



CIARAN CARSON
SPACE, PLACE, WRITING

LIVERPOOL ENGLISH TEXTS AND STUDIES 58







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NEAL ALEXANDER



LIVERPOOL UNIVERSITY PRESS





First published 2010 by
Liverpool University Press
4 Cambridge Street
Liverpool
L69 7ZU

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication data

A British Library CIP record is available

ISBN 978-1-84631-478-0 cased

Typeset by Carnegie Book Production, Lancaster
Printed and bound by CPI Antony Rowe, Chippenham and Eastbourne





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Acknowledgements

This book has been in the works for several years and I have accumulated many debts of gratitude during that time. Firstly, to Ciaran Carson, whose writing is the subject of this book, and who has been generous in correspondence but also tactfully left me to my own devices – which is exactly as it should be. My colleagues at Trinity College Carmarthen and the University of Nottingham have been immensely supportive and encouraging throughout the process. I want especially to thank Sarah Davison, Menna Elfyn, Matt Green, Brean Hammond, Dominic Head, David James, Sean Matthews, Lynda Pratt, Mark Robson, Jeni Williams, and Paul Wright. I have also learned much from the students I have been fortunate to teach at both institutions. I am particularly grateful to Conor Carville, John Goodby, Eamonn Hughes, Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, Jim Moran, Julie Sanders, Laura Wainwright, and Danny Weston who each read and commented upon draft material at various stages of the writing process. The book has benefited considerably from their insights and knowledge, though I am, of course, responsible for any errors of conception or execution that remain. For stimulating conversations on Carson's work and other topics I also wish to thank Shane Alcobia-Murphy, Sarah Brouillette, Alice Entwistle, Colin Graham, Anne Jamison, Richard Kirkland, Sinéad Sturgeon, and Conor Wyer. At Liverpool University Press, Anthony Cond's consistent enthusiasm for the project has been much appreciated, and I am indebted to Helen Tookey for her diligence in seeing it through to publication. My brother, Gareth, has cheered me on from the sidelines, as have the Phillips and Davies families in Wales. My greatest debts are to my parents, Colin and Barbara, for giving me so many opportunities and ensuring that I used them; and to my wife, Tina, whose love, support, and companionship has made everything possible.

Earlier versions of Chapters 2 and 3 have appeared respectively as: 'Mapping Junkspace: Ciaran Carson's Urban Cartographies', *Textual Practice* 21.3 (2007), pp. 505–32; and 'Deviations from the Known Route:



Writing and Walking in Ciaran Carson's Belfast', *Irish Studies Review* 16.1 (2008), pp. 41–54. The receipt of a British Academy Small Research Grant allowed me to make an important visit in July 2009 to the Manuscripts, Archives, and Rare Books Library (MARBL) at Emory University to consult their collection of Carson's papers. For permission to quote from Carson's published work I am grateful to: the author; The Gallery Press; Wake Forest University Press; Random House Group; Granta Books; and Penguin Books. I also thank MARBL for allowing me to quote unpublished material from the Ciaran Carson papers.



Abbreviations

- AP* *The Alexandrine Plan* (Loughcrew: The Gallery Press, 1998)
BC *Belfast Confetti* (Loughcrew: The Gallery Press, 1989)
BN *Breaking News* (Loughcrew: The Gallery Press, 2003)
FAWK *For All We Know* (Loughcrew: The Gallery Press, 2008)
FFA *Fishing for Amber: A Long Story* (London: Granta, 1999)
FL *First Language* (Loughcrew: The Gallery Press, 1993)
IC *The Insular Celts* (Belfast: Ulsterman Publications, 1973)
IDA *The Inferno of Dante Alighieri* (London: Granta, 2002)
IFN *The Irish for No* (Loughcrew: The Gallery Press, 1987)
ITM *Irish Traditional Music* (Belfast: Appletree Press, 1986)
LE *The Lost Explorer* (Belfast: Ulsterman Publications, 1978)
LNF *Last Night's Fun: About Music, Food and Time* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1996)
MC *The Midnight Court* (Loughcrew: The Gallery Press, 2005)
NE *The New Estate* (Belfast: The Blackstaff Press, 1976)
NEOP *The New Estate and Other Poems* (Loughcrew: The Gallery Press, 1988)
OEC *Opera Et Cetera* (Loughcrew: The Gallery Press, 1996)
ONW *On the Night Watch* (Loughcrew: The Gallery Press, 2009)
SF *The Star Factory* (London: Granta, 1997)
ST *Shamrock Tea* (London: Granta, 2001)
T *The Táin* (London: Penguin, 2007)
TN *The Twelfth of Never* (Loughcrew: The Gallery Press, 1998)





Introduction

The publication in 2008 of Ciaran Carson's *Collected Poems*, timed to coincide with the poet's sixtieth birthday, is an obvious milestone along the way of his development as a writer. Leafing through its nearly 600 pages, which include work from eight principal collections produced over a period of more than thirty years, the reader is likely to be struck by the extraordinary scope and resourcefulness of Carson's writing. Experimental rather than self-consciously avant-garde, Carson's poetry exhibits a remarkable linguistic inventiveness, formal complexity, and intellectual daring, always making a concerted effort to communicate with the reader yet also foregrounding the resistances that poetic language affords to habitual modes of perception and understanding. His writing often seems intoxicated with the myriad sensations and experiential atoms it attempts to register and record, wielding a microscopic focus upon the particular that freely transmits a MacNeicean awareness of 'the drunkenness of things being various' to his readers.¹ Equally vertiginous is his almost paranoid intuition of concealed patterns and linkages, so that it often appears that an infinity of connections may proceed from a single observation. Carson first made his name as a brilliant anatomist of the city and urban experience, topics that continue to occupy a central role in his aesthetic; but recently he has emerged as a Borgesian miniaturist of the universal, exploring the fractal worlds within worlds created in and by language.

His *Collected Poems* admirably illustrates this and other aspects of his creative evolution, yet it is also in some ways necessarily deficient in conveying the full extent of Carson's versatility and volatility as a writer. For instance, an artificial distinction seems to be drawn between his original poetry and his books of translations, so that there is no place in the *Collected Poems* for *The Alexandrine Plan* or for the versions of poems by Stefan Augustin Doinas that originally appeared in *Opera Et Cetera*. At the same time, the volume's inclusion of his versions of Japanese haiku in *Belfast Confetti* and translations from the French,



Irish, and Latin in *First Language* admits the prominence of translation to Carson's own creative practice. Of course, there is no room here for Carson's accomplished and highly distinctive prose texts, which have nonetheless assumed increasing importance within his oeuvre in recent years. Furthermore, whatever claims to comprehensiveness the *Collected Poems* might make are qualified by the fact that Carson has swiftly followed it with a new collection of poems, *On the Night Watch*, and a novel, *The Pen Friend*. Consequently, one of the key challenges that Carson's work makes to readers and critics alike is, not of assimilating, but of engaging adequately with its sheer variorum multiplicity and miscellaneity, which can be by turns exhilarating and forbidding.

With such challenges firmly in mind, this book seeks to undertake a detailed and comprehensive study of all of Carson's work to date, in poetry, prose, and translations. It is structured thematically rather than chronologically or on a book-by-book basis, in an effort to identify and appraise recurrent tropes or concerns as they are manifest across his oeuvre and in the different genres in which he writes. Because Carson often returns to and reworks themes and forms employed earlier in his career, in much the same manner in which a musical fugue unfolds through a series of subtly modulated repeats and refrains, I have found it productive to proceed by way of zigzags and switchbacks rather than in a straight line, and hope that the reader will also. As my subtitle suggests, an abiding frame of reference throughout is the nexus of concerns linking space, place, and writing; and it is primarily as an Irish urban writer that I consider Carson here, the most important figure in this regard since James Joyce. Indeed, Carson has acknowledged the influence of Joyce's 'rendering of the music of the city' upon his work in a recent interview.² For Neil Corcoran, Joyce's influence is most evident in Carson's remarkable ability to define 'the contours of a social and psychic map of the city'.³ Certainly, an astute awareness of the interdependence of topography and psychology is present in the work of both writers. Joyce famously told Frank Budgen that in *Ulysses* he wanted 'to give a picture of Dublin so complete that if the city one day suddenly disappeared from the earth it could be reconstructed out of my book'.⁴ A similar desire to represent the city both comprehensively and in its infinite particularity is apparent in Carson's depictions of Belfast, though, like Joyce, he is keenly attuned to the city's symbolic overtones and oneiric potential – the fastidious recording of realistic detail is only one facet of his engagements with urban space.

Of course, Joyce wrote *Ulysses* not in Dublin but in Trieste, Zurich,

and Paris, whereas Carson has lived and worked in Belfast all of his life; yet he is also capable of seeing his home place through the eyes of an outsider or resident alien, imbuing it with a sheen of estrangement that qualifies any too easy accord between self and place. This combination of proximity and distance, intimacy and irony produces an effect akin to that of parallax, whereby shifts in perspective lay bare the processes through which a sense of place is constructed and deconstructed. As a consequence, Carson's writing exemplifies Shane Alcobia-Murphy's comment that 'Northern Irish writers and artists are doing more than simply undermining the stable narratives of "place"; their work functions as intense and recondite explorations of the power relations that inhere within those narratives'.⁵ My sense of the centrality of issues of space and place in Carson's work is intended to be supple enough that lateral and radial links to his related concerns with language and narrative, memory and history, violence and power can be forged in the chapters that follow. Nonetheless, before proceeding to consider these, it may be useful to trace in some more detail the curvature of his career arc thus far, from *The Insular Celts* to *On the Night Watch*, and to sketch in some details of the biographical, literary, and historical contexts that will be important to my readings of his texts.

Ciaran Gerard Carson was born on 9 October 1948 in Belfast, Northern Ireland, to William Carson (or Liam McCarráin as he liked to be known) and Mary Carson (née Maginn). He is one of four children and the family lived initially at 100 Raglan Street in the Lower Falls area of West Belfast, which serves as a recurrent locus in his writing, before moving in the late 1950s to Mooreland Drive, Andersonstown, the 'new estate' of his first book. His father's job as a postman and flair for storytelling have both made significant impressions upon Carson's means of navigating the city and handling narrative, while his frequent recourse to metaphors of weaving and patchworks owe something to the influence of his mother, who had worked as a doffer in a Falls Road linen mill. Both of his parents learned Irish as a second language, and it was used exclusively as the language of the home, the Carson children learning English only at school or on the streets. This formative bilingualism not only lies behind Carson's wide-ranging interests in translation but also infects his awareness of how social and political discourses function in Northern Ireland, making him 'deeply suspicious of language in general', though 'not averse to the pleasure to be had from words'.⁶ Carson was educated at St Gall's and Slate Street schools, then at St Mary's Christian Brothers School and Queen's University, Belfast, where he studied

English and attended some of the last meetings of the Group, a now-legendary writers' workshop established by Philip Hobsbaum in 1963.

Although the Group's importance has been both over-stated and too-strenuously denied, Heather Clark contends that by bringing writers such as Seamus Heaney, Michael Longley, Seamus Deane, and Paul Muldoon, and critics including Michael Allen, Edna Longley, and Arthur Terry together in a context of discussion and debate, its meetings provided 'a space within which the poets could define themselves against each other'.⁷ Similarly, Fran Brearton describes the Group as an 'aesthetic collision ground' that established a matrix of influences that has shaped the work of many Northern Irish poets long after its demise.⁸ Carson's involvement with the Group in the early 1970s was belated and fairly peripheral, though it played a role in introducing him to his contemporaries. He recalls it as a less rigid affair than Hobsbaum's original seminar, 'a moveable feast' that often convened in the pubs close to the university:

It would have been in one or other of these places that I first got to know the likes of the poets Michael Longley, Seamus Heaney, Trevor McMahon, Robert Johnstone and Paul Muldoon, the prose writer Bernard MacLaverty, the painter and poet Jack Pakenham and the critic Michael Allen; later Medbh McGuckian and John Morrow. We would talk books, sport, politics, music, art and the weather. I think we were mutually supportive, but heavy slugging was also par for the course.⁹

At this time, Frank Ormsby was editor of the journal *The Honest Ulsterman* where Carson began to publish poems and book reviews, and Ormsby was also instrumental in the publication of Carson's first pamphlet, *The Insular Celts*, in 1973. The 14 poems included therein are relatively conventional in their forms and subject matter, but announce the decisive influence of early Irish poetry and disclose their acute observations of landscape and human occupations in ways that anticipate some of his subsequent work.

A wry note appended to *The Insular Celts* described Carson, with telegraphic brevity, as being 'at present unsatisfactorily employed as civil servant' (*IC*, 20), and a stint of teaching would follow before he was appointed to a more congenial post as Traditional Arts Officer with the Arts Council for Northern Ireland in 1975. This was to be an immensely important role for Carson both personally and for the development of his poetry and prose writing, which have extensively adapted formal models and themes from Irish music, songs, and oral traditions such as storytelling. In the same year he also published a sharply critical

review of Seamus Heaney's volume, *North*, the appearance of which marked 'a watershed in Northern Irish literary relations', igniting a series of often fierce debates over the relationships between poetry and politics, myth and history against the backdrop of the Troubles.¹⁰ Carson's review set the terms in which future interventions would be made, and his criticisms are threefold. Firstly, he notes that Heaney himself 'seems to have acquired the status of myth, of institution', something confirmed for him by Edward McGuire's idealised portrait of the poet, and *North* succumbs to this notion in its grandiosity and ambition. In poems such as 'Funeral Rites', Heaney appears to be 'trying to emulate Eliot, or Yeats, or both, in a quest for importance'.¹¹ Secondly, the collection's unevenness arises from Heaney's competing impulses towards precision and abstraction, with abstraction finally winning out and finding expression in 'a superstructure of myth and symbol' – specifically, through parallels between the Northern Irish conflict and Iron Age fertility rites or Viking customs. Carson bemoans Heaney's transformation 'from being a writer with the gift of precision, to become the laureate of violence – a mythmaker, an anthropologist of ritual killing, and apologist for "the situation", in the last resort, a mystifier'.¹² Thirdly, and most importantly, he argues that Heaney neglects the political consequences of the violence he anatomises and, in doing so, tends to elide history into myth: 'It is as if he is saying, suffering like this is natural; these things have always happened; they happened then, they happen now, and that is sufficient ground for understanding and absolution.' On the contrary, such transhistorical coherence is only achieved by 'falsifying issues' and 'applying wrong notions of history instead of seeing what's before your eyes'.¹³ Besides being an oblique expression of what Harold Bloom calls 'the anxiety of influence',¹⁴ Carson's commentary on *North* reveals a good deal about his own priorities and presuppositions as a young writer. Firstly, it shows that he tends to deprecate the authority arrogated to the poet as spokesman; secondly, that he values precision and exactitude in poetry's dealings with the world; and thirdly, that he abhors the obfuscations of abstraction and myth where matters of history and politics are concerned.

Some of these characteristics are highlighted by Tom Paulin in an admiring review of Carson's first full-length collection, *The New Estate*, which was published the following year. Expressing a strong preference for those poems dealing with 'the mysterious idealism' of work and craft, culture and industry over his occasional flirtations with Celticism, Paulin praises Carson's 'deft realism' and 'mysterious, exact clarity', affirming

that it is for 'a realism of subject, with a novelist's interest in ordinary life, that *The New Estate* is notable'.¹⁵ Paulin also remarks on the balance Carson achieves between 'studied formal perfection' and 'real contact with life', a balance maintained in his pamphlet, *The Lost Explorer*, which appeared in 1978 and extended his thematic concerns to take in travel and ethnographic encounters.¹⁶ However, while he continued to publish occasional poems in the following years, Carson's increasing immersion in the culture of traditional music and song appears to have led to a growing disaffection with lyric poetry, and a long break ensued before the publication of his next collection, *The Irish for No*, in 1987. Commenting upon this period, he has said that poetry seemed to him 'a self-centred, precious kind of business': 'Whereas with the music – you're right up against the stuff, it's hitting you from all sides, it's alive, here in front of your very eyes and ears, right now. That's a very attractive immediacy. It's not about withdrawing into your cell to compose these careful utterances about life.'¹⁷ Ironically, the mastery of form and scrupulous concision that are evident in his early poetry may also have contributed to a sense of deadlock, the well-made poem appearing ill-suited to engaging meaningfully with immediate social, public concerns. As David Trotter has remarked, 'an appetite for public matters means an appetite for matters that will never yield to coherence or consolation. It means learning the language in which such matters are incoherently and unconsolingly discussed.'¹⁸ While Carson was occupied in playing, recording, and writing about traditional music in the intervening years, culminating in the publication of his *Pocket Guide to Irish Traditional Music* in 1986, he was also, consciously or unconsciously, looking for ways of approximating its immediacy, spontaneity, and rich sociality in writing. A significant complicating factor is likely to have been the characteristic dilemma for the Northern Irish poet of 'finding a voice that speaks to and through the conflict'.¹⁹

The Irish for No made a significant impact upon its publication. John Goodby describes its effect as that of a 'radical transformation of the Northern Irish poetry scene' during the late 1980s,²⁰ and its innovations were both formal and thematic. Immediately striking was its use of a very long line, often stretching beyond the right-hand margin of the page, for which there were several models: the work of the American poet C.K. Williams, especially his volume *Tar*; the rhythms and pacing of an Irish four-bar reel; storytelling and pub-talk; the 17 syllables of Japanese haiku; and the elongated phrases of 'sean-nos' singing.²¹ Equally important, however, were its decisive and imaginatively charged

explorations of the city of Belfast as both a physical place and an affective nexus. This turn towards urban subject-matter, and its dual focus, had been foreshadowed in a review article written by Carson in 1983, which began with a characteristic affirmation:

We live in the Belfast of dreams as much as the physical city. These rehearsals of reality have gone on for years, changing, recurring, twisting back into themselves in a maze of self-reference. Some places do not exist on the map, but are composed of fragments, memories, inventions, other dreams.²²

This passage condenses a series of recurrent tropes, techniques, and thematic preoccupations that can be traced throughout much of Carson's subsequent writing: the collocation of reality and dream; a conception of urban experience as both constantly changing and recurrent; an interest in maps and their telling absences; an emphasis upon composing collages of fragments rather than illusory wholes. All of these features would be amplified and refined in the poems collected in *The Irish for No*.

Carson's concentrated focus upon Belfast's history, geography, and social life is even more intense in his subsequent volume, *Belfast Confetti*, which is also more formally diverse, including versions of haiku and prose texts alongside short and longer narrative poems employing the long line. The topics dealt with in both collections are various, circulating around memory, desire, identity, power, place and its multiple meanings, but there is also an unusually visceral engagement with the realities of civil discord and political violence, and individual poems depict sectarian murders, ambushes, suicides, street riots, and interrogations with a disturbing documentary candour. This has led to Carson being spoken of as a politically engaged 'social' writer, a label that he distrusts and refuses.²³ 'I can't as a writer,' he has said, 'take any kind of moral stance on the "Troubles", beyond registering what happens. And then, as soon as I say that, I realise that "registering" is a kind of morality. Nor can one, even if one wanted to, escape politics.'²⁴ His poems attempt to negotiate this double-bind between registering what happens and implicit moral statement through their reflexive attention to the ways in which events are mediated and represented, as much in the news media as in writing or art. To this end, they tend to implicate the reader in the construction of narratives about the Troubles, raising ethical questions concerning the writer's and reader's shared culpability in the 'aestheticisation of conflict'.²⁵

The medium of language itself becomes the predominant focus in Carson's subsequent collections, *First Language* and *Opera Et Cetera*, both of which include translations from several languages and otherwise

expand the parameters of English through a heady intermixture of widely divergent discourses and exuberant word-play. Nonetheless, the urgent social realities of the Troubles remain an ever-present frame of reference throughout, and the poems' recurrent concerns with doublespeak, informers, censorship, and shibboleths ensure that their fantastic or surreal narratives often reveal an undertow of political immediacy. As Alan Gillis notes, 'Carson's language-games are also war-poems in which a predatory realism stalks his emancipatory drives which, nevertheless, remain insatiable'.²⁶ Indeed, Carson's linguistic experimentalism seems intended as an antidote to the stagnancy and formality of those cultural discourses and formulations of identity that predominate in Northern Ireland, a reminder of art's capacity to enlarge our potential for expression and communication. There is also a shift of focus away from the materiality of the city and towards that of language itself, often at the level of its individual components – *Opera Et Cetera*, for instance, includes two poetic sequences based upon the letters of the alphabet and the radio operator's code respectively. This is accompanied by a foregrounding of poetic form and much more extensive use of rhyme, often as a means of highlighting arbitrary connections and as a generative mechanism for narrative itself.

In 1996 Carson published the first of his several prose books, *Last Night's Fun*, which gives an eccentric account of the Irish traditional music scene and much else besides. Formally, the book approximates to the social experience of a pub session, with each of the chapters named after a tune ('Boil the Breakfast Early', 'The Humours of Whiskey', 'The Ould Orange Flute' etc.), and its multi-layered narrative interleaves notes and observations, reminiscences and meditations, stories and songs in a deliberately digressive and non-linear manner. *The Star Factory* appeared the following year and made use of many of the same techniques to deal with more explicitly autobiographical material, elaborating a kaleidoscopic urban memoir that eschews any straightforward or coherent narrative of the growth of the poet's mind. Chapters are named after streets and buildings, or other architectural features of the city, so that the book resembles an unconventional guidebook to Belfast or an annotated street index, figuring the relationship between self and place in spatial as well as temporal terms, and undertaking a series of intriguing forays into the imagined and remembered city. Both of these texts thrive on their own miscellaneity, blurring generic boundaries and defying summation while simultaneously disclosing a profound interest in systems of ordering

and classification – musical notation, songbooks, dictionaries, street plans, gazetteers, and many others.

In 1998 Carson took early retirement from the Arts Council and embarked on a period of prolific and very varied productivity. In the same year he published *The Alexandrine Plan*, a collection of supplely inventive translations of sonnets by Baudelaire, Rimbaud, and Mallarmé written in rhymed alexandrines. Three more book-length translations have subsequently appeared, each of them serving to underline the importance of translation for Carson as a mode of creative expression: in 2002 his version of Dante's *Inferno*, then a translation of Brian Merriman's *The Midnight Court*, and most recently his retelling of the Old Irish epic, *The Táin*. As I will discuss in Chapter 6, translation has provided Carson with a means of carrying on a dialogue with major texts from the Irish and European traditions, as well as another way of exploring the various other-worlds that open up in the fissures between languages. Shortly after *The Alexandrine Plan* Carson published *The Twelfth of Never*, a hallucinatory sonnet sequence again written in alexandrines but also drawing extensively upon the Irish ballad tradition for its rhythms, subject-matter, and the titles of individual poems. Switching rapidly between different places and times, and marshalling a bewildering cast of historical and mythological characters, the book blends history, memory, and surreal fantasy in a concerted scrambling of Ireland's sectarian iconographies. As David Butler observes, *The Twelfth of Never* describes a never-land of intoxication and metamorphosis 'in which two irreconcilable traditions have become entangled, their shibboleths undermined by conflation and hypallage'.²⁷ The broader context of Northern Ireland's emergent 'peace process' and the new political dispensation promised by the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 are important here, for the putative end of the Troubles saw a new optimism and fluidity in cultural and economic relations coexisting with the hardening of political divisions and the 'institutionalized separateness' of the province's communities.²⁸

Carson's interest in the clashing symbols, narratives, and myths of Unionist and Nationalist cultures in Ireland is pursued in another direction in his prose texts, *Fishing for Amber* and *Shamrock Tea*, which might be thought of as his 'Orange' and 'Green' books respectively. The former sustains a detailed interest in the Dutch Republic of the seventeenth century, exploring its rich achievements in art, science, and politics in order to provide oblique parallels with contemporary Northern Ireland and to implicitly rebuke the warped psychology of Ulster 'Orangeism'. The latter, by contrast, makes a series of links

across different time periods between Ireland and Belgium as part of a baroque satire on Catholic transcendentalism and Nationalist secret societies. *Fishing for Amber* is deeply indebted to the traditions of Irish oral storytelling, whereas *Shamrock Tea* displays a science-fictional fascination with alternative realities and identities, but both texts attempt an encyclopaedic comprehensiveness that defies generic categorisation and contrasts with the narrowness and inflexibility of the ideologies they indirectly invoke.

In 2003 Carson took up the position of Professor of Poetry and Director of the newly created Seamus Heaney Centre for Poetry at Queen's University, Belfast, roles that he connects with the need to demonstrate 'that writing has a real and necessary place in our lives; that writing can make pleasurable sense of our lives'.²⁹ In the same year he published *Breaking News*, a collection of poems inspired in part by the war correspondence of the Anglo-Irish journalist, William Howard Russell (1820–1907), and in part by the historical associations of Belfast street names with colonial conflicts in the Crimea and India. The volume's depictions of the city's contemporaneity are thus informed by a dense layering of spatial and temporal inter-relations. One of the most striking features of the collection is Carson's use of a very short line, often of only one or two words, where the placing of line breaks and the shape of the poems on the page are integral to their subtle effects of disclosure and elision, connection and disconnection. Indeed, Sarah Broom observes that many of the poems in *Breaking News* 'convey in their hesitations and silences a sense of the difficulty of saying anything at all about Belfast'.³⁰ Recurrent concerns with surveillance and the consequences of war indicate a distinct sense of unease and frustration with the progress of the peace process, and Carson also displays a Wittgensteinian preoccupation with the limits of language in contexts of political pressure and social complexity.

A similar awareness of the frailties and duplicity of language is balanced against a sense of its manifold possibilities in Carson's next collection of poetry, *For All We Know*, which also continues and develops the tendency of his later work to favour long sequences where the meanings of individual poems depend upon the intricate relations and echoes orchestrated by the whole. As Carson has said, *For All We Know* is 'a kind of hall of mirrors with poems reflecting and commenting on others'.³¹ Formally, the book is a loose sonnet sequence written in alexandrines and divided into two mirrored halves of 35 poems each (multiples of seven recur obsessively throughout), though its structure is

also based upon the contrapuntal variations and refrains of fugue so that images, phrases, and motifs recur repeatedly in different contexts. The convoluted narrative it relates concerns two lovers, Nina and Gabriel, who meet in a second-hand clothes shop in Belfast, and follows them across Europe as their personal relationship becomes bound up with the murky world of Cold War espionage and political intrigue. This allows Carson to explore the confusions of identity and memory at the intersection of private and public worlds, besides showcasing a newfound talent for writing about love and desire in their most complex manifestations. His most recent collection, *On the Night Watch*, also employs the formal templates of the sonnet and the fugue but does so by reprising the very short line he had honed in *Breaking News*. Once again individual poems echo or rework phrases and images, making frequent references to eyebright, a plant associated with memory and clear sight. Every third poem takes its title from the final line of a preceding poem, creating a half-submerged narrative chain that Carson overlays with a diverse and fragmentary set of epistemological meditations. Read from cover to cover, the volume becomes an echo-chamber recycling themes of war and surveillance, illness and loss, memory and forgetting, as Carson pursues a restless nocturnal meditation upon the fallible resources of language. For Michael Hinds, *On the Night Watch* communicates an impression 'that words never stop resounding, no matter how unadorned they may appear'.³² Indeed, while the poems' brevity and terseness seem to promise immediacy, their syntactical ambiguities and cryptic simplicity demand the reader's careful attention not just to what is said but also 'what/ remains unspoken' (*ONW*, 109).

What this brief overview of Carson's career to date impresses upon the reader is both the variety and range of his creative output and his recurrent capacity for reinvention or renewal. Nevertheless, this book will try to show that Carson's diverse engagements with space and place are consistently central to the vitality and originality of his writing, and it may therefore be as well to outline some of the specifically Irish contexts within which such engagements take place. Literary representations of space have long played an important role in shaping the geographical imaginations that predominate in Irish culture. Because issues of territory and the sense of place have historically been highly politicised in Ireland, writing, along with geography and history, is deeply 'implicated in the flexibilities and fluidities of contested constructions of Irish identity'.³³ Indeed, Richard Kirkland notes a recurrent tendency within Northern Irish culture to defer the painful process of historical

inquiry into the fractures and schisms of social division by imagining community in primarily aesthetic and geographical terms. In this way, 'the landscape becomes a mode of redemption through which the writer can mediate the politics of identity to his/her community'.³⁴ Crucial to such 'redemptive' strategies of mediation is an essentially sedentary understanding of place and belonging that is indebted to Martin Heidegger's influential conjugation of being, dwelling, and making. For Heidegger, space is defined as 'that for which room has been made, that which is let into its bounds', and is joined, gathered, and afforded a distinctive identity by its 'location' here rather than there, so that it may be constituted as a familiar 'place'. Moreover, just as space is 'grounded' in its location, so being and dwelling presuppose one another: 'Man's relation to locations, and through locations to spaces, inheres in his dwelling. The relationship between man and space is none other than dwelling, strictly thought and spoken.'³⁵ It is through dwelling, making a home, that 'man' is able to imbue space with meaning and thus found a secure basis for his own identity.

The core assumptions of Heidegger's essentially Romantic conception of space and place are famously echoed in an Irish context by Seamus Heaney in his lecture, 'The Sense of Place', where he distinguishes between two broadly antipathetic modes of apprehending and depicting place that co-exist in productive tension within the literary sensibility. The first of these is described as 'lived, illiterate and unconscious', whereas the other is 'learned, literate and conscious'. And while he acknowledges the importance of the latter understanding of place for many contemporary Irish poets (including himself), Heaney nonetheless concludes by reasserting the primacy of the former for a truly poetic sensibility:

We are dwellers, we are namers, we are lovers, we make homes and search for our histories. And when we look for the history of our sensibilities I am convinced, as Professor J.C. Beckett was convinced about the history of Ireland generally, that it is to what he called the stable element, the land itself, that we must look for continuity.³⁶

Heaney's affirmation of the importance of a direct, perhaps primal, connection with 'the land itself' not only compounds being and dwelling in a conception of place as stable, fixed, and intimately familiar, but also accords special significance to *rural* places and the countryside generally. Yet even a more self-consciously urban and urbane writer such as John Hewitt, in an attempt to sketch out a 'regionalist' ethos for literature in post-war Northern Ireland, could pre-empt Heaney's position by claiming that the 'Ulster writer [...] must be a rooted man [sic], must

carry the native tang of his idiom like the native dust on his sleeve; otherwise he is an airy internationalist, thistledown, a twig in a stream'. 'An artist,' Hewitt avers, 'must have a native place, pinpointed on a map, even if it is only to run away from.'³⁷

As I will show in Chapter I, such notions of community, rootedness, and organic belonging are substantially undermined by recent geographical understandings of space and place, where 'space' is both a product of, and a productive nexus for, social relations, and 'place' is an unfolding spatio-temporal event. Similarly, the profound influence of cultural theory on Irish Studies since the 1980s has prompted challenges to such sedentary understandings of the relationships between space, place, and identity. For example, David Lloyd has famously critiqued the aesthetic politics underlying Heaney's poetry, which rest upon the 'foreclosed surety of the subject's relation to place', relocating 'an individual and racial identity through the reterritorialization of language and culture'.³⁸ In a similar vein, Kirkland argues that Hewitt's regionalism can be understood primarily as 'a mode of evasion: a way of posing delusory ethical debates on the question of bourgeois identity in his work while avoiding any attempt to address political or *territorial* schism'.³⁹ Interestingly, what both of these critical judgements presuppose is that any adequate engagement with the historical and social complexities of Northern Ireland's contemporary situation will also require more nuanced political understandings of its contested geographies and multiple spatialities.

Consequently, critical interrogation of the ways in which 'Ireland' and 'Irishness' are constructed and constituted has come to be regarded as of prime importance,⁴⁰ entailing as it does not only a stringently self-reflexive critical practice but a thoroughgoing consideration of Ireland's historical and geographical particularities. Underlining this point, Claire Connolly contends that Irish Studies' desire 'to mobilise wider frameworks' of theoretical analysis in recent years is bound up with 'a concerted effort to "dislocate" Ireland'.⁴¹ Connolly's self-conscious deployment of a specifically *spatial* metaphor here is telling, for such critical 'dislocations' inevitably re-focus attention upon the overlapping histories and spatialities from which 'Ireland' is composed. 'As the subject of theory, postcolonial and otherwise,' she contends, "'Ireland" must be understood as both the twenty-six-county nation-state and the six-county statelet, and furthermore, in terms of the connections and affiliations not reducible to these relatively new political creations.'⁴²

Conceptions of space and place receive a notably complex series of inflections in the Irish context: whether in terms of Ireland's

history of conquest and colonial subjugation; its longstanding emigrant diaspora and newer immigrant populations; the legacy of partition and competing territorial claims over the North; or the discontinuous but far-reaching globalisation of Irish society since the Republic of Ireland's and Britain's entry into the European Economic Community in 1973. With regard to the latter circumstances, Richard Kearney contends that the interplay between national, international, and regional communities in Ireland produces a triple-layered identity as a result of which 'Irishness is no longer co-terminous with the geographical outlines of an island'.⁴³ Indeed, Kearney's invocation of a hypothetical, imagined 'fifth province' turns upon the articulations and interconnections between local and global manifestations of Irish identity, the parish and the cosmos.⁴⁴ Obvious problems attend such an ambitious 'postnationalist' attempt to re-imagine a unified and inclusive concept of 'Irishness' for a globalised world;⁴⁵ and it is worth noting that the slippages of geography and identity Kearney identifies are nowhere more apparent than in Northern Ireland, where individual and collective identifications are frequently directed either beyond the border or across the Irish Sea, and (with the advent of dual citizenship after 1998) in some cases both. Yet it is also in the North that territorial claims have made themselves felt with most violence and insistence, as is materially evident in modern Belfast's sectarian geography of 'peace lines' and checkpoints, walled estates and boundary zones.⁴⁶ Moreover, as Scott Brewster observes, in 'a history marked by annexation, such as Ireland's, space becomes a site of dispute and an index of power', while territorial tropes figure prominently in the discourses of both colonial authority and cultural nationalism.⁴⁷ Certainly, such tropes continue to dominate the political and cultural representation of Northern Ireland's 'narrow ground',⁴⁸ but Brewster's remarks also point to the increasing salience accorded to geographical perspectives and spatial theory within the contemporary critical practice of Irish Studies itself.⁴⁹

Gerry Smyth's *Space and the Irish Cultural Imagination* is both an exemplary product of and extended critical commentary upon such cross-disciplinary developments, arguing that modern Ireland's 'cultural concern for space has been mirrored by important changes within the critical institutions which attend the study of Irish culture'.⁵⁰ Smyth's central thesis is that, although the study of Irish culture has long been dominated by temporal categories, 'the primary theme of Irish (cultural, political and social) history would appear to be not historical but geographical – specifically, the presence and function of a "special

relationship” between people and place’.⁵¹ Once again, it can be argued that the various political and affective permutations taken by this ‘special relationship’ are especially fraught with regard to Northern Ireland, where the conflicting but also oddly congruent geopolitical discourses of Nationalism and Unionism both posit a series of mythologised identifications whereby land and community, people and place are understood as mutually self-affirming entities. As Aaron Kelly observes, whatever their disagreements and oppositions, Irish Nationalism and Unionism share the characteristic traits of ‘*rusticative* ideologies’, predicated as they are upon ‘organic and essentialist’ representations of place and social relations as a means of effecting the ‘seamless naturalization’ of the identities they underpin.⁵²

Any critical optic informed by cultural theory will, of course, seek to expose and deconstruct the ideological content informing such supposedly natural affinities. To this end, Smyth argues that the ‘special relationship’ between people and place in Irish culture cannot be claimed as a spontaneous expression of primordial belonging but is, in fact, ‘a construction of a later critical imagination intent on organising both the physical terrain *and* the idea of Ireland into the basis for a political ideology’.⁵³ In this context, though, it is possible to wonder whether the ‘special relationship’ Smyth describes is really a distinctively *Irish* phenomenon or simply a local expression of a more widespread feature of European nationalisms generally.⁵⁴ As Eric Hobsbawm notes, the unifying characteristic of nationalisms is their attempt ‘to fit historically novel, emerging, changing and, even today, far from universal entities into a framework of permanence and universality’,⁵⁵ usually by grounding the sovereignty of the nation-state in a geographical territory that is imagined as enduring and immemorial. Similarly, Anthony Smith remarks that the nationalist spatial vision ‘demands a terrain on which nations can be built’ and a ‘homeland’ brought into being.⁵⁶ Nonetheless, Smyth’s thesis is insightful and illuminating insofar as it underlines the extent to which literature and culture function as part of ‘a high-profile negotiation of ideological space’, major players in ‘the ongoing battle for control of the “space” of Ireland, a battle which is no less real for the fact that it is conducted in the virtual realms of language and literature’.⁵⁷ The consideration of factors specific to the Irish context can therefore permit a more nuanced understanding of how representations of space overlay material spaces and places with a range of symbolic or metaphorical associations, which in turn inflect and condition the ways in which those spaces and places are experienced or perceived.

The particular importance of place and identity for Northern Irish poetry is highlighted in Elmer Kennedy-Andrews's *Writing Home*, which also builds upon the recent spatial turn in Irish Studies. Discussing the work of 17 poets published over four decades, the book sets out to explore the ways in which Northern Irish poetry lends itself to being read as a species of 'earth writing', or *geo-graphy*. For Kennedy-Andrews, place is not to be conceived of as bounded or fixed but rather as porous and mutable, always in process of construction through social relations, and he emphasises the polysemic character of 'home' in much Northern Irish poetry, which often connects to more than one place at any given time. To this end, the book identifies two key transformations in how place is understood in contemporary Irish writing. The first concerns a 'shift in the centre of gravity from the country to the city' that is most forcefully evident in Carson's work, but is also apparent in the predominantly urban sensibilities of his precursors Louis MacNeice and Derek Mahon. Kennedy-Andrews observes that Carson's Belfast is both 'a site of alienation, confusion and violence' and 'a place of new opportunities where questions of identity and nationality have to be re-addressed'.⁵⁸ The second relates to the prominence of 'diasporic notions of culture and identity' as opposed to stable or 'rooted' conceptions of belonging. Here, Paul Muldoon and Sinéad Morrissey serve as exemplars, the former tending to regard home as 'a matter of fluid improvisation' and the latter writing out of an identity deemed to be fundamentally deterritorialised and 'nomadic'.⁵⁹ There is, just occasionally, a suspicion of hyperbole about some of Kennedy-Andrews's arguments, such as his assertion that in contemporary Northern Irish poetry 'the materiality of place is dissolved in textual place'. If anything, Carson's writing suggests that it is the text that often struggles to accommodate the sheer heterogeneous materiality of the city it seeks to represent. What is illuminating, however, is Kennedy-Andrews's recognition of the interdependence of places, their mutual imbrication and co-constitution. 'Places are inevitably more or less hybrid,' he writes, 'their character always influenced by relations with other places.'⁶⁰ This awareness of relations and connections is, I will argue, a key aspect of Carson's representations of space and place throughout his career.

The chapters that follow approach these issues and debates from a variety of perspectives, but also seek to consider how his writing challenges and modifies the various critical and theoretical frameworks employed. Chapter 1 undertakes an exposition of recent paradigms for the study of space and place advanced in the fields of geography and

cultural theory in order to set out some methodological markers for my readings of Carson's texts. Of particular interest will be the still various and rather fluid critical formulations for literary geography, which attend to the articulation of material and metaphorical spaces in literary texts, and map the relations between site or location and literary forms. Reading Carson's work in the light of these ideas, I go on to describe the various ways in which he encourages his readers to plot 'imaginative geographies', intuiting the often hidden networks of relations linking here and elsewhere, local places and global spaces. Chapter 2 concentrates on the mapping of urban space in Carson's texts. Maps recur with obsessive frequency in his representations of Belfast, and are often regarded with suspicion because of their complicity with the territorial prescriptions of vested interests. However, maps and mapping actually function dialectically in Carson's work both as instruments of power to be resisted and as the means by which such resistance might be effected. By dramatising this contradiction, Carson's acutely self-conscious meta-cartography attempts to calibrate Belfast's deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation as it is reconfigured both by its contemporary conflict and by its uneven integration into the late capitalist space of flows.

Moving from the fixed aerial perspective of the map to the contingent sensations and potential disorientations of the city streets, Chapter 3 considers the poetics and politics implied by bodies moving through space. Carson makes recurrent use of the trope of walking in the city both as a metaphor for the act of writing and, in Michel de Certeau's terms, as a resistant spatial practice entailing the mobile and often subversive circulation of citizens within the regulated precincts of urban space. The extent to which Belfast is subject to surveillance and the policing of movements – by representatives of the state and by paramilitary forces – produces a characteristic tension between certainty and uncertainty, where seemingly fixed social relations contrast with a parallel unfixing of meanings and interpretations. Nonetheless, the digressive and disparate trajectories of Carson's ambulant characters and narrators gradually accumulate and intersect in a metaphorical illustration of his point that our attempts to understand or construct the worlds we inhabit involve the ceaseless making and unmaking of links, relationships, and connections. Chapter 4 examines the entwinement of place and memory in Carson's efforts to record the complexity and variety of the city in history. The creatively positive response to urban change and the ephemeral fluctuations of modern experience that is evident in much of his work vies with a powerful undertow of loss and

nostalgia as intimately known places – indeed, whole sections of Belfast’s built environment – are obliterated or transformed. On the one hand, memory functions for Carson as a mode of consolation, and the contemporary city is haunted by the shades of demolished streets and scattered communities. On the other, however, memory serves as an always fallible but politically exigent organ of retrieval and reclamation, composing a fragmentary record of documentary investigations and anecdotes that implicitly upbraids the procedures of official historiography. In this way, that which was is measured against what might have been and Belfast emerges as a palimpsest of memories elaborated in time and space.

In Chapter 5 attention is paid to Carson’s interests in and experiments with narrative, particularly his adaptations of procedures and formulas employed in traditional Irish storytelling. Narrative appeals to Carson because it provides a means of shaping or patterning the chaos of experience, but he also distrusts its capacity to impose upon events any singular and exclusive interpretation. Consequently, the proliferating stories that his poems and prose texts bring into conjunction attest to his conviction that no one account can ever be adequate to the reality it describes. Moreover, Carson’s labyrinthine narratives of digression and divagation, moves and counter-moves are congruent with the space of the city they so often describe, which must also be navigated by way of detours and deviations, following courses that are circumlocutory and round-about. Finally, Chapter 6 considers the bilingual or multilingual basis for much of Carson’s work, focusing particularly upon his longstanding engagements with translation but doing so within the larger context of his reflexive concerns with language as a medium of representation. Throughout, I note the slippage that frequently occurs between translation as an important component of his creative practice and its status as a theme or trope requiring investigation and scrutiny. The dilemmas and indeterminacies affecting translation, which may issue in the ‘Babel-babble’ of semiotic flux, provide a tenacious parallel to the shifting fabric of social space in process of production. Moreover, the border dialogues that Carson’s translations facilitate highlight the condition of ‘ambilocation’ or ‘hyphenation’ that is characteristic of his more recent work, its sense of being neither here nor there, existing in those spaces of the betwixt and between from which stories are generated.

The ambition of this book is to produce a coherent but flexible critical framework for reading the majority of Carson’s work to date, while also attending to the irreducible particularity and eccentricity of

his individual texts. It will be up to the reader to decide whether or not it succeeds. The pleasure of reading Carson is perhaps necessarily bound up with an experience of perplexity, for he is as interested in what might go awry in the process of communication as in ensuring its smooth functioning. Indeed, this margin for doubt, uncertainty, or even incomprehension is something that Carson values himself as a reader, for he says of the poems of Paul Celan: 'I don't pretend to know what the poems mean, but I'm astonished by their immense linguistic depths, their venturing into a world which seems to use language to go beyond language, or beyond our normal understanding of it.'⁶¹ That sense that language might move us beyond our 'normal understanding' at the same moment that it abandons readily comprehensible meaning informs his own conception of poetry as 'other', engaged in a process of 'exploration' and 'discovery' that cannot be second-guessed.⁶² My readings of Carson's texts are intended in a similarly exploratory spirit and seek always to acknowledge their otherness, their deliberate resistance to framing and explanation. They trace patterns of coherence and incoherence where I find them, but also, I hope, leave space for other readings to come.

Notes

- 1 Louis MacNeice, 'Snow', in *Collected Poems*, ed. E.R. Dodds (London: Faber & Faber, 1966), p. 30. MacNeice's influence upon Carson is most explicitly registered in his poems 'Snow' (*BC*, 20–1) and 'Bagpipe Music' (*FL*, 50–3), which each develop skewed intertextual conversations with poems of the same titles by MacNeice. However, Carson has downplayed the importance of MacNeice's example for his work in interview: see John Brown, *In the Chair: Interviews with Poets from the North of Ireland* (Cliffs of Moher: Salmon Publishing, 2002), p. 149.
- 2 Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, 'For all I know: Ciaran Carson in conversation with Elmer Kennedy-Andrews', in Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, ed., *Ciaran Carson: Critical Essays* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2009), p. 20. For a detailed account of some of Carson's affinities with Joyce see David Butler, "'Slightly out of Synch": Joycean Strategies in Ciaran Carson's *The Twelfth of Never*', *Irish University Review* 33.2 (2003), pp. 337–55.
- 3 Neil Corcoran, *After Yeats and Joyce: Reading Modern Irish Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 152.
- 4 Frank Budgen, *James Joyce and the Making of Ulysses* (London: Grayson & Grayson, 1934), p. 69.
- 5 Shane Alcobia-Murphy, *Governing the Tongue in Northern Ireland: The Place of Art/The Art of Place* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2005), p. 112.
- 6 Brown, *In the Chair*, p. 141.
- 7 Heather Clark, *The Ulster Renaissance: Poetry in Belfast 1962–1972* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 9.
- 8 Fran Brearton, 'Poetry of the 1960s: the "Northern Ireland Renaissance"', in

- Matthew Campbell, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Contemporary Irish Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 107.
- 9 Ciaran Carson, 'Afterword', in Frank Ormsby, ed., *The Blackbird's Nest: An Anthology of Poetry from Queen's University Belfast* (Belfast: The Blackstaff Press, 2003), p. 127.
- 10 Clark, *The Ulster Renaissance*, p. 194.
- 11 Ciaran Carson, 'Escaped from the Massacre?', *The Honest Ulsterman* 50 (winter 1975), pp. 183, 185.
- 12 Carson, 'Escaped from the Massacre?', p. 183.
- 13 Carson, 'Escaped from the Massacre?', pp. 184, 186.
- 14 Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973).
- 15 Tom Paulin, 'Shivering Laurels', *The Honest Ulsterman* 51 (Jan/April 1976), pp. 86, 89, 87.
- 16 Paulin, 'Shivering Laurels', p. 88.
- 17 Rand Brandes, 'Ciaran Carson Interviewed by Rand Brandes', *The Irish Review* 8 (1990), p. 81.
- 18 David Trotter, *The Making of the Reader: Language and Subjectivity in Modern American, English and Irish Poetry* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1984), p. 189.
- 19 Sarah Broom, *Contemporary British and Irish Poetry: An Introduction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 142.
- 20 John Goodby, *Irish Poetry Since 1950: From Stillness into History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 290.
- 21 Brandes, 'Ciaran Carson Interviewed', pp. 82–3; Neil Corcoran, 'One Step Forward, Two Steps Back: Ciaran Carson's *The Irish for No*', in Neil Corcoran, ed., *The Chosen Ground: Essays on the Contemporary Poetry of Northern Ireland* (Bridgend: Seren Books, 1992), p. 217.
- 22 Ciaran Carson, 'Interesting Times', *The Honest Ulsterman* 74 (winter 1983), p. 36.
- 23 'I don't think I'm social at all! I wouldn't see myself as being someone who has "something to say". All I can do is observe things and invent stories about it all. What sort of ties my poems have to with the world I don't know.' Niall McGrath, 'Ciaran Carson Interviewed by Niall McGrath', *Edinburgh Review* 93 (1995), p. 61.
- 24 Brown, *In the Chair*, p. 148.
- 25 Alcobia-Murphy, *The Government of the Tongue*, pp. 23–4.
- 26 Alan Gillis, 'Ciaran Carson: beyond Belfast', in Nicholas Allen and Aaron Kelly, eds, *The Cities of Belfast* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2003), p. 184.
- 27 Butler, 'Slightly out of Synch', pp. 338–9.
- 28 R.F. Foster, *Luck and the Irish: A Brief History of Change, c. 1970–2000* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2008), p. 143. See also Terence Brown, *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History 1922–2002* (London: Harper Perennial, 2004), pp. 390–6.
- 29 Nick Topping, 'Out of the Pub and into QUB: Nick Topping talks to Professor Ciaran Carson', *Fortnight* 420 (December 2003), p. 16.
- 30 Broom, *Contemporary British and Irish Poetry*, p. 176.
- 31 Kennedy-Andrews, 'For all I know', p. 22.
- 32 Michael Hinds, 'A deadly sense of comedy', *Irish Times*, 1 August 2009 <<http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/weekend/2009/0801/1224251814377.html>> [accessed 28 September 2009]

- 33 Patrick J. Duffy, 'Writing Ireland: Literature and art in the representation of Irish place', in Brian Graham, ed., *In Search of Ireland: A cultural geography* (London; New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 64, 66.
- 34 Richard Kirkland, *Literature and Culture in Northern Ireland Since 1965: Moments of Danger* (London: Longman, 1996), p. 33.
- 35 Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans., Albert Hofstadter (London: Perennial, 2001), pp. 152, 155. It is worth noting that there is a longer poetic provenance for the importance of 'dwelling' as a mode of being, for example in Ben Jonson's 'To Penshurst'. I am grateful to Julie Sanders for drawing my attention to this broader tradition. For a more sympathetic reading of Heidegger in relation to poetic representations of place see Jonathan Bate, *The Song of the Earth* (London: Picador, 2000), pp. 258–62.
- 36 Seamus Heaney, *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968–1978* (London: Faber & Faber, 1980), pp. 131, 148–9.
- 37 John Hewitt, *Ancestral Voices: The Selected Prose of John Hewitt*, ed. Tom Clyde (Belfast: The Blackstaff Press, 1987), p. 115.
- 38 David Lloyd, *Anomalous States: Irish Writing and the Post-Colonial Moment* (Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 1993), pp. 25, 20.
- 39 Kirkland, *Literature and Culture in Northern Ireland*, p. 30.
- 40 Colin Graham and Richard Kirkland, 'Introduction', in Colin Graham and Richard Kirkland, eds, *Ireland and Cultural Theory: The Mechanics of Authenticity* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), p. 6.
- 41 Claire Connolly, 'Theorising Ireland', *Irish Studies Review* 9.3 (2001), pp. 307–8.
- 42 Connolly, 'Theorising Ireland', p. 312.
- 43 Richard Kearney, *Postnationalist Ireland: Politics, Culture, Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 99.
- 44 Kearney, *Postnationalist Ireland*, p. 100.
- 45 The main stumbling block, it seems to me, concerns the ambiguous relationship between nationalism and postnationalism in Kearney's framework. Although he is energetically critical of the conceptual foundations and political functioning of the nation-state, Kearney still appears to regard the nation as a worthwhile and necessary focus for communal identifications which should be salvaged and recuperated within the new postnationalist order. In this regard, he remains bound by the very conceptual and ideological constraints that he sets out to undermine and supersede. For a more detailed critique of Kearney's thinking along similar lines to these see Colin Graham, *Deconstructing Ireland: Identity, Theory, Culture* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001), pp. 94–8.
- 46 Neil Jarman, 'Intersecting Belfast', in Barbara Bender, ed., *Landscape: Politics and Perspectives* (Oxford: Berg, 1993), p. 107.
- 47 Scott Brewster, 'Introduction: Space', in Scott Brewster, Virginia Crossman, Fiona Becket, and David Alderson, eds, *Ireland in Proximity: History, Gender, Space* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 125. Seamus Deane also notes that the terms 'territory', 'land', and 'soil' become particularly loaded with ideological meaning in Irish literary and political discourse after the Famine in the mid-nineteenth century. Seamus Deane, *Strange Country: Modernity and Nationhood in Irish Writing Since 1790* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p. 70.
- 48 See A.T.Q. Stewart, *The Narrow Ground: Aspects of Ulster 1609–1969* (Belfast: The Blackstaff Press, 1977).

- 49 For two differently shaded accounts of these critical developments see Brian Graham, 'Ireland and Irishness: Place, culture and identity', in Brian Graham, ed., *In Search of Ireland: A cultural geography* (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 1–15, and Yvonne Whelan and Liam Harte, 'Placing Geography in Irish Studies: Symbolic Landscapes of Spectacle and Memory', in Liam Harte and Yvonne Whelan, eds, *Ireland Beyond Boundaries: Mapping Irish Studies in the Twenty-first Century* (London: Pluto, 2007), pp. 175–97.
- 50 Gerry Smyth, *Space and the Irish Cultural Imagination* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), p. xvi.
- 51 Smyth, *Space and the Irish Cultural Imagination*, p. 20.
- 52 Aaron Kelly, *The Thriller and Northern Ireland since 1969: Utterly Resigned Terror* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), p. 83.
- 53 Smyth, *Space and the Irish Cultural Imagination*, p. 63–4.
- 54 To this end, Brian Graham argues that 'there is little that is conceptually exceptional about Irish nationalism', setting his own discussion of place, culture, and identity in Ireland within wider European frames of reference. Graham, 'Ireland and Irishness', p. 7.
- 55 E.J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780: Programme, myth, reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2nd edn, 1992), p. 6.
- 56 Anthony D. Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), p. 184.
- 57 Smyth, *Space and the Irish Cultural Imagination*, p. 71.
- 58 Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, *Writing Home: Poetry and Place in Northern Ireland 1968–2008* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2008), pp. 11, 204.
- 59 Kennedy-Andrews, *Writing Home*, pp. 11, 113, 258.
- 60 Kennedy-Andrews, *Writing Home*, p. 19.
- 61 Kennedy-Andrews, 'For all I know', p. 16.
- 62 Ciaran Carson, 'The Other', in W.N. Herbert and Matthew Hollis, eds, *Strong Words: Modern poets on modern poetry* (Tarsset: Bloodaxe, 2000), p. 235.



CHAPTER ONE

Imaginative Geographies: The Politics and Poetics of Space

The singularity of a literary work, argues Derek Attridge, is best understood as an event in which the reader experiences both inventiveness and alterity. Each reading constitutes ‘an appreciation, a living-through, of the invention that makes the work not just different but a creative re-imagination of cultural materials’.¹ My contention is that the singularity of Ciaran Carson’s writing rests upon his far-reaching imaginative engagements with ideas of space and place, and particularly urban spatiality in an Irish context. It is the purpose of this chapter to set out a critical framework for exploring these engagements in their widest manifestations. Carson’s oeuvre, in poetry, prose, and translations, is in many ways remarkably diverse and eclectic, ranging as it does across generic, geographical, linguistic, and disciplinary boundaries with seeming effortless enthusiasm, insistently placing ‘literature’ within the constellations of a wider universe of discourse and deliberately eschewing distinctions between ‘high’ and ‘low’ cultural forms. He is restlessly inventive in his experiments with form, combining and reworking a wide range of poetic structures and metres with elements adapted from fictional and non-fiction prose narratives, music and popular song, the visual arts and vernacular speech patterns. However, in spite of this propensity for variety there is little doubt that the city of Belfast occupies a central place within Carson’s heterogeneous texts, functioning as a sort of imaginative focal point around which his many other concerns – music, language, narrative, memory, history – are arrayed, like spokes on the hub of a wheel. Belfast is a ground that Carson’s writing returns to again and again, finding it altered each time but also reworking the spatiality of its social life after its own fashion. Neil Corcoran has said that Carson is ‘pre-eminently, the poet of Belfast in its contemporary disintegration’,² and Peter Barry regards his poetry as ‘relentlessly loco-specific’, its imaginative texture bearing



the indelible imprint of the city's urban materiality.³ The city, in all its historical and topographical complexity, serves both as an abiding if not omnipresent frame of reference and as a reservoir of creative impetus for Carson's work.

This imaginative centrality, and Carson's creative re-imagination of the cultural materials the city provides, is exemplified in miniature in the poem 'Belfast', which opens his 2003 collection *Breaking News*. It reads, in full:

east

beyond the yellow
shipyard cranes

a blackbird whistles
in a whin bush

west

beside the motorway
a black taxi

rusts in a field
of blue thistles (*BN*, 11)

Like John Hewitt's poem, 'Gloss, on the difficulties of translation', 'Belfast' refers to a ninth-century scribal poem in Irish, sometimes known as 'The Blackbird of Belfast Lough',⁴ which, Hewitt notes, is 'the first written reference/ to my native place'.⁵ There may be a further reference to Wallace Stevens's poem, 'Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird', though its title and some of its images also link it to Louis MacNeice's 'Belfast', which invokes a near-apocalyptic vision of the city's shipyards, where 'hammers clang murderously on the girders' and gantries stand over the lough like 'crucifixes'.⁶ Carson's epigrammatic poem therefore establishes a network of intertextual relations, and its own depiction of Belfast re-inflects the traces of these prior representations. At the same time it provides a succinct illustration of the complex, many-layered figuration of spatiality that is characteristic of his work.

Like MacNeice's poem, Carson's 'Belfast' conveys, both formally and at the level of content, an image of the city as starkly divided. Each pair of unrhymed couplets is prefaced by a blunt, monosyllabic indicator of direction – the vectors 'east' and 'west' – at once dividing the poem into two mirrored sections and calling attention to the fundamental cleavage of Belfast's urban topography by the river Lagan,

which flows north-eastwards along the Lagan valley and through the city to its estuary at the neck of Belfast Lough. However, this purely geographical distinction between the eastern and western halves of the city's material space alludes metaphorically to Belfast's socio-political and sectarian divisions as they are variously manifested in physical space ('peace-walls', ghettoisation, demographic relocations), mental space (the ideological policing of exclusive 'communities' and no-go areas), and social space (particular spatial practices serving to reinforce socio-spatial segregation). The 'yellow/ shipyard cranes' metonymically represent Protestant Unionist East Belfast and its working-class histories, while the 'black taxi' performs a similar function for the Catholic Nationalist west of the city. One way of reading the poem, therefore, is in terms of its coded but topographically precise references to the city's ingrained divisions and socio-political polarities.

To read 'Belfast' only in this way, however, would be reductive and mechanical, for the poem never dwells explicitly upon the sectarian geographies of the city – which are in any case much more complex than a simple east–west distinction can comprehend⁷ – or upon the violence that has compounded and sustained them. Arguably, this is because it is concerned with finding other ways of conceiving and representing the city's heterogeneous spatiality. Indeed, 'Belfast' combines the poise and brevity of haiku, American Imagist poetics, and the miniaturist detailing of medieval Irish lyrics in order to establish subtle patterns of echo and counterpoint within the 'space' of the poem that both acknowledge and attempt to imaginatively recast Belfast's deep-seated socio-spatial divisions. It is in this recasting that the poem's singularity, in Attridge's terms, can be seen to lie. There is no question here of somehow 'transcending' the brute realities of sectarianism, or the fundamentally territorial and identitarian disputes that lie at the root of the Northern Irish Troubles. But, as I try to show in detail in this book, Carson's representations of Belfast resist and rebuke the idea that the spatial, social, and historical multiplicity of the city can be reduced to a polarised sectarian grid of forces and crass binary oppositions. In this regard, 'Belfast' can best be understood as a compact literary collage, formally reflecting the mosaic of interdigitations that comprise the city's physical and social geography.

As Ian Davidson notes, the Cubist technique of collage or montage was crucial to the 'spatial turn' in twentieth-century art, suggesting new forms of correspondence and coincidence, 'new types of conjunctions and disjunctions' between objects and ideas.⁸ In line with such impulses,

one of the poem's key juxtapositions is to bring emblems of urban or industrial modernity into proximity and conjunction with images drawn from the natural world, a sense of spatial correspondence that is underlined by the initiating force of the prepositions 'beyond' and 'beside'. But this juxtaposition also turns on coincidence, for the striking yellow bill of the 'whistling' blackbird recalls the colour of the iconic cranes of Harland & Wolff's shipyard, and the rusting hulk of the abandoned black taxi has already begun to blend harmoniously with the 'field of blue thistles' in which it has come to rest. Similarly, while the shipyard cranes and taxi are initially opposed to one another as symbols of manufacture and disintegration, creation and decay respectively, this opposition is ultimately unstable and open to deconstruction. At the time of the poem's composition the Harland & Wolff cranes were largely idle, little more than embarrassed reminders of Belfast's glorious past as a world-beating centre for shipbuilding amid a backdrop of more general post-industrial restructuring.⁹ Similarly, when considered closely the slow corrosion and decrepitude of the taxi by the motorway takes on a curiously generative, fecund aspect, as if to imply that what is taking place is a process of decomposition and transformation that may, in fact, be imaginatively productive. Indeed, this deconstructive inter-meshing of seeming opposites is also facilitated at the level of form and sound-sense, for the two 'halves' of the poem are subtly linked by the alliterative repetition of 'b' sounds – 'beyond', 'blackbird', 'bush', 'beside', 'black', 'blue' – all of which are implicitly subtended by the resonant title of the poem: 'Belfast'. The point is further reinforced by the poem's only full rhyme, between 'whistles' and 'thistles', which also serves to bring cranes and taxi, field and whin bush, east and west into closer proximity, implying the porosity of the divisions described.

On closer inspection, then, this seemingly static text discloses a conception of place that is attentive to the ambivalence and instability affecting those cleavages it depicts as structuring the city's urban spatiality. Its representation of the city is also bound up with a sense of the 'event' of place, the ways in which Belfast remains open to historical processes both within and beyond itself, and is reworked or transformed by these over the course of time. Moreover, both the shipyard cranes overlooking the harbour and the ribbon of motorway that runs past the stationary black taxi gesture outwards towards the various routes of transport, trade, and travel – both terrestrial and maritime – that link Belfast to other places physically remote from it. In doing so, they also metonymically invoke those more intangible networks of exchange and

interaction, communication and transmission through which the city is obscurely integrated into the global totality of socio-economic relations. Through its understated, minimalist collage of elements of the city's topography and emblems of its social life, then, Carson's poem alludes to the multiple divisions and convergences informing Belfast's particular and ongoing socio-spatial dialectic. To this extent, it concisely illustrates Edward Larrissy's point that the poems in *Breaking News* often describe and exemplify 'a poetry of the global found in the local'.¹⁰

'Belfast' thereby also underlines the more general importance of ideas of space and place, geography and topology for Carson's aesthetic, an importance that has been noted by several critics of his work. Alex Houen, for instance, reads Carson's work in geopolitical terms, contending that his texts offer 'a novel way of mapping the political violence [of the Troubles] in relation to its socio-political context'.¹¹ Similarly, Jonathan Stainer reads Carson prose book, *The Star Factory*, as offering genuine alternatives to sectarian imaginaries by affording 'shifts in position and perspective, reconfiguring or "recoding" the city in resistive and marginal "parallel" geographies'.¹² These are illuminating perspectives to adopt when reading Carson, but there remains considerable scope for adapting and applying ideas generated by the theoretical ferment of the 'new' geography, the accompanying 'spatial turn' in cultural theory, and more recent paradigms for 'literary geographies' to interpretations of his work. To that end, this chapter will consider Carson's work in the contexts of such theoretical and critical developments, which tend to be cross-disciplinary, and in so doing seek to lay a methodological foundation for the more closely focused thematic readings undertaken in subsequent chapters. It will also move on to discuss the elaboration in Carson's work of 'imaginative geographies' through which the relations between local and global locations, and between material and metaphorical spaces, are represented and explored.

A good place to begin considering recent developments in the conception of space and place is Michel Foucault's account of the longstanding tendency in critical thought for subordinating space to time, geography to history:

A critique could be carried out of this devaluation of space that has prevailed for generations. Did it start with Bergson, or before? Space was treated as the dead, the fixed, the undialectical, the immobile. Time, on the contrary, was richness, fecundity, life, dialectic.¹³

Foucault's remarks succinctly identify two central assumptions about space and spatiality that have been progressively challenged and

undermined by the spatial turn in critical social theory. The first of these is the widespread conception of space as an inert container, an *a priori* backdrop against which objects are distributed or a fixed surface on which historical events occur and social life is played out. Edward Soja traces this view of space as essentially neutral and unchanging, as a setting for power struggles rather than a component of such struggles, to the epistemological primacy of an 'historical imagination' that became dominant in the nineteenth century and continued well into the mid-twentieth century. This powerful historical imagination promoted a 'temporal master-narrative' as part of its critical hermeneutic that substantially inhibited the development of a comparably geographical imagination as counter-balance.¹⁴ The second assumption follows from and reinforces the first: space is conceived as the opposite of time, is defined negatively through a series of polarised binaries, and comes to be devalued in critical thought as a result. As Doreen Massey comments: 'Over and over again, time is defined by things such as change, movement, history, dynamism; while space, rather lamely by comparison, is simply the absence of these things.'¹⁵ The combined result of these assumptions and their persistence in critical thought has been to effectively depoliticise space and geography, and to deny them any significant role in the currents of history, which was typically understood solely in terms of time and temporality. Yet, as Foucault remarks, 'space is fundamental in any form of communal life; space is fundamental in any exercise of power'.¹⁶ A reassertion of the essentially political nature of space and spatial relations is, therefore, a key component of the spatial turn and the new geography, one that has been further supported and enhanced by the growth of postcolonial theory and analyses of the contemporary restructuring of global capitalism. Indeed, by 1985 John Urry felt able to declare that 'it is space rather than time which is the distinctively significant dimension of contemporary capitalism, both in terms of the most salient processes and in terms of a more general social consciousness'.¹⁷

Crucial to this recognition and reassertion of the politics of space has been the effort to conceive of space as other than immobile, inert, ahistorical, and undialectical, and to theorise it instead as an active and fundamental component of social processes. In this connection, David Harvey notes that the critical focus of much work in the new geographies 'is on the process of *becoming* through which people (and geographers) transform themselves through transforming both their natural and social milieus'.¹⁸ Moreover, for Massey, not only history but also space is radically 'open', the product of multifarious interactions, juxtapositions,

and relations-between at scales ranging from the personal and local to the global and cosmological. Conceived in this way, space is 'always under construction' and so 'never finished; never closed' – it is not a coherent synchronic structure but an 'event', and therefore cannot be regarded as either 'a-political' or 'a-temporal'.¹⁹ Particularly significant for such overtly politicised reconsiderations of the nature of space is the work of the French Marxist philosopher Henri Lefebvre, especially his major text, *The Production of Space*. The ambiguous title of Lefebvre's book neatly encapsulates the dialectical core of his argument, which asserts that, far from being naturally given and essentially inert, space is both socially produced and productive of determinate social relations:

The state and each of its constituent institutions call for spaces – but spaces which they can then organize according to their specific requirements; so there is no sense in which space can be treated solely as an *a priori* condition of these institutions and the state which presides over them. [...] Though a *product* to be used, to be consumed, it is also a *means of production*; networks of exchange and flows of raw materials and energy fashion space and are determined by it.²⁰

Here, Lefebvre describes what Soja calls the 'socio-spatial dialectic', through which it is understood that 'social and spatial relations are dialectically inter-reactive, interdependent; that social relations of production are both space-forming and space-contingent'.²¹ Space, then, is socially produced; but equally, society and social relations are also shaped by their constitution in space. In which case, the production of space is profoundly historical and political – 'the terrain of political practice' itself – saturated with ideology and shot through with temporal rhythms.²²

In the course of his attempts to describe and conceptualise this treacherous and over-inscribed 'terrain', Lefebvre sets out a series of spatial triads, two of which seem particularly relevant for our purposes.²³ The first of these concerns the contingent three-way relationship between those 'fields' which are the objects of spatial knowledge: *physical* space (nature and the cosmos), *mental* space (logical and formal abstractions concerning space), and *social* space (the space of social relations and practice).²⁴ Lefebvre, however, is particularly interested in social space because, as Soja observes, it is at once a space distinguishable from physical and mental space, with which it remains in dialectical relations, and also 'a transcending composite of all spaces', subsuming the relations between physical and mental space within itself.²⁵ This already complex situation is further complicated by another of Lefebvre's conceptual

triads, perhaps his most important, which concerns the historically variable interactions within social space between what he calls spatial practices, representations of space, and representational spaces.²⁶ Spatial practices are primarily associated with space as it is *perceived* and deciphered by human subjects, and thus serve to structure everyday reality, inscribing routes and patterns of interaction that link places set aside for work and leisure, public and private life. By contrast, representations of space are bound up with *conceived* or conceptualised space, with the attempts to order socio-spatial relations on the part of planners, architects, cartographers, and technocrats, and as such are inevitably embedded with power, knowledge, and ideology. Finally, representational spaces concern space as it is *lived* through its multiple images and symbols, and are linked to underground or alternative forms of social life as well as the imaginative and affective qualities of art and culture. As Lefebvre says, representational space 'overlays physical space, making symbolic use of its objects'.²⁷ Indeed, the 'fantasy of art' – its function and fundamental aspiration – is to effect a shift within present space from the dominant representations of space 'into what is further off, into nature, into symbols, into representational spaces'.²⁸ Yet this social space of lived experience is inevitably elusive, constantly under threat from the representations of space projected by developers and bureaucrats that seek to appropriate and dominate it, particularly through the production of the simultaneously fragmented and homogenising 'abstract space' that is characteristic of contemporary multinational capitalism. Abstract space seeks to occlude or occult 'differential space', the space of difference, otherness, and particularity, by erasing distinctions and either repressing or formalising both conscious and unconscious modes of lived experience.²⁹ Nonetheless, Lefebvre insists that abstract space is not, in fact, homogeneous but actually 'multiform', riven by conflicts that are internal to its make-up, conflicts that may 'foster the explosion of abstract space and the production of a space that is other'.³⁰

Lefebvre's ideas concerning the production of space have had a significant impact not only upon the new geography and the social sciences generally, but also upon cultural theory, where the currency of 'space' as a critical concept has begun to contest the longstanding primacy held by 'time'. Foucault, no doubt thinking of the contemporaneous impact of structuralism on the human and social sciences, claimed in 1967 that the present age 'may be the age of space':

We are in an era of the simultaneous, of juxtaposition, of the near and the far, of the side-by-side, of the scattered. We exist at a moment when the

world is experiencing, I believe, something less like a great life that would develop through time than like a network that connects points and weaves its skein.

Importantly, he also goes on to qualify this declaration by noting that space also has a history, and that it would therefore be unwise to ignore the 'inevitable interlocking of time with space'.³¹ Foucault's point about 'the age of space' is echoed and extrapolated by Fredric Jameson, who argues that space can be considered 'an existential and cultural dominant' in postmodernism, and proposes a boldly schematic distinction between the epistemological priorities of modernism and postmodernism. 'We have often been told,' he writes, 'that we now inhabit the synchronic rather than the diachronic, and I think it is at least empirically arguable that our daily life, our psychic experience, our cultural languages, are today dominated by categories of space rather than by categories of time, as in the preceding period of modernism.'³² It is difficult to wholly agree either with Jameson's periodisation here, or with the starkly binary nature of the opposition he identifies. Lefebvre, for his part, dates the decisive shattering of Euclidian and perspectivist space to 'around 1910', the same date that Virginia Woolf linked with a shift in the perception of 'human character' making new demands upon modern fiction.³³ Furthermore, there is a growing critical consensus that questions of space and geography fully as much as those bearing upon time condition the experience of modernity and the imagination of modernism.³⁴ For instance, the cultural historian Stephen Kern has shown that, during the modernist period, innovations in technology, communications, and transport networks had profound effects upon how space was experienced and conceived in social and cultural life. As a result, the traditional view of space as 'an inert void in which objects existed' gradually gave way to 'a new view of it as active and full'.³⁵

What is also troubling about Jameson's distinction is the way in which it opposes space to time, equating the dominance of categories of space in postmodernism with a corresponding 'waning of our historicity, of our lived possibility of experiencing history in some active way'.³⁶ This is to forget the interlocking of time with space to which Foucault draws attention, for, as Massey argues, space is not the opposite or negation of time and temporality, but is rather 'integral to the production of history, and thus to the possibility of politics, just as the temporal is to geography'.³⁷ Although time and space remain distinct and irreducible to one another, they are nonetheless 'co-implicated' and dynamically inter-related.³⁸ In the course of his very perceptive analyses of what he calls

'the displacement of time, the spatialization of the temporal', Jameson does briefly acknowledge that he is describing a shift in the relations between time and space rather than a divorce of the two categories from one another. Yet even his most positive valuation of the libidinal and utopian possibilities offered by postmodernism's 'spatialization' of everyday life regards it in terms of a lamentable impoverishment in 'the capacity to think time and History'.³⁹ What such a differential conception of the relation between time and space necessarily obscures is a full recognition of their coeval implication, or what Massey calls 'the unavoidable challenge of negotiating a here-and-now'.⁴⁰ In such circumstances, we have to make the effort to think time and space, history and geography together at once.

In response to this challenge, David Harvey's geographical analysis of the condition of postmodernity in terms of 'time-space compression' provides a suggestive framework for understanding how the changing character of space and place, as well as time and history, condition cultural production. For Harvey, time-space compression describes the effects of those forces and processes driving economic modernisation 'that so revolutionize the objective qualities of space and time that we are forced to alter, sometimes in quite radical ways, how we represent the world to ourselves'.⁴¹ That is to say, time-space compression involves a crisis in representation, necessitating the generation of new modes of seeing, new forms and languages through which the spatio-temporal co-ordinates of the worlds we inhabit and traverse might be mapped and comprehended. Harvey contends that the transition from a Fordist mode of production to the newer techniques of flexible accumulation characteristic of postmodernity has involved 'an intense phase of time-space compression', one that inevitably 'exacts its toll on our capacity to grapple with the realities unfolding around us'.⁴² But if this experience is a hallmark of the condition of postmodernity then it is by no means unique to it, and nor is time-space compression itself. Indeed, Harvey relates the changing manifestations of the concept to a much longer phase of capitalist modernisation, and particularly to an epistemological break occurring some time after 1848, whereby the 'certainty of absolute space and place gave way to the insecurities of a shifting relative space, in which events in one place could have immediate and ramifying effects in several other places'.⁴³

Clearly, this situation is further intensified in succeeding phases of time-space compression, stimulated not least by the increasingly rapid globalisation of capital and communications media in the contemporary

period. In this context the dialectical relationship between space and place is also further deepened and complicated, for a shrinking globe necessarily brings diverse communities and formerly local processes or traditions into closer contact and competition. For the humanist geographer Yi-Fu Tuan, 'when space feels thoroughly familiar to us, it has become place';⁴⁴ but such intimate familiarity and circumscription is surely imperilled, if not impossible, amid the disorientations and disruptions of postmodernity and globalisation. In fact, as Derek Gregory notes, places 'are local condensations and distillations of tremulous global processes that travel through them and whose effects are reworked and inscribed in them. In the world of high modernity it has become virtually impossible to make sense of what happens in a place without looking beyond the local horizon.'⁴⁵ Place can no longer be, if it ever was, a point of anchorage, stability, and unproblematic identity within the encompassing geopolitical contexts and currents of space, with their forbidding heterogeneity and mobile flows of people, capital, and information. Indeed, the specificity of places has less to do with their isolate uniqueness or bounded integrity than with their status as sites of intersection and passage within larger spatial networks. To that extent, places are best conceived as 'integrations of space and time; as *spatio-temporal events*'.⁴⁶ There can be no polarisation of space and place, therefore, just as there can be no binary opposition between space and time, but instead only relationships of contiguity and overlap that are historically variable. Which is why Marcus Doel is tempted to say that 'there is nothing but *splace*, taking *splace* – *splacing*'; the point being to recognise that place just as much as space is not fixed but in process, an unfolding event of becoming.⁴⁷

How might such (re-)conceptualisations of space and place, history and geography be applied to and enhance critical readings of literary texts? One way to begin answering this question is to note that some of the new geographical thinking has itself been stimulated and influenced by models of reading and textuality drawn from literary theory and criticism. For example, Massey's understanding of space as radically 'open' is partially premised upon her sense that as 'the text has been destabilised in literary theory so space might be destabilised in geography (and indeed in wider social theory)'.⁴⁸ Doel similarly affirms that 'what geography deals with can be refigured as textual: not as a linguistic idealism, but as an affective texturing'.⁴⁹ Poststructuralist ideas concerning the play of signification, undecidability, becoming, and aporia have, then, been crucial to attempts within radical geography to

elaborate conceptions of space and place in terms of processes, networks, and events. Marc Brousseau has also called for geographers to attend more closely to the formal, generic, and linguistic specificities of the literary text *as text*, proposing that it 'may constitute a "geographer" in its own right as it generates norms, particular models of readability, that produce a particular type of geography'.⁵⁰ The intention here is to move away from an instrumental use of literary texts as simply another source of geographical information or as reliable conduits of an authentic 'sense of place' and towards a more productive interdisciplinary dialogue between literary studies and spatial science. However, if geographers can benefit from adopting some of the techniques of the literary critic, then, as Brousseau seems to imply, literary critics should themselves recognise that 'space' has always been an important part of both the content and form of 'literature', whether this has been acknowledged or not. Indeed, as Lefebvre himself remarks, 'any search for space in literary texts will find it everywhere and in every guise: enclosed, described, projected, dreamt of, speculated about'.⁵¹ This is not just to say that spaces are projected and represented *in* literary texts, that every event or plot element must *take place* somewhere or other. Rather, as Sheila Hones observes, texts can themselves be conceived as 'spatial events' that are produced 'at the intersection of agents and situations scattered across time and space', linking authors and readers, editors and publishers, printers and compositors, spaces of production, reproduction, and consumption.⁵²

A very early intervention in the field of literary geography can be found in Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the 'chronotope', through which 'spatial and temporal indicators' are combined and articulated in the literary work.⁵³ The chronotope thereby functions as a narrative focal point for the knotting together of temporal and spatial relationships in the text, and as a representational matrix that serves to concretise abstract or philosophical concerns. For instance, the chronotope of the road, which features prominently in the picaresque novel, creates a spatio-temporal situation in which the paths of a varied cast of characters can intersect and their experiences overlap, so that narrative impetus is generated by the complexity of human relations and the collapse of social distances.⁵⁴ Ultimately, Bakhtin is more interested in the temporality of narrative than the spatiality of literary texts, but Franco Moretti has extended and refined some of his ideas in order to foreground what he calls 'the *ortgebunden*, place-bound nature of literary forms: each of them with its peculiar geometry, its boundaries, its spatial taboos and favourite routes'.⁵⁵ According to Moretti, the form, generic characteristics, even

the style of a given text are substantially conditioned or determined by the spaces and places that it represents and out of which it is written. Consequently, 'space is not the "outside" of narrative, [...] but an internal force, that shapes it from within'.⁵⁶ An illustration of this point can be found in his discussion of the '*phenomenology of the border*' in nineteenth-century historical novels, whereby borders between European states serve as sites of 'adventure', allowing for narrative effects relating to encounters, danger, surprise, suspense, and even causing stylistic changes via a rise in the use of figurative language.⁵⁷ Moretti's suggestive version of literary geography, which involves mapping literary phenomena so as to rearrange their components and bring hidden patterns to light, is mobilised in the service of a mode of literary-historical inquiry that does not readily lend itself to a single-author study such as this one, predicated as it is upon the study of collective systems rather than individual instances of literary production.⁵⁸ Nonetheless, the links he makes between particular spaces and literary forms are illuminating for any reading of Carson's work, as I will show in the chapters which follow.

Literary texts can further be understood to produce 'cognitive maps', providing readers with persuasive but ideologically charged representations of space through which they are encouraged to orient their relations with the wider social worlds in which they move – an idea that I explore in relation to Carson's work in Chapter 2. Julian Murphet contends that because culture is inevitably implicated in the production and reproduction of the socio-spatial structures that define our 'reality', individual works or texts may be 'scrutinised for the labour they perform in programming social subjects for their social space'.⁵⁹ Understanding the politics of space can therefore help to reveal the ideology of the text more fully because culture and geography are inextricably intertwined in the exercise of power. As Edward Said affirms, it is imperative to recognise that just as 'none of us is outside or beyond geography, none of us is completely free from the struggle over geography'. 'That struggle,' he says, 'is complex and interesting because it is not only about soldiers and cannons but also about ideas, about forms, about images and imaginings.'⁶⁰ Hence the emphasis Said places upon the 'geographical articulations' of cultural texts, the many ways in which 'structures of location and geographical reference appear in the cultural languages of literature, history, or ethnography', thereby revealing the emplotments of ideology and power-knowledge.⁶¹ To read texts geographically, then, we have to attend closely to the materiality and historicity of the locations

that they (re-)construct and describe – something that I have tried to do with ‘Belfast’ above. What must also be considered, though, is the nature of the relationship between a text’s representations of space or place and the social spaces that it invokes and addresses. To this end, Andrew Thacker introduces the notion of ‘textual space’, which refers to the mutual implication of material and metaphorical spaces in the writing and reading of any literary text, and also describes the dialectical relationship between literary forms and social space. In Thacker’s succinct formulation: *‘Literary texts represent social spaces, but social space shapes literary forms.’*⁶²

The co-implication of material and metaphorical spaces is discussed by Carson – though not in those terms exactly – in the course of a 1991 interview with Frank Ormsby. Carson is prompted to consider what might be called the ‘ground’ for his writing, and his acutely reflective response helpfully identifies a tension or ambiguity that is arguably fundamental to his representations of space and place:

For years I’ve had a series of recurrent dreams about Belfast – nightmares, sometimes, or dreams of containment, repression, anxiety and claustrophobia ... often, I’m lost in an ambiguous labyrinth between the Falls and the Shankill; at other times, the city is idealized and takes on a Gothic industrial beauty. It’s a landscape I know almost better than the waking city: so at times I’m disappointed that the complicated scenery of the dream world is not to be found on the ‘real’ map. But then, the real world sometimes throws up details that are contiguous to the dream. Often they are just as surreal, as shocking and bizarre, as nightmares. Perhaps the poems I write are located somewhere between the two worlds.⁶³

The chief interest of this passage lies not the kernel of biographical self-revelation, however intriguing that may be; nor should we interpret Carson’s words as an expression of faith in the transcendent powers of the poetic imagination, which would dislodge the prosaic impositions of the ‘real’ in favour of a sublime ‘dream’ world that is both terrifying and beautiful. It is clear that that is not what he is saying. Rather, what is most revealing is the way in which the opposition that Carson initially sets up between the ‘real’ map of Belfast and the shape-shifting cities of his dreams becomes progressively deconstructed as he talks on, and is recast instead as a relationship of contiguity in which dreams can be deceptively realistic and the ‘real world’ of Belfast during the Troubles is apt to appear shocking, bizarre, or surreal. That he regards his own poetry as being ‘located somewhere between the two worlds’ is illuminating not because this recognition provides a resolution to the tension

described, a satisfying synthesis that would transcend the dialectical opposition, but because it *deepens* the ambiguity, acknowledging its profundity and its generative possibilities both at once.

Clearly, symbolic or metaphorical representations of space are inflected and conditioned (often indirectly) by the material forces and affective qualities of the physical spaces to which they respond and refer. But equally, such mental projections of ideas and images also act upon and influence (again, indirectly) the lived experience of social space. Or, as James Donald remarks with specific reference to urban space, the city we experience 'is always already symbolised and metaphorised': 'In the subjective life of the city dweller, there is no possibility of defining clear-cut boundaries between reality and imagination.'⁶⁴ Such conflations are made explicit in Carson's prose memoir, *The Star Factory*, where recollections of his Belfast childhood are intertwined with accounts of his attempts to navigate the metamorphic city of his dreams. One chapter relates 'a tangled recurrent dream' where the dense intersections of streets in central Belfast are described in such hallucinatory detail that the cityscape is rapidly destabilised, merging with its cinematic representation in Carol Reed's 1947 film, *Odd Man Out*, but also retains an uncanny familiarity and realism: 'Sometimes, with a *doppelgänger* jolt, I recognize this is the real world, only slightly altered since I last visited, or was invited, and I acknowledge my shadow' (*SF*, 127, 129). Further mutations occur later in the same dream-narrative, as 'the streets turn into wynds and stairs when least expected' and each version of the urban plan dissolves spontaneously into the next (*SF*, 134–5).

A similarly complex imbrication of real and imagined spaces occurs in an unpublished poem, 'Alphabet City', which probably dates from the early 1990s. Here, the narrator's dream narrative not only conflates Belfast with a version of Virginia Woolf's London but also overlays the urban plan of the city (via 'the 1948 street directory') with the textual spaces of an English dictionary:

All this fin-de-siècle drapery and furniture is strangely
Familiar – mostly, I see, beginning with *A*, like aspidistras
Antimacassars, aboulia and absinthe; awful acanthus
Wallpaper ... Ajax ... I realise, of course, I'll wake up any minute

And find myself somewhere down in the *B*'s – the bourgeois Bloomsbury,
Trash-cans overflowing with borscht, the souging trellised scurf
Of bougainvillea, as the bourgeoisie evaporated under the Bruton regime,
Leaving us with the dregs – Bible-thumpers, bidet-sniffers, Bolsheviks.⁶⁵

Alliteration becomes a means of orientation (or disorientation) in this poem, as the dictionary's alphabetical index allows Carson to construct the city via a series of arbitrary juxtapositions and linguistic conjunctions. The unfamiliar proximities permitted on the pages of the dictionary between words that are semantically diverse, belonging to widely differing discursive regimes – 'aboulia' and 'absinthe', for instance – provides the template for a form of imaginative geography in which contemporary Belfast shades into other cities and time zones: London between the wars, Moscow during the Revolution, fin-de-siècle Paris. What such techniques of merging and overlap imply is that Carson's writing emerges out of, and attempts to articulate, the ambiguous and unstable relations between conversant 'worlds', mediating between material and metaphorical spaces, or between physical space and mental space.

I have said that Belfast serves as an imaginative focal point for much of Carson's work, yet the interest and fecundity of his work from the perspective of literary geography is by no means confined to his representations of urban space. Even Carson's earliest poetry bears out Gerry Smyth's observation that Irish poetry tends to be 'overdetermined by spatial concerns',⁶⁶ but it does so in a manner that may initially appear anomalous to readers more familiar with his 'Belfast poems'.⁶⁷ Certainly it seems so to Peter Barry, who notes that Carson's first collection, *The New Estate*, tends to draw upon 'a more traditional rural vocabulary and imagery' than the urban themes and settings which predominate in his work from *The Irish for No* onwards. And this leads Barry to claim, mistakenly I think, that Carson's first collection 'registers and consolidates' a fairly conventional Irish Nationalist frame of reference that is problematised and undermined in his later work.⁶⁸ Granted, it is not difficult to find evidence to support Barry's argument, and a poem such as 'The Insular Celts' would seem, on first reading, to bear out his remarks in exemplary fashion. It describes, in overtly mythopoeic terms, the arrival of the titular Celts on an unnamed island that the reader is to understand is Ireland, or a version of Ireland, lending shape and meaning to the natural landscapes they encounter through acts of naming and ceremonial burial. The co-dependent identity of people and place is underscored by the mingling of the settlers' flesh and bones with the soil of their adopted homeland, a process that enacts a richly symbolic conflation of land and inhabitants, place and language:

They will come back to the warm earth
And call it by possessive names –
Thorned rose, love, woman and mother;

To hard hills of stone they will give
 The words for breast; to meadowland,
 The soft gutturals of rivers,
 Tongues of water; to firm plains, flesh,
 As one day we will discover
 Their way of living, in their death. (*NE*, 2)

The equations between naming and possession, language and landscape posited in these stanzas not only point to Carson's self-conscious engagement with the early Irish poetic tradition in several poems from *The New Estate*, but also carry obvious echoes of contemporary re-workings of the dinnseanchas tradition of Irish place-lore in John Montague's *The Rough Field* and Seamus Heaney's *Wintering Out*. The poem's sensuous evocations of 'warm earth', 'hard hills', and 'firm plains' simultaneously sexualise and anthropomorphise the landscape, echoing the practices of Montague and Heaney by presenting place as a living 'ground' for authentic communal identifications. As David Lloyd observes, such an equation of language, territory, and identity promises 'a healing of division simply by returning the subject to place, in an innocent yet possessive relation to his objects'.⁶⁹

Yet even here, Carson's take on such themes is not merely imitative, nor is it as naively 'traditional' or straightforward as Barry suggests. The first indicator that this may be so is the ambiguous title itself, which by drawing attention to the 'insular' character of the Celtic civilisation described implies that the narrative of arrival, settlement, and organic belonging that the poem constructs is, in fact, an ironic pastiche of Irish nationalist imaginings rather than a 'consolidation' of such myths. As Carson has said in interview, 'The Insular Celts' is a poem that 'speaks very much in inverted commas': 'The showiness is subverted by the speaking voice, which isn't me. It's the voice of a proud and foolish Celt. If it's about Ireland, it's about one view of Ireland. And I hope it's a send-up of Tara brooches and Celtic gimcrackery.'⁷⁰ For all its seeming immersion in a pre-historic, mythopoeic landscape and projection of a Celtic unity of place and community, then, the poem can be read as a de-mythologising commentary upon one dominant strand of Irish Nationalist ideology. It is also a tongue-in-cheek rendition of romantic stereotypes of Irishness as they are constructed and recycled in popular culture and, to some extent, the work of Carson's fellow Northern Irish poets. This recognition further illuminates the poem's concerns with space, which centre on an implicit rebuke of 'insularity' both as a socio-political mindset and as a conceptual marker for the

bounded uniqueness of a given place. Indeed, for Carson, to consider a place in isolation by cutting it off from its contexts is not a means to discover some inherent and essential ‘ground’ through which history and identity can be made to cohere, but rather to render that place effectively meaningless. The meaning of a given place, in a sense, lies precisely in the sum of its contexts and connections with other places; place is ‘always in process, a kind of open field or three-dimensional network with unlimited potential combination and connectivity.’⁷¹ Hence, in the insular world of the Celts, history has narrowed to a ‘confused circle’ of wars and cattle-raids, and life appears little more than a sterile and reiterative sham-death that ‘will happen over again/ And again’ (*NE*, 3). Such circumscribed fixity and futile circularity is itself a forgetting of the fact that on first ‘sail[ing] out for an island’ the Celts had ‘left solid ground behind’, and of the lesson inscribed in the intricate patterns of their art, which celebrates ‘the flight/ of one thing into another’ (*NE*, 2–3).

A number of other poems in *The New Estate* also deal with the theme of ‘insularity’ or hermitage, and each either convey the diminishing effects of such isolation or undermine the illusion of separateness by disclosing the complex web of connections linking diverse and seemingly distinct spaces. Thus, in ‘St Ciaran’s Island’ the poet-saint narrator struggles to regard his physical isolation on a remote island as the necessary condition for a closer approach to God via communion with ‘the green things of the world’ (*NE*, 5). But, as the boundaries of his experience continue to contract, the poem’s ironic edge sharpens, revealing his transfiguration to be essentially a diminution of both his self and of the world he inhabits:

I will be myself alone.
Through the holes in the trellis
Falls thin rain. What drizzles
Slowly into my skull is this:

I will acclimatize.
My head will shrink in size. (*NE*, 6)

The deliberate echo in these lines of the Sinn Féin separatist credo – ‘sinn féin amhain’, ourselves alone – implies criticism rather than endorsement of the ‘insularity’ of much Irish Nationalist ideology, but the poem is also obviously an acutely self-reflexive warning of the dangers attending poetic solipsism or self-isolation from the ‘big world’ (*NE*, 5) of politics and society. Acclimatisation to this impoverished, inward-looking

conception of place and the mode of existence it subtends can only be reductive, the poem implies, a becoming-less.

Against such diminution and constriction, Carson's early poetry imparts a subtle awareness of what Henri Lefebvre calls 'the hyper-complexity of social space', in which local, regional, national, and global articulations of space interact. 'Considered in isolation,' Lefebvre asserts, 'such spaces are mere abstractions. As concrete abstractions, however, they attain "real" existence by virtue of networks and pathways, by virtue of bunches or clusters of relationships.'⁷² These networks and clusters of relationships between spaces become apparent when *The New Estate* is considered as a whole. Not only does the arrangement of poems in the collection describe a gradual shift from the world of early Irish saints and scribes to that of modern, secular Belfast, it also sees the predominantly natural landscapes of poems such as 'The Scribe in the Woods' and 'Winter' (*NE*, 1, 39) become progressively intertwined with depictions of domestic interiors and the rituals of home-making, as in 'Moving In' and 'To a Married Sister' (*NE*, 29, 33). These, in turn, open onto the more explicitly urban, public spaces explored in 'The Bomb Disposal' and 'The Car Cemetery' (*NE*, 21, 31). The latter poem even extrapolates from its street-scenes of traffic flow and parked cars to imagine a world-wide 'graveyard of defunct bodies', where scrapped cars rust amid 'a detritus of lights' (*NE*, 31). Moreover, the volume's recurrent preoccupations with issues of habitation, relocation, building, making, and craftwork emphasise the human processes through which places are made and re-made, encountered, negotiated, and transformed. So in the title poem a recent move from the countryside to a new urban housing estate, while giving rise to elegiac pangs of loss and a certain sense of disorientation or displacement, also becomes the stimulus for 'the swaying lines/ Of a new verse' (*NE*, 41).

The 'hypercomplexity of space' is conveyed to deliberately disorienting effect in subsequent poems such as 'Jawbox' from *Belfast Confetti*, where there is a much more rapid and unstable slippage between urban and rural environments, actual and represented spaces, and the reader's confusion is enhanced by the narrator's habit of misinterpreting images and objects, or of providing false perspectives on events. Such strategies are, however, appropriate to the text's concerns with schizophrenia and dissociations of identity, psychological conditions that implicitly allegorise the political and historical circumstances of the city of Belfast and Northern Ireland generally. Initially, the narrator describes a scene from a film in which an unidentified individual reads a magazine article praising the

'old-fashioned charm' of the Belfast sink – a 'jawbox' in Belfast vernacular. The sink serves as a sliding signifier in the text, cropping up again in a 1940s farmhouse kitchen, the garden of a house (as a flowerpot), and a field near the Irish border (as a cattle-trough). Subsequently, it is also linked with acts of violence and political murder that are investigated by 'Jekyll' and, it appears, perpetrated by his alter-ego 'Hyde'. The poem's running intertextual references to Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* imply the schizoid nature of the society depicted, and this is further underlined by the recurrent equivocation that attends the pronunciation of 'Belfast', where the decision to stress the first or second syllable is also a dilemma of identity politics:

'Why *Belfast*?' the character begins to ponder – he puts the accent
On the *fast*, as if the name was Irish, which it was (or is); this is how
His father says it, just as, being from Belfast, he calls the sink a 'jawbox'.
(BC, 90)

Later on, when Hyde is fleeing the scene of his crimes he will find himself 'caught between/ *Belfast* and *Belfast*' in a pastiche of a film noir pursuit on board a train (BC, 93).

This is presumably the same cross-border train that Jekyll travels on earlier in the poem and that is stopped by a bomb on the line between Dundalk and Newry: 'Or Newry and Dundalk, depending/ Where you're coming from: like the difference between Cambodia and Kampuchea' (BC, 91). Carson's shrewd deployment of cliché in these lines not only indicates the importance of how things are said but also underlines the extent to which location and origin ('where you're coming from') can define identity in the North. As if to further emphasise this point, Jekyll boards a bus to continue his journey and, in a striking equation of geographical division and physical violence, 'the border passes through him/ Like a knife, invisibly, as the blip of the bus is captured on surveillance radar' (BC, 92). Of course, the invisibility of political borders and of the surveillant power of the state are crucial to their efficient functioning. Moreover, while 'Jawbox' insistently foregrounds the ambivalences and indeterminacies that attend the province's border condition, the text's proliferating metamorphoses are countermanded by a powerful impulse towards order (albeit a murderous one) and the resolution of ambiguity. At the poem's conclusion Jekyll stares into a mirror above the Belfast sink, watching as his reflection turns into that of Hyde – 'an Englishman into an Irishman' (BC, 93) – and is subsequently murdered: 'Jekyll's head/ Is jerking back and forward on the rim. Red confetti spatters the glaze.' Crucially, at the poem's conclusion the

homicidal violence that Hyde embodies is aligned with intolerance of the very ambivalence – both semantic and spatial – that the poem has sought to foster and augment: ‘*Belfast*, the voice says, not *Belfast*. Then the credits roll’ (*BC*, 94).

In ‘Jawbox’, the chronotope of the border connects spatial division with historical crisis and psychological trauma, allowing Carson to dramatise the schizoid relationships between Catholic and Protestant, North and South, Ireland and Britain. The same chronotope functions somewhat differently, however, in a later poem, ‘*Jacta Est Alea*’, which comically recasts the fragile political rapprochements of the ‘peace process’ by way of a tipsy encounter in a border pub. Here, the Irish border is conceived less as a fault-line than as a frontier or threshold,⁷³ and as such it connotes an experience of historical transit and transition:

It was one of those puzzling necks of the wood where the South was in
the North, the way
The double cross in a jigsaw loops into its matrix, like the border was a
clef

With arbitrary teeth indented in it. Here it cut clean across the plastic
Lounge of The Half-Way House; my heart lay in the Republic

While my head was in the Six, or so I was inclined. You know that
drinker’s

Angle, elbow-propped, knuckles on his brow like one of the Great
Thinkers?

(*OEC*, 44)

The peculiar, liminal geography of the poem’s setting constructs a spatial boundary that is oddly fluid or elastic, subject to topsy-turvy inversions and sudden infractions. But the border is also violently restrictive, ‘cutting’ an erratic path across this ‘neck’ of the woods and figuratively severing the narrator’s head from his heart and body as he drinks in The Half-Way House.⁷⁴

Such ambiguities seem fitting given that the poem’s punning reference to ‘talks about talks’ places it in the context of post-ceasefire negotiations where the border’s contested status had taken on renewed significance. Carson’s gloss on the Latin tag of the poem’s title – ‘the die is cast’, words attributed to Caesar on crossing the Rubicon – is also accordingly ambivalent, invoking a point of no return or irrevocable step that might as easily lead to war as to peace.⁷⁵ The semi-farcical conversation that is subsequently opened between the speaker and a fellow drinker may be shadowed by the threat of ‘double cross’, but also promises a crossing-over

that will be 'key' to the creation of political accommodations and new matrices of identity. Significantly, the poem does not offer a resolution either way, leaving the frontier intact and the river still to be crossed: 'We stagger on the frontier. He is pro. I am con./ Siamese-like, drunken, inextricable, we wade into the Rubicon' (*OEC*, 44). Yet Carson's satirical tableau again works to undermine the static nature of binary oppositions, so that 'pro' and 'con', like 'North' and 'South', are not only 'inextricable' but also liable to suddenly switch positions or bleed into one another in drunken confusion. To this end, Carson's representations of borders and interfaces as ambiguous 'in-between spaces' are akin to Michel de Certeau's description of the 'frontier': 'A middle place, composed of interactions and inter-views, the frontier is a sort of void, a narrative symbol of exchanges and encounters.' Thus, the narrative collocations elaborated in 'Jacta Est Alea', and in much of Carson's work, privilege a 'logic of ambiguity' that is apt to turn frontiers into crossings, rivers into bridges, boundaries into metaphors, but also vice versa.⁷⁶

Carson's treatment of islands, borders, and frontiers illustrates Doreen Massey's point that space is inevitably 'the product of interrelations' and therefore open to heterogeneity, loose ends, and intersecting stories.⁷⁷ Similarly, places and locations are to be conceived not as bounded or 'insular' but as nodal points in networks that include and connect other places. Indeed, it is possible to identify in Carson's writing a dual focus through which the particular and the paradigmatic, the local and the global, place and space are apprehended simultaneously. Figurations of the familiar sectarian divisions of the Troubles city, and the conspicuous reshaping of Belfast's post-industrial landscapes by planners and paramilitaries alike, are held in productive tension in his work with a range of explorations predicated upon the city's 'elsewheres', its unexpected alignments and affinities with other places, and upon a self-consciously utopian retrieval of its lost, forgotten, or failed incarnations. Appreciating the scope of Carson's spatial aesthetic thus means relating his meticulous charting of intimately known localities and places to the often kaleidoscopic intuition his texts disclose of the fractured global spatiality with which such places are ineluctably intermeshed. To this end, we might speak of the imaginative geographies that are produced and described in his work. The term 'imaginative geography' was originally coined by Edward Said to describe those literary and cultural projections that distinguish between spaces deemed familiar and unfamiliar, particularly within an imperialist economy of difference and otherness. Just as the geographical and cultural entities known as the 'Orient' and the

'Occident' are understood in Said's work as man-made constructs rather than inert facts of nature, so imaginative geographies permit a strategic circumscription and shoring up of identity by investing space with emotional sense and equating difference with the geographical distance of what is 'out there'. Accordingly, 'imaginative geography and history help the mind to intensify its own sense of itself by dramatizing the difference between what is close to it and what is far away'.⁷⁸

Said discusses imaginative geography primarily as an instrument of imperialist power and ideology, but it might also be considered more broadly in terms of the very production and reproduction of everyday life. Advancing this argument, Derek Gregory asserts that 'our imaginative geographies (inside and outside the academy) are global as well as local. They articulate not simply the differences between this place and that, inscribing different images of here and there, but they also shape the ways in which, from our particular perspectives, we conceive of the connections and separations between them.'⁷⁹ In the context of literary and cultural production, then, imaginative geographies would map the alignments, convergences, and interactions between places, characters, and objects that are made and unmade in literary texts, figuratively recasting the relations-between that shape and structure spatiality. As representations of space, imaginative geographies always exist in tension with the material configurations of social space that pertain within a culture at any given moment. Such material configurations are never ultimately fixed or immemorial, however, and by way of their difference from normative representations of space imaginative geographies can highlight the fact that space is always in process, that it is radically 'open' to contestation.

Carson's imaginative geographies accordingly pivot upon the relationships of friction and consonance that pertain between here and elsewhere, home and away, Belfast and the world. Paradoxically, the more he strives to record and catalogue the city in all its intimate particularity the more he finds himself describing and exploring its status as a paradigmatic or 'universal' modern city. Thus, in *The Star Factory*, he confesses that he 'cannot help but see bits of Belfast everywhere', observing that 'Berlin, Warsaw, Tallinn, New York, to name some, have Belfast aspects' (*SF*, 153). If this suggests a tendency on Carson's part to find Belfast wherever he looks – in the quality of light captured in a book of Parisian photographs, for instance, or the cinematography of Jean Cocteau's *Orphée* (*SF*, 153, 267) – and perhaps even an unconscious resistance to the sheer difference of other places and cultures, then it

also underlines the extent to which he regards Belfast as a frame of reference through which other places may be brought into focus. In 'Eesti' the narrator describes his 'homesick-lonely' wanderings through the city of Tallinn and its 'aural labyrinth of streets' only to discover that this foreign city provides him with an unanticipated perspective on the Belfast of his childhood. Both the tintinnabulation of bells and gongs that fills the city streets and the richly symbolic interior of an Estonian church he visits evoke for him 'another/ Time', and the narrative segues from an account of his perambulations in Tallinn to a memory of walking with his father to first Mass in the Belfast dawn (*OEC*, 7–8). In this way, 'Eesti' links the present and the past, here and elsewhere, and enacts a moment of clarification or epiphany by way of experiences that include estrangement and disorientation. On the one hand, Belfast serves as a lens upon the world, a familiar template for making sense of what is foreign or unfamiliar. On the other, the analogies or parallels that are formed in this way also overspill this domesticating function, destabilising any secure sense of native belonging and revealing the displacements that condition the experience of place.

Because of its inherent mutability and multiplicity Carson's Belfast is always on the point of revealing its otherness, its uncanniness, its non-identity with itself. This is the case, for example, in 'The Forgotten City', which rewrites and re-contextualises a poem of the same title by William Carlos Williams, providing an intertextual parallel between Carson's Belfast and Williams's home city of Paterson, New Jersey. Rioting in West Belfast forces Carson's narrator to make a detour through an unfamiliar part of the city, which he finds eerily silent and relatively untouched by the 'disturbances' that so extensively condition life in his own part of the city. His response combines disorientation and bemusement with studious curiosity in lines that closely echo Williams's own: 'I had no idea where I was and promised myself/ I would go back some day and study this/ grave people' (*BN*, 44).⁸⁰ In part an ironic condemnation of the detachment and self-isolation of the city's affluent middle classes during the Troubles, the poem also dramatises the discovery of alterity in the midst of a seemingly familiar environment, an experience that is frequently enacted in Carson's work.

Many of the tenuous and fragmentary recognitions that Carson stages between Belfast and other cities also have the effect of invoking experiences of ghettoisation, economic exploitation, racial or religious tensions, and urban discord that are global as well as local. In his prose piece, 'Schoolboys and Idlers of Pompeii', the Alphabet City area of

New York reminds Carson of Belfast because its roads are ‘pocked and skid-marked, littered with broken glass and crushed beer cans’, while Belfast’s most conspicuous resemblance to New York is found in the ‘underground graffiti mural’ that has recently appeared on the back wall of Gallagher’s tobacco factory, ‘coded, articulated, multi-coloured spray-gunned alphabet – pointing west by style and implication’ (*BC*, 52). In the same text, a group of Belfast ex-pats in Adelaide are engaged in ‘reconstructing a city on the other side of the world’, employing memory and imagination in an (ultimately futile) effort to collapse the temporal and spatial distances that separate them from ‘home’ (*BC*, 53). In this way Carson can be seen to illustrate Elmer Kennedy-Andrews’s point that in contemporary Northern Irish poetry ‘home’ is no longer conceived as somewhere stable and fixed, but is ‘produced out of the encounter with other places, languages and histories, in the process of which the opposition between home and away, self and other, rootedness and itinerancy, is inevitably revised’.⁸¹ Even in the poem ‘Home’, from *Breaking News*, Carson tempers any secure sense of belonging with the dynamics of departure and return. The narrator’s panoramic vista of Belfast – ‘at last/ I see everything’ – is granted only because he is returning ‘from/ the airport down/ the mountain road’ and, in a further twist, his commanding and rather lofty perspective on his home place is disturbingly conflated with that of a ‘British Army/ helicopter’ hovering ‘motionless’ above the city (*BN*, 12–13). Several other poems in the same collection make narrative connections across space and time that further destabilise Belfast’s location, drawing attention to the city’s actual and symbolic implication in imperialist campaigns for global conquest. In ‘The War Correspondent’, the long poetic sequence that concludes *Breaking News*, the narrator’s simultaneously fixated and appalled descriptions of the chaotic violence and clash of cultures during the Crimean War spark off a series of geographical and historical parallels with Belfast, where the street map echoes the names of towns and battlefields mentioned in the poem: Balaklava, Sevastopol, Alma, Odessa, Balkan, Serbia, Crimea. Conversely, the poet-correspondent’s depiction of Gallipoli is a cumulative inventory that combines, in seemingly endless profusion, buildings, landscapes, people, and objects from across the globe – including the ‘sheds and stalls from Billingsgate’, ‘the garlic-oregano-tainted arcades of Bologna’, and ‘all the oubliettes of Trebizond’ – as a way of underscoring the ubiquitous implications and interconnections of the imperialist project (*BN*, 56–8). As the narrator of ‘Exile’ remarks: ‘Belfast/ is many/ places then/ as now’ (*BN*, 51).

Such interconnections and complicities between the proximate and the distant, the local and the global, the present and the past are a means of registering the accelerating disorientations of space-time compression in a rapidly globalising world. In a striking passage from *The Star Factory*, Carson's dream reconstruction of the demolished streets around St Peter's Pro Cathedral in the Lower Falls area implies that Belfast may be everywhere and nowhere at once. In Carson's dream, St Peter's has acquired a broad piazza surrounded by an eclectic melange of buildings that deliberately recall other cities from across the globe:

Chelsea town house, Glasgow tenement, Venetian palazzo, Oxford bookseller's with compass windows, Amsterdam tall house overlooking its reflection in the water, Belfast grocer's corner shop, Parisian boutique, New York deli, Warsaw synagogue, Berlin brothel, Bolognese haberdasher's in an arcade, Delhi shirt-shop, Beijing tea-emporium, Havana humidior, Vienna café, San Francisco oyster bar, Copenhagen doll's house outlet, Chicago kosher butcher's, Dieppe wine-merchant's, Los Angeles thirties automobile showroom, Carson City drive-in movie theatre, Constantinople kiosk, Byzantine bazaar-booth, Buenos Aires private library, Workshop for the Blind on the Shankill Road, the Alexandria Memory Institute, Santiago copper-shop, lonely gasoline pump of Intercourse, North Carolina, Vladivostok ice-store, Tokyo shoe-shop, Kyoto temple, Laredo saloon, Kufra Oasis drinking fountain, Mumbles ice-cream parlour, Roundstone cartographer's, Newmarket bookmaker's, the Boston Aquarium, Cork picture framer's, and ubiquitous McDonald's.

Of course, not all of the buildings on this menu appear simultaneously in any one version of the dream; but the space they occupy accommodates more than would appear feasible, and they are liable to mutate as the dream progresses, depending on what route you take through it; and the facades of the grand piazza will be different every time you enter it. (*SF*, 199–200)

In Carson's dream vision the Lower Falls has become the navel of the world, a site of intersection for radically different times and places that is both place and non-place at once. His description of this fantastical urban space accords well with Michel Foucault's conception of 'heterotopias', 'places that are outside all places, although they are actually localizable'. As Foucault explains, heterotopias are 'counter-sites' that are at once located and dislocated, real and unreal, composites of material and metaphorical space.⁸² Whereas utopias are absolutely different spaces in their 'unreal' perfection, heterotopias are not only different or other spaces, they are also spaces *of* difference that represent, contest, or reverse the emplacements of 'real' space. Indeed, the heterotopia 'has the ability to juxtapose in a single real place several emplacements that are

incompatible in themselves',⁸³ just as the dimensions of Carson's piazza seem capable of accommodating 'more than would appear feasible'.

The vertiginous telescoping of space that Carson's dream-narrative permits imports distance and difference into the heart of a once-familiar place, while the shifting vectors of the dream constantly unsettle the recuperative ambitions of memory. It is worth noting, however, that difference is both exoticised and commercialised here in an echo of postmodern architecture's indiscriminate mixing of forms, styles, and cultural codes – what David Harvey calls its 'pot-pourri of internationalism'.⁸⁴ Carson seems ironically conscious of such models, as the wry humour of his decision to end the list of buildings with a 'ubiquitous McDonald's' implies, and the passage as a whole might be read as an elaborately architectonic intertextual joke. Other writers and artists, including Walter Benjamin ('Berlin brothel'), Jorge Luis Borges ('Buenos Aires private library'), Matsuo Bashō ('Kyoto temple'), Tim Robinson ('Roundstone cartographer's'), and Dylan Thomas ('Mumbles ice cream parlour'), are alluded to by representative buildings, and Carson even includes himself within the frame via a 'Carson City drive-in movie theatre'. Moreover, Carson's mutable, heterotopian piazza is a deliberate reworking of the idea of the Aleph that appears in Borges's story of the same name.⁸⁵ According to one of Borges's characters, the Aleph is an imaginary point in space that contains all other points simultaneously, 'the place where, without admixture or confusion, all the places of the world, seen from every angle, coexist'.⁸⁶ The impossible coexistence of places, perspectives, and objects that Carson's dream image makes possible, therefore, conveys the extent to which his writing seeks not only to depict Belfast as dynamically unsettled, internally plural and self-estranged, but also as a place whose social life is always mysteriously bound up with and dependent upon that of other places beyond it. To this end, Carson is concerned to chart the extent and intensity of Belfast's implication in the wider global economy and to explore the disorientations and realignments that this necessarily entails.

It is worth noting, by way of conclusion, that the contradictory effects of this incorporation into global flows of capital and communication are dramatised through the motif of the sea-voyage in several of Carson's poems, most memorably in 'The Ballad of HMS *Belfast*'. Maritime narratives provide opportunities for travel and adventure, but also serve to illustrate the co-implication of spaces and places in wider systems of relations that are simultaneously historical and geo-political. On one level, for instance, 'The Ballad of HMS *Belfast*' allegorises Belfast's own

pervasive indeterminacy of location, which arises from its ambivalent status as an industrial city with strong economic and political allegiances to Britain but established in and awkwardly integrated with an Ireland that was predominantly rural and agricultural.⁸⁷ As a rewriting of Arthur Rimbaud's *Le Bateau ivre* – which Carson has translated as 'Drunk Boat' (*FL*, 34–7) – the poem also acknowledges Belfast's integration into the far-flung geographic world-systems of imperialism and monopoly capitalism during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a phase of time-space compression in which, according to Fredric Jameson, the experience of the individual subject 'no longer coincides with the place in which it takes place'.⁸⁸ Amid such spatial disjunction, hyphenation is perhaps an unavoidable condition of being, and heterotopias abound – not least of which is the ship itself. 'The sailing vessel,' writes Foucault, 'is the heterotopia par excellence.' It is 'a piece of floating space, a placeless place' that is at once self-enclosed and a mobile point on the expanse of the open seas, serving to connect a network of geographically distant ports via an intricate web of trade routes. Consequently, the ship is both 'the greatest instrument of economic development' and 'the greatest reservoir of imagination' of the high capitalist period.⁸⁹

It is fitting, therefore, that 'The Ballad of HMS *Belfast*' should begin with an act of dis-placement or dis-location that implicitly conflates *Belfast* with Belfast, ship with city, a metaphorical exchange that allows Belfast-as-ship to sail away from 'old Belfast' and begin a series of drink-and-drug-fuelled 'cruises to the Podes and Antipodes':

We gazed at imperceptible horizons, where amethyst
Dims into blue, and pondered them again that night, before the mast.

Some sang of Zanzibar and Montalban, and others of lands unascertained
On maps; we entertained the Phoenix and the Unicorn, till we were
grogged and concertina'ed. (*FL*, 72)

Belfast turns out to be an appropriately heterotopian space of difference, its motley crew made up of hybrid 'Catestants and Protholics', and the ship itself is described as 'full-rigged like the *Beagle*, piston driven like the *Enterprise*/ Express; each system was a back-up for the other, auxiliary-izing verse with prose' (*FL*, 71). These lines allow for a promiscuous intermingling of cultural registers (scientific research and science fiction) and modes of transport (ship, spaceship, and express train) that is typical of the giddy confusions and substitutions characterising the poem as a whole. After one particularly drunken binge, the speaker and his fellow sailors 'felt neither fish nor flesh, but/ Breathed through gills of rum and

brandy' (*FL*, 72). The crew's various adventures on board *Belfast* take them not only across the seven seas but, at one point, 20,000 leagues below as the ship transforms into a Jules Verne-style 'bathyscope' trawling the 'vast and purple catacomb' of the deep for 'cloudy shipwrecks' (*FL*, 73). The exuberant fantasy and dazzling linguistic playfulness of 'The Ballad of HMS *Belfast*' are, however, the correlates of the economic turbulence and intoxicating sense of opportunity that attends the opening up of new global markets. Notably, the attempts of the ship's captain to 'bribe' his crew with 'the Future' turn, in an echo of Keats, upon 'new Empires, Realms of Gold, and precious ore/ Unheard-of since the days of Homer'. In these circumstances, boldly going where none has gone before becomes something more and less than a voyage of discovery and exploration; it is an adventure of conquest and colonial expropriation, or a mercenary bid to 'confound the speculator's markets and their exchequered, logical embargo' (*FL*, 72).

Irrationality, intoxication, and antic disequilibrium, Carson implies, do not confound but may actually underwrite the economic and political motives driving imperialism and the creation of a world market. It is therefore important that at the poem's conclusion the speaker should abruptly deconstruct his fanciful yarns and tall tales, awakening the morning after the night before to find himself not in Vallambroso or Gibraltar but in more familiar, and less welcome, surroundings:

And then the smell of docks and ropeworks. Horse-dung. The tolling of
the Albert clock.

Its Pisan slant. The whirring of its ratchets. Then everything began to
click:

I lay in iron chains, alone, my *aisling* gone, my sentence passed.

Grey Belfast dawn illuminated me, on board the prison ship *Belfast*.
(*FL*, 74)

Awakening from his 'aisling', or dream vision, to the carceral reality of a Belfast dawn, Carson's narrator concludes by undoing the equation he had earlier forged between space and freedom, time and adventure. Now Belfast is a 'prison ship' and the rattling of his 'iron chains' is echoed by the whirring ratchets and tolling chimes of the Albert clock. The whole poem ultimately sharpens the dialectical character of Foucault's ship, for *Belfast* functions as a locus of both liberty and incarceration, of carnivalesque fantasy and corporal punishment, as simultaneously a fabulous schooner sailing on the currents of the imagination and as a floating jail going nowhere in Belfast Lough. Indeed, the poem illustrates

Alan Gillis's point that in Carson's work Belfast is depicted as 'both uncontainable and utterly subjugated', and that his pronounced experimentalism 'remains knowingly and sceptically circumscribed within definite and oppressive historical horizons'.⁹⁰

If 'The Ballad of HMS *Belfast*' can be read as an allegorical riff on the illusions and realities of globalisation, then its response is profoundly ambivalent. On the one hand, the poem is imaginatively alive to the expanded experience of the world that globalisation promises, with its incessant and exciting traffic of commodities, cultures, and ideas between geographically distant places. On the other, it suspects that these new freedoms of movement and exchange may only mask new forms of restriction and division, the closure of fields of perception and experience by those in power. Moreover, this tension between the imaginative potential that lies in discovering or creating connections between places in space and a deeply ingrained wariness of attempts to order, circumscribe, and represent the totality of such geographical relations is central to Carson's spatialised aesthetic as I have been describing it. His imaginative geographies prompt his readers to reflect upon their own implication in such dilemmas, and to question the modes of alignment and orientation that any version of reality encourages them to adopt.

Notes

- 1 Derek Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 67.
- 2 Corcoran, 'One Step Forward, Two Steps Back', p. 216.
- 3 Peter Barry, *Contemporary British Poetry and the City* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 229.
- 4 See Gerard Murphy, ed., *Early Irish Lyrics: Eighth to Twelfth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956), pp. 6–7 and John Montague, ed., *The Faber Book of Irish Verse* (London: Faber & Faber, 1974), pp. 58–9. The poem also gives *The Yellow Nib*, the literary journal of the Seamus Heaney Centre for Poetry edited by Carson, its name. On the symbolic importance of the blackbird in Irish literature and culture see John Wilson Foster, 'Blackbird', *The Yellow Nib* 1 (2005), pp. 3–11.
- 5 John Hewitt, *Collected Poems*, ed. Frank Ormsby (Belfast: The Blackstaff Press, 1991), p. 129.
- 6 Louis MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, ed. E.R. Dodds (London: Faber & Faber, 1979), p. 17.
- 7 In his satirical glossary, 'Welcome to Northern Ireland: A guide for New Millennium tourists', Glenn Patterson includes an entry for 'West Belfast', which reads: 'An area that extends further south than much of south Belfast and excludes from its purview some of the westernmost, inconveniently Protestant, districts of the city.' Glenn Patterson, *Lapsed Protestant* (Dublin: New Island, 2006), p. 7. A similar lack

- of fit between the actualities of the city's social geography and simplified ideological projections of discrete 'communities' can also be observed in East Belfast, which includes areas such as the Nationalist Short Strand.
- 8 Ian Davidson, *Ideas of Space in Contemporary Poetry* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 6, 8.
 - 9 Following its privatisation in 1989, Harland & Wolff pared back its workforce to around 2000 (as compared with 7542 in 1979) and was only enabled to compete in the new global market because it received massive government subsidies. Jonathan Bardon and David Burnett, *Belfast: A Pocket History* (Belfast: The Blackstaff Press, 1996), pp. 147, 135.
 - 10 Edward Larrissy, 'Irish Writing and Globalisation', in Stan Smith, ed., *Globalisation and its Discontents* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2006), p. 135.
 - 11 Alex Houen, *Terrorism and Modern Literature: From Joseph Conrad to Ciaran Carson* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 245.
 - 12 Jonathan Stainer, 'The possibility of non-sectarian futures: emerging disruptive identities of place in the Belfast of Ciaran Carson's *The Star Factory*', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 23 (2005), p. 390.
 - 13 Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977*, ed. Colin Gordon, trans. Colin Gordon et al. (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1980), p. 70.
 - 14 Edward W. Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Contemporary Social Theory* (London: Verso, 1989), pp. 10–11.
 - 15 Doreen Massey, 'Politics and Space/Time', *New Left Review* 196 (1992), p. 72.
 - 16 Michel Foucault, 'Space, Knowledge and Power', in Paul Rabinow, ed., *The Foucault Reader* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), p. 252.
 - 17 John Urry, 'Social Relations, Space and Time', in Derek Gregory and John Urry, eds, *Social Relations and Spatial Structures* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1985), p. 21.
 - 18 David Harvey, *Spaces of Capital: Towards a Critical Geography* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001), p. 115.
 - 19 Doreen Massey, *for space* (London: Sage, 2005), pp. 9, 45.
 - 20 Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), p. 85.
 - 21 Soja, *Postmodern Geographies*, p. 81.
 - 22 Kristin Ross, *The Emergence of Social Space: Rimbaud and the Paris Commune* (London: Verso, 2008), p. 8.
 - 23 Drawing upon Lefebvre's unconventional critical practice, Soja has proposed what he calls a 'trialectics' of 'Thirdspace' that deliberately eschews binary oppositions in an attempt to facilitate a continuing expansion of spatial knowledge. See Edward W. Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), pp. 53–82.
 - 24 Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, pp. 11–12.
 - 25 Soja, *Thirdspace*, p. 62.
 - 26 In what follows I am indebted to the lucid and succinct commentary on this aspect of Lefebvre's thinking provided in Andy Merrifield, 'Henri Lefebvre: A socialist in space', in Mike Crang and Nigel Thrift, eds, *Thinking Space* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 173–6.
 - 27 Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, p. 39.

- 28 Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, pp. 231–2.
- 29 Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, pp. 49–50.
- 30 Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, pp. 287, 391.
- 31 Michel Foucault, *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, ed. James D. Faubion (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2000), pp. 175, 176.
- 32 Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991), pp. 365, 16.
- 33 Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, p. 25. The reference is to Woolf's 1924 essay, 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown'.
- 34 See in particular Andrew Thacker, *Moving through modernity: Space and geography in modernism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003) and the essays collected in Peter Brooker and Andrew Thacker, eds, *Geographies of Modernism: Literatures, cultures, places* (London: Routledge, 2005).
- 35 Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space 1880–1918* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), p. 152.
- 36 Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 21.
- 37 Massey, 'Politics and Space/Time', p. 84.
- 38 Massey, *for space*, p. 55.
- 39 Jameson, *Postmodernism*, pp. 156, 154, 160.
- 40 Massey, *for space*, p. 140.
- 41 David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), p. 240.
- 42 Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, pp. 284, 306.
- 43 Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, p. 261.
- 44 Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis, MN: Minnesota University Press, 1977), p. 73.
- 45 Derek Gregory, *Geographical Imaginations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), p. 122.
- 46 Massey, *for space*, p. 130.
- 47 Marcus Doel, *Poststructuralist Geographies: The Diabolical Art of Spatial Science* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), p. 9.
- 48 Massey, *for space*, pp. 28–9.
- 49 Doel, *Poststructuralist Geographies*, p. 124.
- 50 Marc Brosseau, 'Geography's Literature', *Progress in Human Geography* 18.3 (1994), p. 349. See also Marc Brosseau, 'The City in Textual Form: *Manhattan Transfer's* New York', *Ecumene* 2.1 (1995), p. 92.
- 51 Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, p. 15.
- 52 Sheila Honess, 'Text as It Happens: Literary Geography', *Geography Compass* 2.5 (2008), p. 1302.
- 53 Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 84.
- 54 Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, p. 243.
- 55 Franco Moretti, *Atlas of the European Novel 1800–1900* (London: Verso, 1998), p. 5.
- 56 Moretti, *Atlas of the European Novel*, p. 70.
- 57 Moretti, *Atlas of the European Novel*, pp. 35, 43.
- 58 See Franco Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for Literary History* (London: Verso, 2005), pp. 53–4, 3–4.

- 59 Julian Murphet, 'Grounding Theory: Literary Theory and the New Geography', in Martin McQuillan et al., eds, *Post-theory: New Directions in Criticism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), p. 205.
- 60 Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1994), p. 6.
- 61 Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, p. 61. See also Eric Bulson, *Novels, Maps, Modernity: The Spatial Imagination, 1850–2000* (London; New York: Routledge, 2007), p. 8.
- 62 Andrew Thacker, 'The Idea of a Critical Literary Geography', *New Formations* 57 (2005/6), pp. 62, 63.
- 63 Frank Ormsby, 'Ciaran Carson interviewed by Frank Ormsby', *Linen Hall Review* 8.1 (1991), p. 5.
- 64 James Donald, *Imagining the Modern City* (London: Athlone Press, 1999), p. 17.
- 65 Ciaran Carson, 'Alphabet City', Ciaran Carson Papers, MSS 746, Manuscripts and Rare Books Library, Emory University, Box 19, Folder 4.
- 66 Smyth, *Space and the Irish Cultural Imagination*, p. 56.
- 67 It is worth noting that, at the time of writing, the only selection from Carson's poetry in publication advertises itself as 'a compendium of Belfast poems' and an 'indispensable guidebook to a city few will know exists'. Ciaran Carson, *The Ballad of HMS Belfast: A Compendium of Belfast Poems* (London: Picador, 1999), back cover blurb.
- 68 Barry, *Contemporary British Poetry and the City*, pp. 226–7.
- 69 Lloyd, *Anomalous States*, pp. 20–1.
- 70 Brandes, 'Ciaran Carson interviewed by Rand Brandes', pp. 80–1.
- 71 Davidson, *Ideas of Space in Contemporary Poetry*, p. 30.
- 72 Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, pp. 88, 86.
- 73 For Bakhtin, the chronotope of the threshold 'is always metaphorical and symbolic' and is connected with 'the breaking point of a life, the moment of crisis, the decision that changes a life'. Bakhtin, *The Dialogical Imagination*, p. 248. Carson's use of this chronotope shifts the emphasis from the personal and individual to the collective and social.
- 74 Edna Longley develops this point in a different direction when she notes that 'a doubled and fragmented body is dispersed throughout the poem. The narrative's references to "neck", "teeth", "throat" and mirror insinuate a subtextual vampire-narrative, a hint of Gothic horror.' Edna Longley, *Poetry & Posterity* (Tarset: Bloodaxe Books, 2000), p. 315.
- 75 Nonetheless, Carson seems to regard the crossing of the Rubicon as symbolising the achievement of a lasting and equitable peace: 'I feel I'm in the Rubicon. Maybe we all are. It's a big river, and sometimes the other bank seems very far away. Politically I'm like a lot of people who would like to live in a liberal, allowable state which so far hasn't happened here. A state which allows you to be yourself.' Brown, *In the Chair*, p. 152.
- 76 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 127, 128. On the pertinence of 'in-between spaces' such as borders and margins for the articulation of cultural differences see Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 1–27.
- 77 Massey, *for space*, p. 9.
- 78 Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2003), pp. 4–5, 55.
- 79 Gregory, *Geographical Imaginations*, pp. 203–4. See also Derek Gregory, 'Edward

- Said's Imaginative Geographies', in Mike Crang and Nigel Thrift, eds, *Thinking Space* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 302–48.
- 80 Cf. William Carlos Williams, *Selected Poems*, ed. Charles Tomlinson (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2000), pp. 140–1.
- 81 Kennedy-Andrews, *Writing Home*, p. 18.
- 82 Foucault, *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, p. 178.
- 83 Foucault, *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, p. 181.
- 84 Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, p. 87.
- 85 Carson briefly discusses Borges's 'The Aleph' in *Fishing for Amber*; see *FFA*, pp. 265–6.
- 86 Jorge Luis Borges, *The Aleph and Other Stories*, trans. Andrew Hurley (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2000), p. 127.
- 87 I develop this argument in more detail with regard to literary representations of Belfast in my essay, "Somewhere in the Briny Say": An Imaginative Geography of Belfast', in Ruth Connolly and Ann Coughlan, eds, *New Voices in Irish Criticism* 5 (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2005), pp. 7–15.
- 88 Fredric Jameson, 'Cognitive Mapping', in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, eds, *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1988), p. 349.
- 89 Foucault, *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, pp. 184–5. Carson also discusses the symbolic importance of the ship in interview with Niall McGrath, 'Ciaran Carson: Interview with Niall McGrath', p. 65.
- 90 Gillis, 'Ciaran Carson: Beyond Belfast', pp. 186, 198.



CHAPTER TWO

Mapping Belfast: Urban Cartographies

In the discourse of cultural theory it seems that there is considerable confusion, or at least deep ambivalence, concerning the status and function of maps and mapping. In this context it is important to note that mapping tends to be treated by cultural theorists less in terms of its specific histories and methodological principles than as a set of concepts that are often employed in explicitly metaphorical ways – ‘mapping’, then, rather than strict cartography. On the one hand, there is a tendency to equate mapping with the apparatuses of the state and of social control, as a sort of graphic inscription of panoptic authority that is imposed upon the territory. Certainly, the historical and strategic importance of charts, maps, and plans in the expansion of European imperialism plays a large part in determining this view. For instance, David Harvey observes that ‘the mapping of the world opened up a way to look upon space as open to appropriation for private uses. Mapping also turned out to be far from ideologically neutral.’¹ Similarly, Doreen Massey discusses maps as ‘ordering representations’ that operate as a ‘technology of power’ by stabilising the co-ordinates of time-space and constructing the geographical territory as ‘a coherent closed system’.² This question of closure or delimitation is crucial, for the widespread suspicion of cartography on the part of cultural theorists is arguably also symptomatic of a more widespread, and loosely post-structuralist, distrust of totalisations and grand narratives. As Geoff King observes, ‘because it is founded on processes of universalizing closure, the map becomes an ideal site for a deconstructive project. [...] Gaps and inconsistencies on the map can be highlighted in an attempt to undermine the wider discursive system within which it is embedded.’³ A map is not simply a visual representation of space but can also be construed as a diagram and instrument of power. Indeed, for Michel de Certeau, the map does not simply represent but actually ‘colonizes space’, constituting a



‘totalizing stage’ upon which the current state of geographical knowledge is articulated, and ‘pushes away into its prehistory or into its posterity, as if into the wings, the operations of which it is the result or the necessary condition’.⁴ This erasure of the practices that have gone into its making, ensuring the hegemony of the map over the earlier form of the itinerary, also intimates the way in which the map will impose a particular ‘reading’ upon the territory that it maps, composing a ‘legible’ image only through violent reductionism.

On the other hand, consider the following remarkable passage from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus*, in which the authors are distinguishing between maps and tracings:

Make a map, not a tracing. [...] The map is open and connectable in all of its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification. It can be torn, reversed, adapted to any kind of mounting, reworked by an individual, group, or social formation. It can be drawn on a wall, conceived of as a work of art, constructed as a political action or as a meditation. [...] A map has multiple entryways, as opposed to the tracing, which always comes back ‘to the same’. The map has to do with performance, whereas the tracing always involves an alleged ‘competence’.⁵

The contrast could hardly be greater and, even allowing for Deleuze and Guattari’s deliberately estranging approach to their subject, this seems a very odd way to think of mapping. Far from being an extension of state power, the map is here conceived in terms of performativity, as a tool for dissidents and philosopher-guerrillas that is capable of constant modification and multiple uses rather than imposing a monolithic order ‘from above’. Rhizomatic rather than repressive, Deleuze and Guattari’s map reveals itself as an essentially dynamic and productive nexus that ‘fosters connections between fields’,⁶ a connective apparatus conjugating deterritorialised flows and a diagram for writing itself, conceived as a means of ‘surveying, mapping, even realms that are yet to come’.⁷ More soberly, but to a similar end, Franco Moretti contends that a good map is worth a thousand words ‘because it *produces* a thousand words: it raises doubts, ideas. It poses new questions, and forces you to look for new answers’.⁸

The practices of cartography and writing are thus intimately linked, and both are capable of furthering a critical enterprise that would destabilise rather than entrench hegemonic modes of seeing and understanding. On the one hand, then, mapping can be regarded as a repressive means of social control from above; on the other, it is understood to permit radical reconfigurations of a given environment from below, capable of productively estranging our habitual modes of perception. It is not my

intention here to offer a synthesis, much less a solution, for this seeming impasse in one of the lesser byways of cultural theory. Instead, in this chapter I want to use it as a sort of backdrop against which to discuss the mapping of urban space in Ciaran Carson's work, and to examine in particular the ways in which his writing of the city itself probes the logic and limits of maps and the connections they make visible. Indeed, in what follows I will be arguing that both of the perspectives upon mapping described above serve to inform Carson's work to varying degrees, and often do so simultaneously.

Maps recur with an almost obsessive frequency throughout Carson's work and, at first glance, it would appear that he tends to see them as totalising forms of imposition to be suspected and, wherever possible, deconstructed. For Carson, the bird's-eye view of the map negates human agency and ignores the kinetic energies that are evident at street level, resolving the multidimensional reality of the city in the simplified form of a static chart. Such totalising ambitions are inherently reductive, for 'maps cannot describe everything, or they describe states of mind' (*BC*, 67), betraying their ideological orientations through what they include or omit. Indeed, it is most often to the exclusions and aporias of mapping that Carson attends, as, for example, in the poem 'Turn Again' which opens his landmark collection *Belfast Confetti*:

There is a map of the city which shows the bridge that was never built.
A map which shows the bridge that collapsed; the streets that never
existed.

Ireland's Entry, Elbow Lane, Weigh-House Lane, Back Lane,
Stone-Cutter's Entry –

Today's plan is already yesterday's – the streets that were there are gone.
And the shape of the jails cannot be shown for security reasons. (*BC*, 11)

The poem begins by composing a litany of names that is also a host of absent presences (or present absences), the spectral traces of a city that was planned but never built, existing suggestively on some half-forgotten plane of the imagination but having their entire material presence in the faulty markings upon inaccurate maps. Alan Gillis has described this collocation of the imagined and the obsolete with verifiably extant features of the cityscape in terms of Carson's 'meta-cartography'.⁹ There is an important shift of focus, however, in the last line quoted, as Carson moves from one sort of absent presence to another – that is, from those features that appear only on the map and not on the territory itself, to those that can be located in the city's material topography but that cannot be shown on the map, ostensibly for 'security reasons'.

In both cases, of course, absences are found to be doubly eloquent and it is precisely this asymmetry between the map and the territory that it claims to represent that provides the creative frisson of the poem itself. In this respect, the bridge that was never built and the bridge that collapsed both hold a particularly suggestive metaphorical charge, gesturing towards the simultaneously deconstructive and conjunctive nature of Carson's aesthetic, which typically dismantles and breaks down its subject-matter only to reassemble it in some new and unexpected form. On a more immediate level, though, 'Turn Again' unravels the map's implicit assertion of authority, its ostentatious display of geographical knowledge collated and assembled, simply by exposing it to the flux of history, reminding us that today's plans are always already slipping into obsolescence because of the material reconfiguration of the city that happens day by day, week by week, year by year. The title of the poem captures the sense in which the experience of repetition or 're-turn' can all too easily become an encounter with difference, disorienting rather than reinforcing a secure sense of spatial awareness, as when the speaker 'turns' into a side-street 'to try to throw off my shadow', a seemingly minor deviation through which 'history is changed' (BC, 11).

Importantly, however, 'Turn Again' is not simply concerned with history in the abstract but more immediately with the specific historical and political circumstances of the Troubles, as well as the particular spatial forms to which they give rise, forms and circumstances that would appear to act upon the processes of mapping in sharply contradictory ways. For, on the one hand, incidents of violence and political unrest in Belfast make it ever more imperative for those in power to map the city accurately and comprehensively, and yet, on the other hand, the covert activities of the police, army, and paramilitary groups make such a project increasingly untenable: 'the shape of the jails cannot be shown for security reasons'. In the prose piece 'Question Time', Carson warns:

No, don't trust maps, for they avoid the moment: ramps, barricades, diversions, Peace Lines. Though if there is an ideal map, which shows the city as it is, it may exist in the eye of that helicopter ratcheting overhead, its searchlight fingering and scanning the micro-chip deviations [...]. (BC, 58)

Cartography and panopticism come together in the helicopter's aerial eye of power, but the adoption of the conditional tense ('it may exist') indicates a thoroughgoing scepticism on Carson's part about the ability of any map to show the city as it is in all its seething detail. As he remarks in 'Revised Version': '*The city is a map of the city*' (BC, 69), a

collapsing of the distinction between map and territory that would seem to make a nonsense of this whole mode of representation.

Consequently, his own images of the city consistently presuppose mutation and revision, as, for example, in the following passage from *The Star Factory*:

Sometimes the city is an exploded diagram of itself, along the lines of a vastly complicated interactive model aircraft kit whose components are connected by sprued plastic latitudes and longitudes.

At the same time it mutates like a virus, its programme undergoing daily shifts of emphasis and detail. Its parallels are bent by interior temperatures; engine nacelles become gun pods; sometimes, a whole wing takes on a different slant. [...] Now that I can see the city's microscopic bits transfixed by my attention, I wonder how I might assemble them, for there is no instruction leaflet; I must write it. (*SF*, 15)

Maps pretend to an authoritative verisimilitude that their distanced fixity precludes, for the city's 'daily shifts of emphasis and detail' render each draft untrustworthy or obsolescent. In the face of such abstraction, history and the sheer materiality of the city are liable to reassert themselves, and Carson's work is littered with maps in various stages of physical decay and disintegration: 'With so many foldings and unfoldings, whole segments of the map have fallen off' (*BC*, 35). The metamorphic energies of the urban warp or distort cartographic projections, and writing the city entails the assembly of a rhizomatic narrative through which individual components can sporadically take on 'a different slant'.

And yet, for all this, the city *is a map* of the city. But if it *is* a map, and if Carson's own work can be said to constitute an extended attempt to map the city's spatial and historical mutations, then it can only be on the model of Deleuze and Guattari's rhizomatic map, with its susceptibility to constant modification and multidimensional connections. Alex Houen contends that Carson's writing addresses 'two levels of the city, two types of map': 'On the one hand streets and situations frequently explode into diagrams of their own potential; on the other hand, security forces use virtual mapping to contain the possibility of violence.'¹⁰ In broad agreement, I am arguing that maps function for Carson paradoxically both as forms of imposition to be resisted and as the means by which such resistance can be effected, for it is through mapping that his work calibrates and responds to the city's deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation. Moreover, as Kathleen McCracken observes, in Carson's writing 'the map is a figure which keeps changing,

against the rules of logic and rhetoric, into something else', and to this extent the city and the map do indeed coincide.¹¹ 'Belfast is changing daily' (*BC*, 57), its built environment metamorphosing in response to bombings and demolition, decay and redevelopment, and its citizens are forced to revise their personal maps of the city accordingly.

Carson's city is characterised by perpetual change, a ceaseless interplay of disintegration and construction through which a sense of place is conceived not in terms of certainty and stability but as a process of dislocation and appropriation through which meanings are assembled and contested. In Fran Brearton's words, Carson's work depicts 'a city in perpetual motion, existing in multiple versions in time and space'.¹² In this respect, the city in motion can be seen to disorient the mortificatory imperatives of surveillant control, opposing disciplinary stasis with a fecund dynamism that also figures as a metaphor for artistic creativity and the generation of new forms. In 'Clearance', the swing of a wrecking ball brings with it a proverbial breath of fresh air as the façade of the Royal Avenue Hotel collapses, opening up unexpected new perspectives in the midst of a familiar cityscape:

Suddenly more sky
Than there used to be. A breeze springs up from nowhere –
There, through the gap in the rubble, a greengrocer's shop
I'd never noticed until now. Or had I passed it yesterday? (*IFN*, 32)

The play of presence and absence in the poem sets up a fertile ambiguity between the familiar and the novel, relishing the opportunity for a fresh sensory apprehension of both proximate and distant features of the urban landscape. Such comparatively minor adjustments entail a subtle shift of perspective through which the entire city is sized up anew, both in itself and in relation to its immediate surroundings.

Conversely, but in a similar vein, Carson has a building site figure as a metaphorical 'place of writing' in *The Star Factory*:

I used to watch the bricklayers ply their trade, as they deployed masonic tools
of plumb-line, try-square and spirit-level, setting up taut parallels of pegs and
string, before throwing down neatly gauged dollops of mortar, laying bricks
in practised, quick monotony, chinking each into its matrix with skilled
dints of the trowel. Had their basic modules been alphabet bricks, I could
have seen them building lapidary sentences and paragraphs, as the storeyed
houses became emboldened by their hyphenated, skyward narrative, and
entered the ongoing, fractious epic that is Belfast. (*SF*, 126)

The labour of construction here figures as an analogue for writing the

city, which itself emerges as a storied space of proliferating narratives, a Babel of 'alphabet bricks'. But if the city resembles a vast, unfinished text, then equally and oppositely the fusion of diverse genres, styles, and registers in Carson's writing can be seen as an effort to approximate the hybrid multiplicity of urban forms.¹³ In this respect, the heterogeneous rubble of 'Belfast confetti' – 'Nuts, bolts, nails, car-keys. A fount of broken type' (*IFN*, 31) – also refers to the patchwork of raw materials from which Carson's texts are assembled, the linguistic and urban detritus that can be recovered from the streets, bars, and market stalls of the city. Guinn Batten aptly remarks that Carson's poetry is a 'poetry of the jumble sale and the bomb-site rather than the museum'.¹⁴

Both *The Irish for No* and *Belfast Confetti* work these diverse materials into complex, architecturally orchestrated forms, and *The Star Factory*, in which chapters are named after local streets or landmarks, deliberately resembles a jumbled street directory. Indeed, that book's 'hook-and-eye principle' (*SF*, 226) of often arbitrary or tenuous narrative connections mimics the way in which the alphabetical listings of the street directory allow for the juxtaposition of 'impossibly remote locations' (*SF*, 8). As Deleuze and Guattari remark, rhizomatic writing 'know[s] how to move between things, establish[ing] a logic of the AND' that multiplies transversal conjunctions,¹⁵ a formal characteristic that is replicated throughout Carson's acented network of narratives and the storytelling techniques he employs therein. His rangy, sinuous long-line, which is adapted from the urban poets C.K. Williams and Louis MacNeice but also often approximates to the 17 syllables of Japanese *haiku*, accommodates the rhythms of pub-talk and the brisk inflections of Belfast demotic, while the meandering, improvisatory nature of his longer narratives provides a formal analogue for the shape and texture of life in the city. This scope for rhythmical variation and narrative 'flow' is counterpointed, however, by a sophisticated control of poetic form, particularly in his nine- and ten-line lyrics that both invoke and deviate from the sonnet form.¹⁶ Discussing *The Irish for No*, Neil Corcoran contends that Carson's 'suavely sophisticated playing of control against licence is the crucial element' in the poems' 'delicate manipulation of tone'.¹⁷ His frequent use of enjambment and zeugma also subtly reinforce the dialectic of connection and disjunction that the poems enact.

Carson's sense of the mutability of the city is also bound up with a related interest in the slipperiness and malleability of language. In the prose piece, 'Brick', assonantal slippage and etymological trickery

provide a means of probing Belfast's unstable foundations, delving into the city's material fabric in order to delineate a constitutive dialectic between hard and soft, solid and liquid, land and sea. 'Belfast,' Carson reminds us, 'is built on *sleech* – alluvial or tidal muck – and is built *of* sleech, metamorphosed into brick, the city consuming its source as the brickfields themselves were built upon.' These binary poles – sleech and brick – become progressively conflated, bleeding into one another via an increasingly diffuse system of linguistic resemblances. Just as 'sleech' can be 'allied to *slick* and *sludge*, *slag*, *sleek* and *slush*', so the proverbial solidity of 'brick' may be undermined by association: 'Its root is in *break*, related to the flaw in cloth known as *brack*; worse, it is a cousin of *brock* – not the hardy badger, but rubbish, refuse, broken-down stuff, pig-swill' (*BC*, 72). As John Kerrigan has observed, there is an implicit quarrel with Seamus Heaney underlying 'Brick', for although Carson's mud vision entails a form of 'earth writing' that lies at the root of geography, 'his mock etymological earnestness does not find meaning in a bog but discovers a swamp in philology'.¹⁸ On the one hand, Carson draws a compelling image of Belfast from this verbal swamp; on the other, he renders the city's earnest bulk pliable and soft. Honesty, reliability, sturdy independence: all are founded on a morass, which is itself constantly being transformed into new land, building sites for the future city.

The deconstructive potential of etymology is also elaborated in the companion piece, 'Farset', which elaborates the uncertainties and confusions sedimented in the name 'Belfast' through an eccentric version of *dinnseanchas*, or Irish place-lore.¹⁹ 'Belfast' is a corruption of the Irish 'Béal Feirste', but while 'béal' can quickly be narrowed down to 'a mouth, or the mouth of a river; an opening; an approach', 'feirste' – the genitive of 'fearsad', which gives the river Farset its name – is considerably more problematic. Turning to the Rev. Patrick Dineen's pathologically compendious Irish-English dictionary, Carson finds 'fearsad' glossed as 'a shaft; a spindle; the ulna of the arm; a club; the spindle of an axe; a bar or bank of sand at low tide; a pit or pool of water; a verse, a poem' (*BC*, 48), so that one attractive but incongruous translation of 'Béal Feirste' could be 'the *mouth of the poem*' (*BC*, 49). Amid this welter of referents definition slides into semantic anarchy and meaning threatens to be swept away in a torrent of 'watery confusion' (*BC*, 48). Carson, however, seems prepared to go with the flow, sharing the conviction of cartographer and latter-day *dinnseanchaí*, Tim Robinson, that 'misinterpretation is part of the life of a placename'. 'As language changes course

like a river over the centuries,' writes Robinson, 'sometimes a placename gets left behind, beached far from the flood of meaning. Then another meander of the river reaches it, interpreting it perhaps in some new way. [...] Corruption of the name, it is called; but corruption is fertility.'²⁰ This metaphor of the river of language altering the way in which the sense of place is experienced and understood seems highly pertinent to Carson's representations of Belfast.

Carson's mischievous and slightly scatty way with words and word-play in 'Brick' is both deepened and extended in 'Farset' through the latter's foregrounding of fertile linguistic cross-pollinations, as the Irish and English languages are both plundered simultaneously for definitions and semantic elaborations. The Anglicisation of the name of Belfast's eponymous river is a case in point, and the result is a hybrid form of *dinnseanchas* that is, in the words of Nuala ní Dhomhnaill, 'utterly modern, urban and completely credible'.²¹ But if Irish – which is his first language – flows beneath the surface of Carson's writing in English like an underground river,²² then his Irish has also taken on the colouring of the latter's more pervasive general influence. In *The Star Factory*, he relates how his father would cull stories from *The Arabian Nights*, the Brothers Grimm, Robert Louis Stevenson, and Arthur Conan Doyle, then retell them to his children in Irish, which is emphatically designated as 'the language of the home'. In stark contrast, the public world beyond the 'vestibule' of the family home 'was densely terraced with the English language', which Carson remembers 'learning or lipping on the street' (*SF*, 269). Exposure to this external world of linguistic difference leads to a gradual seepage of English words and constructs into the speech of the Carson children, 'bastardizing' their Irish and provoking the stern correction of their father. This anecdote neatly dramatises the early confluence of linguistic streams in Carson's formative years, both within and without the family home, allegorising the dynamic interplay of the two languages that frequently informs his writing, and which I discuss in more detail in Chapter 6. More importantly perhaps, it also makes a direct metaphorical correlation between language and urban form. The city is 'densely terraced' with the English language, which is itself learnt in the public arena of the street rather than in the domestic space of the family home, but is also infiltrated by 'strange bilingual creatures' like the young Carson, who appears to have a crucial linguistic edge on this monoglot world (*SF*, 269).

Moreover, Carson the adult poet, prose writer, and urban *dinnseanchaí*

discovers an embarrassment of riches in Belfast's terraced streets, entries, and forgotten back alleys. For, quite apart from the slogans and graffiti that proliferate across sidings and gable walls, an elaborate urban text can be discerned in the city's constellations of street names. Street names compose a ragged and fragmentary script for the city, bearing a rich freight of associations and symbolic potential that is invented, revised, written over, and erased as the city itself grows and develops. To this end, Walter Benjamin contends:

What was otherwise reserved for only a very few words, a privileged class of words, the city made possible for all words, or at least a great many: to be elevated to the noble status of a name. This revolution in language was carried out by what is most general: the street.—Through its street names, the city is a linguistic cosmos.²³

Indeed, Benjamin goes so far as to claim that, in certain cases, 'street names are like intoxicating substances that make our perceptions more stratified and richer in spaces'.²⁴ Through their various names the city streets are invested with a form of symbolic geography, a set of imaginative coordinates conveying a sense of the deeper resonances underlying the immediate empirical realities of urban space.

Carson's depictions of Belfast make much of such resonances and street names form an important part of the texture of his writing, mapping the nodes of semantic potential and personal significance that are to be found in his city's literal and metaphorical landscapes. Consequently, street directories and gazetteers have a particular fascination for him, their alphabetical listings and structured indexes constituting a sort of fantastic codex through which the city's supposedly immutable geography can be deconstructed and rearranged – yet another version of Deleuze and Guattari's rhizomatic map. Places that are geographically distinct or socially remote are brought into close proximity, while intimate communities of politico-religious association are exploded and dispersed according to the dictates of an alternative spatial logic. There is, then, a deeper political intent behind Carson's exuberant imaginative variations on 'the cabalistic or magical implications of the alphabet' (*SF*, 7) in *The Star Factory*, which culminate in his transformation into a bookworm, 'ruminating through the one thousand, five hundred and ninety-pages of the Directory in teredo mode, following my non-linear dictates, as I make chambered spirals in my universe, performing parabolas by browsing letters and the blanks between' (*SF*, 8). Beneath the superficial attractiveness of this quirky notion there is a powerful impulse towards

reinvention and imaginative engagement, an off-beat intention to stratify the reader's perceptions and thus make the city richer in spaces.

In particular, Carson finds a singular symbolic richness in the fact that so many of Belfast's streets are named after other towns, cities, and countries; although, as Desmond Fitzgibbon points out, the historical contexts that are attached to these names are often a matter of deep political contention. He argues that the remarkably heavy politicisation of space in Belfast makes it difficult and perhaps irresponsible to etherealise or aestheticise the city:

Peace-lines, wall-murals and bunting act as obvious markers of political and cultural difference, but the street names (for example, Balaclava, Kashmir and Odessa etc.) are part of a double-edged imperial dinnseanchas which manages to integrate and alienate at the same time, depending on the cultural and political allegiance of the individual interacting with his environment.²⁵

Fitzgibbon is right to insist on the actual historical and political context of these names over and above their superficially exotic allure, and is sensitive to the power inscribed within them and its implications for the people who happen to live in the streets they name. However, there is already something appropriately 'double-edged' about the whole notion of an 'imperial dinnseanchas' that would, in the name of colonial authority, attempt to establish discursive control over the city through the medium of a specifically Gaelic tradition of place-lore.

Importantly, the examples that Fitzgibbon provides (Balaclava, Kashmir, and Odessa) are all culled from Carson's work, indicating as they do locations in the Lower Falls Road area, where many streets are (or were) named after places associated with the Crimean War of 1853–6 (Serbia, Sevastopol, Bosnia, Inkerman, Alma etc.) or the Indian Mutiny of 1857–8 (Cawnpore, Lucknow, Benares, Bombay etc.). Both of these historical events are the subject of long poems in *Breaking News*, a collection containing many interlinked lyrics which can be read as glossing the sedimented associations of street names on the Falls Road, past and present. Furthermore, as both 'The Indian Mutiny' and 'The War Correspondent' in that volume make clear, the historical significance of both conflicts is not simply their place in the pageant of imperial dominance, but rather that they are each instances of spectacular incompetence or vulnerability on the part of the British Empire and its military institutions, as well as massive human tragedies.²⁶ In 'Balaklava', Carson's war correspondent fixes his gaze on an especially poignant and

emblematic figure whose remains allegorise loss and mutilation rather than superior force or cultural dominance:

The skeleton of an English horseman
had tatters of scarlet cloth hanging to the bones of his arms;
all the buttons had been cut off the jacket. (*BN*, 63)

Reminders of the bloody failure that was the Charge of the Light Brigade and the ousting of the British East India Company are, therefore, at least as much a part of the historical context behind the names of these streets as is a triumphal display of imperial bombast.²⁷

Alienation and integration are more confused in this respect than Fitzgibbon's overly rigid binary model allows, for even these seemingly straightforward signifiers of Unionist loyalty and imperial ambition are open to a process of contestation, misprision, and appropriation. As Gerry Smyth affirms: 'The rhetorical force of the map/name is to the effect that "these places mean these things, don't they?"; but such a formulation is always open to the possibility of a negative response.'²⁸ Carson's response is, in fact, typically ambivalent, both acknowledging the alienation and oppression inscribed within these names – as in 'Belfast Confetti', where the iteration of street names associated with the Crimean War accentuates that poem's claustrophobic sense of enclosure and danger (*IFN*, 31) – and also elaborating his own imaginative geographies as a way of enriching the city. So, in *The Star Factory*, he observes:

Streets named after places form exotic junctures not to be found on the map of the Empire: Balkan and Ballarat, Cambrai and Cambridge, Carlisle and Carlow, Lisbon and Lisburn, and so on, through Madras and Madrid, till we eventually arrive, by way of Yukon, at the isles of Zetland, whereupon we fall off the margins of the city. (*SF*, 8)

Here again, Carson makes effective use of the arbitrary connections that are facilitated by the street directory's alphabetical arrangement, focusing upon those junctures, relationships, and resemblances that are excluded from, or ignored by, the map of the Empire. Indeed, as Alex Houen remarks, Carson's linguistic explorations can be understood as producing 'a cartography of other possible-worlds'.²⁹ In this way, the margins of the city may be both expanded and redefined, and street names are found to possess a rich indetermination that, according to Michel de Certeau, gives them 'the function of articulating a second, poetic geography on top of the geography of the literal, forbidden or permitted meaning'.³⁰ In the case of Belfast, this palimpsestic dual geography is likely to be especially conflictual, with one layer rubbing uncomfortably against the

other, and Fitzgibbon's warnings about aestheticising or exoticising the city need to be taken seriously. Nonetheless, it seems both significant and entirely natural that, in 'Hamlet' and elsewhere, Carson should connect Raglan Street less with the name and career of a British military leader than with the image of an unravelled sleeve and memories of his demolished childhood home.³¹

Alongside this creative sense of indeterminacy and symbolic surplus, however, Carson's lists of street names can also take on the sombre tones of litany, as they do in Anne Devlin's short story, 'Naming the Names': "Abyssinia, Alma, Balaclava, Balkan, Belgrade, Bosnia", naming the names: empty and broken and beaten places. [...] Gone and going all the time.³² In the face of all the linguistic fluidity and semantic flux that is celebrated in 'Brick' and 'Farset', Carson's depictions of Belfast are also informed by a powerful undertow of loss as whole sections of the city are wiped out and memory struggles to recover something worthwhile from the rubble. If change in the abstract can be seen as a radical source of imaginative potential in Carson's writing, it is often experienced personally in terms of pain and regret, for, as Elizabeth Wilson observes, 'the urban sense of time and decay is a nostalgic one'.³³ During the period of the Troubles, the Lower Falls suffered particularly from the depredations of both planners and paramilitaries, many of its narrow interconnecting streets and busy street-corners having been reconfigured as cul-de-sacs and residential closes or reduced to shabby wasteland. Contemplating a 1923 Ordnance Survey plan of West Belfast, Carson writes:

Even its generous scale of 208.33 feet to the inch cannot accommodate the finer detail: drapers, butchers, grocers, haberdashers, publicans, tailors, pawnbrokers and confectioners, to name some of the plethora of shops that lined the Falls, according to my memory, corroborated by the Street Directory of 1948, the year that I was born. This townscape remained unchanged in its essentials until the early Seventies, until all was swept away in a rash of redevelopment.³⁴

For Carson, even the 'generous' scale of this map is inadequate to register and record the 'finer detail' of the townscape, which is granted a kind of permanence in memory and the printed record of the 1948 Street Directory even as its eventual loss is registered. The urban topography described rebukes the generalisations of the 'official' plan but is nonetheless frozen in a moment of the irretrievable past.

The agents of the state and of 'terrorism' are deemed equally culpable for contemporary Belfast's landscapes of surveillance and desolation in

Carson's work. Moreover, both are equally associated, if in differing ways, with the use of maps and topographical information as modes of power and oppression. In 'Belfast Confetti' Carson's speaker finds himself trapped in the familiar labyrinth of the Lower Falls, and is stopped short by an army checkpoint's 'fusillade of question-marks' (*IFN*, 31). However, a parallel experience is described in the prose piece 'Question Time', where the narrator's cognitive map of this home ground is inspected by local paramilitaries as a means of (putatively) ascertaining his political and sectarian loyalties. As a result, the role of maps in formulating a sense of identity and of the past is explored: 'The map is pieced together bit by bit. I am this map which they examine, checking it for error, hesitation, accuracy; a map which no longer refers to the present world, but to a history, these vanished streets; a map which is this moment, this interrogation, my replies' (*BC*, 63). As I discuss further in Chapter 4, for Carson's citizen-personae, fresh encounters with these transformed landscapes and their vanished streets are characterised by shock or confusion, giving way gradually to the plangent tones of elegiac lament, as in these lines from 'Hamlet':

The sleeve of Raglan Street has been unravelled; the helmet of Balaklava
Is torn away from the mouth. The dim glow of Garnet has gone out,
And with it, all but the memory of where I lived. (*BC*, 107)

In 'Hamlet', all that remains of the past is 'a cry, a summons, clanking out from the smoke/ Of demolition' and Carson's despairing attempt to 'piece together the exploded fragments' (*BC*, 108). In this context, memory becomes a mode of consolation and the contemporary city is haunted by the shades of demolished streets and buildings, a way of life that has been 'swallowed in the maw of time and trouble, clearances' (*BC*, 63).

But if the scarified landscapes of the Falls attest to a more general decimation of the city, then the charred remains of Smithfield market figure as a symbolic black hole in Carson's work, the dark heart of a city collapsing in on itself. Prior to its fire-bombing on 6 May 1974, Smithfield was a longstanding and much-loved part of the city's social and commercial life, a ramshackle maze of stalls and passageways where all manner of second-hand goods and bric-a-brac could be bought or sold.³⁵ Typically, literary depictions of the place often err on the side of romantic whimsicality, but Carson's versions of it are suffused with a brooding, uncanny malevolence, discovering in its smoking carcass a bleak prophecy of the death of the city. To this end, 'Smithfield

Market' rewrites Robert Frost's 'For Once, Then, Something' as Belfast gothic:³⁶

Since everything went up in smoke, no entrances, no exits.
 But as the charred beams hissed and flickered, I glimpsed a map of
 Belfast
 In the ruins: obliterated streets, the faint impression of a key.
 Something many-toothed, elaborate, stirred briefly in the labyrinth.
 (IFN, 37)

The atmosphere of stifling enclosure and sulphurous danger here is suffocating, and the 'something' stirring in the depths of the labyrinth threatens to take on a monstrous shape. Yet the poem hinges around that 'faint impression' of discovery, the possibility of glimpsing an image of the city as it actually is, a map that shows all its many-toothed, elaborate complexity. Something infinitely valuable may remain to be salvaged from the wreckage after all, but, to adapt Walter Benjamin's methodology for historical materialism, this will only be accomplished if the speaker is able to 'seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger'.³⁷

Indeed, Carson's Belfast bears more than a passing resemblance to Benjamin's famous depiction of the angel of history, who is propelled backwards into the future by the storm of 'progress', his face turned towards a past that is apprehended as 'one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet'.³⁸ But if at times Carson's writing of the city betrays a tendency towards retrograde nostalgia, then 'Smithfield Market' suggests ways in which this strain also modulates into a more historically engaged critical anatomy of the 'dilapidated present' (*BC*, 66), an examination of the new urban landscapes that post-industrial Belfast is becoming and an oblique inquiry into the politico-economic forces dictating these transformations. For although a poem such as 'Clearance' celebrates the tearing away of venerable façades as a near-Yeatsian moment of creative destruction, what Carson often discovers clanking out from the smoke of demolition is a nightmarish vista of late capitalist 'junkspace'. 'In Junkspace,' writes the architect Rem Koolhaas, there exist 'subsystems only, without superstructure, orphaned particles in search of a framework or pattern', and the 'soft city' of contemporary experience is characterised by a series of hallucinatory dissolves, through which 'sections rot, are no longer viable, but remain joined to the flesh of the main body via gangrenous passages'.³⁹ Here there is no longer any guiding principle

of organisation for the city's spaces but merely a shifting collection of fragments in process of metamorphosis and dissolution.

In a near echo of Koolhaas's imagery and register, Carson's 'Night Patrol' throws off the 'Victorian creamy façade' of the Grand Central Hotel in order to reveal Belfast's 'inner-city tubing':

cables, sewers, a snarl of Portakabins,
Soft-porn shops and carry-outs. A Telstar Taxis depot that is a hole
In a breeze-block wall, a wire grille and a voice-box uttering
gobbledygook. (*IFN*, 34)

The flux and indeterminacies of language that are manipulated with such creative gusto in 'Brick' and 'Farset' have here deteriorated to the point of incomprehension, and this breakdown is reflected in the unravelling and decay of the urban fabric itself. Behind the creamy façades of prosperous respectability lies a blighted landscape of makeshift economics and squalid deprivation: 'Maggots seethe between the ribs and corrugations' (*IFN*, 37). What is more, there is an inkling in Carson's work – and in this he anticipates Koolhaas's diagnosis – that what is glimpsed here is not simply the half-concealed underbelly of the late capitalist city, but its shifting, semi-solid material substructure, and the miasma of sleech upon which Belfast is built can consequently be reread as a figure for this new base of flexible accumulation and service economies. To this end, 'Question Time' balances the utopian potential that is bound up with the prospect of revision against what is essentially a dystopian image of the contemporary city and its uncertain future: 'The junk is sinking back into the sleech and muck. Pizza parlours, massage parlours, night-clubs, drinking-clubs, antique shops, designer studios momentarily populate the wilderness and the blitz sites; they too will vanish in the morning. Everything will be revised' (*BC*, 57).

All of which raises the thorny question of postmodernism; its applicability to the Northern Irish situation generally and to Carson's writing particularly. This is a notably contentious area of critical debate and Alex Houen wryly notes that while many commentators 'have seen postmodernism to be an issue for Northern Ireland, [...] one could be forgiven for thinking it the last place in which postmodernism might find a foothold' given the part that irredentist nationalism, religious sectarianism, and historical revanchism continue to play in its social and political life.⁴⁰ Nonetheless, Eamonn Hughes's insistence that Northern Ireland be understood as 'a modern place with all the pluralities, discontents, and linkages appropriate to a modern place' usefully points critical discussion away from the ideological dead-end that considers the

statelet as an atavistic and anomalous 'place apart'.⁴¹ Elmer Kennedy-Andrews appears to be making a similar point in more emphatic terms when he describes the North as 'an exemplary site of postmodern heterogeneity, breakdown, hybridity, dual inheritance, exile and cultural pluralism'.⁴² There is, however, a risk here of obscuring the very real material divisions, inequalities, and injustices that continue to inform the contemporary condition not only of Northern Ireland but also of late modernity or postmodernity more generally. Modernity and postmodernity may also take on very specific articulations where Ireland and (particularly) Northern Ireland are concerned. To this end, Joe Cleary contends that 'in an Irish context the term "modernity" is stripped of its semblance of obviousness' and points to the danger of conceiving of Irish modernisation as a process of 'one-way traffic' whereby global socio-economic tendencies are merely adapted to local circumstances.⁴³ A similar analysis is provided by Conor McCarthy in his criticisms of what he calls 'modernisation theory', but, like Cleary, he also stresses 'the continuing cultural, intellectual and political importance of *critical* forms of modernism in the fields of cultural production and criticism'.⁴⁴

Carson's work intersects these issues at a number of points and has often been discussed as broadly 'postmodernist', not least in terms of its emphasis upon contingency and provisionality, its juxtaposition of 'high' and 'low' cultural forms, and its refusal of mythologising 'explanations' for violence and the vicissitudes of history.⁴⁵ Neil Corcoran has called Carson 'the most thoroughgoing postmodernist among his generation of Northern Irish poets',⁴⁶ whereas Richard Kirkland more cautiously sees his work in terms of 'a Northern Irish poetic aesthetic which might be amenable to, if not complicit with, postmodern frameworks of narrative'.⁴⁷ This is perhaps a rather fine distinction, but it is an important one nonetheless. For, while Carson's writing does indeed reject the metanarratives of myth and of the dominant political ideologies of Nationalism and Unionism, its insistent grounding in the material specificities of time and place works to undermine any easy notions of postmodern border crossings and cultural confluences. His representations of Belfast share in and crystallise modernity's contradictions through their compounding of kinesis and inertia, connection and disconnection, creation and destruction, and their dramatisation of the fractious relationship between art and politics. As Houen astutely acknowledges, 'Carson's gestures towards a "postmodern condition" are qualified by the "geopolitical": "The provisionality he explores is not a generalized disintegration of cultural borders and identities, it is a

specific state of socio-political power “tensed” to the “history” of Belfast and Northern Ireland no less than the poems themselves.⁴⁸

Building upon Houen’s analysis, I want to argue that it is through his critical mappings of the city’s emergent ‘junkspace’ that Carson’s dialogue with postmodernism becomes most apparent, for his depictions of Belfast at the end of the twentieth century can be seen to reflect Fredric Jameson’s conviction that the experience of the postmodern is bound up with ‘something like a mutation in built space itself.’⁴⁹ For Jameson, the spatial peculiarities of postmodernism are symptomatic and expressive of ‘a new and historically original dilemma, one that involves our insertion as individual subjects into a multidimensional set of radically discontinuous realities, whose frames range from the still surviving spaces of bourgeois private life all the way to the unimaginable decentering of global capital itself.’⁵⁰ Carson’s Belfast is not Jameson’s Los Angeles, but in *Belfast Confetti* it is nonetheless clear that the perceptual or representational frames of the Troubles city become increasingly enmeshed with those of the postmodern city, making financial investment and expanding consumerism as much a part of Carson’s cityscapes as political murder and socio-religious segregation. The one reality coexists awkwardly and discontinuously with the other, and Carson chronicles their mutual imbrication as the spatial layout of the city warps and shifts under seemingly tectonic pressures.

‘Revised Version’ dramatises these confluences and transformations, while casting a cold eye over official proposals to market Belfast as a ‘world city’:

The jargon sings of leisure purposes, velodromes and pleasure parks, the unfurling petals of the World Rose Convention. As the city consumes itself – scrap iron mouldering on the quays, black holes eating through the time-warp – the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment announces that *to people who have never been to Belfast their image of the place is often far-removed from reality*. No more Belfast champagne, gas bubbled through milk; no more heads in ovens. Intoxication, death, will find their new connections. Cul-de-sacs and ring-roads. *The city is a map of the city.* (BC, 69)

The planners’ and politicians’ anodyne vision of a sweet-smelling, leisure-plex Belfast sounds a decidedly discordant note within earshot of the city’s mouldering quays, and is placed under erasure by the corrosive social realities of post-industrial decline. Intoxication and death, it seems, will find their new connections in spite of superficial efforts at gentrification, while plans for the new city appear choked

with cul-de-sacs and ring-roads. Belfast has not, in fact, left its Troubles behind, and the government's efforts at promoting a revised image of the city seem to imply their blithe indifference towards the civic decay that is everywhere evident.

And yet Carson's own writing of Belfast is itself centrally concerned to document and bring to light those revised versions of the city that disorient official cartographies and static figurations of the city. For Carson, the 'reality' of the city is not to be accessed simply by stripping back the layers of prejudice and distortion that have concealed it from view, but its lineaments are to be glimpsed fleetingly from within the shifting constellations of sensory perceptions and material details he arranges and records. Thus, his mock-scholarly survey of old photographs and aborted plans, inaccurate maps and unlikely proposals in 'Revised Version' conjures 'glimpses of what might have been', a synchronic diagram of how the city never was and could become, which, as soon as it materialises, 'already blurs and fades' (BC, 66). This roll-call of intended streets and developers' fantasias constitutes a finely woven tapestry of absent presences, an imaginary map 'wavering between memory and oblivion' through which Carson marshals the spectral traces of Belfast's failed incarnations, holding a composite image of the dream city in productive tension with its empirical reality: 'It lives on in our imagination, this plan of might-have-beens, legislating for all the possibilities, guaranteed from censure by its non-existence' (BC, 67). In this respect, 'Revised Version' can be seen to express a (significantly unimplemented) methodological principle from Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project*, whereby he intended to 'set up within the actual city of Paris, Paris the dream city – as an aggregate of all the building plans, park projects, and street-name systems that were never developed'.⁵¹ Measuring the actual city of Belfast against Belfast the dream city, Carson exposes the fissures and lapses that disrupt the putatively totalising representational grid of the map, while simultaneously deriving his own imaginative geographies from an exploration of the city's urban unconscious. Moreover, Carson's ex-centric concern for what has been repressed, forgotten or elided from representations of the city in 'Revised Version' stresses the formidably compendious conception of urban experience that sustains his version of Belfast, perhaps confirming Sean O'Brien's perceptive remark that his work 'consists of metonymies for an unstated (and, we infer, unstatable) whole'.⁵² This ungraspable whole both prompts and eludes Carson's writing of Belfast, its significance remaining implied and intangible but everywhere operative as a representational framework or deep structure.

In this context, then, it becomes possible to briefly outline some of the parallels and divergences that may be discerned between Carson's representations of Belfast and Fredric Jameson's concept of cognitive mapping, which aims to extrapolate 'the mental map of city space [...] to that mental map of the social and global totality we all carry around in our heads in variously garbled forms'.⁵³

For Jameson, 'the incapacity to map socially is as crippling to political experience as the analogous incapacity to map spatially is for urban experience',⁵⁴ and this is particularly so in the present postmodern moment where the decentring of social space by multinational capital has undermined older forms of orientation and alignment. His response to this divisive sundering of spatial coordinates is to propose a synthesis of Kevin Lynch's concept of the 'imageable' city and Louis Althusser's formulation of ideology as representing the imaginary relationship of an individual to her real conditions of existence. The aesthetic of cognitive mapping that results conceives of the city as a microcosm of much larger global networks, extending the individual's attempt to grasp the conditions of her displacement within urban space to the unimaginable totality of social structures:

Lynch's conception of city experience – the dialectic between the here and now of immediate perception and the imaginative or imaginary sense of the city as an absent totality – presents something like a spatial analogue of Althusser's great formulation of ideology itself [...]. [T]his positive conception of ideology as a necessary function in any form of social life has the great merit of stressing the gap between the local positioning of the individual subject and the totality of class structures in which he or she is situated, a gap between phenomenological perception and a reality that transcends all individual thinking or experience; but this ideology, as such, attempts to span or coordinate, to map, by means of conscious and unconscious representations.⁵⁵

A possible objection that might be levelled at this avowedly macro-political approach is that in claiming to be able to map *everything* Jameson appears to be assuming the scopic authority of what Michel de Certeau calls the 'solar Eye, looking down like a god' and surveying the frozen cityscape from a point of remote detachment.⁵⁶ But this would be both to misconstrue Jameson's understanding of the concept of 'totality' and to overlook the fact that cognitive mapping, much like de Certeau's account of resistant spatial practices, proceeds outwards from the position of the individual subject within the dislocated circuits and relays of urban space. In fact, Jameson asserts that no such 'privileged

bird's-eye view of the whole' is available; rather, the project of totalisation 'takes as its premise the impossibility for individual and biological human subjects to conceive of such a position, let alone to adopt or achieve it', proceeding instead by way of a sort of Sartrean 'summing up' that remains necessarily partial and subjective.⁵⁷ A more serious misgiving is voiced by Jameson himself, however, when he remarks that, instead of transcending 'the limits of mapping', cognitive mapping actually 'ends up re-spatializing an operation we were supposed to think of in a different manner altogether'.⁵⁸ In this sense, the powerful figure of the visual map reasserts its hypnotic conceptual sway, short-circuiting the willed emergence of new modes of conceiving and negotiating global social structures.

This dual sense of a conceptual reliance upon and fundamental dissatisfaction with the figure of the map is what links Carson's writing of Belfast with Jameson's attempt to grasp the unfigurable social relations of the totality. If Carson is often concerned to undermine or revise the dominant cartographies of military authority and/or public opinion, then this is also bound up with an effort to find new ways of mapping the city and its relationships within a larger, unstatable whole. And throughout this chapter I have been arguing that these new ways of mapping the city can best be thought of on the model of Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome, a fundamentally acentred and fissiparous structure that is opposed to the 'arborescent' logic of the tree and root, and that 'ceaselessly establishes connections between semantic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social structures'.⁵⁹ Yet it can hardly escape our attention that, on Jameson's description at least, the new world-space of multinational capital would itself appear to be a rhizome *par excellence*, albeit one shot through with 'knots of arborescence',⁶⁰ facilitating the flexible integration of individual subjects into its decentred networks of exchange and appropriation, and mutating ceaselessly in accordance with its own voracious inner logic. The problem for Jameson is how we might be able to represent this seemingly 'unrepresentable' structure to ourselves, and it is to this end that he argues that 'conspiracy theory (and its garish narrative manifestations) must be seen as a degraded attempt – through the figuration of advanced technology – to think the impossible totality of the contemporary world system'.⁶¹

The implications of this allegorical reading of conspiracy theory for Carson's work, with its shadowy 'Special Forces' (*FL*, 19) and paranoid apprehension of an increasingly surveillant society, are highly suggestive.

Alan Gillis has written insightfully of how his narrative digressions and circumlocutions ‘suggest a broader whole (of sorts), a hinted-at, potential totality of non-tangible significance’ that appears to be both benevolent and malign.⁶² Indeed, the connections that Carson’s writing makes between semantic chains and organisations of power are at once linguistically inventive and literally lethal for the protagonists of his tall tales, converging more often than not upon the lacerating experience of political murder. ‘Queen’s Gambit’, for example, relays second-hand a labyrinthine narrative of conspiracy and violence told in a Belfast barber’s which – through its intricate weave of cinematic pans and cross-fades, sudden shifts of register, and bewildering cast of double agents, look-a-likes, and impostors – draws the reader into ‘a mental block of dog-leg turns and cul-de-sacs’ (*BC*, 36). The central incidents of the poem – which concern a robbery by small-time criminals, a double- or triple-crossing involving anonymous callers on a confidential telephone line, and a climactic ambush of the British Army by republican paramilitaries – can only be pieced together through fragmentary glimpses of some vast and monstrous encompassing structure that remains but dimly perceivable throughout, as if on the very edge of vision. In a sense, then, the seemingly insoluble matrix of loyalties, conflicts, and unacknowledged complicities that composes Carson’s version of the Troubles might also be read, along the lines suggested by Jameson, as a figure for the everywhere present but even more complex and elusive global networks of late capitalism itself. Or perhaps it would be better simply to say that Carson’s writing of Belfast typically locates itself at the fractious juncture between these two ‘levels’ of social reality.

I want to conclude by suggesting that it is also possible to discover another suggestive version of cognitive mapping in Carson’s work through his fascination with the postal service and its global networks of communication and intercourse. This tracery of images, structures, and tropes centres on the figure of Carson’s postman father, who is his son’s first and most important guide to both the city’s mysterious codes of orientation and the labyrinths of narrative that his writing explores.⁶³ In an early poem, ‘Twine’, the child-narrator plunges his head into his father’s ‘postman sack’ and breathes its ‘gloom’ (*LE*, 10; *NEOP*, 21); while in ‘Bed-Time Story’ he literally steps into his father’s ‘creased, enormous shoes’ and imagines delivering ‘Letters, cards, important gifts’ (*BC*, 86; 88). ‘Post’ develops the theme further by dramatising a moment in which precious knowledge is passed between father and son:

So now he talks
Of how it's changed:
District codes,

His mnemonics
For the various streets
Of the Falls Road walks [...]. (*NEOP*, 58)

Carson Snr is very frequently to be encountered in the middle of telling some yarn or passing on some precious scrap of knowledge such as this, and the postman's 'walk' becomes an archetypal figure underlying and informing all of Carson's circumnavigations of the city, his father's mnemonics serving as a means of ascertaining his own position relative to the surrounding streets. Moreover, because it is intimately connected with supporting and disseminating the cultures of literacy and print, 'the elaborate/ Machinery of books' (*FL*, 68), the postman's walk also features as a recurrent metaphor for writing itself. For instance, the fantastical narrative of language-learning that is spun in 'Second Language' includes an image of the narrator abroad on the pavements of the city:

I love the as-yet morning, when no one's abroad, and I am like a postman
on his walk,
Distributing strange messages and bills, and arbitrations with the world of
talk:

I foot the snow and almost-dark. My shoes are crisp, and bite into the
blue-
White firmament of pavement. (*FL*, 12)

Similarly, the alpine skier who narrates 'Z' likens the parallel tracks he leaves in the snow to the lines of the poem itself, or, in another metaphorical mode, the footsteps of a postman: 'when I deliver all the letters, that's the text./ The canvas sack on my back reminds me I am in the archaic footprints/ Of my postman father. I criss and cross the zig-zag precedents' (*OEC*, 36)

Carson walks in his father's footsteps, but also criss-crosses the paths trodden before him. If the postman's walk serves as an 'archaic' or archetypal figure in Carson's writing, providing patterns of orientation that can either be followed or deviated from, then the imprint that his footsteps leave on the pavements also, in some ultimately ungraspable way, gestures outwards to the global system of correspondences and deliveries with which his father's daily walk is distantly but inextricably bound up. Hence Carson's image of the Belfast sorting office's 'toponymical sages', who are capable of 'envisag[ing] streets they'd never seen (for who could

see all of Belfast, in all its teeming terraces and fractured loyalties?'), receiving Christmas mail from all over the world and assigning each parcel or letter to its destination in the city (*SF*, 277–8). Similarly, in *The Star Factory*, Carson recalls his childhood hobby of stamp-collecting, commenting not only upon 'the classification and taxonomy of minutiae' (*SF*, 30) that is proper to philately but also conjuring a dizzying catalogue of the unacknowledged transactions and material intimacies implied in the lives of stamps, reminding the reader forcefully that 'correspondences seethe everywhere':

Sheets of stamps, books of stamps, coils of stamps unscrolling from antiquated cast-iron slot machines: one could make an epic documentary of one day's issue, salivated on by thousands of tongues, vast spectral demographics of deoxyribonucleic acid chromosomed into the sticky backs of stamps, thumbprinted on to envelopes, or impressed by one delicate trembling fingertip, the aura of gum still lingering like a retroactive kiss on the tongue. All of this takes place in boudoirs, public houses, studies, cafes, libraries, ports, railway stations, hotels, aerodromes, schools, surgeries, pleasure gardens, post offices, garages, on piers and esplanades, on board trains and boats and planes [...]. (*SF*, 37)

'Correspondence' thus becomes a pervasive metaphor in his writing of the city, adumbrating the (often obscure) networks by which Belfast's denizens unwittingly take their place in larger circuits of exchange and transaction, and gesturing towards a network of spatial relationships or connections – a map – that can in some sense be 'envisaged' but not 'seen'. In such aspects of Carson's writing it is possible to discern the germ of a utopian mapping, one that is predicated not upon elevated distance but on an approach to the city, and the larger world with which it is conversant, at the level of its streets. As Carson says in 'Ambition': 'I think I'm starting, now,/ To know the street map with my feet, just like my father' (*BC*, 30). In this way, Jameson's claim that the mutations in built space that characterise postmodernity stand as 'something like an imperative to grow new organs'⁶⁴ is taken seriously in Carson's work. His writing reveals a restless effort to reconfigure our understanding and apprehension of the city, and to conceive of its implication in larger territories of significance in enabling new ways.

Notes

- 1 Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, p. 228.
- 2 Massey, *for space*, pp. 106–11.

- 3 Geoff King, *Mapping Reality: An Exploration of Cultural Cartographies* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996), p. 174.
- 4 De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. 121.
- 5 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (London: Continuum, 1992), pp. 13–14.
- 6 Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 13.
- 7 Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 5.
- 8 Moretti, *Atlas of the European Novel*, pp. 3–4.
- 9 Gillis, 'Ciaran Carson: Beyond Belfast', p. 185.
- 10 Houen, *Terrorism and Modern Literature*, p. 263.
- 11 Kathleen McCracken, 'Ciaran Carson: Unravelling the Conditional, Mapping the Provisional', in Michael Kenneally, ed., *Poetry in Contemporary Irish Literature* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1995), p. 356.
- 12 Fran Brearton, 'Mapping the Trenches: Gyres, Switchbacks and Zig-zag Circles in W.B. Yeats and Ciaran Carson', *Irish Studies Review* 9.3 (2001), p. 383.
- 13 For a discussion of the city as 'a multi-form non-segregated environment' see Lewis Mumford, *The City in History: Its Origins, Its Transformations, and Its Prospects* (San Diego: Harcourt, 1989), p. 493; similarly, Henri Lefebvre describes the 'form' of the city in terms of 'assembly, simultaneity, encounter'. Henri Lefebvre, *Writings on Cities*, ed. and trans. Eleonore Kofman and Elizabeth Lebas (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), p. 166.
- 14 Guinn Batten, 'Ciaran Carson's Parturient Partition: the "Crack" in MacNeice's "More Than Glass"', *The Southern Review* 31.3 (1995), p. 538.
- 15 Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 28.
- 16 Peter Denman suggests that Carson's nine-line poems, which are divided into two stanzas of five and four lines respectively, be called 'nonnets'. Peter Denman, 'Ways of Saying: Boland, Carson, McGuckian', in Michael Kenneally, ed., *Poetry in Contemporary Irish Literature* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1995), p. 161.
- 17 Corcoran, 'One Step Forward, Two Steps Back', p. 218.
- 18 John Kerrigan, 'Earth Writing: Seamus Heaney and Ciaran Carson', *Essays in Criticism* 48.2 (1998), p. 159.
- 19 *The Concise Oxford Companion to Irish Literature* briefly defines 'dinnshenchas' [sic] as 'lore of prominent places': 'Placenames are explained by reference to legends which are linked to them by means of pseudo-etymological techniques, where sometimes fictitious stories are adduced to explain the existing names. [...] It was part of the body of knowledge medieval Irish poets were expected to master'. Robert Welch, ed., *The Concise Oxford Companion to Irish Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 90–1. Carson's interest in medieval Irish (and Welsh) poetry goes back to his very earliest work, and is especially evident in his first collection, *The New Estate*. For an illuminating overview of modern Northern Irish poets' engagements with the tradition of *dinnseanchas* see Houen, *Terrorism and Modern Literature*, pp. 246–59.
- 20 Tim Robinson, *Setting Foot on the Shores of Connemara & Other Writings* (Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 1996), pp. 159–60.
- 21 Nuala ní Dhomhnaill, 'The English for Irish', *The Irish Review* 4 (1988), p. 117.
- 22 Cf. 'Four Sonnets', which includes the line: 'Put your ear to the street, you will hear the underground streams of Belfast' (*FL*, 22).

- 23 Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 522.
- 24 Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, p. 518.
- 25 Desmond Fitzgibbon, 'Delfas, Dorqk, Nublid, Dalway: The Irish City after Joyce', in Aaron Kelly and Alan A. Gillis, eds, *Critical Ireland: New Essays in Irish Literature and Culture* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2001), p. 67.
- 26 As Carson makes clear in his 'Notes', *Breaking News* owes much to the pioneering war correspondence of the Anglo-Irish journalist William Howard Russell (1820–1907), whose reports on the progress of the Crimean campaigns 'were especially influential in shaping public attitudes to the management, and mismanagement, of war' (*BN*, 74).
- 27 Fran Brearton also discusses the historical sedimentation of previous conflicts, particularly those of the Great War, informing 'The War Correspondent' and Carson's poetry more generally in 'Mapping the Trenches', pp. 373, 382–5. In particular, she draws attention to a suggestive isomorphism between Carson's metamorphic, multiform Belfast and the labyrinthine topography of trench landscapes.
- 28 Smyth, *Space and the Irish Cultural Imagination*, p. 41.
- 29 Houen, *Terrorism and Modern Literature*, p. 269.
- 30 De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. 105.
- 31 Fitzroy James Henry Somerset, 1st Baron Raglan, headed an expeditionary force in the Crimea against the Russian army, winning battles at Alma and Inkerman. At Balaclava, he gave the order that initiated the disastrous Charge of the Light Brigade (1854), was blamed for the failure of the Commissariat in the fierce winter of 1854–5, and died shortly before the storming of Sebastopol. See the entry in *Chambers Biographical Dictionary* (Edinburgh: Chambers, 6th edn, 1997), p. 1527. The *OED* glosses 'raglan' as designating 'a sleeve with sloping edges running up to the neck and so without a shoulder seam' or 'a garment with such sleeves'. Raglan Street was located at the heart of the Lower Falls Road area just west of Belfast's city centre and was demolished, along with the surrounding streets, in the 1970s, a process chronicled and responded to in Carson's poem, 'Hamlet' (*BC*, 105–8).
- 32 Anne Devlin, *The Way-Paver* (London: Faber & Faber, 1986), p. 118.
- 33 Elizabeth Wilson, 'The Rhetoric of Urban Space', *New Left Review* 209 (1995), p. 151.
- 34 Ciaran Carson, 'Belfast', Ciaran Carson Papers, MSS 746, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Box 27, Folder 5.
- 35 For a fascinating photographic record of Smithfield, both before and after its fire-bombing, see Kenneth McNally, *Smithfield Market, Belfast* (Belfast: The Blackstaff Press, 1975). Some examples of typical literary treatments are given in Robert Johnstone, *Belfast: Portraits of a City* (London: Barrie & Jenkins, 1990), pp. 142–3 and Patricia Craig, ed., *The Belfast Anthology* (Belfast: The Blackstaff Press, 1999), pp. 413–18.
- 36 See my essay, 'Strange City: Belfast Gothic', in Godela Weiss-Sussex and Franco Bianchini, eds, *Urban Mindscapes of Europe* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006), pp. 113–25. Frost's characteristically rustic poem has its speaker gazing into the depths of a well on the brink of visionary revelation, and concludes enigmatically: 'What was that whiteness?! Truth? A pebble of quartz? For once, then, something.' Robert Frost, *Selected Poems*, ed. Ian Hamilton (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), p. 131.

- 37 Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (London: Pimlico, 1999 [1970]), p. 247.
- 38 Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 249.
- 39 Rem Koolhaas cited in Fredric Jameson, 'Future City', *New Left Review* 21 (2003), p. 74.
- 40 Houen, *Terrorism and Modern Literature*, p. 239.
- 41 Eamonn Hughes, 'Introduction: Northern Ireland – border country', in Eamonn Hughes, ed., *Culture and Politics in Northern Ireland* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1991), p. 3.
- 42 Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, *Fiction and the Northern Ireland Troubles since 1969: (de)constructing the North* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2003), p. 269. In his more recent work on poetry and place in Northern Ireland, Kennedy-Andrews stresses the degree to which ideas of place, home, and belonging are bound up with the politics of territorial contestation and social division. See Kennedy-Andrews, *Writing Home*, p. 2.
- 43 Joe Cleary, 'Introduction: Ireland and modernity', in Joe Cleary and Claire Connolly, eds, *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Irish Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 2, 5.
- 44 Conor McCarthy, *Modernisation, Crisis and Culture in Ireland, 1969–1992* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2000), pp. 15, 41.
- 45 In his notoriously critical review of Seamus Heaney's *North* Carson accuses the elder poet of becoming 'the laureate of violence – a mythmaker, an anthropologist of ritual killing, an apologist for "the situation", in the last resort a mystifier'. Carson, 'Escaped from the Massacre?', p. 183.
- 46 Neil Corcoran, *English Poetry since 1940* (London: Longman, 1993), p. 219. Corcoran also makes rather more tentative claims for Carson's postmodernism in his essay 'One Step Forward, Two Steps Back', p. 216.
- 47 Kirkland, *Literature and Culture in Northern Ireland Since 1965*, p. 42.
- 48 Houen, *Terrorism and Modern Literature*, p. 270.
- 49 Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 38.
- 50 Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 413.
- 51 Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, p. 410.
- 52 Sean O'Brien, *The Deregulated Muse: essays on contemporary British and Irish poetry* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1998), p. 193.
- 53 Jameson, 'Cognitive Mapping', p. 353.
- 54 Jameson, 'Cognitive Mapping', p. 353.
- 55 Jameson, 'Cognitive Mapping', p. 353.
- 56 De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. 92.
- 57 Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 332. Similarly, in *The Political Unconscious* Jameson affirms: 'Totality is not available for representation, any more than it is accessible in the form of some ultimate truth (or moment of Absolute Spirit)'. Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a socially symbolic act* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 39.
- 58 Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 416.
- 59 Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 8.
- 60 Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 22.
- 61 Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 38.
- 62 Gillis, 'Ciaran Carson: beyond Belfast', p. 189.



- 63 Carson has recently acknowledged that his representation of his father in his books 'is sometimes more fictional than biographical'. Kennedy-Andrews, 'For all I know', p. 14.
- 64 Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 39.





CHAPTER THREE

Deviations from the Known Route: Reading, Writing, Walking

Given his desire to know the street map with his feet, it is unsurprising that the act of walking should play such a prominent role in Carson's writing. Indeed, his is a distinctively peripatetic aesthetic. Time and again walking serves not only as a means of registering urban experience, the medium through which all manner of encounters, associations, and sidelong observations are made; it also functions as a figure for the meandering, digressive nature of Carson's narratives, in which 'one thing leads to another' (*FFA*, 152) much as the pedestrian wends her way through the divagating and interconnecting streets of the city. Form and content echo and reinforce each other in this respect, and in both his poetry and his prose Carson's wayward stories are very often told by narrators travelling on foot. This is true even of his translations, as the opening lines of *The Inferno* and *The Midnight Court* respectively show:

Halfway through the story of my life
I came to in a gloomy wood, because
I'd wandered off the path, away from the light. (*IDA*, 1)

'Twas my custom to stroll by a clear winding stream,
With my boots full of dew from the lush meadow green,
Near a neck of the woods where the mountain holds sway,
Without danger or fear at the dawn of the day. (*MC*, 19)

The implicit connection here between 'strolling', 'wandering', and 'straying' is important, for, as Rebecca Solnit observes, walking need not necessarily have a fixed destination but may serve as 'a subversive detour, the scenic route through a half-abandoned landscape of ideas and experiences'.¹

Certainly, walking allows the mind to wander – and for Solnit, 'the mind, like the feet, works at about three miles per hour'² – but



it also encourages a heightened awareness on the part of the walker concerning her status as a body moving through space, with all the possibilities and prohibitions this entails. Urban walking in particular immerses the walker in the quotidian practices and social life of the city, initiating random encounters and unexpected events that may be, by turns, stimulating, alarming, or obscurely revealing. For example, in 'Gate' Carson's pedestrian narrator opens with a 'passing' remark that seems freighted with dark meaning: 'Passing *Terminus* boutique the other day, I see it's got a bit of flak:/ The *T* and the *r* are missing, leaving *e minus*, and a sign saying, MONSTER/ CLOSING DOWN SALE' (*BC*, 45). Here, the disintegrative effects of damage and decay upon the façade of a city-centre building reveal glimpses of an alternative urban semantics, and the surreal or sinister conjugation of discrete signs in the shop window is made possible by the 'wandering' eye of the pedestrian narrator.

Walking, then, is a vehicle for the sort of happenstance conjunctions, affinities, and juxtapositions that are characteristic of figurative language; but in Carson's work walking is also a recurrent figure for writing itself, a means of tracing the physical patterns and 'psychogeographical contours' of the city.³ As John Goodby comments, Carson's personae are 'self-propelled and perambulatory, negotiating a path through Belfast of the Troubles. His and his subjects' means of locomotion are a major factor in shaping the encounter with the world and individual subjectivity, and our readerly encounter with these.'⁴ The notion of walking as 'subversive detour' is variously articulated in Carson's writing, from Mule's 'careful drunken weaving' in 'Dresden' (*IFN*, 16) and his father's characteristic 'stiff-handed walk' as described in *The Star Factory* (*SF*, 27) to the diverse band of 'sommambulists' who 'stumble' their way through the kaleidoscopic historical phantasmagoria of *The Twelfth of Never* (*TN*, 13). Perhaps the best encapsulation of Carson's tendency for contrary progressions, however, and of his chariness of taking the shortest route between two points is the repeated phrase 'one step forward, two steps back',⁵ which, as Neil Corcoran notes, draws our attention to the fact that 'movement by digression' is characteristic of his aesthetic.⁶ In this chapter I will argue that such digressive or circumlocutory habits are neither incidental nor merely rhetorical, but also have important political implications that bear directly upon his representations of space and place. Walking is a mode of perceiving and navigating urban space that precludes any privileged position of detached or passive objectivity in favour of active engagement in the

writing and re-writing of the city-text. Moreover, although Carson's poetry and prose contains unusually sophisticated representations of Belfast as 'a social laboratory for the emergent "strong" or repressive state' and its surveillant technologies,⁷ walking in the city also implies for him a utopian spatial politics through which resistance to various forms of socio-spatial regulation might be both imagined and effected.

Carson's propensity for wandering and diverging is accommodated and perhaps initiated by the heterogeneous and overlapping architectural forms of which Belfast's urban fabric is composed. For the narrator of 'Intelligence', who has one eye on the map and the other on the territory described, the city's now-faded industrial histories are manifest as a 'ubiquitous dense graffiti of public houses, churches, urinals, bonding stores, graving docks, monuments, Sunday schools and Orange halls' interspersed with 'terraces and terraces of kitchen houses, parlour houses, town houses, back-to-back and front-to-back and back-to-front houses' (*BC*, 81). Reading this tangled and intricately detailed text entails navigating it on foot, and thus becoming a figure in the landscape, because maps are suspect and knowing the city involves being *of* the city. This has less to do with the nativism of local allegiances and passwords than with the sort of active engagement with varied spatial environments that is proper to walking. Indeed, while the narrators of Carson's earlier work often confine their perambulations to a fairly restricted 'home ground' of south-west Belfast, bounded by Black Mountain to the west and the River Lagan to the east, Carlisle Circus to the north and Andersonstown to the south, this intimately known terrain is subject – as all spaces are – to the play of historical forces, and so retains an ineluctable capacity for surprise and disorientation. Such experiences are integral to both the pleasures and the politics of walking in the city, and in an autobiographical essay accompanying the artist John Kindness's book *Belfast Frescoes* Carson recalls mornings of thick smog over West Belfast when he would savour 'the prospect of my being lost on the way to school':

After breakfast, muffled in my overcoat and balaclava, I would step into the incandescent wall of coalsmoke smog. I'd inhale its acrid aura through my woollen mouthpiece. Launching tentatively into it, I'd feel my way with fingertips: doors and hyphenated window-sills; verticals and horizontals; the untouchable gloom at the end of a gable wall. [...] As I come on to the Falls Road, I try to visualize its shop-front sequence: Angelone's Ice Saloon; Muldoon's the Barber's; McPeake's 'Wallpaper, Radio and

Drugs'; Kavanagh's the Butcher's; O'Kane's Funeral Parlour; Smyth's the Tobacconist's; the haberdashery whose name I can't remember.⁸

Interestingly, in this passage walking is a means of getting lost and thus achieving a state of pleasurable spatial disorientation, whereas memory provides an equally valuable and pleasurable means of reorientation and re-composition, allowing the young Carson to 'visualize' the Falls Road's 1950s shop-front sequence in his mind's eye.

The conjunction of libidinal and political aspects of walking is perhaps more immediately apparent in Carson's recurrent forays into the narrow alleyways or 'entries' that connect High Street with adjacent streets in the city centre. These entries are distinctive architectural features of the Belfast cityscape, surviving since its seventeenth-century expansion, and several housed the meeting places used by the republican United Irishmen during the late eighteenth century.⁹ Carson is drawn to these interstitial spaces both because of their symbolic importance in the city's political history and public geography, and because they provide yet another figure for the associative logic of his ambulatory narratives. Significantly, then, he defines the Belfast entry as 'a narrow lane between two streets; a backwater or a short-cut, a deviation from the beaten path' (*LNF*, 50).

In a memorable chapter of his prose book *Last Night's Fun*, the liminal space of the Belfast entry serves as a portal onto a cityscape in which past and present, dream and reality are bewilderingly conflated:

Time is never called in my recurring dream of pubs. The Belfast which these dreams inhabit is itself recurrent, changing, self-referential, in which the vestiges of antique maps become the map. I wander streets I try to rediscover in the waking world: dog-leg alleyways and laneways, early-electric downtown avenues, apparent cul-de-sacs which lead you through the colonnaded entrance to a shopping arcade. [...] Because you think you know your way around, you end up sometimes getting lost – the city constantly evolves through synapses and mental lapses, forming bridges, short-cuts, contraflows and one-way systems. If the city is a piece of music, it depends on who's playing it, who's listening; and you are not the person you were a week ago [...]. (*LNF*, 33)

The dialogue that is foregrounded here between the similar but disjunct spatial environments of the waking world and the world of dreams elicits a sense of disorientation that is at once exhilarating and disconcerting. In the passage quoted, walking entails a derangement of the senses that figures the individual's relationship to place as a process of dislocation and realignment that must be repeatedly enacted. Each

encounter with the city's streets, alleyways, and arcades entails adjusting to its changing spatial and temporal coordinates, and such adjustments will necessarily have a destabilising effect upon the identities of both city and individual: 'you are not the person you were a week ago'. The analogy with music, and specifically Irish traditional music, is important, for while tradition 'implies continuity, the creation of new music within an established framework' (*ITM*, 6) it is also true that 'variation [...] is a principle of traditional music. The same tune is never the same tune twice' (*ITM*, 7–8). And a similar dialectic is present in walking; for even the act of retracing a route walked before will always involve a sense of spatio-temporal disjunction that makes a deviation from the beaten path inevitable: the same walk is never the same walk twice.

This interest in deviating from the beaten path draws our attention to the abiding influence of the work of the German critic and theorist Walter Benjamin on Carson's writing. In particular, Carson shares with Benjamin a fascination with the politics of the everyday and a desire to probe the shifting textures of urban experience; he also adopts Benjamin's strategy of writing texts that model their formal structures upon the city and urban spaces.¹⁰ Moreover, for both writers walking becomes an important and recurrent theme in their writing. Carson famously appropriates the following excerpt from Benjamin's memoir, *A Berlin Childhood Around the Turn of the Century*, and uses it as an epigraph to part one of *Belfast Confetti*:

Not to find one's way about in a city is of little interest [...]. But to lose one's way in a city, as one loses one's way in a forest, requires practice [...]. I learned this art late in life: it fulfilled the dreams whose first traces were the labyrinths on the blotters of my exercise books. (*BC*, 14)

Not to find one's way indicates a passive failure on the part of the urban walker, and also implies an abiding impulse for keeping to the straight and narrow. On the contrary, losing one's way requires practice, dedication, and an active decision to break with established paths in order to immerse oneself in the unfamiliar, but potentially revelatory, landscapes of the modern city. There is, Benjamin insists in a related context, an 'art of straying' that may be learnt at the knee of the city, for to become lost there is to generate an unusually acute or heightened perception of the surrounding environment.¹¹ As a pattern can resolve itself from traces of ink, so the freshly apprehended city can reveal itself in new forms, forms that might themselves be translated into labyrinths of print.

An understanding of Benjamin's techniques for interpreting the city's social life and historical transformations helps to illuminate the representational procedures adopted in Carson's writing of Belfast. For Benjamin, straying is both an art and a point of critical departure, as the following methodological note makes clear: 'What for others are deviations are, for me, the data which determine my course.—On the differentials of time (which, for others, disturb the main lines of inquiry), I base my reckoning.'¹² This willingness to plot a wayward course and break with the main lines of inquiry is in keeping with his determination to 'brush history against the grain',¹³ and also leads him to concentrate on the minutiae and marginalia of the city as a means of constructing a fragmentary picture of the social forms taken by capitalist modernity. Throughout much of his work, and particularly in the analysis of Second Empire Paris undertaken in his massive but ultimately unfinished *Arcades Project*, Benjamin is drawn less to the monuments and main thoroughfares of the capital city than to its seedy side-streets and decrepit arcades, detailing modern urban experience through peripheral or despised figures – the rag-picker, the prostitute, the *flâneur* – whose perspectives are discounted or suppressed by the dominant order.¹⁴ In an aside to his seminal revaluation of the Parisian Symbolist poet Charles Baudelaire, he notes a homology between the rag-picker and the poet through which refuse, the obsolete and the discarded, becomes the material for writing: 'Ragpicker and poet: both are concerned with refuse, and both go about their solitary business while other citizens are sleeping; they even move in the same way.'¹⁵ In Benjamin's 'multilayered reading of the city' the residues and detritus of the past serve as sources for writing the secret history of the metropolis, and walking is a crucial means in elaborating such alternative narratives.¹⁶

A broadly similar bent can be discerned in Carson's depictions of Belfast, which often visit and revisit the city's neglected districts and recent wastelands through the eyes and actions of its eccentric, marginal, or dispossessed inhabitants: a barfly haunting demolished pubs ('Barfly'); a prostitute working the streets around Belfast GPO in Tomb Street ('Snowball'); two winos 'reclining on the waste ground/ Between Electric Street and Hemp Street' ('Two Winos', *IFN*, 40); the brock-man and the coal-brick man trawling the streets of the Lower Falls, itself a 'world of cast-offs, hand-me-downs, of new lamps for old' ('Brick', *BC*, 73); a small boy on a travellers' encampment, 'wandering trouserless/ Through his personal map – junked refrigerators, cars and cookers, anchored/ Caravans' ('Travellers', *IFN*, 42).¹⁷ In 'Box' the poet-speaker's sleep is

haunted by the strange vision of a man 'with a cardboard box perched/ On his head – no hands, his body bent into the S or Z of a snake-charmer's/ Rope.' This contorted, possibly mutilated figure crops up in various areas adjacent to the city centre, 'hen-stepping out of a pea-soup fog' and always bearing the enigmatic box that fascinates the narrator:

In all these years, don't ask me what was in there: that would take
A bird's-eye view. But I get a whiff of homelessness, a scaldy fallen
From a nest into another nest, a cross between a toothbrush and a razor.
Open-mouthed, almost sleeping now. A smell of meths and cardboard.

(*IFN*, 43)

That 'smell of meths and cardboard' is, of course, contiguous with the 'whiff of homelessness' the speaker catches, and the box carried on the man's head is its stigmatised emblem, the comfortless 'nest' into which he has fallen. Just as sight gives way to smell in the second stanza of the poem, so the speaker's riddling curiosity softens to sympathetic observation, an attempt to understand and identify with this 'scaldy', but also a refusal of any transcendental knowledge: 'that would take/ A bird's-eye view.' A gulf remains between observer and observed, then, but Carson's eschewal of an elevated perspective for one that remains uncomfortably close to the street implicitly restates a rhetorical question first posed by Benjamin: 'For what do we know of streetcorners, curbstones, the architecture of the pavement – we who have never felt heat, filth, and the edges of the stones beneath our naked soles, and have never scrutinized the uneven placement of the paving stones with an eye toward bedding down on them.'¹⁸

Richard Kirkland astutely remarks that it is 'at the point of tension between observer and inhabitant that Carson's poetry has located itself',¹⁹ an intermediate position that Benjamin identifies with the ambiguous figure of the *flâneur*, the bourgeois city-dweller who 'goes botanizing on the asphalt',²⁰ spending his time in aimlessly walking the streets. 'The city,' writes Benjamin, 'is the realization of that ancient dream of humanity, the labyrinth. It is this reality to which the *flâneur*, without knowing it, devotes himself.'²¹ The *flâneur* is both citizen and artist, a member of the urban crowd and its chief anatomist, for the 'revealing presentations of the big city [...] are the work of those who have traversed the city absently, as it were, lost in thought or worry.'²² Paradoxically, distraction or disconnection from the spatial environments he traverses allows the *flâneur* to tap into the city's unconscious currents and axes of passage – what Guy Debord would call its 'psychogeographical pivot points'²³ – and in *flânerie* the relationship between body and city is

therefore necessarily oblique or even awry. I have already observed that this peripatetic disposition is prominent throughout Carson's writings on Belfast, but his recasting of the Benjaminian *flâneur* is perhaps most evident and interesting in the poem, 'Linear B'.

In this text, Carson skews the traditional features and trajectory of *flânerie* as they are described in Benjamin's work but retains the constitutive ambiguity between observation and participation, allowing this tension to play across the stanza break at the centre of the poem. Initially, the speaker watches a familiar figure:

Threading rapidly between crowds on Royal Avenue, reading
Simultaneously, and writing in his black notebook, peering through
A cracked lens fixed with Sellotape, his *rendez-vous* is not quite *vous*.

Reading, writing, and walking all fuse together in this character's rapid movements through the crowd of which he is and is not a part. Engulfed and self-absorbed, there is something 'cracked' about him, although his seemingly random course eventually reveals a larger pattern: 'But from years of watching, I know the zig-zags circle:/ He has been the same place many times, never standing still.' The uncertainty is carried over into the second stanza, but here there is a decisive shift in the perspective of the speaker, who finally abandons his 'years of watching' and takes to the streets:

One day I clicked with his staccato walk, and glimpsed the open
notebook:
Squiggles, dashes, question-marks, dense as the Rosetta stone.
His good eye glittered at me: it was either nonsense, or a formula – for
Perpetual motion, the scaffolding of shopping lists, or the collapsing city.

(IFN, 33)

The wayward crank who is the focus of attention in 'Linear B' satirises the heroic figure cut by the urban poet as he strolls through the busy streets, his glittering eye implying the possibility of epiphanic insights or the delusions of a mind thinking in code. If there is a formula for 'the collapsing city' then it hovers between the nonsensical and the indecipherable, for the city resists easy textualisation, requiring the invention (and reinvention) of new languages or codes by which it may be represented. As Henri Lefebvre comments: 'The city writes itself on its walls and in its streets. But that writing is never completed. The book never ends and contains many blank or torn pages. It is nothing but a draft, more a collection of scratches than writing.'²⁴

'Linear B' – the title of which alludes to issues of decipherment and translation²⁵ – raises questions over the relationships between representation, textuality, and urban forms, particularly the common metaphor whereby the city is conceived of as a written text or a system of signs.²⁶ For example, Richard Lehan's sweeping survey of *The City in Literature* is informed throughout by his guiding principle that 'the ways of reading the city offer clues to ways of reading the text, urban and literary theory complementing each other.'²⁷ Similarly, but from a different disciplinary perspective, the urbanist Kevin Lynch has famously proposed the following formula for a clarified image of the city: 'Just as this printed page, if it is legible, can be visually grasped as a related pattern of recognizable symbols, so a legible city would be one whose districts or landmarks or pathways are easily identifiable and are easily grouped into an over-all pattern.'²⁸ Attractive as such parallels between the urban environment and the literary text undoubtedly are, however, it is worth retaining some scepticism about the metaphorical correlations upon which they depend. It might be objected that because Lynch's notion of the legible city-text is underwritten by a desire for order and security he runs the risk of subordinating the formal and social complexity of the city to the visual space of rationalism and transparency. Similarly, Lehan's neat analogy between reading the city and reading the text would appear to obscure a number of conceptual difficulties that require attention. For instance, if the city *is* a text, what sort of text is it? Who can be said to 'write' it? And what kinds of readings does it invite?

The work of Henri Lefebvre is helpful in addressing at least the first of these questions, and goes some way towards explaining the representational politics underlying Carson's depiction of Belfast as a palimpsest of conflictual and often contradictory signs. Both elaborating and qualifying the metaphor of the city-text, Lefebvre insists that to apply literary-critical codes 'as a means of deciphering social space must surely reduce that space itself to the status of a *message*, and the inhabiting of it to the status of a *reading*. This is to evade both history and practice.'²⁹ 'Both natural and urban spaces are,' he contends, 'if anything, "over-inscribed": everything therein resembles a rough draft, jumbled and self-contradictory. Rather than signs, what one encounters here are directions – multifarious and overlapping instructions.'³⁰ In this respect, the city-text is understood as elliptical and opaque rather than unified and transparent – more akin to a rebus than a neatly calligraphed page – requiring interpretation and subject to revision as the walls and

streets upon which it is 'written' are demolished and rebuilt. Like Roland Barthes's 'writerly' text, the city is 'a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds'.³¹

Similarly, Carson's Belfast is a city bristling with jumbled and mutually incompatible inscriptions that, paradoxically, announce both a desire for permanence and the knowledge of their inevitable ephemerality all at once:

At times it seems that every inch of Belfast has been written-on, erased, and written-on again: messages, curses, political imperatives, but mostly names, or nicknames – Robbo, Mackers, Scoot, Fra – sometimes litanized obsessively on every brick of a gable wall, as high as the hand will reach, and sometimes higher, these snakes and ladders cancelling each other out in their bid to be remembered. *Remember 1690. Remember 1916*. Most of all, *Remember me. I was here*. (BC, 52)

As Robert McLiam Wilson has it in his novel *Eureka Street*, Belfast 'keeps its walls like a diary',³² but one whose pages may be blank, torn, or over-inscribed to the point of illegibility. The city is a palimpsest of desires and directions, but the overwhelming impulse to remember through writing is also one that entails erasure or tragic forgetting as new messages inscribe themselves into the old. In 'Queen's Gambit', Carson's narrator laments: 'It's so hard to remember, and so easy to forget the casualty list –/ Like the names on a school desk, carved into one another till they're indecipherable' (BC, 35). Because 'every stick and bit implies a narrative, and we ascribe their provenances' (SF, 12), the writing of the city demands a tortuously exacting historiographic aesthetic, an absorption in 'realms of minutiae unknown to the layman' (SF, 16) if an attempt is to be made at recording the teeming events of Belfast's day-to-day life in sufficient detail. The collapsing city may collapse under the weight of its own fractal narratives. To put this another way, an impulse towards composing the city's material and historical multiplicity as a text to be read and deciphered is always qualified in Carson's writing by his acute sensitivity to the contingency and specificity of its changing situations. As Peter Middleton and Tim Woods remark: 'The city challenges an ordered and coherent narrative, yet it also represents a space or matrix of confluence where the status of textuality is constantly being articulated and tested.'³³ The problem therefore becomes one of balancing the desire for knowing Belfast in its totality against the necessity of knowing it in terms of its provisional details.

As we have already seen, in Carson's work the practice of walking in the city is intimately bound up with the effort to depict it in writing,

and may in fact offer a way of balancing such contradictory imperatives. As Raymond Williams observes, 'perception of the new qualities of the modern city had been associated, from the beginning, with a man walking, as if alone, in its streets'; throughout the nineteenth century the city was regarded not simply as the distinctive locus of modern life, but as 'the physical embodiment of a decisive modern consciousness', and walking through the streets provided a means of tracing its semantic convolutions.³⁴ Williams's examples range from Blake and Wordsworth, through Dickens and James Thomson to T.S. Eliot, Woolf, and Joyce. A relevant contemporary use of such techniques is to be found in the work of Iain Sinclair, whose psychogeographical investigations of London's borderlands employ walking as the impetus for a condition of 'alert reverie':

Walking is the best way to explore and exploit the city; the changes, shifts, breaks in the cloud helmet, movement of light on water. Drifting purposefully is the recommended mode, tramping asphalted earth in alert reverie, allowing the friction of an underlying pattern to reveal itself. [...] Walking, moving across a retreating townscape, stitches it all together: the illicit cocktail of bodily exhaustion and a raging carbon monoxide high.³⁵

Although he does not exactly share Sinclair's Blakean occultism and pseudo-mystical investment in 'the vagrant shamanism of the streets',³⁶ Carson's writing does echo both his notion of purposeful drifting and the emphasis he places upon pattern-making as a result of the intersection of multiple trajectories. When, in 'Patchwork', the protagonist's mother notes ruefully that '*the stitches show in everything I've made*' Carson is also alluding to the way in which his narrator's traversals of the city – in the narrative present and in memory – serve to roughly stitch together a host of disparate experiences, not all of them his own (*IFN*, 63). Similarly, in an unpublished poem, 'To the German Language', Carson's narrator describes a border route 'Snarled up with ramps and dragon's teeth, impedimenta, broken bridges' and remarks that 'the way from A to B is often via X, where X is/ The unknown'.³⁷ And yet such pattern-making and forays into the unknown are always fraught in Carson's work, for his adaptations of the pervasive and longstanding literary convention of the urban walker take place in the specific contexts and circumstances of late twentieth-century Belfast. Because of this they expose the Benjaminian *flâneur* to very particular historical and political intensities that require careful calibration.

In this regard, Carson's writing of Belfast can usefully be understood in relation to Michel de Certeau's discussion of walking in the city as

a resistant spatial practice, one that opens up ‘a space for maneuvers of unequal forces and for utopian points of reference’.³⁸ For de Certeau, the city is both the focus for the repressive apparatuses of state administration and a terrain that is ‘left prey to contradictory movements that counterbalance and combine themselves outside the reach of panoptic power’.³⁹ In this way, the urban environment is understood in explicitly dialectical terms as a mesh of overlaid and competing networks of power through which both carceral and libidinal impulses are articulated. On the one hand, de Certeau equates the panoptic power of control with lofty detachment, the elevated, panoramic viewpoint of the ‘voyeur god’ looking down on the city below; on the other, he identifies a challenge to such power in the street-level perspectives of the ‘ordinary practitioners of the city [...] whose bodies follow the thicks and thins of an urban “text” they write without being able to read it’.⁴⁰ To gain a point of eminence is to be ‘lifted out of the city’s grasp’, and this distance conspires with the fiction that ‘makes the complexity of the city readable, and immobilizes its opaque mobility in a transparent text’⁴¹ – precisely the approach that, Lefebvre argues, evades both history and practice. Complexity is sacrificed in an effort to make the city legible and therefore more amenable to scopic control. Conversely, the everyday practice of walking in the city makes use of ‘spaces that cannot be seen’, tracing paths that are ‘unrecognized poems in which each body is an element signed by many others’: ‘A *migrational*, or metaphorical, city thus slips into the clear text of the planned and readable city.’⁴² Furthermore, de Certeau conceives of walking as ‘a space of enunciation’, thus drawing a suggestive analogy with both oral and written forms of narrative:

The walking of passers-by offers a series of turns (*tours*) and detours that can be compared to ‘turns of phrase’ or ‘stylistic figures’. There is a rhetoric of walking. The art of ‘turning’ phrases finds an equivalent in an art of composing a path (*tourner un parcours*).⁴³

Walking in the city entails the delineation of a spatial trajectory that, in its twists and turns, evasions and circumlocutions, tells a story about the spaces traversed, one that (in an echo of Benjamin) is ‘composed with the world’s debris’.⁴⁴

Carson’s writing of Belfast can be seen both to respond to, and complicate, de Certeau’s extremely suggestive account of urban experience.⁴⁵ For example, walking in the city is described as a crucial aid to poetic composition in the introduction to Carson’s 2002 translation of Dante’s *Inferno*:

The deeper I got into the *Inferno*, the more I walked. Hunting for a rhyme, trying to construe a turn of phrase, I'd leave the desk and take to the road, lines ravelling and unravelling in my mind. Usually, I'd head for the old Belfast Waterworks, a few hundred yards away from where I live. The north end of the Waterworks happens to lie on one of Belfast's sectarian fault lines. Situated on a rise above the embankment is the Westland housing estate, a Loyalist enclave which, by a squint of the imagination, you can see as an Italian hill-town. Flags proclaim its allegiance. A gable wall bears the letters UFF – Ulster Freedom Fighters – flanked by two roundels, each bearing a Red Hand within a white Star of David on a blue ground. Often, a British Army helicopter eye-in-the-sky is stationed overhead. (*IDA*, xi)

On Carson's reading, the Italian or Florentine of *The Inferno* goes to 'a music which is by turns mellifluous and rough, taking in both formal discourse and the language of the street. [...] As I walked the streets of Belfast, I wanted to get something of that music' (*IDA*, xxi). Lines suggest themselves and phrases are construed as Carson takes to the road, and the streets of Belfast provide a point of access into the Inferno for the solitary walker. Moreover, it takes little more than 'a squint of the imagination' for his 'divided city' (*IDA*, 40) to become conflated with the schismatic milieu of medieval Florence or the darker regions of Hell, and Carson's Inferno is self-consciously viewed through the eyes of a Belfast: 'Consider a citadel, heavily fortified/ by rings of ditches, moats, trenches, fosses,/ military barriers on every side' (*IDA*, 119). However, as this imagery of fortification and blockade reminds us, the streets of Belfast are both fortified and closely policed, and those who choose to walk through them will be fixed by the watchful eye of the army helicopter patrolling overhead, and perhaps also by the eyes of hostile neighbours. Imagining the helicopter's aerial, bird's-eye view, Carson sees 'a map of North Belfast, its no-go zones and tattered flags, the blackened side-streets, cul-de-sacs and bits of wasteland stitched together by dividing walls and fences' (*IDA*, xi–xii). Contemporary Belfast, like Dante's Florence, 'feels claustrophobic', and can easily become a twitchy, oppressive place 'where everyone is watching everyone, and there is little room for manoeuvre' (*IDA*, xii).

De Certeau's utopian attempt to discover, or produce, such room for manoeuvre, and to discern a coherent micro-politics of disobedience in the practice of everyday life, finds an answer in Carson's insistent recourse to 'bifurcations and alternatives' (*BC*, 73). However, Carson's writing also illustrates some of the limitations that necessarily impose themselves upon such a utopian project, for it recognises that Belfast's militarised and closely scrutinised landscapes can, more often than

not, shut down such options, turning the city into a 'murky prison zone' (*IDA*, 66). Carson's Belfast is perhaps more tightly enmeshed in the technologies of surveillance and regulation than de Certeau's New York, and its streets seem more likely to close in upon those who walk through them. An early poem, 'The Bomb Disposal', compares the spatial layout of the city to the close-packed and deadly circuitry of a bomb, listening to 'the malevolent tick of its heart' and wondering on the possibility of reading 'the message of the threaded veins/ like print, its body's chart'. Just as the bomb disposal expert moves with 'the slow deliberation of a funeral', knowing that one false move will be fatal, so travelling through unknown areas of the city can lead abruptly to a very literal dead end:

I find myself in a crowded taxi
 making deviations from the known route,

 ending in a cul-de-sac
 where everyone breaks out suddenly
 in whispers, noting the boarded windows,
 the drawn blinds. (*NE*, 21)

Here, of course, the mode of transport is not walking but the Belfast black taxi. In another taxi poem, '33333', the speaker again 'finds himself' in a Ford Zephyr, '[g]unning through a mesh of ramps, diversions, one-way systems', on a journey that also quickly deviates from the known route, scrambling familiar coordinates in order to arrive at another portentous terminus: 'I know this place like the back of my hand, except/ My hand is cut off at the wrist. We stop at an open door I never knew existed' (*IFN*, 39).⁴⁶ A sense of orientation that is taken for granted may be undermined as easily as a worn cliché, for the city's 'forbidden areas chang[e] daily' (*NE*, 21) and, like those of the Westland housing estate, are often marked symbolically by a bloody severed hand.⁴⁷

The dangers are even more acute, and certainly more immediately tangible, for the pedestrian wandering through the meaner streets of the inner city on foot, as 'Punctuation' makes clear. This poem follows a man walking, as if alone, on a frosty night 'jittering with lines and angles, invisible trajectories'. Enveloped in this tense, crackly atmosphere, and seemingly caught out 'in the gap between the street-lights' as echoes of gunfire ring out, the speaker-protagonist discovers too late that he is just far enough away from home for it to matter: 'I can/ See my hand, a mile away in the future, just about to turn the latch-key in the lock,/ When another shadow steps out from behind the hedge, going, dot,

dot, dot, dot, dot ...' (*BC*, 64). This metaphorical play on the material qualities of print and typography is made more elaborate in 'Belfast Confetti', which also places its speaker on foot in the midst of violent events:

Suddenly as the riot squad moved in, it was raining exclamation marks,
Nuts, bolts, nails, car-keys. A fount of broken type. And the explosion
Itself – an asterisk on the map. This hyphenated line, a burst of rapid
fire ...

I was trying to complete a sentence in my head, but it kept stuttering,
All the alleyways and side-streets blocked with stops and colons.

I know this labyrinth so well – Balaclava, Raglan, Inkerman, Odessa
Street –

Why can't I escape? Every move is punctuated. Crimea Street. Dead end
again.

A Saracen, Kremlin-2 mesh. Makrolon face-shields. Walkie-talkies. What
is

My name? Where am I coming from? Where am I going? A fusillade of
question-marks. (*IFN*, 31)

The sudden reconfiguration of the cityscape in this poem, as the result of a violent confrontation, serves not to illuminate new connections but rather to shut them down, and the speaker finds his home ground rendered dangerously unfamiliar, a labyrinth of dead ends and one-way systems. Moreover, the agents of this spatial circumscription, the British Army, are figured as the representatives of an aggressively hi-tech modernity predicated upon the regulation and surveillance of the population's movements.

The poem's extended analogy between the built environment of the city and the material composition of the printed text seems to parallel this debilitating sense of physical constriction and entrapment with the frustrations of inarticulacy and the disintegration of sense. Yet if Carson's writing of Belfast is here decomposed to a 'fount of broken type', then that writing nevertheless remains charged with a riotous, explosive energy that is distinctively modernist in character, connoting as it does an instance of 'creative destruction'.⁴⁸ And while the speaker finds his every move punctuated, ending at a military cordon where his origins and destinations are interrogated, the 'fusillade of question-marks' with which the poem concludes manages to leave its onward trajectory at least minimally open to interpretation. 'Belfast confetti' is slang for the miscellaneous rubble thrown during street riots – 'nuts, bolts, nails, car keys' – but also refers, self-reflexively, to the patchwork of raw materials

from which Carson's texts are themselves assembled, the fragments of language and scraps of narrative that litter the streets of his city.⁴⁹ The aesthetic self-consciousness involved here is, of course, pointedly ironised and undermined by the political urgency of the poem's central situation.

The British Army is a ubiquitous and menacing presence in 'Belfast Confetti', bristling with hi-tech equipment and brusque demands while attempting to impose its authority on a hostile labyrinth of tightly packed streets. Carson has an appalled fascination for the jargon of modern technological warfare, recording the precise name and number for a weapon or device, as well as their often incongruous nicknames, because in this highly specialised use of language a particularly sinister kind of logic can be glimpsed.⁵⁰ Yet if the military are often portrayed as the representatives and enforcers of an invasive administrative power in Carson's work, they are also shown to be victims of the very panoptic apparatus that they impose upon the city's streets and help to maintain. Patrolling 'the smog and murk of Belfast' (*BC*, 98), Carson's soldiers can seem as exposed and vulnerable as the speaker in 'Belfast Confetti', hunters who are also hunted and lost. In this, Carson diverges from more typical nationalist representations of the British Army through which soldiers patrolling the streets are apprehended simply as alien intruders, an unwelcome, violently penetrative force embodying the military dominance of a colonial power. For example, Seamus Heaney's 'The Toome Road' famously depicts an early morning convoy of armoured cars, 'warbling along on powerful tyres' near the outskirts of a rural town in Catholic-nationalist South Derry. Because of the poet-speaker's vigilance, however, this military invasion can be confronted with the grounded phallic monument of an 'invisible, untoppled omphalos' that guarantees the rural community's organic relationship to place.⁵¹ And Gerry Adams adapts a more basic version of the same paradigm to the streets of the Lower Falls when he observes 'the omnipresent foot patrols of British soldiers treading carefully through the back streets, a threatening intrusion into an area hostile to their presence'.⁵² For Adams, 'the Falls remains a place apart, a state of mind and even, at times, a political statement', although he also resentfully notes that the area is nonetheless subject to the aerial scrutiny of the British Army post at the top of Divis Tower.⁵³

Carson's attitude to his particular home ground is considerably less proprietorial than Adams's, recognising that that ground is shifting and contested rather than sealed or magically bounded by communal ties.

Moreover, in 'All Souls' he goes out of his way to parody Heaney, adding a tongue-in-cheek science fiction twist to the notion of alien invasion that the elder poet implicitly invokes: 'You can see they come from the Planet X, with their walkie-/ Talkies, the heavy warbling of their heavy Heaney tyres' (*FL*, 40).⁵⁴ Characteristically, where Heaney's poem draws a line between residents and interlopers, natives and colonisers, Carson's is centrally concerned with those confusions of identity and communication that are integral to the political dynamics of the Troubles. Thus, his soldiers use their 'un*Walkman* headphones' to tune into 'a form of blah/ Alive with intimations of mortality, the loud and unclear garbled static' (*FL*, 40), but are nonetheless caught off guard by a group of paramilitaries disguised as firemen, and wearing Hallowe'en masks: 'They were plastic, not explosively, but faces. Then/ They tore their faces off. Un*Walkman*like. Laconic. Workmanlike' (*FL*, 41). It is also productive to contrast Carson's poem 'Army' with Heaney's 'The Toome Road', for this poem similarly stages a military intrusion into the poet's native place. However, rather than expressing outrage or alarm, Carson employs the coldly observant gaze of the concealed sniper in order to record a decidedly nervous, desultory procession through the back streets of the Falls:

The duck patrol is waddling down the odd-numbers side of Raglan Street,
The bass-ackwards private at the rear trying not to think of a third eye
Being drilled in the back of his head. Fifty-five. They stop. The head
Peers round, then leaps the gap of Balaclava Street. He waves the body
over

One by one. Forty-nine. Cape Street. A gable wall. Garnet Street. A gable
wall. (*IFN*, 38)

The rhythmic syncopation of the short sentences and clustered monosyllables in the final line of the poem mimics stop-start heartbeats and faltering steps, and as the ominous countdown continues it becomes increasingly clear that this unit are not waddling but sitting ducks.

Once again, walking provides Carson with an ideal means of describing the topography and atmosphere of the streets adjoining the Falls Road, though it is also a dangerous mode of locomotion that can lead the pedestrian to more than one kind of dead end. The ambushed soldiers in the more recent poem 'Trap' find themselves in a similar position:

backpack radio
antenna

twitching
rifle

headphones
cocked

I don't
read you

what the

over. (*BN*, 15)

In the wrong place at the wrong time, a breakdown in communication can be fatal, and Carson parallels the experience of spatial disorientation with the violent foreshortening of language itself. Crucially, though, it is Carson's imaginative empathy with such experiences of disorientation and exposure in the labyrinthine city that most clearly mark his difference from both Heaney and Adams.

The narrator of Jorge Luis Borges's story 'The Immortal' remarks that a labyrinth is 'a structure compounded to confuse men; its architecture, rich in symmetries, is subordinated to that end'.⁵⁵ Carson's Belfast often appears to have been built to a similar design, the sectarian geography of its architectural forms and the actions of military and paramilitary agents alike combining to produce an extensive carceral system of regulation and control predicated upon the ubiquity of surveillance and the insertion of individual civilian subjects into a fixed and segmented space.⁵⁶ To this end, his prose piece 'Intelligence' begins:

We are all being watched through peep-holes, one-way mirrors, security cameras, talked about on walkie-talkies, car 'phones, Pye Pocketfones; and as this helicopter chainsaws overhead, I pull back the curtains down here in the terraces to watch its pencil-beam of light flick through the card-index – *I see the moon and the moon sees me*, this 30,000,000 candlepower gimbal-mounted Nitesun by which the operator can observe undetected, with his red goggles and an IR filter on the light-source. (*BC*, 78)

The Troubles have created a minatory atmosphere of edgy paranoia in which trust has been tempered with fear to such an extent that 'everyone eyes everyone' else (*BN*, 24), policing each others' movements and internalising the logic of subjugation embodied in the surveillant technology lacing the city's thoroughfares and buildings. Belfast has become 'a Twilight Zone' in which 'Special Powers' are exerted and betrayal lurks at every corner (*FL*, 19), so that paranoia becomes a common reflex for many of Carson's characters and a dominant note

in the poems themselves. In 'Cave Quid Dicis, Quando, et Cui' – the title of which translates roughly as 'beware what you say, when, and to whom' – Carson's spooked narrator counsels gravely: 'Make sure you know your left from right and which side of the road you walk on.' For, in Belfast during the Troubles both the city streets and the treacherous terrain of language itself are planted with hidden traps for the unwary, and even minor slips of the tongue or foot will be recorded and processed in invisible databases by persons unknown for purposes that remain undisclosed: 'Watch if they write in screeds, // For everything you say is never lost, but hangs on in the starry void / In ghosted thumb-whorl spiral galaxies. Your fingerprints are everywhere. *Be paranoid*' (*OEC*, 46).

The paranoid subject, David Trotter explains, is engaged in a search for structure and certainty, typically developing an internally coherent delusional system of 'concealed motives and intentions' which ensures that 'even the most obviously accidental occurrences are incorporated into delusion, and thus made meaningful'.⁵⁷ Paranoia is thus a means of absorbing or deflecting the disorienting effects of historical contingency, and it is certainly the case that the accelerating pace of events – 'Daily splits and splinters at the drop of a hat or principle' (*BC*, 50) – and the apparently random nature of violent actions contribute to the pervasive sense of anxiety and fear that Carson's poems articulate. Consequently, his writing appears to encompass a dialectic of certainty and uncertainty, determinism and contingency. On the one hand, anxiety arises from a surfeit of fixity in terms of social behaviour and spatial mobility; on the other, from a contrary unfixing of meaning and the resulting conflict of interpretations.

This situation is neatly encapsulated in 'Last Orders', where the narrator's entry into a Belfast bar precipitates a tense negotiation of identities and allegiances:

Squeeze the buzzer on the steel mesh gate like a trigger, but
 It's someone else who has you in their sights. Click. It opens. Like
 electronic
 Russian roulette, since you never know for sure who's who, or what
 You're walking into. I, for instance, could be anybody. Though I'm told
 Taig's written on my face. See me, would *I* trust appearances? (*BC*, 46)

The poem's punning title carries both demotic and liturgical connotations – to the last drink of the evening and to the last rites for the dead. Spatial demarcations between inside and outside parallel social and sectarian divisions, and although the speaker squeezes the door buzzer

'like a trigger' he finds the roles abruptly reversed: 'It's someone else who has you in their sights.' Once inside, he and his companions will also find it difficult to make a quick or inconspicuous exit. Surveillance imposes a sense of constriction that has tangible psychological effect in these lines, yet the locus of anxiety shifts in the next line to uncertainty and the absence of secure coordinates. Post-structuralist notions about the impossibility of a stable conception of self are here reconfigured as potentially threatening rather than liberating; if the narrator can 'be anybody' then his fellow drinkers are likely to distrust him, a distrust of 'appearances' that he shares himself. Moreover, although elaborate precautions have been taken to contain or defuse anything out of the ordinary, the speaker finally realises 'how simple it would be for someone/ Like ourselves to walk in and blow the whole place, and ourselves, to Kingdom Come' (*BC*, 46).

Dwelling more explicitly upon the subjects of surveillance and sequestration, 'Intelligence' draws parallels between the carceral reality of Belfast during the Troubles and Jeremy Bentham's plan for a new type of prison, the Panopticon, an open circular structure penetrated by light from all angles, which makes it possible to isolate and observe prisoners constantly from a central command tower in which officers and administrators remain concealed from view. For Michel Foucault, Bentham's Panopticon is 'the diagram of a mechanism of power reduced to its ideal form', the architectural expression of a disciplinary power that seeks to transform 'the whole social body into a field of perception: thousands of eyes posted everywhere, mobile attentions ever on the alert, a long, hierarchized network' effacing all sign of its own operations.⁵⁸ In Carson's work, the eye of panoptic power is most often, and most succinctly, represented in the form of a British Army helicopter – 'the eggbeater spy in the sky' (*BC*, 56) – hovering overhead and scanning the city with powerful night-vision technology, its flickering static translating to throbbing interference for those on the ground as Belfast is bathed in 'the grey light/ of surveillance' (*BN*, 24). As Carson recalls in *The Star Factory*, the white noise of surveillance constitutes a sort of ambient background that not only shapes the waking world of Belfast during the Troubles, but also 'infiltrates' the unconscious of its citizens: 'And last night, as I slept, my dreams were infiltrated by the atmospheric throb of a surveillant helicopter, vacillating high above the roof of the house like a rogue star' (*SF*, 134). The theme is reprised in a number of poems from *Breaking News*, such as 'Spin Cycle' where the narrator inserts ear-plugs to escape the noise and everything goes 'centrifugal'

(*BN*, 39). The extent of the city's transformation into a regulated field of perception – as a legible text or image – is illustrated even in poems such as 'Breath' and 'Minus' which, in noting the novel absence of the helicopter's 'thug thug' overhead, paradoxically attest to the ubiquity of its presence as a representative of surveillant power in the psyches of Carson's citizen personae (*BN*, 23, 46, 40). Most recently, the ubiquitous military helicopter 'hovering on its down-swash of noise' features as a recurrent image in *For All We Know*, a book that extends Carson's previous concerns with surveillance and paranoia into the murky world of Cold War espionage (*FAWK*, 73).

Henri Lefebvre comments that 'the visual space of transparency and readability' is inherently repressive as 'nothing in it escapes the surveillance of power',⁵⁹ and Belfast typically comes into focus as a carceral city in Carson's work through the tyranny of the visual. But while his approach to the city is itself often mediated through ocular observation and the visual arts of film and photography, it is also characterised by an extraordinarily rich sensory apprehension that frequently borders on MacNeicean synaesthesia.⁶⁰ On the tongue, on the eyes, on the ears, in the palms of one's hands, Carson's Belfast is crazier and more of it than we think, approximating to what Donatella Mazzoleni calls the 'total aesthetic' of metropolitan experience: 'In the metropolitan aesthetic the eye fails in its role as an instrument of total control at a distance; once more the ears, and then the nose and skin, acquire an equal importance.'⁶¹ Carson's writing at times seems literally intoxicated with the myriad of sensations and experiential atoms it attempts to register and record, and this insistent pressure of the sheer multiplicity and miscellaneity of urban life suggests for him a means of resisting, if not entirely escaping, the surveillance of power as it is exercised in (and upon) Belfast by state forces and paramilitaries alike. In 'Calvin Klein's *Obsession*', for instance, the scent of *Blue Grass* perfume worn by a former girlfriend takes the narrator instantly and vividly back to 1968:

I'm walking with her through the smoggy early dusk
Of West Belfast: coal-smoke, hops, fur, the smell of stout and whiskey
Breathing out from somewhere. So it all comes back, or nearly all,
A long forgotten kiss. (*IFN*, 21)

As we will see in the next chapter, the sense of smell is a powerful prompt to memory in Carson's writing, and here it serves to superimpose the city of the past – but a precisely remembered past – upon that of the present. Nonetheless, the qualification of 'nearly all' stresses the gap between

experience and its representation, and accepts the necessary provisional character of any attempt to write the city.

Furthermore, for all his acute awareness of the ways in which any genuine freedom of movement in the city tends to be restricted or curtailed by a host of socio-political factors, Carson ultimately refuses Michel Foucault's pessimistic insistence that the surveillant society's carceral system is omnipotent, all-pervasive, and unchallengeable. 'We are neither in the amphitheatre, nor on the stage,' claims Foucault, 'but in the panoptic machine, invested by its effects of power, which we bring to ourselves since we are part of its mechanism.'⁶² By contrast, Carson's intense awareness of the inherent contingency of urban life leads him to assume that the panopticon's over-reaching totalisations will become increasingly untenable, and begin to unravel in ways that may be exploited. This is apparent in the fundamentally dialectical narrative elaborated in 'Intelligence', which both constructs *and* deconstructs an image of Belfast conceived as a Foucauldian carceral city:

We track shadows, echoes, scents, prints; and in the interface the information is decoded, coded back again and stored in bits and bytes and indirect addressing; but the glitches and gremlins and bugs keep fouling-up, seething out from the hardware, the dense entangled circuitry of back streets, backplanes, while the tape is spooling and drooling over alphanumeric strings and random-riot situations [...]. (*BC*, 78–9)

Although its sectarian geography of 'peace-lines' and enclaves, checkpoints and walled estates would appear to lend itself to the logics of segmentation and fixity, the city's 'dense entangled circuitry of back streets' entails a profusion of details and narratives that resist encryption and processing. Walking these streets can therefore offer opportunities for identifying the blind-spots and ambiguities affecting the supposedly complete and austere institutions of government. As the speaker of 'Opus 14' remarks: 'The googolplex security net had been full of innumerable holes held together by string, to be frank' (*FL*, 33). Carson's paranoia is therefore fundamentally ironic, voicing legitimate fears and anxieties but also exhibiting the kind of pervasive self-awareness that Peter Knight identifies in contemporary 'conspiracy culture', whereby a genuine suspicion of authority and government actions is inflected by 'a cynical and self-reflexive scepticism about that suspicion itself'.⁶³ Indeed, while Carson's writing is concerned to delineate in detail the forbidding panoptic apparatus in which Belfast is embedded and of which it is a part, he also attempts to turn the

system's very elaborateness and complexity against itself, revealing the extent to which its 'immense framework of socioeconomic constraints and securities' are in fact riddled with 'a proliferation of aleatory and indeterminable manipulations'.⁶⁴

Although Carson's writing of Belfast notably complicates de Certeau's account of walking in the city, therefore, he ultimately retains the potential for contradictory movements and utopian points of reference, discovering the seeds of a city of refuge within the panoptic machine. And if deviations from the known route are frequently marked by danger in Carson's work, they are also the data that determine his course, for in such bifurcations he finds aesthetic and political alternatives to a malign status quo. The key figure in this respect is perhaps that of the labyrinth, which Conor McCarthy notes is 'an enduring motif' in Carson's writing. For McCarthy, however, the enduring importance of this motif has paradoxically to do with its mutability and transformative potential, and Carson's Belfast is thus best understood as 'a temporal labyrinth as well as a physical one: constantly changing, never fixed, and hence unmappable'.⁶⁵ Because of the intricacy of its changing design, the labyrinth is not simply a space of confinement and delimitation but can also serve as a place in which to lose one's way, re-opening the possibility of chance encounters and unlikely conjunctions. Moreover, as Rebecca Solnit observes, one of the symbolic functions of the labyrinth is to 'signify the complexity of any journey, the difficulty of finding or knowing one's way'.⁶⁶ By following his own 'non-linear dictates' (*SF*, 8) within the narrative labyrinth of the city Carson eschews a legible image of Belfast that would render its complex social life as a passive and inert 'text' in favour of a more dynamic, street-level engagement with its contingent and multiple specificities, the shifting coordinates of time and space that compose its fractious history.

Carson's distinctive writing of the city as walking in the city is therefore predicated upon the articulation of what Richard Sennett calls 'narrative space'; that is, spaces that are 'full of time' and therefore open to an unfolding experience of frustration and exposure, complication and elaboration.⁶⁷ This complex imbrication of space and time, where the layered spatiality of the city corresponds to a series of radically disjunct temporalities, is alluded to self-reflexively in 'Ambition' when the speaker observes that 'often you take one step forward, two steps back':

For if time is a road,
It's fraught with ramps and dog-legs, switchbacks and spaghetti; here
and there,

The dual carriageway becomes a one-track, backward mind. And bits of the landscape

Keep recurring [...]. (*BC*, 27–8)

What ‘Ambition’ also illustrates through its deft deployment of anecdote and reminiscence, cinematic cross-fades between the narrative present and the recalled past, and central focus upon the relationship between father and son, is the extent to which the labyrinth of the city is contiguous with, and overlaid by, the labyrinth of memory, that vast ‘space of fractal variation’ (*LNF*, 89) through which so many of Carson’s peripatetic narrators grope their way towards the future.

Notes

- 1 Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* (London: Verso, 2001), p. 12.
- 2 Solnit, *Wanderlust*, p. 10.
- 3 Guy Debord, ‘Theory of the Dérive’, in Ken Knabb, ed., *Situationist International Anthology* (Berkeley, CA: Bureau of Public Secrets, rev. edn, 2005), p. 62. Debord’s concept of the ‘dérive’, ‘a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances’ is relevant to Carson’s work because of the way in which it combines purposeful disorientation with a street-level analysis of the urban environment.
- 4 John Goodby, ‘“Walking in the city”: space, narrative and surveillance in *The Irish for no and Belfast confetti*’, in Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, ed., *Ciaran Carson: Critical Essays* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2009), p. 67.
- 5 The phrase recurs at least three times: see ‘Calvin Klein’s *Obsession*’ (*IFN*, 2), ‘Ambition’ (*BC*, 27), and ‘Narrative in Black and White’ (*BC*, 102).
- 6 Corcoran, ‘One Step Forward, Two Steps Back’, p. 226.
- 7 David Lloyd, *Ireland after History* (Cork University Press, 1999), p. 47.
- 8 Ciaran Carson, ‘Introduction’, in John Kindness, *Belfast Frescoes* (Belfast: Crowquill Press, 1995), pp. 1–2.
- 9 Jonathan Bardon records that the inaugural meeting of the organising committee for The Society of United Irishmen of Belfast was held at Peggy Barclay’s Tavern in Crown Entry, off High Street on 1 April 1791. Jonathan Bardon, *Belfast: An Illustrated History* (Belfast: The Blackstaff Press, 1982), p. 54.
- 10 The obvious examples in Benjamin’s case are *One-Way Street* and *The Arcades Project*. For the notion of the ‘text-as-city’ in Benjamin’s work see Graeme Gilloch, *Myth and Metropolis: Walter Benjamin and the City* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), pp. 5, 94, 102.
- 11 Walter Benjamin, *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Peter Demetz, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), p. 9.
- 12 Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, p. 456.
- 13 Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 248.
- 14 For illuminating critical overviews of Benjamin’s work in this regard see Gilloch, *Myth and Metropolis* and Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989).
- 15 Walter Benjamin, *The Writer of Modern Life: Essays on Charles Baudelaire*, ed.

- Michael W. Jennings, trans. Howard Eiland et al. (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), p. 108.
- 16 David Frisby, *Cityscapes of Modernity: Critical Explorations* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), p. 23.
- 17 Carson, *The Irish for No*, p. 42.
- 18 Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, p. 517.
- 19 Kirkland, *Literature and Culture in Northern Ireland since 1965*, p. 43.
- 20 Benjamin, *The Writer of Modern Life*, p. 68.
- 21 Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, p. 429.
- 22 Benjamin, *The Writer of Modern Life*, p. 99.
- 23 Debord, 'Theory of the Dérive', p. 66.
- 24 Henri Lefebvre, *The Urban Revolution*, trans. Robert Bononno (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), p. 121.
- 25 Linear B was a script used for writing Mycenaean, an early form of Greek, which resisted decipherment until the 1950s. The Rosetta Stone is a multilingual stele from the Ptolemaic era of Ancient Egypt that played a crucial role in the translation and decipherment of hieroglyphs during the 1820s. Rosetta is also, incidentally, a district and electoral ward of South Belfast.
- 26 For instance, Roland Barthes has argued: 'The city is a discourse and this discourse is truly a language: the city speaks to its inhabitants, we speak our city, the city where we are, simply by living it, by wandering in it, by looking at it.' Roland Barthes, *The Semiotic Challenge*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1988), p. 195. See also James Donald, 'Metropolis: The City as Text', in Robert Boccock and Kenneth Thompson, eds, *Social and Cultural Forms of Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), pp. 417–61.
- 27 Richard Lehan, *The City in Literature: An Intellectual and Cultural History* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998), p. 9.
- 28 Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1960), p. 3.
- 29 Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, p. 7.
- 30 Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, p. 142.
- 31 Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans., Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), p. 5.
- 32 Robert McLiam Wilson, *Eureka Street* (London: Vintage, 1997), p. 212.
- 33 Peter Middleton and Tim Woods, *Literatures of Memory: History, time and space in postwar writing* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), pp. 280–1.
- 34 Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (London: Hogarth Press, 1993), pp. 233, 239.
- 35 Iain Sinclair, *Lights Out for the Territory: 9 Excursions in the Secret History of London* (London: Granta, 1997), p. 4.
- 36 Sinclair, *Lights Out for the Territory*, p. 217.
- 37 Ciaran Carson, 'To the German Language', Ciaran Carson Papers, MSS 746, Manuscripts and Rare Books Library, Emory University, Box 20, Folder 15.
- 38 De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. 18.
- 39 De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. 95.
- 40 De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. 93.
- 41 De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. 92.
- 42 De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. 93.
- 43 De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, pp. 98, 100.

- 44 De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. 107.
- 45 John Goodby also provides suggestive readings of Carson's poetry in relation to de Certeau's work on walking in the city. See Goodby, *Irish Poetry Since 1950*, p. 328 n. 30; and, for a much more detailed and sustained critical discussion, Goodby, 'Walking in the City', pp. 73–85.
- 46 Cf. 'Question Time': 'I know this place like the back of my hand – except who really knows how many hairs there are, how many freckles?' (*BC*, 57).
- 47 The Red Hand of Ulster (or *Lámh Dhearg*) is a heraldic symbol denoting the ancient province of Ulster. Its origins are uncertain, but a popular myth tells of a boat race for the kingship of Ulster in which one of the contestants cut off his hand and threw it to the shore to claim victory. Since the 1970s the Red Hand has been prominent in the sectarian iconography of loyalist paramilitary groups, such as the Ulster Defence Association (UDA), the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) and the Red Hand Commandos. However, it has much older roots in Ulster Gaelic culture and is also used by some nationalist organisations such as the Ulster Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA). For some of Carson's variations on this multivalent symbol, see 'Bloody Hand' (*BC*, 51) and 'Nine Hostages' (*TN*, 18).
- 48 Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, p. 16.
- 49 In an interview with Frank Ormsby, Carson makes this connection explicit: 'That's partly what "Belfast confetti" – the phrase – means to me: bits and pieces of language littered across the streets of Belfast'. Ormsby, 'Ciaran Carson interviewed', p. 6.
- 50 See Ormsby, 'Ciaran Carson interviewed', p. 6.
- 51 Seamus Heaney, *Field Work* (London: Faber & Faber, 1979), p. 15.
- 52 Gerry Adams, *Falls Memories* (Dingle: Brandon, 1993), p. 131.
- 53 Adams, *Falls Memories*, p. x.
- 54 For a detailed critical discussion of this poem's intertextual dialogue with Heaney see Peter McDonald, *Mistaken Identities: Poetry and Northern Ireland* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), pp. 58–61.
- 55 Jorge Luis Borges, *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings*, ed. Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2000), p. 141.
- 56 Given this, it is difficult to assent to Temple Cone's argument that Carson depicts Belfast 'as a panopticon whose structure is in perpetual flux', for the urban flux of the city's transformations through time and the rigidity of the panopticon's spatial layout and regulative ideals are more persuasively regarded as embodying sharply opposed historical forces. Temple Cone, 'Knowing the Street Map by Foot: Ciaran Carson's *Belfast Confetti*', *New Hibernia Review/Iris Éireannach Nua* 10.3 (autumn 2006), p. 72.
- 57 David Trotter, *Paranoid Modernism: Literary Experiment, Psychosis, and the Professionalization of English Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 26.
- 58 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991), pp. 205, 214.
- 59 Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, p. 147.
- 60 See especially 'Snow' in Louis MacNeice, *Collected Poems*, ed. E.R. Dodds (London: Faber & Faber, 1979), p. 30. Carson's own poem, 'Snow', appears in *Belfast Confetti* (*BC*, 20–1).
- 61 Donatella Mazzoleni, 'The City and the Imaginary', trans. John Koumantarakis, in

- Erica Carter et al., eds, *Space and Place: Theories of Identity and Location* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1993), p. 297.
- 62 Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p. 217. Cf. Marshall Berman's complaint that 'Foucault's totalities swallow up every facet of modern life', precluding the possibility of resistance or even dissent. Marshall Berman, *All That is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (London: Verso, 1983), p. 34.
- 63 Peter Knight, *Conspiracy Culture: From Kennedy to the X Files* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 55.
- 64 De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. 40.
- 65 Conor McCarthy, 'Ciaran Carson's Labyrinths', *English* 54 (summer 2005), pp. 99, 101. On the importance and complexity of the figure of the labyrinth in Carson's writing, see also McCracken, 'Ciaran Carson: Unravelling the Conditional, Mapping the Provisional', pp. 356–7.
- 66 Solnit, *Wanderlust*, p. 71.
- 67 Richard Sennett, *The Conscience of the Eye: The Design and Social Life of Cities* (New York: Norton, 1992), pp. 190, 213.



CHAPTER FOUR

Revised Versions: Place and Memory

The importance and complexity of memory in Carson's aesthetic is apparent when, as in 'Ambition', time is conceived as a road that rarely runs straight, its course marked by manifold obstructions and convolutions. After all, the action of taking one step forward, two steps back can be understood in temporal as well as spatial terms, and in Carson's writing the past typically manifests itself as 'a trail of moments/ Dislocated, then located' (*IFN*, 58) that precludes a commanding overview. This much is clear in the opening lines of 'Ambition', where the narrator and his father have climbed Black Mountain in order to survey Belfast's cityscape from an elevated vantage-point: 'Now I've climbed this far, it's time to look back. But smoke obscures/ The panorama from the Mountain Loney spring.' That the poem should begin with an act of 'looking back' invites a reading in metaphorical terms, for during the ascent the two men have been 'smoking "coffin nails"' and the speaker's father has been recalling 'his time inside'. Mistaken for his brother, he had been interned without trial for seven weeks in August 1971, an experience that ghosts the whole of the narrative and is the source of a series of quips and asides, adages and practical knowledge – 'seven cigarette ends made a cigarette' – but is only ever relayed indirectly and in a deliberately fragmented or 'dislocated' form. As the narrator wryly observes at one point, 'my father's wandered off somewhere. I can't seem to find him' (*BC*, 27). Indeed, the poem's intricate choreography of gestures, movements, and exchanges between father and son on the mountainside can be read as allegorising the fraught negotiations and framings that characterise any attempt to articulate the past with the present in Northern Ireland.

Bringing the crisis period of Internment and the subsequent collapse of the Stormont government during 1971–2 into focus through the lens of family history and personal anecdote, the narrative views those events self-consciously from the perspective of a contemporary situation



bits of this and that, weaving in and out, picking, choosing, shuffling, negotiating, building up a picture that is never static, for everything moves through time and space.¹

In this seemingly counter-intuitive formulation, memory does not congeal or freeze the past in an image, 'a neat slice of time', as a photograph would,² but seeks to track its metamorphoses in tandem with those of the present and, crucially, to *interpret* these transformations. The past, like the city itself, is not a site of origin or identity but exists in a series of revised versions that are ceaselessly reconstructed. In this regard, Carson's writing echoes Paul Ricoeur's conviction that 'the phenomena of memory, so closely connected to what we are, oppose the most obstinate of resistances to the *hubris* of total reflection'.³ Nonetheless, the issue of the reliability or unreliability of memory involves important ethical and political considerations – perhaps particularly so in Northern Ireland during the Troubles – and it is therefore significant that Ricoeur should connect memory with 'a specific search for truth' entailing faithfulness, or at least the 'ambition' of 'being faithful to the past'. 'If we can reproach memory with being unreliable,' he writes, 'it is precisely because it is our one and only resource for signifying the past-character of what we declare we remember.'⁴

As we have seen, Carson's writing is often acutely aware of the potential unreliability of memory – even rhyming 'memory' and 'duplicity' in one poem (*AP*, 67) – but I want to argue that this awareness is always held in tension with the ambition of being faithful to the past that Ricoeur describes, resulting in an always equivocal attitude that carefully sifts the claims of memory to be a veracious record of past events. Absolute fidelity to the past may ultimately be unachievable but as an ambition or intention it is the precondition for any ethics of memory; and something like a search for truth seems to be evident in the near-obsessive impulse to record that is ubiquitous in Carson's work. Indeed, the hazy or 'sfumato' outlines of Carson's image of the city become discernible through a meticulous piecing together of details, a montage of textual fragments that includes anecdotes, yarns, snatches of song, brand-names and advertising jingles, political slogans, half-familiar smells, names and places, times and dates, not to mention seemingly endless lists of 'stuff'. Or perhaps it would be better to speak of the constellation of diverse material, discursive and sensory traces in his writing, where 'constellation' is understood as a procedure that 'safeguards particularity but fissures identity, exploding the object into an array of conflictive elements', emphasising the materiality of its composition at the cost of its integrity.⁵

To this end, David Lloyd observes that Carson's 1989 collection, *Belfast Confetti*, 'suggestively assembles the deep and sedimented histories of the city [...], but does so not so much through a diachronic archaeology as through a synchronic section of their continuing play in the history of the present'.⁶ As a compendium of Belfast, however, this heterogeneous constellation of elements is constantly in danger of being overwhelmed both by the material it is forced to digest and by the internal contradictions it holds in tension. Consequently, Carson's city tends to be self-consciously 'a bit out of sync' (*BC*, 35) as time lapses and everything is revised.⁷

This process is illustrated with concision and ironic humour in the poem 'The Exiles' Club', which can to an extent be read as a self-reflexive allegory for Carson's own deployment of memory in his writing. Meeting regularly in a bar in Adelaide, South Australia,⁸ a group of Belfast expats indulge their gastronomic nostalgia with expensively imported Irish whiskey, stout, cigarettes, and a 'slightly-mouldy batch of soda farls' – the almost-authentic, but not entirely savoury, tastes of home – before getting down to the serious business of reminiscence, a collective effort to 'make/ Themselves at home':

After years they have reconstructed the whole of the Falls Road, and now
Are working on the back streets: Lemon, Peel and Omar, Balaclava, Alma.
They just about keep up with the news of bombings and demolition, and
are
Struggling with the finer details: the names and dates carved out
On the back bench of the Leavers' Class in Slate Street School; the Nemo
Café menu;
The effects of the 1941 Blitz, the entire contents of Paddy Lavery's
pawnshop. (*IFN*, 45)

This finicky zeroing-in on 'the finer details' is familiar in Carson's writing – characterised as it is by his ability 'to look closer into things' (*SF*, 44) – although here such introspection begins to appear unhealthy, like the elderly soda farls. The painstaking detail with which the exiles reconstruct their version of the Falls – whether as a scale model, a map, or simply a tightly woven fabric of memories – attests to the hypnotic power of nostalgia, and suggests a desire to replace, perhaps erase, their Australian present through immersion in this carefully remembered and inventoried image of the city. But if this is one way for inveterate exiles to visit home, it is very difficult to know exactly which Belfast they are hoping to return to.

Different temporalities jostle together in the poem (the Blitz, schooldays, the Troubles) creating a sense of simultaneity that is, in turn, directly contradicted by the exiles' express attempts to 'keep up with the news of bombings and demolition', revising their mnemonic map in tandem with diachronic shifts in the actual city's fabric. The intimately known, all-but-vanished city of their personal experience here becomes enmeshed with the contemporary Belfast of media reports and second-hand information, a place from which they are at least doubly removed, yet with which they 'just about' keep up. In this way, 'The Exiles' Club' exemplifies in a peculiarly condensed manner the dialectic between recollection and revision that informs so much of Carson's writing about Belfast. For if his own struggling with the finer details of obliterated streets and pubs, 'all the haberdashery of loss' (*BC*, 21), indicates a desire to turn back the clock or at least salvage something from the wreckage of the past, Carson nonetheless refuses to regard place as a point of stability or suture, but rather evinces a determination to remain 'faithful' to the kinetic, metamorphic, often alienating energies that constitute the 'truth' of modern urban experience: 'Improve, wipe out, begin again, imagine, change' (*BC*, 68).

Noting the unreliability of memory in Carson's work, Conor McCarthy observes that 'the instability of narrative versions of the past [...] is signalled by the way that some of Carson's stories of the past are retold in a number of versions'.⁹ It is fitting, then, that 'The Exiles' Club', itself a narrative about narrative reconstructions of the past, should be retold and revised in the later prose piece, 'Schoolboys and Idlers of Pompeii'. The title refers to the likely creators of graffiti, and in the text's opening paragraphs Carson presents the urban graffito not merely as a sign to be read and deciphered, but as a 'bid to be remembered', perhaps the mnemonic inscription par excellence: '*Remember 1690. Remember 1916. Most of all, Remember me. I was here*' (*BC*, 52). However, it can hardly be ignored that these appeals to memory and remembrance make divergent and sometimes incompatible demands upon their readers. As Ricoeur notes, memory is 'object-oriented' – 'we remember something' – a point that draws our attention to the distinction between memory as intention (*la mémoire*) and memories as the things intended (*les souvenirs*): 'Memory in the singular is a capacity, an effectuation; memories are in the plural.'¹⁰ So, while the memories evoked by the graffiti that Carson reads on Belfast's gable walls (and that we read transcribed, imagined, or remembered in his texts) vary widely, and often serve to reinforce the polarisation of politico-religious identities within the city – the Battle

of the Boyne (1690) versus the Easter Rising (1916) – the intention to remember and to leave lasting traces are common to all. *Les souvenirs* typically act as markers of division, but *la mémoire* can serve as a basis for solidarity.

Having thus established the commonality of intentions to remember within Northern Irish culture, Carson introduces the members of the Falls Road Club who, during their monthly meetings in the Woolongong Bar, ‘begin with small talk of the present, but are soon immersed in history, reconstructing a city on the other side of the world, detailing streets and shops and houses which for the most part only exist in the memory’. On one level, such mnemonic ‘reconstructions’ are merely a convenient focus for exilic sociability and the pleasures of nostalgic reminiscence, a means of getting ‘lost in the comforting dusk and smog and drizzle of the Lower Falls’ (*BC*, 53) – something that Carson is fond of doing himself (*SF*, 160–7). On another, they are attempts to shore up a sense of identity that is bound to place in a Heideggerian equation of being and dwelling.¹¹ But just as their status as emigrants raises the problem of geographical distance, so the fact that the place to which their identities are ostensibly bound exists only in memory pits them in a desperate bid against the onward flow of time: ‘Fortified by expensively-imported *Red Heart* Guinness and Gallaher’s *Blues*, they talk on, trying to get back – before the blitz, the avalanche, the troubles – the drinker interrupted between cup and lip – winding back the clock ...’ (*BC*, 53–4). This effort to reverse the course of history culminates in a visionary resurrection of the city of the past in which ‘each brick, each stone, finds its proper place again’, an impossible restitution that not only conflates memory with imagination but, more importantly, ignores the complex tessellation of temporalities and spatial forms – ‘bridges within bridges’ – that composes the city in history and renders the assignation of a ‘proper’ place perennially suspect. ‘Where does land begin, and water end?’ asks Carson’s narrator, ‘Or memory falter and imagination take hold?’ (*BC*, 54).

For Walter Benjamin, memory ‘brings about the convergence of imagination and thought’,¹² a point that seems highly relevant to Carson’s writing but that requires careful unpacking. To begin with, we can say that the commonality of memory and imagination consists in ‘the enigma of the presence of the absent’ that both are capable of expressing, although to different ends.¹³ Distinguishing between the two is more difficult, as Carson’s writing often demonstrates. ‘Farset’, for instance, begins by treating ‘imagine’ and ‘remember’ as synonymous verbs:

Trying to get back to that river, this river I am about to explore, *I imagine or remember* peering between the rusted iron bars that lined one side of the alleyway behind St Gall's School at the bottom of Waterville Street, gazing down at the dark exhausted water, my cheeks pressed against the cold iron. (BC, 47, my emphasis)

The danger of such connotations is that the ambition of memory to be faithful to the past is jeopardised, and so the always provisional but no less necessary distinction between memory and imagination rests upon Aristotle's assertion that 'memory is of the past', whereas imagination is not. Memory alone can give us, in Ricoeur's words, the 'experience of temporal distance, of the depth of time past'.¹⁴

The affinity between thought and memory is perhaps most evident in the latter's function as *anamnesis*, the work of recollection conceived as 'an active search' entailing a 'traversal of planes of consciousness', which can be contrasted with the passive evocation or 'mémoire involuntaire' of *mneme*. This search for a particular memory-image in anamnesis is analogous to thought in the sense that both constitute a specific search for truth; anamnesis is an attempt to verify that 'something has taken place'.¹⁵ Such verification is inevitably fraught in the Belfast of the Troubles, and is further complicated by Carson's acute awareness of Northern Ireland's 'already overburdened sense of the past'.¹⁶ In 'Gate', for example, there are indeed signs that something has taken place near the city centre – an explosion, some kind of ambush involving army personnel – but the all-important details of what, where, when, and to whom remain the subject of conjecture and approximation. Moreover, it is chiefly in terms of its absences, distortions, and abrupt terminations that the poem's urban tableau is to be read:

The stopped clock of *The Belfast Telegraph* seems to indicate the time
Of the explosion – or was that last week's? Difficult to keep track:
Everything's a bit askew, like the twisted pickets of the security gate,
the wreaths
That approximate the spot where I'm told the night patrol went
through. (BC, 45)

If 'Gate' reveals the difficulties involved in keeping track of events that are both reiterative – 'or was that last week's?' – and the subject of disinformation, it also indicates why memory is both vitally important and a vexed enterprise in Carson's writing, subject as it is to confusion and temporal derangement under the pressure of political circumstances.

Recollection and revision coalesce in the double movement of remembering – one step forward, two steps back – which, as Homi

Bhabha observes, 'is never a quiet act of introspection or retrospection. It is a painful re-remembering, a putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present.'¹⁷ This painful labour of remembering is central to 'Question Time', which deals initially with the 'disappointed hunger for a familiar place' experienced by the 'returning native' (BC, 57), but also unfolds a parable on the abuse of memory and the potential distortion of its truth claims. In the course of a seemingly 'harmless' bicycle ride from North Belfast, via the Unionist heartland of the Shankill Road, to the Nationalist Lower Falls where he spent his childhood, and following a route he often travelled as a boy, the narrator initially enacts a nostalgic return to a once-familiar, originary place. However, his encounter with this place is conflicted and deeply ambivalent, while the place itself has become estranged and faintly uncanny, as if to underline the point that the realities of the present cannot be straightforwardly articulated with his memories of its streets and buildings, landmarks and axes of passage: 'Where I remember rows of houses, factories, there is recent wasteland, broken bricks, chickweed, chain-link fencing. Eventually I find a new road I never knew existed – or is it an old street deprived of all its landmarks?' (BC, 60). History has intervened, as it never fails to do in Carson's Belfast, rendering familiar territory treacherously unfamiliar and the narrator's memories of place unreliable if not obsolete.

However, the reconfiguration of the landscape between the Falls and the Shankill since the late 1960s – the combined result of inner-city decline and redevelopment, depopulation and forced relocations, rioting and bomb damage – has led not only to the erosion or disappearance of a cherished sense of community but also served to harden the lines of demarcation segregating adjacent localities along sectarian divisions.¹⁸ And because the narrator's freewheeling cycle ride has infringed these closely policed boundaries, he arouses the suspicion of local paramilitaries and is subjected to an impromptu interrogation:

*You were seen. You were seen.
Coming from the Shankill.
Where are you from?
Where is he from?
The Falls? When? What street? [...]
What streets could you see from the house? (BC, 62)*

Under duress, the narrator reconstructs the demolished streets and buildings of the Lower Falls from memory, composing a narrative map that is checked and checked again for errors or hesitations. Yet

this act of mnemonic reconstruction clearly does not attest to any straightforward sense of rootedness in place, as the paramilitaries appear to believe it does, nor does 'Question Time' acquiesce in the implicit conflation of dwelling, identity, and political allegiance that their interrogation posits. As Richard Kirkland astutely observes, although Carson's work frequently invokes 'the idea of residency' through its dense cataloguing of the city's topographical and social histories, it is also engaged in a thoroughgoing problematisation of received notions of organic belonging: 'Folk-memory is present in the poetry but is handled as "quotation" and operates under the sign of perpetual erasure.'¹⁹ Indeed, in 'Question Time' Carson's narrator is both a 'native' and an interloper, defined not in terms of self-evident familiarity – otherwise there would be no need for an interrogation – but through the condition of 'inhabit[ing] without residing', 'a habitation without proper inhabiting' that Jacques Derrida attributes to haunting and the spectre or 'revenant' which, like memory, '*begins by coming back*'.²⁰ To the extent that this is true, then, Carson's narrator figures as an (unwelcome) ghost haunting the places of his childhood, the loci of his own past. And thus, to 'return home' in Carson's Belfast is not, as John Kerrigan notes, to 're-experience in-placeness' but 'to encounter an interrogative gap'.²¹

The memories that Carson's writing exhumes are often haunted, and haunting is a recurrent component of his narrators' encounters with the past. In 'Smithfield', for example, a photograph album triggers seemingly repressed memories – 'I have forgotten something, I am/ Going back' – that pass by way of reflections in an undertaker's window before resolving themselves in the uncanny image of 'Sunlight on a brick wall smiling/ With the child who was not there' (*LE*, 7; *NEOP*, 65). Similarly, 'Apparition' conjures a subtly poignant atmosphere of loss by juxtaposing two images of what could be ghosts. One is of an 'angelic old woman' at a second-hand market inspecting a 1940s pin-stripe suit 'as if measuring a corpse'; the other concerns a 'character' in a Falls Road bar wearing a battered flying jacket, a sort of refugee from times past: "Just back from Dresden?", cracked the barman./ "Don't laugh," spat the character, "my father was killed in this here fucking jacket" (*BC*, 76). These metonymic references to the losses of the Second World War are famously extended in 'Dresden'. Moreover, much of the dramatic tension of this long poem resides in the way in which the speaker's digressive and circumlocutory narrative habits conjure up a series of interlinked stories, anecdotes, and nostalgic reminiscences but cannot forestall indefinitely – 'now I'm

getting/ Round to it' (*IFN*, 14) – the encroachment upon consciousness of Horse Boyle's memories of his participation in the bombing of Dresden as a rear gunner for the RAF:

All across the map of Dresden, store-rooms full of china shivered, teetered
 And collapsed, an avalanche of porcelain, slushing and cascading:
 cherubs,
 Shepherdesses, figurines of Hope and Peace and Victory, delicate bone
 fragments. (*IFN*, 15)

As in 'Smithfield', some element of repression, at the level of the narrative if not in Horse Boyle himself, appears to be at least partially overcome in the course of this poem's meandering disclosures. Moreover, the cascade of broken porcelain that Horse remembers or imagines not only refers metonymically to the wider devastation of the city and its citizens' bodies during the bombing raids, but might also be read (more positively) as a metaphor for the shattering of psychic bonds and consequent release of 'blocked' memories in which character, narrator, and reader are each implicated. In this regard, it would seem that Carson concurs with Sigmund Freud's affirmation concerning the persistence of memory-traces that 'everything is somehow preserved and that in suitable circumstances [...] it can be brought back to light'. In which case, forgetting does not entail obliteration or erasure but only necessitates the work of remembering.²²

The conjuncture of memory, place, and haunting is, however, at its most profound and complex in the long poem 'Hamlet', with which *Belfast Confetti* closes. The poem's braided, elegiac narrative, which swells and folds back on itself in elaborate repetitions, or drifts onto parallel lines of thought, is situated, appropriately enough, in The Clock Bar on the Falls Road, where the story of a ghostly urban myth is told and memories of yesteryear interfere with 'the beer-and-whiskey/Tang of now' (*BC*, 105). This story contrives to link the murder of a sergeant in 1922 – during the pogroms and sectarian clashes that followed partition²³ – with a spectral tin can, the sound of which on the cobbled streets of the Falls was supposed to announce the imminence of rioting or a death in the neighbourhood. Like the ghost of King Hamlet haunting the Danish Court, this more mundane apparition indicates that the time is 'out of joint', or rather that it has been rendered dangerously explosive – a '*strange eruption to our state*' – as the emblematic figure of a bomb-disposal expert shielding himself from 'the blast of time' suggests:

I still have this picture of his hands held up to avert the future
 In a final act of *No Surrender*, as, twisting through the murky fathoms
 Of what might have been, he is washed ashore as pearl and coral.

(*BC*, 106–7)

Moreover, throughout ‘Hamlet’ temporal disjunction is closely linked to experiences of spatial dislocation and the alienation or estrangement of a formerly secure sense of place. In this respect, it is significant that the narrator’s etymological excavations of the Falls, ‘from the Irish, *fál*, a hedge’ (*BC*, 105), gradually shift away from ideas of enclosure and self-sufficiency towards thinking of both word and place in terms of a frontier or boundary – even as ‘the illegible, thorny hedge of time itself’ (*BC*, 106) – before terminating in a bleak summary of the dilapidated present: ‘*A no-go area, a ghetto, a demolition zone*’ (*BC*, 107). The tin ghost, it transpires, has been ‘abolished’ along with the streets it haunted, and it is the vanished thoroughfares and buildings of the Falls lost to time – including The Clock Bar itself – that impress their spectral presences upon the narrator’s memory, engaged as he is in ‘celebrating all that’s lost’ (*BC*, 107). In this regard, ‘Hamlet’ illustrates Derrida’s idea that ‘haunting implies places, a habitation, and always a haunted house’.²⁴ On the other hand, in ‘Hamlet’ and elsewhere in his work, Carson’s childhood home at 100 Raglan Street might be regarded less as a haunted house than as a house that haunts, a place that has been abolished in reality but remains the source, subject, and repository of countless memories.²⁵

Indeed, the contemporary city as a whole is typically haunted by multiple articulations of itself in Carson’s texts, manifesting not only in its various and always provisional revised versions but also, as we shall see, through the unrealised projections of its ‘futures past’.²⁶ As Fran Brearton remarks, “Belfast” thus works as both literal and symbolic site in which past and present co-exist in perpetual flux, as more than one place in more than one time.²⁷ Such superimpositions of symbolic coordinates upon an actual topography, and the co-existence of differing articulations of space and time, are often regarded as characteristic of the relationship between place and memory generally. For Peter Middleton and Tim Woods, places are ‘loci of memory; reference points of narratives, propositions and emotions; signs of the passing of time and the histories that mark it’.²⁸ This is perhaps especially true of the city and urban spaces, where the complexity and multiplicity of architectural forms and human interactions compose an unusually rich and variegated ‘text’ in which different temporalities constantly interact. The point is well made by Lewis Mumford:

Through its durable buildings and institutional structures and even more durable symbolic forms of literature and art, the city unites times past, times present, and times to come. Within the historic precincts of the city time clashes with time: time challenges time.²⁹

Such clashes or challenges may be dramatised particularly effectively in textual representations of the city, for, as Andreas Huyssen contends, the temporal reach of the urban imaginary will often 'put different things in one place: memories of what was there before, imagined alternatives to what there is'; and consequently: 'The strong marks of present space merge in the imaginary with traces of the past, erasures, losses, and heterotopias.'³⁰ Such a conception of the urban imaginary usefully alerts us to the politics of memory practices, both actual and possible. On the one hand, Huyssen diagnoses a hypertrophy of memory affecting contemporary Western societies, which arises from the 'increasing instability of time and the fracturing of lived space' attendant upon capitalist modernisation and globalisation. On the other, he also argues that there may be modalities of 'productive remembering' which can be opposed to the widespread 'musealization' of contemporary culture.³¹ Such 'lived memories' would not only provide some minimal 'temporal anchoring' amid the accelerating time-space compression of a globalised world, but also involve a reflexive awareness that memory itself 'is always transitory, notoriously unreliable, and haunted by forgetting, in brief, human and social'.³²

Huyssen's urban imaginary and lived memory are illuminating concepts with which to read Carson's texts, helping to identify the manner in which the explicitly nostalgic tone of much of his writing is joined to a more politicised appraisal of the insistence of the past on the present, and its utility for constructing the future. In this regard, memory and imagination converge once again, the inventory of 'what was there' opening onto an exploration of 'what might have been'. This last phrase recurs often enough and in such a variety of contexts across Carson's work as to constitute a leitmotif, and is arguably central to the politics of memory that informs his writing. It first occurs in 'Dunne', where the fate of a hostage is 'etched/ At last into the memories of what might have been' (*NEOP*, 33); in 'Hairline Crack', what 'could have been or might have been' shadows an unpredictable present of splits and splinters among paramilitary factions (*BC*, 50); for the narrator of 'Hamlet', to contemplate 'what might have been' is to plumb the 'murky fathoms' of history (*BC*, 107); and in 'X-Ray', 'the might-have-been of long-forgotten, long-abandoned chances' linger

somewhere in the synapses of the city or in the memories of its citizens (*OEC*, 90). Perhaps most interesting of all in this context is 'Revised Version', which opens with the narrator's attempts to bring the city's past into focus:

Trying to focus on the imagined grey area between Smithfield and North Street – jumbled bookstalls, fruitstalls, fleshers, the whingeing calls of glaziers and coal-brick men – I catch glimpses of what might have been, but it already blurs and fades; I wake or fall into another dream. (*BC*, 66)

What is conjured up fleetingly in this text is a composite and ever-changing dreamscape of the past, an amalgam of historical texts and photographic images, remembered experience and conjecture that obliquely registers 'the ambivalence of this dilapidated present, the currency of time passing' (*BC*, 66). Through an ironic survey of a mass of superannuated proposals, plans, and projections, in each of which a miraculously transformed Belfast is 'distilled from thin air', Carson's narrator demonstrates how the ghosts of futures past haunt the always-passing present, implicitly placing its certainties under erasure and measuring it against other possibilities (*BC*, 68). Thus, if Carson's writing often confirms Elizabeth Wilson's view that 'the urban sense of time and decay is a nostalgic one, and reminds us of our own lives unreeling out behind us like cigarette smoke',³³ 'Revised Version' demonstrates that this nostalgia need not be conceived as either passive or conservative, at least in the political sense. Indeed, as Huyssen observes, the 'memory of past hopes [...] remains part of any imagination of another future'.³⁴

I have already noted that memories are regarded as neither static nor stable in Carson's work, for while the events of the past can be considered over and done, the ways in which they are perceived and understood may vary greatly from time to time. To this end, Reinhart Koselleck argues that: 'Experiences overlap and mutually impregnate one another. In addition, new hopes or disappointments, or new expectations, enter them with retrospective effect. Thus, experiences alter themselves as well, despite, once having occurred, remaining the same.'³⁵ If, as Freud and Carson both seem to believe, memory-traces persist in spite of our tendency to forget the events they record, then past experiences deemed inconsequential or irrelevant might be re-evaluated and re-activated in the present. Walter Benjamin famously argued that 'nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history'.³⁶ Yet Carson's interest in 'what might have been' is not in any straightforward sense historical but chiefly imaginative, indicating

a fascination with the unrealised alternative versions of the present encoded in the past, possibilities that would have been fulfilled had history taken a different course.

It is in this regard that his writing is most clearly informed by what Svetlana Boym calls 'reflective nostalgia'. Boym distinguishes between two forms of nostalgia, restorative and reflective, which characterise an individual's relation to the past. Restorative nostalgia aims to undo or reverse the painful experiences of temporal distance and displacement, proposing to 'rebuild the lost home and patch up the memory gaps'. In this desire to recover and reconstitute times and places that have been lost it places a premium upon wholeness and continuity, evincing abiding anxieties about 'historical incongruities between past and present', and is associated by Boym with the mechanics of national memory.³⁷ By contrast, reflective nostalgia is linked to cultural memory and does not aim at recovering a sense of unity and plenitude, but rather gravitates towards a critical or ironic 'meditation on history and the passage of time', one that explicitly 'cherishes shattered fragments of memory and temporalizes space'.³⁸ Moreover, for Boym, reflective nostalgia incorporates 'a utopian dimension that consists in the exploration of other potentialities' and, what is perhaps most pertinent to Carson's work, may nurture an urban imagination that not only 'allows one to long for the imaginary past that the city never had' but also suggests how 'this past can influence its future'.³⁹ To this end, reflective nostalgia would seem to provide a critical basis for measuring present realities against the possibilities encoded in what might have been without capitulating either to the restorative conservatism of local culture or to the alienations of capitalist globalisation.

But might Carson's writing not often be regarded as less reflective than restorative in its emphases and ambitions? If the impulses informing restorative nostalgia are well exemplified by the collective reminiscences of the Falls Road Club in Adelaide, then Carson's writing doesn't always clearly distinguish its own procedures from them. And Peter McDonald has remarked upon the elegiac timbre of his representations of Belfast, 'the losses in whose fabric are detailed with something like grief'.⁴⁰ Indeed, it is sometimes a moot point whether such grief is to be regarded in terms of the work of mourning or the circular refrains of melancholia. The ambulant narrator of 'Exile', for instance, walks the 'smouldering/ dark streets' of Belfast in an almost trance-like state of desolation, embarked upon an impossible mission of salvage and recuperation:

Belfast
 is many

 places then
 as now

 all lie
 in ruins

 and
 it is

 as much
 as I can do

 to save
 even one

 from oblivion (*BN*, 51–2)

But such salvation, however much it is willed and desired, is always deferred, for although memory entails the presence of that which is absent it cannot furnish *unmediated* access to the thing remembered. As Michael Parker observes, Carson's texts frequently perceive 'the city and province as a site of fragmentation and fragmented perception',⁴¹ a point that is well illustrated by 'Smithfield Market', where the state of the fire-bombed building's interior arcades and passages allegorise a wider condition of disintegration affecting the city in its entirety: 'Everything unstitched, unravelled – mouldy fabric,/ Rusted heaps of nuts and bolts, electrical spare parts: the ammunition dump/ In miniature' (*IFN*, 37).

Nonetheless, there is no possibility of a return to primordial unity, and it is precisely because the condition of disintegration and fragmentation is general rather than merely local that it must be grasped, understood, and lived rather than denied or wished away with fantasies of recovery and continuity. As Doreen Massey affirms, rather than 'looking back with nostalgia to some identity of place which it is assumed already exists, the past has to be constructed'.⁴² What connects Carson's writing much more closely to reflective rather than restorative modes of nostalgia, then, is his vigilant recognition of the always transitory, and potentially unreliable, nature of memory and memories. In this regard, it is crucial that the narrator of 'Hamlet' should, in the final stanza of the poem, move beyond his restorative effort 'to put a shape/ On what was there' (*BC*, 107) and towards a critically reflective meditation on how the 'reality' of the past is to be represented: 'But, *Was it really like that?* And, *Is the story true?*' Memory is revealed as an inevitably precarious

and provisional labour 'to piece together the exploded fragments' and the time will always be out of joint, for 'time/ Is conversation; it is the hedge that flits incessantly into the present' (*BC*, 108).

The piecing together of exploded fragments of experience is often figured metaphorically in Carson's work in terms of 'patchworks' of memory, recalling the common root shared by 'text' and 'textile' in the Latin *textus*, which suggests a tissue, or woven fabric of language and images. Accordingly, 'Second Language' evokes 'the gritty, knitty, tickly cloth of unspent/ Time': 'I feel its warp and weft. Bobbins pirn and shuttle in Imperial/ Typewriterspeak. I hit the keys. The ribbon-black clunks out the words in serial' (*FL*, 12–13). Indeed, this poem's metaphorical linkage of the functions of writing and communication – typically gendered masculine and associated with his postman father – with those of knitting and weaving – gendered feminine and associated with his mother, who is described as 'a great woollier' (*SF*, 229) – is pervasive in much of Carson's writing.⁴³ 'Interior with Weaver' and 'Linen' from *The New Estate* stand as early examples (*NE*, 10, 11), while in 'Stitch' a box of odd buttons serves as an analogy for the heterogeneous materials that the writer must work into art, 'the shimmering/ Shifting hourglass/ Of everything mismatched' (*NEOP*, 56). 'The Patchwork Quilt' and 'Patchwork' both elaborate the metaphor at greater length (*NEOP*, 70–1; *IFN*, 59–63), and in 'Travellers' the very fabric of the city is once more unravelled and recomposed: 'Belfast/ Tore itself apart and patched things up again' (*IFN*, 42). This metaphorical pattern has also been reworked more recently in *For All We Know*, where Gabriel's 'interminable wrestle with words and meanings' is counterpointed by the memories sewn into Nina's patchwork double quilt, which is conflated in turn with 'the patchwork quilt of Paris: parks, avenues, cemeteries, temples, impasses, arcades' (*FAWK*, 28, 37). In each of these cases, the metaphors of stitching and patchwork, ravelling and knitting serve, either explicitly or implicitly, to illustrate the complex intersections of writing, memory, and place. Through them, Carson's revised versions of Belfast are revealed to be 'palimpsests of history, [...] sites of memory extending both in time and space'.⁴⁴

Here too, the reflective nature of Carson's nostalgia is evident, for it is not merely that memory serves as an impetus for his representations of Belfast, but that the city itself functions in his writing as a kind of memory-theatre, the site and occasion for a wider exploration of the phenomenology of lost time. And in this connection the recurrent figuration of ruined spaces as loci of memory in his writing is significant.

Aside from the vanished streets, shops, and pubs of the Lower Falls, these spaces and buildings include the Grand Central Hotel on Royal Avenue, which served as an army barracks during the 1970s prior to its demolition, and Greeves's Mill, burned down along with hundreds of Catholic homes during sectarian riots in August 1969;⁴⁵ the charred remains of Smithfield market and the neo-gothic interior of the 'ruinous Gasworks' (*BC*, 69); and even the eponymous Star Factory itself, which in 'stark reality' is revealed as the derelict premises of a clothing manufacturer (*SF*, 246). For Tim Edensor, industrial and architectural ruins such as these cannot be dismissed as spaces of waste (or wastes of space) but rather function as 'spaces of defamiliarisation' that challenge and undermine the normative attributions of value expressed in the spatial ordering and regulated practices of everyday life. Moreover, because they foreground the materiality of matter, its sensuous qualities as well as its tendencies to decay and decompose, ruined spaces not only evoke the past, they powerfully convey 'a sense of the transience of all spaces': 'Ruins are signs of the power of historical processes upon a place and reveal the transitoriness of history itself.'⁴⁶ Consequently, if the ruin can be understood as 'an allegory of memory', then memory is revealed to be necessarily fragmentary, partial, and imperfect; but equally, this recognition suggests that ruins may serve as 'places in which to remember otherwise'.⁴⁷

Carson's representations of ruined spaces are a means both of remembering Belfast's industrial histories and the working-class cultures they fostered, and also of recording the process of their erosion and depletion in the post-industrial present. But this is not all, for, particularly in *The Star Factory*, Carson is also engaged in an exploration of the interior spaces of memory itself, a terrain belonging to science fiction that is riddled with wormholes and parallel dimensions, 'lulls or slips of time' (*SF*, 204):

Over and over, though we flit incessantly into the moment, our pasts catch up with us, and apprehend us at the endless intersections, where fingerposts are unreliable, and mileages are tilted. [...] In this non-Euclidian geometry, the interior of a surface is infinitely greater than its exterior. There are boxes within boxes, elaborately carved versions of each other [...]. (*SF*, 208)

This motif of 'boxes within boxes', the spatial structure of a *mise en abyme*, is a favourite of Carson's, implying as it does that there can be no conclusion to any writing that aspires to trace the 'endless intersections' of the city and of memory. Yet it is undoubtedly important to recall that the elaboration of this fantastical, fractal space in the

text is suggested and made possible by memories attached to a ruined building that is located in the physical topography of Belfast with pedantic accuracy – ‘322 Donegall Road, between the streets of Nubia and Soudan’ (*SF*, 246) – and which carries with it a very specific set of historical resonances.

The emotional and imaginative resonances conveyed by or crystallised in objects and sensory perceptions constitute another key facet of Carson’s reflective exploration of memory. Neil Corcoran considers Carson ‘a superb poet of evocation’, noting that his work is studded with ‘moments where the almost forgotten and the almost inconsequential are given their accurate names’, frequently through the incorporation of brand names and lists of commodities.⁴⁸ Sean O’Brien has similarly remarked upon the importance of the senses of smell and taste to Carson’s richly textured apprehension of the realm of things, which he believes marks Carson out as ‘a secular mystic’.⁴⁹ As if to illustrate precisely this point, in *Shamrock Tea* Carson’s narrator observes, with just a hint of self-mockery, that an ‘aroma can induce visions’: ‘Of all the senses, that of smell is the most intangible and yet the most deep-rooted, the most quick to waken long-dormant memories’ (*ST*, 128). This capacity of smells to awaken dormant memories is the subject of ‘Calvin Klein’s *Obsession*’, in which the narrator’s efforts to grasp the significance of ‘a long-forgotten kiss’, as part of a deliberate act of anamnesis, are repeatedly frustrated by a series of involuntary memories, each of which is sparked off by a different smell – beer, whisky, incense, commercial perfumes. The interference of one kind of memory with the other through the course of the poem ensures that as soon as one image of the past has been called up the narrative is constantly ‘drows[ing] off into something else’ (*IFN*, 22)⁵⁰ in a series of flashbacks and leaps sideways that economically illustrate both the power of memory – its ‘obsessions’ – and the unpredictability of its effects:

For there are memories that have no name; you don’t know what to ask
for.

The merest touch of sunshine, a sudden breeze, might summon up
A corner of your life you’d thought, till then, you’d never occupied.
(*IFN*, 24)

Similarly, the symptomatically titled later poem ‘On Not Remembering Some Lines of a Song’ addresses the play of memory and forgetting as the past comes back ‘in dribs and drabs’, and the narrator affirms that ‘nothing ever/ Is forgotten: it’s in there somewhere in the memory-bank,/ Glimmering in binary notation’ (*FL*, 27).

Michael McAteer argues that Carson's poetry witnesses 'not to the autonomy of signifiers but to that of material objects, including speech and language'.⁵¹ Certainly, 'Calvin Klein's *Obsession*' at times exhibits an almost Warhol-esque fascination with commodities both *as* commodities and through their functions as *aides-mémoire*, but is also alert to what Karl Marx called the 'metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties' of commodity fetishism⁵² in a consumer culture dominated by the imperialism of the brand: '*Or maybe it's the name you buy, and not the thing itself*' (*IFN*, 25). But what is less often noted about Carson's work is that, like Derek Mahon,⁵³ he also betrays an abiding interest in what commodities become when they are consumed: waste, rubbish, trash. In 'Rubbish', for instance, the poet-narrator is depicted 'sifting through/ The tip at the bottom of Ganges Street', discovering amid the ordinary detritus a fragment of plaster from a wall of the house in which he used to live (*NEOP*, 24). More characteristically, 'Travellers' is set amid a landscape of 'junked refrigerators, cars and cookers, anchored Caravans' (*IFN*, 42); the nocturnal urban landscape of 'Snowball' includes 'a litter of white plastic cord, a broken whiskey bottle' (*IFN*, 44); and in 'Brick' the heterogeneous rubble and rubbish of the city are recycled as the basis for its new foundations:

As the tall chimneys and the catacomb-like kilns of the brickworks crumbled back into the earth, the very city recycled itself and disassembled buildings – churches, air-raid shelters, haberdashers, pawnshops – were poured into the sleech of the lough shore to make new land; vast armies of binmen or waste-disposal experts laboured through the years transforming countless tons of brock into *terra firma*; the dredged up sludge of the Lagan became Queen's Island, that emblem of solid work and Titanic endeavour. (*BC*, 73)

The effect of this recurrent preoccupation with rubbish is not simply to create a palpable atmosphere of urban degradation – indeed, rubbish is shown to be a viable basis for manufacture and habitation, if not civic principles – but also to demystify the commodity form itself, for, as matter out of place, rubbish is 'a reminder that commodities, despite all their tricks, are just stuff; little combinations of plastics or metal or paper.'⁵⁴ Rubbish is tangible evidence of the material consequences of an egregious contemporary materialism and, as such, is a ubiquitous and unavoidable presence on the streets of Carson's Belfast.

Carson's work is also often minutely attentive to the ways in which history is 'consumed' and recycled in the form of textual representations and visual images. Indeed, his depictions of Belfast during the Troubles illustrate Victor Burgin's point that in 'the memory of the

teletopologically fashioned subject, actual events mingle indiscriminately not only with fantasies but with memories of events in photographs, films, and television broadcasts'.⁵⁵ In 'Cocktails', for example, the pub-talk of a group of journalists settled in the bar of the Europa Hotel deftly conveys the drift of conversation towards the improbable or fantastical, implicitly drawing attention to the feedback loop whereby media reports of the Troubles relay and reinforce a ghoulishly sensationalist version of events:

There was talk of someone who was shot nine times and lived, and
 someone else
 Had the inside info. on the Romper Room. We were trying to remember
 the facts
 Behind the Black & Decker case, when someone ordered another drink
 and we entered
 The realm of Jabberwocks and Angels' Wings, Widows' Kisses, Corpse
 Revivers. (*IFN*, 41)

Here, the narrator's effort 'to remember the facts' is less about remaining faithful to the past than it is about concocting a good story, a process common to the popular media whereby 'news' is subordinated to the demands of 'entertainment'. Nonetheless, as Burgin observes, even individual memories cannot remain unaffected by such influences, nor can the 'facts' of a given situation or event be neatly extracted from the contexts of their transmission and reception, the discursive formations through which they are assembled and articulated. Consequently, Carson's work frequently seeks to foreground the qualities and capacities of the various media through which the past is represented, including their abilities to distort or mislead. Film and television feature prominently, particularly in their documentary registers: in 'Serial', Carson's narrator comments self-reflexively, 'I am hunting with a telephoto/ Fish-eye, shooting, as they say, some footage' (*IFN*, 52); while the surreal montage of memories and 'quotations' that are projected in 'Jawbox' relies upon 'that effect where one image warps into the other, like the double helix/ Of the DNA code', and a split screen suggests 'the parallels of past and present' (*BC*, 93-4).

Carson is also fascinated by photographs, in part because, as Susan Sontag notes, photographs 'turn the past into a consumable object' by abbreviating history and presenting the world in terms of an anthology of images. As 'both a pseudo-presence and a token of absence' a photograph can act as a powerful catalyst for memories: 'Like a wood fire in a room, photographs – especially those of people, of distant

landscapes and faraway cities, of the vanished past – are incitements to reverie.’⁵⁶ Hence, in ‘The Gladstone Bar *circa* 1954’ Carson’s narrator is overwhelmed by a pungent memory when looking at a photograph depicting a once-familiar scene from Belfast’s vanished past:

two men are
unloading beer

you can smell
the hops and yeast

the smouldering
heap of dung

just dropped by
one

of the great
blinkered drayhorses (*BN*, 14)

However, like the work of many Irish visual artists, Carson’s writing does not conform to a naively realist aesthetic,⁵⁷ and another facet of his interest in photography lies in identifying the manner in which the photograph’s apparently self-evident claims to verisimilitude are qualified by the details of focus, framing, tint, and selection that inevitably mark it out as an interpretation of reality rather than a mere reproduction of it.

‘Question Time’ deconstructs a press photograph that purports to document ‘*the savage Lower Falls riots of 3–5 July 1970*’ with dispassionate objectivity and accuracy:

But the caption is inaccurate: the camera has caught only one rioter in the act, his stone a dark blip in the drizzly air. [...] The left-hand frame of the photograph only allows us the ‘nia’ of Roumania Street, so I don’t know what’s going on there, but I’m trying to remember – was I there that night, on this street littered with half-bricks, broken glass, a battered saucepan and a bucket? (*BC*, 58–9)

What this examination discloses is that a photograph may hide as much as it reveals, denying the interconnectedness of experience and events by freezing the flow of time and cropping details that do not fit its agenda. The narrator’s ‘trying to remember’ is, in this context, an effort to redress such deficiencies and an acknowledgement that it is only through the risky, partial, and imperfect medium of memory that one can hope to be faithful to the past in all its complex ramifications. And, as Ricoeur

points out, 'remembering is not only welcoming, receiving an image of the past, it is also searching for it'; to remember is to 'exercise' memory rather than to passively accept the self-evidence of the 'facts' as they are presented.⁵⁸

Much depends, however, upon *how* memory is exercised and to what ends, particularly where remembering joins remembrance in the national politics of commemoration. The issue is perhaps especially fraught in the context of Northern Ireland where commemoration functions as 'a contradictory site of conflict and conflict-resolution' and the fault-line between mythic and actual pasts becomes especially difficult to discern.⁵⁹ This conflictual and contradictory situation undergirds and provides a context for the dizzying bricolage of history, memory, and fantasy that Carson composes in *The Twelfth of Never*. Indeed, the volume's eccentric sonnet sequence involves a thoroughly ironic reappraisal of the politics of remembrance developed in nineteenth-century Irish cultural nationalism as described by Joep Leerssen:

Supernatural characters stalk the literary imagination, who in their trans-individual or trans-historical identity preside over historical change and fleeting centuries: Captain Rock, Melmoth, Dark Rosaleen in all her different renderings, Kathleen ni Houlihan. They are personifications of the act of remembrance, walking and living (or at least undead) memories that haunt successive generations from century to century.⁶⁰

In this way, according to Leerssen, remembrance of a special kind performs a crucial role in the imaginative unification of history and national tradition.

Carson's text includes most of the emblematic literary figures that Leerssen mentions, alongside a supporting cast of leprechauns and cluricaunes, vampires and fairy folk, marching bands and revolutionaries, creating a hallucinatory mish-mash of folklore and history in which the myths of Irish Nationalist and Unionist culture clash, become mutually entangled, and undermine one another. For instance, in 'Wallop the Spot', Thomas Moore's republican hero Captain Rock not only comes to resemble the laudanum-addicted Samuel Taylor Coleridge but, following his hanging, also undergoes a further ironic metamorphosis: 'The next I heard of him, his skin was someone's drum,/ His tibiae and humeri were Orange flutes' (*TN*, 27). The volume's progressive conflation and intermixture of incompatible discourses and traditions is accompanied by elaborate use of colour coding, particularly the counter-pointing of reds and greens, complementary colours that nonetheless symbolise warring national imaginaries. Thus 'Wolf Hill' figures 'little Erin' in

terms that recall both red riding hood and wicked stepmother – ‘A pair of bloody dancing shoes upon her feet,/ Her gown a shamrock green, her cloak a poppy red’ (*TN*, 25) – and in ‘Nine Hostages’ the narrator is confronted by a dream vision of ‘a red dragon, a green gossoon’ (*TN*, 18). Other poems, such as ‘The Rising of the Moon’, ‘1798’, and ‘The Display Case’, equate the visionary apparitions of the *aisling* tradition with nightmare and intoxication, casting Mother Ireland as a cross between Keats’s *belle dame sans merci* and Joyce’s old gummy granny (*TN*, 19, 39, 74). Indeed, David Butler has drawn attention to the ways in which the ‘general *bricolage* of sign and discourse’ that characterises *The Twelfth of Never* suggests parallels with Joyce’s *Ulysses*, its ‘oneiric, mutable progression’ through the sonnet sequence recalling the novel’s Nighttown episode in particular.⁶¹

As Carson’s epigraph from Brewer’s *Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* indicates, the ‘twelfth of never’ refers not only to a placeless place, the never-land of fairytales and fables where ‘everything is metaphor and simile’ (*TN*, 13), but also to a temporal dimension outside of or beyond calendrical time. It is fitting therefore that the text should not only switch between a range of geographically remote settings (Ireland, France, Russia, Japan) but also constellate references to a multitude of seemingly discrete historical events, including the Battle of the Boyne, the French Revolution, the Rebellion of the United Irishmen, the Napoleonic campaigns, the Opium Wars, the Irish Potato Famine, the American Civil War, the Great War, and, more distantly, the Northern Irish Troubles. In fact, the text frequently deploys a species of simultaneous time in which the icons and images that consecrate these events in the national memory overlap or blur together. In ‘Banners’, for example, the poem’s concluding image of ‘dear old Ireland’ is one in which the bodies of soldiers killed in the Napoleonic Wars and those of Irish peasants who starved to death during the Great Hunger are merged together with grim irony: ‘Fields of corpses plentiful as dug potatoes’ (*TN*, 84). At the same time, this imagery of wastelands, battlefields, and poppy meadows cannot help but recall the trench landscapes of the Great War, ‘these fields of ’14’ where the ‘dreams of warriors blow through the summer grass’ (*TN*, 69).

Nonetheless, two dates seem especially important: 1798 and 1998. These serve as the titles for consecutive poems in the volume (*TN*, 39, 40) and draw the reader’s attention not only to the bicentennial anniversary of the failed republican rising led by the United Irishmen (1798), but also to the signing of the Good Friday Agreement and the official institution of

a peace process in Northern Ireland (1998).⁶² In this respect, the volume as a whole can be seen as Janus-faced, torn between commemorating the past and remembering the future, and it is notable that Carson's narrators are as interested in the possible consequences of turbulence on Japanese markets for the global economy of the present as in the enduring legacies of sectarian disputes and conflicts between states. Consequently, it is difficult to know if the text's recurrent allusions to 'the imminent republic of the future' (*TN*, 21) and 'the yet-to-be republic' (*TN*, 47) refer to futures past or a future yet to come.⁶³ In any case, it is significant that its central symbol, the poppy, which in Ireland tends to be associated with the Unionist tradition, is rendered ambivalent, unstable, and cannot be comprehended within a singular or exclusive framework of meaning. One moment it is depicted as 'the emblem of Peace and the Opium Wars' (*TN*, 14), the next as that of 'Death and the Special Powers' (*TN*, 17). Poppies signify remembrance and forgetting, solemnity and intoxication, while the passage of both characters and reader through 'the Forest of Forget-me-not' (*TN*, 49) leads ultimately to 'fields abounding in high cockelorum' where memories and stories are revealed in their variorum multiplicity (*TN*, 89). Besides its sheer linguistic and imaginative brio, then, *The Twelfth of Never* is a text that remains alert to the potential for abuses of memory that lies in the politics of national commemorations. For remembering one version of the past can often mean forgetting another or someone else's, or forgetting the future altogether. To this end, Ricoeur affirms that if there is a 'duty to remember' then it consists not merely in remembering not to forget but, more importantly, entails 'the duty to do justice, through memories, to another than the self'; it is the assumption and fulfilment of a debt to the victims of history, but always 'the other victim, other than ourselves'.⁶⁴

The titles, refrains, and structural ordering of poems in *The Twelfth of Never* derive in large part from the Irish folk-song tradition, although these elements are incessantly dispersed, combined, or re-contextualised in the course of the sequence's contrary progressions. A similarly elaborate musical architectonics also underlies Carson's 2008 collection, *For All We Know*, although here inspiration is derived, uncharacteristically, from baroque classical music and specifically fugue. Fugue entails an intricate contrapuntal composition in which an initial theme is first introduced then imitated at intervals by a succession of 'voices', each adding tonal or harmonic variations and embellishments. *For All We Know* is a brilliant attempt to approximate such formal intricacies by means of an unconventional sonnet sequence written in alexandrine

couplets, its echoes and reprises, counterpoints and elaborations following 'a score/ of harmony and dissonance' (*FAWK*, 93).⁶⁵ The book is divided into two parts, so that each of the 35 poems in part one has its non-identical twin in part two, the two halves mirroring and refracting recurrent themes, phrases, and images – a patchwork quilt, footprints in snow, an old watch – in a scintillating play of repetition and difference. Even more so than *The Twelfth of Never*, then, *For All We Know* asks to be considered as a dispersive but also strangely integrated whole, for while some poems can be read and understood individually none of them conforms to the isolate self-sufficiency of the lyric. In this respect, the book might be regarded as a version of the verse novel, although fugue probably remains the best analogy, for it is chiefly through the relationships and resonances between poems, their mutual harmony or discordance, that meaning is conveyed. As the volume's epigraph from the pianist Glenn Gould makes clear, fugue involves the constellation of continuously shifting musical fragments that are only ever partially or provisionally integrated.

That this shifting constellation of fragments also functions as an allegory for the equally intricate and partial workings of memory is underlined not only by the text's recurrent preoccupation with 'registering elapsed time' (*FAWK*, 27) but also more directly in 'Peace', which broaches the contemporary problems of memory and forgetting that confront Northern Ireland's peace process:

And all the unanswered questions of those dark days come back
To haunt us, the disabled guns that still managed to kill,

The witnesses that became ghosts in the blink of an eye.
Whom can we prosecute when no one is left fit to speak? (*FAWK*, 55)

Here again, the imperfect present is haunted by the past, by a silencing of memory that renders justice impossible and the duty to remember unfulfilled. Thus, while much of the text is concerned with personal and familial memories, the plural connotations of its 'staggered repeats' (*FAWK*, 77) insistently place these fragmentary recollections within the larger contexts of social and cultural memory, where remembering is conjoined to the aims of justice and restitution.

At the same time, through its novelistic unfolding of the story of two lovers who meet in a second-hand clothes shop in Belfast during the 1970s, but whose complicated personal and professional lives take them to Paris, Berlin, and Dresden, *For All We Know* also explores fugue as a psychological condition. In this context, 'fugue' is characterised

by profound confusion over personal identity, dissociative amnesia, and the abandonment or flight from familiar contexts and places; or, as Carson has it in *Shamrock Tea*, 'unknown to himself', the subject 'becomes someone else' (*ST*, 162). To this end, Carson's protagonists, Nina and Gabriel, find themselves living 'double lives' (*FAWK*, 66) in more senses than one, not only because both grew up bilingual but also because the unpredictable and not always readily comprehensible course of events in the narrative provides them with frequent occasions to question their own identities, not to mention each other's. Intermeshing depictions of Belfast during the Troubles, post-1968 Paris, and the febrile world of Cold War espionage in Eastern Europe, the text bristles with double agents and aliases, doppelgangers and look-alikes, deceptions and misrecognitions, while the relative fixity or fluidity of identity presents itself as a central and multi-faceted political problem.

In 'Birthright', for example, sectarian or ethnic identity figures as an inscription of filiation and belonging that can neither be erased nor ignored: 'For all that you assumed a sevenfold identity/ the mark of your people's people blazes on your forehead' (*FAWK*, 40). But while Carson never underestimates the material claims and limitations that the cultural production of identity entails, his recasting of 'Birthright' in part two deliberately re-opens a dialogue that implies that identity is never as 'irrevocable' as Gabriel initially thinks:

In any case, they'll find you out no matter what, for there
 are other indicators of identity. Such as?
 you said. Colour and cut of clothes, I said, the way you talk
 and what you talk about, the way you walk, your stance, or how
 you look askance, the set and colour of your eyes and hair.
 Just look at you, you said, you're talking through your hat. Look at
 what you're wearing, that good Protestant Harris tweed jacket.
 The black serge waistcoat a linen broker might have cast off.
 The grandfather shirt no grandfather of yours ever wore. (*FAWK*, 90)

The dialogic counter-pointing that is evident here is crucial to the volume's multi-layered effects, particularly its rich and complex imbrication of the personal and the political. Throughout *For All We Know*, allegiances or betrayals in the public or political spheres are paralleled and balanced by Carson's sometimes astonishingly subtle explorations of the confusions of identity that arise in a love relationship characterised as much by separation as by togetherness, and ultimately marked by a sense of

'irrevocable' loss. Following Nina's death in a car accident, Gabriel returns inevitably 'to the question of those staggered repeats/ as my memories of you recede into the future' (*FAWK*, III).

In formal and thematic terms, then, *For All We Know* would seem to constitute a significant departure within Carson's oeuvre, further evidence of his willingness to reinvent himself, breaking with established patterns in order to 'blossom with new constellations' (*FAWK*, 107). On the other hand, particularly on re-reading, the volume is also uncannily familiar, full of echoes, correspondences, and 're-memberings' not only within itself but also via intertextual reworkings of motifs or preoccupations from Carson's earlier work. For instance, Nina's patchwork quilt and references to the bombing of Dresden recall poems in *The New Estate and Other Poems* and *The Irish for No*; the volume's metonymic use of watches and time-pieces to explore the vagaries of time expands upon a theme first introduced in 'Four Sonnets' from *First Language*;⁶⁶ its retellings of French fairytales and songs are reminiscent of *The Twelfth of Never*; and the recurrent image of a helicopter hovering above the rooftops of Belfast is familiar from *Breaking News*. Such refrains or slight returns are always instances of reworking and recasting, however, never mere repetitions, and the staggered rhythms of the fugue that Carson adopts and adapts in *For All We Know* therefore serve purposes that are at once aesthetic and political.

In a manner that is broadly contiguous with Carson's previous excavations of place and memory, 'The Shadow' makes a crucial distinction between memorisation and remembering, whereby the ambition of being faithful to the past rests upon the repeated exercise of memory in contexts where it will always be provisional and potentially unreliable. For, as a former Stasi agent confides to Nina, liars merely repeat their stories verbatim, whereas those who tell the truth can always engage in retelling their accounts of the past. Truth depends upon reformulation rather than restatement, the recognition that there will always be multiple perspectives upon a single event, that there is more than one way to tell a story, and more than one story to tell. In turn, the story that Nina tells and retells to Gabriel is itself a reworking of the past that establishes a precarious connection with the truth of events only by means of its repeated self-transformations:

You've told me this story more than once, more than once telling
me something I never heard before until then, telling

it so well I could almost believe I was there myself,
for all that I was at the time so many miles away. (*FAWK*, 31)

This means that there can be no end to visiting and revisiting the past, telling and retelling its stories; no once-and-for-all where the essence of what has been is isolated and displayed in perpetuity. Memory is a process rather than an event or instrument, requiring 'the capacity for endless interpolations into what has been',⁶⁷ and it is here that the dialectic of recollection and revision that I have been tracing in this chapter most clearly opens onto Carson's concerns with narrative and the multiple roles of the storyteller.

Notes

- 1 Ciaran Carson, 'This is what libraries are for', *The Dublin Review* 4 (2001), p. 26.
- 2 Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2002), p. 17. Sontag contends that 'photographs may be more memorable than moving images' precisely *because* they arrest the flow of time.
- 3 Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), p. 24.
- 4 Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, pp. 55, 21.
- 5 Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), p. 330. Eagleton is here extrapolating principles drawn from Walter Benjamin's description and use of the concept.
- 6 Lloyd, *Ireland After History*, p. 51.
- 7 Cf. 'Envoy', the final poem in *The Twelfth of Never*: 'You'll find that everything is slightly out of synch' (*TN*, 89).
- 8 The choice of location here is neither random nor accidental, for Adelaide is also the name of a district of South Belfast lying adjacent to the Lisburn Road, and a 'halt' on the railway line leading south to Dublin. In 'Adelaide Halt' Carson's speaker wonders: 'Adelaide? The name? A city or a girl, who knows?' (*TN*, 16).
- 9 McCarthy, 'Ciaran Carson's Labyrinths', p. 109.
- 10 Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, p. 22.
- 11 'Man's relation to locations, and through locations to spaces, inheres in his dwelling. The relationship between man and space is none other than dwelling, strictly thought and spoken.' Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, p. 155.
- 12 Benjamin, *The Writer of Modern Life*, p. 146.
- 13 Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, p. 8.
- 14 Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, pp. 15, 6.
- 15 Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, pp. 17, 29, 21.
- 16 Kirkland, *Literature and Culture in Northern Ireland Since 1965*, p. 45.
- 17 Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, p. 90.
- 18 Adopting a tone of regretful nostalgia that is always qualified or ironised in Carson's writing, the journalist and local historian Robin Livingstone comments: 'The late 1960s, 1970s and early 1980s were not a good time to be living on the Falls. In the shadow of the hated [Divis] flats, people moved around half-demolished streets, their faces as grim as the landscape. Old brick was replaced by corrugated iron and with each and every demolition phase the spirit of the Falls sagged a little more.' Robin Livingstone, *The Road: Memories of the Falls* (Belfast: The Blackstaff Press,

- 1998), pp. 25–6. For the wider planning context since the Belfast Regional Plan of 1964 see Bardon, *Belfast: An Illustrated History*, pp. 293–8; C.E.B. Brett, *Buildings of Belfast 1700–1914* (Belfast: Friar's Bush Press, rev. edn, 1985), pp. ix–xvi; Frederick W. Boal, *Shaping a City: Belfast in the Late Twentieth Century* (Belfast: Institute of Irish Studies, 1995), pp. 33–62.
- 19 Kirkland, *Literature and Culture in Northern Ireland Since 1965*, p. 44.
- 20 Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx: The State of the Debt, The Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 21, 20, 11.
- 21 Kerrigan, 'Earth Writing', p. 161.
- 22 Sigmund Freud, 'Civilization and Its Discontents', in Peter Gay, ed., *The Freud Reader* (London: Vintage, 1995), p. 725. For a detailed discussion of 'blocked memory' in relation to Freudian psychoanalysis see Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, pp. 69–80.
- 23 See Bardon, *Belfast: An Illustrated History*, pp. 199–202.
- 24 Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 86.
- 25 Perhaps it is something like this that Gaston Bachelard means when he writes: '[B]eyond all the positive values of protection, the house we were born in becomes imbued with dream values which remain after the house is gone. [...] The space we love is unwilling to remain permanently enclosed. It deploys and appears to move elsewhere without difficulty; into other times, and on different planes of dream and memory.' Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), pp. 17, 53.
- 26 I borrow this term from the work of the intellectual historian Reinhart Koselleck, for whom the historical temporality of a given present may be inferred from 'its condition as a superseded former future'. Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), p. 3.
- 27 Brearton, 'Mapping the Trenches', p. 373.
- 28 Middleton and Woods, *Literatures of Memory*, p. 277. Middleton and Woods are clearly drawing upon the work of Pierre Nora, for whom the crystallisation and secretion of memory in specific sites, or *lieux de mémoire*, attests to the abandonment of any natural or spontaneous memory in the social relations of modernity. See Pierre Nora, 'Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire', *Representations* 26 (1989), pp. 7–25.
- 29 Mumford, *The City in History*, p. 98. Following a similar line of thought to Mumford, Freud famously adduces the layering and sedimentation of buildings, structures, and architectural forms from different historical periods that is evident in the city of Rome as an analogy for the encrustations of memory in the psyche. Freud, 'Civilization and its Discontents', pp. 725–7.
- 30 Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), p. 7.
- 31 Huyssen, *Present Pasts*, pp. 18, 27.
- 32 Huyssen, *Present Pasts*, p. 28.
- 33 Wilson, 'The Rhetoric of Urban Space', p. 151. The simile Wilson employs here is particularly apt for Carson's work. Aside from his numerous poems that take smoking as their subject or point of departure, such as 'Blues' and 'Grass', and the

- even more numerous texts in which smoking and cigarettes play more minor roles, Carson has explicitly drawn attention to the relationship between music, smoking, and time in *Last Night's Fun*, where the process of lighting, stubbing-out, and relighting roll-ups is described as creating 'hyphenated pauses' that punctuate the musical session: 'And I'm a moving present dot between the shifting staves of past and future' (*LNF*, 76). And in *Fishing for Amber*, smoking is described as a means of 'paus[ing] time' that plays an important part in the narrative vocabulary of the storyteller (*FFA*, 151–2).
- 34 Huyssen, *Present Pasts*, p. 105.
- 35 Koselleck, *Futures Past*, p. 262.
- 36 Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 246.
- 37 Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), pp. 41, 45.
- 38 Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, p. 49.
- 39 Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, pp. 342, 82.
- 40 McDonald, *Mistaken Identities*, p. 63.
- 41 Michael Parker, *Northern Irish Literature 1975–2006: The Imprint of History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2007), p. 123.
- 42 Doreen Massey, *Space, Place and Gender* (Cambridge: Polity, 1994), p. 171.
- 43 Kathleen McCracken also notes a similar, but not identical, gendering of functions in her essay, 'Ciaran Carson: Unravelling the Conditional, Mapping the Provisional', p. 371. McCracken's distinction is between the masculine activity of wandering in the city and the feminine domestic work of stitching and knitting.
- 44 Huyssen, *Present Pasts*, p. 101.
- 45 See 'Clearance' and 'August 1969' respectively (*IFN*, 32, 35). On the Grand Central Hotel see Marcus Patton, *Central Belfast: A Historical Gazetteer* (Belfast: Ulster Architectural Heritage Society, 1993), p. 287. For succinct historical overviews of the events of 12–16 August 1969 and evaluations of their political significance see Bardon, *Belfast: An Illustrated History*, pp. 282–3 and Michael Parker, *Northern Irish Literature 1956–1975: The Imprint of History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2007), pp. 100–3.
- 46 Tim Edensor, *Industrial Ruins: Space, Aesthetics and Materiality* (Oxford: Berg, 2005), pp. 25, 125, 139.
- 47 Edensor, *Industrial Ruins*, pp. 141, 145.
- 48 Corcoran, 'One Step Forward, Two Steps Back', p. 223.
- 49 O'Brien, *The Deregulated Muse*, p. 192.
- 50 The phrase, 'I have drowsed off into something else' may involve an intertextual reference to Paul Muldoon's poem, 'Something Else', in *Meeting the British*, which was published in 1987, the same year as *The Irish for No*. Paul Muldoon, *Poems 1968–1998* (London: Faber & Faber, 2001), p. 173.
- 51 Michael McAteer, 'The word as object: commodification in the poetry of Ciaran Carson', in Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, ed., *Ciaran Carson: Critical Essays* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2009), p. 134.
- 52 Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), p. 163.
- 53 In this connection, see Hugh Haughton's stimulating essay, "'The bright garbage on the incoming wave": rubbish in the poetry of Derek Mahon', *Textual Practice* 16.2 (2002), pp. 323–43.

- 54 Julian Stallabrass, *Gargantua: Manufactured Mass Culture* (London: Verso, 1996), p. 175.
- 55 Victor Burgin, *In/Different Spaces: Place and Memory in Visual Culture* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996), p. 226.
- 56 Sontag, *On Photography*, pp. 68, 16.
- 57 On the widespread eschewal of any straightforwardly realist aesthetic in contemporary photographic representations of Northern Ireland see Colin Graham, 'Belfast in photographs', in Nicholas Allen and Aaron Kelly, eds, *The cities of Belfast* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2003), p. 154 and Shane Alcobia-Murphy, *Sympathetic Ink: Intertextual Relations in Northern Irish Poetry* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2006), p. 177.
- 58 Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, p. 56.
- 59 Edna Longley, 'Northern Ireland: commemoration, elegy, forgetting', in Ian McBride, ed., *History and Memory in Modern Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 230.
- 60 Joep Leerssen, *Remembrance and Imagination: Patterns in the Historical and Literary Representation of Ireland in the Nineteenth Century* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1996), p. 226.
- 61 Butler, 'Slightly out of Synch', pp. 343, 339.
- 62 For an astute discussion of the relevance of the bicentennial commemorations of the United Irish rebellion for the contemporary 'peace process' in Northern Ireland and for related developments in the Republic see Brown, *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History*, pp. 411–15.
- 63 In this connection, Derrida's remark that 'the injunction of memory' is directed towards 'the anticipation of the future to come' seems relevant. Derrida, *Archive Fever*, p. 79.
- 64 Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, p. 89.
- 65 For a suggestive discussion of fugue as a form of 'invention', with specific reference to Glenn Gould's interpretations of Bach, see Edward W. Said, *On Late Style: Music and Literature Against the Grain* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), pp. 128–30.
- 66 'The crushed carapaces of watches ticked on the pavement. Passers-by ignored them.' 'All over the city, the stopped clocks told each other the different wrong times' (*FL*, 22).
- 67 Benjamin, *Reflections*, p. 16.



CHAPTER FIVE

Spatial Stories: Narrative and Representation

At the end of Volume VI of *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* Laurence Sterne's eponymous author-narrator pauses to review his progress so far, presenting the reader with a series of visual diagrams representing the course taken by his narrative in the preceding volumes. In each of these a series of turns and detours, loops and spirals indicate the various digressions, whimsical flourishes, and redundant elaborations he has made along his meandering and pointedly non-linear way from beginning to middle to end. Moreover, in a characteristically Sternean irony, it is during this digression upon his tendency to digress that Tristram determines to mend his ways and continue with his story 'in a tolerable straight line', one 'turning neither to the right hand or to the left'.¹

Such deliberate self-contradictions have led Paul Muldoon to regard *Tristram Shandy* as exemplary of a wider tendency in Irish writing towards the disruption of linearity by way of 'veerings from, over, and back along a line' and a related affinity for 'the notions of di-, trans-, and regression'.² To say nothing of Muldoon himself, such tendencies are prominent in the restlessly inventive interest in narrative and storytelling that has been evident in Ciaran Carson's writing at least since the publication of *The Irish for No* in 1987. Like Tristram, Carson's narrators rarely proceed in a straightforward manner, often getting lost in associative reveries triggered by sounds and smells, diverging from an initial train of thought only to pick it up again later in a changed context, or demonstrating the unstaunchable exfoliation of one narrative from another so that any notion of a central storyline organising the whole is ultimately undermined. Like Sterne, Carson highlights both the versatility and the inadequacies of narrative forms, revelling in the manifold connections and associations they make possible yet always acknowledging, and to an extent resisting, the artificial modes of

circumscription and ordering they enforce upon representation. Indeed, Carson's writing is not just full of narratives – stories and yarns, anecdotes and conversations of more or less complicated sorts. It is also often centrally *about* narrative, incorporating a pervasive level of meta-commentary through which he probes the limitations and possibilities encoded in the processes of storytelling and the kinds of knowledge that narrative affords. These enquiries are almost always anchored in a particular geographical and historical context – Belfast and Northern Ireland during the Troubles – and the fragmentary or inconclusive character of many of Carson's narratives reflect a society in the process of violent fracture or breakdown. Yet storytelling is also important to Carson because it offers a means of revision and renewal, of discovering coherence in difference and vice versa, and therefore of making sense *differently*. Hence what amounts almost to a statement of faith in the powers of narrative on Carson's behalf: 'I believe that the world exists in such a way that everything relates to something else. Or we make it exist in that way, making links all the time, connecting things up, one thing always leading to another.'³

The antithetical principles of connection and disconnection, correspondence and fracture that vie with each other in Carson's narratives are illustrated in the long poem 'Dresden', which opens *The Irish for No*. From the start the reader is put on guard as to the reliability of the narrative unfolded by the speaker, whose self-conscious checks and hesitations, tangential digressions and elisions immediately imply that this will be as much a story about storytelling as about Horse Boyle's wartime experiences as a rear gunner in the RAF:

Horse Boyle was called Horse Boyle because of his brother Mule;
 Though why Mule was called Mule is anybody's guess. I stayed there
 once,
 Or rather, I nearly stayed there once. But that's another story. (*IFN*, 11)

If not intentionally deceitful, like the narrator of the later poem 'A Date Called *Eat Me*',⁴ Carson's speaker does deliberately puncture the illusion of narrative authority he simultaneously creates in these opening lines. His proffered explanation for how Horse Boyle got his name implies privileged knowledge, but the limits of such knowledge are quickly revealed as the fragile causal chain he constructs is snapped off prematurely. Anybody's guess, it turns out, is as good as his own, for his information – like Horse's name – is second-hand. The narrator's tendency to digress, to temporarily lose the thread of his story in anecdotes and reminiscences, whether first- or second-hand, is also

signalled explicitly by the untold story of how he stayed, or rather ‘nearly stayed’, the night in the brothers’ ‘decrepit caravan’ on the outskirts of Carrick. Besides hinting at the potential overlap between narration and fabulation – the poem’s generously expansive narrative seems capable of encompassing stories of what might have been, as well as what was – this interrupted digression also intimates the way in which one story always leads on to another, resisting any neat circumscription and leaving all manner of narrative loose ends: ‘But that’s another story.’

As with many of Carson’s long poems, ‘Dresden’ is composed of stories within stories, frames within frames, the narrative drifting backwards and forwards in time and space, following a seemingly arbitrary course that turns out to be both refractive and recursive. Storylines branch and ramify unexpectedly, incorporating shifts of pace and tone of voice, or employing ‘anachronies’ such as flashbacks and prolepses,⁵ before circling back to Horse – for ‘this is really Horse’s story’ – via some convenient narrative bridge, a corresponding sound or image, or a loose association of ideas. In this way, Carson amplifies and enriches what Paul Copley calls the text’s ‘narrative space’, multiplying the turns and detours through which its progression from beginning to end is delayed, frustrated, or held in suspense.⁶ Consequently, the reader as much as the narrator is involved in making links and connections between discrete images and contexts, of relating characters to one another and to their respective times and places in the recessive narrative structure. For instance, the teetering ‘baroque pyramids of empty baked bean tins’ which surround Horse and Mule’s caravan set the narrator thinking of a village shop’s gloomy, aromatic interior, with its tinkling bell and ‘pyramids of tins’ (*IFN*, 11). In turn, the narrator’s mildly prurient imaginings concerning the likely whereabouts of the shopkeeper’s daughter return him to Horse, a man who ‘kept his ears to the ground’ and so might be able to satisfy his idle curiosity.

Importantly, Horse Boyle is himself both ‘a great man for current affairs’, carrying news to his neighbours every evening, and a born storyteller of a distinctively digressive bent. The report of a failed mortar-bomb attack at Mullaghbawn prompts Horse to tell a farcical tale concerning Flynn, a hapless IRA volunteer on a cross-border bombing mission. On route to his destination, Flynn imagines himself discovered and surrenders himself needlessly to a policeman who ‘didn’t know young Flynn from Adam. All he wanted/ Was to get home for his tea’, an ironic detail that humorously deflates the heroic pretensions of militant Irish republicanism for which Flynn is made to stand (*IFN*, 12). Flynn’s

acquisition of the 'best of Irish' while in prison is also gently mocked, but leads Horse on to the etymology of Carrick (*'a rock'*) and his wry social commentary on life in Ireland's depleted rural parishes:

You'd be hard put to find a square foot in the whole bloody parish
 That wasn't thick with flints and pebbles. To this day he could hear the
 grate
 And scrape as the spade struck home, for it reminded him of broken
 bones:
 Digging a graveyard, maybe – or better still, trying to dig a reclaimed tip
 Of broken delph and crockery ware – you know that sound that sets your
 teeth on edge
 When the chalk squeaks on the blackboard, or you shovel ashes from the
 stove? (*IFN*, 13)

The finicky precision with which this series of proliferating analogies is developed is characteristic of Carson's writing, as is Horse's sardonic equation of the un-pastoral environs of Carrick with both graveyard and tip. More importantly, these lines also build up a system of images and aural echoes that serve to link the scattered shards of 'flints and pebbles' with 'broken bones' and 'broken delph and crockery ware', inducing a queasy pre-figuration of the poem's long-deferred climax, in which the connection between its wandering narrative and its pregnant title is finally made clear.

With Mule's drunken return to the caravan Horse's voice recedes and is replaced once more by that of the narrator, who relates details of Horse's own life story. These concern emigration first to Manchester, then enlistment in the RAF and his subsequent involvement in the Allied bombing of Dresden during the war. Horse's own narrative, and the various yarns or anecdotes with which it has been linked in the course of the poem, are thus written into the encompassing narratives of Irish diasporic identity and European history. Moreover, at a formal level his heartbroken recollections of the bombing itself serve as a focal point for the 'thousand tinkling echoes' that the poem, it is revealed, has unobtrusively orchestrated into a dissonant fugue of sonic particles: collapsing tin cans, a tinkling shop bell, the 'grate and scrape' of a spade in poor soil, chalk on a blackboard, and, finally, the 'avalanche' of smashed porcelain and china that alludes metaphorically to broken human bodies and their 'delicate bone fragments' (*IFN*, 15). As Neil Corcoran remarks, the sounding together of these noises not only provides 'Dresden' with an epiphanic crescendo but draws 'the narrative's different stories together too, making out of Horse Boyle's life not only a

tale but an emblem of diminishment and depredation'.⁷ However, if the revelation of Horse's wartime experiences and the guilt he has carried since inevitably alters the reader's understanding of his character and circumstances, the poem is also engaged in retelling and re-appraising historical events from the perspective of the marginal and the forgotten. Through an impoverished Irish airman's memories of the devastation of this strategically unimportant German city by Allied forces, 'Dresden' offers an implicit challenge to those bellicose narratives of wartime heroism that sustain one version of British identity.

The eccentricity of Horse Boyle's story is therefore both literal and metaphorical, and 'Dresden' might be said to bear out Elmer Kennedy-Andrews's point that Carson's narrative poetics is premised upon his 'intuition of centrelessness': 'He radically undermines the idea of a centre capable of providing discursive unity and fixity, and the claims of any culture to possess a pure and homogeneous body of values.'⁸ Perhaps 'centrelessness' is too strong in this case, for the whirling, tendentious narrative fragments of 'Dresden' do find a sort of fragile coherence in the echo chamber of Horse Boyle's memories. Yet this is a paradoxical coherence of incoherence – a reiteration of 'melodic fragments/ in continuously unfinished tapestries of sound' (*FAWK*, III) – and 'Dresden' certainly illustrates the processes of decentering and displacement that characterise many of Carson's narrative poems. Not only is the bombardment of Dresden and the killing of its citizens rendered obliquely, as if to underline the psychological difficulty Horse has in confronting the massacre in which he participated. The poem's plangent evocation of civilian deaths caused during the military campaigns of the Second World War also provides a means of reflecting indirectly upon contemporary realities in Northern Ireland during the Troubles, while simultaneously placing local events within a broader set of historical and geographical contexts. To the extent that the historical associations connected with 'Dresden' provide a core or centre for the poem, then, this centre is not 'a fixed locus but a function, a sort of nonlocus in which an infinite number of sign substitutions [come] into play'.⁹

Appropriately enough, 'Dresden' ends on a note of inconclusive circularity, the speaker recalling as he takes his leave of Horse and Mule that he 'might have stayed the night, but there's no time/ to go back to that now; I could hardly, at any rate, pick up the thread' (*IFN*, 16). This wry acknowledgement of the limitations and exclusions placed upon any narrative is telling, for, if Carson places a high value upon

the capacity of narrative to shape and order the chaos of sensations that make up experience, he nonetheless distrusts its tendency to fix events in any particular pattern of interpretation or explanation. Indeed, much of the invention and energy of his narrative imagination proceeds from the conviction that no single account of events can ever be adequate to the reality described:

Anything can be told this way or that way. There's no final way of telling a story, or explaining the totality of whatever it was that happened at any given time. [...] I've lived in Belfast all my life and I still couldn't tell you a fraction of what's going on. All I can do is tell you stories.¹⁰

Every narrative, Carson recognises, is fractional and incomplete; like any other mode of representation, storytelling 'allows some things to be depicted and not others'.¹¹ The danger lies in mistaking an account or representation of reality for the thing itself, the truth of what happened, for as Alan Sinfield argues, stories 'transmit power: they are structured into the social order and the criteria of plausibility define, or seem to define, the scope of feasible change'.¹² Convincing narratives, once they have been naturalised, set limits to our historical understanding that are ultimately ideological.

Carson's strategy is to resist such naturalisation by both stressing the provisionality of any narrative account, its susceptibility to revision or contestation, and by foregrounding the potential duplicities or deceptions of discourse, exposing the unreliability of personal memories and historical narratives alike. Telling stories – stories in the plural – cannot provide the writer with an unassailable vantage point on history, but it can serve as a means of asking questions and raising objections to those persons or narratives making such claims. Carson has said:

[M]y aim was, in that work which deals with the 'Troubles', to act as a camera or a tape-recorder, and present things in a kind of edited surreality. An ear overhearing things in bars. Snatches of black Belfast humour. If there's one thing certain about what was or is going on, is that you don't know the half of it. The official account is only an account, and there are many others. Poetry offers yet another alternative. It asks questions, it thinks. It asks about the truth which is never black-and-white.¹³

According to this rationale, each narrative account of the Troubles is implicated in the many others it seeks to displace; each is a fragment of an inaccessible and incomprehensible whole, and every story will bear the traces of others that have been excluded. As Carson notes in *Fishing for Amber*, 'behind the story we tell today another story lies' (*FFA*, 75).

Hence the tendency of storylines to overlap or bleed into one another in his writing, complicating the picture and casting doubt upon the transparency of any account, as in the labyrinthine narrative of moves and counter-moves elaborated in 'Queen's Gambit':

As someone spills a cup of tea on a discarded *Irish News*

A minor item bleeds through from another page, blurring the main story.
It's difficult to pick up without the whole thing coming apart in your
hands,

But basically it invokes this bunch of cowboys, who, unbeknownst to us
all,

Have jumped on board a Ford Sierra, bound for You-Know-Where.

(BC, 38)

The relationship between this 'bunch of cowboys' and the paramilitary leader 'Mad Dog' Reilly, who is introduced earlier in the poem, remains unclear, while the rapid cuts and dissolves made from scene to scene and character to character mean that the reader may also find it difficult to pick up the narrative thread. Indeed, the 'facts' of the events related – which seem to involve a heist at Belfast's General Post Office, combined with an ambush of British army personnel – are not just dispersed or confusingly conflated in the telling but are always shown to be enmeshed in layers of representational mediation – news stories, hearsay, video footage, 'the wider world of disinformation' (*FAWK*, 24) – and so always already refracted through multiple viewpoints or interpretations. At one point, the poem alludes self-reflexively to its own palimpsestic narrative structure via the 'chalky ghosts' on a blackboard at Army HQ, which show 'what was contemplated and rubbed out, Plan A/ Becoming X or Y; interlocked, curved arrows of the mortgaged future' (*BC*, 37). Like these mutating plans, Carson's narratives are typically in a constant state of becoming as identities slip and successive layers of implication are revealed, every turn and detour mapping out a different set of narrative permutations.

Narrative open-endedness can be a way of registering the eternal provisionality and uncertainty of the future, as in 'Second Language': 'What comes next is next, and no one knows the *che sera* of it, but must allow/ The *Tipp-Ex* present at the fingertips' (*FL*, 13). Equally, though, such unstable narrative fabrications often teeter on the brink of disintegration, like the inept and outmanoeuvred paramilitaries blown up by their own bomb in '58', dissolving any pretence they might make to objectivity or intelligibility as sense is rendered into 'indecipherababble

bits and bods, skuddicked and scrambled like alphabet bricks' (*FL*, 54). In the opening section of 'Queen's Gambit' the narrative zooms in on a conversation between two soldiers and a young woman in a chemist's shop only to break off abruptly in a narrative ellipsis: 'Much of this is unintelligible, blotted out by stars and asterisks/ Just as the street outside is splattered with bits of corrugated iron and confetti' (*BC*, 33). Such lapses rarely derail the narrative impetus and imaginative energy of Carson's poems for long, but they do insistently register the pressures and demands placed upon available narrative models by a historical context defined by suspicion, subterfuge, and conflicting cultural imaginaries. In this regard, Alan Gillis contends that 'Carson's swirling narratives serve to radically undermine the idea that narration might objectively chart complex events, uncovering definite chains of cause and effect within a stabilized contextual and explanatory framework.'¹⁴

Carson's reinvention of himself as a narrative poet in *The Irish for No* and *Belfast Confetti* also implies a reaction against the perceived limitations of the lyric mode he had successfully adopted in *The New Estate*, and which was prevalent in much Northern Irish poetry of the 1960s and 1970s. One such limitation is the emphasis laid in some (neo-Romantic) versions of lyric poetry upon the expression of individual feeling, where the authenticity of the speaking voice is deemed to lie in its capacity to convey the immediacy of personal experience.¹⁵ Thus, Seamus Heaney presents his conception of poetry as 'a point of entry into the buried life of the feelings or as a point of exit for it', so that finding one's poetic voice entails getting 'your own feelings into your own words'.¹⁶ Such an aesthetic is necessarily introspective and self-involved, if not solipsistic, and it is this emphasis upon inner realities and personal feeling that Carson seems to regard as restrictive and, ultimately, uninteresting. 'I don't particularly want to write about how I feel,' he has said. 'I want to write down the yarn, the story. Something which is a bit beyond me. Remembering the time, and recreating the time, all the time.'¹⁷ According to this rationale, then, writing involves going 'beyond' the parameters of the self and personal experience within which the lyric mode is usually understood to operate.

Carson's two-fold interest in both 'remembering' and 'recreating' events or experience through narrative necessarily undermines the solidity of a stable, unitary self that would be the subject of his poetry and guarantee the authenticity of the feelings put into words. As Carson's speaker has it (with a nod to Emily Dickinson) in 'Letters from the Alphabet': 'I is the vertical, the virtual reality. I tell it slant' (*OEC*, 19). Yarn-spinning and

storytelling appeal to Carson, then, because they provide opportunities for deviation and digression, for exploring otherness¹⁸ and exploding the 'virtual reality' of the speaking subject. The 'derangement' of identities is disconcertingly literalised in 'Asylum' where the narrator appears to merge with, and speak for, his mentally ill Uncle John:

Uncle John was not all there. Yet he had
His father's eyes, his mother's nose; and I myself, according to my mother,
Had his mouth. I would imagine myself speaking for him sometimes.
(*IFN*, 54)

Something similarly unsettling happens in 'Patchwork', where the narrator ventriloquises his dead grandmother: '*It took me twenty years to make that quilt – I'm speaking for her now*' (*IFN*, 62); and amid the much more diverse mimicry and ventriloquism of *The Twelfth of Never* Carson explicitly adopts the persona of a writerly alter-ego, Mr Stump, who, it seems, is responsible for many of the book's 'left hand fantasies' (*TN*, 46). There is, then, a determined displacement or denial of the writerly personality in Carson's writing that, as Richard Kirkland observes, accords with the experiences of urban alienation that often make up his subject-matter, so that 'the poetic self as foundation of the lyric convention dissolves on the page as the city becomes an area of discontinuity or fracture'.¹⁹

Carson's willingness to undermine or at least call into question the condition of aesthetic autonomy sometimes claimed for the lyric poem is also apparent in the varieties of impurity and intermixture that his poetry cultivates, assembling a montage of conflicting generic codes and discourses which in turn further destabilises the location of the speaking voice. The formal innovations of his characteristically flexible, elastic long line, adapted in part from the American poet C.K. Williams, are important in this respect. As John Goodby observes, Carson's apparently straggly, expansive poems are not only 'at odds with the usual shapeliness of the lyric'; their long lines also provide an appropriate form for 'the anti-lyric and demotic thrust of his style', granting his writing a distinctively 'novelistic discursivity'.²⁰ To this end, Williams's example appears to have been particularly enabling. The qualities that Carson most obviously shares with the elder poet are his observant responsiveness to mundane illuminations, and his capacity for marrying the vitality of demotic speech patterns to an underlying concern for composition, phrasing, and structure. Williams's style, Carson astutely observes, 'for all its apparent off-handedness, is deliberate, and composed with an eye for traditional

literary technique'.²¹ The long line practised by Williams seems to have suggested to Carson a means of productively expanding the parameters of poetry to take in pub-talk, anecdote, vernacular speech, the thrust and parry of conversation, even and especially where these are bound up with subjects and forms of expression deemed to be 'un-poetic'. 'If you put in enough hours in bars, sooner or later you get to hear every imaginable kind of bullshit', remarks Williams's narrator in 'Bob';²² but for both Williams and Carson, 'bullshit' has a value of its own, encompassing as it does the ramifying narrative fabrications triggered by experience, and through which that experience must be understood. As Carson remarks: 'We invent our lives; our accounts of them change from day to day, without our even knowing it; and it's part of poetry's responsibility to trace those convolutions of the brain.'²³ The capacious range of the long line employed in Carson's poetry allows him to probe the shifting perspectives offered by such narrative accounts, his syntax modulating flexibly in response to context and subject-matter, and creating a sort of backwash effect at line breaks, which often mark moments of suspense or suspension, equivocation and contradiction. It also, as Shane Murphy notes, provides him with a means 'to convey place, history and identity as palimpsests, resistant to unitary readings'.²⁴

The inclusiveness that such a poetic implies is not only at odds with the circumscribed formality and concision that is typically associated with the lyric, but will also tend to regard literature itself as 'just another element in a universe of discourse'.²⁵ Carson's keen awareness of the extent to which distinctions between the literary and the non-literary are ultimately artificial leads him to incorporate a bricolage of references to diverse cultural forms in his poetry, ranging from classical allusions and literary inter-texts to advertising slogans, popular songs, science fiction, television programmes, and so on. This montage of heterogeneous elements, in which different generic codes and linguistic registers jostle one another, involves a multi-perspectivism through which disjunct social worlds are brought into sometimes fractious juxtaposition. And in this regard, Carson's writing could be said to partake in and extend the process of 'novelisation' that Ian Gregson identifies as shaping one strand of contemporary British and Irish poetry. The product of such novelisation is a dialogic poetics premised upon the 'promiscuous mingling of materials, an enjoyment of hybrid forms and images, a conflating of voices and perspectives'.²⁶ For Mikhail Bakhtin, upon whom Gregson draws, 'novelness' recognises the thoroughly heteroglot

nature of language itself, its existence as ‘heteroglossia’ (literally, different tongues), or the diversity of social speech types and individual voices available in a given culture at any particular time.²⁷ Any utterance or act of narrativisation will inevitably reduce this linguistic variety, for narratives purposefully transform meaningless chaos into meaningful patterns by excluding some ways of saying and foregrounding others. Nevertheless, the text displays its ‘novelness’ – a property that is by no means confined to the novel – by ‘put[ting] different orders of experience [...] into dialogue with each other’²⁸ and so preserves the impression of social heteroglossia with its plurality of possible relations to the world.

Bakhtin’s key motifs of dialogue, appropriation, and polyphony are readily identified in Carson’s poetry.²⁹ If his long poems engage the reader through oral performances in which different voices fade in and out, interrupting or correcting each other, his shorter poems often manifest themselves as fragments of conversation overheard in Belfast’s bars past and present. In ‘Barfly’, for instance, the speaker buttonholes the reader from the outset, firing off a series of riddling questions, adages, and grim anecdotes:

Maybe you can figure it, why The Crown and Shamrock and The Rose
and Crown
Are at opposite ends of the town. Politics? The odds change. The borders
move.
Or they’re asked to. A nod’s as good as a wink. For example, in the Arkle
Inn
This night, I’m getting it from the horse’s mouth, when these two punters
walk in,
Produce these rods, and punctuate the lunchtime menu: there’s confetti
everywhere. (*BC*, 55)

Notice how the garrulous conversational tone of these lines economically combines clichés and familiar turns of phrase (‘A nod’s as good as a wink’, ‘getting it from the horse’s mouth’), slang terms (‘punters’, ‘rods’), and a more obviously ‘literary’ deployment of metaphor (‘there’s confetti everywhere’). Just as the slyly resourceful narrator knows when to do a disappearing act – ‘I buzzed off’ – so the language of the poem proves capable of agile shifts of tone and register, assuming one set of discursive conventions only to shed them and adopt another: ‘For, like the menu, everything’s chalked up, and every now and then, wiped clean’ (*BC*, 55). The novelistic discursivity that Goodby identifies is further underscored in the prose poems included in *Belfast Confetti*, texts that attest to the more general cross-fertilisation between poetic and prose

genres in Carson's writing.³⁰ Certainly, texts such as 'Revised Version' and 'Intelligence' exemplify the prose poem's own ambivalent generic status, and its function as 'a vehicle for the introduction of non-literary prose into "poetic" discourse – the prose of the street, the pulpit, the newsrooms, the political arena, the psychiatrist's office, and so on'.³¹

A more immediately obvious source of dialogism in Carson's writing can be found in its multi-layered allusiveness, his voracious incorporation of quotations from a wide range of literary and non-literary sources, such that the text is revealed always to be 'a permutation of texts, an intertextuality'.³² Eamonn Hughes argues that Carson's work treats all writing as ultimately 'traceable to and a re-working or re-imagining of previous writing (or narrative, or music, or painting, or film etc.)'.³³ Or, as Carson himself has it, 'the voice from the grave reverberates in others' mouths' (*BC*, 107). Nonetheless, Carson's use of quotation does not serve to anchor his work in a stable framework of literary-historical explanation – even if it does provide some clues as to his reading habits and influences – but rather seems directed towards the destabilisation of the very notions of literariness and canonicity. In 'Calvin Klein's *Obsession*' a misquotation from Edward Thomas's 'Old Man' rubs shoulders with lyrics from Frank Ifield's 1962 pop song 'I Remember You' and references to the pop art of Andy Warhol (*IFN*, 21, 23). Similarly, the documentary register adopted in a number of Carson's poems tends to blur distinctions between literature and journalism or reportage, and this tendency is further extended in 'The Indian Mutiny' and 'The War Correspondent' in *Breaking News*, which both draw extensively upon the despatches of the Anglo-Irish journalist, William Howard Russell.³⁴

Although the purposes directing some of Carson's intertextual references and borrowings are not always immediately apparent, many seem to imply a logic of juxtaposition or reframing that is implicitly critical. William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and John Keats's 'Ode to a Nightingale' are alluded to in 'The Irish for No' in a manoeuvre that reappraises and recontextualises their figurations of love, longing, and death against a harshly un-romantic historical backdrop of suicide and sectarian murder. As Fiona Stafford comments: 'The English literary tradition seems fragmented and impotent in the context of Northern Ireland, evoked only to demonstrate its inability to mediate in these circumstances.'³⁵ A similar act of appropriation and recontextualisation takes place in 'John Ruskin in Belfast', which not only quotes verbatim from Ruskin's speech 'The Mystery of Life and Its Arts', but also

pastiches his florid prose style in order to have the Victorian aesthete record his horrified impressions of nineteenth-century industrial Belfast. In Carson's version of Ruskin, the city emerges as a degraded place of 'mutilated politics,/ The seething yeast of anarchy: the very image of a pit, where a chained dwarf/ Savages a chained bulldog' (*BC*, 97). Carson will also often adapt the discourses and techniques of other art forms for his own purposes. In 'Whatever Sleep It Is' he borrows the vocabulary of painting and fine art in order to stress the essential artifice of all writing and art; the narrative jerks and jumps of 'Queen's Gambit' owe something to the episodic framing employed in graphic novels; while 'Serial', 'Snow', and 'Jawbox' each filter their riddling, metamorphic narratives through the recording technologies of film and video, mimicking the capacities of both media for instant playback, slow-motion, and fast forward in order to undermine the reader's expectations concerning linear narrative sequence.

Another important dialogue in Carson's work is that between the literate cultures of print and writing on one hand and the traditions of Irish music, song, and oral storytelling on the other. His longstanding involvement in the Irish traditional music scene, both as a practising musician and as Traditional Arts Officer for the Northern Ireland Arts Council from 1975–98, has crucially shaped the idiosyncratic understanding and deployment of 'tradition' in his writing. Moreover, music is not only a thematic concern in poems such as 'Céili' (*NEOP*, 51), 'On Not Remembering Some Lines of a Song' (*FL*, 27–8), or through the more extensive allusions to the Irish ballad tradition made in *The Twelfth of Never*; it has also had a profound influence upon Carson's work at the level of form, particularly through the metrical approximation his long lines make to the pacing and rhythm of a four bar reel,³⁶ though in other ways too. Carson has said that writing a pocket guide to Irish traditional music provided him with 'a kind of blueprint for the shape and structure of *The Irish for No*'³⁷ because of the way in which it incorporates yarns and songs, asides and digressions within the format of a standard guidebook. Part of the purpose behind his writing since the mid-1980s appears to have been to find a literary format capable of approximating the social experience of a traditional pub session, with its odd mixture of formal courtesies and apparently haphazard happenings, of music and song, dance and drink, talk and craic.

Perhaps he comes closest to achieving this goal in his prose book *Last Night's Fun*, in which each chapter is given the name of a tune (with which its contents will usually be only tenuously connected),

one leading into the next in an unfolding, multi-layered conversation that interweaves different times and places, songs and tunes, memories and stories. In the same book, Carson expresses his admiration for the storytelling gifts of the fiddle-player and raconteur John Loughran, 'labyrinthine, funny, scatty, precise, scathing talk that mixed modes and genres in the way that *ceili*-ing itself did' (*LNF*, 82). The analogy between music and narrative is made explicit here, and Carson often speaks of music or song in terms of exchange or dialogue, as part of 'an ongoing conversation, a debate between the community and itself and the concerns of the wider world' (*ITM*, 47). Tradition, in this sense, is rooted in context and the contingency of each performance, subject to seemingly endless variation within its own shifting limits. For there can ultimately be no standard and each version of the tune or song describes only 'temporary delineations of the possible' (*LNF*, 2):

Each time the song is sung, our notions of it change, and we are changed by it. The words are old. They have been worn into shape by many ears and mouths, and have been contemplated often. But every time is new because the time is new, and there is no time like now. (*LNF*, 116)

Variation and difference are therefore intrinsic to the ways in which tradition sustains and reproduces itself. Moreover, there is and can be no final version; or, as Carson says elsewhere, 'the same refrain is always various' (*OEC*, 41). This seemingly paradoxical yoking together of continuity and deviation in the performance of tradition has led Edna Longley to speculate that 'Carson's "post-modernism" may really be a post-traditionalism', whereby the very concept of 'tradition' is freed from some of its narrower associations with fixity or authenticity.³⁸

The paradoxes of Carson's 'post-traditionalism' translate to his handling of narrative, for it is through his adaptation of techniques passed down from the tradition of Irish oral storytelling that he develops a deconstructive form of narrative 'which can entertain its own disruption as part of its repertoire of possibilities'.³⁹ A prefatory note to *The Irish for No* pointedly acknowledges John Campbell of Mullaghbawn, 'whose storytelling suggested some of the narrative procedures of these poems' (*IFN*, 6). And Carson has described Campbell's storytelling in the following terms:

It's the kind of storytelling which is based on the renovation of clichéd situations, and the skill is the ways in which he constantly disappoints your expectations. The high points are more often in the apparently off-hand digressions than in the original ostensible story. Also the story changes

each time he tells it, depending where he is or who he's telling it to ... it's constantly renewable.⁴⁰

What Carson responds to in Campbell's storytelling are the opportunities he finds for subverting his audience's expectations while working within, but also against, a recognisable tradition or set of formal conventions. Indeed, his sense that every narrative performance is unique, that the meaning of a story is contingent upon the context in which it is told, implies a dialectic of continuity and novelty, so that the observance of tradition can supply a means of fostering surprise and constant renewal.

Walter J. Ong observes that in the context of oral tradition narrative originality 'consists not in the introduction of new materials but in fitting the traditional materials effectively into each individual, unique situation and/or audience'.⁴¹ On this interpretation, 'tradition' is conceived not in terms of fixity, stolidity, or security but rather as an 'active process' of handing down or handing on⁴² through which inherited forms, themes, and ideas must be ceaselessly revised and reinterpreted in and for the present moment. At the level of storytelling, then, a respect for tradition does not exclude the possibility of creativity and improvisation, which is effected through the manipulation of narrative conventions or the recombination of plot details and structural elements in a tale. On the contrary, digression and deviation are part and parcel of tradition as it is practised, and so rather than a constraining orthodoxy Carson's understanding of tradition facilitates and even demands heterodoxy. As Georges Denis Zimmermann says of the Irish storyteller: 'Each "traditional" craftsman endowed with personality could modulate his observance of rules and norms, playing with the audience's expectations and deciding which of the structural or verbal devices he knew should be used on a particular occasion; selectivity in itself is already a form of creation.'⁴³

To explain how Carson's borrowings from oral storytelling are harnessed to the distinctively urban character and concerns of his writing since *The Irish for No* – which strives to accommodate an impossible tally of Belfast in all its 'teeming narrative dimensions' and 'atmospheric genre fogs' (*SF*, 160) – it is worth considering the precedent set for his work by another important influence, Cathal O'Byrne. Indeed, Carson directly acknowledges O'Byrne's 'ghostly presence at [his] shoulder' in his prose memoir *The Star Factory*, which notably incorporates chunks of O'Byrne's Belfast miscellany *As I Roved Out* (1946) into its own textual weave (*SF*, 188–91). As Richard Kirkland observes, *As I Roved Out* is

itself a self-consciously hybrid text, a collection of short articles originally published in the *Irish News* but combining elements of the essay form, recollections, and stories to produce a circular, reiterative narrative structure that 'can be entered at any point'.⁴⁴ Moreover, O'Byrne's repeated forays into the demolished streets, entries, and courtyards of Belfast in 'the old days long gone by' are framed by a process of historical retrieval that synthesises memory and reverie. For it was 'within the narrow confines of these little hidden-away places,' O'Byrne insists, that 'Belfast's riches were piled up, and much of its history – its worthwhile history from an Irish point of view – was made'.⁴⁵

Writing from a position within Northern nationalism in the bleak climate of the post-partition years, O'Byrne styles himself as custodian of this neglected and half-forgotten 'worthwhile history', figuring modern Belfast as 'a site of rupture and fragmentation' but more often evoking the city's past in a plangent spiral of longing and loss. To this end, Kirkland argues that O'Byrne is best understood as 'an urban *shanachie*: a writer deploying repetition, folklore, Ulster English, comparative and non-linear forms of storytelling to create an effect which can be near-hypnotic'.⁴⁶ O'Byrne's use of old maps and street directories as creative stimuli for his representations of Belfast also exemplify the way in which his work, like Carson's, combines oral forms with a relish for the material cultures of writing and print.⁴⁷ I have already noted Carson's fascination with the techniques of the *shanachie* – or *seanchaí*, the Irish storyteller – but the significance of O'Byrne's influence rests upon his adaptation of such techniques to the depiction of Belfast in a way that suggests the productive congruence of urban and narrative forms. In their multi-layered figurations of Belfast, both O'Byrne and Carson illustrate James Donald's point that in order 'to imagine the unrepresentable space, life, and languages of the city, to make them liveable, we translate them into narratives'. Equally, though, it is through their shared emphasis upon telling and re-telling, on stories in the plural, that each writer acknowledges the impossibility of defining or reifying the complex social relations and histories of the city in 'a single normative image or all-encompassing narrative'.⁴⁸

In this regard, then, Carson's writing is characteristically urban not merely in its choice of imagery and subject-matter but also in its use of narrative form – although, as the almost oxymoronic formulation 'urban *shanachie*' implies, the forms he employs integrate aspects of urban modernity with oral traditionalism. Simplifying greatly, urban form consists in bringing people and objects together, promoting

the concentration and increasing complexity of social relations in space, while simultaneously increasing opportunities for encountering difference. As Henri Lefebvre describes it, the form of the urban is characterised by ‘simultaneity and encounter’: ‘As a place of encounters, focus of communication and information, the *urban* becomes what it always was: place of desire, permanent disequilibrium, seat of the dissolution of normalities and constraints, the moment of play and of the unpredictable.’⁴⁹ Carson’s work reflects many of these paradigmatic urban features, but also filters them through the specific set of historical and topographical circumstances peculiar to Belfast. The narrative spaces of zig-zags and switchbacks, digressions and dog-leg turns that his long poems and prose texts describe bear an obvious resemblance to the urban spaces of Belfast itself, with its ‘knitted, knotted streets’ and ‘labyrinthine alleyways’ (*BC*, 97), its ‘mesh of ramps, diversions, one-way systems’ (*IFN*, 39).

In ‘The Irish for No’ the narrator’s turning into a side-street provides a direct parallel for the associative turns and detours taken by his own narrative, which segues neatly from perception and description to recollection and word-play:

It was time to turn into the dog-leg’s short-cut from Chlorine Gardens
 Into Cloreen Park, where you might see an *Ulster Says No* scrawled on the
 side
 Of the power-block – which immediately reminds me of the Eglantine
 Inn
 Just on the corner: on the missing *h* of Cloreen, you might say. (*IFN*, 49)

Similarly, in ‘Turn Again’ the narrator turns into a side-street only to find that ‘history is changed’ (*BC*, 11); or, again, in ‘Jawbox’ a twist of the plot leaves the protagonist ‘caught between/ *Belfast* and *Belfast*, in the accordion pleats between two lurching carriages/ Banging, rattling, threatening to break loose’ (*BC*, 93). The metaphorical equation in these lines of narrative convolution with a sense of physical entrapment and danger lends a political edge to the pervasive uncertainty and confusion cultivated in Carson’s writing. Indeed, Peter Barry argues that Carson’s distinctive narrative style is ‘the correlate of a city in which the detour and the devious route to a desired objective are not decorative or artistic flourishes, but an often-necessary survival strategy’.⁵⁰ Hence, in ‘Ambition’, the figuration of time as ‘a road’ where ‘you’re checked and checked again/ By a mobile checkpoint’ (*BC*, 28), an image that also provides a self-reflexive gloss on the poem’s own narrative reconfiguration of time through repetition and recombination. Or, in ‘Serial’, the

'loops and spirals' of the poem's narrative provide a formal contrast with the linear 'invisible bee-line' made by a bullet fired into the Falls Road Library in the opening lines (*IFN*, 52, 51). Moreover, Carson's dialogic conception of the space of writing as a palimpsest, a layered network of conversant voices and narratives, parallels his depiction of the city as an urban 'text' that is ceaselessly inscribed and reworked by the actions and activities of its inhabitants. His mercurial, rhizomatic narratives, like the photographic images contemplated by the narrator of 'Revised Version', are 'tensed to the ifs and buts, the yeas and nays of Belfast's history' (*BC*, 67).

The production of space and the production of narrative are therefore closely connected in Carson's work. In this regard, Franco Moretti argues that geography has an important hand in shaping the kind of stories that get told, different spaces constituting 'different *narrative matrixes*'.⁵¹ In short, geography will partially determine narrative structures and forms. For example, the city provides the necessary locus for what Moretti calls 'the novel of complexity', which follows the composite interactions of diverse social groups, something that is difficult, if not impossible, in a country house or village setting.⁵² This intrinsic relationship between space and narrative form is well illustrated in Carson's unconventional prose memoir, *The Star Factory*, which is divided into chapters named after streets and buildings, business premises and architectural features of the city of Belfast, thus resembling an eccentric guidebook or gazetteer. Like Walter Benjamin in 'A Berlin Chronicle', Carson's text eschews the usual association of autobiography with time, sequence, and continuity to dwell instead in a deliberately disjunctive manner upon the various spaces with which his memories of childhood, adolescence, and adult life are entangled: spaces of play, education, domesticity, exploration, and work.⁵³ In doing so, *The Star Factory* illustrates Steve Pile's point that 'narratives of the self are inherently spatial', for the self constructed in the text 'is constantly being mapped in time and space, as if on a palimpsest'.⁵⁴

The book opens with a memory – related in the present tense – in which the young Carson is listening to his father tell a story in the outside toilet of their home in West Belfast, the cramped dimensions of which rapidly open out onto the potentially infinite 'space of memory and narrative'. In the young Carson's imagination material objects and spaces accumulate metaphorical significance, so that his father's cigarette becomes a visual aid to the story he is telling, drawing 'time-lapse squiggles on the 3-D blackboard dark' (*SF*, 1), and the flushing

of the toilet prompts a vision of ‘the alternative hologram of the city described by its ubiquity of plumbing and its labyrinthine sewers, the underworld of culverts plunged in Stygian gloom’ (*SF*, 2). Images of undergrounds and underworlds, of labyrinthine interior spaces and networks of communication recur again and again in *The Star Factory* – via sewage and drainage systems, railway sidings and junctions, a capacious kitchen dresser, the ‘Toltec labyrinth’ of a wireless radio, the booths or ‘boxes’ of the Crown bar (*SF*, 206, 84, 67–8, 105, 131–2) – and this creates an extended analogy between the intertwined spaces of the city and the text’s ramifying narrative lines, each of which carries ‘an underground train of association’ (*SF*, 209). Just as the text’s portrait of the artist precludes any clear sense of linear development from boy to man, so Carson’s portrait of the city is likewise fragmentary and disjointed, proceeding chiefly by way of elaboration and digression. Emily Cuming observes that: ‘The space of the city itself provides the connective thread – or literally the “context” – which ties Carson’s autobiographical reminiscences to a sense of a wider collective history.’⁵⁵ The book’s refractive narrative structure allows for lateral connections to be made between all manner of seemingly peripheral subjects of interest, much as side-streets and alleyways permit deviations from the known route.

One of the drawbacks of Moretti’s otherwise suggestive argument that space shapes narrative form from within is that it appears to regard both spaces and narrative genres as stable, unambiguous, and clearly defined, so that each space can be unproblematically correlated with its corresponding genre or narrative form. By contrast, Carson’s deliberate confusions of generic boundaries and hybrid narrative forms tend, by analogy, to highlight the mutability of spaces and places, their mutual interpenetration and overlap, and also emphasise the tendency of narrative ‘always to be pushing at or beyond those constraining forms’ by which it would be defined.⁵⁶ In this regard, his prose books elaborate versions of what Michel de Certeau calls ‘spatial stories’. For de Certeau, stories may be regarded as ‘spatial trajectories’, for they ‘traverse and organize places’, selecting and linking sites and spaces together much in the same way as they organise and arrange the temporal sequence of actions and events making up a plot. In this sense, ‘every story is a travel story – a spatial practice’.⁵⁷ Moreover, while narratives are typically concerned with ‘marking out boundaries’, spatial stories also privilege a ‘logic of ambiguity’ that is apt to turn frontiers into crossings, rivers into bridges, boundaries into metaphors, and vice versa.⁵⁸ Such a narrative logic of

spatial ambiguity and interconnectivity is apparent throughout *The Star Factory*, even and perhaps especially in its depictions of the city's internal boundaries and socio-political divisions. For, although Carson's writing insistently registers the ways in which sectarian cleavages are reproduced in the physical fabric of the city, his attentiveness to the historical and topographical particularity of such contested terrains often reveals them to be sites of unexpected convergences and surprising fluidity.

This is true even of his repeated forays into the area of high density housing between the Falls and the Shankill, a liminal interface zone where Catholic and Protestant working-class neighbourhoods are 'joined together as unhappy Siamese twins, one sporadically and mechanically beating the other round the head' (*BC*, 59).⁵⁹ In *The Star Factory*, the fractious and schismatic in-between space of the interface becomes the setting for a nightmarish collision of material and metaphorical spaces:

The dream shifts again, and I am trapped in a grey force-field between the Shankill and the Falls. A magnetic storm has skewed the normal compass of the district, and the poles are all the wrong way round, repelling when they should attract. Directions are revised, as previously communicating streets are misaligned. The powerful anti-gravitational friction has caused tectonic faults to open up, from which emerge, like flotillas salvaged from the bottom of the North Atlantic, the regurgitated superstructures of defunct, Titanic industries: tilted, blackened spinning-mills; the loading-docks of great bakeries at dawn, illuminated by the smell of electricity and yeast; waterworks in convoluted ravines – dams, races, bridges, locks, conduits, sinks, culverts, sluices, ponds, and aqueducts; tentacles and cables of Leviathan, swarming to the surface from a buried ropewalk; catacomb-like brick-kilns. (*SF*, 134)

The 'tectonic faults' of sectarian ideology are here materialised as a concrete fact of the physical environment, and the shifting realignments that take place among features of the cityscape serve only to increase and consolidate – in an audaciously literalised metaphor – the polarisation of different politico-religious communities. Indeed, the revision of directions taking place within this 'force-field' compounds division by severing former routes of communication, exacerbating the speaker's disorientated and claustrophobic feelings of entrapment.

Yet what also 'opens up' from the fault-lines of this passage, via the associations and condensations of dream logic, is a Piranesian panorama of Belfast's industrial histories that serves not only to remind the reader of those now 'defunct' superstructures of employment and production that underlie the sectarian geography of the present, but also

to enact a decisive shift towards metaphors of construction, connection, interaction, and communication: threads, loading-bays, bridges, sluices, conduits, tentacles, cables. In this respect, the 'convoluted ravines' of Belfast's waterworks seem particularly significant, for, as Carson reveals in 'Farset', by 'a conspiracy of history and accident and geography' the river Farset itself forms the 'axis' running between the Falls and Shankill. Running underground, its course follows almost precisely that of the peace-line at the back of Cupar Street, a subterranean current that figuratively connects with the city's urban unconscious, recalling the interface's former existence as the centre of 'Belfast's industrial Venice [...] a maze of dams, reservoirs, sluices, sinks, footbridges' (*BC*, 49). Carson's historical and topographical excavations therefore reveal even Belfast's most rigidly divided landscapes to be contradictory and multi-layered, subject to instabilities and fluidities that, like the Farset, rarely lie far from the surface. They also recall Belfast's origins as a fording-point on the river Lagan, a site of crossing or passage, as well as its histories as a busy seaport and a 'Titanic' centre for shipbuilding,⁶⁰ all associations that add weight to the metaphors of waterways, rivers, and flux that Carson often uses to counterbalance the dominant trope of the 'divided city' – the city as a fixed 'structure' of 'Agendas, bricks and mortar, interfaces' (*FL*, 18). Without its water, Carson reminds the reader, 'there would be no Belfast as we know it, since its industries were impossible without it'; and this watery condition implies that 'interfaces' may involve confluence and convergence as well as conflict and contestation: 'All of Belfast murmurs with innumerable rills, subterranean or otherwise' (*SF*, 45). To this end, the representational spaces his writing describes are sympathetic to conceptions of space in terms of processes, events, and flows – that is, as intimately bound up with time and history. As Jonathan Stainer notes, although Carson's Belfast is 'both fluid and fragmented, it is also simultaneously, *necessarily* interconnected and interdependent'.⁶¹ Another way of putting this would be to say that his texts acknowledge the dialectic of mobility and settledness, flow and fixity that structures Belfast's urban spatiality.

In de Certeau's terms, Carson's narratives compose tours or itineraries, diachronic accounts of possible journeys through a landscape that contrast with the synchronic diagram of the map and its tendency to freeze space in a tableau of fixed positions.⁶² Moreover, just as there are many routes that can be taken in traversing the city, so Carson multiplies the paths that a reader may take in negotiating *The Star Factory*, noting in one of his many self-reflexive asides on the material practices of

writing and reading that the book has been ‘assembled in a patchwork fashion’:

It is quite possible that many readers will, in fact, approach it in a non-sequential *modus operandi*, dipping into and out of it, or skipping bits where the thread of the story gets lost; there are a lot of books I read this way (books of poems, especially, and specifically John Ashbery, whose work I have used in the past as a *sortes Virgilianae* when I got blocked, or the *Gospel According to John*, with its majestic opening: *In the beginning was the Word...*). (*SF*, 244–5)

The ‘open’ narrative structure of the book thus operates as, in Umberto Eco’s words, a ‘field of possibilities’, encouraging the reader to engage in her own spontaneous associations and re-combinations, emphasising the range of integrations to which the text is susceptible in the process of reading.⁶³ Carson’s assimilative and improvisatory writing practices make possible such anarchic reading styles, and Cuming has described Carson’s role as that of the ‘autobiographical *bricoleur*’, the Jack-of-all-trades who collates and configures patterns of connection and personal significance from the mass of heterogeneous materials that happen to come to hand.⁶⁴ Thus, in composing the ‘caravanserai’ of his text (*SF*, 226) he makes use at various times of the techniques of the *flâneur* and psychogeographer, etymologist and lexicographer, collector and archivist, fabulist and researcher, philatelist and trainspotter, and above all those of the storyteller.

Indeed, *The Star Factory* is pre-eminently a story about stories and storytelling, relishing serendipitous discoveries and producing a panoply of connections and coincidences that multiply with every turn of the page. At the heart of the book lies the Star Factory itself, which figures as a sort of linguistic forge ‘where words [are] melted down and like tallow cast into new moulds’ (*SF*, 234). In ‘stark reality’ this mythologised ‘Zone’ is a derelict shirt factory on the Donegall Road (*SF*, 246), but on Carson’s telling it becomes the architectural focus for a Babel of narratives, mapping out a discursive terrain of fractal digressions ‘honeycombed with oxymoron and diversion’ (*SF*, 70): ‘Of necessity, the story they had entered comprised many stories, yet their diverse personal narratives and many-layered time-scales evinced glimpses of an underlying structure, like a traffic flow-chart with its arteries and veins and capillaries’ (*SF*, 62). The underlying structures of the city’s urban fabric are over-written and re-inscribed through the course of the text, producing a palimpsestic ‘interactive blueprint; not virtual, but narrative reality’ (*SF*, 63) whereby Carson’s Belfast holds multiple versions of itself

in the synaptic relays of its expanding memory. Once again, space and narrative are seen to be conjoined in Carson's writing, but here space is something like the condition of narrative itself; it is, as Doreen Massey has it, 'the realm of the configuration of potentially dissonant (or concordant) narratives'.⁶⁵

In *The Star Factory*, Carson's affinity with the 'rambling ambiguity' of his father's storytelling allows him the associative freedom to thread together the myriad experiences and sensory recollections of a childhood apprehended with the analytical distance of the adult writer (*SF*, 76). Yet just as the book's vast accumulation of details and circumlocutory digressions appears to reach critical mass, breaching the limits of time and space, they are collapsed into the brief duration of a storyteller's dramatic pause before the narrative proper can be resumed anew. *The Star Factory* ends as it had begun, with the young Carson listening patiently as his father tells him a story: 'The words are ghosted from his mouth in plumes and wisps of smoke, as I hold his free hand to guide him through the story, and we walk its underworld again' (*SF*, 292). This circular narrative form is shared by Carson's two subsequent prose books, *Fishing for Amber* and *Shamrock Tea*, both of which also build up densely layered narratives in illustration of the fact that 'behind every story lies another story' waiting to be told (*ST*, 166). Moreover, as Catriona O'Reilly notes, all of Carson's prose books combine an interest in idiosyncratic associations and aleatory combinations with a countervailing concern for systems of classification and a pronounced 'taxonomic bent'.⁶⁶ In *Last Night's Fun* each chapter bears the name of a song or tune, while those of *The Star Factory* refer to places in the city of Belfast, past and present; the chapters of *Fishing for Amber* are alphabetised, from 'Antipodes' to 'Zoetrope', and those of *Shamrock Tea* are colour-coded, recalling a painter's palette or an eccentric version of the colour spectrum. Both *Fishing for Amber* and *Shamrock Tea* also make extensive use of the calendar of saints as 'a kind of universal time scale' (*ST*, 293) in which every day or date carries some historico-religious significance. However, such systems often resemble that of Jorge Luis Borges's famous Chinese encyclopedia, so that the 'tabula' or ground of comparison upon which similarities between objects are articulated and ordered is radically undermined.⁶⁷ For instance, the first five chapters of *Fishing for Amber* are 'Antipodes', 'Berenice', 'Clepsydra', 'Delphinium', and 'Ergot', a series that concatenates geography, hagiography, chronometry, botany, herbalism and much else besides in a demonstration of the

alphabet's powers of happenstance juxtaposition. Carson's compendious imagination and multifarious enthusiasms are therefore exercised in profound tension with the structuring codes used to organise his material.

Considered as a pair, *Fishing for Amber* and *Shamrock Tea* might be described as Carson's 'Orange' and 'Green' books respectively, the former taking much of its inspiration from the Dutch Republic of the seventeenth century in an oblique deconstruction of narrowly sectarian ideas concerning Protestant 'Orangeism',⁶⁸ and the latter stressing the links between Ireland and Belgium as part of an elaborate send-up of Catholic mysticism and secret societies. Both texts are also preoccupied in one way or another with the relationship between art and reality, and with the paradoxes of mimesis. In *Fishing for Amber*, Carson's meditations upon the genre paintings and still lives of the Dutch Golden Age turn upon their compounding of illusion and verisimilitude, the fact that their 'accurate depiction[s] of everyday reality' (*FFA*, 142) are dependent upon acts of framing and elision, for as his Dutch narrator Jan Both pointedly remarks, the Thirty Years' War (1618–48) 'is not depicted in the paintings of the Golden Age' (*FFA*, 191). In *Shamrock Tea*, the stereoscopic effects of Jan van Eyck's *Arnolfini Portrait* are humorously ascribed to a psychotropic compound known as 'shamrock tea', and the painting itself functions as a portal to other dimensions of time and reality: 'a door to another world' (*ST*, 247). Painting, observes Uncle Celestine, is both 'the art of making things real' and a means 'to discover things not seen, and present them to the eye as if they actually exist' (*ST*, 50).

Space and narrative are again closely connected, particularly in *Fishing for Amber*, where Holland is depicted as 'a wondrous place, a made-up land' (*FFA*, 4) and a 'nether world' (*FFA*, 6) that overlaps in obvious ways with the 'underworld' of dream and storytelling explored in *The Star Factory*. Besides distantly resembling that of Belfast, the cityscapes of Amsterdam, Delft, Middelburg, and Leyden that are depicted in the text, through their intricate networks of streets and canals, figuratively describe the interconnections and coincidences between the book's multiple narrative strands:

For one thing leads to another, as it does in Holland. The cities, by means of canals, communicate with the sea; canals run from town to town, and from village to village, which are themselves bound together with these watery ways, and are connected even to the houses scattered all over the country; smaller canals surround the fields, meadows, pastures and kitchen-gardens,

...serving at once as boundary wall, hedge and roadway; every house is a little port, in which you might hear stories from the seven seas. One can drift from any place to anywhere. (*FFA*, 152–3)

The emphasis here upon spatial mobility and interconnectivity by which the traveller ‘can drift from any place to anywhere’ clearly parallels the possibilities that open before the reader of Carson’s book. Similarly, the text’s composition of narrative frames within frames resembles that of Golden Age paintings, where ‘the eye is always drawn to a new horizon, and is forced to invent from what it sees or cannot see. So the truth of any matter is not readily discerned’ (*FFA*, 190).

Like *The Star Factory*, *Fishing for Amber* begins with Carson’s father (to whose memory the book is dedicated) telling a story to his children, or rather putting off telling a story by way of an elaborate opening gambit that traps its listeners in the recessive folds of a story about a story that is always about to begin. This structure of the ‘story within a story’ is, as R.F. Foster notes, characteristic of the Irish narrative mode,⁶⁹ and is reworked in a dizzying array of permutations throughout the course of Carson’s text. At its centre is his father’s seven-part story, told in episodic instalments at monthly intervals, concerning Jack the Lad, a sort of Irish Scheherazade who tells stories in return for bed and board at a rich lady’s house. Of course, the intricate series of embedded narratives that Jack relates has already passed through many hands by the time that Carson gives his version of his father’s rendition, continuing the motif whereby every telling is to be understood as a retelling. Around this interrupted narrative Carson spins a baroque profusion of meditations and asides, anecdotes and yarns, many of them sparked off by the preservative or talismanic qualities of amber, its historical, religious, and economic importance, and told by multiple narrators who are often also characters in their own stories. In this way, *Fishing for Amber* inventively combines the two principal modes of Irish oral storytelling: *scéal*, a long, stylized narrative of some performative complexity; and *seanchas*, accounts of customs, local history, genealogies, and old lore that are typically more informative than entertaining.⁷⁰ The text is also extensively indebted to the broader traditions of European storytelling via its inventive versions of Ovid and of Northern European folk tales. Indeed, as Carson acknowledges in a punctilious note to the text, *Fishing for Amber* is ‘as much about reading as it is about writing’ (*FFA*, 352).

Carson’s prose books often recall the work of a number of European exemplars, particularly Jorge Luis Borges, Italo Calvino, and Umberto Eco – all of whom are alluded to either directly or indirectly in the texts

themselves. The affinities that Carson's prose books have with the work of these three writers are chiefly apparent in three ways: through their scholarly fascination with obscure knowledge and lists of often esoteric sources; in their pronounced metafictional concern with the processes of writing and reading and the properties of narrative; and by their compilation of diverse materials and tendency to problematise generic distinctions. They also bear a close affinity with what Steven Connor calls postmodern 'system-fiction', fictions that deliberately resemble encyclopedias, guidebooks, dictionaries, or games. These texts typically make possible 'a reading time made up, so to speak, of interruptions rather than resumptions. One is encouraged to make dips and forays into the text in the way in which one consults a dictionary, rather than being carried along by the temporal line of the fiction.'⁷¹ Certainly, Carson's prose books invite just such readings, although they are also preoccupied with the temporal mechanism by which narrative can carry its readers or listeners along. For instance, *Fishing for Amber* incorporates a characteristic meditation on Henri Bergson's conception of memory, which Bergson imagined as a series of 'snapshots of the passing reality' that are run together like discrete images in a cinematograph. Responding warmly to the idea, Carson elaborates his own view of how narrative works: 'Seen in this light, narrative, which includes biography, is possible only because we make factitious links between one instant and the next: blinks of the eyelid, adumbrated by the ghosts of things already swallowed by the void' (*FFA*, 345). As its recurrent preoccupation with amber implies, *Fishing for Amber* is centrally concerned with the capacity of memory to facilitate such unlikely associations and coincidences, enabling the mind 'to zip from one thing to another which has no tangible connection to the first' (*FFA*, 199), something that the reader is also encouraged to do in following the braided, recursive narrative strands of Carson's text.

At first glance, *Shamrock Tea* appears to be the closest thing in Carson's oeuvre to a novel, though, as O'Reilly remarks, it is one that 'gleefully dispenses with conventional plot development or believable characterization' and may therefore, like his other prose books, be more accurately considered 'a narrative miscellany'.⁷² The book's three chief protagonists are a boy named Carson – a wonky portrait of the artist as a young man – his tomboy cousin Berenice, and their Belgian friend Maeterlinck, who collectively embody the Trinitarian symbolism that suffuses the text: 'We three are Shamrock Tea' (*ST*, 240). While Berenice is sent to a convent school, Carson and Maeterlinck attend

Loyola House, a Jesuit school near the Mourne Mountains, in the library of which they discover three colour-coded books – yellow, blue, and green – which turn out on inspection to be distorted accounts of the trio's own lives, recording experiments undertaken on their child selves with a psychotropic drug called shamrock tea. These books, reveals Carson's 'uncle' Celestine, 'are not mere biographies. Some passages include scenarios that failed to materialize; some describe events as they happened, but not as you remember them; and some are fictions' (*ST*, 211). It transpires that Carson, Berenice, and Maeterlinck are orphans raised by members of the Ancient Order of Hibernians in order to fulfil their part in a bizarre plan to permanently alter the 'mind-set' sustaining the political partition of Ireland by introducing a decoction of shamrock tea into the water supply for the city of Belfast. As Celestine explains, the inhabitants of Belfast will thus

see the world as it really is, a world in which everything connects; where the Many is One, and the One is Many. There will be no division, for everything in the real world refers to something else, which leads to something else again, in a never-ending hymn of praise. The world is an eternal story. (*ST*, 236)

For all the lunatic absurdity of this labyrinthine conspiracy, which has the ultimate aim of building 'the new Jerusalem [...] in Ireland's green and pleasant land' (*ST*, 219), Celestine's belief that 'everything connects' would appear to accord with the narrative procedures of the text itself, which expands exponentially to take in aspects of philosophy, theology, politics, art history, mineralogy, apiculture, herbalism, hagiography, as well as subtly fictionalised biographies of Ludwig Wittgenstein, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Oscar Wilde, and Arthur Conan Doyle. Through narrative, as through the 'two-way portal' of van Eyck's *Arnolfini Portrait* (*ST*, 272), seemingly impossible or inconceivable conjunctions can be forged, and 'any point in time and space can be made to correspond to any other' (*ST*, 262).

Beneath the imaginative syntheses and sheer ludic brio of the text's surface appeal, *Shamrock Tea* appears concerned to weigh up the relative importance of chance and fate, free will and predestination, serendipity and system in determining an individual's identity and actions. One of the entries in Maeterlinck's Blue Book reads: 'Meaningful coincidences are thinkable as pure chance. But the more they multiply and the greater and more exact the correspondence is, the more the probability sinks and their unthinkability increases, until they can no longer be regarded as pure chance ...' (*ST*, 192). In this context, the notion that

'everything is connected, *sub specie aeternitatis*' (*ST*, 260) may actually be profoundly disturbing rather than enabling, for, as Alan Gillis comments, if 'everything connects [...], then everything connives with a totality which may be unspeakable and malign'.⁷³ But this tension between utopian connectivity and totalising circumscription, which is treated with dialectical seriousness in Carson's earlier work, receives a rather hasty resolution in *Shamrock Tea*, when Carson, Berenice, and Maeterlinck decide to accept, against all the evidence, Celestine's assurance that their 'free will has not been compromised' (*ST*, 212) and so play their parts in 'rewriting the history book of Ireland' (*ST*, 251) by going along with the child-snatching Hibernians' crackpot plan. Clearly, this is necessary to advance the plot, and we are still to read the kitsch Irishry of Celestine and Fr Browne ironically if not suspiciously; but it does suggest that in *Shamrock Tea* whimsy and imaginative high jinks tend to displace the deeper political conundrums that animate so much of Carson's other writing.

In any case, the mission upon which the three children are sent goes awry, and the book's narrator, Carson, tumbles through a wormhole to emerge in Ghent in 1952, only to discover that 'it was not the same world as that I had left, although it was almost identical in most respects' (*ST*, 297). Fittingly, he goes on to assume the identity of 'Maeterlinck' and becomes a librarian at the hospice for the insane at Gheel, where he spends his days in conversation with inmates who believe themselves to be famous authors, fictional characters, or historical figures – Sherlock Holmes, Napoleon, St Augustine, Wittgenstein. Such a twist in the plot obviously aligns *Shamrock Tea* with those postmodern fictions concerned to probe questions of ontology by 'creating and exploring other and multiple worlds',⁷⁴ though, like Carson's earlier prose books, it also owes a significant debt to aspects of traditional Irish storytelling. As Zimmermann observes, since the period of the twelfth-century *Acallam na Senórach*, or 'Colloquy of the Ancients', the Irish storyteller's role has been to 'mediate not only between present and past (and future, inasmuch as what they say will be preserved); but also between different levels of reality into which it is possible to travel'.⁷⁵ In its reworking of this traditional paradigm *Shamrock Tea* conceives of stories as 'translating device[s]' (*ST*, 292) that, like van Eyck's miraculous painting, transport the reader to unpredictable destinations and parallel worlds, the purpose of which is to call the codes by which our own version of 'reality' is constructed into question. One version of reality only ever exists in tension with its possible others, and Carson's narrative imagination

highlights the processes whereby identities are formed and negotiated, insisting that human agents are 'subject *to* narrative as well as being subjects *of* narrative'.⁷⁶

Notes

- 1 Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, ed. Melvyn New and Joan New (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1997), pp. 391, 392.
- 2 Paul Muldoon, *To Ireland, I* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 5, 107.
- 3 Brown, *In the Chair*, p. 142.
- 4 Having recalled that his first book-case was made from an apple-box covered in 'wood-grain *Fablon*' the narrator concludes by admitting the falsity of this seemingly authentic, autobiographical detail in his narrative: 'I lied about the *Fablon*, by the way. It was really midnight black with stars on it.' This of course makes the already far-fetched story concerning genetically engineered apples upon which the poem riffs seem even more dubious (*FL*, 14–15).
- 5 Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980), pp. 35–6.
- 6 Paul Copley, *Narrative* (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 12–16.
- 7 Corcoran, 'One Step Forward, Two Steps Back', p. 221.
- 8 Kennedy-Andrews, *Writing Home*, p. 215.
- 9 Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), p. 280.
- 10 Brandes, 'Ciaran Carson interviewed', pp. 84, 88.
- 11 Copley, *Narrative*, p. 6.
- 12 Alan Sinfield, *Literature, Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain* (London: Continuum, 3rd edn, 2004), p. 29.
- 13 Brown, *In the Chair*, pp. 148–9.
- 14 Gillis, 'Ciaran Carson: Beyond Belfast', p. 188.
- 15 Some caution needs to be exercised when generalising about the defining characteristics of lyric poetry. As David Lindley notes, the typical three-fold association of lyric with personal utterance, the expression of felt experience, and brevity or concision has some basis but may also serve to obscure 'the essentially protean character of the genre', its historical susceptibility to modification and cross-fertilisations with other genres. In particular, Lindley argues convincingly that much twentieth-century poetry has called into question 'the standard definition which sees lyric as the expression of a poet's personal feeling'. David Lindley, *Lyric* (London: Methuen, 1985), pp. 13, 82.
- 16 Heaney, *Preoccupations*, pp. 52, 43.
- 17 Brandes, 'Ciaran Carson interviewed', p. 83.
- 18 Carson has described poetry itself as essentially 'other', as 'full of ghostly presences, of others who wrote before you, and of words as yet unknown to you'. Such 'otherness' therefore offers opportunities for discovery and for intertextual dialogues, an expansion of the poet's frame of reference that would bring the self and the other into fruitful conversation. Carson, 'The Other', p. 235.
- 19 Kirkland, *Literature and Culture in Northern Ireland Since 1965*, p. 42.

- 20 Goodby, *Irish Poetry Since 1950*, pp. 290, 292, 293.
- 21 Ciaran Carson, 'Against Oblivion', *The Irish Review* 6 (spring 1989), p. 114.
- 22 C.K. Williams, *New & Selected Poems* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1995), p. 55.
- 23 Carson, 'Against Oblivion', p. 116.
- 24 Shane Murphy, 'Sonnets, centos and long lines: Muldoon, Paulin, McGuckian and Carson', in Matthew Campbell, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Contemporary Irish Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 206.
- 25 Ormsby, 'Ciaran Carson interviewed', pp. 5–6.
- 26 Ian Gregson, *Contemporary Poetry and Postmodernism: Dialogue and Estrangement* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996), pp. 7, 10.
- 27 Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, p. 291.
- 28 Michael Holquist, *Dialogism: Mikhail Bakhtin and His World* (London: Routledge, 2nd edn, 2002), p. 87.
- 29 In this regard, Michael McAteer also observes that 'Carson's style to date appears the poetic embodiment of Bakhtin's idea of polyphony; dexterous, risky, generative, tight yet capable of ecstasy, a language constantly attending to itself.' McAteer, 'The word as object', p. 125.
- 30 In an interview undertaken shortly after the publication of *Belfast Confetti*, Carson suggests that the 'pin-ball machine narrative' of that book might be read in a similar fashion to that of an experimental novel, and continues: 'Does anybody know what a novel is any more? But I would like to blur the distinction between poetry and prose. Oh to be a hyphen ...' Ormsby, 'Ciaran Carson interviewed', p. 8. Carson's brief experimentation with the prose poem also suggests another strand of influence connecting his work with that of the French Symbolist poets Charles Baudelaire and Arthur Rimbaud, both of whom he has translated in *First Language* and, more extensively, in *The Alexandrine Plan*. Baudelaire, in particular, explicitly linked his notion of 'the miracle of a poetic prose' with 'our experience of the life of great cities, the confluence and interactions of the countless relationships within them'. Charles Baudelaire, *The Poems in Prose*, ed. and trans. Francis Scarfe (London: Anvil Press, 1989), p. 25.
- 31 Marguerite S. Murphy, *A Tradition of Subversion: The Prose Poem in English from Wilde to Ashbery* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992), p. 4.
- 32 Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, ed. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), p. 36.
- 33 Eamonn Hughes, "'the mouth of the poem": Carson and Place', in Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, ed., *Ciaran Carson: Critical Essays* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2009), p. 95.
- 34 On Carson's intertextual borrowings from Russell's war journalism, see David Wheatley, "'Pushed next to nothing": Ciaran Carson's *Breaking News*', in Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, ed., *Ciaran Carson: Critical Essays* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2009), pp. 60–3 and Elisabeth Delattre, "'between that world and this": A Reading of *Breaking News* by Ciaran Carson', *Estudios Irlandeses* 3 (2008), pp. 84–6.
- 35 Fiona Stafford, *Starting Lines in Scottish, Irish, and English Poetry: From Burns to Heaney* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 247.
- 36 For detailed discussion of this point see Seán Crosson, *"The Given Note": Traditional Music and Modern Irish Poetry* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008), pp. 246–50.

- 37 Ormsby, 'Ciaran Carson interviewed', p. 7.
- 38 Edna Longley, *The Living Stream: Literature & Revisionism in Ireland* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1994), p. 60.
- 39 Richard Kearney, *On Stories* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 65.
- 40 Brandes, 'Ciaran Carson interviewed', p. 83.
- 41 Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 59.
- 42 Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London: Fontana, 1976), p. 269.
- 43 Georges Denis Zimmermann, *The Irish Storyteller* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2001), p. 445.
- 44 Richard Kirkland, *Cathal O'Byrne and the Northern Revival in Ireland, 1890–1960* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2006), pp. 199, 201.
- 45 Cathal O'Byrne, *As I Roved Out: A Book of the North* (Belfast: Lagan Books, 2000), pp. 208, 119.
- 46 Kirkland, *Cathal O'Byrne*, pp. 202, 6. See also Richard Kirkland, "'The shanachie of Belfast and its red-brick Gaeltacht': Cathal O'Byrne", *Bullán* 4.2 (1999/2000), pp. 67–82.
- 47 See, for instance, O'Byrne, *As I Roved Out*, pp. 152, 262.
- 48 Donald, *Imagining the Modern City*, pp. 127, 139.
- 49 Lefebvre, *Writings on Cities*, p. 129.
- 50 Barry, *Contemporary British Poetry and the City*, p. 229.
- 51 Moretti, *Atlas of the European Novel*, p. 84.
- 52 Moretti, *Atlas of the European Novel*, pp. 68–9, 106.
- 53 Benjamin, *Reflections*, p. 28.
- 54 Steve Pile, 'Memory and the city', in Jan Campbell and Janet Harbord, eds, *Temporalities: autobiography and everyday life* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), pp. 111–12, 125.
- 55 Emily Cuming, 'The Order of Things Past: Ciaran Carson's autobiographical bricolage', *Life Writing* 3.1 (2006), p. 29.
- 56 Steven Connor, 'Postmodernism and literature', in Steven Connor, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 65. See also Andrew Gibson, *Towards a postmodern theory of narrative* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996).
- 57 De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. 115.
- 58 De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, pp. 125, 128.
- 59 The anthropologist Allen Feldman notes that in Belfast 'the urban interface zone is in symbiosis with the pattern of sectarian residential extension, mixing, and contraction. During periods of residential entrenchment along sectarian lines, the proliferation of interfaces, the dissemination of margins, the formalization of boundaries can be expected.' Allen Feldman, *Formations of Violence: The Narrative of the Body and Political Terror in Northern Ireland* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), p. 28.
- 60 See Robert Sweetnam, 'The development of the port', in J.C. Beckett et al., eds, *Belfast: The Making of the City 1800–1914* (Belfast: Appletree Press, 1983), pp. 57–70.
- 61 Stainer, 'The possibility of non-sectarian futures', p. 387.
- 62 De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, pp. 118–22.

- 63 Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, trans. Anna Concogni (London: Hutchinson Radius, 1989), pp. 153, 20.
- 64 Cuming, 'The Order of Things Past', pp. 20–1.
- 65 Massey, *for space*, p. 71.
- 66 Carriona O'Reilly, 'Exploded diagrams', *The Dublin Review* 4 (autumn 2001), pp. 77–8.
- 67 Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. xv–xvii.
- 68 Carson has made this aspect of the text explicit in interview: 'The Dutch Republic in the seventeenth century seems to be a model of what is possible. A state overseen by the House of Orange. It seems that in the Dutch Republic of that time you could say what you wanted, within reason, as long as you did your job. If people here want to be Orangemen, then look to that as your model. Civic pride and responsibility. A willingness to explore the universe through commerce, art, science. An examination of the physical world, which brought into focus the beauty of the particulars of that world. A humility in front of things.' Brown, *In the Chair*, p. 152. Derek Mahon's poem 'Courtyards in Delft' also uses Dutch Golden Age painting – in this case the work of Pieter de Hooch – as an oblique mirror in which to consider Northern Irish Protestant identities, setting an obvious precedent for Carson's much more extensive parallels in *Fishing for Amber*. See Derek Mahon, *Collected Poems* (Loughcrew: The Gallery Press, 1997), pp. 105–6.
- 69 R.F. Foster, *The Irish Story: Telling Tales and Making it up in Ireland* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2002), p. 3. See also Kearney, *On Stories*, pp. 22–3, and Zimmermann, *The Irish Storyteller*, pp. 517–18.
- 70 Zimmermann, *The Irish Storyteller*, p. 430.
- 71 Connor, 'Postmodernism and literature', p. 77.
- 72 O'Reilly, 'Exploded diagrams', p. 87.
- 73 Gillis, 'Ciaran Carson: beyond Belfast', p. 190.
- 74 Steven Connor, *Postmodern Culture: An Introduction to Theories of the Contemporary* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2nd edn, 1997), p. 134.
- 75 Zimmermann, *The Irish Storyteller*, p. 19.
- 76 Kearney, *On Stories*, p. 153.



CHAPTER SIX

Babel-babble: Language and Translation

Translation is a longstanding and recurrent component of Ciaran Carson's work, not only as practice, process, and artefact – as his recent book-length versions of Dante's *Inferno*, Brian Merriman's *The Midnight Court*, and the Old Irish epic, *The Táin*, attest – but also as a theme or trope that relates to the multifarious effects of language itself. In this regard 'translation' concerns itself with the ways in which transactions between words, idioms, discourses, and languages reveal the difference that is internal to all language. Or, as Walter Benjamin expresses it, 'all translation is only a somewhat provisional way of coming to terms with the foreignness of languages'.¹ Translation also literally means to 'carry across', shuttling between differing contexts in order to negotiate meanings that are fundamentally unstable and in dialogue with other meanings, so that translation in this expanded sense is what poetry is all about, as Carson himself has suggested: "Poetry is what gets lost in translation." Perhaps; but poetry is itself translation, carrying a burden of meaning from one place to another, feeling it change in shape and weight as it travels. Words are a shifty business.² Here, the notion that poetry is inimical to translation, often apocryphally ascribed to Robert Frost, is turned abruptly on its head, and Carson's more open conception of translation recognises that while words and languages are 'shifty', untrustworthy even, such 'shiftiness' means that they also encode multiple semantic possibilities.

This is not to deny the importance of translation as a literary practice and a mode of cultural politics in Carson's writing, which to date includes a wide range of often strikingly inventive versions of texts originally written in Irish, Welsh, Latin, French, Italian, Romanian, and Japanese. But it is to argue that, understood in a less literal sense, translation permeates his texts more generally in the form of a concern with the ways in which other words, languages, and cultures imply and



project other worlds, alternative ways of saying and seeing that defamiliarise received habits of perception. To this end, John Goodby observes that ‘the “translation” Carson is interested in is less that between languages as of translation itself as an ontological condition’.³ Clearly, such a condition may entail confusion and inarticulacy – ‘gobbledygook’ or ‘Babel-babble’ – as much as the exhilarations of semantic free-play and linguistic cross-pollinations. Nonetheless, bilingualism or multilingualism is the ground of his work’s perpetually shifting frames of reference, and the tendency of Carson’s translations to diverge from and extensively rework their ‘originals’ bears out Octavio Paz’s comment that although ‘translation overcomes the differences between one language and another, it also reveals them more fully’.⁴ This chapter will explore the various modalities of Carson’s engagements with translation and ‘translation’, paying attention to the ways in which he brings languages and texts into networks of relations with one another, and placing such border dialogues in the context of his broader concerns with language as both speech and writing.

To translate is to assume an intermediate position on the borderline between languages and cultures, conjugating one with the other but owing allegiance to neither absolutely. This intermedial condition is a familiar one in Carson’s writing, and has been glossed by Stan Smith as ‘ambilocation’, a term that describes a characteristic indeterminacy common both to his spatial imaginary and to his interests in linguistic or semiotic flux:

Ambilocation is a different condition from mere ‘bilocation’, the mysterious capacity to be in two places at once. Rather it is a matter of being always in neither place, or of being between places, or of being always in one place which may be Belfast, but also at the same time is many other places, displaced, relocated, mis-placed, displaced, everywhere and nowhere [...].⁵

Carson often expresses the same idea in terms of ‘in-between-ness’, being ‘neither/ One thing nor the other’ (*BC*, 15) or assuming an air of ‘neither-here-nor-there-ness. Coming in the act of going’ (*BC*, 23). Likewise, in ‘Barfly’, the elusive, peripatetic narrator proclaims, ‘I am a hyphen, flitting here and there: between the First and Last’ (*BC*, 55). This hyphenation or in-between-ness is not always comfortable or welcome, and may involve a dangerous sense of entrapment between opposing structures or forces; but it is often associated with a positive sense of liberty and mobility, implying opportunities for negotiation, exchange, and dialogue.

At a very literal level, ambilocation calls to mind the dense meshwork of borders, boundaries, peace-lines, and interfaces that criss-cross Carson’s

early Belfast poems, and in the midst of which his narrators so often find themselves caught. It is also an aspect of those semi-rural hinterlands and ‘intermediate zone[s]’ (*SF*, 85) that are the loci for childhood games in *The Star Factory*. The Bog Meadows, Carson recalls, served both as an ambivalent water-land in which to play and as ‘a natural buffer-zone between the Protestant Lisburn Road and the Catholic Falls’ (*SF*, 100). So the ambilocated nature of Carson’s writing helps to facilitate the flexible depiction of Belfast’s spatial and socio-political complexity. However, the sense of doubleness, dual inheritance, and hyphenation that ambilocation seems to comprehend clearly bears upon issues of language and identity as well, not least in an autobiographical context. As Carson has more than once observed, his own name is itself an instance of hyphenation, and tends to be ‘perceived as an oxymoron, the product of a mixed marriage’ in Northern Ireland, where linguistic markers of identity are of special importance. ‘Ciaran’ derives from the Irish ‘ciar’ (‘dark-haired’) and so is typically identified as Catholic and Nationalist, while, in Northern Ireland, ‘Carson’ inevitably recalls Edward Carson, a figurehead for Ulster Protestantism and Unionist politics. With characteristically wry impudence, though, Carson not only recalls that this ‘founder-father’ of the Northern Irish state was born in Dublin, but relates a folk rumour that Edward Carson ‘was really a Carsoni from Italian stock, which would account for the Mussolini cast of his features’ (*LNF*, 181). Carson impugns his namesake’s pedigree while relishing the ambiguity of his own, his inclination to mix things up implying a calculated disavowal of fixed or unadulterated identity positions.

Carson’s writing is substantially enriched by various forms of linguistic doubleness, for he grew up bilingually, speaking Irish as a first language, unusual circumstances even in Catholic Nationalist West Belfast in the 1950s.⁶ In the Carson family, or Clann Mhic Carráin,⁷ Irish was designated the language of the home, private experience, and familial intercourse, while the public world of the city streets was overwhelmingly monoglot English. The two languages were therefore aligned with and seemed to imply different worlds, albeit worlds that continually overlapped, their codes of communication and belonging seeping gradually into one another. One consequence of Carson’s bilingual upbringing appears to have been an enhanced sensitivity to linguistic difference and a related awareness that language is not and cannot be a transparent medium, that it always refracts or falls short of the reality it claims to depict: ‘I think that from a very early age I was aware that to say a thing in one language was different to saying it in another; that there was always a

gap between the form and the reality, the thing expressed.’⁸ The arbitrary relationship between signifier and signified is made explicit when there are always at least two different linguistic codes available for naming or expressing things.

Carson’s bilingualism also seems to prime his imagination to respond to the many frictions and unlikely correspondences that may occur between and across languages, as in the following anecdote told in *The Star Factory*:

I used to lull myself to sleep with language, mentally repeating, for example, the word *capall*, the Irish for horse, which seemed to be more onomatopoeically equine than its English counterpart; gradually, its trochaic foot would summon up a ghostly echo of ‘cobble’, till, wavering between languages, I would allow my disembodied self to drift out the window and glide through the silent dark gas-lit streets above the mussel-coloured cobblestones. I was bound for the Star Factory, where words were melted down and like tallow cast into new moulds. (*SF*, 234)

That sense of ‘wavering between languages’, and the allied notion that words undergo a process of transmutation as contexts and usages change, are familiar aspects of Carson’s writing that attest to the centrality of translation, in its widest sense, to his aesthetic. The phonetic echo that allows Carson to rhyme ‘*capall*’ with ‘cobble’ initiates a dialectic of similarity and difference that not only links the horse to the surface upon which it walks, but also blurs the divide between private and public spaces, wakefulness and dream, reality and imagination. And this syzygy between the communicating worlds of reality and fantasy is a further instance of the ambilocation that Carson’s work enacts.⁹

A similar but more daring use of the same technique occurs in ‘Eesti’, where an unexpected aural consonance between words from the Estonian and Irish languages, in a poem written in English, allows Carson to juxtapose impressions of the sonorous, bell-echoing streets and churches of Tallinn, visited as an adult, with a memory of attending mass with his father as a boy in West Belfast: ‘*This red-letter day would not be written, had I not wandered through the land of Eesti. I asked my father how he thought it went. He said to me in Irish, Listen: Éist*’ (*OEC*, 8). As Frank Sewell has observed, Carson ‘enjoys slipping in, out of, and between languages’,¹⁰ and the linguistic pluralism that such shifts or slippages exemplify would appear to call into question the very idea of a ‘first language’ along with the concept of pure origins that it implies. Certainly, in the introduction to his translation of Brian Merriman’s *Cúirt an Mheán Oíche, The Midnight Court*, Carson

hesitates to call himself ‘a native speaker’, reminding the reader that he was raised by parents for whom Irish was a second language and noting that ‘it has been a long time since it was the first language in which I think, or express myself, though I sometimes dream in it’. Nonetheless, his upbringing in Irish also allows him to recognise the foreignness of English, while the work of translation, of attempting to approximate the force and suppleness of Merriman’s Irish in his own English rendering, created a situation in which ‘both languages – so familiar yet so foreign – became strange, as I wandered the borders between them’ (*MC*, 14). For Lawrence Venuti, translation constitutes ‘a linguistic “zone of contact” between the foreign and translating cultures, but also within the latter’.¹¹ Similarly, in Carson’s work translation is a process through which to explore the productive estrangements and transactions that take place in the junctures between languages and the cultures they express. As he has said in a recent interview: ‘I’ve always been fascinated by the way other languages, other codes, affect our knowledge, or lack of knowledge, of what we think is familiar and given.’¹²

Bilingualism and heteroglossia become explicit thematic concerns as well as stylistic features in *First Language*, which begins, uniquely in Carson’s oeuvre, with a poem written in Irish but given a French title, ‘La Je-Ne-Sais-Quoi’. The title’s connotations of ineffability and unknowing seem apt given the predicament of the reader without Irish (or French), and as Justin Quinn explains, the poem itself extends this ambiguity of reference, comprising a description of an act of love ‘which is also a description of the mechanism of language’.¹³ As the lovers’ bodies become entwined, sensory perceptions blur together and colloquial phrases are punningly reworked, as in lines such as ‘I bhfaiteadh na mbéal’ (‘In the blink of a mouth’), ‘I bhfriotal na súl’ (‘In the word of an eye’), and ‘I ndorchadas an lae’ (‘In the darkness of day’) (*FL*, 9). Immediately following is the poem ‘Second Language’, which is written in the second language of the title, English, and tells an accelerated, often disorientating story about the narrator’s journeys into and between languages from infancy to adulthood:

English not yet being a language, I wrapped my lubber-lips around my
thumb;
Brain-deaf as an embryo, I was snuggled in my comfort-blanket dumb.
Growling figures campaniled above me, and twanged their carillons of
bronze
Sienna consonants embedded with the vowels *alexandrite*, *emerald* and
topaz.

The topos of their discourse seemed to do with me and convoluted
 genealogy;
 Wordy whorls and braids and skeins and spiral helices, unskeletoned from
 laminate geology –

How this one's slate-blue gaze is correspondent to another's new-born
 eyes;
 Gentians, forget-me-nots, and cornflowers, diurnal in a heliotrope surmise.
 (FL, 10)

From his initial state of 'Brain-deaf' pre-linguistic dumbness, when English is 'not yet' a language, the speaker is precipitated into a world in which verbal sounds and the particles of speech take on a very physical tangibility as 'bronze/ Sienna consonants' and vowels that, in an echo of Arthur Rimbaud's 'Voyelles', manifest themselves to the child's imagination as colour-coded gemstones.¹⁴ These lines also juxtapose the infant's inarticulacy and incomprehension, as indicated by his 'lubber-lips' and the fact that his parents appear as rather frightening 'growling figures', with the remarkably rich and supple vocabulary that Carson employs: 'Wordy whorls and braids and skeins and spiral helices.'

As the spatial focus of the poem gradually moves outwards from the child's body to the room and house he shares with his parents, and thence to the world-at-large of the city streets outside, the linguistic resources of the poem expand exponentially to take in a plethora of discourses, registers, and idioms that are often braided together or become confused in a babble of 'acoustic perfume'. Heard or imagined from the child's bedroom, the Belfast shipyards are loud with 'Shipyard hymns' and the staccato rhythms of 'Six-County Hexametric'; the ropeworks disgorges 'Ratlines, S-twists, plaited halyards, Z-twists, catlines; all had their say'; and as he 'inhales' the formal language of the Latin mass the narrator simultaneously speaks, 'incomprehensibly to others', in Irish. Sensory perceptions blur together so that words are seen or tasted or smelt as much as they are heard – as incense, the 'Phaoronic unguents of dope and glue', or as the 'perfume' of Egyptian hieroglyphics 'exhumed in chancy versions of the *I-Ching*' (FL, 10, 11, 12). Moreover, although 'Second Language' presents the poet-speaker's acquisition of English in terms that are predominantly positive, even touched with the marvellous – he wakes up one morning 'verbed and tensed with speaking English' – part of the point of the poem's extravagantly diverse lexicon is to undermine any ostensible purity that the English language might be said to possess. Indeed, as Jerzy Jarniewicz observes, Carson frequently makes use of words that announce their 'foreign' derivations explicitly.

Thus we have ‘campanile’ and ‘sienna’ from Italian, ‘carillon’ and ‘fleur-de-lys’ from French, Latin declensions (*amo, amas, amat*) and phrases (*Introibos! Ad altare Dei*) alongside Greek words such as ‘helices’, ‘heliotrope’, and ‘sarcophagi’, as well as more exotic references to native American ‘Arapahoes’, Hebrew ‘Nimrod’, and the Chinese ‘*I-Ching*’. Such expressive plurality prompts Jarniewicz to argue that ‘Second Language’ resembles ‘a multilingual collage, an example of the post-Babelian confusion of the tongues, exploding any possibility of a homogeneous and pure diction, and unveiling the essentially hybrid nature of English’.¹⁵ All languages are hybrid, always at least double, Carson seems to imply, so that in a sense a ‘second language’ is all one ever really has, the unity and originality implied by the phrase ‘first language’ being forever displaced or deferred.

Consequently, the story of Babel takes on an iconic importance in many of the poems collected in *First Language*, recounting as it does the loss of a common language and the subsequent scattering of humankind into myriad divergent linguistic communities. Patricia Horton has argued that Carson’s fascination with the trope of Babel is part of his wider interest in the relationships between language and power, so that the hubristic ‘aspiration to unity and stability’ expressed in the building of the city and tower of Babel is ‘analogous to the imperialist desire to dominate and colonize’, promoting an ideology of ‘one people, one state’ that Carson unequivocally rejects.¹⁶ Horton is right to say that Carson’s poems are enthusiastically post-Babelian in their outlook and resources, combining multiple idioms and discourses in a propulsive rhythm of distortion and crossover. Yet if ‘Babel’ once named a desire for unity and cohesion it has also come to stand for their opposites, difference and diffusion, and this tension is one that Carson’s variations on the theme exploit. Fittingly, Babel figures throughout *First Language* in variety of guises that are as often metamorphic as they are monumental: in ‘Tak, Tak’ it appears in the form of a Babylonian bas-relief (*FL*, 64), whereas in ‘Contract’ it is a construct of ‘*Lego*-kit-like Pharaonic phasia-/ Bricks, where everything is built in stages, ages, scaffolding and phrases’ (*FL*, 49). This last image links the architecture of buildings to the architectonics of language as if in illustration of Derek Attridge’s point that ‘Babel is a condition of all languages.’¹⁷ In ‘Opus Operandi’, Babel is the subject of a lecture given by St Jerome, patron saint of translators and author of the Vulgate, who imagines it as ‘an Ark or quinquere me he prised apart’ to release its ‘alphabetical intentions’ and ‘Typecast letters’ in ‘garbled Turkish/ Convolutions’ (*FL*, 61). By the end of the

poem, though, Babel is not a vessel but an underwater destination for which Jerome sets out in an amphibious diving 'bubble' (*FL*, 62). Moreover, Belfast itself emerges as a kind of Babel in the earlier prose piece 'Farset', where Carson's efforts to translate the name of the city (in Irish, *Béal Feirste*) disinter a swarm of variant etymologies and linguistic associations. As the text's tongue-in-cheek melange of philology, place-lore, and dictionary-hunting becomes increasingly involved, the semantic kernel of 'Belfast' is submerged in a 'watery confusion' of histories and languages, whereby experts fail to agree and competing textual accounts each supply different possible translations (*BC*, 48).

Carson's recourse to the trope of Babel is another indication of his interest in the paradoxes of translation, where the seemingly insurmountable grammatical and semantic differences between languages are counter-balanced by inventive accommodations and the practical demands of inter-cultural communication. As Jacques Derrida observes, 'Babel' is both a common noun that can be translated as 'confusion' and a proper name that is therefore, by definition, strictly untranslatable. The undecidable grammatical status of the word thus recounts and reflects 'the necessary and impossible task of translation, its necessity *as* impossibility', for the confounding of human languages that follows upon God's deconstruction of Babel both necessitates the act of translation in the first place and immediately renders any one-to-one equivalence between languages impossible.¹⁸ Yet, according to Lawrence Venuti, something like this desire for an ideal unity between source and target languages remains a key factor informing much translation theory in Anglo-American cultures, dictating the terms of translation practice and the criteria by which foreign texts are selected for translation. In this context, the translator's role is to render herself effectively invisible, supplying an English-language text which is above all 'fluent' and thus serves as a transparent window onto the foreign writer's intentions and the essential meaning of the source text. Such 'fluency' and 'transparency' are not only illusions, however, but also entail an act of violent appropriation that is ultimately 'ethnocentric', for 'the aim of translation is to bring back a cultural other as the same, the recognizable, even the familiar; and this aim always risks a wholesale domestication of the foreign text'.¹⁹ 'Domesticating' translations claim to achieve semantic equivalence by reducing difference and rewriting the source text in accordance with the dominant social and linguistic codes of the home culture.

By contrast, 'foreignizing' translations attempt to preserve difference

by foregrounding the acts of partial interpretation and mediation that all translations must inevitably perform:

Foreignizing translation signifies the difference of the foreign text, yet only by disrupting the cultural codes that prevail in the target language. In its effort to do right abroad, this translation method must do wrong at home, deviating enough from native norms to stage an alien reading experience – choosing to translate a foreign text excluded by domestic literary canons, for instance, or using a marginal discourse to translate it.²⁰

In a sense, then, foreignising translations are as much about exploring the alien within as respecting the difference of the foreign text, displacing the hegemony of standard usages and forms by highlighting the heterogeneity of discourses, registers, and idioms available to the target language – as I have argued Carson does in a poem like ‘Second Language’. Moreover, where domesticating translations posit a source text bearing a secure and readily identifiable set of meanings, foreignising translations acknowledge it as a site of multiple and unstable semantic possibilities that may give rise to widely differing interpretations. These interpretations are necessarily dependent upon the contexts in which they take place and, as Sarah Maguire notes, ‘translation always involves the translator taking a position, an aesthetic position and an ethical position’.²¹ All of this means that translation is best conceived as a process of attentive close reading and creative response rather than an attempt at verbatim reproduction, facilitating what Carson, in ‘The Insular Celts’, calls ‘the flight/ Of one thing into another’ (*NE*, 2–3). Furthermore, if translation involves transformation and metamorphosis rather than mere transport or reproduction then the implicitly hierarchical relationship between an ‘original’ and its translation, where the success of the latter is judged upon its ‘fidelity’ to the former, is undermined. In another metaphor that is also germane to Carson’s work, Walter Benjamin has described the relationship in terms of correspondences, the original and its non-literal translation fitting each other like fragments of a smashed vessel in order to express or realise ‘the central reciprocal relationship between languages’.²²

The uneven but no less central reciprocal relationship between languages, Irish and English, is, of course, an important and vexed issue in Ireland’s cultural history. Ireland was subject to an extensive and traumatising policy of forced Anglicisation and the active suppression of Irish under colonial rule, circumstances that made translation from Gaelic texts a key strand in the rise of Irish cultural nationalism during the nineteenth century.²³ In fact, Declan Kiberd has argued that the

Irish Literary Revival can be understood as 'essentially an exercise in translation' where the process of carrying aspects of Gaelic culture into English-language texts was as much a means of '*inventing as reflecting* an original Ireland': 'to translate Ireland was but another way of bringing it into being'.²⁴ More recently, attitudes towards the Irish language have undergone significant shifts in response to broader social and cultural changes, particularly the impact of globalisation, which has further extended the dominance of English as a lingua franca but also stimulated pockets of resurgence among younger language-learners.²⁵ Justin Quinn observes that many Irish people now regard competence in the language as 'an expression of individuality rather than nationalist feeling', and for most Irish poets writing in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the act of translation has been increasingly decoupled from the politics of cultural nationalism.²⁶ Of course, in a postcolonial context such as Ireland's the power differentials between the translated and translating cultures may be particularly pronounced, and translation can entail experiences of loss or erasure as well as fruitful exchange. Nonetheless, Frank Sewell describes twentieth-century Irish literary culture primarily in terms of the productive and imaginatively generous 'conversations' opened between writers in Irish and English, which take 'the form of listening-in, dialogue and translation'.²⁷ Such inter-lingual conversations are arguably also a feature internal to much Irish writing in English, for a pervasive sense of doubleness can be traced in writers' deployment of non-standard vocabularies and varieties of Hiberno-English, via intertextual dialogues with the Irish literary tradition, or as a result of more cosmopolitan influences. To this end, Neil Corcoran contends that the constitutive duality of Ireland's linguistic and literary traditions produces a heightened attentiveness on the part of many writers to language itself as a medium of expression, a distrust of, or delight in, the plurality of language that implies 'a consciousness of linguistic otherness'.²⁸

The sense of alterity or doubleness that Corcoran identifies is borne out by Carson in an essay significantly titled 'The Other', where he remarks: 'I write in English, but the ghost of Irish hovers behind it; and English itself is full of ghostly presences, of others who wrote before you, and of words as yet unknown to you.'²⁹ The ghost of Irish makes its presence felt in Carson's writing in numerous ways, including his adaptations of oral storytelling techniques, his frequent use of vernacular and dialect terms, and his free-wheeling etymological excursions, all of which bend or stretch the conventions of standard English usage. Translation offers

Carson and other Irish writers opportunities to explore the inherent duality or multiplicity of Irish cultural experience as it continues to evolve, and can also serve as a means of interrogating or redefining the conceptions of 'Irishness' they inherit. Indeed, Terence Brown argues that the significant increase in the number, variety, and quality of translations produced by Irish writers during the 1980s reflected a more general awareness in Irish cultural life that 'national traditions [...] had exhausted themselves', so that the translation of Irish and European texts can be seen as part of a wide-ranging search for 'new modes of vision' and 'alternative perspectives' in a post-nationalist context.³⁰

Though there are obviously exceptions, Brown's argument would also suggest that translation in Ireland since the 1980s has leaned more towards the 'alien reading experiences' of foreignising translation than the conservative tendencies of domestication, for these are most likely to reveal the target culture's own internal difference. Such alternative perspectives and experiences of defamiliarisation were perhaps most urgently required during this period in the North of Ireland, where polarised political ideologies had become particularly deeply entrenched, and this need found varied responses in the work of poets such as Seamus Heaney, Michael Longley, Derek Mahon, Medbh McGuckian, Paul Muldoon, Tom Paulin, and Carson himself.³¹ Michael Cronin has identified three levels at which Northern Irish poets engaged with translation: firstly, translation facilitates the continuation of 'a dialogue with the other language on the island, Irish'; secondly, 'there is translation as liberation, escaping from the pressures of Irish politics and history into the playful exuberance of foreign literatures'; and thirdly, 'there is translation as a way of addressing the conflict but indirectly'.³² As we will see, Carson's work incorporates examples of all three of these 'levels' of engagement in translation, though the levels or approaches that Cronin distinguishes often merge and overlap in his practice.

Carson's dialogue with Irish and with the Irish literary tradition begins with his earliest published work, and his first collection, *The New Estate*, contains half a dozen poems that are either inspired by or translations of early Irish nature lyrics. Perhaps because their sources often derive from the monastic scribal tradition, as compositions written in idle moments in the margins of more scholarly works, they are also texts that often seem appropriately self-conscious about their own status as literary artefacts, demonstrating a cluster of recurrent concerns with speech and writing, and the writer's relationship to the natural world. A trio of poems, 'St Ciaran and the Birds', 'St Ciaran's Island', and

'St Ciaran and the Trees', rework the stories of Carson's namesakes, St Ciaran of Clonmacnoise and St Ciaran of Saighir, via imagery borrowed from the Middle Irish tale *Buile Suibhne* (*The Frenzy of Suibhne*). Like Seamus Heaney's 'Sweeney' in *Sweeney Astray*, St Ciaran is clearly a figure for the poet,³³ depicted in self-imposed isolation among plants and animals, where he steadily divests himself of his selfhood and, paradoxically, makes poetry of his yearning for silence. In 'St Ciaran and the Trees', the saint's body is dispersed into the landscape itself in images that suggest dismemberment: 'I see my mouth in pools and wells;/ my flesh-thin limbs abide in trees' (*IC*, 7). In 'St Ciaran and the Birds' the speaker's voice is a 'tongueless bell', 'For my silence/ No tongue can tell' (*NE*, 4); while the hermit saint of 'St Ciaran's Island', illuminating 'sacred texts' in his seclusion, vows to 'learn to grow in silence,/ And take things as they are' (*NE*, 5). The characteristic note of these poems, like those that they imitate, is the mingling of Christian piety with an older, pagan nature mysticism, so that they seem to occupy a boundary between wholly different worlds and cultural outlooks. Yet the retreat of these poet-saints from both language and the world it describes also appears pathological, involving a mania for solitude and self-annihilation, which suggests that the three poems might also be read as subtle satires on the 'isolated', conscience-racked figure of the Northern Irish poet, and by that token as veiled self-criticisms.

Another poem that draws upon early Irish poetry to compose a portrait of the artist is 'The Scribe in the Woods', which opens *The New Estate* and reads in full:

Behind these hedged lines where I write,
The blackbird sings a dawn
Of parchment held to the light.

Clearer than my hollow bell
The cuckoo has pushed its trill
Into the hush of my nest. (*NE*, 1)

A parenthetical note informs the reader that the poem is 'Adapted from the Early Irish' – the source is an anonymous scribal composition from the early ninth century – and this terse acknowledgement that translation involves 'adaptation' rather than transliteration sounds a key-note that will be amplified in Carson's subsequent work. Indeed, Carson not only shrinks his poem's two stanzas to three lines rather than his source text's four and opts for a much looser rhyme scheme, but also deviates in part from the sense of the original in order to further enhance the

poem's self-reflexive qualities. Some of these differences become apparent if Carson's 'adaptation' is compared with Gerard Murphy's mostly literal prose translation:

A hedge of trees overlooks me; a blackbird's lay sings to me (an announcement which I shall not conceal); above my lined book the birds' chanting sings to me.

A clear-voiced cuckoo sings to me (goodly utterance) in a grey cloak from the bush fortresses. The Lord is indeed good to me: well do I write beneath a forest of woodland.³⁴

The first thing to note here is that Murphy's 'hedge of trees' and 'lined book' become merged together in Carson's 'hedged lines', a phrase that literally denotes the sheltered, sanctuary-like space or 'nest' outdoors where the narrator, a monastic scribe, is at work, but also implies that the poet-speaker's lines themselves are 'hedged' or ambiguous in their meaning. Similarly, the blackbird that sings in the first stanza becomes conflated in Carson's poem with the 'parchment' on which the scribe is writing, as if it were an illustrated figure in an illuminated manuscript, text and environment blurring together: 'a dawn/ Of parchment held to the light'.

Clearly, in a variation on a very traditional metaphor, the blackbird's song is being made to stand for the poet's voice or words, and this also appears to be the case with the cuckoo's 'goodly utterance' in Murphy's version, which causes the scribe to offer praise to God and express the pleasure he takes in his work. The latter elements are excised in Carson's poem, which eschews any direct reference to the source text's Christian context and also treats the cuckoo's song much more ambivalently. Instead of evoking satisfaction or joy, the cuckoo's insinuating 'trill' reminds Carson's speaker of his own lyrical inadequacy, not just because it disturbs the 'hush' of his anchorite solitude but also because of the contrast its ringing clarity makes with his own 'hollow bell'. Carson has said that what he most admires about early Irish lyric poems is their 'clarity and elegance of form'³⁵ and Seamus Heaney has similarly praised the 'tang and clarity of a pristine world of woods and water and birdsong' they are capable of imparting.³⁶ So, one reading of Carson's translation would be to see it as in part a gloss on the process of translation itself: the 'clarity' and verbal complexity of the Irish original may, by comparison, render its English version seemingly 'hollow', yet something of its character and tone are nonetheless 'pushed' (or laid) into the nest of its language. Moreover, the lines of Carson's poem are 'hedged' between

his opposing impulses to respect the intentions and effects of the source text and to explore the possibilities afforded by making its images and symbolism signify differently.

Famously, Carson forsakes the somewhat conventional subject-matter and forms of *The New Estate* for themes at once more distinctively urban and social in his work beginning with *The Irish for No*, which introduced his characteristic long line and was written after a long hiatus. Nevertheless, the reflexive wariness of language in the early poems, as well as their adaptive interests in translation and intertextuality, are reworked with a greater sense of political urgency in the title poem of the latter volume. Indeed, 'The Irish for No' is a text that uses the theme of translation to explore problems that are at once intertextual, political, and ontological. At its centre, the poem's shifting narrative concerns and contexts describe both the limits of translation as a practice of inter-linguistic transfer and its importance as a mode of cultural understanding. As several critics have observed, 'The Irish for No' engages in a series of layered intertextual dialogues,³⁷ the most important of which is with John Keats's 'Ode to a Nightingale', which Carson literally deconstructs, scattering fragments of its lines and images throughout his own text. Ostensibly, the conversation that is thus set up between Carson's and Keats's poems turns upon the juxtaposition of an English Romantic aesthetic sensibility with the circumstances of civil discord, violent death, and political deadlock that dominate Northern Ireland's contemporary situation. Fiona Stafford sees this contrast in terms of a determined confrontation between poet and precursor, as well as between the Irish and English literary traditions, arguing that the poem's opening quotation from Keats – '*Was it a vision, or a waking dream?*' – 'appears in a context of rejection and anger, its lyrical musing transformed into painful uncertainty'.³⁸ Yet, as Patricia Horton points out, it is also precisely this capacity for being in uncertainties – what Keats called 'negative capability' – however painful this may be, that marks Carson's deep affinity with the older poet: 'Carson has an abiding attraction to Keatsian uncertainty and to Keats's probing and blurring of the boundaries between dream and reality, illusion and truth, waking and sleeping'.³⁹

Through its ambivalent and appropriative engagements with Keats's Ode, 'The Irish for No' sharpens and intensifies his sense of being between states of consciousness, between worlds of reality and dream – another instance of ambilocation. On the one hand, Carson ironises and rebukes the Romantic impulse towards transcending reality and its

idealisation of death – ‘*drink and leave the world unseen*’ – by bringing Keats’s sensuous language and imagery into jarring conjunction with some of the more horrifying events of the Troubles: ‘What’s all this to the Belfast business-man who drilled/ Thirteen holes in his head with a Black & Decker?’ (*IFN*, 50). On the other, because of their very extremity and brutality such events can themselves appear unreal or surreal, so that, to paraphrase Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus, history is a nightmare from which the narrator struggles, and ultimately fails, to awake. And this failure reminds us that, as Horton observes, Keats’s Ode itself ‘pitches between visionary impulses [...] and an awareness of the impossibility of transcendence.’⁴⁰ In its counter-pointing of intoxicated reverie and documentary realism, then, as well as its numerous shifts of tone, voice, and register, Carson’s poem worries about how to find a language capable of adequately conveying the ‘reality’ that provides its context.

‘The Irish for No’ is also a poem in which things continually mix and merge or blur together, becoming confused – ‘Mish-mash. Hotch-potch’ – or metamorphosing from one thing into another, like the ‘dangling/ Quotation marks of a yin-yang mobile’ which become ‘the yin-yang of a tennis ball’ that a cat toys with in the final lines, ‘debating whether *yes* is *no*’. This linguistic equivocation, yoking together polar opposites in a similar fashion to the ‘puff of smoke’ over Larne Harbour ‘which might be black or white’ (*IFN*, 50), echoes the riddle of the poem’s title, which ultimately rests upon a problem of translation: there is no Irish for ‘no’, or rather there are many ways of expressing the negative in Irish but none that are absolute and unequivocal:

It was time to turn into the dog’s-leg short-cut from Chlorine Gardens
Into Cloreen Park, where you might see an *Ulster Says No* scrawled on the
side

Of the power-block – which immediately reminds me of the Eglantine
Inn

Just on the corner: on the missing *h* of Cloreen, you might say. We were
debating,

Bacchus and the pards and me, how to render *The Ulster Bank – the Bank
That Likes to Say Yes* into Irish, and whether eglantine was alien to
Ireland.

I cannot see what flowers are at my feet, when *yes* is the verb repeated,
Not exactly yes, but phatic nods and whispers. *The Bank That Answers All
Your Questions*, maybe? That Greek Portico of Mourne Granite, dazzling
With promises and feldspar, mirrors you in the Delphic black of its
windows. (*IFN*, 49)

The setting in these lines is south-central Belfast, a landscape that the observant, ambulant narrator reads for its diverse but also oddly resonant significations. Chlorine Gardens and Cloreen Park are adjacent or adjoining streets, linked by an oxymoronic ‘dog’s-leg short-cut’, while ‘Chlorine’ and ‘Cloreen’ are near-homophones, though their etymologies are divergent – the former being English via Greek, whereas the latter is Anglicised from Irish – and even ‘Chloreen’ is not ‘Chlorine’.

The historical context for the poem includes protests against the Anglo-Irish Agreement of November 1985, as indicated by the ‘*Ulster Says No* scrawled on the side/ Of the power block’, a slogan that summarised Ulster Unionist intransigence in the face of any rapprochement with the Republic and an obdurate refusal of all things ‘Irish’. Indeed, in its blunt, unaccommodating rhetoric, the phrase typifies ‘the stilted style of Unionist discourse’, which Francis Mulhern describes as marking ‘a radical alienation from speech itself – a kind of symbolic death’.⁴¹ By contrast, any effort to translate this slogan – or that of the Ulster Bank – will demand compromise and negotiation, for the grammatical structure of Irish simply does not allow for such cast-iron certainties to be articulated. The absence of words for ‘yes’ and ‘no’ in Irish, where assent or dissent is indicated in conversation by repeating the verb phrase of a question asked,⁴² means that the sentiment informing the statement ‘Ulster Says No’ is strictly inexpressible and the attitude underlying it is linguistically untenable. As Carson has remarked, in a lecture on poetry and translation, this grammatical incommensurability between English and Irish also implies a larger point that ‘different languages have different weights and measures, different sets of social and phenomenological expectations’.⁴³ When Carson’s narrator attempts to translate the vacuous advertising jingle of the Ulster Bank he must rephrase or construe otherwise its intimations of empty promises, and does so parodically via an implied parallel with the Delphic Oracle: ‘*The Bank That Answers All Your Questions, maybe?*’ Translation, in this context, is necessarily mistranslation; but mistranslation is also a way of renovating rhetoric or cliché and thereby avoiding symbolic death. It is, moreover, a paradigm of compromise and negotiation.⁴⁴

If anything, the Belfast of *The Irish for No* and *Belfast Confetti* is characterised by a surfeit of symbols and signs, a surplus of contending and conflicting meanings that Carson’s poems attempt to read in graffiti, street-names and shop signs, the names of bars and clubs and commodities, as well as written reports of the city in newspapers, books, directories, and gazetteers. The theme extends to non-verbal signs in

'Snowball', which opens with what at first appears a confident reading of feminine signals by the (male) voyeur narrator: 'All the signs: bee-hive hair-do, white handbag, white stilettos, split skirt.' The listed details of dress and appearance implicitly identify the anonymous woman as a prostitute working the red-light district adjacent to 'Tomb Street GPO', but the punter idling in his Audi Quattro can't be sure and suddenly 'revs away towards the Albert Clock'. This undermines the narrator's initial claim to be able to read the street-scene before him authoritatively, as the signs he had interpreted become resistant and ambiguous: 'The heels click off – another/ Blind Date? Like a fish-net stocking, everything is full of holes ...' The ambiguity here also affects the title of the poem, which might be understood literally as a noun and linked to the 'Christmas rush' through which the narrator works on night-shift at the sorting office; it could be the cocktail favoured by the woman in the split skirt; or it could describe the 'snowballing' action by which signs acquire alternative meanings in the course of the poem itself. Fittingly, the poem concludes with the narrator's discovery, in 'a forgotten pigeon-hole', of yet another enigmatic message, a postcard dated 9 August 1910, which reads: '*Meet me usual place & time/ Tomorrow – What I have to tell you might not wait – Yours – Forever – B*' (*IFN*, 44). Torn from its context and suppressing most of its key details, this telegraphic dead letter is impossible to decipher accurately, though the urgency to communicate expressed is rendered poignant after the passage of so many years, and its arrested transmission allegorises the extent to which Belfast's circulating signifiers will tend to stray or miss their mark.

Signs are ubiquitous, then, in Carson's Belfast but also notoriously unstable, and this can have deadly consequences in a culture where indicators of identity are taken as read. In 'Last Orders', Carson's nervy, tight-lipped narrator compares entering a bar to Russian roulette, 'since you never know who's who, or what you're walking into' (*BC*, 46); while in the companion poem, 'Night Out', the narrator is given 'the once-over once again' and hears machine-gun fire from beyond the bar's fortified exterior: 'So the sentence of the night/ Is punctuated through and through by rounds of drink, of bullets, of applause' (*BC*, 77). The metaphorical equation of gunfire with punctuation in this line, as well as its device of rendering experience in terms of the grammatical unit of the 'sentence', recalls other poems in both collections, such as 'Punctuation', where the bullets fired at the poem's narrator are registered as 'dot, dot, dot, dot, dot ...' (*BC*, 64), and 'Belfast Confetti', in which an explosion figures as 'an asterisk on the map' (*IFN*, 31). To the extent that they

link grammar and typographical symbols with acts of violence, Carson's poems illustrate David Wheatley's point that the 'social deformations' of the Troubles often gain expression in the very textual fabric of Northern Irish poetry, rendering 'language itself a site of contestation'.⁴⁵

Language is also a site of substitutions that blur meanings together in a manner that approximates to the shifting and unstable character of events, with their proliferation of schisms and splits, conspiracies and internecine disputes. Noting that a unit of soldiers have incongruously chosen to name their Saracen tank 'Felix' after a cartoon cat, the narrator of 'Queen's Gambit' comments wryly: 'It's all the go, here, changing something into something else, like rhyming/ Kampuchea with Cambodia' (*BC*, 36). Amid this accelerated exchange of names, identities, signs, and referents, Carson frequently enacts the breakdown of writing as a result of the historical and political pressures of the conflict he attempts to describe:

It's that frottage effect again: the paper that you're scribbling on is grained
And blackened, till the pencil-lead snaps off, in a valley of the broken
alphabet

And the streets are a bad photostat grey; the ink comes off in your hand.
(*BC*, 35)

The sense here that the written language of the poem mimics the 'broken' terrain of the city streets it represents would seem to bear out Steven Matthews's contention that in Carson's 'oral-centred poetry, the marks of the *written* text are associated with violence'.⁴⁶ Nonetheless, Matthews's argument that Carson's poetry (along with that of Paul Muldoon) 'celebrates [...] the voice as presence' to the detriment of writing and textuality requires qualification.⁴⁷ For, although Carson emphasises the vitality and adaptability of demotic speech, it is also striking how often voices in his Belfast poems teeter on the brink of incomprehensibility or silence, and the mouth itself becomes the focus of violent actions. In 'Yes', for instance, the narrator is prevented from quoting Bashō when an explosion interrupts his cross-border train journey: 'My mouth is full/ Of broken glass and quinine as everything reverses South' (*BC*, 65). And in 'The Mouth', the assassination of an informer (a 'mouth') is relayed via a grisly literalisation of colloquial speech: 'We thought it was time he bit off more than he could chew. Literally' (*BC*, 70).

Mouths, grasses, pipsqueaks, touts, and informers of all kinds also figure prominently in Carson's fourth collection, *First Language*, where there is an even more intense focus upon the terrain and topography of

language itself, as well as a diverse set of engagements with translation. As Alan Gillis remarks, where Carson's previous two collections had taken Belfast as their 'dominant frame of reference', the city in *First Language* 'is disintegrated, replaced by an otherworld of linguistic hallucination'.⁴⁸ Certainly, the exploration of Belfast's history and geography ceases to be the primary stimulus for Carson's narratives, although the context of the Troubles, with its spasmodic irruptions of violence and involuted identity politics, remains strongly present. Indeed, a large part of the purpose of the proliferating language games and general semantic instability that are explored in *First Language* and its successor *Opera Et Cetera* appears to have been to reinvigorate and diversify the languages and images through which Northern Ireland's political and cultural life could be given expression.

Carson's verbal exuberance and invention is pitted against the pernicious, deadening effects of rhetoric and cant in the media, political discourse, and cultural stereotypes; though, as Gillis notes, 'these poems are also marked by confinement as well as by conceptual explosion', combining linguistic ingenuity with a keen awareness of social and historical limitations.⁴⁹ 'Grass', for example, is an intoxicated riff on slang terms, colloquialisms, and thieves' argot that also tells a tale of betrayal and imprisonment when a drug deal goes wrong:

It was the circumbendibus of everything that got us locked
And scuttered, the Anno Domini of what happened yonks before
Our time, and that is why we languish now in Anguagela Jail, while he
Is on the loose. (*FL*, 16)

In this poem Carson lets his own 'echolalia hang out', mixing registers and grafting phrases onto one another at dizzying speed, so that the reader too is caught up in the 'general boggeldybotch' where 'no one/ Seemed to twig which hand was which, or who was who or whom/ Or what was ace or deuce' (*FL*, 16). This disorienting confusion of identities and meanings can be at once exhilarating and dangerously disempowering, as also in 'Two to Tango', which features a narrator who may be a participant in a witness protection programme or a creative writing tutor, or both, and counsels the reader in managing 'changes of identity' (*FL*, 20): 'Whether you want to change your face or not's up to yourself. But the bunk of history/ They'll make up for you. Someone else's shoes. They can put you anywhere. Where's a mystery' (*FL*, 18). Shadowy external forces and agencies – 'They' or 'the Powers-that-Be' (*FL*, 18, 19, 16, 21) – give the impression of a malign and inflexible order persisting beneath the chaotic surfaces of many of these poems. Nonetheless, Carson's virtuoso

manipulation of what he calls ‘Babel-babble’ (*FL*, 34) provides frequent opportunities for the reinvention of received ideas and narratives. An example is the ante-natal class for expectant fathers in ‘Opus Operandi’, which morphs into an interrogative lesson on the concept ‘Orange’, and finds the sectarian codes of differentiation – ‘the shibboleths of *aitch* and *haitch*’⁵⁰ – wanting: ‘It seems the gene-pool got contaminated. Everything was neither one thing nor the other;/ So now they’re trying to agree on a formula for a petition to the Author’ (*FL*, 60).

These themes of merged or hybrid identities are explicitly linked to issues of translation in ‘Second Nature’, the first of Carson’s several versions of ‘Malairt’ by the Irish-language poet Seán Ó Ríordáin. Ó Ríordáin is an enabling example for Carson because of his bilingualism and cultural hyphenation, as a poet whose work in Irish is deeply engaged in conversations with writers from the English literary tradition, especially Wordsworth, Hopkins, and Yeats.⁵¹ In his poem, a character aptly named Turnbull empathises to such a degree with the melancholy look in a horse’s eyes that he and the horse appear, to the narrator at least, to change places or internalise elements of the other. Carson renders the moment of transfer in the following terms:

I looked over at the horse, that I might see the sorrow pouring from its
eyes;
I saw the eyes of Turnbull, looming towards me from the horse’s head.
I looked at Turnbull; I looked at him again, and saw beneath his brows
The too-big eyes that were dumb with sorrow, the horse’s eyes. (*FL*, 38)

‘Malairt’ can be most straightforwardly translated as ‘exchange’, as in ‘rata malairt’ (‘exchange rate’), but Carson has also produced alternative versions under the titles ‘Contract’ and ‘Swap (Double Take)’,⁵² which, taken along with the echo of ‘Second Language’ in ‘Second Nature’, implies that he reads Ó Ríordáin’s poem as being as much about translation and transactions between languages as his own are the products of such processes.

Carson makes this thematic concern explicit in a chapter of his prose book, *Fishing for Amber*, where Ó Ríordáin’s poetry and example provide the focus for a discussion of the ramifications of translation: ‘The word *malairt* itself can mean translation: it is change, barter, dealing, traffic, metamorphosis, destruction: and one can have a change of religion or clothes; one can duel with this word, or take opposing sides’ (*FFA*, 204). This profusion of interpretations is typical of Carson’s approach to translation, which recognises the polysemy of the ‘original’ text as a

matrix for associations and resemblances that can only ever be partial and provisional. A further illustration of this point is given when Carson translates and re-translates a key passage from the Réamhrá, or Preface, to Ó Ríordáin's first collection of poems, *Eireaball Spideoige* (*A Robin's Tail*), changing the accent and introducing subtly different shades of meaning with each of the 'plausible readings' he gives. As he says: 'language can be registered in many ways; and bringing one language to bear upon another is like going through a forest at night, where there are many forking paths, and each route is fraught with its own pitfalls' (*FFA*, 203). 'Second Nature' is a poem that both embodies and reflects upon this process of bringing one language to bear upon another, and the exchange that takes place between Turnbull and the horse clearly allegorises the 'contract', 'swap', or 'double take' that occurs between Ó Ríordáin's and Carson's poems; translation is an opportunity to see the world through other eyes.

'Second Nature' appears in *First Language* sandwiched between two translations from the French, 'Drunk Boat' and 'Correspondances', versions of Arthur Rimbaud's 'Le Bateau Ivre' and Charles Baudelaire's 'Correspondances', respectively. Carson has also translated Baudelaire's poem more than once under different titles – his version in *The Alexandrine Plan* is called 'Coexistences' – and its Symbolist projection of an interior, psychological landscape in which sense impressions and ideas mingle promiscuously together resonates in unexpected ways with the exchange of identities dramatised in 'Second Language'. Like 'Second Language' but unlike Baudelaire's sonnet, Carson's 'Correspondances' is written in four long-lined couplets that make use of some arresting rhymes, particularly the initial pairing of 'babble' and 'Parable', which weighs the promise of encrypted meaning against linguistic confusion. Carson amplifies Baudelaire's sensuous awareness of how sounds, smells, and colours may shimmer and blend together by extending the original's metaphor of the 'dark symbolic forest' into his second stanza, making the natural world and the world of language or sensation merge more fully in the reader's mind: 'Self-confounding echoes buzz and mingle through the gloomy arbours;/ Vowels, perfumes, stars swarm in like fireflies from the midnight blue of harbours' (*FL*, 39). Similarly, Baudelaire's simile for perfumes, 'Doux comme les hautbois' ('mellow as oboes'),⁵³ is not only inventively recast in Carson's version as 'the *oms* and *ahs* of oboes' but also triggers, in stanza three, the appearance of a string quartet wholly absent from the original, which 'yawns and growls at you with amber, rosin, incense, musk' in an exuberant evocation of 'soul and spirit

music' (*FL*, 39). Such refractions and elaborations, which substantially re-make the poem they are translating, along with his flexible recombinations of the original's semantic and formal elements, exemplify Peter Denman's point that Carson's translations typically seek 'to enlarge the poetic and linguistic space that the poems occupy'.⁵⁴ Appropriately, then, 'Coexistences' translates Baudelaire's euphoric phrase 'l'expansion des choses infinies' as 'the expansiveness of things awry and slant' (*AP*, 71). At one level, this line is a further expression of Carson's interest in idiosyncrasies and deviations; but it also implies that, for him, the appeal of the Symbolist aesthetic that Baudelaire's poem expresses lies in the emphasis it places upon suggestiveness and synthesis, bringing like and unlike together in surprising and stimulating conjunctions. As Alan Gillis notes, Carson eschews Baudelaire's sense of underlying unity – 'une ténébreuse et profonde unité' – but retains and expands his intuition of correspondences seething everywhere, 'veer[ing] from one theme or context to another in perpetual motion'.⁵⁵

Such relentless, kinetic energy and an allied interest in altered or extreme states of consciousness make Rimbaud another significant influence on Carson's poetry, as the visionary excesses and cascading images of 'Drunk Boat', and its re-writing as 'The Ballad of HMS *Belfast*', attest. 'Le Bateau Ivre' puts into action Rimbaud's theory that poetry approaches the unknown ('l'inconnu') by way of a systematic disordering of the senses, exploding the unity of the lyric 'I' in the process and introducing a volatile instability to textual meanings.⁵⁶ Carson's translation, again written in long-lined rhyming couplets, begins:

As I glided down the lazy Meuse, I felt my punters had gone AWOL –
In fact, Arapahoes had captured them for target practice, nailing them to
stakes. Oh hell,

I didn't give a damn. I didn't want a crew, nor loads of Belgian wheat,
nor English cotton.
When the whoops and hollers died away, their jobs were well forgotten.

Through the tug and zip of tides, more brain-deaf than an embryo, I
bobbled;

Peninsulas, unmoored and islanded, were envious of my Babel-babble.
(*FL*, 34)

This initial act of unfastening or unbinding, whereby the boat is launched without its crew into an unplotted voyage of fluid movement on the high seas, also entails the abandonment of social and commercial ties so that

poetic subjectivity is freed into currents at once libidinal and linguistic: 'I've been immersed, since then, in Sea Poetry, anthologized by stars' (*FL*, 34). Carson's translation steers a course between registering the unfurling metaphors and dizzy switches of pace and tone of the original, and allowing leeway for its own excursions into slang and idiomatic phrasing ('gone AWOL', 'I didn't give a damn'). Mention of 'Arapahoes' (instead of Rimbaud's generic 'Peaux-rouges' – 'redskins')⁵⁷ and the phrase 'more brain-deaf than an embryo' also forge intertextual links with 'Second Language', further foregrounding the idea of voyaging within language itself.

As 'the ancient parapets of Europe' are left behind (*FL*, 37), experience is increasingly mediated through hallucinations and vivid word-pictures that pretend to a more profound 'reality' – 'I've seen the Real Thing; others only get the aura' (*FL*, 35) – and the poem as a whole, in its delirious panoply of images, seems to promise what Kristin Ross deems a new mode of perception, one 'that is at once cosmological and atomized, planetary and microscopic'.⁵⁸ Yet this visionary euphoria collapses into suicidal despair at the end of the poem, with the threatening appearance of 'Blue Ensigns', 'merchantmen', and 'the drawn blinds of prison-ships' (*FL*, 37). The final image is picked up and elaborated further in 'The Ballad of HMS *Belfast*', which recasts Rimbaud's vatic sea-shanty through the conventions of the Irish *aisling*, or vision-poem, and gives it an anchorage in Belfast's history as both garrison town and sea-port. In its final lines, the narrator is awoken from a dream of fabulous voyages and intoxicated language – 'half-gargled still with braggadocio and garble' – by the tolling of the Albert clock: 'I lay bound in iron chains, alone, my *aisling* gone, my sentence passed./ Grey Belfast dawn illuminated me, on board the prison ship Belfast' (*FL*, 74).

First Language also includes four translations from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* originally commissioned for Michael Hofmann and James Lasdun's *After Ovid: New Metamorphoses*,⁵⁹ and in several of these versions Carson uses the Latin poet's narratives of violence, grief, and revenge to approach the circumstances of the Northern Irish Troubles obliquely. He is, of course, by no means the only Northern Irish poet to make use of classical texts in this way,⁶⁰ but Carson's work seems to illustrate John Kerrigan's point that Irish writers from a Catholic background tend to bring Ovid's 'metamorphic imaginings into fruitful relation with Gaelic', particularly the transformations of Suibhne in *Buile Suibhne*.⁶¹ On the other hand, and given Sarah Annes Brown's point that metamorphosis is 'a helpful metaphor to use of the process of translation or imitation',⁶² Carson's

engagements with Ovid can also be read as extending his explorations of translation as a theme or trope. In 'Ovid: *Metamorphoses*, V, 529–550', a fragmented sonnet written in long-lines, he retells the stories of Persephone and Ascalaphus in broad Belfast vernacular. Persephone is cast as a renegade breaking her 'hunger strike' by eating a forbidden pomegranate, while Ascalaphus appears as an underhanded informer – 'Stoolie. Pipsqueak. Mouth' – whose report to 'the Powers-/ That-Be' ensures her imprisonment in 'the Underworld' for eternity. The feisty Persephone, however, 'spat back as good as she got' and 'slabbered' Ascalaphus with 'unholy water', transforming him into an owl:

All ears, all eyes: touts everywhere, potential freaks,
Beware. For now he is the scrake-owl, Troubles' augury for Auld Lang
Syne,
Who to this day is harbinger of doom, the gloom of Pluto's no-go zone.
(*FL*, 21)

The implicit equation that is made here between Belfast's urban no-go zones and the gloom of Pluto's Underworld looks ahead to Carson's translation of Dante in *The Inferno*, where the analogy will be substantially expanded.

Another sonnet derived from the *Metamorphoses*, 'Ovid: *Metamorphoses*, XIII, 576–619', translates the story of Memnon into a parable of sectarian division. Here, the dead warrior's funeral pyre suggests the symbolic 'bonfires' of the Twelfth of July celebrations, and the smoky birds that commemorate his death enact an annual 'civil war' of reiterative mutual destruction that parallels the rhythms of sectarian confrontation:

And then the squab engendered other birds innumerable. They wheeled
In pyrotechnics round the pyre. The Stukas, on the third approach, split
In two like Prods and Taigs. Scrabbed and pecked at one another.
Sootflecks. Whirl-
Wind. Celtic loops and spirals chawed each other, fell down dead and
splayed. (*FL*, 59)

This strategy of making Ovid's Latin originals speak the language of contemporary events in Northern Ireland is complicated by the intersection of other contexts, such as the Second World War dogfights summoned up by the metaphorical use of 'Stukas', and the larger resonances of 'civil war' or 'burning out'. Likewise, the Troubles look different when they are refracted through the narrative lens that Ovid's *Metamorphoses* provides.

Translation remains an important component of the extensive linguistic experiments that make up Carson's next collection, *Opera Et Cetera*. One of its four sections, 'Alibi', is given over to versions of nine poems from the Romanian of Stefan Augustin Doinas, several of which highlight fragile but suggestive parallels between the respective contexts in which the two poets write. 'Siege', for example, tells a parabolic story of a fortress maintaining a state of siege in the absence of any opposing army, a situation that clearly resonates with the Ulster Protestant 'siege mentality' (*OEC*, 59); while in 'Alibi' the narrator engages in a self-interrogation over his complicity in the murders done in his country, expressing a generalised condition of guilt shared in by a whole society: 'O ubiquitous surveillant God, we are accomplices to all assassinations' (*OEC*, 56). Another section of the book, 'Et Cetera', contains poems provoked by Latin tags culled from *Chambers Dictionary*. The collection is framed, however, by two long sequences, 'Letters from the Alphabet' and 'Opera', which mirror each other in exploiting the ordered structures of the alphabet and the radio operator's code, respectively. Jerzy Jarniewicz has argued that in Carson's writing the stability or reliability implied by alphabetic patterning 'yields to the nearly cosmic rule of metamorphosis',⁶³ and the poems in these sequences work within such systems only to highlight the 'translations' and arbitrary correspondences they unwittingly make possible. Rhyme or adjacency rather than iron logic are employed to forge narrative connections, while the shapes and sounds of letters prompt a proliferating series of mutating images and exuberant word-play.⁶⁴ For instance, in 'G' some unfortunate has his hand 'clamped in a G-clamp to the Black & Decker work-bench' by a gang of 'G-men'; subsequently, 'bugs' proliferate across the film noir city – specifically 'gnats, gads, gargle-flies and gall-flies', all of them 'Spawned from the entomology of G'; and, finally, a pair of spooks named 'Black' and 'Decker' discuss the fate of the man clamped to the work-bench. (*OEC*, 17). In 'W' the narrator is aptly preoccupied with doppelgangers and dualities ('I call you Double You') (*OEC*, 33); 'N' proves that identities are fluid and shifting but that names remain important: 'Listen to me. Nemo is not a nobody. And *Nautilus* is not a narwhal' (*OEC*, 24); and in 'P' the deadpan narrator informs the reader: 'Pea is not a cue' (*OEC*, 26).

Carson's use of dictionaries in many of these poems is obvious;⁶⁵ but if dictionaries can be regarded as 'textual embodiments of a world dominated by a respect for accurate classifications, fixed definitions and a stable order' then Carson's eccentric use of them undermines

such impulses towards social control and cultural authoritarianism.⁶⁶ There are two aspects to consider here, both of which run counter to the investments his work simultaneously makes in structure and system: on the one hand, the poems conjure an overload of linguistic metamorphoses and narrative transitions, where one thing spontaneously becomes another; on the other, they foreground an irreducible impression of difference and particularity, an exhilarated sense of the world's multiplicity and the heterogeneity of language in particular. In 'X-Ray' the narrator composes a labyrinthine catalogue of the Troubles and of Northern Irish history only to reflect that all of this complexity is 'nothing to the cerebral activity of any one of us who sets in train/ These zig-zags' of thought, language, and writing (*OEC*, 90). Another poem, 'Romeo', figures the codes of identity in Belfast or Verona as 'a tangled tagliatelle linguini Veronese' that the narrator struggles 'to unravel/ From its strands of DNA and language' (*OEC*, 84). Conceptual precision is implicitly aligned with sectarian certitudes here, and questions of definition tend to remain questions throughout both 'Letters from the Alphabet' and 'Opera'.

The increasing attention paid to the topos of language itself in Carson's work since *First Language* has been paralleled more recently by a number of more extensive and ambitious engagements with translation. Since 2000 he has published three book-length translations – of Dante's *Inferno*, Brian Merriman's *Cúirt an Mheán Oíche* (*The Midnight Court*), and the Irish epic tale, *Táin Bó Cúailnge* (*The Cattle Raid of Cooley*) – each of which sees him conducting a dialogue with major texts from the Irish and European literary traditions. Both *The Inferno of Dante Alighieri* and *The Táin* incorporate extensive scholarly notes, introductions, and other paratextual material (notes on the translation, pronunciation guides, further reading) that indicate the seriousness with which Carson has approached his task, and he is scrupulous in acknowledging the many sources, translations, and critical texts he has consulted. Carson also typically uses his forewords and introductions as opportunities to meditate upon the process of translation itself, its possibilities as well as its difficulties. In *The Inferno*, for instance, he notes that his decision to write in *terza rima* is unusual among translators of Dante into English because the English language has fewer rhymes available than Italian, and because it is thought that 'the necessity to rhyme will result in lines that sound like a translation'.⁶⁷ His reply is to ask what is wrong with this, and to note that working under such artificially imposed constrictions may have the benefit of producing 'an

English which is sometimes strangely interesting', one that is closer to the effects of Dante's vernacular language (*IDA*, xix).

There are clear affinities, then, between Carson's approach to Dante's text and Venuti's conception of foreignising translations, which may be just as partial in their interpretation of the source texts as domesticating translations but 'tend to flaunt their partiality instead of concealing it'.⁶⁸ By producing a translation of Dante that reads like a translation, Carson's *Inferno* also serves the purpose of estranging or pluralising the linguistic and cultural norms of the English language in which he writes. 'Translating ostensibly from the Italian, Tuscan or Florentine,' he remarks, 'I found myself translating as much from English, or various Englishes' (*IDA*, xx). What links *The Inferno* to *The Midnight Court* is that Carson finds formal models for both his translations in the Irish musical tradition. In Dante's poetry he recognises 'a relentless, peripatetic, ballad-like energy' that suggests a viable parallel with the Hiberno-English ballad, its rhythmical and alliterative suppleness as well as its 'demotic and inclusive intentions' (*IDA*, xxi). In his foreword to *The Midnight Court* he sketches a (perhaps fanciful) portrait of Brian Merriman as a rakish fiddle-player and notes the prosodic similarities between Merriman's lines and the 6/8 rhythm of an Irish jig (*MC*, 10, 11). Both translations exhibit Carson's desire to retain as far as possible the metrical schemes and rhyme patterns of the source texts, even where this leads him to transpose lines or deviate from the literal sense of the words translated, because such departures nonetheless bear 'a sidelong, metaphorical relation to the original' (*MC*, 15). The situation is more complicated with *The Táin* because the original is not only prosimetric, a combination of narrative prose passages with syllabic and metrical verse elements, but also 'a compilation of various styles' as a result of its many-layered textual history (*T*, xv). Once again, though, Carson's impulse is towards preserving the 'stylistic heterogeneity' (*T*, xxvi) he finds in the text – he even makes a brief but suggestive parallel with Joyce's *Ulysses* (*T*, xxi) – and emphasising the intrinsically creative aspects of his translation. 'There is no canonical *Táin*,' he asserts, 'and every translation of it is necessarily another version or recension' (*T*, xxvii).

Carson's *Inferno* is the first full-length version of Dante's text by an Irish writer, though, as David Wallace observes, the construction of an 'Irish Dante' in the work of W.B. Yeats, James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, and Seamus Heaney has been an important part of the Italian poet's extensive afterlife in English during the twentieth century.⁶⁹ The contributions that Carson's translation makes to this tradition are chiefly two-fold:

through his use of Hiberno-English, Belfast demotic, and Ulster-Scots idioms he makes Dante's imagery and narrative resonate inventively with Irish experience; and such resonances are further enhanced by the scattered parallels he draws between the divided, factional society of medieval Florence, the landscapes and fortifications of Hell, and the claustrophobic, dangerous atmosphere of contemporary Belfast. It is worth noting that during July 2001, while Carson was working on his translation, a loyalist protest centred on Holy Cross Catholic primary school in Ardoyne, North Belfast, broke out, reigniting sectarian tensions and provoking violent confrontations near to the writer's home.⁷⁰ This context lends a further poignancy and urgency to his version of Dante's conversation with his fellow Florentine 'Hungry Jacko' in Canto VI:

I answered: 'Jacko, your condition fills
my eyes with tears, no matter what your sins;
but tell me truly, if it's possible,

what holds the future for the citizens
of my divided city? Is there one just man
in it? Or are they all sectarians? (*IDA*, 39–40)

The triple rhyme of 'sins', 'citizens', and 'sectarians' here is itself a succinct, and depressing, commentary upon the political condition of post-Agreement Belfast, and Carson primes the reader to recognise further correspondences in his introduction, which draws implicit comparisons between the Guelph and Ghibelline factions of Dante's Florence and Belfast's Catholic and Protestant communities (*IDA*, xiii). Indeed, Nick Havely has praised Carson's translation particularly for its 'fiercely articulate rendering of the poem's imagined squalor, violence and partisan hostility'.⁷¹ Hell is also a version of Belfast, and vice versa, as in Dante's bird's-eye view of Malebolge's 'defensive spaces' and panopticon-style fortified exterior with 'military barriers on every side' (*IDA*, 119); or again, in his likening of the tar-pits of Canto XXI to scenes of shipbuilding, Dante's Venetian Arsenal merging in Carson's rendering with memories of Belfast's Queen's Island in its heyday (*IDA*, 140).

Carson is also adept more generally at conveying the variety of spatial environments and landscapes that Dante's Hell comprehends, ranging from the 'gloomy wood' of Canto I through meadows, bogs, mires, fens, drains and dikes, towers and chasms, crags, escarpments, lakes, and rivers of blood. Many of these features, however, receive a noticeably 'Irish' inflection in Carson's treatment of them. For instance, his use of the phrase 'the gyres/ of Hell' (*IDA*, 64), and Dante's determination 'to

experience the full extent/ of hell, from gyre to gyre' (*IDA*, 195) both lend a distinctively Yeatsian bent to the conical structure of the Inferno. On entering the Third Circle of Hell, Carson's Dante describes a climate that is 'forever bleak', characterised by 'pouring rain, freezing cold;/ environment unchangingly severe' as if to imply that the Irish weather is a form of infernal punishment:

Giant hailstones, needling sleet, and snow
fall inexhaustibly from darkened skies
to saturate the stinking bog below. (*IDA*, 37)

Similarly, when Dante encounters the giants who are imprisoned in the central pit of Malebolge he mistakes their huge figures for the towers of some infernal city, but Carson has Virgil explain that these 'collosi' are 'stuck/ in this deep pit, as in some Irish bog,/ collectively immobilised by muck' (*IDA*, 216).

This scene with the giant builders of Babel also provides Carson with many opportunities to deploy colloquial and idiomatic speech, Ulster vernacular and slang terms. In doing so, of course, he often strays from the literal meaning of Dante's original but holds to Umberto Eco's dictum that, rather than aiming for strict 'equivalence', a translation should strive 'to create the same effect in the mind of the reader (obviously according to the translator's interpretation) as the original text wanted to create'.⁷² A good example of this equivalence of effect can be seen in Carson's idiosyncratic refashioning of Nimrod's gobbledygook, which can usefully be contrasted with Robin Kirkpatrick's more literal translation (on the right):

<i>Yin twa maghogani gazpaighp boke!</i>	<i>'Raphèl màì amècche zabì almi,'</i>
the awful gub began to roar and	so screaming it began, that
bawl,	fearsome mouth,
for gibberish was all he ever spoke.	unfit to utter any sweeter psalm. ⁷³
	(<i>IDA</i> , 218)

Whereas Kirkpatrick simply retains Dante's garbled Italian phrase, Carson deepens the confusion by making Nimrod speak a mixture of Ulster Scots ('yin twa' is 'one two'), macaronic pseudo-Irish ('mahogany gaspipe' mimics the intonations of Irish as heard by non-Irish speakers), and Ulster English ('boke' is 'vomit') (*IDA*, 290, n).⁷⁴ He also employs the bluntly colloquial phrases 'awful gub' and 'gibberish' in contrast to Kirkpatrick's more demure 'fearsome mouth' and 'sweeter psalm'. Moreover, Carson takes the liberty of enhancing some of Dante's effects, so that the thunderous sound of Nimrod's 'horn' is heard as 'the mad

ta-ra-ra-boom-di-ay! of some gargantuan bugle-megaphone' (*IDA*, 215) and Virgil's sharp-tongued rebuke to the gibbering giant is rendered in the idiom of Belfast banter:

My guide then turned to him: 'Hey, head-the-ball,
stick to your trumpet; give it a good blast
when you feel your temper coming to the boil,
instead of that incessant blah, blah, blah! (*IDA*, 218)

Dante's decision to write in Tuscan vernacular rather than Latin caused concern among critics of his day, one writing to warn that the poem would be 'sounded tritely on the lips of women' and 'croaked forth at street corners'; even Voltaire found the poem's mixture of styles and genres 'bizarre', a 'hotchpotch'.⁷⁵ Carson, however, responds positively to the variety and energy of his language, which takes in 'both formal discourse and the language of the street', and his own translation enhances Dante's multiplicity of registers, tones, and styles (*IDA*, xxi). In doing so, Carson's translation is peculiarly well-equipped to convey the sense of language *in extremis* that permeates the original, of words trying but often failing to describe the awful realities they confront: 'if my pen/ has strayed, it's from the strangeness of it all'; 'our minds weren't made for such reality,/ beside which any form of words must pale'; 'no words exist for such a screed' (*IDA*, 177, 193, 238). Translating Dante, then, Carson finds himself returning to issues that are prevalent in his earlier Belfast poems; but the strongly self-reflexive aspect of his translation is evident in other ways too. It is telling, for example, that Dante's opening line, 'Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita', should become in Carson's version, 'Halfway through the *story* of my life' (*IDA*, 1, my emphasis), reminding us of his recurrent interests in narrative and storytelling; and that Dante's journey through the 'gloomy wood' should link walking and poetic metre, 'one foot firmly set/ below the other in iambic stress' (*IDA*, 2). During his initial equivocations about entering the Inferno with Virgil, Dante is said to have 'shilly-shallied on that twilit shore' (*IDA*, 10), while Carson informs the reader that he only embarked upon a commission to translate from Dante's poem 'after much shilly-shallying' (*IDA*, ix). Carson's retelling of Dante's journey through the deepest reaches of Hell can therefore also be read as an oblique commentary upon his own journeying into Dante's text.

Because Dante's journey takes him through an intermediate zone between waking and sleeping, life and death, Carson has drawn parallels

between *The Inferno* and Brian Merriman's *Cúirt an Mheán Oíche*, suggesting that both texts resemble the Irish genre of the *aisling* or poetic dream-vision (*MC*, 13). Strictly speaking, the *aisling* follows a formula whereby the poet encounters a beautiful woman who personifies Ireland and exhorts him to further the nationalist cause, implicitly linking the promise of sexual and political fulfilment. As Joep Leerssen notes, however, a basic feature of the genre is the poet's experience of vision, which marks an overlap between reality and fiction, placing him 'in a mediating position between the spirit-world of *sí* and of mythical phenomena, and the rest of humanity who have no access to that world'.⁷⁶ Merriman's poem certainly exemplifies this condition of ambilocation by transporting the poet-narrator to a fairy court held near his home-town of Feakle in County Clare, but also parodies the literary conventions of the *aisling* tradition by figuring the usually willowy fairy woman as a gigantic, foul-mouthed harridan. In Carson's translation she is described as 'Broad-arsed and big-bellied, built like a tank,/ And angry as thunder from shoulder to shank' (*MC*, 20). This fearsome bailiff of the court wastes little time in excoriating the poet, a middle-aged bachelor, for his connivance with 'the Irish reluctance to breed' (*MC*, 22), and the lively proceedings of the court itself – 'Where the weak are empowered and women are strong' (*MC*, 21) – allow Merriman to engage frankly with contemporary debates over sexual freedoms, the social position of bastards, and relations between the sexes. Indeed, Declan Kiberd reads Merriman's poem as an Irish expression of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque which challenges puritanical social norms by 'democratizing laughter', and 'celebrates not just the mingling of discourses but also the joining of the male and the female body'.⁷⁷

Carson's rollicking, high-spirited translation seems very much in keeping with the tradition of the carnivalesque. He notes that the atmosphere of Merriman's court 'is not so much that of a court of law, but of a country market, filled with verbal commotion and colour' (*MC*, 12–13), and remarks on the linguistic excesses of the text, particularly its 'abundant lexicon of vilification' (*MC*, 14), which he recreates with considerable panache:

BY THE CROWN of Craglee, if I don't admit
That you're doting, decrepit, and feeble of wit –
And to treat this assembly with all due respect –
I'd rip off your head from its scrawny wee neck,
And I'd knock it for six with the toe of my boot,
And I'd give the remainder no end of abuse,

And I'd pluck such a tune from the strings of your heart,
I'd consign you to Hell without halo or harp. (*MC*, 45)

However, as Seamus Heaney observes, despite its proto-feminist expressions of female empowerment and sexual desire Merriman's poem also articulates its fair share of misogynistic hang-ups, placing 'much emphasis upon woman as a kind of human brooder and mostly ignor[ing] her potential as a being independent of her sexual attributes and her reproductive apparatus'.⁷⁸ Heaney's own partial translation in his *The Midnight Verdict* foregrounds the text's exposure of male anxieties over suppressed female power but also mitigates some of its earthiness and vernacular energy by excising its central exchanges and opting to read this eighteenth-century Irish poem 'within the acoustic of classical myth', specifically Ovid's account of the death of Orpheus.⁷⁹ By comparison, Carson's version effects a more thoroughgoing imbrication of high rhetoric and vulgar comedy, and also paints a vivid portrait of contemporary Ireland's 'calamitous state' through anachronistic references to 'hush money, slush funds', 'upstarts and gangsters', and a 'climate' that has 'worsened of late' (*MC*, 21, 33).

Carson's most recent foray into translation, *The Táin*, is perhaps also his most challenging to date, in part because of the temporal distance and difference separating the social, linguistic, and material cultures of his source text, the Irish tale *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, from those of the twenty-first-century Anglophone world his translation addresses. In his introduction, Carson notes that the 'problem' of the *Táin*'s origins is 'ultimately insoluble' (*T*, xx), though it certainly derives from the oral tradition and may date from the eighth century or earlier.⁸⁰ The basic plot-line of the tale is simple enough: Medb, Queen of Connacht, is envious of her husband Ailill's prize bull, Finnbennach, and instigates a cattle raid to seize the Brown Bull of Cooley, which symbolises the tribal power of the Ulaid, a people inhabiting the North of Ireland. The men of the Ulaid are laid low by a curse, leaving only the prodigious youth Cú Chulainn to defend Ulster single-handed from the onslaughts of the Connacht army, which he does with consistently brutal proficiency. Eventually, the Ulstermen revive and are aided by the formerly traitorous Fergus Mac Róich in defeating the army of Connacht. Subsequently, Finnbennach and the Brown Bull clash and the Brown Bull triumphs but is fatally wounded, an ending that qualifies somewhat the text's apparent celebration of heroic prowess.⁸¹

The histories of the text's composition, transmission, redaction, and translation are considerably more complex, however, and pose substantial

difficulties for any retelling. Indeed, because it exists in multiple, incomplete, and composite recensions that each straddle the divide between oral and literate, pagan and Christian cultures, Carson follows Frank O'Connor in regarding the *Táin* as a many-layered archaeological site. Alternatively, in a metaphor of his own, he describes it as

a magnificently ruined cathedral, whose fabric displays the ravages of war, fashion and liturgical expediency: a compendium of architectural interpolations, erasures, deliberate archaisms, renovations and restorations; a space inhabited by many generations, each commenting on their predecessors. (*T*, xiv)

Thus the *Táin*'s complex textual history of accretions and redactions is presented in a spatial image that emphasises its palimpsestic nature, drawing attention to the various erasures and overlaps that occur between its several linguistic strata. Unlike O'Connor, who describes the *Táin* as 'a simply appalling text' that 'has been endlessly scribbled over',⁸² Carson seems fascinated by such over-writings and the alternative narrative versions that the text is capable of encompassing, a multifariousness that he consciously strives to preserve. For instance, in his translation two differing accounts of the journey undertaken by Medb's army from Finnabair to Conaille are given in succession, with appeals being made to 'other authorities and other books' (*T*, 60); and when Fergus first brokers a ceasefire with Cú Chulainn the narrator remarks: 'They stayed there for the night – or twenty nights, as some versions have it' (*T*, 68). This countenancing of other versions and stories in the plural is, of course, an important component of Carson's aesthetic as I have described it in Chapter 5, and seems to determine his preference for Recension I as the 'base text' for his translation over the more 'literary' and 'prolix' Recension II, which is a twelfth-century 'attempt to present a more unified narrative' (*T*, xxv, xiii–xiv).

A similar preference is evident in Thomas Kinsella's 1969 translation, *The Táin*, which successfully replicates in English the laconic tone of the text's earlier variants in order to 'give an idea of the simple force of the story at its best'.⁸³ Carson forthrightly acknowledges Kinsella's pioneering text to have been an important influence, noting that his own version is both a 'commentary' on and a 'tribute' to that of the elder poet (*T*, xxiv–xxv). Nonetheless, certain key differences in approach and effect can be noted. Although Kinsella recognises that the *Táin* possesses 'no unifying narrative tone', he is also animated by a desire to fashion 'a reasonably coherent narrative' by means of 'extraction' and 'reorganization'.⁸⁴ In doing so, Donna Wong observes, Kinsella is 'not

restoring coherence but creating it'; and while Carson follows Kinsella's lead in dividing the narrative into consecutive chapters, thus presenting a more readable text, he is less driven by a need for coherence than by a fascination with what Wong calls the *Táin*'s 'crazy quilt of episodes'.⁸⁵ Indeed, he says that his overall aim in translating the *Táin* is to have 'given some notion of the stylistic heterogeneity of the text' (*T*, xxvi).⁸⁶

This stylistic heterogeneity arises not just from its various rewritings and interpolations but also because of the *Táin*'s characteristically prosimetric form, combining both discursive and formulaic or alliterative prose passages with rhymed syllabic verse. It also includes examples of the genre known as 'rosc', or 'rhetorics', syntactically ambiguous blocks of rhythmic prose that are often gnomic or obscure in their meaning. Carson regards the latter as instances of 'verbal jousting', but notes that his treatment of these differs from Kinsella's as he has rendered them into 'a kind of prose poetry', with spaces inserted between phrases to mark moments of ambiguity or discontinuity (*T*, xv, xxvi). For instance, the Morrígan, a spirit of death and battle, chants these words to the Brown Bull:

restless does the Dark Bull	know death-dealing slaughter
secret that the raven	wrings from writhing soldiers
as the Dark One grazes	on the dark green grasses
waving meadows blossoming	with necks and flowers (<i>T</i> , 57)

Carson also holds much more closely to the syllable-count and rhyme schemes of the poems by contrast with Kinsella's neo-modernist free verse, his 'fidelity' to the original being evident chiefly in formal terms, whereas he takes more liberties with the order and tone of the narrative. All in all, such fidelity is best understood as an attempt to preserve the strangeness and difference of the *Táin* for modern readers, its multiplicity and resistance to more familiar English literary forms. It is also appropriate that he should remark on the multiple etymologies of the Irish word 'táin', which can describe a raid, a foray, a gathering or assembly, or can mean 'a compilation or anthology of stories and verse, which is precisely what the *Táin* is: words captured on calf skin' (*T*, xv).

On the whole, Carson is also more chary than Kinsella of construing the *Táin* as Ireland's national epic,⁸⁷ tending to foreground aspects of the text that problematise its 'epic' status. As Maria Tymoczko remarks, the tale has historically posed 'serious political problems [...] as a document of cultural nationalism', chiefly because the greatest Irish heroic poem turns out to be 'unliterary, raunchy, and weird'.⁸⁸ Kinsella, of course, is

famously unsqueamish about the *Táin*'s frankness in relation to sexuality and bodily functions, but there is also a heroic grandeur about his translation that remains largely unironised, and in this respect Carson's version differs. Mikhail Bakhtin has said that epic discourse aspires to be singular or 'monologic'; it is handed down as tradition and therefore as 'sacred and sacrosanct, evaluated the same way by all and demanding a pious attitude toward itself'.⁸⁹ However, Carson's keen awareness of the *Táin*'s pervasive wry humour, along with his emphasis upon the text's intrinsic variety or polyphony, lead to the eschewal of such piety and the pluralisation of the 'single and unified world view' that epic discourse expresses. He achieves this through instances of comic degradation and a process Bakhtin calls 'novelization'. By incorporating aspects of extra-literary language, Bakhtin contends, high literary genres such as epic may 'become dialogized, permeated with laughter, irony, humor, elements of self-parody' and so erode the distance imposed by the absolute epic past, its closed 'world of "firsts" and "bests"'.⁹⁰ An example from *The Táin* would be the satirical innuendo that attends Fergus's loss of his sword following a sexual encounter with Medb, and its replacement with a wooden substitute, 'a great big useless rudder' (*T*, 60–1, 76). Subsequently, Fergus remonstrates with Cú Chulainn over his slaying of Etarcomol, saying 'You must think I've a very short prick' (*T*, 77).

Carson's translation also highlights those moments in the *Táin* when the dominant forms of martial masculinity are either mocked or called into question, perhaps as a partial counterbalance to the text's overtly misogynistic depiction of Queen Medb.⁹¹ Although Cú Chulainn repeatedly proves himself an awesome warrior, he is nonetheless occasionally reduced to donning false beards of grass or blackberries so as not to be ridiculed as 'a mere boy' by women and other male warriors (*T*, 80, 93). Carson also plays up the homoerotic overtones of Cú Chulainn's relationship with his foster brother, Fer Diad – they are described as 'Two hearts that beat as one', 'men who shared a bed' (*T*, 141) – and notes the crudely sexual connotations that attend the latter's death when his 'rear portal' is penetrated by Cú Chulainn's phallic weapon, the 'gae bolga' (*T*, 151, 212–13, n. 4). This is not to imply that Carson's translation is primarily parodic or comical but rather to illustrate the range of tones and registers he utilises throughout, from full-throated heroic bombast and poetic pathos to scatological humour and rich irony. For instance, Cú Chulainn's weariness at facing such a multitude of foes alone is sensitively rendered, and his profound grief over Fer Diad's death poignantly but economically expressed: 'He could have cut off my arm,/

my leg, and still I would mourn/ Fer Diad of the steeds, who was/ part of me, and breathes no more' (*T*, 153).

A further aspect of the *Táin* that Carson is particularly adept at conveying is its obsession with topography, particularly with place-names and their often fanciful etymologies, constructing a nuanced understanding of 'landscape as a mnemonic map' where every hill, stone, and ford has a story to tell. To this end, he notes the text's affinities with 'dindsenchas', the Irish tradition of place-lore, and suggests that the *Táin* be considered 'not as a straightforward story-line running from A to B, but as a journey through a landscape, with all sorts of interesting detours to be taken off the main route, like a series of songs with variant airs' (*T*, xvi–xvii). For example, the route taken by Medb's and Ailill's army from Crúachan Aí in the west to the borders of Ulaid territory in the north-east is given in terms of a detailed inventory of place-names and their meanings that fills three pages of text (*T*, 15–17); and in his death-throes the Brown Bull is made to wander across much of the territory of the *Táin* in order to provide further opportunities for dindsenchas:

He went then to Éten Tairb, where he rested his brow against the hill. Hence the name Éten Tairb, the Bull's Brow, in Muirthemne Plain. Then he went by the Midluachair Road to Cuib, where he used to dwell with the dry cows of Dáire, and he tore up the ground there. Hence the name Gort mBúraig, Trench Field. Then he went on and fell dead at the ridge between Ulster and Uí Echach. That place is now called Druim Tairb, Bull Ridge. (*T*, 208)

It is evident that many such stories are retrospective, instances of back-projection that are also efforts to read the landscape as a fabric of narratives. Moreover, Carson notes the symbolic importance of fords in the *Táin*, which act as borders or boundaries between human territories but are also 'liminal zones between this world and the Otherworld' (*T*, xviii). They are often also literally battlegrounds, spaces at which, and in which, Cú Chulainn makes his stand against the enemies of Ulster. Fords are thus both portals and barriers, heterotopian spaces that at once invite and repulse acts of translation or crossing over; and Carson may also be remembering the etymology of another place-name, 'Belfast' or 'Béal Feirste', which can be translated as 'approach to the ford' (*BC*, 48).

The Táin, therefore, presents further evidence of Carson's subtle and highly imaginative engagements with space and place, his many-layered explorations of geography and topography always revealing them to be impregnated by and expressive of history and narrative. Space, in Carson's writing, is full of time; it is, in Doreen Massey's words, 'a simultaneity of stories-so-far'.⁹² Similarly, his experiments in translation exemplify

the condition of ambilocation, occupying those literal and metaphorical spaces that are betwixt or between, and facilitating various acts of 'carrying across' while always acknowledging division and difference.

Notes

- 1 Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 75.
- 2 Carson, 'The Other', p. 235.
- 3 Goodby, *Irish Poetry Since 1950*, p. 295.
- 4 Octavio Paz, 'Translation: Literature and Letters,' in Rainer Schulte and John Biguenet, eds, *Theories of Translation: An Anthology of Essays from Dryden to Derrida* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 154.
- 5 Stan Smith, *Irish Poetry and the Construction of Modern Identity: Ireland between Fantasy and History* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2005), p. 203.
- 6 Although the Irish language has a rich and varied history in Belfast, it was not until the late 1960s that 'a neo-Gaeltacht' of Irish-speaking families was firmly established in the city. Aodán Mac Póilin, 'Irish language writing in Belfast after 1900', in Nicholas Allen and Aaron Kelly, eds, *The cities of Belfast* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2003), p. 128.
- 7 'Within Ireland there was Northern Ireland; within Northern Ireland, Belfast; within Belfast, the Falls Road; within the Falls Road, the Carson family, or Clann Mhic Carráin, a household with its own laws, customs and language.' Ciaran Carson, 'The Language Instinct', <<http://esperanto.ie/english/carson.htm>> [14 April 2009].
- 8 Brandes, 'Ciaran Carson interviewed', p. 77.
- 9 Smith, *Irish Poetry and the Construction of Modern Identity*, pp. 206–7.
- 10 Frank Sewell, 'Carson's carnival of language: the influence of Irish and the oral tradition', in Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, ed., *Ciaran Carson: Critical Essays* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2009), p. 200.
- 11 Lawrence Venuti, 'Translation, Community, Utopia', in Lawrence Venuti, ed., *The Translation Studies Reader* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 477.
- 12 Kennedy-Andrews, 'For all I know', p. 21.
- 13 Justin Quinn, *The Cambridge Introduction to Modern Irish Poetry, 1800–2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 199.
- 14 'A black, E white, I red, U green, O blue: vowels./ One day I'll tell your embryonic births [...].' Arthur Rimbaud, 'Vowels', in *Collected Poems*, trans. Martin Sorrell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 135. Carson also refers directly to Rimbaud's poem in 'Q' and 'U' from 'Letters from the Alphabet' (*OEC*, 27, 31).
- 15 Jerzy Jarniewicz, 'After Babel: Translation and Mistranslation in Contemporary British Poetry', *European Journal of English Studies* 6.1 (2002), p. 100.
- 16 Patricia Horton, "'Faery lands forlorn": reading tradition in the poetry of Ciaran Carson', in Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, ed., *Ciaran Carson: Critical Essays* (Dublin: Four Courts, 2009), p. 175.
- 17 Derek Attridge, *Joyce Effects: On Language, Theory, and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 161.
- 18 Jacques Derrida, 'Des Tours de Babel', in Peggy Kamuf, ed., *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), p. 250.

- 19 Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 18.
- 20 Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility*, p. 20.
- 21 Sarah Maguire, 'Translation', *Poetry Review* 94.4 (2004/5), p. 60.
- 22 Benjamin, *Illuminations*, pp. 79, 73.
- 23 See Maria Tymoczko, *Translation in a Postcolonial Context: Early Irish Literature in English Translation* (Manchester: St Jerome Publishing, 1999), pp. 21, 26.
- 24 Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation* (London: Vintage, 1996), p. 624.
- 25 Tony Crowley, *Wars of Words: The Politics of Language in Ireland 1537–2004* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 186–90.
- 26 Quinn, *The Cambridge Introduction to Modern Irish Poetry*, p. 144.
- 27 Frank Sewell, 'Between two languages: poetry in Irish, English and Irish English', in Matthew Campbell, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Contemporary Irish Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 160, 166.
- 28 Corcoran, *After Yeats and Joyce*, pp. vi, 10.
- 29 Carson, 'The Other', p. 235.
- 30 Brown, *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History*, p. 350.
- 31 Heaney's translations are numerous and include *Sweeney Astray*, *The Cure at Troy*, *Beowulf*, *The Burial at Thebes*, and *The Testament of Cresseid*; Longley's poetry has long been closely engaged with the classics, particularly Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*; Mahon has translated extensively from the French, including work by Molière, Racine, Nerval, and Phillipe Jaccotet; McGuckian and Muldoon have both translated book-length collections by the Irish-language poet Nuala ní Dhomhnaill, and Muldoon has also produced a version of Aristophanes' *The Birds*; Paulin's *The Road to Inver* collects his translations from French, Italian, German, and Russian poets which first appeared between 1975 and 2003.
- 32 Michael Cronin, *Translating Ireland: Translation, Languages, Cultures* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1996), p. 181.
- 33 Seamus Heaney, *Sweeney Astray* (London: Faber & Faber, 1984), p. vi; see also Carson's review article, 'Sweeney Astray: Escaping from Limbo', in Tony Curtis, ed., *The Art of Seamus Heaney* (Bridgend: Seren, 3rd edn, 1994), pp. 141–8.
- 34 Gerard Murphy, ed., *Early Irish Lyrics: Eighth to Twelfth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956), p. 5.
- 35 Ciaran Carson, 'Introduction', in P.L. Henry, ed. and trans., *Amra Cholum Chille: Dallán's Elegy for Columba* (Belfast: Colmcille and ULTACH Trust, 2006), p. 8.
- 36 Heaney, *Preoccupations*, p. 181.
- 37 For example, see Corcoran, 'One Step Forward, Two Steps Back', pp. 214–15, and Longley, *The Living Stream*, p. 53. Longley pertinently notes that 'Carson's quotations, like his street-names and brand-names, belong to a semiotic kaleidoscope whereby bemused narrators revise literary history as history revises them.'
- 38 Stafford, *Starting Lines in Scottish, Irish, and English Poetry*, p. 246.
- 39 Horton, 'Faery lands forlorn', p. 163.
- 40 Horton, 'Faery lands forlorn', p. 165.
- 41 Francis Mulhern, *The Present Lasts a Long Time: Essays in Cultural Politics* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1998), p. 21.
- 42 'There's no word in Irish for *No*. Nor is there one for *Yes*. Of course you can express assent or dissent, but in a slightly roundabout way. You have to reply in the verb in

- which the question was asked. For example, “Have you eaten yet?” and you reply “I have eaten” or “I have not eaten”, except you leave out the “I”, which strikes me as important.’ Brandes, ‘Ciaran Carson interviewed’, p. 84.
- 43 Ciaran Carson, “‘Whose Woods These Are ...’: Some Aspects of Poetry and Translation’, *The Yellow Nib 2* (2006), p. 117.
- 44 Umberto Eco elaborates this conception of translation as negotiation, a process that necessarily entails both losses and gains, when he writes: ‘Between the purely theoretical argument that, since languages are differently structured, translation is impossible, and the commonsensical acknowledgement that people, in this world, after all, do translate and understand each other, it seems to me that the idea of translation as a process of negotiation (between author and text, between author and readers, as well as between the structure of two languages and the encyclopaedias of two cultures) is the only one that matches our experience.’ Umberto Eco, *Mouse or Rat? Translation as Negotiation* (London: Phoenix, 2004), p. 34.
- 45 David Wheatley, “‘That blank mouth’: Secrecy, shibboleths, and silence in Northern Irish poetry’, *Journal of Modern Literature* 25.1 (2001), p. 4.
- 46 Steven Matthews, *Irish Poetry: Politics, History, Negotiation: The Evolving Debate, 1969 to the Present* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997), p. 197.
- 47 Matthews, *Irish Poetry*, p. 189.
- 48 Gillis, ‘Ciaran Carson: Beyond Belfast’, p. 184.
- 49 Gillis, ‘Ciaran Carson: Beyond Belfast’, p. 184.
- 50 As a very general rule of thumb, Ulster Protestants are thought to pronounce the letter ‘H’ as ‘aitch’, while Catholics typically say ‘haitch’.
- 51 Declan Kiberd, *Irish Classics* (London: Granta, 2001), pp. 602–16; Sewell, ‘Between two languages’, p. 151.
- 52 See *FFA*, 204, and Carson, ‘Whose Woods These Are’, pp. 118–19. In an essay on Irish poetry of the 1940s Carson admits that he has been trying to translate Ó Ríordáin’s poem ‘for about half of my life’, noting that ‘the title itself is untranslatable’, and includes yet another version under the title ‘Mirror’. Ciaran Carson, ‘Beagles, Horses, Thighs, Bikes, Boats, Grass, Bluebells, Rickshaws, Stockings’, in Theo Dorgan and Noel Duffy, eds, *Watching the River Flow: A Century of Irish Poetry* (Dublin: Poetry Ireland, 1999), p. 85.
- 53 Charles Baudelaire, *The Complete Verse*, trans. Francis Scarfe (London: Anvil, 1986), p. 61.
- 54 Peter Denman, ‘Language and the prosodic line in Carson’s poetry’, in Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, ed., *Ciaran Carson: Critical Essays* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2009), p. 28.
- 55 Alan Gillis, ‘Acoustic perfume’, in Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, ed., *Ciaran Carson: Critical Essays* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2009), pp. 259, 258.
- 56 Peter Nicholls, *Modernisms: A Literary Guide* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1995), pp. 30–1.
- 57 Rimbaud, *Collected Poems*, pp. 124, 125.
- 58 Ross, *The Emergence of Social Space*, p. 120.
- 59 Michael Hofmann and James Lasdun, eds, *After Ovid: New Metamorphoses* (London: Faber & Faber, 1994).
- 60 The example of Michael Longley is particularly relevant in this regard, especially his engagements with Homer and appropriations of the figure of Odysseus, but also his dialogues with Latin poets such as Ovid, Horace, Propertius, and Tibullus.

- See McDonald, *Mistaken Identities*, pp. 138–42, and John Kerrigan, ‘Ulster Ovids’, in Neil Corcoran, ed., *The Chosen Ground: Essays on the Contemporary Poetry of Northern Ireland* (Bridgend: Seren Books, 1992), pp. 244–46.
- 61 Kerrigan, ‘Ulster Ovids’, p. 242.
- 62 Sarah Annes Brown, *The Metamorphoses of Ovid: From Chaucer to Ted Hughes* (London: Duckworth, 2002), p. 12.
- 63 Jerzy Jarniewicz, ‘Alphabets and labyrinths in Ciaran Carson’s *Fishing for amber*’, in Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, ed., *Ciaran Carson: Critical Essays* (Dublin: Four Courts, 2009), p. 225.
- 64 In interview, Carson speaks of his experiments with rhyme and narrative in the following terms: ‘I found in a way rhyme helps you to find a story. [...] This idea that rhyme invents a story almost of its own accord. And there’s a sort of randomness involved in it as well, of course. An interesting edge between writing the story yourself and allowing the story to occur via rhymes.’ McGrath, ‘Ciaran Carson: Interview with Niall McGrath’, p. 63.
- 65 ‘You can see I use dictionaries. The language is too big for me, and I’ve come to realise more and more my ignorance of it. If language is a mirror, I look up *mirror*, and discover it to be, among other things, “a small glass formerly worn in the hat by men and at the girdle by women”; it is “the speculum of a bird’s wing”.’ Carson, ‘The Other’, p. 235.
- 66 Rod Mengham, *Language* (London: Fontana, 1995), p. 110. On Carson’s use of dictionaries see McCarthy, ‘Ciaran Carson’s Labyrinths’, p. 113.
- 67 This is essentially the position taken recently by Robin Kirkpatrick in the introduction to his own translation of the *Inferno*: ‘All too often rhyme becomes the dominant point of interest in a line, drawing undue attention to itself and often distorting the subtleties of cadence or inflection and thrust of Dante’s narrative.’ Robin Kirkpatrick, ‘Introduction’, Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy I: Inferno*, trans. Robin Kirkpatrick (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2006), p. xciii. By contrast, Carson tends to see such ‘distortions’ as both inevitable and creatively productive.
- 68 Venuti, *The Translator’s Invisibility*, p. 34.
- 69 David Wallace, ‘Dante in English’, in Rachel Jacoff, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Dante* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 252–5.
- 70 For details and the broader context see Parker, *Northern Irish Literature 1975–2006*, pp. 202–3.
- 71 Nick Havely, ‘Hell for Poets’, *The Cambridge Quarterly* 32.4 (2003), p. 375.
- 72 Eco, *Mouse or Rat?*, p. 56.
- 73 Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy I: Inferno*, trans. Kirkpatrick, p. 279.
- 74 For the likely origin of the phrase ‘mahogany gaspipe’ see Myles na Gopaleen, *The Best of Myles*, ed. Kevin O’Nolan (London: Picador, 1977), p. 66.
- 75 Nick Havely, *Dante* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), pp. 226, 230.
- 76 Joep Leerssen, *Mere Irish and Fíor Ghael: Studies in the Idea of Irish Nationality, its Development and Literary Expression prior to the Nineteenth Century* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1996), p. 238.
- 77 Kiberd, *Irish Classics*, pp. 191–2, 195.
- 78 Seamus Heaney, *The Redress of Poetry* (London: Faber & Faber, 1995), p. 56.
- 79 Seamus Heaney, *The Midnight Verdict* (Loughcrew: The Gallery Press, 1993), p. 11.

- 80 For an overview of scholarly attempts to date the first composition of the *Táin* see Ruairí Ó hUiginn, 'The Background and Development of *Táin Bó Cúailgne*', in J.P. Mallory, ed., *Aspects of The Táin* (Belfast: December Publications, 1992), pp. 31–2.
- 81 On this point see Máire ní Mhaonaigh, 'The literature of medieval Ireland, 800–1200: from the Vikings to the Normans', in Margaret Kelleher and Philip O'Leary, eds, *The Cambridge History of Irish Literature: Volume 1: To 1890* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 53.
- 82 Frank O'Connor, *The Backward Look: A Survey of Irish Literature* (London: Macmillan, 1967), p. 30.
- 83 Thomas Kinsella, *The Táin: Translated from the Irish Epic Táin Bó Cúailnge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. xi.
- 84 Kinsella, *The Táin*, pp. xiii, xi.
- 85 Donna Wong, 'Literature and the oral tradition', in Margaret Kelleher and Philip O'Leary, eds, *The Cambridge History of Irish Literature: Volume 1: To 1890* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 642, 639.
- 86 Bernard O'Donoghue also observes that Carson's 'modern version' 'testifies to the stylistic and episodic vagaries of the medieval text, seeing these as an inalienable aspect of the original'. Bernard O'Donoghue, 'Review of Ciaran Carson, *The Táin*', *Translation and Literature* 17 (2008), p. 239.
- 87 'The *Táin*, or Cattle Raid, is the nearest approach to a great epic that Ireland has produced. For parts of the narrative, and for some of the ancillary stories, achievement at the highest level of saga literature may fairly be claimed.' Kinsella, *The Táin*, p. vii.
- 88 Tymoczko, *Translation in a Postcolonial Context*, p. 66.
- 89 Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, p. 16.
- 90 Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, pp. 35, 7, 13.
- 91 On the depiction of Medb see Patricia Kelly, 'The Táin as Literature', in J.P. Mallory, ed., *Aspects of The Táin* (Belfast: December Publications, 1992), pp. 77–84.
- 92 Massey, *for space*, p. 9.

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