Banville, harness the mode’s potential in more subtle and complex ways. In contrast to Stoppard, Okri or Crace, each of whom has published an Arcadia to call their own, it may at first glance be difficult to see how the bucolic tradition, established in classical culture by the Idylls of Theocritus and Virgil’s Eclogues is cogent for John Banville’s fiction. Yet, I contend that the pastoral mode and the postmodern come together, in his later writing especially, as a canon of identity discourse, where one voice explores such post-/modern perennials as the question of self and authenticity in relation the other, and another voice pastoralizes the attendant findings into a quest that leads through the narrator’s eye, constructing fictional counterworlds and idylls, ever vulnerable to a human condition in purgatory between modern doubt and postmodern disingenuousness.

**Always Already Elsewhere**

Lastly, pastoral is always already set in the past, bereft of reality and imbued with nostalgia; the mode, then, is always already elsewhere. It is difficult if not futile to argue against pastoral as a construct of nostalgia and retreat; the idealised countryside of the pastoral text is, after all, an Arcadia that uses language to create a world different from what is perceived to be real. This retreat, however, may function simply as an escape from the complexities of urban life, society, and even the reality of the present, or it may be used as a means of exploration (Gifford, Pastoral 46). Similarly, nostalgia is not simply a feeling that urges one to look back at void, an absence of something or someone, an elsewhere or an-other. More than a feeling, rather, nostalgia is an impulse, a thrust that involves an act, and what nostalgia acts out, or causes to be enacted, is nostos, the act of return. This desire to return home, moreover, is brought about by algos, or extreme pain, grief, and distress (Boym, The Future of Nostalgia xiii).

Nostalgia, then, as a literary device saturated in the pain of longing and the attendant (re-)enactment of nostos, is driven towards a point of origin, situated both in a space and a time where the protagonist used to be. Pastoral also always points to something that is elsewhere, at a condition of absence that comes into being in its narrative landscapes, in the lacunae of the resultant crises of identity, and in the architectonics of Arcadia. Nostalgia thus also conditions pastoral with a subtext of crisis, a crisis of identity, authenticity, and narrative. In pastoral narratives, the longing for what one no longer has becomes a question of belonging, a quest-like return to what one used to ‘be.’ Post-/modern iterations of

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2 I am referring to Jim Crace’s Arcadia (1992), Tom Stoppard’s Arcadia (1993) and Ben Okri’s In Arcadia (2002).
the pastoral mode thus often turn this self-same quest onto its head and inside-out, resulting in a text where the enactment of return, and the desire for a self one thought one used to be, is itself questioned and emplotted into the narrative.

To re-iterate, questions of time, place and identity all meld in pastoral to create versions of the mode so versatile that it continues to influence and provide impulses for fictions today. No contemporary author demonstrates this more iconically than John Banville. He is seen in equal terms as an old-fashioned modernist and a newfangled postmodernist (McNamee, A Postmodern Spirituality) as much “a man with nothing to say” as an author with “too much to write” (Kenny, John Banville 37). Banville’s oeuvre wavers indecisively between modernism and postmodernism; his fiction embodies the viewpoint that “the anxiety of contamination in modernism is concerned with preserving the integrity of the autonomous art work so that it can conceptually counterbalance the potential senselessness and chaos of our world” (Kenny, John Banville 17).

In many ways, all this makes Banville a present-day pastoralist, for pastoral too has survived as an autonomous mode that spotlights the significance of the construction of an aesthetic literary form, even when it is deemed equally important that the stability of such constructions be called into question (and often within the same body of writing). Pastoral, albeit in its various post-/modern transformations, is well suited to John Banville’s works because both author and mode are prone to query their (meta-)narrative constructions in a self-conscious discourse that swings back and forth between pastoral regression and post-/modern reflexion.

Freddie Montgomery, Alexander Cleave, Max Morden, Gabriel Godkin, Adam Godley and Oliver Orme: Banville’s protagonists are all “possessed of a past” (Bell, A Banville Reader 3) which they paint in the post-card colours of a postmodern pastoral. Variously as writers, historians, actors, mathematicians, literary critics, con-artists, criminals and spies, they are all characters in search of a grand narrative with which they can impose some sense and meaning onto the world. Their obsession with the past is only matched by their fixation on memory: “all thinking is in a sense remembering” (Birchwood 11). To remember, in this sense, is to try to return to one’s past its constitutive elements in order to stabilize one’s sense of self in a crisis-ridden and conflicted now. Thus, Banville’s novels transform the pastoral mode from a vehicle of socio-cultural, public identity discourse to one that encompasses the private process of re-identification located in the individual subject as a result of continuous interpellation. In doing so, the Irish author shows that identity discourse can build a bridge of consilience between postmodern literature and a seemingly outdated, irrelevant
mode – between two seemingly paradoxical cultural tools that have shaped countless literary and cultural texts. As a result, the pastoral mode has greatly enriched and diversified the postmodern survey of the processes of identity formation, deconstruction and reification.

Although not applicable to reading all of Banville’s works, the pastoral mode opens new vistas of analysis for his central concerns, namely the collaboration of ethics and aesthetics in art and the topography of the mind as subject to the literary concomitance of narrative, imagination, and memory. In contrast to traditional forms, Banville’s pastoral contexts manifest themselves more within than without, be it in the construction of imaginative otherworlds and idylls, or as narrative meditations on the power games of fiction, reality, and illusion. This narrative thrust of Banville’s fictions is elegantly mirrored and summarised in St. Augustine’s elaborations on the soul’s turn inward to discover external truths: “ab exterioribus ad interiora, ab inferioribus ad superiora [from the outer to the inner, from the lower to the higher]” (Augustinus, Enarrationes in Psalmos, XL, p. 2108). Ultimately, Banville’s protagonists often harbour an Arcadia of the unconscious conditioned by a subtext of childhood nostalgia and a desire to return to a state of innocence. Brought to the surface by a moment of crisis, the attendant process of narrative emplotment results in a pastoral retreat, sojourn and return, in search of a higher, metanarrative or truth. Banville’s resultant fictions explore, subvert, and transform the pastoral mode into an ambiguous landscape and a quest for a stable self-identity.

Finally, I would like to cite Harold Toliver’s Pastoral Forms and Attitudes (1984): “Whether or not the texts examined here need all be considered ‘pastoral’ is not as important as our discovering something in them through this lens that would be less noticeable through another” (vii). While the classification of Banville as a pastoralist, accordingly, is by no means a straightforward endeavour, it is not the aim of this study to examine his works as pastoral in an overdetermined and exhaustive fashion. I do not wish to cast the net of this study too wide, in other words, only to discover that not all in it is fish. Thus, I exclude from my survey Banville’s first novel Nightspawn (1971), his foray into short stories, Long Lankin (1970), the novels The Untouchable (2000) and Shroud (2002), most of his plays as well as his novel Ancient Light (2013).