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-

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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.\footnote{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 \textit{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.}

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. (\textit{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, \textit{Identity, Culture and the Postmodern World} 40). The process of identification through narrative emplot-
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.]