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 decentralised 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