When the full extent of Martin Heidegger’s commitment to Nazism emerged in the 1980s, the resulting ‘Affair’ provoked many poetic, dramatic and fictional treatments. In his substantial poem ‘The Caravans on Lüneberg Heath’ (1987), Ulster poet Tom Paulin initially responded with an impassioned critique, and he has returned to Heidegger several more times in his poetry and criticism. The result is one of the subtlest and most ambivalent treatments of the Heidegger case, which touches on some of Paulin’s most urgent poetic concerns regarding hermetic language, ‘dwelling without roots’, and the role of the committed intellectual within an oppressive state.

Introduction: The ‘Heidegger Affair’

In the history of post-war German thought, one ‘text crime’ stands out, namely the so-called ‘Heidegger Affair’ that erupted in the late 1980s, involving the pre-eminent German thinker of the twentieth century and his political stance vis-à-vis the National Socialist regime, especially during his time as Rector of the University of Freiburg in 1933-4. Exhibit A in any arraignment of Heidegger has to be the inaugural address which he gave in May 1933, on the assumption of the rectorship, ‘Die Selbstbehauptung der deutschen Universität’ (The Self-Assertion of the German University). Heidegger’s son Hermann is at pains to point out: “The words “National Socialism” and “National Socialist” do not occur in this address; “the Führer”, the “Reich Chancellor” or “Hitler” are not named” – but no amount of special pleading can take away from the fact that Heidegger intervened politically at a crucial moment in the establishment of the National Socialist regime. Having put his name forward for the rectorship and then accepted the appointment, he joined the Party (on 1 May 1933, the same day as Carl Schmitt) and gave a high-profile speech which, at the very least, gave the new regime a thinly veiled approval by thematising concepts such as ‘Entschlossenheit’ (resoluteness) and ‘Führerschaft’ (leadership), making no secret of the speaker’s ‘völkisch’ nationalism and enthusiasm for the destiny of the Movement. Heidegger resigned the rectorship after less than a year, in February 1934, and the speech was withdrawn from publication, but the
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damage was done, especially since – even after the war, after the Holocaust – Heidegger refused to recant and distance himself publicly from the regime and its crimes.²

Heidegger really didn’t do ‘Vergangenheitsbewältigung’ (coming to terms with the past): the closest he came was in an egregiously evasive, self-justificatory interview with Der Spiegel recorded in 1966 but released (at his insistence) only after his death in 1976. The Rectorial Address was then republished in 1982, initially in a bilingual German/French edition, and the whole ‘Heidegger Affair’ took off in 1987, with the publication – first in French, but soon afterwards in thirteen other languages – of the book *Heidegger et le nazisme* by the Chilean historian (and professor at the Freie Universität in Berlin) Víctor Fariás.³ Fariás created a stir by documenting the true extent of Heidegger’s Nazi affiliation and arguing that he was not just a duped fellow-traveller – like, for example, in another field, the composer Richard Strauss⁴ – but rather a ‘true believer’. Nor is it a coincidence that the Affair should have originated and had its most explosive impact in France, for French Heidegger reception had achieved international pre-eminence in the post-war period, with what Vincent Descombes calls the intellectual ‘generation of the three H’s’ (Hegel and Husserl being the other two).⁵ Fariás’ book led to a flurry of publications by leading intellectuals of the French left who felt obliged to take a stance: Jacques Derrida’s book *De l’esprit: Heidegger et la question* (1987) is the best known, but there were also rather less well-known books by Pierre Bourdieu, Luc Ferry and Alain Renaut, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, Jean-François Lyotard and others.⁶ These publications (and the many more that have followed since, notably by American Heideggerians)⁷ have all been exercised by the question of the extent to which Heidegger’s philosophy and politics are related, indeed whether the philosophy might be *predicated* on the politics. Not that this question is exactly unique to Heidegger’s case, though, or even to German-language culture, for the question of the relationship between the work of an intellectual or artistic genius and their rebarbative politics continues to exercise scholars of, say, Martin Luther, Richard Wagner or Stefan George, not to mention Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot, Louis-Ferdinand Céline, Gabriele d’Annunzio and many others. Since the late 1980s the philosophical community has come to terms with the Heidegger Affair and absorbed its impact, though: ten years after Fariás, Julian Young even managed to argue, against the grain, that Heidegger’s thought was not compromised by his Nazi affiliation and instead consistent with ‘a commitment to orthodox liberal democracy’.⁸ Heidegger’s popularity