjective freedom is native to the choices it makes with regard to the maps it will use (Taylor, *Sources of the Self* 28).

The question of how to map morality and self is also central to John Banville’s *The Book of Evidence* (1989). More than that, it must be regarded as the *raison d’être* of his entire ‘Frames’ trilogy – *The Book* is followed by *Ghosts* (1993) and
Athena (1995). Protagonist Freddie Montgomery poses the question of morality right in the beginning: “I am merely asking, with all respect, whether it is feasible to hold on to the principle of moral culpability once the notion of free will has been abandoned” (BoE 16). Freddie continues to examine the question thoroughly as the consequent narrative unfolds: “The question is wrong, that’s the trouble. It assumes that actions are determined by volition, deliberate thought, a careful weighing-up of facts” (BoE 38), until he finally shatters the concept of free will using Nietzsche as his intellectual weapon of choice: “There are no moral facts, only moral interpretations of facts” (Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil, qtd. in BoE 34).

Just as The Book of Evidence interrogates the imperatives of free will and moral culpability, Ghosts, as a logical continuation, tries to provide an answer, and to do so it draws heavily on Nietzsche’s vision of a humankind that is integrated into the scheme of nature and sin. For Nietzsche envisions humanity as living in harmony with nature as part of a great, undifferentiated whole. At the same time humankind is capable of recognising things other than itself, according to the German philosopher. This vision, Brendan McNamee observes, is both “centred in the imagination and decentred in the recognition that this imagination lays down no laws and knows itself to be only one half of a whole” (McNamee, “The Human Moment” 70). Ghosts maps out this vision in the discourse of absences and lacunae that Freddie obsesses over, and that he fills with his own imaginings.

Where Nietzsche uses the imagery of nature to map out his concepts of morality semantically, Ghosts thrives on the relation between nature, morality and culpability, transforming the resulting medley of concepts into a pastoral descant about the crisis of identity and self. For a crisis of identity often entails a desire to act out a retreat and a return within the contexts and the narrative landscapes of an Arcadian otherwhile and elsewhere. Pastoral can thereby function not only as a map, a means of orientation, but as a grand narrative of identity discourse in Banville’s post-/modern novels. Indeed, the entire trilogy is concerned precisely with how a “decentred,” irrational subject in crisis maps out a moral space in a narrative that mirrors the pastoral sojourn. In simpler terms, but with more pathos, Freddie uses language to create an Arcadian grand narrative sans moral culpability, and while the resulting discourse is fictitious and imagined, he can at least call it his own.
Morality and Identity in *The Book of Evidence*

Frederick Charles St John Vanderveld Montgomery is a man of many names and a polyvalent character. Convicted of the senseless murder of a young woman, he is writing a *Book of Evidence* from a dank, damp, Dublin prison cell. Maolseachlainn, his attorney, has negotiated a plea of guilty to the lesser charge of manslaughter, in exchange for a shortened sentence. But, by preventing a prolonged trial, Maolseachlainn has shortened Freddie’s ‘sentences,’ too, thereby inadvertently pre-empting Montgomery’s wish to have his say in the courtroom, and to indulge in a moment of self-affirming, narcissistic tribunal histrionics:

I’ll plead guilty, of course – haven’t I done so all along? – but I do not like it that I may not give evidence, no, that I don’t like. It’s not fair. Even a dog such as I must have his day. I have always been myself in the witness box, gazing straight ahead, quite calm, and wearing casual clothes, as the newspapers will have it. And then that authoritative voice, telling my side of things, in my own words. Now I am to be denied this moment of drama. (*BoE* 182)

Freddie’s testimonial is never intended as an “apologia” or “defence” (*BoE* 16), however, but as a means of self-reification, a coming to terms with his deeds, desires, and defects. The result is a solipsistic narrative that hovers between facts and fictions. In the beginning, Montgomery professes to recount truthfully and accurately the circumstances of the murder: “I wish to claim full responsibility for my actions – after all, they are the only thing I can call my own” (*BoE* 16). By the end of the novel, however, Freddie wants nothing to do with his *Book*; he orders to have it put away “with the other, official fictions” (*BoE* 220). He is not interested in an authoritative account of the murder, but through the act of writing, desires to re-discover an authentic sense of self: “I saw myself as a masterbuilder who would one day assemble a marvellous edifice around myself, a kind of grand pavilion, airy and light, which would contain me utterly and yet wherein I would be free” (16).

His identity, he claims, is in ruins, a ghost of its former self. He feels “unhoused” and “at once exposed and invisible [...] as something without weight, without moorings, a floating phantom” (*BoE* 16). Freddie, it appears, has enormous difficulty with asserting himself as an individual and his project of identification seems always already deferred: “I was always a little behind, trotting in the rear of my own life. [...] Stuck in the past, I was always peering beyond the present towards a limitless future. Now, I suppose the future may be said to have arrived” (*BoE* 38). Only in the act of murder itself do the past, present and future finally come together: violently, suddenly, but completely and compre-
hensively: “To do the worst thing, the very worst thing, that’s the way to be free. I would never again need to pretend to myself to be what I was not” (BoE 125).

Prison provides Freddie with temporary shelter, even if it also robs him of “something essential,” as if “the stuffing has been knocked out” (BoE 6). There he is given “a space and a distance to reflect upon himself in an attempt to discard all masks and discover authenticity” (Berensmeyer, John Banville: Fictions of Order 207). This is altogether too simple, however. Freddie is a man of deviance – masks are his métier. He is “a quick-change artist” who “place[s] all faith in the mask [...] the true stamp of refined humanity. Did I say that or someone else?” (BoE 191). In this reference to Yeats, Freddie confesses an informed understanding of the art of masking and unmasking. He revels in such fantasies, moreover, as he adopts and discards a large number of make-shift identities at will. His masks are taken mostly from literature; he is at once an “exotic animal, last survivor of a species they had thought extinct” (BoE 1), “Jean-Jacques the cultured killer (BoE 5), then Gilles de Rais (BoE 32), Raskolnikov (BoE 91), and finally, Moosbrugger (BoE 163). According to Freddie, masks offer a veneer of veracity; paradoxically, they are “the only way another creature can be known,” because they remain on “the surface [...] where there is depth” (BoE 72).

The ambiguities of acting and actions and of masking and unmasking are a recurring theme in many of Banville’s novels. Freddie comments on the subject in length in Ghosts, even quoting Diderot on acting:

He [Diderot] knew how much of life is a part that we play. He conceived of living as a form of necessary hypocrisy, each man acting out his part, posing as himself. It is true. What have I ever been but an actor, even if a bad one, too much involved in my role, not detached enough, not sufficiently cold. [...] This is why I have never learned to live properly among others. People find me strange. Well, I find myself strange. I am not convincing, somehow, even to myself. (G 198)

Right from the start, Freddie places himself on the periphery as an outsider, cut off from the rest of humanity. “Other people,” he says, “seemed to have a density, a thereness, which I lacked” (BoE 16). He has done nothing but assume a series of roles in his life, and he has treated each and every one of them with penchant triviality, as a joke. They

enabled him to establish an ironic distance from which to observe and present himself with a mixture of self-loathing and sardonic pride, conscious of the equally prefigured perceptions of others and thus progressively integrating the subjective and objective perspectives (Berensmeyer, John Banville: Fictions of Order 207).
Yet, for all his culture, reading and intellect, neither his many masks nor his *Book of Evidence*, his ‘autobiographical fiction,’ can truly unmask the real, authentic self, nor offer in its pages that “marvellous edifice” of innocence and freedom he so ardently desires:

Yes, to be found out, to be suddenly pounced upon, beaten, stripped, and set before the howling multitude, that was my deepest, most ardent desire[...]. Then finally I would be no longer that poor impersonation of myself I had been doing all my life. I would be real. I would be, of all things, human. (*BoE* 161–162)

In truth, Freddie’s autobiographical assertions quickly turn on him, as they turn on themselves. According to Paul De Man, the autobiographical project produces and determines life. Masks are an inherent part of the trope of autobiography; they manifest themselves “in the etymology of the trope’s name, *prosopon poien*, to confer a mask or a face.” To write an autobiography, in other words, is to give and take away faces, to face and to deface (De Man, “Autobiography as Defacement” 924, 926).

Kim Worthington goes a step further and interprets Freddie’s play with masks, roles and faces as a pretentious posture of “calculated deviance” (“A Devious Narrative” 206). Freddie “feigns excommunication (and irresponsible detachment),” she argues, “from the constraints of rational placement.” Though he seeks to enter a “utopia of excommunicative freedom,” he can never quite reach it, because such a state is “beyond or without language and rationality” (Worthington, “A Devious Narrative” 206). Freddie writes in order to assert his self; he never intends for any of his words to be read by others, however, and that is his fatal flaw. Thus he condemns his self to the periphery, but within the boundaries of the rational communicative protocols that provide the means of comprehension of his claims. He has, for example, always lived the life of an itinerant, whether in southern Europe with his wife and autistic son, on a Mediterranean island, at the detached and secluded family home Coolgrange in the country, or on the ‘island’ in *Ghosts*. Rather than escaping all community, he has situated himself, much like the shepherd of pejorative pastoral, “at contestational marginal sites within the communities” (Worthington, “A Devious Narrative” 207), thereby to observe, criticize and through that social criticism, narcissistically attempt to realign his “bifurcate” (*BoE* 95) sense of self.

**Grand Narratives, Grand Identities**

Despite the various professions and apparent confessions to that effect, Freddie does not, ultimately, hanker after authenticity through narrative, or at least not
exclusively. He does not have this luxury. The “density, the thereness” that he feels as something palpable in “others” (BoE 16) is what he wants to bestow on himself, and thereby achieve a tangible sense of corpo(reality). The narrative emplotment of his self is an attempt to achieve embodiment, to become something unmistakably tangible, physical, and ultimately visible, not only to others, but also to his own, estranged sense of self. The Book is fraught with passages that mourn this seeming lack of corpo(reality):

I felt that I was utterly unlike myself. [...] It was as if I – the real, sentient I – had somehow got myself trapped inside a body not my own. [...] But no, that’s not it exactly. For the person that was inside was also strange to me. [...] This is not clear, I know. I say the one within was strange to me, but which version of me do I mean? [...] But it was not a new sensation. I have always felt – what is the word – bifurcate, that’s it. (BoE 95)

In truth, at this point of the story the endeavour to achieve corpo(reality) brings Freddie closer to self-destruction than self-reification. For he is more than aware of his power to use language as a vessel to fill with facts and fictions at will, and he utilises this dialectic so as to construct a narrative Arcadia, a linguistic borderland where fiction and lies can thrive without moral culpability: “Lying makes a dull world more interesting. To lie is to create” (G 191). Furthermore, he mocks and parodies the self he describes throughout, and he is not able to achieve an objective, authorial distance from reality: “There was something irresistibly funny in the way reality, banal as ever, was fulfilling my worst fantasies” (BoE 3). This artistry, this narrative ‘deviance’ is driven by an overwhelming, egotistical desire for authorial recognition. To become “a master of the spare style, of the art that conceals art” (BoE 202), he claims, is what he now desires most.

This aim, to achieve the “ruthless suppression of the ego for the sake of the text” (BoE 203), moreover, stands in stark contrast to Freddie’s self-adorning, narcissistic narrative. When the narrative frame of The Book fails him, Montgomery turns to an anti-narrative descant of fictions and consequently sets himself up as “the pawn of extra-personal determination” (Worthington, “A Devious Narrative” 214). All this artistry reveals that, between the lines of The Book there beats a timid heart, tentative and full of doubt: “in that grim, shadowed gallery I call my heart, I stood uneasily, with a hand to my mouth, silent, envious, uncertain” (BoE 17). Montgomery’s eyes set their sights backwards, hoping to move forwards: “The myriad possibilities of the past lay behind me, a strew of wreckage. Was there, in all that, one particular shard – a decision reached, a road taken, a signpost followed – that would show me just how I had come to
my present state?” (BoE 37). By looking back, Freddie seeks comfort in the grand narrative of the human experience of time and nostalgia, and there are countless other examples of master narratives that Freddie uses to his own advantage. Life, according to Freddie, is “a prison in which all actions are determined according to a random pattern thrown down by an unknown and insensate authority.” The world is one big, “unpredictable, seething […] swirl of chance collisions” (BoE 16, 18).

The entire symphony of The Book of Evidence is orchestrated meticulously around a bass register of such grand narrative (author)isations. Freddie’s identity is in crisis, and the possibility to escape from the constraints of intersubjective rationality to the linguistic borderland of Arcadian nostalgia strikes a harmonious chord with this “child among adults” (BoE 16). Unwilling to move forward, he hankers after a time when all was right with the world, a lost age of innocence: “I always feel like a traveller on the point of departure. Even arriving I seemed to be turning away, with a lingering glance at the lost land” (BoE 40). Like his father – who saw Ireland as “the only worthwhile world,” Freddie too wants “to believe in this fantasy of a great good place that had been taken away from us and our kind” (BoE 29).

As a site of pastoral, Ireland itself can be traced as far back as Spenser: “in its otherness on the edge of Europe, in its greenness and difference, Ireland has provided for the modern western world an equivalent of the ancient world’s remote rural Arcadia (Grene, “Black Pastoral” 1). The Book of Evidence, in accordance with this, can be read as Banville’s pastoralisation of the literary ‘otherness’ and the cultural ‘difference’ that prevails through his country’s heritage. Indeed, Banville’s entire œuvre pays homage to “the human fall-out of this legacy of disinheritance with an array of characters who exist anxiously in the world, unable to access any shared or generally accepted beliefs that will tell them who they are” (Hand, John Banville 136).

It is in this vein that pastoral begins to take on the role of a soothing, self-asserting grand narrative for Freddie in the excommunicative exile he has, with his narrative art, crafted for himself. Though it manifests itself most notably in references to childhood, the past and a “lost land,” it is through Freddie’s desire to create a selfhood by means of authorship that the linguistic borderland of Arcadia and its powerful subtext of nostalgia first become textualised. The Book of Evidence, above all else, draws attention to Freddie’s amazing creative, authorial powers. He demonstrates an unparalleled capacity to situate, circumscribe and control characters through narrative. This power, however, also strikes a discordant note with claims that his writing is nothing more than the
precipitate of "puppet-show twitchings which passes for consciousness" (BoE 38).

Banville has said that he imagines Freddie caught between the living and the
dead, between imagination and (corpo)reality: “[H]e is trying to find ground to
stand on. He’s in purgatory, and he’s trying to find a solid corner in it, and he
can’t” (Schwall, “An Interview with John Banville” 1997, 14). By manipulating
the text and its countless characters, what Freddie is trying to do is to create a
‘golden world’ that will not only accommodate the living and the dead, but him
also, a criminal who sees himself as something in between: “It is not the dead
that interest me now[.] [...] Who then? The living? No, no, something in be‐
tween; some third thing” (G 29). And Ghosts is a seamless, masterful continuation
of this grand narrative endeavour.

3.2 Ghosts: Pastoral Retreat, Postmodern Return

The pastoral is an ironic form, based on a
perceivable distance between the alleged
and the implied. It lets us know either that
its point of view is significant largely be‐
cause it contrasts with some other point of
view, or that its real subject is something in
addition to (or perhaps even instead of) its
ostensible subject. – Ettin, Literature and the
Pastoral 12

Viewed from a certain angle, these polite ar‐
cadian scenes can seem a riotous bacchanal.
— Ghosts 98

‘I Have Embarked for the Golden World’

If The Book of Evidence is Freddie’s narrative gateway to excommunicative exile,
Ghosts documents his arrival on the other side, at a ‘golden world’ islanded from
the problems of reality. The Book was an exercise in exorcism, to banish the
phantoms of Josie Bell’s murder and its consequences. Freddie’s crime, ulti‐
mately, was “a failure of imagination, a failure to realise that someone other than

1 Ghosts 128
himself was real” (McNamee, “The Human Moment” 70). It is somewhat para-
doxical then, that in Ghosts he uses imagination as a source of power to try and
come to terms with the resulting exile, and the results amount to a ghostwriter’s
dead letters focalised around the fictions of others and their (in)authentic lives:
words doomed to remain in purgatory, neither delivered nor returned.

At first, the narrator of Ghosts is far away from this anti-climactic truth,
however, and for now he continues to write and address his ‘letters.’ The nar-
rative, at least in the beginning, is under his control as he breathes life into any
number of characters: “A little world is coming into being. Who speaks? I do.
Little god” (G 4). Indeed, this “little god” endows his narrative not only with
characters, but also complements it with a seemingly coherent structure. Ghosts
divides into four parts, and Part One sees Freddie on an island off the coast of
Ireland; he has served the ten years of his prison sentence. The island is unspe-
cified and Freddie is never named, though his identity becomes clear when, as
narrator, he recounts a murder that mirrors Josie Bell’s fate in The Book
with ominous accuracy (G 83–87). In all else, Freddie remains as unreliable a narrator
as ever.

On this island Freddie paints a picture of himself as the “amanuensis” to a
Professor Silas Kreutznaer, sharing a house with the art expert and his other
assistant, Licht. He then invents and narrates the arrival on the island of an
altogether disparate group of day-trippers, and goes on to meticulously pen
down their thoughts. Freddie paints their actions with the obsessive brush
strokes typical of a master of the narrative art. He pays particular attention to
a young woman called Flora. All this, Freddie maintains, is but “a fiction that,
for reasons not wholly clear […] it suited [him] to maintain.” Indeed, Part One
takes up almost half of the entire novel, however, and though he asserts assid-
uously that he is simply “playing the part,” (G 33) there is much less that speaks
for such thespian trickery than for the machinations of something far greater,
the pretext of a hidden agenda.

First things first, the island; when the authorities ask Freddie where he would
like to go upon his release, he immediately replies: “Oh, an island, where else?
All I wanted […] was a place of seclusion and tranquillity where I could begin
the long process of readjustment to the world.” There he would also continue
his “studies of a famous painter,” later revealed to be a certain Vaublin, an al-
most-anagram of ‘Banville.’ Islands have a great appeal for Freddie. They give
him “the sense of boundedness […] of being protected from the world – and of
the world being protected from [him]” (G 21). What Freddie is trying to achieve
through the island setting, first and foremost, is a retreat from the self:
And so I had come to this penitential isle [...] seeking not redemption [...] but an accommodation with myself [...] and my poor, swollen conscience. [...] When I arrived I felt at once as if somehow I had come home [...] I was trying to get as far away as possible from everything. [...] I was determined to try to make myself into a – what would you call it? – a monomorph: a monad. [...] And then to start again, empty. [...] I had retreated into solitude [...] I was living in a fantasy world, a world of pictures and painted figures and all the rest of it. (G 22, 25–27)

The island functions as a mythical place where time, reality, and imagination hold sway. It is very much a means of retreat for Freddie, a purgatory penitentiary, a “pilgrimage isle” (G 30) that can offer him “disconnection, an escapism from complexity and contradiction” (Gifford, Pastoral 71). Throughout literature, the island setting has been used as a heterotopia for those stranded on foreign shores of the self. Banville – or Freddie, rather – invokes numerous literary parallels in every part of the narrative. Kreutznaer, for one, is Robinson Crusoe’s ‘original’ name, before it turns into Crusoe “by the usual corruption of words in England” (Defoe, Robinson Crusoe 5). Countless other castaways from literature make an appearance: there is “the Swiss family Robertson” (G 52); at one point Freddie sees himself as “Jim Hawkins” from Treasure Island “off on another adventure” (G 38); at another point the island suddenly mirrors Swift’s Laputa – “I had no desire to realight from Laputa into the land of giants and horses” (G 34). All these references and allusions, to name but a few, come together in an artful amalgamation of mythologies based on a fabulous journey to an island, and Freddie is both painter and curator of the result, “Le monde d’or, [...] one of those timeless images that seem to have been hanging forever in the gallery of the mind” (G 94–5).

Le monde d’or: the island and its colourful assortment of castaways is a setting Banville, or rather his narrator, has constructed in order to ‘speak’ life into a specific painting by a certain Jean Vaublin. Both painter and painting are an invention, it is needless to say, but they are inventions whose historical footprints and provenance are accurately documented in the novel. Freddie bestows on the “long dead and not quite first-rate master” of his monde d’or an eighteenth-century Dutch pedigree whose name oscillates between numerous near-anagrams of Banville: “Faubelin, Vanhoblin, Van Hobelijn” (G 315). In sum, it is no coincidence that the narrator and the painter share elusive identities: “He changed his name, his nationality, everything covering his tracks. I have the impression of a man on the run. There is no early work, no juvenilia, no remnants of his apprenticeship. Suddenly one day he starts to paint. Yes, a manufactured man. Is that what attracts me?” (G 35).
As for the painting, it is described as one of Vaublin’s typical “pélerinages or a delicate fête galante” (G 30), and is ostentatiously modelled on Antoine Watteau’s L’Embarquement pour Cythère (see Appendix Fig. 5 and Fig. 6). The exact translation of the title is still a matter of debate among scholars, though the choices have been narrowed down to a disambiguation between “The Embarcation for Cythera” and “The Embarcation from Cythera,” where both bear significance to Ghosts. Just as Watteau’s paintings can be said to focus on both an imminent departure to and a return from Cythera, so Ghosts, its characters, narrator, and narrative alike, are “poised between sea and sky, suspended,” as if “floating in some heavy, sluggish substance, the Dead Sea of the mind” (G 202, 205). Indeed, the fête galante as a genre is perfectly suited to bring such chance arrangements to the canvas:

The term [fête galante] characterises those gatherings of men and women, usually dressed with studied refinement, who flirt decorously, dance, make music or talk freely, in a landscape or in a sumptuously unreal architectural setting. The shimmering coloured silk of their theatrical clothes [...] raises the question [...] who are these figures, and who are they supposed to represent? (Roland, Watteau 171)

In sum, Ghosts is the narrative emplotment of the fête galante. Freddie uses Cythera, the mythical birthplace of Aphrodite, as a typical Arcadian setting to evoke the genre’s “sumptuously unreal” sense of suspension. Already at the shipwreck, one of the castaways lets fly the curse “Cythera, my foot” (G 3), and this very imprecation returns at regular intervals throughout the novel, almost like a leitmotif (G 3, 31, 221). Where the painting acknowledges the fête galante as an escapist activity, then, Part One of narrative celebrates pastoral poetry as escapist literature. Its mesmerising monologues drift back and forth, between
past and present, and between the various characters. Part One is a medley of exquisitely descriptive writing, peppered with beautifully rendered cameos that capture Freddie’s intense, distracted gaze upon this odd texture of people and landscape. There is a sense that neither the narrator nor Banville are under any pressure to advance the plot, placing each brush stroke with careful contentment, willed to prolong the escape for as long as possible.

For all this celebration of escapism, crucial questions remain: does the “penitential isle” truly offer a delightful escape? Does the ‘golden world’ lead Freddie closer to wish-fulfilment, or does it take him further away from authenticity, even leave him more astray and in more doubt than before? Freddie’s wish is to enact in the idyllic life on the island a pastoral retreat from the problems and sophistications of ethics and society; he would, at least in Part One of Ghosts, concur with Alexander Pope’s observation that “Pastoral is an image of what they call the Golden Age. [...] We must therefore use some illusion to render a Pastoral delightful” (Pope, “Pastorals” 25–27). He would also gladly accept Terry Gifford’s reading of pastoral as “the historiography of wish-fulfilment,” whence the latter itself must be “an illusion,” since it is born from a fabricated aesthetic convention or mode (Pastoral 41–2). Wittgenstein conversely argues that “ethics and aesthetics are one and the same” (Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus 6.421), and Freddie would agree with this equivalency too. Amidst this purgatory of verisimilitudes and doubt, Le monde d’or epitomizes Freddie’s endeavour to assuage ethics with aesthetics, to transform such and similar convolutions into lesser matters, but with more art. And the island with its many pastoral fictions, he is convinced, can help him in this “process of putting the complex into the simple” (Empson, Some Versions of Pastoral 23). The result is an obsessive and incurably solipsistic search for a satisfactory aesthetic.

Yet the painting also holds an uncanny significance for Freddie: “Even in Le monde d’or, apparently so chaste, so ethereal, a certain hectic air of expectancy bespeaks excesses remembered or to come” (G 95). Freddie sees the painting as darkest pastoral and not merely as a fête galante to be taken at face value: “the blonde woman walking away on the arm of the old man – who himself has the touch of the roué – wears a wearily knowing air, while the two boys, those pallid, slightly ravaged putti, seem to have seen more things than they should” (G 96). This is a bucolic scene under threat, an image of innocence waiting for disaster to strike; amidst the eschewal of reality, Freddie senses a latent violence that overshadows his golden world: “Even the little girl with the braided hair who leads the lady by the hand has the aura of a fledgling Justine or Juliette, a potential victim in whom old men might repose dark dreams of tender abuse” (G 96). Freddie’s Cythera thus becomes an amalgam of the idyllic and the demonic.
It is at once Aphrodite’s island of love and Aeaea, Circe’s island of dark magic and transformation (G 7). The narrative achieves its mastery in the way Banville’s narrator keeps oscillating between these two mythical images of darkness and of light.

‘That Particular Shade of Green’

The collusion of dreams and demons is not simply another means of escape and eschewal, because it offers Freddie a much-needed mode of exploration. Through the island, its characters and its setting in the hortus conclusus of the ‘golden world,’ moreover, Freddie “is trying to find ground to stand on. He’s in purgatory, and he’s trying to find a solid corner in it” (Schwall, “An Interview with John Banville” 14). His endeavour to find such firm “ground” becomes most evident as the ‘visitors’ are about to leave the island. Assuming the role of a melancholy Jacques mourning their departure, Freddie pays homage to the shepherd, the defining character of stock-pastoral poetry: “If the others had stayed [...] they might have become a little community, might have formed a little fold, and I could have been the shepherd guarding them against the prowling wolf” (G 92). Naturally, just as the reader recognises that the pastoral landscape is an Arcadia because its language is idealised, Freddie is also very aware of the interdependency that reigns supreme over his narrative, the characters, and the idyll he constructs for its telling: “I know that the reality they inhabit is different from mine. [...] They are only flies after all, and I am only I. [...] They might be a host of shining seraphim come to comfort me” (G 97).

At the side of the house Freddie discovers “the remains of what must once have been a kitchen garden” (G 98). It is in the cultivation and rejuvenation of this new-found-land of “good black soil” that Freddie begins to see a means of resolving the problem of reality and representation that has, ever since the murder of Josie Bell, both defined and perplexed his schizoid sense of identity. The first seeds are sown by Freddie’s favourite thinker, Nietzsche, whom he quotes profusely: “Hard beside the woe of the world, and often upon its volcanic soil, man has laid out his little garden of happiness” (Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human* 90 qtd. in *Ghosts* 97). Freddie is all too eager to paint himself in the image of this “man” who first braves to break ground in a “garden of happiness” to call his own and as juxtaposed to the world of woe: “Yes, you have guessed it, I have taken up gardening, even in the shadow of my ruins” (G 97).

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3 *Ghosts* 178.
The act of gardening is not only “a relaxation from the rigours of scholarship” for Freddie. It is much “more than that. Out there among these greens, in this clement weather, the irresistible sensation of being in touch with something, some authentic, fundamental thing, to which a part of me I had thought atrophied responds as if to a healing and invigorating balm” (G 97). The garden to Freddie is the first and the most ‘natural’ stepping stone towards atonement and “proper restitution” for his crimes. He seeks solace in the fecundity of nature, to unite the seemingly irreconcilable elements that shape his contradictory character into a reincarnated, innocent self: “Perhaps I shall make a little statue of myself and grind it up and mix it with the clay, as the philosopher so charmingly recommends, and that way come to live again through these growing things” (G 97).

Nature, as discussed previously, is Nietzsche’s map of morality and sin, and Freddie’s “little garden of happiness” epitomises the philosopher’s vision of the (de)centred imagination, where humankind lives both in harmony with nature and through nature is also given the ability to recognise and appreciate things other than itself. By virtue of the garden, “choked with weeds and scutch grass,” Freddie recognises his self in the other. He has developed a “great fondness for the stunted things, the runts, the ones that fail to flower and yet refuse to die” (G 98). Moreover, Freddie sees himself as both the source and enabler of their valiance and tenacity:

[I]t is because of me that they cling on […] simply my presence gives them heart somehow, and makes them live. Who or what would there be to notice their struggles if I did not come out and walk among them every day? […] I am the agent of individuation: in me they find their singularity. I painted them in neat rows, just so, and gave each one its space; without me only the madness of mere growth. (G 98)

At this point, however, the attentive reader will not be convinced so easily of Freddie’s renewed sense of agency. The passage ostentatiously reminds us that this is Freddie at his most narcissistic. Not nature is in need of his presence and recognition, but vice versa. Only a little earlier Freddie is repeatedly struck by nature’s indifference: “Nothing surprises nature; terrible deeds, the most appalling crimes, leave the world unmoved, as I can attest.” But, unlike most others, who “find this uncanny” and are “raging for a response,” Freddie “take[s] comfort from this universal dispassion” (G 65). Why then, should nature suddenly have regard for or have become dependent on him? On the contrary, he is very impressed by nature’s disregard for human concerns and reciprocates with an equivocally casual fascination for natural phenomena: “Life, growth, this tender green fighting its way up through the dirt, that’s all that interests me” (G 98).
The weeds exercise a particular fascination on him: “And then there are the weeds; I know that if I were a real gardener, I would do merciless and unrelenting battle against weeds, but the fact is, I cherish them” (G 99). They are, for the present, his greatest source of reification, they are his “agent[s] of individuation”:

I wonder if they feel pain, experience terror, if they weep and bleed, in their damp, vermiculate world, just as we do, up here in the light? I look at the little sprigs of chickweed trembling among the bean shoots and I am strangely moved. Such steadfastness, such yearning. They want to live too. That is all they ask: to have their little moment in the world. (G 99)

The personification of the garden illustrates Freddie’s desire to live out, by means of a kind of symbiosis with nature’s humanoid idiosyncrasies, precisely that “moment of drama” he is denied in The Book of Evidence. It is “what [one] might call a pathetic fallacy, all right” (G 66). The garden functions as an Arcadian, escapist (re)construction of nature and it represents a poignant attempt on Freddie’s part to satisfy his imaginative desire to humanise the world: “that’s me always, hungering after other worlds [...] so that I can fill them up, I suppose, with my imaginings” (G 75). Furthermore, these are Freddie’s first earnest steps towards atonement for his crimes, whereby, as if for the first time, the reader should see him in a state of prelapsarian innocence. This image is reinforced by nostalgic references to a pastoral past basking in the “immemorial happiness” of childhood:

All this, the garden and so on, why does it remind me so strongly of boyhood days? God knows, I was never a tow-haired child of nature, ensnared with flowers and romping on the grass. [...] Yet when I trail out here with my hoe I feel the chime of an immemorial happiness. Is it that the past has become pastoral, as much a fancy as in my mind this garden is, perpetually vernal, aglow with a stylised, prelapsarian sunlight such as that which shines with melancholy radiance over Vaublin’s pleasure parks? That is what I am digging for, I suppose, that is what I am trying to uncover: the forfeited, impossible, never to be found again state of simple innocence. (G 100)

Above all else, perhaps, Ghosts is a latter-day pastoral constructed by a narrator-creator in search of atonement. As such, Freddie sees in the narrative realization of Le monde d’or a means of reviving Josie Bell, by virtue of his imaginative powers: “What form would such atonement take that would turn back time and bring the dead to life?” (G 68). At the same time Freddie is convinced – and goes to great lengths to persuade the reader – of a “genetic” disability to relate to women, both real and imagined. In an episode before the castaways
arrive, he indulges in a brief relationship with a Dutch widow living a hermit’s life on the island, Mrs Vanden. Her sudden death brutally throws his own confused issues of gender and identity into sharp relief:

A sort of lust for knowledge, the passionate desire to delve my way into womanhood and taste the very temper of its being. Dangerous talk, I know. Well, go ahead, misunderstand me, I don’t care. Perhaps I have always wanted to be a woman, perhaps that’s it. If so, I have reached the halfway stage, unsexed, poor androgyne that I am become by now. (G 69–70)

Amidst Freddie’s ragtag collection of shipwreck survivors the reader finds Flora – Banville’s choice of names is never a coincidence and always significant – a languorous girl-like figure, the archetype of feminine vulnerability. Just as the plants of his “kitchen garden” allowed Freddie to bask in the glow of verbal architectonics and the linguistic landscapes of Arcadian innocence, Flora is Freddie’s avatar of “atonement” (G 91). She is the key to his revival of Josie Bell: “in my imaginings I can clearly see this cleansed new creature streaming up out of myself like a proselyte rising drenched from the baptismal river amid glad cries” (G 69).

Freddie’s relation to Flora is particularly suited to a Lacanian reading. Any individual’s “entry into language,” according to Jacques Lacan, is “the precondition for becoming conscious” (Lacan, “The Mirror Stage” 4). Flora, in a similar vein, is Freddie’s pretext for becoming conscious of human beings and realities other than those he fabricates within his fictions and his imagination: “And somehow by being suddenly herself like this she made the things around her be there too. In her, and what she spoke, the world [...] found its grounding and was realised” (G 147). Towards the end of Part One Freddie reiterates that Flora’s arrival has somehow aided him to see and perceive his surroundings with an intimacy and immediacy previously lacking in his consciousness:

No longer Our Lady of the Enigmas, but a girl, just a girl. And as she talked I found myself looking at her and seeing her as if for the first time, not as a gathering of details, but all of a piece, solid and singular, and amazing. No, not amazing. That is the point. She was simply there, an incarnation of herself, no longer a nexus of adjectives, but pure and present noun. (G 147)

Flora, as the name suggests, is Freddie’s “kitchen garden” Arcadia in human form. Her ‘entry’ into his language has rekindled in him a new sense of identification. It is through her words that his observing self is suddenly liberated from its own intellectual conditioning and makes its first steps toward a new-found appreciation for the reality of woman. The impact of this epiphany
is monumental, especially when contrasted with Freddie’s perception of “wom‐
anhood” in The Book of Evidence: “She. There is no she, of course. There is only an organisation of shapes and colours. Yet I try to make up a life for her” (BoE 105). Flora not only introduces Montgomery to the reality of said womanhood, but to reality as a human experience per se. Previously, Freddie’s fictions functioned as an eschewal of moral culpability and the causal realities brought about by the murder of Josie Bell. His narrative emplotment of the seven shipwrecked survivors was little more than an intellectual exercise in escapism. Flora, in the beginning, was to him but a vessel for his narrative self, reborn in a prelapsarian state of innocence:

It was innocence I was after […] the innocent, pure clay awaiting a grizzled Pygmalion to inspire it with life. It is as simple as that. Not love or passion, not even the notion of the radiant self rising up like flame in the mirror of the other, but the hunger only to have her live and to live in her, to conjugate in her the verb of being. (G 70)

Flora has become Freddie’s new “agent of individuation.” She has transformed his language itself into an Arcadia of new possibilities. The ‘linguistic garden’ that he once solely cultivated as a narrative emplacement of his self is no longer a mere means of escape, but has become a viable vehicle for the exploration of previously unchartered realities. Where Freddie previously used his imaginative prowess to exorcise the ghosts of his past, he is suddenly confronted with a pristine “verb of being” that can offer a re-reading – and thus inherently also a re-writing – of these fictions. And as his ‘reading’ of Flora changes, so his ‘writ‐
ing’ of the castaways develops. The Freddie of Parts Two and Three of the novel is not only a “little god,” a Prospero whose authorial magic has brought about this tempestuous narrative and its signature shipwreck so that he may people the island he himself created: it is Freddie the Caliban. Having successfully en‐
tered into language, he now wishes to be acknowledged as part of the golden world, and not just to remain “this thing of darkness” washed up on the foreign shores of the self.

**Freddie’s Ghosts of Focalisation and Fiction**

The beauty of the golden world is neither in the brush of the painter nor in the pen of the author. It is in the eye of the beholder and in the point of view of the narrator. Freddie is that narrator and, like Prospero, he has unleashed a narra‐
torial tempest that shipwrecks a band of castaways in search of an innocent ‘agent of individuation’ and atonement. On the one hand, his greatest source of power is his ability to stand apart from this “lambent, salt-washed world” (G 8),
and whence to behold the island in the golden, calm eye of the storm. His greatest weakness, on the other hand, is at the same time his desire to be a part of this world as a Caliban who, upon successful entry into this islanded hortus, hungers after other ‘adjectives’ and ‘verbs of being.’ In sum, Freddie sets sail for a pastoral sojourn in order “to begin the long process of readjustment to the world,” but upon return from this island of “survivors” he may very well find himself once again shipwrecked “on the pale margin” (G 20) of the inauthentic self.

Ghosts, as indeed most of Banville’s novels, oscillates between modernist and postmodernist concerns. In a seemingly fragmented and chaotic world, the modernist author tries to impose meaning and order. Thus, the modernist puts all faith in the power of words, whereby new, experimental and original modes of expression forge connections with reality:

[T]o cite the canonical metaphor, the imagination ceases to function as a mirror reflecting some external reality and becomes a lamp which projects its own internally generated light onto things. As a consequence of this momentous reversal of roles, meaning is no longer primarily considered as a transcendent property of divine being; it is now hailed as a transcendental product of the human mind. (Kearney, The Wake of Imagination 155)

Where the modernist artist believes the world can be said in words, Freddie Montgomery loses himself in self-indulgent whorls of wordiness. Yet, this is not for a lack of faith in his imagination or polished expressions – “I can imagine anything” (G 31) – but for his propensity to immediately parody all efforts of “readjustment” as if filtered through a postmodern looking glass: “Childe Someone to the dark tower came” (G 116). Or, as Richard Kearney puts more precisely, the postmodernist imagination is characterised by

an interplay between multiple looking glasses which reflect each other interminably. The postmodern paradigm is, in other words, that of a labyrinth of mirrors which extend infinitely in all directions a labyrinth where the image of the self (as presence to itself) dissolves into self-parody. (Kearney, The Wake of Imagination 252)

Order and meaning are elbowed aside with a flippant shrug of the shoulder, for all is but a “mirroring which mirrors nothing but the act of mirroring” (Kearney, The Wake of Imagination 254–5). While Banville’s writing openly flirts with postmodern techniques and tendencies, it is more fruitful to consider his novels, and Ghosts in particular, as pendular; they swing back and forth between several recurring grand narratives and other metafictional, anti-hierarchical and cynical moods.
To put it differently, there is a “deep sense of critical sympathy in Banville for those […] who dreamed of metanarratives and unifying visions” (McMinn, *John Banville* 7), and Freddie Montgomery epitomises this oscillatory, post-/modernist stance like no other. The entire *Book of Evidence* as well as the first two Parts of *Ghosts* are dominated by Freddie’s desperate search for a grand narrative identity that can assuage ethics with aesthetics and thereby comfort his schizoid, “bifurcate” sense of identity – be it in the form of Diderot on acting, Nietzsche’s map of morality and sin in Nature, Watteau’s *fête galante*, or the pastoral retreat. In sum, though “[t]here may no longer be any hope of a convincing master narrative,” Freddie, as most other Banville characters, certainly wishes there were (McMinn, *John Banville* 8).

At the same time, however, Freddie cannot help but make a (meta-)fictional virtue of his narrative retreat. In *Ghosts*, ascents of pastoral prosody quickly match descants of postmodern parody. There is method to Freddie’s madness, nonetheless: the first section’s pastoral sojourn in search of a grand narrative of redemption and a stable self-identity is systematically deconstructed by a return to postmodern unreliability, disenchantment, and disingenuousness. The journey to the island in Part Two illustrates the complex antagonistic dynamics of the pastoral sojourn and the postmodern return that permeate the entire novel. Indeed, most of the elements Banville and his narrator use to construct their islanded Arcadia now parry with their postmodernist counterparts.

The journey to the coast, to start at the beginning, becomes an “Anabasis” (*G* 124), a march from a coast into the interior – as that of the younger Cyrus into Asia in 401 BC, as narrated by Xenophon in his work *Anabasis* (*OED online*). Freddie at first tries to construct a narrative medley of pastoral song that pays homage to similar musical allusions as they appear in *The Tempest*: “He heard the music the island makes, the deep song rising out of the earth, and thought he must be imagining it” (*G* 124). Literally, anabasis means ascent, whence the postmodern circle closes in a return to a point of origin that is invariably deconstructed: “It is […] the performance of my life, a masterpiece of dissembling” (*G* 123).

Everything experiences re-reading and reinterpretation. The coast is abandoned in order to explore the island interior. Even the island itself suddenly is “not like an island at all,” but “more like a bit of mainland that has recently come adrift” (*G* 124). Freddie falls prey to the quicksands of his own “vivid fictions” (*G* 150). In the beginning there is hope to regain innocence, and this hope is nourished by his narcissistic imagination: “I have a gratifying sense of myself as a sentinel, a guardian, a protector against that prowler, my dark other” (*G* 34). In similarly self-conscious, mythical terms Freddie – at the beginning of Part
Two — recalls “that trip south” from Dublin “as a sort of epic journey” where he sees himself as “Odysseus, homeless now, setting out once more, a last time, from Ithaca” (G 188). What was previously a “big, old rain-stained statue of one of the Caesars” (G 11) is now replaced by an itinerant Ulysses, who on a last journey has embarked not to but from his ‘golden world.’ A self-dramatised, mock-epic narrative of the hero’s return follows, “complete with a loyal companion, fears of domestic betrayal, a mute reunion with a long-forgotten son, and the final humiliation of seeing his ancestral home abandoned by the faithless wife” (McMinn, John Banville 121).

Part Two of Ghosts continues the motif of the journey, but it precedes the stranding of the seven voyagers with the story that first took Freddie to the island. On this epic journey Montgomery decides to detour to his former home, where, he informs Billy (a concomitant and another ex-convict) his wife still lives. The landscape and the house epitomise what one might call the archetypal architectonics of nostalgia, where Freddie re-enters his past:

Dreamily I advanced, admiring the sea-green moss on the door of the disused privy, the lilac tumbling over its rusted tin roof. A breeze swooped down and a thrush whistled its brief, thick song. I paused, light-headed and blinking. At last the luminous air, the bird’s song, that particular shade of green, all combined to succeed in transporting me back for a moment to the far, lost past, to some rain-washed, silvery-grey morning like this one, forgotten but still somehow felt, and I stood for a moment in inexplicable rapture, my face lifted to the light, and felt a sort of breathlessness, an inward stag‐
gering, as if an enormous, airy weight had been dropped into my arms. (G 178)

Freddie does not want to enter the house at first. Indeed, he “was turning to go, more relieved […] than anything else, when […] in a sudden swoon of anger, or proprietary resentment,” he breaks the “panes of frosted glass in the door” and steps inside:

I shut the door behind me and stood and took another deep breath, like a diver poised on the springboard’s thrumming tip. The furniture hung about pretending not to look at me. Stillness lay like a dust sheet over everything. There was no one at home, I could sense it. I walked here and there, my footsteps falling without sound. I had a strange sensation in my ears, a sort of fullness, as if I were in a vessel fathoms deep with the weight of the ocean pressing all around me. The objects that I looked at seemed insulated, as if they had been painted with a protective coating of some invisible stuff, cool and thick and smooth as enamel, and when I touched them I could not seem to feel them. I thought of being here, a solemn little boy in a grubby jersey, crop-headed, frowning, with inky fingers and defenceless, translucent pink ears, sit-
ting at this table hunched over my homework on a winter evening and dreaming of the future. Can I really ever have been thus? Can that child be me? (G 180)

Thus, the detour to his former home quickly develops into a stand-alone, narrative enactment of the pastoral sojourn and its return to a postmodern purgatory of uncertainty and disillusionment. First, Freddie embarks on a journey south in search of “a place where the dead have not died, and [he is] innocent” (G 173). The narrative is studded with digressions to many an idyll where “the grass [is] green as it only can be in memory” (G 211); the sum of these diversions then translates into an overwhelming impulse to act out the nostos, the return to where he feels he used to be, and whence to unify a childhood past with the predicaments of the present and that future state of innocence so ardently desired. But the process of self-reification within a pastoral of nostalgia is doomed to fail from the outset, as this is a ‘mock-epic,’ where all attempts at being “honest” provoke only “general hoots of merriment and rich scorn” (G 27). Here we encounter the pastoral at its most postmodern, for the mode “may easily be parodied, but it equally returns the charge upon the parodist, co-occupying with comedy itself the status of a genre that is at the same time an everyday, multifarious aspect of ourselves” (James “Introduction: Reenvisioning Pastoral” 15).

In this sense, Freddie ‘embarks upon the golden world’ and paints a pastoral scenography as a source for inversion, satiric adaptation and, to some extent, sardonic transposition.

Freddie’s feverish, manic musing within the memoirs of his former home is suddenly interrupted by his son, Vanderveld. Handicapped, mute, and mentally challenged, Vanderveld has retained that very innocence the father is so desperately trying to regain: “he is perfectly at peace, locked away inside himself. I picture a far, white country, everything blurred and flat under a bleached sky” (G 183). The son’s ghostly delicacy at once enthrals and terrifies the father: “I used to picture us someday in the far future strolling together down a dappled street in the south somewhere[. ...] But while I had my face turned away, dreaming of that or some other, equally fatuous idyll, the Erl King got him” (G 186). Vanderveld’s difficulties to interact with the world around him remind Freddie of his own failure to make an impression on his own surroundings, even those of his past: “I could make no impression. Everything gave before me like smoke. What was I looking for anyway?” (G 186). Disappointed and frustrated, he turns away from his son in an attempt to abandon memory itself; “all [his] ghosts are gathering here,” and he cannot handle it, for he has “met Death upon the road,” (183) in the form of the son he once had, who died long ago, and who now returns as a phantom reminder of Poussin’s haunting epitaph: *Et in Arcadia Ego*. 
Yet ghosts, like the beauty of the ‘golden world,’ can only become fully present in the eye of the beholder. Freddie’s narrative, similarly, is not truly concerned with the lives of the castaways, but with the position of the narrator in relation to his narrative, or rather, with the perspective of the painter in relation to his painting: “the centre of a painting […] is never where it should be, is never central, or obviously significant, but could be a patch of sky, the fold of a gown, a dog scratching its ear, anything” (G 127). At first Freddie promises to be the master narrator of “a little world” as he attempts to convince the reader to follow his own focalisations. But as the novel unfolds it keeps falling short of these grandiloquent expectations. Instead, Freddie holds the reader sway, between the expected viva activa of “a little world coming into being” and the viva contemplativa that bespeaks the Arcadian “scenes suffused with tenderness and melancholy” (G 95). The “characters themselves remain curiously passive throughout”; what is instead always active is “the creative imagination of the narrator […] who animates all about him” (Hand, John Banville 147).

Freddie, moreover, is constantly shifting the focus of his inquiries. One moment he is musing over the ordered, secluded charm of the urban hortus conclusus – “What is it about these tidy estates, these little parks and shopping malls, that speaks so eloquently to us? What is still living there that in us is dead?” (G 165). The next moment he questions the authenticity and the innocence of his creations:

Where do they come from, these sudden phantoms that stride unbidden into my unguarded thoughts, pushy and smug and scattering cigarette ash on the carpet, as if they owned the place? Invented in the idle play of the mind, they can suddenly turn treacherous, can rear up in a flash and give a nasty bite to the hand that fashioned them. (G 168)

All is a matter of perspective and perception, a question of focalisation and fiction, and Freddie is the ghost(writer) who mediates between the “multiple worlds” (G 172) thus created: “Am I the ghost at their banquet, sucking up a little of their life to warm myself? [… W]hen I look into that mirror I see no reflection. I am there and not there” (G 169–70). From one point of view, then, the narrator has “embarked for the golden world,” from another he finds himself “down here in the underworld” (G 128, 96–97). The island imagery oscillates in equal measure between Cythera and Aeaea, between presence and absence, and between innocence and “concupiscence.” Indeed, as Freddie remarks in a sweeping, preemptively conclusive statement, when “[v]iewed from a certain angle, these polite arcadian scenes can seem a riotous bacchanal” (G 95). This in turn may be read as an allusion to Poussin’s Bacchanalia, which depicts arcadia’s transi-
tion from bucolic innocence to a celebration of concupiscence (see Appendix, Fig. 7 and Fig. 8).

It is perhaps all too fitting that Freddie’s constant shift of perspective finds both climax and anti-climax in Le monde d’or, the painting that holds the entire novel together. For until we get to Part Three, Freddie’s narrative can be described as an act of artistic gymnastics, taking the reader across a string of lies and fantasies tied between the painting’s focal point and its vanishing point. The story’s climax and attendant promise of revelation presents itself in this third, very brief section of the novel; Freddie describes the painting in excessive detail, summarising all that he has hitherto ‘researched.’ In his description the narrator offers himself up to the painting in a loving yet troubled gaze; more accurately, his point of view moves between the constructed objectivity of a catalogue entry and the deconstructive subjectivity of pastoral fictions and fantasies as elicited by the work itself. The result is a reproduction of Watteau’s Pierrot, dit autrefois Giles (see Appendix, Fig. 9) as superimposed upon the two versions of the same artist’s Embarcation to/from Cythera.

Freddie, dit autrefois Pierrot, now “stands before us like our own reflection distorted in a mirror, known yet strange. [...] Has he dropped from the sky or risen from the underworld? We have the sense of a mournful apotheosis” (G 225). And like Montgomery, that “child among adults” (BoE 16), Pierrot “is the childish man, the mannish child.” Certain details that are absent in Watteau, moreover, have been added to Le monde d’or. First, Freddie notes, “the X-rays show beneath his face another face which may be that of a woman.” Second, “he does not usually carry a club; in this instance, he does” (G 226). These two distinctive elements add to the already numerous ghostly links between the narrator’s narcissistic point of view and his violent past (McMinn, John Banville 123).

Finally, Part Three returns to a question crucial to the entire novel, a question that brings together the mock-epic and the pastoral elements of Freddie’s narrative golden world: “Is this a calculated irony, a mocking gesture towards our feeble notions of pastoral?” For this is “the Golden World, or the last of it” (G 229). It is “the eye of Nature itself, gazing out at us in a kind of stoic wonderment.” Like Freddie the narrator of Ghosts, this is where Watteau, dit autrefois Vaublin, has gathered his little group and set them down in this wind-tossed glade, in this delicate, artificial light, and painted them as angels and as clowns. It is a world where nothing is lost, where all is accounted for while yet the mystery of things is preserved; a world where they may live, however briefly, however tenuously, in the failing evening of the self, solitary and at the same time together somehow here in this place, dying as they may be and yet fixed forever in a luminous, unending instant. (G 231)
Ghosts is a philosophical inquiry into the art of perspective and, vice versa, a celebration of the multiple perspectives of art. Curiosity is the catalyst of an entire novel in which

[n]othing happens, nothing will happen, yet everything is poised, waiting. [...] This is what holds it together, this sense of expectancy, like a spring tensed in mid-air and sustained by its own force, exerting equal force everywhere. And I, I am there and not there: I am the pretext of things. [...] Without me there would be no moment, no separable event, only the brute, blind drift of things. (G 40)

In a last defiant attempt at self-reification, Freddie concludes: “What happens does not matter; the moment is all. This is the golden world” (G 231). Yet the fact is that “the painting is a fake[.] Yes, more of gilt in it than gold,” and Freddie too is no more than an effigy burning up with guilt, a ghost left in purgatory, haunted by his own imaginings. His overwhelming sense of alienation still remains, even after attempting to tell his story through the characters he creates. All in all, his imagination, the source of his power, fails him. At best it can conjure up no more than an androgynous “homo verus of myth and legend” (G 124).

Finally, Ghosts paints in words the pastoral pilgrimage of a man who as a “Childe Someone to the dark tower came” (G 104) because “he felt more than ever like the hero in a tale of chivalry commanded to perform a task of rescue and reconciliation” (G 240). But his quest has led him to the “Château d’If” (G 75) of postmodern doubt, where he now resides and dines every day at a “banquet” of “ghosts and absences.” There his imagination is left “hungering after other worlds” (G 169, 75), and though his “writing is almost done,” and “Vaublin shall live!” (G 245) there can be no return for him. Ultimately, “language is not commodious enough to encompass the notion of a return” (G 212). All that remains is to ask: “Which is better, ignorance or enlightenment?” (G 243). And, as so often with rhetorical questions, the query itself pre-empts all possible answers.
3.3 Art, Arcadia and *Athena*

[T]he future was no more than a replay of the past; a long suspended moment of stillness and circularity between the rackety end of the classical world and the first, fevered thrashings of the so-called Renaissance. I picture a kind of darksome northern Arcady, thick-forested, befogged and silent, lost in the glimmering, frost-bound deeps of immemorial night. – *Athena* 80

A Search for Authenticity

Freddie Montgomery is a cultured killer in search of an ethics of authenticity with which to find “[a]tonement. Redemption. That kind of thing” (*Athena* 67). In *The Book of Evidence*, Banville’s anti-hero shows us not only that he can think, but also that he can speak – “by golly, how he can speak”; in *Ghosts*, he shows us that he can write and imagine too, “but what is gone is coherence. Meaning has fallen out of [Freddie’s] life like the bottom falling out of a bucket” (Banville, “‘Thou Shalt Not Kill’” 136–7). Crucially, Freddie himself comes to this conclusion already in the beginning of *The Book of Evidence*:

A washed-blue dawn was breaking in Madrid. I stopped outside the station and watched a flock of birds wheeling and tumbling at an immense height, and, the strangest thing, a gust of euphoria, or something like euphoria, swept through me, making me tremble, and bringing tears to my eyes. It was from lack of sleep, I suppose, and the effect of the high thin air [...] I was at a turning point, you will tell me, just there the future forked for me and I took the wrong path without noticing – that’s what you’ll tell me, isn’t it, you who must have meaning in everything, who lust after meaning, your palms sticky and your faces on fire! But calm, Frederick, calm. Forgive me this outburst, your honour. It is just that I do not believe such moments mean anything – or any moments, for that matter. They have significance, apparently. They may even have value of some sort. But they do not mean anything. (*BoE* 23–24)

In the ‘Frames’ trilogy, Montgomery invites the reader to witness, through three self-involved narratives, his attempts at confession, atonement and re-identification, respectively. Solipsistic sojourns of the imagination, carried out within each narrative and characterized by the dynamic of retreat and return, become the constructs of this protracted process, yet in each novel they are shaped with
(un)conscious alterations on the part of the narrator, though their purpose remains the same: first, as a means of escape into the excommunicative exile of a confessional, if fictional narrative, then as a means of exploration and as an attempt to bring back to life the *Ghosts* of his past, and lastly, and perhaps most selfishly, for the sake of reincarnation in art and fiction. The resulting narrative, *Athena*, thus becomes Banville’s third foray into Freddie’s mind and imagination, a third attempt at a story that “never really ends, but simply enters another fictional landscape, one in which he is condemned, yet again, like Coleridge’s Ancient Mariner, to relive and retell his ghostly tale” (McMinn, *John Banville: A Critical Study* 129).

Unlike *The Book of Evidence* or *Ghosts*, both novels mired in the past, *Athena*’s narrative thrust is forward, towards “intimation[s] of the future” (*A* 178). Here is the old Freddie with a new identity: “Morrow: yes, that is my name, now. [...] I chose it for its faintly hopeful hint of futurity, and, of course, the Wellsian echo” (*A* 7). This time, Freddie is enlisted by Morden, a shady character who is part of a gang trading in stolen artworks, to authenticate a series of eight paintings. Almost simultaneously, and suspiciously, he falls in love with a woman on the street, a woman he henceforth refers to as A. *Athena*, accordingly, becomes a “love letter to a woman who is no more than a letter herself, no more than an indefinite article” (Thomson, “Powers of Misrecognition” 238). Indeed, the letter itself is “not even the initial of her name,” but Freddie chooses it because “of all the ways it can be uttered, from an exclamation of surprise to a moan of pleasure or of pure pain. It will be different every time I say it” (*A* 48).

Montgomery is undoubtedly seduced by the many erudite implications the letter A carries, as it (and by extension the woman) may embody the divine Athena or Aphrodite, and it may personify art, or simply language itself. Interestingly, her signifier also corresponds to the *petit objet a* Derrida writes of when he formulates the non-concept of *différance*, from which he puts forward that the structure of language, and identities within language, becomes apparent. This *différance*, for Derrida, is unheard, silent, and although his own neologism can make it visible, it cannot be willed into existence; the *petit objet a* is Derrida’s epitome of a present absence, an always already elsewhere: “The a of différance, thus, is not heard; it remains silent, secret and discreet as a tomb” (*Margins of Philosophy* 4).

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4 The plot is based somewhat on an art robbery that occurred in Ireland around 1986, “when a criminal gang stole eleven paintings from the collection of Sir Alfred Beit, at his home in Russborough House, near Blessington in County Wicklow” (McMinn, *John Banville: A Critical Study* 130).
Two such “tomb-like” (A 2) rooms exist in *Athena*: the room in which Freddie works to authenticate the paintings, and the aesthetic space that is his own imagination, his own private Arcadia of the mind, in which, the *petit objet a* rings true as an *Et in Arcadia Ego*, the “discreet” tomb of the possibilities he celebrates through A: “[W]hat a thing we made there in that secret white room at the heart of the old house, what a marvellous edifice we erected. For this is what I see, you and me [...] labouring wordlessly to fashion our private temple to the twin gods watching over us” (A 2). Freddie goes so far as to suggest he *should* view A. as a sign without a referent: “there is no real she, only a set of signs, a series of appearances, a grid of relations between swarming particles” (A 97). Thus A. might be viewed as an analogy for the postmodern idea of being without essence and identity, an anomaly amid an infinitely intricate world of signs and signifiers. Nonetheless, Freddie resists this view, certain that he sees an essential being during their love-making, that “she was there at those times, it was she who clutched me to her and cried out” (A 97). It thus becomes painfully clear that Freddie’s search for A. masks his search for authenticity. *Athena* becomes Morrow’s love-letter to his earlier fictional self, and writing this letter is his way of resurrecting and preserving his fantasy about A., and all she may signify, albeit without a referent.

Additionally, the surreptitious fantasy of A. is presented in the form of the ekphrases Freddie writes of the paintings he studies and means to authenticate. Here the astute reader will notice Banville’s carefully crafted final irony of Freddie’s interpretive efforts when the seven paintings he examined turn out to be fakes, but an eighth painting he did not, *The Birth of Athena*, proves to be authentic. When Mr Sharpe, “[a] second opinion” from England at first declares “They are all copies [...] Every one of them,” Freddie is shocked into utter silence: “There was a beat of stillness, as if everything everywhere had halted suddenly and then slowly, painfully, started up again” (A 208). Sharpe further adds insult to injury when he glances over at Morrow in a “sly, almost flirtatious”

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5 Ekphrasis was first learned as a tool of rhetoric and then became a skilled way of describing art and other aesthetic objects. Using ekphrasis successfully was a means of demonstrating scholastic or authorial prowess, and eventually ekphrasis became “an art that described art” (Welsh, *Ekphrasis* 1). Ekphrasis occupies a curious place between the realms of the visual and the linguistic. As Peter Wagner writes in his *Icons-Text-Icon‐texts: Essays on Ekphrasis and Intermediary*, “Ekphrasis, then, has a Janus face: as a form of mimesis, it stages a paradoxical performance, promising to give voice to the allegedly silent image even while attempting to overcome the power of the image by transforming and inscribing it” (Wagner 13). Despite all of the changes the word has undergone and no matter the argument making use of the term, the apparent conflict between image and word is central to the concept (Welsh, *Ekphrasis* 1).
manner, only to declare: “I cannot imagine how anyone could have mistaken such daubs for the real thing.” It comes as no surprise, however, that “[t]here had been an odd, unidentifiably familiar ring to Sharpe’s announcement; it was like news so long awaited that when it came at last it was no longer news” (A 209).

Ultimately, *Athena* is itself a finely crafted work of *faux art*; Banville has infused the narrative, at the level of plot, character as well as underlying themes and motifs, with a postmodernist quest for authenticity. The mastermind behind the entire art heist, known as “the Da,” for example, uses the seven fake paintings to smuggle one authentic stolen painting out of the country. And for Freddie, the final irony reveals itself in that single painting’s undiscovered authenticity, because it epitomises the paradoxical nature of his own artistically masked if authentic love for A., despite his poor judgement (or purposeful misrepresentations). To emphasize this, Freddie’s failure to recognise the paintings as fakes resonates with the subject matter of the paintings themselves, which depict various scenes of pursuit, desire and transformation as inspired by Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*.

**Art as Arcadia**

Banville’s use of ekphrasis in *Athena* is intimately linked to Mannerism in art as well as to a postmodern playfulness that pervades the entire novel and with which he deconstructs any notions of reality or authenticity behind the text. Literary criticism has long identified striking analogies between postmodern fiction and metahistorical, mannerist traditions. In his *Postscript to ‘The Name of the Rose,’* for example, Umberto Eco postulates this comparison by declaring that “postmodernism is not a trend to be chronologically defined, but rather an ideal category – or, better still, a *Kunstwollen*, a mode of operating.” Indeed, Eco goes on to postulate postmodernism as a self-conscious stylization adopted by the author, and places it as the most important criterion for defining mannerist works of art: “We could say that every period has its own postmodernism, just...
as every period would have its own mannerism” (Postscript to ‘The Name of the Rose’ 66).

Beyond its functionality as a modus operandi, the mannerist-postmodernist approach is also characterised by an ironic, even at times sardonic disposition towards literary traditions. Elke Pacholek-Brandt argues that mannerist and postmodernist authors share an unmistakably anti-classical attitude (Imagination (Un)limited 35–36), one corroborated by the grand-father of postmodernism, Lyotard himself:

[R]ealistic representations can no longer evoke reality except as nostalgia or mockery, as an occasion for suffering rather than satisfaction. Classicism seems to be ruled out in a world in which reality is so destabilized that it offers no occasion for experience but one for ratings and experimentation. (Lyotard et al., The Lyotard Reader and Guide 125)

This anti-mimetic, anti-classical Kunstwollen manifests itself in the mannerist-postmodernist text in a number of additional stylistic choices: a desire to create and to surprise, a self-deprecating ostentation, an excessive use of metaphor, a propensity for rhetorical stylization, and a curious affinity for mythological themes and mythemes, Ovid’s Metamorphoses in particular. As Petra Tournay has illustrated in her seminal study of Athena (2001), all these mannerist-postmodernist analogies are evident in Banville’s novel, more consciously on behalf of the author than in any other postmodernist text. Banville, she argues, knowingly employs mannerist themes and stylistic devices in the text. He functionalizes them by laying bare their operations, by producing an ‘inside-out novel, which wears its skeleton and its nerves on the outside’ (Brown, The Literature of Ireland 230) and thereby undermines and ironically deconstructs this relation. [...] The deliberate foregrounding of mannerist elements is a reaction to the petrification and deterioration of the postmodern discourse and highlights Banville’s awareness that postmodernism too has ‘run its course’ (The Literature of Ireland 17) and has become obsolete. (Tournay, “Into the Heart of the Labyrinth” 109–110).

Banville’s mannerist-postmodernist Kunstwollen is nowhere more pronounced than in the seven ekphrases disseminated throughout the novel, which function as spoofs of art criticism that also hold up a mirror to the novel’s plot and to Freddie’s inner turmoils. Tournay goes a step further to suggest that, “if cryptically attributed to Banville himself, those passages can (almost inevitably) only be read as ironic self-references to his own approach to art and writing and are as such a parody of aesthetic criticism” (“Into the Heart of the Labyrinth” 110).
Already in his first ekphrasis, Morrow criticizes Johann Livelb (read: John Banville) and his “Pursuit of Daphne” for anti-classical ostentations:

Here as in so much of Livelb’s work the loftiness of the classical theme is sacrificed for the sake of showiness and vulgar effects[...]. To quote the critic Eric Auerbach writing in a different context, what we have here is ‘a highly rhetorical style in which the gruesomely sensory has gained a large place; a sombre and highly rhetorical realism which is totally alien to classical antiquity.’ (A 19)

Freddie’s ekphrases overflow with such and similar comments about the execution of the paintings, and as Tournay conclusively argues, they thus become “self-ironic mannerist manifestos” that are “immediately programmatic for the novel” (“Into the Heart of the Labyrinth” 110).

Although Tournay’s analysis of Athena’s mannerist-postmodernist analogies is exemplary, it focuses somewhat heavily on Banville’s ironic and self-referential involvement with the text, ignoring how a postmodernist-mannerist modus operandi also helps Freddie resolve, at least in part, his dilemma of atonement and restitution. Though we can accept Banville’s conscious attempt to deconstruct the postmodernist endeavour by making the appropriately mocking mannerist analogies, and thereby turn it into a Kunstwollen devoid of meaning or purpose, we cannot ignore the crucial role the paintings play in helping Morrow achieve atonement and as an aid for the self-preservation of his own naïve ideals.

Banville’s mannerist-postmodernist ekphrases also function as a mode of artistic suspension which Freddie uses as a kind of aesthetic Arcadia in which he can wax nostalgic about the past without giving up or otherwise betraying the character he has so meticulously constructed for himself in The Book of Evidence and Ghosts: a narcissistic, mock-heroic art lover suspended between multiple self-authored narrative identities. Whenever and wherever Morrow encounters A., partial recollections of a gilted past follow suit: “I basked in this time out of time as in one of those long Saturday mornings of childhood. She would come. We would be there together. Everything would happen” (A 90). Morrow experiences seemingly unconscious moments of memory upon which he nevertheless confers a carefully crafted sense of being in a pastoral otherwhile and elsewhere:

It was a surprise when I stepped out into the world again, how bright and gay everything seemed, the sun, the gleaming grass, those Van Gogh trees, and the big, light sky with its fringe of coppery clouds; I felt as if I had been away on a long journey.

7 Eric Auerbach is the author of the classical study Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature (2013 [1946]).
and now all at once had arrived back home again. [...] What paradisal longings are these that assail me at unconsidered moments when my mind is looking elsewhere? (A 35–36)

Regardless of how often Freddie’s unconscious wills into existence artistically gilded memories, and regardless of how much he wants “to preserve [them] in the crystal of remembrance like one of those little scenes in glass globes” (A 86), he cannot escape the wills of his own narrative art, the ever present machinations of his (and Banville’s) postmodernist-mannerist Kunstwollen: “Is it hindsight that has conferred on the place a pent-up, mocking air?” (55). Aptly, he concludes: “I could weep up a blizzard once I got started” (86).

Morrow’s ekphrasis of the fictional Job van Hellin’s ‘Syrinx Delivered’ is particularly telling of an irrepressible desire to use the paintings as a means of suspending belief in reality. To do so, the paintings are described as ambiguous mock-pastorals that do not quite match the classical, Ovidian depictions of the golden world that inspired them:

The landscape depicted here is not the Arcady of rock and olive tree and harsh, noonday light, but the peaceable northern plain untouched by the riotous passions of gods and heroes yet over which there hangs an atmosphere of indefinable unease. [...] Placed in the middle distance, the figures of god and nymph, caught in their little drama of desire and loss, seem almost incidental to the composition, which could easily stand without them as self-contained landscape. Here, in this green and golden world, on this tawny afternoon, their black sheep Pan disports himself: with what skill the artist has depicted this figure, making it at once numinous, comic and terrifying. (A 104)

The paintings and their descriptions are also Banville’s most powerful tools for mirroring, in Freddie’s character and love interest A., the novel’s recurrent motifs of absence, loss and the attenuation of reality. Petra Tournay’s own analysis of the purpose of A. falls somewhat short in this regard, especially in its conclusion: “if A. is absent, so also is Athena, it is deconstructed into a no-thing. It becomes therefore, another instance illustrative of art-as-failure or language-as failure” (“Into the Heart of the Labyrinth” 115 [original emphasis]). Yet it is precisely due to the failure of Morrow’s narrative art, and his failure to make A. into something tangible, especially as expressed through his failure to correctly assess the paintings, that he preserves something of his own ideals. Accordingly, Freddie neither deconstructs A., nor Banville Athena, into the “no-thing” of an irretrievable absence.

In a rare moment of honesty and self-affirmation, Freddie acknowledges that “it is not the anima lost in me that I am after, but the ineffable mystery of the
Other (I can hear your ribald snigger); that is what all my life long I have plunged into again and again as into a choked Sargasso Sea wherein I can never find my depth” (A 46–47). This marks the starting point of that unique, idealised aesthetic space where his love can finally “come into being.” Freddie constructs A., his beloved other (and thus also an aspect of himself) as the artistic avatar of wish-fulfilment unassuaged. He expresses artistically this love-locked state to her repeatedly in the paintings and their ekphrases, respectively; the descriptions themselves become expressions of Morrow’s ideal of arrested movement and suspension. Thus, A. expresses the structure of absence epitomised by the objet petit a, even if that structure is itself integrated into the sublime totality of the “familiar otherwhere of art” (A 81), and brought to the surface in the protagonist’s irreparable sense of being always already elsewhere.

**Art as Atonement**

Art and the artistic imagination are themes central to the entire ‘Frames’ trilogy, brought to life through a series of interrelated and recurring motifs. Art is first of all used as a redemptive project, conceived by Freddie in *The Book of Evidence* as a possible means of compensation and atonement for the murder of Josie Bell: “In killing Josie Bell I had destroyed a part of the world. Those hammer-blows had shattered a complex of memories and sensations and possibilities – a life, in short – which was irreplaceable, but which, somehow, must be replaced” (BoE 149). Crucially, Freddie’s redemptive project is always also an artistic, aesthetic one, and he repeatedly undermines the necessary questions of morality by digressing (and escaping to) various forms of art. In *The Book of Evidence*, it is the art of the narrative (in the guise of a confessional) that preoccupies him: “I do not seek, my lord, to excuse my actions, only to explain them” (BoE 11). Freddie recounts Josie’s harrowing murder without the ethical or moral overtones one might expect of a traditional confessional, however, and paints it as caused by a failure of his imagination, instead, by his inability to see her as a real, live human being:

This is the worst, the essential sin, I think, the one for which there will be no forgiveness: that I never imagined her vividly enough, that I never made her be there sufficiently, that I did not make her live. Yes, that failure of imagination is my real crime, the one that made the others possible. What I told that policeman is true: I killed her because I could kill her, and I could kill her because for me she was not alive. (BoE 215)
In *Ghosts*, Freddie is more concerned with the appearance and gilt of his *monde d’or* than with any atonement of guilt that his narrative incarnations should achieve: “What happens does not matter; the moment is all. This is the golden world” (*G* 131). A host of pictorial comparisons bespeak the narrator’s painterly eye and betrays an irrepressibly solipsistic artist within. Additionally, Freddie’s is a descriptive mode defined by overly self-referential and metafictional strands, because, in keeping with metafiction in literary theory, his narrative “draws attention to the fact that life, as well as novels, [are] constructed through frames, and that it is finally impossible to know where one frame ends and another begins” (Waugh, *Metafiction* 29).

Finally, the notion of art is combined with mythological motifs borrowed from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, and, alongside Morrow’s love of A. and the attendant ekphrases scattered throughout the novel, create an aesthetic space quintessentially Arcadian in nature, because only “the familiar otherwhere of art” (*A* 81) can evoke the kind of space-time alternate reality in which one can re-write the rules and laws applicable to redemption: “In their relation to empirical reality works of art recall the theologumenon that in a state of redemption everything will be just as it is and yet wholly different” (*A* 105).

Unsurprisingly, Freddie’s narrative aestheticism possesses a dehumanizing quality that is befitting of both his murder of Josie Bell and his confused sense of apperance and reality. He admits to a lack of interest in anything but the surface, the superficial, already *The Book of Evidence*: “This is the only way another creature can be known: on the surface, that’s where there is depth” (*BoE* 72). Art is to him infinitely more appealing than reality, the artificial more worthy of his attention than actually living human beings: “I am told I should treasure life, but give me the realm of art anytime”(*G* 239). Montgomery acknowledges the consequent shortcomings of his obsessive aestheticism openly, and repeatedly: “unfed by experience or, as yet, by art, my imagination faltered”; “how little I know of what they call the real world” (*A* 22, 71). In summary, the three novels can be viewed as various dramatizations of one and the same attempt by their narrator-creator to transcend the chasm between reality and art. Additionally, they also function as narrative contemplations on the failure of language and the failure of art-as-language to create this aesthetically ideal, Arcadian space, while having to contend with and acknowledge the postmodern intersections and subversions that inevitably arise.

Montgomery perceives the relationship between art and life as a kind of osmosis, where the supremacy of the former resolves many (but not all) of the inconsistencies of the latter. The result is a deliberately self-questioning, exploratory retreat from reality into the “familiar” (read: nonthreatening, as-
suaging) otherworlds of art and fiction. Banville thereby enhances the overall ingenuity of Freddie’s narrative; this is reflected in the redemptive project our protagonist embarks upon in *The Book of Evidence*, when he claims: “What was required was not my symbolic death [...] but for her to be brought back to life. That, and nothing less” (*BoE* 152). And, at the end of *The Book*, Freddie even appears to be drawing a new life-force from this seemingly unattainable goal, though he has made little measurable progress towards achieving it:

And so my task now is to bring her back to life. I am not sure what that means, but it strikes me with the force of an unavoidable imperative. How am I to make it come about, this act of parturition? Must I imagine her from the start, from infancy? I am puzzled, and not a little fearful, and yet there is something stirring in me, and I am strangely excited. I seem to have taken on a new weight and density. I feel gay and at the same time wonderfully serious. I am big with possibilities. I am living for two. (*BoE* 215)

Despite this “new weight and density,” redemption remains elusive in *Ghosts* too, where nothing really happens other than another failed attempt at an imaginative reincarnation in the frail, beautiful Flora, “singled out” by this “little god” as the perfect prey for his rehabilitation. Still Freddie cannot but stay true to his obsession with art and artificiality; in keeping with his painterly eye, he sets out to imagine Flora in meticulous pictorial detail, “assembling her gradually, with great care, starting at the extremities, […] her hard little hands, the vulnerable, veined, milk-blue back of her knees” (94). His efforts are undone by a kind of anti-epiphany in which Flora appears to him no longer “Our Lady of the Enigmas,” no longer “like the Virgin in the middle of the Annunciation,” but “an incarnation of herself […] a girl, just a girl who somehow by being suddenly herself” makes “the things around her be there too” (*G* 146). Again, Freddie’s attitude is too solipsistic, self-conscious and artificial, too predatory to bestow upon Flora a life or personality of her own. This is evidenced all the more clearly by how easily he rejects her at the end of *Ghosts* as “just a girl, greedy and dissatisfied” (*G* 239). Ultimately, Freddie still finds too much pleasure in the redemptive task of *writing* someone into existence, and it is all too fitting that he cannot find atonement as long as he revels so openly in his own narrative art.

Only in *Athena* does Montgomery (now Morrow) partly undo the languish of *The Book of Evidence* and *Ghosts* as he becomes capable of some amount of atonement. This stems partly from the adoptoin of a new, more direct kind of honesty:
I was always thinking of other things, struggling inwardly with those big burdensome words that, had I had the nerve to speak them, would have made you stare first and then laugh. Atonement. Redemption. That kind of thing. I was still in hell, you see, or purgatory, at least, and you were one of the elect at whom I squinnied up yearningly as you paced the Elysian fields in golden light. (A 67)

As his attraction to A. reveals itself to be more fictitious than real, Freddie is once again seduced by the familiar artificiality of art, nevertheless. A. embodies this moral ambiguity: she is the “alpha” of Morrow’s emotions, and the “omega” of his intellect. The reader of *Athena* follows an amalgamation of fictions, avatars, disguises and effigies for the sake of A(rt), and in the name of A(rt). In his descriptions of A., the narrator remains stubbornly focused on contrived, artificial and exquisitely abstract imagery:

Hair really very black, blue-black, like a crow’s wing, and a violet shading in the hollows of her eyes. Identifying marks. Dear God. Absurdly, I see a little black pillbox hat and a black three quarters veil – a joke, surely, these outlandish accessories, on the part of playful memory? (A 38–39)

Gradually, A. is unmasked as a figment of Freddie’s imagination, a woman made of the shades and textures of an alluring painting; A. is Freddie’s avatar of art come alive, projected onto his mind’s painterly eye: “I was content there and then and wanted nothing but that this peaceful and phantasmally peopled solitude should continue without disturbance, content, that is, until you became animate suddenly and stepped out of your frame” (A 83). The active “little god” and narrator-creator of *Ghosts* has been replaced by a man who acknowledges a passive role in such adventures. Although A. ultimately abandons him, Morrow willingly welcomes the fraud, concedes to her fictive nature as well as the imaginative act by which he has brought her to life. Towards the end of *Athena*, in fact, A. has metamorphosed into “a pale, glistening new creature [...] as if she had just broken open the chrysalis and were resting a moment before the ordeal of unfolding herself into this new life I had given her. I? Yes: I. Who else was there, to make her come alive?” (A 175). Thus, Morrow’s attempt at “restitution” has been achieved, at least partly, and yet without committing to a spiritual or moral experience – as his passion for A(rt) might suggest – but as an act of the creative imagination, the realm where all the characters and scenes of *Athena* truly belong:

But I knew I must not give in to self-pity. I had nothing to pity myself for. She had been mine for a time, and now she was gone. Gone, but alive, in whatever form life might have taken for her, and from the start that was supposed to be my task: to give
her life. Come live in me, I had said, and be my love. Intending, of course, whether I knew it or not, that I in turn would live in her. (A 223)

Banville does not make it quite so easy for Freddie, of course; in truth, Freddie is framed, in every sense of the word. The frame is one of the most recurrent images and becomes a leitmotif central to the entire art trilogy – or ‘Frames Trilogy,’ as the three novels are also aptly referred to. Scenes are often introduced framed by windows or doorways: “see that dazed green view framed in the white window”; “The window framed a three-quarters view of indistinct greenery and the corner of a sloped field” (G 55, 206). Frames are also used to outline the female characters as they first appear: “A maid was standing in the open window”; “Here comes Sophie now, barefoot, still with her leather jacket over her shoulders, and time shimmers in its frame” (BoE 78, G 55). Freddie also often frames his descriptions of landscape detail, using the sky and the clouds: “See that dazed green view framed in the white window” (G 38). Finally, a pivotal moment of epiphany occurs when Freddie turns the landscape of the golden world he created itself into the frame of his imagination, celebrating his creation as the “little god” accordingly:

Look at this foliage, these clouds, the texture of this gown. A stricken figure stares out at something that is being lost. There is an impression of music, tiny, exact and gay. [...] Birds unseen are fluting in the trees, the sun shines somewhere, the distances of the sea are vague and palely blue, the galliot awaits. The figures move, if they move, as in a moving scene, one that they define, by being there, its arbiters. Without them only the wilderness, green riot, tumult of wind and the crazy sun. They formulate the tale and people it and give it substance. They are the human moment. (G 38)

The frame thus becomes a leitmotif representing the narrator’s relentless impulse for contemplation as well as his unconscious desire to embrace nature and the imagination. Nature, in its newly framed, ordered, Arcadian state, in turn becomes the outline for Freddie’s aesthetically constructed perception of life and reality. When Freddie’s somewhat impulsive, unbridged imagination is tamed by these gilded landscapes, they provide an aesthetic epiphany and enclose his “bifurcate” sense of self and identity in “the frame of memory” (A 115). For frames also work as symbols of recollection, and they equally often represent the creative power of the imagination, as when A. “became animate suddenly and stepped out of [her] frame” (A 83).

All perception, then, is a framing performed by the narrator, and the narrator is in turn framed by his own narrative. Although frames (and all that they represent) can offer Freddie a means to order and attempt to control his otherwise disobedient mind, they provide him with but a stepping stone for his imagina-
tion, for his A(rt) into reality; like A., not only do they abandon him, they frame him. Ultimately, frames do not provide him with a means of atonement for his actions in the real world. Thus, art may function as an aesthetic Arcadia, and it may lead Freddie (the cultured killer) one step closer to reality where atonement may be realised, but a final redemptive act must still follow within an(other) reality, of which Freddie knows and acknowledges too little.

Accordingly, it is through an(other) female character, not A., that Banville lets his protagonist achieve atonement: Aunt Corky. A bizarre, elderly lady and a distant relative, Morrow visits her and, upon her dismissal from a nursing home, agrees to attend to her needs until she passes away. He bears witness to her death, and the depressing sight of her debilitation and illness stands in disturbing contrast to Freddie’s aesthetically crafted, narcissistic narrative:

What I took at first for a bundle of rags heaped on the floor in the open doorway turned out on closer inspection to be Aunt Corky. She lay with her head pressed at a sharp angle against the skirting board, and with one leg and an arm twisted under her. I thought of a nestling fallen from the nest, the frail bones and waxen flesh and the scrawny neck twisted. I assumed she was dead. (A 192)

As Freddie himself admits, “this was the first time [... he] had looked at a naked woman without desire” (A 194). In her death, Aunt Corky forces Freddie to look at the reality of life through her own, most intimate frame of mind, and on her terms, for once, rather than his. By affording Aunt Corky a substantial amount of space in his narrative, Freddie can in some ways restore life to a woman who possesses neither the captivating beauty of Josie Bell, nor the comforting artifice of art, nor Flora’s frail innocence. Rather, she is an old, decrepit woman who wears grotesque make-up and attire. The difference, however, is crucial, for this time he is not moving within the realms of his solipsistic imagination, but manages to confront the harsh realities of death and decay. His attendant view of the world changes, and the gruelling experience of witnessing Aunt Corky’s death invigorates a man whose own imagination could otherwise but banish him into a purgatory stupor:

I stepped along as if on springs, snuffing up the chill air through lifted nostrils and contemplating the mystery of death. This was a world without Aunt Corky in it. What had been her was gone, dispersed like smoke. Forgive me, Auntie, but there was something invigorating in the thought; not the thought that you were no more, you understand, but that so much that was not you remained. No, I do not understand it either but I cannot think how else to put it. I suspect it was a little of what the condemned man must feel when the last-minute reprieve comes through and he is led away rubber-kneed from the scaffold: a mingling of surprise and left-over dread and
a sort of breathless urgency. *More, more* – it is the cry of the survivor – *give me more!* (A 205, original emphasis)

If A. remains suspended in the always already elsewhere of Freddie’s memories, fictions, desires and his imagination, between physical prurience and beautified superficiality, whereby she gives substance only to Freddie’s corrupted fascination with art, Aunt Corky becomes an authentic link to the real world, finally sanctioning him with a unique if somewhat casual act of redemption.