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, imbibes the human time-experience with existential depth. Paradoxically, it is in human na-

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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.²

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 literate 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 also always 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-

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 antebellum 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 lick-spittles, happy in their master’s benevolence, never thought to question how he had acquired his thousand acres, his castle and his wealth. (Barry, Guerrilla 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 unreliabilty 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 begging description: “Intimations abound, but they are felt only, and words fail to transfixed 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, 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 pain‐terly 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-

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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 keep 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 99)

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