The Avatars of Memory

She is in my memory her own avatar. Which is the more real, the woman reclining on the grassy bank of my recollections, or the strew of dust and dried marrow that is all the earth any longer retains of her? No doubt for others elsewhere she persists[.] — *The Sea*

Like Freddie Montgomery, both Cleave and Morden are in a state of permanent sulk, for each man’s world and self does not match up to their inner visions and desires. Therefore each tries to find recourse in the various female figures that link them to “the waxworks of memory” (*S* 118) as they become the focus of each narrative. These women protagonists – for they become crucial to story and narrator alike – at once facilitate and hinder the men’s process of self-reification and readjustment. In the second narrative strand of *The Sea*, for example, the adult Morden relates the story of his wife’s cancer with flashbacks of how they met and their life as a husband and wife, and in the third strand of narrative the young boy Max shares the stage with the Graces. From the earliest days Morden felt that his birth and upbringing were constraining his personal development: “I never had a personality, […] I was always a distinct no one, whose fiercest wish was to be an indistinct someone” (*S* 216). He experiences for the first time a sense of social betterment in his encounter with the family Grace, whom he sees as “the gods” (3): “How proud I was to be seen with them, these divinities” (145). Chloe Grace, in particular, develops into Morden’s “true origin […] of self-consciousness” (168). Lacan postulates that to exist is to be recognised by an-other; similarly, Morden believes that “no one had yet been real in the way that Chloe was. And if she was real, so, suddenly, was I” (168). The adult Morden craves for this childhood experience of self-reification and sees his relationship with Anna as based on the same need: “Anna, I saw at once, would be the medium of my transmutation. She was the fairground mirror in which all my distortions would be made straight” (116).

Both Cleave and Morden assign a certain amount of blame for their sense of inauthenticity to a lack of “class,” and seek to compensate it through the women they choose. Alexander Cleave “would happily have exchanged everything [he] had made [himself] into for a modicum of inherited grace, […] class, breeding, money” (*E* 36). The more the narrative of *Eclipse* begins to unfold, the more we see Cleave using female figures as lenses through which his storied self must be read. In Part I of the novel Cleave describes how he met Lydia during a brief
stay at a “summer city” in the autumn of his acting career. The discrepancies between their social background and status dominate his description. Where Lydia was “of an aristocratic family of fabulous pedigree,” Cleave was careful not to “permit certain prominences to show through the deliberate fuzziness of [his] origins” (E34). He had “a room in a rotting tenement in one of those cobbled canyons off the river” (E36); she sojourned at the “Hotel Halcyon,” which Cleave describes in the light of idyll and gilded fantasy: “The Hotel Halcyon took on for me the air of an oasis; before I entered there I imagined behind that revolving door a secret world of greenery and splashing water and sultry murmurings” (E34–5).

As the summer houses fail to offer a means of escape and a form of reification in their crumbling topographies, eroded by time, three women in each novel variously become “avatar,” “effigy,” or “demon temptress,” each “conjured up by the force of [the protagonist’s] desire” (S98, 118) to fulfil his “dreams, fantasies, [...] delusions” of self (E28). In Part I of Eclipse, Lily, daughter of housekeeper Quirke, becomes a first “real, [...] physical presence” and begins to intrude upon the ghosts of a “phantom woman and her phantasmal child,” that haunt Cleave’s house and mind: “Her presence makes the house seem impossibly overcrowded. She has upset the balance of things” (E95). In Part II Lily and Quirke begin to take over Cleave’s life, or more precisely, that life which he has fashioned for himself in his solipsistic narrative:

They have come into focus, in a way that I am not sure I like, and that certainly I did not expect. It is as if they had stood up in their seats and ambled on to the stage while the play was going on, interrupting me in the middle of an intense if perhaps overly introspective soliloquy, and to save the show I must find a means somehow of incorporating them into the plot (E122).

Whilst wife Lydia is always also present in Cleave’s thoughts and actions, the more important female figure in the process of readjustment is his daughter Cass. Though the novel is ostensibly centred around Cleave’s plight “to cease becoming and merely be” (77), as the story begins to unfold “it becomes increasingly clear that the person haunting the narrative is his daughter Cass” (Hand, John Banville 170). Cleave’s daughter suffers from a rare strain of schizophrenia, Mandelbaum syndrome, and the father envies his daughter for her lack of self-consciousness, as it stands in utter contrast to his own acting self. Unlike Cass, who “does not act, but variously is” (E72), Cleave must always act and cannot simply be; he cannot do without an audience, and he sees himself as an understudy of the many masks he puts on and the many roles he plays. Cass is for him “a symbol of the elusive completion of himself that he so desperately
seeks” (McNamee, “Time Enough for Love” 223). In sum, like Morden, for whom Chloe, Anna and Mrs Grace all embodied “the chance to fulfil the fantasy of [his] self” (S 105), Cleave is attracted to women out of a similar need to be recognised by their other. He describes the numerous relationships before his marriage to Lydia as an abhorrence of life in a “vacuum”:

And things rushed into this vacuum where the self should be. Women, for instance. They fell into me, thinking to fill me with all they had to give. It was not simply that I was an actor and therefore supposedly lacking an essential part of personality; I was a challenge to them, to their urge to create, to make life. (E 33)

Paradoxically, neither Max nor Alexander can ultimately have what they want, because the desires of the wanting self inherently entail an absence, a kink of complexity that torments them as it does other Banville protagonists. This absence as always already elsewhere is epitomised by various elements throughout both novels. First, the memories of the childhood past are emplotted within pastoral narratives of nostalgia; as previously discussed, the dialectics of presence and absence are central to the pastoral mode, and in Banville’s nostalgia narratives absence is most strongly felt in the pastoral past by which each character attempts to achieve or re-invent their own presence in the now. This dialectic of presence and absence, of being-in-the-world, and what Jacques Lacan calls the process of identification of the self through “an-other,” is brought into the narratives by the summer houses and the imaginative collusion of the three-fold temporal strata in each narrative: one of the present, ‘an-other’ of the past and yet another moving towards a future imagined through the lens of the pastoral past. Furthermore, though the various female figures are the human companions that both accompany and link the male protagonists to their pasts, they do not reinforce a sense of self, but counter-act it. Chloe, for example, severs Morden from his imagined quasi-paradise and gilded boyhood world. The self-consciousness she engenders in him “expelled [him] from that sense of the immanence of all things, the all things that had included me, in which up to then I had dwelt, in more or less blissful ignorance (S 168). Similarly, Cleave’s life, lived through the many women he “fell into,” can be seen as “progress from a position of obsession with wholeness, with an absolute order or a pure, unadulterated self, to an acceptance of life as a process, unending and almost always incomplete, its deplorable dearth of meaning amply compensated for by an abundance of significance” (McNamee, “Time Enough for Love” 227). Thus, to continue to map elements of the pastoral in “the waxworks of memory” and the unconscious is to move to another Arcadian retreat used by all of Banville’s later
characters, including Freddie Montgomery in *Ghosts*: a retreat to the imagination and the mind.

A sense of displacement is central to both novels without which the journey to the summers of the past would not have taken place. Each protagonist feels out of place in their present space and time. Additionally, both perceive “humanity as being permanently displaced between imagination and the material world (McNamee, “‘A Rosy Crucifixion’” 151). In an attempt to come to terms with the attendant estrangement of self, Max and Alexander retreat to the only kingdom where they feel they hold power and influence: the kingdom of the mind. There the strong hold of language allows them to house in an Arcadia of verbal and intellectual illusions: “‘Harpazein,’ I said hastily, ‘to seize. Greek, that is.’ Playing the fussy old professor, remote but kindly; when in difficulty, act” (*E* 16). Language, after all, is the voice of the mind, and to Cleave and Morden language has always been more than a key to the “sealed chamber” of the imagination. It is also a powerful source of solace, certainty and stability in the face of their present crisis of identity. Language to both is a religion; it is the church where they seek refuge and try to heal their hurts.

From the very first pages the reader is made aware in both novels that the respective narrative realities cannot be perceived, read or imagined but through the lens of the protagonists’ narcissistic, metafictional obsession with language: “Plimsoll. Now, there is a word one does not hear any more, or rarely” (*S* 11). Countless other language-related queries and anomalies are dispersed throughout the novel; their resolution more often than not offers, if only briefly, moments of unassailable conviction and comfort that counteract the characters’ sense of permanent displacement between self and the world: “Anaglypta. All afternoon I had been searching for the word and now I had found it” (*E* 20). Ever and again the narrators try to extend these moments of escape by producing exquisitely written prose that celebrates the significance of nature, or more specifically, “the superabundance of summer” (*E* 188). In lyrical interludes they paint landscapes of the imagination where the otherwise overwhelming sense of displacement and bifurcation disappears, and where the absence of an idyllic elsewhere is amalgamated with the landscapes of the now: “It was a sumptuous, oh, truly a sumptuous autumn day, all Byzantine coppers and golds under a Tiepolo sky of enamelled blue, the countryside all fixed and glassy, seeming not so much itself as its own reflection in the still surface of a lake” (*S* 45).

Words are Max’s consolation, vocabulary his comfort, and language his Arcadia. He constructs idyllic retreats and alternate, escapist realities primarily by virtue of his narrative art. “Immersed in words,” Max argues, “paltry as they may be ... I had felt myself break through ... into another state where ordinary laws
did not operate ... where I was ... more vividly present than ever I could be in
what we call, because we must, the real world” (S 97–8). As Roy L. Hunt argues,
“[r]eality is given meaning through language. When we learn our language we
acquire an arbitrary set of codes which define our concept of reality.” There is,
however, a fundamental paradox in attempting to understand reality when that
reality is but a construction based on the past as pastoral. Neither Cleave nor
Morden, intellectuals in search of a pastoral grand narrative of nostalgia can
“stand outside the system [of language] and discuss objective truth in itself be‐
cause without a language reality has no meaning.” Thus, Hunt continues, if the
attempt “to discover objective truth involves using an arbitrary symbolic system
which immediately places itself between reality and our comprehension of
it, [...]. once reality is mediated through language, reality is forever displaced”
(Hunt, “Hell Goes Round and Round” 155).

Arcadia, like language, is inherently bifurcate. There are, after all, “two kinds
of Arcadia: shaggy and smooth; dark and light; a place of bucolic leisure and a
place of primitive panic” (Schama, “Arcadia Redesigned” 517). In language there
is always a subject and an object; in the pastoral mode too, there can be no
presence without absence, and in any narrative emplotment no sense of self
without an-other. Morden’s pastoral reading of the past consoles and commem‐
orates the absence of self by calling upon the absence of others. On the one hand,
his recourse to the mode imbues him with a “sense of the immanence of all
things” (S 167). On the other hand, all pastoral can do is to provide the narrative
process of (re-)identification and remembering with a symbolic paradigm for
“putting the complex into the simple” (Empson, Some Versions of Pastoral 23).
Morden’s commemorative nostalgia narrative endows the holiday resort with
such a symbolic system: “At the seaside all is narrow horizontals, the world
reduced to a few long straight lines pressed between earth and sky” (S 10).

Then again, language is a symbolic system, to recall Hunt, that is caught
“between reality and our comprehension of it,” whence it is always already “dis‐
placed.” At best it can punctuate the darkness of grief, offer a brief sense of
ennoblement to the attendant pain, but it can never truly dispel it. Morden com‐
to realise this during one of his many hospital visits. There it dawns upon him
that he “would never again be able to think of another word to say to [Anna]. [...] From this day forward all would be dissembling. There would be no other way
to live with death” (22–3). The Sea and Eclipse, perhaps above all else, are elegies
about the coming to terms with mortality. And though the retreat into the nos‐
talgia constructions of memory and the imagination cannot truly offer stability
and re-adjustment, it does, at its high points, give the protagonists a sense of
leaving stronger than upon embarkment for the golden world.