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 Viewed from a certain angle, these polite arcadian 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‐
doxical 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
dead letters 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‐
cified 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 assid‐
uously 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. (G 22, 25–27)

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. 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

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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 content‐
ment, willed to prolong the escape for as long as possible.

For all this celebration of escapism, crucial questions remain: does the “pen‐
itential 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 veri‐
similitudes 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 po‐
tential 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.