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 enthusiastic.

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 reaccountability, 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 Reichsforstminister 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. Therefore, 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:

**Heidegger**

No, no, I mean no flattery, only – But ah, it seems the photographer wishes to take our portrait together. Shall we ... ?

**Celan**

(Sharply) No. (*Softens his tone*) No, please. I ... I have an aversion to being photographed.

*A moment of awkward silence. Heidegger realises Celan is deliberately refusing to be photographed with him.*

**Heidegger**

Ahem. Yes, of course, I understand ... (*Pause*) And your health has improved, yes? We had heard that you were in hospital.
I was in a Swiss clinic. I suffer from depression. And other things. (Brief laugh) I have bad dreams. Bad memories. (Conversation Act II, p. 296.

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
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. [...] [I]t 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 philospher state: “Let me show you my little kingdom. I bought the plot of land here in 1922 – or was it ‘2I?z – 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 Ausschwitz is barbaric” (quotd. 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:

**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.

**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.*
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, Paul Celan 169).

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:

**Celan**

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

**Heidegger**

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.

**Celan**

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

**Heidegger**

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**

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 pharmacopeia.
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).

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

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

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).