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 between; 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 because 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 arcanian scenes can seem a riotous bacchanal.

— Ghosts 98

‘I Have Embarked for the Golden World’¹

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, ultimately, 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-
doadoxical 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
death 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-
cificed 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 assidu-
ously 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. 

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.² 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

² Matters are further complicated by the presence of two versions of “The Embarcation.” The first version now hangs in the Louvre, in Paris (See Appendix, Fig. 5), while the second version is in the Charlottenburg Palace, in Berlin (See Appendix, Fig. 6). For a comprehensive scholarly account of these paintings, see Posner, Donald. “The Fêtes Galantes” Antoine Watteau. 1984, pp. 116–195).

Banville acknowledges a regard for Watteau in an interview with Hedwig Schwall: “I love Watteau, but I don’t really like him as an artist: technically he is not very interesting. His pictures are rather wan; yet I love the way Watteau’s figures seem to have their own light. There is an extraordinary picture, it is in the Wallace collection in London – people sitting in a woodland scene at night, and they are like glow-worms. I love that. I find a pathos in that. These glowing figures are very moving; this is poetry. Yet I wouldn’t admire Watteau as a painter, whereas I admire Cézanne. You can love things without admiring them and you can admire things without loving them” (Schwall, "An Interview with John Banville" 1997, p. 18).
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 “penitantial 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 verisimilarities 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).

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. 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 ‘wri‐ting’ 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 narratorial 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 confort 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 abandonded 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 staggering, 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 proprietorial 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 enrthals 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 arcanian 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.