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 brave 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).
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. Not 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 con-
fused 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, mis-
understand 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 precon-
dition 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 identi-
fication. 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