Other (I can hear your ribald snigger); that is what all my life long I have plunged into again and again as into a choked Sargasso Sea wherein I can never find my depth” (A 46–47). This marks the starting point of that unique, idealised aesthetic space where his love can finally “come into being.” Freddie constructs A., his beloved other (and thus also an aspect of himself) as the artistic avatar of wish-fulfilment unassuaged. He expresses artistically this love-locked state to her repeatedly in the paintings and their ekphrases, respectively; the descriptions themselves become expressions of Morrow’s ideal of arrested movement and suspension. Thus, A. expresses the structure of absence epitomised by the objet petit a, even if that structure is itself integrated into the sublime totality of the “familiar otherwhere of art” (A 81), and brought to the surface in the protagonist’s irreparable sense of being always already elsewhere.

Art as Atonement

Art and the artistic imagination are themes central to the entire ‘Frames’ trilogy, brought to life through a series of interrelated and recurring motifs. Art is first of all used as a redemptive project, conceived by Freddie in The Book of Evidence as a possible means of compensation and atonement for the murder of Josie Bell: “In killing Josie Bell I had destroyed a part of the world. Those hammer-blows had shattered a complex of memories and sensations and possibilities – a life, in short – which was irreplaceable, but which, somehow, must be replaced” (BoE 149). Crucially, Freddie’s redemptive project is always also an artistic, aesthetic one, and he repeatedly undermines the necessary questions of morality by diverging (and escaping to) various forms of art. In The Book of Evidence, it is the art of the narrative (in the guise of a confessional) that preoccupies him: “I do not seek, my lord, to excuse my actions, only to explain them” (BoE 11). Freddie recounts Josie’s harrowing murder without the ethical or moral overtones one might expect of a traditional confessional, however, and paints it as caused by a failure of his imagination, instead, by his inability to see her as a real, live human being:

This is the worst, the essential sin, I think, the one for which there will be no forgiveness: that I never imagined her vividly enough, that I never made her be there sufficiently, that I did not make her live. Yes, that failure of imagination is my real crime, the one that made the others possible. What I told that policeman is true I killed her because I could kill her, and I could kill her because for me she was not alive. (BoE 215)
In *Ghosts*, Freddie is more concerned with the appearance and gilt of his *monde d’or* than with any atonement of guilt that his narrative incarnations should achieve: “What happens does not matter; the moment is all. This is the golden world” (*G* 131). A host of pictorial comparisons bespeak the narrator’s painterly eye and betrays an irrepressibly solipsistic artist within. Additionally, Freddie’s is a descriptive mode defined by overly self-referential and metafictional strands, because, in keeping with metafiction in literary theory, his narrative “draws attention to the fact that life, as well as novels, [are] constructed through frames, and that it is finally impossible to know where one frame ends and another begins” (Waugh, *Metafiction* 29).

Finally, the notion of art is combined with mythological motifs borrowed from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, and, alongside Morrow’s love of A. and the attendant ekphrases scattered throughout the novel, create an aesthetic space quintessentially Arcadian in nature, because only “the familiar otherwhere of art” (*A* 81) can evoke the kind of space-time alternate reality in which one can re-write the rules and laws applicable to redemption: “In their relation to empirical reality works of art recall the theologumenon that in a state of redemption everything will be just as it is and yet wholly different” (*A* 105).

Unsurprisingly, Freddie’s narrative aestheticism possesses a dehumanizing quality that is befitting of both his murder of Josie Bell and his confused sense of apperance and reality. He admits to a lack of interest in anything but the surface, the superficial, already *The Book of Evidence*: “This is the only way another creature can be known: on the surface, that’s where there is depth” (*BoE* 72). Art is to him infinitely more appealing than reality, the artificial more worthy of his attention than actually living human beings: “I am told I should treasure life, but give me the realm of art anytime”(*G* 239). Montgomery acknowledges the consequent shortcomings of his obsessive aestheticism openly, and repeatedly: “unfed by experience or, as yet, by art, my imagination faltered”; “how little I know of what they call the real world” (*A* 22, 71). In summary, the three novels can be viewed as various dramatizations of one and the same attempt by their narrator-creator to transcend the chasm between reality and art. Additionally, they also function as narrative contemplations on the failure of language and the failure of art-as-language to create this aesthetically ideal, Arcadian space, while having to contend with and acknowledge the postmodern intersections and subversions that inevitably arise.

Montgomery perceives the relationship between art and life as a kind of osmosis, where the supremacy of the former resolves many (but not all) of the inconsistencies of the latter. The result is a deliberately self-questioning, exploratory retreat from reality into the “familiar” (read: nonthreatening, as-
suaging) otherworlds of art and fiction. Banville thereby enhances the overall ingenuity of Freddie’s narrative; this is reflected in the redemptive project our protagonist embarks upon in *The Book of Evidence*, when he claims: “What was required was not my symbolic death […] but for her to be brought back to life. That, and nothing less” (*BoE* 152). And, at the end of *The Book*, Freddie even appears to be drawing a new life-force from this seemingly unattainable goal, though he has made little measurable progress towards achieving it:

And so my task now is to bring her back to life. I am not sure what that means, but it strikes me with the force of an unavoidable imperative. How am I to make it come about, this act of parturition? Must I imagine her from the start, from infancy? I am puzzled, and not a little fearful, and yet there is something stirring in me, and I am strangely excited. I seem to have taken on a new weight and density. I feel gay and at the same time wonderfully serious. I am big with possibilities. I am living for two. (*BoE* 215)

Despite this “new weight and density,” redemption remains elusive in *Ghosts* too, where nothing really happens other than another failed attempt at an imaginative reincarnation in the frail, beautiful Flora, “ singled out” by this “little god” as the perfect prey for his rehabilitation. Still Freddie cannot but stay true to his obsession with art and artificiality; in keeping with his painterly eye, he sets out to imagine Flora in meticulous pictorial detail, “assembling her gradually, with great care, starting at the extremities, […] her hard little hands, the vulnerable, veined, milk-blue back of her knees” (94). His efforts are undone by a kind of anti-epiphany in which Flora appears to him no longer “Our Lady of the Enigmas,” no longer “like the Virgin in the middle of the Annunciation,” but “an incarnation of herself […] a girl, just a girl who somehow by being suddenly herself” makes “the things around her be there too” (*G* 146). Again, Freddie’s attitude is too solipsistic, self-conscious and artificial, too predatory to bestow upon Flora a life or personality of her own. This is evidenced all the more clearly by how easily he rejects her at the end of *Ghosts* as “just a girl, greedy and dissatisfied” (*G* 239). Ultimately, Freddie still finds too much pleasure in the redemptive task of *writing* someone into existence, and it is all too fitting that he cannot find atonement as long as he revels so openly in his own narrative art.

Only in *Athena* does Montgomery (now Morrow) partly undo the languish of *The Book of Evidence* and *Ghosts* as he becomes capable of some amount of atonement. This stems partly from the adoptoin of a new, more direct kind of honesty:
I was always thinking of other things, struggling inwardly with those big burdensome words that, had I had the nerve to speak them, would have made you stare first and then laugh. Atonement. Redemption. That kind of thing. I was still in hell, you see, or purgatory, at least, and you were one of the elect at whom I squinted up yearningly as you paced the Elysian fields in golden light. (A 67)

As his attraction to A. reveals itself to be more fictitious than real, Freddie is once again seduced by the familiar artificiality of art, nevertheless. A. embodies this moral ambiguity: she is the “alpha” of Morrow’s emotions, and the “omega” of his intellect. The reader of *Athena* follows an amalgamation of fictions, avatars, disguises and effigies for the sake of A(rt), and in the name of A(rt). In his descriptions of A., the narrator remains stubbornly focused on contrived, artificial and exquisitely abstract imagery:

Hair really very black, blue-black, like a crow’s wing, and a violet shading in the hollows of her eyes. Identifying marks. Dear God. Absurdly, I see a little black pillbox hat and a black three quarters veil – a joke, surely, these outlandish accessories, on the part of playful memory? (A 38–39)

Gradually, A. is unmasked as a figment of Freddie’s imagination, a woman made of the shades and textures of an alluring painting; A. is Freddie’s avatar of art come alive, projected onto his mind’s painterly eye: “I was content there and then and wanted nothing but that this peaceful and phantasmally peopled solitude should continue without disturbance, content, that is, until you became animate suddenly and stepped out of your frame” (A 83). The active “little god” and narrator-creator of *Ghosts* has been replaced by a man who acknowledges a passive role in such adventures. Although A. ultimately abandons him, Morrow willingly welcomes the fraud, concedes to her fictive nature as well as the imaginative act by which he has brought her to life. Towards the end of *Athena*, in fact, A. has metamorphosed into “a pale, glistening new creature [...] as if she had just broken open the chrysalis and were resting a moment before the ordeal of unfolding herself into this new life I had given her. I? Yes: I. Who else was there, to make her come alive?” (A 175). Thus, Morrow’s attempt at “restitution” has been achieved, at least partly, and yet without committing to a spiritual or moral experience – as his passion for A(rt) might suggest – but as an act of the creative imagination, the realm where all the characters and scenes of *Athena* truly belong:

But I knew I must not give in to self-pity. I had nothing to pity myself for. She had been mine for a time, and now she was gone. Gone, but alive, in whatever form life might have taken for her, and from the start that was supposed to be my task: to give
her life. Come live in me, I had said, and be my love. Intending, of course, whether I knew it or not, that I in turn would live in her. (A 223)

Banville does not make it quite so easy for Freddie, of course; in truth, Freddie is framed, in every sense of the word. The frame is one of the most recurrent images and becomes a leitmotif central to the entire art trilogy – or ‘Frames Trilogy’, as the three novels are also aptly referred to. Scenes are often introduced framed by windows or doorways: “see that dazed green view framed in the white window”; “The window framed a three-quarters view of indistinct greenery and the corner of a sloped field” (G55, 206). Frames are also used to outline the female characters as they first appear: “A maid was standing in the open window”; “Here comes Sophie now, barefoot, still with her leather jacket over her shoulders, and time shimmers in its frame” (BoE 78, G55). Freddie also often frames his descriptions of landscape detail, using the sky and the clouds: “See that dazed green view framed in the white window” (G38). Finally, a pivotal moment of epiphany occurs when Freddie turns the landscape of the golden world he created itself into the frame of his imagination, celebrating his creation as the “little god” accordingly:

Look at this foliage, these clouds, the texture of this gown. A stricken figure stares out at something that is being lost. There is an impression of music, tiny, exact and gay. […] Birds unseen are fluting in the trees, the sun shines somewhere, the distances of the sea are vague and palely blue, the galliot awaits. The figures move, if they move, as in a moving scene, one that they define, by being there, its arbiters. Without them only the wilderness, green riot, tumult of wind and the crazy sun. They formulate the tale and people it and give it substance. They are the human moment. (G38)

The frame thus becomes a leitmotif representing the narrator’s relentless impulse for contemplation as well as his unconscious desire to embrace nature and the imagination. Nature, in its newly framed, ordered, Arcadian state, in turn becomes the outline for Freddie’s aesthetically constructed perception of life and reality. When Freddie’s somewhat impulsive, unbridged imagination is tamed by these gilded landscapes, they provide an aesthetic epiphany and enclose his “bifurcate” sense of self and identity in “the frame of memory” (A 115). For frames also work as symbols of recollection, and they equally often represent the creative power of the imagination, as when A. “became animate suddenly and stepped out of [her] frame” (A 83).

All perception, then, is a framing performed by the narrator, and the narrator is in turn framed by his own narrative. Although frames (and all that they represent) can offer Freddie a means to order and attempt to control his otherwise disobedient mind, they provide him with but a stepping stone for his imagina-
tion, for his A(rt) into reality; like A., not only do they abandon him, they frame him. Ultimately, frames do not provide him with a means of atonement for his actions in the real world. Thus, art may function as an aesthetic Arcadia, and it may lead Freddie (the cultured killer) one step closer to reality where atonement may be realised, but a final redemptive act must still follow within an(other) reality, of which Freddie knows and acknowledges too little.

Accordingly, it is through an(other) female character, not A., that Banville lets his protagonist achieve atonement: Aunt Corky. A bizarre, elderly lady and a distant relative, Morrow visits her and, upon her dismissal from a nursing home, agrees to attend to her needs until she passes away. He bears witness to her death, and the depressing sight of her debilitation and illness stands in disturbing contrast to Freddie’s aesthetically crafted, narcissistic narrative:

What I took at first for a bundle of rags heaped on the floor in the open doorway turned out on closer inspection to be Aunt Corky. She lay with her head pressed at a sharp angle against the skirting board, and with one leg and an arm twisted under her. I thought of a nestling fallen from the nest, the frail bones and waxen flesh and the scrawny neck twisted. I assumed she was dead. (A 192)

As Freddie himself admits, “this was the first time [... he] had looked at a naked woman without desire” (A 194). In her death, Aunt Corky forces Freddie to look at the reality of life through her own, most intimate frame of mind, and on her terms, for once, rather than his. By affording Aunt Corky a substantial amount of space in his narrative, Freddie can in some ways restore life to a woman who possesses neither the captivating beauty of Josie Bell, nor the comforting artifice of art, nor Flora’s frail innocence. Rather, she is an old, decrepit woman who wears grotesque make-up and attire. The difference, however, is crucial, for this time he is not moving within the realms of his solipsistic imagination, but manages to confront the harsh realities of death and decay. His attendant view of the world changes, and the gruelling experience of witnessing Aunt Corky’s death invigorates a man whose own imagination could otherwise but banish him into a purgatory stupor:

I stepped along as if on springs, snuffing up the chill air through lifted nostrils and contemplating the mystery of death. This was a world without Aunt Corky in it. What had been her was gone, dispersed like smoke. Forgive me, Auntie, but there was something invigorating in the thought; not the thought that you were no more, you understand, but that so much that was not you remained. No, I do not understand it either but I cannot think how else to put it. I suspect it was a little of what the condemned man must feel when the last-minute reprieve comes through and he is led away rubber-kneed from the scaffold: a mingling of surprise and left-over dread and
a sort of breathless urgency. *More, more* – it is the cry of the survivor – *give me more!* (A 205, original emphasis)

If A. remains suspended in the always already elsewhere of Freddie’s memories, fictions, desires and his imagination, between physical prurience and beautified superficiality, whereby she gives substance only to Freddie’s corrupted fascination with art, Aunt Corky becomes an authentic link to the real world, finally sanctioning him with a unique if somewhat casual act of redemption.