spiritual communion with human life and reality experienced so rarely by Banville protagonists. The phrase is literally synonymous with a life beyond numbers, letters or words, and it marks an innocence restored. Where previous attempts at recollecting childhood memories resulted in a desperate if transparent counter-memorialising of the past, acceptance of the present and one’s part in it have transformed our recluse, isolated historian into a man with a life with “super-numerous” futures and possibilities.

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

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

The Past as Pastoral in Eclipse and The Sea

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

If Alexander Cleave is compelled to return to the *locus amoenus* of his childhood in order “to locate that singular essential self,” (*E* 51) Max Morden remembers the past into being first and foremost as a means of escape from the present: “we sought escape from an intolerable present in the only tense possible, the past” (*S* 99). The main narrative of *The Sea* takes place exactly a year after Morden and his wife, Anna, first visited Mr Todd, the aptly named oncologist who diagnosed Anna’s cancer, “the bulge that was big baby De’Ath, burgeoning inside her, biding its time” (18). The narrative re-enters a year later, when Anna has passed away, and when, in a dream, the art critic is suddenly compelled to return to The Cedars, his parents’ summer house, site of many holiday memories and secret-keeper of other, darker events that may otherwise go forgotten: “a dream it was that drew me here” (24). Max is walking aimlessly “along a country road […] going home, it seemed” when he experiences the following:

Immediately then, and for the first time in I do not know how long, I thought of Ballyless and the house there on Station Road, and the Graces, and Chloe Grace, I cannot think why, and it was as if I had stepped suddenly out of the dark into a splash of pale, saltwashed sunlight. It endured only a minute, less than a minute, that happy lightsomeness, but it told me what to do, and where I must go. (*S* 26)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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