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 descent 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.