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 oneric 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, *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