

“THE GHOST OF THAT INELUCTABLE PAST”:
TRAUMA AND MEMORY IN JOHN BANVILLE’S *FRAMES TRILOGY*

BY

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract.....	iv
Introduction.....	v
Chapter 1.....	1
“The Grief of Renunciation and Departure”: Separation and Trauma in <i>The Book of Evidence</i>	
Chapter 2.....	37
“The Strangeness of Being Here – of Being Anywhere”: The Post-Traumatic Purgatory of <i>Ghosts</i>	
Chapter 3.....	68
“The Dead Do Not Forgive”: The Painful Persistence of Memory in <i>Athena</i>	
Conclusion.....	86
References.....	91
Curriculum Vitae.....	95

ABSTRACT

John Banville's *Frames Trilogy*—which consists of *The Book of Evidence*, *Ghosts*, and *Athena*—is a series of interconnected novels haunted by the memory of a singular, traumatic event: the senseless murder of an innocent woman at the hands of the Trilogy's first-person narrator. This thesis project examines the central role that the corresponding themes of trauma and memory play within these three testimonial novels as they grapple with the horror of the crime and its guilt-ridden aftermath. Utilizing the critical frameworks of both trauma studies and Irish memory studies, I argue that the traumas embedded within the narrator's distinctively Irish memory constitute the thematic core of the Trilogy and generate its emotive power. Further, I contend that the evident symptoms of traumatic memory within the text operate on the levels of both content and form, thereby revealing how the writing process subconsciously functions as a therapeutic exercise for both fictional narrator and real-life author alike. In so doing, this thesis significantly advances the ongoing critical re-evaluation within Banville scholarship of the author's literary engagement with his Irish socio-political and historical milieu.

INTRODUCTION

Early in *The Book of Evidence*, Freddie Montgomery, the novel's first-person narrator, describes the disorienting experience of returning to Ireland in the early 1980s and finding the country utterly "changed" after spending many years abroad:

The charm I had felt in Kingstown, I mean Dun Laoghaire, did not endure into the city. My seat at the front on the top deck of the bus – my old seat, my favourite! – showed me scenes I hardly recognised. In the ten years since I had last been here something had happened, something had befallen the place. Whole streets were gone, the houses torn out and replaced by frightening blocks of steel and black glass. An old square where Daphne and I lived for a while had been razed and made into a vast, cindered car-park. I saw a church for sale – a church, for sale! Oh, something dreadful had happened. The very air itself seemed damaged. Despite the late hour a faint glow of daylight lingered, dense, dust-laden, like the haze after an explosion, or a great conflagration. People in the streets had the shocked look of survivors, they seemed not to walk but reel. I got down from the bus and picked my way among them with lowered gaze, afraid I might see horrors. (27)

This is no Yeatsian image of change as a "terrible beauty" come to Ireland, but rather, more like an irrevocable symptom of the "filthy modern tide" eroding the distinctive landscape features of the past ("Easter, 1916"; "The Statues"). Frightening manifestations of commercialism and secularism occlude or replace the once familiar landmarks of home. The remembered past has been razed to pave the way for a bleak, impersonal future. In Freddie's horrified rendering of it, the violence of this rapid transformation is

visible on the faces of the people in the streets. They bear the “shocked look of survivors” following a blast. They appear, in a word, traumatized.

I begin with this passage because I believe that it foregrounds the corresponding themes of trauma and memory, and purposefully situates them within a distinctively Irish context. These thematic features become central to the novels of John Banville’s *Frames Trilogy*—*The Book of Evidence*, *Ghosts*, and *Athena*—novels which tell the story of an individual haunted by the horrors of both his personal and his cultural past. Indeed, the emotive power of the Trilogy stems from its depiction of Freddie’s struggle to come to terms with the traumas that continuously possess his memory. Yet, this aspect of the novels remains largely unremarked and overlooked in Banville scholarship. In this thesis, I will explore how the themes of trauma and memory function within the distinctively Irish context of Banville’s *Frames Trilogy*.

First, I want to highlight the correspondence between theme and context here. According to Cathy Caruth, “to be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event,” or to be plagued by the repeated, often belated return of an unassimilable past (*Trauma* 4-5). This pathological symptom of memory is, for Caruth, a “symptom of history” itself: “The traumatized, we might say, carry an impossible history within them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess” (5). Here, Caruth is describing the experience of individuals. However, in another essay within the same volume, Kai Erikson broadens this concept to include what he calls “traumatized communities”: “Sometimes the tissues of community can be damaged in much the same way as the tissues of mind and body. [...] Trauma, that is, has a social dimension” (Erikson 185). Elsewhere, Caruth combines these social and historical

dimensions when she postulates that “history is precisely the way we are implicated in one another’s traumas” (*Unclaimed Experience* 24). Irish history—particularly that of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—is one rife with violence, conflict, instability, and suffering. Famine, wars, rebellions, political executions, terrorist bombings, hunger strikes, and clerical abuse are among the historical horrors that haunt Irish memory, thus irrevocably damaging the tissues of community and cultural identity. As Freddie Montgomery observes throughout the *Frames Trilogy*, Ireland is a nation damaged and dragged down by the impossible weight of its past.

In order to better contextualize the passage from *The Book of Evidence* cited at the outset, it is important to note that the decade which Freddie spent away from Ireland—the 1970s—was a particularly turbulent one in that country. Significant social, cultural, and political changes occurred in rapid succession, set against the horrific, violent backdrop of the Troubles. In his book *Transitions*, Richard Kearney explains that the tumultuous conflict between the rival claims of tradition and modernity in Ireland brought about numerous crises throughout this period: “a crisis of culture,” “a crisis of consciousness,” and an “unsettling crisis of identity,” all of which contribute to what Kearney terms, more broadly, a “transitional crisis” between past and future (9-10). Historian Kevin Whelan also sees the 1970s in Ireland as a time of rapid transition. As he describes it, the traditional, conservative, and “artificially constructed” identity of mid-twentieth century Ireland—“de Valera’s intolerably dreary Eden”—began to “[dissolve] rapidly through the internationalization of capital, the impact of global communications, rapid social transformations, the creation of an extensive underclass and shifting gender roles. Over time, this hollow edifice was crumbling for the knocker’s ball which hit it full frontally in

the 1970s” (Whelan 96). Conor McCarthy echoes this “knocker’s ball” notion of identity destruction in his analysis of the experience of modernization in Ireland, describing it as “the shattering, fragmenting experience of modernity” (17). Like Kearney, McCarthy characterizes the period from the late 1960s onward as one of “massive” crisis, highlighting several historical conditions such as political crisis, economic crisis, and, of course, the Northern crisis. He, too, emphasizes the complex ideological relationship between modernization and nationalism in Ireland, arguing that, due to the island’s long colonial past and more recent political and sectarian divisions, Ireland occupies a unique position “on the boundaries of tradition and modernity” (17). But in Ireland, boundaries are often bitterly contested, becoming battlegrounds. The cultural and political upheavals of this period eventually gave way to the violence of the Troubles, which added personal peril to the growing list of cultural insecurities. The Troubles became yet another instance of the cyclical, sectarian violence that has plagued Ireland for centuries, the ghosts of past strife violently revisited on the present. From all accounts, the 1970s in Ireland was a time of crisis, a time of rapid transition and political turmoil, a time which undoubtedly had a profound impact on Irish memory.

For Freddie, the returning emigrant, the encounter with this “great conflagration” of cultural change comes as a sudden and significant shock. The “charm” of his homecoming is violently dispelled and quickly replaced with the perception of Dublin as a “stricken city,” and his “fellow countrymen” as “survivors” (28, 25, 27). Freddie experiences the jarring pain of estrangement and dislocation from a homeland that he no longer recognizes as his own. Here, as with many other artistic representations of Irish memory, Freddie’s vision of the past illustrates the tension between nostalgia and anti-

nostalgia in an Irish context. Irish scholar Emilie Pine explains that, “the alienation of an ultra-modern present [...] leads to nostalgia for a simpler past [...] a past which does not make demands of the present” (7-8). “In contrast,” she continues, “anti-nostalgia’s vision frames the past as inherently unstable and traumatic, encouraging audiences to be grateful that they have escaped” (8). Though the tone of the passage from *The Book of Evidence* above could largely be characterized as nostalgic, it also calls to mind the unresolved elements of the Irish past, a past which soon bursts forth violently into the present. Just days after his arrival home, Freddie encounters the unrest of the Troubles firsthand when a car bomb explodes in a crowded Dublin street, killing and maiming many innocent people. This horrific brush with history sets the stage for Freddie’s own violent contribution to an already unsettled and traumatized Irish present.

Freddie’s moment of rupture is both the personal and cultural crisis at the heart of the *Frames Trilogy*. In *The Book of Evidence*, Freddie brutally murders an innocent woman, a senseless crime that he attributes to a “failure of imagination” on his part, an inability to imagine the other as truly real (183). In the context of the novel, Banville uses this phrase to convey Freddie’s personal failing, an essential lack of human empathy which allows him to perpetrate this isolated criminal act. However, in a later interview with *The Observer*, the author re-purposes his phrase to highlight the distinctively Irish dimension of the crime, linking Freddie’s selfish actions to the acts of political terrorism perpetrated by Irish paramilitary groups throughout the Troubles:

I realised many years after I had written it that *The Book of Evidence* was, in many ways, about Ireland because it was about the failure of imagination and the failure to imagine other people into existence. You can only plant a bomb in

Omagh main street if the people walking around in the street are not really human. And what happened in Ireland in the last 30 years was a great failure of the imagination. But I didn't set out to do that in the book, but we're never free of our time. We like to think we are but we're not. ("Oblique Dreamer")

Here, Banville reveals that Freddie's ethical "failure of imagination" can be seen as the localized symptom of a larger cultural crisis in Ireland. The events within the novel become representative of—and entangled with—the harsh realities of its time. And, more importantly, Banville reveals that this transmission operated on a subconscious level for him. The historical milieu of violence and upheaval in Ireland seeped into Banville's work involuntarily, thereby illustrating what Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub identify in their seminal work on testimony as "the very *tension between textualization and contextualization*" (xv). This tension, they argue, "might yield new avenues of insight, both into the texts at stake and into their context—the political, historical, and biographical realities with which the texts are dynamically involved and within which their particular creative possibilities are themselves inscribed" (xv). Felman and Laub also emphasize "how art inscribes (artistically bears witness to) *what we do not yet know of our lived historical relation to events of our times*" (xx). Thus, Banville's own experiences of Ireland in crisis unavoidably haunt the Trilogy, giving a deeper resonance to the events and memories that it portrays. Freddie, as artist figure, can be read, at least in part, as Banville's fictional proxy within the text, using testimonial narrative to navigate through the haunted landscape of Irish memory.

Now, I hasten to say that I am *not* suggesting that the *Frames Trilogy* presents an autobiographical portrait of Banville. Nor could I support such a claim given the limited

biographical information that I have on the author. The first-person narrative of these three novels is entirely a work of fiction, and both its story and its voice are those of Freddie, not Banville. What I *am* highlighting is that, on the levels of both plot and form, the Trilogy displays many of the stylistic elements that have more recently come to characterize trauma fiction, such as narrative fragmentation, disjointed chronology, dissociation, repetition, fixation, and possession by the ghosts of history or memory. Given that literary trauma studies was only a nascent field when the novels of the Trilogy were written, Banville could not have simply adhered to an established trauma narrative formula or style because such a thing did not yet exist. This suggests, therefore, that something else was at work within these novels, quite possibly the subconscious attempt by the author to explore and come to terms with the effects of trauma through the medium of fiction.

It is worth mentioning here that, in a recent interview with *The Paris Review*, Banville discusses the influence of trauma and memory on his work as an artist. In response to a question about his Irish upbringing, he had this to say: “Auden said that children should be loaded with as much trauma as they can bear, because it’s good for them. I think that’s certainly true of children who are going to turn out to be artists. My traumas were Wexford, Ireland, the fifties, and especially the Catholic Church. [...] Of course now I feed on it” (McKeon). Here, the author clearly states that the formative traumas of his personal and cultural past directly inform his work as an artist. Later in that same interview, Banville characterizes the process of writing his novel, *Mefisto*, as a traumatic experience. He explains:

My wife says I had a nervous breakdown during the writing of *Mefisto*. [...]

Mefisto was a big shift for me. I began to write in a different way. I began to trust my instincts, to lose control, deliberately. It was exciting and it was frightening.

The writer who wrote *Mefisto* was a writer in deep trouble. He didn't know what he was doing. He was striking out into new territory—new for him, at least. It was painful at the time, and it was hideous in many ways. [...] That was a traumatic time for me. The book came out in the spring, and I remember I spent that following summer digging in my garden [...] I was healing myself from some kind of traumatic process that I don't pretend to understand. All right, let's agree with my wife and call it a nervous breakdown.

As he describes it, the experience of personal crisis during the writing process manifested as an innovative, stylistic shift within the novel itself. Banville's self-described loss of narrative control in *Mefisto* was undoubtedly disruptive for the writer known at that time for his somewhat overwrought, formal experimentalism in novels such as *Doctor Copernicus* and *Kepler*. For Banville, this deliberate loss of control became a way of trusting his instincts, thereby allowing his subconscious to influence his work organically. Though *Mefisto*—the novel that immediately precedes those of the *Frames Trilogy*—lies outside of the scope of this thesis, it, too, rehearses some of the stylistic elements of trauma fiction, setting the stage for the three novels that followed it. In a separate interview, Banville points to *The Book of Evidence* as another illustration of the stylistic shift into what he calls his “later style” (Charney). By the author's own admission, the novels of this period mark a turning point in his career as a writer, and it is a turning point indelibly marked by personal and cultural trauma. As with *Mefisto*, the

novels of the *Frames Trilogy* stylistically explore the themes of trauma and memory, depicting both an individual and a nation in a state of crisis.

Contrary to the critical readings of Banville that depict the author as an elitist aesthete who is not engaged with the social and historical realities of Ireland, Irish memory often resonates deeply throughout his work, though perhaps it operates in a slightly different way than it does in that of his contemporaries. This difference gives rise to the misconception that Irish memory has no real role or function in Banville's fiction. In an interview following the publication of *Athena*, interviewer Claudia Pfeiffer prompted Banville to discuss the Irish context—or lack thereof—of the *Frames Trilogy* with the following observation: “your trilogy is set in Ireland again. However, apart from some details, such as the atmosphere of a Dublin street or a pub or even a bombing in *The Book of Evidence*, there doesn't seem to be any significance in that” (27). Pfeiffer's comments typify a trend in Banville criticism which downplays the significance of the Irish context of his work. The implication here is that the novels of the Trilogy are merely set in Ireland, but they are not particularly concerned with it. This critical myopia forecloses a thematic strand that is absolutely essential to understanding the *Frames Trilogy*, and, in fact, much of Banville's other work.

In order to better contextualize the Trilogy, it is important to foreground some of Banville's previous treatments of Irish memory within his corpus. The *Frames Trilogy* is certainly not his first engagement with the traumatic events of the Irish past. Banville's early Big House novel, *Birchwood*, contains a telescopic, deliberately anachronistic depiction of a particularly troubled period in Irish history, intermingling the horrors of the Great Famine, the Land Wars, the Irish War of Independence, and the Irish Civil War,

events which span nearly eighty years. With *Birchwood*, published during the Troubles in 1973, Banville revisits the violent realities of earlier generations in Ireland, thereby connecting these historical events in the minds of the reader. In *The Newton Letter*—a novel set in a Big House in contemporary Ireland—one of the characters proposes a toast at a drawing-room tea party to “August the twenty-seventh,” the notorious date of the IRA assassination of Lord Mountbatten, and the bombing of a British Army convoy at Warrenpoint in 1979, one of the single bloodiest dates in the record of the Troubles (*The Revolutions Trilogy* 535). Given that the novel was published only three years after these events occurred, their inclusion here is clearly meant to strike a chord. In both instances, Irish memory imbues these works with their historical resonance and their emotive power, especially for an Irish audience.

Yet, even when his novels are not set in Ireland, or are not strictly *about* Ireland, Irish themes still register in the text, even to the surprise of the author himself. Banville scholar Derek Hand convincingly argues that Banville’s science tetralogy—begun in the 1970s—contains the unmistakable imprint of national identity crisis and sectarian violence, even as the process of writing about scientists during the Middle Ages may have been intended by the author as a retreat or an escape from the contemporary “horrors of violence in the North of Ireland” (19). In a recent conversation between the two, Banville confirms Hand’s theory about the Irish subtext behind the novels of the tetralogy, often described by critics as Banville’s notably non-Irish novels: “Of course, *Doctor Copernicus* was a way of not writing another Irish novel. In *Birchwood* I had done my Irish novel. But of course, as you have said, as I look back on *Copernicus* and *Kepler*, I see how Ireland seeped into them. How could it not, especially in the 1970s,

when we were tearing ourselves to pieces?” (Friberg 202). Again, the crises of the 1970s subconsciously worked their way into Banville’s fiction of that time. Unquestionably, there is more of Ireland in Banville’s work than just that which appears on its surface.

Together, these examples of what Banville calls “the strange way in which fiction and life seep into each other” reveal the extent to which Ireland made a profound impact on the author and his work (Friberg 203). Banville worked as a copy-editor and, later, sub-editor at *The Irish Press* during the 1970s and 1980s, and so he was undoubtedly exposed to—or, more likely, overexposed to—the horrors in the headlines of the time. It should, therefore, come as no surprise that these shocking, gruesome events and their social fallout found their way into Banville’s work. The 1974 Dublin bombings that killed dozens of innocent rush-hour commuters certainly informed the fictional car bombing depicted in *The Book of Evidence*. And the 1986 art heist at the wealthy Russborough House estate inspired the criminal storyline of *Athena* (McMinn 130). Yet it was the notorious 1982 MacArthur murders that became the violent, historical centerpiece of the *Frames Trilogy*. As the story goes, Malcolm MacArthur committed a sequence of two cold-blooded murders in Ireland within just a few days, including the brutal murder of a young nurse in Dublin’s Phoenix Park—the singular crime on which *The Book of Evidence* is largely based. “This event was made even more extraordinary,” Derek Hand explains,

when Macarthur was discovered hiding out in the then Attorney General’s home. The Fianna Fáil government of the day, led by Charles Haughey, was obviously aghast at this improbable connection between a murderer and a member of its cabinet. In response, Haughey gave Irish politics a phrase that still has resonance

when he declared the whole episode to be ‘grotesque, unbelievable, bizarre and unprecedented.’ (132)

The apparently motiveless murders, the subsequent manhunt, the shocking circumstances of MacArthur’s capture, and the scandalous political fallout conspired to form one of the most sensational stories in recent Irish history. These murders contributed to the unsettled mood in Ireland at the time, adding yet another incidence of senseless violence to the already fraught atmosphere of the Troubles. As one pub patron in *The Book of Evidence* remarks, “*I’ve lived here thirty-three years and everyone is afraid,*” a statement that conveys the feelings of fear and general unease that permeated Dublin in the wake of these horrific events (139). Banville’s fictional adaptation of the MacArthur episode and the Dublin bombing puts these otherwise separate, anachronistic incidents in conversation with one another, thereby linking them in the mind of the reader and highlighting the pattern of traumatic violence in recent Irish memory.

The macabre fascination surrounding the eccentric character of Malcolm MacArthur became one of the many inspirations for Banville’s *Frames Trilogy*. Many factual details of the story were copied down directly, so much so, in fact, that Banville says that during the writing process, he forgot that had not invented the character himself. However, the author makes an important distinction between his fictional character and the man on whom he is largely based: “the difference between Freddie Montgomery and the real Malcolm MacArthur is that MacArthur killed twice. Freddie Montgomery would never have killed again.” Further, Banville states, “I don’t think MacArthur would have had the self-awareness to write this kind of story” (Friberg 203). This assertion by the author is significant here because Banville distinguishes between these two men’s

experiences as perpetrators of violence, as well as their responses to it. In his discussion on “victims” and “perpetrators,” trauma theorist Dominick LaCapra allows for what he terms “perpetrator trauma.” He explains:

not everyone traumatized by events is a victim. There is the possibility of perpetrator trauma which must itself be acknowledged and in some sense worked through if perpetrators are to distance themselves from an earlier implication in deadly ideologies and practices. Such trauma does not, however, entail the equation or identification of the perpetrator and the victim. (79)

This idea of perpetrator trauma is useful in highlighting the key difference between these two murderers. Whereas MacArthur kills again just days later without remorse, Freddie suffers the shock of his own crime and, following his capture, writes a series of testimonies examining what went wrong and how to make it right again. And more importantly, according to Banville, Freddie would never kill again. In a sense, the crucial difference between these two perpetrators is one of trauma. While it may seem counterintuitive to describe Freddie’s experience of committing a murder as a traumatic one, his response to the crime rehearses many of the symptoms of trauma and its remembered aftermath, as the three chapters of this thesis will demonstrate.

Banville scholars have tended to overlook the evident themes of trauma and Irish memory in the *Frames Trilogy*. Most are primarily concerned with the way each of the three novels reflects or interacts with Banville’s literary aesthetic on the whole, pointing out the larger modernist and/or postmodernist trends to which his work conforms. In the first critical monograph on the author, pioneering Banville scholar Rüdiger Imhof does not offer a central thesis so much as a series of readings on the novels in the Trilogy. He

ultimately concludes, rather broadly, that the Trilogy as a whole “focuses on how the artistic imagination works and what it makes of the world” (237). This is generally true, although it says nothing specific of the tumultuous Irish context with which the artistic imagination is attempting to engage. In *The Supreme Fictions of John Banville*, Joseph McMinn concentrates his analysis of the Trilogy on Freddie’s pictorial imagination and his inability to differentiate life from art, reality from fiction: “Art has robbed Freddie of his sense, and his three solipsistic narratives show an imagination rich with fantasy but utterly baffled by his own fictions” (12). Again, the artistic imagination appears as the primary critical concern, yet its Irish historical context remains largely unacknowledged. In *Exploring Fictions*, Derek Hand focuses his discussion on the way the Trilogy examines “the nature of the self and its predicament in the contemporary postmodern world” (116). For Hand, Freddie becomes “another of Banville’s meditations on the disconnected and dislocated nature of postmodern existence” (133). This hits closer to home, but still falls short of addressing the uniquely traumatic nature of the Irish experience in the postmodern world. John Kenny highlights the moral concerns of the Trilogy, or what he calls “the outright thematics of good and evil,” which manifest in the novels as the “related subjects of violence, viciousness, transgression, and immorality” (121, 122). Elke D’hoker examines the Trilogy according to her central thesis on the function of representation in the work of Banville, highlighting the ethical concerns at the heart of these three novels. Incidentally, D’hoker does state that Banville’s first-person narrators “can be observed in the process of representing their traumatic past, their tormented thoughts and divided selves in a coherent narrative so as to achieve a sense of self that is unitary, solid and clear” (2). In *John Banville’s Narcissistic Fictions*, Mark

O'Connell explores his clever thesis of narratorial narcissism and discovers in the Trilogy a happy hunting ground, wherein the narrator commits a murder “because of his inability to see beyond himself” (2). These and other scholars provide some wonderfully insightful readings of the novels in question—as well as that of Banville’s work generally—which have helped inform my own readings of Banville. Yet, on the whole, they fail to highlight the central role that the traumatic experience of Irish memory plays within the interlocking narratives of the *Frames Trilogy*.

Though the theme of traumatic memory in Banville’s work remains largely unexplored, Irish trauma is an important issue within the emerging field of Irish memory studies, making it a timely, as well as fruitful, critical lens through which to view Banville’s work. In the introduction to the recent scholarly series *Memory Ireland*—which could also be said to function as an introduction to the field of Irish memory studies itself—editor Oona Frawley explains that a “significant contribution to memory studies comes through the related field of trauma studies,” which, in the humanities, has utilized “psychological theories of trauma and traumatic memory” in order to study social group trauma and examine its enduring cultural impact (xiv). She highlights the revolutionary—admittedly “controversial”—application of trauma theory to social groups as an important critical development, arguing that “there is no doubt that trauma studies broke ground and thus changed the way in which we consider trauma at the social level to be discussable” (xv). This strand of trauma studies becomes, for Frawley, “the point at which memory studies might be said to have met Irish studies” (xv). In other words, to study Irish memory is to study the impact and enduring legacy of cultural trauma.

In another recent study of Irish memory, Emilie Pine sets out to examine, she says, “the ways in which Irish remembrance culture has responded to the subject of past traumas” (Pine 3). For Pine, the representation of Ireland’s traumatic past has become one the most distinctive and pervasive features of Irish remembrance culture: “From 1980 to 2010 Irish culture has undergone a major shift in terms of the representation of the past. That shift [...] has resulted in traumatic memory becoming the dominant way of seeing, of understanding, and of communicating, the Irish past. We are obsessed with the past, and we are haunted by trauma” (5). This obsessive fixation on revisiting and communicating a painful past characterizes Freddie’s narrative throughout the *Frames Trilogy*, indicating that these novels—published between 1989 and 1995—respond to and represent the memories that haunt contemporary Irish remembrance culture.

Trauma theorists have highlighted the vital role that literature plays in the representation of memory. Felman and Laub find that the literature of trauma becomes the inevitable response to what they call the “unresolved *crisis of history*,” a crisis which, they explain, is “translated into a *crisis of literature* insofar as literature becomes a witness, and perhaps the only witness, to the crisis within history which precisely cannot be articulated, witnessed in the given categories of history itself” (xviii). Literature, as they see it, bears witness to memory in a way that history cannot. In this same vein, Cathy Caruth points to Freud’s reliance on literature to illustrate “traumatic neurosis” in order to make the argument that literature “best represents” the experience of trauma: “If Freud turns to literature to describe traumatic experience, it is because literature, like psychoanalysis, is interested in the complex relation between knowing and not knowing. And it is, indeed at the specific point at which knowing and not knowing intersect that the

language of literature and the psychoanalytic theory of traumatic experience precisely meet” (*Unclaimed Experience* 3). Like Felman and Laub, Caruth believes that literature accesses the unknown that lies beyond the bounds of theory. She argues that trauma is “always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise accessible” (4). The “story of trauma” attests to this inaccessible truth through “a kind of double telling, the oscillation between a *crisis of death* and the correlative *crisis of life*: between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival” (7). Thus, the literature of trauma, as the narrative experience of catastrophe and fallout, becomes an invaluable tool in understanding its impact.

Memory narratives employ distinctive formal and stylistic elements in order to best represent traumatic experience. In *Trauma and History in the Irish Novel*, Robert Garratt outlines the major features of what he calls the “trauma novel,” distinguishing it from the “novel about trauma.” As he describes it, the trauma novel is “a work of fiction that treats as an important and central part of the story the struggle of a disturbed individual to discover, confront, and give voice to a vague yet threatening catastrophic past” (5). This differs from the novel about trauma, in which trauma merely determines character or informs the central story as a condition, or a background. In the novel about trauma, the troubling experience operates outside the frame of the novel as an “external force,” allowing the form to utilize “conventional narrative strategies” and “linear story lines.” By contrast, Garratt argues, the trauma novel

employs a narrative strategy in which a reconstruction of events through memories, flashbacks, dreams, and hauntings is as important as the events

themselves. [...] it depicts the process by which a person encounters and comes to know a traumatic event or moment that has previously proven inaccessible. In so doing the trauma novel stakes its claim as a literary hybrid, a work that balances narration and narrative, a story that both describes an external violent action and portrays the mind's attempt to remember it. (5)

Here, Garratt emphasizes that the trauma novel depicts the psychological response to experience, that the fictional narrative represents an individual in the act of processing his or her trauma.

In this respect, the trauma novel performs the therapeutic processes described by historian and trauma scholar Dominick LaCapra. Adapting concepts from Freud and psychoanalysis, LaCapra explains that “acting out” and “working through” are two interrelated ways of coming to terms with trauma. “Acting out,” he says, “is related to repetition, and even the repetition compulsion—the tendency to repeat something convulsively. This is very clear in the case of people who undergo a trauma. They have a tendency to relive the past, to be haunted by ghosts or even to exist in the present as if one were still fully in the past, with no distance from it” (142-143). LaCapra links the repetition compulsion of acting out with Freud's concept of melancholia, which he describes as “an arrested process in which the depressed, self-berating, and traumatized self, locked in compulsive repetition, is possessed by the past” (66). Working through, on the other hand, is linked to the healing process of mourning: “Mourning brings the possibility of engaging trauma and achieving a reinvestment in, or recathexis of, life which allows one to begin again” (66). For LaCapra, these two responses to trauma

become “intimately related parts of a process,” the process of coming to terms with a traumatic past (143).

The trauma novel, therefore, can be said to depict the therapeutic processes of melancholia and mourning, acting out and working through traumatic memory in the form of narrative. As such, it has become an especially useful and fruitful literary form in contemporary Ireland, a nation with a traumatic past and a troubled imagination. Garratt points to the “centrality of trauma in Irish history” and the inherent difficulty of representing it in historical realism as the central reasons for the importance of the trauma novel in an Irish context (9). In his study of the Irish trauma novel, Garratt does not address Banville’s work directly, except in an endnote acknowledging the omission and the possibility of Banville’s inclusion in a more comprehensive study of trauma and memory in recent Irish fiction (150). In other words, Garratt recognizes the thematic importance of trauma and memory in Banville’s work and suggests that these hitherto overlooked subjects in Banville criticism warrant further exploration.

In addition to its adherence to Garratt’s definition of the trauma novel, Banville’s Trilogy also organically conforms to a unique, three-phase paradigm for the transformative experience of trauma, originally used by historian Eric Leed to describe the psychological impact of World War I on the soldiers who fought. In *No Man’s Land*, Leed characterizes the traumatic experiences of war as “rituals of passage,” citing the anthropological theory of rites of passage developed by Arnold van Gennep:

Van Gennep divided rites of passage into three phases: rites of separation, which remove an individual or group of individuals from his or their accustomed place; liminal rites, which symbolically fix the character of the “passenger” as one who

is between states, places, or conditions; and finally rites of incorporation

(postliminal rites), which welcome the individual back into the group. (Leed 14)

Drawing on wartime accounts and memoirs written by veterans, Leed describes the experience of war as “an experience of marginality,” and, consequently, emphasizes the importance of the first two phases of van Gennep’s model—“separation” and “liminality”—to his study of war trauma (15). Leed ultimately concludes that the returning war veteran is denied completion of the third phase—re-incorporation into society—and instead remains what he calls a “liminal type”: “He derives all of his features from the fact that he has crossed the boundaries of disjunctive social worlds, from peace to war, and back. He has been reshaped by his voyage along the margins of civilization, a voyage in which he has been presented with wonders, curiosities, and monsters - things that can only be guessed at by those who remained at home” (194). In *Worlds of Hurt*, trauma scholar Kali Tal brings Leed’s ideas on the experience of war into a larger discussion of traumatic experience. She explains: “Recent work in psychiatry suggests that we can make a connection between the trauma of soldiers and the trauma of other persons subjected to severe stress. [...] Trauma is a transformative experience, and those who are transformed can never entirely return to a state of previous innocence” (119). In this way, Leed’s description of the trauma of war becomes a useful paradigm for understanding the transformative experience of all trauma.

As it happens, it also serves as a useful paradigm for understanding Freddie’s narrative in the *Frames Trilogy*, as the three novels could be said to correspond with the three phases respectively. My thesis, therefore, will analyze the ways that each novel reflects aspects of the traumatic experience: Chapter 1 will examine Freddie’s testimony

of traumatic separation in *The Book of Evidence*; Chapter 2 will examine his post-traumatic liminality in *Ghosts*; Chapter 3 will examine his ill-fated attempt to bury the past and re-incorporate into contemporary Irish society in *Athena*. Throughout this analysis, I will call attention to the way that the narrative depicts the themes of trauma and memory on the level of both plot and form. On the whole, this thesis will argue that Banville's Trilogy presents the scripto-therapeutic process of acting out and working through memory in an effort to engage with Ireland's haunted past and imagine the possibility of a more ethical future.

CHAPTER 1

“The Grief of Renunciation and Departure”:

Separation and Trauma in *The Book of Evidence*

In the very first sentence of *The Book of Evidence*, John Banville announces to the reader—in the voice of Freddie Montgomery—that the novel will take the form of a prepared courtroom testimony: “My lord, when you ask me to tell the court in my own words, this is what I shall say” (5). In the context of the narrative, Freddie’s testimony serves as an act of legal witness, a confession of criminal guilt intended to be given as evidence during his forthcoming murder trial. As Freddie ultimately reveals, he will plead guilty to murder in the first degree without any plea bargains or concessions. Through his testimony, he intends to confess “so readily” to his crime, to make “no excuses,” and even to display “a forensic interest in [his] motives” (208). In short, Freddie’s testimony will not function as a plea for legal leniency or penal mitigation. Rather, it will function—as its title suggests—as Freddie’s book of evidence, a narrative told in his own words that strives to depict the circumstances leading up to his crime, and the traumatic experience of its aftermath. Banville himself describes the novel as “a kind of appalled act of witness,” suggesting that the narrator is still struggling to comprehend the horror of his own actions (“Thou Shalt Not Kill” 354). As such, Freddie’s testimony has significance and power well beyond the limited confines of the criminal courtroom. It represents a form of first-person narrative which bears witness to trauma, to memory, and to history itself.

According to Shoshana Felman, testimony has become a dominant strand—perhaps *the* dominant strand—in the contemporary cultural narrative in response to the traumatic nature of modern history. She argues that

testimony has become a crucial mode of our relation to events of our times—our relation to the traumas of contemporary history [...] As a relation to events, testimony seems to be composed of bits and pieces of a memory that has been overwhelmed by occurrences that have not settled into understanding or remembrance, acts that cannot be constructed as knowledge nor assimilated into full cognition, events in excess of our frames of reference. (Felman and Laub 5)

In this way, testimony is a narrative form that represents the process or experience of trauma itself, even as it functions in response to trauma. “In the testimony,” Felman argues, “language is in process and in trial, it does not possess itself as a conclusion, as the constataion of a verdict or the self-transparency of knowledge. Testimony is, in other words, a discursive *practice*” or “*speech act*” (5). Therefore, testimony is an active process, a narrative quest to discover a truth as yet unavailable to its witness. Felman’s collaborator, Dr. Dori Laub, writing of his experiences as a psychiatrist treating trauma survivors, echoes these same sentiments in his own analysis of the function of testimony. He concludes that “what ultimately matters in all processes of witnessing, spasmodic and continuous, conscious and unconscious, is not simply the information, the establishment of the facts, but the experience itself of *living through* testimony, of giving testimony” (Felman and Laub 85). Testimony thus becomes a therapeutic medium of catharsis, of healing, a speech act without a clear objective except, simply, to tell. By adopting this

form, Banville allows his novel to function as the healing speech act of its fictional narrator, and, perhaps obliquely, that of its real-life author.

In the philosophical dialogue “Imagination, Testimony and Trust,” Paul Ricoeur addresses the “indispensable” function of testimony. “Testimony,” he explains, “is the ultimate link between imagination and memory, because the witness says ‘I was part of the story. I was there.’ At the same time, the witness tells a story that is a living presentation, and therefore deploys the capacity of imagination to place events before our eyes, as if we were there. Testimony would be a way of bringing memory and imagination together” (Ricoeur 16). Dori Laub, too, describes the unique imaginative experience of receiving or hearing testimony: “The testimony to the trauma thus includes its hearer, who is, so to speak, the blank screen on which the event comes to be inscribed for the first time. By extension, the listener to the trauma comes to be a participant and a co-owner of the traumatic event: through his very listening, he comes to partially experience trauma in himself” (Felman and Laub 57). Both Ricoeur and Laub describe the emotional, imaginative response to receiving testimony, one that Dominick LaCapra has termed “empathic unsettlement,” or the emotional involvement of the reader or hearer with the witness (LaCapra 41). Thus, Banville’s novel derives its true emotive and imaginative power, first and foremost, from its testimonial form.

But the reader of *The Book of Evidence* is faced with a significant challenge: in order to have empathy for the novel’s first-person narrator-witness, one must, in a sense, become an accessory to murder. Banville uses Freddie’s fictional testimony to push the boundaries of the human capacity for identification. According to the author himself, this testimonial novel crosses the imaginary threshold that insulates the reader from Freddie’s

guilt: “We too are somehow implicated in this crime” (“Thou Shalt Not Kill” 355).

Elsewhere, Banville takes this idea one step further, arguing that “Freddie Montgomery is a perfectly sane human being who in a moment of inattention and in a state of moral decay and moral freefall has done something that any of us, given the circumstances, would do” (Pfeiffer 29). The key phrase here, of course, is *given the circumstances*, and so exploring these circumstances becomes essential to understanding the true nature of Freddie’s experience. Banville reveals in both of these quotes that his intention was to make Freddie identifiably human, as someone worthy of a reader’s empathy, even as he carries out this most monstrous, inhuman deed. In other words, the experience of empathic unsettlement for the reader of *The Book of Evidence* is intended by its author to be, quite literally, an unsettling experience.

Freddie’s testimony in the novel becomes the means through which he describes the personal and cultural faults—the “circumstances”—which put him in a state of “moral freefall” and brought about his moment of crisis. Therefore, its telling is essential in order to fully understand his crime. When Freddie’s legal counsel advises him to plead guilty to manslaughter, explaining that “no evidence will be heard,” he objects to this procedure. His issue is not with the guilty plea—“I’ll plead guilty, of course - haven’t I done so all along?”—but rather, with the missed opportunity to give his testimony, to tell his story. Freddie insists on “telling my side of things, in my own words” (154-155). He therefore refuses to sign the criminal confession compiled for him by the police—or, as he calls it, “Cunningham’s marvelous document”—after examining the text transcript of it:

These are not my words. [...] Behind the mask of the bald old codger a fiendish artist had been at work, the kind of artist I could never be, direct yet subtle, a master of the spare style, of the art that conceals art. [...] He had taken my story, with all its [...] frills and fancy bits, and pared it down to stark essentials. It was an account of my crime I hardly recognised, and yet I believed it. He had made a murderer of me. (177, 172-173)

Freddie is, of course, a murderer, a fact that he readily admits. Yet his story, with all its frills and fancy bits included, is clearly meant to tell a different story, one which situates the events of the murder within a larger context of cultural crisis and violence in Ireland. Written in his own words, Freddie's testimonial narrative becomes an imaginative act of witness which provides an important counterbalance to "the other, official fictions" of sensationalized newspaper articles, faulty witness statements, and pared-down police confessions (186). In other words, he hopes that his testimony will help set the record straight, or, at the very least, give it the vital third dimension that it otherwise lacks.

As the events of the novel demonstrate, Irish history and memory provide an essential context for Freddie's testimonial narrative. Given the historical period in which the novel is set, it comes as no great surprise when the unmistakable violence of the Troubles makes an appearance. Just days after arriving home from a decade-long absence, Freddie learns of the explosion of a car bomb in Dublin from a friend who witnesses the horrific aftermath first-hand: "The hospital was in an uproar. A bomb had gone off in a car in a crowded shopping street, quite a small device, apparently, but remarkably effective. [Anna] had wandered unchallenged into the casualty ward. There were bodies lying everywhere. She walked among the dead and dying, feeling like a

survivor herself” (70). Anna’s encounter with the survivors of terrorist violence here recalls Freddie’s own encounter with the shocked survivors of modernity in Ireland. When paired together, these instances provide more than just a haunting backdrop to the story of Freddie’s crime; they also provide a useful historico-political context for investigating and understanding Freddie’s actions and motivations. Both survivor encounters provoke feelings of horror in Freddie as he comes face-to-face with the sudden, violent transformations of home. The alienating effect of these changes—these traumas of homecoming—makes Freddie increasingly desperate as he struggles to reconcile the past with the present.

The horror of Freddie’s cultural dislocation from homeland corresponds to the personal alienation he feels from his ancestral home. Even as he arrives after a ten year absence, Freddie, the “prodigal son,” paradoxically imagines himself to be leaving his homeland behind. As he describes it, his homecoming becomes a leavetaking:

What a surprise the familiar always is. It was all there, the broken gate, the drive, the long meadow, the oak wood - home! - all perfectly in place, waiting for me, a little smaller than I remembered, like a scale-model of itself. I laughed. It was not really a laugh, more an exclamation of startlement and recognition. Before such scenes as this - trees, the shimmering fields, that mild soft light - I always feel like a traveller on the point of departure. Even arriving I seemed to be turning away, with a lingering glance at the lost land. (35)

The “lost land” Freddie refers to here is soon revealed to be that of the past, or more specifically, the distant realm of his childhood. While surveying the house and grounds with his mother, Freddie is haunted by the spectre of his youthful self: “I had a vision of

myself, a small boy with a fierce frown [...] and my grieving heart wobbled, as if it were not myself I was remembering, but something like a son, dear and vulnerable, lost to me forever in the depths of my own past” (39). This ghost of the past forces him to mourn the enormity of change he has experienced in life, from the innocence and vulnerability of lost youth to the alienation and homesickness of adulthood. Freddie suffers the disorienting shock of his homecoming as a form of emotional blunt force trauma, one which results in an internal bleeding, of sorts: “all the time, deep inside me somewhere, hardly acknowledged, grief dripped and dripped, a kind of silvery ichor, pure, and strangely precious. Home, yes, home is always a surprise” (39). Freddie’s surprise is the experience of being a stranger in his own home, of being a changed, unfamiliar self in eerily familiar surroundings: “The room, the house, the garden and the fields, all was strange to me, I did not recognise it today - strange, and yet known, too, like a place in - yes - in a dream” (48).

Despite the significant passage of time that has elapsed since his last visit, Freddie observes the striking sameness and constancy of his childhood home, Coolgrange, the Big House and ancestral seat of the Montgomery Family. The Big House itself is a well-known cultural—and literary—icon of the Irish past, symbolizing the extensive history of political and economic repression suffered by the native, Catholic Irish at the hands of their Protestant, Anglo-Irish landlords before Ireland gained its political independence. In the contemporary moment of the novel, the Big House, divorced from its former political function, becomes more of a time capsule for memory and nostalgia. As soon as Freddie walks through the front door of Coolgrange, he recognizes the asynchrony of the place:

I stepped into the hall and for an instant it was as if I had stepped soundlessly through the membrane of time itself. I faltered, tottering inwardly. Hatstand with broken umbrella, that floor tile, still loose [...] The taste of apples unaccountably flooded my mouth. I felt vaguely as if something momentous had happened, as if in the blink of an eye everything around me had been whipped away and replaced instantly with an exact replica, perfect in every detail, down to the last dust-mote. (37)

The house is an emblem of memory, replete with the sensory experiences of Freddie's childhood—"unaccountably" familiar tastes and "piercingly evocative" smells. Later, Freddie observes that the detritus of time has begun to occupy the corners of his former home: "Things thronged around me in the shadows - a battered rocking-horse, an old high bicycle, a bundle of antique tennis racquets - their outlines blurred, greyish, fading, as if this place were a way-station where the past paused on its way down into oblivion" (41). What is passing into oblivion here is a way of life. These particular items depict aspects of the dead past that Freddie mourns especially: childhood innocence, premodernity, and the bygone aristocratic life of leisure and privileged ease, respectively. His physical proximity to these "things" makes his chronological distance from them even more disorienting.

Like Coolgrange, Freddie, too, is a bit of an anachronism. He fancies himself a cultured Anglo-Irish aristocrat cast in the mold of his father, a man who Freddie describes as "a tragic figure, a gentleman of the old school displaced in time" (27). Saddled with an absurdly aristocratic name—Frederick Charles St John Vanderveld Montgomery—Freddie precariously straddles the gulf between two very distinct social

and historical worlds: those of aristocratic, colonial Ireland and democratic, postcolonial Ireland. This historical dislocation is the socio-political inheritance of his class, which Freddie associates with his deceased father. In the novel, Freddie describes his father's political worldview—and, therefore, a version of his own—thus:

We had a great distaste for the world generally, there was that much in common between us. I notice I have inherited his laugh, that soft, nasal snicker which was his only comment on the large events of his time. Schisms, wars, catastrophes, what did he care for such matters? – the world, the only worthwhile world, had ended with the last viceroy's departure from these shores, after that it was all just a wrangle among peasants. He really did try to believe in this fantasy of a great good place that had been taken away from us and our kind – our kind being Castle Catholics, as he liked to say, yes, sir, Castle Catholics, and proud of it! But I think there was less pride than chagrin. I think he was secretly ashamed not to be a Protestant: he would have had so much less explaining, so much less justifying, to do. (26-27)

Freddie's father effectively alienates his family from the political and cultural identity of contemporary, Free State Ireland by clinging to a retrograde Unionist socio-political philosophy. His allegiance to the "fantasy" of remembered union with Great Britain highlights the past-centered orientation of his kind, a historical stance which renders them homeless in the postcolonial present. Along with these anachronistic social politics, Freddie inherits his father's dangerous and mistaken belief that he is somehow insulated against the catastrophic events of his time. However, a version of the sectarianism that

characterizes the Troubles—reduced here to a mere “wrangle among peasants”—takes shape inside his own home.

From his parents, Freddie inherits a volatile combination of competing identities and ideologies. After discussing his father’s Catholic Unionist identity, Freddie reveals that his mother is Protestant. He playfully refers to his mother’s ancestral family as “her Dutch forebears, King Billy’s henchmen,” a nicknamed reference to the Dutch-born, Protestant King William III, whose forces were victorious over those of the Catholic King James II in the Battle of the Boyne, thereby solidifying Protestant rule in Ireland (44). The marriage of a proud Castle Catholic to an overbearing Dutch Protestant produces an unsettled dynamic within the Montgomery Family. Despite his father’s aristocratic pretensions, Freddie’s mother reveals that, in life, he was no more than a social pretender, a bankrupt, and a fraud: “You got the money, she said, what there was of it - he left me only debts [...] I should have known better, she said, than to marry a mick” (52). In his mother’s eyes, Freddie’s father was no better than the lowly crowd of Irish peasants at whom he sneered. Freddie illustrates the underlying marital tension between his parents as he reflects on the past with a good friend of the family, Charlie French:

They had been young together, he and my parents, in their cups they would reminisce about hunt balls before the war, and dashing up to Dublin for the Show, and all the rest of it. I listened to this stuff with boundless contempt, curling an adolescent’s villous lip [...] But to be fair to Charles, I do not think he really subscribed to this fantasy of the dear dead days. He could not ignore the tiny trill of hysteria that made my mother’s goitrous throat vibrate, nor the way my father

looked at her sometimes, poised on the edge of his chair, tense as a whippet, pop-eyed and pale, with an expression of incredulous loathing. When they got going like this, the two of them, they forgot everything else, their son, their friend, everything, locked together in a kind of macabre trance. (31)

This dynamic—fraught with fantasies of the remembered past, hysteria, loathing, and macabre confrontation—can be seen as a microcosm of the social and sectarian tensions in Ireland. To paraphrase Yeats, great hatred, little room maims Freddie at the start (“Remorse for Intemperate Speech”).

As the product of this volatile union, Freddie himself becomes something of a ticking timebomb. He admits that this violent unpredictability leads others to handle him with kid gloves: “[Charlie] treated me tentatively, as if I were something that might blow up in his face at any moment” (31). Freddie also describes being “prone to accidie,” or what he calls his “bad moods”: “Very black, very black. As if the world had grown suddenly dim, as if something had dirtied the air. Even when I was a child my depressions frightened people” (38, 43). These depressions are the emotional legacy of his dysfunctional home and homeland. Before he ever arrives at Coolgrange upon his return to Ireland, Freddie dreads the inevitable “attack of filial heartburn” that will accompany any interactions he has with his mother (36). What he discovers during his visit is that he has been usurped and disinherited, his placement as heir to the family home taken over by his mother’s friend and business partner, Joanne: “she is like a son to me, the son I never had” (64). At these dismissive words, Freddie leaves his mother and Coolgrange behind in “anger” and “a state of high indignation” (63). The fuse to the explosive core of his memory is thus ignited.

Freddie experiences the inner turmoil of his hyphenated identity as a decentering, dislocating, and dividing of the self. In the novel, Freddie repeatedly describes a feeling of being, in his word, “bifurcate,” and later qualifies that “a strong mixture of Catholic and Calvinist blood courses in [his] veins” (82, 84). This ichorous mingling of incompatible identities causes Freddie to become estranged from himself, and more importantly, distanced from his actions. As he recounts it, the original conception of his criminal plot comes to him unbidden, like instructions from an outside party: “Strangely, it was like the work of someone else, which had been given to me to measure and to test. This process of distancing seems to have been an essential preliminary to action” (82). Freddie explains this “someone else” to be a version of himself that he does not know or recognize: “I felt that I was utterly unlike myself [...] as if I - the real, thinking, sentient I - had somehow got myself trapped inside a body not my own” (82). Here, Freddie is describing the experience of dissociation, or the psychological splitting of the self. He even goes so far as to give a name to this outsider inside of him, this unpredictable side of himself: “Bunter was restive, aching to get out. He had been shut up for so long, burbling and grumbling and taunting in there, and I knew that when he burst out at last he would talk and talk and talk” (82). Bunter is the personification of Freddie’s tormented past: the boy maimed at the start by history, the man haunted ever since by memory. Bunter is the homesick expatriate, suffering the strain of personal and cultural dislocation. Bunter is the embittered legacy of Freddie’s father: “all that anger and resentment, that furious, unfocused energy” (45). Bunter is a timebomb, and he wants to do more than just talk. As Freddie reveals in his criminal confession, Bunter’s eventual appearance is one marked

by violent action, by a traumatic rupture with the past: “he was let slip once, was Bunter, just once, and look what happened” (26).

Freddie’s psychotic break is the calamitous end to the sequence of shocks and bad decisions that precede and accompany his return to Ireland, events that describe his emotional downward spiral. After initially refusing to pay back a loan to a small-time drug lord in the Mediterranean, Freddie returns home, leaving his wife and child as collateral, in order to get some help from his family. However, the financial ruin of his ancestral home and his strained relationship with his aging mother lead him to look for money through alternative means, namely, the theft of a valuable artwork from a wealthy collector and old friend of the family, Helmut Behrens. This ill-conceived plan shows Freddie’s loosening grip on reality. He conceives of the theft as “a simple business transaction between civilised people,” a legitimate means to an end: “I believed, you see, that the matter would be entirely between Behrens and me, with Anna perhaps as go-between” (89). His actions would not constitute a crime so much as a settling of old accounts. Elsewhere, he characterizes his criminal plot as the work of a desperate man, born of resentment and overwhelming self-pity:

I wonder if the court appreciates what a state my nerves were in, not just that day, but throughout that period? My wife and child were being held hostage by wicked people, I was practically broke, my quarterly allowance from the pittance left me by my father was not due for another two months, and here I was, after a ghastly night, red-eyed, unshaven, stranded in the middle of nowhere and contemplating desperate actions. (82)

Had he not been “stranded in that hole,” Freddie believes that none of the ensuing events would ever have happened:

I would have gone to Charlie French and borrowed some money from him, and returned to the island and paid my debt to Señor Aguirre, and then I would have taken my wife and child and come home, to Coolgrange, to make my peace with my mother, and settle down, and become a squireen like my father, and live, and be happy. Ah— (81)

With the benefit of hindsight, Freddie is able to think in a level-headed manner about what he would have or should have done in the past, following the forked paths to redemption that are now foreclosed to him. But in the moment, he moves forward with his ill-fated plan, spurred on by an overwhelming “sense of inevitability” (84). Freddie’s frayed nerves reach their breaking point when he is incidentally discovered in the act of stealing the painting by Behrens’s maidservant: “This, I remember thinking bitterly, this is the last straw. I was outraged. How dare the world strew these obstacles in my path. It was not fair, it was just not fair!” (95). Here, the obstacle in his path is a woman named Josie Bell, an innocent bystander who, as we soon discover, becomes the victim of Freddie’s—Bunter’s—wrath.

Josie’s appearance in the gallery marks the point of no return for Freddie, the moment when his attempt to reconcile with the past is thwarted. Josie, therefore, becomes the scapegoat for all of Freddie’s frustrations. He lashes out at her for his own failures, his indignities, and all of the injustices that he has been made to suffer in life. In his mind, the world is an unfair place; it has wronged him; and Josie is somehow complicit in

these wrongs. Even as he bludgeons Josie to death with a hammer, Freddie paradoxically imagines himself as a victim of circumstance:

Perhaps I would have stopped then, if she had not suddenly launched herself at me across the back of the seat, flailing and screaming. I was dismayed. How could this be happening to me - it was all so *unfair*. Bitter tears of self-pity squeezed into my eyes. I pushed her away from me and swung the hammer in a wide, backhand sweep. The force of the blow flung her against the door, and her head struck the window, and a fine thread of blood ran out of her nostril and across her cheek. There was blood on the window, too, a fan-shaped spray of tiny drops. She closed her eyes and turned her face away from me, making a low, guttural noise at the back of her throat. She put a hand up to her head just as I was swinging at her again, and when the blow landed on her temple her fingers were in the way, and I heard one of them crack, and I winced, and almost apologised. Oh! she said, and suddenly, as if everything inside her had collapsed, she slithered down the seat on to the floor. (98)

In this depiction, Freddie treats the murder as if it were an unpleasant but necessary task which he was made to perform, a ritual sacrifice perhaps. He nearly stops, he almost apologizes, but ultimately, he destroys the human obstacle placed in his path. Freddie is finally able to counter the injustice of the world with definitive action, but unleashes Bunter in the process: "I had struck a blow for the inner man, that guffawing, fat foulmouth who had been telling me all along I was living a lie. And he had burst out at last, it was he, the ogre, who was pounding along in this lemon-coloured light, with blood on his pelt, and me slung helpless over his back" (106). Here, Bunter, the monster within

Freddie, avenges himself on the world for his insecurities, for his feelings of personal and cultural dislocation. Bunter's resentment and unfocused aggression find their focus in Josie, the unfortunate victim who, Freddie recognizes, was no more than a stand-in: "That fat monster inside me just saw his chance and leaped out, frothing and flailing. He had scores to settle with the world, and she, at that moment, was world enough for him" (128).

Like Stephen in *Ulysses*, shattering the chandelier with his ashplant—*Nothung!*—Freddie violently breaks the spell of the past with the repetitive blows of his hammer. He immediately recognizes Josie's murder as a moment of rupture: "Everything was gone, the past, Coolgrange, Daphne, all my previous life, gone, abandoned, drained of its essence, its significance. To do the worst thing, the very worst thing, that's the way to be free. I would never again need to pretend to myself to be what I was not" (106). He has effectively broken away from the life that brought him to this moment of crisis to begin with—the experiences of cultural and personal alienation, the history of violence, the memories of family strife. This traumatic act of renunciation functions as the final and most drastic of Freddie's rites of separation. Freddie has effectively removed himself from the human world. There is simply no going back, no undoing what he has done, no simple reconciliation with the past. Ironically, by doing the "very worst thing" to attain his freedom from the ghosts of the past, Freddie inaugurates a future that will be forever haunted by the horrific memory of his deed.

Despite his active role as perpetrator of the crime, Freddie experiences Josie's horrific murder as a site of personal trauma. Following the deadly confrontation in the

getaway car, he describes a feeling of estrangement from himself and his surroundings, indicating that he has crossed into a new, uncharted realm of experience:

The light in the windscreen was a splintered glare, I thought for a second the glass was smashed, until I put a hand to my face and discovered I was crying. This I found encouraging. My tears seemed not just a fore-token of remorse, but the sign of some more common, simpler urge, an affect for which there was no name, but which might be my last link, the only one that would hold, with the world of ordinary things. For everything was changed, where I was now I had not been before. I trembled, and all around me trembled, and there was a sluggish, sticky feel to things, as if I and all of this - car, road, trees, those distant meadows - as if we had all a moment ago struggled mute and amazed out of a birthhole in the air.

(99)

Freddie looks out on this new world with “dreamy amazement,” as if he were “a visitor from another part of the world altogether, hardly able to believe how much like home everything looked and yet how different it was” (99). The only difference between the new world and the old one is the stark, brutal reality of Freddie’s crime. Because of it, his world has suddenly been made strange; it has become alien to him. Here, Freddie experiences trauma as rebirth, passing through what Kali Tal—referencing scholar Chaim Shatan—calls “the trauma membrane,” the transformative threshold of traumatic experience that separates trauma initiates from their non-traumatized peers (Tal 15-16). After his moment of rupture, Freddie discovers that everything has changed, recalling his disorienting experience of returning to a “changed” Ireland early in the novel. Like the shocked survivors in the streets of Dublin, Freddie, too, has become traumatized.

Immediately following Josie's murder, Freddie enters into an apparent state of shock. As he describes it, his initial impression of this new, post-traumatic realm of experience is characterized by numbness: "I seemed to float, bemused, in a dreamy detachment, as if I had been given a great dose of local anaesthetic" (109). In his numbed state, Freddie flees from the crime scene, disposes of all the objects associated with the murder—the weapon, the getaway car, the body—and unceremoniously dumps the stolen painting. This final act he refers to as "a gesture of renunciation," an indication of his immediate and desperate need to disburden his conscience (102). This, of course, proves to be impossible for Freddie. The symbolic act of cleaning his hands after the murder serves as a harsh reminder of his newfound, inexpungible guilt:

I needed, I positively longed, to wash my hands, to plunge up to the elbows in scalding suds, to sluice myself, to drench, rinse, scour - to be clean [...] I washed my hands as best I could and dried them on the tail of my shirt. Yet when I had finished, and was about to leave, I discovered a drop of blood between my fingers. I don't know where it came from. It may have been on the pullover, or even in my hair. The blood was thick by now, dark, and sticky. Nothing, not the stains in the car, the smears on the windows, not her cries, not even the smells of her dying, none of it affected me as did this drop of brownish gum. I plunged my fists under the tap again, whining in dismay, and scrubbed and scrubbed, but I could not get rid of it. The blood went, but something remained, all that long day I could feel it there, clinging in the fork of tender flesh between my fingers, a moist, warm, secret stain.

I am afraid to think what I have done. (106-107)

Here, Freddie cannot fathom the enormity nor the brutality of his actions. The traumatic experience has only just begun to sink in, belatedly, and so his bruised conscience is unable to grasp it, to fully know it: “I could not think directly about what I had done. It would have been like trying to stare steadily into a blinding light. It was too big, too bright, to contemplate. It was incomprehensible” (128). Instead of acknowledging and facing his secret, Freddie attempts to hide from it—or with it—amidst the old, ordinary world that he left behind, the same one that he lashed out against so violently in the first place. He takes refuge in the ancestral home of his friend, Charlie French, without a plan, merely hoping that the whole business of his crime will somehow work itself out. However, he quickly discovers that even as he avoids capture by the authorities, he cannot hide from the shock of his own guilt: “This was the world I must live in from now on, in the searing, inescapable light” (118).

As he re-enters civilization following the murder, Freddie discovers that the “secret stain” on his conscience has further alienated him from the world around him. Upon arrival in the city center of Dublin, Freddie fears that he might, unbeknownst to him, bear some obvious marking of his crime: “I dodged along through the crowds like a drunk, surprised that they did not part before me in horror” (110). Later, he imagines that his crime has transformed him into something no longer recognizably human, something monstrous:

The people among whom I moved were strange to me, stranger than usual, I mean. I felt I was no longer of their species, that something had happened since I had last encountered a crowd of them together, that an adjustment had occurred in me, a tiny, amazingly swift and momentous evolutionary event. I passed through

their midst like a changeling, a sport of nature [...] They surged around me at a sort of stumble, dull-eyed and confused, like refugees. I saw myself, bobbing head and shoulders above them, disguised, solitary, nursing my huge secret. (138-139)

Again, Freddie encounters strangers in the streets of Dublin that he imagines to be survivors of some unknown cataclysm. And, again, he feels like an alien wandering through a “stricken city”:

All round me was an inferno of haste and noise. A gang of men stripped to the waist was gouging a hole in the road with pneumatic drills. The traffic snarled and bellowed, sunlight flashing like knives off the windshields and the throbbing roofs of cars. The air was a poisonous hot blue haze. [...] My world, and I an outcast in it. I felt a deep, dispassionate pity for myself, as for some poor lost wandering creature. (110)

Here, Freddie passes through a hellish otherworld of modernity, recalling his earlier depiction of a “changed” Dublin. And, just as he does at the beginning of the novel, he escapes these horrors in the street by taking refuge in Wally’s, his favorite pub. As Freddie fondly observes after his initial return home to Ireland, “No, Wally’s was not changed, not changed at all” (29). Inside this timeless sanctuary, he hopes to somehow escape the horrors of his past.

In *Worlds of Hurt*, trauma scholar Kali Tal underscores the prevalence of what she calls the “universal drive to testify” in her study of trauma accounts and testimonies: “One of the strongest themes in the literature of trauma is the urge to bear witness, to carry the tale of horror back to the halls of ‘normalcy’ and to testify to the people the truth of their experience” (120). Accordingly, once Freddie is within the familiar walls of

Wally's pub, he wonders if he should tell the bartender about his crime, thereby transforming it into no more than a "horrid tale": "The thought of confessing gave me a little lift, it was so splendidly irresponsible. It made the whole thing seem no more than a spot of high jinks, a jape that had gone wrong" (112). Here, Freddie envisions himself as Christy Mahon in *The Playboy of the Western World*, sharing the gruesome story of his violent crime with an admiring audience. And just like the play, Josie, the victim, makes an appearance in the bar to disrupt the tale of the would-be storyteller: "Distinctly in my head her voice again said: Don't" (112). The major difference here is that, unlike Old Mahon, Josie is truly dead, and so there can be no scene of reconciliation and newfound respect between perpetrator and victim. Ultimately, Freddie does not testify or confess to his crime in this barroom theater, but instead, drinks himself into a state of oblivion. In the immediate aftermath of the murder, drinking becomes Freddie's necessary means of denial, repression, and forgetting.

By having Freddie take refuge in Wally's pub after Josie's murder, Banville draws attention to an emerging pattern: Freddie repeatedly consumes large volumes of alcohol to anesthetize himself against the pain of experience, and to cope with the unbearable burden of his guilt. Throughout the novel, Freddie often remarks that he needs a drink, or needs more drink, to brace himself and achieve his desired level of "numbed euphoria" (129). He drinks to numb himself to the changes he encounters in Ireland; he drinks to fortify himself for the contentious reunion with his mother; and he drinks to insulate himself against the horrific reality of his crime: "what would I have done in all this affair without the solace of drink and its deadening effect?" (131). As Freddie continues to grapple with his guilty conscience, the "deadenning effect" of the alcohol

becomes its most important virtue for him: “I tried to achieve oblivion, God knows, I poured in the booze until my lips went numb and my knees would hardly bend, but it was no good, I could not escape myself” (146). There can be no solace, no escape from his gruesome deed, only the temporary alleviation of suffering that drunkenness offers him. Though the respite it offers is brief, drinking becomes a temporary release from Freddie’s grapple hold with the world, an escape into a quasi-fictional otherworld. As he explains it, alcohol transports him to “another version of reality” where he achieves a “form of enlightenment” (113). However, drinking also evokes Dionysian rites of sacrifice—“There is something about gin, the tang in it of the deep wildwood, perhaps, that always makes me think of twilight and mists and dead maidens”—the irony of which does not escape him: “I did say dead maidens, didn’t I. Dear me” (29).

Freddie’s overindulgence of alcohol in the novel is only matched by a similar overconsumption of food. He is an emotional eater; he eats—as well as drinks—his feelings. By his own admission, Freddie struggles with his weight, perhaps due to the recurring pain of his past. He explains in his testimony that he has always been “inclined towards flab” (26). Even the name he chooses for his criminal alter ego—Bunter—is a playful reference to a comically overweight character from the comics. During several key moments in the novel, food becomes an important source of comfort for Freddie, an insulation against his overwhelming feelings of pain and guilt. On the morning of Josie’s murder, Freddie consumes a large breakfast of “sausages and rashers and black pudding”—all meat products—in the parlour room of a boarding house. He parenthetically highlights the irony of this moment in light of what he proceeds to do later that same day: “it was the executioner who ate a hearty breakfast” (79). Late in the

novel, once Freddie recognizes that his capture by the police is imminent, he describes immediately becoming very hungry: “I went down to the kitchen and made an enormous omelette, and devoured half a loaf of bread and drank a pint of milk. I sat hunched over the table with my elbows planted on either side of the plate and my head hanging, stuffing the food into myself with animal indifference [...] I was ravenous, I could not get enough to eat” (160). Here, he overeats to insulate himself against the painful reckoning that is to come. Interestingly, the most gruesome image of Freddie eating in the novel comes from a dream he has on his first night home at Coolgrange, before his crime ever takes place. He recounts the dream at length in his testimony:

I had dreamed I was gnawing the ripped-out sternum of some creature, possibly human. It seemed to have been parboiled, for the meat on it was soft and white. Barely warm now, it crumbled in my mouth like suet, making me gag [...] there I was, mumbling these frightful gobs of flesh, my stomach heaving even as I slept [...] Some nameless authority was making me do this terrible thing, was standing over me implacably with folded arms as I sucked and slobbered, yet despite this - or perhaps, even, because of it - despite the horror, too, and the nausea - deep inside me something exulted. (47)

This carnivorous, possibly cannibalistic dream becomes a horrifying prefiguration of Josie’s murder. Bunter, the fat ogre within him, delights in the forced consumption of soft, white flesh—a symbolic sacrifice of innocence. Yet the dream also produces a painful “dry retching” sensation in Freddie as he awakes, indicating just how difficult it will be for him to fully digest the truly traumatic experience of his crime.

Freddie's physical body suffers the shock and revulsion of Josie's murder even as his mind refuses to grasp it. His digestive system rejects all of his attempts to obliterate the feelings of guilt and pain through an overindulgence of food and drink. Throughout the novel, Freddie's eating and drinking binges result in physical illness, namely, nausea and vomiting. After murdering Josie, Freddie gets rid of the blood-spattered hammer and then immediately gets sick: "abruptly I bent forward and vomited up the glutinous remains of the breakfast I had consumed an age ago, in another life" (98). Later, while hiding out from the authorities at Charlie French's house, Freddie stuffs himself with food and drink as he begins to realize just how much trouble he has gotten himself into. After an emotional evening of overeating and heavy drinking, arguing with his mother on the phone, and weeping over Charlie's avuncular generosity, Freddie becomes violently ill: "The next thing I recall is being on my knees in the lavatory, puking up a ferruginous torrent of wine mixed with fibrous strands of meat and bits of carrot. The look of this stuff gushing out filled me with wonder, as if it were not vomit, but something rich and strange, a dark stream of ore from the deep mine of my innards" (134). And finally, during an interrogation by the police, Freddie responds to the seemingly straightforward question *why did you do it?* by vomiting and nearly fainting. In this final instance, the guard who accompanies Freddie to the bathroom offers a few amusing words of consolation that become useful in understanding these scenes of physical illness that recur throughout the novel: "Always the same, he said, in a chatty tone, stuff comes up that you think you never ate" (167). In other words, Freddie's vomiting is, metaphorically speaking, the return of the repressed. Just as Freddie's body vehemently rejects his overindulgence of food and drink, Freddie's conscience refuses to absorb and digest his

crime: “the image of her bloodied face shot up in front of me like something in a fairground stall, and I had to sit down, winded and shaking. For I kept forgetting, you see, forgetting all about it, for quite long periods. I supposed my mind needed respite, in order to cope” (122). The repressed, undigested image of Josie’s death returns unbidden, an involuntary regurgitation of his guilt.

Freddie’s overindulgent rituals of forgetting provide only temporary relief or escape before the horrors of his repressed past resurface from the depths of unconscious memory. These flashbacks to the murder highlight the traumatic nature of his experience as they are an important symptom of post-traumatic stress disorder. Cathy Caruth describes the symptoms associated with PTSD as follows: “there is a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviors stemming from the event, along with numbing that may have begun during or after the experience, and possibly also increased arousal to (and avoidance of) stimuli recalling the event” (*Unclaimed Experience* 4). Throughout the novel, Freddie exhibits many of the symptoms of PTSD, including dreams, hallucinations, numbness, avoidance behaviors, and what Caruth refers to as the “belatedness” of the traumatic experience: “the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated *possession* of the one who experiences it. To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event” (4-5). In other words, the full extent of the psychological trauma is not known at the time of the traumatic event, but becomes apparent with the gradual appearance of symptoms following a post-traumatic incubation period. Freud termed this period “latency,” which Caruth understands to be “the successive movement from an

event to its repression to its return” (7). Kai Erikson explains this process more simply: “Our memory repeats to us what we haven’t yet come to terms with, what still haunts us” (184). Freddie’s involuntary re-encounter with Josie’s “bloodied face” highlights his possession by the horrifying memory of trauma. It also symptomatically marks the return of the repressed after a period of willful forgetting.

With his capture, Freddie’s period of post-traumatic latency comes to an abrupt, harsh, and, paradoxically, welcome end. He likens this moment of reckoning to the inevitable hangover that follows a binge of heavy drinking: “Now that I have sobered up forever I look back not only on that time but on all my life as a sort of tipsy but not particularly happy spree, from which I knew I would have to emerge sooner or later, with a bad headache. This, ah yes, this is hangover time with a vengeance” (131). Sobering reality has finally caught up with him, both literally and figuratively. Freddie recognizes that even as he hid behind drink and denial at Charlie French’s house, he was eagerly awaiting the relief of being captured and “unmasked”:

Yes, to be found out, to be suddenly pounced upon, beaten, stripped, and set before the howling multitude, that was my deepest, most ardent desire [...] First there would be panic, then pain. And when everything was gone, every shred of dignity and pretence, what freedom there would be, what lightness! No, what am I saying, not lightness, but its opposite: weight, gravity, the sense at last of being firmly grounded. Then finally I would be me, no longer that poor impersonation of myself I had been doing all my life. I would be real. I would be, of all things, human. (138)

In this description, capture carries with it the promise of “weight” and “gravity,” qualities that Freddie believes he has always been missing. Elsewhere in the novel, he characterizes himself as “something without weight, without moorings, a floating phantom,” contrasting that with his perception of other people, who “seemed to have a density, a thereness, which I lacked” (16). As Freddie explains it, he has always suffered this spectral weightlessness through the experiences of dislocation and isolation: “Never wholly anywhere, never with anyone, either, that was me, always” (48). This feeling of detachment ultimately allows him to murder another human being. Now, even as the threat of indefinite incarceration looms, Freddie believes that the process of answering for his crime will give him the substance, purpose, and humanity that he lacks.

The first step in what Banville dubs Freddie’s “*Search for Authenticity*” is a reconsideration of what it means to be human in the first place (“Thou Shalt Not Kill” 350). Freddie holds a decidedly bleak view of humanity, perhaps due to the emotional traumas of his cultural and familial past. He extrapolates on the human experience based on his own feelings of displacement and alienation:

I have never really got used to being on this earth. Sometimes I think our presence here is due to a cosmic blunder, that we were meant for another planet altogether, with other arrangements, and other laws, and other, grimmer skies. I try to imagine it, our true place, off on the far side of the galaxy, whirling and whirling. And the ones who were meant for here, are they out there, baffled and homesick, like us? No, they would have become extinct long ago. How could they survive, these gentle earthlings, in a world that was made to contain *us*? (24)

In Freddie's perception, "the tenderness of things, the simple goodness of the world" stands in stark contrast to the "badness" of its human inhabitants (24, 47). Here, he posits that violence and discord are traits inherent to *us*, to human nature as a whole.

Interestingly, this inclusive meditation on the evil of humanity in Freddie's testimony immediately follows a moment of foresight where he recognizes a diabolical purpose behind his journey home to Ireland: "At that instant it came to me that I was on my way to do something very bad, something really appalling, something for which there would be no forgiveness. It was not a premonition, that is too tentative a word. I knew. I cannot explain how, but I knew" (23). Initially, it does not occur to Freddie that this impulse for "badness" might be unique to him, to his own individual nature, rather than inherent to all humans. However, he subsequently witnesses a simple act of human goodness which presents this possibility to him. During the visit home to Coolgrange, Freddie learns from his mother that she has recently suffered a slight stroke, the mere mention of which prompts her dear friend Joanne to embrace her consolingly. As he observes this affectionate gesture, Freddie begins to recognize that he can no longer generalize about the qualities and deficiencies of humanity as such, but rather, must look inward:

Here is a question: if man is a sick animal, an insane animal, as I have reason to believe, then how account for these small, unbidden gestures of kindness and of care? Does it occur to you, my lord, that people of our kind [...] that we have missed out on something, I mean something in general, a universal principle, which is so simple, so obvious, that no one has ever thought to tell us about it? They all know what it is, my learned friend, this knowledge is the badge of their fellowship. And they are everywhere, the vast, sad, initiated crowd. (43)

Here, Freddie speculates that those of his kind—his “kind” being criminal sociopaths—lack some essential knowledge or quality that make one truly human. This deficiency renders him more pathetic than vicious; he becomes no more than a member of the pitiable, un-initiated crowd, desperately seeking the missing essence of his humanity. In the moments following Josie’s murder, Freddie recognizes that this crippling lack has alienated him from others all along. His initial response to the violent, heartless crime further cements his inhumanity: “I thought: I am not human. Then I turned and walked away” (102).

Throughout his testimony, Freddie reflects on abstract philosophical notions regarding human nature, free will, and moral culpability, before, ultimately, acknowledging that an essential flaw or deficiency in his own moral character led to his crime. Despite all of his playful, rhetorical questions and semantic evasions—“I am merely asking, with all respect, whether it is feasible to hold on to the principle of moral culpability once the notion of free will has been abandoned”—Freddie refuses to deny or extenuate his role in the killing of Josie Bell: “I wish to claim full responsibility for my actions – after all, they are the only things I can call my own” (16). This confession of guilt represents his first step in the process of facing up to the horrific reality of his crime. However, Freddie has much more difficulty responding to the obvious follow-up question—*why?*—posed by one of the police interrogators after Freddie’s capture: “I stared at him, startled, and at a loss. It was the one thing I had never asked myself, not with such simple, unavoidable force [...] I had not the heart to confess to him that there was nothing to confess, that there had been no plan worthy of the name, that I had acted almost without thinking from the start” (167-168). After the police continue to press him

on the matter, Freddie finally blurts out, “I killed her because I could [...] what more can I say?” (169). This admission that he murdered an innocent woman without cause, merely because he “could,” leads him to the more profound realization that he acted due to what he identifies as a “failure of imagination”: “This is the worst, the essential sin, I think, the one for which there will be no forgiveness: that I never imagined her vividly enough, that I never made her be there sufficiently, that I did not make her live. Yes, that failure of imagination is my real crime, the one that made the others possible” (183).

Freddie’s imaginative deficiency is the crippled moral conscience of a man maimed at the start by an unbearable weight of history, and traumatized by a crisis of memory. Like the car bomb planted in a busy shopping street, Freddie’s crime is a senseless, mercenary act of violence against an innocent victim due to an essential lack of human empathy. It could also be argued that there is a historico-political dimension to Freddie’s social pathology. Freddie, the elitist Anglo-Irish aristocrat, is able to murder a maidservant—a member of the lower classes or peasantry—because he does not recognize or value her life. She is no more to him than an obstacle in his path, a chip in the game of high-stakes poker he attempts to play with Behrens. Due to a sense of entitlement left unfulfilled, Freddie believes that the world has disinherited him and, therefore, that it owes him. Only after violently lashing out is he able to see the impact of his actions on the world of others. Following his first appearance in court, Freddie is escorted past a crowd that has gathered to catch a glimpse of the high-class murderer: “When they caught sight of me they gave a cry, a sort of ululant wail of awe and execration that made my skin prickle. [...] They shook their fists, they howled. One or two of them seemed about to break from the rest and fly at me. A woman spat, and called

me a dirty bastard. [...] That was when I realised, for the first time, it was *one of theirs* I had killed” (179). This seeming reference to Freddie’s social elevation above the rabble, along with his romanticized perception of himself as “a sort of celebrity” or “Jean-Jacques the cultured killer,” reveals the extent to which notions of class and culture influenced his crime (6). However, his imaginative failure is largely a personal one. Freddie admits to having always felt closed off from the human world as a whole; in one instance, he recounts an illustrative story of personal alienation that becomes a metaphor for his solitary life. While passing by a crowded pub, a patron stumbles out through the door and Freddie takes a brief look inside through the open doorway: “A kind of slow amazement came over me, a kind of bafflement and grief, at how firmly I felt myself excluded from that simple, ugly, roistering world. That is how I seem to have spent my life, walking by open, noisy doorways, and passing on, into the darkness” (184). Freddie explains that he carries this image with him because it represents an important instance of being “afforded a glimpse into what seems a new world, but which I realise has been there all along, without my noticing” (181). The “darkness” in which he walks is of his own making.

The irony of Freddie’s criminal imaginative failure is that Josie’s murder is immediately preceded by a creative act of imagination on his part. Just before he is caught in the act of stealing the painting, *Portrait of a Woman with Gloves*, Freddie succeeds in bringing the female subject of the portrait to life in his imagination: “She. There is no she, of course. There is only an organisation of shapes and colours. Yet I try to make up a life for her” (90). He creates a four-page narrative describing the anonymous woman and how her portrait painting came to be, all of it, of course,

imagined. In Freddie's rendering, the female subject feels scrutinized and penetrated by the impersonal, professional gaze of her painter: "No one has ever looked at her like this before. So this is what it is to be known! It is almost indecent" (92). Freddie envisions the woman as a version of Dorian Gray, imbuing the painting with her human essence, her soul. He imagines her first sight of the finished work: "She looks and looks. She had expected it would be like looking in a mirror; but this is someone she does not recognise, and yet knows. The words come unbidden into her head: Now I know how to die. [...] She is calm. She is happy. She feels numbed, hollowed, a walking shell" (93). This artistic meditation concludes when Freddie is interrupted by Josie, whose human presence hardly registers with him. Just before he strikes her with the hammer for the first time, Freddie finally sees Josie: "I had never felt another's presence so immediately and with such raw force. I saw her now, really saw her, for the first time, her mousy hair and bad skin, that bruised look around her eyes. She was quite ordinary, and yet, somehow, I don't know - somehow radiant" (97). This moment of seeing and sensing another human being does nothing to stay his hand. By destroying Josie, Freddie reveals that she was no more real to him than the imagined woman in the painting, perhaps even less so. It is the painted woman and not the dying, human one who gives him "a last, dismissive stare" before he flees the scene of his crimes (102). The failure of imagination is that Freddie cannot differentiate between art and life, between the imagined ideal and the real. The irony is that he is able to perceive the human essence of the woman in the stolen painting, but not that of the real woman with whom he comes face to face during his escape.

Freddie's acknowledgement of the imaginative failure behind Josie's murder brings the ethical dimension of the novel into the frame. As Freddie sees it, the only way

to atone for his radical failure of imagination is through a radical feat of imagination. He describes this revelation:

In killing Josie Bell I had destroyed a part of the world. Those hammer-blows had shattered a complex of memories and sensations and possibilities - a life, in short - which was irreplaceable, but which, somehow, must be replaced. For the crime of murder I would be caught and put away, I knew this with the calmness and certainty which only an irrelevance could inspire, and then they would say I had paid my debt, in the belief that by walling me up alive they had struck a sort of balance. They would be right, according to the laws of retribution and revenge: such balance, however, would be at best a negative thing. No, no. What was required was not my symbolic death - I recognised this, though I did not understand what it meant - but for her to be brought back to life. That, and nothing less. (129)

To combat the destruction and death he has wrought, Freddie believes that he must create something to fill the void. As with the woman in the painting, he must attempt to capture Josie's human essence and immortalize her in a living work of art. He begins this quest for redemption through the imaginative creation of his testimony.

In his philosophical dialogue on testimony, Paul Ricoeur emphasizes the importance of written expression and discourse in the process of forgiving, forgetting, and healing the traumas of the past. He points to the ethical function of testimony, positing "language as a weapon against violence, indeed the best weapon there is against violence" (17). With his testimony, Freddie seeks to combat the cycle of violence and retribution which he has unwittingly initiated with his crime. The retaliation he fears is

not from Josie's family or the angry rabble he encounters outside the courts, but from the authorities of the criminal justice system and their "laws of retribution and revenge" designed to bring about his "symbolic death." As he is arrested, Freddie recognizes the policemen's desire for physical violence against him: "I knew that at the slightest provocation they would set on me and beat me half to death, they were just waiting for the chance" (164). He recounts his ride down to the police station as one fraught with "excitement and pent-up rage," even characterizing the aggressive driving style of his captors as a form of violence: "Speed soothed them: speed was violence" (164). Once in the interrogation room, Freddie's refusal to sign a confession reveals the precariousness of the policemen's restraint against their urge to retaliate against him: "There was another of those brief, stentorian silences, while they stood over me, clenching their fists and breathing heavily down their nostrils. The air rippled with suppressed violence" (175). Freddie hopes to ward off these violent impulses toward punishment through language: first, by pleading guilty to murder in the first degree, refusing himself any legal concessions, and second, through the creation of his testimonial confession, written in his own words.

After surveying the strewn wreckage of the past, Freddie's testimony begins to imagine the possibility of a future beyond the "symbolic death" of his indefinite incarceration. Shortly after Josie's murder, Freddie sees the image of "a doorway, [...] opening on to a darkened room, and a mysterious sense of expectancy, of something or someone about to appear" (108). He encounters some variant of this image several more times throughout the novel, referring to it as a "fragment of memory" (120). As the novel progresses, it becomes clear that this image represents an imagined vision of his future,

hinting at the possibility of redemption: “there rose up out of me again, like the spectre of an onerous and ineluctable task, the picture of that mysterious, dark doorway, and the invisible presence in it, yearning to appear, to be there. To live” (173). According to Freddie, just as the story of his past becomes bound up with death, so will the story of his future become one of new life:

What I told the policeman is true - I killed her because I could kill her, and I could kill her because for me she was not alive. And so my task now is to bring her back to life. I am not sure what that means, but it strikes me with the force of an unavoidable imperative. How am I to make it come about, this act of parturition? Must I imagine her from the start, from infancy? I am puzzled, and not a little fearful, and yet there is something stirring in me, and I am strangely excited. I seem to have taken on a new weight and density. I feel gay and at the same time wonderfully serious. I am big with possibilities. I am living for two. (183)

Freddie senses the growth within him of an authentic, ethical imagination, or, as Banville explains, he becomes “pregnant with his own incipient humanity” (“Thou Shalt Not Kill” 358). He has now acquired the human weight and density that he previously lacked. In taking Josie’s life, he has taken her essence, her soul, and so now he believes that he must live for her. Freddie’s “unavoidable imperative” becomes a duty to the dead, an obligation to do right by Josie’s memory. His hopes for redemption depend on the strength of his burgeoning imagination: “It even seem[s] that someday I might wake up and see, coming forward from the darkened room into the frame of that doorway which is always in my mind now, a child, a girl, one whom I will recognise at once, without the shadow of a doubt” (186). Freddie’s testimony in *The Book of Evidence* is only the

beginning of his path toward redemption. Next, he must cross the threshold into the haunted, liminal space of memory and imagination in order to heal the wounds of his past and re-imagine a more ethical future.

CHAPTER 2

“The Strangeness of Being Here - of Being Anywhere”:

The Post-Traumatic Purgatory of *Ghosts*

In *Ghosts*, Banville depicts Freddie’s period of transition and healing between his traumatic rupture with the human world and his incorporation back into it. According to the author himself, the novel is intended to be “an account of [Freddie’s] time in Purgatory” (“Thou Shalt Not Kill” 355). Freddie has been released from the hell of prison after serving his life sentence, but as he reveals in the novel, he is not prepared to fully re-enter the human world. Guilt over his crime still consumes him and separates him from the society of others, and so he isolates himself, both literally and figuratively, on a sparsely populated island off the coast of Ireland. As the title to the novel suggests, *Ghosts* presents Freddie as he encounters the spectres of his past in the haunted landscapes of memory and imagination. The events of the novel occur in the uncertain, imaginative terrain of Freddie’s mind, and so several of its characters are figments or ghosts seemingly conjured by the narrator himself. Therein lies the essential difficulty of the novel. Banville deliberately blurs the line separating narrative reality from imaginative creation, thereby emphasizing the creative efforts that Freddie undertakes in order to atone for his radical and traumatic failure of imagination in *The Book of Evidence*. Through his narrative, he attempts to re-imagine himself and his relationship to others in order to find a way beyond the solipsistic prison of the self. In this tangled web of fictional self-creation and self-referentiality, *Ghosts* explores Freddie’s experience of post-traumatic liminality, and dramatizes his struggle to re-establish an ethical link to the human world through the development of his imagination.

In the novel, Freddie's imaginative development operates, first and foremost, on a formal level. His narrative oscillates between first and third-person narration, initially identifying its narrator only as "little god," the creator and puppet-master in control of the novel and its characters (191). In fact, other than a few references to the events of *The Book of Evidence*, the novel does not offer the true identity of its narrator until nearly halfway through it, when one of the characters—described in the third-person—calls out "*Montgomery!*" as he glimpses Freddie through a window (293). Following the more or less straightforward testimonial narrative in *The Book of Evidence*, Freddie's narrative in *Ghosts* presents his imagination in the self-conscious process of creating. Throughout the novel, Freddie, as narrator-artist, gives himself written commands such as: "Details, details: pile them on"; "Tea. Talk about tea"; and "Croke, now, try Croke" (195, 238, 295). These imaginative exercises interrupt the flow of narration in the novel, revealing it to be a form of self-instruction or self-creation. As Mark O'Connell describes it, the novel "feels like little more than a very elaborate and skilfully executed creative writing exercise," wherein Freddie is "trying to train the direction of his gaze outward through the application of the literary imagination" (190). There is truth to this analysis, but it fails to factor in the therapeutic value of the writing exercise itself. As Kali Tal explains, "Expression, in the form of narration, is frequently a step on the journey towards becoming postliminal, towards rewriting the traumatic events that severed [the trauma survivor's] connections to the rest of society" (122). In the context of the Trilogy, the novel functions as a scripto-therapeutic exercise of redress and recovery between Freddie's imaginative failure in *The Book of Evidence* and his hoped-for imaginative redemption in *Athena*.

In narrative time, *Ghosts* takes up Freddie's story a decade after the events of *The Book of Evidence*. The intervening ten years represent the period of his incarceration, "life, that is, minus time off for good, for exemplary, behaviour" (208). Having served his mandatory life sentence—and thereby enduring a symbolic death—Freddie is finally released from prison into the unreal afterlife of freedom: "The fact is, I did find myself outside the gates one grey morning, I did have a brown-paper parcel under my arm. I had imagined this moment so often that now when it had arrived I could hardly believe in it. Everything looked like an elaborate stage-set, plausible but not real" (325). Right from the outset, his imagination becomes a filter for lived experience. Unlike his previous return to Dublin following a ten year absence, the first thing that Freddie notes is how little has changed while he has been away: "The city, this dingy little city for which I have such a grim affection, seemed hardly changed. I scanned the skyline, looking for momentous gaps. A few landmarks had been taken away, a few incongruities added, but generally the view looked much as I remembered it. Strange to have been here all this time and yet not here at all" (326). This time, it is not Dublin that has changed, but Freddie himself:

I was not at all the same person that I had been a decade before [...] A slow sea-change had taken place. I believe that over those ten years of incarceration [...] I had evolved into an infinitely more complex organism. This is not to say that I felt myself to be better than I had been - the doctrine of penal rehabilitation broke against the rock of my inexpugible guilt - nor did it mean I was any worse, either: just different. Everything had become more intricate, more dense and

pensive. My crime had ramified it; it sat inside me now like a second, parasitic self, its tentacles coiled around my cells. I had grown fat on my sin. (208)

As he describes it here, the experience of trauma and its aftermath has consumed and irrevocably transformed Freddie. He wants to believe that he has sloughed off the skin of his old self and become, in a sense, reborn: “Here it is, I said to myself, here is where it really starts: my life. But I was not convinced” (327). Instead, Freddie quickly comes to recognize that his release does not signify a fresh start free of the past, but rather, a continuation of the same life that he left behind, albeit one radically marked and transformed by the traumas of the past. And just like the people he encountered in the streets of Dublin ten years prior, Freddie himself has now become “a survivor” (327).

In keeping with the second phase of the traumatic experience—liminality—Freddie greets his newfound freedom with trepidation and uncertainty, feeling out of place in the world almost immediately. He admits to being self-conscious, acknowledging, for instance, that his outmoded attire marks him out as “a pariah,” or, more humorously, “an alien trying to pass for human” (326). Freddie’s conscience tells him that he belongs somewhere out of sight from the world: “Surely it was not right, surely in common decency the least I could do would be to put my head down and creep away abjectly into some dark hole where the world would not have to look at me” (328). But this sense of deserved damnation is balanced by a faint glimmer of hope for redemption: “Come, I told myself, make an effort, this may be your last shot at what will be the nearest you will ever get to normal life. I still had hopes, you see, that the human world would take me back into its simple and forgiving embrace” (333-334). Initially, the only society in which Freddie feels welcome is that of his fellow ex-con and friend from

inside, Billy. As the two of them sit together in a pub after Freddie's release, they mutually acknowledge that their fellow patrons can easily spot them as criminals: "'Two of a kind, you and me. Sort of a brotherhood, eh?' [...] 'Yes, Billy,' I said, 'that's right: sort of a brotherhood'" (335). For Freddie, this brotherhood represents more than just a fellowship between ex-cons; it becomes an imagined community of outsiders, a brotherhood of the damaged and the damned.

In "Notes on Trauma and Community," Kai Erikson posits that "trauma can create community," where "estrangement becomes the basis for communality." He explains: "Indeed, it can happen that otherwise unconnected persons who share a traumatic experience seek one another out and develop a form of fellowship on the strength of that common tie. [...] It is a gathering of the wounded" (185, 186-187). Throughout the Trilogy, Freddie repeatedly identifies himself with the "derelicts" or tramps he encounters in the streets, and even imagines himself becoming "one of that band, one of the lost ones, the escapees" (328). He reveals this affinity for "the lost ones" through an anecdote he relates toward the end of *The Book of Evidence*. Following his capture, Freddie finds himself in the back of a police van holding one of these Beckettian tramps in his arms after the vehicle makes a sudden sharp turn, causing its passengers to collide: "The smell was appalling, of course, and the rags he wore had a slippery feel to them that made me clench my teeth, but still I held him, and would not let him fall to the floor, and I even - surely I am embroidering - I think I may even have clasped him to me for a moment, in a gesture of, I don't know, of sympathy, of comradeship, of solidarity, something like that" (184). Freddie's feelings of estrangement and remoteness from the

human world—the symptoms of his newfound state of post-traumatic liminality—represent the common features of this marginalized brotherhood.

Freddie attempts to find his way back into the “forgiving embrace” of the human world by making the journey home to Coolgrange. He knows before he ever arrives at the house that the visit is destined to be a fraught one—especially following his wife Daphne’s assertion that she does not wish to see him again—and so he tells himself that his arrival outside the gates to Coolgrange is somehow incidental: “I had not intended that we should come this way, I had left it to Billy to choose whatever road he wished; yet here we were. [...] ‘Home.’ I laughed. The word boomed like a foghorn” (342). Here, Billy functions as a Dickensian ghost, bringing Freddie unwittingly to the gates of his past, a world that he can re-enter, but can no longer touch:

All the same, now that I was here, by accident, I could not resist looking over the old place one more time, trying my feet in the old footprints, as it were, to see if they still fitted. Yet I could not feel the way one is supposed to feel amid the suddenly rediscovered surroundings of one’s past, all swoony and tearful, in a transport of ecstatic remembrance, clasping it all to one’s breast with a stifled cry and a sudden, sweet ache in the heart, that kind of thing. No; what I felt was a sort of glazed numbness, as if I were suspended in some thin, transparent stuff, like one of those eggs my mother used to preserve in waterglass when I was a child. This is what happens to you in prison, you lose your past, it is confiscated from you, along with your bootlaces and your belt, when you enter through that strait gate. It was all still here, the ancient, enduring world, suave and detailed, standing

years-deep in its own silence, only beyond my touching, as if shut away behind glass. (344-345)

Freddie attempts to break through the glass into this closed world of the past, both literally and figuratively. When he encounters a locked door, he responds violently: “in a sudden swoon of anger, or proprietorial resentment, [...] I turned with an elbow lifted and bashed it against one of the panes of frosted glass in the door” (349). Despite this forced, physical entry, Freddie soon realizes that he cannot spiritually enter the house, that some essential part of him is missing inside the walls of Coolgrange. He explains: “I could touch nothing, could not feel the texture of things: the house had been emptied of me; I had been exorcised from it. [...] I closed my eyes and was assailed anew by that feeling of both being and not being, of having drifted loose from myself. [...] I stood in the midst of my own absence, in the birthplace that had rid itself of me utterly” (350-351). Freddie recognizes that he has become a spiritual orphan, cast out from his own home. His life at Coolgrange has been closed off from him; the trace of his past has been erased from the house. He experiences the traumatic rupture with his past anew, feeling a decentering “sense of dislocation [...] as if mind and body had pulled loose from each other” (347). Here, Freddie describes the experience of dissociation, a symptom of trauma survivors when faced with a memory trigger. Freddie learns a hard lesson on his first day of freedom: he can never again go home: “It is lost to me; all lost. As I emerged from the gap in the hedge I felt myself stepping out of something, as if I had left a part of my life behind me, snagged on the briars like an old coat, and I experienced a spasm of blinding grief” (356).

For Freddie, the loss of his wife Daphne compounds the pain of this failed homecoming. As he reflects on Daphne's refusal to see him following his release, he imagines that she must be having a romantic affair with someone else, a thought that he maintains never occurred to him during the entire time he was away in prison: "I knew that most likely I had lost my wife, yet I had thought of her all along as somehow safe, chained to the rock of my absence" (340). Now, as the idea of Daphne taking a lover begins to take form, his imagination runs wild:

as she stood there in my musings, I gave her, without really intending it, a companion. He was indistinct at first, just a man-shape hovering at the edge of fancy, but as my imagination - bloodshot, prehensile - took hold of him in fierce scrutiny the current crackled in the electrodes and a shudder ran through him and at once he began to walk and talk, with awful plausibility. Where do they come from, these sudden phantoms that stride unbidden into my unguarded thoughts [...]? Invented in the idle play of the mind, they can suddenly turn treacherous, can rear up in a flash and give a nasty bite to the hand that fashioned them. This one was taking on attributes by the instant. He was tall and lean, with lank fair hair and a square jaw, togged out in tweeds and a checked shirt and scuffed, oxblood brogues. [...] There is a touch of the rake about him. He drives a sports car and rides a large horse. He is probably a Protestant. And he is fucking my wife. (339)

Through the fabrication of this anonymous lover, Freddie attempts to stoke the fires of his own jealousy. This handsome, wealthy, Protestant "companion" is the quintessential embodiment of everything that Freddie is not, stirring in him feelings of both personal

and cultural resentment. He recognizes that he deserves to be abandoned—and much worse—by Daphne after all that he has done, and so this imagined act of betrayal really becomes an exercise to help awaken the incipient humanity within him through the feelings of passion and pain:

Yet I know too there is something in me that wants it to have happened, wants to lean over them with face on fire and feed in sorrow on their embraces and drink deep their cries. What awful need is this? Am I the ghost at their banquet, sucking up a little of their life to warm myself? Her phantom lover is more real than I: when I look into that mirror I see no reflection. I am there and not there, flitting in panic this way and that in the torture chamber of my imaginings, poor, parched
Nosferatu. (341)

Freddie imagines himself as a wraith, thirsting for the passionate experience of jealousy—or any human emotion—in order to bring him back to life. He has become a ghost, no more real than a figment of his own imagination. Freddie describes himself on this spectral journey into his past as “a doctor feeling for the place that pains” (348). But as he soon discovers, in his case, pain is not a place: it is the absence of a place; it is homelessness, rejection, abandonment; it is marginality. And the only remedy for this type of pain is exile.

At its core, *Ghosts* is a novel about the experience of exile. Freddie attempts to leave his painful past behind and sets out to find a place, a setting more suited to his liminal state. As he explains it, he desires the splendid isolation of an island: “Oh, an island, where else? All I wanted [...] was a place of seclusion and tranquillity where I could begin the long process of readjustment to the world [...] There is something about

islands that appeals to me, the sense of boundedness, I supposed, of being protected from the world - and of the world being protected from me, there is that, too" (207). The island represents Freddie's self-imposed, spiritual exile from the world. At one point, he refers to it as the "Land of Nod," a Biblical reference to Cain's exile from Eden after the murder of his brother (249). After his departure from the human world, Freddie alights on the isolated landscape of the island. As he describes it, he finds its "bleakness congenial," its features "gratifyingly lacking in the picturesque" (210). For the exiled Freddie, the spartan island represents everything he wants in a new home: "when I arrived I felt at once as if somehow I had come home. Will that seem strange, to say I felt at home in such seemingly uncongenial surroundings? But the poverty, you see, the dullness and lack of emphasis, these might have been a form of subtlety, after all. Drama was the last thing I wanted [...] Yes, I felt at home - I, who thought never again to feel at home anywhere" (211). He makes himself at home within the familiar surroundings of a large, stately mansion on the island, reminiscent of the Big House of Coolgrange in which he grew up. But here, the nearly vacant Big House, rather than symbolizing ancestry and aristocracy, becomes a metaphor for his spiritual ruin: "*My life is a ruin, an abandoned house, a derelict place*" (237). On the island, Freddie finds a home for himself despite his spiritually dislocated state.

The geographical remoteness of Freddie's new island home corresponds to his condition of spiritual liminality. He imagines himself dwelling on the margins of existence itself:

I lie for a long time thinking of nothing. I can do that, I can make my mind go blank. It is a knack I acquired in the days when the thought of what was to be

endured before darkness and oblivion came again was hardly to be borne. And so, quite empty, weightless as a paper skiff, I make my voyage out, far, far out, to the very brim, where a disc of water shimmers like molten coin against a coin-coloured sky, and everything lifts, and sky and waters merge invisibly. That is where I seem to be most at ease now, on the far, pale margin of things. If I can call it ease. If I can call it being. (207)

For the spectral Freddie, the island is, quite simply, “a place to be,” a place in which he can exist (220). His journey to the island represents a pilgrimage, of sorts, and initiates a process of spiritual healing: “I had come to this penitential isle (there are beehive huts in the hills), seeking not redemption, for that would have been too much to ask, but an accommodation with myself, maybe, and with my poor, swollen conscience” (209). In other words, Freddie must discover a new way to live with himself, and with his ineluctable past.

To begin accomplishing this feat of spiritual rehabilitation and self-accommodation, Freddie takes up honest labor. He cultivates a garden, he chops wood, he takes out the rubbish; he finds enjoyment in “the simple goodness of the commonplace” and “the quiet delights of drudgery” (218). Most importantly, though, Freddie takes up scholarly work on a Dutch artist named Jean Vaublin, “a long-dead and not quite first-rate master” (220). It is important to note the embedded joke here. The fictional artist’s name is a near anagram of John Banville, adding a layer of fictional self-referentiality to the entire novel. Here, Banville reveals himself to be Freddie’s inspirational guide—and ours—on this journey through the liminal realm of memory and imagination. In a sense, Freddie resolves to study the very artist who fashioned him, an

artist he fittingly describes as “a manufactured man” (220). This self-manufacturing or self re-creation becomes Freddie’s project, too. At the close of *The Book of Evidence*, Freddie reveals his determination to avoid grief and despair over the loss of his freedom by taking up the study of Dutch painting, a fitting subject due to his failed attempt to steal a Dutch masterpiece from the Behrens collection at Whitewater House: “I would work, I would study. The theme was there, ready-made” (182). Now that he is free, he aims to continue this project of spiritual redemption through honest labor. Armed with a letter of introduction to Professor Silas Kreutznaer, a world renowned art historian, written on his behalf by the “kindly and forgiving” Anna Behrens, Freddie travels to the island home of this esteemed scholar so that he can, in Anna’s words, “*make a new start*” (338). Though genuinely fascinated by the enigmatic works of Vaublin, Freddie recognizes the desperation that brought him to the island in the first place. As he admits, “the truth is I had nowhere else to go. The house, the Professor, the work on Vaublin, all this represented for me the last outpost on the border; beyond were the fiery, waterless wastes where no man or even monster could survive” (383). As he sees it, this is his only chance for redemption. Freddie imagines the moment when the Professor accepts his request to stay and work on the island as “the commencement of [his] return from the wilderness into the place of humankind” (380). The island, therefore, marks the apogee in Freddie’s journey away from the human world.

Even as the island offers Freddie a healing refuge from the world, it also represents another version of prison for him. In this bleak, isolated landscape, he suffers the slow passage of time with horrible immediacy, counting down the long days of an interminable life sentence:

The days hung heavy, falling towards night. We watched in silence the unremitting, slow advance of time. Here on Devil's Island we are not allowed the illusions of highs and troughs, of sudden speedings up, of halts and starts. There is only the steady, glacial creep that carries all along with it. Sometimes I fancied I could feel the planet itself hurtling ponderously through space in its bubble of bright air. I had my moments of rebellion, of course, when I would scramble up from the slimed flagstones and rattle my shackles in rage, shouting for the non-existent jailer. Mostly, though, I was content, or calm, at least, with the febrile calm of the chronic invalid. (216)

This experience of time echoes his earlier reflection from prison at the close of *The Book of Evidence*: "Time passes. I eat time. I imagine myself a kind of grub, calmly and methodically consuming the future, what the world outside calls the future" (186). In both instances, Freddie is imprisoned within time itself, suspended between an unthinkable past and an unimaginable future. But, paradoxically, he also appears to be trapped outside of time as it is experienced by others. In this way, the island—referred to in the passage above as Devil's Island—begins to assume the hellish torments of Purgatory. Borrowing a line from a letter by Keats, Freddie imagines that he has departed the human world and ventured into a mythical underworld of sorts: "*I have an habitual feeling of my real life having passed, and that I am leading a posthumous existence. I had burned my boats, the years were strewn like ashes on the water. I was at rest here, in the calm under the great wave of the world*" (211). However, as he soon discovers, there is to be no rest for him in the spiritual incarceration of this afterlife; rather, he will be forced to face up to and relive his worst sins: "Now I am condemned to sit here in my filthy straw

and sift through the bones of it all over again. Eternal recurrence! [...] there was to be no end of it, for me; my term was just beginning” (363). Though he has served his penal sentence by law, Freddie is still not free from the Purgatory of his guilt. There is no break, no time off for good behavior: “it all went on, went on without stop, and every moment of it had to be lived, used up, somehow; not a lapse, not the tiniest falter in the flow; a life sentence” (213). As Sergeant Toner, his parole officer on the island, commiserates, “life means life, right enough” (222).

This hellish prison in which Freddie finds himself is the inescapable prison of the solipsistic self:

I was trying to get as far away as possible from everything. I had tried to get away from myself, too, but in vain. The Chinese, or perhaps it was the Florentines of Dante’s day - anyway, some such fierce and unforgiving people - would bind a murderer head and toe to the corpse of his victim and sling this terrible parcel into a dungeon and throw away the key. I knew something of that, here in my oubliette, lashed to my ineluctable self, not to mention...well, not to mention.

(212)

That which he does not mention is the murder victim, Josie Bell, the corpse to whom he is inextricably bound. She is the *other* that Freddie failed to imagine due to what he describes as his “incurable solipsism,” or his “passionate attachment to self, that I-beam set down in the dead centre of the world and holding the whole rickety edifice in place” (261, 212-213). Revisiting the events of Josie’s murder in a third-person, hypothetical account, Freddie provides a disturbing description of his solipsism, explaining that he is “not used to seeing people whole, the rest of humanity being for him for the most part a

kind of annoying fog obscuring his view of the darkened shop-window of the world and of himself reflected in it” (265). Here, Freddie describes the world as no more than a mirror for the self, thus illustrating Richard Kearney’s warning about the dangers of postmodernity for the human imagination. In *The Wake of Imagination*, Kearney characterizes the postmodern imagination as an imagination in crisis, obsessed with its own futility and impending demise. He utilizes the metaphor of a *labyrinth of looking-glasses* to explain the self-undermining, subject-decentering, *parodic* paradigm of the postmodern imagination (3-17). Presented with inter-reflecting mirrored surfaces only, the imagination inevitably becomes a solipsistic and nihilistic one, lost in a welter of meaninglessness. Freddie, who comes to believe that the world is governed by “chance, pure chance” acutely suffers from this postmodern nihilism (18). As Freddie explains it, he has always struggled to find a singular, coherent identity for himself, and this confused self-obsession is the stumbling block that prevents him from adequately imagining anyone else: “I did not know what I was. How then was I to be expected to know what others are, to imagine them so vividly as to make them quicken into a sort of life?” (213). And so he realizes that he must make imaginative self-creation his task in the hope that it may lead him beyond the solipsistic prison of the self back into the land of the living: “Forget the past, then, give up all hope of retrieving my lost selves, just let it go, just let it all fall away? And then be something new, a sticky, staggering thing with myriad-faceted eyes and wet wings, an astonishment standing up in the world, straining drunkenly for flight. Was that it, that I must imagine myself into existence before tackling the harder task of conjuring another?” (363-364). As Freddie sees it, he must remake or reimagine himself in order to have any hope for redemption in the human world.

The irony, of course, is that Freddie conceives of himself in relation to others, imagining that he needs them in order to exist, to become fully human. Echoing sentiments described in *The Book of Evidence*, Freddie explains that, to him, other people seem to possess the weight of humanity that he lacks. Here, in *Ghosts*, he acknowledges those feelings once again, having fled the human world in favor of spiritual isolation on the island:

I need these people, the Sergeant, and Mr Tighe the shopman in the village, even Miss Broaders, [...] who presides over the post office. I needed them especially in the early days. They had substance, which was precisely what I seemed to lack. I held on to them as if they were a handle by which I might hold on to things, to solid, simple (yes, simple!) things, and to myself among them. For I felt like something suspended in empty air, weightless, transparent, turning this way or that in every buffet of wind that blew. (222)

Freddie repeatedly describes his need for human companionship, for the company of others: “Company, that was what we wanted, the brute warmth of the presence of others to tell us we were alive after all, despite appearances” (224). Elsewhere in the novel, he reflects on this same idea after asking Billy to accompany him on his journey away from civilization: “Was it just that I did not want to travel alone, trapped with my haunted thoughts? Yes, that must have been it, I’m sure: I wanted company” (337). With the repetition of the word “company” in these two passages, Banville establishes a deliberate resonance with Beckett’s prose fiction by that name, a story of the solipsistic self imagining others by necessity, the “devised deviser devising it all for company” (Beckett 33). Freddie needs the company of others to feel alive, thereby revealing the spectral,

liminal state in which he tenuously exists. His spirit desperately clings to the living world, hovering on the very margins of existence itself. From this vantage point on the periphery, Freddie begins to sympathize and identify with the spirits of the dead: “At least when I was locked away I had felt I was definitively there, but now that I was free (or at large, at any rate) I seemed hardly to be here at all. This is how I imagine ghosts existing, poor, pale wraiths pegged out to shiver in the wind of the world like so much insubstantial laundry, yearning towards us, the heedless ones, as we walk blithely through them” (222-223). Without much in the way of human companionship, Freddie—like Beckett’s “devised deviser”—looks to the company of his ghosts.

In the relative isolation of the island, Freddie imagines that his new home is populated by the phantoms of memory and imagination. As he describes it, he “live[s] amongst ghosts and absences” (255). Late in *The Book of Evidence*, Freddie recognizes that his testimony, with its catalog of deaths—first his father, then Josie Bell, and later, his mother and Helmut Behrens—has begun to turn into “the Book of the Dead,” a reference to the ancient Egyptian funerary text (164). *Ghosts* becomes its sequel. Here, in the hellish afterlife of his tormented memory, Freddie believes that he dwells among ghosts, the still-living spirits of the past:

I have a sense, however illusory, of living among lives: a sense, that is, of the significance, the ravelled complexity of things. They speak to me, these lives, these things, of matters I do not fully understand. They speak of the past and, more compellingly, of the future. They are urgent at times, at times so weary and faded I can scarcely hear them. (280)

These “lives” have vital lessons to share with the spectral Freddie. The uninhabited island, with its pastoral landscape of “whitewashed cottages and dry-stone walls, and sheep,” functions for him as a ghostly repository of Irish cultural memory (210). Freddie sarcastically refers to the island’s “long tradition of inbreeding and recurring bouts of internecine strife,” a clear reference to the violent history and unsettled politics of its Irish mainland counterpart (383). On this island of the dead, he summons the ghosts of cultural memory through the workings of his imagination. At the mention of “famine times” in a discussion with the postmistress, Freddie tries to imagine the potato famine through the eyes of the island’s former inhabitants: “A thousand souls lived here then. I picture them, in their cawbeens and their shawls, straggling down the path to the beach and the waiting black ship, the men fixed on something distant and the women looking back out of huge, stricken eyes. [...] Such suffering, such grief: unimaginable. No, that’s not right. I can imagine it. I can imagine anything” (216-217). With its starving, displaced peasants and coffin ships, the famine is the ur-trauma in Ireland, the cultural memory of the dead that still pains the consciousness of the living. Dominick LaCapra calls this a “founding trauma,” where the cultural trauma “paradoxically becomes the basis for collective or personal identity, or both” (81). In this instance, Freddie believes that he can imagine the suffering and the grief of this horrific, historical event. He sympathizes with the ghosts of the famine dead because he, too, has suffered passage through the membrane of trauma, both personally and collectively; he, too, mourns the irrevocable rupture with the past. On this ghostly island of memory, the past begins to return: “I closed my eyes and the past was like a melody I had lost that was starting to come back, I could hear it in my mind, a tiny, thin, heartbreaking music” (249). This melody of the past is vital to the development

of a truly ethical imagination. As Richard Kearney explains it, an “ethically responsible imagination [...] insist[s] on the need to record the formative narratives of the past as invaluable archives of human suffering, hope and action” (*The Wake of Imagination* 393). Here on the island, surrounded by “emblematic fragments from the deep past,” Freddie endeavors to record these narratives of memory—at once both personal and cultural—and re-discover his humanity (225).

Due to his spectral state, Freddie imagines that he has a unique relationship to the dead. The spiritual seclusion of the island offers him “a different way of being alive,” an experience of liminality that allows him to “simply drift away” and become like one of the dead:

I would lose myself, I mean I would flow out of myself somehow and be as a phantom, a patch of moving dark against the lighter darkness all around me. The night seemed something on the point of being spoken. This sense of immanence, of things biding their time, waiting to occur, was it all just imagination and wishful thinking? Night-time always seems peopled to me; they throng about me, the dead ones, yearning to speak. (223)

Here, as with Beckett’s “devised deviser,” Freddie is “in the same figment dark as his figments” (Beckett 33). In this description of dream-like existence, he envisions himself as a spiritual medium, of sorts, struggling to discern the voices of the dead who can no longer speak for themselves. As Freddie imagines it, this duty to invoke the dead becomes the ethical responsibility of the living:

I know I would be grateful for any intercourse with the dead, no matter how baleful their stares or unavoidable their pale, pointing fingers. I feel I might be

able, not to exonerate, but to explain myself, perhaps, to account for my neglectfulness, my failures, the things left unsaid, all those sins against the dead, both of omission and commission, of which I had been guilty while they were still in the land of the living. But more than that, more important than the desire for self-justification, is the conviction that I have, however preposterous it may sound, that there is an onus on us, the living, to conjure up our particular dead. I am certain there is no other form of afterlife for them than this, that they should live in us, and through us. It is our duty. (264)

Freddie carries within him the ghosts of numerous dead, but there is only one that he feels especially compelled to conjure. He resolves at the close of *The Book of Evidence* not to “give in to despair” because he still has something—or, rather, someone—to live for: “I have my task, my term” (186). As Freddie imagines it, the task of conjuring Josie’s ghost remains his only hope for redemption, for “atonement” or “restitution” of the life he took away. Speaking of himself in the third-person, he explains:

what he needed now was the art of necromancy. The question was how to put into place another’s life, but how could he answer, he who hardly knew how to live his own? A life! [...] That was what he had taken from her, and now must restore. He would need help. Oh, he would need help. And so he waits for the rustle in the air, for the moment of sudden cold, for the soundless falling into step beside him that will announce the presence of the ghost that somehow he must conjure. (267)

Like Orpheus, Freddie hopes that his spiritual journey into the underworld, to the absolute margins of existence, will allow him to find Josie’s ghost and return with it to

the living world, thus restoring her to life. In other words, he hopes to accomplish the impossible.

Yet, in his imagination, Freddie can conceive of the possibility of redemption. His dreams offer him a temporary reprieve from guilt by allowing him to forget his crime and re-imagine himself as somehow other:

Some mornings when I wake up I do not remember who I am or what it is I have done. I will lie there for a minute or more, unwilling to stir, basking in the anaesthetic of forgetfulness. It is like being new-born. At such moments, I glimpse a different self, as yet unblackened, ripe with potential, a sort of radiant big infant swaddled in shining light. Then it all comes seeping back, spreading like a slow, thick liquid through my mind. (250)

But even as the guilty burden of memory returns to his waking consciousness, the vision of a purified, redeemed self remains in the frame of his mind:

Still the dream persists, suppressed but always there, that somehow by some miraculous effort of the heart what was done could be undone. What form would such atonement take that would turn back time and bring the dead to life? None. None possible, not in the real world. And yet in my imaginings I can clearly see this cleansed new creature streaming up out of myself like a proselyte rising drenched from the baptismal river amid glad cries. (251)

Dreams, as unconscious exercises of imagination, can be an escape from reality. At times, they give Freddie the hope that, however impossible it may seem, he can somehow be redeemed. Yet, as he well knows, dreams can also be unpredictable, turning against the will of the dreamer: "Dreams bring remembrance, too; perhaps that is what they are

for, to force us to dredge up those dirty little deeds and dodges we thought we had succeeded in forgetting. These half-involuntary memories are a terrible thing” (270-271). In one instance, Freddie interrupts his own narrative and refuses to recount one of his dreams, explaining, simply, “Some dreams are too terrible to be told” (302). This sentiment becomes even more unsettling in light of the dreams that he succeeds in telling over the course of the Trilogy. Freddie reveals that these “half-involuntary memories” sometimes take the form of horrifying nightmares, leading him to look beyond the unconscious realm of dreams for the possibility of imaginative redemption:

There are nightmares too, of course, the recurring ones, lit with a garish, unearthly glow, in which the dead speak to me: flesh, burst bone, the slow, secret, blue-black ooze. I shall not try to recount them, these bloodstained pageants. They are no use to me. They are only a kind of lurid tinkering that my fancy indulges in, the crackles and jagged sparks thrown off by the spinning dynamo of my overburdened conscience. It is not the dead that interest me now, no matter how piteously they may howl in the chambers of the night. Who, then? The living? No, no, something in between; some third thing. (215)

This “third thing” that interests Freddie is the *other*, the life-like human figment that exists in the fictional otherworld of his burgeoning imagination. And it carries with it his hope for redemption.

In *Ghosts*, the arrival of the seven castaways on Freddie’s island heralds the appearance of this “third thing” within the frame of his imagination. The novel opens with their introduction into this marginal world: “Here they are. [...] They are struggling up the dunes, stumbling in the sand, squabbling, complaining, wanting sympathy,

wanting to be elsewhere. That, most of all: to be elsewhere. There is no elsewhere, for them. Only here, in this little round. [...] A little world is coming into being” (191).

Freddie reveals that the appearance of these characters on the island fulfills his unconscious desire for company: “I must have been waiting all along for them, or something like them, without knowing it, perhaps. Biding my time, that is the phrase” (224). He refers to these marooned day-trippers as “my foundered creatures,” revealing them to be his creations, the figments of his imagination (193). In essence, Freddie becomes the “little god” of this “little world” (191):

I am there and not there: I am the pretext of things, though I sport no thick gold wing or pale halo. Without me there would be no moment, no separable event, only the brute, blind drift of things. That seems true; important, too. (Yes, it would appear that after all I am indeed required.) And yet, though I am one of them, I am only a half figure, a figure half-seen, standing in the doorway, or sitting at a corner of the scrubbed pine table with a cracked mug at my elbow, and if they try to see me straight, or turn their heads too quickly, I am gone. (225)

Like their creator, these castaways are identified as “survivors,” having endured the traumatic, storm-tossed seas of imaginative creation (202). As they are making their way up the dunes, from the stranded ship to the Big House on the island, Freddie imagines that they step out of the frame of his mind and into his world: “here is the moment where worlds collide” (198). Here, the solitary self begins to imagine itself in the company of others.

This “moment where worlds collide” is also the moment where the imaginary world of the novel, effectively, turns in on itself, collapsing the boundary between

imagination and reality. As we soon discover, there ceases to be an objective narrative reality in the novel. In other words, there is no discernible difference between the world in which Freddie exists and the world which he imagines into being. This inward turn is symptomatic of trauma narratives, where the subjective experience occludes objective reality. As readers, we are drawn into and trapped within the nebulous realm of Freddie's imagination, with Freddie serving as our narrator and guide. At times, even he fails to discern the essential difference between these worlds. As first-person, omniscient narrator, Freddie exerts authorial control over the world of the novel and the other characters within it: "I could leave them there, I could walk away now and leave them there forever" (203). However, he also reveals himself to be a creature of this world, as well as its creator: "I live here, in this lambent, salt-washed world, in these faded rooms, amidst this stillness. And it lives in me" (196). Here, the world of the imagination bears the imprint of the real. In the novel, these side-by-side worlds begin to overlap and interfere with one another. Freddie's narrative occupies the liminal space that separates existence from non-existence, reality from fiction, and memory from imagination; in short, it occupies a third place, one that can somehow encompass all of these possibilities. Freddie describes the experience of his existence within these interconnected, mirrored worlds:

Worlds within worlds. They bleed into each other. I am at once here and there, then and now, as if by magic. I think of the stillness that lives in the depths of mirrors. It is not our world that is reflected there. It is another place entirely, another universe, cunningly made to mimic ours. Anything is possible there; even the dead may come back to life. Flaws develop in the glass, patches of silvering

fall away and reveal the inhabitants of that parallel, inverted world going about their lives all unawares. And sometimes the glass turns to air and they step through it without a sound and walk into *my* world. (239)

Here, the silvering begins to fall away from the mirrors in the postmodern labyrinth, allowing Freddie to see—to imagine—beyond himself.

Through the creation of this liminal, narrative world—this escape from the mirrored labyrinth of the self—Freddie imagines a path to redemption. He describes the transformative process of entering into this dreamworld of his imagination:

I would look out the window and see that little band of castaways toiling up the road to the house and a door would open into another world. Oh, a little door, hardly high enough for me to squeeze through, but a door, all the same. And out there in that new place I would lose myself, would fade and become one of them, would be another person, not what I had been - or even, perhaps, would cease altogether. Not to be, not to be: the old cry. Or to be as they, rather: real and yet mere fancy, the necessary dreams of one lying on a narrow bed watching barred light move on a grey wall and imagining fields, oaks, gulls, moving figures, a peopled world. (387-388)

Here, the “barred light” suggests the possibility that Freddie has never actually left prison, or that this dream of the castaways precedes his release. Yet the distinction hardly matters, as Freddie’s narrative essentially knocks down the “grey wall” that separates the real from the imagined. In this “peopled” otherworld of the imagination, Freddie nurtures the development of a new self, one with the ethical dimension that he lacks, in the hopes that he can, in good conscience, finally return to the human world.

Just as the marginal island becomes a place *from* which Freddie can re-enter the world, art becomes an imaginative frame *through* which he can do so. As a self-styled art historian, Freddie re-imagines himself within the realm of art, or more specifically, the mirrored world within a world of painting. Adopting a scholarly tone, he proposes the following aphorism about the relationship between art and reality: “Art imitates nature not by mimesis but by achieving for itself a natural objectivity” (274). Freddie believes that every work of art establishes a new world of its own, one that is at once a part of the world of its creator and, at the same time, independent of it. As such, his studies of Dutch painting afford him a glimpse of the redeemed world that he so desires: *Le monde d’or*, the Golden World, by Jean Vaublin. Freddie’s fascination with this particular painting, the “last and most enigmatic” of Vaublin’s masterpieces, forms the artistic focal point of the novel (221). He perceives something thrillingly mysterious and universal about the painting: “*Le monde d’or* is one of those handful of timeless images that seem to have been hanging forever in the gallery of the mind. There is something mysterious here beyond the inherent mysteriousness of art itself” (274). As Freddie reveals through his various descriptions and analyses of the work, the painting depicts the arrival or departure by boat of seven strange figures, many of whom represent stock characters from the *commedia dell’arte*. He describes these painted subjects of Vaublin’s Golden World as “inscrutable figures scattered about the canvas like the survivors of a vast calamity of air and light” (302). They, too, represent survivors in his mind. For Freddie, it is a scene that inspires both the plot and the characters for his narrative, for his imagined encounter with the castaways. He envisions bringing the seven figures in *Le monde d’or* to life through an act of his creative imagination—the writing of a fictional narrative—just as he had

done ten years earlier with the woman in the stolen painting in *The Book of Evidence*: “Ah, the little figures, I told myself, how convincingly, how gaily they shall strut!” (220). The castaways on Freddie’s island represent the figures in the painting come to life. By opening the doorway between these two worlds—one real and one imagined—Freddie enters a third place, a place of healing: the mysterious Golden World of art, where his spirit can mingle with these painted others.

As the figures in the painting come to life in Freddie’s mind, his study of *Le monde d’or* begins to take on a distinctly personal cast. In his scholarly analysis of the painting, he offers the following observations on the figure of Pierrot, a distinctive male character who stands prominent and alone in the foreground of the image:

He stands before us like our own reflection distorted in a mirror, known yet strange. [...] He is isolated from the rest of the figures ranged behind him, suspended between their world and ours, a man alone. Has he dropped from the sky or risen from the underworld? We have a sense of mournful apotheosis. [...] He seems trapped, held fast by invisible constraints. [...] We have the impression of past suffering and a present numbness. [...] He seems someone to whom something terrible has happened, or who has done some terrible thing [...] What is it he has done, what crime is he guilty of? (391-392, 394)

Here, Freddie’s interpretation of the painted figure of Pierrot clearly becomes an autobiographical one. He even goes so far as to give Pierrot a club, a blunt implement reminiscent of his murder weapon. Like Dorian Gray, the painting comes to depict the guilt and deformities of his soul. A similar scholarly self-portrait appears in his account of Vaublin’s conception and creation of his masterpiece: “He had begun work on *Le*

monde d'or, hastening while his strength lasted. The summer was hot. I see him aloft in his attic rooms, all doors and windows open to the air [...] He wants to confess to something but cannot, something about a crime committed long ago; something about a woman” (304). Freddie spiritually inserts himself into the painting as both its painter and painted subject, imagining this timeless otherworld of art as an escape from the temporal, guilt-ridden world of his own past. As he describes, “It is a world where nothing is lost, where all is accounted for while yet the mystery of things is preserved; a world where they may live, however briefly, however tenuously, in the failing evening of the self, solitary and at the same time together somewhere here in this place, dying as they may be and yet fixed forever in a luminous, unending instant” (397). In the Golden World of Freddie’s imagination, art becomes the therapeutic medium of healing and redemption, the frame through which he can re-imagine his connection to the human world.

From out of the painted frame of Vaublin’s *Le monde d'or*, the *other* finally appears in the dark doorway of Freddie’s burgeoning imagination, the same dark doorway he envisioned in *The Book of Evidence*. Freddie highlights this epiphanic, imaginative breakthrough in his narrative with simple stage directions, “Enter Flora” (320). Among the seven castaways that arrive on Freddie’s island, he immediately identifies one, a young woman, through whom he imagines navigating his way back to the human world: “It was Flora I was vainly watching for, of course, the rest of them might have been so many maggots in a cheese for all I cared. Oh yes, I had spotted her straight away [...] She sprang out of their midst like the Virgin in a busy Annunciation” (251). And like the Virgin Mary, Flora represents for Freddie the virgin womb of imaginative creation: “It was innocence I was after, I suppose, the innocent, pure clay

awaiting a grizzled Pygmalion to inspire it with life. It is as simple as that. Not love or passion, not even the notion of the radiant self rising up like flame in the mirror of the other, but hunger only to have her live and to live in her, to conjugate in her the verb of being” (252). This grammatical metaphor for sexual procreation reveals Freddie’s need for the *other* to accomplish his hoped-for imaginative redemption. As he sees it, he can only redeem himself by giving Josie new life, and he can only give her new life if he can successfully conceive of the *other*, if the other can truly come alive in his imagination. This pun on the idea of conception—imaginative creation versus sexual procreation—becomes one of the central motifs in *Athena*. Freddie must solve the imaginative conundrum of the *other* in order to successfully re-incorporate himself into the human world.

Flora provides Freddie with his first glimpse of the imagined other through the frame of his artistic, creative imagination. In the novel, Freddie creates her, imagining her into life, through the sheer intensity of his gaze: “I am like an anthropologist studying the last surviving specimen of some delicate, elusive species long thought extinct. I am assembling her gradually, with great care” (273). In this way, he mimics the life-bestowing creative process of the artist as described by Banville himself: “Under the artist’s humid scrutiny the object grows warm, it stirs and shies, giving off the blush of verisimilitude; the flash of his relentless gaze strikes them and the little monsters rise and walk, their bandages unfurling” (“The Personae of Summer” 348). Once assembled under Freddie’s creative scrutiny, Flora ceases to be a painted image, an assemblage of words, a figment of Freddie’s imagination. She comes alive and steps through the dark doorway into his world, and as she does so, she transfigures everything:

I found myself looking at her and seeing her as if for the first time, not as a gathering of details, but all of a piece, solid and singular and amazing. No, not amazing. That is the point. She was simply there, an incarnation of herself [...] No longer Our Lady of the Enigmas, but a girl, just a girl. And somehow by being suddenly herself like this she made the things around her be there too. In her, and in what she spoke, the world, the little world in which we sat, found its grounding and was realised. It was as if she had dropped a condensed drop of colour into the water of the world and the colour had spread and the outlines of things had sprung into bright relief. [...] I felt everyone and everything shiver and shift, falling into vividest forms, detaching themselves from me and my conception of them and changing themselves instead into what they were, no longer figment, no longer mystery, no longer a part of my imagining. And I, was I there amongst them, at last? (321)

Through her life-like presence in his world, Flora makes everything and everyone become real, including Freddie himself. Flora and her fellow castaways become, as Freddie imagines, “the motley troupe who would take me into their midst and make a man of me” (401). As figments of his creative imagination, they bring him closer to the ethical threshold of the other. And in their perceived otherness, they begin to restore his humanity, to heal his traumatic rupture with the human world. Now, Freddie can imagine leaving the exile of the island—and his state of spectral liminality—behind him. His period of imaginative transition—following the trauma of its failure—has come to an end, and so he is, in a sense, returning to the world and beginning all over again: “I still had, still have, much to learn. I am, I realise, only at the beginning of this birthing

business” (405). This “birthing business”—the hoped-for redemptive encounter with the other—becomes the subject of the third and final novel in the Trilogy: *Athena*.

CHAPTER 3

“The Dead Do Not Forgive”:

The Painful Persistence of Memory in *Athena*

Athena, the third and final novel of the *Frames Trilogy*, takes the unique form of a testimonial love letter written by Freddie Montgomery—under the alias F. Morrow—for a mysterious woman referred to only as “A.” The novel opens with an address to “My love,” deliberately echoing the earlier, formal address to “My lord” in the beginning lines of *The Book of Evidence*. This shift in audience reflects the more intimate nature of *Athena*, a novel meant to depict the “murk and confusion” of Freddie’s heart—“Heart, yes; not a word you will have heard me employ very often up to now”—which follows the abrupt ending of his doomed love affair with A. (416). The emotional tumult at the heart of *Athena* becomes emblematic of Freddie’s difficult, unredemptive return to the human world following his period of self-imposed exile depicted in *Ghosts*. And as this final novel of Freddie’s saga reveals, his time away from Dublin did little to exorcise the ghost of his violent past, a revenant that returns unbidden due to his peripheral involvement with another, eerily familiar crime at Whitewater House. In *Athena*, Banville shows the ways in which the memory of Freddie’s buried past continues to haunt him, intruding devastatingly upon his still-possessed present.

As with the previous two novels, the form of *Athena* itself becomes a matter of interest in this exploration of the ways that traumatic memory functions throughout the Trilogy. Freddie’s narrative in the final novel is, again, a retrospective one, a testimony depicting the heartbreaking events surrounding his affair with A. and his deception at the hands of the Da’s criminal syndicate—a crime family of which A. is a core member, as Freddie ultimately discovers. In this third installment, his memory narrative assumes the

form of a letter from a jilted lover, its spontaneous and fragmented nature meant to convey the anguish, shame, and heartache of its bereft author. Freddie acknowledges the errant form and jumbled chronology of his account through parenthetical asides or comments which are scattered throughout the text. “I am so confused, so confused!” he interjects at one point; “I know, I know, this is all out of sequence” he later admits (459, 486). Finally, in an address late in the novel, Freddie explains that the disorder of his narrative is, in a way, deliberate, that it serves to illustrate his tormented emotional state: “This is all confused, I know, unfocused and confused and other near-anagrams indicating distress. But that is how I want it to be, all smeary with tears and lymph and squirming spawn and glass-green mucus: my snail trail” (605). In other words, the form that the novel assumes is meant to communicate the painful, traumatic nature of Freddie’s remembered experiences. It conveys the intimacy and the immediacy of memory, not merely its contents.

The body of Freddie’s testimonial letter to A. is interspersed with sample passages of his art criticism, these being the product of his commission to evaluate and catalogue a cache of stolen paintings for Morden and the Da. As with Freddie’s criticism of *Le monde d’or* in *Ghosts*, the tone of this ostensibly objective scholarship becomes increasingly subjective and autobiographical as the novel progresses, further illustrating how the torment of Freddie’s past colors his perception and experience of virtually everything. Conveniently, the mythological subjects of the paintings—classical scenes depicting amorous pursuit, kidnap, rape, revenge, and betrayal—offer a series of thematic parallels to the events of the novel, giving Freddie’s commentary a dual resonance. Freddie eventually abandons the critical pretense altogether and addresses A. directly in

these passages, as seen here in his comments on the final painting in the series: “How calmly the lovers...I can’t. How calmly the lovers lie. (As you lied to me)” (590). Here, Freddie’s subjective experience—his grief over the loss of A.—completely overwhelms and overwrites any attempt at objective criticism. Together, these affected passages of art scholarship form a narrative tributary which, in its climax, flows seamlessly back into the larger body of Freddie’s anguished testimony.

In the context of the novel, Freddie ostensibly writes this mournful letter to his lost love in response to A.’s parting words to him: “*Write to me*” (601). Yet she leaves him no forwarding address, and so, from the start, his narrative grapples with its own futility, its very impossibility. A’s absence, her unreachability, threatens to silence Freddie and destroy the story he intends to copy down. In Dori Laub’s analysis of testimony, he warns: “The absence of an empathic listener, or more radically, the absence of an *addressable other*, an other who can hear the anguish of one’s memories and thus affirm and recognize their realness, annihilates the story” (Felman and Laub 68). At the outset of the novel, Freddie acknowledges the unlikelihood that his testimony can ever reach A., its intended audience. Yet by addressing his narrative to her in second-person form—“You. You.”—he opens up a site of testimonial possibility for himself: “If words can reach whatever world you may be suffering in, then listen” (415). Despite knowing that A. will never read or respond to the letter, Freddie still poses several questions to her throughout it concerning her knowledge of or involvement in his deception. He asks her, for instance, “Were you waiting all along to go, poised to leap? [...] Were you part of the plot, a party to it?” (416). Freddie recognizes, however, that he is merely tormenting himself by asking these unanswerable questions: “How calmly I pose these questions, yet

what a storm of anxiety and pain they provoke in me - for I shall never know the answers for sure, no matter how long I brood on it all, no matter how many obsessed hours I spend turning over the scraps of evidence you left behind” (458). Here, *Athena* becomes another book of evidence, with Freddie giving testimony as victim rather than perpetrator this time around. Eventually, he turns the rhetorical questions on himself, asking why his memory continually forces him to revisit and relive the “anguish and shame” of his deception: “But why do I torment myself like this, what does it matter any more? Is the loss of you not flame enough, that I must keep scorching myself over these embers? Yet I have nothing else, no packet of letters, no locket of bright hair, only these speculations that I turn over endlessly in my head like things on a spit” (470). As Freddie reveals here, his memory narrative, tortured though it may be, is all that he has left. It is his lifeline, his only means of emotional survival. Freddie describes his narrative at various points as a “clumsy song” of unrequited love, and a piercing “howl of anguish,” neither of which will likely ever reach the ears of the *other* to whom it is addressed (591, 532).

Despite A.’s absence at the time of Freddie’s writing, his testimony seems somehow compulsory or coerced in certain instances in the text. As Freddie recounts the difficult story of his Aunt Corky’s death, he interrupts himself to inquire, “The hospital...Must I do the hospital?” before resignedly describing the experience of identifying her body in the morgue (586). Elsewhere in the text, he interjects phrases such as “Ah, I am tired of this” and “I can’t,” highlighting the fatiguing nature of his testimonial task and the emotional energy required to sustain it (596, 590). Finally, as Freddie recalls the moment of his discovery that A. deceived him and fled Dublin, his narrative temporarily breaks off: “If only I could end it here” (601). This line is, of

course, a double entendre, and both of its possible readings show just how acutely painful the memory of this moment is for Freddie. Though he may wish to end “it” there, the implication is that, for some unstated or perhaps unknown reason, he cannot. He has a narrative task, a duty that he must fulfill. And so he goes on, with both his testimony and his life, revealing a kind of Beckettian resolve in the process. Thus, Freddie’s narrative in *Athena*, as well as that of the entire Trilogy, becomes an illustration of Laub’s assertion that testimony is “a ceaseless struggle,” a continual obligation to face up to the ghosts of one’s past (Felman and Laub 75).

Laub explains the need for an *other* in order to set in motion what he calls the “therapeutic process” of testimony, “a process of constructing a narrative, of reconstructing a history and essentially, of *re-externalizing the event*.” He explains:

This re-externalization of the event can occur and take effect only when one can articulate and *transmit* the story, literally transfer it to another outside oneself and then take it back again, inside. Telling thus entails a reassertion of the hegemony of reality and a re-externalization of the evil that affected and contaminated the trauma victim. (69)

In *Athena*, this therapeutic process is jeopardized by the absence of an other to whom Freddie can give testimony. In a parenthetical aside, he self-mockingly likens himself as he writes to “a magistrate listening to a doltish accused stumbling through his earnest and self-condemning testimony” (484). The “earnest and self-condemning testimony” he refers to here is, of course, his own, and yet he is also its “pitying” transcriber. Here, Freddie imagines himself as somehow other, as external to himself, receiving and transcribing his own testimony. Thus, he externalizes the events of his past through the

act of writing it down. Freddie directly acknowledges that he is likely writing only for himself: “Since I am no longer speaking to anyone except myself (and maybe some dazed survivor of Armageddon, in footrags and squashed top-hat, idly turning over these scorched pages in his bomb-shelter of a night), I do not know why I should go on fussing over niceties of narrative structure, but I do” (597-598). In this instance, Freddie ponders for whom he is even bothering to observe narrative conventions, and his response is twofold: for the possibility, however remote, of an *addressable other* and, of course, for *himself*. Freddie is both the writer of and the audience for his narrative in *Athena*. As a testimony, the novel represents yet another instance of his need to *act out* and *work through* the traumatic nature of his past, as well as its manifestations in, and impacts on the present. And as such, there is a sense of urgency for him to tell it, to get it right, and, again, to put it in his own words.

As with *The Book of Evidence*, *Athena* depicts Freddie’s compulsion to provide his own version of events to serve as counterpoint to the “other, official fictions,” namely those that appear publicly in the newspapers in the wake of his latest scandal (186). In the novel, Freddie explains that he is “filled with indignation and proprietorial resentment” when the news of the art heist and subsequent forgery plot comes out in the papers: “it was as if some painful episode of my private life had been dug up by these pig-faced delvers [...] and spread across eight columns for the diversion of a sniggering public” (604). As he sees it, the facts of the case become distorted and “denatured” for maximum effect. His anguished love story of “desire and deceit” with A. appears instead as “a clumping caper, bizarre, farcical almost” (604). However, as Freddie admits, his testimony is not exactly concerned with depicting *the truth* either, if such an objective

account could even be said to exist. He explains the transformative nature of retrospective narrative thus: “The present modifies the past, it is a continuing, insidious process” (484). His version is therefore written, as he describes it, with both “the bitterness” and “the benefit of shameless hindsight” (518, 599). Throughout the novel, Freddie gestures to things that he missed along the way while being willfully deceived, such as the physical resemblance between Popeye and A., who he later reveals to be brother and sister. He also sniffs out the art forgery plot—quite literally—repeatedly registering the “familiar” smell of “sawdust and glue and pungent oil” which he later identifies as the distinctive traces of art fabrication (460). As Freddie explains it, his impulse to write his own version of the story is ultimately an emotional defense mechanism triggered by the discovery of A.’s deception and departure: “What I wanted [...] was to have it all turned into a tale, made fabulous, unreal, harmless” (602-603). He hopes that transforming his painful past into narrative will somehow confine its most poisonous, corrosive elements.

As Freddie grapples with the difficult task of testifying, of narrativizing the past, he begins to observe and record the imaginative properties of his memory, metaphorically likening its inner workings to those of a dramatic stage production. Throughout the novel, Freddie employs theatrical images in order to set the stage for tableau-like scenes from his memory and transform his testimony into a theater of remembrance. “I want you to see the scene,” he tells A., who also features as a central character within this imagined drama (466). As Freddie recounts his fateful introduction to the sinister Morden, he describes it thus: “The occasion of our first meeting retains in my memory a sort of lurid, phosphorescent glow; I have an impression of a greenish light and dispersing stage smoke and the sudden swirl and crack of a cloak and a big voice booming out: *Tarraa!*”

(419). Elsewhere, Freddie envisions the special effects of a dramatic scene-change as he transitions between remembered scenes: “Now everything shifts again, the false panels and secret compartments slide this way and that with an oiled, surreptitious smoothness, and it is another day and we are somewhere else” (467). Thus, the highly skilled stagehands of memory allow him to effortlessly travel through space and time, jumping from scene to scene in his mind in order to produce a fluid narrative reenactment of the past.

However, Freddie acknowledges the way that these imaginative contortions and juxtapositions can unintentionally produce false impressions. As he describes it, one of memory’s “tricks” is its tendency to “[conflate] separate occasions”: “And here memory, that ingenious stage director, performs one of its impossible, magical scene-changes, splicing together two different occasions with bland disregard for setting, props or costumes” (523, 514). In his desperate attempt to discover significance or meaning in the events of the past, Freddie is repeatedly prone to factual error. Sometimes this produces desirable effects, as when Freddie’s “playful memory” outfits A. in costumes featuring “outlandish accessories” for some of their many trysts (448). But with each mistake or discrepancy that comes to light, Freddie is compelled to ask himself anew, “if I have got that detail wrong what else am I misremembering?” a question which leads him to the inevitable conclusion that “none of this is as it really happened” (425). As Freddie well knows from previous experience and discovers here yet again, the line separating memory from imagination is a porous one. Thus, his testimonial narrative presents an altered and, at times, fabricated version of the past as it is perceived through the distorting lens of memory.

The theme of inauthenticity, therefore, plays a significant role in *Athena*. An “air of fakery” pervades Freddie’s entire narrative, a story filled with forged paintings, secret identities, and “invented lives” (464, 563). Several important scenes in the novel occur in “some fake old-fashioned pub,” and one character in particular—Francie, who is quite possibly Freddie’s alter ego—is described as “made-up, a manufactured man” (563, 464). These fabrications are, in part, the evidence, the residue of Freddie’s attempts to transform his painful past into a harmless story, a fiction, a play of memory. However, he self-consciously calls attention to the gaps and omissions within his narrative, the moments when he deliberately avoids or glosses over especially difficult memories. For instance, after skirting the subject of dead loved ones and “others”—Josie Bell being one such implied *other*—Freddie interrupts himself to point out the “giveaway” in the text when he begins “consciously to dissemble.” “Whenever I employ locutions such as that,” he explains, “you will know I am inventing,” and then adds, “But then, when do I not use such locutions?” (435). Here, Freddie playfully undermines the perceived truth of his entire narrative, unabashedly calling himself a liar. More importantly, however, he succeeds in skipping over and reburying the painful memory that threatened to resurface in the text—the murder and its fallout—by instead distracting the reader with a lesser confession of narrative unreliability. Freddie’s evasiveness, however, is only so effective in keeping the horror of his past at bay. In another instance, as he recalls encountering one of Morden’s henchmen while snooping around the basement forgery workshop, Freddie is forced to exert heavy-handed narratorial control: “Francie ambled forward and picked up a miniature hammer from the workbench and turned to me and—Enough of this. I do not like it down here! I do not like it at all. A wave of my wand and *pop!* here

we are magically at street level again” (461). As this sudden outburst illustrates, he cannot simply banish the ghosts of violence past that this memory—complete with murder-weapon madeleine—evokes, and so he avoids the scene entirely, effectively striking it from the narrative record with a stroke of his pen. The authentic past, however, refuses to stay hidden from view for long.

Freddie’s disguised identity in *Athena* represents an extension of this narrative avoidance technique, his attempt to simply make his past disappear with a wave of his wand or a stroke of his pen. As Freddie reveals early in the novel, he has legally changed his name by deed poll “along with everything else that was changeable,” later lamenting, “If only there were a deed poll by which past deeds might be changed” (419, 477). Even his choice of name—F. Morrow—is due in part, he explains, to its “faintly hopeful hint of futurity” (421). As Freddie sees it, his future depends upon his ability to break away from his past, to reinvent himself and become a “self-made man” (467). But as he well knows, the past cannot simply be denied or avoided, especially a troubled past like his:

Always it comes back. I think of it as another story altogether but it is not. I delude myself that I have sloughed it all off and that I can walk on naked and unashamed into a new name, a new life, light and gladsome as a transmigrating soul, but no, it comes back dragging its boneless limbs through the muck and rears up at me grotesquely in the unlikeliest of shapes. (506)

Like the ghost of Banquo in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, the macabre spectre of Freddie’s violent past—the ghost of his inexpugible guilt—stalks the narrative stage. In several instances, Freddie gives his past a figural form, using corpse-like images to communicate the horror of its corporeal return. When Morden’s background check on the man he

knows only as Morrow uncovers “grave misdeeds,” Freddie recounts feeling like his “buried past” has been brought “sitting bolt upright out of its coffin, wide-eyed and hideously grinning” (466-467). Shortly thereafter, he describes how the story of Aunt Corky’s haunted past stirs “the murky waters of remembrance” in him, causing the sunken corpse of his own dark past to resurface: “That’s how it is, you tie a rock to things and sink them in the depths and then the first autumn storm breaks and they come bobbing up again with bloated limbs and filmed-over eyes that stare straight through you into eternity” (496). Despite the disguise of a new name and the hopeful fiction of a new identity, Freddie comes to realize that the albatross of his horrific past is truly inescapable.

Freddie’s “grave misdeeds” are recalled in the novel by a series of crimes that have Dublin, again, in an uproar of “rumour and fearful speculation, clutching itself in happy terror” (571). An unknown serial killer, nicknamed the Vampire, is making news with a series of horrific crimes against women, providing yet another unsettling backdrop of senseless violence which operates much like the newspaper coverage of the terrorist bombing throughout *The Book of Evidence*. In addition, the Da and his gang have stolen several Dutch masterpieces from Whitewater House and murdered a security guard in the process—with a hammer, no less—a clear copycat crime, perhaps meant to implicate Freddie. These echoes of past traumas illustrate the many ways in which patterns of violence haunt Irish memory unrelentingly. They also bring Freddie face-to-face with “an all too familiar revenant, the ghost of an old self” (477). One particular instance of Freddie’s encounter with the spectre of the past deserves special attention here. As Inspector Hackett questions Freddie about the latest Whitewater heist and reveals to him

the eerie coincidences linking the crimes of past and present—namely, the location and the murder weapon—Freddie interrupts his narrative abruptly in order to record a cinematic flashback to the scene of Josie’s murder:

A country road and a big old car weaving from side to side and veering to a halt in the ditch. The scene is in black and white, scratched and jerky, as in an old newsreel. All is still for a moment, then the car rocks suddenly, violently, on its springs and a voice cries out in agony and anguish. Welcome to my nightmares. I am always outside the car, never in it. Is that not strange? (512)

Through narrative juxtaposition, Freddie reveals that his flashback was brought on by Hackett’s interrogation, which he describes as a moment of “stress and extremity” accompanied by “a dizzying sense of dislocation, of being torn in two” (512). As with his return home to Coolgrange in *Ghosts*, Freddie responds to the memory stimulus here by dissociating, detaching and distancing himself from the painful immediacy of his past. As a result, he experiences an interesting form of traumatic recall, reliving the original event from a distance as third-party witness, rather than first-person perpetrator.

This shift in perspective highlights the evolution in Freddie’s narrative reenactments of the murder over the course of the Trilogy, from the first-person testimonial account in *The Book of Evidence*, to the second-person imaginative exercise in *Ghosts*, to the third-person eyewitness flashback in *Athena*. Each novel represents a new narrative coping strategy. In *Athena*, Freddie initially translates the story of his past into what he calls his “tall tale.” When he first tells A. the tale of the murder, he does so obliquely through third-person narrative: “I know a man [...] who killed a woman once” (524). Again, Freddie’s urge to tell, to confess his anguished past is tempered by an

opposing urge to distance himself, to make it unreal or harmless. The story of Josie's murder that he tells has a "quaint" sound to it, he explains, "like something out of the Brothers Grimm": "The bad thief went to the rich man's mansion to steal a picture and when the maid got in his way he hit her on the head and killed her dead" (524-525). A. responds to this fairy tale with a story from her own past, told in the first-person, indicating that she understands the autobiographical import of Freddie's oblique confession. Later, Freddie discovers that the story of the murder arouses A., that its violence becomes an erotic thrill for her. "She was a devotee of pain," he explains, "nothing was as real to her as suffering" (566). A.'s voyeuristic fascination with second-hand violence frustrates Freddie, who knows its horror only too intimately: "She did not know the thing itself, the real thing, the flash and shudder and sudden heat, the body's speechless astonishment" (567). Yet when A. asks him to tell her the story of "that man" again, Freddie obligingly recounts it again for her with such vivid immediacy that the act of telling becomes a form of first-person reenactment: "I told her: midsummer sun, the birds in the trees, the silent house, that painted stare, then blood and stench and cries. When I had recounted everything we made love, immediately, without preliminaries, going at each other like - like I don't know what. 'Hit me,' she cried, 'hit me!'" (567). Here, A. transforms the horror of Freddie's past into a perversely pleasurable present.

In *Athena*, Freddie acts out the central trauma of his past through the sexual violence of his relationship with A. In Freddie's version of events, A. comes up with the idea for him to beat her all on her own, egging him on in the midst of their lovemaking, "*Hit me, hit me like you hit her*" (562). In this moment, past and present converge provocatively. Freddie describes his initial reluctance and trepidation to carry out A.'s

request, explaining, “From some things there is no going back - who should know that better than I?” (565). Here, the haunting memory of Josie’s plea for mercy—*Don’t*—is confounded by the frightening excitement of A.’s demand for abuse—*Do*. Freddie eventually overcomes his fears and beats A., thereby transforming violence into little more than brutal, sexual foreplay. The novel’s description of these “tender beatings” reveals this process of tender transformation at work:

I was monster and at the same time man. She would thrash under my blows with her face screwed up and fiercely biting her own arm and I would not stop, no, I would not stop. And all the time something was falling away from me, the accretion of years, flakes of it shaking free and falling with each stylised blow that I struck. Afterwards I kissed the marks the tethers had left on her wrists and ankles and wrapped her gently in the old grey rug and sat on the floor with my head close to hers and watched over her while she lay with her eyes closed, sleeping sometimes, her breath on my cheek, her hand twitching in mine like something dying. (565)

In essence, Freddie is rewriting the disturbing memory of the murder as just another of these tender beatings. One could easily substitute Josie for A. in the previous passage up until the point at which Freddie describes kissing the wounds that he has inflicted. Here, Freddie’s imagination attempts to record over his memory in order to rebury or perhaps even forget the grave misdeeds of his past. However, this scene of sexual violence retains the unmistakable brutality of its precursor, especially in that last, lingering image of “something dying.”

Freddie paradoxically imagines that he brings A. to life through these stylized reenactments of the murder, a clear inversion of the past intended to assuage his guilt over the life that he so violently brought to an end. Here, he describes the aftermath of these abusive acts of creation:

How wan and used and lost she looked after these bouts of passion and pain, with her matted eyelashes and her damp hair smeared on her forehead and her poor lips bruised and swollen, a pale, glistening new creature I hardly recognised, as if she had just broken open the chrysalis and were resting a moment before the ordeal of unfolding herself into this new life I had given her. I? Yes: I. Who else was there, to make her come alive? (565-566)

In this perversion of the myth of Pygmalion and Galatea—the classical subject of one of the stolen paintings—Freddie makes his beloved “come alive” through physical violence, as well as through the violent intensity of his imaginative gaze. As with Flora in *Ghosts*, Freddie seems to consume and assemble A. through a process of creative scrutiny, or as he calls it, “an enraptured cannibalism of the senses” (518). And again, as with Flora, it is unclear to whom or what “A.” actually refers in the novel. When introducing this mysterious codename for his lover, Freddie is deliberately cryptic: “A., I shall call her. Just A. [...] It’s not even the initial of her name, it’s only a letter, but it sounds right, it feels right” (454). “A.” seems to refer to both a real, flesh-and-blood woman—Morden and Popeye’s sister, the Da’s daughter—and a painted woman—the subject of the painting *Birth of Athena*, the only genuine article in the otherwise forged group of stolen paintings. In Freddie’s account of it, these two figures—each love objects in their own right—merge somehow into one: “I was like a lover who gazes in tongue-tied joy upon

his darling and sees not her face but a dream of it. You were the pictures and they were you and I never noticed. All this I understand now - but *then*; ah, my dear, *then*! You see my difficulty” (485). Even as he proclaims to have it all sorted out now, his narrative still renders it all the more vague, illustrated by the frequent and unpredictable shift in pronouns from the second-person “you” to the third-person “she” throughout the novel. Freddie also goes into great detail about his sexual relationship with A.—which would seemingly require a human partner—and yet his physical intimacy with the paintings has a sexual feel about it, too: “I had never before been in such proximity to works of art, had never been allowed such freedoms, had never been [...] given license to enter the innermost secret places of a sacred object” (484). Despite this confusion, Freddie maintains that, through A., he finally glimpses true, unmistakable human *otherness*: “I insist that I looked harder at you and deeper into your depths than anyone ever did before or will again. I saw you. That was the point of it all. I saw you. (Or I saw someone)” (518).

In essence, Freddie’s rapturous affair with the mysterious A.—part woman, part artistic ideal of womanhood—represents his attempts to solve, once and for all, “the ineffable mystery of the Other,” and to somehow create a new life to atone for the one that he took (453). In this way, she represents for him the possibility of redemption. Throughout the Trilogy, he wrestles with “big burdensome words” like atonement, redemption, and forgiveness, desperately seeking a means of escape from the hellish prison of his past (471). As Freddie sees it, A. finally offers him the hope of spiritual transcendence: “I was still in hell, you see, or purgatory, at least, and you were one of the elect at whom I squinnied up yearningly as you paced the Elysian fields in golden light”

(471). Freddie believes that in order to redeem his previous failure of imagination, he must achieve a creative triumph of imagination: “from the start that was supposed to be my task: to give her life. Come live in me, I had said, and be my love. Intending, of course, whether I knew it or not, that I in turn would live in her” (608). Thus, A. represents his lifeline back to the human world, making her abrupt disappearance even more disorienting for him. In the wake of her departure, the world into which he reincorporates is “immense” and “hollowed out somehow,” and he is left “rattling about helplessly like a shrivelled pea in this vast shell” (603). Following his abandonment, Freddie must face the reality that redemption is no longer possible for him, if indeed it ever was. In the end, he remains possessed by the ghost of his troubled, ineluctable past: “So much violence in me still, unassuaged” (607).

Freddie’s failure to achieve redemption in *Athena* is crucial to the therapeutic success of the Trilogy’s narrative as a whole. Banville explains the significance of leaving Freddie’s quest for redemption unfulfilled: “the failure remains as it must. The dead cannot be made to live again, and art cannot be put in the place of life” (“Thou Shalt Not Kill” 356). Elsewhere, the author explains it thus: “The moral predicament that he finds himself in is irredeemable - once you kill a human being, there’s no way of atoning for it, there’s no redemption” (Pfeiffer 37). In this way, Banville’s vision for the Trilogy corresponds to what Dominick LaCapra calls “the problem of narrative and redemption.” According to LaCapra, “redemptive narrative is a narrative that denies the trauma that brought it into existence” (179). In other words, the linear structure of conventional narrative seeks to redeem the past, to give it purpose or meaning within the context of a larger story written from the vantage of an enlightened present. Trauma, as a disruption

of the natural order, as an unassimilable event without purpose or meaning, undermines the logical progression and coherence of this form. Thus, there is no space to neatly explore it within the limits of conventional, redemptive narrative. Instead, LaCapra advocates the use of “more experimental, nonredemptive narratives,” which he defines as “narratives that are trying to come to terms with trauma in a post-traumatic context, in ways that involve both acting out and working through” (179). Freddie’s narrative in the Trilogy serves as an example of such a form. It refuses Freddie—as well as the reader—the comfort of redemption or the solace of closure. The present remains a haunted space as it must.

Thus, Banville’s *Frames Trilogy*, as a whole, represents the ceaseless struggle of testimony, the scripto-therapeutic process of acting out and working through traumatic memory in order to come to terms with an unredeemable past and, perhaps through this process, to contribute to the creation of a more ethical future. As Freddie ultimately concludes in the closing lines of the Trilogy, his narrative accomplishes what it set out to do—quite simply, to write, to testify, to tell his story in his own words: “Write to me, she said. Write to me. I have written” (617).

CONCLUSION

In May of 2009, John Banville wrote an op-ed piece for the *New York Times* called “A Century of Looking the Other Way” in response to the published findings from the Commission to Inquire Into Child Abuse in Ireland—the so-called Ryan report—which details many deeply disturbing patterns of abuse that occurred between 1914 and 2000. In his article, Banville examines the hypocrisy of “the Irish” who “collectively threw up their hands in horror, asking that question we have heard so often, from so many parts of the world, throughout the past century: How could it happen?” The author’s response to this rhetorical question is simple: “Everyone knew, but no one said.” According to Banville, the systematic abuse of children in Ireland’s orphanages, industrial schools, and reformatories—places where, according to the Ryan report, violence “was practically a means of communication”—was allowed to occur because the Irish essentially turned a blind eye to it. This troubling fact leads Banville to muse about human nature when it is confronted with moral or political predicaments such as this:

Human beings—human beings everywhere, not just in Ireland—have a remarkable ability to entertain simultaneously any number of contradictory propositions. Perfectly decent people can know a thing and at the same time not know it. Think of Turkey and the Armenians at the beginning of the 20th century, think of Germany and the Jews in the 1940s, think of Bosnia and Rwanda in our own time.

A version of this same sentiment appears in Freddie Montgomery’s testimonial musings in *Athena*. While being questioned by Inspector Hackett about his involvement with the latest art heist at Whitewater House, Freddie realizes that he has been willfully ignorant of what is going on around him and hidden his criminal complicity even from himself:

“Of course I had recognised [the stolen paintings] ... I had recognised them and at the same time I had not. Extraordinary, this knack the mind has of holding things, however intimately connected, on entirely separate levels, like so many layers of molten silt” (513-514). The context here is quite different, of course, but the human—and Irish—impulse to ignore the problematic is once again on display. Banville ends his op-ed piece with an acknowledgement of Ireland’s collective guilt for what he calls “a century of looking the other way”: “We knew, and did not know. That is our shame today.” Interestingly, these final words echo the closing lines of *The Book of Evidence*, in which Freddie responds to the question of how much of his testimony is actually true: “True, Inspector? I said. All of it. None of it. Only the shame” (186). This resonance between the worlds of fiction and history is by no means incidental. The guilt and shame that haunt Freddie’s testimonial narrative in the *Frames Trilogy* are the crippling legacies of Irish memory itself.

In this thesis, I have endeavored to show how trauma and memory form the thematic core of Banville’s *Frames Trilogy*. As each chapter demonstrates, Freddie’s experience of trauma—and its remembered aftermath—shapes his narrative across the three novels, dictating both its form and its content. It is worth mentioning again that Banville did not consciously write this trilogy according to a narrative blueprint of the traumatic experience because such a thing did not yet exist—if it could even be said to exist now. What this means, I argue, is that the form and content of Banville’s *Frames Trilogy* are the organic product of the author’s own experience of and relation to Irish memory. This view runs contrary to many critical readings of Banville that ignore—or even reject—the author’s cultural and historical milieu in favor of a more aesthetic or

philosophical approach to his work, thereby making this thesis discussion a worthwhile contribution to the fields of both Banville studies and Irish memory studies as a whole.

For further evidence of Banville's literary engagement with the subject of Irish memory, one need look no further than his latest project, a series of crime novels written under the pen-name Benjamin Black. As Black, Banville examines 1950s Ireland, which, according to the author, presents a "fascinating" and relatively unexplored period in Irish history characterized by "deprivation," "depression," and "guilt" (Burke 291, 295). This series of crime novels features a recurring protagonist, Quirke, a pathologist—note the playful irony—who consults with one Inspector Hackett—a character borrowed from *Athena*—on numerous murder and missing persons cases, many of which deal with the socio-political taboos of this era, including clerical abuse, rape, incest, and abortion. Within each novel, the mystery plot functions to draw the reader into what ultimately becomes an investigation of the Irish experience. Banville infuses Black's work with an exaggeratedly violent, noir atmosphere, thus adhering to the stylistic hallmarks of crime fiction. Yet his rendering of 1950s Ireland bears more than a faint resemblance to the cultural context of this historical period. The author explains that writing as Black allows him the freedom to "trawl through my memory [...] dredging up bits of my past" in a more straightforward manner than in the work he publishes under his real name (290). It seems fair to conclude, therefore, that the Black novels merit consideration alongside Banville's other treatments of Irish memory, further highlighting the significance of this theme within the author's corpus.

Banville's literary preoccupation with trauma and memory is, at least in part, the product of his obsessive, meticulous writing process. He once likened himself at work to

a “schoolboy” fulfilling a schoolroom punishment: “I’m like Bart Simpson up there at the blackboard writing ‘I must get it right, I must get it right,’ over and over again. I [have] to keep doing it over and over again, until I [get] it right” (Friberg 203). In the *Frames Trilogy*, this authorial tendency to perfect the act of writing by telling and re-telling the same story resonates with the traumatic experience itself, one characterized by fixation and repetition. As Freddie’s story progresses, his need to “get it right” takes on an ever-increasing note of urgency. After all, as Freddie sees it, narrative *rightness* carries his only hope for redemption and healing.

For Banville, too, there is more at stake in the novels than just the (im)possibility of Freddie’s redemption. Derek Hand argues that Banville is the latest in a long line of Irish storytellers with an ambition to use art to bring about substantive socio-political change: “Banville’s Irishness is to be found in his insistence on the transformative nature of art and the artistic imagination. In other words, for Banville, [...] art can actually matter in the real political world of intervention and change. [...] The purpose of art is not to tell it as it is, but rather to imagine it as it might be” (Hand 19). Although this comes across as slightly more utopian, I think, than Hand intended, I agree with his overall sentiments here. Through Freddie’s narrative of redress and recovery, Banville strives to prove that a more ethical future could, in a sense, be imagined into existence. And the gradual development of Freddie’s conscience—his ethical imagination—over the course of the novels indicates that this possibility could yet become reality, even in an unredeemed and unredeemable world. With the *Frames Trilogy*, Banville presents a distinctively Irish parable of trauma and memory, and suggests that the only way to

banish the ghosts and heal the wounds of the past is through the therapeutic medium of narrative.

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Cumulative GPA: 3.8

Trinity College Dublin, Ireland – School of English & School of Drama

Visiting Student, 2004-2005

Yearlong Participant in the Notre Dame Dublin Programme

Awards and Accomplishments:

Awarded English Department Graduate Fellowship, Wake Forest University, 2010 - 2012

Awarded Scholarship to Participate in the Notre Dame Irish Seminar 2011 at the Keough-Naughton O’Connell House in Dublin, Ireland

Awarded Summer Research Scholarship, Wake Forest University, Summer 2011

Certified in specialized Crisis Prevention and Physical Intervention (CPPI) training from the Perkins School for the Blind

Completed one year of AmeriCorps service, teacher training, and professional development seminars

Awarded membership in Sigma Tau Delta, English Honor Society at Notre Dame

Awarded Dean’s List for Academic Honors at Notre Dame, Fall 2002 – Spring 2006

Professional Experience:

Fitton Center for Creative Arts Director of Community Outreach and Volunteer Engagement	Hamilton, OH Jan 2016 – present
Little Brothers – Friends of the Elderly Coordinator of Volunteer Programs	Boston, MA Mar 2012 – Jan 2014
Wake Forest University English Graduate Assistant & Teaching Assistant	Winston-Salem, NC Aug 2010 – Feb 2012
Perkins School for the Blind Teaching Assistant	Boston, MA Sept 2009 – Aug 2010
Paraclete Academy After-School Academy Program Teacher (AmeriCorps)	Boston, MA Sept 2008 – Aug 2009
Little Brothers – Friends of the Elderly North Dublin Program Coordinator	Dublin, Ireland July 2007 – June 2008
Wentworth Institute of Technology Administrative Assistant to the President	Boston, MA Nov 2006 – July 2007