5 Conclusions

Is this a calculated irony, a mocking gesture towards our feeble notions of pastoral? – *Ghosts* 229

This study offers a hitherto little explored vista on John Banville’s fictions, and argues that the contemporary Irish author is in many ways a post-/modern pastoralist. His entire oeuvre wavers indecisively between modernist and post-modernist concerns, as his fictions embody the viewpoint that “the anxiety of contamination in modernism is concerned with preserving the integrity of the autonomous art work so that it can conceptually counterbalance the potential senselessness and chaos of our world” (Kenny, *John Banville* 38). Pastoral, too, has survived as an autonomous mode that spotlights the significance of the construction of an aesthetic literary form, even when it is deemed equally important that, within that very same body of writing, the stability of such constructions should be called into doubt. Thus, pastoral in its various post-/modern transformations, is well suited as a lens through which to view and to understand much of John Banville’s writing, because both author and mode are prone to query their (meta-)narrative constructions in a self-conscious discourse that swings back and forth, between pastoral regression and post-/modern reflexion.

The pastoral lens opens new perspectives of analysis for Banville’s central concerns: the collusion of ethics and aesthetics in art and the process of self-identification in narrative, as well as the topography of the mind as subject to the literary concomitance of narrative, imagination, and memory. In contrast to more traditional forms, Banville’s pastoral contexts of retreat, sojourn and return manifest themselves more within than without, be it in the construction of imaginative otherworlds and idylls or as narrative meditations on the power games of fiction, reality, and illusion. His protagonists often harbour an Arcadia of the unconscious conditioned by a subtext of childhood nostalgia and a desire to return to a state of innocence. Brought to the surface by a moment of crisis, the attendant process of narrative emplotment produces a text that explores, subverts and transforms the pastoral mode into an ambiguous landscape of the perennial quest for a stable self-identity.
I

Banville’s pastoral aesthetic finds its most outspoken exponent in Freddie Montgomery. His *Book of Evidence* questions how to map morality and self in a social and cultural landscape where “the notion of free will has been abandoned” and where, in echo of Nietzsche, “there are no moral facts, only moral interpretations of facts” (*BoE* 16, 34). Freddie’s narcissistic narrative is born out of the need to relate culture, morality and culpability to his own decentred sense of identity. The resulting *Book* thrives on using language to construct for its author-narrator a (meta-)fictional narrative in desire of retreat, protection and absolution from an overwhelming present conditioned by crime and crisis. Thus, *The Book of Evidence* raises the pastoral contexts of retreat and return onto the meta-levels of language, where a master narrative is constructed to excommunicate and to exculpate Freddie from any sense of morality and accountability: “I saw myself as a master builder, who would one day assemble a marvellous edifice around myself, a kind of grand pavilion, airy and light, which would contain me utterly and yet wherein I would be free” (*BoE* 16). The architectonics of the resultant narrative, in direct comparison, create “a kind of Crystal Palace, beautifully structured and strong because of inner relationships and symmetries.” As Banville instrumentalises the pastoral mode, much like Montgomery, he is “fully aware that artificial conditions [are] being created, but he [is] also proud of his extraordinary ability to contrive the transparent tegument” (Heaney, “‘Eclogues in Extremis’” 6). Arcadia, not unlike Freddie and his ‘edifice’, wants to be viewed and admired from all sides; it wants the audience (as Montgomery wants the reader) to “enter and to stand back,” to regard it as “both a revelation and an intervention, as a *locus amoenus* where you can choose to remember or forget” (Heaney, “‘Eclogues in Extremis’” 7).

On the surface of the text, Freddie’s emplotment of self in the excommunicative exile of an Arcadian grand narrative is successful. And yet, such reclusion, however meticulously mapped out and constructed, is not enough for him. This becomes apparent when, immediately upon release from prison in *Ghosts*, Montgomery is compelled to act out his retreat in various other ways—be it as a physical sojourn on an island somewhere off the coast of Ireland, to the *fête galante* of *Le monde d’or*, or to a pastoral past made “half of memory” and half of reality. Thus, Freddie constructs a fictional narrative where he “speaks life” into a ‘golden world;’ he is Prospero and the other characters sprites, like Ariel, commanded by the sorcery of his linguistic prowess and imagination. Where *The Book* celebrates Montgomery’s amazing authorial powers, *Ghosts* subverts the same narrative art with an authoritative subtext of childhood nostalgia characterised by a crisis of inauthenticity and (corpo)reality. For Freddie can
achieve atonement only if he acknowledges his “bifurcate” self—as much a Prospero as a Caliban, as much a wordsmith as a ‘thing of darkness’, washed up on foreign shores of the self.

Ultimately, Montgomery is captured and progressively framed by the interlocked narratives of Banville’s ‘Frames’ trilogy. In each of the three novels, Freddie (albeit in different guises) emplots various works of art, be they real, counterfeit, or metafictional, into his storied self, thereby carefully crafting a Kunstwollen, an overly self-conscious and stylised discourse for his crisis of identity. Crucially, Banville’s artful narrative relies heavily on various aspects of the pastoral mode, including its characteristic nostalgia, its inherent dynamic of retreat and return, and its elegiac, redemptive project, to create for Montgomery a storied self who at times eschews the present for the “familiar otherwhere of art,” a nostalgic and excommunicative exile, and at other times explores issues of identity as mirrored against the beautiful if frustratingly untenable artifice of reality:

In the first days in that secret room I was happier than I can remember ever having been before, astray in the familiar otherwhere of art. Astray, yes, and yet somehow at the same time more keenly aware, of things and of myself, than in any other of the periods of my life that have printed themselves with particular significance on my memory. (A 78)

Montgomery also reminds us that landscape is no natural phenomenon but an aesthetic concept born in culture and literature: “Nature did not exist until we invented it one eighteenth-century morning radiant with Alpine light” (G 65). To regard a landscape is to transform a segment of the visual world into art, whether by sight, or as Freddie does, through narrative. Indeed, “landscape does not exist without the human agent recognizing it as such and transmitting his impression” (Parry, Landscapes of Discourse 13). Just as every landscape is constructed by an observing subject, so the ‘Frames’ trilogy’s Le monde d’or, its artistically islanded golden world, is a narrative construction of an alternate reality painted on the canvas of Freddie’s fictions. It is a mirror in which Montgomery wants his own subject refracted as an otherworldly shepherd exchanging (and often confusing) the complex for the simple, the guilty for the innocent, and illusion for reality: “I was like some creature of the so-called wild poised on open ground with miraculously refined senses tuned to the weather of the world” (A 78).

It is in this vein that pastoral begins to take on the role of a soothing, self-asserting grand narrative for Freddie in the excommunicative exile he has, with his narrative art, crafted for himself. Though it manifests itself most notably in
references to childhood, the past and a ‘lost land,’ it is due to Freddie’s desire to create a selfhood by means of authorship that the linguistic borderland of Arcadia and its powerful subtext of nostalgia first become textualised. The entire ‘Frames’ trilogy, above all else, draws attention to Montgomery’s authorial powers: he exhibits an unparalleled capacity to situate, circumscribe, and control characters through narrative. This power, however, also stands in a kind of discordant relationship with his claims that his writing amounts to no more than “puppet-show twitchings which passes for consciousness” (BoE 38).

Additionally, it both pains and pleases Freddie that all is a question of perspective and perception. He is well aware, after all, that the attempts to create an aesthetic paradise – where he can return to a state of innocence and receive atonement for his crimes – cannot escape the uprooting undercurrent of his own post-/modern impulses. These are forces, moreover, that inescapably result in a gaze at the real, hard and uncompromising truths that govern his bifurcated self. There is in the modernist arts and literature “never simply a mimetic reflection of a predefined reality” (Parry, *Landscapes of Discourse* 5); any vision of idyll and harmony can easily become a dystopia fraught with profound unease. So too with Freddie’s ‘island’ in *Ghosts*: from one point of view, he has “embarked for the golden world,” from another he finds himself “in the underworld.” Thus, innocence is displaced by “concupiscence” (G 95). Indeed, when “viewed from a certain angle these polite arcadian scenes can seem a riotous bacchanal” (*Ghosts* 96–97). It is perhaps useful to consider Simon Schama’s remarks here, that “the mark of the original Arcadians was their bestiality, their presiding divinity. Pan copulated with goats ... [and] was taught how to masturbate by his father, Hermes” (Schama, “Arcadia Redesigned” 526).

In sum, Freddie Montgomery, perhaps Banville’s finest if most disturbing, creation, transforms the pastoral mode into an identity discourse that tests and questions many modernist and postmodernist tendencies. Banville creates a god-like author-narrator in Freddie and frames him in a trilogy of his own authoring, in order to transform the traditional mimetic approach to literature and art into a narcissistic, yet melancholy retreat inward. Simultaneously, Banville’s postmodern, authorial kaleidoscope refracts any search for order and meaning into countless reflections, re-readings, and re-interpretations. Thus, a return to postmodern unreliability and disingenuousness disrupts the protagonist’s search and sojourn in the grand, Arcadian narratives he has constructed for himself as a retreat into various culturally charged landscapes (and otherwordly escapes). This is visible in Freddie’s narration throughout, where ascents of pastoral prosody constantly face off against descants of postmodern parody, and where
Freddie the ‘little god’ and puppet-master of various storied others, nonetheless always struggles to comprehend (and thereby offer stability to) his self.

II

Narratives give space to memory just as much as memory spatializes narrative. As Gaston Bachelard has argued in his Poetics of Space, spatial experiences are often transformed into metaphors for our thinking: “an implicit geometry—whether we will or no—confers spatiality upon thought” (Bachelard, Poetics of Space 212). Any such conferment of “spatiality upon thought” bestows in equal measure a spatiality upon our capacity to remember. John Banville shares precisely this insight with the French intellectual, that memories are first spatial before, if at all, they are perceived on a temporal axis, and it provides the foundations on which the Irish writer’s fiction is housed. In order to achieve this spatial emplotment of memory within narrative, John Banville turns landscape and architecture into metaphors of thought and into sites of pastoral nostalgia and remembrance. More specifically, each time-experience, narrated by the protagonists always with supreme eloquence, transforms the natural sites and architectural settings into a journey towards a point of pastoral return, “to those Arcadian fields where memory and imagination merge” (E 137). Indeed, John Banville is as much concerned with the topography of the mind as Gaston Bachelard is with a “topoanalysis” of “felicitous space”. What connects the two are the concepts of nostalgia and remembrance as expressed in the pastoral mode, which is itself, after all, a poetics of dwelling. The pastoral mode is very well suited to narratives of memory because in its architecture and its landscapes is where memory often dwells, as idealized, nostalgic constructions of an imagination vying for a return to innocence and stability. As Simon Schama puts it, “[before it can ever be a [pastoral] repose for the senses, landscape is the work of the mind. Its scenery is built up as much from strata of memory as from layers of rock” (Schama, Landscape and Memory 7).

What makes Banville’s novels uniquely different from other fictions concerned with mapping nostalgia, memory and crises of identity onto narrative, however, is in the way the Irish author turns away from narrative as a collective memory experience to create post-/modern pastorals that explore the intersection of memory and subjectivity. A subject’s memories create subjective memories, after all, and the pastoral offers both a temporal axis (expressed in its dynamic of retreat and return) as well as a spatial architectonic (expressed as Arcadia) within which the individual can reckon with memories and the crisis-ridden self. We see this particularly well in Birchwood (1973), Banville’s Big House novel turned post-/modern pastoral. 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 post-modernist manner, it all starts with anti-Cartesian invocation: “I am, therefore I think. That seems inescapable” (BW 1), and since “all thinking is in a sense remembering” (BW 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. These playful, unreliable inversions combine to turn Godkin into a mock-heroic protagonist who epitomises the pastoral mode’s pejorative potential as a vehicle for socio-cultural and political criticism, parody and satire.

Houses, big and small, remain important in Banville’s later works too, including Ghosts, Eclipse, The Sea, A Conversation in the Mountains and The Infinities, 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. Banville achieves a postmodern subversion of the Big House novel through farcical characterization and through the parodied description of the decline of Birchwood itself. 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,” but one that ultimately leads to stasis or “moments of the sublime, raised and cancelled in the structural metaphor of ‘petrifaction’” (Sage, “The Politics of Petrifaction” 32, 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 delusions and mental development of its historian-narrator, and thus turns a narrative that begins with the telling admonition: “Words fail me” (NL 1) into
a powerful study of how mental topographies are shaped by the elusive nature of memory. Evident from the outset of the novel, *The Newton Letter*’s 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 in Fern House, and it is written as a postmodern satire of historical writing reinforced by a parallel parody of the Big House genre. All 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. In this vein, Banville’s use of the Big House in *The Newton Letter* 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, used to parody a mainstay of postmodernism: the unreliable narrator in search of a stable self-identity.

**III**

Alexander Cleave and Max Morden, much like Montgomery, are incurable narcissists; both seek refuge in the past as both are plagued by flashbacks of an “intolerable present” full of doubt and polyvalence. Their narratives expand Banville’s post-/modern pastoralism to include re-examinations of nostalgia and the human experience of time. *Eclipse* and *The Sea* begin where Homer’s *Odyssey* left off, as narrative re-enactments of a nostalgia that facilitates the protagonist’s return to a point of origin, an imagined *locus amoenus* or home; the attendant sojourn functions as a re-evaluation and rediscovery of the crisis-ridden self. At the helm of both *Eclipse* and *The Sea*, are narrators, crucially, who try to manipulate the nostalgic act of retreat and return with their linguistic and intellectual prowess, in order to construct memories of a pastoral past where both a vain escape from and a more productive exploration of an identity crisis is possible.

Terry Gifford points to pastoral as “the poetry of illusion,” where the bucolic construct of a golden age becomes “the historiography of wish-fulfilment” (*Pastoral* 41–2). Accordingly, the two novels *Eclipse* and *The Sea* can be read as post-/modern autobiographies of wishful thinking. The context and construction of a return to a childhood of innocence is closely connected to an incessant debate about the human experience of time and the imagination’s attempts to overcome such limits. Cleave and Morden are narrators who wish to regress to a childhood as an imagined quasi-paradise. Their storied self cannot, however,
but oscillate between nostalgic regression and postmodern reflexion in the here and now. The authenticity of their imaginative retreats is constantly called into doubt by a narrative self writing through the typically post-/modern looking-glass, tinged in the playful, yet poignant hue of parody and irresolution.

Many of Banville’s protagonists also use women as a point of access to return to an imagined prelapsarian state of innocence before they ‘fall,’ variously to crime (Montgomery), to complacency and an overall withdrawal from reality (Cleave), and to alcohol – Morden’s “big baby’s bottle” and “soother” (*The Sea* 248). The numerous female protagonists are not only effigies of each narrator’s desires and fantasies, but each also functions as a narrative other through which the former seeks to assess and assert their selves. Josie Bell, Flora, Chloe, and Cass Cleave, to name but the most prominent, move through each narrative as “agent[s] of individuation,” (as in *The Book of Evidence* and *Ghosts*), to “fill up the vacuum where the self should be” (*Eclipse*) or as “avatar[s] of memory,” concomitant in the protagonist’s search for “that Edenic moment” of childhood innocence (*The Sea*).

Childhood is a strong theme in Banville’s later works too, as it offers to the main characters a very potent point of access to the Arcadia of their youth, be it real, imagined, or a commixture of both: “At the end of their lives, all men look back and think that their youth was Arcadia” (Goethe, quoted in Katsumata, *Arcadia of My Youth*). Montgomery, Morden, and Cleave are elderly men who suddenly find themselves “in the failing evening of the self” (*G* 231). In search of authenticity, they become nostalgic for a future that mirrors the “superabundance” and care-free simplicities of a childhood in a pastoral past. In the Freudian sense, childhood is a quasi-paradise governed by the pleasure principle and removed from the burdens of rationality and reality (Heiler, “Transformations of the Pastoral” 334). In an attempt to regain this otherwise unparalleled state of innocence, each protagonist, Cleave and Morden in particular, constructs an imagined, second childhood as a regressive, idyllic experience.

Childhood and innocence, moreover, are direct counterparts to ageing and death. Flora, Cass, Chloe: Banville’s main women become vessels in which the protagonists hope to recreate their childhood selves and thus to return to a prelapsarian state of innocence. Each female character constitutes a crucial element in the male protagonist’s ceremonial rite of commemoration through which they try to return to the Arcadia of youth. Triggered by grief for a real, physical loss, a nostalgic return to the landscapes of childhood is enacted. The death of his wife, Anna, is pivotal to Morden’s entire narrative return and attendant sojourn at The Cedars, for example, but death is also a constitutive element of the crises felt by Montgomery and Cleave. Indeed, when Freddie
murders Josie Bell, he at once also kills the Dutch woman in his beloved Portrait of a Woman with Gloves, whose “fortitude and pathos” came upon him “suddenly in a golden room on a summer eve” (BoE 78), and who was more authentic to him than any woman of flesh and bones. Freddie has always been able to see the female other through the eyes of the masters of the Dutch golden age, but he cannot, in his own Le Monde d’Or, frame an adequate artistic parallel with which to return to life Josie Bell. Fiction and imagination, which have long become Freddie’s only hope, fail him. The shock of this failure liberates him, at first: “I would never again need to pretend to myself to be what I was not” (BoE 125). And yet, the entire first part of Ghosts counteracts this claim in Freddie’s imaginative return to a world where Josie Bell is still alive and he is innocent.

A discourse of death also pervades Banville’s Eclipse and The Sea, making for darkest pastoral. Arguably Banville’s most intimate, solipsistic novels to date, both provide narrative space to the various ways in which grief and mortality irrupt the minutiae of daily life. Both Cleave and Morden are suddenly confronted with painful experiences of loss in the present and seek counsel in the past; both must come to terms with an increased, pervasive awareness of the mortifications of ageing, and both seek to enact a return to sites of memory and childhood, physically and mentally, in search of “a way to live with death” (The Sea 23). Memory merges with imagination, blurring the boundaries of illusion and reality and obscuring the perception of time. Thus, the return to sites of boyhood creates in each narrative an idyllic chronotope, a counter-worldly escape from the seemingly self-destructive present.

And yet, as both Guercino’s and Poussin’s Et in Arcadia Ego testify, there can be no escape from death. What is designed as an anti-modernist “escape from an intolerable present” (Rosner, Conservatism and Crisis 75) at first, quickly brings back to life various ghosts and traumata of the past. The nostalgic act is thus forcefully transformed into a commemorative rite in acknowledgement of death in the imagined Arcadia of youth. The riddle of the mortal form of the self and that of the Arcadian Ego is both resolved and made insignificant, for death is not an absent ‘other’ but a doppelganger, always already present, who shadows, walks alongside, and often even resides within the self:

I felt it that first day out in the fields. It was as if someone had fallen silently into step beside me, or inside me, rather, someone who was else, another, and yet familiar. ... I stopped, struck, stricken by that infernal cold I have come to know so well, that paradisal cold. Then a slight thickening in the air, a momentary occlusion of the light, as if something had plummeted past the sun, a winged boy, perhaps, or falling angel. (E 3)
Where Cleave and Morden parley with the various phantoms of their past in an escapist idyll of their own making, ironically, the same idyll gives narrative space to their grief and distress, and both narratives become prophetic valedictions foreshadowing that “final, most momentous change of all” (S 34).

IV
In his most recent novels, Banville uses the pastoral mode to affect a transformation of a modern search for narrative identity into a postmodern search for authorial immortality. He begins this project in *The Infinities* (2009), set in a kind of multiverse-acknowledging, parallel future Ireland, and he concludes the project masterfully with *The Blue Guitar* (2015). Indeed, if *The Sea* centres around a mortal protagonist driven to Arcadian places (and spaces) of childhood by his “rueful desire to understand the fragility of human existence,” *The Infinities* provides a more humorous treatise of the classical themes of love, death and desire, and its divine protagonists revel in the many ironies on offer in the mortal world. Adam Sr.’s imminent death generates a tension that infiltrates the thoughts, interactions and, ultimately, the narratives of every character at his deathbed. Adam Jr., the apprehensive son, is more ponderous about his childhood than even his father. His wife, the appropriately named Helen, 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 Wagstaff. 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 various divinities 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, he echoes the mythological Zeus’s own hankerings after mortal delights and adventures. Roddy Wagstaff, in turn, is painted as a kind of Pan, a satyr who presides over the bacchanals of Arcadia. Greek divinities, 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 Infinities*, where a setting that mirrors Poussin’s pastoral, commingles with a postmodern Irish wake, on the one hand, and an elegiac, concupiscent bacchanal, on the other.

Indeed, *The Infinities* melds the original, Greek myths and grand narratives of literature with the postmodern; this becomes even more relevant if we take into account how postmodern fiction has always thoroughly exploited love and death, not only as popular tropes, but essentially as formally relevant features of the novel. John Banville’s postmodern fiction achieves the humorous exploi-
tation of these two perennial pillars of human existence by systematically es-
establishing and then placing in prominent position the relation between the
characters, the reader and the author, and by weaving all three into a web of
love, seduction and deferred self-annihilation, so as to, ultimately, transgress
traditional 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, as a result,
ceaselessly misunderstood.

In *The Blue Guitar* (2015), Banville achieves a sequel to *The Infinities* (2009) in
various ways. On the one hand, many of the latter’s concerns are echoed in the
former as Banville endeavours to create a kind of Hardyesque Wessex-equiva-
lent of Ireland, by positing and then confirming Adam Godley’s many-worlds
theory in *The Blue Guitar*. As Adam Godley Sr. muses in *The Infinities*, “the eye
makes the horizon. [...] The child on the train was a sort of horizon to him and
he a sort of horizon to the child only because each considered himself to be at
the centre of something—to be, indeed, that centre itself” (*I* 114). In *The Blue
Guitar*, the theory of infinities is transformed into a fully developed, globally
accepted world-view and offered as a hypermodern pastoral grand narrative to
the human condition and existence itself. And yet, in typically postmodern
fashion, Oliver Orme cannot but comment on the theory critically, and with
curiosity:

> They tell us of the welter of other worlds we shall never see, but what of the worlds
> we do see, the worlds of birds and beasts, what could be more other from us than
> these? And yet we were of those worlds, once, a long time ago, and frolicked in those
> happy fields, all the evidence assures us it’s the case, though I find it hard to credit.
> (*The Blue Guitar* 171)

An unabated desire to transform reality into art has driven John Banville’s entire
oeuvre, and the author’s many efforts find a culmination in the unimpeachably
elegant tenets of *The Blue Guitar*. Inspired by Wallace Stevens’ poem “The Man
with the Blue Guitar,” we can easily discern similarities between Banville’s ef-
forts and the music played old man post-/modernism’s “blue guitar.” Ultimately,
the Irish author provides in his seductively artistic and intellectual fictions “a
tune beyond us, yet ourselves.” Banville offers narratives, in other words, that
emaplo the self onto the temporal axis of a futuristic nostalgia, where other(s)
inhabit the topographies of memory and the mind, and where the resultant nar-
ratives of love, crisis and regret are willed artistically onto otherworldly land-
scrapes, escapes, and explorations of wishful thinking, in a tireless effort to grasp
the intangible in the postmodern condition: *always already elsewhere.*