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BELFAST TEXTILES
ON CIARAN CARSON'S POETICS

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Abstract

This thesis is a study of the formation and development of Ciaran Carson's poetics from his debut in the 1970s up to and including his fourth principal collection of poems, *First Language*, published in 1993. Examining Carson's recourse to different kinds of rewriting, made manifest as intertextuality and translation, it aims to account for the thematic formulation and formal realization of this poetics.

The poetics is elicited from two distinct groups of poems. The first group comprises poems, given in the consecutive volumes *The Lost Explorer* (1978), *The Irish for No* (1987), *Belfast Confetti* (1989) and *First Language*, in which textile techniques serve metaphorically as poetic techniques. These poems are read as formulating a poetics which is formally realized in a second group of poems in which rewriting is the dominant technique. By examining the textile/textual metaphors, and their gradual reconfiguration, and the different manifestations of rewriting in Carson's work the thesis seeks to describe and demonstrate some of the main principles and expressions of this poetics and its development over time.

The thesis sees rewriting as integral to Carson's poetic method: Earlier texts are deliberately drawn upon and made a constitutive part of a new poem. To account for the textual relations and their effect on meaning-making perspectives are borrowed from theories of intertextuality, especially intertextuality as conceptualized by Gérard Genette and Laurent Jenny, as well as from contemporary translation studies and poetics. A theoretical framework is also provided by the textile/textual metaphors which are employed as analytical tools.

It is argued that rewriting is not an end in itself but an important means for the poet to articulate his views on both aesthetic and historical issues. The thesis relates the practice of rewriting to a prominent concern in Carson's work: the relation between form and material and how to adequately express the complicated experiences associated with Northern Ireland in poetic form. The thesis contends through detailed analysis of Carson's strategies of rewriting that his persistent recourse to recycling discloses his attentiveness to his own poetic expression and that his poetics should be seen as both an aesthetics and an ethics – an evolving response along both aesthetic and ethical lines to the complexities of his situation and his role as a poet.

Keywords: Irish poetry, Ciaran Carson, poetics, intertextuality, translation

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Linköping, August 2013

Jenny

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1. Introduction

Forty years ago, in 1973, Ciaran Carson published his first volume of poems, the pamphlet *The Insular Celts*. Included therein is the poem “Interior with Weaver” which three years later would reappear in his first principal collection of poems, *The New Estate* (1976). Though the poem, on the face of it, is a portrayal of a weaver and “his endless repetitions”, it is easy to read it as an analogy for creation in general and thus also for poetic creation, the particular art at which the poet who wrote it aspires to excel.

In fact, “Interior with Weaver” stands as the first example of a type of poem in which various kinds of textile techniques serve as analogues of poetic creation. In *The Insular Celts*, the metaphor is as yet only hinted at but subsequent collections, *The Lost Explorer* (1978), *The Irish for No* (1987), *Belfast Confetti* (1989) and *First Language* (1993), furnish instances that do not only suggest poetic creativity in general but may be specifically applied to Carson’s characteristic method of composing poems through various forms of rewriting. In these collections, a series of metaphors – writing as quilting, writing as unravelling, writing as weaving – preempt some of the principles behind Carson’s poems. In broad, the metaphors help explicate the ways in which an earlier text is appropriated – quoted or rewritten – and made a constitutive part of a new poem (to be discussed below as intertextuality) or the ways in which poems constitute new versions in a new language of texts previously wrought in another (to be discussed under the heading of translation).

This thesis argues that a close examination of textile imagery in Carson’s work and its ramifications, previously not analysed in depth, together with a detailed analysis of Carson’s method of rewriting, allows us to study Carson’s artistic coming-into-being in a new light, particularly its very early phase which is markedly underestimated within established Carson criticism. There has developed a tradition within Carson scholarship, in evidence since the 1990s, to overlook the 70s production and to take his second, and highly praised, major collection of poems *The Irish for No* as starting-point for critical inquiry. Yet omitting the juvenilia has certain bearings on our perception of Carson’s project as well as for

critically analysing his later work. Carson's juvenilia allow us to discern and describe the nature and function of themes and methods which Carson pursues and refines throughout his career, although they take different expressions and formal manifestations.

In uncovering this important poetological strand in Carson's work, I will, however, concentrate on Carson's early collections, published between 1973 and 1993.¹ My concern is with two distinct sets of poems. The first group is a series of poems, given in the consecutive collections *The Lost Explorer*, *The Irish for No*, *Belfast Confetti* and *First Language*, which presents us with textile techniques and which may be seen as analogous to poetic techniques. These poems, although they do not hold the status of meta-poems, may be read as formulating a poetics which is formally realized in a second group of poems in which rewriting is the dominant technique. The subtexts used for this purpose range from early Irish lyrics through Shakespeare, Heaney and Frost to haiku, Ovid and French symbolism, and serve a variety of aims, one of which is to provide representations of Belfast, Carson's native city. By tracing the textile metaphors, and their reconfigurations in consecutive collections, and by analysing Carson's recourse to rewriting (and recycling) in selected key poems, I aim to describe and demonstrate some of the main principles and expressions of this poetics and its development. This in turn allows us to unravel the gradual emergence and transformation of Carson's poetry and his techniques up to where he, as I see it, comes into his own as a poet, the 1993 collection *First Language*. As Carson becomes more adept as a poet the textile metaphors studied in this thesis gradually disappear while the techniques remain and develop. However, it should be stressed that the intention here is not to draw a firm line between the poetry written between 1973 and 1993, and the writing which follows after. The aim is to call attention to continuities between the juvenilia and Carson's later production and to suggest that we might see the poetry up to and including *First Language* in terms of a pattern of growth. Carson's creative output does change character with the 1993 collection but this development might be seen as one where he expands on and applies the techniques gained in earlier collections. After *First Language*, Carson's authorship sees several thematic and stylistic shifts and from the mid-1990s, his writing broadens in terms of genre to

¹ At this point, a short biographical note might be appropriate. Ciaran Carson was born in 1948 in Belfast and raised in a Catholic, Irish-speaking family. He studied English at Queen's University, where Seamus Heaney was one of his teachers. Between 1975 and 1998, Carson held positions with the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, first as Traditional Arts Officer and from 1992 as Literature and Traditional Arts Officer. He was appointed as the Director of the Seamus Heaney Centre for Poetry in 2003. His later work comprises poetry (*Opera Et Cetera* (1996), *The Twelfth of Never* (1998), *The Alexandrine Plan* (1998), *For All We Know* (2008), *On the Night Watch* (2009) and *Until Before After* (2010)) as well as prose (*Last Night's Fun* (1996), *The Star Factory* (1997), *Fishing for Amber* (1999), *Shamrock Tea* (2001), *The Pen Friend* (2009) and *Exchange Places* (2012)). In addition, he has published a number of translations (*The Inferno of Dante Alighieri* (2002), *The Midnight Court* (2005), *The Tain* (2007) and *Illuminations* (2012)).

include prose and more extensive translation. His specific method of writing new texts by rewriting old ones, however, remains.

The pervasiveness and the nature of the development to be discussed in this thesis can be glimpsed from two poems which flank the period with which this thesis is concerned and which, notably, portray a weaver. In the 1973 poem “Interior with Weaver”, mentioned earlier, the speaker is a mere observer, looking at a weaver or what might even be a pictorial representation of a weaver; the poem’s title and the detached and descriptive mode of the poem suggest a painting. What we see in this poem is the “idea” of the weaver as a model for the poet. When Carson returns to the activity of weaving twenty years later, in the poem “Second Language” of the 1993 collection *First Language*, the poet-speaker is, by implication, a weaver as a weaver’s loom and a typewriter coalesce in an image where the two are difficult to disentangle: “Bobbins pirn and shuttle in Imperial / Typewriterspeak.” The inclusion of the image of the poet as a weaver in the poem “Second Language” is most significant. The poem, which is semi-autobiographical, charts the speaker’s gradual acquisition of Irish, Latin and finally English. It does not seem amiss to suggest that what is depicted here is also the poet’s gradual acquisition of a language. For it is when the speaker has gained proficiency in the last of these languages that the poem shifts its tense from past to present and the poet begins to write/weave: “I hit the keys. The ribbon-black clunks out the words in serial.” It is this process that I aim to explicate in this thesis.

Previous Research

Since Carson’s emergence as a poet of acclaim in the late 1980s, there has been a sustained increase in critical engagement with his work. He is a given representative of contemporary Irish literature in literary histories, handbooks and anthologies.² Numerous articles have been published on his work and recent years have seen the appearance of the first full-length critical studies of his work: *Ciaran Carson: Critical Essays* (ed. Elmer Kennedy-Andrews) published in 2009 and Neal Alexander’s monograph *Ciaran Carson: Space, Place, Writing*, published the following year, in 2010. This section provides an overview of the major currents within Carson criticism and positions the present thesis within this critical field. Further references are brought up in the analytical chapters, where relevant. Each analytical

² In book chapters and anthologies Carson is often grouped and discussed together with the poetry of his contemporaries Paul Muldoon, Medbh McGuckian and, occasionally, Tom Paulin. A critical narrative that has gained some currency sees the poets of this generation as representatives of a postmodern strand in Northern Irish poetry whose experimentation with poetic form distinguishes their work from the preceding generation of Seamus Heaney, Derek Mahon and Michael Longley. This narrative, however, has also met with objections from critics who propose more nuanced readings of the individual poets (of both generations) and their relation to poetic form.

chapter also furnishes a brief summary of the critical response to the poetry discussed therein.

Carson's poetry dominates in critical discussion whereas his prose works and translations have garnered less critical attention. Much criticism is centred on his second major collection *The Irish for No*, and the two collections which followed shortly after, *Belfast Confetti* and *First Language*. Comments on the juvenilia are scarce, something which has not gone entirely unnoticed by critics. There are a few scholars who seek to remedy the critical imbalance between the early work and Carson's mature writing, pointing to continuities, and whose contributions should be duly mentioned.³ Patricia Horton posits that the marginalization of Carson's first major collection *The New Estate* might be due to the fact that "it does not fit into the 'postmodern' paradigm" which criticism has imposed on *The Irish for No* and later collections.⁴ Addressing Carson's status as a postmodern writer, however, Horton finds that *The New Estate* introduces "strategies and issues" which we encounter again in Carson's later production; for example "its impulse towards transcendence" and "its exploration of real and ideal selves".⁵ Kathleen McCracken finds that "[t]onally and contextually, Carson's voice and preoccupations are already formed in the early work" but finds no continuity on the level of form.⁶ John Goodby recognizes in the early work "Carson's humour" and detects "elements of a critique of Heaneyesque notions of mythic history" in the poem "The Insular Celts".⁷ The contributions of Peter Denman, Eamonn Hughes and Frank Sewell included in the 2009 *Ciaran Carson: Critical Essays* touch on the juvenilia. Regarding form and verse lines, Denman finds that *The Lost Explorer* to some extent anticipates *The Irish for No*.⁸ Hughes shows that Irish traditional forms and the urban, said to characterize Carson's mature work, were already present in Carson's early poetry.⁹ Sewell considers the influence of the Irish language and the

³ The marginal status of the early work in Carson criticism and its consequences for a critical reading and appreciation of Carson's work is discussed at more length in Chapters 2 and 3.

⁴ Patricia Horton, "From Romantic to Postmodern: Imagining the Real in the Work of Ciaran Carson", *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 25.1–2 (1999), 349. Horton has also published an extended version of this essay: "'Faery lands forlorn': Reading Tradition in the Poetry of Ciaran Carson", in Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, ed., *Ciaran Carson: Critical Essays* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2009).

⁵ Horton, "From Romantic to Postmodern", 349.

⁶ Kathleen McCracken, "Ciaran Carson: Unravelling the Conditional, Mapping the Provisional", in Michael Kenneally, ed., *Poetry in Contemporary Irish Literature* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1995), 369.

⁷ John Goodby, *Irish Poetry since 1950: From Stillness into History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 192.

⁸ Peter Denman, "Language and the Prosodic Line in Carson's Poetry", in *Ciaran Carson: Critical Essays*, 29.

⁹ Eamonn Hughes, "'the mouth of the poem': Carson and Place", in *Ciaran Carson: Critical Essays*, 86.

tradition of oral storytelling on Carson's work from *The New Estate* onwards.¹⁰ These contributions are important but they are, at the same time, in a minority. The claim can be made that Carson's juvenilia have not made it into critical discussion and that from a critical perspective *The Irish for No* is, as one critic puts it, seen to have "marked the inception, in diction as much as in themes, of a distinctive poetic writing".¹¹

As will be discussed at more length in Chapter 2, which deals with the 1970s production, the early poems have in part been overshadowed by the accomplishment of *The Irish for No* and subsequent collections. And if *The Irish for No* has served as one critical base, criticism is now beginning to move on to Carson's more recent writings. While the two full-length studies devoted to Carson's work aim to cover Carson's whole career, they can be set against the scope and approach of recent handbooks of Irish poetry, published in the same period. In *Concise Companion to Post-War British and Irish Poetry* (2009), *Modern Irish and Scottish Poetry* (2011) and *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish Poetry* (2012), Carson's juvenilia is mentioned only in brief or elided altogether.¹² While it remains to be seen which trend will gain currency, it may be argued that as forty years have passed since Carson made his poetic debut, it is time to return to the early phase, which is an integral part of his authorship and is vital to a thorough understanding of the gestation and formation of his work.

Carson's writings have been approached from a wide range of critical perspectives, yet there are some topics that are more recurrent than others and form identifiable categories. In the three recent literary histories given above Carson is (chiefly) discussed in chapters which deal with Belfast/the city, poetic form, and translation.¹³ These are categories representative of Irish poetry to which Carson has made important contributions. They also draw together previous scholarship: While translation is a relatively recent interest amongst Carson scholars, the city and issues related to form are consolidated within the established criticism. The city is the main topic of Alexander's monograph and several contributions in *Ciaran Carson: Critical Essays*, although not limited to these, deal with the same topics.

Carson's hometown Belfast is the base for his poetry, and the city (with related notions of space and place) is arguably the most examined aspect of Carson's

¹⁰ Frank Sewell, "Carson's Carnival of Language: The Influence of Irish and the Oral Tradition", in *Ciaran Carson: Critical Essays*, 182ff.

¹¹ Rui Carvalho Homem, *Poetry and Translation in Northern Ireland: Dislocations in Contemporary Writing* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 166.

¹² This is not to disregard that the studies devoted to Carson's work and the literary histories have different functions which may account for differences in scope and selection.

¹³ C. D. Blanton, Nigel Alderman and Peter Middleton, eds., *Concise Companion to Post-War British and Irish Poetry* (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009). Peter Mackay, Edna Longley and Fran Brearton, eds., *Modern Irish and Scottish Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011). Fran Brearton and Alan Gillis, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

work. Important contributions to this topic are made by critics who have come to focus on the interrelation between Belfast, as subject matter, and form. Given the steady increase of studies in this category, only a selection can be given here. In his seminal essay “One Step Forward, Two Steps Back: Ciaran Carson’s *The Irish for No*” (1992; rev. 1999), Neil Corcoran claims that Carson’s Belfast has “necessitated the construction of his radically *sui generis* forms” and “provoked, or even demanded” Carson’s “individual forms”.¹⁴ Goodby similarly finds that the city as subject matter has “fed a formal development beyond the dominant lyric”.¹⁵ To Goodby, Carson’s long lines, first encountered in *The Irish for No*, are seen as the formal response to the city thematics. Hughes examines Carson’s combined use of Irish oral and musical forms and references to reading, textuality and the materiality of books, finding that Carson’s “version of the city both enables and emerges from this intersection of traditions and the world of material print culture”.¹⁶ To Hughes, “the urban is given the convoluted form previously associated with the traditional; the urban has become, like the traditional, self-inwoven and recursive”.¹⁷ Eric Falci and Kennedy-Andrews both elicit a poetics although their focus is on different forms and principles. Falci proposes that “the dominant metaphor of Carson’s poetics is cartographical” and that Carson, in his attempts to represent the city, counterpoises “two different kinds of maps”: “remembered maps” and “the surveillance map”.¹⁸ Kennedy-Andrews, in turn, finds that it is the flâneur’s “perspective of situatedness, historicity and fragmentariness that forms the basis of Carson’s new urban poetics”.¹⁹ Kennedy-Andrews focuses his analysis of what he terms “broken forms” and “gapped, elliptical poems”, chiefly in *Belfast Confetti* and *Breaking News*, and finds that the “broken style reflects a fractured city” but also “function[s] to represent epistemological attitudes”.²⁰ Alexander’s monograph *Ciaran Carson: Space, Place, Writing* is to date the most extensive study on the intersection of the city and writing in Carson’s work. Taking Carson’s whole career as his corpus, this thematic study relates Carson’s writing of the city to issues of “language and narrative, memory and history, violence and power”.²¹ The idea that subject matter and form are interrelated informs the present thesis. In contrast to earlier studies, however,

¹⁴ 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), 216. Revised version published in Neil Corcoran, *Poets of Modern Ireland: Text, Context, Intertext* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1999), 180.

¹⁵ Goodby, *Irish Poetry since 1950*, 290.

¹⁶ Hughes, “‘the mouth of the poem’: Carson and Place”, 104.

¹⁷ Hughes, “‘the mouth of the poem’: Carson and Place”, 88.

¹⁸ Eric Falci, “Place, Space, and Landscape”, in *Concise Companion to Post-War British and Irish Poetry*, 213f.

¹⁹ Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, “In Belfast”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish Poetry*, 463.

²⁰ Kennedy-Andrews, “In Belfast”, 462.

²¹ Neal Alexander, *Ciaran Carson: Space, Place, Writing* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010), 11.

the thesis relates this to Carson's recourse to rewriting. Rewriting as an aesthetic principle, carries with it an ethical stance, and enables Carson to write about the city in ways which allows both for its perpetual change and for multiple versions and interpretations. That said, this thesis is not limited to representations of Belfast or the city as subject matter.

Critics have also taken an interest in other aspects of form. Examining the narrative structure of *The Irish for No* in his early and highly influential essay "One Step Forward, Two Steps Back", mentioned earlier, Corcoran comments on the poems' "intricate circularity".²² Seán Crosson studies *The Irish for No* in relation to Irish traditional music. Crosson finds a certain correspondence between Carson's metre and Irish traditional music and points to repetition and variation as characteristics of both Irish traditional music and Carson's poetry.²³ This study too focuses on repetition and variation but links this to Carson's patchwork poetics. Other critics have discussed Carson's poetry in relation to poetic forms. Denman analyses Carson's verse lines, rhymes and deployment of traditional forms such as the sonnet and his deviations from norms. The conventional forms, Denman holds, should be seen as a matrix against which Carson's poems can be read. He extends this idea to Carson's translations and suggests that the "distinctiveness of the translation operates against and around an original text that is always there in the background".²⁴ Denman undertakes formal analysis of some poems but not Carson's translations which are only mentioned in passing. Carson is also one of several poets discussed by Alan Gillis in his chapter on "The Modern Irish Sonnet" in *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish Poetry*. Gillis traces Carson's variations of the sonnet form and finds that in *First Language*, *Opera et Cetera* and particularly *The Twelfth of Never*, "the sonnet is purposively felt as an arbitrary grid" and that Carson "invites the form's pre-given architecture to predominate".²⁵ Denman's and Gillis' remarks are close to the idea of procedural forms and constraints as generative devices which inform my discussion of some of Carson's poems, particularly the rewritings included in *First Language*.

Carson's intra- and intertextuality is a feature often noticed and commented upon by critics. Still, there is a shortage in in-depth analyses. Hughes takes an interest in Carson's "inter-, intra- and para-textual play" and their "deliberate display" in Carson's texts. He links this aspect of Carson's work to the Irish oral tradition and urban print culture. These textual relations are part of "the world of commodity and exchange, the world of the urban".²⁶ His interest is in intertextuality as an aspect of Carson's work rather than in activating the textual links and interrelations, but the essay contains many perceptive points. Analyses of

²² Corcoran, "One Step Forward, Two Steps Back" (1992), 227.

²³ Seán Crosson, "Performance and Music in the Poetry of Ciaran Carson", *Nordic Irish Studies* 3.1 (2004), 101.

²⁴ Denman, 28.

²⁵ Alan Gillis, "The Modern Irish Sonnet", in *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish Poetry*, 583.

²⁶ Hughes, "the mouth of the poem: Carson and Place", 104.

Carson's intertextuality are often limited to individual poems, and critics tend to divide on the function of intertextuality in Carson's work. Commenting on textual relations in *The Irish for No*, Corcoran finds that "when he is allusive, he is almost uninterpretablely so, not pointed or ironic or context-creating or self-displaying in any of the recognised ways".²⁷ Mary Fitzgerald-Hoyt reads "The Irish for No" through a postcolonial prism. The poem and its use of Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" is "a colonial response".²⁸ Fiona Stafford too analyses Keats's presence in the poem in relation to postcolonial theories and applies Homi Bhabha's notion of mimicry but she concludes that the poem is not a simple "postcolonial rejection"; the two poems are "linked by their very uncertainties".²⁹ As regards intertextuality, "The Irish for No" is the most examined poem. Michael O'Neill and Peter Mackay are two other critics who have contributed perspectives on this poem and its use of intertexts, considering the poem's dialogue with Romanticism.³⁰ The thesis sees intratextuality and intertextuality as parts of the same phenomenon and as systematic and integral to Carson's poetic method. The thesis also performs intertextual readings of several key poems where the textual relations are activated.

In addition to the influence of the Irish tradition of music, song and storytelling on Carson's work (see Crosson and Sewell above) critics have also taken an interest in the connections between Carson's writings and that of other authors, as well as with various literary traditions. John Kerrigan discusses Carson's poetry in relation to Seamus Heaney's, pointing to differences in the two poets' conception of language and place.³¹ Horton discusses Carson in relation to Keats, De Quincey, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Walter Benjamin and Borges and finds a shared interest in "perception, vision and visionary states, and in their exploration of the relationship between 'reality' and imagination".³² Ciaran O'Neill considers Carson's poetry in relation to American precursors and notes the formative influence of C. K. Williams, William Carlos Williams and Robert Frost on Carson's verse.³³ These are valuable contributions which situate Carson within tradition. The dialogues which the present thesis takes an interest in are, however, of a different kind. The thesis discusses Carson's reviews of earlier poets' work and his handbook on *Irish*

²⁷ Corcoran, "One Step Forward, Two Steps Back" (1992), 228.

²⁸ Mary Fitzgerald-Hoyt, "Grounding Keats's Nightingale: Ciaran Carson's *The Irish for No*", *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 19.2 (1993), 79.

²⁹ Fiona Stafford, *Starting Lines in Scottish, Irish, and English Poetry: From Burns to Heaney* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 291.

³⁰ Michael O'Neill, *The All-Sustaining Air: Romantic Legacies and Renewals in British, American, and Irish Poetry since 1900* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 133f. Peter Mackay, "Contemporary Northern Irish Poetry and Romanticism", in *The Oxford Handbook of Irish Poetry*, 304ff.

³¹ See John Kerrigan, "Earth Writing: Seamus Heaney and Ciaran Carson", *Essays in Criticism* 48.2 (1998), 144-168.

³² Horton, "From Romantic to Postmodern", 337.

³³ See Ciaran O'Neill, "Borrowed Lines? A Reading of Ciaran Carson's American Influences", in *Ciaran Carson: Critical Essays*, 201-213.

Traditional Music as extra-poetic contributions which disclose his stance on poetological issues, and his poetic method, where textual links influence the meaning of the new (and the old) text in significant ways, i.e. cases of intertextuality and translation.

Carson's practice of translation has been largely underrepresented in criticism but is gradually emerging as a category within Carson scholarship. One of the earliest contributors to this field is Kathleen Shields who examines Carson's version of Rimbaud's "Le Bateau Ivre". Carson's translating strategies in this poem, she finds, "have a destabilizing effect and represent a refusal to anchor meaning in a given history or community", something which she links to Carson's general refusal "to stay still in one meaning or one language".³⁴ Rui Carvalho Homem devotes a chapter to Carson in *Poetry and Translation in Northern Ireland* (2009), aiming to discuss the close relationship between Carson's "original" writing and his translations within the framework of "Carson's spatially alert poetics".³⁵ Homem considers Carson's book-length translations and the versions of foreign originals in *First Language*. To Homem, translation is for Carson an "enabling factor of his ethical and political positioning with regard to his time and place".³⁶ Sewell points to Carson's versions of early Irish lyrics in *The New Estate* and undertakes an analysis of the poem "Winter", relating the discussion to the general influence of the Irish language and the tradition of storytelling on Carson's work.³⁷ Alexander considers translation as both theme and practice and relates this to Carson's "broader concerns with language as both speech and writing".³⁸ Examples are from Carson's whole career: the versions of early Irish lyrics in *The New Estate*, some of the versions of foreign originals included in Carson's collections of poetry, as well as his book-length translations. The chapter provides an excellent survey of different forms of translation in Carson's work but only allows for analysis of some texts. Matthew Reynolds provides a brief discussion of Carson's translation of the *Inferno*, observing its faithfulness to the source text as regards structure and form but remarks on its "great independence of tone".³⁹ Carson, Reynolds finds, makes the *Inferno* "his own distinctive thing".⁴⁰ Justin Quinn's recent contribution to *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish Poetry* aims to counter the scant attention that translations from languages other than Irish have been given "for the understanding of contemporary Irish poetry written in English".⁴¹ Carson's practice is discussed along with that of several other contemporary poets.

³⁴ Kathleen Shields, *Gained in Translation: Language, Poetry and Identity in Twentieth-Century Ireland* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2000), 198f and 201.

³⁵ Homem, 184.

³⁶ Homem, 197.

³⁷ Sewell, 189ff.

³⁸ Alexander, 176.

³⁹ Matthew Reynolds, *The Poetry of Translation: From Chaucer and Petrarch to Homer and Logue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 49.

⁴⁰ Reynolds, 50.

⁴¹ Justin Quinn, "Incoming: Irish Poetry and Translation", in *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish Poetry*, 341.

However, although Quinn's interest is in translations and versions included in the poets' own collections his discussion of Carson includes only a brief reference to *The Alexandrine Plan* and he centres instead on Carson's "'internationalized' anglophone poetic idiom" in *For All We Know*, finding that Carson thereby "sidesteps the issue of the prerogative of a national literature".⁴² Critics tend to fight shy of close examination of Carson's translations, especially the versions included in his collections of poetry, and therefore the critics enumerated above make important contributions to this aspect of Carson's writing. Directing their focus to the relation between translation and Carson's "original" writing, they prepare the ground for further discussion and more in-depth analysis of a corpus which criticism is yet to account for. However, translation and how it forms part of the larger practice of rewriting within Carson's authorship, which the present thesis aims to discuss, still merits attention.

The prevalence in Carson's work of textile metaphors, which will be subject to a detailed analysis in this thesis, has been noted by a number of critics. A first observation is made by McCracken who astutely points to the connection between "the maternal inheritance of unravelling and stitching, and the paternal one of discovery and mapping" and Carson's "praxis" but she limits her observations to the two poems "The Patchwork Quilt" and "Patchwork" and does not specify or pursue the discussion further.⁴³ Clair Wills, similarly limiting her discussion to "Patchwork", aptly observes that "Carson's poetry characteristically draws the disparate elements of memory, fact, and fantasy together, in a manner reminiscent [...] of the stitching together of scraps of different fabric into a whole", linking the idea to the "instability" of memory.⁴⁴ Kennedy-Andrews in *Ciaran Carson: Critical Essays* briefly but perceptively comments that the poem "Patchwork" "offers an emblem of stitching and mending, the poem itself a patchwork made out of fragments of memory and speech, that is, something new made out of old bits and pieces."⁴⁵ Elisabeth Delattre, too, limits her observation to "Patchwork". Her focus is on language and stitches, yarn and thread, "the text becomes a braid, a metaphorical spinning yarn which turns upon itself"; patchwork is referred to only in a footnote where she links the metaphor to language, stating that "[t]his image is indeed quite common in literature, but in Carson's case it acquires further specificity, as it becomes part of the very texture of language".⁴⁶ Alexander, finally, notes Carson's "frequent recourse to metaphors of weaving and patchworks",⁴⁷ further observing that the "metaphorical linkage of the functions of writing and

⁴² Quinn, "Incoming", 352.

⁴³ McCracken, 370f.

⁴⁴ Clair Wills, "Modes of Redress: The Elegy in Recent Irish Poetry", *Princeton University Library Chronicle* 59.3 (Spring 1998), 608.

⁴⁵ Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, "Carson, Heaney, and the Art of Getting Lost", in *Ciaran Carson: Critical Essays*, 244.

⁴⁶ Elisabeth Delattre, "'A Fusillade of Question Marks': (Re)presenting the Present or the Poet as a Chronicler in *The Irish for No* by Ciaran Carson", *Estudios Irlandeses* 5 (2010), 30.

⁴⁷ Alexander, 3.

communication – typically gendered masculine and associated with his postman father – with those of knitting and weaving – gendered feminine and associated with his mother [...] is pervasive in much of Carson’s writing”.⁴⁸ However, despite these useful and pertinent remarks, no one has undertaken a thorough or extensive analysis of the metaphors – their meaning and reconfiguration – and explored their potential for examining Carson’s poetic development and his recourse to intertextuality and translation, which is the project of this thesis.

Theoretical Perspectives

My discussion of Carson’s poetry is predicated on the umbrella term “poetics”. The term, of course, originates with Aristotle’s *Poetics* in which he aims to catalogue “poetry in general”, its division into genres, its structures and effects.⁴⁹ *Poetics*, although variously interpreted, has had an immense impact on poetics and inaugurates a tradition of poetological texts, spanning from Antiquity, through the Renaissance and the Neo-Classical period, which inquires into the nature of poetry (or literature, generally), its forms, distinctive features and purposes, often with a normative stance, stipulating rules for literary creation. In the modern era, as authors begin to articulate and publicly announce their own individual poetics in prefaces, essays and manifestos, we begin to see a shift away from a general and prescriptive poetics to the poetological considerations of the individual author and the term acquires a descriptive meaning. Today poetics usually refers to the poetic practice of an individual author, group or movement as this is made manifest in the literary work itself. In other words, poetics refers to the “implicit principles” which may be elicited through critical and interpretative engagement with the literary material.⁵⁰ The “styles, techniques, and dominant characteristics” thus identified need not be explicitly accounted for by the author him-/herself, as Edgar Allan Poe famously did in his essay “The Philosophy of Composition” (1846), in which he provides a detailed account of the composition of his poem “The Raven”.⁵¹

In the twentieth century poetics has also come to refer to the study of literature or more specifically, the study of literary discourse, seeking to investigate the specificity of literature as a medium, how literary works produce their meaning and literature as a system. In his entry on “poetics” in *Dictionary of Concepts in Literary Criticism and Theory* (1992) Wendell V. Harris notes “the extension of ‘poetics’ to

⁴⁸ Alexander, 127.

⁴⁹ Aristotle, *Poetics*, ed. and trans. Stephen Halliwell (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), 29.

⁵⁰ *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, eds. Alex Preminger and T. V. F. Brogan (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), s.v. *poetics*.

⁵¹ Wendell V. Harris, *Dictionary of Concepts in Literary Criticism and Theory* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1992), 290. Wendell also writes that this usage “has become common in English only recently”, 290. His examples of studies date from the 1960s onwards.

include all investigation into the nature and function of literature as well as into that which makes possible its interpretation”.⁵² This is a direction in part prompted by theoretical developments in other disciplines. Approaches inspired by Russian Formalism and Structuralism, for example, take an interest in literary discourse. Roman Jakobson and Russian Formalism represent one strand which focuses on “the *differentia specifica*” of literature or, with another term, literariness: how literature is different from other art forms as well as how literary discourse differs from other verbal utterances.⁵³ In his seminal essay “Linguistics and Poetics” (1960), Jakobson declares that: “Poetics deals primarily with the question, *What makes a verbal message a work of art?*”⁵⁴ Another strand seeks to describe how literary works produce their meaning and directs its focus to the literary system. In *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature* (1975) Jonathan Culler defines poetics as “the theory of the practice of reading”.⁵⁵ To Culler, poetics is the examination of “the devices, conventions and strategies of literature, of the means by which literary works create their effects” and which “enable them to have the meaning they do for readers of literature”.⁵⁶ A near-similar project is Gérard Genette’s sequence *The Architext* (1979) *Palimpsests* (1982) and *Paratexts* (1987). Here Genette seeks to examine and categorize the different kinds of relations that texts can have with other texts and aims to chart how individual works relate to and achieve their meaning in relation to other texts within the system. In *Palimpsests*, Genette claims that “the subject of poetics is transtextuality, or the textual transcendence of the text [...] ‘all that sets the text in a relationship, whether obvious or concealed, with other texts’”.⁵⁷ To Graham Allen, Genette here “pushes the practice of structuralist poetics into an arena which can be termed intertextual”.⁵⁸

My concern in this thesis is with Carson’s poetic praxis. Thus, poetics should be understood in the sense of the poetic principles, techniques and devices used by the individual author as this may be discerned in the lyrical material itself. Although I will draw on interviews, essays or Carson’s reviews of other authors’ work, as these disclose Carson’s views on poetological issues, it is Carson’s poetry, and the underlying principles on which it is based, which is in focus.⁵⁹ It should be

⁵² Harris, 290.

⁵³ Roman Jakobson, “Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics”, in Thomas A. Sebeok, ed., *Style in Language* (Cambridge, Mass.: The M.I.T. Press, 1975), 350.

⁵⁴ Jakobson, 350.

⁵⁵ Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 301.

⁵⁶ Culler, viii.

⁵⁷ Gérard Genette, *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, trans. Channa Newman and Claude Doubinsky (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 1.

⁵⁸ Graham Allen, *Intertextuality* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), 2nd ed., 95. Allen categorizes Genette’s theories as “Structuralist poetics”. See Chapter 3, “Structuralist Approaches: Genette and Riffaterre”, 92–129.

⁵⁹ Carson has made poetological statements in interviews, articles and reviews. He has for example discussed the importance of music for his poetic practice, which has prompted

emphasized that the poetics that I seek to describe has not been explicitly promoted by Carson himself, by way of a public declaration, still it is my contention that it is a poetics which may be extracted from the poems.

Rewriting is, as I see it, integral to Carson's poetic method: Carson makes new poems by using older texts. In my analyses I examine *how* Carson engages with the appropriated material and the use to which it is put in the new poem. The recycling, however, is not an end in itself: it is a means by which Carson makes poems yet one which allows him to articulate his views on both aesthetic and historical issues.

As textual phenomena, recycling, appropriation and allusion are instances of intertextuality, and some clarification of the meaning of these terms, and particularly of intertextuality, is called for. The term intertextuality is first encountered in the 1960s in the work of Julia Kristeva who aims to formulate a theory of text (or textuality) and meaning in text. Kristeva's notion of intertextuality, and some of its underlying theorems, is, however, in part born out of ideas first expounded by Mikhail Bakhtin. The main influence stems from Bakhtin's concept of dialogism in language.⁶⁰ To Bakhtin language exists in a socio-cultural context. Utterances are made by specific individuals in specific social situations. They are not isolated and self-sufficient entities but respond or react to prior utterances and anticipate further responses.⁶¹ Utterances are, in this sense, relational. In addition to this, the words that we use in specific situations carry with them their earlier uses. In Bakhtin's words "the word does not forget its own path and cannot completely free itself from the power of those concrete contexts into which it has entered".⁶² The words we use carry dialogic resonance.⁶³

Kristeva transfers the notion of dialogism to text. Similar to Bakhtin's view on language, Kristeva sees text as embedded within a socio-cultural context and made up of earlier discourses. In her key essays "Word, Dialogue, and Novel" (1969) and "The Bounded Text" (1969), she formulates her view of text – which essentially is an ontology of text⁶⁴ – in the following way: "any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another";⁶⁵ and, a text

examinations of his verse lines in relation to Irish traditional music, such as the reel. Carson has also been asked to account for his method in interviews. His reviews of other authors' work, further, disclose his own aesthetic attitude and ambitions. Carson is at the same time not an overtly programmatic poet but more oblique in his pronouncements.

⁶⁰ For a more extensive discussion of dialogism, see Per Linell, *Rethinking Language, Mind, and World Dialogically* (Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, 2009).

⁶¹ Anne-Marie Londen, "Det dialogiska yttrandet: Om Bachtins syn på språket", *Nya Argus* 3 (1989), 11.

⁶² Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1984), quoted in Allen, 26.

⁶³ Londen, 11.

⁶⁴ Manfred Pfister, "How Postmodern is Intertextuality?", in Heinrich F. Plett, ed., *Intertextuality* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1991), 210.

⁶⁵ Julia Kristeva, "Word, Dialogue, and Novel", in *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, ed. Leon S. Roudiez, trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine and Leon S. Roudiez (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), 66.

is “a permutation of texts, an intertextuality: in the space of a given text, several utterances, taken from other texts, intersect and neutralize one another”.⁶⁶ Intertextuality, then, denotes the very condition of text; a condition which in turn holds implications for meaning: Since a text is made up of “utterances, taken from other texts”, which are transformed, texts do not yield unified meanings. A similar view of text is encountered in Roland Barthes’ work. In “The Death of the Author” (1968), Barthes describes text as “a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture”.⁶⁷ Barthes’ conception too has implications for meaning in text: Meaning can never be finally settled as each textual relation will lead on to another textual relation: “the citations which go to make up a text are anonymous, untraceable, and yet *already read*: they are quotations without inverted commas.”⁶⁸ This leads Barthes to famously declare “the death of the author”, by which is meant the denial of the author’s control over the meaning of his or her text.

Although I do not, in principle, reject Kristeva’s or Barthes’ ideas of text as made up of other texts as well as of the social fabric, intertextuality is understood, in this thesis, as a term with a more limited meaning. The reason for this is that the object of my study is of a different kind: Carson’s habit of using older texts as raw material for the making of new poems. In other words: earlier texts – or fragments of earlier texts – are in most cases, probably intentionally, used as constitutive parts of new poems. Furthermore, this intended recycling, often (but not always) foregrounded by the poems themselves in their titles or paratexts, directs the reader to specific texts, thus suggesting that part of the new poem’s meaning lies within or is dependent on the textual relation. As a result, the textual fluidity proposed by Kristeva and Barthes is, in most cases, replaced by an aesthetic method where the relations between subtext and text are intended and identifiable. Yet, this is not a return to conventional source study. As I see it, it is a matter of interpreting the textual relations on one level, the use to which the earlier texts have been put and how they influence meaning in significant ways; and a matter of interpreting what it means to recycle. Intertextuality is one of the ways through which Carson’s poems come to have meaning.

For the purpose of my analyses the theories of Genette and Laurent Jenny, and their orientation towards different kinds of textual relations and how texts come to have meaning in their relations to particular texts, have proved more germane.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Julia Kristeva, “The Bounded Text”, in *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, 36.

⁶⁷ Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author”, in *Image, Music, Text*, ed. and trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 146.

⁶⁸ Roland Barthes, “From Work to Text”, in *Image, Music, Text*, 160.

⁶⁹ The poststructuralist approach, it should be said, has never had the intention to provide a method for examining specific relations between specific texts. For a discussion, and different understandings, of poststructuralist intertextuality and literary studies see for example Chapters 1–2 in Allen’s *Intertextuality*; Jay Clayton and Eric Rothstein, “Figures in

In *Palimpsests* Genette outlines the different kinds of relations that a text can have with other texts, and which are labelled: intertextuality, paratextuality, architextuality, metatextuality and hypertextuality. Intertextuality is “the actual presence of one text within another”; to Genette these are limited to allusions, quotations or cases of plagiarism. Paratextuality are titles, prefaces, epigraphs, reviews; texts which lie outside the text but which may work as a contract between text and reader, guiding or steering the reader to a certain interpretation or approach. Architextuality refers to a text’s relation to the literary system; a relation which may be overt (signalled in paratexts) or covert. Metatextuality denotes instances when a text speaks about another text “without necessarily citing it”. Literary criticism is a clear example of this particular relation. Hypertextuality, finally, is a case of more extensive relations: “any relationship uniting a text B [...] to an earlier text A [...] upon which it is grafted in a manner that is not that of commentary”.⁷⁰

Genette’s taxonomy, firstly, helps highlight the various levels on which Carson engages with earlier texts and what kind of textual operations he is involved in, although I do not follow Genette’s terminology in my discussion of Carson’s rewritings. Carson makes use of earlier texts as fragments and incorporates them into his poems, but we also encounter more extensive engagements with earlier texts; through different kinds of operations Carson writes a new poem based on an earlier text in the sense that his poem would not, in Genette’s words, “exist, as such, without A, from which it originates through a process I shall provisionally call *transformation*, and which it consequently evokes more or less perceptibly without necessarily speaking of it or citing it”.⁷¹ Carson’s rewritings of several precursor texts such as MacNeice’s “Snow” and Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* belong here. Secondly, Carson’s engagement with earlier texts is often announced by way of different kinds of paratexts. Titles and subtitles, in particular, set up textual relations suggesting that a poem’s meaning potential lies in the relation specified. Titles work as contracts: prod the reader to consider the poems in relation to their sources, as in “Ovid: *Metamorphoses*, V, 529–550”. Yet contracts are also set up between poems and the literary system: In *First Language*, the titles of some poems refer to literary genres or text types and the poems’ meanings lie within the tension created by the titles and the poems themselves. Lastly, rewriting occasionally entails a shift of genre. As we shall see in the analysis of “Hamlet”, for example, the poem achieves part of its meaning through Carson’s departure from the dramatic structure.

Jenny’s ideas are formulated in “The Strategy of Form” (Fr. orig. 1976). His theory offers perspectives for examining interrelations where an earlier text is a

the Corpus: Theories of Influence and Intertextuality”, in Jay Clayton and Eric Rothstein, eds., *Influence and Intertextuality in Literary History* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 22f.; Anders Olsson, “Intertextualitet, komparation och reception”, in Staffan Bergsten, ed., *Litteraturvetenskap – en inledning* (Lund: Studentlitteratur, 2002), 64f.

⁷⁰ Genette, *Palimpsests*, 1ff.

⁷¹ Genette, *Palimpsests*, 5.

constituent part of a later text and where the relations influence meaning in significant ways. His criterion for intertextuality is the following: “we propose to speak of intertextuality only when there can be found in a text elements exhibiting a structure created previous to the text, above the level of the lexeme, of course, but independently of the level of that structure.”⁷² Here, intertextuality “designates not a confused, mysterious accumulation of influences, but the work of transformation and assimilation of various texts that is accomplished by a focal text which keeps control over the meaning.”⁷³ The merits of Jenny’s theory can be summarized with the help of Udo J. Hebel, according to whom Jenny “tries to account for the additional meaning brought into the single text by its intertextual relations. Intertextuality no longer destabilizes the text or disseminates its meaning infinitely, but rather enhances the constitution of meaning.”⁷⁴ To Jenny, the earlier text “is there, potentially present” in the new text, suggesting a relation that can be activated and hence contribute with meaning.⁷⁵ The earlier text, in other words, holds meaning potential in its new context. This is not to say, however, that the earlier text holds the same “meaning” as in its first context; it is not a straightforward transfer of “meaning” but the operation involves and entails appropriation: “Works of literature are never mere ‘memories’, they rewrite what they remember” for “assimilation and transformation [...] characterize all intertextual processes.”⁷⁶

As has been pointed out, translation plays an important role in Carson’s poetic activities, and a number of poems with which the thesis is concerned constitute new versions of texts first wrought in another language. This inter-lingual relation raises the issue of translation. According to a “common-sense” understanding of translation this textual operation “creates a new text on the basis of a previously existing text in another language; the resulting text is expected to entertain a certain, culturally determined relation to the anterior text.”⁷⁷ Translation is of

⁷² Laurent Jenny, “The Strategy of Form”, in Tzvetan Todorov, ed., *French Literary Theory Today: A Reader*, trans. R. Carter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 40.

⁷³ Jenny, 39f.

⁷⁴ Udo J. Hebel, “Introduction”, in Udo J. Hebel, ed., *Intertextuality, Allusion, and Quotation: An International Bibliography of Critical Studies* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989), 12f.

⁷⁵ Jenny, 45.

⁷⁶ Jenny, 37. Similar perspectives on intertextuality can be found, for example, in Gian Biagio Conte’s *The Rhetoric of Imitation* (1987; *Memoria dei poeti e sistema letterario*, 1974) and Thomas M. Greene’s *The Light in Troy: Imitation and Discovery in Renaissance Poetry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982). In his highly influential study Greene provides a taxonomy of imitation, identifying four types which he terms: reproductive/sacramental, eclectic/exploitative, heuristic and dialectical. Each type denotes a specific kind of textual operation and evinces a certain view of history. In ways similar to Jenny, Greene’s concern is with textual relations where an anterior text is a “constitutive structural element” and a “constitutive presence” in a later work, 17 and 36f.

⁷⁷ Theo Hermans and Werner Koller, “The Relation between Translations and their Sources, and the Ontological Status of Translations”, in Harald Kittel, Armin Paul Frank,

course far more complex than this and current debates within the field of translation studies suggest that translation can only be understood on a local level, in time and place. Lawrence Venuti reminds us that “[t]he very idea of what a translation is – and whether it is distinct from or overlaps with an adaptation or imitation, a paraphrase or parody – is a category that varies according to different translating cultures”.⁷⁸ A similar point is raised by Maria Tymoczko in her study *Enlarging Translation, Empowering Translators* (2007) but she also furthers the discussion in important ways by pointing to extant texts. “[T]ranslations can vary radically with respect to the rank at which they operate”; e.g. word-by-word or translation of “story”.⁷⁹ And she also points to texts which “challeng[e] dominant ideas about the nature of translation” and that “examples of radically different translation types abound everywhere”; philological translations occur alongside experimental translations such as those of Ezra Pound or Celia and Louis Zukovsky’s rendering of Catullus and which stretch the concept.⁸⁰ The Carson poems that will be considered in this thesis do not read like prototypical translations if we measure them according to traditional notions of accuracy, correctness and faithfulness.⁸¹ This is also reflected in critical commentary where the terms translation, version and adaptation are variously used to refer to the same Carson text. But it is not only the case that his versions depart from their sources, they come to read very much like his own poems, something which has prompted more than one critic to say that “it didn’t dawn on me that it was the translations. It seemed so much like your own work”.⁸² In Carson’s case it has proved germane to consider also the function of his versions. The poems certainly gain part of their meaning in relation to their sources but his versions are not meant to “serve as a substitute for the original utterance” or to “stand as an acceptable alternative to or substitute for the original”.⁸³ The versions are for Carson (as for many other poets) integral to his aesthetics; again, it is a means to compose poems but in this specific case the material originates in another language. For this reason I see Carson’s versions of foreign-language texts as part

Norbert Greiner, eds., *Übersetzung: Ein Internationales Handbuch zur Übersetzungsforschung* (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2004), 23.

⁷⁸ Lawrence Venuti, “Translation: Between the Universal and the Local”, *PN Review* 184, 35: 2 (2008), 34.

⁷⁹ Maria Tymoczko, *Enlarging Translation, Empowering Translators* (Manchester and Kinderhook: St Jerome Publishing, 2007), 63.

⁸⁰ Tymoczko, 64f. Tymoczko also points to the “coexistence” of different kinds of translations and norms during the Irish revival.

⁸¹ Lawrence Venuti, “Introduction”, in Lawrence Venuti, ed., *The Translation Studies Reader* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 2nd ed., 5f. As Venuti writes, equivalence is one of the parameters used for measuring a translation against the source text. Equivalence further brings with it notions of “accuracy”, “adequacy”, “correctness”, “correspondence”, “fidelity” and “identity”.

⁸² David Laskowski, “Inventing Carson: An Interview”, *Chicago Review* 45.3–4 (1999), 97. Laskowski is here commenting on Carson’s *The Alexandrine Plan* (1998).

⁸³ Hermans and Koller, 26.

of the larger phenomenon of recycling. Recycling can be seen as a cluster term for various kinds of rewriting. This is not to disregard that rewriting may take different manifestations and that the textual process might involve linguistic and cultural transmission.

I wish to conclude this section by referring to a study which has contributed valuable perspectives for a consideration of Carson's project: Joseph M. Conte's *Unending Design: The Forms of Postmodern Poetry* (1991). Conte detects amongst postmodern poets "a new perception of poetic form".⁸⁴ He seeks to account for "the surprising diversity" of poetic expressions by establishing "a systematic typology".⁸⁵ He identifies two poetic forms as particularly symptomatic of the postmodern condition, which he labels serial and procedural.⁸⁶ Of these two, Conte's notion of procedural form and constraints as generative devices has proved illuminative. The procedural form entails that the author prior to composition makes formal choices which will then generate the composition itself.⁸⁷ These formal choices are "predetermined" but also "arbitrary constraints".⁸⁸ The constraints may be a poetic form, an earlier text or an invented constraint as exemplified by the Oulipo writer Georges Perec who famously set himself the task of composing a novel without the letter "e". As a method for literary production it "rejects the concept of a form superimposed on preexistent content" and "[f]ormal choices thus precede content, and the arbitrary constraints are relied on to generate, not contain, the material of the poem."⁸⁹ The notion of procedural form contributes interesting perspectives on poetic composition. In a 2009 interview, Carson himself has actually expressed an idea of literary making which lies close to Conte. There Carson talks about poetic form (a haiku or a sonnet) or an earlier text as constraints, finding that "[c]onstraints, arbitrary as they are, are always useful [...] In labouring to make the expression fit the constraint, be it syllable-count or rhyme, one invariably comes up with a more accurate construction."⁹⁰ Commenting further on the jointly published collections *The Twelfth of Never* and *The Alexandrine Plan*, where the former deploys the sonnet form and the latter consists of versions of French originals by Baudelaire, Rimbaud and Mallarmé, Carson says that they "were part of the same project, to take a given form and see what can be made of it. The constraint is always useful."⁹¹ It is, however, for highlighting the function of forms, and what can be achieved with form, that Conte's ideas are an inspiration for this thesis. As we will see, the idea of constraint lends itself to Carson's poems. For example, *First Language*, the last

⁸⁴ Joseph M. Conte, *Unending Design: The Forms of Postmodern Poetry* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1991), 3.

⁸⁵ Conte, 1.

⁸⁶ Conte, 3.

⁸⁷ Conte, 40.

⁸⁸ Conte, 3.

⁸⁹ Conte, 40.

⁹⁰ Jenny Malmqvist, "Interview with Ciaran Carson", *Notre Dame Review* 27 (Winter/Spring 2009), 17.

⁹¹ Malmqvist, 20.

volume to be discussed in this study, provides us with a variety of constraints almost to the point of foregrounding the principle. Through the deployment of rhyme, titles which gesture to genres and forms, and rewritings of earlier texts, the poems therein seem generated by these varied predetermined structures.

Outline of the Present Study

The thesis is organized in four analytical chapters which follow Carson's poetic development from his debut in the 1970s up to and including the 1993 collection *First Language*. Each chapter traces a textile/textual metaphor and applies it to the analysis of selected key poems where Carson engages in rewriting, several of which have previously not been analysed in depth or have received only modest critical consideration.

Of the chapters to follow, Chapter 2: "Exploring" focuses on Carson's juvenilia: the pamphlet *The Insular Celts* (1973), Carson's first principal collection of poems *The New Estate* (1976) and his second pamphlet *The Lost Explorer* (1978). The chapter discusses Carson's early poems which have received little attention in the established Carson criticism. In this early phase we see the first thematic formulation of a poetics, which is realized in the subsequent collection *The Irish for No*, as well as the first examples of rewriting in Carson's poetry. The examination of the poetry is supplemented with a discussion of Carson's 1975 review of Heaney's *North* in which he evaluates the moral consequences of Heaney's aesthetic procedures thus introducing an important concern which will inform his subsequent writings.

Chapter 3: "Quilting" focuses on Carson's second principal collection of poems *The Irish for No* (1987) in which the poetics is first realized. To place Carson's poetic development in a broader context, the chapter begins by considering two texts outside of Carson's poetic production – *Irish Traditional Music* published in 1986 and his review of C. K. Williams in 1989 – suggesting that we see the period in-between the juvenilia and *The Irish for No* as a period of artistic gestation. In contrast to the standard approach to the collection, this chapter reads it as continuous with the juvenilia. The chapter undertakes extensive analyses of "The Irish for No", which in its intricate intertextuality can be seen as a primer for what the thesis terms the patchwork poetics, and "Patchwork", where we see a thematic reformulation of the poetics. The chapter closes with a brief discussion of two poems included in *The New Estate and Other Poems* of 1988 which, on a thematic level, vary the poetics.

Chapter 4: "Unravelling" considers *Belfast Confetti* (1989), Carson's third major collection of poems; how it both confirms and consolidates the undertakings of *The Irish for No* but also reconsiders its aesthetic principles. Examining the collection's varied range of rewritings the chapter sees an extension of the patchwork poetics and suggests that the notion of "unravelling" be understood as

both the appropriation and adaptation of earlier text and a questioning of textual representation.

The last analytical chapter, Chapter 5: “Meta-morphosing” deals with *First Language*, Carson’s fourth collection, published in 1993. The chapter relates Carson’s engagement with earlier texts to the collection’s general preoccupation with form, narrative and structure. Poems derived from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* are singled out for special analysis. While these poems have been scantily treated in critical commentary, being largely seen as “versions” or free translations and thus considered as a parallel activity to Carson’s “original” poetry, the chapter reads them as constituting new poems and integral to his poetic project. This latter perspective is corroborated by this collection’s textile metaphor, which both completes the poetics traced in previous chapters and introduces new ideas, intimating text-making in a broad sense.



2. Exploring *The Insular Celts*, *The New Estate* and *The Lost Explorer*

When Ciaran Carson's first major collection of poems *The New Estate* was published in 1976, it received an enthusiastic review by Tom Paulin in *The Honest Ulsterman*. Except for the opening poems (on "saints and scholars"), and the adaptations of Irish and Welsh verse, Paulin finds that some of the "later poems are so good that this must be easily the best first volume to appear for a long time, and to mention that it is Ciaran Carson's first collection is not to imply a qualification".⁹² What appeals most to Paulin is the book's "realism of subject, with a novelist's interest in ordinary life".⁹³ He concludes his review by restating his praise, saying that "Carson's poems have a mysterious, exact clarity, their language is sharp and delicate, and their rhythms are never monotonously iambic – they are subtle and unobtrusive. This volume is the work of a brilliant and formidable talent".⁹⁴

Surveying the existing Carson criticism over the past two to three decades, it is of note how little has been written on what Paulin in the mid-1970s labelled "the work of a brilliant and formidable talent", relative to Carson's later collections. While Carson's mature poetry – especially *The Irish for No*, *Belfast Confetti* and *First Language* – is familiar territory within the established criticism, his juvenilia – to which belong also the two pamphlets *The Insular Celts* and *The Lost Explorer* – are largely underrepresented. Far more criticism exists on Carson's later poetry than that of the 1970s. As was mentioned in the Introduction to this thesis, there are a few critics who engage critically with Carson's juvenilia and thereby fill in the gaps, pointing to continuities between the early poetry and *The Irish for No* onwards.⁹⁵

⁹² Tom Paulin, "Shivering Laurels", *The Honest Ulsterman* 51 (Jan/April 1976), 86.

⁹³ Paulin, 87.

⁹⁴ Paulin, 89.

⁹⁵ See the section "Previous Research" in the Introduction to this thesis.

Yet the typical method within criticism is to quickly glance over the juvenilia and to focus on Carson's later production. This latter approach is unfortunate. The early phase amounts to a near-decade of Carson's artistic career, and merits attention in its own right, but a consideration of the poems written within that period can also shed helpful light on Carson's subsequent work.⁹⁶

The New Estate and the second pamphlet *The Lost Explorer* were republished as *The New Estate and Other Poems* in 1988; ten years after the appearance of *The Lost Explorer*, which can be said to mark the final phase of Carson's juvenilia, and one year after the publication of *The Irish for No*, the collection which brought Carson the critics' recognition. At the same time as this volume collects poems from the early period, and makes accessible "other poems" which had not appeared in the three earlier volumes, *The New Estate and Other Poems* might actually have contributed to the imbalance in critical attention given to the juvenilia and the mature poetry.

To start with, it should be noted that it is not the whole body of Carson's juvenilia that is represented in this volume. Reading Carson's early poetry from the perspective of this collected book of poems, rather than the individual first editions of *The Insular Celts*, *The New Estate* and *The Lost Explorer* entails a loss of certain poems as well as a loss of context. Not all poems are republished in *The New Estate and Other Poems*; of the fourteen pieces of *The Insular Celts* only three survive into *The New Estate and Other Poems*.⁹⁷ This volume also varies the arrangement of the poems and breaks with the publication history as poems of *The Lost Explorer* and previously uncollected material are interspersed between the poems of *The Insular Celts* and *The New Estate*. This means that Carson's corpus is different from what it appears from this collected book. For a study of Carson's poetry, this holds certain consequences. As this thesis contends, abstracting the early poems from the collection and time period in which they were first published has bearing on our perception of Carson's project, not only at this early stage in his career but for critically approaching the work which follows from the juvenilia.

Yet there seem to be further explanations for the attention paid to *The Irish for No* and later collections, compared to the juvenilia. Critics are divided in their opinion on the early poetry, not only on the aesthetic qualities of the poems but also, perhaps more importantly, on the significance of the early poetry for that written from the 1980s onwards.

⁹⁶ As I see it, it is a matter of putting both the juvenilia and *The Irish for No* in context. Carson's 70s poetry ought to be considered in its original context and in relation to Carson's review of Heaney's *North* which discloses his aesthetic ambitions. Yet Carson's juvenilia provide an important context for *The Irish for No*.

⁹⁷ *The New Estate and Other Poems* omits the poem "Winter" of *The New Estate* and it includes only three of the fourteen poems of *The Insular Celts*. Carson's 2008 *Collected Poems*, in turn, reprints a selection "from *The New Estate and Other Poems*", omitting seven poems of the earlier collected volume ("Collecting Stamps", "Agianapa I", "Sickness" and "The Car Cemetery" of *The New Estate*; "Africa", "The Great Fitzpatrick" and "Visitors" of *The Lost Explorer*).

There is general agreement amongst Carson scholars that his more accomplished work begins with *The Irish for No*. It is a familiar contention that it is here that Carson comes into possession of his unique poetic voice and expression. In this respect, the appearance of *The New Estate and Other Poems* the year after *The Irish for No* meant that the early poems were read against the achievements of the later collection. Even though most critics admit that the early poems are “very competent”⁹⁸ they are also seen as “standard” Northern Irish poems. In Goodby’s words, the poems display “conformity to the generic tone of Northern Irish poetry of the time”.⁹⁹ Regarding form, the juvenilia cannot quite compete with *The Irish for No* which – along with the poetry of Paul Muldoon – is said to represent a postmodern vein in Northern Irish poetry, in its challenge to the “well-made poem”. And Carson has himself critiqued the early pieces from the viewpoint of subsequent writing. In an interview conducted in the summer of 1989, Carson described *The New Estate* as being “too ‘accomplished’”, “worked and careful, and not taking too many risks”, “well-done, but [...] too reserved”.¹⁰⁰ Two years later, Carson varied his critique, saying in interview with Frank Ormsby that he was “not so sure if reissuing *The New Estate* was such a good idea because it’s so different from what I’ve done recently ... it’s a string quartet as opposed to a pub session”.¹⁰¹ Compared to the formal undertakings of *The Irish for No*, particularly the long lines which are seen as one of the hallmarks of Carson’s 1980s and early 1990s poetry, the early poems are considered too reliant on standard verse forms; something on which both Carson and his critics, then, are seemingly in consent.

Furthermore, the Carson of *The New Estate* is also seen as a poet who has yet to break loose from his predecessors. A wry note is made in the recent *Concise Companion to Post-War British and Irish Poetry* where *The New Estate* is described as being “fashioned within the prevailing formalist weather of Queen’s in the 1970s”.¹⁰² Other critics note the influence of Carson’s most immediate precursors where Heaney, in particular, is seen as a major influence. Carol Rumens describes the Carson of *The New Estate* as “a quiet, solid worker in the groves of Heaney”.¹⁰³ Sewell suggests that “[m]any of the poem titles could have been Heaney’s”, while content-wise, some poems echo the poetry of Heaney and John Montague.¹⁰⁴

⁹⁸ Denman, 29.

⁹⁹ Goodby, *Irish Poetry since 1950*, 192.

¹⁰⁰ Rand Brandes, “Ciaran Carson Interviewed by Rand Brandes”, *The Irish Review* 8 (1990), 80.

¹⁰¹ Frank Ormsby, “Ciaran Carson Interviewed by Frank Ormsby”, *The Linen Hall Review* 8.1 (1991), 7.

¹⁰² John P. Waters, “Form and Identity in Northern Irish Poetry”, in *Concise Companion to Post-War British and Irish Poetry*, 95.

¹⁰³ Carol Rumens, “The Stitches Show”, *Poetry Review* 89.3 (Autumn 1999), 86.

¹⁰⁴ Sewell, 186. Sewell mentions the poems on St Ciaran, the Celts and the musician/poet O’Carolan.

Goodby, similarly, notes a “Heaney-like concern with craft”¹⁰⁵ while Delattre identifies the influence of Derek Mahon.¹⁰⁶

Poetic influences, of course, can take many different expressions and are always difficult to chart, yet the local poetry scene of the early 1970s, of which Carson formed part, is certainly of note. Carson has himself acknowledged having been inspired by Heaney and “his example”. “Because”, Carson has said, “before Heaney, there was precious little, certainly nothing like poetry which had some tie-up with our own vernacular, with ordinary Ulster speech”.¹⁰⁷ It does not seem without significance that Heaney taught at Queen’s while Carson (and his peers Muldoon and Medbh McGuckian) was a student there and that the two would meet in “‘practical criticism’ seminars”.¹⁰⁸ Neither does it seem without significance that Carson started out as a poet at a time when several of his immediate predecessors, as well as his contemporaries, were resident in Belfast. Still, even though the poets knew and associated with each other, Carson’s attitude to the so-called Belfast Group is ambiguous.¹⁰⁹ While the Carson papers held at the Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library at Emory University contain worksheets from group meetings (dated to 1971–1972), Carson is often reluctant to comment on what shaping influence these sessions might have had on his poetry.¹¹⁰ In the following comment, which opens his Afterword to *The Blackbird’s Nest: An Anthology of Poetry from Queen’s University Belfast* (2006) – a collection of poems by Queen’s-associated poets – Carson is equivocal; he both promotes and downplays the Group’s role:

¹⁰⁵ Goodby, *Irish Poetry since 1950*, 192.

¹⁰⁶ Delattre, 25.

¹⁰⁷ Brandes, 79.

¹⁰⁸ Seamus Heaney, “Introduction”, in W. R. Irvine, ed., *From the Small Back Room: A Festschrift for Ciaran Carson* (Belfast: Netherlea, 2008), 14.

¹⁰⁹ For further discussion on the Group, see for example Heather Clark, *The Ulster Renaissance: Poetry in Belfast 1962–1972* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006). Chapter 2 in her study is devoted to the Group.

¹¹⁰ Carson’s worksheets comprise the following poems: “Letter from Alaska”, “Aranmore Island”, “The Island Revisited”, “Wheel”, “Post Mortem on a Mass Grave”, “The Clockwork Pigeon”. Ciaran Carson Papers (MSS 746), Series 5: Belfast Group Worksheets, [1971–1972], Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University: <http://findingaids.library.emory.edu/documents/carson746/series5/> Accessed 13 June 2013.

As I recall it, the Belfast Group of the late 1960s and early 70s was a somewhat loose group. True, it had formal meetings in the back room of Queen's English Department at 4 University Square, but it was really a moveable feast, and its members were just as likely to congregate over a few or many drinks in other venues that lay within a half-mile radius of the Lanyon Building [...] 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.¹¹¹

When surveying the critical coverage of Carson's juvenilia in handbooks and literary overviews, further, it seems as if his early poetry cannot quite compete with the works of other Northern poets for critical space. There are reasons for this. When Carson published his first collection, *The New Estate*, Heaney was already established as the leading poet, having published his fourth (and controversial) collection *North* the year before. Heaney's contemporaries Michael Longley and Mahon had also published collections to critical acclaim. In Carson's own generation, his debut partly coincided with Muldoon's, whose poetry attracted more critical attention, causing Carson's reputation to lag behind. This is reflected in the relatively little space given to Carson's early poetry in contemporary overviews of Irish literature. For example, in *British Poetry since 1970: A Critical Survey*, published in 1980, Carson is only noted in brief for having made his debut; Blake Morrison, in the chapter "Young Poets in the 1970s", focuses his Northern Ireland section on Paulin, Ormsby and Muldoon who are noted for "hav[ing] already paved the way towards impressive individual achievements".¹¹² And Terence Brown's essay "A Northern Renaissance: Poets from the North of Ireland 1965–1980" is, in its own way, telling. Brown's discussion of Carson is illustrated, not with the poetry which falls within the period of his title, but with the 1987 collection *The Irish for No*.¹¹³

In the decades to follow, Carson's juvenilia do in fact appear in handbooks. Goodby, in *Irish Poetry since 1950*, devotes a separate section to Carson's juvenilia: "Ciaran Carson's *New Estate*".¹¹⁴ Christina Hunt Mahony touches briefly on the period in her *Contemporary Irish Poetry* (1998) and other handbooks make brief reference to the titles but go no further.¹¹⁵ It is Carson's later work that is given proportionally more space. As for the juvenilia, no account exceeds Goodby's one-and-a-half page section on the early poetry. In some of the most recent handbooks, further, the juvenilia are scantily treated. In each of these cases, the little attention given to Carson's juvenilia might well be justified with reference to

¹¹¹ Ciaran Carson, "Afterword", in Frank Ormsby, ed., *The Blackbird's Nest: An Anthology of Poetry from Queen's University Belfast* (Belfast: The Blackstaff Press, 2006), 127.

¹¹² Blake Morrison, "Young Poets in the 1970s", in Michael Schmidt and Peter Jones, eds., *British Poetry since 1970: A Critical Survey* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1980), 151f.

¹¹³ Terence Brown, *Ireland's Literature: Selected Essays* (Mullingar: The Lilliput Press, 1988), 218ff.

¹¹⁴ Goodby, *Irish Poetry since 1950*, 191f.

¹¹⁵ Christina Hunt Mahony, *Contemporary Irish Literature: Transforming Tradition* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 79f.

the handbooks' aim and focus but when we add these together, the result is a telling omission.

Of Carson's writings of the 1970s, it is his review of Heaney's *North*, published in *The Honest Ulsterman* in 1975 under the title "Escaped from the Massacre?" which arguably has garnered most critical commentary. The extent of critical attention which the review yielded at the time meant that, as Homem puts it, Carson "a year before he published his first collection, began by inscribing his name on lists of *secondary* rather than primary sources for contemporary poetry".¹¹⁶ This observation is corroborated by Michael Parker who begins his section on Carson's mature writing, in *Northern Irish Literature, 1975–2006* (2007), by stating that before the publication of *The Irish for No*, "Carson had previously published only one full collection in the mid-1970s, *The New Estate*, but was best known for his work as a Traditional Arts Officer at the ACNI, as well as for his highly critical review of Seamus Heaney's *North*".¹¹⁷

One strand within Carson criticism which has taken on currency sees *The Irish for No* as continuous with the ideas expressed in his review of *North*. Parker continues, quite rightly, saying that "[t]he concerns that piece raised about the dangers of aestheticising violence are carried over into *The Irish for No*'s intriguing opening poem, 'Dresden'".¹¹⁸ Parker is not alone in making such claims, and the present thesis subscribes to the idea, although it also claims that the discussion of *The Irish for No*, and its relation to the early phase, can be broadened. Corcoran in 1992 (and repeated in 1999) and Goodby in 2000, are two other critics who read *The Irish for No* in relation to Heaney, finding support for their argument in Carson's review of *North*. To Corcoran and Goodby, *The Irish for No* challenges the so-called "mythic" writing of Heaney and its gestures towards meta-narrative.

In his essay "One Step Forward, Two Steps Back: Ciaran Carson's *The Irish for No*", Corcoran writes that *The Irish for No* "put the criticism into a newly illuminated perspective by emphasizing the extent to which, in challenging Heaney's methods in *North*, Carson was, at the same time, quite as certain as Heaney himself that some disruption of the lyric was essential if the material of Northern Ireland after 1969 was to be adequately expressed, or at least encountered, in poetry".¹¹⁹ Writing on the "radically individual forms" of *The Irish for No* – the "exfoliations, turnings and returning, digressions and parentheses, lapses and dissolving, mazes of the seemingly aleatory and circuitous" – Corcoran finds that "[i]n rejecting the metanarrative of myth, Carson creates a narrative poetry of his own".¹²⁰ Goodby, likewise, finds that while the poem "The Insular Celts" of the juvenilia may be read as a critique of Heaney's cyclical interpretation of history, "[o]nly a radically new style – one in which the critique of myth is

¹¹⁶ Homem, 166.

¹¹⁷ Michael Parker, *Northern Irish Literature, 1975–2006*, vol. 2 (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 119.

¹¹⁸ Parker, 119.

¹¹⁹ Corcoran, "One Step Forward, Two Steps Back" (1999), 177f.

¹²⁰ Corcoran, "One Step Forward, Two Steps Back" (1999), 180.

implicit in anti-lyricism, in foregrounded commercial detritus, in the brickly streets and alleys of Belfast – would enable Carson to break free” of Heaney’s influence.¹²¹ This “radically new style”, Goodby finds in *The Irish for No* and *Belfast Confetti* where “thematics [...] fed a formal development beyond the dominant lyric” and where this is formally manifested in Carson’s use of the long line.¹²² Corcoran’s and Goodby’s observations are pertinent, especially in their focus on the collection’s formal aspects. Of particular importance is their observation that Carson’s subject matter resists or cannot be accommodated within the standard form of the time. In this, they prepare the ground for further discussion.

It is the contention of this thesis that the discussion of the relation between Carson’s early poetry and his later poetry can be refined. In response to the critical approaches to Carson’s juvenilia outlined above, this chapter suggests that we see the 1970s as a period of apprenticeship where Carson is working towards what the present thesis sees as one of his characteristic methods of composition: rewriting.

In order to understand this period of apprenticeship it is necessary to place the early poetry within its first context. This means that we must resituate the 1970s poems in the individual collections and time period in which they were first published. It also entails bringing the poetry and Carson’s review of *North* into relationship, seeing the review as an extra-poetic discussion of aesthetic and ethical ideals and the poetry as the creative platform where Carson tries out various themes and formal principles, some of which he pursues, while others he abandons. With earlier critics, I hold that Carson’s review of *North* offers valuable perspectives on poetological issues which prefigure his later work, yet a discussion solely based on the review will yield only a partial view of Carson’s project since it excludes the poetry from the discussion. Arguably *The Irish for No* is not only continuous with Carson’s review of *North* but was to some extent, thematically and formally, prepared for in the early poetry.

The early phase can reasonably be characterized as an exploration of themes, forms and methods. Here Carson’s rewritings of early Irish lyrics in *The Insular Celts* and *The New Estate* can be said to serve as a testing-ground where the aspirant poet can labour with different forms, voices and expressions. Yet this period of apprenticeship is not only about practising form and technique. Carson can also be seen to try out analogies for poetic creativity. Bringing attention to the poem “The Patchwork Quilt”, the final poem of *The Lost Explorer*, this thesis proposes that Carson formulates a poetics as early as in 1978 which prefigures some of the characteristic principles behind his future compositions, of which we see the first examples in *The Irish for No*. In this respect, this poem may be seen as a transitional poem between Carson’s juvenilia and his mature work.¹²³ In addition to this, the

¹²¹ Goodby, *Irish Poetry since 1950*, 192.

¹²² Goodby, *Irish Poetry since 1950*, 290.

¹²³ “The Patchwork Quilt” has not been considered within the context of Carson’s juvenilia or set in relation to his poetic development.

poetics intimated by “The Patchwork Quilt” can be seen as offering an alternative to Heaney’s aesthetics. To Heaney’s metaphor of “digging” Carson’s writing finds its image in a patchwork where old scraps are recycled and stitched together to form a new whole. Therefore, a challenge to the standard lyric, to meta-narratives and to Heaney’s procedures can be said to take its start here in this 1978 poem.

My discussion in this chapter will centre on three strands which in different ways anticipate Carson’s later work: Carson’s practice of rewriting, of which his juvenilia provide us with the first examples; the textile thematics which takes its beginning in this early phase; and Carson’s review of *North*, as it unveils Carson’s standpoint on aesthetic principles. In Carson’s juvenilia, the textile thematics and the rewritings are parallel developments but they will later become interconnected.

The Insular Celts and The New Estate

Published in 1976, *The New Estate* brings together poems that were written between 1971 and 1974/1975, including some of the poems first published in the pamphlet *The Insular Celts*, in 1973.¹²⁴ Given that these are debut collections, it is not surprising to find in them a certain sense of self-reflexivity: several poems might be construed as mediations on the figure of the poet and poetry as an art form.

Reading through *The Insular Celts* it is of note how this young poet seems intent on telling the reader who he is *not*. Carson’s first attempt at poetic self-fashioning works partly by distancing himself from easy identification with certain notions of “Irishness” and the (Irish) poet. When in interview with Brandes, Carson was asked to comment on the title poem of *The Insular Celts*, whether it is “purely a poem about Ireland”, Carson replied that “[i]t 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”. This is a risky strategy, particularly for a poet who is yet to establish his own voice and Carson has himself admitted that many readers have taken this poem at face value and do not “see the irony in it. Or the humour.”¹²⁵

Yet we do well to place other poems of *The Insular Celts* within quotation marks too. Included in the pamphlet are three poems on Irish saints with the name of St Ciaran: “St Ciaran and the Birds”, “St Ciaran and the Trees” and “St Ciaran’s Island”.¹²⁶ Here, Carson seemingly sets up an affiliation – based on his own name – only to disqualify it. The construction of poetic identity works by subversion. If

¹²⁴ Brandes, 80. In the interview, Carson estimates that the majority of the poems of *The New Estate* were written between 1971 and 1974/1975.

¹²⁵ Brandes, 80.

¹²⁶ “St Ciaran and the Birds” and “St Ciaran’s Island” are reprinted in *The New Estate*. According to Carson’s “Notes on the Text”, appended to *The New Estate*, these poems are based on poems included in Gerard Murphy, *Early Irish Lyrics: Eighth to Twelfth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1956).

the name Ciaran is a first sign that the poems should be read as self-conscious portraits of the artist, this inference is supported by the fact that one of them, “St Ciaran and the Birds”, stems from the canonical Irish epic *Buile Suibhne*, a well-known tale used by many Irish writers as a “narrative of the poet”.¹²⁷ As Corcoran tells us, “Sweeney”, flits frequently through modern Irish writing” and in Flann O’Brien’s *At Swim-Two-Birds* (1939), and later, Heaney’s *Sweeney Astray* (1983), two notable appropriations of the Sweeney figure, Sweeney becomes “a significant mode of self-definition and a compelling self-image for the modern Irish writer”.¹²⁸

The portrayals of the saints further tie in with conventional images of the artist. Here it does not seem too far-fetched to read the poems as commenting on the role and responsibility of the poet, for critiqued in these poems is the condition or disposition of the poet as being exiled from society. The poet-saints of these poems have retreated from “the known world” or the “big world” to live in isolation.¹²⁹ As “St Ciaran’s Island” intimates, the saint’s isolation is as much an existential condition: “soon my hut may be the only island / It will not matter. // I will be myself alone.” Portraying the poet-saint as withdrawn or exiled from society, the general tenor of the pamphlet nevertheless questions this precondition. Most immediately, for the saints of these poems isolation leads to silence. The monk in “St Ciaran’s Island” “must learn to grow in silence” and in “St Ciaran and the Birds”, we read: “For my voice, / the tongueless bell, / for my silence / no tongue can tell.” Variations on this theme are seen in other poems of the pamphlet which explore islands, peripheries and margins. In the opening poem, “Letter from Alaska”, the retreat to “the world’s last infinity”, where “[s]ilence is for miles around”, might avert communication as “[o]ur letter may have trouble / getting through”. The disinclination to engage with the world outside one’s own immediate surroundings, Carson seems to say, will in the end obstruct imagination. “St Ciaran’s Island” bears this out: If the saint “will be myself alone” (echoing “sinn féin”, “ourselves alone”), this will inevitably lead to the condition where “I will acclimatize. / My head will shrink in size.” The seclusion practised by the saints in these poems seems hardly tenable. Alexander suggests, quite rightly, that

¹²⁷ Hughes, “‘the mouth of the poem’: Carson and Place”, 86.

¹²⁸ Neil Corcoran, *After Yeats and Joyce: Reading Modern Irish Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 20ff. Corcoran gives the following account of the Sweeney figure: The legend of Sweeney derives from the Early Irish *Buile Suibhne* which tells of a king transformed into a “bird-man”. The reason for its continuous appeal to writers seems to lie with the tension between different world-views which the tale enacts. In the original story, the tension is between the Celtic, and pagan, and Christianity but as Corcoran shows in his discussion of modern versions, this conflict has been extended and proliferated to other kinds of tensions which the poet might be faced with. Heaney, for example, draws upon Sweeney’s position as an outsider as he negotiates his own position after having left Northern Ireland in the early 70s.

¹²⁹ The poems “St Ciaran and the Trees” and “St Ciaran’s Island”.

the poems might read “as subtle satires on the ‘isolated’, conscience-racked figure of the Northern Irish poet, and by that token as veiled self-criticisms”.¹³⁰

It is possible to find wider implications in the pamphlet’s title. When in the same interview with Brandes, Carson was asked to comment on the expectation that Irish poets should speak “about” Ireland, he replied: “That’s why it’s called ‘The *Insular Celts*’. It implies that that idea of the world is finally closed and small-minded.”¹³¹ Thus, one might well suggest that the “insularity” targeted by the title is the demand on poets to speak on behalf of Ireland and which in the 1970s was essentially a pressure on poets to respond to the Northern Ireland crisis.¹³² With the outbreak of the violent conflict media sought “a poetry that would ‘deal with’ the Troubles”.¹³³ This was a pressure which weighed more heavily on Heaney and his contemporaries but Carson and his generation became inevitable inheritors. Writing on Heaney, Longley and Mahon, Goodby points out that, amongst the older generation, “[t]here is, also, a collective belief that the Troubles violate a pre-existing decorum – social, aesthetic, political – which requires poetry to represent it”.¹³⁴ Refusing to be made a spokesperson, Heaney famously replied that poets “will only be worth listening to if they are saying something about and to themselves.”¹³⁵ This does not preclude the poetry from responding to the conflict, however. While we do not see much of the political situation in *The Insular Celts* the question of how to properly engage with violence and death in art underpins Carson’s 1975 review of *North* and runs as a subtext throughout his later work.

In *The Insular Celts*, Carson can be said to draw on the Irish tradition and notions of Irishness to negotiate the role or responsibility of the poet. But whereas the biographical note appended to the pamphlet tells us that Carson “[s]poke Irish from birth, therefore interested in things Irish”, Carson the poet should not be mistaken for an official Irishman who – in or through his poems – speaks on behalf of his country or the political situation.

Two other poems in *The Insular Celts* work as transitional poems between the pamphlet and *The New Estate*, and also prefigure later preoccupations: In “The Scribe in the Woods”, to be discussed at more length further on, Carson adapts a ninth-century Irish lyric; the poem standing as a first example of the practice of rewriting in Carson’s authorship. The poem “Interior with Weaver”, referred to at the beginning of this thesis, intimates an analogy for which there are many precedents in Irish poetry: that between the poet and a craftsman. Here the impetus behind the analogy is not the poet’s name, as in the St Ciaran poems, yet something near-similar. The weaver, and “his endless repetitions”, might be

¹³⁰ Alexander, 186.

¹³¹ Brandes, 81. Emphasis in original.

¹³² Gerald Dawe, “History Class: Northern Poetry, 1970–82”, *New Hibernia Review* 7.1 (Spring 2003), 80.

¹³³ Blake Morrison, *Seamus Heaney* (London and New York: Methuen, 1982), 55.

¹³⁴ Goodby, *Irish Poetry since 1950*, 8.

¹³⁵ Heaney, *Poetry Book Society Bulletin*, 85 (Summer 1975), quoted in Morrison, *Seamus Heaney*, 55f.

construed as a model for the poet not only because the word “weave” is cognate with “text”. As we will see, the poem with its theme of weaving, although a singular analogy in *The Insular Celts*, anticipates an important theme in Carson’s later poetry.

In his review of *The New Estate*, Paulin notes in the collection a “governing fascination, reminiscent of Dutch painting, with domestic interiors and people working”, as well as an interest in “a culture embodied in its industries”.¹³⁶ Although not limited to this theme, craft is indeed one of the main concerns of the collection, something which, in the first Blackstaff edition of *The New Estate*, is underscored by illustrations from Georgius Agricola’s book on mining, *De Re Metallica* (1556), reproduced on the cover and within, where five images are interspersed between the poems.

In this collection, Carson pursues the analogy between the craftsman and the poet, first introduced in *The Insular Celts*, yet he significantly shifts the focus from the craftsman to craft, intimating that he is no longer – or to the same extent, at least – concerned with the figure of the poet but with the poem itself. This transition is nicely illustrated when the image of the weaver of *The Insular Celts* gives way to that of linen in *The New Estate*. When reprinted in the later collection, “Interior with Weaver” is given next to the poem “Linen”, telling of the artefact. As with several poems of *The New Estate*, “Linen” is about craft but as we will see in later chapters this intimated analogy of text and textile – which also taps into Belfast’s industrial past – anticipates the textile metaphors that will play an important role in Carson’s later poetry and poetics.¹³⁷

Within *The Insular Celts* and *The New Estate* we find the first instances of rewriting in Carson’s work, a practice which he will consistently return to throughout his career although it will take different manifestations and be put to different uses. Analysing Carson’s three adaptations of Irish verse – “The Scribe in the Woods” (first published in *The Insular Celts*, later republished as the opening poem of *The New Estate*), “Tuaim Inbir” and “Winter”, poems which have been given scant critical attention and are rarely subject to close analysis – I will suggest that Carson’s rewritings, at this stage in his career, play an important role in the formation of his poetry. On the level of theme, “The Scribe in the Woods” allows Carson to mediate on the figure of the poet; in “Winter” pressures brought to bear on the poet’s capacity for art are addressed. On the level of form and language, the adaptations provide a testing-ground where Carson can try his hand at different forms and techniques whilst assuming various voices.

¹³⁶ Paulin, 87 and 88.

¹³⁷ In the poem “Linen”, linen is one of those “[t]hings needed for a wedding or a funeral”. Other poems also include references to linen. In “Visiting the Dead”, “They have laid her in clean linen”. In “To a Married Sister”, the speaker “left you cluttered with gifts – crockery, / Knives, the bed-linen still in its cellophane”. In “Moving In”, the speaker “painted the inside of the linen / Cupboard”.

Rewriting Early Irish Poetry

The poems of *The Insular Celts* and *The New Estate* were written at a time when Carson was much preoccupied with early Irish poetry.¹³⁸ Looking back to this period in a recent interview with Kennedy-Andrews, Carson explains how he, after having “overcome [his] discomfort with [his] upbringing in Irish”, turned his bilingualism to creative advantage and set out to translate or adapt early Irish lyrics or to write poems otherwise “inflected or infected by the metres and assonances of Early Irish verse”.¹³⁹ In rewriting early Irish verse, Carson installs himself in a line of twentieth-century Irish poets for whom versions of early Irish poetry, as Denman argues, have come to serve as trial pieces.¹⁴⁰ Sewell, similarly, suggests that we see these early adaptations, undertaken by the “fledgling poet”, “perhaps as apprentice pieces”.¹⁴¹

Carson himself has in retrospect described his early rewritings as an exchange of sorts where, by engaging with the forms and techniques of early Irish lyrics, he “wanted to see the world in the way those people did”.¹⁴² More importantly, however, Carson aimed to “re-write English through the medium of that older Irish”.¹⁴³ Carson’s idea of rewriting English through another language suggests that from the outset of his career, translation and adaptation are driven by the impulse to create a new poetic expression. At this early stage, however, his rewritings are, along the lines of Denman and Sewell, best described as apprentice poems where he follows the examples of others. While he certainly adds his own signature to the poems they carry none of the weight – aesthetically and ethically – of his later rewritings.

When reading Carson’s three versions of early Irish lyrics – “The Scribe in the Woods”, “Tuaim Inbir” and “Winter” – we do well to see them as belonging in two places at once: On a superficial level, the references to monasteries and scribes keep the poems in the ancient world. The poet retains some of the most obvious antiquarian details, emphasizing his allegiance to a well-acknowledged historical heritage. At the same time, these adaptations are undertaken by a 1970s poet, anxious to refine and extend the language of his time, with the temporal and cultural distance that this entails. In this respect, Carson is part of his *zeitgeist*;

¹³⁸ Brandes, 80.

¹³⁹ Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, “For All I Know: Ciaran Carson in Conversation with Elmer Kennedy-Andrews”, in *Ciaran Carson: Critical Essays*, 15.

¹⁴⁰ Denman argues that translations of Early Irish verse “constituted the test pieces for twentieth-century Irish poets”, 42.

¹⁴¹ Sewell, 198.

¹⁴² John Brown, *In the Chair: Interviews with Poets from the North of Ireland* (Cliffs of Moher: Salmon Publishing, 2002), 145.

¹⁴³ John Brown, 145.

Carson’s poems being in line with similar adaptations of ancient poetry made at the same time by other Irish poets.¹⁴⁴

“The Scribe in the Woods”

Early Irish original ¹⁴⁵	Murphy’s literal translation	Carson’s version
Dom-farcaí fídbaide fál fom-chain loíd luin, lúad nād cé; hūas mo lebrán, ind línech, fom-chain trírech inna n-én.	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.	Behind the hedged lines where I write, The blackbird sings a dawn Of parchment held to the light.
Fomm-chain coí menn, medair mass, hi mbrot glass de dingnaib doss. Debrath! nom-Choimmdiu-coíma: caín-scribaimm fo roída ross.	A clear-voiced cuckoo sings to me (goodly utterance) in a grey cloak from bush fortresses. The Lord is indeed good to me: well do I write beneath a forest of woodland.	Clearer than my hollow bell The cuckoo has pushed its trill Into the hush of my nest.

Carson’s version of the early Irish lyric “The Scribe in the Woods”, first published in *The Insular Celts* and later given as the opening poem of *The New Estate*, is necessarily self-reflexive. The poem tells of a scribe, as does the original, transcribing a text. Yet on the textual level, Carson is himself rewriting someone else’s words, i.e. those of the ninth-century scribe. Carson, then, is at once rewriting a poem *about* a scribe and rewriting a scribe.

The Irish original of the poem which in English usually goes under the title “The Scribe in the Woods” is written on the margin of a ninth-century manuscript, found at the monastery of St Gall, Switzerland.¹⁴⁶ Referencing the poem as an example of Early Irish nature poetry in a 1978 broadcast on RTE, Heaney introduces the poem as offering to us a “glimpse of nature through the rinsed eyes of Celtic Christianity”.¹⁴⁷ In Heaney’s reading, the poem’s “imagination” “tak[es] its colouring from two very different elements”: “the *pagus*, the pagan wilderness, green, full-throated, unrestrained” and “the lined book, the Christian *disciplina*, the sense of spiritual principle and a religious calling that transcends the almost carnal lushness of nature itself.”¹⁴⁸ Indeed, having first described the woods and the

¹⁴⁴ I am most grateful to Dr. Patricia Ronan of Uppsala University for translating the early Irish originals for me.

¹⁴⁵ As printed in Gerard Murphy, 4f.

¹⁴⁶ Gerard Murphy, 5 and 172.

¹⁴⁷ Seamus Heaney, “The God in the Tree: Early Irish Nature Poetry”, in *Preoccupation: Selected Prose 1968-1978* (London: Faber and Faber, 1980), 183.

¹⁴⁸ Heaney, “The God in the Tree”, 183.

birds' song which accompany the scribe's writing, the poem concludes: "Debrath! nom-Choimmdiu-coíma: / cáin-scríbaimm fo roída ross" ("The Lord is indeed good to me: well do I write beneath a forest of woodland"). The poem is organized into two four-line stanzas. The meter is *rannaigecht*.¹⁴⁹

In interview, Carson has acknowledged that his version of "The Scribe in the Woods", as well as his other two adaptations of Irish originals in *The New Estate*, was inspired by Gerard Murphy's 1958 anthology *Early Irish Lyrics*, which reprints the Irish verses along with literal translations in prose, a glossary and annotations.¹⁵⁰ In his version of the poem, Carson condenses the two quatrains of the original into two three-line stanzas. He retains the seven syllable line, except in the first and second lines of the first stanza which comprise eight and six syllables respectively. Carson makes use of end rhymes and consonance, internal rhyme and assonance but his poem does not employ as intricate a pattern as the Irish original. Whereas the original is highly rhetorical in its use of repetition of structure and alliteration – the first line opens with "Dom-farcaí" ("overlooks me") and three continuing lines begin with "fom-chain" ("sings to me") – Carson's version reads more like a continuous narrative, as his lines enjamb onto the next one.

While Carson can be seen to appropriate the form, staying close to the original in some respects and departing from it in others, it is, however, on the level of content that Carson takes liberties with the original. Here Carson both concentrates and expands the theme of the poem. He carries over the general idea of the poem, i.e. that the birds are doing the writing for the scribe, but in his version this is made more explicit as "[t]he blackbird sings a dawn / Of parchment". Furthermore, Carson collapses writing and nature: One may for example note how he compresses the first and third lines of the first stanza – "Dom-farcaí fidbaide fál" ("A hedge of trees overlooks me") and "hūas mo lebrán, ind línech" ("above my lined book") – into "the hedged lines"; and towards the end of the poem, Carson's scribe comes to identify with the birds, or even transforms into a bird as the concluding line plays on parallel meanings of "my nest".

If Heaney found in the original the presence of *pagus*, the natural world in Carson's poem does not come across as "pagan wilderness [...] unrestrained" but as structured as "[b]ehind the hedged lines where I write", of the opening stanza, may refer, not only to the scribe's book, but to the hedge as "lined", and, as the stanza continues, the blackbird's lay merges with the "parchment". Alexander makes a pertinent observation, suggesting that "the blackbird that sings [...] becomes conflated in Carson's poem with the 'parchment' on which the scribe is

¹⁴⁹ The rhyme scheme is complex. Gerard Murphy explains *rannaigecht* as a seven syllable line, "with rhyme between the final words of lines *b* and *d*, consonance between the final of *a* and the finals of *b* and *d*, and *aiçill*-rhyme between the final of *c* and a word in the interior of *d* (and in quatrain 2 between the final of *a* and a word in the interior of *b* as well). Alliteration is frequent.", 173.

¹⁵⁰ Kennedy-Andrews, "For All I Know", 15.

writing, as if it were an illustrated figure in an illuminated manuscript, text and environment blurring together”.¹⁵¹

Yet what is most noticeable when comparing the original and Carson’s version is that Carson omits what Heaney referred to as the Christian *disciplina*. Carson does not carry over the Christian theme or the reference to God. Tentatively, the omission of God points to the socio-cultural differences between the ninth-century scribe and the contemporary poet rewriting the poem in the 1970s: Whereas the early Irish scribe finds that God protects him (“nom-Choimmdiu-coíma”: “The Lord is indeed good to me”) there is no God to guide Carson’s poet. Furthermore, while the original ends on a note of serenity, the scribe paying homage to God and accepting his seclusion, Carson leaves us with the image of the cuckoo which “has pushed its trill / Into the hush of my nest.” The choice of “push”, with its connotation of force, suggests an intrusion from the outside world which is either negative or a necessity.

The aim of Carson’s adaptation is not to render the original into English but to write a new poem which is nevertheless based on an earlier one. In his version, Carson plays with inside/outside, similarities/differences, separation/merging which is already there in the original but emphasized in his own version. Here, Carson sets up a tension between the birds and the scribe. The blackbird and the scribe are joined in their activities – as the blackbird “sings a dawn / Of parchment” – but in comparison with the cuckoo’s “trill” the scribe has but a “hollow bell”.

¹⁵¹ Alexander, 187.

“Tuaim Inbir”

Early Irish original ¹⁵²	Murphy’s literal translation	Carson’s version
<i>Suibne Geilt:</i>	<i>Mad Suibne:</i>	
M’airiuclán hi Túaim Inbir: nī lántechdais bes sēstu – conā rētglañnaib a réir, conā gréin, conā ēscu.	My little oratory in Túaim Inbir: a full mansion could not be more delightful (?) – with its stars in due order with its sun and its moon.	More ingenious than a mansion, My little house is lit By trickeries of sun and moon. The stars are all in scansion.
Gobbán du-rigni in sin (co n-ēcestar dūib a stoir); mu chridecān, Dīa du nim, is hé tugatōir rod-toig.	It is Gobbán who has made it (that its tale may be told you); my beloved God from Heaven is the thatcher who has roofed it.	God is not aloof. He has made this place for me, And lets his changing skies As thatch to my roof.
Tech innā fera flechod, maigen ’nā áigder rindi; soilsidir bid hi lugburt, os ē cen udnucht n-imbí.	A house in which rain does not fall, a place in which spear-points are not feared; having no wattling around it, it is as bright as though one were in a garden.	Yet no rain falls. Pointed spear-points are not feared. It is all gifted with brightness In my garden without garden walls.

In Murphy’s *Early Irish Lyrics*, the Irish original on which Carson’s poem “Tuaim Inbir” is based is presented as being spoken by Suibne Geilt/Mad Sweeney. As Murphy points out, however, Sweeney scholars have diverged in their opinion of the poem’s origin. Referring to a ninth-century manuscript where “Suibne Geilt” is written in the margin above the poem, Murphy deduces that the scribe “clearly pictured the poem as being uttered by Suibne”.¹⁵³ Jackson, on the other hand, claims that the reference to Sweeney is a “scribal misinterpretation” and that the poem was initially a “hermit poem” which had then been turned into a Sweeney poem in “the ‘wild man’ tradition”, by the ninth-century scribe.¹⁵⁴ While Carson in his end notes to *The New Estate* recognizes the original as part of the *Buile Suibhne* sequence, he omits the reference to Sweeney in the presentation of his poem: there is nothing overt to suggest to the reader that his poem is spoken by Sweeney. Rather than staying strictly with his source, Carson updates and appropriates the poem to the 1970s and lets the voice of Sweeney (there as an absent presence) coalesce with that of the contemporary poet.

¹⁵² As printed in Gerard Murphy, 112f.

¹⁵³ Gerard Murphy, 224.

¹⁵⁴ Gerard Murphy, 224f.

The different interpretations of the poem's origin and the conflicting attributions to Sweeney yield different readings of the poem. Jackson understands the opening line – “M'airiuclán hi Túaim Inbir” (“My little oratory in Túaim Inbir”) – as referring to an actual oratory at Túaim Inbir, whereas Murphy, following Carney, suggests that the oratory should be seen as Sweeney's home in the tree-tops.¹⁵⁵ Continuing his interpretation, Jackson understands “Gobbán” as referring to “the mythical Gobbán” and “builder of monasteries” in both secular and hagiographical tradition, which in the context of the poem, makes Gobbán the builder of the oratory.¹⁵⁶ Carson, on the other hand, omits the reference to an oratory altogether, including Gobbán, but keeps the reference to God who is said to have provided the “roof” for the speaker's habitat. Carson can thus be seen to place his speaker outdoors, which would be in keeping with Sweeney tradition.

Carson's adaptation of the Irish original into “Tuaim Inbir” is more subtle than his version of “The Scribe in the Woods”. At a first glance, it would seem that his poem is rather close to the original, on the level of content, but on closer inspection, one realizes that Carson slightly changes the topic of the poem: With the exception of the first line, most lines of the original find their correspondent in Carson's version, although their order may have been rearranged and one or two references have been omitted (as outlined above). At the same time, in omitting the first line (“My little oratory in Túaim Inbir”) and in taking the place-name as the title of his poem, his version becomes a meditation on place which is different from the original. The title alone situates the poem within the Irish tradition of *dinnsbenchas*, or place-name poetry. That his poem tells the story of a specific place is further emphasized in that Carson, in his end notes to *The New Estate*, draws our attention to the etymology of the place-name: here Carson glosses it as “the mound (or funeral mound) by the inlet”. From *Belfast Confetti* onwards, Carson is said to write modern *dinnsbenchas*, “Tuaim Inbir” thus being an early example of the genre in his work although here he writes within a borrowed format.

¹⁵⁵ Gerard Murphy, 113 and 224f.

¹⁵⁶ Gerard Murphy, 224.

“Winter”

Early Irish original ¹⁵⁷	Murphy’s literal translation	Carson’s version
<i>Ut dixit Finn úa Báiscni:</i>	As Finn, descendant of Báiscne, said:	
Scél lem dúib: dordaid dam; snigid gaim; ro fáith sam;	I have tidings for you: the stag bells; winter pours; summer has gone;	News to tell: the stag bells – summer goes, winter snows.
Gáeth ard úar; ísel grían; gair a rriith; ruirthech rían;	Wind is high and cold; the sun low; its course is short; the sea runs strongly;	
Rorúad rath; ro cleth cruth; ro gab gnáth giugrann guth.	Bracken is very red; its shape has been hidden; the call of the barnacle-geese has become usual;	Bracken, bright red, an unmade bed; usual as ice, wild geese’s voice.
Ro gab úacht etti én; aigre ré; é mo scél.	Cold has seized the wings of birds; season of ice: these are my tidings.	Cold holds the wings of birds – has seized my words, so ends my tale.

“Winter” adapts a sequence from the Finn cycle, which dates to the ninth or tenth century.¹⁵⁸ In Murphy, the poem is attributed to Finn who is also its speaker. The poem opens with “Scél lem dúib” where “scél” has been variously interpreted as “tidings” (Murphy), “song” (Flann O’Brien) and in Carson’s version, “news”. Likewise, the concluding line, which reads “é mo scél” has been rendered as “these are my tidings” (Murphy), “that’s my rhyme” (O’Brien) and “so ends my tale” (Carson).¹⁵⁹ Consequently, the first and final lines of the poem frame the poem as a narrative, not only of winter (as suggested by the English title), but as a narrative of storytelling.

Having established his presence in the opening line of the poem, and drawing our attention to the poem as a story rather than a mimetic representation, the speaker continues the first stanza by situating his narrative in winter: “dordaid dam; / snigid gaim; / ro fáith sam;” (“the stag bells; winter pours; summer has gone”). In the second and third stanza, winter is described and the poem leaves us with an image of how the cold has taken the wings of birds, whereupon the speaker concludes his story.

In Carson’s version, the image of the final stanza is expanded as the “[c]old holds” not only “the wings of birds”, but “has seized my words”. Not only are the

¹⁵⁷ As printed in Gerard Murphy, 160f.

¹⁵⁸ Gerard Murphy, 161 and 235.

¹⁵⁹ Flann O’Brien quoted in Heaney, “The God in the Tree”, 182.

birds unable to fly but, one is led to assume, the speaker's imagination and his ability to express himself suffer the same fate. Analysing Carson's adaptation in his essay "The Influence of Irish and the Oral Tradition", Sewell finds that Carson "makes explicit what is implicit in [...] other versions [of the original]: that this is a mood piece, reflecting also the condition or situation of the teller of the tale [...] There can't be any doubt but that he too (the speaker – one imagines a monk or hermit) is caught in the grip of winter".¹⁶⁰ Furthermore, discussing Carson's and Heaney's "contemporaneous preoccupation" with "Winter" (this poem too is referred to in Heaney's 1978 talk on RTE), Sewell makes a valid point when saying that the poets' interest in the poem, "with its still chilling sense of being locked in a dumbfounding winter, seems on hindsight to recall the zeitgeist of the mid-to-late 1970s in the north east of Ireland".¹⁶¹ Discussing the poem in Flann O'Brien's version, Heaney finds in it "the sharp tooth of winter", "where the authentic chill of winter and the bittersweet weather of a northern autumn pierce into the marrow of the quatrains".¹⁶² If following on from Sewell, in Carson's version, winter, and its near-paralysing effect on the speaker, gives resonance to the political climate in the North.

As Sewell points out, it is noteworthy that Carson and Heaney are both concerned with the same poem at roughly the same time: Carson's version appeared in print in 1976; Heaney's talk was broadcast in 1978. To this should of course also be added the poets' concern with "The Scribe in the Woods" as discussed above.¹⁶³ However, Carson's and Heaney's shared interest in the poems might arguably also reflect their canonical position within Irish literature.

Analysing Carson's formal deviations from the Irish original, Sewell suggests that his version "provide[s] early signs of Carson's formal inventiveness and flexibility".¹⁶⁴ Indeed, to the original's four quatrains Carson makes do with three, omitting the second stanza and the description of winter. For Sewell, this is a way for Carson to evade the risk of cliché but the effect is of course that "the sharp tooth of winter", which Heaney found in O'Brien's version, is somewhat lost.¹⁶⁵ Carson also employs a freer rhyme-scheme than his model.

¹⁶⁰ Sewell, 188. Sewell compares Carson's version to the Irish original, a literal translation in English, and Flann O'Brien's translation as given by Heaney in his RTE talk (the talk was later printed as "The God in Tree" in *Preoccupations*). Although it is well known that Carson's version is based on Murphy, Sewell does not include this translation in his discussion. As a consequence, the reference to Finn is overlooked and he speaks instead of "a monk or hermit". Sewell mistakenly attributes O'Brien's version to Heaney.

¹⁶¹ Sewell, 188.

¹⁶² Heaney, "The God in the Tree", 182.

¹⁶³ It may be noted that Heaney opens his discussion of Early Irish nature poetry with "The Blackbird of Belfast Lough". The poem has since then been translated by both Heaney and Carson. The Irish original, Heaney's and Carson's versions are given next to one another on the Seamus Heaney Centre for Poetry website. The blackbird has also given name to the magazine issued by the Seamus Heaney Centre for Poetry, *The Blackbird's Nest*.

¹⁶⁴ Sewell, 188.

¹⁶⁵ Sewell, 187.

For Carson, the adaptations and appropriations of Irish verses are driven by the impulse to “re-write English”, to forge a new expression, and at the same time, the themes of the original provide him with a ground to consider the role of the poet. It should be kept in mind that his versions are clearly interpretations of the originals, rather than faithful renditions, which means that he will in some cases expand what is latent in the original, and in other cases, omit what does not suit his purpose.

Of Carson’s three versions of Early Irish lyrics included in *The Insular Celts* and *The New Estate*, only “Tuaim Inbir” survives into the 1988 collection *The New Estate and Other Poems* and the *Collected Poems* of 2008. This may suggest self-criticism on the part of Carson, on the thematic preoccupations of the poems, their formal expression or on his techniques in adapting the Irish originals. “The Scribe in the Woods” was first published in *The Insular Celts* where it is preceded by two poems, “Letter from Alaska” and “Marginalia”. In *The New Estate*, “The Scribe in the Woods” stands as the opening poem of the collection. Its position as the introductory poem of the collection is, on the one hand, chronologically motivated as “Letter from Alaska” and “Marginalia” do not appear in *The New Estate*; thus making “The Scribe in the Woods” the first example of Carson’s early poetry. At the same time, the organization of the collection, where “The Scribe in the Woods”, along with four more pieces of *The Insular Celts* is confined to the beginning of the book, may also be explained with reference to Carson’s artistic development. As the collection progresses towards its final poem, “The New Estate”, “the hedged lines” of “The Scribe in the Woods” is replaced by “washing [which] flutters like the swaying lines / Of a new verse”.¹⁶⁶

In *The New Estate*, “Tuaim Inbir” is preceded by the poem “Moving In” and followed by the poem “The Car Cemetery”. In *The New Estate and Other Poems*, the position of the poem has been rearranged and it now appears in-between “The Moon Parlour” and “Belleek”, although the other poems are also reprinted. This suggests a conscious treatment of the poem where the new arrangement establishes new links between poems.

As the penultimate poem of *The New Estate*, “Winter”, immediately precedes “The New Estate”. Even though the poem does not reappear in *The New Estate and Other Poems* or *Collected Poems*, the poem serves its function within *The New Estate*, where it can be said to occupy a strategic position. Leaving us with the image of the poet as unable to speak or express himself, due to the cold of winter or the situation in the North, “Winter” prepares the way for “The New Estate” and this poem’s parting with what has gone before and its call for “a new verse”. Since it is excluded from Carson’s two volumes of collected poems one might argue that after *The New Estate*, the poem’s work is done. Once we get to the 1988 *The New*

¹⁶⁶ In terms of Carson’s works, *The New Estate* spans the first five years of the 1970s, collecting poems written between 1971/1972 and 1975/1976.

Estate and Other Poems, Carson has indeed been able to weld a poetic expression which may account for his Northern experience.¹⁶⁷

“The swaying lines / Of a new verse”: “The New Estate”

The New Estate concludes with the title poem. In this piece, the poet’s concern with poetic form is made explicit in the subject matter of the poem. “The New Estate” polarizes two different kinds of landscape and two different ways of living. In this, the poem dramatizes the poet’s search for “a new verse”.

In the first stanza, the speaker distances himself from “the corncrake’s elegy” and the “[r]usty / Iambics that escaped your discipline / Of shorn lawns”. Alluding in the next line to Gerard Manley Hopkins’ poem “Spring and Fall” – where the young Margaret is told that while she is “grieving / Over Goldengrove unleaving” it is herself that she mourns – Carson’s poem takes an unsentimental stance, stating that “[i]t [the corncrake’s elegy] does not grieve for you, nor for itself.” Without nostalgia, the speaker leaves this earlier landscape behind, which in the three concluding lines of the stanza is described as: “the rolled gold of cornfields, / Their rustling of tinsel in the wind, / A whole field quivering like blown silk?” What is parted with is a landscape which is ordered and structured (one recalls “the hedged lines” of “The Scribe in the Woods”) and nature as culture, where the field which quivers “like blown silk”, again, evokes “The Scribe in the Woods” and the blackbird which “sings a dawn / Of parchment”. In the second stanza, the speaker queries “a life of loving / Money”, which also includes “marble / Toilet fixtures, the silence of water-beds”. The poem’s arrangement suggests that to this way of life belongs also “[t]hat book of poems you bought yesterday?”

As the title-poem of the collection, and in its position as the concluding poem, “The New Estate” aspires to the status of a meta-poem. However, the poem is not programmatic, declaring a new poetics. Rather, the poet’s exploring of “a new verse” is tentative, and while much space is given to descriptions of the earlier landscape and earlier way of living which the speaker distances himself from, the poem does not explicitly articulate the new. In the second stanza, “washing flutters like the swaying lines / Of a new verse”. By implication, the “old verse” is rejected in favour of “[t]he high fidelity / Music” but the poem does not specify this any further. Even though the concluding line questions the relevance or significance of “[t]hat book of poems you bought yesterday”, this seems a genuine question to which the poet does not have an answer. While “The New Estate” may be read as a groping towards a poetics, the absence of one in this poem suggests that in the mid-1970s, Carson was yet to find his own poetic expression. “The New Estate”

¹⁶⁷ In *The New Estate and Other Poems*, “Winter” has been replaced by two adaptations of Welsh originals written “after”: “Epitaph”, after Dafydd Jones and “The Lost Girl”, after Robert ab Gwilym Ddu.

attempts a reorientation but the “new verse”, is first formulated in *The Last Explorer* and the poem “The Patchwork Quilt”, which continues the analogy text/textile.

Context Matters: Carson’s Review of Heaney’s *North*

On the publication of Heaney’s *North* in 1975, Carson wrote a review of the collection for *The Honest Ulsterman*, entitled “Escaped from the Massacre?” It is possible to see the review as another aspect of Carson’s poetic development.

The review is frequently brought up in discussions of *North*, where it comes to represent “the classic dissent for [Carson’s] generation from the ‘mythic method’”.¹⁶⁸ In several respects, this is valid. In his review, Carson writes that some of Heaney’s procedures have “degenerated into a messy historical and religious surmise – a kind of Golden Bough activity”.¹⁶⁹ At the same time it often goes unnoted that, while Carson objects to Heaney’s “mythic” approach, he also brings attention to poems which in his view are more adequate in their treatment of their violent and disturbing material. These poems, Carson finds, are marked by an “honesty of observation” and can thus be set against the “glib analyses” of the other poems.¹⁷⁰ The same goes for the second part of *North*, which leaves Carson with “the impression of someone involved in writing, of trying to come to terms with himself”.¹⁷¹ This latter aspect of Carson’s critique is, however, often passed over in criticism.

The review is instructive: Evaluating the historical and moral consequences of Heaney’s aesthetic principles in *North*, Carson addresses the responsibility of the poet while grappling with the question of how to adequately represent violence and human suffering in poetry. For our discussion, the review is of interest as it reveals, not only Heaney’s practices in *North* as these are understood by Carson, but Carson’s own aesthetic ideals in relation to his views on how the political situation in Northern Ireland might be dealt with in poetry; this at a time when he was himself in the process of exploring different poetic forms and methods.

¹⁶⁸ Steven Matthews, *Irish Poetry: Politics, History and Negotiations: The Evolving Debate, 1969 to the Present* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997), 190. In critical commentary, “myth” is frequently used with reference to Heaney’s procedures in *North*. The blurb on the cover of *North* advertises that “Heaney has found a myth which allows him to articulate a vision of Ireland – its people, history and landscape”. However, the Iron Age ritual sacrifices that Heaney draws on are not a myth, but in the course of time, they may have, as well as the events of Irish history, acquired “mythic” status. The analogues that Heaney establishes may be described as a “mythic” method or “mythic” approach, as in T. S. Eliot’s reading of *Ulysses* in “Ulysses, Order and Myth”.

¹⁶⁹ Ciaran Carson, “Escaped from the Massacre? *North* by Seamus Heaney”, *The Honest Ulsterman* 50 (Winter 1975), 184.

¹⁷⁰ Carson, “Escaped from the Massacre?”, 185.

¹⁷¹ Carson, “Escaped from the Massacre?”, 186.

To set the background: The “mythic” method which Heaney deploys in *North* can be understood as the poet’s solution to the challenge posed to artistic representations of the Northern Ireland conflict. Heaney himself has explained how the political situation in Northern Ireland resisted conventional form: In an interview in 1973, Heaney said that he wanted “to take the English lyric and make it eat stuff that it has never eaten before ... like all the messy and, it would seem, incomprehensible obsessions in the North, and make it still an English lyric”.¹⁷² But the conflict would also affect Heaney’s conception of poetry more generally. With the outbreak of the violence “the problems of poetry moved from being simply a matter of achieving the satisfactory verbal icon to being a search for images and symbols adequate to our predicament.”¹⁷³ Here, Heaney’s reading of P. V. Glob’s *The Bog People* came to play a central role for the direction of his poetry and his search for “images and symbols”. To Heaney, the book’s photographs of Iron Age bodies, victims of murder or ritual sacrifices, “naked, strangled or with their throats cut”, merged with photographs of victims of sectarian killings in Ireland, and he felt that “in relation to the tradition of Irish political martyrdom for that cause whose icon is Kathleen Ni Houlihan”, the prehistoric ritual sacrifices represented “more than an archaic barbarous rite: it is an archetypal pattern”.¹⁷⁴

Heaney’s approach to the Troubles in *North* – and his juxtaposing of past and present violence – came to focus the question of the relationship between art and politics.¹⁷⁵ Heather Clark has described *North* as “a watershed in Northern Ireland literary relations”, with critics divided on the applicability of the “mythic” method to the conflict.¹⁷⁶ Whereas, as Morrison explains, most London-based critics did not seem much aware “about what view of the Troubles the volume took or what loyalties it betrayed; it was enough, apparently, that it should be ‘involved’. In Belfast, where there was no such doubt about what was being said, the reception of the book was markedly less enthusiastic”.¹⁷⁷ Amongst its harshest and most oft-quoted critics are Edna Longley and Carson. Edna Longley objects to Heaney’s conflation of past and present. Questioning the “mythic confederation”¹⁷⁸ of ritual

¹⁷² Heaney in interview 1973, quoted in Neil Corcoran, *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney: A Critical Study* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), 53. Heaney of course was not alone in this enterprise: while the formal experiments of Carson, Muldoon and McGuckian can be interpreted as representing a challenge of established forms, the thrust of much of their work is towards voicing the experience of the Troubles.

¹⁷³ Seamus Heaney, from “Feeling into Words”, reprinted in *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose 1971–2001* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), 23.

¹⁷⁴ Heaney, from “Feeling into Words”, 24f.

¹⁷⁵ Elmer Andrews, *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 81. See also Clark, *The Ulster Renaissance*, 194f.

¹⁷⁶ Clark, *The Ulster Renaissance*, 194. Andrews devotes a chapter to the critical reception of *North* in *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney*: See Chapter 3: “Poetry and Politics”, 80–119.

¹⁷⁷ Morrison, *Seamus Heaney*, 56.

¹⁷⁸ Edna Longley, “‘Inner Emigré’ or ‘Artful Voyeur’? Seamus Heaney’s *North*”, in *Poetry in the Wars* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1987), 159.

sacrifices in Iron Age Jutland, the Viking conquests of Ireland and the Irish conflict, she asks: “What is the precise ‘emblematic’ relevance of these mummified figures to the ‘man-killing parishes’ of Northern Ireland?”¹⁷⁹ Where Heaney’s earlier volume *Wintering Out* succeeded in “[working] from present to past, interpreting”, Longley writes, *North* fails in that Heaney “works from past to present – equating.”¹⁸⁰ Her main objection, however, seems to be with the political consequences of the artistic procedures. Commenting on the first part of *North*, Longley finds that the poetry “often falls between the stools of poetry and politics instead of building a mythic bridge”.¹⁸¹ Carson expresses a similar concern (indeed Longley’s and Carson’s reviews are often brought up together) when he writes that “Heaney seems to have moved [...] from being a writer with the gift of percision [sic], to become the laureate of violence – a mythmaker, an anthropologist of ritual killing, an apologist for ‘the situation, in the last resort, a mystifier’”.¹⁸²

In the opening paragraph of his review, Carson refers to Heaney’s “desire to abstract, to create a superstructure of myth and symbol”¹⁸³ and towards the review’s close he calls for the need of “seeing what’s before your eyes”.¹⁸⁴ This, in brief, can be said to concentrate Carson’s critique of Heaney’s methods in *North*. Carson finds that by creating and imposing a “mythic” framework on the political situation in Northern Ireland, Heaney de-contextualizes what is local in space and time, “for the sake of the parallels of ritual”.¹⁸⁵ In “Punishment” this analogy between past and present, where atrocities in Iron Age Denmark are given alongside sectarian violence in contemporary Northern Ireland, leads to a deterministic view of history – a sense of inevitable repetitiveness – which does not allow for alternatives or change: “these things have always happened; they happened then, they happen now, and that is sufficient ground for understanding and absolution”, as Carson writes.¹⁸⁶ Here, Carson finds that this cyclical notion of history – which emanates from Heaney’s mythic framework – leads to a view of violence which is morally problematic in that it comes to work, or present itself, “almost as a consolation”.¹⁸⁷

To the final poem of *North*, “Exposure”, where the poet is depicted (depicts himself) as a “wood-kerne” // Escaped from the massacre”,¹⁸⁸ Carson remarks that “No-one really escapes from the massacre, of course – the only way you can

¹⁷⁹ Longley, “‘Inner Emigré’ or ‘Artful Voyeur?’”, 151. Longley also writes, that “Heaney does not distinguish between involuntary and voluntary ‘martyrdom’, and the nature of his ‘archetype’ is such as to subsume the latter within the former”, 151.

¹⁸⁰ Longley, “‘Inner Emigré’ or ‘Artful Voyeur?’”, 158.

¹⁸¹ Longley, “‘Inner Emigré’ or ‘Artful Voyeur?’”, 150.

¹⁸² Carson, “Escaped from the Massacre?”, 183.

¹⁸³ Carson, “Escaped from the Massacre?”, 183.

¹⁸⁴ Carson, “Escaped from the Massacre?”, 186.

¹⁸⁵ Carson, “Escaped from the Massacre?”, 184.

¹⁸⁶ Carson, “Escaped from the Massacre?”, 184.

¹⁸⁷ Carson, “Escaped from the Massacre?”, 184.

¹⁸⁸ Seamus Heaney, “Exposure”, in *Opened Ground: Poems 1966-1996* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), 144.

do that is by falsifying issues, by applying wrong notions of history instead of seeing what's before your eyes."¹⁸⁹ "If", as Corcoran aptly points out, Heaney held "wrong ideas of history" he also, by implication, held "wrong ideas of literature".¹⁹⁰ The question is, of course, how the notion of "seeing what's before your eyes" finds its formal equivalent in poetry. While one must perhaps look for the answer in Carson's own poetry, it would, however, seem that Heaney comes close in one or two poems in the first part of *North*. In Carson's view, the poem "Strange Fruit" is one of the few good poems of the bog sequence as it "refuses to fall into the glib analyses" of many other poems, and it "does not posture in its own 'understanding' of death; Heaney says quite honestly that he doesn't know".¹⁹¹ As has been pointed out by several critics, this is the poem where Heaney sees his own aesthetics questioned by the poem's subject matter.¹⁹² In its opening line, "Strange Fruit" describes the body of a murdered girl by way of simile, but as the poem progresses the figurative language breaks down and towards the poem's close, the speaker can only give a direct description of the girl: "Murdered, forgotten, nameless, terrible / Beheaded girl, outstaring axe / And beatification, outstaring / What had begun to feel like reverence."¹⁹³ In Andrews' words, "[t]he poem ends with a ringing indictment of [Heaney's] archaeological and aestheticising approach".¹⁹⁴ Commenting on the poem himself, Heaney has said that when in the process of revising the poem, "the voice that came in when I revised was a rebuke to the literary quality of that reverent emotion."¹⁹⁵ The first part of the poem "Funeral Rites", likewise, is commended by Carson for its "visual honesty". With reference to the poem's description of bodies exhumed from Danish bogs, Carson writes that "this, we feel, is what a corpse looks like".¹⁹⁶

To summarize thus far: Although not a downright dismissal of the collection, Carson criticizes Heaney's "mythic" method on the grounds that it fails to account for the complexity of what is specific in time and place, leading to generalizations. To Carson, the coherence generated leads to historical and political conclusions which he finds difficult to morally justify. On the level of form, metaphor and simile seemingly distract from the subject matter. The approach prescribed by Carson is one which attempts "visual honesty"; "seeing what's before your eyes".

¹⁸⁹ Carson, "Escaped from the Massacre?", 186.

¹⁹⁰ Corcoran, "One Step Forward, Two Steps Back" (1999), 179.

¹⁹¹ Carson, "Escaped from the Massacre?", 185.

¹⁹² Several critics have commented on this aspect of the poem. See for example Corcoran, *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney*, 74f or Helen Vendler, *Seamus Heaney* (London: Fontana Press, 1999), 48.

¹⁹³ Heaney, "Strange Fruit", in *Opened Ground*, 119.

¹⁹⁴ Andrews, 118.

¹⁹⁵ Heaney in interview with John Haffenden, quoted in Longley, "'Inner Emigré' or 'Artful Voyeur?'" , 155. See also Edna Longley, "No More Poems About Paintings?": "the sonnet's belated 'turn' in the eleventh line wakes up to the implications of 'made an exhibition' and 'gradual ease' for the poem itself." In *The Living Stream: Literature and Revisionism in Ireland* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1994), 238.

¹⁹⁶ Carson, "Escaped from the Massacre?", 185.

Additionally, as Corcoran has pointed out, the “wrong ideas of literature” might also refer to the Romantic ideal of transcendence through art and the ideals of High Modernism (to which I shall return in the discussion of *The Irish for No*).¹⁹⁷

A poem which can be brought up in this context is “Post Mortem on a Mass Grave”, an unpublished poem by Carson, folded with the Belfast Group worksheets 1971–1972 at Emory.¹⁹⁸ In its references to “soil”, “spade”, “bodies / well-preserved”, and the act of digging, the poem’s first three stanzas evoke Heaney’s archaeological writing. As the poem progresses, however, Carson takes on a scientific, almost clinical, approach towards the poem’s material, in comparison to early Heaney where graves and bodies are often aestheticized. Although the poem pre-dates *North* and Carson’s review of the collection, it is possible to see the poem as an early instance of the “seeing what’s before your eyes” approach which Carson calls for in his review. The poem speaks of “post mortem”, “evidence”, the narrator and his companion mark “the holes / where the bullets found their heads”, and the medical officer “makes a clean cut / between one man’s ribs, // examines the heart, / washes clean is [sic] hands”. By historical and scientific deduction, “this man’s stump / is evidence of frostbite” and “This man’s tongue / protrudes from his teeth” tells us that “That was the year / of the drought.” Carson’s reconstruction of the past, his “post mortem”, is methodological. He does not deploy metaphors or figurative language; neither does he seek to explain or justify but aims merely at description.

In the review, Carson comes to address the role or the moral responsibility of the poet. In this respect, Carson’s title “Escaped from the Massacre?”, and his concluding statement that one cannot escape, might equally be aimed at the poet, who in the poem “Exposure” is portrayed as a “wood-kerne // Escaped from the massacre, / Taking protective colouring / From bole and bark”.¹⁹⁹ In one sense, Heaney’s “wood-kerne” reminds us of Carson’s ironic portraits of the poet-saint of *The Insular Celts* where the poet is “retreating from the edge / of the known world” and is “going green at last” or “must forever be alone / with the green things of the world”.²⁰⁰ However, it would seem that, just as the general tenor of *The Insular Celts* questions the poet’s isolation, so does Heaney’s poet question his exile as he “sit[s] weighing and weighing / My responsible *tristia*.”²⁰¹ For Heaney, this may have a semi-autobiographical resonance, as he explains it in *Stepping Stones: Leaving Belfast for County Wicklow*, he was able to get away “from the consensus culture

¹⁹⁷ Corcoran, “One Step Forward, Two Steps Back” (1999), 179.

¹⁹⁸ Ciaran Carson, “Post Mortem on a Mass Grave”, Ciaran Carson Papers (MSS 746), Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

¹⁹⁹ Heaney, “Exposure”, in *Opened Ground*, 144.

²⁰⁰ See “St Ciaran and the Trees” and “St Ciaran’s Island”. According to *The Oxford English Dictionary* “kerne” (or kerne) can denote both an Irish foot-soldier and a peasant or vagabond; “wood-kerne” means “[a]n Irish outlaw or robber haunting woods or wild country”. *The Oxford English Dictionary*, prepared by J. A. Simpson and E. S. C. Weiner (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), s.v. *kerne*.

²⁰¹ Heaney, “Exposure”, in *Opened Ground*, 143.

that had built up among” the Belfast poets of the 1960s and early 1970s, and the “party line” that had developed.²⁰² In moving, Heaney had “create[d] a stand off.”²⁰³

With reference to the last two stanzas of “Punishment”, which read “I who have stood dumb / when your betraying sisters, / cauled in tar, / wept by the railings, // who would connive / in civilized outrage / yet understand the exact / and tribal, intimate revenge.”, Carson writes that Heaney “seems to be offering his ‘understanding’ of the situation almost as a consolation”.²⁰⁴ A little earlier in the review, on “Kinship”, Carson has criticized Heaney’s need “to explain, to justify [...] in terms of his myth”.²⁰⁵ Recalling that “Strange Fruit” was praised for not “postur[ing] in its own ‘understanding’”, it would seem that a further critique of *North* is Heaney’s attempt to explain.

While acknowledging that there is never a neutral rendering of an event, free from perspective or ideology, Carson’s own poetry aims to work against explanations or judgements. When asked about his own collection *Belfast Confetti* and its “attempt to ‘face into the massacre’”, in a 2002 interview, Carson said:

I can’t as a writer, take any kind of moral stance on the ‘Troubles’, beyond registering what happens. And then, as soon as I say that, I realize that ‘registering’ is a kind of morality. Nor can one, even if one wanted to, escape politics. But my 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. [...] If there’s one thing certain about what was or is going on, it’s 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.²⁰⁶

Carson’s review of *North*, and what he perceives as Heaney’s methods in this volume, is very much an ethical discussion as he problematizes some of the historical and moral implications of Heaney’s aesthetics. As will be seen in the following chapters of this thesis, which engage with *The Irish for No*, *Belfast Confetti* and *First Language*, Carson’s poetics is both an aesthetics and an ethics. This two-sided aspect of Carson’s poetics is brought prominently to the fore in these later collections as Carson’s subject matter shifts in focus towards the Northern Ireland conflict.

²⁰² Dennis O’Driscoll, *Stepping Stones: Interviews with Seamus Heaney* (London: Faber and Faber, 2008), 160.

²⁰³ O’Driscoll, 160. Accordingly, Heaney saw Longley and Carson’s criticism as personal rather than artistic and ideological.

²⁰⁴ Carson, “Escaped from the Massacre?”, 184. “Punishment” quoted by Carson in the review.

²⁰⁵ Carson, “Escaped from the Massacre?”, 184.

²⁰⁶ John Brown, 148f.

The Lost Explorer

Carson's publications of the 1970s followed each other in rapid succession. Having published the pamphlet *The Insular Celts* in 1973 and his first collection of poems, *The New Estate*, in 1976, Carson issued a second pamphlet, *The Lost Explorer*, in 1978. *The Lost Explorer* is a slim volume, comprising only ten poems. While several poems of *The Insular Celts* are included in *The New Estate*, suggesting that the latter in part continues on from or grows out of the earlier pamphlet, the poems of *The Lost Explorer* reveal both continuities and marked discontinuities with the earlier work. Above all, the pamphlet can be seen as a compilation of test pieces where Carson rehearses different themes and forms. *The Lost Explorer* does not quite hold together as a collection: for all their merit, the poems appear disparate in subject matter and there is no clear direction.

After *The Lost Explorer*, it would be eight years until Carson's next publication, *Irish Traditional Music*, and nine years until his next volume of poetry, *The Irish for No*, which may qualify the impression that the pamphlet comprises a series of trial pieces. There might be several reasons behind this gap. Carson has himself explained that his work as Traditional Arts Officer with the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, a position he took up in 1975, led him to question poetry as an art form.²⁰⁷ In comparison with song and music, Carson felt that "[t]he stuff I had been doing up until then, in terms of writing seemed a bit thin, pale, contained, too aesthetic. So I just went off the whole idea of being a 'poet'".²⁰⁸ While this is the narrative established by Carson himself, his doubts about poetry might also, perhaps, be set in relation to the challenge posed by the Northern Ireland conflict, as discussed earlier. Furthermore, one is tempted to see the publication gap as in part a consequence of the crowded poetry scene in Belfast. At least Carson himself hints at this. Although tongue-in-cheek, Carson has said that: "I didn't write very much between 1976 and 1985. Paul Muldoon was doing the thing so well, so why bother?"²⁰⁹

The Irish for No displays, most critics will contend, a "radically different approach and diction".²¹⁰ This is in many ways a valid reading, especially if one compares *The Irish for No* with *The New Estate*. At the same time, there is room to suggest that the "approach and diction" which characterize *The Irish for No* were in part prefigured in Carson's poetry of the late 1970s. This is not to say that *The Lost Explorer* marks a dramatic shift in Carson's work as *The Irish for No* will. Yet, artistically it would seem possible to place *The Lost Explorer* midpoint between the two early volumes and *The Irish for No*.

Only a few critics have engaged critically with *The Lost Explorer* and only a few poems have been commented on. Denman, who is the critic who has devoted most space to a critical consideration of *The Lost Explorer*, has written perceptively

²⁰⁷ See for example Brandes, 81 and Laskowski, 92.

²⁰⁸ Laskowski, 92.

²⁰⁹ John Brown, 145.

²¹⁰ Denman, 29.

on the poems' formal aspects. He observes that in the pamphlet "there is already a progression from the generally tight and contained poems" that characterize *The New Estate* and towards the forms of *The Irish for No*.²¹¹ The formal precursors of Carson's later work, poems such as "The Great Fitzpatrick", "The Incredible Shrinking Man" and "Twine", Denman writes, "are beginning to open out" and "they can be left inconclusive and open-ended as if hinting at larger forms."²¹²

If some of the poems of *The Lost Explorer* foreshadow *The Irish for No* onwards, on the level of form, some may be read as early examples of ideas pursued, while others deal with themes abandoned, in subsequent writings. To the last group belong a series of "travel poems". As Hughes has noted in passing, "The Great Fitzpatrick", "East of Cairo" and "Africa" are reminiscent of the poetry of Muldoon in that they "make Muldoon-like gestures to travel".²¹³ In the context of *The Lost Explorer*, this group of poems is significant as they make up roughly one third of the poems. To this group may also be added the poem "Letter from Alaska" of the earlier pamphlet, in its reference to an elsewhere. However, after the 1970s the "travel poems" are not taken any further in Carson's writings, and while "East of Cairo" is reprinted in the *Collected Poems* of 2008, "The Great Fitzpatrick" and "Africa" have been omitted so as to suggest that they are not part of Carson's self-fashioning. The creative potential of the poems' subject matter is unfulfilled, for whatever reason. There is a certain sense of self-reflexivity here. Carson the poet in search of a poetic expression is like the narrators and explorers of his poems. The character Fitzpatrick ends up among natives in Borneo by accident as his plane crashes in a "virgin forest". But even though he is made "their god" and is "allowed to take photographs" of the natives, Fitzpatrick "escaped" and on his return home (to Ireland one presumes), "the useless spools, with 'some pictures he had taken / of a native girl'" are "left undeveloped". On a different note, the narrator of "East of Cairo", we are told, "had come to the East, after all, / to find myself" but discovers that "there was nothing there" and "now have plans to go to the holy city of Lhasa" instead.

Other poems, however, look ahead to later themes. Horton observes that "[f]rom his earliest work, Carson has been preoccupied with the idea of boundaries" and gives "The Great Fitzpatrick" as one example.²¹⁴ Alexander points to memory and "elements of repression" in the poem "Smithfield".²¹⁵ And in the poem "Twine" the pamphlet gives us the first portrait of the postman-father who will become an important and prominent figure in subsequent work.²¹⁶ On the level of theme, the concluding poem "The Patchwork Quilt" anticipates future

²¹¹ Denman, 29.

²¹² Denman, 29.

²¹³ Hughes, "the mouth of the poem": Carson and Place", 88.

²¹⁴ Horton, "Faery lands forlorn": Reading Tradition in the Poetry of Ciaran Carson", 163.

²¹⁵ Alexander, 121.

²¹⁶ The various portraits of the postman-father are traceable from *The Lost Explorer* onwards. The portraits are intratextually connected. As the figure develops, the postman-father becomes a model for the poet.

preoccupations but as we shall see, its significance within Carson's work extends beyond that of theme.

To Craft a Poem: "The Patchwork Quilt"

The poem "The Patchwork Quilt" was written in 1977 or 1978.²¹⁷ In its suggested analogy between the making of a patchwork quilt and the writing of poetry, Carson can be said to have found a model for his poetry. The poem's significance is indicated by its position as the closing poem of the pamphlet *The Lost Explorer*. Moreover, in Carson's two collected works *The New Estate and Other Poems* of 1988 and the 2008 *Collected Poems*, it replaces "The New Estate" as the concluding poem.²¹⁸ Its status is also settled in *The Irish for No* where it is recycled and incorporated into the poem "Patchwork". Although Carson is wary of anything that looks too programmatic, "The Patchwork Quilt" in fact anticipates some of the principles behind his subsequent work, in particular his method of composing poems through recourse to intertextuality.

"The Patchwork Quilt" has not been discussed or analysed in any detail. Whereas the textile metaphors have been observed by earlier critics, commentary is chiefly limited to the poem "Patchwork", and the observations are not followed up by analysis.²¹⁹ However, an examination of Carson's formulation of the technique, in this and other poems, is a prerequisite for understanding how the analogy is put to work in his writing. A consideration of "The Patchwork Quilt" suggests that the metaphor is both more specific and multifaceted than previously accounted for, denoting both a method and an artistic ideal.

Where the earlier "Interior with Weaver" hinted at the analogy between textile and text, and other poems make reference to this theme, "The Patchwork Quilt" elaborates on the metaphor to a greater extent in its articulation of the actual making of a textile. Here are the two opening paragraphs of the poem:

²¹⁷ Brandes, 86.

²¹⁸ One might argue that "The Patchwork Quilt" stands as the final poem for chronological reasons. However, otherwise in *The New Estate and Other Poems*, Carson breaks with the chronology and poems of *The Lost Explorer* are interspersed between poems of *The Insular Celts* and *The New Estate*.

²¹⁹ McCracken places the poem within the collected volume *The New Estate and Other Poems* and not *The Lost Explorer*. She sees it as "a recent (and previously uncollected) piece", and takes it in another direction than this thesis as she relates it to the collected *The New Estate and Other Poems*, 370. Alexander too places it in this collected book of poems and does not discuss it in the context of the juvenilia. No detailed analysis of the poem has been undertaken. Therefore, while the patchwork metaphor has been observed by other critics, it has also, in part, been abstracted from Carson's own formulation of it in his poems. Most observations are limited to, and begin with the poem "Patchwork" in *The Irish for No* yet that poem has an important forerunner in "The Patchwork Quilt" and hence Carson's juvenilia.

It took me twenty years to make
that quilt. My mother had just died when I began.
It took my mind off things. How many nights
I don't know. The children all in bed,
I'd light the lamp. Scraps of John's old shirts,
a curtain, a flowered dress I wore one summer
then forgot about. Squares and diamonds,
calico and gingham, linen, cotton, anything
that came to hand. I snipped them all up.

I think at first I had a pattern
in my head, though maybe I think now
it changed. For when I look at it, it's hard
to see where I began, or when I ended.
Then I recognize a bit of print, Janie's blouse
the day she fell in the river. But then again, it looks
like something else. There are so many
lines, so many checks.

If this is how a quilt is made it is also one of the ways in which a poem can be made. The speaker's detailing of the making of a quilt serves metaphorically for the making of a poem.²²⁰ For the textile/text analogy, the attention given to the practice and the principles behind the making, in this poem, is certainly rewarding. In the first paragraph the speaker tells of the various materials that she recycles and assembles to make her quilt. Significantly, the "scraps" are of different forms (squares and diamonds) and fabrics (calico and gingham, linen, cotton) and have been put to various uses or functions (shirts, a curtain, a flowered dress). As the second paragraph continues – and the speaker shifts to contemplate the quilt as a finished whole – we learn that the scraps carry with them aspects of meaning, from their earlier context ("Janie's blouse / the day she fell in the river"), which also means that each recycled material is endowed with history and evokes a memory; has a potential story to tell. While the scraps are used to form a new whole, their earlier existence is still identifiable, or traceable, ("I recognize a bit of print"), at the same time as the new context transforms them ("But then again, it looks / like something else. There are so many / lines, so many checks"). The finished quilt is more than its parts. The principle of quilting entails taking the earlier textiles apart ("I snipped them all up"), joining them with other scraps, stitching them together and, finally, giving them a new function: having previously been part of a shirt or a curtain they now form part of a quilt which the speaker "had meant [...] to be a present / for Janie's wedding".

In its description of this particular activity, further, the poem significantly establishes a dialogue with Heaney's "Digging" and his so-called archaeological

²²⁰ The speaker of this poem is the grandmother of the poet-speaker of the later poem "Patchwork".

poetics. In this poem Heaney famously constructs an analogy between the activity of digging and the writing of poetry. In his essay “Feeling into Words”, Heaney describes “poetry as a dig, a dig for finds that end up being plants”.²²¹ “The Patchwork Quilt” contains an allusion to “Digging”. Carson’s patchwork and “the needle / thin as thin between my thumb and finger” in the third paragraph can be read as an alternative to Heaney’s pen/spade metaphor, whose two components are equated with one another, first in the beginning of the poem (“Between my finger and my thumb / The squat pen rests; snug as a gun.”) and finally in the last short stanza (“Between my finger and my thumb / The squat pen rests. / I’ll dig with it.”).²²² Significantly, in recycling Heaney’s lines Carson replaces the pen with a needle, changes the order of finger and thumb through a chiasmus, and leaves out any equivalent of Heaney’s reference to “gun”, preferring to associate the poetic creativity of finger and thumb not with digging but with another, predominantly feminine activity, exercised here by the grandmother, not (as in Heaney’s case) by the father and grandfather.

But the activity holds further implications. An interesting detail in the poem is its seemingly irrelevant reference to the tree, which first appears in the third paragraph – “The thread went in / and out and on and on, the tree was rustling / at the window; the clock ticked” – and then reappears in the fourth and final paragraph: “That tree. Someone should trim it, it’s been there / so long, you can hardly see in here. / The leaves can fall, all the different / bits and pieces that were joined can join.” Surely it is noteworthy that the tree figures in the context of stitching, and, by analogy, writing. In the first instance, the tree, “rustling / at the window”, seems to remind the narrator of the world outside and connect her with it. Even though the narrator “didn’t want / to look at anything”, as if seeking seclusion in the creative process, her surroundings still intrude and she still hears the tree while going about her business. In the second instance, the description of the leaves blurs into the account of the quilt. Here the two lines “all the different / bits and pieces that were joined can join” may equally refer to the leaves, falling to the ground and into a new pattern, and the scraps that are stitched into the quilt.

Furthermore, the tree is associated with life and mutability: “the tree was rustling” and “the clock ticked”; “it’s been there / so long”; “[t]he leaves can fall”. Given the meta-poetic dimension of the poem, it does not seem amiss to connect this tree with a famous antecedent, the tree depicted by Keats in his “Ode on a Grecian Urn”. Depicted on an ancient urn, Keats’s tree “cannot shed / Your leaves, nor ever bid the spring adieu”.²²³ The pictorial representation of the tree remains permanent in a world of change. In this, Keats’s tree can be said to offer us a “negative other” to Carson’s tree. The implication of this is not only that art, as viewed by Carson’s poem, is not immune to change: if it is to be true to life, art must be change itself.

²²¹ Heaney, *from* “Feeling into Words”, 14.

²²² Heaney, “Digging”, in *Opened Ground*, 3f.

²²³ John Keats, “Ode on a Grecian Urn”, in *The Poems of John Keats*, ed. Jack Stillinger (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978), 372f.

“The Patchwork Quilt” presents us with a specific technique which may be applied to Carson’s method of composing poems through intricate intertextuality, where earlier texts are recycled to form an integral and constitutive part of a poem. Carson’s intertextuality comes close to the patchwork technique where recycled fragments are not entirely absorbed in the new text. In many of his poems he is the quilt-master whose “stitches / shine in everything I’ve made”. In addition to this, through its imagery and its evocation of two famous predecessor poems, “The Patchwork Quilt” suggests an attitude to art: art should be looked upon as an intimate, ongoing, improvised activity. It cannot and should not aspire to the condition of something finished and arrested but is always recycled and rewritten, at the level of theme, form and language. Such appears to be the message conveyed by the image of patchwork and the patchwork technique, in this poem. In *The Irish for No*, to be considered in the following chapter, the poetics is formally realized but the textile metaphor also undergoes its own transformation.



3. Quilting

The Irish for No

The Irish for No, published in 1987, is commonly viewed as the collection in which Carson establishes his personal idiom and introduces the themes and techniques which would later be seen as the hallmark of his mature poetry. If, as was pointed out in the preceding chapter, the poems of *The New Estate* are generally regarded as conventional, conforming to the standard lyric of the 1970s,²²⁴ one of the adjectives most frequently used with reference to *The Irish for No* is “radical”, usually employed to single out a particular aspect which the critic considers innovative. Tracing the development of Carson’s poetry from *The New Estate* to the 1996 collection *Opera Et Cetera*, Ben Howard finds that *The Irish for No* “marks a radical departure, structurally and thematically” from the debut collection, while foreshadowing later volumes.²²⁵ Denman sees in *The Irish for No* “the foundation of a radically new diction” which sets it apart from the early work, the poems “establish[ing] what came to be regarded as the characteristic Carson language”.²²⁶ And when summarizing the achievements of *The Irish for No* in his study *Irish Poetry since 1950*, Goodby terms it, along with Carson’s third collection *Belfast Confetti* published only two years later, “[t]he most radical transformation of the Northern Irish poetry scene of the late 1980s”.²²⁷ As will appear from the following, what the reviewers and critics specifically have in mind, when they talk about this “radical” shift, seems to involve the following three features: In *The Irish for No*, Belfast occupies a central place as both setting for and subject matter of the poems; Carson introduces a poetry influenced by Irish traditional music, storytelling and the Irish language; and he establishes the long line as the formal signature of his verse.

²²⁴ Denman, 29; Goodby, *Irish Poetry since 1950*, 192.

²²⁵ Ben Howard, “The Evolving Art of Ciaran Carson”, *Shenandoah* 48.1 (1998), 99f.

²²⁶ Denman, 29.

²²⁷ Goodby, *Irish Poetry since 1950*, 290.

Whilst subsequent collections would secure Belfast, the Irish tradition and the long line as abiding preoccupations of Carson's writing, their significance, at the time of publication, is best seen against the work of other Northern poets. Here it appears that Carson has been able to carve out a role or position for himself. By the very presence of Belfast, Goodby claims, *The Irish for No* "expanded the thematics of Northern Irish poetry",²²⁸ for as Quinn observes in *The Cambridge Introduction to Modern Irish Poetry, 1800–2000*, "Irish poetry has" largely "overlooked the city as subject, preferring landscape".²²⁹ This is corroborated by Parker, who writes that by "[e]xposing the complexity and fragility of the historical and contemporary *urban* experience [...] Carson has hugely extended the scope of Northern Irish poetry".²³⁰ Edna Longley, who reviewed the collection for *Poetry Review* in their winter 1987/1988 issue, found that Carson's "immersion in Irish traditional culture, musical and oral, ha[d] produced something entirely new".²³¹ On the same note, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, who reviewed *The Irish for No* under the title "The English for Irish", and for whom the collection was a "joy" and a "relief", recognized in the poems "the authentic voice of the good 'seanchai'" (storyteller), "until now never encountered within the covers of a poetrybook", "the quite palpable and undisguised presence of the Irish Language" and "utterly modern, urban" *dinnshenchas* (place-name poems).²³² Edna Longley was one of the first to comment on the "extended line-unit" of Carson's verse which from *The Irish for No* onwards has become one of the most commented-on features of Carson's work as it sets his verse apart from the conventional lyric.²³³

In *The Irish for No*, Belfast as theme and form are interdependent for, as noted by earlier critics, Carson's Belfast cannot be narrated by using standard lyrical forms. As already mentioned in the previous chapters, this is an argument advanced convincingly by Goodby and Corcoran, amongst others. Writing on *The Irish for No* and *Belfast Confetti*, Goodby finds "the urban subject matter [...] most immediately gripping" but, his argument continues, "even more important were the ways in which thematics (of the city, but also of narrative, memory and language) fed a formal development beyond the dominant lyric".²³⁴ On similar lines, Corcoran finds Carson "[a] resolutely urban poet" and claims that "[a] response to that city in this time ["post-1968"] has necessitated the construction of his radically *sui generis* forms".²³⁵ In the revised 1999 version of his essay, Corcoran strengthens his claim, asserting that Belfast "has provoked, or even demanded, the

²²⁸ Goodby, *Irish Poetry since 1950*, 290.

²²⁹ Justin Quinn, *The Cambridge Introduction to Modern Irish Poetry, 1800–2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 203.

²³⁰ Parker, 127.

²³¹ Edna Longley, "Border Crossings", *Poetry Review* 77.4 (Winter 1987/1988), 48.

²³² Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, "The English for Irish", *The Irish Review* 4 (1988), 116ff.

²³³ Longley, "Border Crossings", 48. Waters finds the Carson of *The Irish for No* "free from the minimalist anti-discursive aesthetic that is one end point of the well-made lyric poem", 107.

²³⁴ Goodby, *Irish Poetry since 1950*, 290.

²³⁵ Corcoran, "One Step Forward, Two Steps Back" (1992), 216.

construction of his radically individual forms”.²³⁶ However, while the observations and claims made by the critics enumerated above are important and most relevant to *The Irish for No*, the discussion can also be thoroughly refined, particularly with regard to Carson’s poetic gestation leading up to the second collection and to the relation between the juvenilia and this later collection.

When Goodby discusses the achievements of Carson’s poetry from *The Irish for No* to *Opera Et Cetera*, he chooses for his title “‘That’s another story’: Carson redivivus”.²³⁷ *The Irish for No* is said by Goodby to mark Carson’s “reappearance”.²³⁸ Although Goodby, it should be emphasized, is one of few critics who engage with Carson’s juvenilia, the title of this section and the vocabulary used to refer to *The Irish for No* bear the marks of the standard approach to both Carson’s authorship and his second principal collection of poems. Within this standard approach, *The Irish for No* is seen to emerge after a period of “poetic silence” and to announce a major reorientation in Carson’s poetry, both formal and thematic.²³⁹ Viewing Carson’s work in this perspective has certain consequences. Firstly, it tends to separate Carson’s juvenilia from *The Irish for No* and subsequent collections and thereby disguise continuities in his writings. Secondly, and following from this, it tends to see the period between the early poetry and *The Irish for No* as of marginal interest to a discussion of his work. The terms “poetic silence” and “silence”, frequently used in critical commentary, are, in this respect, revealing. One of the standard phrases, “an eleven-year-long poetic silence”, discloses the marginalization of *The Lost Explorer* in critical discussion.

This slanted view of Carson’s poetic development was observed by McCracken as early as in her 1995 essay “Ciaran Carson: Unravelling the Conditional, Mapping the Provisional” which, within the space allowed by the essay, does its part to rectify it. McCracken writes there that “[t]he almost ten-year silence between the early publications and *The Irish for No* would seem to imply that Carson’s debut was something of a false start” but contends that one would “be mistaken to disregard the importance of either *The New Estate* or *The Lost Explorer*”.²⁴⁰ To her, “[t]onally and contextually, Carson’s voice and preoccupations are already formed in the early work”, although, with regard to form, the poems are “unlikely antecedents”.²⁴¹ McCracken’s observation is a most important one but, as has

²³⁶ Corcoran, “One Step Forward, Two Steps Back” (1999), 180.

²³⁷ Goodby, *Irish Poetry since 1950*, 290.

²³⁸ Goodby, *Irish Poetry since 1950*, 290. In fact, a few pages earlier, Goodby describes *The Irish for No* as “the most spectacular resurrection since Clarke’s in 1955”, 281.

²³⁹ In critical commentary, “poetic silence” and “silence” are frequently used when referring to the period in-between Carson’s early work and *The Irish for No*. A variant phrase, “creative silence”, is seen in David Wheatley’s “‘That Blank Mouth’: Secrecy, Shibboleths, and Silence in Northern Irish Poetry”, *Journal of Modern Literature* XXV.1 (Fall 2001), 9. Yet this latter phrase is ambiguous as it may equally suggest that this was a “silence” which bore creativity.

²⁴⁰ McCracken, 369.

²⁴¹ McCracken, 369.

already been pointed out in earlier chapters of the thesis, only a few critics have followed suit.²⁴²

So normative seems the standard approach to Carson's work that even in a recent study, *The Irish for No* is taken as a starting-point for analysis. In the introductory paragraph to his chapter on Carson, Homem validates rather than remedies the conventional perspective. He writes there:

Indeed, the success enjoyed by Carson's *The Irish for No* (1987), published after a silence of 11 years, has meant that critical accounts of his work have made it a *de facto* inaugural book; and although its success prompted the relaunch (in 1988, as an expanded edition) of his 1976 collection, *The New Estate*, neither this retrieval of his first volume nor the inclusion of it at the beginning of the *Collected Poems* (2008) have revoked the perception that *The Irish for No* marked the inception, in diction as much as in themes, of a distinctive poetic writing.²⁴³

In contrast to the standard approach, the present chapter will read *The Irish for No* as bearing witness to an unfolding poetics that took its beginning in Carson's 1970s poetry. It is the contention of this thesis that some of the techniques and procedures of *The Irish for No* were suggested and even prepared for as early as in the 1978 collection *The Lost Explorer*. If so, Carson's early poetry provides a valuable entry to *The Irish for No*. This is not to deny that the second collection also involves a new direction. As we have seen, the title poem of *The New Estate* dramatizes the poet's search for a "new verse", while the concluding poem of *The Lost Explorer*, "The Patchwork Quilt", formulates a tentative poetics which not only looks forward to but helps define what can be seen as a paradigmatic Carson text, in *The Irish for No* but also in later writing. In this chapter, I will argue that "The Patchwork Quilt" also provides us with a model for analysis. In *The Irish for No*, the poetics introduced in "The Patchwork Quilt" is explored further in the concluding poem "Patchwork", thus establishing a connection, between *The Irish for No* and the early work. While the earlier poem, as the title intimates, describes a patchwork quilt and the process by which it is made, the later poem *is* a patchwork and manifests the patchwork technique in its own texture and method of composition. Set in relation to the subject matter of *The Irish for No*, I will argue that the patchwork technique – essentially a composite method by means of which various fragments are recycled and pieced together to form a new whole – provides Carson with a model for writing Belfast.²⁴⁴

²⁴² See the section "Previous Research" in the Introduction.

²⁴³ Homem, 166.

²⁴⁴ The metaphor is also used in relation to space, as will be seen from the following discussion of *The Irish for No* and *Belfast Confetti*. The thesis's primary focus, however, is with poetic method. For the continued importance of patchwork as a metaphor for the geography of cities, see the 2008 collection *For All We Know*: "I'm looking at the patchwork quilt of Paris: / parks, avenues, cemeteries, temples, impasses, arcades." ("L'Air du Temps", part I), "Light dappled the parterres and borders of the patchwork quilt, // and I

In an interview with Brandes, conducted two years after the publication of *The Irish for No*, Carson explains that “the whole of *The Irish for No* is a deliberate stitching together of poems and themes, a patchwork”.²⁴⁵ The comparison of *The Irish for No* with a patchwork is apposite as it allows us to see each of the collection’s twenty-four poems as interrelated narratives, contributing to the larger Belfast narrative that the collection is intent on telling, while at the same time implying that Belfast relies on the heterogeneous and multiple for its “meaning”. In his attempt to write “the ongoing, fractious epic that is Belfast”,²⁴⁶ Carson’s method is composite, bringing together that which is various in voice, form and material. Underlying Carson’s approach to his subject matter is the understanding that there can never be a single authoritative telling of a story. At the same time, in the preceding chapter the discussion of the poem “The Patchwork Quilt” suggested that the analogy between poetry and patchwork, understood here as both an artefact and a technique, may be advanced further and used with reference, not only to collections of poems envisaged as wholes, but also to individual poems, where the analogy comes to describe the texture or composition of a poem: texts are created by old texts which are recycled but not entirely absorbed in the new context. Thus, in the image of the patchwork is concentrated Carson’s attitude to poetry as a means of representation and his poetic method.

Theoretical Background

Before I consider *The Irish for No* further I want to begin this chapter by examining two texts which in terms of their year of publication frame the collection: Carson’s guide book *Irish Traditional Music*, published in 1986, and his review of C. K. Williams, “Against Oblivion”, published in *The Irish Review* in 1989.

It is widely held by critics that Irish traditional music and the poetry of C. K. Williams have played a formative role in Carson’s poetry from *The Irish for No* onwards. Edna Longley, one of the first reviewers of *The Irish for No*, for example, notes in the collection “Gaelic modes”, “Irish traditional culture, musical and

remember how you once thought the quilt was Paris, / the *quartiers* demarcated by pattern and colour.” (“Rue Daguerre”, part I), “You can see how the patchwork / might resemble that country in summer, with its bright fields // and the crooked white seams of its intervening roadways.” (“On the Contrary”, part II), “I said I thought I’d seen the patchwork quilt somewhere before. // It’s a very old pattern, you said, Cathedral Windows. / My four aunts made it, having been made widows by the War. // They pieced back together the light of the shattered windows. / They saw themselves walking again down a shimmering aisle.” (“The Story of the Chevalier”, part II), “gazing at Paris // spread out before you like the parterres of the patchwork quilt.” (“Rue Daguerre”, part II), “as the quilters make a pattern of their remnant and rags” (“Zugzwang”, part II).

²⁴⁵ Brandes, 86.

²⁴⁶ Ciaran Carson, *The Star Factory* (London: Granta, 1997), 126.

oral”, and the “extended line-unit (which nods to C. K. Williams)”.²⁴⁷ Corcoran, likewise, finds that the poems of *The Irish for No* “formally [...] may be said to join together two widely divergent kinds of structure: the very long line which Carson derives primarily from the American poet C. K. Williams, and the oral forms of Irish traditional story-telling and even Irish traditional music”.²⁴⁸ Against this background it is a little peculiar that Carson’s own writings on traditional music and the poetry of Williams have not been considered in closer detail. In fact, they are often excluded from or overlooked in critical discussions.²⁴⁹ This is unfortunate. Firstly, for a consideration of *The Irish for No*, *Irish Traditional Music* and the Williams review are most relevant for they reveal Carson’s formal ambitions as well as his poetic gestation, the path taken from *The Lost Explorer* to *The Irish for No*. The composition of *Irish Traditional Music*, and the principles of traditional music outlined therein, anticipates the form and some of the poetic procedures of the collection as well as Carson’s approach to narrative. Carson’s review of Williams, in part a discussion of Williams’ poetry, in part an autobiographical note on his own artistic development, gives us an insight into the years leading up to *The Irish for No* and reveals that the early to mid 1980s were, in important ways, spent contemplating poetry. Secondly, Carson’s description of traditional music and his critical engagement with Williams’ poetry disclose that what Carson derives from them is not just form and structure but an attitude to art.

²⁴⁷ Longley, “Border Crossings”, 48.

²⁴⁸ Corcoran, “One Step Forward, Two Steps Back” (1992), 217. Yet there is no general consensus as to how this varied influence should be balanced. Theo Dorgan, for instance, remains sceptical about the influence of Williams’ long lines and finds the influence of Irish traditional song more convincing, see Dorgan’s “Introduction” to *Irish Poetry since Kavanagh* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1996), 14. Fiona Sampson sees in the subsequent collection *Belfast Confetti*, “Whitmanesque long lines”, *Beyond the Lyric: A Map of Contemporary British Poetry* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2012), 239.

²⁴⁹ *Irish Traditional Music* features rarely in Carson criticism. When mentioned it is often as bibliographical reference only. There may be several reasons as to why it is overlooked: the book falls outside of Carson’s poetic production and it precedes *The Irish for No* which most accounts take as their starting-point for analysis. Important exceptions are: Crosson’s “Performance and Music in the Poetry of Ciaran Carson” and Davide Benine, “Ciaran Carson’s Constellations of Ideas: Theories on Traditional Culture from Within”, *The Brazilian Journal of Irish Studies* 8 (June 2006). In Crosson and Benine, *Irish Traditional Music* is discussed in brief but more space is given to *Last Night’s Fun*, Carson’s second book on Irish music, published in 1996. In their contributions to *Ciaran Carson: Critical Essays*, Goodby, Tim Hancock and Sewell make reference to *Irish Traditional Music* but the text is not considered in detail. Carson’s review of Williams is discussed by Ciaran O’Neill.

Carson's Poetics and *Irish Traditional Music*

Irish Traditional Music was published in 1986, eight years after the pamphlet *The Lost Explorer* and ten years after *The New Estate*; hence the reference to the period in-between as one of “poetic silence” or “silence”. From Carson’s own accounts of the period it would seem as if this “silence” was, in part, caused by or at least maintained by a general discontent with the poetic medium and with poetic forms. A few critics have picked up on this, suggesting that the gap in poetic output is a formal one. Corcoran, for example, writes about Carson’s “personal search [...] for a way of registering in his own writing the full shock of the challenge to recognised modes and forms represented by the realities” of the Troubles.²⁵⁰ On similar lines, Alexander proposes a “deadlock” due to the clash between “the well-made poem” and “immediate social, public concerns”.²⁵¹ Delattre, finally, explains the “hiatus” as a consequence of his work with the Arts Council “but mostly because he was trying to find a new form of inspiration and writing after his first volume of verse, *The New Estate*”.²⁵²

Having considered Carson’s juvenilia in the previous chapter, there is reason to suggest that the “new form” was not entirely unprepared for. One may suggest further that Carson’s “search” for form already informs the early poetry. If so, the “silence” yields a telling expression in the poem “The Patchwork Quilt” since this poem not only closes *The Lost Explorer*, but the entire 1970s production, with a tentative poetics which is left unrealized or unfulfilled until *The Irish for No* in 1987.

The significance of *Irish Traditional Music* is best seen against the background of this period of seeming “poetic silence”. “Interviews have”, as Tim Hancock rightly points out, “established a narrative whereby Carson attributes the discovery of his own true poetic voice [...] to lessons learned while playing and listening to traditional music”.²⁵³ In 1975, shortly after he had completed *The New Estate*, Carson took up the position of Traditional Arts Officer in the Arts Council of Northern Ireland.²⁵⁴ Carson has himself explained that his engagement, both in his capacity as Traditional Arts Officer and as a musician, with Irish traditional music led him to question poetry as an art form. In comparison with traditional music poetry seemed to him “remote”, “[r]emoved, academic”, “a self-centred, precious kind of business”.²⁵⁵ Moreover, music suggested to him the difference between “[t]he idea of art being on the page” and “the idea of art being a form that can expand itself, involve a lot of things, like conversation, dancing, singing, playing

²⁵⁰ Corcoran, “One Step Forward, Two Steps Back” (1992), 216.

²⁵¹ Alexander, 6.

²⁵² Delattre, 25.

²⁵³ Tim Hancock, “Ciaran Carson: The Spy in the Superior Turret”, in *Ciaran Carson: Critical Essays*, 146.

²⁵⁴ For Carson’s comments on the period, see Brandes, 81f; John Brown, 145; Laskowski, 92; Ormsby, 7.

²⁵⁵ Brandes, 81.

music”.²⁵⁶ However, if, as Carson himself has acknowledged, it was “that whole area of experience” which made him doubt poetry as a means of representation, in the mid to late 1970s, it also proved germane for his writing in the mid-1980s; music suggesting compositional and structural formats which could be transferred to writing.²⁵⁷ In the next few pages, I will consider how Irish traditional music, from Carson’s own accounts of it, might be seen to have affected his poetics, proposing that the years between 1979 and 1986 be envisaged not so much as “silence”, as a period of artistic gestation.

The contrast between “[t]he idea of art being on the page” and “the idea of art being a form that can expand itself, involve a lot of things” is an important one in so far that it can also be said to suggest two different kinds of writing.²⁵⁸ The poems of *The Irish for No* manifestly move away from “art on the page”. The long verse lines challenge the physical format of the page and there is a sense of immediacy in the narrative, as if the speakers of the poems are telling their stories here and now; one often finds the narratives digressing and the speakers employ self-correction. In *The Irish for No* is also manifested a poetry that tries to make room for song, parable and memory, or to put it differently, that which is various in form, material and voice.

It is possible to see *Irish Traditional Music* as a first instance of “the idea of art being a form that can expand itself, involve a lot of things”, in written form; an “idea” that is then developed further in *The Irish for No*. Carson himself admits as much when he describes the guide book as “a kind of blueprint for the shape and structure of *The Irish for No* ... yarns and songs wander in and out of what appears at first sight to be a standard guide”.²⁵⁹ In *Irish Traditional Music* the “idea” manifests itself in that the book is composed of diverse material: it comprises excerpts from handbooks on music, songs, stories, anecdotes, proverbs, pictures and it quotes musicians and practitioners. To fully understand this form, however, we need to pay close attention to Carson’s description of Irish music, especially the performance there of: both as to *what* is being said and *how*.

²⁵⁶ Laskowski, 92.

²⁵⁷ Brandes, 82.

²⁵⁸ In *The Irish for No* form adapts to subject in the sense described by Goodby in *Irish Poetry since 1950*: “thematics [...] fed a formal development beyond the dominant lyric”, 290.

From the two 1998 collections *The Twelfth of Never* and *The Alexandrine Plan*, which is when Carson starts working with the traditional sonnet form, the reverse can be seen to take place: topic has to adapt to form and formal constraints. The two kinds of writing are in a sense made manifest in how Carson uses “patchwork” in relation to cities: In *The Irish for No*, Carson uses the patchwork technique to “write” Belfast and his descriptions of Belfast compares with a patchwork. In *For All We Know*, the form of the patchwork is “imposed” on Paris: “I’m looking at the patchwork quilt of Paris”. It is possible to see *Belfast Confetti* and *First Language* as precursors of the latter approach.

²⁵⁹ Ormsby, 7.

In the following account, Carson describes “a night’s singing in the village of Coolea”:

In a night’s singing in the village of Coolea in the West Cork Gaeltacht, for instance, you will hear elaborately-ornamented songs which might indeed remind one of a North Indian raga; chorus drinking songs, sporting songs, songs from the classic ballad repertory, and newly-composed songs on local incidents – like the coming of the ESB to Coolea: ‘Oh Johnny dear and did you hear what all the neighbours say? / For the ESB with ’lectricity is landed in Coolea / For to give us light by day or night with bulbs that do not blow / Oh dear, oh dear, if we had them here some fifty years ago.’ And in between a set or two might be danced, a story told, some drink consumed. The situation, in fact, might be the genre: a context which allows a varied emotional range, in which the music and singing is itself part of an ongoing conversation, a debate between the community and itself and the concerns of the wider world.²⁶⁰

Accordingly, what songs are sung, what stories told are so, not because of a set programme, but because the “situation” demands them, and the “context” allows them. If the form of *Irish Traditional Music* corresponds to, or at least aspires to, a musical session, this entails that it should not be understood in a technical sense, i.e. as a container for content, but rather, that its form is generated or even dictated by its subject, as suggested by Carson’s own description of the book as “yarns and songs wander in and out of what appears at first sight to be a standard guide”.²⁶¹ This statement also reveals to us that his subject matter, Irish traditional music, resists academic as well as unitary organization, the “standard” form of representing. Here “the idea of art being a form that can expand itself, involve a lot of things” comes to denote a form that expands itself to the object to be represented.

At the same time as the form of *Irish Traditional Music* derives from the musical experience, it also takes its colouring from Carson’s attitude to his subject matter. In interview, Carson has said that his aim with the book was “to give an account of the music as it is, from the perspective of someone who is actively engaged in it”.²⁶² This is important: Approaching his subject from the viewpoint of the practitioner entails that he places his emphasis on performance, rather than on the printed version of a tune or a song, something which in turn entails an emphasis on context. Accordingly, the answer to the question with which Carson opens his book – “What is traditional music?” – lies not within the definition given there, but should instead be sought in the ensuing pages which serve to exemplify Irish traditional music with reference to its procedures, instruments and various contexts of playing and singing traditional music. To be true to his topic, “to give an account of the music as it *is*” (my italics), songs, like the one on “the coming of the ESB to Coolea” in the passage quoted above, are not only an inevitable part of

²⁶⁰ Ciaran Carson, *Irish Traditional Music* (Belfast: Appletree Press, 1986), 47.

²⁶¹ Ormsby, 7.

²⁶² Ormsby, 7.

the telling, but should be understood as being on equal footing with the theoretical and more academic accounts.

In this I take a broader view than Davide Benine, one of few critics to have considered the guide at some length. He writes: “For all its practical purpose and its commitment to actual music-making, there is a great deal of theory in this book: Carson sets traditional music in a historical framework, comparing it to baroque and ancient music; the analysis is conducted with a precise awareness of the principles of musicology and of the harmonic theory.” Benine further sees *Irish Traditional Music* as introducing a “theoretical strain” in Carson’s writing.²⁶³ While I acknowledge the theoretical aspects of Carson’s book I see these as given by or inherent to the genre in which he is writing. What Carson brings to the genre, however, is, again, “the idea of art being a form that can expand itself, involve a lot of things”.²⁶⁴ Whilst this shows in the narrative itself Carson’s practical approach is also revealed in the book’s “Selected Bibliography” section. Having first listed some ten handbooks on Irish music, he concludes by saying that “[a]ny music learned from the above sources should always be done in conjunction to endless listening to traditional tunes as they are actually played: cold print cannot convey style; and style is often content. A book is only a book, and never to be trusted wholly”.²⁶⁵

In *Irish Traditional Music*, then, Carson outlines the main principles of performing traditional music. The account lends itself to a description of some of his own narrative techniques and procedures from *The Irish for No* onwards. Whilst due attention should be given to the differences between the two arts, it is possible to read Carson’s poetry as being inspired by or analogous to the improvisational character of traditional music. In particular, applied to Carson’s work, the analogy gives us a key for reading intra- and intertextuality, these terms being understood both as an element in the text and a method of composition.²⁶⁶

Outlining “[s]ome general notions about the music”, Carson writes: “Variation [...] is a principle of traditional music”.²⁶⁷ This, he goes on to explain, entails that: “The same tune is never the same tune twice. A traditional tune printed in a book is not *the* tune; it is a description of one of its many possible shapes. The same tune played by the same musician on different occasions will not be the same tune”.²⁶⁸ A bit further on, we learn that “tunes are played at least twice round”.²⁶⁹ It goes

²⁶³ Benine, 120.

²⁶⁴ Laskowski, 92.

²⁶⁵ Carson, *Irish Traditional Music*, 68.

²⁶⁶ Playing music and writing poems, certainly, are two separate activities with different outcomes. As Carson himself explains: “The song, after all, is one expression of whatever is going on at that particular social gathering”, 50. A performance is situated in a specific time and place, it involves certain actors, and the dialogue between performer and audience.

²⁶⁷ Carson, *Irish Traditional Music*, 7.

²⁶⁸ Carson, *Irish Traditional Music*, 7f.

²⁶⁹ Carson, *Irish Traditional Music*, 57.

without saying that playing music and writing poetry are distinct activities but Carson's poetry can be seen as attempting to reformulate the principle of repetition with variation in written form. As Shane Murphy, and many critics with him, has observed, repetition is fundamental to Carson's work: "Carson's poetry insists on repetition and circularity within the 'narrow ground' of Ulster geography and history".²⁷⁰ This observation, although acute, may, should even, be taken further: To Carson, a repetition is never identical but always slightly different from what has gone before. In this respect, "circularity" does not entail sameness. Furthermore, since repetition, in principle, can go on forever, it eschews closure and can thereby be used to challenge fixed and stable meanings. The poem "Asylum" illustrates this aspect of Carson's writing, expressing repetition on the level of theme, form and language.

Of the poems of *The Irish for No*, "Asylum" was the last to be written.²⁷¹ Composed on the same day as the birth of his first son, it is "about all the big things. Sex and love and birth and death".²⁷² Possibly, the poem also carries autobiographical resonance, as do many poems of *The Irish for No*. In so far as "all the big things" sums up the terms of our existence, the poem's preoccupation with repetition implies that repetition has connotations of Carson's view of life. The poem tells of two days, one involving Uncle John, recalled and told in retrospect; one involving the speaker's "other uncle, Pat", the poem's present. The poem opens with "this repeated tic, the latch jiggling and clicking" as Uncle John "rehearsed the possibility of entering, or opening." Uncle John's "rehearsing" whether to enter or open compares with the narrative's comings and goings into past and present. The movement of the poem is both "the fast-forward" and "the rewind button", and sometimes it is the "slowed-down motion of the replay". However, even though the speaker at one point claims that "it does repeat itself", the past is not the present. This is suggested in that the poem's repetitions do not come back in identical form. For example, the closing line of the first stanza – "An electric / Yellow bakery van hummed by; he sniffed the air. A car backfired." – returns in the second stanza as – "A yellow bakery van hums by. There is a lull, and then a car backfires." One of the elements in the text that makes it possible for us to locate the narrative in time is, incidentally, the repeated references to the "electric / Yellow bakery van" and the car that "backfired"/"backfires."

²⁷⁰ 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), 204.

²⁷¹ Brandes, 85.

²⁷² Brandes, 85.

It is, nevertheless, in the following description that the principle of repetition with variation finds its most succinct articulation:

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 speaking for him sometimes. He had
A second cousin's hands, or a cousin's twice removed, an uncle's way of walking;
In other words, he was himself.

Identifying the recognizable characteristics of earlier generations in Uncle John's physical appearance, the description exposes sameness: Uncle John "had / His father's eyes, his mother's nose" and so forth. However, the speaker's concluding remark, that "[i]n other words, he was himself", reveals that Uncle John is more than the sum of these traits, at the same time as they contribute to his identity.

Thus, in theory and in form, *Irish Traditional Music* suggests a technique of composition that is later employed in *The Irish for No*. This is a technique which may also be aligned with the patchwork poetics, first introduced in *The Lost Explorer* and the poem "The Patchwork Quilt". In that various materials and different voices are brought together into a new whole, the form of *Irish Traditional Music* compares with a patchwork, although here, the form is derived from the musical experience. It is, however, noteworthy that when the patchwork and the patchwork technique of "The Patchwork Quilt" are picked up again in *The Irish for No*, it is done in the context of forms and strategies inspired by traditional music. Whilst it is possible to see the patchwork poetics and the performance of traditional music as parallel and intersecting, music also allows us to take the patchwork poetics further; it may even be suggested that traditional music brings out the creative and interpretative potential of the patchwork poetics. Firstly, "the idea of art being a form that can expand itself, involve a lot of things", entails, not only a form that assembles and accommodates the heterogeneous, but that this patchwork form is generated or dictated by the object of representation. If poetic form can be said to construct and shape what is being represented, the patchwork form tries to match content as far as one can genuinely do this. Secondly, the principle of repetition with variation allows us to see the patches, and by analogy, the textual fragments, as not identical to their former existence but as slightly different, in short, as recycling with a difference.

“Against Oblivion”: Carson’s Review of C. K. Williams

In 1989, two years after the publication of *The Irish for No*, Carson reviewed C. K. Williams’ *Poems 1963–1983* and *Flesh and Blood*, both of which had appeared in the UK the previous year, for *The Irish Review*. Within established Carson criticism, “Against Oblivion” is a marginal text. While Carson’s review of *North*, “Escaped from the Massacre?”, is a frequent feature in both Carson and Heaney criticism, it is rare to find references to the Williams review. At the same time, few critics will deny the relevance of the American poet for Carson’s own work: It has become a commonplace to ascribe his long lines – the formal trademark of his poetry of the late 1980s and 1990s – in part, to the influence of Williams.²⁷³

To start on an autobiographical note: In the review, Carson openly acknowledges his debt to the older poet. Accordingly, Williams’ 1983 collection *Tar* was an important source of inspiration for Carson as he began “toying with the possibility of writing in a mode which would owe something to traditional oral narrative”.²⁷⁴ On a formal level, *Tar* provided Carson with a model for uniting various concerns and practices which he himself had yet to realize in poetic form: traditional storytelling, the “demotic”, “elevated into something intricate, dark, humorous and terrifying” (as seen in the works of George V. Higgins) and the “beautifully modulated, drawled speech” of Appalachian music and oral art forms.²⁷⁵ If Appalachian art forms seemed to Carson “laconic, deadpan, tongue-in-cheek, underpinned by a dead-sure sense of rhythm and structure”, these features were also what he found in Williams’ poetry.²⁷⁶ Summarizing the “typical Williams qualities”, this time with reference to *Flesh and Blood*, he writes: “the laconic, observant, democratic speaking voice; the long, apparently straggly lines which turn out, on closer observation, to be exactly rooted in syntax; the way the onward thrust of the line is slowed down, deliberated on, by ‘thingy’, concrete nouns”.²⁷⁷ The description is, if one will, applicable to the form of *The Irish for No*, and the two subsequent collections, *Belfast Confetti* and *First Language*, as shown in, for example, Ciaran O’Neill’s examination of Carson’s dialogues with Williams. There O’Neill discusses not only the long lines but the two poets’ penchant for “dirty realism” and “reportage, or recycling narratives in the manner of a story-teller”.²⁷⁸

However, the aim here is not to posit poetic relations and influences based on a writer’s acknowledgements. “We invent our lives”, writes Carson towards the end of the review. Presumably, poets also invent their traditions and literary precursors

²⁷³ C. K. Williams’ (b. 1936) debut collection *Lies* was published in 1969. In *With Ignorance* (1977), Williams introduces the long lines which since then have been seen as the hallmark of his poetry. His early work engages with social and political issues, whereas in later writings, Williams turns to more personal themes.

²⁷⁴ Ciaran Carson, “Against Oblivion”, *The Irish Review* 6–7 (1989), 115.

²⁷⁵ Carson, “Against Oblivion”, 116.

²⁷⁶ Carson, “Against Oblivion”, 116.

²⁷⁷ Carson, “Against Oblivion”, 114.

²⁷⁸ Ciaran O’Neill, 204f.

since we read this shortly before Carson states, in the next sentence, that “[w]ithin a year of reading *Tar*, I had written a book called *The Irish for No*: I hereby acknowledge a debt.”²⁷⁹ Nevertheless, I hold that Carson’s review of Williams provides us with a valuable perspective, not least because Carson’s engagement with poetological issues in this review suggests what poetic concerns preoccupied him at the time. As with his review of *North*, his critical commentary of Williams’ work discloses his aesthetic interests and aspirations and in this respect the review might well elucidate aspects of his own work.

If Carson’s review of *North*, published one year before his debut collection *The New Estate*, suggested his poetic ideals in the mid-1970s, his review of Williams, published two years after his second collection, reveals how these ideals, some ten years later, had found a formal counterpart in Williams’ poetry. As was pointed out, Carson’s critique of *North* was twofold, aimed both at Heaney’s “mythic” procedures and his attempts “to explain, to justify the lines in terms of his myth”.²⁸⁰ Responding to the poem “Punishment”, where the poet “understand[s] the exact / and tribal, intimate revenge”, Carson finds it most problematic that Heaney “seems to be offering his ‘understanding’ of the situation almost as a consolation”.²⁸¹ Conversely, one of the poems of *North* which met with Carson’s approval was “Strange Fruit”, because it “does not posture in its own ‘understanding’ of death; Heaney says quite honestly that he doesn’t know”.²⁸² As we shall see from examining Carson’s review of Williams, the aspects of Williams’ writing that attracts Carson to his work stand in direct opposition to those he dismissed in *North*. Carson, interestingly, thus polarizes the aesthetics of *North* and that of Williams. It is for these reasons, and for Carson’s continuous reflection on the poet and the poetic medium, that “Against Oblivion” merits our attention.

“Narrative, anecdote, and the moral implications of all storytelling: this is essential Williams”, writes Carson.²⁸³ The statement could equally be used to summarize Carson’s own poetic concerns. “[T]he moral implications of all storytelling”, or to rephrase, the moral responsibility of the poet towards his material and his readers seems a key concern when tracing Carson’s development towards a poetics. It underpins his early musings on the poet in *The Insular Celts*; it is explicitly addressed in his review of *North*, thus making the Williams review continuous with the Heaney review; and it is, arguably, the impetus behind his search for a “new verse”, which is adequate to his material. For Carson, the “moral implications of all storytelling” seemingly refers to the difficulty of doing justice to the world’s complexity in poetic form.²⁸⁴ Perhaps “the moral implications” entail

²⁷⁹ Carson, “Against Oblivion”, 116. In the review, Carson also writes that the poems of *Tar* “struck me with the force of revelation”, 115.

²⁸⁰ Carson, “Escaped from the Massacre?”, 184.

²⁸¹ Carson, “Escaped from the Massacre?”, 184.

²⁸² Carson, “Escaped from the Massacre?”, 185.

²⁸³ Carson, “Against Oblivion”, 115.

²⁸⁴ On a side note, but anticipating Chapter 4, this is of course a concern which Carson shares with Louis MacNeice whose canonical poem “Snow” famously claims: “World is

being true to the reader, acknowledging, as Carson will in *Belfast Confetti*, that only “[t]he city is a map of the city”, all its representations are flawed.²⁸⁵

The aspect that Carson seems to value most in *Tar* is that the collection deals with “all the big issues”, “love, loss, sex and death”

in the voice of someone thinking, working things out, trying to say it right; a voice which for all its assurance, was strangely modest, puzzled, saying, well, I finally don’t know any more about this than you; the voice of the storyteller who leaves the listener to draw his own conclusions.²⁸⁶

The voice of *Tar*, which in Carson’s words is “strangely modest, puzzled, saying, well, I finally don’t know” is in stark contrast to the voice of the first part of *North*, which in Carson’s view, “seems to be offering his ‘understanding’ of the situation”.²⁸⁷ It is, however, a voice which is not too far from the voice of the second part of *North*, which Carson identifies as “someone involved in writing, of trying to come to terms with himself”.²⁸⁸ It is, additionally, a voice that we come to recognize in *The Irish for No* and Carson’s later writings, both poetry and prose. To exemplify: The collection *The Irish for No* opens with “Horse Boyle was called Horse Boyle because of his brother Mule, / Though why Mule was called Mule is anybody’s guess.” (“Dresden”) and ends with the words “I don’t know” (“Patchwork”).²⁸⁹ In-between is the title poem “The Irish for No”. Alluding to the fact that there is no single word in Irish for the English “no”, the title intimates that one cannot translate, in the sense of equate, between languages or worlds, something which in the context of the poem may be seen as gesturing to Heaney’s “translations” in *North*. Opening with the question “*Was it a vision, or a waking dream?*” (from Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale”, italics in original), the title poem also established that all-important conjunction “or”, which opens up for alternatives rather than conclusive explanations. In his writing, then, Carson poises himself between or amongst possibilities.

On the same note, O’Neill finds that Carson “refus[es] to pass judgement” and holds that the “idea of the poet as outwardly a chronicler of events has continuity” with Williams”.²⁹⁰ This description of the poet as “a chronicler of events” is

suddener than we fancy it. // World is crazier and more of it than we think, / Incorrigibly plural.” Louis MacNeice, “Snow”, in *The Collected Poems of Louis MacNeice*, ed. E. R. Dodds (London: Faber and Faber, 1979), 30.

²⁸⁵ This phrase first appears in the poem “The Bomb Disposal” of *The New Estate* and then reappears in the poem “Revised Version” in *Belfast Confetti*.

²⁸⁶ Carson, “Against Oblivion”, 116.

²⁸⁷ Carson, “Escaped from the Massacre?”, 184.

²⁸⁸ Carson, “Escaped from the Massacre?”, 186.

²⁸⁹ Delattre’s comment on the concluding line of the poem “Patchwork” summarizes this well. She writes: “Meaning is not arrested, far from it, but provisional, unstable and shifting as configurations proceed and vary”, 27.

²⁹⁰ Ciaran O’Neill, 205. O’Neill is here commenting on the poem “Cocktails”.

reminiscent of Carson's aim to "act as a camera", referred to in the previous chapter, but it also compares and contrasts with Carson's description of the Heaney of *North*, as "a mythmaker, an anthropologist of ritual killing, an apologist for the situation".²⁹¹ The difference between the two approaches can be described as the difference between the composite method of the patchwork, where the poet assembles various narratives, creates new narratives out of bits and pieces, but does not claim that the last word can be said as this recycling can, in principle, go on forever, and the more analytical method of Heaney, where the activity of digging uncovers stories, already there to be discovered, which are then interpreted and explained.

The idea that the poet should recount events but not seek to explain them does not entail, however, that the poet should not be present in his work. Carson, for instance, criticizes Williams' early work because he finds there that: "Many of these poems incline towards the worst tendencies of the American Creative Writing School: a style which is curiously anonymous."²⁹² To Carson, the guiding principle is the one articulated in "The Patchwork Quilt", where "the stitches / Shine in everything I've made".

In sum, then, Carson's critical assessment of Williams conveys that what he derives from the older poet is not only the long lines, but he seems also to adopt Williams' anti-authoritarian attitude towards "all the big issues". Writing Belfast in *The Irish for No*, Carson does so in the voice of "someone thinking, working things out, trying to say it right".²⁹³

It should be noted of course that the traits that Carson singles out in his review of Williams are typical of other poets too: Walt Whitman, Ginsburg and Williams Carlos Williams spring to mind. Given the personal character of the review one might be forgiven for seeing it as an account of Carson's own artistic development more than it is a review of Williams' recent poetry. Yet it might well be that it is in his critical encounter with the American poet that Carson is able to articulate and formulate his artistic ideals, even for himself.

²⁹¹ Carson, "Escaped from the Massacre?", 183.

²⁹² Carson, "Against Oblivion", 116.

²⁹³ Carson, "Against Oblivion", 116.

The Patchwork of *The Irish for No*

On its appearance, *The Irish for No* was reviewed by Gerald Dawe in *The Linen Hall Review* along with Heaney's *The Haw Lantern* and Muldoon's *Meeting the British*, three volumes of poetry which all saw their publication in 1987. Coming towards the close of the review, Dawe writes:

A question that arose on reading the new collections is what they tell us, as poems, about the place to which they directly or indirectly, primarily or ultimately, refer? To look at that question from another angle, is there such a place as 'The North' out of which these poems are eventually drawn into a common, distinctive and separate imaginative region?²⁹⁴

He answers his own question in the negative, finding that "there is little sense of a community being addressed".²⁹⁵ To Dawe, Heaney of *The Haw Lantern* "reverts to a prelapsarian state of parable and allegory" whilst the "literariness" of *Meeting the British* is seen to have "created a new line in poetic 'subjects'". In *The Irish for No*, Dawe identifies elements of traditional storytelling.²⁹⁶

Indeed, as stated in the introduction to this chapter, the storytelling quality of *The Irish for No* is one of the aspects upon which the collection's reputation rests, along with its long lines and city-centred thematics. Here it is worth giving Dawe's comment in full: "Carson certainly sees, with an almost Eliot-like vision, the collective life in the literally deconstructed city of Belfast. The rich contrast is how he, in part, reveals this to us in traditional story-telling and not a heap of broken images."²⁹⁷ Dawe's observation is a most important one for although *The Irish for No* tells of a fragmented city and shattered lives, and several of the poems themselves – in their very texture – are made up of fragments, literary and non-literary, the effect of the poems or the collection as a whole is not fragmentation.

"Belfast Confetti", one of Carson's most oft-commented and oft-referenced poems, is in its different ways evocative of the poet's undertaking to write Belfast in *The Irish for No*. As Michael McAteer, like many others with him, has observed the poem "foregrounds the process of poetic creation and the frustration of that process as the subject of the poem itself".²⁹⁸

Most immediately, the "confetti" of the title might lead our thoughts to bits of paper thrown on festive occasions. This is indeed the image we are given in another poem in the collection, "August 1969", where British troops arriving in Belfast, instilling hope of an end to the violence, were welcomed with "[s]inging,

²⁹⁴ Gerald Dawe, [Review of *The Irish for No*, *The Haw Lantern*, and *Meeting the British*], *The Linen Hall Review*, 4.3 (1987), 25.

²⁹⁵ Dawe, Review of *The Irish for No*, 25.

²⁹⁶ Dawe, Review of *The Irish for No*, 25.

²⁹⁷ Dawe, Review of *The Irish for No*, 25.

²⁹⁸ Michael McAteer, "The World as Object: Commodification in the Poetry of Ciaran Carson", in *Ciaran Carson: Critical Essays*, 128f.

dancing on the streets. Confetti drifts across the city. Charred receipts, and bills-of-lading, contracts, dockets, pay-slips”. Yet as is well-known the conflict did not abate with the arrival of the British Army in Northern Ireland; 1969 witnessed instead an escalation of violence, leading to decades of internecine war. The phrase “Belfast confetti”, which gives title to the poem, as well as Carson’s subsequent collection of poems, registers this turn of political and violent events, the phrase referring here to objects thrown in street riots.²⁹⁹

“Belfast confetti”, and its association with violence, is given a concrete image in the very opening of the poem: “Suddenly as the riot squad moved in it was raining exclamation marks, / Nuts, bolts, nails, car-keys. A fount of broken type.” Yet Carson also takes the image one step further, extending it, as Parker rightly observes, to “the domain of print”.³⁰⁰ It is not only street ammunition hurled in riots – “[n]uts, bolts, nails, car-keys” – that is “raining” in this line but “exclamation marks”. The poem, thus, is equally about “history and poetry, civil disturbance and textual disturbance”.³⁰¹

In the poem, Carson takes recourse to punctuation marks – their graphical form and function within a text – to represent violence and its psychological effect on the speaker. The exclamation marks, indicating the loud and hostile atmosphere during the riot, become as hard and concrete as the objects thrown. An explosion is “an asterisk on the map” and gunfire is a “hyphenated line”. The speaker, trying to escape from the scene, finds that all the routes are “blocked with stops and colons” and that “[e]very move is punctuated. Crimea Street. Dead end again”. The graphic sign of the “asterisk on the map” becomes a visual metaphor for the explosion. The length of the “hyphenated line” makes concrete to the reader the ongoing gunfire. The shape of stops and colons evoke bullets and in blocking “the alleyways and side-streets” they become demarcations which prevent escape. The “fusillade of question-marks” with which the poem closes leaves behind it a feeling of existential anxiety.

In this midst of violence, the speaker “was trying to complete a sentence in my head, but it kept stuttering”. Violence hinders cognitive processes. Yet there are no sentences, no text, out on the streets either; only punctuation marks which have lost their primary function to bring structure in written text and to further thought

²⁹⁹ There are precedents for this usage of confetti as a concrete image of violence. *The Oxford English Dictionary* gives two occurrences of figurative usage: “Litter of rubble, stale Confetti sprinkle of blood”, from C. Day Lewis *Poems in Wartime* (1940) and from *New Statesman* 1941, “*Confetti*, ammunition”. See *The Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. *confetti*. The poem “August 1969”, where confetti is used in the context of celebration, also refers to the parents’ honeymoon in Dublin in September 1944. Parker gives an account of the term “Belfast confetti” in a socio-political context where it “is said to date from the 1920s and originally referred to nuts, bolts and pieces of scrap metal used to bombard Catholic workers in the shipyards. Since the onset of the later Troubles it has been used more loosely to refer to any material thrown by rioters or packed into nail-bombs”, 262 n. 97.

³⁰⁰ Parker, 122.

³⁰¹ Kennedy-Andrews, “In Belfast”, 462.

and narrative. Standing metaphorically for bullets, gunfire and demarcations, these stops, colons and question marks deny communication. Sarah Broom puts this well, saying that “punctuation becomes an equivalent violence on a linguistic level”.³⁰² If the city itself is text then this is a text permeated by violence within which the speaker is trapped.

Within critical commentary, the “confetti” of the title is sometimes taken to denote the “heterogeneous materials” that make up Carson’s poems, especially in the subsequent collection *Belfast Confetti* in which Carson’s intertextuality becomes even more varied and more pronounced.³⁰³ To Alexander, who advances the argument a bit further, the phrase “Belfast confetti” “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”.³⁰⁴ A variation on this, also expressed by Alexander, is to see the confetti as “the linguistic and urban detritus that can be recovered from the streets, bars, and market stalls of the city”.³⁰⁵ Literally and metaphorically, “confetti” is by all means a valid image of the varied and recycled *materials* that form part of Carson’s poems. In this, confetti is akin to or varies the scraps of discarded clothes and textiles with which the grandmother of “The Patchwork Quilt” makes her quilt. Yet the patchwork poetics – as formulated in and derived from the earlier poem and not based on a general notion of “patchwork” – refers not only to materials but describes also the technique of making the quilt/poem and the quilt/poem itself, the texture and composition of the “assembled” whole. Here “confetti” does not hold the same potential as does the patchwork metaphor. It is, of course, suggestive to see the confetti, as in “August 1969” quoted earlier, as pieces of paper “drift[ing] across the city”. But there is, firstly, a randomness in how confetti falls to the ground which is not quite apt to Carson’s poems and collections which display a conscious structure and design. Secondly, to see the poems and the collections as a patchwork, further, is to see them as the result of a composite method, where that which is various in voice, form and material are joint together into a meaningful whole; scattered pieces of confetti, by contrast, do not necessarily join with one another. Therefore, the “confetti” might well form part of the patchwork – as envisioned in Alexander’s phrase “the patchwork of raw materials from which Carson’s texts are themselves assembled” – but the patchwork poetics designate more than this.³⁰⁶

³⁰² Sarah Broom, *Contemporary British and Irish Poetry. An Introduction* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 167.

³⁰³ See Goodby, *Irish Poetry since 1950*, 293f. Broom makes a similar claim, 168.

³⁰⁴ Alexander, 99f.

³⁰⁵ Alexander, 63.

³⁰⁶ One might also consider the different connotations of “confetti” and patchwork, respectively. The poem “Belfast Confetti” and the collection *Belfast Confetti* collocate confetti with violence and death.

To reiterate Carson's own description of *The Irish for No*, in the interview with Brandes quoted in the introduction to this chapter, the collection is "a deliberate stitching together of poems and themes, a patchwork".³⁰⁷ The metaphor allows us to see the overall organization of the collection as a quilt made up of twenty-four poems/patches. The collection is divided into three parts, a structure which might be said to stitch the poems into groups according to theme and form. Parts I and III mirror each other: They comprise four long poems each, written in the long line. Although varied in theme they might still be said to deal with subjects of a more personal character. Part II consists of sixteen nine-line poems, also written in the long line. They are to their majority city-centred and intense in their focus on the Northern Ireland crisis. The stitching together is continued on the textual level in the repetition of images, phrases, idioms and objects which join the long and short poems, and the collection as a whole, together.³⁰⁸

The opening poem of the collection, "Dresden", unveils in concentrated form the collection's "deliberate stitching together of poems and themes, a patchwork", although here the idea can be furthered to the level of the poem's composition.³⁰⁹ "Dresden" tells of the two brothers Horse Boyle and Mule and the speaker's visit to the brothers. Yet as we learn two thirds into the poem, "this is really Horse's story". If this is Horse's story the poem also tells the story of the German city of Dresden which was destroyed by bombs in the Second World War, a destruction that Horse Boyle partook in having joined the RAF. Within this main or frame narrative are other stories (some related by Horse himself), memories and anecdotes. Incidentally, although *The Irish for No* is praised for its city-centred thematics, "Dresden" is not set in Belfast but in the rural outskirts of Carrick. In this, the poem corroborates Hughes' point that "[t]he move from *The New Estate* to later volumes is not straightforwardly a move from the rural to the urban".³¹⁰

The poem "Dresden" has garnered much critical attention. As the opening poem of *The Irish for No* it stands as the first example of what critics see as a "radical" shift in style which distinguishes the collection both from Carson's juvenilia and from the work of his contemporaries and immediate predecessors. Parker, in his *Northern Irish Literature, 1975–2006*, finds the poem "markedly different [...] in style from so many of the other 'war' poems" of the decade, especially the poems of Heaney, Longley and Mahon, whilst "conscious of their work".³¹¹ According to Parker, the poem's identity, as well as its merits, lies within

³⁰⁷ Brandes, 86.

³⁰⁸ One observes in this collection other instances where textile techniques are used metaphorically. In the poem "Smithfield Market", which tells of the destruction of this place, we read that "[e]verything unstitched, unravelled – mouldy fabric, / Rusted heaps of nuts and bolts". However, used here with reference to space this metaphor is different from the one examined in this thesis which employs the metaphor in relation to poetic method.

³⁰⁹ Brandes, 86.

³¹⁰ Hughes, " 'the mouth of the poem': Carson and Place", 102.

³¹¹ Parker, 119.

the fact that although its subject matter is “historical”, the narrative – with its “gaps, hesitations, self-corrections, digressions and contradictions” – calls attention to “issues of form, language, narrative and textual authority”.³¹² This kind of narrative, of which “Dresden” is a first example, is often taken to illustrate the influence of storytelling on Carson’s poetry, be it in the long extended line or the composition of poems where stories diverge into different strands and directions. Undoubtedly, storytelling is an important influence which should be sought for in Carson’s poems and is a strategy which is well foregrounded in this particular poem.

Ní Dhomhnaill, however, makes a most important claim when stating that while the features of oral storytelling – the winding narrative, repetitions, the associative chain where stories beget stories – are certainly possible to identify in Carson’s poems, they are not “mere transcripts” of oral stories taken down in writing. “Their art”, she suggests, “is rather that of a successful mimicing of oral techniques within the much more formal framework of a printed poem.”³¹³ The patchwork, in fact, might be seen as the “formal framework” within which the storytelling of the poem occurs.

Firstly, Carson’s own reflections on the poem are illustrative. In the interview with Brandes, he says of “Dresden”:

I heard a lot of the stories in that poem. Everything in that poem actually happened, if you believe the people I heard it from, and of course I’m giving their accounts another wee twist of my own. And the characters and situations are not so much invented by me, but they’re composites of various characters and events out there in the real world. Outside of that kind of twisting, well, it’s all true bill. It’s fact.³¹⁴

If this is how stories and poems are constructed it is a description which evokes the patchwork. The poet constructs his poem from stories which have been handed down to him (evoking the very meaning of “tradition”) and when recycling, adds his own signature. The characters and situations related in the poem – and which are poetic representations – are, tellingly, “composites of various characters and events”. The poem is, on the one hand, the grandmother’s patchwork quilt reconfigured: Just as the quilt is made up of patches from “John’s old shirts, / a curtain, a flowered dress I wore one summer”, the poet “twists” and arranges stories related to him into a new pattern. But the description also reminds one of Uncle John of “Asylum”, discussed earlier in this chapter, who “had / His father’s eyes, his mother’s nose” and yet “was himself”. Joint together in the poem the different stories, characters and situations create something new which is more than the sum of these parts.

³¹² Parker, 119.

³¹³ Ní Dhomhnaill, 117.

³¹⁴ Brandes, 83.

The quilt, then, can be said to offer an image of the poem's structure. "Dresden" consists of ten stanzas, or patches, of nine lines each. It is possible to designate one story or theme to each stanza but this does not make them into self-contained entities. The stanzas enjamb and Horse is present in all, either as a character or storyteller, something which holds the poem together. Yet there are also other elements which bring the poem's parts together. Most stanzas make reference to a sound or noise: tin cans falling, a shop bell tinkling, a sizzling pan, the grate and scrape of a spade, chalk on blackboard, all culminating in Horse's recollections of the air raid on Dresden and "a thousand tinkling echoes – / All across the map of Dresden". In Corcoran's reading, the sounds "chime together into the peculiar atonal harmony of 'Dresden'."³¹⁵ To borrow from the patchwork metaphor, the sounds are one of the ways in which the stanzas – the patches – are stitched together.

Another image that joins the patches of the poem together is broken and discarded objects, in particular broken china. As Dresden is bombed "store-rooms full of china shivered, teetered / And collapsed". A parallel image is the milkmaid of which there remains only a "creamy hand". This gives an eerie resonance to a destroyed city. Yet through the patchwork technique Carson manages to give us more than, "a heap of broken images", to borrow from Dawe.³¹⁶

"The Irish for No"

The poetics suggested by "The Patchwork Quilt" finds its formal manifestation in several poems in *The Irish for No* but specifically in two poems: "The Irish for No" and "Patchwork". In the latter, Carson looks back to the concluding poem (which he quotes) of *The Lost Explorer*, while in the former, the title poem of the collection, he arguably makes more elaborate and varied use of the patchwork technique than in any other poem of *The Irish for No*. In it, Carson creates a patchwork by fusing a variety of thematic and textual components, which are linked to a carefully chosen selection of intertexts. Through intricate interplay these components help narrate Belfast. Chief among them are references to various dramatic and poetic texts: Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale", Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, Heaney's *Death of a Naturalist* and *Door into the Dark* and Robert Frost's "After Apple-Picking" and "Acquainted with the Night". Sometimes, these literary borrowings are clearly signposted, as in "Was it a vision, or a waking dream?", where the quotation from Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" is given in italics, thus separating it from Carson's own words; sometimes, the allusion takes the form of a pun, as when Frost's "Acquainted with the Night" is rendered as "acquainted with the light"; at other times, the source has been played around with: Heaney's "jam-jars" (in *Death of a Naturalist*) are in Carson's poems "[e]mpty jam-jars". In addition to these literary intertexts, the poem also makes use of political and commercial

³¹⁵ Corcoran, "One Step Forward, Two Steps Back" (1999), 185.

³¹⁶ Dawe, Review of *The Irish for No*, 25.

slogans, and “Belfast parable”.³¹⁷ By dint of the complex way in which these textual elements are combined, “The Irish for No” articulates an aesthetic and historical attitude which is of interest for the following two reasons: Firstly, the interplay between Carson’s text and the intertexts advocates multiplicity, something which not only relates to the general tenor of the poem, but highlights its title, which reminds us that there is no single word for “no” in the Irish language.³¹⁸ Secondly, Carson’s attitude, as far as this is suggested in the poem, may be set against that of Heaney and his “mythic” procedures in *North*, for “The Irish for No” may be construed as resuming Carson’s critique of Heaney, begun in his review of *North*. The following analysis of “The Irish for No” aims to exemplify that the patchwork technique thus provides Carson with a model for writing Belfast, which at the same time allows him to acknowledge how precarious are our representations of reality.

The poem’s quotations and allusions have generated much critical commentary.³¹⁹ In his essay, “One Step Forward, Two Steps Back: Ciaran Carson’s *The Irish for No*”, first published in 1992, Corcoran reads the intertextuality of the title poem and the collection as a whole alongside postmodern theories.³²⁰ The allusions, Corcoran proposes, are “peculiarly supernumerary”,³²¹ “parenthetical, digressive, in no sense an inevitable element of the structure”,³²² “when he is allusive, he almost uninterpretably so, not pointed or ironic or context-creating or self-displaying in any of the recognised ways”.³²³ The allusions, he contends, are “instances of frail but poised coincidence rather than of the more vibrant energy and tension usually evident in complex and sophisticated intertextuality, they have their clear local point but lack defining context”.³²⁴ Fitzgerald-Hoyt, on the other hand, sees the poem’s use of Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale”, the extended

³¹⁷ In interview with Brandes, Carson says that the story of the Belfast businessman in the concluding stanza “happened. It’s become a kind of Belfast parable”, 84.

³¹⁸ Many critics have addressed the poem’s title and its implications, coming to near-similar interpretations. Broom, for example, finds that “it implies a valuing of ambiguity and ambivalence, an avoidance of absolutes and certainty”, 166. Goodby finds the title “a summation of the conditional, provisional nature of experience as he perceives it”, *Irish Poetry since 1950*, 292.

³¹⁹ Michael O’Neill, for example, considers the poem’s negotiation with Romanticism. The Keatsian intertext, O’Neill suggests, “draws the Belfast poet into artistic complicity with his Romantic forebear” but “the poem’s own relationship with Keatsian Romanticism seems itself to be ‘unsolved’”, 134. The most recent contribution is made by Mackay. The present thesis, however, takes the opposite view to Mackay’s reading. To Mackay, “different narratives are garbled together with no hope of disentangling them but instead are left as ‘metonymies for an unstated (and, we infer, unstatable) whole’”, “Contemporary Northern Irish Poetry and Romanticism”, 305.

³²⁰ Corcoran, “One Step Forward, Two Steps Back” (1992), 216.

³²¹ Corcoran, “One Step Forward, Two Steps Back” (1992), 230.

³²² Corcoran, “One Step Forward, Two Steps Back” (1992), 230.

³²³ Corcoran, “One Step Forward, Two Steps Back” (1992), 228.

³²⁴ Corcoran, “One Step Forward, Two Steps Back” (1992), 230.

intertext of the poem, as “an act of literary subversion”.³²⁵ In Fitzgerald-Hoyt’s reading, which takes its inspiration from Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin’s *The Empire Writes Back* (1989), the Keatsian fragments are treated as a shorthand for “the English literary canon”,³²⁶ “English poetic discourse”,³²⁷ “English domination”,³²⁸ and the idea of England as “centre”.³²⁹

Contrary to Corcoran, I hold that the intertexts are a constitutive part of the text and that without them, not only the structure, but the entire poem, would collapse.³³⁰ Firstly, the poem works by juxtaposing and contrasting Belfast reality with *Romeo and Juliet*, the world of Keats’s ode and the world of Frost. Secondly, the poem’s subject matter, Belfast, relies on the manifold and multi-voiced, both for its “telling” and for its “meaning”. In this poem, and elsewhere in the collection, Carson calls our attention to the difficulties involved in representing experience, but his answer to this problem lies in the patchwork technique, where textual fragments are assembled to form a new whole. What results is a form that works against summary judgements and offers a view from different perspectives. Contrary to Fitzgerald-Hoyt, I do not read “The Irish for No” as targeting the colonizer in a post-colonial sense. In its many references to Keats’s ode, the poem is, first and foremost, in dialogue with another *text*. What the poem “targets” or evaluates is form, language, aesthetics, and modes of representation.

Markedly shorter than the three other stanzas, the opening stanza of “The Irish for No” works as a primer for the different uses to which the intertexts of the poem are put, concentrates the main themes of the poem, and declares Carson’s aesthetic principles, which, as I have suggested, may be set against those of Heaney:

³²⁵ Fitzgerald-Hoyt, 76.

³²⁶ Fitzgerald-Hoyt, 79.

³²⁷ Fitzgerald-Hoyt, 79.

³²⁸ Fitzgerald-Hoyt, 80.

³²⁹ Fitzgerald-Hoyt, 79. On similar lines, Stafford writes: “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”, 247. She finds further that “Carson’s apparent resistance to, and fascination with, Keats is inevitably and overtly political”, 262.

³³⁰ With reference to the Frost intertext in the poem “Whatever Sleep It Is”, Corcoran claims that the “literary reference takes its place as just another element in the poem’s patchwork fabric, as just another piece happening to be to hand, but one which makes “Whatever Sleep It Is” the tracing of an acknowledgement, a deference as well as a difference.”, “One Step Forward, Two Steps Back” (1992), 230. While this is a correct description of the poem “Whatever Sleep It Is”, it should be noted that Corcoran uses the term “patchwork fabric” in a much more restricted sense than this thesis does. Corcoran seems to be using “patchwork” in a general sense and not as suggested by the poems “The Patchwork Quilt” or “Patchwork”. Corcoran’s understanding of Carson’s intertexts, and that of the present thesis, suggest further the different usages of the term “patchwork”.

Was it a vision, or a waking dream? I heard her voice before I saw / What looked like the balcony scene in *Romeo and Juliet*, except Romeo / Seemed to have shinned up a pipe and was inside arguing with her. The casements / Were wide open and I could see some Japanese-style wall-hangings, the dangling / Quotation marks of a yin-yang mobile. *It's got nothing*, she was snarling, *nothing / To do with politics*, and, before the bamboo curtain came down, / *That goes for you too!*

In this intricate stanza the two intertexts, Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" and *Romeo and Juliet* are set to work at different levels in the text. As an instance of intertextuality, the question with which the poem opens, "*Was it a vision, or a waking dream?*", quotes the penultimate line of Keats's ode. At the same time, the question is intratextually recontextualized in Carson's poem, as it may well be uttered by the Belfast "Juliet" referred to in the next sentence: "I heard her voice before I saw". The sentence's reference to *Romeo and Juliet*, likewise, directs us towards Shakespeare's play but since it is clear by the time we get this far into the poem that this intertext is put forward by the speaker, it brings to the poem a sense of self-reflexivity. If the sensuous world of Keats's ode is made to contrast with Belfast reality, the link to *Romeo and Juliet* suggests a narrative which is easier to assimilate with the situation in Northern Ireland, a country divided between Montagues and Capulets, even though the quarrel overheard between the lovers is in stark contrast with the Shakespearean Juliet's response to Romeo, in the balcony scene.

Keats's question and the reference to *Romeo and Juliet* are, in different ways, about perception, interpretation and the representation of experience.³³¹ In Keats's poem, "*Was it a vision, or a waking dream?*" is primarily a genuine question of how to interpret experience. Carson's poem reinforces this search for an adequate description. Carson's speaker, both observer and interpreter, first interprets and compares a quarrel with an earlier narrative, that of "the balcony scene in *Romeo and Juliet*".³³² Significantly, however, he is then led to modify his first impulse, something which is made clear in that the comparison with *Romeo and Juliet* is put forward with the modifier: "except". Here, the speaker's representation of the scene in the window can be said to dramatize "visual honesty" and the "seeing

³³¹ It is worth noting that the four quotations from Keats included in the poem describe or call attention to perception: "Was it a vision, or a waking dream?", "I cannot see what flowers are at my feet", "drink and leave the world unseen", "The murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves".

³³² At the same time as Carson's poem reinforces the search for an adequate description, there are also important differences: Keats's line connotes to how we interpret something with our senses. Carson's reference to *Romeo and Juliet* suggests that we interpret, or "see", an experience in relation to earlier narratives. In this context may be noted the Shakespearean Romeo's sentiments in the balcony scene. Upon hearing and seeing Juliet, Romeo is led to ponder on the relation between the real and the imaginary: "I am afeard, / Being in night, all this is but a dream", William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, act II, scene ii, ed. Brian Gibbons, The Arden Edition of the Works of William Shakespeare (London and New York: Methuen, 1980), 133.

what's before your eyes" approach that Carson saw lacking in several poems in *North*.³³³ In this sense, the "except" may be understood as a guiding principle to which both the poet and the reader should adhere: Analogies should always come with a modifier, bringing attention to differences and to that which is particular, not as in *North*, by equating past and present. Read as a veiled instruction to the reader, the literary references of "The Irish for No" should be seen as signifying not only the original but, reset in Carson's poem, as being slightly different from the original.

"Ode to a Nightingale", then, is the extended intertext of "The Irish for No".³³⁴ In ways similar to the grandmother who snips up old clothes and fabrics, Carson cuts up Keats's ode like a concrete object to be used in his own quilt. Appearing as fragments throughout the poem, Keats's ode is like the "old shirts, / a curtain, a flowered dress" that keep coming back in different patches – as "[s]quares and diamonds" – in a patchwork quilt, contributing to the larger pattern of the poem.

Carson opens his poem, then, by quoting the penultimate line of Keats's ode, "*Was it a vision, or a waking dream?*", and fragments from the ode then run through the entire poem, culminating in the fourth and final stanza. It is significant that Carson opens his poem with a question to which neither he nor Keats provides a definite answer. Given its position as the penultimate line in the ode, the question evokes the entire poem. For Keats's speaker, the line is primarily a question of how to interpret experience. Poised on the threshold between waking and sleeping, he can only ask yet another question, which then closes the ode: "Do I wake or sleep?" Interestingly, Keats's conclusion becomes Carson's starting-point. The question introduces into the poem, from its very beginning, the possibility of alternative interpretations, rather than absolute explanations; a theme which runs through the whole poem. As Stafford points out, this is the question which "seems to embody Keats's celebrated aesthetic ideal of 'negative capability'"³³⁵ which Keats explains as "when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason".³³⁶ If we read Keats's question, recontextualized in the first stanza of the poem, as being uttered by Carson's speaker, "it" referring to the window scene described there, it suggests to us that the speaker does not know how to justly describe what he sees, which might be why, as the stanza progresses, he attempts to see "it" in terms of another narrative: "the balcony scene in *Romeo and Juliet*". However, since *Romeo and Juliet* too is rejected, Carson's speaker is, in the course of the poem, led to accept that "things remain / unsolved". Like "the unfed cat" in the concluding stanza, the speaker is left "debating whether *yes* is *no*". This is, at the same time, an uncertainty that Carson does not purport to solve. Thus, in both texts, the question is offered as an attempt to account for experience but the experience as such generates only questions rather than answers.

³³³ Carson, "Escaped from the Massacre?", 185f.

³³⁴ See Keats, "Ode to a Nightingale", in *The Poems of John Keats*, 369-372.

³³⁵ Stafford, 289.

³³⁶ Keats quoted in Stafford, 289.

Throughout “The Irish for No”, the world of the ode is, in different ways, made to contrast with Belfast reality, which entails an evaluation of a certain kind of aesthetics.³³⁷ Each stanza presents a Belfast scene and each stanza includes one quotation and one or more allusions to Keats which are set to work against each other in complex and intricate ways. In the first stanza, an allusion to the ode, “casements”, comes to serve as a mimetic representation of Belfast reality, signifying a Belfast locality in the *diegesis*, whereas the quotation, “*Was it a vision, or a waking dream?*”, in a self-conscious manner, is tested as a plausible description of the experience recounted. In Carson’s poem, Keats’s “[c]harm’d magic casements, opening on the foam / Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn”, reappear as “[t]he casements / Were wide open” allowing the speaker to witness a quarrel between a man and a woman.³³⁸ Set in relation to other elements in this stanza, which allude to or evoke theatrical performance – most directly *Romeo and Juliet*, but also “Juliet” closing “the bamboo curtain” in the final line – the “casements” also compare with a stage. Thus simultaneously, the “casements”, “wide open” present us with a domestic quarrel and become the locale for the Belfast “Romeo” and “Juliet”. Trying to make sense of this scene, at the same time as he recounts it, Carson’s speaker can be said to borrow Keats’s “*Was it a vision, or a waking dream?*”. Here the line qualifies as a question, put forward by the speaker in the *diegesis*, of how to interpret an experience. Yet, in Keats’s poem, the experience is compelled by the nightingale’s song and “[t]he voice I hear this passing night”, whereas in Carson, it is “Juliet’s” voice that seems to provoke the question.

The second stanza complicates the relation between the world of Keats’s ode and Belfast, or art and reality in general. On a first reading, Carson’s second stanza seems to rely on the fifth stanza of Keats’s ode. Carson quotes the opening line of Keats’s stanza, “*I cannot see what flowers are at my feet*” and “the pastoral eglantine” of

³³⁷ “Ode to a Nightingale” appears in the form of both quotations and allusions, according to the following structure: Each of the four stanzas includes or centres on one quotation and the first three stanzas include between one and three allusions. In the first three stanzas, Carson works his way backwards through the ode, beginning where Keats concludes, whereas the fourth and final stanza breaks this pattern. The first stanza quotes the line “Was it a vision, or a waking dream?” which in Keats appears in stanza 8; the quotation in the second stanza, “I cannot see what flowers are at my feet”, is from Keats stanza 5; “drink and leave the world unseen” in stanza three is from Keats stanza 2; the quotation in the fourth and final stanza, “The murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves”, returns to Keats stanza 5. The first stanza alludes to “casements”, Keats stanza 7; the second stanza alludes to “eglantine”, in Keats stanza 5, and “Bacchus and the pards”, Keats stanza 4; the allusion “perilous seas”, in stanza 3 breaks the pattern, alluding to Keats stanza 7. The allusions are embedded in the text whereas the quotations, given in italics, stand out from Carson’s own words. In Carson’s arrangement, the different textual and thematic components of Keats’s ode are juxtaposed in new ways.

³³⁸ Whereas Keats’s casements open out on the sea, Carson directs our attention to an interior which remains impenetrable. Interestingly, all four stanzas refer to interiors. Also note the poem’s repeated references to different kinds of “frames”: “casements”, “portico”, “windows” and “door”.

Keats's stanza finds its correspondence first in the name of a pub, "The Eglantine Inn", and then again in the speaker's meditation on "whether eglantine was alien to Ireland". There are also similarities in the "botanical" settings of the two stanzas: Keats's speaker is in the garden; Carson's speaker walks through "Chlorine Gardens" and "Cloreen Park" to get to "The Eglantine Inn". However, the relation between the two texts is, on closer inspection, not as straightforward as it might first seem. Since "The Eglantine Inn" is a pub in real Belfast, "eglantine" is not necessarily an allusion to Keats but may equally have been suggested by Belfast reality. "Chlorine Gardens" and "Cloreen Park", similarly, being actual places in Belfast, make Carson's setting independent of Keats's ode. Differently put, in this stanza, the Belfast locality is prior to the setting suggested by the ode. This prompts the question to what degree Carson's stanza is indebted to Keats.

Significantly, "The Eglantine Inn" is the place where "Bacchus and the pards and me" entertain each other by "debating" various linguistic and botanical questions with an ontological twist, such as the possibility of translating a commercial slogan from English to Irish, or pondering "whether eglantine was alien to Ireland". Whilst "eglantine", in this instance, might well refer to the flower, the presence of Keats's ode in the following line, equally suggests that what the speaker and his companions are debating here is, rather, whether the imagery deployed in Keats's ode is "alien" to Ireland. The quotation from Keats, "*I cannot see what flowers are at my feet*", becomes part of this translational and philosophical activity. In Keats, the line tells us that the speaker's sight is obstructed or denied by "darkness", and that he must instead rely on his other senses to orient himself, to "guess each sweet". In Carson's poem, the line becomes highly self-reflexive: Uttered by the speaker in the context of translating, it is suggested that sight is obstructed or distorted by language: "*I cannot see what flowers are at my feet*, when *yes* is the verb repeated, / Not exactly yes, but phatic nods and whispers."

The third stanza recounts the death of the UDR corporal, but even though Carson here makes use of imagery similar to the ode, it is not until the end of the stanza that we encounter Keats in the form of allusion and quotation. Here the allusion "perilous seas" seems no longer to signify or stand in for a physical place but prefigures and permutates with the quotation "*drink and leave the world unseen*", expressing longing for escape and transcendence from the world. However, the brutal deaths described in the third and fourth stanza are in stark contrast with the momentary solace offered by alcohol. The brutality of the deaths described here also contrasts with Keats's ethereal longing for death, expressed as: "I have been half in love with easeful Death", "Now more than ever seems it rich to die".

The fragments from Keats's ode culminate in the fourth and final stanza which may be read as an evaluation of sorts, of Keatsian aesthetics. It opens by asking "What's all this to the Belfast business-man who drilled / Thirteen holes in his head with a Black & Decker?"; a question which seems aimed at the earlier stanzas' dialogues with Keats. Yet in this stanza it is Heaney who provides the allusions and hence the Belfast locality against which the quotation from Keats is assessed. Alluding to Heaney's *Door into the Dark*, Carson juxtaposes Heaney and Keats by

stating that: “They opened the door into the dark: / *The murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves.*” Corcoran suggests that “it would appear that Carson’s poem finds behind the door of Heaney’s earlier work not contemporary terror but literature, not the dark of Northern Ireland’s nightmare but the luxuriance of Keats’s ode”.³³⁹ Whilst this is suggestive, it is a reading in which the intertexts have been detached from their function within this stanza; it speaks more of the Romantic strain which is in evidence in Heaney’s own poetry. Set to work in the *diegesis*, Heaney’s door does in fact lead to “terror”: as “[t]hey opened the door into the dark” what they encounter is the body of the dead Belfast businessman. We are no longer in Keats’s garden where flies murmur on summer evenings but in a garage where flies hover over a dead man’s body. Behind Heaney’s “door” is the grimness of Belfast reality; a reality which is in stark contrast to the pastoral world of Keats’s ode and the aesthetics of Romanticism.

On a thematic level, it is possible to read “The Irish for No” as a reply of sorts to Keats’s meditations on the relation between the real and the imaginary and man’s longing for transcendence, but the poem seems also, by way of Keats, to resume Carson’s critique of Heaney, begun in his review of *North*. The ode’s realization that one cannot escape life through resort to artificial realms brings us back to Carson’s position in his review, “Escaped from the Massacre?”, and the charges made against Heaney’s mythic procedures: “No-one really escapes from the massacre, of course – the only way you can do that is by falsifying issues, by applying wrong notions of history instead of seeing what’s before your eyes.”³⁴⁰ In “The Irish for No”, Carson renews his claim: If the reference to *Romeo and Juliet* in the first stanza is there to represent art, and the second stanza is spent in the company of “Bacchus and the pards”, the final stanza is intent on bringing us back to a grim reality by asking: “What’s all this to the Belfast business-man who drilled / Thirteen holes in his head with a Black & Decker?” In this context, it seems highly significant that “The Irish for No”, a poem which insists on “visual honesty” and the “seeing what’s before your eyes” approach, should quote the line “I cannot see what flowers are at my feet”. Gesturing towards Keats’s and Heaney’s aesthetics, the “world” as represented by the two precursors, the line prepares the way for Carson’s dialogue with Heaney in the fourth and final stanza of the poem.

At first glance, Shakespeare’s tragedy about two rival families does not seem out of place in a Belfast poem, Montagues and Capulets evoking conflicts between Protestants and Catholics. Set in relation to the themes of the stanzas – the second stanza addressing translation from English to Irish, the third and fourth stanza reporting what might be sectarian murder(s) (at least, the reference to the “corporal in the UDR” draws attention to political allegiance) – it would seem that “Romeo” and “Juliet” of the first stanza are part of a Northern Irish “theme”. The reference to *Romeo and Juliet* is, nevertheless, complicated by the fact that the speaker seems to withdraw his initial comparison between the couple in the

³³⁹ Corcoran, “One Step Forward, Two Steps Back” (1992), 214f.

³⁴⁰ Carson, “Escaped from the Massacre?”, 186.

window and Shakespeare's play. There are two alternative ways of reading the speaker's modification: On the one hand, the "except" might be understood as disqualifying the play's relevance to Carson's poem or Belfast. On the other hand, we may read this as, not discarding Shakespeare's play on the level of theme, but as a meta-narrative. The speaker's modification seems, again, an example of "visual honesty", the "seeing what's before your eyes" approach, that Carson called for in his review. The modification also suggests that perceiving and interpreting in terms of earlier narratives, models or structures may conceal what is particular. If *Romeo and Juliet* is a meta-narrative, the opening stanza rejects it, emphasizing instead what is local in time and space, as well as personal experience. Consequently, the reference to *Romeo and Juliet* is not there simply to establish similarities but to suggest differences.

The domestic interior, the "Japanese-style wall-hangings" and the "bamboo curtain", suggests that this is not medieval Verona. More specifically, "Chlorine Gardens", "Clorreen Park" and "The Eglantine Inn" locate the setting in the University area in Belfast, while the slogan "Ulster Says No", a Unionist response to the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement, suggests that the temporal setting of the poem is the mid-1980s. This slogan also provides us with a political context particular to Northern Ireland. If Carson's setting differs, neither is the window scene of the first stanza the archetypal love scene of Shakespeare's play: In this version, "Romeo" and "Juliet" are inside together, not apart as in Shakespeare's play. "Romeo" and "Juliet" are not declaring their love for each other but "arguing" and "Juliet" is "snarling". Furthermore, this "Juliet" won't let herself be aestheticized: in an act which evokes a theatrical performance, she closes "the bamboo curtain" and hence the "scene". Neither will she let what for her is personal be interpreted as "political", as she declares, first for "Romeo" and then for the speaker, that "*It's got nothing ... nothing / To do with politics*". Ironically, however, politics, which is omnipresent in Belfast, seeps into this lovers' tiff as well, if only by the woman's emphasis that this particular quarrel, at least, is *not* about politics.

In the concluding stanza, Carson positions himself in relation to tradition and his literary precursors: Heaney and Keats, discussed earlier, and Robert Frost. Commenting on the "literary context" of the final stanza, Goodby finds that the brutal death described therein "pointedly charges a certain kind of writing with inattention to such horrors", and continues that, "Heaney – via his Keatsian style – and even Mahon [...] are, it is suggested, too concerned with plenitude and aesthetic closure in their poetry to acknowledge the harsh realities of the Troubles or the Belfast landscape in which they are (largely) fought out".³⁴¹ It is noteworthy how in the following lines, given in the middle of the stanza, allusions to Heaney, Keats and Frost create a tightly-knit narrative in which the allusions are used, both to describe the grim Belfast scene in the *diegesis*, and to evaluate the aesthetics associated with the intertexts, in relation to Belfast reality:

³⁴¹ Goodby, *Irish Poetry since 1950*, 292.

[...] They opened the door into the dark: / *The murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves.*
Empty jam-jars. / Mish-mash. Hotch-potch. And now you rub your eyes and get
acquainted with the light

Heaney's "door into the dark" is made a concrete door which leads into the garage where Keats's flies (here attracted to death) suggest the body of the dead Belfast businessman. Differently put, behind (in the different senses of the word) Heaney's "door into the dark" is death – Keats's flies are in this stanza the (only) sign of death; stand in for death. Yet the shift from "[t]hey" to "you", in the third line quoted, intimates that the two Frost allusions – "And now you rub your eyes" and "get acquainted with the light" – are not primarily there to record experience but that this is the speaker – by way of Frost – meditating on what is an (in)appropriate aesthetic response to death. "And now you rub your eyes", firstly, alludes to Frost's "After Apple-Picking" where the speaker cannot "rub the strangeness from my sight / I got from looking through a pane of glass [...] And held against the world of hoary grass".³⁴² Frost's speaker cannot disengage himself from the artificial view of the world created by the pane of ice. Carson's poem urges us to rub any artificial or mythic sights from our eyes; wishes to invert the blindness of Keats's speaker – "I cannot see what flowers are at my feet" – as well as Heaney's aesthetics, as this was assessed in Carson's review of *North*, where he criticized Heaney for not "seeing what's before your eyes". The second Frost allusion underscores the need of "visual honesty". Where Frost's speaker, in "Acquainted with the Night", voices his nightly anxiety (night, of course, also underscoring mental and emotional darkness),³⁴³ Carson's poem is saying that in Belfast, people wake up to death and brutality: two lines into the stanza we read that: "It was just a normal morning / When they came" ("they" prefiguring "they" who open the "door into the dark"). By reversing Frost's "night" into "light" the sentiments, nevertheless, remain almost the same: The reversal emphasizes the grimness of a Belfast reality where morning and light do not bring comfort or consolation.

Whilst Carson's use of Heaney, Keats and Frost in this stanza might be read as a repudiation of their aesthetics in this particular context, the "unfed cat toy[ing] with the yin-yang of a tennis-ball, debating whether *yes* is *no*", in the concluding line of the poem, suggests that the liabilities of aesthetic representation might not be entirely resolved. Yet the patchwork technique – eschewing closure – offers a form which allows the poet to be as genuine as possible to the object to be represented.

³⁴² Robert Frost, "After Apple-Picking", in *The Poetry of Robert Frost*, ed. Edward Connery Lathem (London: Jonathan Cape, 1972), 68. First published in *North of Boston* (1914).

³⁴³ Frost, "Acquainted with the Night", in *The Poetry of Robert Frost*, 255. First published in *West-Running Brook* (1928).

“Patchwork”

It seems significant that when “The Patchwork Quilt” is evoked in “Patchwork” it is as a memory. Beginning in the here-and-now (“It was only just this minute”) the poem then moves backwards in time to the speaker’s childhood, culminating with his recollections of “granny” and “the quilt”:

It took me twenty years to make that quilt – / I’m speaking for her, now – and, your father’s stitched into that quilt, / Your uncles and your aunts. She’d take a sip from the baby Power’s / On the bedside table. Anything that came to hand, a bit of cotton print, / A poplin tie: I snipped them all up. I could see her working in the gloom, / The shadow of the quilt draped round her knees. A needle shone between / Her thumb and finger. Minutes, hours of stitches threaded patiently; my father / Tugged at her, a stitch went wrong; she started up again.

“Patchwork” self-consciously places “The Patchwork Quilt” within quotation marks for this is, simultaneously, a poem quoting and alluding to an earlier poem and a grandson quoting and “speaking for” his grandmother, so as to suggest that we construct poems, stories, the past by borrowing someone else’s words. What we recognize as the opening line of “The Patchwork Quilt” – “It took me twenty years to make that quilt” – is here put forward with “I’m speaking for her, now”. Its closing line, likewise, reappears as a slight misquote as “*The stitches show in everything I’ve made*, she’d say”. In the earlier poem, the line reads instead “the stitches / *shine* in everything I’ve made” (my italics). The speaker misquoting “shine” as “show” ties in with “the gloom” in which he imagines that the grandmother sits working. Perhaps the stitches, in the course of time, have also lost some of their “shine”.

In this poem, the image of “patchwork” is extended and reconfigured. It appears both as the quilt made by the grandmother, and as “handkerchiefs: six neatly-hemmed squares” and various clothes and garments made by the speaker’s mother. While the mother and grandmother engage in what is essentially the same exercise the “almost identical” portrayal of them with “the needle [...] between her thumb and finger” also calls attention to differences: The grandmother is imagined with “[t]he shadow of the quilt draped round her knees. A needle shone between / Her thumb and finger. Minutes, hours of stitches threaded patiently”. The mother, on the other hand, with “the needle shone between her thumb and finger” is “stitching, / Darning, mending: the woolly callous on a sock, the unravelling jumper / That became a scarf.” Given the meta-poetic dimension of the poem it does not seem amiss to suggest that what is intimated here are similar yet two different kinds of writing, where the mother’s unravelling and stitching together of everyday objects anticipates the next step in Carson’s poetic development.

To make her quilt, the grandmother makes use of “[a]nything that came to hand, a bit of cotton print, / A poplin tie: I snipped them all up” and then “thread[s] patiently”. As an intended wedding gift which “took me twenty years to make” the quilt is endowed with symbolic value that extends beyond the practical function of a quilt: Time and

family are stitched into it – “[m]inutes, hours of stitches” and “*your father’s stitched into that quilt, / Your uncles and your aunts.*” – and so holds together a family that has been scattered, “*Davy’s gone to England, / Rosie to America; who’ll be next?*”

In comparison with the grandmother, the mother is engaged in a more practical, even mundane, activity. While the grandmother “thread[s] patiently” on the same object the mother is “stitching, / Darning, mending” clothes and garments which are of and for everyday use: “the woolly callous on a sock, the unravelled jumper / That became a scarf”, and the “[t]ear in my new white Sunday shirt” that “[e]ventually she cut [...] up for handkerchiefs: six neatly-hemmed squares.” Tentatively, the mother’s mending and stitching of tears are tried out at the beginning of the poem where a “rip” in the poem’s present leads to the “[t]ear” when the speaker was six. Returning briefly to the present, “[s]nags of greyish wool” are then used to stitch together this first childhood memory with the recollection of “the mountain that we climbed that day”.

If Carson, from “Patchwork” onwards, inclines towards the mother’s more immediate way of recycling everyday objects it is one that his poet-speaker has first-hand experience of as “I held my arms at arms’ length as she wound and wound” and the mother also makes clothes for the speaker to wear.³⁴⁴ The making of the quilt, on the other hand, is something that the speaker has only been told about (“she’d say”) as the quilt was made before he was born. After the grandmother’s death the quilt has been lost from his view, as “some one of us has it now, though who exactly I don’t know”, and so it exists only as a memory. Perhaps the fact that the speaker’s father, uncles and aunts are “stitched into” the quilt suggests also that it belongs to the earlier generation. But the mother’s “stitching, / Darning, mending”, lastly, also acquires a deeper significance: In surgery for his appendectomy, the speaker imagines his mother with “the needle [...] between her thumb and finger” so as to suggest that it is the mother who “stitches” him together.

Whilst “Patchwork” on a thematic and compositional level presents us with the patchwork techniques that the poet inherits from his mother and grandmother it also gives us the first glimpse of father and son on the mountain, a scene which equally asks to be read meta-poetically. As Edna Longley points out, “the relationship between father and son [...] has often focused new definitions of social and artistic identity”.³⁴⁵ If the figure of the father, up until *The Irish for No*, has been left largely undeveloped, he comes, from this collection onwards, to play an important role in (staging) the poet’s development.

³⁴⁴ The “cable-knit pullover” presumably made out of recycled material, being in this sense both new and “second-hand”, looks forward to *Belfast Confetti*: The poet-speaker putting on the father’s postman uniform in “Bed-Time Story”.

³⁴⁵ Edna Longley, “‘When Did You Last See Your Father?’ Perceptions of the Past in Northern Irish Writing 1965–1985”, in *The Living Stream*, 152.

“Patchwork” intimates a separation between mother and son and the son’s filiation with his father. The “[t]ear in my new white Sunday shirt” in the opening of the poem is suggestive:

It was only just this minute that I noticed the perfectly triangular / Barbed wire rip
in the sleeve of my shirt, and wondered where I’d got it. / I’d crossed no fences
that I knew about. Then it struck me: an almost identical / Tear in my new white
Sunday shirt, when I was six. My mother, after her initial / Nagging, stitched it up.
But you can never make a perfect job on tears like that.

We infer as the poem progresses, that the son got the tear when he ascended the mountain with his father. That this is a tear that asks to be read symbolically is suggested by the “rip” and the crossing of fences in the second and third line. The mother, attempting to mend the shirt so as to undo the tear, fails for one cannot, the speaker points out, “make a perfect job on tears like that”. Possibly, the tear symbolizes also a loss of innocence, a transition from one state to another where the latter is intimately connected with the father. It is, after all, the new white Sunday shirt, presumably intended for Mass and with its connotations of innocence and purity, that cannot be mended. In fact, in its references to tears of different kinds, on the one hand, and different stages in life – the relation between parent and child, children leaving home, weddings, funerals – the poem suggests that life consists of “rip” and “tears”. This is, in the collection, given a further configuration in the city itself: Smithfield Market, in the poem of that title, is “unstitched, unravelled – mouldy fabric” due to a fire-bomb. In “Travellers”, similarly, “Belfast / Tore itself apart and patched things up again. Like this. Like his extended family.”

In “Patchwork”, the scene of the father and son on the mountain might be read as a formulation of the poet’s relation to tradition. That the scene is important is evident in that Carson returns to it in subsequent writings, in *Belfast Confetti* and his autobiographical *The Star Factory*. Firstly, the mountain is highly significant in itself as mountains play an important role both in the Bible and in classical mythology. Parnassus, to give just one precedent for Carson’s mountain, being famously “associated with the worship of Apollo and the Muses”.³⁴⁶

As Edna Longley has observed, “Ambition” of the subsequent *Belfast Confetti*, depicting father and son on Black Mountain, continues in the tradition of Heaney’s “Follower”.³⁴⁷ Whilst this will be discussed in the next chapter, “Ambition”, and that poem’s portrait of father and son, has an important prequel in “Patchwork”, and this poem too, gains resonance from Heaney’s earlier poem. A comparison

³⁴⁶ *The Oxford Companion to Classical Literature*, ed. M. C. Howatson, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 2nd ed., s.v. *Parnassus*. Hughes notes that in Northern Irish poetry, the convention “is to view the hills from the streets”, whereas “the view *from* the hills” is more typical of fiction, “What Itch of Contradiction? Belfast in Poetry”, in Nicholas Allen and Aaron Kelly, eds., *The Cities of Belfast* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2003), 106.

³⁴⁷ Edna Longley, “Introduction: Revising ‘Irish Literature’”, in *The Living Stream*, 65.

between Heaney's "Follower" and Carson's "Patchwork" and the father-son relation portrayed therein, throws in relief the two poets' views on the relation between the poet and tradition and what the son inherits from the father. "Follower" is, as Edna Longley reminds us, one of several poems that "dwell on the responsibility of 'following', and being followed by, earlier generations".³⁴⁸ Indeed, in this poem "[a]ll I ever did was follow / In his broad shadow round the farm." but "today / It is my father who keeps stumbling / Behind me, and will not go away."³⁴⁹ While Carson in "Ambition" picks up on the idea of "following" and perhaps even surpassing the father, in "Patchwork", the father and son are portrayed as being together ("we climbed"). Carson's father and son even share a view as "we could see the map of Belfast". This shared view can be compared and contrasted with "Follower": Here the poet-son aspires to "grow up and plough, / To close one eye, stiffen my arm", just as he had watched his father do: "His eye / Narrowed and angled at the ground, / Mapping the furrow exactly." A further difference between the poems is that whereas Heaney's father is "[m]apping the furrow exactly", Carson's father "pointed out the landmarks", including "the invisible speck of our house, lost in all the rows / And terraces and furrows", on what is already a map, "the map of Belfast." As Edna Longley notes, in "Follower", "qualities of the father define qualities of the poetry: technical 'expertise', weight".³⁵⁰ If "[m]apping the furrow exactly" represents an ideal for Heaney's poet-speaker, the father pointing out landmarks on "the map of Belfast" becomes an ideal for Carson's poet-speaker in his representations of the city. Undertaking to write Belfast in *Belfast Confetti*, Carson starts from the premise that only "*the city is a map of the city*".³⁵¹

Postlude: "Stitch" and "Post"

The two poems "Stitch" and "Post", published in *The New Estate and Other Poems* in 1988, can be seen to vary the patchwork poetics associated with the grandmother and the mother, whereas "Post" foregrounds the importance of storytelling.

In terms of its year of publication *The New Estate and Other Poems* stands in-between *The Irish for No* and *Belfast Confetti*. It collects poems of *The New Estate*, *The Lost Explorer* and twelve previously unpublished poems, two of which are "Stitch"

³⁴⁸ Edna Longley, "When Did You Last See Your Father?", 158.

³⁴⁹ Heaney, "Follower", in *Opened Ground*, 11.

³⁵⁰ Edna Longley, "When Did You Last See Your Father?", 158.

³⁵¹ The phrase "the map of Belfast" can be said to vary "*the city is a map of the city*" which appears first in *The New Estate* and then in "Revised Version" in *Belfast Confetti*. Compare "we could see the map of Belfast. [...] the rows / And terraces and furrows" with a near-similar view in *For All We Know* where "the map" is replaced by "the patchwork quilt": "I'm looking at the patchwork quilt of Paris: / parks, avenues, cemeteries, temples, impasses, arcades." ("L'Air du Temps", part I) and "gazing at Paris // spread out before you like the parterres of the patchwork quilt." ("Rue Daguerre", part II).

and “Post”. In poetic form, the newly added poems seem more at home with the early poetry (and might well have been composed before *The Irish for No*) but “Stitch” and “Post” earn their place in the discussion due to the presence of the mother and the father, and the skills associated with them.

The two poems, firstly, tap into the “tear” between mother and son in “Patchwork” and the son’s filiation with the father. “Stitch” ends with the mother sewing back a button on the son’s cuff and “then snips / The thread”, intimating their separation. In “Post” the speaker recalls his younger self working as a postman during Christmas break, thus following in his father’s footsteps “[b]ecause I was / My father’s son.”

The titles of the two poems and their position within *Other Poems* are suggestive. They stand together with other poems about family members which take their titles after the “protagonist’s” relation to the speaker. In a sequence that draws our attention to generations, “Stitch” and “Post” are preceded by “Great-Grandmother” and “Grandfather” and followed by “To a Married Sister”. Whilst this series would justify the titles “Mother” and “Father”, the fact that the two poems depart from the pattern, and take their titles after practices associated with the mother and father, respectively, invites us to read them symbolically.

In “Stitch”, the son searches through his mother’s *Quality Street* Chocolate-tin button-box, looking for a button to replace one that he has lost. Alexander is right to point out here that the “box of odd buttons serves as an analogy for the heterogeneous materials that the writer must work into art”.³⁵² Yet the analogy might be pursued further. Separating the buttons from the box itself, i.e. the contents of the box from the box in which they are contained, we get a complementary view of Carson’s poetics to the one outlined thus far.

Searching through the box, the speaker finds: “Shingly mock / Tortoiseshell and mother-of-pearl, / Clouded amber plastic, // Beads of jet and jade; / Squeaky plaited leather knobs, / The synthetic horn // Of a duffel-coat toggle; / A spiky thistle brooch / With a broken catch.” These buttons are, similar to the patches with which the grandmother makes her quilt, of different shape (beads, knobs, horn), colour (clouded amber), material (plastic, leather, synthetic) and texture (shingly mock tortoiseshell, squeaky plaited leather knobs). Since these are the contents of the mother’s button-box, the buttons are associated with the mother’s mundane activity of “stitching, / Darning, mending” in “Patchwork”. If the buttons are indeed analogous with the varied materials that make up Carson’s poems, the poem suggests that the choice (of intertext, for instance) is based on a certain selection. This is not the grandmother who made use of “anything / That came to hand” but, rather, the speaker is seen searching for “not the twin / Of this lost button, // But something very like”.

The button-box containing the buttons is significantly a recycled chocolate-tin box put to new use. It announces *Quality Street* (as title or contract) chocolate but contains something else, buttons, which, presumably, are themselves recycled. The

³⁵² Alexander, 127.

form of the box remains the same but its content is new. As the speaker pours the buttons back into the box he sees time and history: “the shimmering / Shifting hourglass / Of everything mismatched ...” The box becomes an archive from which one may select an object (a “Squeaky plaited leather knob” which is at once, texture, shape and material; or an imitation as in “The synthetic horn”) to replace an absence in the present.

“Post” in turn casts the father as postman and storyteller; in this poem intimately connected. The figure is important: the father as postman and the son as aspiring postman are developed through *Belfast Confetti*, *First Language* up to *Opera Et Cetera*, where the poet-son becomes the postman himself. In “Post”, the father relates how his mnemonic map of the streets for his postal walk has been replaced by district codes. Yet to the father, the mnemonics for the various streets – “*Bom-legged Baker / With a Pound of English / And Scotch Nails*” – was also a narrative, a story told to himself so that he would remember his route and know where to go. Thus the moral of the poem: To tell stories is to know where one is going.³⁵³

In *Belfast Confetti*, to be discussed next, the quilt as form and technique is still valid when analysing the composition of the collection and its individual poems and pieces. Yet what Carson distances himself from, as intimated by the poem “Patchwork”, is the quilt as a finished work of art. This is instead replaced by the mother’s recycling which is configured as a more mundane and ongoing process, making objects for everyday use which can be continuously revised.

³⁵³ It can be added that the poem pulls in two directions. There are two strands in the poem: the father and son and death. The Carson papers at the Emory archives give the variant title “Waste”. This is suggestive. On a concrete level this alternative title links up with the rubbish-bin in the poem. But it might also be extended to the poem’s reference to people gone before their time. As the speaker retrieves the *Irish News* and the death columns from the rubbish-bin he does not let them vanish and thus prevents them from falling into forgetfulness. Ciaran Carson Papers (MSS 746), Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University:
<http://findingaids.library.emory.edu/documents/carson746/series2/subseries2.2/subseries2.2a/> Accessed 11 December 2012.



4. Unravelling *Belfast Confetti*

Belfast Confetti (1989), Carson's third collection of poems, is in many ways continuous with *The Irish for No*, published only two years earlier. Its title is the title of a poem in *The Irish for No*. It shares its general compositional structure and its poetic forms with the earlier volume: like *The Irish for No* it is divided into three parts and combines long poems and nine-line poems, written in the long unrhymed line upon which much of the reputation of *The Irish for No* rests. The recurrence and repetition of phrases, images and motifs (most notably, confetti and the map), scenes and characters, establish links across the two books. Set in and centred on Belfast, *Belfast Confetti* occasionally returns to the streets and locations of *The Irish for No* as it continues to explore the city marred by the Northern Ireland conflict.

Belfast Confetti confirms the achievements of *The Irish for No*. Full of praise, in his 1990 review of the collection for *The Times Literary Supplement*, Corcoran writes that "the first thing to be said about the new book is how delightedly we may recognize in it the signs of a quite exceptional and original talent, having discovered its proper expression, enthusiastically trying to keep up with itself".³⁵⁴ In *Belfast Confetti*, Corcoran continues, the long line is made "once and for all, Carson's own".³⁵⁵ Writing a decade later, Goodby finds the urban thematics, which we saw introduced in *The Irish for No*, "consolidated by the even more city-centred *Belfast Confetti*".³⁵⁶ "Both books", Goodby asserts, "showed just how far Carson had transformed his work in reaction against Heaney and in response to the intimidating example of Muldoon."³⁵⁷

³⁵⁴ Corcoran, "Past Imperfect", *The Times Literary Supplement* 4510 (2 November 1990), 1184.

³⁵⁵ Corcoran, "Past Imperfect", 1184.

³⁵⁶ Goodby, *Irish Poetry since 1950*, 290.

³⁵⁷ Goodby, *Irish Poetry since 1950*, 290.

When in an interview with Brandes, conducted in the summer of 1989, Carson was asked to comment on the “obviously” “strong link” between *The Irish for No* and *Belfast Confetti* he replied that the latter is “exploring the same area. Or it’s filling in details on the same map.”³⁵⁸ Still, if to read *Belfast Confetti* is to recognize aspects of the earlier collection *The Irish No*, there are also notable differences. The overall design of the two collections is in fact only near-identical. The composition of *Belfast Confetti* is more complex and the collection more formally diverse, bringing together verse and prose in a variety of kinds: a prefatory poem introduces the collection as a whole, each of the three parts carries its own epigraph, in parts I and III the long poems are accompanied by versions of haiku and in part II the nine-liners appear side-by-side with prose pieces. Images and motifs which first appeared in *The Irish for No* are recontextualized and given new functions and new meanings. Scenes are rewritten or read in a new light; themes are revisited. The Belfast of *Belfast Confetti* is, as many critics have noted, much darker and appears even more fragmented. Difference within a familiar framework characterizes the collection.

Belfast Confetti, then, in returning to some of the themes and forms of *The Irish for No*, but in a different way, gives notice of the aesthetic and ethical efforts undertaken. Firstly, it attests to Carson’s resistance to closure, to a singular narrative. As Peter McDonald rightly observes, “Carson’s poetry is much occupied by the difficulties and liabilities of narrative” and voices a “distrust of the tendencies towards coherence which narrative generates”.³⁵⁹ Secondly, it questions the idea of a finished work of art. Therefore, if in *The Irish for No* Carson was intent on writing “the ongoing, fractious epic that is Belfast” we shall see *Belfast Confetti* as a renewed attempt to write this epic.³⁶⁰ This is not to undermine the status or validity of *The Irish for No*. It is inherent to the patchwork poetics that texts are taken apart and pieced back together again in a new context. Yet set in relation to the close affinities between *The Irish for No* and *Belfast Confetti* there is here a further dimension to Carson practising recycling on his own work: It is by relinquishing his claim to a singular, authoritative narrative that his poems gain their authority. This is an important aspect of Carson’s poetics: The patchwork quilt of *The Irish for No* must be recycled or else it becomes itself, as the poem “Patchwork” intimates, a finished work of art.

In terms of Carson’s poetics, *Belfast Confetti* is a transitional book. If Carson’s juvenilia were characterized by a search for an adequate stance (a search which found its critical articulation in his review of Heaney’s *North*), the period in-between *The Lost Explorer* and *Irish Traditional Music* was in part “about” finding an expression; the patchwork poetics, as realized in *The Irish for No*, enabled Carson to match form and content. In *Belfast Confetti*, however, Carson dissolves the idea of a correct and adequate expression. In evidence in the collection is a distrust of

³⁵⁸ Brandes, 87.

³⁵⁹ Peter McDonald, *Mistaken Identities: Poetry and Northern Ireland* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997), 58 and 64.

³⁶⁰ Carson, *The Star Factory*, 126.

representation. If in *The Irish for No Carson* strives to represent experience as genuinely as he can, he brings to *Belfast Confetti* an equal ambition to write about experience but finds that the only genuine approach is to acknowledge the liabilities of representation.

In *Belfast Confetti*, these concerns are predominant in the prose pieces in the central section of the collection which will therefore be given particular attention in the present chapter. Yet the ideas articulated there have poetological consequences. The questioning of representation is formally reflected in the variety of forms deployed in *Belfast Confetti*, in the complex arrangement of the collection, in which poems and pieces read as “mirrors”,³⁶¹ and in the collection’s intertextuality, which in *Belfast Confetti* becomes more pronounced and finds new manifestations: *Belfast Confetti* displays an increased sensibility towards rewriting. Carson’s distrust of representation emanates, in part, from his earlier engagement with the patchwork poetics which is given important new expression in *Belfast Confetti*.

Belfast Confetti is a consciously organized book; by Carson’s own admission its “architecture” is “deliberate. Maybe too deliberate”.³⁶² Its structure is, on the one hand, seemingly transparent. Each poetic form has its assigned position within the collection, its own dominant thematic preoccupation and characteristic mode. The long poems, that occupy parts I and III, are narrative in mode and address themes of personal character. The nine-liners may be described as miniatures: they evoke the sonnet form and concentrate on one scene or situation. It is in these short poems that the subject of the Northern Ireland conflict is most explicitly dealt with. The prose pieces meditate on the idea of representing the city.

The book’s composition is, at the same time, probably one of Carson’s most intricate and complex and therefore its initial transparency is deceptive. The “idea” behind it, Carson admits in the interview with Brandes, was to create “a hall of mirrors, in which all the poems are versions of each other” and which seemed to him an expression of “real life”.³⁶³ Each piece or poem can be read on its own but there is, at the same time, a tension, or even a counter-movement of sorts, within the collection as poems and pieces resist the boundaries set up by the (rigid) structure and sabotage the cohesion of the collection.³⁶⁴

³⁶¹ This is Carson’s own word for the book’s composition, Brandes, 87.

³⁶² Brandes, 87.

³⁶³ Brandes, 87.

³⁶⁴ With Goodby, we might see this aspect of the collection as resisting “the tradition of the free-standing lyric”, *Irish Poetry since 1950*, 294. Following Hughes, the collection’s intratextuality can be said to attest to the idea that the city cannot be contained within one poem or one form. As Hughes astutely remarks, Carson’s Belfast “cannot [...] be seen as organic or coherent: known places are returned to until such time as the repressed is recalled”. In this context, Hughes continues: “Carson’s intratextuality is the formal equivalent of those narratives which revisit and return to supposedly known places until

The organization of *Belfast Confetti* recalls Muldoon's comments in an earlier, 1981 interview with John Haffenden, but Carson takes the idea one step further by interspersing intertexts of different kinds.³⁶⁵ *Belfast Confetti* is an overtly intertextual collection. Its intertexts are, as one critic observes, "as heterogeneous as the confetti of the title".³⁶⁶ The intertextuality takes different manifestations. Quotations, in the form of epigraphs, from Walter Benjamin, *A Berlin Childhood around the Turn of the Century* (part I), the *Ordinance of the Corporation of Belfast* of 1678 (part II) and Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City* (part III) introduce the three parts and accentuate the urban setting and thematics. Versions of haiku, based on originals ranging from Bashō in the seventeenth century to Shiki in the nineteenth century, are incorporated into parts I and III: in part I the long poems are commented on by haiku placed between; in part III a haiku opens the section and sets one of the dominant themes. In part I Carson "rewrites" MacNeice's canonical "Snow" whilst "All the Better to See You With" re-imagines *Little Red Riding Hood* in Belfast. In part III, the poem "John Ruskin in Belfast" speaks in the voice of Ruskin and quotes from his *The Mystery of Life and Its Arts*, whilst the concluding poem "Hamlet" derives important features from Shakespeare's play. In the prose pieces in part II Carson engages with historical and official accounts of Belfast which are quoted or otherwise referenced.

This intricate composition of *Belfast Confetti* is aesthetically and ethically compelling but also makes demands on the reader. As McCracken notes, "[t]he combination is as rewarding as it is challenging".³⁶⁷ When John Lucas opens his 1990 review of *Belfast Confetti* by saying that "[t]here's so much going on in Ciaran Carson's new volume that it's impossible to do more here than offer a few pointers to its riches", and a bit further on, admits his reluctance to quote from the book, claiming that "to do so is to lose the power of its connections, and the value of individual poems and prose pieces", he acknowledges both the complex arrangement of the collection and the ensuing difficulties involved in attempting an account of the collection in any other form than its own.³⁶⁸

To admit to these difficulties encountered by the critic is, however, to acknowledge the aesthetic and ethical gestures of the collection. As McDonald aptly points out in his chapter on "Poetry, Narrative, and Violence" in *Mistaken*

such time as they become altered and unfamiliar." Hughes, " 'the mouth of the poem': Carson and Place", 99 and 100.

³⁶⁵ In the interview Muldoon says: "I've become very interested in structures that can be fixed like mirrors at angles to each other – it relates to narrative form – so that new images can emerge from the setting up of the poems in relation to each other: further ironies are possible, further mischief is possible." John Haffenden, "Interview with Paul Muldoon", *Vienpoints: Poets in Conversation* (Faber and Faber: London, 1981), 136.

³⁶⁶ Broom, 168. The applicability of confetti to Carson's intertexts is discussed in Chapter 3, in relation to the poem "Belfast Confetti".

³⁶⁷ McCracken, 358.

³⁶⁸ John Lucas, "Changing History", *New Statesman and Society* 3:112 (3 August 1990), 42.

Identities, “poetry makes sense of things in distinctive ways, which defeat the patterns offered by rhetorical and political coherences”.³⁶⁹

“Turn Again”

The Gallery Press edition of *Belfast Confetti* opens with the poem “Turn Again”. The collection’s organization, which places the poem between the book’s dedication to Carson’s father and part I has led at least one critic to ponder the poem’s status, whether it “is somehow separate from the rest of the collection”.³⁷⁰ Corcoran notes that it introduces the English and American editions of the earlier volume, *The Irish for No.*³⁷¹ Interestingly, and maybe because of this, “Turn Again” does not feature in the American Wake Forest edition of *Belfast Confetti*.

The poem’s position in *Belfast Confetti* will necessarily set up a certain reading, although the poem does not hold the status of a programme. It condenses some of the recurrent thematic preoccupations of the collection and introduces the motif of the map. Nearly all the lines of “Turn Again” prefigure lines and situations described in later poems.

The first stanza focuses on the discrepancy between representation and the object of representation, and the difficulties involved in representing reality. It relates a series of Belfast maps which all prove to be inaccurate when held up against the city in the narrative present. To briefly summarize this oft-commented poem: Each in its different way, the maps referenced draw our attention to the liabilities of representation. One group of maps represents bridges and streets that are non-existent: a bridge that was planned but never built, a bridge that no longer exists. On yet another map, “the shape of jails cannot be shown for security reasons”. One map’s failure to capture reality lies with the object to be represented, and it lies with time: The city is in constant change and therefore: “[t]oday’s plan is already yesterday’s – the streets that were there are gone.” The representation becomes a trace of what was there.

³⁶⁹ McDonald, 65f. The composition of the collection acquires a deeper significance when set against the socio-political conditions of 1980s Northern Ireland. Fran Brearton’s observation is in this context most insightful: “For Carson, writing in the late 1980s when the Northern Irish situation appeared [...] to be dauntingly static, even if its underlying complexities indicated movement, the sense of living and writing within the ‘labyrinth’ of ‘Belfast Confetti’ is particularly acute, as is the fear of boundaries, fixity, and containment.” Fran Brearton, “Mapping the Trenches: Gyres, Switchbacks and Zig-zag Circles in W. B. Yeats and Ciaran Carson”, *Irish Studies Review* 9.3 (December 2001), 382. The structure of the collection can further be said to evoke the political geography of the city – demarcations, barricades, the peace lines – which individual poems and pieces defeat or press beyond.

³⁷⁰ Hughes, “‘the mouth of the poem’: Carson and Place”, 91.

³⁷¹ Corcoran, “Past Imperfect”, 1184.

The theme of representation, concentrated in “Turn Again” in the official map, underpins the entire collection. Individual poems and pieces add their contributions to what is an unfolding argument. The prose piece “Question Time” calls attention to the fact that representations construct their own reality. There a photograph of a street riot “has caught only one rioter in the act”, “[t]he others, these would-be or has-been or may-be rioters have momentarily become spectators”, turning the one rioter into the protagonist as he performs “his David-and-Goliath act”. In “Narrative in Black and White”, a blurred reproduction plays tricks on the viewer: the golf balls, “you’d easily misconstrue as ping-pong” and as for the golf club, “[p]eople have been known / To mistake it for a gun”. In the collection representations are continuously being revised: In the first long poem of the collection, “Loaf”, “We wrote our names [...] We made up affairs [...] then we wiped it all clean”; in “Queen’s Gambit” plans are “contemplated and rubbed out, Plan A, / Becoming X or Y” and the “waste-paper bin is full of crumpled drafts”.

The opening line of the second stanza might be read as a culmination of sorts of the idea of representation as well as the failure of representation charted in the first stanza. It reads: “The linen backing is falling apart – the Falls Road hangs by a thread.” What is described here is a torn and disintegrating map – or representation – of Belfast, which no longer holds together. A similar description is seen in “Queen’s Gambit” where “whole segments of the map have fallen off” and “[i]t’s difficult to pick up without the whole thing coming apart in your hands”.

The line reads, simultaneously, as a description of the city itself. Imagining Belfast as a textile (and evoking thus Belfast’s industrial past and the linen industry), it suggests that the fabric of the city is torn, “is falling apart”. In this respect, the mother’s recycling and “stitching, / Darning, mending” (“Patchwork”) of clothes, which are either torn or worn out, takes on further significance. By analogy, the poet’s writing, if associated with “mending”, becomes a way to piece back, or stitch together, the fragmented representations of the city.³⁷²

“Turn Again” may be read meta-poetically. Its position in the collection, its title and the concluding lines – “I turn into / A side-street to try to throw off my shadow, and history is changed” – can be seen as the poet’s undertaking in *Belfast Confetti*, to narrate Belfast anew, differently from *The Irish for No*. But also, as Quinn astutely points out, each poem or prose passage may be seen as a new “turn”, another way of storying the city”.³⁷³ Additionally, the title and these lines also capture the idea of repetitions as new contributions. As noted by Alexander, “[t]he title of the poem captures the sense in which the experience of repetition or ‘return’ can all too easily become an encounter with difference”.³⁷⁴ On similar lines,

³⁷² The ideas expressed here are in fact anticipated by nine-liners in *The Irish for No*. In “Smithfield Market”, the materiality of Belfast is imagined as textile: “Everything unstitched, unravelled.” In “Travellers”, “Belfast / Tore itself apart and patched things up again.” These ideas are, however, taken further in *Belfast Confetti*.

³⁷³ Quinn, *The Cambridge Introduction to Modern Irish Poetry*, 201.

³⁷⁴ Alexander, 60.

Goodby observes that “‘turn’ is (again) used to mean ‘change’, and throughout, Belfast is seen as an indefinable, protean city of process, one which exposes the instability, impossibility rather, of any mapping system”.³⁷⁵

Mixing Poetry and Prose

In the central section of *Belfast Confetti*, Carson alternates nine-line poems and prose pieces averaging three or four pages in length, although one piece stretches over seven pages (“Question Time”). It opens with a quotation from the 1678 *Ordinance of the Corporation of Belfast*, describing how mastiff dogs “*have Barbarously fallen upon*” horses, cattle and men so that “*many Inhabitants ffear their lives to walk the streets or laines either by night or day*” (italics in original). Its function is twofold: On the level of theme, the epigraph anticipates the short poems which detail how terrorist violence frames the lives of Belfast’s citizens. As a historical document and earlier telling of the city, it forms part of the group of non-literary sources which are incorporated in the form of quotations into the prose passages.

While the short poem is familiar to the reader of *The Irish for No*, where nine-liners occupy the same position within the collection, the prose bits suggest a new strand in Carson’s poetry. Critics have noted a “novelistic discursivity” in his long pieces.³⁷⁶ By Carson’s own acknowledgement, the six prose meditations on Belfast were written before the poems and were first intended for another book.³⁷⁷ In the interview with Brandes Carson says:

The Irish for No was written without preconceptions, and it was only until the poems were written that I realised they could make a formal whole. *Confetti* is more thought-out; but then again, useful accidents happened. The prose bits come from what I initially conceived of as being a separate book, a fairly big prose exploration of Belfast ... which foundered because I got tired of the research work involved, and the initial excitement of the research lapsed. Then I realised that the pieces I

³⁷⁵ John Goodby, “‘Walking in the City’: Space, Narrative and Surveillance in *The Irish for No* and *Belfast Confetti*”, in *Ciaran Carson: Critical Essays*, 71.

³⁷⁶ Goodby, *Irish Poetry since 1950*, 293.

³⁷⁷ Brandes, 87. The poems of *Belfast Confetti* were, accordingly, written between 1987 and 1989. The prose project on Belfast might therefore well have been begun before or written in parallel with *Irish Traditional Music* and *The Irish for No*. Carson’s conception of Belfast reality as part landscape part mindscape – which finds its strongest articulation in *Belfast Confetti*, most notably in the prose pieces – is seen as early as in his 1983 review for *The Honest Ulsterman*, where he reviews four recently published books on Belfast history, “Interesting Times”, *The Honest Ulsterman* 74 (Winter 1983). It should be noted however that the narrative present in the prose piece “Revised Version” is dated to 1987. Some of the pieces are re-worked in *The Star Factory*. This aspect of Belfast as part landscape and part mindscape is discussed further in Brearton’s article “Mapping the Trenches: Gyres, Switchbacks and Zig-zag Circles in W. B. Yeats and Ciaran Carson”.

had written were an obverse side to the poems I was writing ... like the other side of the Persian rug.³⁷⁸

Even though the collection's combination of poetry and prose is (to date) unparalleled within Carson's work, he is not treading new ground. Sewell, in his article "The Influence of Irish and the Oral Tradition", included in *Ciaran Carson: Critical Essays*, informs us that "[t]he carefully arranged mixing of genres in [*Belfast Confetti*], especially the combination of prose passages and poems, recalls (in Ireland, at least) the form that many classic tales have come down to us, including *The Táin* and *The Children of Lír*".³⁷⁹ This is a tradition of which Carson himself, at the time of composition, was well aware. Reviewing Heaney's translation of the early Irish epic *Buile Suibhne* in 1984 Carson notes that "the prose delineates the outward events of the story; the verse recounts an inward, psychological journey; and certainly, much of the effect of the original is gained by this creative interplay".³⁸⁰

This is not to say, however, that this is how the prose and the short lyrics work in *Belfast Confetti*. It would be too mechanical a reading to transpose this patterning to the central section of *Belfast Confetti* as it would be to simplify the intricate composition of the collection as a whole.

Before I discuss the six prose pieces, it is worthwhile to consider the nine-liners and their relationship to the prose pieces. The short poems included in the central section of *Belfast Confetti* cover much of the same ground as the prose passages but deal more prominently with the Troubles. They are, with one exception, located in Belfast, a city in the hands of paramilitary organizations. The poems are dark, disturbing, relating sectarian violence and atrocities.

The sense of entrapment experienced by the speaker of the poem "Belfast Confetti" in *The Irish for No* pervades the series of short poems. In the second poem in the series, "Last Orders", to enter a bar in the city is like playing "Russian roulette, since you never know for sure who's who, or what / You're walking into." The poem closes with the sinister statement: "how simple it would be for someone / Like ourselves to walk in and blow the whole place, and ourselves, to Kingdom Come." In "Punctuation": "The shots, the echoes, are like whips, and when you flinch, / You don't know where it's coming from. This bullet, is your name on it?" The effect of reading these poems is one of enclosure and confinement, which is intensified by the repeated references to "gates" ("the security gate", "the steel mesh gate", "the galvanized wire mesh gate")³⁸¹ and the

³⁷⁸ Brandes, 87.

³⁷⁹ Sewell, 199. This is also reminiscent of the Japanese art form *haibun*, in which haiku and prose complement each other, as seen in Bashō's *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, one of the classics of Japanese literature. See Nobuyuki Yuasa, "Introduction" to Matsuo Bashō's *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, trans. Yuasa (London: Penguin, 1966), 39.

³⁸⁰ Ciaran Carson, "Sweeney Astray: Escaping from Limbo", in Tony Curtis, ed., *The Art of Seamus Heaney* (Bridgend: Seren, 2001), 4th ed., 142.

³⁸¹ The poems "Gate", "Last Orders", "Night Out".

fact that some of the violence takes place inside these gates: “The gate squeaks open, slams shut almost instantly behind us.”

Belfast in these poems is a city marred by violence. It is, as several of these poems highlight, physically damaged. In “Gate” we witness the site of an explosion, in “Barfly” the lunchtime menu is punctuated by bullets, “there’s confetti everywhere”. Variations on the damaged city are seen in poems whose titles incorporate body parts: “Bloody Hand”, “The Mouth”, “The Knee”. These poems, Carson has said in interview, are “left-overs”: “It began initially with an intention to do a whole book on parts of the body.”³⁸² Whilst this intention was not fully realized, in the interview he still refers to the collection as being about the “[m]utilation of the body and the city”.³⁸³

This idea of a wounded body and city has echoes of the poem “Patchwork” of *The Irish for No*. There the mother’s “stitching, / Darning, mending” was first evoked in the context of “the surgery”: In hospital for his appendectomy the speaker of the poem imagines his mother as “the needle shone between her thumb and finger, stitching, / Darning, mending: the woolly callous on a sock, the unravelled jumper / That became a scarf.” Here the mother’s stitching carries the dual meaning of recycling or mending clothes and of healing. As suggested earlier, when the prefatory poem “Turn Again” was discussed, stitching/mending is carried over into *Belfast Confetti*. By analogy, the collection, however modestly, gestures towards the idea that the fragmented city might perhaps be “stitched” back together.

In the short poems, violence is omnipresent. It leaves physical traces on the city landscape and its citizens are made victims of violence. The speakers in these poems cannot give straightforward interpretations of the violent attacks that disrupt daily life, and the point is of course that they cannot be made sense of. In “Barfly”, two men walk into a bar and “punctuate the lunchtime menu”. To this, the speaker responds by saying: “Which, I take it, was a message. Or an audio-visual aid.” The speaker understands as much as that the attack was “a message” but is left uncertain as to what message exactly. In addition, several accounts come with modifiers and precautionary notes. Carson’s speakers are no omniscient narrators who have all the requisite information; instead events or situations are known by way of informants or learnt second-hand and are put forward in the text with “I’m told” (“Gate”) and “according to sources” (“Jump Leads”).

³⁸² Brandes, 87.

³⁸³ Brandes, 87.

“Yes”

“Yes” stands out from the other short poems.³⁸⁴ In this poem the poet has imaginatively, but only momentarily, left Northern Ireland and the urban environment, as the poem is set on a train outside Dundalk in the Republic, on the Enterprise express which links Dublin and Belfast. This change of location, however, does not offer any respite from the conflict or the sense of entrapment that dominates the other poems; the train is coming to a halt because of a border bomb.

Whilst the titles of the other short poems are given an explanation or an immediate context in the respective poem, the title “Yes” leaves the reader in uncertainty as to how it should be understood; “Yes” – which is an affirmation – is an eerie title for a poem which relates a border bomb. Further ambiguity is added when we consider that there is no single word for “yes” in the Irish language, the nearest equivalent put forward in the poem “The Irish for No” being “phatic nods and whispers”. Yet even in English “yes” and “no” are by no means straightforward but dependent on context and perspective; the earlier poem “The Irish for No” having left us with the image of the cat “debating whether *yes* is *no*”.

Denman sees in Carson’s nine-line poems, of *Belfast Confetti* but also of the earlier *The Irish for No*, “the ghost of the sonnet form” where the “five/four division” mirrors the “eight/six division” of the sonnet.³⁸⁵ Whereas the other nine-line poems of *Belfast Confetti* can be said to gesture towards the sonnet – in form, they break after the first five lines, and on the level of content, the first part can be said to present a scene or idea which is then reflected or elaborated upon in the second part³⁸⁶ – “Yes” departs from this pattern, implying perhaps that the situation described cannot be fitted into formal constraints; be it constraints in general or of this particular poetic form.³⁸⁷ To put it differently, the disturbance of life – caused by a bomb – can be read as being formally mirrored in the poem’s arrangement. The fifth line enjambes into the sixth line, and what is formally the second part. The formal conventional break is deferred and is replaced, in the *diegesis*, by the bomb. To borrow an image from another poem, the opening nine-liner “Gate” where “[e]verything’s a bit askew”, in both a temporal and spatial sense, due to explosions in the city, the bomb in “Yes” explodes the poem from within.

³⁸⁴ The poem stands together with the nine-liner “Punctuation” in-between the prose pieces “Question Time” and “Revised Version”. Read as a series, the titles of these four texts create a suggestive narrative.

³⁸⁵ Denman, 32. Alan Gillis too identifies the poems as sonnets, “The Modern Irish Sonnet”, 583. Gillis provides an interesting discussion of the sonnet and Carson’s appropriation of the form.

³⁸⁶ Admittedly, to say that the second part comments on the first would, in Carson’s case, be too strong.

³⁸⁷ Another poem that departs from the pattern is “Jump Leads” in which the fifth line overflows into the sixth, creating a continuous narrative.

It is in the context of the explosion that a reference to and quotation from Bashō appear. The second part reads in full:

I'm about to quote from Bashō's *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* –
Blossoming mushroom: from some unknown tree a leaf has stuck to it –
When it goes off and we're thrown out of kilter. My mouth is full
Of broken glass and quinine as everything reverses South.

It is of note that, in ways reminiscent to the quotations from Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" in "The Irish for No", discussed at some length in the previous chapter, the quotation is set to work on different levels in the text simultaneously. In the *diegesis*, firstly, the speaker – the represented "I" – intends to quote from Bashō's *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* but is prevented from doing this for in that particular moment the bomb goes off and his mouth becomes "full / Of broken glass and quinine" instead of words.³⁸⁸

On the textual level, nevertheless, the poem itself – or differently put, the representing "I" – quotes Bashō. Since this is a poem that seems self-consciously aware of its form several interpretive possibilities arise which need not exclude one another. If we stay with the (conventional) 8/6 (or in Carson's case 5/4) sonnet form, it is expected of the second part to respond to what has gone before. What "Yes" does is to borrow an earlier text and make it part of its own reply. To complicate this further, the quotation from Bashō seemingly holds the position of the bomb. One might even go as far as to suggest that the Bashō poem *is* the bomb. Instead of representing the explosion himself, Carson places there another text, i.e. another representation. In this context, we might remind ourselves of the poem "Belfast Confetti", discussed in the preceding chapter, in which punctuation marks hold similar positions: there an asterisk serves as a visual metaphor for an explosion, and the graphic impression of a "hyphenated line" accentuates ongoing and continuous gunfire. Yet whereas in "Belfast Confetti" the punctuation marks are the only signs of a text, the text itself missing (the speaker "cannot complete a sentence in my head" and the streets too are devoid of sentences), the Bashō poem is a complete text in itself.

The presence of Bashō's haiku in a poem about a border bomb in Ireland is by no means easily interpreted.³⁸⁹ The haiku was composed in the late seventeenth century and describes a natural phenomenon where a leaf has stuck to a mushroom. There is in the haiku a sense of wonder, as if seeing something for the

³⁸⁸ The quinine refers back to the Schweppes in the first stanza: "When the train slows with a noise like Schweppes." Carson recycles this line in the poem "S" in *Opera Et Cetera* (1996) in which "[t]he train slowed to a halt with a sigh like Schweppes".

³⁸⁹ Although one might in this context remind oneself of Muldoon's poem "The Narrow Road to the Deep North", Mahon's "A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford" and Muldoon's "Gathering Mushrooms". As noted by several critics, Muldoon's "Gathering Mushrooms" alludes to Mahon's "A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford". Muldoon's poem was dedicated to Carson. To pursue these links, however, falls outside the scope of the present analysis.

first time. In “Yes”, by contrast, a bomb has “stuck” to a train. Hence a natural image stands in for something unnatural; a singularity replaces that which, at the height of the Troubles, has become quotidian. It is my contention that the function of the Bashō quotation lies precisely in this: By importing another representation which is out of place in the situation it is asked to describe, Carson puts the focus on the bomb and produces a conceptual disruption which may parallel that of the bomb. If, as the speaker says in the poem, “we’re no strangers to the border bomb”, the poet has to find new means to represent it, to make the bomb as foreign and strange as the bomb is in real life. We should react to the bomb with the same impulse of incomprehension as we might react to the presence of Bashō in this poem. It works as a self-reflexive commentary too: After *The Irish for No* and *Belfast Confetti*, Carson’s reader is “no stranger” to bombs, violence and atrocities. The intertext becomes a way for *this* bomb not to go unnoted and a means to disrupt habituated reactions or readings.

“Yes” foregrounds representation and reads as an attempt, through contrast, to make strange and disrupt straightforward representation of that which is incomprehensible and that which might not, cannot, be directly represented. The poem departs from the five/four pattern that Carson deploys in the other short poems, the reply expected (of the sonnet) is delayed or, even, is lacking altogether. The represented I is silenced and the explosion itself replaced by another text whose original is foreign to that which it is taken to represent. In the end, however, the moral question the reader should ask him- or herself is not what the intertext is doing in Carson’s poem about a border bomb in Ireland but why there is a bomb on a train in Ireland.

The Poetics of Unravelling

Included in the central section of *Belfast Confetti* are six prose pieces on Belfast. With Jerzy Jarniewicz I hold that “Carson’s prose is a consistent extension of his interests shown in his poems”.³⁹⁰ In this particular instance, the prose pieces, as Broom observes, “allow a more discursive approach to the themes tackled by the poems”.³⁹¹ Examining the prose pieces below, I will suggest that they give coherence to Carson’s poetic priorities and strategies in *Belfast Confetti* as a whole. (This is not to say that the prose pieces were not revised, modified or adapted to *Belfast Confetti*. Neither is this to forget that their inclusion in the collection affected their “generic status”).³⁹²

³⁹⁰ Jerzy Jarniewicz, “Alphabets and Labyrinths in *Fishing for Amber*”, in *Ciaran Carson: Critical Essays*, 221.

³⁹¹ Broom, 168.

³⁹² The term “generic status” is borrowed from Alexander, 154. One notes in criticism various definitions of the prose pieces. Alexander identifies them as “prose poems” and sees them as “Carson’s brief experimentation with the prose poem”, 172 n. 30. Jonathan Hufstader labels them essays, *Tongue of Water, Teeth of Stones: Northern Irish Poetry and Social*

Firstly, in their explorations into Belfast etymology, geography, cartography and history the prose pieces work, simultaneously, as self-reflexive queries into language, memory, identity, the relation between self and place – the result of which must necessarily affect Carson’s own undertakings in his poetry. Secondly, but related to the first, the pieces evince Carson’s preoccupation with representation; realized here as the inadequacy of representation for fully capturing the object to be represented. Whilst Carson’s writing has always focused on the discrepancy between representation and its object, the prose pieces read as a more extensive reflection upon this problem. Thirdly, the pieces both manifest and extend the patchwork poetics as conceived in the earlier volumes.

Notably, in “Brick”, which explores the foundation that Belfast is built on and built of, the mother’s “stitching, / Darning, mending” and unravelling (“Patchwork”) is reconfigured as an “incessant unravelling [...] as woollen jumpers became scarves and socks”. Embedded within the speaker’s reflections on the city, the mother’s practice is, significantly, made adjacent to the condition of the city: “the very city recycled itself and disassembled buildings [...] were poured into the sloop of the lough shore to make new land”. In the prose pieces, we see Carson engaged in a parallel activity, making new text out of old. The materials that Carson recycles here are, significantly, largely earlier accounts, both written and visual, of Belfast. On a most concrete level, this demonstrates how the telling of Belfast must be continuously revised and updated. But “unravelling” acquires in these pieces a further meaning: Carson’s handling of the earlier material, together with the various themes of the prose pieces, reveals that what is also being unravelled is not only actual representations but the very act of representation.

In the prose pieces, Carson draws on a variety of non-literary sources which are quoted or otherwise referenced: official documents, history books, guides to the city, maps and dictionaries, dating from the late seventeenth century to the narrative present.³⁹³ However, although the sources provide us with glimpses into

Violence (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1999), 235. Hufstader refers to the writer/speaker as “[t]he essayist”, 236. Temple Cone sees the prose passages as “essays that resemble prose poems”, “Knowing the Street Map by Foot: Ciaran Carson’s *Belfast Confetti*”, *New Hibernia Review* 10.3 (Autumn 2006), 69. Sean O’Brien proposes “essay-poem”, *The Deregulated Muse* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1998), 190.

³⁹³ *Belfast Confetti* has a forerunner in Montague’s *The Rough Field*, which makes use of historical documents, newspapers, letters, pamphlets. The achieved effect is, however, different from *Belfast Confetti*. As Alex Houen, amongst others, has noted, in *The Rough Field*, the “potential fragmenting of cultural heritage is [...] foregrounded more generally by the poem’s juxtapositions (mostly in its margins) of literary and historical texts from the sixteenth to the twentieth century that bear upon the region’s settlement”, but “[r]ather than reconciling political and religious voices, then, the poem leaves them to stand alongside and in contrast to each other.” Alex Houen, *Terrorism and Modern Literature, from Joseph Conrad to Ciaran Carson* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 249. Goodby sees in *The Rough Field*, “juxtaposed, collage effects”, *Irish Poetry since 1950*, 294. Corcoran writes further, linking the form to the political context: “The need to put the situation into perspectives of various kinds – to situate *it*, in fact – in ways that might allow honest,

Belfast past, their main function, when reset in Carson's texts, is not to provide us with information; they are, as McCracken notes, "set well back from journalism or historiography".³⁹⁴ Rather, by evaluating various accounts against each other, by testing them against the real world or the personally experienced, Carson shows how historical accounts – which proclaim accuracy as their watchword – are shaped by perspective, agenda and the medium itself. Maps "are suspect", "avoid the moment" ("Question 'Time'"), "maps cannot describe everything, or they describe states of mind" ("Revised Version"); photographs, on the other hand, freeze the moment, a fact that complicates their claim to verisimilitude since, as "Question Time" shows, they make "spectators" of "would-be or has-been or may-be rioters"; books may be based on misinformation and are therefore incorrect ("Farset"). In other words, the earlier material is not there, as one critic puts it, to heighten "[h]istorical consciousness" and, with reference to this part's epigraph, to "indicat[e] that the chaos the poet encounters in his travels through present-day Belfast had parallels of danger in the city's past".³⁹⁵ That is to simplify Carson's use of intertextuality. For although the quotation from the *Ordinance of the Corporation of Belfast* thematically links up with the short poems, Carson's unravelling of the historical material in the pieces questions its authority.

In their "incessant unravelling" of texts with factual claims, the pieces are very much of their time. Without necessarily labelling the pieces postmodern, similar tendencies may be noted in postmodern texts of the same period. As Linda Hutcheon observes, "[p]ostmodern texts consistently use and abuse actual historical documents and documentation in such a way as to stress both the discursive nature of those representations of the past and the narrativized form in which we read them".³⁹⁶

It should be noted, too, that although the speaker's personal experience (sometimes corresponding with Carson's autobiography) is often used to counter the historical and official accounts related in the prose pieces, his recollections are also provisional and uncertain. As Hutcheon rightly points out, "the past is only known to us today through its textualized traces"³⁹⁷ but our memories are, likewise, reconstructions, yielding to perspectives, interpretations and our ideals. In this

intelligent, and subtle but still feelingful response, is partly the reason that some individual volumes from the North in this period aim for a more inclusive and coherent structure than is attempted in the usual collection of separate poems. Montague's *The Rough Field* was an early and influential volume of this kind." *After Yeats and Joyce*, 142f.

³⁹⁴ McCracken, 359.

³⁹⁵ Mahony, 83.

³⁹⁶ Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), 87.

³⁹⁷ Hutcheon, 81.

context, it is worth remembering what Georges Gusdorf says of autobiography, that it is “a second reading of experience”.³⁹⁸

In the following discussion of the six prose pieces, I have chosen to examine each piece individually, maintaining the sequential order in which they are given in *Belfast Confetti*. The discussion centres on what I see as the dominant theme(s) of each piece; the heading assigned to each reflects this reading. The discussions do not purport to be exhaustive since each piece contains sub-themes running parallel to the main theme being unravelled. An alternative approach would have been to organize the discussion by theme. This would, however, conceal Carson’s principle of organization. The first piece in the series, “Farset”, has its given position. The positions of “Brick” and “Intelligence”, as the penultimate and final piece of the series, respectively, are suggestive in that these pieces portray the poet-speaker’s mother and father.

Origins: “Farset”

Carson begins his series of prose passages on Belfast with an investigation of the river Farset which gives Belfast its name.³⁹⁹ For a study of place, this harking back to a supposed beginning is a valid starting-point. However, despite its inquiry into the etymology of the place-name Belfast and its play with the Irish tradition of *dinnseanchas* (“lore of prominent places”), the aim of the piece is not to establish original meaning or to give an authoritative history of place.⁴⁰⁰ “Farset” points instead to the thorny nature of such undertakings; it becomes instead an

³⁹⁸ Georges Gusdorf, “Conditions and Limits of Autobiography”, in James Olney, ed. and trans., *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 38.

³⁹⁹ Carson reworks this account of the river Farset in *The Star Factory* (see the chapter on “Milltown Cemetery”) and in the essay “Belfast: Betwixt, Between, Behind the Name”, in Stephen Kelly and David Johnston, eds., *Betwixt and Between: Place and Cultural Translation* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2007).

⁴⁰⁰ *Dinnseanchas* is defined in *The Oxford Companion to Irish Literature*: “The *dinnshenchas* reflects a mentality in which the land of Ireland is perceived as being completely translated into story: each place has a history which is continuously retold. The *dinnshenchas* is the storehouse of this knowledge.” Within the tradition, further, “[p]lace-names 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.” *The Oxford Companion to Irish Literature*, ed. Robert Welch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), s.v. *dinnshenchas*. This thesis employs the Modern Irish standard spelling *dinnseanchas* (cf. Old Irish *dindsenchas* and Middle Irish *dinnshenchas*). Alexander recognizes “Farset” as “a hybrid form of *dinnseanchas*”, 65. Houen, however, although he sees in *The Irish for No, Belfast Confetti* and *The Star Factory* an “examination of the *dinnseanchas* in the context of postmodern claims about linguistic arbitrariness, internationalism, and narrative fragmentation”, does not include “Farset” in his analysis, 254.

“unravelling” of the implications of such undertakings. It is apposite that to make this point about origin and original meaning Carson takes as his subject matter the river, a symbol of change, fluidity and movement.

“Farset” manages to be light-hearted and serious at the same time. Certainly, the etymological inquiry which is at the centre of the piece is carried out with “mock etymological earnestness”⁴⁰¹ and a “tone of straight-faced jiggery-pokery”;⁴⁰² the piece qualifying as “an eccentric version of dinnseanchas”.⁴⁰³ But for all the humour displayed there, the piece is held in check by the accounts of the actual river which frame the linguistic inquiry, suggesting that the speaker is in earnest about his subject matter. The humour fades as the narrative, towards its close, turns to contemplate the “meaning” of the river Farset in present-day Belfast, the speaker drawing our attention to a segregated city and streets “burned down” in the Troubles.⁴⁰⁴

The piece is a parallel exploration of the river and the meaning of its name. It opens with a child’s perception of the river, “imagine[d] or remember[ed]” by the adult writer: “Muck. Water. A bottomless bucket. The undercarriage of a pram. A rusted spring mattress. The river, the stream, the sewer trickles from a black mouth and disappears down a black hole.” This semi-autobiographical return to childhood seems part and parcel of poems of place, as we recognize them from Heaney, and before him, Wordsworth. Importantly, in the context of “Farset”, and in its wider context, *Belfast Confetti*, what we see here is concrete, descriptive of the river’s materiality, its perpetual flow and the impermanence of things. It is, significantly, a view of the river before the speaker knows its name, since “It is only years later I will find its name. For now I take it in with a child’s rapt boredom”.⁴⁰⁵ It is a view of the river before any historical or cultural meaning has been attached to it and before it has become endowed with symbolic value. Yet this primordial image of the river is, as the adult speaker makes us aware, a reconstruction filtered through his memory or imagination; the childhood

⁴⁰¹ Kerrigan, “Earth Writing”, 159.

⁴⁰² Wheatley, 13.

⁴⁰³ Alexander, 64.

⁴⁰⁴ The river Farset crosses what on street level is divided territory and joins that which is physically, politically and denominationally separated. One way to view the river is to say that it joins, rather than divides, just as the stitches in a quilt will join different patches. As Alexander shows in his insightful reading of space and place in Carson’s work, the river Farset is “a subterranean current that figuratively connects with the city’s urban unconscious”. To Alexander, “Carson’s historical and topographical excavations therefore reveal even Belfast’s most rigidly divided landscape to be contradictory and multi-layered, subject to instabilities and fluidities that, like the Farset, rarely lie far from the surface”, 163.

⁴⁰⁵ The fact that the child does not know the name of the river is also stressed in Carson’s two other accounts of the river Farset. In *The Star Factory*, Carson writes: “though I didn’t know its name then [...] I did not know its name, then, but was mesmerized by its rubbish”, 48. In “Belfast: Betwixt, Between, Behind the Name”: “It will take me some years to discover that this exhausted stream is the Farset river”, 21.

experience of the river has been given or acquired its significance only in retrospect.

From the child's image of the river the piece turns to historical accounts which each attempt an explanation of the etymology of the Belfast name: George Benn, "writing in the 1820s", "Dubourdieu, writing some years earlier" and "Ward, Lock & Co.'s *Guide to Northern Ireland*, a hundred-odd years later". These three accounts, however, equal three different versions, thus testifying to the fact that interpretations are relative. The speaker's consultation of the books fails to yield one singular explanation and leads only, to borrow from the poem itself, to "watery confusion".

The etymological inquiry begins with a re-translation from English to Irish, the speaker going back to the original Irish *Béal Feirste*. But this is a name which in turn needs translation and whereas "*Béal* is easy. It means a mouth, or the mouth of a river; an opening; an approach", *feirste* requires further examination. Tracing its meaning from the genitive form *feirste* to the common-sense *fearsad*, the speaker's consultation of Irish-English, Scottish Gaelic and English-Irish dictionaries reaches the conclusion that *feirste* denotes a host of things: "a shaft; a spindle; the ulna of the arm; a club; the spindle of an axel; a bar or bank of sand at low water; a deep narrow channel on a strand at low tide; a pit or pool of water; a verse, a poem" (Dineen's Irish-English), "wallet" (O'Reilly), "axis" (McCionnaith's). By the time this survey is complete, however, the speaker must try to reassemble the name by reconnecting the alternative meanings with the city itself. This is done first in relation to Belfast topography and finds historical corroboration. According to this "simple approach", Belfast is "the *approach to the sandbank*, or the *mouth of the Farset*, or the *approach to the ford*". A second hypothesis translates *fearsad* as "axis" but this is not based on "scientific observation" and given that this is related to an anecdote told by the speaker's father it is an anachronism. A third, "more fanciful" alternative translates Belfast as "the *mouth of the poem*", for Carson adds, "surely Farset is related to the Latin turn in the furrow known as *versus*?"

The consultation of the various books and dictionaries suggests that Carson's aim in this piece is not to find a singular definition of the place-name Belfast. The very purpose of the piece is to illustrate diversity and multiplicity. As Stan Smith aptly points out, "Farset" demonstrates "a kind of back formation in which the imagining of origins is slowly transformed into an elaborate fantasy spun out of their interactions".⁴⁰⁶ On a similar line, David Wheatley observes that "[w]here a return to etymological roots in Friel or Heaney offers the chance of digging down to solid and authenticated ground, in Carson's hands it has become akin to opening a never-ending series of trapdoors under the fabric of his poems".⁴⁰⁷ The

⁴⁰⁶ Stan Smith, "'Crusing to the Podes': Ciaran Carson's Virtual Realities", in *Ciaran Carson: Critical Essays*, 122. First published in Smith, *Irish Poetry and the Construction of Modern Identity* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2005).

⁴⁰⁷ Wheatley, 13. Certainly, critics divide on Heaney's and Carson's attitude to place and language. Alan Gillis, in a recent article, has countered Wheatley's polarization of Heaney and Carson. See his "Names for Nameless Things: The Poetics of Place Names", in *Modern*

same object, the Belfast name, is variously interpreted and the point with the piece's recourse to historical sources is to make manifest the provisional nature of interpretation.

The denial of one singular meaning acquires a deeper significance when read against the 1980s Belfast. In his 1984 review of Heaney's *Sweeney Astray* (1983), a translation of the early Irish *Buile Suibhne* in which *dinnseanchas* form an integral part of the narrative, Carson writes that *dinnseanchas* "existed to give historical legitimacy to territorial claims".⁴⁰⁸ Writing in Belfast, and of Belfast, in the mid-to-late 1980s, there are reasons why the writer recoils from settling on an exclusive interpretation of place. In the piece to be discussed next, "Schoolboys and Idlers of Pompeii", phrases such as "Remember 1690" and "Remember 1916" inscribed on gable walls define territory, identity and adherence to one particular version of history and also work to reinforce this identity and territory. In contrast, in "Farset", Carson suggests that several readings of place are possible, for "strangely, by a conspiracy of history and accident and geography, the river Farset, this hidden stream, is all these things: it is the axis of the opposed Catholic Falls Road and the Protestant Shankhill", though now a "hidden stream", "it sinks and surfaces" and follows close to the Peace Line before it is lost under what is now High Street.

Remembering: "Schoolboys and Idlers of Pompeii"

"Schoolboys and Idlers of Pompeii" is about memory, or particularly, remembering. The general idea of the piece is that remembering is a necessarily situated activity; the past can only be reconstructed from our current position in time and space. In this, the piece attests to theoretical ideas that have gained currency throughout the twentieth century. In Jan Assmann's formulation, for example, memory is "the contemporized past".⁴⁰⁹ What Assmann defines as cultural memory, further, "always relates its knowledge to an actual and contemporary situation [...] sometimes by appropriation, sometimes by criticism, sometimes by preservation or by transformation".⁴¹⁰ The piece also varies the idea of repetition with variation, discussed in the previous chapter, i.e. that repetitions do not return in identical form. It befits the theme of the piece, therefore, that "Schoolboys and Idlers of Pompeii" recycles the poem "The Exiles' Club" of *The Irish for No*.

Irish and Scottish Poetry, 210f. In the same book, however, Aaron Kelly follows the same critical path as Wheatley. See his "Desire Lines: Mapping the City in Contemporary Belfast and Glasgow Poetry", in *Modern Irish and Scottish Poetry*, 225.

⁴⁰⁸ Carson, "Sweeney Astray: Escaping from Limbo", 142. We might compare Carson's definition with Heaney's in "The Sense of Place": "poems and tales which relate the original meanings of place names and constitute a form of mythological etymology", 131.

⁴⁰⁹ Jan Assmann, "Collective Memory and Cultural Identity", *New German Critique* 65 (1995), 129.

⁴¹⁰ Assmann, 130.

In this piece, Carson makes use of space to underline the temporal divide that separates the present from the past. It opens with three separate inscriptions which accentuate here-there, now-then. The first inscription is a graffito in Alphabet City in New York saying “Belfast” but although Alphabet City “resembles Belfast”, it is deemed “unlikely” that this particular inscription is in fact referring to “the city where I was born”. Conversely, a “New York underground graffiti mural” in Belfast might be “pointing west by style and implication”, but signifies, in Belfast, something else. Following from this logic therefore, whilst “*Remember 1690. Remember 1916*”, written on gable walls in Belfast make reference to historical events which are in ways related to Northern Ireland, and refer to the “same” space, now is not then and the past is not the present.

The piece focuses on the Falls Road Club, a group of Belfast emigrants “[e]xiled” in Australia since the 1950s and 1960s, that meets once a month in the Woolongong Bar in Adelaide, to reconstruct “a city on the other side of the world, detailing streets and shops and houses which for the most part only exist now in the memory”. Indeed, “[r]emembering is one of the main functions” of the group. In this “Schoolboys and Idlers of Pompeii” dramatizes collective remembering and the reconstruction of the past: one memory begets another, combining the communal and the individual, as first “someone”, then “[s]omeone else” and “[s]omeone else again” adds to the stories told. Yet the piece also draws attention to the precariousness of our memories of the past for it concludes by asking the question “Where does land begin, and water end? Or memory falter, and imagination take hold?”

“Exiled” in Australia, the emigrants are “soon immersed in history” and the “comforting dusk and smog and drizzle of the Lower Falls”. Returning back to childhood, to reconstruct what was once theirs, the members are, however, themselves markers of time passed. The piece illustrates Gusdorf’s idea that “the man who remembers his past has not been for a long time the same being, the child or adolescent, who lived that past.”⁴¹¹ Therefore, they remember the “taste of school milk” but drink stout. The “expensively-imported *Red Heart* Guinness” is of home but it is not the taste recollected.

Just as the name of the club, the Falls Road Club, harks back to the street on which they grew up, the “expensively-imported *Red Heart* Guinness and Gallaher’s *Blues*” provide the members with local colour, and *The Irish News* reports on local events, the group’s collective remembering becomes a means for identity formation and identity maintenance. But there is here a complex intertwining of memory and identity. John R. Gillis claims that “the notion of identity depends on the idea of memory, and vice versa. The core meaning of any individual or group identity, namely, a sense of sameness over time and space, is sustained by remembering; and what is remembered is defined by the assumed identity.”⁴¹²

⁴¹¹ Gusdorf, 38.

⁴¹² John R. Gillis, “Memory and Identity: The History of a Relationship”, in John R. Gillis, ed., *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 3.

However, as Alexander points out, the memory/identity work of the Irish emigrants is complicated in that “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”.⁴¹³

The reconstructed Falls Road becomes, as several critics have noted, a “palimpsest” which occupies more than one time and space: “bridges within bridges”.⁴¹⁴ Each act of remembering creates a new layer. Towards the piece’s close, Carson writes: “the alphabet soup of demolition sorts itself into phrases, names, buildings, as if, on the last day, not only bodies are resurrected whole and perfect, but each brick, each stone, finds its proper place again”. This image is at once consoling and, as Alexander points out, ahistorical; it will only work if time is arrested. In Alexander’s reading, it “ignores the complex tessellation of temporalities and spatial forms [...] that composes the city in history and renders the assignation of a ‘proper’ place perennially suspect”.⁴¹⁵ Whilst this is a pertinent comment, Broom highlights another, equally important, aspect of the passage. To Broom, it shows “the way in which mental maps and systems are more dogged in survival than the bricks and mortar of the city, even though they may have no particular claim to accuracy”.⁴¹⁶

In Hughes’ reading, the Irish emigrants portrayed here, and in the earlier poem “The Exiles’ Club”, are:

deluded nostalgic obsessives, pedants of place, but also analogues of the poet whose poem and prose piece enact what the exile’s club is attempting, in the delineation and cataloguing of place. Such an exercise, the two pieces strongly suggest, is futile since regardless of one’s distance from or nearness to, in both a geographical and a historical sense, the places that one is trying to recapture, such a recapturing is itself impossible, not least because of the metamorphic nature of the city”.⁴¹⁷

There are, however, other readings possible: I find little support in the narrative itself that the exiles are seen as “deluded nostalgic obsessive”; their exercise may be “futile” but they are portrayed with warmth. Their memory work has consoling effect on them and is important for their sense of identity, something which the poet does not deny them. It is in the following piece, “Question Time” that the relation between self and place is made political. Furthermore, the memory work of the exiles’ club is positive in comparison with the sectarian slogans written on gable walls, which assume a fixed past with fixed meaning.

⁴¹³ Alexander, 117.

⁴¹⁴ The palimpsest-like quality of the reconstructed city is indeed noticed by a number of critics. See for example, Smith, 122.

⁴¹⁵ Alexander, 117.

⁴¹⁶ Broom, 170.

⁴¹⁷ Hughes, “‘the mouth of the poem’: Carson and Place”, 98.

Importantly, in his portrayal of the Falls Road Club, Carson stages memory work as a continuous process, based on personal knowledge and experience. This we may contrast with the “Remember 1690” and “Remember 1916”, written on walls in the city which seem to assume “historical memory”, as this is formulated by Bernard Giesen and Kay Junge. According to them, “[h]istorical memory” is “not based on personal experience” but “constructs a common past of a social community that extends beyond the life-span of its individual members”.⁴¹⁸ This, however, seems to or even risks making the past static. Additionally, although the poet’s practice may in some respects be analogous to the exiles’ memory work, the poet is self-consciously aware of his own undertakings; he knows of the “futility” of the exercise. It is by acknowledging and admitting to the impossibility of “recapturing” that his poems and pieces gain authenticity.

Self and Place: “Question Time”

“Question Time” focuses on the relation between self and place, and related to this, on issues of identity and belonging. It opens with a quotation from George Benn’s 1823 history of Belfast (one of the intertexts of “Farset”), relating the sense of dislocation experienced by a “*native of Belfast*”, “*who had been brought up in one of the best streets which it contained, lately came over from America, after nearly a life-long absence, to visit the home of his youth*” (italics in original). This sense of “disorientation, that disappointed hunger for a familiar place” pervades the piece. Due to urban development or the conflict in present-day Belfast, places are erased or shift shape. The familiar becomes unfamiliar and the city, in the empirical world, collides with the citizens’ idea of Belfast, based on memory.⁴¹⁹

The relation between self and place takes on a new urgency when the speaker, undertaking a bicycle tour of his childhood streets, is interrogated by the paramilitary organization that controls the area. Moving back and forth through Catholic and Protestant areas, the speaker’s identity becomes indeterminate and he is forced to prove his identity by showing his knowledge of the neighbourhood as it was in the past. One of the lines “snapped” at him by the interrogators goes: “Yeah, I know it’s not there anymore. You just tell me what was there.” Whereas earlier in the piece, the memories related by the speaker have been framed by modifiers such as “I’m trying to remember”, “I think” or put forward with a sense

⁴¹⁸ Bernhard Giesen and Kay Junge, “Historical Memory”, in Gerard Delanty and Engin F. Isin, eds., *Handbook of Historical Sociology* (London, Sage, 2003), 326.

⁴¹⁹ A similar experience is detailed in Carson’s 1983 review of four then recently published books on Belfast history, “Interesting Times” in *The Honest Ulsterman*, and in his “Belfast Notes” in *The Times Literary Supplement* March 18–24 (1988), 304. In *The Honest Ulsterman* review Carson relates how his first reading of Cathal O’Byrne’s *As I Roved Out* (1946), an historical account of Belfast, “coincided” with Sunday walks with his father, so that “the city hovered between itself and O’Byrne’s [sic] Georgian prose, the memories and speculations of what might have been”, 36.

of uncertainty, “is it an old street deprived of all its landmarks?”, underscoring the provisional nature of memory, the interrogators do not allow for “error, hesitation, accuracy”. In other words, they assume that identity and memory are fixed and “objective phenomena”; they give them “the status of material objects – memory as something to be retrieved; identity as something that can be lost as well as found”.⁴²⁰

“Question Time” can be said to expose the logic by which the paramilitaries operate. When the speaker evaluates the interrogation by comparing it to a “bad police-B movie” he is not only undermining the interrogation but calling attention to how their rhetoric is borrowed. The poet, then, becomes like the “bomb-disposal expert” in the short poem “Jump Leads” that precedes “Question Time” and who “started very young by taking a torch apart at Christmas to see what made it tick”. Writing in Belfast in the 1980s, when life in the city is like “Russian roulette, since you never know for sure who’s who, or what / You’re walking into” (“Last Orders”), the poet finds a way to undermine the paramilitaries by defusing their logic and rhetoric. It is in this light we should see the interrogation of “Question Time” as well as the nine-line poems where Carson has paramilitary members as speakers.

When interrogated the speaker feels that he becomes “this map which they examine”, “a map which no longer refers to the present world, but to a history”, “a map which is this moment, this interrogation, my replies”. This is part of a general demonstration that maps, according to the speaker, are “suspect”. Visual representations, whose aim is to work as a guide, they nevertheless fail to represent reality “for they avoid the moment: ramps, barricades, diversions, Peace Lines”.

“Revised Version”

The title of this piece and some phrases therein are frequently quoted in Carson criticism, where they are taken to summarize Carson’s perception of the city as being in continuous change (the city revises itself) and its attendant consequences for representation: due to the city’s transformative nature representations must be continuously revised.⁴²¹ “Revised version”, in other words, is often used to denote “rewriting”.

Whilst this is, on the one hand, a valid interpretation of the term “revised version”, it is also a reading that has been abstracted from its immediate context, i.e. the piece of that title. The interpretation belongs more to (is more applicable to) the earlier “Question Time” or the following piece “Brick” where the city shifts

⁴²⁰ John R. Gillis, 3.

⁴²¹ Oft-quoted phrases are: “Improve, wipe out, begin again, imagine, change”, “everything is contingent and provisional; and the subjunctive mood of these images is tensed to the ifs and buts, the yeas and nays of Belfast’s history”, “*the city is a map of the city*” (italics in original).

shape so that “maps and street directories” go out of date and lose their function as a guide to the city. The piece “Revised Version” reveals another meaning which furthers Carson’s idea of representation. For when represented, the object of representation becomes a “revised version” of itself; any representation of the city is a “revised version” of the city.

We see a first example of this idea when the speaker compares two editions of Nesbitt’s *The Changing Face of Belfast*, the first 1968 edition and the second revised 1982 edition. Reproduced in both is a photograph, “High Street, looking east, 1851” but since the later edition, we are told, “has somehow skimmed on the ink”, what in the first edition appears as “dark threatening historicity”, “has been replaced by a noon-day shimmer”. The same photograph, i.e. the same street view of Belfast, is therefore “depicted” and interpreted differently: the two dogs that seemed to be fighting in the first (darker) edition are in the second (brighter) one seen to be playing, likewise, the “one-legged man with a doomy placard tied to his back” now “proclaims salvation”.

The idea that representations do not reflect the city as it is but construct it, is underscored when the speaker surveys old maps and plans, which were once future plans of Belfast (attempts or ambitions to “revise” the city). “[M]aps cannot describe everything, or they describe states of mind”, writes Carson before he references “Dubourdieu’s ‘very incorrect’ *Plan of Belfast in 1811*, which shows *streets and blocks of buildings which have never existed*” and John Mulholland’s *Plan of 1788*, “dedicated to the Earl of Donegall, who owned half the town” and which “shows a grand never-to-be canal”, “‘intended streets’, miasmas, projections”. The recent 1987 *Concept Plan for Lagganside* falls under scrutiny too for there “the Blackstaff river is deculverted to form a marina; our architect has drawn little boats and happy figures here, absolving the stench and excrement and rubbish of the present. Here is the Eden of the future – gardens, fields, streams, clear water”. As Alexander notes, the future plans of Belfast are in stark contrast to Belfast reality; particularly the 1987 plan seems to side-step the political turmoil.⁴²² This contrast between reality and future prospects is augmented by the rhetoric in the passages; Carson speaking there of “the second Venice”, “miasmas”, “dream-canal”, “the Eden of the future” and the “little boats and happy figures”.

Other representations of the city, referenced in this piece, draw attention to the fact that they may serve particular interests. The ordinance of 1680, which required that lanterns should be hung at doors or windows “to prevent disorders and mischief”, was later reformulated, the reference to disorder omitted. Does this omission make the city less violent and threatening, Carson seems to ask? This change in formulation is partially mirrored as the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment claims that “to people who have never been to Belfast their image of the place is often far-removed from the reality.” To this, the speaker wryly replies that it is “the jargon [which] sings of leisure purposes, velodromes and pleasure parks, the unfurling petals of the World Rose Convention”, that is “far-removed from the

⁴²² Alexander, 75.

reality”. One might change – revise – the “image” of the city but this will not solve the city’s socio-political problem: “Intoxication, death, will find their new connections.”

The piece culminates in the line “*The city is a map of the city*”. But this line also brings together ideas that Carson has been working out in the earlier pieces, leading up to “Revised Version”. It informs the collection as a whole. By way of summary thus far, its meaning is, at least, twofold. Firstly, due to its mutability the city derails representation; as an object of representation the city cannot be contained within a particular form. Secondly, and conversely, since representations are never neutral, but always selective and shaped by beliefs, perspective or the medium itself, the object represented will never be the thing in “itself”. In this, the line becomes an indicator of Carson’s own development. When it first appeared in the poem “The Bomb Disposal” in *The New Estate* (where the city was peripheral or not yet realized as subject matter) it referred to changes in the city caused by the conflict: “its forbidden areas changing daily”. When it reappears in *Belfast Confetti* – after more than a decade of increased political turmoil, and, for Carson, poetic development – it speaks of a heightened concern with the unravelling of representation.

The Mother: “Brick”

“Brick” is about the city, and, its mutability. It begins thus: “Belfast 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; sleech, this indeterminate slobbery semi-fluid”.⁴²³ The piece complements “Farset”. If the river gives Belfast its name, the foundation which Belfast is built on and built of is “semi-fluid”.⁴²⁴ As in the earlier piece, the impermanent nature of the city is underscored by etymological inquiry. A series of associations takes us from “sleech” to “brick” to the phrase “Belfast confetti”. A further image is given in the childhood recollection of building towns and cities of clay; cities which, likewise, are impermanent. Commenting on the etymological inquiry into “brick”, Sean O’Brien is correct to point out that “it is hard to say from one moment to the next whether the object of study is a word or a place”.⁴²⁵ This idea is taken further by Hughes, who makes the important observation that “[t]he city itself is material as is made clear by Carson’s associative chain of ‘brick, break, brack’”, “[t]he city itself is a fabric”, “[t]his material quality makes the city textile and therefore, in Carson’s declension, text”.⁴²⁶

⁴²³ Part of this piece is reprised in the chapter “Brickle Bridge” in *The Star Factory*, 241f.

⁴²⁴ We might compare this image of the city with MacNeice’s “Valediction”: “See Belfast, devout and profane and hard, / Built on reclaimed mud, hammers playing in the shipyard”, in *The Collected Poems of Louis MacNeice*, 52.

⁴²⁵ O’Brien, 190.

⁴²⁶ Hughes, ” ‘the mouth of the poem’: Carson and Place”, 103.

It is noteworthy how the city's mutability and the city's materiality come together in the piece's portrayal of the mother. The account of the mother, engaging in creative and – textile – activity is, significantly, woven into the descriptions of the city's recycling of itself. In "Brick", the mother is seen "unravelling" which takes the activity, and the poetics associated with it, one step further. The grandmother's making of a patchwork quilt, an object or even a work of art, portrayed in "The Patchwork Quilt", is reconfigured in "Patchwork" as the mother's "darning, / Mending, stitching", unravelling, and recycling as an everyday necessity, and becomes in "Brick" an "incessant unravelling [...] as woollen jumpers became scarves and socks" which parallels the city's transformative character. As already discussed in the introduction to the prose pieces, "unravelling" denotes both Carson's recycling of text and his "unravelling" of the logic behind representation.

But the mother's presence in this piece is significant on other levels too. Much space in *Belfast Confetti* is given to father-figures: the poet-speaker's father (based on Carson's actual father) or literary forefathers. In fact, so central is the father-figure in *Belfast Confetti*, and subsequent collections, that the mother is, with only a few exceptions, left unmentioned in Carson criticism. When "Brick" is discussed, critics tend to focus on its linguistic play, its exploration into the meaning of the phrase "Belfast confetti", or the transformative nature of the city. Perhaps we only see the significance of the mother's "unravelling" if we take our starting-point in "The Patchwork Quilt", follow the theme through *The Irish for No* to *Belfast Confetti* and examine its gradual reconfiguration.

While the father is encountered again in *First Language* and *Opera Et Cetera*, the mother becomes an absence in Carson's poetry; she resurfaces only briefly in Carson's *The Star Factory*, his semi-autobiographical book which is also a narrative of the city. The poem "Patchwork", discussed in the previous chapter, intimated a separation from the mother as she, unsuccessfully, tried to stitch up the "[t]ear in my new white Sunday shirt", the speaker got as he climbed the mountain with his father. This might be taken to suggest that the mother's role has changed. Carson has reached the point where the poetics, associated with the mother, has been accommodated. It needs no longer be articulated and becomes henceforth an absent presence.

"Farset" and "Brick" yield comparison with (early) Heaney's aesthetics. As Kerrigan observes in his essay "Earth Writing: Seamus Heaney and Ciaran Carson", in "Brick" Carson shows us that "an urban poet can be as interested as a rural poet in *Grund*, because earth is what cities grow from".⁴²⁷ Their different conceptions of "earth", however, testify to differences between the two poets. Addressing Carson's etymological inquiries, Kerrigan finds "an anti-Heaneyesque edge; his mock etymological earnestness does not find meaning in a bog but discovers a swamp in philology."⁴²⁸ Moreover, in the essay "Feeling into Words",

⁴²⁷ Kerrigan, "Earth Writing", 158.

⁴²⁸ Kerrigan, "Earth Writing", 159.

Heaney described the bog as “the memory of the landscape, or as a landscape that remembered everything that happened in and to it”.⁴²⁹ In “Farset”, Carson claims that the river “remembers spindles, arms, the songs of mill-girls”, but in the following sentence, this is cancelled out, since Carson there restates his claim: “It remembers nothing”. Whereas Heaney, further, supports his idea by drawing attention to the fact that “if you go round the National Museum in Dublin, you will realize that a great proportion of the most cherished material heritage of Ireland was ‘found in a bog’”, Carson’s city, in “Farset” and “Brick”, shows us that things material are constantly being recycled and made into something else.⁴³⁰

The Father: “Intelligence”

In the final prose piece, “Intelligence”, Carson deals with sight or different kinds of seeing.⁴³¹ It comprises four separate but interrelated sections. The first one details various surveillance devices in the city: “We are all being watched”. Next follows a long quotation from Jeremy Bentham’s *Panopticon*, which most critics read as an equation of Carson’s Belfast, the “surveyed urban space”, and Bentham’s prison.⁴³² To Goodby it depicts “an ultimate nightmare; the city as a prison made totally transparent, and accessible, to power.”⁴³³ The third section centres on the 1986 reprint of the 1920s Ordnance plan of North Belfast but instead of offering a complete view, parts of the city – prisons – are invisible, withheld from view. These three sections are set against the fourth and concluding one, which portrays the father and poet-son on Black Mountain overlooking Belfast. Read as a series, this final “almost idyllic episode”, as Wolfgang Görtschacher aptly points out, “counteract[s]” the three preceding visions of Belfast as “prison and inferno”.⁴³⁴

It is of note that, in this piece on “seeing”, it is only in the fourth and final image, showing the father and son on the mountain, that the verb “to see” is used.

⁴²⁹ Heaney, *from* “Feeling into Words”, 22.

⁴³⁰ Heaney, *from* “Feeling into Words”, 22.

⁴³¹ The collection as a whole is concerned with “seeing”. “Loaf”: “We were staring out the window”. The haiku following “Loaf”: “nothing to be seen”. In “Snow” the speaker sees “a shadowed parlour just before the blinds are drawn”. “All the Better to See You With”, plays on seeing and in “Ambition”: “it’s time to look back. But smoke obscures the panorama”.

⁴³² Wolfgang Görtschacher, “The Reinvention of Belfast in the Poetry of Ciaran Carson”, in Klaus Martens, Paul Morris and Arlette Warken, eds., *A World of Local Voices: Poetry in English Today* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2003), 88.

⁴³³ Goodby, “Walking in the City”, 79.

⁴³⁴ Görtschacher, 88. Although to group this episode with the near-similar ones in “Ambition”, “Patchwork” and the Milltown Cemetery chapter of *The Star Factory*, as Görtschacher does, is to disregard the singularity of each poem/chapter, as they allow us to trace the relationship between father and son, the father’s role and the son’s gradual independence from the father.

However, seeing here is based on memory and personal knowledge not on actual seeing. The episode itself is recollected, seen “through the time-warp”. On the mountain, father and son “pretend to see” their house and: “I can nearly see”, “this house that we strain our eyes to see”.

In Goodby’s reading, the portrayal of father and son on the mountain suggests a “different remembering, and therefore remapping, through speculative local and family history”.⁴³⁵ This reading may be related to the title of the piece, “Intelligence”, which here denotes knowledge and information. Interestingly, despite the intense surveillance of the city and its citizens surveillance provides little knowledge for the information must be “decoded, coded back again and stored in bits and bytes”. In Belfast, everyone is watching everyone, but if “we are prisoners or officers in Bentham’s Panopticon”, “sorting out who’s who is a problem for the naïve user”. The map, containing “blank zones”, will fail to guide. The father, on the other hand, points to what is already familiar knowledge.

The image of the father and son on the mountain revisits “Patchwork” and given the meta-poetic dimension of the earlier poem, the scene, as it reappears here, seems significant. Similar to “Patchwork”, the father works as a guide, pointing out landmarks. But the father is here also given an additional role as storyteller. Towards the piece’s close, there is a movement from the mountain to their home: although still related from the speaker’s memory, he recalls how he would “squat by the fire [...] while my father tells me a story”

Given the piece’s preoccupation with sight and seeing one is inevitably reminded of the notion of “seeing what’s before your eyes”, that Carson put forward in his review of Heaney’s *North*, claiming there that Heaney’s mythic procedures distracted from the grim reality. In *Belfast Confetti*, Carson still strives towards his earlier ideal but he has also become aware of the difficulties in representing “what’s before your eyes”. Notably, where father and son, in “Patchwork”, were looking at the “map of Belfast”, Carson’s unravelling of representation in *Belfast Confetti* seems to have dissolved the map. What remains is the relation between father and son and storytelling.

⁴³⁵ Goodby, “Walking in the City”, 79.

Haiku as (Self-)Reflexive Commentary

Parts I and III of *Belfast Confetti* alternate long poems and versions of haiku. When in the 1989 interview with Brandes, Carson was asked what he aimed “to achieve structurally” with the haiku, he replied:

I meant them as stop-gaps between the long poems, a kind of punctuation. A space where you can reflect on what’s gone before and what might be coming next. And of course the 17 syllables of the haiku resemble the long line of the poems. They’re meant as an ironic commentary, something tongue-in-cheek, and the haiku is always tongue-in-cheek.⁴³⁶

On a structural level the combination of haiku and long poems parallels the juxtaposition of short poems and prose pieces in the central part of the collection; the interplay between the poems, however, differs. Here the long poems and the haiku are thematically refracted through each other. In this, Carson is partly gesturing back to the Japanese convention of incorporating haiku into prose narratives, as seen for instance in Bashō’s *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, where the haiku and the prose can be seen as “two mirrors held up facing each other”.⁴³⁷ I will return to this aspect of the haiku further on but first briefly address Carson’s idea or rather, aesthetic ideal, of the long line as resembling a haiku.

The interview with Brandes took place in August 1989. The idea of the long line as aspiring to a haiku – in length and precision – is something that Carson also articulates elsewhere around this time.⁴³⁸ Ciaran O’Neill brings our attention to letters to Corcoran, of May and October 1989, where Carson lists the haiku as one of the influences behind his long line, writing there that it is partly “based around *haiku*’s seventeen syllables, and the intention is to have a kind of *haiku* clarity within the line – stumbling-blocks of word-clusters, piling up adjectives, etc.”⁴³⁹ We see this again in Carson’s own critical writing. In his 1989 review of Williams, discussed at some length in the preceding chapter as it related to *The Irish for No*, the haiku is made a feature of Williams’ poetry. Commenting on Williams’ collection *Flesh and Blood*, published in the UK the preceding year, Carson finds that the “individual lines”, “in their nitty-grittiness and poise, make gestures towards haiku form, though they are slightly longer than the conventional 17 syllables – typically, about 25 syllables with eight or nine main stresses”. Here

⁴³⁶ Brandes, 88.

⁴³⁷ In his “Introduction” to his translation of Bashō’s *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, Yuasa writes that the book is regarded as one of the classics of Japanese literature, for being able to balance haiku and prose, 39.

⁴³⁸ It is articulated again in the 2002 interview with Brown, although there the immediate context is *Twelfth of Never*, in which haiku is incorporated and made part of a poem’s texture, John Brown, 145.

⁴³⁹ Ciaran O’Neill, 204. Other influences that Carson mentions in his letters are storytelling and Irish traditional music. Carson’s long line is discussed in Chapter 3 of this thesis.

Carson also suggests that if Williams in his poetry “is concerned with the revelations of the ordinary and mundane” his eight-line verse “might be thought of as extended *haiku*”.⁴⁴⁰

The interview, Carson’s letters to the critic Corcoran, and his own reading of Williams testify to Carson’s interest in and preoccupation with the haiku; they reveal his ambitions with the long line in *Belfast Confetti* – and with the benefit of hindsight, possibly *The Irish for No* – offering, at the same time, interpretive directions. Few critics, however, have pursued an analysis of Carson’s long line in relation to the haiku, and fewer still would probably have done so, had Carson not suggested a relationship in interviews and other writings. (Although, one might add, Carson makes the confluence most explicit in the poem “Yes”, which reproduces a haiku, not in the three line structure which is the convention in translation, but in Carson’s own long line.) Within Carson criticism, Ciaran O’Neill’s description of Carson’s long line as “[o]scillating between the modes of ‘storytelling’ and the Japanese *haiku*”, calling it “a marriage of traditions, almost” is paradigmatic as it acknowledges Carson’s own formulation while it does not press further to illustrate it.⁴⁴¹ What is perhaps more important for the discussion to follow is what Carson’s comments on the haiku and the long line reveal about his attitude to literary form: they show him both attentive to form, and what may be achieved by form, whilst allowing the poet to adapt or bend form to suit his own purposes.

The actual manifestations of haiku in *Belfast Confetti*, then, – the versions of Japanese originals included in parts I and III – have been given scant critical attention. Most critics are content to mention them as part of the collection’s design and structural arrangement. Furthermore, when the haiku are referenced, critics tend to pick up on Carson’s own description of them as “stop-gaps” or “punctuations” in-between the long poems but they rarely commit to a close reading of the poems. The two following examples are, in their different ways, telling. In his 1990 review of *Belfast Confetti*, Corcoran offers some general remarks, suggesting that the haiku “are there perhaps in something of the spirit of Derek Mahon’s poem ‘The Snow Party’, in which Basho attends to civility and *politesse* while ‘Elsewhere they are burning Witches and heretics / In the boiling squares.’” He continues: “Like Mahon, Carson is reminding us that there really is no ‘elsewhere’: the perfect sad poise of haiku, its white-surrounded, apparently history-free precision, may be longed for as transcendence, but is in fact complicit with a culture that is also capable of burning its heretics.”⁴⁴² Yet this brief sketch is more an illustration of a critic reading a poet through another poet’s work than it is a critical engagement with Carson’s haiku in *Belfast Confetti*. Furthermore, the “achieved serenity” that Mahon makes reference to in her brief commentary on

⁴⁴⁰ Carson, “Against Oblivion”, 114.

⁴⁴¹ Ciaran O’Neill, 204.

⁴⁴² Corcoran, “Past Imperfect”, 1184.

the poems seems more influenced by the idea of haiku than it explains Carson's versions.⁴⁴³

Critics, then, tend to fight shy of close engagement with Carson's versions of haiku, but one also notes a lack of understanding of them as poems. In his 1999 revised version of the essay "One Step Forward, Two Steps Back", Corcoran expresses the opinion that "*Belfast Confetti* goes on, perhaps a little too self-consciously, to use actual *haiku* form".⁴⁴⁴ On similar lines, Ciaran O'Neill remarks that "[f]or some readers however, the arrangement of *Belfast Confetti* may have the effect of overstatement; the evocation and prevalence of the *haiku* being otherwise underscored throughout in Carson's sustained use of the long poetic line."⁴⁴⁵

But the haiku are also curiously absent when Carson's translations are discussed. In his chapter on Carson in *Poetry and Translation in Northern Ireland*, published in 2009, which aims at a comprehensive reading of Carson's poetics in relation to his translational practice, Homem makes the claim that translation is "an integral part of [Carson's] output, and an enabling factor of his ethical and political positioning with regard to his time and place".⁴⁴⁶ Given that the haiku are versions of originals in another language, which are incorporated into one of Carson's collections of poetry, they would seem a prime example for Homem, but whilst *Belfast Confetti* is discussed, the haiku are only mentioned briefly.

Not only can the discussion of Carson's haiku in *Belfast Confetti* be refined, then, but a critical consideration of them contributes to our understanding of Carson's poetics. The haiku are texts twice recycled: They are versions of originals in another language which are appropriated and recontextualized and made an integral part, not only of the collection in which they appear, but of Carson's work. The fact that they appear in the *Collected Poems*, whereas the translations of Stefan Augustin Doinas included in the section "Alibi" in *Opera Et Cetera* and his translations of *The Alexandrine Plan* do not, attest to the fact that the haiku are an essential part of *Belfast Confetti* as well as Carson's poetic practice.

Carson's versions of haiku are based on originals ranging from Bashō in the seventeenth century to Shiki in the nineteenth century; the name of the original author is given below the poem. By Carson's own acknowledgements, his versions are "much indebted" to Harold G. Henderson's anthology *An Introduction to Haiku* (1958). Parts I and III include five haiku each which alternate with five long poems. Although the paratextual comment points us in the direction of the original author, the haiku are not structured in chronological order, i.e. by date of composition or first publication, and except for the three Buson poems, they are not organized by author.

Through the recurrence of imagery or thematics, Carson establishes links between his versions of haiku and his other poems. We see this, for example, in

⁴⁴³ Mahony, 81.

⁴⁴⁴ Corcoran, "One Step Forward, Two Steps Back" (1999), 181.

⁴⁴⁵ Ciaran O'Neill, 204.

⁴⁴⁶ Homem, 197.

part I where the first haiku, derived from Joso and telling of “Plains and mountains, skies / all up to their eyes in snow: / nothing to be seen.”, links up with the preceding “Loaf” and the following “Snow”. But the connections are not mere coincidence. They stem also from deliberate appropriation; the originals are manipulated in various degrees. To fully appreciate the haiku, therefore we must take into account that they are not (merely) “versions” strewn across the first and final part of *Belfast Confetti* but deliberate rewritings.

Continuing with Carson’s haiku introduced above, we see his efforts when comparing it to Henderson’s versions of Joso’s original. Henderson’s literal translation of the Japanese original reads: “Plains-too mountains-too snow-by have-been-taken everything is-not”. His verse translation reads: “Mountains and plains, / all are captured by the snow – / nothing remains.”⁴⁴⁷ Carson, in his version, turns the haiku into a poem about seeing or the lack thereof: “nothing to be seen”. In this, his version is made to connote the collection at large; the theme of perception and surveillance of *Belfast Confetti*. The haiku preceding the long poem “Ambition”, further, ends with a sense of loss and dislocation – “I know the wild geese / ate my barley – yesterday? / Today? Where did they go? – which is perhaps only latent in the original and Henderson’s translations – yet one which links thematically with “Ambition” where the speaker-son has become separated from his father and “can’t seem to find him”. However, in this case, we might have to allow for Carson’s own comments on the haiku as “tongue-in-cheek”. “Ironic commentary”, further, might be an apt description of the haiku preceding “Queen’s Gambit”. The haiku which reads – “To Lord Toba’s hall / five or six horsemen blow in: / storm-wind of the fall.” – compares and contrasts with the poem, telling of attacks and robberies carried out by criminals and paramilitary organizations.

“Borrowed armour”

“Borrowed armour” is a version of a haiku by Yosa Buson (1715–1783). It reads:

*I've just put on this
borrowed armour: second-hand
cold freezes my bones.*

Reading the poem against the translations given in Henderson, it becomes clear that Carson is not engaged in mere imitation or copying. Henderson’s literal translation runs: “Borrowed armor me-to get-fitted cold”, his verse translation: “Borrowed armor, old, / getting fitted to my body – / oh, it’s cold!”⁴⁴⁸ Comparing

⁴⁴⁷ Harold G. Henderson, *An Introduction to Haiku: An Anthology of Poems and Poets from Bashō to Shiki* (New York: Doubleday, 1958), 59.

⁴⁴⁸ Henderson, 106.

Carson's poem and Henderson's versions one notes how Carson recycles some parts, sometimes with variation, at the same time as he shifts the prototype around and introduces new elements. Carson reverses the order of information from object/action/effect into action/object/effect; shifts the verb from the passive ("me-to get-fitted", "getting fitted to my body") to the active ("I've just put on this"); rephrases Henderson's "old" into "second-hand" and likewise, "body" into "bones". Carson also employs the haiku convention of dividing the poem into two parts, where the parts are separated by a colon.

Furthermore, in rewriting and recontextualizing the haiku, Carson explores themes and meanings latent in the model, expands the poem's meaning potential and thereby, its frame of reference. Thus the aim of Carson's poem is not replication but rather, the earlier poem is used to create a new poem, a new whole, which becomes bound up with Carson's own work.

In the context of *Belfast Confetti*, "Borrowed armour" may be read as addressing the role of the poet. Taking into account Carson's way of recycling the earlier models, including his way of reference (the paratext Buson), the poem comes to read as a self-reflexive commentary on the process of translation and literary creation: the poet putting on "borrowed armour" in the act of writing. First, in shifting the verb from the passive to the active, Carson gives his speaker a more performative role in the poem: the speaker is the one putting on the armour, something which compares with the source in which the speaker is a receiver. Furthermore, the acknowledgement to Buson can be said to interact with the theme of the poem: the fact that Carson gives Buson's name below the poem may be read as intimating the theme of "borrowing"; Carson does not claim the poem as his own. It may further be noted that the haiku is given in italics (as are all the haiku): this differs from the layout of the poems in the collection as a whole but links up with the quotations that are incorporated into poems and prose pieces. The italics may be merely graphical but, tentatively, it may be interpreted as an index of another "voice", either in the sense that Carson speaks through another writer (Buson) or that Carson himself speaks in another voice. If so, Carson can be said to hint at some kind of co-authoring. In a most concrete sense, of course, the poem itself, it may be argued, is for the poet, "borrowed armour".

On a most immediate level, "Borrowed armour" asks to be read in relation to other poems in the third part of the collection. On a thematic level, it anticipates the poem "Bed-Time Story". Establishing an analogy between the poet-son and postman-father, in which the poet-son is seen to put on the father's postman uniform, "Bed-Time Story" reads as a variant on the theme of "borrowed armour".

Father-Figures

Father-figures appear throughout *Belfast Confetti*, a collection dedicated to Carson's father. In poems based on Carson's actual father, the figure focuses on the poet's relation to tradition and intimates what he learns from his storytelling postman-father.⁴⁴⁹ There are precedents for the figure: The father features in "Twine" of *The Lost Explorer*, "Post" of *The New Estate and Other Poems* and "Patchwork" of *The Irish for No*. In *Belfast Confetti*, the poem "Ambition" and the prose piece "Intelligence" resituate the father and poet-son on Black Mountain, a scene first given in "Patchwork".

Reading "Ambition" against "Patchwork", the poem stages the son's gradual independence from the father. Here, the father is no longer the guide who "pointed out the landmarks" to his son in "Patchwork", which is to suggest that by this time the poet has found his subject, Belfast. Neither is the speaker the child who climbed the mountain with his father and then shared the (father's) view of Belfast. For while the earlier poem emphasized the shared moment between father and son ("we climbed", "we could see"), the opening of "Ambition" imagines the son on his own. The poem begins with "Now *I've climbed* this far, it's time to look back." (my italics) and a few lines further on we read that "my father's wandered off somewhere. I can't seem to find him." This does not mean, however, that the father is absent in the poem. The poem recounts the father's biography, his "ambition", the speaker paraphrases or quotes the father and the narrative is sometimes interrupted by the father's voice.

As pointed out in the previous chapter when "Patchwork" was discussed, Edna Longley finds that "Ambition" "follows in the footsteps" of Heaney's "Follower".⁴⁵⁰ Heaney's poem, to reiterate, forms part of a group of poems which "dwell[s] on the responsibility of 'following', and being followed by, earlier generations".⁴⁵¹ By using Heaney's poem as a foil, a reading of "Ambition" gains in perspective: "Ambition" can be seen to dramatize the state in-between "following" and "being followed by" at the same time as it downplays the idea of following. The ending of "Ambition" can, on a first reading, be seen to mimic "Follower": First, the son "found him [the father] yesterday a hundred yards ahead of me" and then, the son "closed in on him [...] He stopped and turned, / Made two steps back towards me, and I took one step forward." However, returning to the beginning of the poem, we are reminded that the father has "wandered off somewhere" and therefore, the son has, strictly speaking, not been "following" his father; having first lost and then found each other on the mountain, the father is only accidentally "ahead" and the son behind. Moreover, the shifting positions of father and son, of closing in, stopping and turning and finally, taking "two steps

⁴⁴⁹ Edna Longley writes that "[f]athers in Northern Irish literature calibrate tradition and transition, small shifts in the land of 'Not an Inch'", "'When Did You Last See Your Father?'" 154.

⁴⁵⁰ Edna Longley, "Introduction: Revising 'Irish Literature'", 65.

⁴⁵¹ Edna Longley, "'When Did You Last See Your Father?'" 158.

back” and “one step forward” are not straightforward in that they could equally mean that father and son meet, or that the son surpasses the father.⁴⁵²

There are elements in the poem that suggest that it is a gradual independence from the father that is being depicted here; to borrow from the poem’s epigraph, it is not about “ultimate escape” but “one step at a time”. For even though the son has “climbed this far” on his own he still cannot see Belfast clearly, since “smoke obscures / The panorama from the Mountain Loney spring”. Seemingly, not even a drink from the spring can clear his view since we read, in the next line, “*but* my father’s wandered off somewhere.” (my italics)⁴⁵³ Therefore, even though the father has fulfilled the role given to him in “Patchwork”, the son still seeks direction. The son is, somehow, poised in-between. In his own words, he is “the temporary man”, “this casual preserve”, “practising my signature”, he is “starting, now, / To know the street map with my feet, just like my father.”

The prose piece “Intelligence” parallels the episode described in “Patchwork” but also takes it one stage further: Having climbed the mountain, the father sits smoking, pointing out Belfast localities to his son. There is, at the same time an important contrast: here the father also functions as storyteller. Furthermore, the father and son, looking at Belfast, and the father telling a story, have a much deeper significance in this poem. For recontextualized in “Intelligence”, the scene comes after a series of descriptions of state and government surveillance: a catalogue of various surveillance devices and an account of Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon. As Görtschacher, quoted earlier, points out, father and son looking at Belfast “counteract”⁴⁵⁴ the state-controlled “intelligence”. And Goodby sees here a “different remembering, and therefore remapping, through speculative local and family history”.⁴⁵⁵

In the poem “Bed-Time Story” in the third part of *Belfast Confetti*, the father as storyteller and postman coalesce and “walking” acquires a further symbolic value. It may be that the poet must first tread the ground where others have walked before, and in this later poem it is dramatized in that the poet-son puts on his father’s shoes. But “Bed-Time Story” is also about the poet-speaker trying on the father’s communicative skills. Significantly, as the father has fallen asleep (is

⁴⁵² “Ambition” may be further compared with the father-figure as imagined by Muldoon. Edna Longley writes: “Throughout Muldoon’s poetry the father is a persistent metaphysical shadow. Behind, rather than both behind and in front like Heaney’s father-figure, he represents ‘what is ... immediately over my shoulder.’” “When Did You Last See Your Father?”, 169.

⁴⁵³ The poem’s reference to a spring strengthens the mountain’s relation to classical mythology. Helicon with its two fountains Aganippe and Hippocrene, is “believed to inspire those who drank from them” and Parnassus, “the whole mountain, as well as the spring, was sacred, associated with the worship of Apollo and the Muses.” *The Oxford Companion to Classical Literature*, s.v. *Helicon* and *Parnassus*.

⁴⁵⁴ Görtschacher. 88.

⁴⁵⁵ Goodby. “Walking in the City”, 79.

passive), the son is (as in “Borrowed armour”) active: “I step into the shoes again, and walk. I will deliver / Letters, cards, important gifts.”

“Snow”

“Snow” rewrites Louis MacNeice’s 1935 poem of the same title. In MacNeice’s own words, the poem, which “has often puzzled people”, is “the direct record of a direct experience, the realization of a very obvious fact, that one thing is different from another”.⁴⁵⁶ In the poem, “world” (without the article) is famously described as “[i]ncorrigibly plural”.⁴⁵⁷ This realization is brought to the speaker through visual and sensory experience and is symbolically conveyed through objects and natural phenomena that are at once everyday and within poetry, conventionalized: snow, roses and a window, and, a tangerine, the latter lending the sensation of “[t]he drunkenness of things being various”. On the level of form, the poem attempts to reproduce the world’s complexity by departing from traditional form, breaking with patterns established in the poem or by de-familiarizing language. MacNeice’s “Snow”, therefore, is also, as is well-known, “about” how we perceive or conceptualize the world in and through form and language.

As Edna Longley shows in her essay “The Room Where MacNeice Wrote ‘Snow’”, MacNeice has proved influential on the works of his Northern Irish successors. Clark continues this argument. In a reading partly suggested by Harold Bloom’s “anxiety of influence”, Clark claims that Heaney, Mahon and Longley, “collectively establishing MacNeice as the doyen of Northern poetry, by promoting a selective canon, and by ‘rewriting’ many of his ideological and philosophical concerns in their own work [...] have placed him at the beginning of a line of an inheritance which is, by right, theirs”.⁴⁵⁸

Carson is not the first Northern poet to undertake a rewriting of MacNeice’s canonical poem on “flux and pattern”, “life’s disjunctions to poetic conjunction”.⁴⁵⁹ Precedents are Mahon’s 1964 poem “In Carrowdore Churchyard” and Muldoon’s “History” of 1980. The three rewritings of “Snow” are discussed by Edna Longley in her essay, the essay providing thus a framework for comparing the three poets’ interest in MacNeice, although she devotes more space to Mahon and Muldoon than to Carson’s poem. In Longley’s reading, Muldoon “invokes ‘Snow’ less as written text than as creative act or touchstone or stay against confusion”.⁴⁶⁰ To her, Mahon’s and Muldoon’s rewritings “show Mahon as more preoccupied with poetry’s ‘formalising activity’, and Muldoon with its cognitive

⁴⁵⁶ Louis MacNeice, *Selected Literary Criticism of Louis MacNeice*, ed. Alan Heuser (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987), 162.

⁴⁵⁷ MacNeice, “Snow”, in *The Collected Poems of Louis MacNeice*, 30.

⁴⁵⁸ Heather Clark, “Revising MacNeice”, *The Cambridge Quarterly* 31.1 (2002), 80f.

⁴⁵⁹ Edna Longley, “The Room Where MacNeice Wrote ‘Snow’”, in *The Living Stream*, 254 and 259.

⁴⁶⁰ Longley, “The Room Where MacNeice Wrote ‘Snow’”, 260.

activity: with knowing and saying rather than with shape and image.”⁴⁶¹ Turning to Carson, Longley finds that MacNeice, in some respects, can be said to provide Carson with an example. Both of them, for instance, shy away from “linguistic hierarchies”.⁴⁶² Still Longley reads in Carson’s “Snow” a critique of its predecessor. Carson’s poem, she finds, “plays on the historical distance, the ‘glass’, between the progressive 1930s and the Northern Irish war, quotes key-words from ‘Snow’ in ironic contexts (‘incorrigible stop’), and translates roses and snow into blood and death. Disjunction, incompatibility, prevails [...] But if the celebratory shine goes off ‘Snow’ [...] Carson’s poem remains within the darker orbit of its ambiguity”.⁴⁶³ In a later essay, Longley restates her reading, finding that Carson “updates the snow and roses into disturbing images of violent death”.⁴⁶⁴

Longley’s reading is partly corroborated by Carson’s own reflections on the poem. In an interview, conducted shortly after *Belfast Confetti* was published, Carson explained that “Snow” “is, in part, a send-up of MacNeice’s poem ... maybe I was trying to suggest that his beautiful ambiguities could be placed in a more biographical, ordinary context, just as the bits of Keats in ‘The Irish for No’ are exploring how the romantic agony fits into a context of brutality and political violence.”⁴⁶⁵

And Carson’s “Snow” evokes, on the one hand, a more “ordinary context”. It charts commonplace, perhaps even trivial, events: The first stanza centres on a ping-pong ball, the second stanza relates the speaker’s visit to the bank and Ross’s auction, in the third and final stanza, the speaker explores the second-hand sofa bought at the auction and the ping-pong ball recovered from its “dark recesses”. The ping-pong ball in fact, this mundane object, becomes the poem’s dominant image. This compares with MacNeice’s “Snow” which, although its main imagery and images may be domestic, takes the world’s complexity as its explicit subject matter, repeating the word “world” throughout the poem’s three stanzas, which is why it might read as making grander, more existential and ontological, claims than Carson’s “Snow”.

Yet at the same time as Carson’s rewriting of “Snow” is perhaps a little tongue-in-cheek he is also in earnest about his subject-matter. There is a deeper meaning to Carson’s poem than first meets the eye and which lies within the contrast between MacNeice’s poem, which opens with “[t]he room was suddenly rich”, and the emptiness, the acute sense of having “nothing” felt by Carson’s speaker.

Carson’s “Snow” opens with “[a] white dot flicked back and forth across the bay window: not / A table-tennis ball, but ‘ping-pong’, since this is happening in another era”. This ping-pong ball “bounces” through Carson’s poem, where it is

⁴⁶¹ Longley, “The Room Where MacNeice Wrote ‘Snow’”, 260.

⁴⁶² Longley, “The Room Where MacNeice Wrote ‘Snow’”, 263.

⁴⁶³ Longley, “The Room Where MacNeice Wrote ‘Snow’”, 263.

⁴⁶⁴ Edna Longley, “Out of Ulster I: Louis MacNeice and His Influence”, in *Irish Poetry since Kavanagh*, 52.

⁴⁶⁵ Ormsby, 6.

set to perform similar functions to MacNeice's snow, roses and tangerine and in the final stanza, lends the speaker with a visionary experience. It is tempting to see the "ping-pong ball" as a veiled and playful reference to MacNeice's critical writing. As Longley reminds us in her essay, MacNeice "compared syntax in poetry to squash rather than tennis, saluting Frost as 'a master of angles'".⁴⁶⁶ My concern here is not with the syntactic level but the sports metaphor is not beside the point when approaching Carson's "Snow". In interview with Brown, having first been asked to comment on MacNeice's influence on his writing, Carson says that "[s]port is a great model for writing. It can't exist without rules. You need the rules to create wit, skill, humour, irony, play. You play with the rules, and within the rules; sometimes even against the rules. You play your own game".⁴⁶⁷ In "Snow", Carson engages with MacNeice's poem, not only on the conceptual level, but as text. His poem carries the same title as its predecessor, imagery (the window) and images (snow, roses) recur and as Longley, referenced earlier, noted key-words from MacNeice's poem appear in "ironic contexts",⁴⁶⁸ are misquoted or inverted. Carson maintains the tripartite structure, although his stanzas are considerably longer, and he makes consistent use of the long line. Within the context of Carson's "Snow", it does not seem amiss to see his rewriting as "a game"; Carson playing "with the rules, and within the rules; sometimes even against the rules", set up by MacNeice's poem.

Like MacNeice, Carson opens his poem with "the bay window". But whereas MacNeice's "great bay-window", as is well-known, both joins and separates the snow and roses, "[s]pawning snow and pink roses against it", outside and inside, the window in Carson's poem is mere background/foreground against which or through which his speaker sees the "white dot" that "flicked back and forth across" it. In MacNeice, further, the window is the vehicle that brings to the speaker, upon seeing the roses and the snow, the sensation of "[w]orld is suddener than we fancy it". In fact, what MacNeice's poem strives to mimic here, according to MacNeice himself, is "the direct record of a direct experience, the realization of a very obvious fact, that one thing is different from another – a fact which everyone knows but few people perhaps have had it brought home to them in this particular way, i.e. through the sudden violent perception of snow and roses juxtaposed".⁴⁶⁹ In Carson, on the other hand, the window retreats into the background and the focus is instead on the ping-pong ball. Where MacNeice's poem juxtaposes two objects, the snow and roses, so as to call attention to their difference, Carson centres on one. Yet he is able to achieve difference through naming, saying what the "white dot" is "not", i.e. a "table-tennis ball" because of the temporal setting of his poem. This, however, generates a further contrast between MacNeice and Carson: MacNeice's speaker is concerned with different objects whereas Carson is concerned with the names of objects.

⁴⁶⁶ Longley, "The Room Where MacNeice Wrote 'Snow'", 262.

⁴⁶⁷ John Brown, 149.

⁴⁶⁸ Longley, "The Room Where MacNeice Wrote 'Snow'", 263.

⁴⁶⁹ MacNeice, *Selected Literary Criticism of Louis MacNeice*, 162.

The ping-pong ball appears in a multitude of roles. Importantly, its function in the poem is not permanent. As it “bounces off into a corner and ticks to an incorrigible stop”, it comes to represent both movement and stasis; a stasis that is perhaps felt more acutely when set against MacNeice’s world, described as “incorrigibly plural”, and when considering the fact that its “stop”, seemingly ends all activity related in the first lines. It is only “days later” that the speaker picks it up to examine it. The sensation in MacNeice’s first stanza is sudden, in Carson’s poem there is instead a delayed (re)action.

At the same time as the ping-pong ball replaces the snow and roses in MacNeice’s first stanza, it also holds the position of the “tangerine” in MacNeice’s second stanza. In the latter, MacNeice has the speaker “peel and portion / A tangerine and spit the pips and feel / The drunkenness of things being various.” Carson’s ping-pong ball, becomes its antithesis or negative other. Here: “I broke open the husk so many times / And always found it empty; the pith was a wordless bubble.” Whatever Carson’s speaker is searching for, his examination of the ping-pong ball (which is a continuous, repeated activity) fails to yield insight or knowledge; it does not allow him to grasp the complexities of life. It is of note, in this context, that when the ping-pong ball is introduced into the poem, it is with a negation, the speaker saying what the “white dot” is “not” (a table-tennis ball). Similarly, when trying to describe its “pallor”, the speaker feels that “it’s neither ivory / Nor milk”. A sense of emptiness and absence, then, hovers in the first stanza and is continued into the second.

The second stanza transplants or relocates MacNeice’s window/glass into the interior of a bank: “Her face was snow and roses just behind / The bullet-proof glass”. Most immediately, this rewrites the concluding line of MacNeice’s poem, where his speaker reaches the conclusion that: “There is more than glass between the snow and the huge roses.” In Edna Longley’s words, the “between” in MacNeice’s line “is famously ambiguous in opening up distance, yet perhaps retaining closeness”.⁴⁷⁰ In Carson’s poem, however, the glass denies any contact between the speaker/subject and the bank-clerk/object: “I couldn’t touch her if I tried.” If in MacNeice, the snow and roses help bring out the realization of the world’s suddenness, they are here used metaphorically to describe the bank-clerk’s physical appearance.

In this second stanza, the ping-pong ball is a present absence. The first two lines read: “Though there’s nothing in the thing itself, bits of it come back unbidden, / Playing in the archaic dusk till the white blip became invisible.” The game itself, seemingly, takes over as a frame of reference as the sight of the “rubber thimble” of the bank-clerk makes the speaker *feel* (italics mine) “the tacky pimples of a ping-pong bat”. The game prefigures and creates a framework which gives resonance to the monetary transactions and the bidding at the auction that take place in this stanza: of having and not having, as seen in that the speaker gets “my money” but also “the chit” telling him “what you haven’t got”. At Ross’s

⁴⁷⁰ Longley, “The Room Where MacNeice Wrote ‘Snow’”, 258.

auction, where the speaker goes next, to make his bid for “this Thirties scuffed leather sofa”, there are “[g]estures, prices: soundlessly collateral in the murmuring room.”⁴⁷¹

The third stanza starts with “nothing”, but as the speaker recovers from the sofa “all the haberdashery of loss – cuff buttons, / Broken ball-point pens and fluff, old pennies, pins and needles, and yes, / A ping-pong ball”, he becomes, it appears, to borrow from MacNeice, “suddenly rich”, experiencing the “various”. In this stanza, which deploys religious imagery (knelling, rosary) and verges on the sacred, a realization of sorts is brought out, the poem collapsing the image of the window and the ping-pong ball. Retrieving from the sofa a “ping-pong ball”, the speaker “cupped it in my hands like a crystal, seeing not / The future, but a shadowed parlour just before the blinds are drawn.” The image recalls MacNeice’s “On the tongue on the eyes on the ears in the palms of one’s hands”, the penultimate line in his “Snow”, but the speaker, trying to hold experience in his hands is a recurring image in MacNeice’s early poetry. In “The Brandy Glass”: “Only let it form within his hands once more – / The moment, cradled like a brandy glass.” In “Train to Dublin”: “I cannot hold / This stuff within my hands and the train goes on.”⁴⁷² In MacNeice, the hand, of course, mimics form.

The ping-pong ball, “like a crystal”, becomes a window/glass that offers a view. If the ball, in the first stanza, was “empty”, its “pith was a wordless bubble”, Carson’s speaker now sees: “not / The future, but a shadowed parlour just before the blinds are drawn. Someone has put up two trestles. Handshakes all round, nods and whispers. / Roses are brought in, and suddenly, white confetti seethes against the window.” The last line collapses the first and final lines of MacNeice’s poem. Given that the sight of the roses, snow and the window is conjured by Carson’s speaker it does not seem amiss to see these as purely textual. What the speaker sees in the ping-pong ball, recovered from the second-hand 1930s sofa, is the window in the earlier poem. By extension, what Carson’s speaker holds in his hands is MacNeice’s earlier poem.

It is of note that whereas MacNeice opens with a sudden experience, it is not until this vision at the end of the poem that a direct impulse or response is registered in Carson’s speaker. This impulse is underscored by a shift of tense, the last line being related in the present tense, as if taking place in the narrative present.

There is a circularity in MacNeice’s poem; the final image returns to the first, although the realization is extended. Carson’s poem does not return to “the bay window” in the opening line, but stretches back in time, to a recovered past, and the window is not concrete but one imagined or textual.

⁴⁷¹ Cf. “Ambition” which features a game of tennis. There the commentator borrows metaphors from war to describe the game, as in “[s]omeone is *fighting a losing battle*”.

⁴⁷² MacNeice, “The Brandy Glass” and “Train to Dublin”, in *The Collected Poems of Louis MacNeice*, 84 and 27.

In “The Irish for No”, lines from Keats were incorporated into the poem’s texture. “Snow”, on the other hand, is an extended engagement with a prior text where the prototype works as a “constraint”.⁴⁷³ A term which springs to mind in this context is “appropriation” for, importantly, whilst Carson’s speaker might be said to hold MacNeice’s earlier poem in his hands, what he sees is his own reading or interpretation of the poem. Furthermore, Carson replaces MacNeice’s famous “snow” with an image which is firmly based in his own work: “confetti”. In this, “Snow” mirrors the haiku and anticipates the extended versions in *First Language*.

“Hamlet”

Belfast Confetti concludes with the poem “Hamlet”. The title of the poem evokes Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. One might even propose that the title sets up a contract between text and reader (Genette following Lejeune),⁴⁷⁴ foregrounding *Hamlet* as the extended intertext or in Genette’s terminology, hypotext, of the poem.⁴⁷⁵ The relation between Carson’s poem and Shakespeare’s play is strengthened by quotations, given in italics so as to direct the reader to an intertext but, simultaneously, nested within the narrative. One detects further a certain thematic overlap and allusions to the play (most notably, the ghost). Carson has, in interview, offered some details for his use of *Hamlet*. To him *Hamlet* “is a political play about a rotten state of Denmark that resembles our own state; and it’s a play about fathers and sons and the ghosts they have to exorcise; it’s a discussion of the morality of violence and terrorism”.⁴⁷⁶ Certainly, *Hamlet* and “Hamlet” converge on these matters. Yet despite the links posited by Carson himself – between the fictionalized past and the internecine war in Northern Ireland, between the play and his own thematic preoccupations – it would be misleading to take his comments as an invitation to see *Hamlet* as a meta-narrative, by which contemporary violence might be explained or understood. Carson’s engagement with *Hamlet* is far more complex than that. To the extent that Carson is concerned with the “*strange eruption to our state*” (italics in original, “Hamlet” quoting *Hamlet*), his main preoccupation is with its telling.

“Hamlet” both compares and contrasts with “The Irish for No”, a poem in which Carson also makes use of a Shakespeare tragedy as intertext and which was discussed at some length in the preceding chapter. If in the earlier poem, the

⁴⁷³ In interview with Malmqvist, Carson explains how poetic forms or precursor texts can work as a “constraint”, against which new poems can be created, 17, 20.

⁴⁷⁴ Genette, *Palimpsests*, 3. Genette writes in a footnote: “The term *pact* is evidently somewhat optimistic with regard to the role of the reader, who has signed nothing and must either take it or leave it. But the generic or other markings *commit* the author, who, under penalty of being misunderstood, respects them more frequently than one might expect”, 430.

⁴⁷⁵ Genette, *Palimpsests*, 5.

⁴⁷⁶ Ormsby, 6.

window scene of the quarrelling couple evoked *Romeo and Juliet* to the speaker, this was a comparison – and intertext – which was soon modified or, depending on our interpretation, disqualified. “Hamlet”, on the other hand, is more affirmative of its prototype than is “The Irish for No”, and self-consciously prods the reader into considering *Hamlet* as intertext: Sometimes overtly, sometimes obliquely, *Hamlet* is present throughout the poem. It is precisely in its affinities with but departures from the play that the aesthetic, historical and ethical gestures of the poem are made apparent.

The difference between the use of the two Shakespearean plays as intertexts in “The Irish for No” and “Hamlet” might be sought in Carson’s conception of representation, as this is in evidence in *The Irish for No* and *Belfast Confetti*, respectively. In “The Irish for No”, in a passage that works self-reflexively, *Romeo and Juliet* is tested as a plausible narrative for the events witnessed by the speaker. In this poem, the intertext is coupled with the notion of “seeing what’s before your eyes” and the question: “what is an adequate description of reality?”; a question that in turn assumes the belief that there might indeed be one.⁴⁷⁷ In *Belfast Confetti*, the notion of “visual honesty” has been rendered problematic (as seen in “Intelligence”, discussed earlier in this chapter) and Carson’s unravelling of representation itself has revealed the liabilities of representation.⁴⁷⁸ These ideas both inform and are articulated further in “Hamlet”. If *Belfast Confetti* as a whole attests to an increased sensibility towards rewriting this is no longer fed by a search for an adequate expression. By the time the collection is complete, Carson’s interest shifts to an increased engagement with form; this is brought prominently to the fore in “Hamlet”.

If we take as our first premise the idea – suggested by Carson himself in the interview quoted earlier – that *Hamlet* “is a political play about a rotten state of Denmark that resembles our own state”, “Hamlet” nevertheless constructs the politics differently from the play. In *Hamlet*, the ghost’s apparition to Horatio in the first scene prompts the latter – by way of exposition – to exclaim that “[t]his bodes some strange eruption to our state”.⁴⁷⁹ The ghost telling prince Hamlet of the king’s murder, urging the son to “revenge” and “remember me” become the impetus for the action of the play.⁴⁸⁰ It is the cause of the conflict within Hamlet (to trust the ghost’s telling or not, to act or not) and between Hamlet and the other characters. It leads in the end only to more deaths in the court of Elsinore. Embedded within the main action is the play-within-the-play: staged, not for

⁴⁷⁷ Carson, “Escaped from the Massacre?”, 186.

⁴⁷⁸ Carson, “Escaped from the Massacre?”, 185.

⁴⁷⁹ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, act I, scene i, in ed. Susanne L. Wofford, *Case Studies in Contemporary Criticism* (Boston and New York: Bedford/St Martin’s, 1994), 69. In this section, all quotations from *Hamlet* are from this edition.

⁴⁸⁰ The ghost says to *Hamlet*: “So art thou to revenge, when thou shalt hear.” Act I, scene v, l. 8. “Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder.” Act I, scene v, l. 25. “Adieu, adieu, adieu! remember me”, act I, scene v, l. 91.

aesthetic but, political purposes, the play not only dramatizes the murder, but is what propels Hamlet into action and revenge.⁴⁸¹ Thus taking political disorder as our main theme, the violent events of *Hamlet* might be easily fitted into a schema of cause-and-effect or the traditional structure of the drama.⁴⁸²

In Carson's "Hamlet", past and present violence is omnipresent. War imagery is deployed and this poem also tells of a murder, related only four lines into the poem. It opens thus:

As usual, the clock in The Clock Bar was a good few minutes fast:
A fiction no one really bothered to maintain, unlike the story
The comrade on my left was telling, which no one knew for certain truth:
Back in 1922, a sergeant, I forget his name, was shot outside the National Bank . . .

In important contrast with Shakespeare's play, however, the poem is not driven by the murder. Differently put, it is not the murder – and by extension violence, death and revenge – which moves "Hamlet" forward. For just as the sergeant who was shot outside the National Bank in 1922, we learn a few lines further on, "doesn't really feature in the story", past and present violence, in Northern Ireland or elsewhere, is a constant but not what is taken to be resolved or explained. This means, to begin with, that tragic and violent events of Irish history, referenced in the poem, are not structured according to a logical or dramatic pattern which promises, in the end, a resolution. 1922 and 1969, critical years in Irish history, are given along with armoured figures, bombs, no-go zones and demolished streets – a Belfast reality since there are indeed those who cling to and act on bids to "remember". Yet, following McDonald's general discussion of violence in Carson's poetry, what we are given in the poem are historical and political details, not a coherent narrative where one event leads to another.⁴⁸³ In other words, the poem does not structure the events of Irish past and present within a dramatic pattern of cohesion. It refrains, thereby, from interpreting, from making sense in a logical way. This might be set in relation to the fact that the references to 1922 and 1969 are slightly off-centre: 1922 saw the outbreak of the Irish Civil War but the year appears here as a temporal marker for when the sergeant was shot, and whose murder is only the prelude to the main story. And whereas the events of 1969 in ways (according to one view of history) follow on the events of 1922 the year 69 is, in the text, put forward with the slightly mischievous image of "two dogs meeting in the revolutionary 69 of a long sniff". It is rather the reader of the poem, with his

⁴⁸¹ In this *Hamlet* gives an eerie resonance to W. B. Yeats's reflections in his 1938 poem "Man and the Echo": "Did that play of mine send out / Certain men the English shot? / Did words of mine put too great strain / On that woman's reeling brain? / Could my spoken words have checked / That whereby a house lay wrecked?" W. B. Yeats, *The Poems*, ed. Daniel Albright (London: Everyman, 1990).

⁴⁸² The traditional five act drama is structured accordingly: exposition, complication/rising action, climax, falling action, and denouement/resolution.

⁴⁸³ See McDonald, 62f.

or her knowledge of Irish history, who makes the connections, who construes a coherent narrative from the details. In this respect, “Hamlet” exemplifies and makes poignant Alexander’s claim that Carson “implicate[s] 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’”, a claim which I can only second.⁴⁸⁴

This means that *if* “the clock” running fast in the opening line of the poem bears any relation to Hamlet’s realization that “time is out of joint – O cursed spite, / That ever I was born to set it right!”, Carson does not purport to be able to set time right.⁴⁸⁵ In “Hamlet”, Carson shifts the focus from the historical and political realm to the complexities of representation. The clock – this quotidian object – is an important case in point. Hamlet’s metaphorical, yet ontological, claim about the world’s order and state of affairs in Denmark – concentrated in “time is out of joint” – is here reconfigured as an extant clock running fast. Tellingly, the clock measures and represents time, but is not time *per se*. To put it differently, it is not “time” which “is out of joint” in Carson’s poem, but its representation. The clock is by extension a flawed representation of reality. It denotes in the poem not political turmoil but the discrepancy between reality (“real time”) and representation (a clock running fast), between reality and lived reality.

Whereas the clock running fast is “[a] fiction no one really bothered to maintain”, the story of the sergeant who was shot, however, is by this logic, important to “maintain”. Yet in the next few lines we learn that the “nub” of the comrade’s story is in fact not the sergeant but “[*A*]his tin can” (italics in original) which since the night of the murder has been heard “trundling down” (italics in original) the streets on nights of civil unrest and disorder. On this matter, the comrade’s story in the *diegesis* and Carson’s poem converge, for although violence is registered and felt throughout the poem, the primary concern lies with this mundane object, the tin can. This tin can, paralleling the ghost in *Hamlet*, is set to work on two levels in the text: as *the story* of the tin-can ghost and as the tin can itself.

The *story* of the tin-can ghost in Carson’s poem partially inverts the *story* of the ghost in Shakespeare’s play. To begin with, Carson’s inversion of the first scene of the play – with its notions of “seeing”, “believing” and “imagining” – is suggestive. In the opening of the play, the ghost of the late King Hamlet appears to the two officers Marcellus and Barnardo and Prince Hamlet’s friend Horatio. The ghost’s apparition in this scene, however, is preceded by the verbal account of its two earlier appearances, i.e. in the play the ghost exists first as a “story” which is only

⁴⁸⁴ Alexander, 7. A similar claim is made by McDonald. Writing on “Campaign” of *The Irish for No* and “All Souls” of *First Language*, McDonald says that “narrative coherence belongs to the questioners who translate ‘Who?’ into ‘What?’, rather than to the poetic voice, which clings to particulars of memory and experience, however unpalatable or disconcerting these may be”, 63. For a more recent observation on this aspect, see Kennedy-Andrews’ chapter “In Belfast” in the recently published *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish Poetry*.

⁴⁸⁵ *Hamlet*, act I, scene v, ll. 188–190.

later empirically, and visually, corroborated. For two preceding nights, it is said, the ghost has appeared to Marcellus and Barnardo whilst attending to their nightly guard (watch) of the castle. On the night with which the play opens, Horatio has come to see the ghost for himself, so as to witness and verify what the guards claim to have seen, not trusting their “story”.⁴⁸⁶ As Marcellus says: “Horatio says ’tis but our fantasy, / And will not let belief take hold of him / Touching this dreaded sight twice seen of us; / Therefore I have entreated him along, / With us to watch the minutes of this night, / That if again this apparition come, / He may approve our eyes and speak to it.”⁴⁸⁷ For our discussion, two things are of particular note: Firstly, belief is based on seeing and personal experience. We see this again when Horatio, upon seeing the ghost for himself, exclaims: “Before my God, I might not this believe / Without the sensible and true avouch / Of mine own eyes.”⁴⁸⁸ Secondly, as Horatio sees the ghost for himself he both confirms its existence (the ghost becomes extant) and bears witness to the guards’ story, whereby the story ceases to be “but our fantasy”.

In “Hamlet”, truth-claims seem, unlike in *Hamlet*, uncalled-for. The story of the tin-can ghost is a story related by “[t]he comrade on my left” (the comrade performing Barnardo’s role) “which no one knew for certain truth”. The general tenor of the poem is that the story’s significance lies not with its empirical accuracy. It is a “fiction” in which the comrade and the speaker seem willing to engage. In contrast to Shakespeare’s ghost, the tin can has never been seen, for whilst “*thousands heard*” “*no one ever / Saw*” (italics in original). And as the poem progresses, we learn that the ghost has disappeared along with the demolition of the streets and it exists now only in memory, as a story. In this context, reference can be made to a similar episode in the earlier “Schoolboys and Idlers of Pompeii” where a group of Irish immigrants in Australia entertain each other with different versions and interpretations of the tin can. Functioning as a local myth, the story matters to the immigrants because it is a story of home and it becomes thus a vehicle for their memory work. Given the situational similarities between “Hamlet” and “Schoolboys”, it does not seem amiss to suggest that this is how the story of the tin can works also in “Hamlet”. It is not truth which is at stake here – “fiction” entering into the poem in the very first lines – but storytelling itself.

The ghost in *Hamlet*, existing first as a “story” then as an extant ghost “armed [...] so like the King”, has a story of its own to tell but one intended for Hamlet solely; that of the King’s murder by his own brother Claudius.⁴⁸⁹ It should be noted, of course, that the spirit is an image of the King, not the King himself. This is why Hamlet does not know whether he can in fact trust the ghost’s words, allowing for the possibility that it might well be the devil that has assumed his

⁴⁸⁶ *Hamlet*, act I, scene i, l. 32. Barnardo says: “Sit down a while, / And let us once again assail your ears, / That are so fortified against our story, / What we have two nights seen.” Act I, scene i, ll. 30–33.

⁴⁸⁷ *Hamlet*, act I, scene i, ll. 23–29.

⁴⁸⁸ *Hamlet*, act I, scene i, ll. 56–58.

⁴⁸⁹ *Hamlet*, act I, scene i, ll. 110.

father's shape.⁴⁹⁰ In pursuit of truth Hamlet resolves to set up a play in which will be dramatized events which he has only learnt at second hand. As Hamlet says: "For murder, though it have no tongue, will speak / With most miraculous organ. I'll have these players / Play something like the murder of my father / Before mine uncle."⁴⁹¹ Unable to see the factual events of his father's death for himself, so as to verify the ghost's report, Hamlet resorts to representation as a means of re-enactment and as a means to simulate the factual event. Here Hamlet insists that the play will be a "mirror up to nature".⁴⁹² He assumes further that truth will unfold before his eyes: if Claudius is guilty of fratricide he will not be able to watch the play without disclosing the crime. As Hamlet declares in a well-known passage: "I'll have grounds / More relative than this – the play's the thing / Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King."⁴⁹³ Tellingly, the play – this "purest form of mimesis" and "imitation of human action" – is not staged for aesthetic ends but with a political intent behind it.⁴⁹⁴

In "Hamlet", the tin can announces death, for "when it skittered to a halt, you knew / That someone else had snuffed it". Yet the tin can does not have a story of its own to tell, as does Shakespeare's ghost. Furthermore, whilst the tin can was first heard on the night when the sergeant was killed, we cannot be certain whether it is the ghost of the dead policeman (like Shakespeare's king/ghost) urging "revenge" or whether his death and the tin can's first appearance were merely coincidental. The poem points towards the latter, however. The tin can, the poem intimates, is a construction – maintained through communal storytelling – and a form by which we give shape to experience.

Towards the poem's close the speaker himself bears witness to the *story* of the tin-can ghost saying that "I, too, heard the ghost". In one respect, this evokes Horatio's testimony in the first scene of the play but in "Hamlet", truth has since long been made redundant. Subsequent lines strengthen the initial interpretation that the tin-can ghost is a form by which we give shape to experience. For as the lines read in full: "I, too, heard the ghost: / A roulette trickle, or the hesitant annunciation of a downpour, ricocheting / Off the window; a goods train shunting distantly into a siding, / Then groaning to a halt; the rainy cries of children after

⁴⁹⁰ "The spirit that I have seen / May be a [dev'l], and the [dev'l] hath power / T'assume a pleasing shape", act II, scene ii, ll. 578–580.

⁴⁹¹ *Hamlet*, act II, scene ii, ll. 574–576. As Hamlet tells Claudius during the play: "this play is the image of a murder done in Vienna", act III, scene ii, 224–225.

⁴⁹² *Hamlet*, act III, scene ii, ll. 16–22. Hamlet instructs the actors: "Suit the action to the word, the word to the action, with this special observance, that you o'erstep not the modesty of nature: for any thing so o'erdone is from the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is, to hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature: to show virtue her feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure." In the Bedford/St Martin's edition of *Hamlet* "pressure" is explained as "Impression (as of a seal), exact image", 86.

⁴⁹³ *Hamlet*, act II, scene ii, ll. 583–585.

⁴⁹⁴ Paul Copley, *Narrative* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 62.

dusk.” Here the tin can is merely a form by which the speaker interprets and gives shape to the sounds of the city.

At this stage it is worthwhile returning to the beginning of the poem where the tin can is first introduced. It is noteworthy that the telling of the tin can is partly intertwined with the etymological inquiry into the meaning of the “place-name” the Falls, a Catholic area in Belfast where Carson spent part of his childhood. In a sequence, the English “Falls” is re-translated into the Irish word *fál* which in turn is explained as follows: it can mean “a hedge”, “*any kind of enclosed thing*”, “*frontier, boundary, as in the undiscovered country / From whose bourne no traveller returns*, the illegible, thorny hedge of time itself”. On the one hand, this might be taken to suggest that the “meaning” of the tin can might be as various as the name the Falls. On the other hand, it should be observed that the alternative translations are tightly knit; they all denote some kind of enclosure. Does this mean, by extension, that names can become like hedges, that they put a hedge around reality?

The poem culminates with a sequence of meta-poetic reflections. Here *Hamlet* the play works partly as a theoretical framework against which Carson articulates his aesthetic and historical attitude. It is noteworthy here how the imagery conjures Shakespeare’s play: “the voice from the grave”, “the iron mask”, the “son looking for his father, or the father for his son”, the aim to put time right.

When by the end of the poem Carson writes – “So we name the constellations, to put a shape / On what was there; so, the storyteller picks his way between the isolated stars” – he expresses the idea that we give form and meaning to experience.⁴⁹⁵ The sergeant, with which the poem and the comrade’s story opened, is one of these isolated stars. His name is forgotten but the bullet has his name on it: “a name drifting like an afterthought, / A scribbled wisp of smoke you try and grasp, as it becomes diminuendo then / Vanishes.” If we remove the name we might no longer see the constellation. Perhaps we only see something because we put a name on it.

In “Hamlet”, questions such as “*Was it really like that? And, Is the story true?*” are made redundant. These questions are, in a way, variations of the Shakespearean Hamlet’s questions as he evaluates the ghost’s telling, resorting to another representation in his pursuit of truth. By the time Carson composes his “Hamlet” the idea of mimesis has been dispelled. Moreover, in Carson’s poem there can be no “mirror up to nature” for reality itself is partly a fiction. We cannot reach exactitude in representation for even our interpretations of reality are disjointed. This idea has underpinned the collection as a whole – indeed the idea is accentuated by the epigraph to the third part, Carson quoting there from Kevin Lynch *The Image of the City*. It is again formulated in the clock running fast. As

⁴⁹⁵ Benine has written on the constellation as a model for storytelling in “Ciaran Carson’s Constellations of Ideas: Theories on Traditional Culture from Within”, see section on “Constellations of Meaning”, 125–127. See also Carson, *The Star Factory*: “It has been suggested that the mind of the storyteller is inhabited by constellations of such crucial points, whose stars are transformed or regurgitated into patterns of the everyday”, 66f.

Carson returns to the clock towards the end of the poem we read that “even if / The clock is put to rights, everyone will still believe it’s fast.” Hence we return also to the beginning of the poem and its theme of “fiction”.

“We try to piece together the exploded fragments.”, writes Carson. Alexander notes in this context that “[t]he piecing together of exploded fragments of experience is often figured metaphorically in Carson’s work in terms of ‘patchworks’ of memory”.⁴⁹⁶ Carson’s line does indeed evoke a patchwork yet the function of patchwork does not remain the same throughout Carson’s work but, as we have seen in earlier chapters of this thesis, it changes and is reformulated. In “Hamlet”, the piecing together of fragments is preceded by the following: “Like some son looking for his father, or the father for his son”. This intimates, not representation, but sense-making, generally understood. When Carson says: “Let these broken spars / Stand for the Armada and its proud full sails, for even if / The clock is put to rights, everyone will still believe it’s fast”, he stresses further his concern with sense-making rather than representation. It is no longer verisimilitude that is sought but, rather, we need “names” and “forms” to “see what’s before [our] eyes”.

“Hamlet” is, in the end, a most self-reflexive poem. By taking its title from the play *Hamlet*, Carson names his constellation “to put a shape on what” is “there”. *Hamlet* becomes a tin can “trundling down” the slope of Carson’s poem; Carson having “pick[ed] his way” through Shakespeare’s play. From this follows, however, that if we remove the name “Hamlet”, if we “tear off the iron mask”, what becomes of Carson’s poem? The Carson papers at the Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library at Emory University reveal two variant titles of the poem: “Hamlet’s Father’s Helmet” and “The Meaning of the Falls Road”.⁴⁹⁷ Each in its own way, these titles focus on the issue of representation. In “Hamlet”, Hamlet’s father’s helmet appears in the repeated references to armoured figures – the bomb-disposal expert with his “strangely-mediaeval visor”, the “helmet of Balaklava / Is torn away from the mouth”, and “the iron mask” – but also indirectly in the tin can with its connotations of form. In the etymological sequence, meaning collapses into the manifold explanations of the Falls as “hedge”, in the sense of enclosure. Thus, both the tin can and the hedge point to form as the main focus of the poem. In “Hamlet”, Shakespeare’s play as a thematic model is less at issue than it is a starting-point for a demonstration of form as an instrument of sense-making. The contract sets up the reader to search for a rewriting of *Hamlet* when in fact the reader might have to use the idea of the contract as something more elastic. *First Language*, the volume following *Belfast Confetti*, with its increased focus on form, requires the reader to be even more attuned to this.

⁴⁹⁶ Alexander, 127.

⁴⁹⁷ Ciaran Carson Papers (MSS 746), Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University:

<http://findingaids.library.emory.edu/documents/carson746/series2/subseries2.2/subseries2.2a/> Accessed 11 December 2012.



5. Meta-morphosing

First Language

First Language, Carson's fourth principal collection of poems, was published in 1993. It received the inaugural T. S. Eliot Prize for the best poetry collection published in the UK and Ireland that year, although, it did not appeal to everyone. In comparison with the two preceding volumes, *The Irish for No* and *Belfast Confetti*, the critical response to *First Language* has been mixed. Reviewing the collection for *The Times Literary Supplement*, Wills finds that the collection "has a contrived and overloaded feel about it" and that "the musical range of the verse" suffers by Carson's "ambitious cultural project".⁴⁹⁸ Not everyone has concurred with the critique but it has become commonplace to point to "[t]he risk taken", in this and in the subsequent collection *Opera Et Cetera*, which lies in "a brave move beyond the communal and local material [...] to an investigation of the principles which underlay them".⁴⁹⁹ The "risk taken", of course, is that linguistic play and formal experimentation can easily become an end in itself.⁵⁰⁰

Due to Carson's increased engagement with language and form in this collection, *First Language* has been said to "represent a departure as marked as that of *The Irish for No*".⁵⁰¹ There is general consensus amongst critics that the new direction is in the poems' "shift of focus away from the materiality of the city and towards that of language itself, often at the level of its individual components".⁵⁰² However, as Alexander astutely remarks, this need not entail that historical context is forsaken. He observes that "the context of the Troubles, with its spasmodic irruptions of violence and involuted identity politics, remains strongly present."⁵⁰³ The realities of the Northern Ireland conflict are still there in *First Language* but this

⁴⁹⁸ Clair Wills, "Ulster Echolalia", *The Times Literary Supplement* 4747 (25 March 1994), 23.

⁴⁹⁹ Goodby, *Irish Poetry since 1950*, 295.

⁵⁰⁰ This charge has also been levelled at Muldoon and McGuckian.

⁵⁰¹ Howard, 103.

⁵⁰² Alexander, 8.

⁵⁰³ Alexander, 193.

concern, I suggest, is coupled with a further concentration towards their telling and with the aesthetics and ethics of writing. Put in relation to the previous volumes, *First Language* is the logical extension of the poet's earlier preoccupation with the poetic medium and with the quandaries of artistic representations.

Form in *First Language* is an important generator of meaning. Poems are created and realized in relation to earlier texts and text types. But whereas earlier varieties of rewriting have been determined by specific textual materials, in *First Language* Carson reverses his technique. What remains of the prototypes is their structure, something which allows him to combine the most various kinds of textual material and bring them to bear on the topics that he is pursuing.

What *First Language* is in part about can be gathered from "Second Language", the volume's second poem which follows on the introductory poem "*La Je-Né-Sais-Quoi*", written in Irish. Thematically, the poem is a stock-taking of sorts, but it also brings some of the collection's concerns into focus and provides us with the fourth, and final, textile metaphor examined in this thesis.

"Second Language" charts the speaker's acquisition of English, from infancy when English is an absence, "English not being yet a language", to the moment when the speaker "woke up, verbed and tensed with speaking English; I lisped the words so knowingly". The acquisition involves also Irish, "incomprehensibly to others", and Latin which is "inhaled *amo, amas, amat* in *quids* of *pros* and *versus* and *Introibos / Ad altare De?*". The poem has, rightly so, been interpreted in relation to Carson's linguistic biography; Irish being his first and English his second language whereas Latin is associated with his Catholic upbringing. Other details in the poem support the poem's autobiographical resonance, notably the Belfast localities and the presence of the postman-father.

This *type* of poem is, of course, a prototypical poem: the acquisition of a language reading simultaneously as the poet's acquisition of his own idiom. Yet there is an indeterminate character over the poem; a quality which pervades the poem and the collection as a whole. Set within the framework of a dream, Carson recoils slightly from having given us a portrait of the poet's coming-into-being whilst acknowledging the provisional nature of such undertakings. Just as dreams, their logic and components, are elusive when we try to recollect them, our autobiography can be equally difficult to pin down. If this complicates the authority of the telling it, conversely, gives the poem authority, admitting to its conditional character. The poem both is, and is not, a coming-into-being poem. Which is why, perhaps, both poet and scholar "must allow / The *Tipp-Ex* present at the fingertips."

Earlier critics have commented on the poem's relation to texts by Carson's Irish predecessors. Matthews finds that "[f]or some of its length, the poem is a clear reworking of Heaney's allegorical treatment of his own learning of language in his poem 'Alphabets'".⁵⁰⁴ Homem, likewise, points to Heaney's "Alphabets" but adds MacNeice's "Carrickfergus" and James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a*

⁵⁰⁴ Matthews, 198.

Young Man.⁵⁰⁵ Certainly, to some extent these literary forefathers are hovering over the poem but I also think that what we are dealing with in this poem is, in the words of the poem, a much more “convoluted genealogy”. Anticipating what will be discussed at more length below, in relation to the collection’s textile metaphor, it might be posited that what Carson’s poem shares with the predecessor texts is a structure; a generic structure which brings with it a linear narrative and certain constituents, as well as a “shared” historical, geographical and cultural context, upon which each writer inserts his specific details. Where there are similarities there are often differences. Placed next to one another these texts evince the particularity of each author.

“Second Language” is about being, “not being” and becoming. The poem begins by looking back but is also about looking ahead. Significantly, the poem charts language acquisition but does not *stage* the search for a voice or expression; it accounts for what has to some degree already been acquired and which can now be put to use. Still the poem is not about endings or closure; language acquisition is never completed but continuous. It is about the past, what has been and what is yet to come, held as a potential: “What comes next is next, and no one knows the *che sera* of it” and “[t]he future looms into the mouth incessantly, gulped-at and unspoken”. In this the poem returns to the absence with which the poem began, “English not being yet a language”, but just as “yet” forebodes what is to come, or did come, “unspoken” holds a promise, something awaiting fulfilment, waiting to be realized.

Like all language acquisition, this takes place in a context: family, home, church, the city. This poet’s particular language is acquired both through spoken language, “the world of talk” and the sounds of the city, particularly the sounds of Belfast industry and the shipyards where “all had their say”. The environment in which the acquisition takes place is, moreover, linguistically and literary ordered or organized. We encounter: “Sienna consonants”, “the vowels *alexandrite, emerald* and *topaz*”, “The topos of their discourse”, “Wordy whorls”, “Alexandrine tropes”, “the stanzaic-papered wall”, “Latin conjugations”, “A hieroglyphic alphabet”. The city itself is related in metrical terms, or differently put, is metrically structured: “Shipyard hymns / Then echoed from the East: gantry-clank and rivet-ranks, Six-County hexametric / Brackets, bulkheads, girders, beams, and stanchions; convocated and Titanic.”

The poem gives us the image of a weaver’s loom and a typewriter, having merged into one, and the poet as weaver. The image is telling, at this stage in Carson’s career, and in this particular context of language acquisition. Read together with the preceding poems on textile techniques “The Patchwork Quilt”, “Patchwork”, “Brick” and “Second Language” constitute a narrative of the emerging poet while intimating his indebtedness to earlier generations and his hometown. The story that unfolds is one where the poet-speaker relates a technique, assists in a technique, and finally practises a technique: In “Patchwork”,

⁵⁰⁵ Homem, 171.

the poet-speaker quotes his grandmother (in the earlier “The Patchwork Quilt”) telling of the principles behind making a patchwork quilt. In “Patchwork” and “Brick” he becomes involved in the mother’s practice of stitching, darning, mending, unravelling: he both assists his mother and wears the clothes that she mends/makes. In “Second Language”, he is the craftsman himself. Particularly, he is a weaver, an analogy which returns us to Carson’s juvenilia and the very first instance of the intimated metaphor, “Interior with Weaver”. It should be noted that while the poet inherits some of the techniques from his grandmother and mother the textile metaphor is also part of his Belfast inheritance. In “Brick” the mother’s recycling is part of the city’s perpetual recycling of itself. “Second Language” charts the poet-speaker’s acquisition of a language, and as with all language acquisition, it will bear the mark of the context in which it occurs. This poet has learnt the languages of Belfast, of this old linen city. The techniques which he practises enable him to write about his hometown and to approach it as genuinely as he can, allowing for multiplicity. But it is also a poetics which is *of* Belfast.

Carson’s poetic method in this collection is given an explanatory metaphor in “Second Language” and the proposed analogy between the poet and the weaver, the typewriter and the loom, and the poem and the weave: “Bobbins pirn and shuttle in Imperial / Typewriterspeak. I hit the keys. The ribbon-black clunks out the words in serial. // What comes next is next, and no one knows the *che sera* of it, but must allow / The *Tipp-Ex* present at the fingertips.” The weave, consisting of warp (threads lengthwise along the loom) and weft (the threads passed sideways, across the warp), provides us with yet another textile technique which may be employed to text-making. The warp we may see as an underlying structure, the weft the poet’s contribution: the components brought in. The warp, as we shall see, can as in the earlier metaphors be an earlier text but in this collection Carson also extends the metaphor to include all that which goes into the making of a poem: a text, the literary tradition or system, cultural narratives.

As a first instance, the idea of warp and weft can be applied to the poem itself. The warp in this poem is a most general one: the acquisition of a language and/or artistic gestation. Yet what is added is this poet’s particular weft, his autobiography, the particular Belfast context, the three languages, the postman-father and the textile metaphor, that the poet weaves into his poem. Continuing with the textile metaphor and the portrait of the postman-father Carson also weaves his earlier poems into this one. It is for its specificities, and the particular components that are woven into the underlying structure, that this poem, this poet’s weave, will be different from his predecessors.

The poem’s theme of being, “not being” and becoming is built up by the prevalence of the prefix *un-*: “Wordy whorls and braids and skeins and spiral helices, *unskeltoned* from laminate geology”, “Alexandrine tropes came growling out like beagles, loped and *unroped* / On a snuffly Autumn”, “disgorged hawsers, *unkinkable* lay”, “Flimsy tissue-paper plans of aeroplanes *unfolded* whimsical ideas of the blue, / Where, *unwound*, the prop’s elastic is *unpropped*”, “Easter is an *unspun*

cerement, the gritty, knitty, tickly cloth of *unspent* // 'Time' (italics mine). Indeed, the prefix *un-* occurs throughout the whole collection.⁵⁰⁶ It follows, to some extent, the idea of "unravelling" in *The Irish for No* and *Belfast Confetti*, where the word comes to refer to the process of unmaking and making, in that order. This meaning remains somewhat, in that the prefix in some cases comes to denote alteration, but the states described are also left more ambiguous and fluctuating, for have the "[w]ordy whorls and braids and skeins and spiral helices, unskeletoned from laminate geology" dissolved from an earlier state, one of being "skeletoned" and have the "Alexandrine tropes" been "roped"? An additional meaning which the prefix holds, then, and which furthers the idea, is that of being, not being and becoming, brought to the point in "[t]he future looms into the mouth incessantly, gulped-at and unspoken".

The prefix is part of and contributes to what is a larger concern in the collection. The construction with *un-*, whereby words contain their opposite, and the states described, whereby something can potentially become its opposite, link up with the general idea of metamorphosis: the change out of and into something else. The notion of metamorphosis gives focus to the collection's formal preoccupations as well as its thematics. We encounter change and alteration, as theme and form, in Carson's rewritings – most overtly in his rewritings of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* – but the notion as such is not limited to these but applicable to Carson's poetic practice as being one of constant recreation and transformation. Carson's poetry is about resisting the static, about encompassing or accommodating duality or multiplicity in one. The technique of warp and weft, in this collection, then, combines with the general idea of metamorphosis. It creates a tension between different states which is also apt for the textual relations which the poems set up and are realized against. Approaching Carson's poems we might, however, see them as a reversed metamorphosis: the earlier structure (which Carson takes for his warp) remains and is built upon but the components are replaced with new ones.

If the poet's language acquisition is one warp upon which or with which the poet composes poems, then cultural narratives also provide underlying structures. One such structure is the Tower of Babel, evoked and brought into *First Language* through different kinds of intertexts. The Gallery Press edition of the volume reproduces the painting "Wieża Babel" by St. Dobiasz on the cover. This pictorial representation of the Tower of Babel reinforces the collection's focus on language and translation. Up to a certain point the reference works in tandem with the

⁵⁰⁶ See the following instances: "unbitten" ("A Date Called *Eat Me*"), "unlatched" ("Grass" and twice in "Four Sonnets"), "Unparalysed" ("*Apparat*"), "Uncharted" ("The Brain of Edward Carson"), "unmoored" and "unanchored" ("Drunk Boat"), "un*Walkman*" and "Un*Walkmanlike*" ("All Souls"), "unfurled" ("Sonnet"), "unscabbarded" ("Ovid: *Metamorphoses*, XIII, 439–575"), "unstung" ("Contract"), "unmarked" ("Bagpipe Music"), "An as-yet-unbloodied bib" ("Opus Operandi"), "unopened" ("*Tak, Tak*"), "ungloving", "unstrummable", "unquotes" ("Latitude 38°S"), "unascertained", "Unheard-of", "Unfathomed" ("The Ballad of HMS Belfast").

collection's title, reminding us that in the Bible the language spoken during the construction of the Tower, and before the profusion of languages, was indeed the first language. Yet the idea of a first, and single, language is dispelled with the introduction of a "Second Language", hence singular becomes plural; becomes its opposite.

The reference to Babel is continued within the collection and occurs in several poems, although the references are, as is often the case in Carson's poetry, filtered through his speaker and therefore slightly skewed.⁵⁰⁷ Nimrod and "his bold Arapahoes, // Who whooped and hollered in their unforked tongue" appear in "Second Language". In "Contract", the speaker sees, or imagines, "Brueghel's *Babel*, *Lego*-kit-like Pharaonic phasia- / Bricks, where everything is built in stages, ages, scaffolding, and phrases." In "Opus Operandi", "Jerome drank the vision in. He put on his airman's snorkel and got into the bubble. / He gave the thumbs-up sign, and set the ultrasonic scan for Babel." "*Tak, Tak*", finally, gives us yet another source: "Vulgate-black like the inside of an unopened Bible – / *Cessaverunt aedificare civitatem. Et idcirco vocatum est ejus Babel.*" Despite, or perhaps because of, this prevalence of reference to the Tower of Babel it is never allowed to settle and become a symbol in the collection. Carson draws our attention to different interpretations and understandings of Babel: the Bible, Jerome and Brueghel. If Genesis offers one explanation for the profusion of languages this is an aetiology which has been variously interpreted and understood and proliferated upon in different ways. The Tower of Babel can be seen as a cultural intertext drawn upon. The references point to a structure which is employed to explain phenomena or to be made into art. Yet the same warp can generate different weaves due to the particular elements that comprise the weft.

The literary tradition and system, or form more generally understood, can also be seen as a warp. Noteworthy are the many poems in this collection which take a genre, poetic form, text type or earlier text for their titles. Some titles incorporate sayings or expressions, "*La Je-Ne-Sais-Quoi*" or "A Date Called *Eat Me*". Some poems take their titles from a genre: "The Ballad of HMS Belfast" or "Contract". Other poems are named after poetic forms: "Sonnet" and "Four Sonnets". Others yet take their titles from earlier texts: "Ovid: *Metamorphoses*, V, 529–550" and "*Correspondances*". "Opus 14", in turn, evokes a list, whereas "Latitude 38° S" makes gestures towards a map. This attention to form becomes even more apparent when we consider that the first three poems derived from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* appear under different titles when included in Michael Hofmann and James Lasdun's anthology *After Ovid: New Metamorphoses* (1994). There the poems take their titles after the tales related therein – "Ascalaphus", "Hecuba" and "Aurora and Memnon" – yet when incorporated into *First Language* they are retitled in ways which call attention to an earlier text and only indirectly to the mythological content, as seen in "Ovid: *Metamorphoses*, V, 529–550". The title of the fourth Ovid

⁵⁰⁷ In addition to the poems given here other poems play with or rhyme with the word Babel: "Babel-babble" ("Drunk Boat"), "babble" and "Parable" ("*Correspondances*"), "psychobabble handbag" ("Bagpipe Music").

poem, “Down Under”, retains the geographical reference to Australia when appearing in *First Language* as “Latitude 38° S”, but points to a map. The Carson papers at the Emory archives reveal further how the collection’s focus has been steered towards that of form. “The Ballad of HMS Belfast” is there given with the variant title “The Voyages of HMS Belfast”, the change intimating a shift from content to form. The four sections of the poem “Four Sonnets”, likewise, which in *First Language* are given the serial numbers 1–4, are there revealed to have had the alternative titles “Early Days” and “Sonnet” (first sonnet), “The One Before the First One” (third sonnet) and “Number Three” (fourth sonnet), although some of these examples make use of a formal and ordering principle.⁵⁰⁸

In Carson’s hands, this varied range of texts and text types becomes structures against which the poems realize themselves. The titles are not merely descriptive. They provide structures for a poem’s realization, on the level of both composition and interpretation. The structure is one which a poem can follow, transgress or deviate from. The poem’s meaning unfolds against and lies in the tension between the title – the framework set up – and the poem itself.

Genette’s categories of different kinds of textual relations certainly spring to mind here. Genette’s idea of a contract is also promoted by the titles, although, as in the case of “Hamlet” discussed in the previous chapter, some flexibility is called for: these texts and text types are not static but have undergone change, have been altered from within through actual use, which means that we are right to ask which variant of the “sonnet” exactly, Carson’s poem of that title evokes. The framework set up proves, on closer examination, to be less certain than perhaps first assumed.

An additional perspective is given by Genette’s distinction between thematic and rhematic titles, where the former refer to the subject matter and the latter refer to the text “considered as a work and as an object”.⁵⁰⁹ The two alternative titles “The Voyages of HMS Belfast” and “The Ballad of HMS Belfast” illustrate the difference, as the second title puts the emphasis on the way in which the “voyages” of this ship are told. Yet, given the general tenor of the collection, form is here, and in other poems, simultaneously part of the poem’s thematics. The poems are self-consciously about form and the tension between a title and its poem becomes part of meaning-making.

Conte’s notion of procedural form and constraints as generative devices, is also relevant in the context of *First Language* but in a different way from Genette. The collection certainly displays what can be made of form and what may be achieved through form. The collection as a whole seems to foreground the principle of constraint and generative devices. This is varied by Denman who uses the term

⁵⁰⁸ Ciaran Carson Papers (MSS 746), Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University:

<http://findingaids.library.emory.edu/documents/carson746/series2/subseries2.2/subseries2.2a/> Accessed 11 December 2012.

⁵⁰⁹ Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 78.

“structural matrix”.⁵¹⁰ Denman perceptively links this to Carson’s translations, although not the poems which will be discussed here: “The distinctiveness of the translation operates against and around an original text that is always there in the background [...] The original text is a structural matrix. Carson’s versions are generated not by a need to make the already well-known poem of Baudelaire, or Dante, or Ní Dhomhnaill available to an Irish readership, but to enlarge the poetic and linguistic space that the poems occupy.”⁵¹¹

By way of completing the analysis of Carson’s rewritings and the textual metaphors which have been traced in previous chapters the idea of warp and weft will be employed in the analysis of Carson’s extended rewritings, included in *First Language*. In the following, the poems “Ovid: *Metamorphoses*, V, 529–550” and “Latitude 38° S” will be analysed in order to illustrate Carson’s method of composition. Ovid’s original we may see as the warp, the weft comprising Carson’s own contribution together with textual elements which he recycles from the original. While the collection has garnered much critical commentary, the rewritings have been given considerably less attention than the other poems. This is on the one hand symptomatic of Carson’s rewritings; their status as poems seems unclear in criticism, and when considered they are mostly discussed on a thematic or ideational level. This thesis contends that not only are the rewritings integral to the collection but they can be said to join the collection’s preoccupation with language and form whilst being in part continuous with the earlier collection *Belfast Confetti*, particularly the haiku, “Snow” and “Hamlet” which also are extended rewritings of anterior texts and where the haiku involve a degree of translation. In *First Language*, the focus on form is also a continued investigation *into* form and its workings.

⁵¹⁰ Denman, 28.

⁵¹¹ Denman, 28.

Metamorphoses

First Language includes four poems which are derived from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, two of which will be examined here: "Ovid: *Metamorphoses*, V, 529–550" and "Latitude 38° S". The poems were commissioned by Hofmann and Lasdun to form part of their project of contemporary responses to the *Metamorphoses*, published as *After Ovid: New Metamorphoses* in 1994. This volume collects rewritings of passages from the *Metamorphoses* by 42 poets, amongst whom we recognize Carson's peers Longley, Muldoon, Mahon and Eavan Boland. Carson's pieces were incorporated into *First Language*, as Carson has said in interview, "[i]t so occurred that the bits I did were in line with what I was already doing".⁵¹² In spite of Carson's own claim, however, that the Ovid poems are "in line with" his writing at large, they have received only modest critical attention. With only a few exceptions, which will be referenced in the present section, there is paucity in critical engagement with the Ovid poems. In ways similar to Carson's other extended rewritings and free translations the Ovid poems are unjustly overlooked. There is a tendency to sidestep the poems and to see them as a parallel activity to Carson's "original" writing. As I will demonstrate in this section, however, these poems repay close examination as they disclose important aspects of Carson's poetic method, its aesthetics and ethics.

The *Metamorphoses* commands a unique position in Western culture and literature. It is possibly the most accessible and historically important repository of classical mythology. Given the mythological framework or contents of Ovid's epic it is perhaps of little surprise that Carson's rewritings have given rise to readings which also place his poems within a mythic framework. Writing on the poems entitled "Ovid: *Metamorphoses*, XIII, 439–575" and "Ovid: *Metamorphoses*, XIII, 576–619" Mahony finds in these poems "Belfast present" "mythologized".⁵¹³ Commenting on the first of these two poems, which relates Hecuba's grief and revenge for her dead children, Mahony maintains that "[a]nyone who has followed the years of tit-for-tat murders of one sectarian group against the other in Northern Ireland will have no difficulty in finding parallels with the story of the Trojan War, in this grieving, and eventually politicized matriarch".⁵¹⁴ On the second one, she finds that "the tale of the memorial to Memnon", related in the poem, is "a reenactment of civil war played out annually in the sky by birds, a ritual too reminiscent of the annual Battle of the Boyne commemorations in Ulster to be overlooked or minimized".⁵¹⁵ Perhaps inadvertently this reading casts Carson as a poet who takes recourse to myth as explanatory framework. Such an image does not chime with Carson's project which, from its start in the 1970s, counsels against mythic readings and grand narratives. Yet it is also an image which is at odds with, rather than implicated by, the poems themselves. In the context of the poems, and

⁵¹² Niall McGrath, "Interview with Ciaran Carson", *Edinburgh Review* 93 (1995), 65.

⁵¹³ Mahony, 85.

⁵¹⁴ Mahony, 85.

⁵¹⁵ Mahony, 85.

in the context of the poems as *rewritings*, it is difficult to assent to Mahony's thematic and contextual reading. To move directly from myth to history is to short-circuit the poems, i.e. the ways in which they operate as poems, how they come to have meaning in relation to the source drawn upon and how they come to talk about violence, past and present, mythological and historical.

Hufstader follows in the same vein, reading the Ovid poems in relation to myth. In his discussion we see again a conflation of myth and history. He writes: "Reminiscent of Heaney's *North*, which Carson so disliked when it appeared, this is a version of violence as ur-myth. In his three translations from the *Metamorphoses*, Carson gives a succinct but comprehensive anatomy of violence during the Troubles".⁵¹⁶ On the poem "Ovid: *Metamorphoses*, XIII, 576–619" Hufstader claims that "Carson emblemizes the fundamental Ulster phenomenon of division into two" whereas "Latitude 38° S" "concludes [Carson's] mythology of violence in *First Language* by recounting Apollo's flaying of Marsyas".⁵¹⁷ He posits further that Carson, "working through violent identities in poetry" in his earlier volumes, has come to conform to Heaney's mythic procedures in *North*.⁵¹⁸

In the analyses of "Ovid: *Metamorphoses*, V, 529–550" and "Latitude 38° S" below I aim to show that these poems are not reducible to mythological readings and that they disclose Carson's attentiveness to the poetic medium. Here Carson self-consciously probes into the ways in which we write about violence. In this Carson is still cognizant of the ethical consequences of aesthetic representations of violence and continuous with his critique of Heaney's mythic procedures in *North*. To say that the severity of violence that Northern Ireland has witnessed could be incorporated into a mythological framework is problematic in itself but it is also against Carson's aesthetics and ethics as these have developed up to this point in his career.

To suggest that there are parallels between the violent episodes from classical mythology and the Northern Ireland conflict is one thing. To say that Carson "mythologizes" is something else. Firstly, the deployment of myth does not necessarily lead to a mythologizing; myth might be employed for a number of reasons, one of which might be to question its relevance or applicability. Secondly, placing Carson's Ovid poems within a mythological framework runs the risk of treating the *Metamorphoses* as a mere source from which the classical myths can be retrieved. This would be to oversimplify Carson's poems as well as their engagement with Ovid's text; thematic contingency must be complemented with an examination of formal techniques and procedures.

The *Metamorphoses*, in addition to being a treasure trove of classical mythology, is also an artistic composition which incorporates the myths into a larger narrative of change and transformation and storytelling. A closer consideration of Carson's poems reveals that he is not committed to a "mythologizing" of violence or that

⁵¹⁶ Hufstader, 243f.

⁵¹⁷ Hufstader, 243f.

⁵¹⁸ Hufstader, 245f.

his poems is an attempt to explain violence by reference to an “ur-myth”.⁵¹⁹ It is in fact not myths which Carson engages with but with an earlier text. The distinction is important. If the poems bear witness to the Northern Ireland conflict it is not by viewing it through a mythological prism but highlighting how, through language and narrative, we write about violence. Myth is not offered as a framework for understanding the conflict; what we are offered is a textual framework. This should not be seen as disengagement on the poet’s part. Rather, by engaging with an earlier text, and through allusions to other texts on difficult matters, the poems explore how we write about violence. Language and form are in focus here. If the poems are about history it is about how history is viewed through language and narrative, rather than myth. It has already been suggested in earlier chapters that Carson is not the poet who takes it upon himself to explain but to explore how we perceive the world in narrative and through language. This relates, too, to the “specificity of literature” and “its difference from ordinary discourse by an empirical individual about the world”.⁵²⁰

There is, then, a risk in overlooking the intertextual intent and purpose of the poems, i.e. how Carson makes use of earlier material to construct a new poem and its effect on meaning-making. In addition to this, on the note of Carson’s recourse to Heaney’s mythic method: a shared preoccupation with recycling should not mask differences. There is an element of circularity in Carson’s procedures but circularity can be understood in different ways: as mere repetition (i.e. history as repeating itself), or as repetition with a difference. Carson’s textual engagement and his intertextual strategies proceed according to the principle of repetition with variation, and therefore the past, if the earlier texts are taken to represent it, does not return in identical form.

Before we proceed to the analyses of “Ovid: *Metamorphosis*, V, 529–550” and “Latitude 38° S” the discussion gains in perspective if we first consider the conception and publication history of the poems. According to Hofmann and Lasdun, in their “Introduction” to *After Ovid*, “[t]here is nothing in it that was not written specifically for it”.⁵²¹ The task set to the contributors was “to translate, reinterpret, reflect on or completely re-imagine the narratives” and “[w]ithout prescribing how, we wanted an Ovid remade, made new”.⁵²² Carson’s Ovid poems, then, had their genesis and took shape within the context of contemporary rewritings – not of myth – but of the *Metamorphoses*. Published as part of this project they appear within the covers of a book whose title and foreword specifically bear out the Ovidian connection.

It is significant that this Ovidian context is brought over and into *First Language* through a change of titles. Whereas in *After Ovid*, the poems take their titles from the tales related (thus conforming to the anthology as a whole), the titles of *First*

⁵¹⁹ Hufstader, 243f.

⁵²⁰ Culler, 189f.

⁵²¹ Michael Hofmann and James Lasdun, “Introduction”, in Michael Hofmann and James Lasdun, eds., *After Ovid: New Metamorphoses* (London: Faber and Faber, 1994), xi.

⁵²² Hofmann and Lasdun, xii.

Language direct the reader to specific passages of the *Metamorphoses*: “Ascalaphus” is retitled “Ovid: *Metamorphoses*, V, 529–550” and the two ensuing poems “Hecuba” and “Aurora and Memnon” follow the same pattern. The renaming is instructive. Had “Ascalaphus”, “Hecuba” and “Aurora and Memnon” been incorporated into *First Language* under these titles, their Ovidian connection, provided by the framework of the anthology, would have been lost to the reader. By retitling the poems in ways which point us towards Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Carson creates a textual frame for reading and interpreting, thus disclosing that the poems owe their Ovidian connection. The title of the fourth poem, in the anthology named “Down Under” and in *First Language* appearing as “Latitude 38° S” differs from the others, but the Ovidian link is written into the poem: in this poem the *Metamorphoses* features both as text and as a tangible object. The titles, then, can be seen as a first indicator that Carson is in fact engaged with text not myth; the titles enforce the Ovidian framework and usher the reader towards the *Metamorphoses*. The Ovidian context provided by the titles in *First Language*, might even be seen as a strategy employed by the poet to avoid a mythic framework. The impulse to read the poems as myth is held in check by the Ovidian link signalled in the titles. The titles warrant a reading where the poems are considered as rewritings of text rather than myth.

The Ovidian link gives the poems a sense of self-reflexivity. Both Ovid and Carson are engaged in artistic tellings of violence. This is explored within a framework of narrative. When in the poem “Latitude 38° S” Carson writes, “So they tell their stories, of the cruelty of gods and words and music”, he is suggesting that violence as subject is not new. It is a theme which authors engage, and have engaged, with. These tellings, however, are significantly, “[w]ritten on the water”, hence not fixated but impermanent and open to change.

“My mind is bent to tell of bodies changed into new forms.”, Ovid states at the very beginning of the *Metamorphoses*.⁵²³ Given the explicit Ovidian framework, it is possible to suggest that it is not the myths that are Carson’s primary concern – although this is what the poems deal with on a surface level – but the epic’s theme of transformation, with story-telling, and with translation in the widest sense of the word. Probing into Carson’s poems, by examining their relation to the Ovidian prototype and their narrative framework, we see how they are both about storytelling and shape-shifting whilst enacting this in their own form. It is within this framework we should then consider the poems’ subject-matter.

⁵²³ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Frank Justus Miller (1919), revised G. P. Goold (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1977), 3.

“Ovid: *Metamorphoses*, V, 529–550”

In the *Metamorphoses*, lines 529–550 of Book V form part of what is often referred to as the Muse’s tale and which narrates the Ceres/Proserpina (Demeter/Persephone) myth (the whole tale comprises lines 341–661). There it is related how Dis (Hades), having been struck by one of Cupid’s arrows, abducts Proserpina to the Underworld. In lines 529–550, Ceres calls on Jove to restore Proserpina to her but he declares that she may only return if she has not eaten while in the Underworld, “[f]or so have the fates decreed”.⁵²⁴ As the tale unfolds we learn that Proserpina has already eaten seven seeds of a pomegranate; having witnessed this, Ascalaphus informs the gods, and thus hinders her return to her mother. The section ends with Proserpina transforming Ascalaphus into “an ill-omened bird”, “a loathsome bird, prophet of woe, the slothful screech-owl, a bird of evil omen to men”.⁵²⁵

The title of Carson’s poem establishes lines 529–550 of Book V as a framework for the poem. However, inspection of Carson’s poem in relation to its source reveals that this poem is not a line-by-line rendition of the source and, for that matter, that it does not proceed in a linear fashion through the anterior text: line 529 is not taken as a starting-point for the poem; instead the opening line tells of the event which, in the source, is related a few lines further on (lines 534-538): “Persephone ate seven pomegranate seeds.” Furthermore, Carson shifts the genre and condenses Ovid’s 21 lines into a 14-line sonnet, organized into three quatrains and a concluding couplet. This generic shift brings with it certain conventions for organizing the material, but Carson also creates his own logic: Consonance and assonance establish links where words and sounds correspond to one another rather than being true to the earlier text. He rewrites the tale in his own idiom, breaking up Ovid’s long elegant lines into short phrases. Carson also rearranges the order of events and information and omits characters that are central to the tale in the *Metamorphoses*, as well as to the myth: Ceres and Jove. Carson’s poem comes to focus on but two characters, Persephone and Ascalaphus, and the painful events they are involved in.

Employing the idea of warp and weft, we note that Carson can be seen to weave a new poem in which the passage from the *Metamorphoses*, referred to in the title provides the warp. The structure that Carson retains from this passage, and which makes up the warp, comprises the following constituent events: Persephone eating (and related to this, the prohibition and the pomegranate), Ascalaphus informing on Persephone and Persephone’s revenge, leading to Ascalaphus’ transformation.⁵²⁶ The weft, in turn, consists of a variety of materials from

⁵²⁴ Ovid, 275.

⁵²⁵ Ovid, 277.

⁵²⁶ I use the term “constituent events” in the sense given by H. Porter Abbott in *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*. These are events which “are necessary for the story to be the story it is. They are the turning points, the events that drive the story forward and that

different domains. Components from the *Metamorphoses* are recycled and interwoven but Ovid’s epic is not the sole intertext. To tell *his* story of Persephone and Ascalaphus Carson makes reference to the Northern Irish historical context, alludes to songs and poems and, additionally, sets up a formal (aural) constraint according to which the telling in part unfolds. The diversity of the materials and the combination of the warp and the weft of Carson’s poem can be illustrated by this chart:

Weft	Warp	Persephone eating	Ascalaphus informing	Persephone’s revenge	Ascalaphus’ transformation
the <i>Metamorphoses</i> Classical Mythology		seven pomegranate seeds		unholy water from the Phlegethon	
N. Ireland History		hunger strike			Troubles’ augury
Assonantal onomatopoeia		bubble	blabbed	slabbered	
Songs and poetic intertexts		strange fruit	knocked on Heaven’s iron door		Auld Lang Syne

The chart displays a complex interweaving of different kinds of materials where Carson incorporates some components from the *Metamorphoses*: the symbolic “seven pomegranate seeds” which generate the other events, and “unholy water from the Phlegethon”, the mythological river which in this tale is the catalyst for Ascalaphus’ transformation but which we encounter also in many other texts. The classical tale, and the mythological context, is however broadened when “hunger strike” and “Troubles’ augury” are used to narrate the gods’ prohibition and the kind of bird that Ascalaphus transforms into. The frame of reference thus extends to a Northern Irish historical and political context; “hunger strike”, of course, reminding us of the hunger strikes of prisoners at the height of the Troubles. Yet Carson does not let the poem stay within a mythological and Northern Irish historical context but upsets these boundaries. The series “bubble”, “blabbed”, “slabbered” – which in itself in fact constitutes the main story, up to Ascalaphus’

lead to other events”, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 2nd ed., 22.

transformation, as these words are taken to refer to the pomegranate, Ascalaphus telling on Persephone and Persephone throwing water on Ascalaphus – provides both a colloquial/informal and poetic context of the poet's own making, as it proceeds according to a formal principle of sound-patterning. And contexts multiply when allusions to Billie Holiday's song and Heaney's poem "Strange Fruit", Bob Dylan's "Knockin' on Heaven's Door" and "Auld Lang Syne" are brought in to refer to the pomegranate and the other constituent events.

Carson does not give primacy to one but depends on all the varied materials for his telling. However, while a narrative built on internal sound-patterning, as suggested by the "bubble", "blabbed" and "slabbered" series, would certainly need complementary elements to help narrate the story, the other contexts/domains would be able to provide the weft themselves. It would be possible to narrate the Persephone and Ascalaphus tale through recourse to Northern Irish history solely. Likewise, a patchwork of recycled earlier titles of songs and poems would function on its own. Carson's poem makes a point, however, of combining classical myth, provided by the source text, with local history, consonantal and assonantal wordplay, and popular songs and poems, which in turn generate new contexts (literary, historical, political). The telling of the tale is refracted through these additional devices, something which in turn makes it difficult to assign a clear "meaning" to the poem or to say that the poem is "about" Northern Ireland as seen through classical mythology; rather, it is an inquiry into the tale and its possible meanings.

This can be demonstrated by an examination of the opening quatrain of Carson's poem, here followed by the corresponding lines in Frank Justus Miller's Loeb translation:

Persephone ate seven pomegranate seeds. So what? I'll tell you what –
It doesn't do to touch strange fruit, when it's forbidden by the Powers-
That-Be. Who put you on a hunger strike which, if you break, you'll stay put
In the Underworld. It doesn't do to get caught out. Watch out for prowlers.

But if you so greatly desire to separate them, Proserpina shall return to heaven, but on one condition only: if in the lower-world no food has as yet touched her lips. For so have the fates decreed. He [Jove] spoke; but Ceres was resolved to have her daughter back. Not so the fates; for the girl had already broken her fast, and while, simple child that she was, she wandered in the trim gardens, she had plucked a purple pomegranate hanging from a bending bough, and peeling off the yellowish rind, she had eaten seven of the seeds. The only one who saw the act was Ascalaphus [...] The boy saw, and by his cruel tattling thwarted the girl's return to earth. (*Metamorphoses*, Book V, lines 529–542)

Compared with Miller's literal prose translation, Carson's poem is not a (re)telling of the tale but a commentary. In the process, not only the literary format (from epic to sonnet) but also the narrative framework and text type are altered. Whereas

the *Metamorphoses* gradually guides the reader through the events, progressing in the order of cause-and-effect from the gods' prohibition to Persephone breaking their rule and onwards, Carson takes Persephone's eating of the pomegranate as already established knowledge. The examination of this event and its consequences becomes the topic of the poem.

In the opening of the poem, Carson's speaker sets two tasks for himself. The statement "I'll tell you what", by way of replying back to the introductory "Persephone ate seven pomegranate seeds. So what?" is dual: it refers to the telling/explanation that will be given in the course of the poem but it also carries with it a note of warning. The tale becomes a cautionary tale.⁵²⁷ Continuing on from this first warning, the opening quatrain ends with: "It doesn't do to get caught out. Watch out for prowlers." And the concluding couplet too, urges precaution: "Beware." While this is an aspect that is present in the tale as told by Ovid it is nevertheless augmented in Carson's poem.

It would appear first that Persephone's eating of seven pomegranate seeds, with which the poem opens, is taken as example, yet a warning one. There are two "don't's" given here to explain her wrong-doing. Firstly, she offended against the gods' decree: "It doesn't do to touch strange fruit, when its forbidden by the Powers- / That-Be." Secondly, she got caught doing so: "It doesn't do to get caught out." With this frame established we enter the tale:

In the second and third quatrain, we follow the tale in the *diegesis*, although by way of summary. The language of the poem is colloquial and direct. The second quatrain tells of Persephone's plucking and eating of the pomegranate: She "plucked the dull-orange bubble. / Split the cortex. Sucked." This is followed by Ascalaphus – referred to as "Stoolie. Pipsqueak. Mouth." – witnessing the act and running off to tell the gods. The third quatrain relates Persephone's revenge – "she spat back as good as she had got" – and the beginning of Ascalaphus' transformation into a bird.

The concluding couplet completes Ascalaphus' transformation. He has become "the scrake-owl, Troubles' augury for Auld Lang Syne". But the couplet's shift from past to present is also a shift from the classical/mythological tale to the poem's larger narrative framework with which the poem began; to its commentary and cautionary aspect. However, here we realize that what at the beginning of the poem had appeared as a warning example, Persephone's eating of the

⁵²⁷ In this, the poem shares something with "Two to Tango", which precedes "Ovid: *Metamorphoses*, V, 529–550" in the collection, and which reads both as an instruction for undercover agents and as a guide for writers. In addition, in relation to the Ovid poem discussed here the following quotations from "Two to Tango" are gratifying: "And you make sure you don't repeat yourself. Change the routine ever / So slightly. Tell no one, I mean no one, what you're up to. Never. Never. Never. // Use slang and buzz-words sparingly." [...] "And then you think, not to repeat yourself is not real life. And so you do. You develop mannerisms. Tics and tags, without them looking like they're pseudo." [...] "Decide before you start, work out your plot, then go for it. *Be inspirational.* // One side says this, the other that. You work it out yourself and walk between the story lines."

pomegranate, was only the prelude for the warning example set by Ascalaphus. Persephone becomes a victim of arbitrary rules and an informer. Ascalaphus becomes the constant informer.

The poem exists in several places at once. To begin with, we are provided with both a classical/mythological locality, “Pluto’s murky realm”, and a setting which bears resonance to a Northern Irish urban context: “no-go zone”. It is unclear, however, whether the classical/mythological setting has been transposed to Northern Ireland or *vice versa*, and the two merge towards the end of the poem, the poem closing with “Pluto’s no-go zone”. Yet this spatial setting is also textual. Certainly, Pluto’s realm is provided by the *Metamorphoses* but the “no-go zone” is also an established space in Carson’s poetry, one his speakers have entered or refrained from entering in earlier poems. The spatial coordinates of the poem are indeterminate and expand further through the poem’s allusions to other intertexts. Just as the poem’s locality is ambiguous, the complex interweaving of various materials creates a movement between the different domains and the text-worlds that they are associated with.

The series “bubble”, “blabbed” and “slabbered” creates a closely-knit narrative. The elements and events referred to here – the pomegranate, Ascalaphus’ informing and Persephone’s revenge – are by all means interconnected in the story: the “bubble” leads to Ascalaphus’ “blabbing” which leads to Persephone’s “slabbering”. The sonic patterning reinforces this chain of events. “bubble” and “blabbed” both hold end positions in the second quatrain: lines one and three, respectively. Although “bubble” and “blabbed” are not perfect rhymes, there is a near-occurrence of sound and, technically, “blabbed” is the (poem’s) response to “bubble”. In other words, on both an aural and an organizational level, as well as in relation to the act it describes, “blabbed” is inextricably linked with “bubble”. “[S]labbered” does not hold an end position and so it does not follow up on the previous two in the same way. Nevertheless, the effect of this matching of sound and events in this cause-and-effect narrative is uncanny.

If the series generates one understanding of the tale, a countermovement is created by other components which deny easy access to the events. Allusions to poems and songs, further, pull the tale in other directions and complicate the telling; generating alternative meanings. In addition to being external to the tale which they help to tell, “strange fruit”, to refer to the pomegranate, Ascalaphus’ “knocked at Heaven’s Door” and his transformation into “Troubles’ augury for Auld Lang Syne” are, outside of the poem, not each other’s consequences. Brought into the poem, they bring with them earlier contexts and meaning at the same time as they are transformed in their new setting. The phrase “knocked, knocked” of course, is an allusion to Bob Dylan’s song which was also part of the soundtrack to the 1973 film *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid*. In the film the song accompanies or intimates Pat’s realization that his role as law enforcer brings death. The phrase multiplies in Carson’s poem: It describes the actual act, underscores Ascalaphus’ wish for entry to the gods, while bringing death to both Ascalaphus and Persephone. “Auld Lang Syne” sees its meaning reversed: whereas its common

meaning is about maintaining old friendship, Ascalaphus means the end of friendship. At the same time, the references need not stay within these contexts. Part of popular culture, they have been performed by numerous artists which entails an accumulation of voices and contexts. “[S]trange fruit”, as we shall see, opens up and forms part of a wider discussion of the poem’s underlying subject-matter of violence.

The pomegranate, firstly, is the starting-point for Carson’s inquiry as well as for the events which will alter both Persephone’s and Ascalaphus’ lives. Given that Carson refers to the pomegranate three times, each time in a different way, in a 14-line poem, it is clearly taken for particular examination. Ovid is content with mentioning it once. First referred to as “pomegranate” it comes endowed with mythological context and symbolic meaning. However, as Karen Bennett is right to point out, the fruit in this poem is “stripped of all its mystical and emotive associations and becomes a piece of edible vegetable matter”.⁵²⁸ The reference to the pomegranate as “dull-orange bubble”, further, “demythologizes the fruit” and it is in this poem “merely food”.⁵²⁹ But the fruit can also be said to lose its symbolic function because of the varied references which both destabilize and multiply its meaning.

“[S]trange fruit”, to refer to the pomegranate, is a carefully chosen intertext. The phrase is the title of a song performed by Billie Holiday, about lynchings of African-Americans in the American South, and the title of a poem in Heaney’s *North*, which tells of a sacrificial killing in Iron Age Jutland. As has been observed by earlier critics, these two allusions both reinforce and widen the poem’s concern with violence and human suffering. In Bennett’s reading, the allusion “strange fruit”, given in the context of “Powers- / That-Be” “is clearly intended to awaken the reader’s sense of injustice at the arbitrary and tyrannical use of power”.⁵³⁰ And Homem notes that in following upon the song and Heaney “Carson makes his refraction of the *Metamorphoses* politically broader and more diffuse”.⁵³¹ While this is one effect which the allusions have, as they are brought into the poem, the discussion can also be taken further if we probe into the particular usage of the phrase “strange fruit” in the poem, and how it compares with the earlier instances.

Carson’s poem shares a theme of violence, oppression and injustice with the earlier texts but its usage of “strange fruit”, within this context, differs and comes to disclose Carson’s alertness to the poetic medium in relation to violent material; how we write about violence. In the song “strange fruit” stands metaphorically for

⁵²⁸ Karen Bennett, “The Recurrent Quest: Demeter and Persephone in Modern-Day Ireland”, *Classical and Modern Literature* 23.1 (2003), 23. Bennett analyses the poem as given in *After Ovid: New Metamorphoses* and in relation to the whole Demeter/Persephone myth. Building upon Lévi-Strauss’ ideas she concludes that Carson “mythologizes in order to undermine”, 26. Although she discusses the poem (“Ascalaphus”) in relation to myth, her analysis is insightful. Her postcolonial claims are, however, difficult to assent to.

⁵²⁹ Bennett, 24.

⁵³⁰ Bennett, 23.

⁵³¹ Homem, 186.

corpses hanging from trees. Heaney's poem, which is intertextually linked with the song, continues the comparison between a fruit and a dead girl's head but by way of simile instead of a metaphor. His poem begins: "Here is the girl's head like an exhumed gourd."⁵³² Heaney's poem is, as mentioned in Chapter 2 of this thesis, a poem in which the poet's aesthetics is questioned by his own subject-matter. Corcoran, for example, has pointed out how "[t]he poem's material [...] criticizes the poem" and in Vendler's reading, Heaney in this poem "recognizes his own tendency to beatify and to venerate, and he finds his response inadequate to the girl's murder".⁵³³ Heaney's poet-speaker does not carry the comparison through but alters his way of describing the dead girl.

Carson differentiates himself from the earlier usages of "strange fruit". In the song and, initially, in Heaney's poem, "strange fruit" and "gourd" are used to refer to corpses. Carson departs from the figurative usage; in his poem "strange fruit" is used to refer to a fruit. Ethical implications can be drawn from this. The images generated by the earlier texts are shocking and disturbing in using something natural to describe death. But there are moral consequences with describing dead bodies as something other than what they are – a realization which we actually see in Heaney's poem as the poet-speaker refrains from pursuing his comparison of the murdered girl's head and a fruit. This interrogation of usages is pursued further in the second quatrain, when the pomegranate (as object) appears again. There we read that Persephone "plucked the dull-orange bubble. / Split the cortex. Sucked." The word "cortex" was probably suggested by the original's "cortice" (rind) but the choice of "cortex", draws attention to itself; particularly in relation to the earlier reference to the pomegranate as "strange fruit" and the contexts that this allusion brings with it.⁵³⁴ With "cortex", fruits and heads become associated in Carson's poem too. However, since it is still the fruit that is being described here, Carson inverts the metaphorical usage of the earlier texts. The fruit, in Carson's poem, is associated with violence, death and injustice, and in this it is in keeping both with the *Metamorphoses*, in which it causes painful events, and with the song and Heaney's poem, where fruits are used to describe atrocities, but, Carson is not using it to refer to dead bodies. Having refused the pomegranate its symbolic function, and made it into an everyday object, the poem says that something as seemingly harmless can disrupt life, but when we write about dead bodies the natural world cannot provide us with images. Although Carson's poem is not describing a dead body, the poem nevertheless disallows this metaphorical usage by employing the phrase to refer back to a fruit instead of corpses.

The incorporation of the allusion "strange fruit", which relates to earlier narratives of violence, shows Carson cognizant of the liabilities involved in artistic representation. The allusion can also be said to continue Carson's dialogue with Heaney although it may be argued that Carson is not resuming his critique of Heaney but admitting mutual awareness. Significantly, in his review of *North* the

⁵³² Heaney, "Strange Fruit", in *Opened Ground*, 119.

⁵³³ Corcoran, *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney*, 75; Vendler, 48.

⁵³⁴ Ovid, 274.

poem “Strange Fruit” was singled out by Carson as one of the good poems in the book since it “does not posture in its own ‘understanding’ of death; Heaney says quite honestly that he doesn’t know”.⁵³⁵ What may be suggested here is that he has found common ground with Heaney, which lies in the poets’ shared responsibility towards the poetic medium and their subject-matter; the self-reflexivity and attentiveness with which their projects must be undertaken.

Rewriting a passage from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, which deals with themes of disobedience, informants, punishment and revenge, the method employed allows Carson to interweave similar, but different, narratives within the same framework. The various narratives coexist but they also refract one another. The textual components are linked by association. Ascalaphus leads from “bubble” to “blabbed” and the sonic patterning leads to songs. The murders in “Strange Fruit” lead to the murder in “Knockin’ on Heaven’s Door”, the betrayal of friendship in “Knockin’ on Heaven’s Door” leads to “Auld Lang Syne”, whose common meaning of friendship is turned inside out. Thus, the story is not repeating itself but the poem’s intricate structure allows for unique stories to shed light on one another.

“Latitude 38° S”

“Latitude 38° S” is a poem about art and metamorphosis. Whereas “Ovid: *Metamorphoses*, V, 529–550” inquires into a specific tale, that of Persephone and Ascalaphus with its themes of violence, injustice and revenge, this poem takes the *Metamorphoses*, and its general framework of transformation, as its underlying structure and subject of examination. Within this framework, different kinds of metamorphosis from Ovid’s epic – the tales of Marsyas, Perdix and Daedalus – as well as of Carson’s own making, are interwoven.

The poem emanates from a reading of the *Metamorphoses* and it opens with the tale of Marsyas, the satyr who challenged Apollo to a music competition:

Then they told the story of the satyr, who played the flute so brilliantly / In Phrygia,
he tried to beat Apollo. Apollo won, of course; for extra measure, thought / He’d
bring the satyr down another peg or two: stripped off his pelt, ungloving it from //
Scalpwads down. And could he play then? With his fingertips all raw, / His
everything all peeled and skinless?

The opening draws on the passage in Book VI in the *Metamorphoses*, lines 382–440. The key details – the framework of storytelling, Marsyas and Apollo, the competition and Apollo’s punishment of Marsyas – are all derived from Ovid. Yet the poem is not a direct textual rendition of the *Metamorphoses* but the speaker’s reflection and meditation on the tale. The evaluative “of course” and the questions,

⁵³⁵ Carson, “Escaped from the Massacre?”, 185.

underlining the consequences for the fluteplayer who can no longer perform his art, are the speaker's own additions. In this the poem shares a format and a mode with Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" (alluded to towards the poem's close) where we, similarly, find the speaker contemplating a scene on an ancient artwork, responding to it by posing questions.⁵³⁶

In the poem the *Metamorphoses* is both a tangible object and a text. One can "flip" its pages and in the library "[t]here's a shelf of *Metamorphoses*. Commentaries. Lives. *The Mystery of Ovid's / Exile*." It appears also in the form of a quotation from the first English translation, Golding's 1567 version: "clearest in that Realme". As these examples disclose, however, the *Metamorphoses* is not Keats's "cold pastoral"; as an artwork, it has remained since the first century, but as text it is not static. Since its conception in antiquity, it has been subject to metamorphosis. It exists in multiple editions and copies, it has been commented on, and translated. Just as the myths collected and drawn upon by Ovid, and then told by his many speakers in the *diegesis*, are communal, the *Metamorphoses* has passed through many hands, has been continuously (re)told and (re)interpreted at different times and places and in different languages. When Ovid's successors, in the poem's concluding section "stare into / The water – 'clearest in that Realme' – and see the fishes shingled", what they see, the quotation marks imply, is Golding's translation of the Marsyas tale. The translation, the poem intimates, is like water in-between the viewer/reader and what is below the surface, and like water, it can refract. The *Metamorphoses* – in itself an example of recreation – exists in several versions and is part of a larger literary and cultural context; is part of cultural memory. It is a richly layered weave which, in turn, has provided the warp and weft of new poems, what this poem calls "[t]he fledglings of the lyrebird's song". "Latitude 38° S" is one of these fledglings.

The title "Latitude 38° S" sets up a different framework in comparison with "Ovid: *Metamorphoses*, V, 529–550", which directs the reader to specific lines in the source text, yet it provides a clue for how to approach the poem. Firstly, it links the two worlds of the poem: Australia, located at 38° S, and Greece, the home of the classical myths, located at latitude 38° N; a connection which is picked up again when an Australian stamp, "bearing the unlikely-looking lyre-shaped / Tail of the lyrebird" brings back "the Phrygian mode". Secondly, the geographical reference emphasizes the relocation of the myths which have travelled from Athens, to Ovid's Rome, to the poem's Apollo Bay; a relocation which is both spatial and temporal. Furthermore, read self-reflexively, it gives an insight into the working of the poem *vis-à-vis* its source text and the myths drawn upon. Since the southern and northern latitude are both each other's opposites as well as parallels, the title connotes the collection's general idea of being, not being and becoming, the change out of and into something else; metamorphosis.

⁵³⁶ Chapter 2 of this thesis makes a brief comparison between the image of the tree in "The Patchwork Quilt" and "Ode on a Grecian Urn", suggesting that Keats's tree, representing permanence, can be seen as the negative other to the tree in Carson's poem, representing change and mutability.

The poem is divided into seven numbered sections. Sections one to six are held together by the tale of Marsyas but perhaps more significantly, by Ovid's text and storytelling. The poem begins in Ovid's narrative and with storytelling ("Then they told the story") and returns in the sixth section to the text and "Ovid's people". Within this framework occur the other tales of metamorphoses: those of Perdix and Daedalus and those of the poet's own making.⁵³⁷ The poem does not read as a continuous or linear narrative but the poem is held together thematically, by the theme of metamorphosis, and formally, by the recurrence of words and phrases, alliteration, and imagery. Within each section, there is a movement between the mythological world, provided by Ovid's text, and that of the poet.

Examining the *Metamorphoses*, and its idea of transformation, the poem intimates that art is, or should aspire to, change and recreation. "Latitude 38° S" bears this out on the level of theme and form. Having considered Apollo's punishment of Marsyas, Carson's speaker responds to the tale with his own transformation of the satyr, changing the fluteplayer into an instrument: "The pulsing bag / Of guts you'd think might play a tune, if you could bring yourself to blow and squeeze it." The example is indicative of Carson's way of incorporating metamorphoses not only as theme but as a method of his own.

Marsyas's tale is followed, in the second section, by a brief account of Perdix (Book VIII), the transition from one tale to the other, and one section to the other, being made by the speaker turning the page: he "flipped the tissue-paper and took in the Christian iconography". Here it is related that Perdix "who'd invented the saw had studied the anatomy of a / Fish's spine. From bronze he cut the teeth and tried them out on a boxwood tree". Yet reflecting on tales of metamorphosis, derived from Ovid's epic, the speaker's thoughts and the narrative begin to follow the same path: the "boxwood tree", with which the speaker's account of Perdix ends, turns in the following line into a "boxwood flute", which is an addition of Carson's own making. The transition and transformation is suggestive. It is an indicator of Carson's narrative procedure in the poem: Carson here using the "saw" of the myth (to cut down the tree) to make another instrument, the flute with which he can and will play his own tunes with whilst, again, underlining how one metamorphosis can become another.

The poem's following four sections, section three to six, unfold as a series of associations where episodes and elements from the *Metamorphoses* merge with Carson's own accounts of art, books and writing and different kinds of shape-shifting. In the third section, Daedalus (Book VIII) is "herring-boning feathers into wings", our speaker imagining himself as "[t]he sticky, thumby wax with which he oozed the quills together". Henceforth, as the two worlds become more and more interwoven, the poet-speaker is the "wax" which joins the different parts of the poem. A first case in point is the character Fletcher, in the following section,

⁵³⁷ In the *Metamorphoses* Marsyas's tale is related in Book VI ll. 382–440, the tale of Daedalus in Book VIII ll. 183–235, followed by Perdix ll. 236–259. In Carson's poem the telling of Daedalus and Perdix is reversed.

who has been “trying to copy the *Inquit* page off the Book / Of Kells”. Fletcher is connected with Marsyas, in that both of them lose skin (Fletcher “sliced the palp / Of his finger off”),⁵³⁸ and with Daedalus, as they both work with quills, but notably Fletcher is also connected to the previous tales through his name: Marsyas’s finger(tips) and flute and Daedalus’ feather. In the fifth section, the library, with its “[b]asement, security requirements, conduits, wiring, laminates and ducts. / Up above, the floor and stacks and filing systems”, evokes a labyrinth and the books become an instrument for the poet to play on as he “strummed their rigid spiny gamut”.

In section six, the Australian stamp with “the unlikely-looking lyre-shaped / Tail of the lyrebird” evokes “the Phrygian mode”. Indigenous to Australia, the lyrebird connects the two worlds of the poem. It is “unlikely-looking” because in the pictorial representation the bird’s tail is shaped in the form of an ancient lyre, although the natural bird does not display its tail in this shape; the stamp intimating the quandaries of representation. Yet the lyre, of course, is also connected with Apollo and in this section we return to the passage, as well as to the narrative mode, with which the poem began, that of the telling of Marsyas. Marsyas’s tale is hereby concluded and its metamorphosis related: Marsyas giving name to a river “which – / Said Ovid’s people – sprang from all the tears the country fauns and nymphs / And shepherds wept in Phrygia, as they mourned their friend the fettered satyr”.

Whereas the poem’s first six sections are about the *Metamorphoses* and the two worlds, that of the myth and that of the poet’s own making, the concluding section has a meta-poetic quality. It begins: “So they tell their stories, of the cruelty of gods and words and music. / The fledglings of the lyrebird’s song.” Here “they”, who in the previous parts have been used to refer to the Phrygians and “Ovid’s people”, i.e. the storytellers in the *diegesis* of the *Metamorphoses*, extends to poets in general, including Carson himself. The mentioning of the lyrebird, known for its vocal mimicry, is significant since it points both to imitation and to the recycling of sounds for the incorporation and creation of a new song; the reproduction of sounds for a new purpose.⁵³⁹

⁵³⁸ In his essay “Ulster Ovids”, Kerrigan discusses how the *Metamorphoses*, as well as Ovid’s biography, banished from Rome to forced exile at Tomi, a “victim of his art”, have provided imaginative ground for Northern Irish poets. Published in 1992, the essay predates Carson’s Ovid poems but several of Carson’s contemporaries are discussed. Heaney, envisaging himself as an “inner émigré”, “weighing and weighing / My responsible *tristia*” is a well-known example, in *The Chosen Ground: Essays on the Contemporary Poetry of Northern Ireland*, 241 and 239. Carson’s interest is in the idea of transformation despite this poem’s mentioning of both the *Metamorphoses* and John C. Thibault’s *The Mystery of Ovid’s Exile*. Although this focus is certainly suggested by the framework of the anthology *After Ovid*, for which the Ovid poems were commissioned, the *Metamorphoses* contains plenty of tales of artists who are victims of their art, Marsyas being one example.

⁵³⁹ The lyrebird, which is indigenous to Australia, is a gratifying image of the poet. It can imitate other birds as well as man-made sounds (“human whistles and speech fragments,

It is significant how in Carson's combination and moulding of the tales, they can all be taken to suggest different kinds of imitation. In Marsyas we see someone who aspires to be someone else: to challenge the god on the god's own territory and usurp the god's power. Fletcher approaches the *Book of Kells* as Marsyas approaches Apollo: "he'd been trying to copy the *Inquit* page off the Book / Of Kells, as if it were a series of 'unquotes'. The way you'd disengage / The lashes of a feather, then try and put them back together." Fletcher is not writing to multiply the original but to replace it. An example of imitation which aims to retain both the form and function of the original, Fletcher too loses skin in the process as he, when sharpening his quill accidentally "sliced the palp / Of his finger off". Marsyas and Fletcher who both try to be the model can be set against Daedalus and Perdix whose skills represent recreation.⁵⁴⁰ Daedalus, "herring-boning feathers into wings" and "ooz[ing] the quills together" is recycling, joining smaller parts into a larger entity. He starts with a model but constructs something of his own making. Perdix identifies a form, "a / Fish's spine", examines its "anatomy", and by inventing the "saw", gives the form a new function. Just as the tales narrated show different methods, art can be approached in different ways. However, Carson's concern in this poem is not mainly with the artist but with the artist's craft. Carson combines the tale of Marsyas with that of Perdix and Daedalus but his handling of Perdix' and Daedalus' tales helps prove the point. In "Latitude 38° S", their tales are given in concentrated form of two lines each, the emphasis falling on their making: Daedalus constructing wings out of feathers and Perdix's invention of the saw. Key components, such as the labyrinth in Crete, the death of Daedalus' son Icarus, and Daedalus killing Perdix, are omitted. The fact that Daedalus makes wings in order to escape imprisonment is likewise left out. And it is not Perdix's transformation into a partridge which is placed in focus but the creativity which his skill represents: seeing connections, making use of already existent material and putting it to new use. Hereby both the constituent events of the myths and their themes of jealousy, escape and death are omitted, something which underscores that Carson's interest lies not in retelling but in recycling.

The various examples of imitation give a self-reflexive commentary on Carson's own practice of imitation, broadly understood. Daedalus' technique of recycling and joining quills is suggestive of what Carson has done previously; it varies his patchwork technique. In "Latitude 38° S", however, Carson joins tales of art and metamorphosis (feathers) into a larger narrative about art and metamorphosis (a wing) but he also identifies a structure – the *Metamorphoses* – and gives it a new function. The combination parallels the idea of warp and weft.

vehicles, cameras, and musical instruments") which it incorporates into its song. The sounds are mainly "culturally transmitted" and learnt from older birds rather than the actual sources. *The New Encyclopedia of Birds*, ed. Christopher Perrins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), s.v. *lyrebirds*.

⁵⁴⁰ Set in relation to the lyrebird it is of course suggestive that Daedalus makes wings to fly with but is not transformed into a bird, he is a man with wings, whereas according to the myth, Perdix metamorphoses into a bird.

According to this reading of “Latitude 38° S”, the poem is not a mythologizing of the present as has been suggested in earlier criticism. The poem points to a scholarly context of research and interpretation and to the *Metamorphoses* and Ovid as a field of study: the labyrinth-like library is “packed with expectant academics” and the library shelf contains commentaries. Examining the *Metamorphoses*, its framework of change, and selected passages, the poem is one such commentary but in poetic form. Instead of writing a scholarly essay, Carson writes a poem which begins in the *Metamorphoses* and ends with a reflection on Ovid’s legacy and art in general; which begins with the tale of Marsyas and ends with the conclusion that artists do not create myths; they give voice to tradition and inherited material. The myths, “[f]ossil ribs and saws [...] the fluteplayer’s outstretched fingers”, are there to be drawn upon but their telling, the “stories, of the cruelty of gods and words and music” are “[w]ritten on the water”; ongoing and forever changeable.

6. Concluding Remarks

The aim of this thesis is to provide an account of Ciaran Carson's characteristic method of writing new poems by rewriting anterior texts. I examine Carson's method in terms of its thematic formulation and its formal realization from his debut in the 1970s up to and including his 1993 collection *First Language*. As the title of my thesis indicates, the nature of this poetics is often expressed through metaphorical associations with a craft: quilting, unravelling, weaving. Its development is traced by means of four successive analytical metaphors: "Exploring", "Quilting", "Unravelling", "Meta-morphosing". These metaphors also provide the titles of the four analytical chapters of the thesis.

Rewriting, made manifest in Carson's work as both intertextuality and translation, is marked by self-reflexivity: it shows Carson's attentiveness to poetry as a medium and to his own expression. It is associated with the ambition to be as genuine as possible towards the material, whilst admitting to the liabilities of poetic representations; the material in the poems analysed in this thesis is often the historical and political situation in Northern Ireland and particularly its effects on the city of Belfast.

The early poem "The Patchwork Quilt", which closes Carson's juvenilia and anticipates his subsequent writing, gives a detailed description of the principles behind making a quilt. It reads, metaphorically, as a description of the making of a poem but, also, as a version of intertextuality: old material is recycled and deliberately incorporated into and made a constitutive part of a text, something which, in turn, affects meaning-making. The old fragments carry with them meaning from their earlier context at the same time as they are subject to recontextualization. In "Patchwork" and "Brick" recycling remains a component, although the techniques change, which makes the poems particularly apt to relate to Carson's own practice of recycling and his conscious use of earlier texts. Just as the techniques, as well as their intents and purposes, are modified in each ensuing poem, so Carson's practice of rewriting changes character. In this thesis I have traced the interconnections between the textile/textual techniques, aiming to chart the formation and development of Carson's poetics and his recourse to rewriting.

As my analyses reveal, the metaphors are both more singular and multifaceted than previously noticed, and they also help to refine and nuance the discussion of Carson's rewritings – his strategies and its functions – which have not received the attention they merit.

My tracing of Carson's textile/textual techniques examines writing as quilting, writing as unravelling and writing as weaving. Following "The Patchwork Quilt", the mother's "stitching, / Darning, mending" and unravelling in "Patchwork" in *The Irish for No* serves metaphorically for the ways in which earlier texts are adapted or appropriated into a new text. The technique of "unravelling" is furthered in "Brick" of *Belfast Confetti*, which stresses ongoing recycling: "jumpers became scarves and socks" and can become something new again; similarly, a text written once can be once or twice recycled. "Second Language" of *First Language* both completes the textile imagery and suggests new beginnings. On a thematic level, it makes the analogy between textile creativity and poetic creativity (and particularly Carson's own practice) manifest: *weave* is cognate with *text* and in this poem the poet is the craftsman. Although the technique is no longer that of stitching together old material, the weave, made up of warp and weft, lends itself to text-making, but in a broader sense. We may envisage the warp as an underlying structure – which may be an earlier text, but also the literary system, cultural narratives, life itself, all that a poet draws on to make a poem – and the weft as the poet's contribution.

Carson engages with earlier texts in ways similar to the techniques described. In "The Irish for No", deploying the patchwork poetics, quotations and allusions from Keats, Shakespeare, Heaney and Frost are incorporated into the poem's quilt. In *Belfast Confetti*, Carson adapts and appropriates a variety of texts and engages in an activity which bears semblance to the mother's "incessant unravelling", making new text out of old. Historical accounts, Japanese haiku, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and MacNeice's "Snow" are just a few of the texts appropriated and subjected to various kinds of transformations. In *First Language*, Carson's extensive engagements with the *Metamorphoses* produce new poems, the earlier text acquiring the function of a predetermined structure upon which or with which Carson weaves a new poem; a method to some extent anticipated already in *Belfast Confetti*, in Carson's rewritings of haiku.

Significantly, the textile metaphors denote more than technique. In the four poems, the techniques are linked to specific practices, intents and purposes and these, further, are given in specific contexts. In this, the metaphors carry with them an artistic attitude or ideal. The two portraits of the mother, following on that of the grandmother, intimate a reconceptualization of the artistic project: there is here a movement away from the idea of the finished work of art (a quilt) – intended as a symbolic gift – to the idea of art as an everyday object for everyday use, made out of necessity, and where the artwork itself does not remain immune to recycling but can itself be recycled. The practices, further, are placed in the context of and made to connote life, mutability, the condition of the city, even, as in "Brick", "the great chain of being". The idea of art that this yields is that art should be seen as an

ongoing activity which must forfeit its claim to permanence. In addition to this, the practices are placed within a personal sphere: in the context of family, the poet's hometown, and in relation to language acquisition. Here, the textile/textual practices become associated with the terms of our existence.

The successive reconfigurations of the metaphors display self-consciousness on the part of the poet, who in each of the poems reformulates the metaphor and advances it one step further. This self-reflexive mode is heightened by the fact that the poems "The Patchwork Quilt", "Patchwork" and "Brick" are intertextually linked. "Brick" returns to "Patchwork" and "Patchwork" returns to "The Patchwork Quilt". Notably what is being returned to in each instance (amongst a few other details) is the description of the techniques. This makes the metaphors, although distinctive in themselves, not entirely separate but interconnected. Together, they comprise a series of techniques which also involves a retake of the earlier one. The formulation of the poetics works by accretion. This means too that while the reconfiguration of the metaphors in these poems is thematic, the poems themselves execute the poetics. Carson puts the poetics of recycling into practice in his own thematic formulation of it.

Carson's complex and elaborate rewritings are related to a wider discussion about form and material. The methods given by the metaphors enable Carson to deal with the quandaries of aesthetic representations: the patchwork poetics enables Carson to attempt representation, whereas the metaphor of unravelling is coupled with a distrust of representation – a realization that accurate representations cannot be made – which leads to a focus on form and an increasing attention to the mechanisms behind narratives. Carson himself has described the collection *The Irish for No* as a patchwork, made up of poems/patches which contribute to the larger narrative of the collection; suggesting that the Belfast he seeks to describe in this collection depends on the heterogeneous. Yet this thesis takes the patchwork metaphor further to the level of the composition of individual poems. In "The Irish for No" the patchwork poetics, a composite method whereby various fragments are recycled and pieced together to form a new whole, provides Carson with a model for writing Belfast. It allows for the multiple and heterogeneous and simultaneously allows the poet to admit how precarious are our representations of experience. The poem, due to its self-reflexive incorporation of intertexts, works against summary judgements and offers a view from different perspectives.

In *Belfast Confetti*, Carson dissolves the idea of a correct and adequate expression. In evidence in this collection is a distrust of representation, the poet admitting to the inadequacy of representation for fully capturing the object to be represented. The only approach is to acknowledge the provisional nature of representation. What is being "unravelling" in this collection are not only earlier texts but also the idea of representation. This is most prominently handled in the collection's prose pieces where Carson recycles historical accounts of Belfast. On a most concrete level this demonstrates how the telling of Belfast must be continuously revised, but it also questions the accuracy of textual accounts. It

discloses too that representations can only be partial, are dependent on perspectives. Yet unravelling, understood simultaneously as the appropriation or adaptation of an earlier text and the questioning of representation, is seen in other poems too. In “Yes”, an intertext takes the position of a bomb, drawing our attention to representations of violence. The poem reads as an attempt, through contrast, to make strange straightforward representation of that which is incomprehensible and that which might not, cannot, be directly represented. The incorporation of the intertext destabilizes the act of representing and upsets habitual reading-experiences. In this collection, rewriting leads to a questioning of representation which leads to a focus on form. This is brought to the fore in the concluding poem “Hamlet”. The poem draws on Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* but the poem’s aesthetic, historical and ethical gestures lie in its affinities with, and departures from, the play; the aim is not to incorporate the Northern Ireland conflict into a narrative of revenge. In this poem, Shakespeare’s play as a thematic model is less at issue than it is a starting-point for a demonstration of form as an instrument of sense-making.

There is an ethical dimension to Carson’s writing. An ethical stance is in evidence in his 1975 review of Heaney’s *North* where he discusses the historical and political consequences of Heaney’s aesthetic procedures, famously criticizing Heaney’s mythic method on the grounds that past and present collapse, something which not only suggests a cyclical notion of history but one which seems to imply that violence is natural and inevitable. A more adequate response, Carson suggests in the review, is one where the poet does not seek to explain but simply describes, “seeing what’s before your eyes”. This aspect also shows in Carson’s review of C. K. Williams, where he values the poet’s anti-authoritarian attitude. As critics have pointed out before me, Carson’s poetry reveals a rejection of meta-narratives and his poems work against summary judgements and explanations. Yet he achieves this in part through recycling. Considering his deployment of earlier texts, one is certainly right to ask how he himself avoids conflating past and present. However, recycling entails that nothing returns in identical shape; earlier texts, recontextualized, do not denote the same thing as in their original context. This notion of repetition with a difference is also promoted by the metaphors of quilting and unravelling: on a concrete level, the textiles do not return in identical form but are made into and become something else. Carson’s strategies, further, also work against coherence and cohesion. The earlier texts introduce into Carson’s poems not similarities but differences, not explanatory frameworks but multiplicity, heterogeneity and ambiguity. It is at this point pertinent to remind oneself of the fact that when the patchwork poetics is first introduced in “The Patchwork Quilt” it is, through an allusion, offered as an alternative to Heaney’s poetics. To Heaney’s pen/spade/gun analogy Carson suggests the pen/needle and to the activity of “digging” is set that of stitching together that which is varied in shape and form.

“The Irish for No”, for example, a poem which displays a self-conscious deployment of intertexts, intimates that analogies should always come with a modifier, bringing attention to differences and to that which is particular, not by

equating past and present. The opening stanza reads as a guiding principle for both reader and poet, imparting the idea that the intertexts should not be seen as signifying the original but as being slightly different from the original. In introducing several intertexts, several voices, this poem also destabilizes one singular narrative and Carson's own poem is left open-ended. Furthermore, Carson, drawing on what could be regarded as archetypal narratives of sectarian conflict, revenge and violence – *Romeo and Juliet*, *Hamlet*, the *Metamorphoses* – does not allow them to work as such. It is of note that when the two Shakespeare plays are drawn upon it is not as their “original” selves. *Romeo and Juliet* comes with a modifier, calling our attention to differences and that which is local. Contemporary Belfast is not medieval Verona. And neither is contemporary Belfast Hamlet's Elsinore. Setting Carson's “Hamlet” against *Hamlet* we see the aesthetic and ethical undertakings of Carson's project. Carson's generic shift in his rewriting suggests that actual violence cannot be organized into a schema of cause-and-effect where one event is the “logical” consequence of a preceding one. Making use of earlier narratives on violence, but recontextualizing and pointing to the specificity of time and place, the poems imply that while both the past and present know of violence, its causes differ.

It is in part due to rewriting that Carson achieves an anti-authoritarian stance which he values in C. K. Williams but also sees in some poems in Heaney's *North* – poems in which the poet does not seek to explain. Composing poems which draw on other texts and foregrounding textual interrelations, Carson suggests that his poems are not self-sufficient entities. Because of this deliberate and signalled *inter*-textual relationship, Carson overtly relinquishes his claim to authority and totalizing narratives, making his poems dependent on the reader to co-construct and complete them by activating the links; a process which, of course, is beyond the poet's control.

Carson's recourse to rewriting unveils a self-reflexive stance towards the practice. In my discussion of Carson's two Ovid poems, “Ovid: *Metamorphoses*, V, 529–550” and “Latitude 38° S”, in the previous chapter, I point to the risk of overlooking the intertextual purpose in Carson's rewritings of episodes from the *Metamorphoses*, i.e. *how* he engages with and makes use of the earlier material. There I argue against critical readings in which Carson is seen to “mythologize” the Northern Ireland crisis, due to thematic similarities between the political conflict and the mythological tales related in the poems. Such a reading would not only be at odds with Carson's work at large, which consistently counsels against easy identifications, but with the poems themselves. Although the poems, in particular the first of the poems discussed, “Ovid: *Metamorphoses*, V, 529–550”, contain a mythic and a contemporary world, the interrelations set up in the poems are those between two texts. Carson is not engaging with myth but with text. This should not be seen as disengagement on the poet's part but discloses an intense awareness of the quandaries of aesthetic representations of violence and the poet's responsibility towards his material. These poems are commentaries on the *Metamorphoses* used to inquire into how we, as “Latitude 38° S” puts it, “tell [...] stories, of the cruelty of gods and words and music”. For this reason I also argue

against the claim put forward by one critic that Carson, throughout *The Irish for No*, *Belfast Confetti* and finally *First Language*, gradually works his way towards the mythic method he dismissed in *North*. On the contrary, Carson's handling of the earlier text shows that he is still continuous with his critique and remains cognizant of the ethical implications of poetic representations of violence. That said, there is here a sense of return to Heaney's *North* and Carson's review of it, but it lies elsewhere. Alluding to a poem in *North*, in which the poet admits to the liabilities of his own aesthetics, I suggest that Carson has, at this stage, found common ground with his senior, which lies in the poets' shared responsibility towards their medium.

Carson's review of *North*, his strategies in rewriting, and here, his engagement with the Ovid poems and the allusion to Heaney, show Carson's critical engagement with his own expression. Carson's poetics is both an aesthetics and an ethics – an evolving response along both aesthetic and ethical lines to the complexities of his situation and his role as a poet.

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