spiritual communion with human life and reality experienced so rarely by Banville protagonists. The phrase is literally synonymous with a life beyond numbers, letters or words, and it marks an innocence restored. Where previous attempts at recollecting childhood memories resulted in a desperate if transparent counter-memorialising of the past, acceptance of the present and one’s part in it have transformed our recluse, isolated historian into a man with a life with “super-numerous” futures and possibilities.

4.2 ‘Possessed of a Past’: Pastoral, Identity, and Memory in *Eclipse*, *The Sea* and *Conversation in the Mountains*

In that dreamy stillness, like the azure distances of a stage set, the summers back to childhood seem present; to childhood, and beyond childhood, to those Arcadian fields where memory and imagination merge. — *Eclipse* 137

**The Past as Pastoral in *Eclipse* and *The Sea***

“The past beats inside me like a second heart” (S10): to quote this is to summon, all at once, the quintessential themes and tropes that permeate John Banville’s *Eclipse* (2000) and *The Sea* (2005). Though they are not considered partner novels and were published five years apart, when read together, there is more than enough food for thought and comparative analysis. In both novels, for example, a crisis of identity ensues for each protagonist caused by a sudden, traumatic experience. In *Eclipse*, actor Alexander Cleave “walks out of a performance” never to return to the stage and “retires from life” to his mother’s house and boyhood home (E20). In *The Sea*, art critic Max Morden has recently lost his wife to cancer, and “seeking to assuage [his] heaviness of heart” (S252), journeys to Ballymore, a seaside town where he spent his childhood holidays and where, one fateful summer, he encountered the family Grace.

Whether childhood resort or boyhood home, both can be read as sites of memory and nostalgia that house a pastoral past built on the crumbling promontory of an identity in crisis. Each crisis of self, and with it the point of departure to a sojourn in the past, is paramount to the way each story unfolds and to the consequent attempts at narrative reification. In “Time Enough for Love: *The Sea*” (2006), Brendan McNamee observes that
Banville’s protagonists exist in a twilight world between two seemingly irreconcilable extremes: on the one hand, the world in which they physically exist, with all its attendant loss and pain, and on the other, perhaps created by a need to escape this calvary, an imaginative paradise wherein all earthly strife is unknown. (McNamee, “Time Enough for Love: The Sea 243)

Though at first sight Cleave’s breakdown on stage and Morden’s difficulties dealing with death seem somewhat unrelatable, each protagonist confronts the momentous task of resolving their crisis of identity homogeneously. In order to come to terms with their present, conflicted self, both protagonists recollect imagined versions of their childhood as nostalgic, pastoral narratives of retreat. When read in Freudian terms, childhood is a quasi-paradisiacal stage under the reign of the pleasure principle and unburdened by the constraints of a rationalist-utilitarian reality (Heiler, “Transformations of the Pastoral” 334). Accordingly, both protagonists negotiate their way through the “earthly strife” of the present and the “imaginative paradise” of the past in order to find “peace of mind” and to try and accept “life in all its clouded glory” (S 243).

Each nostalgia narrative is also fraught with uncertainty and doubt. First, a caesura in the way both characters perceive time begins to unsettle the minutiae of quotidian life: “it has all begun to run together, past and possible future and impossible present” (S 96); “There is no present, the past is random and only the future is fixed” (E 77). Consequently, the two main “characters enter into a search for an appropriate language that will contain their experience, and render themselves and their lives knowable” (Hand, John Banville 165). But language – and both Max and Alexander are obsessed with language – introduces other variables on the strength of its inherent ambiguity. The resulting linguistic, (meta-)fictional constructs of reclusion as well as the various Arcadian memory landscapes and architectonics, the summer houses and their surroundings, most importantly, lead both characters to a retreat into the mind and the imagination: “I am happy, or happiest, at least, in this sealed chamber, suspended in the tideless sea of myself” (E 131). Cleave’s comparison is evocative of Andrew Marvell’s famous ocean metaphor in “The Garden”:

Meanwhile the mind, from pleasures less,
Withdraws into its happiness.
The mind, that ocean where each kind
Does straight its own resemblance find. (41–44)

Cleave and Morden, as most of Banville’s later protagonists, are self-celebratory, solipsistic narcissists that use their linguistic prowess to create private, secluded Arcadiae of the imagination with which to contend their overwhelming sense
of displacement between their experience of time, self and their place in the world. They become inhabitants of “a twilit netherworld in which it [is] scarcely possible to distinguish dream from waking” (S 96–7). In purgatory between idyllic day dreams of the past and the nightmarish reality of the present, they continue to suffer from insomnia and bouts of obsessive restlessness. Somnambulists in the pastoral pastures of their imagined pasts, they are compelled to journey to sites of childhood and memory in search of solace and stability. As Alexander Cleave summarises in Eclipse: “What is it about the past that makes the present by comparison seem so pallid and weightless?” (E 48).

The first premise both protagonists share is, as previously mentioned, a crisis of identity. Alexander Cleave describes his “collapse” on stage as the culmination point of the past months during which he “had been beset by bouts of crippling self-consciousness” (E 88). He sees the main source of what has befallen him in his vocation as an actor:

I spoke all the parts, even of the vanquished and the slain. I would be anyone but myself. Thus it continued year on year, the intense, unending rehearsal. But what was I rehearsing for? When I searched inside myself, I found nothing finished, only a permanent potential, a waiting to go on. At the site of what was supposed to be my self was only a vacancy, an ecstatic hollow. (E 33)

The moment of histrionic paralysis on stage stems, Cleave claims, not from a failure to recognise the self, but from the opposite, a “hideous awareness” of an “insupportable excess of self” (88). Cleave, as his name suggests, has always been cleft between the art and reality of his profession: “on stage I cannot act and in life never cease from acting” (152). His entire “life has been given over to improvising identities, losing himself in other people’s words and actions” along the way (Hand, John Banville 166). He feels his only option is to journey to the imagined locus amoenus of his childhood and thereby put himself “out of harm’s way” (E 14).

Thus, “on one of those vague hazy days of early June that seem made half of weather and half of memory,” Cleave packs his bags and embarks on a journey to his deceased mother’s house. Lydia, his wife, accuses him of “being a sentimentalist,” shrugging her husband’s resolve off as “some kind of ridiculous nostalgia.” Cleave, always brooding on words, retorts with an attempt to exculpate himself from her scrutiny: “Sentimentality: unearned emotion. Nostalgia: longing for what never was.” At first he assumes that the journey will be no more than “a brief respite from life, an interval between acts” (13). Upon arrival in the southeast of Ireland, however, he soon realizes that he is “after nothing less than a total transformation [...] into a miraculous, bright new being” (37).
As Cleave finds himself “standing in [his] drawers at the window of [his] boyhood bedroom,” he feels he cannot but indulge in a meticulous survey of the past to find “exactly the moment of catastrophic inattention [when he] dropped the gilded bowl of [his] life and let it shatter” (39).

If Alexander Cleave is compelled to return to the *locus amoenus* of his childhood in order “to locate that singular essential self,” (E 51) Max Morden remembers the past into being first and foremost as a means of escape from the present: “we sought escape from an intolerable present in the only tense possible, the past” (S 99). The main narrative of *The Sea* takes place exactly a year after Morden and his wife, Anna, first visited Mr Todd, the aptly named oncologist who diagnosed Anna’s cancer, “the bulge that was big baby De’Ath, burgeoning inside her, biding its time” (18). The narrative re-enters a year later, when Anna has passed away, and when, in a dream, the art critic is suddenly compelled to return to The Cedars, his parents’ summer house, site of many holiday memories and secret-keeper of other, darker events that may otherwise go forgotten: “a dream it was that drew me here” (24). Max is walking aimlessly “along a country road […] going home, it seemed” when he experiences the following:

Immediately then, and for the first time in I do not know how long, I thought of Ballyless and the house there on Station Road, and the Graces, and Chloe Grace, I cannot think why, and it was as if I had stepped suddenly out of the dark into a splash of pale, saltwashed sunlight. It endured only a minute, less than a minute, that happy lightsomeness, but it told me what to do, and where I must go. (S 26)

Morden’s somewhat Beckettian dream sequence expresses an unconscious desire for *nostos*, or “homecoming,” (25) invoked by imaginative memories of those childhood summer idylls. Ultimately, this “lyreless Orpheus,” (24) as Morden refers to himself, is attempting to escape the *algos* that is overwhelming him, hoping to alleviate the grief he is presently experiencing for the loss of his wife.

*The Sea* unfolds as an internal monologue with three narrative strands, all told by Morden: “one, his account of life at the Cedars[;] […] two, the story of Anna’s cancer and how they both dealt with it along with some history of their relationship; and three, memories of that childhood summer with the Graces” (McNamee, “Time Enough for Love” 244). The third strand represents what one may call yet another version of the seemingly lost, paradisal ‘golden world,’ a feature prevalent in Banville’s later works. By using such sites of memory and time as the sea, the beach and the Cedars summer house, in particular, Banville provides a re-reading of these elements that focuses on questions of the human experience of time, the fickle nature of memory, and the fantastic faculties of language and the imagination to think away all conflicts and contradictions. In
summary, Max first seeks refuge in the past in an attempt to play truant from
the present, which he experiences as “harsh,” “cold,” and altogether “impossible”:

To be concealed, protected, guarded, that is all I have ever truly wanted, to burrow
down into a place of womby warmth and cower there, hidden from the sky’s indif‐
ferent gaze and the harsh air’s damagings. That is why the past is just such a retreat
for me, I go there eagerly, rubbing my hands and shaking off the cold present and the
colder future. (S 60–1)

Having returned to The Cedars, Morden, like Freddie Montgomery in Ghosts,
retires into the kingdom of his mind to finish a “Big Book,” not on Vaublin, but
“on Bonnard” (260). With intimate, impressionistic brush strokes – mimetic of
Bonnard’s landscapes, interiors and still lifes – Morden paints in words portraits
of his self in an imagined past. These storied representations are, however, al‐
ways in a tussle with the subjectivity of time and the singular idiosyncrasies of
memory: “Memory dislikes motion, preferring to hold things still, and as with
so many of these remembered scenes I see this one as a tableau” (221). The
Cedars, much like Cleave’s boyhood home in Eclipse, thus becomes emblematic
of the “Arcadian fields where memory and imagination merge” (E 137), and
where the unreliable, always questionable human experience of time and the
timelessness of the imagination become interconnected.

In Part II of the novel, “the different strands of the narrative begin to weave
together and, in one significant section, distant paradisal past and painful
present reality are both formally balanced and subtly intertwined” (McNamee,
“Time Enough for Love” 245). Banville achieves this equilibrium mainly through
his use of the sea as a central image that embodies both the limits of the human
experience of time and the imagination’s prowess to overcome these boundaries:
“The sea is godlike both in its immensity and its implacable indifference”
(McNamee, “Time Enough for Love” 246). Ironically perhaps, it is Alexander
Cleave who first muses on the many roles and guises of the sea: “Why do I find
the thought of the sea so alarming? We speak of its power and violence as if it
were a species of wild animal, ravening and unappeasable, but the sea does
nothing, it is simply there, its own reality” (E 67).

Where Max looks to the past merely as a “retreat,” Cleave is in need of “re‐
tirement from life” completely. As so often with Banville protagonists, both are
uncomfortable with their present, “authentic life,” as Morden calls it, “which is
supposed to be all struggle, unflagging action and affirmation” (S 60). They are
rather more interested in remembering life than living it: “Really, one might
almost live one’s life over, if only one could make a sufficient effort of recollec‐
tion” (S 160); “What is it about the past that makes the present by comparison
seem so pallid and weightless?” (E 50). Remembering, we remind ourselves, is always also linked to the process of identification as a means of self-reification, whence the various landscapes, sites and architectonics of memory found in both narratives, and especially in the individuals perceived to be moving through them, also facilitate explorations and re-evaluations of self.

Accordingly, sites of memory and recollection take centre-stage in the novels and strengthen the narrator’s obsession with the past as a lost childhood and quasi-paradise. As the third narrative strand of The Sea unfolds, for example, the summer house becomes increasingly significant in Morden’s enactment of nostalgia. The Cedars, in his memories, is pictured as the epitome of Arcadian architectonics, “a museum of sorts, retaining material traces of his childhood” (Friberg, “Waters and Memories Always Divide” 253). It is through this house that Max first entered, the “summer world” of the fittingly named Grace family, whom he saw as “divinities” that singled him out for their favour: “How proud I was to be seen with them, these divinities, for I thought of course that they were the gods, so different were they from anyone I had hitherto known” (S 107–8).

The journey to Ballyless takes the adult Morden to “the very sanctum” he first pictured the living room of the Cedars to be. Upon entering the house, the boy Morden feels as if he has by magic “vaulted all the obstacles” and landed “next to an angled, solid-seeming beam of sunlight, with Mrs. Grace in a loose-fitting, flowered dress, light blue with a darker pattern of blue blossoms” (S 85). Soon after, at a picnic outing with the Graces, in his imagination he experiences an “Edenic moment,” where he evokes the hortus conclusus of the golden age in the image of himself “at what was suddenly the centre of the world, with that shaft of sunlight and those vestigial flowers […] Mrs. Grace offering me an apple, that was however nowhere in evidence” (90).

To say that the “apple,” however, “was nowhere in evidence” is to confuse the “mists from the all too real then” with “the blissfully imagined now” (S 92). The confusion stems not from a moment of inattentiveness, but is in fact an example of Morden’s wilful equivocation of past and future. He has in his imagination returned to the past because he is desirous of a life within its innocent, impressionistic memories. His “ridiculous nostalgia,” then, to borrow Lydia Cleave’s cogent remark, is not only a retrospection into a bucolic childhood, but the expression of a desire to superimpose that pastoral version of the past onto an equally idyllic possibility of the future:

This is […] exactly how I would have foreseen my future self. […] Yes, this is what I thought adulthood would be, a kind of long Indian summer, a state of tranquillity, of calm incuriousness, with nothing left of the barely bearable raw immediacy of child-
hood, all the things solved that had puzzled me when I was small, all mysteries settled, all questions answered, and the moments dripping away, unnoticed almost, drip by golden drip, towards the final, almost unnoticed quietus. (94)

Naturally, the art critic is all too well aware of the “oddly antique cast” which emanates from this blissful “version of the future.” Yet he indulges in it because he is “not so much anticipating the future as nostalgic for it, since what in [his] imaginings was to come was in reality already gone” (96).

Alexander Cleave’s story is also one of an identity cleft between progress and procrastination as it clings to the past. Eclipse is a tragedy in five Aristotelian acts that culminates in the cathartic suicide of the protagonist’s daughter, Cass. This eventually leads to Cleave’s return from his pastoral sojourn in the past to the present, disenchanted by the dialectics of identity and (in)authenticity, and eclipsed by the certainty of death – one is easily reminded of Poussin’s Et in Arcadia Ego. Like Morden, Cleave is haunted by dreams that become the point of departure to childhood memories: “‘I dreamed last night I was a child and here again’” he tells Lydia, who replies with a pentameter of perfect pith and exactitude: “‘Of course; you never left here, that’s the truth.’” Cleave follows up this reductio ad absurdum with a pentameter of his own, in admonishment, like Max, of the house and its significance: “The house itself it was that drew me back, sent out its secret summoners to bid me come [...] home [sic!]” (E 4). Such and similar somnambulant summons, seemingly homeward bound, pervade the introductory pages of Eclipse, and they also take up much of the beginning of The Sea. These dream sequences are so similar in style and imagery, moreover, that they could have been experienced by one and the same person:

The house itself it was that drew me back, sent out its secret summoners to bid me come [...] home, I was going to say. [...] For miles I had been travelling in a kind of sleep and now I thought I was lost. I wanted to turn the car around and drive back the way I had come, but something would not let me go. Something. [...] I walked forward to the brow of the hill and saw the town then, its few little glimmering lights, and, beyond, the fainter glimmer of the sea, and I knew where unknowingly I had come to. (E 4–6)

A dream it was that drew me here. In it, I was walking along a country road, that was all. [...] I was determinedly on my way somewhere, going home, it seemed, although I did not know what or where exactly home might be. Something had broken down, a car, no, a bicycle, a boy’s bicycle, for as well as being the age I am now I was a boy as well, a big awkward boy, yes, and on my way home, it must have been home, or somewhere that had been home, once, and that I would recognise again, when I got
there. [...] I was calm in myself, quite calm, and confident, too, despite not knowing rightly where I was going except that I was going home. (S 25–27)

We are reminded here of Gaston Bachelard’s elegant observations about the “pre-human” and “immemorial” quality that such “spaces of our past” can have on us in his *Poetics of Space*, especially when “we return to them in our night dreams” and “daydreams” alike (Bachelard 10). More precisely:

[A]ll the spaces of our past moments of solitude, the spaces in which we have suffered from solitude, enjoyed desired and compromised solitude, remain indelible within us[,] [...] We return to them in our night dreams. These retreats have the value of a shell. And when we reach the very end of the labyrinths of sleep [...] we may perhaps experience a type of repose that is pre-human; pre-human, in this case, approaching the immemorial. (Bachelard, *Poetics of Space* 10)

The striking similarities at the outset of each character’s pastoral retreat also foreshadow the interchangeable conclusions both inevitably come to. For Cleave and Morden share the insight that their return to the pastoral past is an expression of their desire for an equally simple, peaceful future. Cleave’s quibbles with Lydia encapsulate this moment of epiphany for both:

‘It’s something to do with the future,’ I said. ‘In the dream [...] I’m standing in the doorway, in the sun, on an Easter Sunday morning, and somehow it is the future.’ [...] ‘It sounds more like the past, to me,’ she said, losing interest, what little there had been. The past, or the future, yes, I might have said – but whose? (E 8)

As the tag-question implies, even this piece of insight is not without qualms and doubt. Rather, each protagonist’s return to the past also amounts in some respects to more disappointment. The various sites of memory are simultaneously the source of aesthetic recall and self-reflecting tribulations. On the one hand, a first narrative sees Max run away from the twelve-month experience of his wife’s death to the Cedars, where he hopes to summer in many a childhood memory. Cleave follows suit, after choking on stage, and returns to his mother’s old house. Parallel to these gilded evocations, on the other hand, run narrative strands that expose each site of memory and childhood to the ruthless, disillusioned light of the present. First, the protagonists begin to doubt the veracity of their memories; Cleave interrupts his incessant “obsessing on the past” and asks himself: “Am I remembering anything rightly? I may be embellishing, inventing, I may be mixing everything up. [...] These are the telltale threads on which memory snags her nails” (E 56–7). Then, the summer house – the primary site of childhood memories – presents itself robbed of all preconceived charm and nostalgia:
The model of the house in my head, try as it would to accommodate itself to the original, kept coming up against stubborn resistance. Everything was slightly out of scale, all angles slightly out of true. [...] I experienced a sense almost of panic as the real, the crassly complacent real, took hold of the things I thought I remembered and shook them into its own shape. Something precious was dissolving and pouring away between my fingers. Yet how easily, in the end, I let it go. The past, I mean, the real past, matters less than we pretend. (S 156–7)

The image of the house based on past perceptions fails to live up to the house of the present the adult Max re-enters. It is not the present and the past that square off against each other here, but the “real” and the “imagined past.” To deny the significance of “the real” past, however, is to disown that which seemingly matters most, the “imagined” past. And that idyllic childhood itself, after all, can only exist as an-other to “the real” past, without which neither Morden nor Cleave would have a recourse to the present: “what makes for presence if not absence? – I mean the presence of oneself as a remembered other – and I might as well never have gone away” (E 46).

Alexander Cleave is also abruptly brought back to the memories of his “real” childhood upon re-entering his mother’s house. First, he makes his way through its garden:

Behind the gate was a mass of overgrown creeper and old brambles [...] The garden was grown to shoulder-height in places. The rose trees hung in dripping tangles, and clumps of scutch grass steamed [...] [...] I set off toward the house, the untidy back of which hung out in seeming despair over this scene of vegetable riot. Nettles stung me, cobwebs strung with pearls of moisture draped themselves across my face. All of childhood was in the high sharp stink of rained-on weeds. (E 113)

We are reminded of Virgil’s *Idylls* here, in which, ever and anon, the shepherds face similar realisms: “Wherever you tread the ground’s one thorny ambush” (*Idyll* 7, “Harvest Home” 20–21). Further disappointments ensue for Cleave when he braves entrance, disappointments similar to those experienced by the adult Morden:

I was in the kitchen. I might never have been here before. Or I might have been, but in another dimension. Talking about making strange! Everything was askew. It was like entering backstage and seeing the set in reverse, all the parts of it known but not where they should be. (E 114)

If “pastoral,” to borrow Terry Gifford’s eloquent phrasing, “is the poetry of illusion” and “the Golden Age is the historiography of wish fulfilment” (*Pastoral* 41–2), *Eclipse* and *The Sea* can be read as postmodern autobiographies of wishful
thinking. *The Sea* in particular beckons to be read through a bifocal lens of the pastoral and the postmodern; Banville’s masterful intertwining of the three narrative strands is made possible by the narrator’s use of three temporal strata. As Morden observes, “it has all begun to run together, past and possible future and impossible present” (S 96). The pastoral mode in *The Sea* is tightly linked to the human experience of time and the mind’s attempts to overcome such limitations. A pastoral nostalgia experience thus develops into a discourse of identity by virtue of a multilayered process, around which the narratives of the two novels are conspicuously structured.

First, the present is experienced as a physical impossibility because it has been thrown into crisis by sudden experiences of shock, grief or distress. Then, in search of escape and “peace of mind,” the imagination remembers – and consequently feeds on – memories of the past, tinged with the postcard colours of an idyllic childhood of bliss and ignorance. Lastly, and here the circle of my argument closes as time returns to its point of origin, the future is brought into play by the self-same desire for idylls and indifference hitherto reserved for memories, the imagination, and the past. The result is a nostalgia narrative that explores questions of identity as embedded in temporal signifiers of self and ‘the other,’ which the pastoral mode expresses in the form of a reciprocal subtext of presence and absence. Perhaps Hedda Friberg puts it best in her essay “‘Waters and Memory Always Divide’: Sites of Memory in John Banville’s *The Sea*”:

> Running off as they do in opposite directions, and separating irreversibly, Morden’s past and future nevertheless [...] remain in collusion. As the future is ‘born,’ Morden’s past which is not born, becomes ‘the other.’ [...] Diverging, curving away from the future, the stream of the past nevertheless colludes with that of the future. (Friberg, “‘Waters and Memory Always Divide’” 254)

Confronting the fickle nature of memory and the boundaries of human time-experience also means confronting the real experiences of childhood versus the imagined; the two stand in stark contrast to each other, one absent as an imagined, pastoral past, and the other always felt as tortuously disenchanting the present. The resulting tensions condition the displacement experienced so strongly by both characters. Once the summer houses fail to fulfil their function as the Arcadian architectonics of childhood nostalgia and retreat, the previous sense of purpose and significance, in other words, the search for “that singular essential self” becomes but an absence.
The Avatars of Memory

She is in my memory her own avatar. Which is the more real, the woman reclining on the grassy bank of my recollections, or the strew of dust and dried marrow that is all the earth any longer retains of her? No doubt for others elsewhere she persists[.]. — *The Sea*

Like Freddie Montgomery, both Cleave and Morden are in a state of permanent sulk, for each man’s world and self does not match up to their inner visions and desires. Therefore each tries to find recourse in the various female figures that link them to “the waxworks of memory” (*S* 118) as they become the focus of each narrative. These women protagonists – for they become crucial to story and narrator alike – at once facilitate and hinder the men’s process of self-reification and readjustment. In the second narrative strand of *The Sea*, for example, the adult Morden relates the story of his wife’s cancer with flashbacks of how they met and their life as a husband and wife, and in the third strand of narrative the young boy Max shares the stage with the Graces. From the earliest days Morden felt that his birth and upbringing were constraining his personal development: “I never had a personality, […] I was always a distinct no one, whose fiercest wish was to be an indistinct someone” (*S* 216). He experiences for the first time a sense of social betterment in his encounter with the family Grace, whom he sees as “the gods” (3): “How proud I was to be seen with them, these divinities” (145). Chloe Grace, in particular, develops into Morden’s “true origin […] of self-consciousness” (168). Lacan postulates that to exist is to be recognised by an-other; similarly, Morden believes that “no one had yet been real in the way that Chloe was. And if she was real, so, suddenly, was I” (168).

The adult Morden craves for this childhood experience of self-reification and sees his relationship with Anna as based on the same need: “Anna, I saw at once, would be the medium of my transmutation. She was the fairground mirror in which all my distortions would be made straight” (116).

Both Cleave and Morden assign a certain amount of blame for their sense of inauthenticity to a lack of “class,” and seek to compensate it through the women they choose. Alexander Cleave “would happily have exchanged everything [he] had made [himself] into for a modicum of inherited grace, […] class, breeding, money” (*E* 36). The more the narrative of *Eclipse* begins to unfold, the more we see Cleave using female figures as lenses through which his storied self must be read. In Part I of the novel Cleave describes how he met Lydia during a brief
stay at a “summer city” in the autumn of his acting career. The discrepancies between their social background and status dominate his description. Where Lydia was “of an aristocratic family of fabulous pedigree,” Cleave was careful not to “permit certain prominences to show through the deliberate fuzziness of [his] origins” (E34). He had “a room in a rotting tenement in one of those cobbled canyons off the river” (E36); she sojourned at the “Hotel Halcyon,” which Cleave describes in the light of idyll and gilded fantasy: “The Hotel Halcyon took on for me the air of an oasis; before I entered there I imagined behind that revolving door a secret world of greenery and plashing water and sultry murmurings” (E34–5).

As the summer houses fail to offer a means of escape and a form of reification in their crumbling topographies, eroded by time, three women in each novel variously become “avatar,” “effigy,” or “demon temptress,” each “conjured up by the force of [the protagonist’s] desire” (S98, 118) to fulfil his “dreams, fantasies, [...] delusions” of self (E28). In Part I of Eclipse, Lily, daughter of housekeeper Quirke, becomes a first “real, [...] physical presence” and begins to intrude upon the ghosts of a “phantom woman and her phantasmal child,” that haunt Cleave’s house and mind: “Her presence makes the house seem impossibly overcrowded. She has upset the balance of things” (E95). In Part II Lily and Quirke begin to take over Cleave’s life, or more precisely, that life which he has fashioned for himself in his solipsistic narrative:

They have come into focus, in a way that I am not sure I like, and that certainly I did not expect. It is as if they had stood up in their seats and ambled on to the stage while the play was going on, interrupting me in the middle of an intense if perhaps overly introspective soliloquy, and to save the show I must find a means somehow of incorporating them into the plot (E122).

Whilst wife Lydia is always also present in Cleave’s thoughts and actions, the more important female figure in the process of readjustment is his daughter Cass. Though the novel is ostensibly centred around Cleave’s plight “to cease becoming and merely be” (77), as the story begins to unfold “it becomes increasingly clear that the person haunting the narrative is his daughter Cass” (Hand, John Banville 170). Cleave’s daughter suffers from a rare strain of schizophrenia, Mandelbaum syndrome, and the father envies his daughter for her lack of self-consciousness, as it stands in utter contrast to his own acting self. Unlike Cass, who “does not act, but variously is” (E72), Cleave must always act and cannot simply be; he cannot do without an audience, and he sees himself as an understudy of the many masks he puts on and the many roles he plays. Cass is for him “a symbol of the elusive completion of himself that he so desperately
seeks” (McNamee, “Time Enough for Love” 223). In sum, like Morden, for whom Chloe, Anna and Mrs Grace all embodied “the chance to fulfil the fantasy of [his] self” (S 105), Cleave is attracted to women out of a similar need to be recognised by their other. He describes the numerous relationships before his marriage to Lydia as an abhorrence of life in a “vacuum”:

And things rushed into this vacuum where the self should be. Women, for instance. They fell into me, thinking to fill me with all they had to give. It was not simply that I was an actor and therefore supposedly lacking an essential part of personality; I was a challenge to them, to their urge to create, to make life. (E 33)

Paradoxically, neither Max nor Alexander can ultimately have what they want, because the desires of the wanting self inherently entail an absence, a kink of complexity that torments them as it does other Banville protagonists. This absence as always already elsewhere is epitomised by various elements throughout both novels. First, the memories of the childhood past are emplotted within pastoral narratives of nostalgia; as previously discussed, the dialectics of presence and absence are central to the pastoral mode, and in Banville’s nostalgia narratives absence is most strongly felt in the pastoral past by which each character attempts to achieve or re-invent their own presence in the now. This dialectic of presence and absence, of being-in-the-world, and what Jacques Lacan calls the process of identification of the self through “an-other,” is brought into the narratives by the summer houses and the imaginative collusion of the three-fold temporal strata in each narrative: one of the present, ‘an-other’ of the past and yet another moving towards a future imagined through the lens of the pastoral past. Furthermore, though the various female figures are the human companions that both accompany and link the male protagonists to their pasts, they do not reinforce a sense of self, but counter-act it. Chloe, for example, severs Morden from his imagined quasi-paradise and gilded boyhood world. The self-consciousness she engenders in him “expelled [him] from that sense of the immanence of all things, the all things that had included me, in which up to then I had dwelt, in more or less blissful ignorance (S 168). Similarly, Cleave’s life, lived through the many women he “fell into,” can be seen as “progress from a position of obsession with wholeness, with an absolute order or a pure, unadulterated self, to an acceptance of life as a process, unending and almost always incomplete, its deplorable dearth of meaning amply compensated for by an abundance of significance” (McNamee, “Time Enough for Love” 227). Thus, to continue to map elements of the pastoral in “the waxworks of memory” and the unconscious is to move to another Arcadian retreat used by all of Banville’s later
characters, including Freddie Montgomery in *Ghosts*: a retreat to the imagination and the mind.

A sense of displacement is central to both novels without which the journey to the summers of the past would not have taken place. Each protagonist feels out of place in their present space and time. Additionally, both perceive “humanity as being permanently displaced between imagination and the material world (McNamee, “‘A Rosy Crucifixion’” 151). In an attempt to come to terms with the attendant estrangement of self, Max and Alexander retreat to the only kingdom where they feel they hold power and influence: the kingdom of the mind. There the strong hold of language allows them to house in an Arcadia of verbal and intellectual illusions: “‘Harpazein,’ I said hastily, ‘to seize. Greek, that is.’ Playing the fussy old professor, remote but kindly; when in difficulty, act” (*E* 16). Language, after all, is the voice of the mind, and to Cleave and Morden language has always been more than a key to the “sealed chamber” of the imagination. It is also a powerful source of solace, certainty and stability in the face of their present crisis of identity. Language to both is a religion; it is the church where they seek refuge and try to heal their hurts.

From the very first pages the reader is made aware in both novels that the respective narrative realities cannot be perceived, read or imagined but through the lens of the protagonists’ narcissistic, metafictional obsession with language: “Plimsoll. Now, there is a word one does not hear any more, or rarely” (*S* 11). Countless other language-related queries and anomalies are dispersed throughout the novel; their resolution more often than not offers, if only briefly, moments of unassailable conviction and comfort that counteract the characters’ sense of permanent displacement between self and the world: “Anaglypta. All afternoon I had been searching for the word and now I had found it” (*E* 20). Ever and again the narrators try to extend these moments of escape by producing exquisitely written prose that celebrates the significance of nature, or more specifically, “the superabundance of summer” (*E* 188). In lyrical interludes they paint landscapes of the imagination where the otherwise overwhelming sense of displacement and bifurcation disappears, and where the absence of an idyllic elsewhere is amalgamated with the landscapes of the now: “It was a sumptuous, oh, truly a sumptuous autumn day, all Byzantine coppers and golds under a Tiepolo sky of enamelled blue, the countryside all fixed and glassy, seeming not so much itself as its own reflection in the still surface of a lake” (*S* 45).

Words are Max’s consolation, vocabulary his comfort, and language his Arcadia. He constructs idyllic retreats and alternate, escapist realities primarily by virtue of his narrative art. “Immersed in words,” Max argues, “paltry as they may be ... I had felt myself break through ... into another state where ordinary laws
did not operate ... where I was ... more vividly present than ever I could be in what we call, because we must, the real world” (S 97–8). As Roy L. Hunt argues, “[r]eality is given meaning through language. When we learn our language we acquire an arbitrary set of codes which define our concept of reality.” There is, however, a fundamental paradox in attempting to understand reality when that reality is but a construction based on the past as pastoral. Neither Cleave nor Morden, intellectuals in search of a pastoral grand narrative of nostalgia can “stand outside the system [of language] and discuss objective truth in itself because without a language reality has no meaning.” Thus, Hunt continues, if the attempt “to discover objective truth involves using an arbitrary symbolic system which immediately places itself between reality and our comprehension of it, [...] once reality is mediated through language, reality is forever displaced” (Hunt, “Hell Goes Round and Round” 155).

Arcadia, like language, is inherently bifurcate. There are, after all, “two kinds of Arcadia: shaggy and smooth; dark and light; a place of bucolic leisure and a place of primitive panic” (Schama, “Arcadia Redesigned” 517). In language there is always a subject and an object; in the pastoral mode too, there can be no presence without absence, and in any narrative emplotment no sense of self without an-other. Morden’s pastoral reading of the past consoles and commemorates the absence of self by calling upon the absence of others. On the one hand, his recourse to the mode imbues him with a “sense of the immanence of all things” (S 167). On the other hand, all pastoral can do is to provide the narrative process of (re-)identification and remembering with a symbolic paradigm for “putting the complex into the simple” (Empson, Some Versions of Pastoral 23). Morden’s commemorative nostalgia narrative endows the holiday resort with such a symbolic system: “At the seaside all is narrow horizontals, the world reduced to a few long straight lines pressed between earth and sky” (S 10).

Then again, language is a symbolic system, to recall Hunt, that is caught “between reality and our comprehension of it,” whence it is always already “displaced.” At best it can punctuate the darkness of grief, offer a brief sense of ennoblement to the attendant pain, but it can never truly dispel it. Morden comes to realise this during one of his many hospital visits. There it dawns upon him that he “would never again be able to think of another word to say to [Anna]. [...] From this day forward all would be dissembling. There would be no other way to live with death” (22–3). The Sea and Eclipse, perhaps above all else, are elegies about the coming to terms with mortality. And though the retreat into the nostalgia constructions of memory and the imagination cannot truly offer stability and re-adjustment, it does, at its high points, give the protagonists a sense of leaving stronger than upon embarkment for the golden world.
Between Trauma and Nostalgia in *Conversation in the Mountains*

People have said that only survivors themselves understand what happened. I’ll go a step further. We don’t. [...] I know I don’t. [...] So there’s a dilemma. What do we do? Do we not talk about it? Elie Wiesel has said many times that silence is the only proper response, but then most of us, including him, feel that not to speak is impossible. To speak is impossible, and not to speak is impossible. — Schreiber Weitz, 1990

The act of remembering always also involves a mode of reliving the memories selected for recall – an experience that can be as painful as it is a necessary means of elegiac memorializing. Thus it is that, despite Theodor Adorno’s often misinterpreted statement, “[w]riting poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” (Adorno, “Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft” 231), no single historical tragedy of the twentieth century precipitated more literary, poetic and elegiac engagement than the Holocaust, and not many critics give credit to Banville for also attempting such a task, albeit indirectly, in his *Conversation in the Mountains* (2008). The short radio play is about Paul Celan, the Holocaust survivor-poet who, on July 25 1967, paid a visit to Martin Heidegger at the alleged Nazi sympathizer’s mountain cabin or “Hütte” at Todtnauberg. Their meeting remains shrouded in mystery, and, as there is no record of the conversation(s) between these two antithetical intellectual giants of the twentieth century, countless efforts exist that attempt to divine what may or may not have been said. Banville’s *Conversation in the Mountains* is one such effort, a semi-fictional account of their...
meeting in which Celan demanded Heidegger to come clean about his past Nazi enthusiasms.

Indeed, *Conversation in the Mountains* is a play about coming to terms – whether literally, metaphorically, historically or philosophically – with trauma and accountability. The case has been made that Celan was most likely suffering from a form of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), in which “the overwhelming events of the past repeatedly possess, in intrusive images and thoughts, the one who has lived through them” (Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* 151). The play begins and ends with excerpts from two of Celan’s most famous poems – “Todesfuge” at the outset, and “Todtnauberg” in its final lines, thereby encoding poetically a paradox at the heart of understanding PTSD:

[W]hile the traumatized are called upon to see and to relive the insistent reality of the past, they recover a past that encounters consciousness only through the very denial of active recollection. [...] Modern neurobiologists have in fact suggested that the unerring ‘engraving’ on the mind, the ‘etching into the brain’ of an event in trauma may be associated with its elision of its normal encoding in memory. (Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* 153)

Celan’s poetry embodies this paradox of trauma because it encodes the horrors of the Holocaust into a narrative memory. In his search for accountability (by meeting with Heidegger), moreover, Celan is in search of re-countability, a way to integrate his traumatic experiences into a complete story of the past. This process of narrativisation is crucial, because “[t]he flashback or traumatic re-enactment conveys [...] both the truth of an event and the truth of its incomprehensibility [sic!]” (Caruth 153). As holocaust survivor Sonia Schreiber Weitz elegantly summarises, “[t]o speak is impossible, and not to speak is impossible” (“Videotaped Interview”).

At first, Celan’s poetic quest for justice, accountability and a voice for deeds unspeakable, a “hop, today, for a thinker’s (un-delayed coming) word in the heart” (“Todtnauberg” 11–15) – a word that remains delayed indefinitely and,
ultimately, un-spoken,\(^8\) clashes with Heidegger’s own search for philosophical and ideological identity. The way in which Heidegger’s “Hütte” embodies a nostalgic space for the philosopher’s most successful years at the same time that Celan experienced various traumas, makes the encounter of poet and philosopher in 1967 a unique locus in space-time, in which their conversation hovers between Celan’s traumata and Heidegger’s nostalgia. This tension is what imbues Banville’s entire Conversation with an eerie, intangible quality, and which makes the play so interesting as an elegiac, redemptive pastoral.

Thus, numerous aspects of Conversation’s design resonate with Banville’s speculative effort, including its structure – entirely a series of encounters and confrontations that culminate in Celan/Heidegger’s retreat to and return from a locus full of ‘hope’ and the promise of redemption. This retreat and return are underscored poetically by Banville’s inclusion of Celan’s most celebrated as well as most written about poems, “Death Fugue” at the beginning of the play, and ‘Todtnauberg’ at its close. Accordingly, the play begins with Celan’s reading of the final lines of “Death Fugue” to “an auditorium packed with a thousand-strong audience” at the University of Freiburg, “in the old heart of Germany” (Conversation, Act I, pp. 294–295).

Banville’s emphasis on Freiburg, historically a fortified town of free citizens, as “the old heart of Germany,” is particularly significant here, especially if we take into account how comprehensively the topos of the forest captured every realm of Nazi art, politics and ideology after 1933, and with what tenacity “the obsession with a myth of origins” took hold of Ahnenerbe, the organisation founded in 1935 “under the aegis of the SS” that “promoted and pursued research into Germanic antiquity and racial identity” (Schama, “The Hunt for Germania” 79). Ahnenerbe appropriated German forests into Nazi origin myths based on a “need for an ancestral memory of woodland warriors,” that in turn echoed “the patriotic topographers of the German Renaissance” (Schama 1995: 81, 95). Indeed, the protection and conservation of German forests was taken more seriously by the Third Reich and its Reichforstminister Göring than by any other German government. As Banville’s Celan reminds us in Act III of the play,

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\(^8\) Celan famously sent Martin Heidegger a bibliophile edition of ‘Todtnauberg,’ the poem he wrote shortly after their encounter, and it has been convincingly argued that he thereby “expected or hoped it would elicit an answer from him.” Celan’s unique use of the adverb ‘undelayed’ [un-gesäumt] in the edition he sent to Heidegger can be seen as “an urgent personal appeal to fulfil that hope.” The poet deleted the adverb from his collection of poems Light Compulsion [Lichtzwang] (1970) two years later, however, as he “must have realised that an ‘undelayed’ word from Heidegger condemning Nazism or speaking of the philosopher’s Nazi past would not be forthcoming” (Lyon, James K. Paul Celan and Martin Heidegger: An Unresolved Conversation 188).
When they built the camp at Buchenwald, the SS were careful to preserve Goethe’s famous, favourite oak tree on the site. You have a great feeling for culture, you Germans” (Conversation 300). Simon Schama echoes Celan’s sarcasm in his own study of the Nazi ‘hunt for Germania,’ when he states, forcefully: “It is, of course, painful to acknowledge how ecologically conscientious the most barbaric regime in modern history actually was. [...] Exterminating millions of lives was not at all incompatible with passionate protection for millions of trees” (Schama, “Hunt for Germania” 119).

This deeply perverted paradox, first hinted at in Act I of the play, is further compounded in Act II, in which Gerhart Baumann, the organiser of Celan’s reading, claims, immediately afterwards: “We know what it is for you to come here to Freiburg – what it is for you to be among Germans.” Celan, in the mildest and most ironic of rebukes, as if to suggest how little Baumann or anyone else at the reading could truly ‘know’ what it was like for him ‘to be among Germans,’ simply retorts: “Your language is my mother tongue, Professor. Literally – my mother was a German-speaker” (Conversation, Act II, pp. 295). The poet’s deliberate use of the phrase ‘mother tongue’ and the immediate reminder to Baumann that his mother, too was a ‘German-speaker’ evokes Celan’s relationship to his mother and to the German language, the tongue shared between mother and son. For it was Fritzi Celan who sowed the seeds of her son’s love for German, and though he grew up in a polyglot environment, “it was the German mother tongue, the Muttersprache, in which he flourished” (Felstiner, Paul Celan 6). Memories of her were to him always bound to the language that so intimately connected them, and yet simultaneously that same language was perverted to word the hideous, traumatic slogan: Arbeit Macht Frei [labour sets you free]: “[T]he motherword led me,” Celan would later write, “so that a single spasm / would pass through the hand / that now, and now, grasps at my heart!” (Celan, “In Front of the Candle” 43–46). As is typical of Conversation’s structure of flashbacks, Banville provides a metafictional interpretation of the real Celan’s profound pain in Act VI, in which ‘Paul’ has the last conversation – almost an argument – with his ‘Mother,’ and at the end of which the poet recites in a voice-over the elegiac verses: “It’s falling, Mother, snow in the Ukraine: / The Saviour’s crown a thousand grains of grief” (Celan, Selected Poems 306).

Considering the complex biographical and historical backdrop of its delivery, Celan’s response to Baumann can be read as an articulation of his entire poetic being, because it shows how unyieldingly he registered in German the catastrophes made in Germany – catastrophes so intimately linked to his own life. With his world obliterated, Celan held fast to the ‘mother tongue’ that was both
his and theirs, perhaps because, literally, it was all he had left. Thus, Celan’s choice to write in German forces an encounter between poet and reader, between the Holocaust perpetrators and its survivors, and between those responsible and those, like Baumann, desperately trying to repair the irreparable. In the aftermath of “that which happened” to both humankind and the German language between 1933 and 1945, poetry to Celan meant a reaching out: “I went with my very being toward language,” he once said, and “insofar as it was language that had been damaged, his verse might repair that damage” (Felstiner, *Paul Celan* xvi, xviii).

The conversation(s) or speech acts that take place between Celan and Heidegger at Todtnauberg in the play are closely linked to the crucial role speech itself plays in coming to terms with the individual and historical trauma of the Holocaust. As Kevin Newmark observes, only through speech can the traumatized try “to move away from the experience of shock by reintegrating it into a stable understanding of it” (qtd. in Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* 154). Thus speech presents risks as much as it presents opportunities for healing, for “[t]he danger of speech, of integration into the narration of memory, may lie not in what it cannot understand, but in that it understands too much” (Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* 154). Banville’s extensive integration of Celan’s poetry, coupled with his many allusions to the poet’s conflicted relationship with German, his “mother-tongue,” shows an acute awareness of the forked nature of speech and language as tools of therapy and injury alike. Speech, or more accurately in this case, conversation, thus is turned not only into a “vehicle of understanding, but also the locus of what cannot yet be understood.” Speech becomes “the event of creating an address for the specificity of a historical experience that annihilated any possibility of address” (Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* 155–156).

Ultimately, speech and conversation allow for a traumatic re-experiencing of the event which carries with it what Dori Laub calls the “collapse of witnessing,” an impossibility of knowing that first constituted the trauma itself. This impossibility of knowing in turn coerces us into a new kind of challenge, namely to

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9 Celan’s mother and father were deported to an internment camp near Transnitria in June 1942, on a Saturday when Celan had stayed with some friends, and could not return due to a curfew. Banville’s Celan recounts the harrowing experience of returning home as follows: “In the morning when I arrived home it was no longer home: the house was deserted, the front door was sealed, and my mother and father were gone. […] It wasn’t until years later that I learned what had become of them. They were taken in a transport east to Transnitria. […] My father died from typhus in the autumn of that year, and in the winter my mother was shot, being no longer fit for work” (*Conversation* Act VII, pp. 307–308).
listen and to witness said impossibility (Laub, “An Event Without a Witness” 80). Celan’s reading of his poem “Todesfuge” at the opening of *Conversation* expresses this impossibility in its purest and most poetic form, because, as Dori Laub suggests, “[s]ometimes it is better not to know too much” because, speaking as a clinician, “to listen to the crisis of trauma [...] is to hear in the testimony the survivor’s departure from it; the challenge of the therapeutic listener, in other words, is how to listen to departure” (Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* 10). At the beginning of the play, Heidegger listens as Celan speaks, or more accurately, as he reads out loud his traumas poetically. Then, as of Act III in particular, Celan mostly listens as Heidegger speaks nostalgically of the ‘hut,’ his philosophy and all that is his at Todtnauberg: “Let me show you my little kingdom. I bought the plot of land here in 1922 or was it ’21? – So I’ve been a presence in this clearing for forty-five years. (*To himself*) Lord, so long!” (Act III, pp. 298). It is in this relation between listening and speaking that the possibility of “a truly pedagogical encounter emerges, an encounter that, by breaking with traditional modes of understanding, creates new ways of gaining access to a historical catastrophe” (Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* 155).

Crucially, while the hut functions as a space for the nostalgic recollection of his success and of his philosophy for Heidegger, in Celan, it triggers memories that are traumatic, and this is what creates an impalpable tension between the two throughout their sojourn at Todtnauberg. What makes the situation much more difficult for Banville’s Celan, then, is in the way his reading at the University of Freiburg, in front of Heidegger, forces a confrontation and return to the trauma of the Holocaust, rather than a departure or retreat from it. Banville has his Celan belie these difficulties in the way the poet refuses to be photographed with Heidegger, and in Celan’s overall hesitance and inability to meet Heidegger’s practiced eloquence with more than a few sharp-tongued responses:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Heidegger</strong></th>
<th>No, no, I mean no flattery, only – But ah, it seems the photographer wishes to take our portrait together. Shall we ... ?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Celan</strong></td>
<td>(<em>Sharply</em>) No. (<em>Softens his tone</em>) No, please. I ... I have an aversion to being photographed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>A moment of awkward silence. Heidegger realises Celan is deliberately refusing to be photographed with him.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Heidegger</strong></td>
<td>Ahem. Yes, of course, I understand ... (<em>Pause</em>) And your health has improved, yes? We had heard that you were in hospital.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The way Banville has constructed Celan’s series of encounters at the beginning of the play, first with the University of Freiburg, then his audience and reading-organiser Baumann, and finally Heidegger, shows the author’s keen awareness of the paradox that committed Celan to this poetic decontamination of German, a language previously misappropriated by Nazi jargon and racist thinking. In this context, Celan’s (albeit metafictional) reference to his mother and the German mother tongue epitomizes the subliminal irony of Baumann’s remarks after the reading: “[W]e shall tell our children how on this day, the 24th of July 1967, in Freiburg in the old heart of Germany, we saw and heard the greatest poet of the age, Paul Celan” (Act I, pp. 294–5). Celan’s perception of the irony is brought full circle when, in response to Heidegger complimenting him as “the greatest German poet of our time,” Celan insists that he is “not German, Herr Doctor.” Heidegger’s response betrays both his efforts at reconciliation and that he too is aware of the paradox: “But you write in the German language. That is our common homeland, yours and mine” (Act II, pp. 296–7).

If the conversation with Baumann shows a Celan ready to deal with such ironies in responses that mask a haunted mind, the poet is not equally equipped for what immediately follows – his first encounter with Heidegger. Where the philosopher is presented as a “vigorous seventy-eight-year old” who “wishes to meet [Celan],” the other, at first, can only respond to Heidegger’s ostentatiously preconceived, artificial compliments with civility and veneration: “I once wrote that all of my work was no more than an effort to say philosophically what Rilke had already said poetically. I might add your name to his in that formulation”

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10 Banville showcases the meticulous research that has gone into the lives, history, poetry and philosophy surrounding the unresolved encounter between Celan and Heidegger, when, in an interview, he recommends Felstiner’s biography itself: “First of all, any reader wishing to learn about Celan should read John Felstiner’s definitive biographical study, Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew, which as well as an account of the life contains some of the finest translations of Celan’s extremely difficult poetry – Felstiner’s English version of “Todesfuge” is a triumph. For Heidegger, Hugo Ott’s biography is very thorough, though Ott is quite condemnatory, and quite rightly, of the philosopher’s murky politics” (Sarvas, Mark. ‘Conversation in the Mountains – A Brief Q&A With John Banville.’ July 01, 2008).
Historically, Heidegger was certainly more informed and better prepared for the meeting than Celan, whose delicate mental state provoked from him ambivalent behaviour, including the abrupt declaration that he did not wish to be photographed with Heidegger – mirrored in Act II of the play. In the days that precede the reading, Celan was clearly plagued with doubts he shared with his wife, who replied: “I understand that the reading in Freiburg with Heidegger present will cause some difficulties. Nevertheless I hope it will come off all right” (Celan, *Correspondance* vol. 1, p. 548 quoted in Lyon 163). Heidegger, on the other hand, sought to create an opportunity for conciliation rather than confrontation, as indicated by an undated letter sent to Baumann shortly before the reading:

I’ve wanted to become acquainted with Paul Celan for a long time. He stands farthest in the forefront and holds himself back the most. I know all of his works, also of the serious crisis from which he managed to extricate himself as much as a person is able. Your are correct in interpreting how helpful a reading here would be. July 24 would be the best date for me. [...] It would also be healing to show P.C. the Black Forest. (Baumann, *Erinnerungen an Paul Celan* 59–60, quoted in Lyon, *Paul Celan and Martin Heidegger* 162).

The letter shows Heidegger’s genuine interest in meeting Celan, hints at conciliatory motives, but also lays bare the philosopher’s considerable arrogance in assuming that “it would be healing to show P.C. the Black Forest” – how can he presume to be able to put Celan on the road to recovery? Given Celan’s mental state and Heidegger’s ulterior motives in arranging the reading, their encounter was always going to be a balancing act between confrontation and conciliation.

Accordingly, Heidegger’s walk upon this tightrope is threaded into the play in the form of two plots designed to intertwine various metafictional, historical figures in chance meetings and confrontations that lead up to the primary plot, our eponymous conversation in the mountains. The second plot, told in a series of flashbacks from February 1924 to 1950, functions much like a revolving door of these encounters, mainly between Heidegger’s former student and turbulent liaison Hannah Arendt, and Karl Jaspers, with whom, following his public declaration of sympathy for the National Socialists in 1933, Heidegger brought upon

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11 It is crucial to note here that “when Celan visited Heidegger in Freiburg on July 24–25, 1967, he was on a leave of confinement in a psychiatric clinic to which he returned after the visit.” Furthermore, “he was not formally released until October of that year” (Lyon, *Paul Celan and Martin Heidegger* 160).

12 In 1946, on the twentieth anniversary of the death of Rainer Maria Rilke, Heidegger delivered a lecture entitled ‘What are Poets for?’ [‘Wozu Dichter?’].
himself an embittered political and personal altercation. In a series of flashbacks, the audience thus witnesses Hannah Arendt’s transformative encounters and relationship with Heidegger, from “a young lady” at Marburg University in February 1924 who “would like to take [Heidegger’s] philosophy course” (Act IV, p. 301), to his “darling girl,” whom he promises to “protect,” to “keep […] safe” (Act X, p. 313), to the “muse” who helps him write his “great work” Being and Time (Act XIII, p. 318), and finally to the “briskly” confident and successful philosopher who “finished [her own] book,” The Origins of Totalitarianism (1951), one that “owes everything to those earliest days in Marburg, to [Heidegger] and to what [he was] then” (Act XX, p. 325).

These flashbacks are clearly designed to enrich our historical understanding of Heidegger; the ambiguity is evident, especially when intertwined with Heidegger’s exchanges with Celan in ‘the hut’. Banville thus successfully stages a dramatic re-possession of Being and Time, and offers a glimpse of Heidegger’s humanity as juxtaposed to the inhumanity of Nazi ideology. As Arendt herself summarises, Heidegger’s failing is perhaps not so much his declaration of support for the Nazis – his relationship with her shows that we all make mistakes, – but the resultant philosophy that she was the apparent ‘muse’ to. As she claims, towards the end of the play, Heidegger’s “is a philosophy of the individual, [hers] of plurality.” For she believes it is “not the authenticity of the individual but the virtuosity of acting together with others that brings into the world the openness that [Heidegger has] always sought.” It is Heidegger’s “tragedy,” then, that he “never understood” how “the world becomes inhuman without the continual talk in it of humans” (Act XX, pp. 326–327). If the first plot re-imagines a series of historical events that result in the birth of a poem – Celan’s ‘Todtnauberg,’ the second plot is much like an elegy that outlines, and to an extent attempts to explain the death of some of Heidegger’s most important and intimate personal relationships, whether between a student he loved and admired, an erstwhile colleague he disenfranchised through his concomitance with Nazi ideology (Karl Jaspers), or Paul Celan, “poet, survivor, Jew” (Felstiner, Paul Celan), with whom he engaged in an antithetical yet reciprocal appropriation of poetry and philosophy.

The setting of the primary plot at Heidegger’s ‘hut’ on Todtnauberg, though historical, is also charged with considerable symbolism and meaning for Banville’s overall elegiac endeavour. The hut itself is a particularly potent place / space for Conversation, because it is where Celan’s and Heidegger’s personal and ideological histories and philosophies intertwine to create a seemingly insurmountable tension in an already strained relationship. In his later philosophy, Heidegger contemplated two questions: ‘What are poets for?’ and ‘What does
it mean to dwell upon the earth?’ – questions that are closely linked, it would seem, and that Celan too dwelled upon his entire later life. For Heidegger, language is the house of being; it is through language that unconcealment takes place for human beings. By disclosing the being of entities in language, the poet lets them be. That is the special, the sacred role of the poet. What is distinctive about the way that humankind inhabits the earth? It is that we dwell poetically (Bate, *The Song of the Earth* 258).

This *dwelling* poetically is precisely what Banville’s Heidegger is trying to achieve in his hut at Todtnauberg. As Celan enters the “famous hut,” Heidegger introduces his “little kingdom” accordingly: “When I secured the professorship at Marburg I knew I’d need a place to escape to” (*Conversation Act III*, p. 298). Tension mounts as Celan admits: “I envy you such a place. In my apartment where I live in Paris I frequently feel I’m suffocating” (*III*, p. 297). Indeed, as Baumann drives Celan into the mountains, the poet explains his philosophical concomitance with Heidegger: “His concerns echo mine – we’re both dwellers in the house of language” (*Act III*, p. 297). Dwelling, to Heidegger, was the authentic form of *being* as set against “the false ontologies of Cartesian dualism and subjective idealism” (Bate, *The Song of the Earth* 261). It is important to note how subtly Heidegger references his own ‘hut’ in the definition of ‘dwelling’ outlined in his “Building Dwelling Thinking”:

> Only if we are capable of dwelling, only then can we build. Let us think for a while of a farmhouse in the Black Forest, which was built some two hundred years ago by the dwelling of peasants. Here the self-sufficiency of the power to let earth and heaven, divinities and mortals enter in simple oneness into things, ordered the house. It placed the farm on the wind-sheltered mountain slope looking south, among the meadows close to the spring. […] It made room in its chamber for the hallowed places of childbirth and the ‘tree of the dead’ – for that is what they call a coffin there: the *Totenbaum* – and in this way it designed for the different generations under one roof the character of their journey through time. (Heidegger, “Building Dwelling Thinking” 160)

To summarise Heidegger’s concepts, beings exist without human consciousness, but in order that they might attain to ‘Being’ in the sense of becoming a presence, a disclosure, a space must exist. Heidegger names this space, which he equates with human consciousness, *Lichtung*, a term with very relevant meanings and translations. First and foremost, *Lichtung* can be translated into ‘forest clearing,’ but it also has the sense of a space in which everything is lit up. Language, then, opens up a *Lichtung* for human ‘being’ as such. Banville adroitly hints at these
core concepts of Heidegger’s philosophy when he has his metafictional philosopher say: “Let me show you my little kingdom. I bought the plot of land here in 1922 – or was it ‘2I’s – So I’ve been a presence in this clearing for forty-five years” (Act III, p. 298, italics my own).

Banville also uses his metafictional character’s understanding of Heidegger’s philosophy to stage a profound irony that is progressively revealed in Conversation, because it is Banville’s Celan, not his Heidegger – for all the latter’s building and dwelling in the ‘hut’ of language – who appears to have found a way to “dwell poetically” and through his poetry to ‘build’ “for the different generations [of his people] under one roof [the poetry] of their journey through time.” This irony is also what explains some of Heidegger’s reverence for Celan and his poetry, as well as the all-pervasive unease that relentlessly preys on the two throughout the play. Where Banville’s Heidegger confidently stages himself as the host in his hut of language, it is Celan who quietly disassembles this confidence and unconceals, even unspeaks Heidegger’s philosophical escapism; already in Act III, Celan begins to unbuild Heidegger’s nostalgic, Arcadian architectonics:

Heidegger: Yes, yes. Often now the past seems more real to me than the present. (Brief laugh) It’s the way with all old men. (They walk forward) Those trees are mine, on the slope. And this is my well, you see, with the wooden star above it. Now. (He unlocks the door) Please. (They enter the cabin. Pause) History will remember this day, Herr Celan.

Celan: And what will history’s judgement be, I wonder? (Conversation Act III, p. 299)

Unconcealment pervades Conversation in the Mountains as both a mode and a motif; as a mode, it is used by both plots of the play, the plot of unveiling flashbacks to Heidegger’s time as rector of the University of Freiburg and affair with Hannah Arendt, and the plot of Celan’s reading and conversation with the philosopher in his hut at Todtnauberg. As a motif, unconcealment pervades all of Celan’s words, poetry and actions in the play. First, Celan’s entire poetic is an act of unconcealment that goes against Adorno’s “To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” (quod. in Conversation V, 304); the play opens with Celan’s most famous example, “Todesfuge,” and closes with his most frequently analysed and interpreted, ‘Todtnauberg’. There can be no coincidence in Banville’s choice of poems, for each insists upon a presencing of ‘Death,’ whose phonetically German counterpart – ‘Tod’ – is echoed in the titles of both poems, as if to reinforce the age-old pastoral epitaph Et in Arcadia Ego.
Heidegger’s concept of *presencing* is crucial to an understanding of a further dynamic of the aforementioned irony, because it encapsulates the complex relationship between Celan and the German philosopher perfectly, both linguistically and philosophically. Much of Heidegger’s early *Being and Time* (1927) and his later *Building Dwelling Thinking* (1971), is primarily concerned with the idea that “poetry is the original admission of dwelling because it is a *presencing* not a representation, a form of being not of mapping” (Bate 2000, 262, *italics* my own). Yet, linguistically, and thus ironically, a spatial mapping of this concept of be-ing (*Dasein*) is inevitable if we revert to Heidegger’s own terminology for presence / *presencing*: *Anwesen*. For the German noun ‘*Anwesen*’ is commonly also used to refer to a person’s property, estate or stately home. Celan thus quintessentially deconstructs Heidegger’s entire concept of being or poetically dwelling – first through his reading of ‘*Todesfuge*’ at the University of Freiburg, where the philosopher was rector until April 1934, and then more systematically during his presence, his *Anwesen* at the philosopher’s hut, *Anwesen*, and “little kingdom.”

Banville’s Celan calmly and with a certain poetic elegance deconstructs several of Heidegger’s explanations during their first conversations of the play in Act III; the entire scene is launched by “an awkward pause” to which Celan responds: “There are so many things we may not talk about it’s impossible to know where to begin” (III, 300). What follows is an exchange between an eerily composed Celan and an easily irritable Heidegger, who, despite his best efforts to be the perfect host, hoping to guide Celan “back inside” his “house of Being” (IV, 303), is caught off-guard on several occasions by the poet’s innocuous but probing remarks:

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*Celan*  
(Dreamily, as if to himself) When they built the camp at Buchenwald the SS were careful to preserve Goethe’s famous favourite oak tree on the site. You have a great feeling for culture, you Germans.

*Heidegger* rises, goes and pours a glass of water for himself, drinks.

*Heidegger*  
Yes, you’re right: the water tastes of the deeps. (Pause) I was never an anti-Semite, you know. I defy anyone to find a single word anywhere in my writings to indicate otherwise. I see you’re sceptical. You’re thinking, A man may harbour in his heart things he will never allow himself to say. But we’re men of the word, you and I. We know the importance of what’s said and not said, and the distinction between the two.

*Celan*  
(Lightly) Are you a man of your word, Herr Doktor? […]

*Heidegger*  
If you mean, have I lied, I’ll answer you what Nietzsche said: *There are no facts, only interpretations.*
Six million is a fact. Six million facts. Are they to be denied? (Act III, 300–301)

Further exchanges follow in Act V, where Heidegger is repeatedly taken out of his comfort zone as he betrays a defiant irascibility:  

Pah! – that’s Adorno. What was it he said: To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. Typical Bolshevist thinking. You have refuted him.

Have I? I wonder. I almost met him once, Adorno. [...] 

He branded my philosophy as fascist. I don’t know which is worse, the characterisation itself, or the shallowness of the mind that formulated it. [...] A total misunderstanding of my position. Jargon! Ha! He should know, he and his fellow-travellers in the so-called Frankfurt School.

And yet in his strictures on modern-day technology he can sound remarkably like you.

Nonsense! Adorno is a fool and a coward who sold himself to the Americans, like his pal Herbert Marcuse, my one-time pupil. Don’t talk to me of Adorno. [...] A charlatan! (Pause) Forgive me. I’m overwrought. You’ll understand, I hope, something of the causes of my bitterness. (Act V, p. 304)

These subtle acts of unconcealment and deconstruction are followed by a symbolically charged “walk along a mountain path,” during which it becomes clear that Celan has a greater understanding of the plant life around the hut than Heidegger:

CELAN walks back to him from some paces away.

Arnica. Good for bruises. And here’s eyebright, Scrophulariaceae, a cure for the eyes. (Soft laugh) Mother Nature’s pharmacopoeia.

It is important to note that this analysis focuses on Banville’s (meta)fictional, literary Heidegger / Celan, and is not to be interpreted as an historically accurate evaluation of their actual conversation. Indeed, as James K. Lyon concludes in his nuanced study of the encounter:

There is not a shred of documented biographical evidence from their entire time together to suggest that Celan condemned Heidegger, felt hostility toward him, or was disappointed with him. In fact the opposite seems true. Later attempts to portray this as a failed encounter and an enormous disappointment for Celan are based on considerations that arose more than a week after the visit (Lyon, Paol Celan 169).
14 Historically speaking, Celan’s mental state and health did indeed improve after his conversation with Heidegger: “Temporarily, at least, the meeting with Heidegger had had an undeniable salutary effect on his [Celan’s] mental state, which no one could have predicted and which most critics afterward have ignored (Lyon, Paul Celan 170).

**Heidegger**

You even know the Latin names—I’m impressed.

**Celan**

*How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea,*  
*Whose action is no stronger than a flower?* (Act XII, p. 315)

More important for Banville’s elegiac project in *Conversation* is the specificity of the herbs that Celan finds along the mountain path, including “Arnica. Good for bruises,” and “eyebright, *Scrophulariaceae*, a cure for the eyes.” As if to further reinforce the symbolic significance of these flowers, Banville’s Celan then quotes Shakespeare’s Sonnet 65. The “rage” clearly alludes to Heidegger’s previous irascibility; the “bruises” are an external, metaphorical manifestation of Celan’s pain, suffering and loss, and the “eyebright” symbolically represents the German poet’s desire for clarity, closure, a way for Heidegger to clear his own name, and Celan’s hope “for a word of explanation, […] even, maybe a word of apology” (Act VI, p. 305).  

Although the purpose of the radio play is never entirely clear, especially as it takes Banville out of his fictional comfort zone, the conversations between Celan and Heidegger are historically and philosophically charged, and thus provide a potent vehicle for an equally pastoral as well as postmodern elegiac endeavour that eventually leads to concomitance, commemoration and indeed commiseration of the Holocaust. As Banville states in an interview about the play:

> I’ve always been fascinated by the thought of these two extraordinary figures encountering each other – the philosopher who had been a Nazi, the poet whose parents had been destroyed in a Nazi work camp – at the famous “hut” in the Black Forest. […] The conversation in the hut was not recorded, and neither man gave an account of it. […] Besides the flora and fauna, did they talk about the war, about Nazism and Heidegger’s refusal publicly to account for, much less apologise for, his membership of the Party? I could not resist speculating. (Sarvas, “A Brief Q & A with John Banville” July 1, 2008)

Perhaps the only surviving letter that directly relates to their meeting, dated January 30, 1968, sent by Heidegger to Celan, best shows the true value and significance of both the historical conversation and Banville’s metafictional endeavour. In the letter, Heidegger reacts to a copy of an expensive limited edition