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 counterpoints 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 minuitiae 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)