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 (Greene, “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