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. Banville’s achievement of this subversion 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