of ‘Todtnauberg’ that Celan had recently sent him. The letter reveals a Heidegger reflecting briefly on their ‘conversation’ six months earlier and thanks Celan for the poem, which he describes as “the word of the poet […] that preserves the memory of a day of various moods in the Black Forest.” Heidegger then makes an unusual observation: “Since then [our meeting] we have exchanged a good deal of mutual silence. I think that someday some of it will be redeemed from unspokenness through conversation” (letter qtd. in Krass, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, Aug. 1, 1997, p. 57). Perhaps it is this idea of redemption from the unspoken which is carried forward most powerfully by the conversation’s legacy, and which, ultimately, Banville is trying to recapture in his unique radio-play. The result is a play that dialectically also disavows Adorno’s famous claim, as if to say that if to write poetry after Ausschwitz is barbaric, not to write, is even more so.

4.3 *Et in Arcadia Ego*: Death in Arcadia, Death in Banville

At the end of their lives, all men look back and think their youth was Arcadia. — J. W. Goethe

The secret of survival is a defective imagination. The inability of mortals to imagine things as they truly are is what allows them to live, since one momentary, unresisted glimpse of the world’s totality of suffering would annihilate them on the spot[...]. We have stronger stomachs, stouter lungs, we see it all in all its awfulness at every moment and are not daunted; that is the difference; that is what makes us divine. — *The Infinities*

Death, Love, and (Im)mortality in *The Sea* and *The Infinities*

At times Banville’s novels read like “death-haunted” epitaphs, at other times his focus is on life as a lighthearted, even “comical venture with occasional irruptions of the tragic” (Barry, “Banville in Interview” 2005). Max Morden’s many confrontations with mortality in *The Sea* – the suicide of Myles and Chloe Grace,
the death of his mother, and Anna’s terminal condition, among others – result in mood swings between “anger, vituperation, violence” (S 149) and the need for comic relief from the attendant grief. So too, when he learns of Anna’s cancer: “In the midst of the imperial progress that was our life together a grinning losel had stepped out of the cheering crowd and sketching a parody of a bow had handed my tragic queen the warrant of impeachment” (19–20). This pendular momentum is not only visible in The Sea, but also in its novel posterior, The Infinites, in which, quintessentially, we find “the gods, at play in the house of mortals” (Corrigan 2010). It was only a matter of time, after the highly cerebral introspections about the human fear of death and its consequences – abundant in Eclipse and The Sea – that Banville’s efforts would move full circle, to musings about the death of immortality itself. Where The Sea is about coming to terms with the inevitability and omnipresence of human mortality, The Infinites centres around the gods of the ancient world – Hermes, Zeus et al. – and their perennial, unattainable efforts to die: “Each time he [Zeus] dips his beak into the essence of a girl he takes, so he believes, another enchanting sip of death, pure and precious. For of course he wants to die, as do all of us immortals, that is well known” (I 67).

A memorable sentence opens The Sea: “They departed, the gods, on the day of the strange tide” (1), and The Infinites is based upon a reversal of this seemingly incontrovertible truth: it is set in a world in which the gods never departed at all. They pass their time by observing, wryly commenting on, and occasionally interfering with the affairs of human beings. Already at the outset, Hermes, the self-appointed narrator of the novel, mischievously muses as to “[w]hy in such times as these would the gods come back to be among men? [...] But the fact is we never left – you only stopped entertaining us” (I 14). Throughout the novel, Hermes observes, in prose with a propensity for empyrean poetics, the world he and his fellow gods created, deliberating on the fascinating problems of human interaction and behaviour. Indeed, tragi-comical attitudes about love, death and (im)mortality act against and complement each other to create pastoral otherworlds of escape, self-exploration and nostalgia. Accordingly, everything in both The Sea and The Infinites is suffused with the gods and Arcadia. The setting of The Infinites is a country house aptly named Arden in which the central human character, Adam Godley Sr., lies bed-ridden and dying in the attic, alternatively also known as ‘the Sky Room.’ There, in the prime of his life, he used to work as a theoretical mathematician, and there he is “condemned not to death, not yet, but to a life into which he feels he does not properly fit” (I 4). Adam Sr.’s greatest achievement is his theory of unified time, space and being, and yet, trying to convey his theory to the world at large has so far presented
itself as an insurmountable problem. It is one of the few problems that the divine Hermes truly sympathises with:

He always deplored the humble objects out of which his predecessors – so many of whom he helped to discredit – forged their metaphors, all those colliding billiard balls and rolling dice, the lifts going up and coming down, ships passing each other in the benighted night. Yet how else were they to speaks that which cannot be spoken, sat least not in the common tongue? He sought to cleave exclusively to numbers, figures, concrete symbols. He knew, of course, the peril of confusing the expression of something with the something itself, and even he sometimes went astray in the uncertain zone between the concept and the thing conceptualized; even he, like me, mistook sometimes the manifestation for the essence. Because for both of us this essence is essentially inessential, when it comes to the business of making manifest. For me, the gods; for him, the infinities. You see the fix we are in. (I 131)

Many signature Banville features return in *The Infinities*, including lyrical, self-aggrandising prose, a confrontation of philosophical issues, and high-culture allusions. Unlike in *The Sea*, these all serve to showcase Banville’s ironic humour. Where *The Sea* is very clear in its mission of atonement for a childhood tragedy, *The Infinities* is a clever comedy, its narrator cloaked connivingly in the garb of the ancient Greek tragedy. As Eoghan Smith puts it, “*The Infinities* is still very much concerned with authenticity, yet the suffocating interiority of [Banville’s] middle-aged solipsistic male narrators is at least partially abandoned for a more panoramic gaze” (*John Banville: Art and Authenticity* 146). The two novels are intimately connected, nevertheless, by their continuous obsession with themes and tropes central to most of Banville’s fiction: dying, death and the various stages of existence in between. Indeed, *The Infinities* is filled variously with characters either who have died, who are dying, or those who cannot die. Thus, just as in his ‘Frames’ trilogy, these novels sway between tropes of mortality and immortality, linked inexorably to the author’s own idea of himself as a kind of “deity who feels compelled to relinquish the possibility of an authentic art, but who cannot quite do so” (Smith, *John Banville: Art and Authenticity* 147). Banville, essentially, is himself musing on the problems of writing novel, for the author creates his setting, creates his characters and imagines his plot, only to then find that he cannot make them stick to the plan intended for them. In the same fashion, Zeus, Hermes, and all the rest of the gods are astonished that, after they created humans, the humans discovered for themselves love, lust, as well as other means of interaction that can serve as both a means of exploration of and an escape from the mortal realities thrust upon them by the
gods. The toys crafted by Zeus et al. for their own amusement, have come to life and Hermes, like any author, cannot wait to see what they will do next:

[S]ee what they made of this mess of frottage; it is as if a fractious child had been handed a few timber shavings and a bucket of mud to keep him quiet only for him promptly to erect a cathedral, complete with baptistry, steeple, weathercock and all. Within the precincts of this consecrated house they afford each other sanctuary, excuse each other their failings, their sweats and smells, their lies and subterfuges, above all their ineradicable self-obsession. This is what baffles us, how they wriggled out of our grasp and somehow became free to forgive each other for all that they are not. (I 67)

This pivotal yet elusive issue is expressed in a postmodern style that uses the Arcadian architectonics of solipsistic, self-scrutinizing nostalgia, a return to the seemingly idyllic simplicity of country life, and an obsession with the antics of memory to stage once again not only a crisis of identity but, in a more panoramic, aggrandising manner, a crisis critical of how to live life itself. Banville’s achievement in *The Infinities* lies mostly in the way he turns a setting that echoes Poussin’s pastoral into a postmodern Irish wake, on the one hand, and an elegiac, myth-imbued bacchanal, on the other. The way *The Infinities* melds the original, Greek myths and grand narratives of literature with the postmodern becomes even more relevant if we take into account how postmodern fiction has always thoroughly exploited love and death, not only as central tropes, but essentially as formally relevant features of the novel. John Banville’s postmodern fiction achieves the humorous exploitation of these two perennial pillars of human existence by systematically establishing and then placing in prominent position the relation between the characters, the reader and the author, and entangling all three into a web of love, seduction and deferred annihilation, ultimately transgressing classical ontological parameters. In this regard, then, John Banville’s novels develop and foreground a notion of love and desire as a creative activity, an instance of textual narrative which is necessarily seductive and, finally, the time-honoured equation of life with discourse / narration. Banville’s characters essentially engage in a challenge with their sense of impending death – both spiritual and physical – precisely by means of their accomplished storytelling, whereby writing, language and its fictions themselves contain a seductive charge. His characters evoke the problematic ‘tradition’ of the impossibility and necessity of discourse ranging from Beckett to Nabokov, only to name two of Banville’s most revered literary influences:

Not only did my Dad set me to monitor the house and ensure he was not disturbed at his illicit amours but I also had to render the lady Helen’s husband sleepless so he
would go night-wandering and vacate the bed. Then – and wait till you hear this – then I was commanded to hold back the dawn for fully an hour, to give the old boy extra time in which to work his wiles on the unsuspecting girl. (I 69)

To return to *The Sea, The Infinities* is a fitting sequel to Banville’s Booker Prize-winning novel, especially if we appreciate, by applying McHale’s observations about earlier Banville novels, *The Sea’s* establishment of death as a meta-object and meta-theme, and how it “characterizes not the fictional interactions in the text’s world, but rather the interactions between the text and its world on the one hand, and the reader and his or her world on the other” (McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* 227). Ultimately, the two novels are mirrors that reflect back upon each other, mutually, an ontological exploration of the purgatory of (im)mortality, where *The Sea’s* Max Morden creates divine, god-like narrative effigies of those he both admired in his past, only to burn them at the altar of a present where immortality does not exist, because it is contingent, after death, on the memories of others, and the gods of *The Infinities*, on the other hand, who are in fact jealous of human life, love and even death. Refusing to gift Adam Godley Sr. a much-awaited death and extending his bloodline in a pregnancy at the end of the novel is emblematic of an ultimate act of revenge by the gods, against the easy escape available to humans: death. Thus, Adam Godley Sr. is forced to suffer the original conundrum of how to communicate his theory of infinities, and the otherwise highly dysfunctional rest of his family must live out the comically tragic existence they have manoeuvred themselves into, through foolish, self-annihilating acts motivated by lust, love and desire.

By stark contrast, *The Sea’s* protagonist Max Morden is permitted a much more satisfying moment of closure and epiphany. Musing over how Connie lives on in others’ memories, for example, Max reflects:

Thus in the minds of the many does the one ramify and disperse. It does not last, it cannot, it is not immortality. We carry the dead with us only until we die too, and then it is we who are borne along for a little while, and then our bearers in their turn drop, and so on into the unimaginable generations. (S 87)

Towards the end of the novel, Max also remarks that he is “compiling a Book of the Dead” (S 237), and how Morden is indeed an apposite family name for a self-appointed chronicler of the dead, for ‘morden’ in German means ‘to murder’ or ‘to kill.’ Very much in keeping with this “joke in bad taste on the part of polyglot fate” (S 13), Max seems more engrossed in painstakingly recording the passing away of those near and dear to him than in his own life. First and foremost, there was the recent death of his wife. He likewise notes her father’s death shortly after he and Anna were married (S 107), and the deaths of his own parents
as well as of Carlo and Constance Grace (S 261). Lastly, but perhaps most significantly, there were the traumatic deaths of Chloe and Myles, who committed suicide “on the day of the strange tide” (S 3) during that otherwise idyllic summer, leaving the boy Max with Poussin’s epitaph – *Et in Arcadia Ego* – burned like a mnemonic of death into the landscape of all future childhood memories.

Beating inside him “like a second heart” (S 13), the past holds great power over Max; it offers him a second life amidst idyllic, childhood memories, yet it also keeps reminding him of his first encounter with death. Thus, the narrative swings back and forth, and Max is continually trying to find himself in this plethora of attitudes towards the past. At times he cannot but eagerly immerse himself in said past, using his imagination as a gateway between the “intolerable” present and the memories of his summers among “the gods.” At other times “there are moments when the past has a force so strong it seems one might be annihilated by it” (S 47). Two deaths, moreover, stand like the tombstone of Arcady at the centre of these polymorphic memory landscapes. The first is the death of the twins, in the distant past, and the second, of Anna, having just occurred in the recent past. These two traumatic events weave a dark, red thread through the three strands of Morden’s already complex self-narrative. The result is a story and narrator that are at a constant tug of war between various inescapable *memento mori*, where the present reality is encased in a “hebetudinous catafalque” (S 218), and the imagined past is blanketed by the g(u)ilt of memory.

Thus death, always in collaboration with Mnemosyne, runs as a leitmotif through the three narrative strands of *The Sea*. First, Morden’s journey into the summers of his childhood can be read as a commemorative rite for Anna’s death, “a rite performed in a place of refuge – a sanctuary of spontaneous devotion and silent pilgrimage – in which one finds the living heart of memory” (Friberg, “Waters and Memories Always Divide” 257). Though Anna “is lodged in [him] like a knife,” he is also already beginning to forget her; the gilded, innocent image he has of her in his mind is “fraying, bits of pigments, flakes of gold leaf are chipping off.” Eventually, he fears, “the entire canvas [will] be empty” (S 215). He journeys to The Cedars with a desperate desire to counteract that forgetting, and thereby “to find some sort of absolution in the past – from the past” (Friberg, “Waters and Memories Always Divide” 259). His attempts to recall and in a way revive Anna’s life through a retreat into the memories of childhood bring back to life not Anna, but even older conflicts and traumata, for at the heart of his summers among the family Grace, his ‘divinities,’ is the sudden suicide of Chloe and Myles. As a boy, Max witnesses Chloe Grace taking her own life when she walks into the sea and drowns herself; Myles follows her, and Morden is left on
the beach in utter shock as his innocence fails him, confronted with one of those typically Banvillian “irruptions of the tragic” (Barry, “‘As Clear as Mirror Glass’” 2005).

Morden’s return to The Cedars is also driven by a search for meaning behind the Arcadian epitaph, *Et in Arcadia Ego*, for the two most memorable and idyllic moments of his life were both pierced by untimely death. As a consequence of these traumatic experiences, Morden has, all his life, always had to grapple with the seeming paradox of mortality amidst a paradise gained and then lost. Thus, much like Poussin before him, Max paints several versions of *Et in Arcadia Ego*. At the centre of the first version, or narrative strand, stands Anna: she is the fulcrum around which the two dimensions of time and imagination move. “It is the loss of Anna,” Brendan McNamee observes, “that leads to the entire structure of the childhood memory, which [...] may be either ‘real or imagined’ (S 132). It is the loss of Anna which takes him back to The Cedars[...] The reality of her disease,” on the one hand, “sets her firmly in the world of temporal loss”; Morden raises her to the imagined heights of divinity, on the other hand, “by way of a number of structural and stylistic subtleties throughout the text” (McNamee, *The Quest for God in the Novels of John Banville* 251).

The divinities of Greek mythology, Aphrodite, Eros, and Pan in particular, have always presided over pastoral landscapes, especially those of the Renaissance, and echoes of their presence are superabundant in the nexus of Morden’s memories and imaginings. Accordingly, Anna moves as much between spheres of the “real and the imagined” (S 132) as between descriptions of divinity and mortality. At their first meeting, for example, Morden talks of how it was her size that first caught his eye: “Not that she was so very large, but she was made on a different scale from that of any woman I had known before her” (S 73). Anna is described as possessing a godlike quality which is further strengthened, when, looking at her, Morden “had difficulty fixing a depth of focus” (S 74). To themselves and others, Anna and Max seemed a golden couple: “How grand we must have looked, the two of us, making our entrance, taller than everyone else, our gaze directed over their heads as if fixed on some far fine vista that only we were privileged enough to see” (S 74). Furthermore, Morden describes the world of Anna and her father as “fantastical one wherein the rules as I had known them up to then did not apply, where everything shimmered and nothing was real” (S 77). Accordingly, and as a quasi-apotheosis of these amorous pantheisms, Anna’s proposal of marriage represents to Morden a unique opportunity “to become a denizen of these excitingly alien deeps,” and ultimately also “the chance to fulfil the fantasy of myself” (S 78).
These descriptions of life together with Anna distinctly echo sensations evoked by the Graces, too. Chloe Grace, in particular, is described as possessing a goddess-like capriciousness and cruelty. Chloe and Anna, the two most central “avatars” of love in Morden’s life, are also the two most authoritative voices on all matters of mortality and death. The *Et in Arcadia Ego* motif of a paradise lived and then lost is strongly brought to life in the narrative strands that detail each relationship. Illness, misfortune, untimely death: such things happen to others, but neither to the “divinities” Chloe and Myles, nor to Anna and Morden. Just as the shepherds in Poussin’s two versions of *Et in Arcadia Ego* first express shock (see Appendix, Fig. 3) and then acknowledge death in Arcadia in dignified consensus (see Appendix, Fig. 4), so Morden’s attitude towards death experiences a paradigm shift between Chloe’s suicide and Anna’s passing. The boy Max, for example, is left utterly dumbfounded by the fact that Chloe had gone so suddenly: “How could she be with me one moment and the next not? How could she be elsewhere, absolutely?” (S 140). By the time Anna passes away, however, the swan song of innocence has long been replaced by a knowing air steeped in experience. Human existence is to the adult Morden but a condition always already overshadowed by death: “But then, at what moment, of all our moments, is life not utterly, utterly changed, until the final, most momentous change of all?” (S 33–4).

If *The Sea*’s mortal protagonist is driven to Arcadian memories of childhood by his “rueful desire to understand the fragility of human existence,” *The Infinities* is a more comic, humorous treatise of classical themes of love, death and desire, and its divine protagonists revel in the many ironies on offer. Adam Sr.’s imminent death generates a tension that infiltrates the thoughts, interactions and the narratives of every character at his deathbed. Adam Jr., the apprehensive son, is more ponderous about his childhood than even his father. The appropriately named Helen, his wife, is ravished by Zeus. Ursula, Adam Sr.’s wife, cannot make out whether her husband still has his consciousness. Petra, the emotionally and psychologically fraught daughter, timidly awaits her prospective lover, Roddy Waggstaff. Benny Grace, a former colleague of the dying Adam, adds to the tension with his disturbing presence. Each character echoes in their story traits and behaviours of a divinity of Greek mythology itself. Adam Sr. is clearly a kind of omniscient Zeus whose desire to become immortal (through his work in the field of mathematics and his theory of the infinities) echoes the divine counterpart’s own hankerings after mortal delights and adventures. Roddy Waggstaff, in turn, is painted as a kind of Pan, a satyr who presides over the bacchanals of Arcadia itself. His “slightly stooped” posture, the “narrow fawn
slacks”, coupled with “slip-on shoes, and a white shirt” betray these parallels only too easily:

Tall and slender and slightly stooped, Roddy has the aspect of a film heartthrob of a former time. He wears narrow fawn slacks sharply pressed, and pale-tan, slip-on shoes, and a white shirt that fairly shines in the sunlight, the collar open over a loosely knotted yellow cravat. His caramel-coloured hair is parted at the side and carefully arranged in a casual sweep across his brow. He has green eyes and a phthisic pallor. *(I 87)*

As ever, Banville leads us mischievously astray here again, because the real Pan later takes on the form of a pudgy, benevolent and entirely undemanding Benny Grace:

The name he is going under is Benny Grace. What he is doing here, or thinks to do, I cannot say, although I have my suspicions, oh, indeed, I have. Should I fly down from the roof now [...] and give him an admonitory skelp of my serpented staff? With the likes of him, if he has a like, it is always well to get in early. I know him and his disruptive ways.[.] *(I 132)*

Banville also constantly shifts between various narrative voices and perspectives, to add to the complexity of the playful, yet complex interplay between his mortal and immortal characters – even family dog Rex is given a voice and is apparently “accustomed by now to their [the Godleys’] frequently inexplicable ways” *(I 125)*. The narrative shifts quickly and unexpectedly between first and third person. The author’s use of such sudden changes in perspective implies that “no character is fully in charge of their thoughts” *(Smith, John Banville: Art and Authenticity 155)*, and that Banville has here again created an author-god, much like Freddie Montgomery did in *Ghosts*.

An additional level of sophistication and irony has been added in *The Infinities*, because the playful trickster and author-god narrator (Prospero’s Ariel in *The Tempest*), is here played and mirrored in a real god-author, Hermes. Hermes does not function like an all-knowing authorial figure who can control everything and everyone in his own narrative, however. Instead, to emphasize both the limitations and the constructedness of the all-powerful deity that he and the other Greek gods represent, Banville plays with the concept of voice. First, the quick alternation between first and third-person point of view create a sense of uncontrolled disorientation; second, the reader at times hears Adam’s interior voice as he lies on his death-bed, only to realize it is actually Hermes who is forcing these thoughts onto the mathematician himself:
[I]t seems to him, that he is being born in reverse, so that this garrulous dying he is doing will bring him not to the next world but back to a state of suspended pre-existence, ready to start all over again from before the beginning. It is a nice conceit, is it not? I shall let him entertain it for the nonce. (I 33)

Here Banville has created a concept of death concomitant with the notions that govern the self and the other and the dynamics constitutive of the identification process. In *Ghosts*, for example, Freddie Montgomery’s brutal murder of Josie Bell throws into sharp relief a confused understanding of gender and identity, especially as pertaining to the female ‘other’ and his own sense of bifurcation. According to Montgomery, “there is an onus on us, the living, to conjure up our particular dead [...] they should live in us, and through us” (G 83). In an attempt to fulfil this “onus,” Freddie tries to bring Josie Bell back to life through the narrative emplotment of the little golden world that is *Le monde d’or*. This act, supposedly one of atonement, fails, however, because Freddie tries to deny death, and death is undeniable, even in the ‘golden world’: *Et in Arcadia Ego*. Thus, when face to face with the ghost of his dead son and finally confronted with this irrevocable truth, he can only turn away in frustrated disappointment from the past he had returned to in search of clarity, simplicity, and stability.

In writing his “Big Book on Bonnard,” Max Morden attempts something similar. As he continues his research on the French painter, he begins to see several parallels between his own life with Anna and the artist’s last years with wife Marthe. Morden alludes, for example, to a day in 1893, when Bonnard “spied a girl getting off a Paris tram and [...] followed her to her place of work, [...] where she spent her days sewing pearls on to funeral wreaths. Thus death at the start wove its black ribbon into their lives” (S 151). Morden constructs a second parallel to Bonnard and Marthe’s retreat at Le Bosquet when he compares the way he and Anna shut themselves away in their house during the entire twelve months of her suffering. Thirdly,

the contrast between Bonnard’s late, mysteriously veiled self-portraits and the series he painted concurrently of his wife stretched out in the bath, insulated from the mortifications of age because these pictures always show her much younger than she was at the time, provides an exact correlative to the narrative, which offers similarly veiled self-portraits of Morden – as a boy, in middle-age, and in his sixties (Imhof, “The Sea: ‘Was’t Well Done?’” 176).

As in *Ghosts* and *Athena*, Morden’s narrative emplotment of self in art here is fraught with a conflicted, paradoxical relation to his identity. Max openly admits, on the one hand, that “the notion of an essential, singular self is problematic” for him (S 216). On the other hand, his “Big Book on Bonnard” wants to be
the precise counterpart to his “Book of the Dead”; he recreates Anna’s life in the book’s narrative art in an attempt to ward off the ageing process. The project to write about a famous artist and through the narrative emplotment of that artist’s art resolve his own problematic sense of self fails, ultimately, because

[p]oking at his memories, insomniac and regularly anaesthetized by his hip flask, Morden sits pushing his paragraphs around, unable any longer to grasp quite what it is writing is supposed to do. He is metaphorically writing against the tide, feeling that he might almost be able to turn back time if he can concentrate sufficiently on the art of recollection. (Kenny, John Banville: Visions and Revisions 178)

In the search for a meaning behind the deaths that so suddenly sever him from those carefree childhood days of love, glory and divinity, Morden has become an art historian who in the years immediately before and after Anna’s death, very fittingly and ironically, specialises in studying manifestations of death in art. As Rüdiger Imhof remarks, Morden “perceives reality, the world, in terms of art, thus creating a distance between himself and […] life” (“The Sea: ‘Was’t Well Done?’” 166). More than that, by using art to distance himself from life, Morden brings himself inescapably closer to its polar opposite, death. The young Max of innocence, who defined himself through a life with and love to others, is replaced by an elderly erudite of experience who believes that he can get a final reading of his own life by writing about the deaths of those he once loved. Yet, at the same time, Morden looks upon himself as a nobody, who doubts the existence of the self. He perceives himself as someone who is “trying to write [his] will on a machine that was lacking the word I. The letter I, that is, small and large” (S 71). It goes without saying that no one can write their will convincingly without the word ‘I,’ and thus Morden feels condemned to see himself as such a no one, torn between postmodern doubts of the existence of the self and the desire to give his own life meaning in a narrative written against the grand imaginative backdrop of Arcadian landscapes crowned by the golden haze of memory.

Perhaps it is Victor Maskell, protagonist of Banville’s The Untouchable (1997), who comes closest to what is at the heart of Morden’s plight. Maskell, ostentatiously modelled on Anthony Blunt, a leading Poussin expert and Soviet spy, defends the painter’s Arcadia against critics who “spent their energies searching for the meaning of the work,” when, in fact,

there is no meaning. Significance, yes; affects; authority; mystery – magic, if you wish – but no meaning. The figures in the Arcadia are not pointing to some fatuous parable about mortality and the soul and salvation; they simply are. Their meaning is