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 otherworldly escapes). This is visible in Freddie’s narration throughout, where ascents of pastoral prosody constantly face off against descents of postmodern parody, and where