is monumental, especially when contrasted with Freddie’s perception of “womanhood” 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 ‘writing’ 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 entered 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 comfort 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 abandoned 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 enchants 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 un‐guarded 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? [...] then 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 arcadian 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.