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 painfully narrative elegies mourning the loss of control.

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

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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 misrecog-
nition in which each protagonist constructs views of others that, eventually, are
revealed to be delusions of an overly scientific and nostalgic imagination. Ban-
ville 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 his-
torical 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)

5 Cf. Lernout, Geert. ”Banville and Being: The Newton Letter and History”; Hand, John
Banville 23–66 or McMinn, John Banville 83.
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 90)

The above marks an important and extremely rare moment in Banville fiction, an instance of acceptance and joy as the character is overcome with the sense of human possibility; previous frustration, confusion and dejection give way to pure and simple tranquillity. The unborn child, “secret in its warm sea” hints at the possibility for redemption in a new-found future. “Super-numerous existence”, a phrase lifted from the Ninth of Rilke’s Duino Elegies, encapsulates this