IV Always Already Elsewhere: Mapping Arcadia in Memory and Mind

It was a realm she was able to enter at will because she had lived a life so rich with misery, mistakes and love that she had gradually found an art of creating pleasant places in her mind [...]. Unhappiness had taught her the art of happiness. And art had taught her the saving graces of escape into the enchanted countrysides of her mind. — Ben Okri, In Arcadia

4.1 From Birchwood to The Newton Letter: Banville’s Post-/Modern Pastoral Elegies

The impulse to preserve the past is part of the impulse to preserve the self. [...] The nostalgic impulse is an important agent in adjustment to crisis; it is a social emollient and reinforces [...] identity when confidence is weakened or threatened. — Madan Sarup

A study of the way we remember is a study of the way we are. — J. Fentress, C. Wickham

Memory, Narrative, and Identity in Theory

We construct memory and memory constructs us; our identity, both public and private, is a dynamic process because time is itself a dynamo propelled by the repetition of things past. This cycle in turn gives birth – and life – to memory. Time is and always has been akin to memory. Speaking in purely abstract terms, memory is a perpetuum mobile, unending by virtue of repetition, but as it is subject to the whims and idiosyncrasies of the human mind, where it lives, memory can be fickle, unreliable, and forgetful. Thus, narratives have time and again served as mnemonics of memory. St. Augustine, one of the most influential
figures in the establishment of the modern Christian church, for example turns to scripture in his Confessions to discuss the human experience of temporality; the New Testament, after all, is not only the first Christian narrative, but also the first Christian narrative of time.

Our identities cannot be comprehensively understood, moreover, without “a given place and time,” (Sarup 15) where memory and narrative are ample sources for both. As Paul Ricoeur perceptively argues, “narratives, on the one hand, are the modes of discourse appropriate to our experience of time; and time experience, on the other hand, is the ultimate referent of the narrative mode.” Ricoeur gives much philosophical thought to narrative as that “mode of discourse, through which the mode of being or temporal being, is brought to language” (“The Human Experience of Time” 107, 99). He uses the notion of plot as a “decisive concept” in his “inquiry into the temporal aspect of narrative” (“The Human Experience of Time” 99). The notion of plot carries with it several advantages, Ricoeur continues; it “provides us with a structure which could be common to both historical and fictional narratives,” whence it also allows us to disambiguate between – rather than dispute over – “the truth-claim of history vs. that of fiction” (105). Additionally, events made into story through plot are “not bound to a merely chronological order of events” (103). Narratives are by definition composite of chronological and non-chronological dimensions, where the former may be called “the episodic dimension” and the latter “the configurational dimension”. Episodically speaking, events constitute the story; configurationally speaking “the plot construes significant wholes out of scattered events” (106).

Despite, or rather thanks to its abstract character, plot carries several temporal implications. It splices narrative time into episodic and configurational dimensions, and thus a narrative’s beginning can be read in the end and the end in the beginning. To put it differently, plot thereby enables time itself to be read backwards, “as the recapitulation of the initial conditions of a course of action in its terminal consequences. In that way, a plot establishes human action not only within time […] but within memory” (108). Thus memory repeats the course of events not according to chronological order but according to “the counterpart of time as stretching-along between a beginning and an end.” This process, moreover, does not abolish time, but rather, through repetition, imbues the human time-experience with existential depth. Paradoxically, it is in human na-

1 For a crisp, in-depth analysis of Augustine’s concepts of time and narrative see Ricoeur’s seminal essay, “The Human Experience of Time” 101–114.
ture to measure time because the heroes of narrative “reckon with time,” and not vice versa (110–2).

The process of narrative emplotment does so much more than merely establish individual or collective identities within an “eloquent” time-experience. Our ‘reckoning’ with time is transformed by narrative emplotment into our ‘recollecting’ it, too. Narratives provide both public and private identities with a means of escape – from the battle of reification in a ‘meaningful’ chronology – on the one hand, and a means of reclusion to the refuge of dechronologization, on the other hand. All this is spearheaded by memory, that process of repetition and restitution of the storied self in the narrative time-experience (113–4).

In the oral tradition of storytelling, for example, memorization is achieved by means of repetition; the repetition of formulaic figures and tropes – rhythmic, rhapsodic, even rhyming – produces mnemonic sound patterns that facilitate memorization. The redundancy that results from these repetitive formulations creates homogeneity and univocality. This in turn enables the identities, values and collective memories of an entire civilization to be passed on in oral narratives, which usually take the form of origin myths, fables, or aetiological tales. (Ong, “Some Psychodynamics of Orality” 31–34)

Repetition shapes manifestations of memory in the literate tradition too, though somewhat differently. Where the oral tradition of storytelling remembers by means of the repetition of larger-than-life figures of speech, written texts memorize through codification. Oral narratives use a relatively small vocabulary but grow every story to the size of legend; literary texts, in stark contrast, can afford to draw on a vast range of expressions, but conserve information regardless of its ‘present’ significance to the individual or the collective memory. The
significance of the story told is measured in relative terms only, for the medium is considered – in both senses of the word – far more telling.  

Despite the marked differences between the oral and literate codification of narratives, questions of plot, identity, and memory, are common to both. The process of narrative identification, for one, is at the heart of both oral and literal traditions, though it develops and manifests itself differently in each. Where the oral tradition uses memory to establish and strengthen collective identity, the literate tradition places more emphasis on the singularity of individual memorization. As Radstone and Hodgkin argue,

studies of memory are intimately [...] linked with histories of subjectivity and shed light on historical variations in conceptions of subjectivity and experience. [...] The history of memory is indissociably linked, then, with the complex story of the emergence on to the historical stage of a bounded, coherent self who comes to be understood as the ‘container’ or possessor of memory. The distinction of an ‘outside’ of happenings and an ‘inside’ of their remembrance is inextricably connected with the emergence of this bounded subject. (Memory Cultures 2009: 2–3)

It follows then that narratives are to identity what mnemonics are to memory: the former is essential to the forming of the latter. Remembering is always also a reification of identity by virtue of the past that functions as an absence, as ‘an-other’ mirroring the present self – it “is through recollections of the past that people represent themselves to themselves” (Sarup, Identity, Culture and the Postmodern World 40). The process of identification through narrative emplot-

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2 In his ground-breaking study “Some Psychodynamics of Orality” (1982), Walter J. Ong compares and contrasts translations of Genesis 1:1–5 to illustrate both the preservation of “the ‘additive’ oral style” and its metamorphosis to a version more adjusted to the sensibilities of print and writing. Below is an excerpt from the Douay version (1610) which, “produced in a culture with still a massive oral residue, [...] keeps close in many ways to the additive Hebrew original” (37):

In the beginning God created heaven and earth. And the earth was void and empty, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the spirit of God moved over the waters. And God said: Be light made. And light was made. And God saw the light that it was good; and he divided the light from the darkness. And he called the light Day, and the darkness Night; and there was evening and morning one day.

By contrast, the New American Bible (1970), as quoted in Ong, “Some Psychodynamics of Orality” 37:

In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless wasteland, and darkness covered the abyss, while a mighty wind swept over the waters. Then God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light. God saw how good the light was. God then separated the light from the darkness. God called the light ‘day’ and the darkness he called ‘night.’ Thus evening came, and morning followed the first day.
ment corresponds to the process of remembering the storied self in the various codifications of memory.

Repetition as a form of remembering is particularly visible in those kinds of narratives in which quests are the catalysts of plot; narratives, more precisely, “in which the quest itself duplicates as a travel in space which assumes the shape of a return to the origin” (Ricoeur, “The Human Experience of Time” 113): quests in which the questions encountered map out the answers sought after. Two paradigms of the quest narrative, as travel and return, are of particular interest to this investigation. The first is best exemplified using Ulysses’ travels, and the second is the pastoral sojourn as preceded by the (narrative) enactment of nostalgia.

In *The Trial of the Labyrinth* (1978), Mircéa Eliade writes about the epic hero that he is “the prototype of man, not only modern man, but the man of the future as well, because he represents the type of the ‘trapped’ voyager.” Indeed, Eliade reads Ulysses’ journey not exclusively as a fated delay, but as a sojourn that results in personal growth:

> His voyage was a voyage towards the centre, towards Ithaca, which is to say, towards himself. He was a fine navigator, but destiny – spoken here in terms of trials of initiation which he had to overcome – forced him to postpone indefinitely his return to hearth and home. I think that the myth of Ulysses is very important for us. We will all be a little like Ulysses, for in searching, in hoping to arrive, and finally without a doubt, in finding once again the homeland, the hearth, we rediscover ourselves. But, as in the Labyrinth, in every questionable turn, one risks ‘losing oneself.’ If one succeeds in getting out of the Labyrinth, in finding again one’s home, then one becomes a new being. (109 quoted in Ricoeur, “The Human Experience of Time” 113)

Eliade’s evaluation of Ulysses’ travels essentially prefigures the enactment of nostalgia as a narrative of re-evaluation and “rediscovery” of self. As such, the word nostalgia has developed beyond its original Greek definition: “when we say that someone is feeling nostalgic, we suggest that they are in a reverie-like state of remembrance for experiences which, as past, are unrecoverable” (Frawley, *Irish Pastoral* 3). While it can be argued that nostalgia embodies a “lost, unrecoverable past” as brought about by “a sense of lack in the present and an access to the past through physical and visual objects” (*Irish Pastoral* 4), we are reminded that it is precisely this form of nostalgia that conditions the pastoral mode with a subtext of crisis, and that this crisis in identity transforms the pastoral sojourn itself from an escapist endeavour to a narrative mode that can explore (and possibly restore) the self. Moreover, it is the intricate interplay of a) nostalgia expressed in narrative, b) the linguistic landscapes of Arcadia, and
c) memory, that makes visible the process of identification in the pastoral mode, both within and without.

On the one hand, the context of return is externalized by the idyllic constructs of Arcadia: Ulysses’ “rediscovery” of self in *The Odyssey* is paralleled by a geographic return to Ithaca, his birthplace, his “hearth and home” and supposed *locus amoenus*. Here memory plays a first and quintessential part, for it is in the sketchbook of memory – and we all carry one with us – that sites of remembrance are first constructed. And it is from this gallery that the point of return is chosen. In *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard notes that though memories represent a past to which return is only theoretically possible, “the more securely [memories] are fixed in space, the sounder they are” (*The Poetics of Space* 9). In other words, the more specifically we can describe a setting, the better we remember it and the more we are ourselves remembered by it.

Narratives give space to memory, marking an important shift from modern to postmodern and contemporary mnemonic configurations. In *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard demonstrates a unique prescience of this shift as he intriguingly studies “the topography of our intimate being”; in lyrical chapters he undertakes a systematic “topoanalysis” of the “space we love” (3). In Chapter Nine, ‘The Dialectics of Outside and Inside’, Bachelard expounds the significance of spatial experiences as metaphors to our thinking and to the metaphysics of our being: “an implicit geometry – whether we will or no – confers spatiality upon thought” (*The Poetics of Space* 212). Any such conferment of “spatiality upon thought”, moreover, bestows in equal measure a spatiality upon our capacity to remember.

John Banville shares with Bachelard an appreciation for the idea that memories are first spatial before they are perceived on a temporal axis, and it is precisely this insight that provides the foundations on which much of the Irish author’s fiction is housed. Already on page one of Banville’s first successful novel, *Birchwood* (1973), for example, narrator-protagonist Gabriel Godkin proclaims that “all thinking is in a sense remembering” (*BW* 1), and the narrator-historian of *The Newton Letter* (1983) takes the metaphor one step further: “There was no sense of life messily making itself from moment to moment. It had all been lived already, and we were merely tracing the set patterns, as if not living really, but remembering” (*NL* 58). But it is especially in his later works – *Eclipse* (2000), *The Sea* (2005), and *The Infinities* (2009) – that John Banville turns landscape and architecture into metaphors of thought and into sites of pastoral nostalgia and memory. More specifically, each time-experience, narrated by the protagonists always with supreme eloquence, transforms the natural sites and
architectural settings into a journey towards a point of pastoral return, “to those Arcadian fields where memory and imagination merge” (*Eclipse* 137).

Indeed, John Banville is as much concerned with the “topography of the mind” as Gaston Bachelard is with a “topoanalysis” of “felicitous space.” The two are connected thus by the concepts of nostalgia and remembrance as expressed in the pastoral mode, which is itself, after all, a poetics of dwelling. The pastoral mode is very well suited to narratives of memory because often it is in its architecture and its landscapes, where memories dwell as idealized, nostalgic constructions of an imagination in search for innocence and stability. As Simon Schama puts it, “[before it can ever be a [pastoral] repose for the senses, landscape is the work of the mind. Its scenery is built up as much from strata of memory as from layers of rock” (*Landscape and Memory* 7). Landscapes, moreover, “are culture before they are nature,” as Freddie Montgomery also reminds the reader in *Ghosts*: “Nature did not exist until we invented it one eighteenth-century morning radiant with Alpine light” (*Ghosts* 65). These courtyards of the mind and landscapes of the imagination provide fertile ground for post-/modern and contemporary pastoralists alike. Therein lies a certain danger of misinterpretation too, because “once a certain idea of landscape, a myth, a vision, establishes itself in an actual place, it has a peculiar way of muddling, categorizing, of making metaphors more real than their referents; of becoming, in fact, part of the scenery” (Schama, *Landscape and Memory* 61).

In her recent study of Twentieth-century Irish literature, *Irish Pastoral* (2005), Oona Frawley develops Schama’s concepts of landscape and memory and superimposes them critically onto the pastoral mode of nostalgia. Frawley argues that nostalgia narratives, pastoral versions in particular, are born within “[c]olonial or post-colonial cultures” because they “experience a fraught relationship with the nature and the landscape of their homelands.” Irish literature, for example, has always been much concerned with nature and the landscape, because these are nostalgic sites of collective memory and identification. In Irish literature, “nature and landscape become signifiers, lenses through which it is possible to examine cultural and historical developments.” Irish landscapes are representative, in other words, of the cultural, historical and political tensions and ambiguities that characterised much of Irish foreign and domestic policy in the late Nineteenth Century. The Emerald Isle and its landscape, moreover, was considered “both ‘Irish’ – in the sense that it is physically attached to the country – and not ‘Irish,’ in the sense that ‘Ireland’ does not exist as an independent nation” (*Irish Pastoral* 2). Twentieth-century Irish writers – Joyce, Beckett, Heaney, to name the most prominent of Frawley’s examples – found recourse in the pastoral mode accordingly, in an attempt to express the ambi-
guities and tensions that coursed through the veins of their heartland’s post-colonial history and collective identity.

Though Frawley’s study of Irish nostalgia focuses on collective memory and identity, the pastoral is a powerful literary mode within which individual, private crises of identity are also explored, especially as removed or isolated from communal or national concerns. Banville’s novels are particularly good examples of this development in the mode and its manifestations in post-/modern Irish literature, for when Banville looks through the pastoral lens, he adjusts its magnification to look at the characters in more detail. The focus of the pastoral mode and its subtext of nostalgia thus shifts in his novels from the collective to the individual, from the distant to the intimate. This shift can be observed particularly well in his early novels Birchwood (1973) and The Newton Letter (1982), in which historical, elegiac metafiction is appropriated for postmodern studies of identities in crisis and despair. These and similar concerns are expressed with more maturity in Eclipse (2000) and The Sea (2005), and they return in his radio-play A Conversation in the Mountains (2006), in which Banville stages (as historiographic metafiction) the famous encounter between Heidegger and poet Paul Celan, in order to show how individual identity is inevitably affected by collectively remembered experiences.

To offer another comparison to the paradigm shift effected by Banville: Michel Foucault, in his seminal essay on heterotopia (1967), shifts the problematic of Bachelardian topoanalysis from “felicitous spaces” to “other spaces – spaces of crisis, deviance, exclusion, and illusion; in other words, to heterotopoanalysis” (Ockman, “Review of The Poetics of Space” 3). Foucault’s paradigmatic shift does for Bachelard what Banville’s latest works do for Twentieth-century Irish literature and the pastoral mode. To read Irish literature of the last century through the looking glass of collective identity discourse and ‘Irishness’ – whether political, historical, socio-historical or socio-political – though fascinating, is to tread on familiar ground. To do what Banville does, and subordinate these collective concerns in favour of the contemporary nexus of language and self, is a paradigmatically more difficult, but equally rewarding use of the pastoral mode.

Ultimately, Banville turns away from narrative as a collective memory experience to create post-/modern pastorals that explore the intersection of memory and subjectivity; a subject’s memories create subjective memories, after all, and the pastoral offers both a temporal axis (expressed in its dynamic of retreat and return) as well as a spatial architectonic (expressed as Arcadia) within which the individual can reckon with memories and the crisis-ridden self – in their wake.]
Birchwood: The Big House as Pastoral Space

We imagine that we remember things as they were, while in fact all we carry into the future are fragments which reconstruct a wholly illusory past — Birchwood 12

In *Birchwood* (1973), the aforementioned paradigm shift is effected through Banville’s use of the Big House motif supplied with a postmodern twist to create mock-pastoral elegies about the potentially counter-productive communion of memory, imagination and reality. The dominance of the Big House in modern Irish fiction is directly proportional to the decline of the culture it seeks to portray. Though its historical counterpart (the country-house of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy) had all but fallen into obscurity, the Big House remained an important part of modern Irish literature, be it as symbol, setting, motif or topography of collective memory, nostalgia and myth (Genet, *The Big House in Ireland* 215–216).

The Big House has as many critics as it has proponents. Seamus Deane, for example, denounces its rise in the modern Irish novel as a “retrograde phenomenon”, one that he aligns with Yeats’ distortion of Irish history into myth:

> The Big House surrounded by the unruly tenantry, culture besieged by barbarity, a refined aristocracy beset by a vulgar middle class – all of these are recurrent images in twentieth-century Irish fiction which draw heavily on Yeats’ poetry for them. (Deane, “Yeats: The Creation of an Audience” 32)

Deane thus profiles the Big House novel as an enemy of realism, and as a “reactionary element in modern Irish writing.” The Big House “syndrome”, in his view, “enshrines a distorted version of Irish history” (“Yeats: The Creation of an Audience” 33). A different, more apologetic perspective is offered by Andrew Parkin, who explicitly rejects Deane’s assessment of the Big House culture in Irish literature as an “artificial process:”

> It is, on the contrary, entirely natural: the corpse is exhumed by some for purposes of revenge, by others it is resurrected in the nostalgic and ambivalent imagination, for they are its apologists and critics [...] What we are encountering is the tenacious hold of a form of rural culture over the modern imagination, however cosmopolitan. This is partly accounted for by the immense energy of the pastoral – here is an Irish version of pastoral. (Parkin, “Shadows of Destruction” 306–307, 309–10)

Here, Parkin is one of the first to explicitly link the persistence of the Big House in modern Irish literature to the pastoral mode, and though his argument does
not truly challenge Deane’s view of the Big House as a harbourer of distorted myths, he is right to point to its collusion with pastoral in the psyche of modern Irish authors.

Pastoral parallels abound, interestingly, between Ireland’s Big House literature and the literature of the American south. The colonial mansion, a problematic ante-bellum memento, relentlessly haunts The Sound and the Fury, for example, and William Faulkner exploits its evocative symbolism accordingly. When complemented by the Gothic tradition, both the colonial mansion and the Big House become symbols of a lost Edenic past, creating a timeless literature of memory, “whereby the Big house fulfils a role not dissimilar to that fulfilled by the ruin for the Romantics, and becomes invested with all kinds of oneiric symbolism – part of a baroque landscape of melancholy or terror” (Genet, The Big House in Ireland 217).

Although several studies link the Big House to modern Irish fiction, it remains both underappreciated and undervalued in the context of postmodern Irish literature. It happens too often, as with Deane, that the Big House remains predictable, even hackneyed as a motif, creating in the reader all but a sense of déjà vu. Elsewhere, as with Parkin, the Big House is relegated to being complicit in the fabrication of the myth of an unspoilt, rural Ireland, turning a blind eye to any political or social reality. And although the Big House novel of modern Irish fiction “must inevitably be identified with a rather parochial, narrowly nostalgic world-view” (Genet, The Big House in Ireland 218), exceptions, such as Banville’s Birchwood or The Newton Letter, do exist. More importantly, these exceptions use the Big House motif to transport the pastoral from the modern to the postmodern. A master manipulator of the novel form who delights in formal symmetries, on the one hand, and who subscribes to modernist despair and alienation, on the other, Banville revels in an overtly self-conscious style, brazen narrative deceptions and clearly loves parody. His oeuvre, then, is at once “impeccably modernist” and blatantly postmodernist; it inhabits a post-/modernist purgatory simultaneously “possessed of a past” (Bell 2012) and playfully poised on the promontory of a possible but seemingly intangible future – always already elsewhere. Banville “has a deep fascination with the past as a form of consolation for contemporary grief. This suggests a Romantic protected by the Sceptic” (McMinn, John Banville 17) – or, to put it differently, a modernist in the guise of a postmodernist.

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Birchwood (1973) is a perfect example of how masterfully Banville walks the post-/modernist tightrope. Gabriel Godkin, its predictably solipsistic narrator, convincingly re-invents a past for himself that probably never was, in an order it likely never had, so as to impose a pattern upon his thoughts and experiences that must remain all but elusive. Twists and turns accompany all that the reader may assume to know, and in a typically postmodernist manner. It all starts with thinking, according to Godkin: “I am, therefore I think. That seems inescapable” (BW 1), and since “all thinking is in a sense remembering” (3), Gabriel’s writing always has the past as both its proper tense and proper subject. It is hardly surprising then, that Godkin feels the need to constantly re-invent, especially when he recalls the tragic relationships of his childhood: “I began to write, as a means of finding them again, and thought that at last I had discovered a form which would contain and order all my losses. I was wrong” (BW 170).

Although Gabriel’s efforts at finding some order and harmony in the world he inhabits are but the attempts of someone trying to “find the truffle embedded in the muck” (BW 3), his most redeeming quality remains a Romantic persistence, maintained among all the “sleight of hand, dark laughter” and among all the mocking scepticism he encounters:

The harmony of the seasons mocks me. [...] This world. I feel that if I could understand it I might then begin to understand the creatures who inhabit it. But I do not understand it. I find the world always odd, but odder still, I suppose, is the fact that I find it so, for what are the eternal verities by which I measure these temporal aberrations?

Intimations abound, but they are felt only, and words fail to transfix them. (BW 170)

Godkin’s narration is entirely fabricated, but, unlike Freddie Montgomery, not because he enjoys presiding as a ‘little god’ over the fictional world he creates, but because his writing invariably drifts into fantasy: “We imagine that we remember things as they were, while in fact all we carry into the future are fragments which reconstruct a wholly illusory past” (BW 4). His imagination overpowers his memory, and all actual experiences from the past mutiny against any order or system with which he tries to apprehend their reality.

Although Birchwood has often been described as a Big House novel, it is one as much as it is not, and it shows how eclectically the Big House motif lends itself to a post-/modernist treatment; several of the Big House novel’s stock features appear in Part One: a summary of the Godkins’ history (BW 15–19), numerous descriptions of the family’s “genteel slide toward penury” (49), a fear of upheaval and rebellion, as well as various stock characters. Banville himself says: “Birchwood has all the stereotypes: the dark, angry father; the long-suffering mother; ghastly grand-parents; the artistic son; the wild son; the strange
aunt; it has them all” (Sheehan, “Novelists on the Novel” 83). And although at first sight it may thus appear as “just another Anglo-Irish country house novel,” Birchwood is in no way curtailed by a Big House corset. Rather, Banville parodies the genre; he “takes over and reshapes [the] stereotypes, characters, plot structures and social codes [of the Big House novel], working within the form in order to subvert it” (Burgstaller, “‘This Lawless House’” 240).

Elements of satire and farce pervade the entire novel, making for darkest mock-pastoral. As William Empson states,

it is important for a nation with a strong class-system to have an art-form that not merely evades but breaks through it, that makes the classes feel part of a larger unity or simply at home with each other. This may be done in odd ways, and as well by mockery as admiration. (Some Versions of Pastoral 199)

It is hardly surprising that Big Houses and ancestral homes should feature in literature, moreover, since their aristocratic inhabitants were patrons and audiences alike. And yet, as Tom Barry observes in his Guerilla Days in Ireland (1981):

[T]he Big House near all the towns was a feature of first importance in the lives of the people. In it lived the leading British loyalists, secure and affluent in his many acres enclosed by high demesne walls. Around him lived his many labourers, grooms, gardeners and household servants, whose mission in life was to serve their lord and master. In the towns, many of the rich shopkeepers bowed before the “great family”, and to them those in the Big House were veritable Gods. The sycophants and lickspittles, happy in their master’s benevolence, never thought to question how he had acquired his thousand acres, his castle and his wealth. (Barry, Guerilla Days in Ireland 28)

Used in its ‘pejorative’ sense (Gifford, Pastoral:2), the pastoral mode answers this need to “question” accordingly, and with a certain ironic elegance, because “it describes the lives of ‘simple’ low people to an audience of refined wealthy people, so as to make them first think ‘this is true about everyone’ and then “this is specially true about us” (Empson, “‘The Beggar’s Opera’: Mock-Pastoral as the Cult of Independence” 195‒196). Crucially, Empson points out that though pastoral writes “about” common people, it is not “by” or “for” them (196), and what Empson says about the pastoral mode in his discussion of The Beggar’s Opera can be applied equally to the Big House in post-/modern Irish literature, for within the work itself, “it is the clash and identification of the refined, the universal, and the low that is the whole point of pastoral” (“‘The Beggar’s Opera’” 249). This clash is nowhere closer to breaking the surface of deception than
in the Big House novel. William Empson himself argued that “genuine pastoral could only be reached through burlesque” (Some Versions of Pastoral 229). Therefore, by extension, “[t]he only way to use the heroic convention was to turn it into the mock-hero, the rogue, the man half-justified by pastoral” (Some Versions of Pastoral 200).

In Birchwood, Gabriel Godkin personifies precisely such a ‘half-justified’ rogue and ‘mock-hero.’ Heir to an explosive Ascendancy family – his grandmother spontaneously combusts! – he purports to narrate “the fall and rise of Birchwood” (BW 1), though his constant inversions (“I am, therefore I think”) are too conspicuous to hide the subversive intentions that drive the mock-narrative. Gabriel acknowledges this unreliability readily, yet not without insisting on its necessity: “So here then is an ending, of a kind, to my story. It may not have been like that, any of it. I invent, necessarily” (BW 170).

By turning Godkin into a mock-heroic protagonist, Banville can develop his post-/modern approach to the Big House novel more extensively, harnessing its full potential for farce, parody and satire. The author achieves the postmodern subversion of the Big House novel through farcical characterization, on the one hand, and through the parodied description of the decline of Birchwood itself. Many minor characters are intimately linked to the humour of the novel, which is at times farcical and at other times steeped in black comedy. The deaths of Granny Godkin and her husband coupled with their funeral, are a source of mirth and, in equal measure, of horror. Granda Godkin is a particularly vital minor character responsible for much of the dark hilarity by virtue of his many quirks, antics and disturbingly comical high jinks (BW 46–47, 51). He passes away soon after, and, aptly, is found dead “in the birch wood, curled like a still-born infant in the grass” (BW 56).

Other minor characters, such as Josie the cook, are found “on her hands and knees under the dining room table, motionless, staring at nothing” (BW 41), or Nockter, the manservant, who delivers Granny Godkin’s death in his own unique and memorable fashion; they too serve to perpetuate Birchwood’s involuntary transformation into a “madhouse” (BW 15, 39). As Gabriel summarises,

> It was so perfect a picture of bad news arriving, this little figure behind the rain-stippled glass looming out of wind and violence, that at first I took it to be no more than a stray fancy born of boredom. I looked again. He slipped on the grass, frantically backpedaling an imaginary bicycle, and plunged abruptly arse over tip out of my view amid a sense of general hilarity. I waited, and sure enough a few moments later the house quivered with the first groundswell of catastrophe. (BW 75–76)
Birchwood itself slowly becomes a mock-pastoral space saturated in elegiac overtones. Descriptions of its idyllic, natural beauty are always also combined with images of a house, a social class, and a family in ruins:

She [Granny Godkin] sat on the iron seat in the little arbour under the lilacs. An early cricket ticked among the bluebells. She heard without hearing it the music fade down in the fallow field. All was still in her little chapel, while, outside, spring whistled in the leaves, the chimneys, ran shrieking through the long grass under the trees. Spring. Perceive the scene, how, how shall I say, how the day quivers between silence and that spring song, such moments are rare, when it seems, in spite of all, that it might be possible to forgive the world for all that it is not. (BW 15)

Banville uses yet another aspect of the mock-pastoral, in the person of Gabriel, to effect Gifford’s “pejorative” use of the mode: role-reversal. Role-reversal manifests itself when the ‘fool’ or ‘rogue’ of mock-pastoral becomes at once judge and jury, or at least an externally removed commentator and critic of the proceedings integral to the narrative. Though Gabriel reveals himself as the rightful heir to Birchwood, he deliberately places himself outside the pretensions of the traditional life as an Irish squire. This becomes clear in the relentless conflicts for position and recognition with Michael, his twin brother: “Michael, of course, wanted to be squire, to ride on a black horse around his land and hunt the foxes and thrash the peasants. He wanted all that I had, and hated me for having it and despising it” (BW 169).

As the mock-heroic protagonist of his own mock-narrative turned pejorative pastoral, Gabriel uses the setting of the Big House as a means of private revelation and re-identification. This is emphasized by the plot structure itself; Birchwood consists of three parts and is circular in both narrative form and design. Part I, “The Book of the Dead,” recounts Gabriel’s memories of “home” and of his family; Part II, “Air and Angels,” follows his travels with a “Dickensian travelling circus” (Genet, The Big House in Ireland 218) after he runs away from home. Part III, finally, titled “Mercury,” brings Gabriel back to Birchwood. Birchwood is thus “the moving spirit” of the novel, as Susanne Burgstaller observes, “determining the fate of its inhabitants and the structure of Gabriel’s tale” (The Big House in Ireland 241). Gabriel’s return to Birchwood itself shows that a real separation from the Big House and his former home is not possible. Once he recognizes this paradox in his efforts to re-invent himself, Gabriel comes to accept a secluded, solitary existence in Birchwood and pursues a new way of life:

Perhaps I shall leave here. Where would I go? Is that why they all fought so hard for Birchwood, because there is nowhere else for them to be? Outside is destruction and
I do not speak the language of this wild country. I shall stay here, alone, and live a life different from any the house has ever known. Yes. (BW 170)

Whether this new life is real or imagined, Godkin is clearly building himself a social and spiritual Arcadia by cherishing his inheritance and making repairs, thereby ensuring “the rise” of Birchwood and closing the circle of inversions his narrative opened with. This new way of life gives him licence, moreover, to comment as an outsider, from within:

I watched from my window, fascinated. I wanted to go help them, to say, Look, I am not my father, I am something different, but they would have run away from me, horrified. The poppies languished. I worked on the house, cleared out the attic, boarded up the windows smashed during the siege, tended the flower beds, I do not know why. The summerhouse was invaded by pigeons, starlings, a hive of bees. I let them stay there. They were alive, and I had enough of death (BW 168–169)

Gabriel’s journey through the narrative is also defined by the pastoral mode’s dynamic of retreat and return, though the retreat and return happen simultaneously and in a chronologically inverted manner. The narrative begins with Gabriel’s return to Birchwood, which immediately becomes a retreat into the past and bygone days of this Big House ruin: “The past is poised around me. I imagine an arrow whistling through the darkness” (BW 3). Yet, as so often with Banville’s protagonists, their retreat into the dreams of the past is disrupted by a rude awakening into a nightmarish present reality: “I had dreamed of the house so often on my travels that now it refused to be real, even while I stood among its ruins. It was not Birchwood of which I had dreamed, but a dream of Birchwood, woven out of bits and scraps” (BW 4).

As such, Gabriel’s reconstruction and “search for time misplaced” begins positively, and he at first believes himself capable of retelling Birchwood’s history: “These things, these Madeleines, I gathered anew, compared them to my memories of them, added them to the mosaic, like an archaeologist mapping a buried empire” (BW 4). As the story progresses our narrator becomes less and less assured of the factual accuracy of his account, flirting ostentatiously with an as-of-yet alluring Mnemosyne before admitting, finally, the potential inaccuracy of his memories and to his own inclination to invent:

Such scenes as this I see, or imagine I see, no difference, through a glass sharply. The light is lucid, steady, and does not glance in spikes or stars from bright things, but shines in cool cubes, planes and violet lines and lines within planes, as light trapped in polished crystal will shine. Indeed, now that I think of it, I feel it is not a glass through which I see, but rather a gathering of perfect prisms. There is hardly any
sound, except for now and then a faint ringing chime, or a distant twittering, strange, unsettling. Outside my memories, this silence and harmony, this brilliance I find again in that second silent world which exists, independent, ordered by unknown laws, in the depths of mirrors. This is how I remember such scenes. If I provide something otherwise than this, be assured that I am inventing. (BW 13)

Gabriel’s memories of his childhood shift repeatedly and with increasing energy and inevitability from hauntingly beautiful images of a childhood country-house paradise to moments of strange and curious tragedy:

Timidly, almost unnoticed, there came a breaking in upon me that music, palpable and tender, which a wood in summer makes, whose melody is always just beyond hearing, always enticing. Dreamily I wandered down through the trees, into the blue green gloom. Down there were flies, not the intricate translucent things which browsed among the birches, but vivid nightblue brutes with brittle bodies, swarming over the rot, and there were black birds too, under the bushes screaming. (BW 24)

Gabriel’s look back on his life at Birchwood showcases a tragically nostalgic obsession with his own (in)capacity to remember – taken together, there are no fewer than fifty instances of ‘I can / cannot recall’ and ‘I can / cannot remember’ disseminated throughout the novel. This is a search for meaning through language that is continuously disrupted by moments equally grotesque and violent as they seem (for Gabriel) to be quotidian.

Amidst his tale of violent confusion, Godkin repeatedly also finds solace in moments of revelation and joy at the unadorned beauty of nature and its uninvolved ‘silence’:

Listen, listen, if I know my world, which is doubtful, but if I do, I know it is chaotic, mean and vicious, with laws cast in the wrong moulds, a fair conception gone awry, in short an awful place, and yet, and yet a place capable of glory in those rare moments when a little light breaks forth, and something is not explained, not forgiven, but merely illuminated. (BW 25)

Godkin here expresses an unimpeachable redemptive ideal that drives his quest for meaning and love amidst the horrors of his past. This ideal, as so often in Banville, is celebrated in irruptions of epiphanic descriptions of the ordinary splendour of nature; nature, its beauty ever tangible and vibrant, is too often in the blind spot of the human eye, whose selfish and obsessive search for self-identity relegates it to an idealised space, always already elsewhere and ever waiting to be perceived, appreciated. As Joseph McMinn concludes in his survey of Banville’s early fiction:
These special moments of revelation [...] usually occur in the depths of suffering and present themselves as unspoken images to an imagination heightened and intensified by pain. They are like moments of exquisite serenity in the midst of disaster, when order is suddenly glimpsed in the concrete and the tangible, as if it had been simply waiting to be noticed. (McMinn "An Exalted Naming" 21)

As is typical for Banville, the beauty and serenity glimpsed in nature is always coupled with foul and chaotic circumstances, ever colluding to blindside nature’s beauty and to remind the narrator of the absurdities of their world. Godkin’s narrative is littered with such contradictions: “Violets and cow shit, my life has ever been thus” (BW 126). By contrast, nature’s uninvolved, speechless beauty mirrors a search for simplicity and innocence of which modern ways of knowing, rationality and abstraction are hopelessly deficient. Nature’s harmony, order and beauty are each effortless, where Banville’s protagonists embark on a painful and exhausting quest for this selfsame order and harmony, one they then acknowledge too late as a paradise lost. Godkin searches for this harmony and purpose in all but the right places, and though he does discover “intimations” of it upon his return and in the rebuilding of Birchwood, he also ends the narrative with an admission of failure: “I was wrong. There is no form, no order, only echoes and coincidences, sleight of hand, dark laughter. I accept it.” Gabriel is forced to recognise that what he set out to express is beggaring description: “Intimations abound, but they are felt only, and words fail to transfix them.” Our narrator, in his search for a form that would accommodate the oxymorons of his past life, admits defeat and resorts in his despair to the safe haven of a Wittgensteinian turn of phrase: “Whereof I cannot speak, thereof I must be silent” (BW 171).

Rüdiger Imhof, in his own analysis of Gabriel’s use of “a wide variety of different literary genres, conventions and stereotypes to see whether these could assist him in his quest,” concludes that the protagonist has “failed because the old forms were of no use to him, and new, more adequate ones he has as yet not been able to discover.” None of “the conventions and strategies” stood up to the task, Imhof argues, and “all they were suited for was to be parodied” (Imhof, John Banville 72–73). This conclusion is altogether too simplistic, however; although Gabriel mocks the Big House and despairs at how ineffectually he can reckon with his memories, his Birchwood also provides the beginnings of some redemptive insight and, in its final pages, reads both like an elegy for “the fall” of the Big House as well as a celebration of a new-found life within its walls. The secret to this redemptive success is a shift in the narrator’s focus; upon his return to Birchwood, Gabriel recognizes that the rebuilding of a ruin, be it Birchwood or his own identity and feeling of self-worth, is a process rather than
a malignant, incorrigible condition. Thus despair is ultimately trumped by a fervent hope and belief in the possibility of a new life, however long and arduous in its remaking: “I shall stay here, alone, and live a life different from any the house has ever known. Yes” (BW 170). The search for this new life, moreover, is carried over into Banville’s scientific tetralogy,⁴ and can be re-traced particularly well in its third instalment, The Newton Letter.

‘A Time out of Time’: The Newton Letter as Counter-Memorial Pastoral

It all has the air of a pastoral mime, with the shepherd’s wife and the shepherd, and Cupid and the maid, and, scribbling within a crystal cave, myself, a haggard-eyed Damon — The Newton Letter 12.

A plethora of parallels connects Birchwood (1973) to The Newton Letter (1982), though the two novels were published nearly ten years apart, and although they register two different distinct periods of Banville’s writing career. In each novel, the authenticity of memory remains elusive, and both narratives are driven by a desire to shape representations of the self by negotiating (with) the past. Furthermore, the pastoral mode’s own binary structure of dialectical oppositions is used by each protagonist in an attempt to underpin their respective subjects, while simultaneously subverting the selfsame oppositions. Paradoxically, both narrator’s efforts at absolute control over their self-representation become painfully narrative elegies mourning the loss of control.

The Newton Letter belongs to the tetralogy including Kepler (1981), Doctor Copernicus (1978) and Mefisto (1986), each concerned with the lives of its eponymous scientist, and thus they are pervaded by similar philosophical questions about the nature of knowledge, purpose, order and identity. Banville conceived the tetralogy according to the “classical Greek notion of the tetralogy – three tragedies and a satire, with The Newton Letter as the satire” (Carty, “John Banville Interviewed” 18). Fundamentally, The Newton Letter satirizes the academic, scientific approach to life, an approach that proves grossly inadequate in the face of the present and reality. In this vain, the narrator of The Newton Letter is a historian attempting to write a biography of Isaac Newton; for this purpose he retreats to the lodge of a country house (The Ferns) and spends a summer so-

journ obsessed with a period of Newton’s own life, the summer of 1693, when the scientist suffered a personal crisis that ultimately resulted in the end of his scientific career. Specifically, the narrator is intrigued by a letter in which Newton supposedly voiced this crisis; Newton’s letter is henceforth suffused with the narrator’s own involvement with the Lawless family residing at The Ferns to become a narrative retreat and revision of his past and flawed view of reality.

Like Gabriel Godkin, the narrator of *The Newton Letter* desires to order the past in an attempt to understand the self. Many delusions and failures follow, and only slowly does it dawn upon our historian that a transition from the learned and academic can only happen when he unlearns his narrow, scientific understanding of life:

I had brought guidebooks to trees and birds, but I couldn’t get the hang of them. The illustrations would not match up with the real specimens before me. Every bird looked like a starling. I soon got discouraged. Perhaps that explains the sense I had of being an interloper. Amid those sunlit scenes I felt detached, as if I myself were a mere idea, a stylised and subtly inaccurate illustration of something that was only real elsewhere. *(NL 5)*

As noted by several critics, both novels also share common ground as post-/modern responses to Irish history. Historical contexts are alluded to alongside the two novels’ subversion of the Big House to create narratives of misrecognition in which each protagonist constructs views of others that, eventually, are revealed to be delusions of an overly scientific and nostalgic imagination. Banville comments on his own use of the Big House as a personal symbol, stating that he chose the Big House setting for *Birchwood* as well as *The Newton Letter* to strengthen his parodic and metafictional “literary angle of vision,” because the Big House is “the most clichéd thing in Irish fiction” (Banville and Schwall, “An Interview with John Banville” 19). His own association with Irish history is curiously emphatic, even petulant, warranting a critical move away from historical interpretations of both *Birchwood* and *The Newton Letter*:

The only direct statement I’ve ever made in any book that I have written is at the end of *Birchwood* where the protagonist says: ‘I’ll stay in this house and I’ll live a life different from any the house has ever known’ (*BW* 171). And that is my statement. I stay in this country but I’m not going to be an Irish writer. I’m not going to do the Irish thing.’ (Banville and Schwall, “An Interview with John Banville” 19)

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Critics who have insisted on a historical interpretation of the two novels should also consider Banville’s efforts at exclusion from that circle of Irish writers who place themselves squarely in the cross-section of literatures evolving from debates about Irish identity: “I don’t really think that specifically ‘national’ literatures are of terribly great significance [...] I feel a part of my culture. But it’s purely a personal culture gleaned from bits and pieces of European culture of four thousand years. It’s purely something I have manufactured” (Sheehan 1979: 81). On the one hand, Banville’s active resistance to any kind of nationalist discourse thus forces a re-evaluation of his use of the Big House genre; on the other hand, it also resonates with the outsider figures that repeatedly appear in his novels – “bewildered men, abandoned by the powers of language and frustrated in their desires for knowledge, power and sex” (Thomson, “‘Powers of Misrecognition’” 113).

It should be noted, accordingly, that houses big and small remain important in Banville’s later novels too, including *Ghosts, Eclipse, The Sea* and *A Conversation in the Mountains*, creating what Neil Murphy has called the “hallucinatory topos” (“From Long Lankin to Birchwood” 10) of Banville’s architectural spaces: the houses “provide formal image-structures that are integral to the protagonist’s memory or imagined desires but are rarely linked to socio-economic or historical contexts” (Thomson, “‘Powers of Misrecognition’” 114). It can be said, accordingly, that both *The Newton Letter* and *Birchwood* exploit the genre of the Big House novel in different ways and for different purposes. In *Birchwood*, for example, the Big House genre is emptied of much of its historicity, and is instead used as an aesthetic device to evoke visions of Anglo-Irish decadence without being tied to a specific space and time. Such use of the Big House has multiple implications for *Birchwood*. First, it creates “instant associations with decay, political crisis and, significantly, the image of a class of people increasingly out of touch with reality” (McMinn, *John Banville* 32). Second, the Big House becomes an architectonic of personal association and an elegiac articulation of loss. As Victor Sage argues, *Birchwood* is an interplay between “the entropy of lyric idealism and the processes of incarnate history” (Sage, 32), but one that ultimately leads to stasis or “moments of the sublime, raised and cancelled in the structural metaphor of ‘petrifaction’” (Sage 36), a metaphor which corresponds to “the fall and rise” (*BW* 1) of the Big House in literature itself.

Fern House, the Big House of *The Newton Letter* is pivotal in giving space to the narrator’s delusions and mental development. As it becomes evident at the beginning of the novel, our historian has become disillusioned with texts, language and other academic systems of knowledge: “I’ve lost my faith in the primacy of text” (*NL* 1); his retreat to the Ferns is therefore designed to help clear
out “the real people[…] objects, landscapes even” that “keep getting in the way” (NL 1). *The Newton Letter* is the narrative that results from this sojourn, and it is presented as a personal letter to a friend who goes by the name of Clio, a clear allusion to the muse of history (Burgstaller 247). The letter itself is a satire of historical writing reinforced by the parallel parody of the Big House genre. The narrator’s exclusively academic outlook on life comes across as cruel and impersonal. He is forced, on the one hand, to change his point of view – “My illusions about them soon began, if not to crumble, then to modify” (NL 15), and towards the end of the novel, to hand in a kind of professional resignation from historiographical endeavours, mirroring, ironically, Newton’s own exodus from academia: “I can’t go on. I’m not a historian any more” (NL 80). This represents a clear contrast to the narrator’s earlier efforts at trying to capture and use The Ferns, the beauty of its natural surroundings in particular, for his own academic purposes:

I recall one day when I was in, appropriately enough, the orchard. The sun was shining, the trees were in blossom. It would be a splendid book, fresh and clean as this bright scene before me. The academies would be stunned, you would be proud of me, and Cambridge would offer me a big job. I felt an extraordinary sense of purity, of tender innocence. Thus Newton himself must have stood one fine morning in his mother’s garden at Woolsthorpe, as the ripe apples dropped about his head. (NL 7)

As so often with Banville, compensation for the loss of faith in texts, language or systems of order can be found in the form of an uncomfortable if emancipating rediscovery of the ordinary. Any and all absolutes that the narrator worships in the name of science are undone, ironically, by the simple, idyllic beauty he finds repeatedly at his very feet: “Time is different in the country. […] The weather that late May was splendid, sunny and still, and tinged with sadness. I killed whole days rambling the fields” (NL 5). *The Newton Letter* thereby becomes a pastoral text that teaches its creator to become mindful again of the beauty of nature. As our historian realizes soon enough, the remembrance of reality as a simple, sensuous experience enriches rather than obscures the search for order: “It wasn’t the exotic I was after, but the ordinary, that strangest and most elusive of enigmas” (NL 14). Where previously “real people kept getting in the way” or expectations “would not match up” with his academic surrealities (NL 1, 5), the narrator finds solace in the following sublime epiphany about what it means to live rather than wallow in memory:

It was the notion of a time out of time, of this summer as a self-contained unit separate from the time of the ordinary world. The events I read of in the newspapers were, not unreal, but only real out there, and irredeemably ordinary; Ferns, on the other hand,
its daily minutiae, was strange beyond expressing, unreal, and yet hypnotically vivid in its unreality. There was no sense of life messily making itself from moment to moment. It had all been lived already, and we were merely tracing the set patterns, as if not living really, but remembering. (NL 57)

As Gabriel Godkin of Birchwood, the narrator of The Newton Letter was at first deluded to think that his scientific imagination would provide the most authentic version of the past, surpassing even an objective, deductive collection of experiences. Both narrators at first disavow the conventional relation of historical knowledge between subjects and objects, whereby objectivity presupposes subjectivity and vice versa, creating an unstable relation between their perceptions of past and reality. It is only in the ordinary splendour of nature, its beauty concrete, vivid and observable, that each becomes appreciative again of the past as they remember it as well as the reality they have disfigured by their previous insistence on “inventing” (BW 21). What at first “has the air of a pastoral mime” (NL 14) is slowly replaced by a renewed faith in the natural and the ordinary. Perhaps one of Banville’s favourite quotations from Rilke’s Duino Elegies best expresses the elegance of this experience:

Are we, perhaps, here just for saying: House. Bridge, Fountain, Gate, Jug, Fruit tree, Window, – possibly: Pillar, Tower? […] but for saying, remember, oh, for such saying as never the things themselves hoped so intensely to be. Is not the secret purpose of this sly Earth, in urging a pair of lovers, just to make everything leap with ecstasy in them? […] Here is the time for the Tellable, here is its home. (Rilke, Duino Elegies 85)

The narrators of both novels exhibit a strong tendency to resist or undermine the traditions of elegiac narrative while they simultaneously obsess on the remembrance and recollection of memories. In this vain, Banville’s use of the Big House is far more counter-memorial than historical. Narratives that at first attempt to counteract the failure to remember are subverted to create what may be best described as counter-memorial pastorals of personal identity and memory. Both Birchwood and The Ferns are transformed, as Vera Kreilkamp argues, and

the physical solidarity of the symbolic, decaying Big House […] dissolves into a pattern of personal evocation. The house is seldom described, but it is obsessively recalled and lamented – with the focus always on the self-consciously literary angle of vision in the act of recollection, rather than on the object that is lost. (Kreilkamp, The Anglo-Irish Novel 250)

In Birchwood, for example, Gabriel Godkin presents his own subjective viewpoint as an experience of fragmentation and loss marked by warped and unre-
coverable memories. Although memory offers a tantalising version of things past, it is, ultimately, an incomplete form of access to self-understanding, and one that negatively affects both present and future, since “all thinking is in a sense remembering” (BW 11). From the very beginning, therefore, Gabriel appears to be powerless to shape his own memories into the narrative form of his choosing. Rüdiger Imhof observes that “Gabriel’s [quest] is first and foremost not an epistemological quest, but one directed at making sense of the past by remembering it and, more importantly, by writing it down in the form of a sustained narrative” (Imhof, John Banville 54). Godkin’s final statements overturn his entire narrative efforts, however, when he chooses not to remember Birchwood as it was but to make it new, and to live in an alternative if equally idealized reality that chooses the future over the past: “I do not speak the language of this wild country. I shall stay here, alone, and live a life different from any the house has ever known. Yes” (BW 174).

The Newton Letter follows suit and in many ways finishes the counter-memorial manifesto that Birchwood began. It begins by lamenting the contemporary philosopher’s loss of hope in the powers of the imagination: Gabriel’s appropriation of Wittgenstein – “whereof I cannot speak, thereof I must be silent” (BW 174) is transformed into Newton’s bucolic rediscovery of the spiritual joy to be found in the attention to the beauties of the ordinary, tangible world:

I seem to have been only as a boy playing on the seashore, and diverting myself in now and then finding a smoother pebble or a prettier shell than ordinary, whilst the great ocean of truth lay all undiscovered before me. (NL 99)

Like Newton’s discovery of the “smoother pebble” at the seashore, The Newton Letter ends as a celebration of the unpredictability of existence, for only the unpredictable can create real emotions and true joy. At the end of The Letter, the narrator reveals that his erstwhile love-interest Otillie is pregnant with his child:

The child is there. The notion of this strange life, secret in its warm sea, provokes in me the desire to live – to live forever, I mean, if necessary. The future now has the same resonance that the past once had, for me. I am pregnant myself, in a way. Super-numerous existence wells up in my heart. (NL 90)

The above marks an important and extremely rare moment in Banville fiction, an instance of acceptance and joy as the character is overcome with the sense of human possibility; previous frustration, confusion and dejection give way to pure and simple tranquillity. The unborn child, “secret in its warm sea” hints at the possibility for redemption in a new-found future. “Super-numerous existence”, a phrase lifted from the Ninth of Rilke’s Duino Elegies, encapsulates this
spiritual communion with human life and reality experienced so rarely by Banville protagonists. The phrase is literally synonymous with a life beyond numbers, letters or words, and it marks an innocence restored. Where previous attempts at recollecting childhood memories resulted in a desperate if transparent counter-memorialising of the past, acceptance of the present and one’s part in it have transformed our recluse, isolated historian into a man with a life with “super-numerous” futures and possibilities.

4.2 ‘Possessed of a Past’: Pastoral, Identity, and Memory in Eclipse, The Sea and Conversation in the Mountains

In that dreamy stillness, like the azure distances of a stage set, the summers back to childhood seem present; to childhood, and beyond childhood, to those Arcadian fields where memory and imagination merge. — Eclipse 137

The Past as Pastoral in Eclipse and The Sea

“The past beats inside me like a second heart” (S 10): to quote this is to summon, all at once, the quintessential themes and tropes that permeate John Banville’s Eclipse (2000) and The Sea (2005). Though they are not considered partner novels and were published five years apart, when read together, there is more than enough food for thought and comparative analysis. In both novels, for example, a crisis of identity ensues for each protagonist caused by a sudden, traumatic experience. In Eclipse, actor Alexander Cleave “walks out of a performance” never to return to the stage and “retires from life” to his mother’s house and boyhood home (E 20). In The Sea, art critic Max Morden has recently lost his wife to cancer, and “seeking to assuage [his] heaviness of heart” (S 252), journeys to Ballymore, a seaside town where he spent his childhood holidays and where, one fateful summer, he encountered the family Grace.

Whether childhood resort or boyhood home, both can be read as sites of memory and nostalgia that house a pastoral past built on the crumbling promontory of an identity in crisis. Each crisis of self, and with it the point of departure to a sojourn in the past, is paramount to the way each story unfolds and to the consequent attempts at narrative reification. In “Time Enough for Love: The Sea” (2006), Brendan McNamee observes that
Banville’s protagonists exist in a twilight world between two seemingly irreconcilable extremes: on the one hand, the world in which they physically exist, with all its attendant loss and pain, and on the other, perhaps created by a need to escape this calvary, an imaginative paradise wherein all earthly strife is unknown. (McNamee, “Time Enough for Love: The Sea 243)

Though at first sight Cleave’s breakdown on stage and Morden’s difficulties dealing with death seem somewhat unrelatable, each protagonist confronts the momentous task of resolving their crisis of identity homogeneously. In order to come to terms with their present, conflicted self, both protagonists recollect imagined versions of their childhood as nostalgic, pastoral narratives of retreat. When read in Freudian terms, childhood is a quasi-paradisiacal stage under the reign of the pleasure principle and unburdened by the constraints of a rationalist-utilitarian reality (Heiler, “Transformations of the Pastoral” 334). Accordingly, both protagonists negotiate their way through the “earthly strife” of the present and the “imaginative paradise” of the past in order to find “peace of mind” and to try and accept “life in all its clouded glory” (S 243).

Each nostalgia narrative is also fraught with uncertainty and doubt. First, a caesura in the way both characters perceive time begins to unsettle the minutiae of quotidian life: “it has all begun to run together, past and possible future and impossible present” (S 96); “There is no present, the past is random and only the future is fixed” (E 77). Consequently, the two main “characters enter into a search for an appropriate language that will contain their experience, and render themselves and their lives knowable” (Hand, John Banville 165). But language – and both Max and Alexander are obsessed with language – introduces other variables on the strength of its inherent ambiguity. The resulting linguistic, (meta-)fictional constructs of reclusion as well as the various Arcadian memory landscapes and architectonics, the summer houses and their surroundings, most importantly, lead both characters to a retreat into the mind and the imagination: “I am happy, or happiest, at least, in this sealed chamber, suspended in the tideless sea of myself” (E 131). Cleave’s comparison is evocative of Andrew Marvell’s famous ocean metaphor in “The Garden”:

Meanwhile the mind, from pleasures less,
Withdraws into its happiness.
The mind, that ocean where each kind
Does straight its own resemblance find. (41–44)

Cleave and Morden, as most of Banville’s later protagonists, are self-celebratory, solipsistic narcissists that use their linguistic prowess to create private, secluded Arcadiae of the imagination with which to contend their overwhelming sense
of displacement between their experience of time, self and their place in the world. They become inhabitants of “a twilit netherworld in which it [is] scarcely possible to distinguish dream from waking” (S 96–7). In purgatory between idyllic day dreams of the past and the nightmarish reality of the present, they continue to suffer from insomnia and bouts of obsessive restlessness. Somnambulists in the pastoral pastures of their imagined pasts, they are compelled to journey to sites of childhood and memory in search of solace and stability. As Alexander Cleave summarises in Eclipse: “What is it about the past that makes the present by comparison seem so pallid and weightless?” (E 48).

The first premise both protagonists share is, as previously mentioned, a crisis of identity. Alexander Cleave describes his “collapse” on stage as the culmination point of the past months during which he “had been beset by bouts of crippling self-consciousness” (E 88). He sees the main source of what has befallen him in his vocation as an actor:

I spoke all the parts, even of the vanquished and the slain. I would be anyone but myself. Thus it continued year on year, the intense, unending rehearsal. But what was I rehearsing for? When I searched inside myself, I found nothing finished, only a permanent potential, a waiting to go on. At the site of what was supposed to be my self was only a vacancy, an ecstatic hollow. (E 33)

The moment of histrionic paralysis on stage stems, Cleave claims, not from a failure to recognise the self, but from the opposite, a “hideous awareness” of an “insupportable excess of self” (88). Cleave, as his name suggests, has always been cleft between the art and reality of his profession: “on stage I cannot act and in life never cease from acting” (152). His entire “life has been given over to improvising identities, losing himself in other people’s words and actions” along the way (Hand, John Banville 166). He feels his only option is to journey to the imagined locus amoenus of his childhood and thereby put himself “out of harm’s way” (E 14).

Thus, “on one of those vague hazy days of early June that seem made half of weather and half of memory,” Cleave packs his bags and embarks on a journey to his deceased mother’s house. Lydia, his wife, accuses him of “being a sentimentalist,” shrugging her husband’s resolve off as “some kind of ridiculous nostalgia.” Cleave, always brooding on words, retorts with an attempt to exculpate himself from her scrutiny: “Sentimentality: unearned emotion. Nostalgia: longing for what never was.” At first he assumes that the journey will be no more than “a brief respite from life, an interval between acts” (13). Upon arrival in the southeast of Ireland, however, he soon realizes that he is “after nothing less than a total transformation [...] into a miraculous, bright new being” (37).
As Cleave finds himself “standing in [his] drawers at the window of [his] boy‐
hood bedroom,” he feels he cannot but indulge in a meticulous survey of the past
to find “exactly the moment of catastrophic inattention [when he] dropped the
gilded bowl of [his] life and let it shatter” (39).

If Alexander Cleave is compelled to return to the *locus amoenus* of his child‐
hood in order “to locate that singular essential self,” (E 51) Max Morden remem‐
bers the past into being first and foremost as a means of escape from the present:
“we sought escape from an intolerable present in the only tense possible, the
past” (S99). The main narrative of *The Sea* takes place exactly a year after Morden
and his wife, Anna, first visited Mr Todd, the aptly named oncologist who di‐
agnosed Anna’s cancer, “the bulge that was big baby De’Ath, burgeoning inside
her, biding its time” (18). The narrative re-enters a year later, when Anna has
passed away, and when, in a dream, the art critic is suddenly compelled to return
to The Cedars, his parents’ summer house, site of many holiday memories and
secret-keeper of other, darker events that may otherwise go forgotten: “a dream
it was that drew me here” (24). Max is walking aimlessly “along a country
road [...] going home, it seemed” when he experiences the following:

Immediately then, and for the first time in I do not know how long, I thought of
Ballyless and the house there on Station Road, and the Graces, and Chloe Grace, I
cannot think why, and it was as if I had stepped suddenly out of the dark into a splash
of pale, saltwashed sunlight. It endured only a minute, less than a minute, that happy
lightsomeness, but it told me what to do, and where I must go. (S26)

Morden’s somewhat Beckettian dream sequence expresses an unconscious de‐
sire for *nostos*, or “homecoming,” (25) invoked by imaginative memories of those
childhood summer idylls. Ultimately, this “lyreless Orpheus,” (24) as Morden
refers to himself, is attempting to escape the *algos* that is overwhelming him,
hoping to alleviate the grief he is presently experiencing for the loss of his wife.

*The Sea* unfolds as an internal monologue with three narrative strands, all
told by Morden: “one, his account of life at the Cedars[;] [...] two, the story of
Anna’s cancer and how they both dealt with it along with some history of their
relationship; and three, memories of that childhood summer with the Graces”
(McNamee, “Time Enough for Love” 244). The third strand represents what one
may call yet another version of the seemingly lost, paradisal ‘golden world,’ a
feature prevalent in Banville’s later works. By using such sites of memory and
time as the sea, the beach and the Cedars summer house, in particular, Banville
provides a re-reading of these elements that focuses on questions of the human
experience of time, the fickle nature of memory, and the fantastic faculties of
language and the imagination to think away all conflicts and contradictions. In
summary, Max first seeks refuge in the past in an attempt to play truant from the present, which he experiences as “harsh,” “cold,” and altogether “impossible”:

To be concealed, protected, guarded, that is all I have ever truly wanted, to burrow down into a place of womby warmth and cower there, hidden from the sky’s indifferent gaze and the harsh air’s damagings. That is why the past is just such a retreat for me, I go there eagerly, rubbing my hands and shaking off the cold present and the colder future. (S 60–1)

Having returned to The Cedars, Morden, like Freddie Montgomery in *Ghosts*, retires into the kingdom of his mind to finish a “Big Book,” not on Vaublin, but “on Bonnard” (260). With intimate, impressionistic brush strokes – mimetic of Bonnard’s landscapes, interiors and still lifes – Morden paints in words portraits of his self in an imagined past. These storied representations are, however, always in a tussle with the subjectivity of time and the singular idiosyncrasies of memory: “Memory dislikes motion, preferring to hold things still, and as with so many of these remembered scenes I see this one as a tableau” (221). The Cedars, much like Cleave’s boyhood home in *Eclipse*, thus becomes emblematic of the “Arcadian fields where memory and imagination merge” (*E* 137), and where the unreliable, always questionable human experience of time and the timelessness of the imagination become interconnected.

In Part II of the novel, “the different strands of the narrative begin to weave together and, in one significant section, distant paradisal past and painful present reality are both formally balanced and subtly intertwined” (McNamee, “Time Enough for Love” 245). Banville achieves this equilibrium mainly through his use of the sea as a central image that embodies both the limits of the human experience of time and the imagination’s prowess to overcome these boundaries: “The sea is godlike both in its immensity and its implacable indifference” (McNamee, “Time Enough for Love” 246). Ironically perhaps, it is Alexander Cleave who first muses on the many roles and guises of the sea: “Why do I find the thought of the sea so alarming? We speak of its power and violence as if it were a species of wild animal, ravening and unappeasable, but the sea does nothing, it is simply there, its own reality” (*E* 67).

Where Max looks to the past merely as a “retreat,” Cleave is in need of “retirement from life” completely. As so often with Banville protagonists, both are uncomfortable with their present, “authentic life,” as Morden calls it, “which is supposed to be all struggle, unflagging action and affirmation” (S 60). They are rather more interested in remembering life than living it: “Really, one might almost live one’s life over, if only one could make a sufficient effort of recollection” (S 160); “What is it about the past that makes the present by comparison
seem so pallid and weightless?” (E 50). Remembering, we remind ourselves, is always also linked to the process of identification as a means of self-reification, whence the various landscapes, sites and architectonics of memory found in both narratives, and especially in the individuals perceived to be moving through them, also facilitate explorations and re-evaluations of self.

Accordingly, sites of memory and recollection take centre-stage in the novels and strengthen the narrator’s obsession with the past as a lost childhood and quasi-paradise. As the third narrative strand of The Sea unfolds, for example, the summer house becomes increasingly significant in Morden’s enactment of nostalgia. The Cedars, in his memories, is pictured as the epitome of Arcadian architectonics, “a museum of sorts, retaining material traces of his childhood” (Friberg, “Waters and Memories Always Divide” 253). It is through this house that Max first entered, the “summer world” of the fittingly named Grace family, whom he saw as “divinities” that singled him out for their favour: “How proud I was to be seen with them, these divinities, for I thought of course that they were the gods, so different were they from anyone I had hitherto known” (S 107–8).

The journey to Ballyless takes the adult Morden to “the very sanctum” he first pictured the living room of the Cedars to be. Upon entering the house, the boy Morden feels as if he has by magic “vaulted all the obstacles” and landed “next to an angled, solid-seeming beam of sunlight, with Mrs. Grace in a loose-fitting, flowered dress, light blue with a darker pattern of blue blossoms” (S 85). Soon after, at a picnic outing with the Graces, in his imagination he experiences an “Edenic moment,” where he evokes the hortus conclusus of the golden age in the image of himself “at what was suddenly the centre of the world, with that shaft of sunlight and those vestigial flowers [...] Mrs Grace offering me an apple, that was however nowhere in evidence” (90).

To say that the “apple,” however, “was nowhere in evidence” is to confuse the “mists from the all too real then” with “the blissfully imagined now” (S 92). The confusion stems not from a moment of inattentiveness, but is in fact an example of Morden’s wilful equivocation of past and future. He has in his imagination returned to the past because he is desirous of a life within its innocent, impressionistic memories. His “ridiculous nostalgia,” then, to borrow Lydia Cleave’s cogent remark, is not only a retrospection into a bucolic childhood, but the expression of a desire to superimpose that pastoral version of the past onto an equally idyllic possibility of the future:

This is [...] exactly how I would have foreseen my future self. [...] Yes, this is what I thought adulthood would be, a kind of long Indian summer, a state of tranquillity, of calm incuriousness, with nothing left of the barely bearable raw immediacy of child-
hood, all the things solved that had puzzled me when I was small, all mysteries settled, all questions answered, and the moments dripping away, unnoticed almost, drip by golden drip, towards the final, almost unnoticed quietus. (94)

Naturally, the art critic is all too well aware of the “oddly antique cast” which emanates from this blissful “version of the future.” Yet he indulges in it because he is “not so much anticipating the future as nostalgic for it, since what in [his] imaginings was to come was in reality already gone” (96).

Alexander Cleave’s story is also one of an identity cleft between progress and procrastination as it clings to the past. *Eclipse* is a tragedy in five Aristotelian acts that culminates in the cathartic suicide of the protagonist’s daughter, Cass. This eventually leads to Cleave’s return from his pastoral sojourn in the past to the present, disenchanted by the dialectics of identity and (in)authenticity, and eclipsed by the certainty of death – one is easily reminded of Poussin’s *Et in Arcadia Ego*. Like Morden, Cleave is haunted by dreams that become the point of departure to childhood memories: “I dreamed last night I was a child and here again” he tells Lydia, who replies with a pentameter of perfect pith and exactitude: “Of course; you never left here, that’s the truth.” Cleave follows up this *reductio ad absurdum* with a pentameter of his own, in admonishment, like Max, of the house and its significance: “The house itself it was that drew me back, sent out its secret summoners to bid me come […] home [sic!]” (*E* 4). Such and similar somnambulant summons, seemingly homeward bound, pervade the introductory pages of *Eclipse*, and they also take up much of the beginning of *The Sea*. These dream sequences are so similar in style and imagery, moreover, that they could have been experienced by one and the same person:

The house itself it was that drew me back, sent out its secret summoners to bid me come […] home, I was going to say. […] For miles I had been travelling in a kind of sleep and now I thought I was lost. I wanted to turn the car around and drive back the way I had come, but something would not let me go. Something. […] I walked forward to the brow of the hill and saw the town then, its few little glimmering lights, and, beyond, the fainter glimmer of the sea, and I knew where unknowingly I had come to. (*E* 4–6)

A dream it was that drew me here. In it, I was walking along a country road, that was all. […] I was determinedly on my way somewhere, going home, it seemed, although I did not know what or where exactly home might be. Something had broken down, a car, no, a bicycle, a boy’s bicycle, for as well as being the age I am now I was a boy as well, a big awkward boy, yes, and on my way home, it must have been home, or somewhere that had been home, once, and that I would recognise again, when I got
there. [...] I was calm in myself, quite calm, and confident, too, despite not knowing rightly where I was going except that I was going home. (S 25–27)

We are reminded here of Gaston Bachelard’s elegant observations about the “pre-human” and “immemorial” quality that such “spaces of our past” can have on us in his Poetics of Space, especially when “we return to them in our night dreams” and “daydreams” alike (Bachelard 10). More precisely:

[A]ll the spaces of our past moments of solitude, the spaces in which we have suffered from solitude, enjoyed desired and compromised solitude, remain indelible within us[.] [...] We return to them in our night dreams. These retreats have the value of a shell. And when we reach the very end of the labyrinths of sleep [...] we may perhaps experience a type of repose that is pre-human; pre-human, in this case, approaching the immemorial. (Bachelard, Poetics of Space 10)

The striking similarities at the outset of each character’s pastoral retreat also foreshadow the interchangeable conclusions both inevitably come to. For Cleave and Morden share the insight that their return to the pastoral past is an expression of their desire for an equally simple, peaceful future. Cleave’s quibbles with Lydia encapsulate this moment of epiphany for both:

‘It’s something to do with the future,’ I said. ‘In the dream [...] I’m standing in the doorway, in the sun, on an Easter Sunday morning, and somehow it is the future.’ [...] ‘It sounds more like the past, to me;’ she said, losing interest, what little there had been. The past, or the future, yes, I might have said – but whose? (E 8)

As the tag-question implies, even this piece of insight is not without qualms and doubt. Rather, each protagonist’s return to the past also amounts in some respects to more disappointment. The various sites of memory are simultaneously the source of aesthetic recall and self-reflecting tribulations. On the one hand, a first narrative sees Max run away from the twelve-month experience of his wife’s death to the Cedars, where he hopes to summer in many a childhood memory. Cleave follows suit, after choking on stage, and returns to his mother’s old house. Parallel to these gilded evocations, on the other hand, run narrative strands that expose each site of memory and childhood to the ruthless, disillusioned light of the present. First, the protagonists begin to doubt the veracity of their memories; Cleave interrupts his incessant “obsessing on the past” and asks himself: “Am I remembering anything rightly? I may be embellishing, inventing, I may be mixing everything up. [...] These are the telltale threads on which memory snags her nails” (E 56–7). Then, the summer house – the primary site of childhood memories – presents itself robbed of all preconceived charm and nostalgia:
The model of the house in my head, try as it would to accommodate itself to the original, kept coming up against stubborn resistance. Everything was slightly out of scale, all angles slightly out of true. [...] I experienced a sense almost of panic as the real, the crassly complacent real, took hold of the things I thought I remembered and shook them into its own shape. Something precious was dissolving and pouring away between my fingers. Yet how easily, in the end, I let it go. The past, I mean, the real past, matters less than we pretend. (S 156–7)

The image of the house based on past perceptions fails to live up to the house of the present the adult Max re-enters. It is not the present and the past that square off against each other here, but the “real” and the “imagined past.” To deny the significance of “the real” past, however, is to disown that which seemingly matters most, the “imagined” past. And that idyllic childhood itself, after all, can only exist as an-other to “the real” past, without which neither Morden nor Cleave would have a recourse to the present: “what makes for presence if not absence? – I mean the presence of oneself as a remembered other – and I might as well never have gone away” (E 46).

Alexander Cleave is also abruptly brought back to the memories of his “real” childhood upon re-entering his mother’s house. First, he makes his way through its garden:

Behind the gate was a mass of overgrown creeper and old brambles [...] The garden was grown to shoulder-height in places. The rose trees hung in dripping tangles, and clumps of scutch grass steamed[.] [...] I set off toward the house, the untidy back of which hung out in seeming despair over this scene of vegetable riot. Nettles stung me, cobwebs strung with pearls of moisture draped themselves across my face. All of childhood was in the high sharp stink of rained-on weeds. (E 113)

We are reminded of Virgil’s *Idylls* here, in which, ever and anon, the shepherds face similar realisms: “Wherever you tread the ground’s one thorny ambush” (Idyll 7, “Harvest Home” 20–21). Further disappointments ensue for Cleave when he braves entrance, disappointments similar to those experienced by the adult Morden:

I was in the kitchen. I might never have been here before. Or I might have been, but in another dimension. Talking about making strange! Everything was askew. It was like entering backstage and seeing the set in reverse, all the parts of it known but not where they should be. (E 114)

If “pastoral,” to borrow Terry Gifford’s eloquent phrasing, “is the poetry of illusion” and “the Golden Age is the historiography of wish fulfilment” (Pastoral 41–2), *Eclipse* and *The Sea* can be read as postmodern autobiographies of wishful
thinking. *The Sea* in particular beckons to be read through a bifocal lens of the pastoral and the postmodern; Banville’s masterful intertwining of the three narrative strands is made possible by the narrator’s use of three temporal strata. As Morden observes, “it has all begun to run together, past and possible future and impossible present” (S 96). The pastoral mode in *The Sea* is tightly linked to the human experience of time and the mind’s attempts to overcome such limitations. A pastoral nostalgia experience thus develops into a discourse of identity by virtue of a multilayered process, around which the narratives of the two novels are conspicuously structured.

First, the present is experienced as a physical impossibility because it has been thrown into crisis by sudden experiences of shock, grief or distress. Then, in search of escape and “peace of mind,” the imagination remembers – and consequently feeds on – memories of the past, tinged with the postcard colours of an idyllic childhood of bliss and ignorance. Lastly, and here the circle of my argument closes as time returns to its point of origin, the future is brought into play by the self-same desire for idylls and indifference hitherto reserved for memories, the imagination, and the past. The result is a nostalgia narrative that explores questions of identity as embedded in temporal signifiers of self and ‘the other,’ which the pastoral mode expresses in the form of a reciprocal subtext of presence and absence. Perhaps Hedda Friberg puts it best in her essay “‘Waters and Memory Always Divide’: Sites of Memory in John Banville’s *The Sea*”:

Running off as they do in opposite directions, and separating irreversibly, Morden’s past and future nevertheless […] remain in collusion. As the future is ‘born,’ Morden’s past which is not born, becomes ‘the other.’ […] Diverging, curving away from the future, the stream of the past nevertheless colludes with that of the future. (Friberg, “‘Waters and Memory Always Divide’” 254)

Confronting the fickle nature of memory and the boundaries of human time-experience also means confronting the real experiences of childhood versus the imagined; the two stand in stark contrast to each other, one absent as an imagined, pastoral past, and the other always felt as tortuously disenchanted the present. The resulting tensions condition the displacement experienced so strongly by both characters. Once the summer houses fail to fulfil their function as the Arcadian architectonics of childhood nostalgia and retreat, the previous sense of purpose and significance, in other words, the search for “that singular essential self” becomes but an absence.
The Avatars of Memory

She is in my memory her own avatar. Which is the more real, the woman reclining on the grassy bank of my recollections, or the strew of dust and dried marrow that is all the earth any longer retains of her? No doubt for others elsewhere she persists. — The Sea

Like Freddie Montgomery, both Cleave and Morden are in a state of permanent sulk, for each man’s world and self does not match up to their inner visions and desires. Therefore each tries to find recourse in the various female figures that link them to “the waxworks of memory” (S 118) as they become the focus of each narrative. These women protagonists – for they become crucial to story and narrator alike – at once facilitate and hinder the men’s process of self-reification and readjustment. In the second narrative strand of The Sea, for example, the adult Morden relates the story of his wife’s cancer with flashbacks of how they met and their life as a husband and wife, and in the third strand of narrative the young boy Max shares the stage with the Graces. From the earliest days Morden felt that his birth and upbringing were constraining his personal development: “I never had a personality, […] I was always a distinct no one, whose fiercest wish was to be an indistinct someone” (S 216). He experiences for the first time a sense of social betterment in his encounter with the family Grace, whom he sees as “the gods” (3): “How proud I was to be seen with them, these divinities” (145). Chloe Grace, in particular, develops into Morden’s “true origin […] of self-consciousness” (168). Lacan postulates that to exist is to be recognised by an-other; similarly, Morden believes that “no one had yet been real in the way that Chloe was. And if she was real, so, suddenly, was I” (S 168).

The adult Morden craves for this childhood experience of self-reification and sees his relationship with Anna as based on the same need: “Anna, I saw at once, would be the medium of my transmutation. She was the fairground mirror in which all my distortions would be made straight” (116).

Both Cleave and Morden assign a certain amount of blame for their sense of inauthenticity to a lack of “class,” and seek to compensate it through the women they choose. Alexander Cleave “would happily have exchanged everything [he] had made [himself] into for a modicum of inherited grace, […] class, breeding, money” (E 36). The more the narrative of Eclipse begins to unfold, the more we see Cleave using female figures as lenses through which his storied self must be read. In Part I of the novel Cleave describes how he met Lydia during a brief
stay at a “summer city” in the autumn of his acting career. The discrepancies between their social background and status dominate his description. Where Lydia was “of an aristocratic family of fabulous pedigree,” Cleave was careful not to “permit certain prominences to show through the deliberate fuzziness of [his] origins” (E34). He had “a room in a rotting tenement in one of those cobbled canyons off the river” (E36); she sojourned at the “Hotel Halcyon,” which Cleave describes in the light of idyll and gilded fantasy: “The Hotel Halcyon took on for me the air of an oasis; before I entered there I imagined behind that revolving door a secret world of greenery and plashing water and sultry murmurings” (E34–5).

As the summer houses fail to offer a means of escape and a form of reification in their crumbling topographies, eroded by time, three women in each novel variously become “avatar,” “effigy,” or “demon temptress,” each “conjured up by the force of [the protagonist’s] desire” (S 98, 118) to fulfil his “dreams, fantasies, […] delusions” of self (E28). In Part I of Eclipse, Lily, daughter of housekeeper Quirke, becomes a first “real, […] physical presence” and begins to intrude upon the ghosts of a “phantom woman and her phantasmal child,” that haunt Cleave’s house and mind: “Her presence makes the house seem impossibly overcrowded. She has upset the balance of things” (E95). In Part II Lily and Quirke begin to take over Cleave’s life, or more precisely, that life which he has fashioned for himself in his solipsistic narrative:

“They have come into focus, in a way that I am not sure I like, and that certainly I did not expect. It is as if they had stood up in their seats and ambled on to the stage while the play was going on, interrupting me in the middle of an intense if perhaps overly introspective soliloquy, and to save the show I must find a means somehow of incorporating them into the plot (E122).

Whilst wife Lydia is always also present in Cleave’s thoughts and actions, the more important female figure in the process of readjustment is his daughter Cass. Though the novel is ostensibly centred around Cleave’s plight “to cease becoming and merely be” (77), as the story begins to unfold “it becomes increasingly clear that the person haunting the narrative is his daughter Cass” (Hand, John Banville 170). Cleave’s daughter suffers from a rare strain of schizophrenia, Mandelbaum syndrome, and the father envies his daughter for her lack of self-consciousness, as it stands in utter contrast to his own acting self. Unlike Cass, who “does not act, but variously is” (E72), Cleave must always act and cannot simply be; he cannot do without an audience, and he sees himself as an understudy of the many masks he puts on and the many roles he plays. Cass is for him “a symbol of the elusive completion of himself that he so desperately
seeks” (McNamee, “Time Enough for Love” 223). In sum, like Morden, for whom Chloe, Anna and Mrs Grace all embodied “the chance to fulfil the fantasy of [his] self” (S 105), Cleave is attracted to women out of a similar need to be recognised by their other. He describes the numerous relationships before his marriage to Lydia as an abhorrence of life in a “vacuum”:

And things rushed into this vacuum where the self should be. Women, for instance. They fell into me, thinking to fill me with all they had to give. It was not simply that I was an actor and therefore supposedly lacking an essential part of personality; I was a challenge to them, to their urge to create, to make life. (E 33)

Paradoxically, neither Max nor Alexander can ultimately have what they want, because the desires of the wanting self inherently entail an absence, a kink of complexity that torments them as it does other Banville protagonists. This absence as always already elsewhere is epitomised by various elements throughout both novels. First, the memories of the childhood past are emplotted within pastoral narratives of nostalgia; as previously discussed, the dialectics of presence and absence are central to the pastoral mode, and in Banville’s nostalgia narratives absence is most strongly felt in the pastoral past by which each character attempts to achieve or re-invent their own presence in the now. This dialectic of presence and absence, of being-in-the-world, and what Jacques Lacan calls the process of identification of the self through “an-other,” is brought into the narratives by the summer houses and the imaginative collusion of the three-fold temporal strata in each narrative: one of the present, ‘an-other’ of the past and yet another moving towards a future imagined through the lens of the pastoral past. Furthermore, though the various female figures are the human companions that both accompany and link the male protagonists to their pasts, they do not reinforce a sense of self, but counter-act it. Chloe, for example, severs Morden from his imagined quasi-paradise and gilded boyhood world. The self-consciousness she engenders in him “expelled [him] from that sense of the immanence of all things, the all things that had included me, in which up to then I had dwelt, in more or less blissful ignorance (S 168). Similarly, Cleave’s life, lived through the many women he “fell into,” can be seen as “progress from a position of obsession with wholeness, with an absolute order or a pure, unadulterated self, to an acceptance of life as a process, unending and almost always incomplete, its deplorable dearth of meaning amply compensated for by an abundance of significance” (McNamee, “Time Enough for Love” 227). Thus, to continue to map elements of the pastoral in “the waxworks of memory” and the unconscious is to move to another Arcadian retreat used by all of Banville’s later
characters, including Freddie Montgomery in *Ghosts*: a retreat to the imagination and the mind.

A sense of displacement is central to both novels without which the journey to the summers of the past would not have taken place. Each protagonist feels out of place in their present space and time. Additionally, both perceive “humanity as being permanently displaced between imagination and the material world (McNamee, “‘A Rosy Crucifixion’” 151). In an attempt to come to terms with the attendant estrangement of self, Max and Alexander retreat to the only kingdom where they feel they hold power and influence: the kingdom of the mind. There the strong hold of language allows them to house in an Arcadia of verbal and intellectual illusions: “‘Harpazein,’ I said hastily, ‘to seize. Greek, that is.’ Playing the fussy old professor, remote but kindly; when in difficulty, act” (E 16). Language, after all, is the voice of the mind, and to Cleave and Morden language has always been more than a key to the “sealed chamber” of the imagination. It is also a powerful source of solace, certainty and stability in the face of their present crisis of identity. Language to both is a religion; it is the church where they seek refuge and try to heal their hurts.

From the very first pages the reader is made aware in both novels that the respective narrative realities cannot be perceived, read or imagined but through the lens of the protagonists’ narcissistic, metafictional obsession with language: “Plimsoll. Now, there is a word one does not hear any more, or rarely” (S 11). Countless other language-related queries and anomalies are dispersed throughout the novel; their resolution more often than not offers, if only briefly, moments of unassailable conviction and comfort that counteract the characters’ sense of permanent displacement between self and the world: “Anaglypta. All afternoon I had been searching for the word and now I had found it” (E 20). Ever and again the narrators try to extend these moments of escape by producing exquisitely written prose that celebrates the significance of nature, or more specifically, “the superabundance of summer” (E 188). In lyrical interludes they paint landscapes of the imagination where the otherwise overwhelming sense of displacement and bifurcation disappears, and where the absence of an idyllic elsewhere is amalgamated with the landscapes of the now: “It was a sumptuous, oh, truly a sumptuous autumn day, all Byzantine coppers and golds under a Tiepolo sky of enamelled blue, the countryside all fixed and glassy, seeming not so much itself as its own reflection in the still surface of a lake” (S 45).

Words are Max’s consolation, vocabulary his comfort, and language his Arcadia. He constructs idyllic retreats and alternate, escapist realities primarily by virtue of his narrative art. “Immersed in words,” Max argues, “paltry as they may be ... I had felt myself break through ... into another state where ordinary laws
did not operate ... where I was ... more vividly present than ever I could be in what we call, because we must, the real world” (S 97–8). As Roy L. Hunt argues, “[r]eality is given meaning through language. When we learn our language we acquire an arbitrary set of codes which define our concept of reality.” There is, however, a fundamental paradox in attempting to understand reality when that reality is but a construction based on the past as pastoral. Neither Cleave nor Morden, intellectuals in search of a pastoral grand narrative of nostalgia can “stand outside the system [of language] and discuss objective truth in itself because without a language reality has no meaning.” Thus, Hunt continues, if the attempt “to discover objective truth involves using an arbitrary symbolic system which immediately places itself between reality and our comprehension of it, [...]. once reality is mediated through language, reality is forever displaced” (Hunt, “Hell Goes Round and Round” 155).

Arcadia, like language, is inherently bifurcate. There are, after all, “two kinds of Arcadia: shaggy and smooth; dark and light; a place of bucolic leisure and a place of primitive panic” (Schama, “Arcadia Redesigned” 517). In language there is always a subject and an object; in the pastoral mode too, there can be no presence without absence, and in any narrative emplotment no sense of self without an-other. Morden’s pastoral reading of the past consoles and commemorates the absence of self by calling upon the absence of others. On the one hand, his recourse to the mode imbues him with a “sense of the immanence of all things” (S 167). On the other hand, all pastoral can do is to provide the narrative process of (re-)identification and remembering with a symbolic paradigm for “putting the complex into the simple” (Empson, Some Versions of Pastoral 23). Morden’s commemorative nostalgia narrative endows the holiday resort with such a symbolic system: “At the seaside all is narrow horizontals, the world reduced to a few long straight lines pressed between earth and sky” (S 10).

Then again, language is a symbolic system, to recall Hunt, that is caught “between reality and our comprehension of it,” whence it is always already “displaced.” At best it can punctuate the darkness of grief, offer a brief sense of ennoblement to the attendant pain, but it can never truly dispel it. Morden comes to realise this during one of his many hospital visits. There it dawns upon him that he “would never again be able to think of another word to say to [Anna]. [...] From this day forward all would be dissembling. There would be no other way to live with death” (22–3). The Sea and Eclipse, perhaps above all else, are elegies about the coming to terms with mortality. And though the retreat into the nostalgia constructions of memory and the imagination cannot truly offer stability and re-adjustment, it does, at its high points, give the protagonists a sense of leaving stronger than upon embarkment for the golden world.
Between Trauma and Nostalgia in *Conversation in the Mountains*

People have said that only survivors themselves understand what happened. I’ll go a step further. We don’t. [...] I know I don’t. [...] So there’s a dilemma. What do we do? Do we not talk about it? Elie Wiesel has said many times that silence is the only proper response, but then most of us, including him, feel that not to speak is impossible. To speak is impossible, and not to speak is impossible. — Schreiber Weitz, 1990

The act of remembering always also involves a mode of reliving the memories selected for recall – an experience that can be as painful as it is a necessary means of elegiac memorializing. Thus it is that, despite Theodor Adorno’s often misinterpreted statement, “[w]riting poetry after Ausschwitz is barbaric” (Adorno, “Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft” 231), no single historical tragedy of the twentieth century precipitated more literary, poetic and elegiac engagement than the Holocaust, and not many critics give credit to Banville for also attempting such a task, albeit indirectly, in his *Conversation in the Mountains* (2008). The short radio play is about Paul Celan, the Holocaust survivor-poet who, on July 25 1967, paid a visit to Martin Heidegger at the alleged Nazi sympathizer’s mountain cabin or “Hütte” at Todtnauberg. Their meeting remains shrouded in mystery, and, as there is no record of the conversation(s) between these two antithetical intellectual giants of the twentieth century, countless efforts exist that attempt to divine what may or may not have been said. Banville’s *Conversation in the Mountains* is one such effort, a semi-fictional account of their

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6 John K. Roth’s *Holocaust Literature*. (Salem Press, 2008) provides an up-to-date and extensive overview of the holocaust’s literary legacy.

meeting in which Celan demanded Heidegger to come clean about his past Nazi enthusiasms.

Indeed, Conversation in the Mountains is a play about coming to terms – whether literally, metaphorically, historically or philosophically – with trauma and accountability. The case has been made that Celan was most likely suffering from a form of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), in which “the overwhelming events of the past repeatedly possess, in intrusive images and thoughts, the one who has lived through them” (Caruth, Trauma: Explorations in Memory 151). The play begins and ends with excerpts from two of Celan’s most famous poems – “Todesfuge” at the outset, and “Todtnauberg” in its final lines, thereby encoding poetically a paradox at the heart of understanding PTSD:

[W]hile the traumatized are called upon to see and to relive the insistent reality of the past, they recover a past that encounters consciousness only through the very denial of active recollection. [...] Modern neurobiologists have in fact suggested that the unerring ‘engraving’ on the mind, the ‘etching into the brain’ of an event in trauma may be associated with its elision of its normal encoding in memory. (Caruth, Trauma: Explorations in Memory 153)

Celan’s poetry embodies this paradox of trauma because it encodes the horrors of the Holocaust into a narrative memory. In his search for accountability (by meeting with Heidegger), moreover, Celan is in search of reaccountability, a way to integrate his traumatic experiences into a complete story of the past. This process of narrativisation is crucial, because “[t]he flashback or traumatic re-enactment conveys [...] both the truth of an event and the truth of its incomprehensibility [sic!]” (Caruth 153). As holocaust survivor Sonia Schreiber Weitz elegantly summarises, “[t]o speak is impossible, and not to speak is impossible” (“Videotaped Interview”).

At first, Celan’s poetic quest for justice, accountability and a voice for deeds unspeakable, a “hop, today, for a thinker’s (un-delayed coming) word in the heart” (“Todtnauberg” 11–15) – a word that remains delayed indefinitely and,
ultimately, un-spoken,\textsuperscript{8} clashes with Heidegger’s own search for philosophical and ideological identity. The way in which Heidegger’s “Hütte” embodies a nostalgic space for the philosopher’s most successful years at the same time that Celan experienced various traumas, makes the encounter of poet and philosopher in 1967 a unique locus in space-time, in which their conversation hovers between Celan’s traumata and Heidegger’s nostalgia. This tension is what imbues Banville’s entire \textit{Conversation} with an eerie, intangible quality, and which makes the play so interesting as an elegiac, redemptive pastoral.

Thus, numerous aspects of \textit{Conversation}’s design resonate with Banville’s speculative effort, including its structure – entirely a series of encounters and confrontations that culminate in Celan/Heidegger’s retreat to and return from a \textit{locus} full of ‘hope’ and the promise of redemption. This retreat and return are underscored poetically by Banville’s inclusion of Celan’s most celebrated as well as most written about poems, “Death Fugue” at the beginning of the play, and ‘Todtnauberg’ at its close. Accordingly, the play begins with Celan’s reading of the final lines of “Death Fugue” to “an auditorium packed with a thousand-strong audience” at the University of Freiburg, “in the old heart of Germany” (\textit{Conversation}, Act I, pp. 294–295).

Banville’s emphasis on Freiburg, historically a fortified town of free citizens, as “the old heart of Germany,” is particularly significant here, especially if we take into account how comprehensively the topos of the forest captured every realm of Nazi art, politics and ideology after 1933, and with what tenacity “the obsession with a myth of origins” took hold of \textit{Ahnenerbe}, the organisation founded in 1935 “under the aegis of the SS” that “promoted and pursued research into Germanic antiquity and racial identity” (Schama, “The Hunt for Germania” 79). \textit{Ahnenerbe} appropriated German forests into Nazi origin myths based on a “need for an ancestral memory of woodland warriors,” that in turn echoed “the patriotic topographers of the German Renaissance” (Schama 1995: 81, 95). Indeed, the protection and conservation of German forests was taken more seriously by the Third Reich and its Reichforstminister Göring than by any other German government. As Banville’s Celan reminds us in Act III of the play,

\textsuperscript{8} Celan famously sent Martin Heidegger a bibliophile edition of ‘Todtnauberg,’ the poem he wrote shortly after their encounter, and it has been convincingly argued that he thereby “expected or hoped it would elicit an answer from him.” Celan’s unique use of the adverb ‘undelayed’ [un-gesäumt] in the edition he sent to Heidegger can be seen as “an urgent personal appeal to fulfill that hope.” The poet deleted the adverb from his collection of poems \textit{Light Compulsion} [Lichtzwang] (1970) two years later, however, as he “must have realised that an ‘undelayed’ word from Heidegger condemning Nazism or speaking of the philosopher’s Nazi past would not be forthcoming” (Lyon, James K. \textit{Paul Celan and Martin Heidegger: An Unresolved Conversation} 188).
“When they built the camp at Buchenwald, the SS were careful to preserve Goethe’s famous, favourite oak tree on the site. You have a great feeling for culture, you Germans” (Conversation 300). Simon Schama echoes Celan’s sarcasm in his own study of the Nazi ‘hunt for Germania,’ when he states, forcefully: “It is, of course, painful to acknowledge how ecologically conscientious the most barbaric regime in modern history actually was. […] Exterminating millions of lives was not at all incompatible with passionate protection for millions of trees” (Schama, “Hunt for Germania” 119).

This deeply perverted paradox, first hinted at in Act I of the play, is further compounded in Act II, in which Gerhart Baumann, the organiser of Celan’s reading, claims, immediately afterwards: “We know what it is for you to come here to Freiburg – what it is for you to be among Germans.” Celan, in the mildest and most ironic of rebukes, as if to suggest how little Baumann or anyone else at the reading could truly ‘know’ what it was like for him ‘to be among Germans,’ simply retorts: “Your language is my mother tongue, Professor. Literally – my mother was a German-speaker” (Conversation, Act II, pp. 295). The poet’s deliberate use of the phrase ‘mother tongue’ and the immediate reminder to Baumann that his mother, too was a ‘German-speaker’ evokes Celan’s relationship to his mother and to the German language, the tongue shared between mother and son. For it was Fritzi Celan who sowed the seeds of her son’s love for German, and though he grew up in a polyglot environment, “it was the German mother tongue, the Muttersprache, in which he flourished” (Felstiner, Paul Celan 6). Memories of her were to him always bound to the language that so intimately connected them, and yet simultaneously that same language was perverted to word the hideous, traumatic slogan: Arbeit Macht Frei [labour sets you free]: “[T]he motherword led me,” Celan would later write, “so that a single spasm / would pass through the hand / that now, and now, grasps at my heart!” (Celan, “In Front of the Candle” 43–46). As is typical of Conversation’s structure of flashbacks, Banville provides a metafictional interpretation of the real Celan’s profound pain in Act VI, in which ‘Paul’ has the last conversation – almost an argument – with his ‘Mother,’ and at the end of which the poet recites in a voice-over the elegiac verses: “It’s falling, Mother, snow in the Ukraine: / The Saviour’s crown a thousand grains of grief” (Celan, Selected Poems 306).

Considering the complex biographical and historical backdrop of its delivery, Celan’s response to Baumann can be read as an articulation of his entire poetic being, because it shows how unyieldingly he registered in German the catastrophes made in Germany – catastrophes so intimately linked to his own life. With his world obliterated, Celan held fast to the ‘mother tongue’ that was both
his and theirs, perhaps because, literally, it was all he had left.9 Thus, Celan’s choice to write in German forces an encounter between poet and reader, between the Holocaust perpetrators and its survivors, and between those responsible and those, like Baumann, desperately trying to repair the irreparable. In the aftermath of “that which happened” to both humankind and the German language between 1933 and 1945, poetry to Celan meant a reaching out: “I went with my very being toward language,” he once said, and “insofar as it was language that had been damaged, his verse might repair that damage” (Felstiner, Paul Celan xvi, xviii).

The conversation(s) or speech acts that take place between Celan and Heidegger at Todtnauberg in the play are closely linked to the crucial role speech itself plays in coming to terms with the individual and historical trauma of the Holocaust. As Kevin Newmark observes, only through speech can the traumatized try “to move away from the experience of shock by reintegrating it into a stable understanding of it” (qtd. in Caruth, Trauma: Explorations in Memory 154). Thus speech presents risks as much as it presents opportunities for healing, for “[t]he danger of speech, of integration into the narration of memory, may lie not in what it cannot understand, but in that it understands too much” (Caruth, Trauma: Explorations in Memory 154). Banville’s extensive integration of Celan’s poetry, coupled with his many allusions to the poet’s conflicted relationship with German, his “mother-tongue,” shows an acute awareness of the forked nature of speech and language as tools of therapy and injury alike. Speech, or more accurately in this case, conversation, thus is turned not only into a “vehicle of understanding, but also the locus of what cannot yet be understood.” Speech becomes “the event of creating an address for the specificity of a historical experience that annihilated any possibility of address” (Caruth, Trauma: Explorations in Memory 155–156).

Ultimately, speech and conversation allow for a traumatic re-experiencing of the event which carries with it what Dori Laub calls the “collapse of witnessing,” an impossibility of knowing that first constituted the trauma itself. This impossibility of knowing in turn coerces us into a new kind of challenge, namely to

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9 Celan’s mother and father were deported to an internment camp near Transnitria in June 1942, on a Saturday when Celan had stayed with some friends, and could not return due to a curfew. Banville’s Celan recounts the harrowing experience of returning home as follows: “In the morning when I arrived home it was no longer home: the house was deserted, the front door was sealed, and my mother and father were gone. [...] It wasn’t until years later that I learned what had become of them. They were taken in a transport east to Transnitria. [...] My father died from typhus in the autumn of that year, and in the winter my mother was shot, being no longer fit for work” (Conversation Act VII, pp. 307–308).
listen and to witness said impossibility (Laub, “An Event Without a Witness” 80). Celan’s reading of his poem “Todesfuge” at the opening of Conversation expresses this impossibility in its purest and most poetic form, because, as Dori Laub suggests, “[s]ometimes it is better not to know too much” because, speaking as a clinician, “to listen to the crisis of trauma […] is to hear in the testimony the survivor’s departure from it; the challenge of the therapeutic listener, in other words, is how to listen to departure” (Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* 10). At the beginning of the play, Heidegger listens as Celan speaks, or more accurately, as he reads out loud his traumas poetically. Then, as of Act III in particular, Celan mostly listens as Heidegger speaks nostalgically of the ‘hut,’ his philosophy and all that is his at Todtnauberg: “Let me show you my little kingdom. I bought the plot of land here in 1922 or was it ’21? – So I’ve been a presence in this clearing for forty-five years. (*To himself*) Lord, so long!” (Act III, pp. 298). It is in this relation between listening and speaking that the possibility of “a truly pedagogical encounter emerges, an encounter that, by breaking with traditional modes of understanding, creates new ways of gaining access to a historical catastrophe” (Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* 155).

Crucially, while the hut functions as a space for the nostalgic recollection of his success and of his philosophy for Heidegger, in Celan, it triggers memories that are traumatic, and this is what creates an impalpable tension between the two throughout their sojourn at Todtnauberg. What makes the situation much more difficult for Banville’s Celan, then, is in the way his reading at the University of Freiburg, in front of Heidegger, forces a confrontation and return to the trauma of the Holocaust, rather than a departure or retreat from it. Banville has his Celan belie these difficulties in the way the poet refuses to be photographed with Heidegger, and in Celan’s overall hesitance and inability to meet Heidegger’s practiced eloquence with more than a few sharp-tongued responses:

**Heidegger**

No, no, I mean no flattery, only – But ah, it seems the photographer wishes to take our portrait together. Shall we … ?

**Celan**

(Sharply) No. (*Softens his tone*) No, please. I … I have an aversion to being photographed.

*A moment of awkward silence*. **Heidegger** realises **Celan** is deliberately refusing to be photographed with him.

**Heidegger**

Ahem. Yes, of course, I understand … (*Pause*) And your health has improved, yes? We had heard that you were in hospital.
CELAN: I was in a Swiss clinic. I suffer from depression. And other things. (Brief laugh) I have bad dreams. Bad memories. (Conversation Act II, p. 296.)

The way Banville has constructed Celan’s series of encounters at the beginning of the play, first with the University of Freiburg, then his audience and reading-organiser Baumann, and finally Heidegger, shows the author’s keen awareness of the paradox that committed Celan to this poetic decontamination of German, a language previously misappropriated by Nazi jargon and racist thinking. In this context, Celan’s (albeit metafictional) reference to his mother and the German mother tongue epitomizes the subliminal irony of Baumann’s remarks after the reading: “[W]e shall tell our children how on this day, the 24th of July 1967, in Freiburg in the old heart of Germany, we saw and heard the greatest poet of the age, Paul Celan” (Act I, pp. 294–5). Celan’s perception of the irony is brought full circle when, in response to Heidegger complimenting him as “the greatest German poet of our time,” Celan insists that he is “not German, Herr Doctor.” Heidegger’s response betrays both his efforts at reconciliation and that he too is aware of the paradox: “But you write in the German language. That is our common homeland, yours and mine” (Act II, pp. 296–7).

If the conversation with Baumann shows a Celan ready to deal with such ironies in responses that mask a haunted mind, the poet is not equally equipped for what immediately follows – his first encounter with Heidegger. Where the philosopher is presented as a “vigorous seventy-eight-year old” who “wishes to meet [Celan],” the other, at first, can only respond to Heidegger’s ostentatiously preconceived, artificial compliments with civility and veneration: “I once wrote that all of my work was no more than an effort to say philosophically what Rilke had already said poetically. I might add your name to his in that formulation”

10 Banville showcases the meticulous research that has gone into the lives, history, poetry and philosophy surrounding the unresolved encounter between Celan and Heidegger, when, in an interview, he recommends Felstiner’s biography itself: “First of all, any reader wishing to learn about Celan should read John Felstiner’s definitive biographical study, Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew, which as well as an account of the life contains some of the finest translations of Celan’s extremely difficult poetry – Felstiner’s English version of “Todesfuge” is a triumph. For Heidegger, Hugo Ott’s biography is very thorough, though Ott is quite condematory, and quite rightly, of the philosopher’s murky politics” (Sarvas, Mark. ‘Conversation in the Mountains – A Brief Q&A With John Banville.’ July 01, 2008).
Historically, Heidegger was certainly more informed and better prepared for the meeting than Celan, whose delicate mental state provoked from him ambivalent behaviour, including the abrupt declaration that he did not wish to be photographed with Heidegger – mirrored in Act II of the play. In the days that precede the reading, Celan was clearly plagued with doubts he shared with his wife, who replied: “I understand that the reading in Freiburg with Heidegger present will cause some difficulties. Nevertheless I hope it will come off all right” (Celan, Correspondance vol. 1, p. 548 quodt. in Lyon 163). Heidegger, on the other hand, sought to create an opportunity for conciliation rather than confrontation, as indicated by an undated letter sent to Baumann shortly before the reading:

I’ve wanted to become acquainted with Paul Celan for a long time. He stands farthest in the forefront and holds himself back the most. I know all of his works, also of the serious crisis from which he managed to extricate himself as much as a person is able. Your are correct in interpreting how helpful a reading here would be. July 24 would be the best date for me. […] It would also be healing to show P. C. the Black Forest. (Baumann, Erinnerungen an Paul Celan 59–60, quodt. in Lyon, Paul Celan and Martin Heidegger 162).

The letter shows Heidegger’s genuine interest in meeting Celan, hints at conciliatory motives, but also lays bare the philosopher’s considerable arrogance in assuming that “it would be healing to show P. C. the Black Forest” – how can he presume to be able to put Celan on the road to recovery? Given Celan’s mental state and Heidegger’s ulterior motives in arranging the reading, their encounter was always going to be a balancing act between confrontation and conciliation.

Accordingly, Heidegger’s walk upon this tightrope is threaded into the play in the form of two plots designed to intertwine various metafictional, historical figures in chance meetings and confrontations that lead up to the primary plot, our eponymous conversation in the mountains. The second plot, told in a series of flashbacks from February 1924 to 1950, functions much like a revolving door of these encounters, mainly between Heidegger’s former student and turbulent liaison Hannah Arendt, and Karl Jaspers, with whom, following his public declaration of sympathy for the National Socialists in 1933, Heidegger brought upon

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11 It is crucial to note here that “when Celan visited Heidegger in Freiburg on July 24–25, 1967, he was on a leave of confinement in a psychiatric clinic to which he returned after the visit.” Furthermore, “he was not formally released until October of that year” (Lyon, Paul Celan and Martin Heidegger 160).

12 In 1946, on the twentieth anniversary of the death of Rainer Maria Rilke, Heidegger delivered a lecture entitled ‘What are Poets for?’ ['Wozu Dichter?'].

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himsself an embittered political and personal altercation. In a series of flashbacks, the audience thus witnesses Hannah Arendt’s transformative encounters and relationship with Heidegger, from “a young lady” at Marburg University in February 1924 who “would like to take [Heidegger’s] philosophy course” (Act IV, p. 301), to his “darling girl,” whom he promises to “protect,” to “keep […] safe” (Act X, p. 313), to the “muse” who helps him write his “great work” Being and Time (Act XIII, p. 318), and finally to the “briskly” confident and successful philosopher who “finished [her own] book,” The Origins of Totalitarianism (1951), one that “owes everything to those earliest days in Marburg, to [Heidegger] and to what [he was] then” (Act XX, p. 325).

These flashbacks are clearly designed to enrich our historical understanding of Heidegger; the ambiguity is evident, especially when intertwined with Heidegger’s exchanges with Celan in ‘the hut’. Banville thus successfully stages a dramatic re-possession of Being and Time, and offers a glimpse of Heidegger’s humanity as juxtaposed to the inhumanity of Nazi ideology. As Arendt herself summarises, Heidegger’s failing is perhaps not so much his declaration of support for the Nazis – his relationship with her shows that we all make mistakes, – but the resultant philosophy that she was the apparent ‘muse’ to. As she claims, towards the end of the play, Heidegger’s “is a philosophy of the individual, [hers] of plurality.” For she believes it is “not the authenticity of the individual but the virtuosity of acting together with others that brings into the world the openness that [Heidegger has] always sought.” It is Heidegger’s “tragedy,” then, that he “never understood” how “the world becomes inhuman without the continual talk in it of humans” (Act XX, pp. 326–327). If the first plot re-imagines a series of historical events that result in the birth of a poem – Celan’s ‘Todtnauberg,’ the second plot is much like an elegy that outlines, and to an extent attempts to explain the death of some of Heidegger’s most important and intimate personal relationships, whether between a student he loved and admired, an erstwhile colleague he disenfranchised through his concomitance with Nazi ideology (Karl Jaspers), or Paul Celan, “poet, survivor, Jew” (Felstiner, Paul Celan), with whom he engaged in an antithetical yet reciprocal appropriation of poetry and philosophy.

The setting of the primary plot at Heidegger’s ‘hut’ on Todtnauberg, though historical, is also charged with considerable symbolism and meaning for Banville’s overall elegiac endeavour. The hut itself is a particularly potent place / space for Conversation, because it is where Celan’s and Heidegger’s personal and ideological histories and philosophies intertwine to create a seemingly insurmountable tension in an already strained relationship. In his later philosophy, Heidegger contemplated two questions: ‘What are poets for?’ and ‘What does...
it mean to dwell upon the earth?’ – questions that are closely linked, it would seem, and that Celan too dwelled upon his entire later life. For Heidegger,

language is the house of being; it is through language that unconcealment takes place for human beings. By disclosing the being of entities in language, the poet lets them be. That is the special, the sacred role of the poet. What is distinctive about the way that humankind inhabits the earth? It is that we dwell poetically (Bate, *The Song of the Earth* 258).

This *dwelling* poetically is precisely what Banville’s Heidegger is trying to achieve in his hut at Todtnauberg. As Celan enters the “famous hut,” Heidegger introduces his “little kingdom” accordingly: “When I secured the professorship at Marburg I knew I’d need a place to escape to” (*Conversation Act III*, p. 298). Tension mounts as Celan admits: “I envy you such a place. In my apartment where I live in Paris I frequently feel I’m suffocating” (*III*, p. 297). Indeed, as Baumann drives Celan into the mountains, the poet explains his philosophical concomitance with Heidegger: “His concerns echo mine – we’re both dwellers in the house of language” (*Act III*, p. 297). Dwelling, to Heidegger, was the authentic form of *being* as set against “the false ontologies of Cartesian dualism and subjective idealism” (Bate, *The Song of the Earth* 261). It is important to note how subtly Heidegger references his own ‘hut’ in the definition of ‘dwelling’ outlined in his “Building Dwelling Thinking”:

Only if we are capable of dwelling, only then can we build. Let us think for a while of a farmhouse in the Black Forest, which was built some two hundred years ago by the dwelling of peasants. Here the self-sufficiency of the power to let earth and heaven, divinities and mortals enter in simple oneness into things, ordered the house. It placed the farm on the wind-sheltered mountain slope looking south, among the meadows close to the spring. [...] [I]t made room in its chamber for the hallowed places of childbirth and the ‘tree of the dead’ – for that is what they call a coffin there: the *Totenbaum* – and in this way it designed for the different generations under one roof the character of their journey through time. (Heidegger, “Building Dwelling Thinking” 160)

To summarise Heidegger’s concepts, beings exist without human consciousness, but in order that they might attain to ‘Being’ in the sense of becoming a presence, a disclosure, a space must exist. Heidegger names this space, which he equates with human consciousness, *Lichtung*, a term with very relevant meanings and translations. First and foremost, *Lichtung* can be translated into ‘forest clearing,’ but it also has the sense of a space in which everything is lit up. Language, then, opens up a *Lichtung* for human ‘being’ as such. Banville adroitly hints at these
core concepts of Heidegger’s philosophy when he has his metafictional philosopher state: “Let me show you my little kingdom. I bought the plot of land here in 1922 – or was it ’2I?s – So I’ve been a presence in this clearing for forty-five years” (Act III, p. 298, *italics* my own).

Banville also uses his metafictional character’s understanding of Heidegger’s philosophy to stage a profound irony that is progressively revealed in *Conversation*, because it is Banville’s Celan, not his Heidegger – for all the latter’s building and dwelling in the ‘hut’ of language – who appears to have found a way to “dwell poetically” and through his poetry to ‘build’ “for the different generations [of his people] under one roof [the poetry] of their journey through time.” This irony is also what explains some of Heidegger’s reverence for Celan and his poetry, as well as the all-pervasive unease that relentlessly preys on the two throughout the play. Where Banville’s Heidegger confidently stages himself as the host in his hut of language, it is Celan who quietly disassembles this confidence and *unconceals*, even *unspeaks* Heidegger’s philosophical escapism; already in Act III, Celan begins to *unbuild* Heidegger’s nostalgic, Arcadian architectonics:

**HEIDEGGER**

Yes, yes. Often now the past seems more real to me than the present. (Brief laugh) It’s the way with all old men. (They walk forward) Those trees are mine, on the slope. And this is my well, you see, with the wooden star above it. Now. (He unlocks the door) Please. (They enter the cabin. Pause) History will remember this day, Herr Celan.

**CELAN**

And what will history’s judgement be, I wonder? (*Conversation* Act III, p. 299)

Unconcealment pervades *Conversation in the Mountains* as both a mode and a motif; as a mode, it is used by both plots of the play, the plot of unveiling flashbacks to Heidegger’s time as rector of the University of Freiburg and affair with Hannah Arendt, and the plot of Celan’s reading and conversation with the philosopher in his hut at Todtnauberg. As a motif, unconcealment pervades all of Celan’s words, poetry and actions in the play. First, Celan’s entire poetic is an act of unconcealment that goes against Adorno’s “To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” (quotd. in *Conversation V*, 304); the play opens with Celan’s most famous example, “Todesfuge,” and closes with his most frequently analysed and interpreted, ‘Todtnauberg’. There can be no coincidence in Banville’s choice of poems, for each insists upon a *presencing* of ‘Death,’ whose phonetically German counterpart – ‘Tod’ – is echoed in the titles of both poems, as if to reinforce the age-old pastoral epitaph *Et in Arcadia Ego*. 

Lizenziert für Gast am 03.08.2019 um 08:38 Uhr
Heidegger’s concept of *presencing* is crucial to an understanding of a further dynamic of the aforementioned irony, because it encapsulates the complex relationship between Celan and the German philosopher perfectly, both linguistically and philosophically. Much of Heidegger’s early *Being and Time* (1927) and his later *Building Dwelling Thinking* (1971), is primarily concerned with the idea that “poetry is the original admission of dwelling because it is a *presencing* not a representation, a form of being not of mapping” (Bate 2000, 262, italics my own). Yet, linguistically, and thus ironically, a spatial mapping of this concept of be-ing (*Dasein*) is inevitable if we revert to Heidegger’s own terminology for presence / presencing: *Anwesen*. For the German noun ‘Anwesen’ is commonly also used to refer to a person’s property, estate or stately home. Celan thus quintessentially deconstructs Heidegger’s entire concept of being or poetically dwelling – first through his reading of ‘Todesfuge’ at the University of Freiburg, where the philosopher was rector until April 1934, and then more systematically during his presence, his *Anwesen* at the philosopher’s hut, *Anwesen*, and “little kingdom.”

Banville’s Celan calmly and with a certain poetic elegance deconstructs several of Heidegger’s explanations during their first conversations of the play in Act III; the entire scene is launched by “an awkward pause” to which Celan responds: “There are so many things we may not talk about it’s impossible to know where to begin” (III, 300). What follows is an exchange between an eerily composed Celan and an easily irritable Heidegger, who, despite his best efforts to be the perfect host, hoping to guide Celan “back inside” his “house of Being” (IV, 303), is caught off-guard on several occasions by the poet’s innocuous but probing remarks:

**Celan** *(Dreamily, as if to himself)* When they built the camp at Buchenwald the SS were careful to preserve Goethe’s famous favourite oak tree on the site. You have a great feeling for culture, you Germans.

**Heidegger** rises, goes and pours a glass of water for himself, drinks.

Yes, you’re right: the water tastes of the deeps. *(Pause)* I was never an anti-Semite, you know. I defy anyone to find a single word anywhere in my writings to indicate otherwise. I see you’re sceptical. You’re thinking, *A man may harbour in his heart things he will never allow himself to say.* But we’re men of the word, you and I. We know the importance of what’s said and not said, and the distinction between the two.

**Celan** *(Lightly)* Are you a man of your word, Herr Doktor? [...]  

**Heidegger** If you mean, have I lied, I’ll answer you what Nietzsche said: *There are no facts, only interpretations.*
Six million is a fact. Six million facts. Are they to be denied? (Act III, 300–301)

Further exchanges follow in Act V, where Heidegger is repeatedly taken out of his comfort zone as he betrays a defiant irascibility:

Heidegger

Pah! – that’s Adorno. What was it he said: To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. Typical Bolshevist thinking. You have refuted him.

Celan

Have I? I wonder. I almost met him once, Adorno. [...] 

Heidegger

He branded my philosophy as fascist. I don’t know which is worse, the characterisation itself, or the shallowness of the mind that formulated it. [...] A total misunderstanding of my position. Jargon! Ha! He should know, he and his fellow-travellers in the so-called Frankfurt School.

Celan

And yet in his strictures on modern-day technology he can sound remarkably like you.

Heidegger

Nonsense! Adorno is a fool and a coward who sold himself to the Americans, like his pal Herbert Marcuse, my one-time pupil. Don’t talk to me of Adorno. [...] A charlatan! (Pause) Forgive me. I’m overwrought. You’ll understand, I hope, something of the causes of my bitterness. (Act V, p. 304)

These subtle acts of unconcealment and deconstruction are followed by a symbolically charged “walk along a mountain path,” during which it becomes clear that Celan has a greater understanding of the plant life around the hut than Heidegger:

Celan

Celan walks back to him from some paces away. Arnica. Good for bruises. And here’s eyebright, Scrophulariaceae, a cure for the eyes. (Soft laugh) Mother Nature’s pharmacopoeia.

13 It is important to note that this analysis focuses on Banville’s (meta)fictional, literary Heidegger / Celan, and is not to be interpreted as an historically accurate evaluation of their actual conversation. Indeed, as James K. Lyon concludes in his nuanced study of the encounter:

There is not a shred of documented biographical evidence from their entire time together to suggest that Celan condemned Heidegger, felt hostility toward him, or was disappointed with him. In fact the opposite seems true. Later attempts to portray this as a failed encounter and an enormous disappointment for Celan are based on considerations that arose more than a week after the visit (Lyon, Paul Celan 169).
More important for Banville’s elegiac project in *Conversation* is the specificity of the herbs that Celan finds along the mountain path, including “Arnica. Good for bruises,” and “eyebright, *Scrophulariaceae*, a cure for the eyes.” As if to further reinforce the symbolic significance of these flowers, Banville’s Celan then quotes Shakespeare’s Sonnet 65. The “rage” clearly alludes to Heidegger’s previous irascibility; the “bruises” are an external, metaphorical manifestation of Celan’s pain, suffering and loss, and the “eyebright” symbolically represents the German poet’s desire for clarity, closure, a way for Heidegger to clear his own name, and Celan’s hope “for a word of explanation, [...] even, maybe a word of apology” (Act VI, p. 305).

Although the purpose of the radio play is never entirely clear, especially as it takes Banville out of his fictional comfort zone, the conversations between Celan and Heidegger are historically and philosophically charged, and thus provide a potent vehicle for an equally pastoral as well as postmodern elegiac endeavour that eventually leads to concomitance, commemoration and indeed commiseration of the Holocaust. As Banville states in an interview about the play:

> I’ve always been fascinated by the thought of these two extraordinary figures encountering each other – the philosopher who had been a Nazi, the poet whose parents had been destroyed in a Nazi work camp – at the famous “hut” in the Black Forest. [...] The conversation in the hut was not recorded, and neither man gave an account of it. [...] Besides the flora and fauna, did they talk about the war, about Nazism and Heidegger’s refusal publicly to account for, much less apologise for, his membership of the Party? I could not resist speculating. (Sarvas, “A Brief Q & A with John Banville” July 1, 2008)

Perhaps the only surviving letter that directly relates to their meeting, dated January 30, 1968, sent by Heidegger to Celan, best shows the true value and significance of both the historical conversation and Banville’s metafictional endeavour. In the letter, Heidegger reacts to a copy of an expensive limited edition

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14 Historically speaking, Celan’s mental state and health did indeed improve after his conversation with Heidegger: “Temporarily, at least, the meeting with Heidegger had had an undeniable salutary effect on his [Celan’s] mental state, which no one could have predicted and which most critics afterward have ignored (Lyon, *Paul Celan* 170).
of ‘Todtnauberg’ that Celan had recently sent him. The letter reveals a Heidegger reflecting briefly on their ‘conversation’ six months earlier and thanks Celan for the poem, which he describes as “the word of the poet [...] that preserves the memory of a day of various moods in the Black Forest.” Heidegger then makes an unusual observation: “Since then [our meeting] we have exchanged a good deal of mutual silence. I think that someday some of it will be redeemed from unspokenness through conversation” (letter qtd. in Krass, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, Aug. 1, 1997, p. 57). Perhaps it is this idea of redemption from the unspoken which is carried forward most powerfully by the conversation’s legacy, and which, ultimately, Banville is trying to recapture in his unique radio-play. The result is a play that dialectically also disavows Adorno’s famous claim, as if to say that if to write poetry after Ausschwitz is barbaric, not to write, is even more so.

### 4.3 *Et in Arcadia Ego*: Death in Arcadia, Death in Banville

At the end of their lives, all men look back and think their youth was Arcadia. — J. W. Goethe

The secret of survival is a defective imagination. The inability of mortals to imagine things as they truly are is what allows them to live, since one momentary, resisted glimpse of the world’s totality of suffering would annihilate them on the spot[ [...] We have stronger stomachs, stouter lungs, we see it all in all its awfulness at every moment and are not daunted; that is the difference; that is what makes us divine. — *The Infinities*

### Death, Love, and (Im)mortality in *The Sea* and *The Infinities*

At times Banville’s novels read like “death-haunted” epitaphs, at other times his focus is on life as a lighthearted, even “comical venture with occasional irruptions of the tragic” (Barry, “Banville in Interview” 2005). Max Morden’s many confrontations with mortality in *The Sea* – the suicide of Myles and Chloe Grace,
the death of his mother, and Anna’s terminal condition, among others – result in mood swings between “anger, vituperation, violence” (S 149) and the need for comic relief from the attendant grief. So too, when he learns of Anna’s cancer: “In the midst of the imperial progress that was our life together a grinning losel had stepped out of the cheering crowd and sketching a parody of a bow had handed my tragic queen the warrant of impeachment” (19–20). This pendular momentum is not only visible in *The Sea*, but also in its novel posterior, *The Infinities*, in which, quintessentially, we find “the gods, at play in the house of mortals” (Corrigan 2010). It was only a matter of time, after the highly cerebral introspections about the human fear of death and its consequences – abundant in *Eclipse* and *The Sea* – that Banville’s efforts would move full circle, to musings about the death of immortality itself. Where *The Sea* is about coming to terms with the inevitability and omnipresence of human mortality, *The Infinities* centres around the gods of the ancient world – Hermes, Zeus et al. – and their perennial, unattainable efforts to die: “Each time he [Zeus] dips his beak into the essence of a girl he takes, so he believes, another enchanting sip of death, pure and precious. For of course he wants to die, as do all of us immortals, that is well known” (I 67).

A memorable sentence opens *The Sea*: “They departed, the gods, on the day of the strange tide” (1), and *The Infinities* is based upon a reversal of this seemingly incontrovertible truth: it is set in a world in which the gods never departed at all. They pass their time by observing, wryly commenting on, and occasionally interfering with the affairs of human beings. Already at the outset, Hermes, the self-appointed narrator of the novel, mischievously muses as to “[w]hy in such times as these would the gods come back to be among men? [...] But the fact is we never left – you only stopped entertaining us” (I 14). Throughout the novel, Hermes observes, in prose with a propensity for empyrean poetics, the world he and his fellow gods created, deliberating on the fascinating problems of human interaction and behaviour. Indeed, tragi-comical attitudes about love, death and (im)mortality act against and complement each other to create pastoral otherworlds of escape, self-exploration and nostalgia. Accordingly, everything in both *The Sea* and *The Infinities* is suffused with the gods and Arcadia. The setting of *The Infinities* is a country house aptly named Arden in which the central human character, Adam Godley Sr., lies bed-ridden and dying in the attic, alternatively also known as ‘the Sky Room.’ There, in the prime of his life, he used to work as a theoretical mathematician, and there he is “condemned not to death, not yet, but to a life into which he feels he does not properly fit” (I 4). Adam Sr.’s greatest achievement is his theory of unified time, space and being, and yet, trying to convey his theory to the world at large has so far presented
itself as an insurmountable problem. It is one of the few problems that the divine Hermes truly sympathises with:

He always deplored the humble objects out of which his predecessors – so many of whom he helped to discredit – forged their metaphors, all those colliding billiard balls and rolling dice, the lifts going up and coming down, ships passing each other in the benighted night. Yet how else were they to speaks that which cannot be spoken, sat least not in the common tongue? He sought to cleave exclusively to numbers, figures, concrete symbols. He knew, of course, the peril of confusing the expression of something with the something itself, and even he sometimes went astray in the uncertain zone between the concept and the thing conceptualized; even he, like me, mistook sometimes the manifestation for the essence. Because for both of us this essence is essentially inessential, when it comes to the business of making manifest. For me, the gods; for him, the infinities. You see the fix we are in. (I 131)

Many signature Banville features return in *The Infinities*, including lyrical, self-aggrandising prose, a confrontation of philosophical issues, and high-culture allusions. Unlike in *The Sea*, these all serve to showcase Banville’s ironic humour. Where *The Sea* is very clear in its mission of atonement for a childhood tragedy, *The Infinities* is a clever comedy, its narrator cloaked connivingly in the garb of the ancient Greek tragedy. As Eoghan Smith puts it, “*The Infinities* is still very much concerned with authenticity, yet the suffocating interiority of [Banville’s] middle-aged solipsistic male narrators is at least partially abandoned for a more panoramic gaze” (*John Banville: Art and Authenticity* 146). The two novels are intimately connected, nevertheless, by their continuous obsession with themes and tropes central to most of Banville’s fiction: dying, death and the various stages of existence in between. Indeed, *The Infinities* is filled variously with characters either who have died, who are dying, or those who cannot die. Thus, just as in his ‘Frames’ trilogy, these novels sway between tropes of mortality and immortality, linked inexorably to the author’s own idea of himself as a kind of “deity who feels compelled to relinquish the possibility of an authentic art, but who cannot quite do so” (Smith, *John Banville: Art and Authenticity* 147). Banville, essentially, is himself musing on the problems of writing novel, for the author creates his setting, creates his characters and imagines his plot, only to then find that he cannot make them stick to the plan intended for them. In the same fashion, Zeus, Hermes, and all the rest of the gods are astonished that, after they created humans, the humans discovered for themselves love, lust, as well as other means of interaction that can serve as both a means of exploration of and an escape from the mortal realities thrust upon them by the
gods. The toys crafted by Zeus et al. for their own amusement, have come to life and Hermes, like any author, cannot wait to see what they will do next:

[S]ee what they made of this mess of frottage; it is as if a fractious child had been handed a few timber shavings and a bucket of mud to keep him quiet only for him promptly to erect a cathedral, complete with baptistry, steeple, weathercock and all. Within the precincts of this consecrated house they afford each other sanctuary, excuse each other their failings, their sweats and smells, their lies and subterfuges, above all their ineradicable self-obsession. This is what baffles us, how they wriggled out of our grasp and somehow became free to forgive each other for all that they are not. (I 67)

This pivotal yet elusive issue is expressed in a postmodern style that uses the Arcadian architectonics of solipsistic, self-scrutinizing nostalgia, a return to the seemingly idyllic simplicity of country life, and an obsession with the antics of memory to stage once again not only a crisis of identity but, in a more panoramic, aggrandising manner, a crisis critical of how to live life itself. Banville’s achievement in *The Infinities* lies mostly in the way he turns a setting that echoes Poussin’s pastoral into a postmodern Irish wake, on the one hand, and an elegiac, myth-imbued bacchanal, on the other. The way *The Infinities* melds the original, Greek myths and grand narratives of literature with the postmodern becomes even more relevant if we take into account how postmodern fiction has always thoroughly exploited love and death, not only as central tropes, but essentially as formally relevant features of the novel. John Banville’s postmodern fiction achieves the humorous exploitation of these two perennial pillars of human existence by systematically establishing and then placing in prominent position the relation between the characters, the reader and the author, and entangling all three into a web of love, seduction and deferred annihilation, ultimately transgressing classical ontological parameters. In this regard, then, John Banville’s novels develop and foreground a notion of love and desire as a creative activity, an instance of textual narrative which is necessarily seductive and, finally, the time-honoured equation of life with discourse / narration. Banville’s characters essentially engage in a challenge with their sense of impending death – both spiritual and physical – precisely by means of their accomplished storytelling, whereby writing, language and its fictions themselves contain a seductive charge. His characters evoke the problematic ‘tradition’ of the impossibility and necessity of discourse ranging from Beckett to Nabokov, only to name two of Banville’s most revered literary influences:

Not only did my Dad set me to monitor the house and ensure he was not disturbed at his illicit amours but I also had to render the lady Helen’s husband sleepless so he
would go night-wandering and vacate the bed. Then – and wait till you hear this – then I was commanded to hold back the dawn for fully an hour, to give the old boy extra time in which to work his wiles on the unsuspecting girl. (I 69)

To return to *The Sea, The Infinities* is a fitting sequel to Banville’s Booker Prize-winning novel, especially if we appreciate, by applying McHale’s observations about earlier Banville novels, *The Sea’s* establishment of death as a meta-object and meta-theme, and how it “characterizes not the fictional interactions in the text’s world, but rather the interactions between the text and its world on the one hand, and the reader and his or her world on the other” (McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* 227). Ultimately, the two novels are mirrors that reflect back upon each other, mutually, an ontological exploration of the purgatory of (im)mortality, where *The Sea’s* Max Morden creates divine, god-like narrative effigies of those he both admired in his past, only to burn them at the altar of a present where immortality does not exist, because it is contingent, after death, on the memories of others, and the gods of *The Infinities*, on the other hand, who are in fact jealous of human life, love and even death. Refusing to gift Adam Godley Sr. a much-awaited death and extending his bloodline in a pregnancy at the end of the novel is emblematic of an ultimate act of revenge by the gods, against the easy escape available to humans: death. Thus, Adam Godley Sr. is forced to suffer the original conundrum of how to communicate his theory of infinities, and the otherwise highly dysfunctional rest of his family must live out the comically tragic existence they have manoeuvred themselves into, through foolish, self-annihilating acts motivated by lust, love and desire.

By stark contrast, *The Sea’s* protagonist Max Morden is permitted a much more satisfying moment of closure and epiphany. Musing over how Connie lives on in others’ memories, for example, Max reflects:

Thus in the minds of the many does the one ramify and disperse. It does not last, it cannot, it is not immortality. We carry the dead with us only until we die too, and then it is we who are borne along for a little while, and then our bearers in their turn drop, and so on into the unimaginable generations. (S 87)

Towards the end of the novel, Max also remarks that he is “compiling a Book of the Dead” (S 237), and how Morden is indeed an apposite family name for a self-appointed chronicler of the dead, for ‘morden’ in German means ‘to murder’ or ‘to kill.’ Very much in keeping with this “joke in bad taste on the part of polyglot fate” (S 13), Max seems more engrossed in painstakingly recording the passing away of those near and dear to him than in his own life. First and foremost, there was the recent death of his wife. He likewise notes her father’s death shortly after he and Anna were married (S 107), and the deaths of his own parents
as well as of Carlo and Constance Grace (S 261). Lastly, but perhaps most significantly, there were the traumatic deaths of Chloe and Myles, who committed suicide “on the day of the strange tide” (S 3) during that otherwise idyllic summer, leaving the boy Max with Poussin’s epitaph – *Et in Arcadia Ego* – burned like a mnemonic of death into the landscape of all future childhood memories.

Beating inside him “like a second heart” (S 13), the past holds great power over Max; it offers him a second life amidst idyllic, childhood memories, yet it also keeps reminding him of his first encounter with death. Thus, the narrative swings back and forth, and Max is continually trying to find himself in this plethora of attitudes towards the past. At times he cannot but eagerly immerse himself in said past, using his imagination as a gateway between the “intolerable” present and the memories of his summers among “the gods.” At other times “there are moments when the past has a force so strong it seems one might be annihilated by it” (S 47). Two deaths, moreover, stand like the tombstone of Arcady at the centre of these polymorphic memory landscapes. The first is the death of the twins, in the distant past, and the second, of Anna, having just occurred in the recent past. These two traumatic events weave a dark, red thread through the three strands of Morden’s already complex self-narrative. The result is a story and narrator that are at a constant tug of war between various inescapable *memento mori*, where the present reality is encased in a “hebetudinous catafalque” (S 218), and the imagined past is blanketed by the g(u)ilt of memory.

Thus death, always in collaboration with Mnemosyne, runs as a leitmotif through the three narrative strands of *The Sea*. First, Morden’s journey into the summers of his childhood can be read as a commemorative rite for Anna’s death, “a rite performed in a place of refuge – a sanctuary of spontaneous devotion and silent pilgrimage – in which one finds the living heart of memory” (Friberg, “Waters and Memories Always Divide” 257). Though Anna “is lodged in [him] like a knife,” he is also already beginning to forget her; the gilded, innocent image he has of her in his mind is “fraying, bits of pigments, flakes of gold leaf are chipping off.” Eventually, he fears, “the entire canvas [will] be empty” (S 215). He journeys to The Cedars with a desperate desire to counteract that forgetting, and thereby “to find some sort of absolution in the past – from the past” (Friberg, “Waters and Memories Always Divide” 259). His attempts to recall and in a way revive Anna’s life through a retreat into the memories of childhood bring back to life not Anna, but even older conflicts and traumata, for at the heart of his summers among the family Grace, his ‘divinities,’ is the sudden suicide of Chloe and Myles. As a boy, Max witnesses Chloe Grace taking her own life when she walks into the sea and drowns herself; Myles follows her, and Morden is left on
the beach in utter shock as his innocence fails him, confronted with one of those typically Banvillian “irruptions of the tragic” (Barry, “‘As Clear as Mirror Glass’” 2005).

Morden’s return to The Cedars is also driven by a search for meaning behind the Arcadian epitaph, *Et in Arcadia Ego*, for the two most memorable and idyllic moments of his life were both pierced by untimely death. As a consequence of these traumatic experiences, Morden has, all his life, always had to grapple with the seeming paradox of mortality amidst a paradise gained and then lost. Thus, much like Poussin before him, Max paints several versions of *Et in Arcadia Ego*. At the centre of the first version, or narrative strand, stands Anna: she is the fulcrum around which the two dimensions of time and imagination move. “It is the loss of Anna,” Brendan McNamee observes, “that leads to the entire structure of the childhood memory, which […] may be either ‘real or imagined’ (S 132). It is the loss of Anna which takes him back to The Cedars[. …] The reality of her disease,” on the one hand, “sets her firmly in the world of temporal loss”; Morden raises her to the imagined heights of divinity, on the other hand, “by way of a number of structural and stylistic subtleties throughout the text” (McNamee, *The Quest for God in the Novels of John Banville* 251).

The divinities of Greek mythology, Aphrodite, Eros, and Pan in particular, have always presided over pastoral landscapes, especially those of the Renaissance, and echoes of their presence are superabundant in the nexus of Morden’s memories and imaginings. Accordingly, Anna moves as much between spheres of the “real and the imagined” (S 132) as between descriptions of divinity and mortality. At their first meeting, for example, Morden talks of how it was her size that first caught his eye: “Not that she was so very large, but she was made on a different scale from that of any woman I had known before her” (S 73). Anna is described as possessing a godlike quality which is further strengthened, when, looking at her, Morden “had difficulty fixing a depth of focus” (S 74). To themselves and others, Anna and Max seemed a golden couple: “How grand we must have looked, the two of us, making our entrance, taller than everyone else, our gaze directed over their heads as if fixed on some far fine vista that only we were privileged enough to see” (S 74). Furthermore, Morden describes the world of Anna and her father as “fantastical one wherein the rules as I had known them up to then did not apply, where everything shimmered and nothing was real” (S 77). Accordingly, and as a quasi-apotheosis of these amorous pantheisms, Anna’s proposal of marriage represents to Morden a unique opportunity “to become a denizen of these excitingly alien deeps,” and ultimately also “the chance to fulfil the fantasy of myself” (S 78).
These descriptions of life together with Anna distinctly echo sensations evoked by the Graces, too. Chloe Grace, in particular, is described as possessing a goddess-like capriciousness and cruelty. Chloe and Anna, the two most central “avatars” of love in Morden’s life, are also the two most authoritative voices on all matters of mortality and death. The *Et in Arcadia Ego* motif of a paradise lived and then lost is strongly brought to life in the narrative strands that detail each relationship. Illness, misfortune, untimely death: such things happen to others, but neither to the “divinities” Chloe and Myles, nor to Anna and Morden. Just as the shepherds in Poussin’s two versions of *Et in Arcadia Ego* first express shock (see Appendix, Fig. 3) and then acknowledge death in Arcadia in dignified consensus (see Appendix, Fig. 4), so Morden’s attitude towards death experiences a paradigm shift between Chloe’s suicide and Anna’s passing. The boy Max, for example, is left utterly dumbfounded by the fact that Chloe had gone so suddenly: “How could she be with me one moment and the next not? How could she be elsewhere, absolutely?” (S 140). By the time Anna passes away, however, the swan song of innocence has long been replaced by a knowing air steeped in experience. Human existence is to the adult Morden but a condition always already overshadowed by death: “But then, at what moment, of all our moments, is life not utterly, utterly changed, until the final, most momentous change of all?” (S 33–4).

If *The Sea*’s mortal protagonist is driven to Arcadian memories of childhood by his “rueful desire to understand the fragility of human existence,” *The Infinities* is a more comic, humorous treatise of classical themes of love, death and desire, and its divine protagonists revel in the many ironies on offer. Adam Sr.’s imminent death generates a tension that infiltrates the thoughts, interactions and the narratives of every character at his deathbed. Adam Jr., the apprehensive son, is more ponderous about his childhood than even his father. The appropriately named Helen, his wife, is ravished by Zeus. Ursula, Adam Sr.’s wife, cannot make out whether her husband still has his consciousness. Petra, the emotionally and psychologically fraught daughter, timidly awaits her prospective lover, Roddy Waggstaff. Benny Grace, a former colleague of the dying Adam, adds to the tension with his disturbing presence. Each character echoes in their story traits and behaviours of a divinity of Greek mythology itself. Adam Sr. is clearly a kind of omniscient Zeus whose desire to become immortal (through his work in the field of mathematics and his theory of the infinities) echoes the divine counterpart’s own hankerings after mortal delights and adventures. Roddy Waggstaff, in turn, is painted as a kind of Pan, a satyr who presides over the bacchanals of Arcadia itself. His “slightly stooped” posture, the “narrow fawn
slacks”, coupled with “slip-on shoes, and a white shirt” betray these parallels only too easily:

Tall and slender and slightly stooped, Roddy has the aspect of a film heartthrob of a former time. He wears narrow fawn slacks sharply pressed, and pale-tan, slip-on shoes, and a white shirt that fairly shines in the sunlight, the collar open over a loosely knotted yellow cravat. His caramel-coloured hair is parted at the side and carefully arranged in a casual sweep across his brow. He has green eyes and a phthisic pallor. (*I 87*)

As ever, Banville leads us mischievously astray here again, because the *real* Pan later takes on the form of a pudgy, benevolent and entirely undemanding Benny Grace:

The name he is going under is Benny Grace. What he is doing here, or thinks to do, I cannot say, although I have my suspicions, oh, indeed, I have. Should I fly down from the roof now [...] and give him an admonitory skelp of my serpented staff? With the likes of him, if he has a like, it is always well to get in early. I know him and his disruptive ways[.] (*I 132*)

Banville also constantly shifts between various narrative voices and perspectives, to add to the complexity of the playful, yet complex interplay between his mortal and immortal characters – even family dog Rex is given a voice and is apparently “accustomed by now to their [the Godleys’] frequently inexplicable ways” (*I 125*). The narrative shifts quickly and unexpectedly between first and third person. The author’s use of such sudden changes in perspective implies that “no character is fully in charge of their thoughts” (Smith, *John Banville: Art and Authenticity* 155), and that Banville has here again created an author-god, much like Freddie Montgomery did in *Ghosts*.

An additional level of sophistication and irony has been added in *The Infinities*, because the playful trickster and author-god narrator (Prospero’s Ariel in *The Tempest*), is here played and mirrored in a real god-author, Hermes. Hermes does not function like an all-knowing authorial figure who can control everything and everyone in his own narrative, however. Instead, to emphasize both the limitations and the constructedness of the all-powerful deity that he and the other Greek gods represent, Banville plays with the concept of voice. First, the quick alternation between first and third-person point of view create a sense of uncontrolled disorientation; second, the reader at times hears Adam’s interior voice as he lies on his death-bed, only to realize it is actually Hermes who is forcing these thoughts onto the mathematician himself:
It seems to him, that he is being born in reverse, so that this garrulous dying he is doing will bring him not to the next world but back to a state of suspended pre-existence, ready to start all over again from before the beginning. It is a nice conceit, is it not? I shall let him entertain it for the nonce. (I 33)

Here Banville has created a concept of death concomitant with the notions that govern the self and the other and the dynamics constitutive of the identification process. In Ghosts, for example, Freddie Montgomery’s brutal murder of Josie Bell throws into sharp relief a confused understanding of gender and identity, especially as pertaining to the female ‘other’ and his own sense of bifurcation. According to Montgomery, “there is an onus on us, the living, to conjure up our particular dead […] they should live in us, and through us” (G 83). In an attempt to fulfil this “onus,” Freddie tries to bring Josie Bell back to life through the narrative emplotment of the little golden world that is Le monde d’or. This act, supposedly one of atonement, fails, however, because Freddie tries to deny death, and death is undeniable, even in the ‘golden world’: Et in Arcadia Ego. Thus, when face to face with the ghost of his dead son and finally confronted with this irrevocable truth, he can only turn away in frustrated disappointment from the past he had returned to in search of clarity, simplicity, and stability.

In writing his “Big Book on Bonnard,” Max Morden attempts something similar. As he continues his research on the French painter, he begins to see several parallels between his own life with Anna and the artist’s last years with wife Marthe. Morden alludes, for example, to a day in 1893, when Bonnard “spied a girl getting off a Paris tram and [...] followed her to her place of work, [...] where she spent her days sewing pearls on to funeral wreaths. Thus death at the start wove its black ribbon into their lives” (S 151). Morden constructs a second parallel to Bonnard and Marthe’s retreat at Le Bosquet when he compares the way he and Anna shut themselves away in their house during the entire twelve months of her suffering. Thirdly,

the contrast between Bonnard’s late, mysteriously veiled self-portraits and the series he painted concurrently of his wife stretched out in the bath, insulated from the mortifications of age because these pictures always show her much younger than she was at the time, provides an exact correlative to the narrative, which offers similarly veiled self-portraits of Morden – as a boy, in middle-age, and in his sixties (Imhof, “The Sea: ‘Was’t Well Done?’” 176).

As in Ghosts and Athena, Morden’s narrative emplotment of self in art here is fraught with a conflicted, paradoxical relation to his identity. Max openly admits, on the one hand, that “the notion of an essential, singular self is problematic” for him (S 216). On the other hand, his “Big Book on Bonnard” wants to be
the precise counterpart to his “Book of the Dead”; he recreates Anna’s life in the book’s narrative art in an attempt to ward off the ageing process. The project to write about a famous artist and through the narrative emplotment of that artist’s art resolve his own problematic sense of self fails, ultimately, because

[p]oking at his memories, insomniac and regularly anaesthetized by his hip flask, Morden sits pushing his paragraphs around, unable any longer to grasp quite what it is writing is supposed to do. He is metaphorically writing against the tide, feeling that he might almost be able to turn back time if he can concentrate sufficiently on the art of recollection. (Kenny, John Banville: Visions and Revisions 178)

In the search for a meaning behind the deaths that so suddenly sever him from those carefree childhood days of love, glory and divinity, Morden has become an art historian who in the years immediately before and after Anna’s death, very fittingly and ironically, specialises in studying manifestations of death in art. As Rüdiger Imhof remarks, Morden “perceives reality, the world, in terms of art, thus creating a distance between himself and […] life” (“The Sea: ‘Was’t Well Done?’” 166). More than that, by using art to distance himself from life, Morden brings himself inescapably closer to its polar opposite, death. The young Max of innocence, who defined himself through a life with and love to others, is replaced by an elderly erudite of experience who believes that he can get a final reading of his own life by writing about the deaths of those he once loved. Yet, at the same time, Morden looks upon himself as a nobody, who doubts the existence of the self. He perceives himself as someone who is “trying to write [his] will on a machine that was lacking the word I. The letter I, that is, small and large” (S 71). It goes without saying that no one can write their will convincingly without the word ‘I’, and thus Morden feels condemned to see himself as such a no one, torn between postmodern doubts of the existence of the self and the desire to give his own life meaning in a narrative written against the grand imaginative backdrop of Arcadian landscapes crowned by the golden haze of memory.

Perhaps it is Victor Maskell, protagonist of Banville’s The Untouchable (1997), who comes closest to what is at the heart of Morden’s plight. Maskell, ostentatiously modelled on Anthony Blunt, a leading Poussin expert and Soviet spy, defends the painter’s Arcadia against critics who “spent their energies searching for the meaning of the work,” when, in fact,

there is no meaning. Significance, yes; affects; authority; mystery – magic, if you wish – but no meaning. The figures in the Arcadia are not pointing to some fatuous parable about mortality and the soul and salvation; they simply are. Their meaning is
that they are there. This is the fundamental fact of artistic creation, the putting in place of something where otherwise there would be nothing. (The Untouchable 343)

In “the ever shifting myriad worlds” through which Morden, or for that matter Maskell, Montgomery or Cleave move, death is the “singular, unchanging and wholly authentic thing” (U 343). Max, moreover, sees in the two most traumatic deaths he has encountered the paradigmatic chronotope of his own self. Like death’s ego in Arcadia, his own self must cease trying to become, and simply accept that it is. If The Sea, then, is centred around a coming to terms with the inevitability of death, The Infinities closes the circle by arguing for the affirmation of life in a narrative that curves asymptotically towards a death that never happens. Indeed, the novel ends with a kind of rebirth in the pregnancy hinted at in the lines of the novel – “She presses a hand to her womb. ‘Oh!’” – a twist unexpected by all but the immortal gods, who have spent the entire narrative seeking to understand what it is like to live, to be mortal. Thus, The Infinities culminates in a beautiful piece of prose suffused with the divine equanimity of the gods who, it would appear, have finally moved from witnessing the mortals, and understanding their fragility, to a true appreciation of the human condition:

This is the mortal world. 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 for ever in a luminous, unending instant. (I 272)

‘A Tune Beyond us, yet Ourselves’: John Banville’s Man with The Blue Guitar

The Blue Guitar (2015) appears more than a quarter century after Banville published The Book of Evidence (1989), the masterpiece that turned him into one of Ireland’s most accomplished living novelists. And yet, his latest production could, like so many of the previous, carry the title of his first critical success. Its protagonist Oliver Otway Orme, embodies many of the characteristics of the Banville men who have gone before him. Gabriel Godkin, Freddie Montgomery, Axel Vander, Max Morden or Adam Godley: each of these solipsistic, narcissistic narrators and their story reappears in some form or other as part and parcel of Orme’s identity. Thus, The Blue Guitar closes the circle of many of Banville’s earlier efforts, neatly fitting several of the author’s central concerns into its tightly written narrative, and, in many ways, Banville’s latest novel amounts to
a retrospective of his narrative art, exhibiting his oeuvre in its entirety within
the gallery of its two-hundred-and-fifty pages.

Oliver Orme is a painter who can no longer paint. Middle-aged, “pushing
fifty” (BG 4), damaged and prone to musing, Orme is “owning up” to the various
petty crimes and crises that make up the patchwork of his life so far. The reader
is immediately ensnared into playing a kind of stand-in as Orme’s “inexistent
confessor” (BG 16). At the outset of the novel, we find Orme returned with wife
Gloria to Ireland, in the long wake of several tragedies. His ability to paint has
disappeared; the “embers of inspiration [have] become ashes, and cold ashes at
that” (BG 38). Previously, the affair with his friend’s wife was exposed, and like
Eclipse’s Axel Vander, Orme retreats to his childhood home not only to “weather
the storm,” but to survey the wreckage. “From now on,” he concludes, “all would
be aftermath” (BG 5, 74).

Banville’s latest narrator is a careful creation who, in his voice, manner, ap‐
pearance, character and even origin story is very much an amalgam of previous
Banville protagonists. Indeed, much of what makes The Blue Guitar work is the
way in which the Irish author infuses it with the entirety of his oeuvre, turning
the novel into a retrospective on various levels. Firstly, and most visibly, Oliver’s
story can be read as a playfully postmodern, if nostalgic elegy that holds a ka‐
leidoscopic mirror up to the human condition. A second reading transforms The
Blue Guitar into a metafictional vehicle that enables a critical retrospective of
the “infinity of worlds” created by each of Banville’s previous novels itself, and
in which “all possibilities are fulfilled” (I 105). At the end of their professional
lives, both Banville and his narrator, Orme, appear to look back and find that
neither the author nor the artist as a young man could live up to the much-prof‐
essed Arcadia of youth:

Childhood is supposed to be a radiant springtime but mine seems to have been always
autumn, the gales seething in the big beeches behind this old gate-lodge, as they’re
doing right now, and the rooks above them wheeling haphazard, like scraps of char
from a bonfire, and a custard-coloured gleam having its last go low down in the
western sky. Besides, I’m tired of the past, of the wish to be there and not here. (BG
4)

Throughout The Blue Guitar, Orme is marked by an involuntary obsession with
the past that he would prefer to suppress: “I’m tired of brooding,” he would have
his readers believe: “it availeth naught.” Yet soon it returns, “the past, the past”,
like a narrative incantation that guides the prose inevitably to a foregone con‐
clusion. The subtle phrases that took The Sea from past to present are gone,
however, and instead, bright announcements have taken their place: “Yes, here
it comes, the past again.” The past has been transformed, no longer a welcome
locus of respite from the present, but an intrusive, unwelcome guest, to whom
entry cannot be denied, nevertheless: “Damn it, here’s another digression” (BG
26, 67, 89).

Orme’s survey of his life begins as the staged confessional of a former painter
whose first-person voice is very reminiscent of Hermes, The Infinities’ playful
narrator, with his penchant for wordplay and the all-too-predicable antics of
narrative unreliability:

Call me Autolycus. Well, no, don’t. Although I am, like that unfunny clown, a picker-up
of unconsidered trifles. Which is a fancy way of saying I steal things. Always did, as
far back as I can remember. I may fairly claim to have been a child prodigy in the fine
art of thieving. This is my shameful secret, one of my shameful secrets, of which,
however, I am not as ashamed as I should be. (BG 1)

Orme even introduces himself as the son of Hermes, Autolycus. Clearly, Banville
could not resist establishing a proper literary (if fictional) heritage for his latest
protagonist, for Autolycus appears as a comic relief character and thief in
Shakespeare’s The Winter’s Tale, where his boast as “a snapper-up of unconsidered trifles” (4.3.26). mirrors almost exactly Orme’s self-appraisal above. Indeed,
as a self-proclaimed prince of thieves, Autolycus has a pedigree of great cunning
and an even greater ego, which often leads him into undesirable, braggart sce-
narios. Thus, parallels between Autolycus and Orme are plentiful: both are crafty
tale-tellers, men of masks and clothes-changers who serve to advance a variety
of themes on art and nature, on appearance and reality. Additionally, it appears
that Banville has written The Blue Guitar as a kind of sequel to The Infinities;
Orme attests to this not only by proclaiming himself as the apparent son of
Hermes, but also in his repeated references to the theory of infinities posited by
Adam Godley Sr. in The Infinities:

The fact is, I’m not really here, or the here that I’m here in is not here, really. I might
be a creature from one of that multitude of universes we are assured exists, all of them
nested inside each other, like the skins of an infinitely vast onion, who by cosmic
accident made a misstep and broke through to this world, where I was once and have
become again what I am. (BG 65)

There is more behind the art of Banville’s allusions, nonetheless, because Orme’s
recurrent mention of the “multitude of universes” is designed to justify his klep-
tomania, desperately seeking a way to will it into art, to “transmute the object
stolen” into “something sacral” that shines beyond the “profane”:
I’m thinking of those Godley particles we hear so much about, these days, that at one moment are in one place and the next in another, even on the far side of the universe, with no trace whatever of how they got from here to there. That’s the way it always is with a theft. It’s as if a single thing by being stolen were on the instant made into two[...]. It’s a kind of [...] transubstantiation, if that’s not going too far. For it did give me a feeling almost of holy awe, on that first occasion, and does so still, every time.

That’s the sacral side of the thing; the profane side is if anything even more numinous. (BG 21)

Thus, Orme also strongly alludes to The Book of Evidence’s Freddie Montgomery, who emplots various works of art, be they real, counterfeit, or metafictional, into his storied self, thereby carefully crafting a Kunstwollen, an overly self-conscious and stylised discourse for his crisis of identity. In reverse process to Montgomery’s Kunstwollen, Orme steals in order to will the theft (arguably the most profane and base form of criminal activity) into a higher, sacral form of art: “Just as art uses up its materials by absorbing them wholly into the work, [...] so too the act, the art, of stealing transmutes the object stolen” (BG 16). Orme’s delusional, if cleverly argued justifications mirror Freddie Montgomery’s narcissistic, self-aggrandising explanations: “In this way, is not the thief doing a favour to things by dint of renewing them? Does he not enhance the world by buffing up its tarnished silver?” (BG 17).

All this makes painfully clear Orme’s fundamental flaw as The Blue Guitar’s tragic anti-hero: as someone who fled to small-town Ireland “out of fear of the world” (BG 65), and as someone who has become in equal parts loquacious self-explainer and a chronic solipsist who desperately seeks to find meaning and acknowledgement in grandiose justifications, verbal charm and meta-observational self-flagellation, Orme is ultimately left stranded, having lost much of what he tried to thieve into possession – for how can we claim to truly possess something that was stolen? Whether it is his petty thievings as a child, his efforts to rob life of its reality in his paintings, or stealing Polly from his best friend, Orme leaves himself impotent, dispossessed of all that he once owned and used to justify his actions, or by which to measure his self-worth. Indeed, he admits this at an early point in the novel: “Painting, like stealing, was an endless effort at possession, and endlessly I failed. Stealing other people’s goods, daubing scenes, loving Polly: all the one, in the end” (BG 60). Finally, Orme even admits that “things” concern him “not [...] as they are, but as they offer themselves up to being expressed. The expressing is all” (BG 114).

Despite these flaws and the sorry state he finds himself in at the outset of The Blue Guitar, Orme’s self-deprecating humour and naïveté endear him to the reader. Although he surrenders to creative impotence, Orme never stops
thinking, wondering, musing. Nevertheless, our peripatetic, recidivistic “painster” is undone by the world’s refusal to sit still and be captured by him and his kleptomaniac will to steal things into art. We are told that he never paints people, only objects, in part because people are so mutable, but mostly because he is himself handicapped when it comes to seeing and understanding human comportment and interaction. As Polly astutely remarks when Oliver blurts out that he wants to paint her, “But you only paint things, [...] not people, and even when you do you make them look like things” (BG 114). Recalling his dead daughter, Orme writes, “How well I remember her face, which is a foolish claim to make, since any face, especially a child’s, is in a gradual but relentless process of change and development, so that what I carry in my memory can be only a version of her, a generalisation of her, that I have fashioned for myself, as an evanescent keepsake” (BG 169).

It can be argued that Orme’s wilfully ignorant desire to articulate things not as they are, but to constantly seek out their expressive potential instead, is an essential quality an artist should possess. Banville’s novel is a supreme cautionary tale of how extending this outlook to an understanding of human behaviour itself can be truly dangerous. To achieve this, he uses an extensive, carefully developed allusion to Wallace Stevens’ poem “The Man With the Blue Guitar.” Indeed, Stevens’ poem epitomises all at once both the central themes of the novel and the quintessential struggles of its protagonist. For Wallace Stevens, as for Banville and Orme, reality is an abstraction with many possible perspectives and perspective possibilities. Poet, author and artist alike struggle to create original perspectives of reality, and in their efforts to capture said reality, create new, modern, meta-realities. Each creation, in turn, is also always an act of de-creation or destruction of actual reality, or actuality, and herein lies the danger that haunts the trinity of ‘creators’ – Banville, Orme, and Stevens – behind The Blue Guitar.

In The Necessary Angel (1951), Stevens defines his modern reality as “a reality of decreation, in which our revelations are not the revelations of belief, but the precious portents of our own powers” (140). Through his long poem “The Man with the Blue Guitar,” Stevens relates the destruction of traditional reality to the epiphany that a poem is not the expression of truth, but the result of the poet’s desire to bring to life the potential any given reality has to be expressed. Thus, Stevens’ poetry, like Orme’s art and Banville’s novels, exists in a kind of purgatory state of non/existence, in a matrix characterised by the dynamic of retreat and return at the heart of post-/modern pastoral’s always already elsewhere. A true achievement of The Blue Guitar, accordingly, lies in the way in which it neatly ties up these efforts on the part of Banville, by alluding to Stevens,
and in the postmodern tragedy of Orme’s narrative plight. Stevens’ poem “The Man with the Blue Guitar” begins by metaphorically comparing poets to musicians: the guitar is the man’s instrument of perception, and thus conceptualizes the artist’s problem of creation. Inspired by Picasso’s painting “The Old Guitarist” (see Appendix, Fig. 10), Stevens stages an imaginary conversation between the old man and his audience:

They said, ‘You have a blue guitar,
You do not play things as they are.’
The man replied, ‘Things as they are
Are changed upon the blue guitar.’

And they said then, ‘But play, you must,
A tune beyond us, yet ourselves,
A tune upon the blue guitar
Of things exactly as they are.’

(Stevens, “The Man With the Blue Guitar” 3–10)

The guitar does not, indeed it cannot express reality – just as Orme’s painting, and by extension his retrospective narrative – but instead it creates a new reality based upon a myriad of perceptions. “You see how for me everything is always like something else? – I’m sure that’s part of why I can’t paint any more, this shiftingness I see in all things” (BG 48). In one of his “Adagia” (1934–1940), Stevens describes the relation of reality and imagination: “The imagination consumes and exhausts some element of reality” (Opus Posthumous 198). This very process of consumption is paralleled by the many metaphors Orme uses to explain his theory of art’s transmutation of reality:

As the crisis deepened, it wasn’t long before I recognised and accepted what appeared to me a simple and self-evident truth, namely, that there was no such thing as the thing itself, only effects of things, the generative swirl of relation. [… M]y effort wasn’t to reproduce the world, or even to represent it. The pictures I painted were intended as autonomous things, things to match the world’s things, the unmanageable thereness of which had somehow to be managed. (BG 59)

The first section of Stevens’ poem further articulates the artist’s pressures to recreate reality as at once “A tune beyond us, yet ourselves” and as a reflection of “things as they are.” Clearly, the listeners do not understand the dialectic impossibility that governs their own request, especially when the old man shows that his instrument allows him only to represent reality, not to create it. Banville’s Orme epitomises precisely this hubris in his firm belief that stealing things can elevate them from the profane to the numinous. Naturally, these parallels
can also be applied to what Banville tries to achieve in his entire oeuvre, artistically, and they can be taken as a mild rebuke of his readers’ expectations to transmute the mundane minutiæ of human life to the profane dimensions of the gods of old.

Additionally, the first section of the poem provides Banville with a crucial metaphor that helps Orme expose the demands of realism on the artist – expectations that both author and his protagonist have fallen prey to: “I cannot bring a world quite round, / Although I patch it as I can. / […] If to serenade almost to man / Is to miss, by that, things as they are” (Stevens, “The Man with the Blue Guitar” 7–10). Commenting on the parallel experience of writing “a Banville novel,” the Irish author expresses similar sentiments in an interview with The Paris Review: “The world is not real for me until it has been pushed through the mesh of language […] If I can catch the play of light on a wall, and catch it just so, that is enough for me” (McKeon, “The Art of Fiction” 133).

The crisis of representation played out by the artist on a tightrope of the audience’s expectations, between actual reality and the interpretation of reality, throws Orme into a deep funk of artistic “impotence.” And, as in many Banville novels, this crisis triggers in Oliver a nostalgic return to the childhood home where a survey of adult life as pierced by untimely deaths and disappointments have made the once-painter into a “painster” in search of redemption, once finally “undone, a sack of sorrow, regret and guilt” (BG 65). Indeed, the typically Banvillean preliminary sketches that Oliver provides of himself as an irreparable narcissist are slowly but decidedly replaced by a protagonist who becomes progressively more honest about his own pain and the pain he has caused others. The verbal self-indulgence fades, and a powerful drama emerges: “What creature is it that returns to die in the place where it was born?” (BG 65) Oliver asks when he has arrived at his supposed locus amoenus, hinting at the sojourn’s true purpose, namely to reckon with various deaths – deaths of loved ones that have already occurred, as well as with the inevitability of his own demise.

Indeed, what keeps Oliver’s story from being just the random broodings of a frustrated middle-aged man is its grounding in loss and its repeated confrontations with mortality. At first Orme contemplates in typically narcissistic fashion how a fear of death justifies his kleptomania as an act of both literal and metaphorical duplicity, and again he hijacks (and to an extent repeatedly misappropriates) for this purpose the many-worlds theory posited by Adam Godley Sr. in The Infinities:

[O]ne of the more deplorable aspects of dying, aside from the terror, pain and filth, is the fact that when I’m gone there will be no one here to register the world in just the way that I do. […] Others will register other versions of the world, countless billions
of them, a welter of worlds particular each to each, but the one that I shall have made merely by my brief presence in it will be lost for ever. That’s a harrowing thought, I find, more so in a way even than the prospect of the loss of self itself. (BG 11)

It is striking that there are as many funerals as there are picnics in the pages of The Blue Guitar – a fitting balancing act that pervades the entire novel. Two events appear to have precipitated Orme’s current state of perplexity, in particular: the first is the sudden death of his three-year-old daughter, Olivia, as well as its ramifications in his marriage. “Her death had a deadening effect in general on our lives […] something of us died along with her” (BG 96). With great deliberation and care, as he is wont to, Banville discloses the circumstances that have shaped his protagonists’ lives. The tragic, shared loss of Olivia decisively shaped the aloof, at times prickly relationship between Oliver and Gloria. We come to understand how, by the end of Orme’s story, Polly has come to achieve her ambition, and we gain insight into just how much Oliver had deluded himself about his family, about his wife and even about Polly:

Yet oftentimes, too, I entertain the fancy that somewhere in that infinity of imbricated other creations there’s an entirely other me, a dashing fellow, insolent, devil-may-care and satanically handsome, whom all the men resent and all the women throw themselves at, who lives catch as catch can, getting by no one knows how, and who would scorn to fiddle with colouring-boxes and suchlike childish geegaws. Yes yes, I see him, that Other Oliver[ […] Yet would I leave again and try to be him, or something like him, elsewhere? No: this is a fit place to be a failure in. (BG 65)

A quintessential desire to return to a simpler time engenders Orme’s nostalgic impulses, a desire that is mirrored in William Empson’s axiomatic description of the pastoral as a “process of putting the complex into the simple” (Some Versions of Pastoral 23). This desire is so strong in Orme that he manages to convince himself that he, and indeed his entire world, is in the middle of this very process of reversal from the complex, unbearable reality to a simpler, comforting and soothing past: “Everything is reverting to what it used to be[ […] Retrograde progression, they call it – […] The future, in other words, will be the past, as time turns on its fulcrum into another cycle of eternal recurrence” (BG 66).

Banville evokes this idea of regression by setting the novel in an otherworldly Ireland where present, past and future slowly meld into a multiverse that runs parallel to the readers’ own universe. At first, the world depicted in The Blue Guitar appears ordinary, a forlorn corner of the rain-sodden, windswept British Isles. Yet, soon enough, curiosities begin to appear. The sky is full of airships (BG 62, 63, 155), and although the narrative time seems to be the present, various aspects of Orme’s world recall late-Victorian or Edwardian society: the muddy
airfield where Orme the itinerant art dealer lands his plane is manned by two farm lads, brothers, Orville and Wilbur Wright, for example. Scientists have confirmed the Godley particles, postulated by Adam Godley in *The Infinities*, as the raw material of all creations. The continent is beguiled by a country called Alpinia, painted by Oliver as a kind of otherworldly, postmodern Arcadia with “a Caspar David Friedrich sky”:\(^{15}\)

> It was as if I had set off heedlessly up a gentle grassy slope somewhere in old Alpinia itself, plucking edelweiss blossoms and delighting in the song of the lark, and presently had come to the crest and stopped open-mouthed before a terrifying vista of range upon range of flinty, snow-clad peaks, each one loftier than the last, stretching off into the misty distances of a Caspar David Friedrich sky.\(^{[.]}\) (BG 29)

Despite all the incessant dampness and murky weather, the sun, we are informed, is heaving with calamitously destructive activity. Interestingly, each and every regressive anomaly of this otherworldly Britain (and Ireland) is always paralleled by the wilful *Kunstwollen* that colours Orme’s own efforts to return to a simpler time. The violence that is necessary for such a *caesura* irrupts the narrative time-and-again with fitting imagery:

> [I]t seems to me something has changed in the decades since I was a boy. I am well aware how spurious can be the glow that plays over remembrances of childhood. All the same I recall afternoons of sun-struck stillness the like of which we don’t seem to have any more. [...] I felt just now a sudden sweet rush of fondness for the little boy that I was then. [...] There was a smell of sun-bleached timbers and creosote and dust that seemed the evocative whiff of an already lost past. (BG 34–35)

So, recalling his sister’s grief when she was scorned by the pimply youth she adored, Oliver remembers that he thought of her weeping figure as a sacrificial victim on an altar, and came to understand, therefore, that out of “transgression and sacred terror the gods were born” (BG 220). Polly seems to think that Oliver is god-like, and sees herself as an Ariadne rescued by the great god Dionysus. Gloria tends lovingly to a sickly, potbound myrtle, a plant associated with death, rebirth and transformation in classical mythology. And the art dealer Perry in his aeroplane is, perhaps, a would-be *deus-ex-machina*.

Transformation – a form of appropriation in Banville’s scheme of things – thus becomes the novel’s overarching concern. Art transforms reality, or at least

\(^{15}\) See Appendix, Fig. 11, showing one of Caspar David Friedrich’s most iconic paintings (and eponymous skies), *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog.*
what we think of as everyday reality. Oliver is speaking for Banville, it would seem, when he declares:

But no, no, it was more than that I was about: it was nothing less than total transformation, the clay made spirit. Pleasure, delight, the raptures of the flesh, such things mean nothing, next to nothing, to a man like me. Trans-this and trans-that, all the transes, that’s what I was after, the making over of things, of everything, by the force of concentration, which is, and don’t mistake it, the force of forces. The world would be so thoroughly the object of my passionate regard that it would break out and blush madly in a blaze of self-awareness. (BG 174)

Indeed, a desire for the transformation of reality into art has driven John Banville’s entire oeuvre, and the author’s many efforts finds a culmination in the unimpeachably elegant tenets of *The Blue Guitar*. Inspired by Wallace Stevens’ poem, we can easily discern similarities between Banville’s efforts to write, Orme’s painstaking painting and the music played by ‘The Man with the Blue Guitar.’ In an interview with *The New Yorker*, Banville provides a rare glimpse into his own childhood efforts at painting: As Banville admits in *The New Yorker* interview, he too tried to play upon the blue guitar, and, in his various attempts to capture the past, has moved variously between painting and writing. “On weekends”, he explains in the interview, “his mother would take him into Dublin to go to Combridges, a bookstore that doubled as an art-supplies shop. Along with an easel and paints and brushes, he insisted on making her buy him large tubes of zinc white. Then, he would stand in front of his easel for hours trying to paint “mythological scenes of great meaning. But painting never quite clicked, and so Banville, the teenager, traded paintbrushes for pens. Half a century later, Banville thinks about what life may have been like as a painter:

I loved all the paint, that whole world, all that beautiful equipment one uses. That’s one thing I hate about being a novelist: I have a nice fountain pen and nice big books to write in, but it’s nothing compared to being a painter and all the wonderful brushes and all that paint and all that turpentine and those wonderful smells, all that muckiness – it’s like being a child again. (Delistraty, “John Banville on the Utter Mystery of Writing”)

The nostalgic qualities of this return to the clean-slate state of childhood throws into sharp relief the similarities between author and protagonist. Like Orme, Banville appears unable to dispossess himself from the relentless hold of the past upon what he is trying to put on paper in his fictions:

The past fascinates me obsessively, I suppose, because it’s such a strange phenomenon[. …] The past was the present at some point, and it was just as boring as the
present. What makes it so important? What gives it that luminous, exalted quality where it becomes the past? When does the past become ‘the past’? Is yesterday ‘the past’? Is last week ‘the past’? How far do you have to go until the past becomes ‘the past’? These are things I’ve never found an answer to, and that’s why they fascinate me. (Delistraty “John Banville on the Utter Mystery of Writing”) 

Unlike Orme, however, who sets out in *The Blue Guitar* on long verbal incantations to justify his petty crimes as well as his affair with Polly, Banville has by now abandoned all such pretensions about writing: “Writing,” he has said in an interview with *The New Yorker*, “is a mysterious process that I don’t pretend to understand” (Delistraty, “John Banville on the Utter Mystery of Writing”). What the Irish author provides in his seductively artistic and intellectual fictions, is “a tune beyond us, yet ourselves”; narratives, in other words, that are postmodern celebrations of the expressive qualities inherent to the art of writing, the potential of which is to be exalted rather than suppressed. This epiphany is quintessentially postmodern and counteracts the anti-modernist tendencies one may accuse Banville of. This may also mark Banville’s departure from Arcadia and its nostalgic allure. Indeed, perhaps the best way to summarize the actuality of this turn in the Irish author’s novels is to use P.K. Paige’s poetic response to Wallace Stevens’ poem, a reply that encapsulates the entirety of the postmodern condition:

> The man replied, ‘Things as they are
> are not the same as things that were
> or will be in another year.
> The literal is rarely true
> for truth is old and truth is new
> and faceted – a metaphor
> for something higher than we are.
> I play the truth of Everyman
> I play the truth as best I can.
> The things I play are better far
> *when changed upon the blue guitar.*'

P.K. Page, “The Blue Guitar” 36