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Limits of orality and textuality in Ciaran Carson’s poetry

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Introduction

_In the beginning was the Word._

John 1:1

_The trace must be thought before the entity._

_The (pure) trace is différance._

Jacques Derrida, _Of Grammatology_

_How things are named by any other name except themselves, thereof I meant to speak._

Ciaran Carson, “Whisky”

Literary scholarship, as any other field of research, looks into its subject matter from two perspectives: that of present day issues and themes, and the historical point of view which regards the development of literature itself and a theoretical reflection on it. Any literary theory whose ambition is to grasp the phenomenon of literacy in general cannot allow itself to reduce any of the two perspectives to a single one, but faces the difficult task of combining the two into a dynamic paradigm. Thus, it can be argued that no reflection on literature and literary theory can be deemed complete without checking how its tools function when applied both to the contemporary problems and their historical evolution, i.e. proving its potential to shed light on its subject both in synchronic and diachronic terms. The question of the synchronic and diachronic approaches is central to the organization of this work and shall be discussed later on in this introduction. At this point, however, it immediately raises questions about the roots and origins of both literature and literary studies.
This thesis does not attempt to establish a firm basis of the phenomenon of literacy. Moreover, at some point it might even be necessary to entirely drop the very idea of a positively defined source or mythical spring from which the art of crafting words stems. What this thesis is in fact trying to prove is that we cannot speak of a definite centre or core that contains in itself an enclosed set of essential features that characterise literature. What I would like to propose is to perceive the process of evolution in literature as a dynamic, self-propelling dialectic of two features which have been at various points in history used to designate as the founding principles of literature: orality and textuality. These two models, I would argue, are specific boundaries and oppositions that can serve as signposts delimiting the field in which the phenomenon of literature emerges. In order to do that, however, the two terms have to be redefined and reassessed – released from their traditional, commonsensical meaning. Thus, it becomes crucial to inspect the ideas that lie behind writing and speaking, so that they can be reconfigured in such a way as to build a functional model for the production of literary texts.

At this point I shall present the working definitions of orality and textuality. With regard to orality, it is not understood here as a historical stage in the development of literature, but rather its constitutive element which links “literariness” back to an oral tradition which is an institution responsible for upholding the continuity of culture.¹ As Przemysław Czapliński argues, the distinguishing features of this type of literature are:

- anonymity – the whole tradition actually stands for the “author,” while individual works are produced in a processual manner by way of a set of operations (forming the rules of oral composition),²

² Ibid., pp. 12-13. Key figures in this approach are Milman Parry and Albert Lord.
- the fact that is establishes and operates within an ontological paradigm of communication shaping individual consciousness,

- the belief that the spoken word is also a means of action, emphasizing its performative, physical aspect and freeing it from the position of a mere “thought-representative.”

This thesis does not attempt to engage in an anthropologically-inflected discussion regarding the so-called great divide, i.e. the relationship of orality and textuality on the historical plane of the development of cultures. Thus, I shall limit my scope of interest to what has been set out by the most influential scholars in this field as the general directions of conceiving orality, which Czapliński sums up as: a holistic approach to the “work,” its processual organization and interactive performance, its modes of actualizing memory and power of live speech, as well as the articulation (and dependence on) a particular paradigm of communication. In short – orality is a mode of producing literature which has its own sources, structures and forms, all related to the physicality of speech and rooted in the practices of the community.

Textuality, on the other hand, is the condition of “writenness,” according to the New Oxford Dictionary of English (2001). This, however, can mean many things. Firstly, as we learn from OED that in the 19th century it was understood as the adherence to the text, i.e. being faithful to the Holy Scriptures and accepting their authoritative position. This already foreshadows the closeness to the letter, both in a semantic sense (as a patient hermeneutical operation) and in relation to its physical aspect, by focusing on the materiality of the book and typography. I take all of those elements to designate textuality which is, from this perspective, both a state (condition of being textual, i.e. “etched” or “weaved”) and a process (as a practice of reading, following the line of the text and the way in which the text dynamically opens up or closes before the scrutinizing eye).

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3 Ibid., pp. 21-23. One needs to mention in this context Walter Ong, Marshall McLuhan and Eric Havelock.
4 Ibid., pp. 19-20. A complete “performative” theory of orality was developed by Richard Bauman.
5 Ibid., p. 30.
Structuralism took the word “text” to replace the old notion of “work,” while post-structuralism made one step further by showing that text is not a closed structure, but an open-ended field where various chains of signification converge. From this perspective, adopted also in this thesis, just like orality, “textuality is one way to know the world,” the crucial difference being that its field of operation is the signifier. This allowed Spivak to formulate the following definition: textuality is a “sowing that does not produce plants, but is simply infinitely repeated.” This metaphor, constructed on the ground of Jacques Derrida’s deconstruction, combines two crucial elements: the autonomous and iterative nature of text and its self-generative propelling that makes texts spread (or “disseminate” to introduce Derrida’s term). This way of putting it, although rooted in one specific theory and thus prone to criticism, seems to be, as I shall try to prove, a productive approach and despite its limitations provides a firm basis for exploring the ways in which literary texts are produced.

Naturally, such an attempt is bound to be limited, as a thorough analysis would extend far beyond the scope of literary studies onto the fields of anthropology, philosophy and linguistics. It might perhaps be a utopian project to combine the knowledge from such disparate fields, since with such a large amount of data that these areas of study provide a complete synthesis would be an ever-receding goal, disappearing whenever we would want to finally get hold of it. What I propose instead is to try to retrace this model of literary production and its limits through a single narrative – that of a literary output of a single author, in this particular case – Ciaran Carson. The assumption that I am willing to admit to frankly here would be that the development of a particular “species” is reflected in the development of a single representative of that “species” – that ontogenesis follows closely the philogenesis. My assumption is that if we take a closer look at the work of a single writer,  

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6 The interlacing of texts and chains of signs is particularly made visible in the theories of “intertextuality” (formulated by Julia Kristeva) and “hypertextuality” (Gérard Genette).
whose *ouevre* is big enough to perform such an operation, it might be possible to discern in it, in its themes, internal tensions and resolutions, the exact same pattern that could be observed by scrutinizing the historical development of literature. This is not to say that I shall be trying to analyse the work of Ciaran Carson as a self-enclosed entity that hovers lonely over a desert of dead signifiers. Far from that – the perspective of New Criticism that would lean towards such an interpretation is in case of this particular poet and writer impossible, as his work is deeply indebted to and rooted in the cultural background from which it emerges. My argument here would be that it is the notion of the literary subject that needs to be redefined in this case. Therefore, it shall be of no concern here to establish connections between particular events from the author’s life and his works. It is rather the projection of him onto that field of literature (delimited by the two poles of orality and textuality) that will be the subject of this thesis. This projection, I would argue, extends beyond the singular psyche of a living person. It is a “subjective field” that contains elements that have psychological, cultural and intrinsically literary origin, which have been incorporated into the image of the author, the vague entity we come to know through the signature of Ciaran Carson and his work.

A question might be raised at this point whether such an approach does not fall into the category of pure textualism, a trend within human sciences that would follow a radical interpretation of the statement made by Jacques Derrida in *Of Grammatology*, namely that there is nothing outside text, that text is the fabric of reality as we know it and cannot be broken through in order to reach some kind of an actual truth about the world. This argument could be countered with the observation that the “subjective field” I would like to use as the point of departure here is comprised not only of abstract, immaterial elements, but can also envelop within its web-like structure the physical traces of the material world which fail to be abstracted into symbols, such as smells, textures and tastes. Thus, it could be argued that any such “subjective field” is a structure that cuts across the boundaries of space and time,
incorporating elements that are both textual and not, rearranging them into a delicate network that is projected onto the canvas of language. This, I would argue, would be the closest to any definition of literature that I can offer at this point.

The questions of orality and textuality have been often tackled by philosophers in the 20th century and proved to be inextricably linked, providing a creative tension that is centred around the most basic questions of the nature of language, our relationship to it and the function of literature. In a lucid essay on the subject, Joseph N. Riddel comments on the differing approaches to language and Being in the thought of Martin Heidegger and its subsequent criticism conducted by Jacques Derrida. He remarks that for Heidegger, language is the “language of Being,” while poetic speech is the authentic voice of that language, a voice that articulates Being. Derrida, on the other hand, introduces the concept of différence, through which he wants to point out the fact that language is just a figural play of irreducible differences. This distinction would lie in the fact that for Heidegger the authentic language, ripe with meaning, is the place where Being dwells, i.e. where it announces and reveals itself. Thus, he posits a positive approach to language and gives the poets a primary place in the world as they are shepherds of Being, the final meaning, tending to it and sanctifying it. Derrida, on the other hand, claims that language is governed by a certain “play” and constant reiteration of a lack of meaning. The tension between the two thinkers on this subject is the exact tension that I would like to point out as the “engine” that “runs” literature, transforming the poem into a space where Being and difference collide, thus setting into motion something that could be called, for lack of a better expression, a literary consciousness. This phenomenon is, I would say, the proper object of literary studies and the final frontier of any serious poet.

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Philosophical technicalities aside, I would like to point out that the question of the meaning of literature, along with its accompanying shadow of literary studies, is stretched between these two extremes: the orality, viewed by some as the firm presence, a basis and foundation of all possible literatures, and textuality, regarded by others as an initial “tracing,” a rift, slide or spacing that provides the necessary impetus to the circulation of meaning and thus gives rise to a play of meaning without which the literary work would not be capable of attaining the crucial hermeneutic depth. Ciaran Carson’s poetry is a vast body of works which constantly oscillate between these two poles. The Northern Irish poet is equally drawn to both extremes: he indulges in both the traditional aspects of storytelling, lyric and epic poetry, and in the modern, purely textual possibilities from which he derives his elusive, multi-faceted style.

The crucial question regarding the dynamics of orality and textuality is whether this pair (a thesis and its accompanying anti-thesis – it does not really matter how we ascribe the roles) leads up to a certain synthesis. This should be carefully probed, as a positive answer might entail a certain teleological perspective on literature. It would mean that there is a goal towards which literature strives, or some ultimate deep meaning that it tries to convey. I would thus argue, avoiding the temptation to fall into a historically determined Hegelian world, that there is no such thing – that literature is ultimately the expression of an existential condition of man and his relation to language, an open-ended region of freedom that has to be constantly reinvented but resists any closing up and pinning down. Whether this freedom is in the end intimately connected with death and whether there is a way breaking of this dialectic is another question – one that I will try to relate to in the last chapter.
Ciaran Carson was born in 1948 in Belfast, Northern Ireland, where he lives to this day. He is a poet, novelist, columnist, translator and Professor at Queen’s University Belfast, where he is also the Director of The Seamus Heaney Centre for Poetry. For over twenty years he was Traditional Arts Officer of the Arts Council of Northern Ireland. He won numerous prizes, including the Eric Gregory Award, Alice Hunt Bartlett Award, Irish Literature Prize for Poetry, T. S. Eliot Prize, Forward Poetry Prize and the Cholmondeley Award. As a prolific author and accomplished musician, he has won recognition among both the reading public, poets and critics alike, making him a leading figure within the so-called “second generation” of post-war Northern Irish poets, which includes such figures as Paul Muldoon, Tom Paulin and Medbh McGuckian. Ciaran Carson’s diverse output is marked, however, by a significant, unique turn. Although his first poetry collection *New Estate* (1976) was well-received, he remained silent until 1987, when he published the ground-breaking book *The Irish for No*. This unusual period of quietude is all the more extraordinary because the latter collection brought about a radical change in his poetic diction and thus constituted a “second debut.”

The structure of this thesis follows roughly the historical development of Ciaran Carson as a writer from that new debut, although it does not amount to saying that the theoretical approach must always coincide chronologically with the work of a particular author. Simply, certain themes are reiterated and reworked, introducing a vast area of self-referentiality and intertextuality in Carson’s poetry. These motifs are evolving like voices in the fugue (another oral-textual pair), and cannot be understood without jumping forwards and backwards, or proceeding, like Carson himself likes to say, “two steps forward, one step back.”

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10 Detailed information regarding Ciaran Carson’s career can be found on the following websites, which also served as the basis for this short synopsis:
http://www.qub.ac.uk/schools/SeamusHeaneyCentreforPoetry/Staff/ProfessorCiaranCarson/
http://literature.britishcouncil.org/ciaran-carson
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ciaran_Carson
(all accessed 27 April 2012).
Nevertheless, the first chapter traces the chronological development from *The Irish For No* (1987) to *First Language* (1993), whereas the third chapter proceeds from the 2008 collection *For All We Know*, through *On the Night Watch* (2009) to *Until Before After* (2010). Only in the third chapter, with the exception of its third section devoted to *Breaking News* (2003), I take a step back to analyze portions of *Belfast Confetti* (1990) and *The Irish for No*. This approach allows combining the synchronic and diachronic perspectives. The former is related to the status of literature as a space extended between orality and textuality (thus, its universal condition), whereas the latter is connected with the operation of the dialectic between orality and textuality within the poet’s work, leading from one silence to another. Hopefully, the two perspectives, just like the two sides of the dialectic, are brought closer when the discussion shifts to the last significant subject of Carson’s poetry – death. Literature acquires in this way the metaphorical status of a mirror to life, which also proceeds from a “debut” and silence to death (and another silence). Therefore, the diachronic perspective shall be seen to lead to the question of Being (by way of death) and dissolve, just like the structural, synchronic tension between orality and textuality winds up as its constituents converge in the death-poem which brings the Hegelian *Aufhebung* (overcoming of dialectics) and heralds a new self-consciousness.

Therefore, I shall begin from silence – Carson’s own silence – because the emergence of a voice is always preceded by a moment of stillness. This pregnant silence is a period during which Carson became – to employ his own phrase – “dissatisfied with poetry for some time,”\(^\text{11}\) so it must have a special bearing on the whole of his work. Thus, the collection *New Estate* remains beyond the scope of this thesis, as it does not belong to the figure whose emergence I trace in Ciaran Carson’s poetry. Interestingly enough, the last two collections discussed in this thesis are leading up to another silence which is of an altogether dissimilar

provenance and was crafted for a different purpose. The evolution of Carson’s themes, as described in this dissertation, will always be accompanied by a memory of that special silence that envelops his poetry. These two silences are necessary to grasp the meaning of the figure that Ciaran Carson’s work draws or, to speak in an alternate register preserving the duality of approaches, the kind of song that it sings. As I have already mentioned, I tend to regard this pattern to be an expression of the general movement that literature makes both individually, within a poem, and as a whole cultural formation in the history of man. Perhaps this story, figure or song (all are equally applicable in Carson’s case) is also a version of the history of man told from the perspective of language.

From this first silence emerges a poet who is pregnant with ideas and is ready to reinvent himself, as if awakened by a breath of a muse. The first two poetry books Carson published after 1987 – the turning point whose significance I have expounded above – lay down the most fundamental themes of his poetry. These are, according to my diagnosis: city, memory and history. The three vast fields can be interpreted to have a special significance, denoting the tension between various pairs of meaningful oppositions which accompany humankind: the personal (individual memory, oikos) and the public (history, polis), the surface (city) and the depth (history and memory), the material (city) and the immaterial (history), the present (city, memory) and the absent (history, unconscious memory). Seen from that perspective, this triad covers a large portion of ideas that have traditionally been regarded as the basic issues in reflection within human sciences.

However, what is of primal interest here is that these three areas are approached and “mapped out” by means of dissecting them on the table with the two basic tools, i.e. orality and textuality. Thus, what I would like convey is that each of the three fields is probed from many sides, using many approaches. For example, when Carson deals with history, he breaks it down into personal memory and public history. Then, he proceeds to dissect the two using
the twin tools, showing how one and the other are crafted using oral and textual techniques, exposing certain inconsistencies and irregularities. When he takes up the theme of the city, on the other hand, he shows us how it is constructed and imagined by individuals by means of oral and textual means, and how that process is kept in check by collective textual procedures. By doing so, Carson constructs an interesting account of culture, showing how many-dimensional it is and how literature can reflect that because of the special place it occupies – right in-between the oral (the physical) and the textual (the abstract).

History, addressed by Carson openly in Breaking News (2003) is another dimension where orality and textuality enter into a complicated relationship. The first-hand oral transmission of historical events is an important element constituting the process of shaping history which, from the moment its witnesses pass away, becomes a purely textual construct. This is especially visible in the reverence surrounding the veterans of the First World War\textsuperscript{12} or the recollections of survivors from concentration camps (e.g. works by Primo Levi). What we learn from those who still bear witness to history are delicate shades of orality painted on the dense canvas of history. That tension also permeates Carson’s writing on the subject of history, as he shows that memory (whether collective and individual) can operate in both modes: the oral and the textual.

Later on, Carson becomes more interested in the epistemological side of things. As of For All We Know (2008), he takes a necessary step back, which proves to be two steps forward in the end. By focusing on the ways we perceive things and make sense of them, Carson is finally able to combine the various themes he already touched upon into a new weave, a new vision. At this point, however, he comes up to a certain halt, a moment when the barriers of language and cognition in general become finally clear. This is a turning point,

\textsuperscript{12} When Florence Green, the last such veteran, died, The Telegraph notably remarked that this event is “marking the end of an era in British history.” Cf. http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/9066371/Last-surviving-veteran-of-First-World-War-dies-aged-110.html (27 April 2012).
as another great shift begins, leading us towards the questions of being and death, which he openly confronts in the two latest poetry collections from 2009 and 2010.

Are the limits of orality and textuality reached at this point? In some ways he does seem to stop at that point, but on the other hand he points out how these barriers can be overcome, or at least remodelled. They are surely put to a strong test of deconstruction which, as Spivak remarks, “by inaugurating the open-ended indefiniteness of textuality […] shows us the lure of the abyss as freedom.”

Is it possible to descend deeper beyond and come back with a new kind of poetry? Is it possible to die in literature and emerge as something different? Can the limits or orality and textuality be transgressed? What would it mean? Would that be inhuman? These questions should remain open until the final moment.

* *

Three other things have to be shortly explained out of the necessity to preserve certain scholarly standards. These two issues regard the omissions that I have taken courtesy to make in order to develop the argument most convincingly and the pre-existing critical points of reference in the study of Ciaran Carson’s writings.

First of all, this dissertation does not take into account the whole of Ciaran Carson’s rich oeuvre. The early poetry, i.e. The New Estate and The Lost Explorer are not tackled here because they precede that crucial period of silence and are – to quote Carson – “so different from what I’ve done recently [i.e. around 1991 – G.C.]” that it would be a futile exercise to try to include them in the general argument. Moreover, I have decided to exclude any discussion of his prose works. This step is justified in the light of the other important angle that this dissertation takes, i.e. preoccupation with poetry alone and its special meaning in the

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14 Frank Ormsby interviews Ciaran Carson in Linen Hall Review.
history of literature, as well as the fact that it inhabits the elemental dialectic of orality and textuality. Nor am I taking into account Carson’s numerous translations, for their character is less intimate and original, although to a certain extent enlightening.

Some may consider it a bold statement, but little new light can be shed on Carson’s work in general from the perspective of the collections *Opera Et Cetera* (1996) and *The Twelfth of Never* (1998), be they an exposition of his linguistic virtuosity. They only corroborate evidence gathered from other poetry books and were accordingly disregarded here, so as not to obscure the bigger picture.

Secondly, it is of course not the case that this dissertation is a pioneering work of criticism in its field. Many distinguished commentators contributed to the critical enterprise that has been developed around Carson’s writings and many of them are quoted in the essay. There are two monographs available, one of which is a collection of essays\(^\text{15}\) and the other a close study of the theme of space in Carson’s work.\(^\text{16}\) Both are highly recommended to anyone interested in the subject but fail to provide a broader theoretical framework that could embrace the whole of his writing. Of course, a detailed analysis of Carson’s works offered by these two important pieces of criticism is not to be underestimated, as it forms the necessary counterpart to the rather sweeping gesture made by enclosing a single writer in a single dialectical movement. The two approaches are bound to clash and inform each other, without – however, as I hope – having to enter into conflict, as they keep themselves mutually in check.

Thirdly, I do not venture to explore in detail the wide range of Carson’s translations and adaptations. This fascinating body of work includes a translation of Dante’s *Inferno* (which won the 2002 Oxford Weidenfeld Translation Prize), Brian Merriman’s *The Midnight Court* (2005), Old Irish epic *The Táin* (2007), as well as *The Alexandrine Plan* (1998) – a


book of loose translations of sonnets by Baudelaire, Rimbaud and Mallarmé. *Opera Et Cetera* (1996) contains translations from the Romanian poet Stefan Augustin Doinas, while *First Language* features a number of adaptations from Ovid. Such an impressive *dossier* is a testimony to the deeply intertextual character of Carson’s *oeuvre*, again bringing to the foreground the textuality that is so often associated with his poetry. According to Julia Kristeva, intertextuality is the “interdependence of literary texts, the interdependence of any one literary text with all those that have gone before” to the effect that “discourses or sign systems are transposed into one another.”\(^\text{17}\) In this light, Carson’s work should be perceived as an especially dense and eclectic hub of traditions and influences, a crossroads for various discourses and points of view. This once again emphasizes the textuality of his work, creating a thick backdrop against which his unique voice is able to come to life.

Chapter One – The dialectics of orality and textuality

I Aspects of orality in The Irish For No

An expression has meaning only in the stream of life.

Ludwig Wittgenstein

The turn

After having abandoned traditional lyric poetry in the mid-1970s, Ciaran Carson brought his writing to a halt, allowing himself space in which he could pursue his interests in traditional music. Apparently, the turn towards the actual practice of culture within a community has proven to be the vehicle of necessary reinvigoration for his poetic work. It is in the performative aspect of musical culture that he found the right formula for his writing. As his prose book Last Night’s Fun proves¹, it is not only the music itself that is at stake here, but also talk of music: the conversations between musicians, talk of music among others, audience commentaries and, most notably, the storytelling that is involved in the practices of meeting among the Irish. He remarks that a tune is not only a musical piece but also a “modus operandi, a way of renegotiating lost time.”² Carson’s interest in folklore is not a scholarly one, but rather arises from the recognition of the values and goals that stand behind the traditional cultural practices. Among these is the establishing of a social, communal network (a “congregation,” as he puts it) which in turn enacts identity and thus brings people together, providing them with a safety net of external memory and a set of values to live by. These highly important objectives, however, are not produced officially, in the form of codices, but are rather a virtual living space whose parameters can be negotiated by the members of the

¹ A quasi-memoir about pubs, music, food and drink. Prose pieces, however, remain outside the scope of this dissertation.
community through interaction, since it is impossible to estimate “how far or deep its
palimpsests extend.” It is the mechanics and know-how of this interaction that fuelled
Carson’s lyric talent and guided it towards an entirely different poetic project. Interestingly,
the fascination with folklore, which originally stems from the Romantic Movement, leads
Carson away from the 19th-century perspective on literature. In the 1987 collection The Irish
For No Carson is no longer preoccupied with the lyrical I and moves towards an entirely
dissimilar vision of poetry. His focus shifts towards a different mode of speaking – one that
relies on the oral tradition which he inherits from Irish traditional music and storytelling. Of
course, he does not break away from the textual paradigm and remains essentially a writer.
Still, he infuses his work with the virus of the oral tradition, allowing the content from the old,
almost forgotten language to resurface in his work. In this way, he revives and revitalizes both
traditions. Simultaneously, he reinvents himself as poet and pays homage to the centuries-old
institution which made him an active participant in that culture.

The revival of the oral tradition

In his lectures on the art of poetry, Jorge Louis Borges claims that the split of the poet into a
lyricist and a storyteller is a disgrace for the world of literature. Although his hope that some
day the epic poem – which combines the two – will be revived may be an old-fashioned
nostalgia after the old ways of literature, Carson might to a certain extent fulfil the gap that
Borges had in mind by historically bridging the two poles. The Argentinean remarks that
stories have always kept our company and it would be an event of utmost importance if poets
could once again combine this basic impulse that makes us tell stories with the craft of poetic
“singing.” Perhaps the turn of the 20th century, when most stories that we share as participants
in Euro-American culture have their origin in Hollywood film studios, was the right moment

3 Ibid.
stated otherwise, all quotations from Polish sources are provided in my translation – G.C.]
to revisit the traditional concept of storytelling before it vanished into thin air – a fate against which the ardent collector and scholar of Irish storytelling, Sean O Suillebhain, warns at the end of his short introduction to this subject. He suggests that the modern material culture is enchanted by the notion of progress and mechanises storytelling, thus relegating it to the rank of an “object on display in a museum.”

Still, Carson is not the only poet who answers the call Borges made. Jerzy Bartmiński claims that one can observe a general renaissance of orality. The key factors that operate behind this return are the questions of control, liveliness and dialogic nature. The first one is of great interest for Carson, as his fascination with broadly understood surveillance verges on obsession and is one of the most important themes in his work. The second issue is related to the general interest in the “live” substance in poetry and language, displayed by some of the most creative or avant-garde poets in the 20th century, e.g. Frank O’Hara, who claimed that a poem should exist “between two persons instead of two pages.” Moreover, oral culture contains at least germs of two other subcodes of “live” meaning, i.e. gestural (a physical subcode whose fullest realisation is dance) and prosodic (also a physical subcode related to phonetic qualities, whose fullest realisation is singing). Finally and most importantly, the revival of orality is motivated by its introduction of the dialogue, understood as a doubly structuring mechanism: (i) in terms of a dialogic opening towards otherness (as represented in the philosophy of “alterity” developed by Martin Buber or Emmanuel Levinas) and (ii) as the internal, heterogeneous principle of dialogue (developed and elaborated upon by Mikhail Bakhtin, especially with regard to his concept of the “heteroglossia,” in particular the way it

exposes the fact that it is “the diversity of speech, and not the unity of normative shared language, that is the ground of style”.

The increasing interest in the spoken narrative was also heralded by a Russian formalist scholar Boris Eichenbaum back in 1924. He pointed out that the illusion of orality and free improvisation is often a desired feature among poets who like to fall back on the primitive, primordial force of live storytelling. Such attempts are a means for returning to the power of utterance and guarding oneself from the stiffness embodied in the metaphor of museum. The Polish poet Miron Białoszewski, who revolutionised Polish poetic diction in the 20th century, also addresses that problem in his poetic manifesto, confronting himself with the “mountain” of written literature which, as he claims, turned out to be so frightening for Balzac. He claims that poetry should be an artful recording of that which is being said, because otherwise the internal dramatic nature of the word – its fluctuations, deformations and natural saturation – will be entirely lost. Writing should not “eat up” that which is spoken, but rather “fish out” the living material, often in the humble form of minute details. This poetic credo definitely suits the kind of poetic project that Carson embarks upon.

The dialectic

In order to avoid confusion, it has to be noted at this stage that textuality and orality should not be understood as binary, ultimately classifying characteristics, but as (proto)types, poles between which a literary performance oscillates. We are not dealing with embodiments of one of these two options, but rather appropriations, especially in the case of poetry which, just like Carson’s, is available to us in the form of books, at least in most cases. Eichenbaum

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rightly speaks in this context about “imitation” because no essentialist claims can be made on this subject. Another Russian scholar – Sergey Bernstein – investigated this subject in detail in his 1927 essay\(^\text{12}\) whose best parts anticipate the deconstructive analysis of the same subject conducted much later by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida in the book *Of Grammatology*.

Bernstein reformulates the problem in terms of two types of poetry and poets – recitative and non-recitative – which he developed on the basis of a survey made among contemporary Russian poets. His conclusions are that poets do not necessarily introduce intonational schemas into their works and that the famed “song-quality” is not carried by the syntax but is rather contained as hints in the semantic and emotional colouring. Poetry is not only music – it is also a drawing, as the renowned Russian poet Alexander Blok rightly observed.\(^\text{13}\) The internal rhythm does not have to stem from the material phonetic features, but can just as well be derived from the rhythms of walking, gesturing etc. Bernstein points out that the recitative type of poetry, although apparently closer to the organic ideal of oral production, is “tied” by the material performance and features a presupposition of “*harmonia praestabilita*” (Leibniz’s term) – i.e. that there is only one correct rendering of the poem, contained or suggested in it. However, it is the non-recitative approach, a result of the “silent reading revolution”\(^\text{14}\) that introduces the freedom of interpretation, thus enriching the poem by allowing it to rest as a potentiality, whose possible material fulfilments can never be exhausted. Thus, the introduction of writing grants literature an autonomous nature and frees the audience from the authoritative reading of the *Autorenleser* (the one and only authoritative interpretation) and allows the multiple *Selbstleser*\(^\text{15}\) (individual reading) to invest the poem with actual meaning. Obviously, the aesthetic totalities in writing and speech differ, but one

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\(^{13}\) Ibid., p. 186.

\(^{14}\) Term coined by Alberto Manguel, cf.: his essay “Milczący czytelnicy”, trans. R. Chymkowski, in: *Antropologia słowa*, p. 413.

\(^{15}\) Terms coined by Eduard Sievers, quoted by Sergey Bernstein in “Wiersz a recytacja.”
cannot claim that a poem without its phonetic realisation is not a full literary being. Moreover, the openness to interpretation and free association is another feature that helps establish a poem as a dialogic being – a feature that will play the key role in the whole body of Carson’s poetry. Therefore, Carson’s interest in traditional oral literary culture will not be read here as a full return to the “ideal” of orally transmitted narratives. He rather employs some of its elements, utilizing them to propel his poetic diction. As he put it himself in the acknowledgments to the *Irish For No*, it was the “procedures” that he borrowed and not the general idea of oral discourse. He remains conscious of the complications and tensions that arise from the differences between what is said and what is written. It can be safely claimed that the dialectics of speech and text is exactly what this poetry book is about – the fascination with the processes during which the *signum signi* of *scripta* can be turned into *verba* – a sign filled with something: a spirit, ideology or some metaphysical substance, which makes language a topic that can never be exhausted. Carson definitely saw hope and new potential for poetry in that little paradox of writing. Perhaps also because poetry is the only means of communication that can so freely move between that oral, mythical origin of *homo loquens* and the modern *textus* which has so deeply influenced the ways we think and act.

**The Irish For No**

*The Irish For No*, published in 1987, is a carefully structured book whose organization is very revealing, especially in the context of some of the above remarks. Divided into three unnamed parts, it contains two outer sections of longer poems and a middle section of shorter ones. The long poems thus embrace and hold the second part. This structural division has interesting implications when we consider the thematic concerns. The characteristically long-line poems in Part One probe various ways of storytelling, examining and bringing to focus the various possibilities for structuring events in a narrative. In Part Two Carson cuts the length of the
poem (but not the line!) and arranges a series of snapshots which capture images of urban nature, with a special emphasis on violence, whereas in Part Three he combines the two spheres, embedding in long narratives the tensions between the private world of *oikos* (family and identity) and the public *polis* (politics and violence). He moves in two dimensions – vertically in the axis of private memory, local identity and fantasy, and horizontally in the axis of history, ideology and reality. Each poem is an attempt at finding the points where the two dimensions meet, and a renegotiation of the relationship they come into. The vehicle for this operation is narration – Carson is navigating through this two-dimensional ocean, but the control is somehow displaced. The literary subject of these poems is nowhere near the stability of the traditional lyrical poetry. The subject itself is being renegotiated, too. The narrative is a journey whose full meaning and outcome will crystallize only at its very end. Like in Homer’s *Odyssey*, the narrator winds his way through various perils, armed only with a narrative – a story whose meaning is always on the run, changing with every enjambment, turning unexpectedly on the bends of memory, slipping on its rhyme or rhythm, guided only by free association and constantly threatened with the violent reality of the Troubles.

The book opens with “Dresden,” one of the most frequently anthologized poems by Carson, and immediately takes us into the *medias res* of an engaging, multi-dimensional story. Just like in the prototypical act of Biblical creation, the poem starts with the act of naming – the title of the poem and the figure of “Horse,” introduced at the very beginning, bring to the fore the twin protagonists whose relationship will be weaved into or perhaps out of the body of the poem. In the first two lines, we learn that “Horse Boyle was called Horse Boyle because of his brother Mule; / Though why Mule was called Mule is anybody’s guess.” (IN 77) Just like traditional oral poetry, “Dresden” picks up the theme of origins and attempts a reconstruction of the road from the current state of signification back to the

16 All quotations from Carson’s poems (except for the last two collections) come from *Collected Poems* (Loughcrew: Gallery Press, 2008) and will be referred to in a uniform manner: by providing the abbreviation of the title of the collection, followed by the page number.
moment of its birth, the reverse road consisting of course in the *mythos* (plot, story or legend in Greek). This approach, however, is abandoned for its futility – “anybody’s guess” has nothing to do with the motivation that a proper mythical story would provide. Instead, a narrative “I” emerges, embodying the figure of the storyteller and providing another frame of reference in the poem. The narrator begins his own subjective version of this already mediated story and we know, after the initial preamble, that it will be one of a different sort: “I stayed there once, / Or rather, I nearly stayed there once. But that’s another story. / At any rate […]”

(IN 77) The personal dimension, the direct connection of the storyteller with the events he is relating is of course to a certain extent an appropriation because he did not participate in the Horse’s life during the Second World War. Still, the mythical gap is closed by the continuity of the contiguous stories that emerge from direct oral contact. In “Dresden,” the road back to history never leads along a highway of a historicist generalization. Instead, the poem branches off into a myriad of digressions, like a tree.

The written text suggests that there is an entire network of interrelated stories that stand behind it and what we see on the page is just a selection, one possible way through the maze of stories whose full realization exceeds the individual and serves as the basis for the development of a local community and identity.

“Dresden,” although it transcends some of the notions that have been attributed to the oral literary tradition by scholars like Paul Zumthor, e.g. impersonality and timelessness, nevertheless utilizes oral techniques that make the poem sound like a convincing negotiation between the two traditions – oral and textual – at the same time emphasizing the fact that literature (and poetry *par excellence*) is perhaps the only cultural creation which stands on both sides of this divide, nourishing itself with material from both extremes of the spectrum.

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17 Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill observed in her review of this poetry book that “the structure of these poems is that of an organic thing, a tree perhaps, with the subplots branching off here and there” (*Irish Review* 4 (1988), pp. 116-118, quoted after: Frank Sewell, “The influence of Irish and the oral tradition”, in: Ciaran Carson. Critical Essays, ed. E. Kennedy-Andrews, Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2009, p. 190). Although her remark seems perfectly fitting, I would replace the hesitant metaphor of tree with that of a rhizome, in order to draw some attention to the relationship between Ciaran Carson’s poems and some philosophical ideas of Gilles Deleuze. These will be discussed further on in the chapter.

Thus, by encompassing a broad range of literary devices, Carson is able to fuse the particular and the general, spontaneity and authority, as well as totalization and analysis. “Dresden,” as well as other long poems in *The Irish For No*, exhibits many traditional storytelling features and combines them with their material content in order to achieve interesting effects.

Zumthor also points to other typical features that characterize oral discourse. He mentions the immediacy of narration\(^\text{19}\), which could be referred to the above example of the opening of the poem “Dresden.” Similarly, other long poems in the volume feature such openings: “We were sitting at the Camlough halt” (“Judgement,” IN 82), “I raised my glass, and – ” ("Calvin Klein’s Obsession,” IN 85), “The leg was giving me a problem” (“Whatever Sleep It Is,” IN 89), to quote just a few. Thus, at the onset there is always a real-life, particular situation\(^\text{20}\), not an abstract configuration; the stories begin in the middle, from the material world of everyday reality. Next, their progression is stylized on physical movement – it is governed by an intentional and fluid progression, but there are false starts, illogical detours and repetitions.\(^\text{21}\) Such movement would also suggest a proximity to the natural progression of thought – unrestrained, wandering, meandering and always situated in the context of human struggle – an existentialist *agon*. This direction of interpretation is suggested by scholars in the area – Etienne Gilson and Walter Ong – who suggest that in oral discourse it is the thought that bears life and linguistic expression is almost instinctual\(^\text{22}\); word equals event (through the etymology of the Hebrew word *dābor*, as noted by Ong\(^\text{23}\)), standing somehow close to the origin of the dialectic between event and meaning whose central position was pointed out by Paul Ricoeur\(^\text{24}\) and whose importance is one of the central motifs in Carson’s poetry. This movement of discontinuities and continuities is clearly visible in the meandering

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\(^\text{19}\) Ibid.


\(^\text{21}\) Paul Zumthor, “Właściwości tekstu orального”, p. 211.


\(^\text{23}\) Walter J. Ong, “Psychodynamika oralności”, ibid.

of the long lines in “Dresden,” where the description of the “decrepit caravan” suddenly proceeds, under a pretence of a comparison, to turn into another story, this time that of visiting a shop. Here, however, Carson cunningly uses phatic expressions and the textuality of the poem (especially the line break and stanza break) to jump from one story to another: “A minor avalanche would ensue – more like a shop bell, really, // The old-fashioned ones on string, connected to the latch, I think, / And as you entered in, […]” …you were already in a different story, one could finish. Further progressions are made by means of guesses: “If anybody knew, / It would be Horse” and examples which devour their parent stories: “Take young Flynn, for instance,” turning into a yarn about the unfortunate IRA bomber, Irish language, school, his teacher and the place his teacher came from. These monstrous retardations are not subordinate elements, but just like in Erich Auerbach’s analysis of the same phenomenon in Homer,\(^{25}\) fill the present moment, the scene of consciousness. Auerbach also quotes, with respect to this matter, Friedrich Schiller’s idea that the aim of such retardations always lies in each moment of their movement. Thus, as the author of *Mimesis* argues, Homeric discourse does not give us a sense of perspective, which stands in sharp contrast to the Biblical discourse of the Elohist, who has claims to absolute historical truth. Homer rather “cocoon[s]” us in his story, ensnares in his verse and spins a yarn around our minds.\(^{26}\)

Auerbach also alludes to the two types of “binding” that make the text cohere: the vertical and the horizontal. In the case of Homer, the horizontal dimension is consistent, if only through the contiguous nature of its narrative components. On the other hand, the Biblical narration is characterized by certain understatements which demand a vertical (theological, metaphorical) explanation that make the text homogenous and communicable. Carson’s type of narrative dispersion is no doubt of the Homeric type, since it does not


\(^{26}\) Ibid., p. 39.
provide any coherent whole, but a series of metaphorically or metonymically linked stories which embrace various aspects of life and slowly progress from point A to point B by taking a detour through the whole of the alphabet. Thus, his narrative long poems are rather a mode of performance and not a mirror of thought – an important distinction introduced by Bronislaw Malinowski.27 The protagonists are brought to the fore, each becoming an actor on the scene provided by the space of the poem, investing the words with a meaning that always reaches back to a particular place, event, memory or another history, enacting thus the local identity and reinforcing the oral tradition or social communication. Ong links orality with pragmatics, whereas chirography is coupled with syntax, thus underlining the performative aspect of this kind of poetry.28 He also suggests some of the goals this performance centres around: the ordering of the present reality through work of genealogy and the identification with the community. These goals are also suggested in Carson’s poems. To this catalogue one may add other items elaborated upon by Ray Cashman in his study on the Irish storytelling tradition: commemoration, redirection of attention from sectarianism and building a certain typology of characters by turning them into “human types.”29 These questions pertain to Carson’s poetry, in which we can see the utilization of these mechanisms in the field of Northern Irish experience, problematized and elaborated upon in many of his books.

The ends of discourse

The abovementioned slips that enable Carson to thread along different stories and jump from one level of narration to another is also a feature diagnosed by Zumthor as a certain fluidity of textual borders30, which stems from the lack of a hierarchical, “vertical” organizing principle, such as a rhetorical aim or an ideological purpose. One effect of this is a “semantic surplus”

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28 Ibid., pp. 192-193.
that is being created at the very heart of such a discursive plurality. Tzvetan Todorov interprets this supplement of meaning in narration as the unique feature of texts produced by the discourse of *homme recit* – a person who is immediately turning his or her potentiality into a story. He recalls the figure of Scheherazade from *Arabian Nights*, whose position as a narrator, as well as the narrators of her stories, demand the continuity of narration, because silence, the end of the story, means death to them. Therefore, within this figure of life as storytelling, every narration cannot come to a halt, but has to retain a certain lack of meaning, or an extra element which in turn can be transformed into another story, thus keeping up the flow of the overarching narrative. This idea can be rephrased in psychoanalytical terms. Jacques Lacan developed the concept of *objet petit a* – a certain leftover that had to be renounced or repressed by the speaking subject so that he or she could become a linguistic being, endowed with what we understand as human subjectivity: “The *objet a* is something from which the subject, in order to constitute itself, has separated itself off as organ.” Of *objet petit a*, claims Lacan, is the object cause of desire and is in itself unattainable – it only looms somewhere on the horizon (its “reality is purely topological”) and can never be incorporated back, so that the subject, guided by this primal loss, could regain the full, mythical identity; it is an “object around which the drive moves.” This Lacanian object has a double meaning. On the one hand it is an abstract emptiness around which the desire can circulate, never attaining its final goal. On the other, however, it realizes itself in the form of one of the so

32 In an essay titled “Behind the Fable,” Michel Foucault speaks of figures who loom somewhere in the background of the narrative, fighting for the right to tell their story. They embody the battle of discourses which takes places somewhere in the shadow, but whose fierce competition guarantees the balance and sovereignty of the initial multiplicity, thus not allowing for a monologic, often ideologically slanted option to take over the plurality of discourse and govern it. See: Michel Foucault, “Zaplecza fabuły”, in: *Szaleństwo i literatura*, trans. A. Lewańska, Warszaw: Aletheia, 1999, p. 165.
34 Ibid., p. 257.
35 Ibid.
called partial objects (of the partial drives): oral, anal, scopic or vocational.\textsuperscript{36} In the context of poetry it would of course manifest itself ambiguously, both in the repetition automatism of certain phrases and as the vocational object denoting the “voice” – in this case the full manifestation of meaning in a direct utterance of the storyteller. This existential position of the subject sheds light on Todorov’s opposition of happiness and story; if we were to choose the former, the latter would never manifest itself.\textsuperscript{37} In this sense, culture is a source of discontent – a concept which Freud developed extensively in the essay “Civilization and its Discontents.” Cashman also notes that the poetics of loss lies at the very heart of traditional storytelling on the Irish border.\textsuperscript{38} Carson’s long, rambling narratives express the idea that storytelling equals life, while stopping the ever-shifting current of poetic speech means death – “an empty book kills,” Todorov claims.\textsuperscript{39} Therefore, what we encounter both in Arabian Nights and Carson’s poems is a certain drive towards constant retardations which Todorov calls “embedding” (“enchassement” in French).\textsuperscript{40} Every character, event or memory that appears in the story is aptly utilized as a springboard that allows narrative shifts to occur. In “Judgement,” the anonymous narrator begins by introducing a “man-story” – Johnny Mickey. “He was telling me this story / Of a Father Clarke,” (IN 82) who leads us to Mickey Quigley and Sergeant Flynn, who in turn lead us to McErleans and McCorley, then to the poet McCooey, who rounds off the story. The poem contains intermezzi of a ballad-like quality which give yet another angle on the story, recycling its themes and suggesting possible moral interpretations.

Michel Foucault remarks in his essay “Language to infinity” that Blanchot’s dictum of “writing that does not allow death” suggests that words have a certain infinite power of postponing the stiffness of finite representation, which is in turn fuelled by the emptiness that

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., p. 103-104.
\textsuperscript{37} Tzvetan Todorov, “Ludzie-opowieści”, p. 207.
\textsuperscript{38} Ray Cashman, Storytelling on the Northern Irish Border, p. 244.
\textsuperscript{39} Tzvetan Todorov, “Ludzie-opowieści”, p. 205.
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., p. 202.
enforces upon the text its repetitions (manifest in Carson in the form of stock-phrases, phatic expressions and proverbs) and self-referentiality (in the form of asides like “this is really Horse’s story, Horse who – now I’m getting / Round to it – ”) (IN 14). The author of The Order of Things points out that literature is forming a virtual reality by means of the word which creates its own image, thus forming a “great, invisible labyrinth of repetition, of language that divides itself and becomes its own mirror.” He rightly observes that the desire to say everything (in this case, to encompass all stories and relate them) brings the author close to the boundary of impossibility (eventual inevitability of death and silence). Language, left to its devices, performs an endless postponing of its aim (in “Dresden” it is the question of the bombardment of the title city) and refuses itself the right to remain still: “It drives itself out of any possible resting place.” This play of surplus and lack suggest a void from which literature stems, “that absence in the interior from which the work paradoxically erects itself.” Thus, Carson’s poems, “Dresden” in particular, embody this infinite movement which has two dimensions: recycling of the catalogue of stories (the dimension which Foucault calls “Library” after Borges – a textual device) and experimenting with the various transitions and bridges between them (which Foucault calls “Rhetoric” – a procedure related to orality). “Dresden” can be viewed in this light as a literary enactment of Northern Irish discourse in its fullest plurality and thus a successful attempt at capturing and reinvigorating its vitality. The strength of that gesture lies primarily in the fact that it is
inclusive in its political aspect; it rejects repression in favour of a new language – a new approach to neighbouring, hospitality and openness.

**Locality and the reservoir**

The story in “Judgement” “shivered to a halt” like the arriving train, tellingly on the line “your man McCooey’s [the poet] long since dead.” (IN 84) The two protagonists embark then on a train journey through a telling landscape – one that emphasizes the significance of the narrative – a “dried up reservoir,” related to the country where there was “[n]ot so much water as would drown a rat.” (IN 83-84) This element is also a characteristic feature of the traditional oral narrative and Carson manages to weave it into his poem, foregrounding the importance of the relationship between the landscape and the narrative. Cashman observes in his study that in the oral tradition, it is the place that serves as the organizing principle and not ideas.46 The landscape, especially the familiar, domesticated landscape of the local area, is a mnemonic tool that can be summoned up at any time in order to pick up the thread of the story and push it further, either through association with a certain place, a place name, or a memory of a place. Names and place names inject dynamism into the discourse (often in an ironic way) because its motor is the very act of speaking.47 This approach has a very strong tradition in the Irish and Northern Irish poetry – such mental excavations are called *dinnseanchas*, “lore of places and their names.”48 Young Flynn from “Dresden,” who “was in for seven years and learned to speak / The best of Irish” knew “why this place was called / Whatever: Carrick, for example, was a rock.” (IN 78) He provides explications, e.g. “Carrowkeel […] – Narrow Quarter, Flynn explained –” (IN 79) This pan-semiotic nature of the landscape, though often fake or superficial, is nevertheless an important tool in pushing

the storyteller’s discourse further, allowing unpredictable connections, as in this case where
the progression is made through the use of a proverb which “springs to mind” in the context
of rocks: “When you buy meat you buy bones, when you buy land you buy stones.” (IN 79)

As Frank Sewell has noted in his essay on some aspects of storytelling in Carson’s
poetry, the Northern Irish poet very much enjoys etymologies, be they true or real, because
they allow one to immerse in the Babelonian nature of language. Proverbs, employed by
Carson on many occasion, are an interesting poetic device in the hands of this particular
writer. Proverbs, as Riesmann observes, stem from tribal verdicts and suggest some notion of
the law, or a change in the law. Carson subverts them by exposing their obsoleteness and
stiff nature. He treats them as clichés, but at the same time explodes their meaning by drawing
surprising analogies, often guided by a single word. In “Dresden” he writes that “You could
take a horse to water but you couldn’t make him drink.” (IN 79) This resonates with other
potential meanings, since the protagonist of the poem is actually named Horse. Carson opens
up the natural, full ambiguity of the word. As the official nature of the discourse diminishes,
hierarchies dwindle and static boundaries between phenomena and concepts begin to be
blurred, everything is mixed and combined. In this way, speech in Carson’s poetry is freed
from the government of norms and turns into a special language – a poetic discourse which
allows the words to resonate, shine unabashedly with their potentialities, staging the
unrestricted life of the word. This is perhaps a way of referring to, or imitating the primal
glossolalia, as Zumthor suggests. The holy state of “speaking languages,” seems to be
actually connected to the natural condition of language, in which words are both
defamiliarized, exposing their materiality, and ripe with meaning. Michel de Certeau
interprets this state, made available to us in the form of poetry, as a “return of the voices

50 David Riesmann, “Tradycja orálna a słowo pisane”, collective translation edited by G. Godlewski, in:
Antropologia słowa, p. 397.
through which the social body «speaks» in quotations, sentence fragments, the tonalities of «words,» the sounds things make.”

The image of speech

The tension between the immediacy of speech and image, and the scriptural recording that tries to catch up with the thought and the ensuing dialectics of rules that the text enforces, is interestingly problematized in the poem “Whatever Sleep It Is.” This poem illustrates the metaphor of the “recorder of thought” and the dialectical mutuality of narrative and life. Essentially, the poem is an ekphrasis – a description of a work of art – but it is not an ordinary one, since its object is being created simultaneously as the writing proceeds, thus making it a “performative” ekphrasis which does not allow to resolve too easily what comes first – the imagined work of art or the words that used to describe that which is about-to-be. In this way it becomes an ekphrasis of the process of cognition, which showcases the workings of Gilson’s “recorder,” showing how “narrative meaning exists dialectically in the tension between its world and the world of the reader.” Back to Carson’s poem: “The leg was giving me a problem, interfering, somehow, with the total / Composition – I didn’t know, at this stage, if he’d be a walker or a skier.” (IN 89) The “total composition” seems to be a kind of an abstract notion, a framing which is not a structural unity, but a concept of writing itself, or rather performing the artwork (or life) in a textual variant. “[E]verything [is] as full of holes as a Swiss cheese,” (IN 89) we learn, an effect which is reinforced by the constant undermining and modality of the phrases: “I wanted,” “if it doesn’t work,” “It might be,” or “have yet to be established.” (IN 89) Finally, we learn that the character, whom we are

54 Etienne Gilson, “Słowo mówione i słowo pisane”, p. 421.
55 Ibid., pp. 421-422.
56 Michael Bell, “How Primordial is Narrative?”, in: Narrative in culture: the uses of storytelling in the sciences, philosophy and literature, ed. Ch. Nash, New York: Routledge, 1990, p. 188.
looking at, or rather what we might be imagining through Carson’s story-image, might “indeed, be you, but with a life you haven’t / Worked out yet.” (IN 89-90) Having thus established the “virtual reality” of the poem, the narrator concludes that “I think the story is starting to take shape.” (IN 90) So, as it transpires, the artwork might be the poem itself, its various ticks and turns suggesting possible worlds and potential meanings that we might import into the poem as readers. “Could it be that the character I’d painted out / By now was lurking out there?” (IN 90) the lyrical subject asks, suggesting that the reader might have already animated the lifeless text into a scene and that he or she is now a part of the whole performance. The poem thus turns into a fable about how we really create meaning and not necessarily discover it. The poet is hesitating too; he is asking questions and is never quite sure what will come out from the next line, what kind of turn the language will take. “Meanwhile Mr Natural, / As we’ll call him” (IN 90) really begins to move, animated by words like a Golem58, and climbs the stairs, turning into an angel. This scene of “important announcement,” meant for the girl who “[p]erhaps he is in love with”, is unsuccessful, since she is asleep and completely oblivious to what takes place. It is only the milkman – a silent witness – who is amazed at the sight of the angel. “He rubs his eyes; / He is still drowsy with these six days out of seven. Tomorrow yawns ahead / With routine promises; tomorrow, after all, he will be free.” (IN 91) What this final turn of the poem signifies is that the textual phantom-like angel heralds freedom, but the annunciation is not to be missed, we have to wake from “whatever sleep it is” and allow ourselves to be amazed, to make this narrative ours, i.e. invest it with meaning, animate it in our imagination, shed the veil of deadly, final representation, follow the ekphrasis to life and connect with the life-giving narrative in an epiphany. Carson furnishes for us a meeting which we can attend only if we animate the word

58 Paul Ricoeur remarks that text turns language into a sculpture (“Mowa i pismo”, p. 427). In this case we can observe a desire on Carson’s part to transcend this through the introduction of a performative ekphrasis whose object is unstable and unfinished, thus provoking the reader to rest on the multiplicity of the image and in effect animating the “sculpture” by the magic of words, the verba that arises from the scripta.
with our own creativity. We have to participate in the narrative so that it can become a dialogic exchange.\textsuperscript{59} Here, Carson achieves an important goal for which he has been preparing the ground in these three poems: a “narrative contract”\textsuperscript{60} consisting in the acceptance of the branching, polyphonic discourse which guarantees the dialectic relationship between the storyteller and the audience. This point of meeting is negotiated somewhere between the plurality of the oral discourse and the textual rhetoric. The privacy of an individual reading aligns itself with the public, identity-performing function of the spoken narrative. What this kind of poetry demands and allows for is a relaxation of the individual ego and an immersion in the fabric of language that can then perform its illuminating role. This is certainly not a mimetic type of poetry – it rather rests on the tension between an associative and speculative state\textsuperscript{61}, demanding their interaction in the construction of a meaning that will never be final, but will always branch off in many directions, allowing yet “another eye to view the world with.”\textsuperscript{62} Further possible ways to enter the scene are suggested, for there are “at least two ways of saying anything.”\textsuperscript{63} Bruno Bettelheim argues that sticking to the text in a slavish manner rids it of a value which lies in the possibility to find oneself among the images, connect to the stories with those of our own. This obviously has a therapeutic function. In this way, Carson’s poems prepare the ground for a negotiation between the cosmo-centric, contextualized world of meandering stories and the logo-centric, linear world of chirographic transcription.\textsuperscript{64} This approach makes place for an orally established Umwelt to rise in all its particularity, but also allows this Umwelt to become Welt, since writing reveals before us the

\textsuperscript{59} Bruno Bettelheim, “O sztuce opowiadania baśni”, in: \textit{Antropologia słowa}, p. 219. Bettelheim also remarks in this short essay that the possibility to “find oneself” in the images proposed by the story has a therapeutic dimension (p. 224) because of the unconscious relation we establish with stories already in childhood (p. 222).

\textsuperscript{60} Michael Bell, “How Primordial is Narrative?”, p. 200.


\textsuperscript{63} Ibid., p. 184.

\textsuperscript{64} Derrick de Kerckhove, “Słuch oralny a słuch pisemny”, pp. 403-404.
purpose of discourse, which is to design the world,\textsuperscript{65} not only mimic it. The oral and textual procedures are seen, in such context, to cooperate and rest on each other, because it is their interaction that guarantees the construction of a meaningful reality which we can inhabit.

**Ying-yang, *I-Ching* and politics**

The third sequence in *The Irish For No* opens with the poem under the same title. Its first line immediately takes us back to the image of an apparition with which the poem “Whatever Sleep It Is” ended with: “*Was it a vision or a waking dream?*” (IN 110) This time, however, the ghost-like figure reproaches the readers with a very telling remark: “*It's got nothing, […] nothing to do with politics, […] That goes for you too!*” This call, in all of its powerful ambiguity, evokes a very distinct idea: that everything both has everything and nothing to do with politics. This *aisling*-like dream vision is a “snarling” reminder of the fact that the question of politics, which in Northern Ireland is bound to be circling around the question of the dualistic division present in the society (aptly suggested in the image of the “*Ulster Says No*” slogan scrawled on a wall), is rooted in the ideology and, ultimately, in language. The binary opposition of “No” and “Yes,” which lies at the heart of the Troubles, is projected by Carson back onto the sphere of language and communication. In the Irish language, apparently, there is no “yes” and “no”, as in English, and any confirmation is presented, as the poem suggests, by a “verb repeated” and “phatic nods and whispers.” (IN 110) The narrator thus wonders how it would be possible to translate another slogan: “*The Ulster Bank – the Bank / That Likes to Say Yes.*” One of the options would be: “*The Bank That Answers All / Your Questions,*” which interestingly points to two possible resolutions of this violent binarism: translation and inclusiveness. If the problem is a matter of linguistic mechanisms that allow for an easy dichotomization of political life, then perhaps translation might be the

\textsuperscript{65} Paul Ricoeur, “*Mowa i pismo*”, p. 429.
right defence mechanism to shield oneself from the antagonisms created in such a way. Another step in this logic is expressed in the enjambment “Answers All / Your Questions,” where for a moment we pause and may ponder on the possibility of “answering all,” i.e. considering the opposite points of view and seeking solutions that would rather encompass the division and relocate it, rephrase it in different terms – translate it onto a different matrix so as to obliterate its harmful effects. The dissolution of all, too easily coined binary oppositions is a recurring motif in the poem. Already in the very first stanza the narrator introduces the image of yin-yang, which signifies the transience and mutability of opposites, underlining the dialectical and unstable nature of any given oppositions. Other examples of the rhetoric utilized in the poem are: “a puff of smoke which might be black or white,” reiterations of compound words governed by the logic of the hyphen: “jam-jars,” “[m]ish-mash,” “[h]otch-potch,” and the final image of a cat that “toys with the ying-yang of a tennis ball, debating whether yes is no.” (IN 111) This doubleness carries a telling load of ancient Chinese philosophy which, when appropriated to the Troubles, undermines its ideological basis. The key theses articulated in the I Ching, the Book of Changes, are: Yin and Yang are not mutually exclusive, on the contrary – they are interdependent and can be both subdivided into their own Yins and Yangs. They simultaneously embrace and uphold each other, as each can transform into the opposite, while parts of Yin are always contained in the Yang, and vice versa. It is all not to say that Chinese philosophy could bring an instant salvation to the Northern Irish society, since – as Carson rightly observes – “What’s all this to the Belfast business-man who drilled / Thirteen holes in his head with a Black & Decker?” (IN 111) What it rather suggests is that the very opening up of discourses, which we employ in order to talk about these things, may help save humanity amidst a serious epistemological crisis that has surfaced in the Troubles. Thus, transcending the Yes-No opposition, which is paradoxically best expressed in the language of slogans, whose deconstruction is a hobby of
Carson’s (so that they become post-modern koans of Zen perhaps), is the first and necessary step on the road towards understanding violence and preparing its thorough critique – a task that looms behind this poem and, consequently, the book as a whole. This criticism is based on the reinvention of dialectics, which – I would argue – begins from the dialectic of orality and textuality.

In the following poem titled “Serial,” Carson returns to the questions of language and reading as interpretative gestures. He describes a scene in which a foot patrol crosses the street: “you can identify them by the black markings / On their cheeks, the fact that it is winter and the hedges are bare.” (IN 113) The ironic cadenza of this excerpt serves well to remind us of the fact that we actually do see the reality, but to a certain extent we un-see it, putting the “reading” in between ourselves and the surrounding world. The poem continues: “These errors of reading are not the only difference between us and them / Though the shibboleths are lingua franca.” The slips referred to in here have the potential to uncover mechanisms operating behind everyday speech. Self-consciously, this passage itself offers us the most basic linguistic mechanism that is used to parcel, differentiate and categorize: the dangerous logic of pronouns in the notorious phrase “us and them.” Therefore, to drive the argument home, the above-quoted passage in “Serial” is followed by an image of “a museum where the stuffed / Wolfhound was just as native as the Shell tiger” (IN 113), which enhances the question with a layer of national identity, showing the arbitrariness of such constructs when framed within a broader perspective. The fluidity and lack of fixed boundaries in the conceptualization of (national) identity is the thesis with which the poem ends: “and nothing can be justified / As the independent eye of the chameleon sees blue as green.” However, the ying-yang concept of mutability, which is revisited in this poem, has a more distinct ethical dimension, since the opening image in “Serial” features a nightmare of a near-death experience which returns to haunt the narrator: “I had a feeling I’d been there before: in a
black taxi, [...] when this bullet / Drilled [...] through the open window.” The traumatic compulsion to repeat operates both on the level of an individual psyche of the participants and the level of the torn society in general. In order to break the “serial,” vicious cycle of violence, a certain ideological relaxation is needed and the first step in that transformation is the recognition of the linguistic mechanism that makes us believe in the possibility to “code” and “decipher” the world only in one subset of categories.

This third and last section of the book finishes off with two poems: “Asylum” and “Patchwork,” both of which interestingly revert from the questions of politics back to themes of home and family. This move is a strong sign of the overall impotence of political discussion in the face of the Northern Irish conflict. It is the individual that has to begin an ethical journey and there is no other place to begin than home, family, personal memory and emotionality. It does not amount to a return to the lyrical type of poetry, however. The themes may be similar, but their treatment is quite different, as Carson needed the whole book to sketch the progression necessary to arrive at this point. Responsible mobilization of subjects in the field of politics has to be preceded by a meditation on the question of subjectivity itself. The detailed questions of ideology can come only after the recognition of the fluidity of concepts and their reliance on hidden presuppositions, often linguistic in nature. Carson performs in this book a radical deconstruction of the ways of thinking about problems in Northern Ireland. He dismantles the fixed connection between personal and national identity, the public and the private, by repainting them from bottom up and not the other way round. He tries to shed official discourses in order to begin the story from the beginning, to retell it perhaps in different terms, to open a possibility for a “talking cure” that could heal the wounds of the damaged society.

A broadly understood orality was the perfect tool to do that. By way of infusing his poetry with its virus, he draws our attention to an important lesson that has to be learned by
every storyteller, i.e. even if telling stories is to a certain extent formulaic, it is the sheer overwhelming diversity of these strategies and approaches that have to be reckoned with.\textsuperscript{66} Their epistemological richness, when transposed onto the spheres of both local culture and politics, shows that there are many different ways of “shaping memory through narrative,”\textsuperscript{67} which have to be excavated and re-enacted in order to achieve important political and poetic goals: to relax the tense oppositions which still underpin sectarianism in Northern Ireland and to find the right \textit{idiom}, not individual \textit{words}, but a new syntax that would be more wary of its mechanics. Literature arises in this context as a bridge, not the one Borges dreamed of (returning to the mythical unity in poetry), but a far more contextualized one, yet at the same time universal. This bridge is an arch of understanding, whose construction unveils the fact that everything begins with a story, even time, as Todorov claims.\textsuperscript{68} Poetry fashioned in this way acquires an important function – to meander along the “trail of moments / Dislocated, then located” (IN 117) in order to find, as does the dog from the poem “Asylum”, “[t]he acrid spoor of something that was human.” (IN 118) The word “spoor” is a “trace” that will be followed throughout this dissertation, as it is one of many marks that will lead us to a very special understanding of poetry and humanity – the ultimate layers of Ciaran Carson’s poetic \textit{ouevre}.

\textsuperscript{67} Ray Cashman, \textit{Storytelling on the Northern Irish Border}, p. 27.
\textsuperscript{68} Tzvetan Todorov, “Ludzie-opowieści”, p. 211.
II Aspects of textuality in *The Irish For No*

*Writing is a relation between life and death,*

*between present and representation.*

Jacques Derrida

**The scene of writing**

In the previous sections I have been concentrating on the aspects of oral tradition in Carson’s poetry and its importance in the process of establishing a distinct poetic voice. As I have tried to show, orality is a device that serves Carson not just to mimic the more traditional storytelling practices, but also to introduce questions of ethical nature and possible ways of organizing experience. Still, it does not limit and enclose him within that paradigm. Carson is also a poet who is deeply conscious of the more “writerly” aspects of poetry: the internal mechanics of a poem as text and the material nature of writing as an artifice. He explores the possibilities and limitations that poetry offers as a written artefact on the page. As has been already observed, poetry is the only means of communication that enables to transcend the opposition of text and utterance in both ways. Gilson captured this bi-focal nature of poetry in the metaphor of words „chasing” thoughts. If speech could catch up with thought, he argues by quoting the French poet Paul Valery, it would cease to be speech.69 On the other hand, text as an organizing principle enforces its own rules and mechanisms on thought. Carson’s poetry, as of *The Irish For No*, inhabits this breach between the two worlds and lets his poetry feed on the tensions that are produced there. The purely textual implications in his poetry will thus be subject matter of some of the following remarks.

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69 Etienne Gilson, “Słowo mówione i słowo pisane”, p. 422.
Just as the long poems in *The Irish For No* are a field in which the oral tradition can be most clearly discerned, the shorter ones, included in the second part of this book, contain many elements which demonstrate a more textual character and allow for some insight into the textuality of Carson’s work. “Dresden” opens the first part and the book itself, but the opening poem of the second part – “Belfast Confetti” – is perhaps even more famous. This oft-quoted poem is an exploration in the area of representation, as it sets before us a purely textual scene that tries to describe the situation of being in a riot. However, the poem abstains from a traditionally mimetic approach to the subject. Instead, Carson builds an entirely text-based evocation of the riot, one that is enclosed entirely within the walls of script and reproduces rather then represents the root experience, setting it in on a textual plane:

*Belfast Confetti*

Suddenly as the riot squad moved in, it was raining exclamation marks,

Nuts, bolts, nails, car-keys. A fount of broken type. And the explosion

Itself – an asterisk on the map. This hyphenated line, a burst of rapid fire . . .

I was trying to complete a sentence in my head but it kept stuttering,

All the alleyways and side-streets blocked with stops and colons.

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

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

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


(IN 93)
A video illustration to this poem has been done, in which Carson is reading it to the visual accompaniment of real footage from violent Northern Irish riots. However, the author of this video added one little element that seems to be the key issue here: the sound of typing. A seemingly obsolete piece of background sound that merges with the sad tones of the piano, it actually is, in my opinion, the most important aspect of this rendering. Basically, “Belfast Confetti” is not a mimetic scene of violent outrage, a socialist critique, or an elegy for the torn city. Of course, those aspects are important in this context, but first and foremost this poem is a scene of writing. The core of the poem is the actual process of the textualization of the subject, a congealing of experience in a scriptural variant – a scene of recording, remembering and restructuring of the world, performed by means of text.

The rapid opening of the poem with the “suddenly as the,” puts the reader already in medias res and quickly builds up a sense of necessity and irrevocability of what is described. Already in that very same line we encounter the first textual metaphor of “raining exclamation marks.” The proximity of the outside scene and the inside visualization (or rather textualization) is so great that any distance is almost entirely obliterated. More such metaphors follow, sketching a situation in which we are showered with “broken type” and the explosion is “an asterisk on the map.” At this point, all remnants of mimesis are shed, since we learn that everything takes place on the plane of a map – a level at least once removed from what we may call reality. There is no question of representation, because the world becomes inaccessible and we are transported either one level further, into the subjectivity of the narrator emerging from the text, or deeper into the mind of an on-scene witness. The second option would of course be less likely, because the whole stanza is in the past tense, but such an interpretation could be defended as well.

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70 Available online: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KLiXqjGmBOo (accessed 12 January 2012).
71 Or, as Michel de Certeau has it, “intextuation.” Cf. Michel de Certeau, The Practice of Everyday Life, p. 140.
Either way, Carson stages for us a mind at work, a subjectivity which thinks in language and cannot free itself from it. The labyrinth evoked at the beginning of the second stanza is built from words – place names are its bricks, while the dead ends and blockades are “stops and colons.” Movement of thought is almost entirely blocked in such a situation. The “sentence in my head” is “stuttering” and everything is brought to a standstill. The violence pictured in this poem is interestingly a stiff, dead, halting force. The “burst of rapid fire” is a “hyphenated line” which is cut and hollowed by a void of silence. Of course, as it was elaborated upon in the previous sections, silence literally means death, because the inability to carry the narrative is a sign of exhaustion and diminishing. Thus, the end of the first stanza, where everything is blocked – fixed in its position by the deadening, impersonal force of violence which brings everything to a full stop – is a traumatic moment, as paralysis seems to lock all movement of thought and language.

Luckily, the turn of the poem, the sonnet-like volte-face that splits “Belfast Confetti,” brings about a resuscitation of subjectivity, as it begins with “I know.” It is not, however, a glorious poetic “I” that manifests its metaphorical capabilities and is able to uphold itself on Platonic idealism and Cartesian certainty, but rather a traumatized subjectivity, one that has been made to assume a fixed linguistic position of the shifter “I” because of the violent force which exerts its invisible power. As Jacques Lacan observes in his analysis of how signification produces subjectivity, the realms of knowing and being are strongly disjunctive.\(^{72}\) Therefore, the claim “I know” is not an existential assertion of “I am” in the sense of a Cartesian \textit{ego cogito}, but a sign of the fact that a certain position has been assumed

\(^{72}\) This distinction is most clearly visible on the level of speech analysis and the distinction between the subject of enunciation and the enunciating subject, i.e. that there is a split between who is performing the utterance and who is manifesting in the words of that very utterance. Cf. Jacques Lacan, \textit{The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis}, pp. 138-139. The fundamental alienation is discussed later on in the seminar: “If we choose being, the subject disappears, it eludes us, it falls into non-meaning. If we choose meaning, the meaning survives only deprived of that part of non-meaning that is, strictly speaking, that which constitutes in the realization of the subject, the unconscious. In other words, it is of the nature of this meaning, as it emerges in the field of the Other, to be in a large part of its field, eclipsed by the disappearance of being, induced by the very function of the signifier.” (p. 211)
in discourse. In this case, of course, this discourse is one of a wounded culture. No wonder then that after this first assertion marking the entry into the realm of traumatized human subjectivity is made, the newly-born subject is beginning to ask the fundamental questions about its nature. “Why can’t I escape?” is the first in order and suggests a certain anxiety resulting from the arbitrary positioning in a reality that we feel is not native to us – after all language is a realm that we are born into, that we enter and are forced to adopt, not being usually in the position to alter it. This *Geworfenheit* – an existentialist notion of a feeling of being thrown into this world – is the first reaction. “Every move is punctuated” because the rules of discourse cannot be rejected if one wants to hold on to being human. The newly-found freedom lies only in the possibility of speaking. The binders of the discourse we are dealing with here are very aptly set by the place names which refer to the Crimean campaign and by the proper, alien-sounding names of military paraphernalia. The former stage a certain historical theatre, which governs and regulates writing in terms of ideology, while the latter are signs of an impersonal oppression. They are typical displacements of real forces, since the British Army is hiding in this poem behind historical terms “Saracen”, the Eastern “Kremlin” and proper trademark “Makrolon.” Faces are shielded which only adds to the impression of the overwhelming impersonality and the eventual impossibility of establishing a direct contact, a “face-to-face” relationship with another subjectivity in this situation. This is only strengthened by the “[w]alkie-talkies” which metonymically stand for deferment of communication and the loss of a human voice amidst the mediating technological devices.

In this void, hollowed reality that is brought to life by violence and governed biopolitically through discursive blockades, without any possibility for meeting others and establishing normal bonds, the subject of the poem begins to ask more questions of a rather fundamental nature, regarding its identity, origin and destination. Or rather, it can be read as a

73 Or, more precisely perhaps, “wound culture,” as described by Mark Seltzer in “Wound Culture: Trauma in the Pathological Public Sphere”, *October* 80 (Spring 1997), p. 25.
process of interrogation, because even if the questions are asked within the subject, their
nature is authoritarian, since to ask them is to pin-point identity in its movement, hold it up
and paralyse it. This view is more clearly expressed in another poem from that section –
“Campaign”: “They had questioned him for hours. Who exactly was he? And when / He told
them, they questioned him again. […] Then / they took him […] and told him / What he was.”
(IN 98) The terrible danger that we fear behind those lines is that perhaps these three
questions can serve as a basis for judging someone, the minimum set of information that
allows identity to be parcelled into a pre-defined compound. The aim of these questions is not
existential reflexion, but rather bio-political management of identity and assignation of a tag
that will, from now onwards, take the place of dignity, like a Jewish star attached to the coat
of a ghetto inhabitant. The meaning of these questions is reduced to a “fusillade of question-
marks” – symbolic traces, just like the exclamation marks with which the poem opened. The
materiality of signs and the focus on the typography as an equally meaningful level of the text
is again a prime example of Carson’s extended textuality. When purely graphical symbols
acquire their own meaning and overlap with reality, textuality is exposed as a constitutive
element of our understanding of the world. Asterisks, question marks, stops and colons are all
traces which etch the image of reality, just like emotions, ideas and actions.

The human spoor and the typing machine

These traces, left on the surface of the poem, to use a spatial metaphor, have been utilized and
conceptualized by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida in his discussion of the “scene of
writing” in the essay “Freud and the Scene of Writing.” The scene described by Derrida is a
metaphor of memory as writing, which recurs in Freud’s analyses as a handy illustration.
Derrida, however, shows that it is not only a metaphor. In the end, all “[p]syehical content
will be represented by a text […]. The structure of the psychical apparatus will be
represented by a writing machine.”

He argues that a certain “psychical text” is the primary circuit in the mechanics of subjectivity and precedes even the voice, which is usually perceived as the elementary level of language. Curiously enough, Derrida claims that this “text is not thinkable in an originary or modified form of presence. […] Everything begins with reproduction.”

Therefore, such questions as name and origin are indeed not at the heart of subjectivity. What has been uncovered is a writing machine, a mechanism of reproducing experience in a textual format and storing it in the form of memory. Thus, as the great deconstructor of metaphysics tries to show, a “total reassimilation into speech, is, in principle, impossible or limited,” because “words are also and «primarily» things” and “[p]ure words and pure things are […] «theoretical fictions».”

Assuming that Carson procures for us, just like Freud, a certain paradigmatic scene of writing, it can be argued that Carson’s position is similar to that of Derrida’s, i.e. there is no metaphysical “presence” or regulative idea that guarantees truthfulness of representation, while language is fictionalizing reality already at an unconscious level: “Writing supplements perception before the latter even appears to itself.”

Therefore, the traumatic scene of the riot cannot happen anywhere else then in the field of a text. Finally we can arrive at an understanding of the sound of typing and locate it in our interpretation. It is actually the sound of the world typing itself on the subject. “Belfast Confetti” is thus a scene of writing, one that problematizes not only the question of a traumatized subject positioned in the “wound culture,” but also the question of subjectivity in broader terms, exposing at the same time the mutual interdependence of the two. Derrida also claims that “writing is unthinkable without repression,” and the trauma surfacing in this poem is a symptom that reveals a great deal of repression that is finally sublimated into a form

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75 Ibid., p. 92.
76 Ibid., p. 102.
77 Ibid., p. 110.
78 Ibid., p. 113.
of art. On the one hand, we have then the question of reality inscribing itself onto the psyche, thus giving birth to a wounded subjectivity, but on the other, the root idea of subjectivity and in consequence “authorship” is heavily undermined: “[t]he «subject» of writing does not exist if we mean by that some sovereign solitude of the author.”

Thus, the poem “Belfast Confetti” is a programmatic piece of writing which breaks away from all kinds of metaphysics so as to clear the way for a better understanding of how violence operates within the Northern Irish society. In this way, Carson’s employing of pure textuality is a radical move. However, it is not a postmodernist gesture of rejection, but an intentional step forward, governed by a deep understanding of a need for the renewal of the ethical perception of the Troubles. The almost phenomenological reduction of subjectivity allows Carson to put in the foreground the mechanisms of violence which are inscribing, tearing themselves on the body of the society which is at the same time severely disciplined, all in a purely discursive way, making it invisible to many of the commentators. Reading deep into the poem, we find a great deal of understanding for the tremendous pain inflicted on that society, but at the same time a deep sense of a loss at which the perplexed people remain because of a lack of understanding of the events and a readiness to return to the usual, oppressive oppositions.

Another interesting poem which takes up the theme of textuality as subjectivity is “Linear B,” whose title already hints that language and the questions of deciphering and decoding will be involved. The poem begins en route by “[t]hreading rapidly between crowds” (IN 95) and immediately sends us to the Latin meaning of the word “text” which is deeply related to “threading.” The Merriam Webster dictionary observes that “text” comes from Medieval Latin “textus” and further from Latin “texture”: context, from “texere”: “to weave.” Thus, we come to the close relation between “threading rapidly” and “weaving the

79 Ibid.
text.” Metaphors referring back to the cloth-making process and its resemblance to writing are very frequently employed by Carson who, as a writer born in Belfast, eagerly alludes to the local linen industry and ropeworks. This characteristic feature already guides us in the direction of treating the subject as a needle that is stitching its own story within the fabric of the city (or, as this dissertation aims to prove, text in general): “The stitches show in everything I’ve made.” (IN 122) The primacy of text, which is so strongly emphasized by Derrida, can be seen to work here as well, because the mechanism of “reading / Simultaneously, and writing in this black notebook” is an image strikingly similar to the working of the wonderful tablet described by Freud in his short essay “A Note Upon the Mystic Writing-Pad” – a metaphor elaborated upon by Derrida. Freud sums up his discussion of the psychic apparatus by saying that

if we imagine one hand writing upon the surface of the Mystic Writing-Pad while another periodically raises its covering sheet from the wax slab, we shall have a concrete representation of the way in which I tried to picture the functioning of the perceptual apparatus of our mind.”

Such a perspective on the subjectivity of this poem also welcomes the above-mentioned split between knowing and being, as developed by Lacan, since “his [the subject’s] rendez-vous is not quite vous.” Etymology can help again at this point. “Rendez vous” comes from Middle French phrase (first known use in 1582) “present yourselves,” which would mean that what the subject “quite” lacks is the reflexivity, that all it carries is just a “presentation” or, as we should say after Derrida, “representation.” “But from years of watching,” we learn, “I know the zig-zags circle: / He has been the same place many times, never standing still.” Thus, the situation is becoming more and more clear: the narrator of the poem is also a split, hollowed

80 Sigmund Freud, “A Note Upon the Mystic Writing-Pad”, quoted in: Jacques Derrida, “Freud and the Scene of Writing”, p. 112.
subject locked in the utterance “I know,” but he is trying to catch up with that ever-receding image (cf. “representation”) of himself escaping and, interestingly, mute. This last element points to the fact that the doppelganger is the “real” part of the split self.\textsuperscript{81}

That mysterious hero of the poem, the notorious shadow stalking the streets, “peering,” “reading” and “writing” may be the figure of the narrator himself, but viewed from inside out. They fit each other like the left and right side of a glove: one is the subject in speech, the other is the apparatus working behind it – one is mute, the other is speaking. This split within the psyche is of course a motif that has been introduced into psychoanalysis by Lacan, but initially it was developed by Hegel, who analyzed human subjectivity as a split between two instances which are set in motion by the dialectic of the master and slave. Of course, neither Lacan nor Hegel would assume a possibility of those two parts coming together in a conscious unity; it would entail a total revealing of the unconscious in the conscious, which would in turn mean a total annihilation of subjectivity as we know it. However, the epistemological fantasy contained in Carson’s poem allows for a glimpse of the other side. We can take a sneak peek at what happens underneath the façade of defence mechanisms of the ego. When the narrator “clicked with his staccato walk,” he glimpsed an “open notebook” full of “[s]quiggles, dashes, question-marks, dense as the Rosetta stone.” “[I]t was either nonsense, or a formula – for / Perpetual motion,” he observes. However, why should there be a difference between the two? Perhaps what we are dealing with here is the “psychical text,” whose nature is indecipherable and whose grammar is personal and unconscious, as Derrida suggests? What this text upholds is in fact the continuous fluidity of experience – a guarantee of “never standing still” by way of “perpetual motion.” What the narrator might have glimpsed in this very poem is Freud’s quasi-mythical primary process, the first extension of consciousness towards the world in Hegel’s terms (before the split, or

\textsuperscript{81} I am referring to Lacan’s understanding of the real as one of the three fundamental registers of human reality. The real is the traumatic, unassimilable element of experience, one that cannot be rendered discursively. Cf. Jacques Lacan, \textit{The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis}, pp. 51-55.
fraying [work of difference], as Derrida would say). This process in turn guarantees the emergence of the “collapsing city” – a constantly metamorphosing reality. Meaning is produced in movement, Carson seems to suggest, while we are often concentrating on its very outcome, the phase in which it is already formulated. However, there operates, as if from underneath, a more fundamental process. That is why we have to reach back behind the “natural” language and “glimpse” that under-language of Linear B. Its very name brings connotations of underlying continuity (“linear”) and supposed secondary character (“B”).

**The webs of discourse**

Thus, Carson manages to encapsulate a new vision of subjectivity which remains in accord with the findings of post-modern philosophy. He expresses these ideas, however, by performing, or staging for us the problems in a manner that evades the traditional discourses of both poetry and philosophy. In this way, he creates a path that will enable him to focus on problems of epistemological and ethical nature without abandoning the continuity of speech, making his figures more alive than any traditional philosopher would dream of. By staging the problems in a theatre whose boundaries are made of his own memory and experiences, or are directly stemming from them, he creates a uniquely personal space in his poems, where every contact with the public sphere generates a meaningful response in the field of a sensitive subjectivity.

This would be impossible without the textual (or textile) approach Carson takes as a metaphoric basis for his poetry, which is especially visible in the second part of *The Irish For No*. Having set the textual scene in “Belfast Confetti,” he proceeds to depict the city in a series of dialectically organized short poems which are informed with the metaphor of weaving, threading, as well as unstitching and unravelling. These figures of speech are not only a sign of being brought up in a city whose textile industry had a tremendous impact on
the imagination of the child – it is also a structuring and self-referencing principle. As was already mentioned above, the text is etymologically related to cloth and fabric, presupposing a specific understanding of what it is. Roland Barthes provides a definition of an ideal text at the outset of his book *S/Z*. He remarks that the model text is one whose

networks are many and interact, without any one of them being able to surpass the rest; this text is a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds; it has no beginning; it is reversible; we gain access to it by several entrances, none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one; the codes it mobilizes extend *as far as the eye can reach*, they are indeterminable [...]; the systems of meaning can take over this absolutely plural text, but their number is never closed, based as it is on the infinity of language.82

Thus, Barthes posits a vision of the text as a universal paradigm, a singular entity inexhaustible in its plurality. Such a text is unveiling itself before us, offering always just a glimpse, as its totality does not exist.83 This text sends us back to itself, producing chains of signifiers which do not lead towards a fixed centre, a vantage point of meaning and clarification. In this, it is also a web which is spun eternally not by some mythic entity, but by ourselves, our cognition. This spinning may just as well be considered to be psychic life or life in general. Such an interpretation would sit well with the concept of never-ending storytelling, which was brought up in the previous sections so as to symbolize and embody life from a narrativistic standpoint.

However, this spinning is a dialectical process, as was poignantly indicated by Walter Benjamin in his essay on Proust. In “The Image of Proust,” he also recalls the idea that “[t]he Latin word *textum* means «web»” and remarks that “the important thing for the remembering author is not what he experienced, but the weaving of his memory, the Penelope work of [...]

83 Or would have to be conceived of as a deteriorated, “always already ruined” library from Borges’s story “The Library of Babel.”
recollected.” Penelope, the wife of Odysseus, was preparing a shroud for his father Laertes and claimed that she will choose from one of the suitors when the shroud is ready. However, to protract the process, she was secretly undoing the shroud during the night, prolonging its preparation and thus postponing her fate. Her situation is strikingly similar in this context to that of Scheherazade, who also had to defer her end of the story. However, whereas Scheherazade would stand for the oral dimension of this practice, Penelope would denote its textual counterpart. Moreover, her name is said to combine the Greek word for “web” or “woof” and the word for “eye” or “face.” Similarly, Carson employs a whole lot of dialectic images in which the fabric or text of the city Belfast is being made and unmade, punctured with holes and see-through voids, then sewn and basted together, always giving new insights, inducing epiphanies and eternally shifting in the spinning mind.

In “Clearance,” the “Royal Avenue Hotel collapses under the breaker’s pendulum,” exposing “[z]ig-zag stairwells, chimney-flues, and a ’thirties mural.” “There, through a gap in the rubble,” the narrator notices “a greengrocer’s shop” – “even from this distance, the potatoes smell of earth.” (IN 94) The dialectical counterpart to this poem is the above-discussed “Linear B” – the two poems face each other on the page and offer two glimpses of the Royal Avenue, an element which links them structurally and perhaps even symbolically, as an ironic remark on the obsoleteness of the royal-style, old-fashioned British politics in Northern Ireland. Whatever the case, the two poems interestingly show how the text of the city unmakes itself, but the blank space that is showing from underneath is substituted for something else – there is no void, or to paraphrase the words of Derrida – there is nothing beyond the text. The opening, unstitched in “Clearance,” is immediately made up by the activity of the mind in “Linear B,” which sews the city together by “threading rapidly” and setting the “collapsing city” in “perpetual motion.”

85 This mechanism is captured by Derrida in the concept of différance, which will be elaborated upon later on.
A similar dialectic is set in motion in another pair of poems: “Night Patrol” and “August 1969.” These two explore the shifting of the text’s tectonics; the movement of planes and the tossing off of façades. In “Night Patrol,” “the whole Victorian creamy façade has been tossed off / To show the inner-city tubings: cables, sewers, a snarl of Portakabins, / Soft-porn shops and carry-outs.” (IN 96) Barthes argues that a particular text does not allow us access to its model, but rather places us in a “network with a thousand entries”; choosing one of them does not entail accepting certain norms but just opens up a perspective that is constantly moving and remains mysteriously open.86 The Victorian façade can be interpreted as a stiff discourse which blocks associations and tries to govern and manage some paths of signification, at the same time repressing others. The text, on the other hand, wants to unveil itself like a tapestry in all directions, finally overthrowing any limitations imposed by a singular model of reading and interpretation. A hole blown in the “Victorian façade” is a textual sabotage, whose aim is to open up signification and free it in its multi-faceted nature, accepting the impassable otherness of the text and the portion of non-meaning that is always left out from our rationalization of language, embodied in the final image of the poem: “a voice box uttering gobbledygook.” (IN 96)87

In “August 1969,” it is the façade of the Greeve’s Mill that is “washed in a Niagara of flame” as the “riot fizzles out.” (IN 97) The historical background is important in this context. When the “troops march in,” the two and half days’ long riots finally end, marking the end of probably the single most violent confrontation in the history of Northern Irish Troubles. The Battle of the Bogside, as it is called, was fought between the RUC (Royal Ulster Constabulary) – the local police force, often accused of taking the Protestant’s side – and the inhabitants of the Bogside, who were defending their living quarter in Londonderry, after the RUC invaded it in response to an attack on the Apprentice Boys’ march in the city. The riots,

87 Barthes also claims that literature is “intentional cacography.” See: ibid., p. 9.
which involved the use of gas, petrol bombs and left over a thousand injured, ended when the British authorities decided to break their non-involvement attitude and send British troops so as to put an end to violence. Interestingly, the torn Bogside eagerly welcomed the entry of the army with “singing, dancing on the streets,” considering the retreat of RUC as their own victory: “Happy days, my mother claims, the mill-girls chattering, linking arms.” What these images seem to communicate can be read from the perspective of the dialectic between orality and textuality, as well as with regard to the dialectical counterpart poem “Night Patrol.” Whereas in the latter poem it is the Victorian façade that gets torn down, in “August 1969” we see the Greeve’s Mill on fire. The Mill could be read in this context as an important entity – not just a modelling institution imposing law, but a spinning force that lies at the heart of the community defending itself. The end of the riots is a happy occasion, because the fabric of the city and community, which had been undone through violence, can now commence to remake itself. This is heralded by the mill-girls who chatter and link arms, forming the first paradigmatic links within a community that needs to patch up itself. The air is filled with confetti, which changed from the bits and pieces included in the bomb with the aim to hurt, into “[c]harred receipts and bills-of-lading, contracts, dockets, pay-slips” (IN 97) which are all documents of people exchanging something, dealing with each other, interacting; these are the traces of meetings that can be tracked down in text, in the fabric of a society that is bustling with life. The process of healing and transforming signifiers of violence back into their life-giving context is summed up in the last line of the first stanza: “The weave is set: a melt of bobbins, spindles, shuttles.” Those elements, previously found within bombs (cf. “Belfast Confetti”) are restored to their primary use – the stitching, sewing and joining. A most tragic ambiguity is thus developed by Carson in the image of confetti – it can be either used to cause harm (in the form of a bomb), or to baste together that which has been torn apart (as during a wedding). However, an equally frightful interpretation can be put forward: that this ambiguity
is in fact a dual possibility that is ingrained in the human condition and that perhaps it is from
now on, after the loss of innocence, impossible to distinguish between those two threads –
“The weave is set: a melt…” The Battle of the Bogside may have been the most tragic and
terrible event in the history of that community – one whose product is this inextricable knot in
the web of history and identity. Seen from this perspective, the second stanza would be a very
clear driving of this argument home. “But then, it all changed when I met your father.” This
line signals a kind of double-expression, marking and highlighting the loss of innocence in the
context of the community as a whole. The Battle is a scar that has written itself on the tissue
of that community with an “indelible ink” – just like the meaning of that photograph which
takes the mother of the narrator back to September 1944. The picture transports her into the
realm of a “weekend honeymoon” which is at the same time criss-crossed with the public
sphere, i.e. the Second World War and some of the key events that form a web of symbolic
meanings: last transport to Auschwitz and operation Market Garden, to name just two. Such
dualities, inherent to text, are painfully exposed by Carson in their total ambiguity.

The Smithfield labyrinth

The most revealing textual epiphany in this section of The Irish For No is contained, however,
in the poem “Smithfield Market.” It is a description of a market that was blown up during the
Troubles in 1974 – a place formerly known for its second-hand bookshops and now just
another commercial spot in modern Belfast. This booksellers’ labyrinth is described by
Carson as a true maze, “branching into passages, into cul-de-sacs, / Stalls, compartments,
alcoves,” (IN 99) which doubles the effect, turning it a dense figure of a textual labyrinth of
books placed within yet another labyrinth – that of text as an ontological paradigm. However,
the effect of the devastation is that the market now lies torn apart: “[e]verything unstitched,
unravelled,” showing “mouldy fabric,” while “[m]aggots seethe between the ribs and
corrugations.” This is another image of the fabric of Belfast being undone, showing its underside, a “mouldy” inside. This is yet another example of Carson’s surprising findings, since no one would expect signs of corruption there, in the depths of Smithfield Market. As it turns out, there are no easy solutions here – the ambivalence can be traced in every point of the text of Belfast, just as Barthes says that every single text is a theory of an escape, of an irreducible, eternally circulating “difference which indefinitely returns, insubmissive.”

Every possibility of a safe haven is annulled in the web of memory and history, where there is no point that we can claim an innocent and secure resting place for our thoughts. There, however, somewhere in the unstitched ruins of the market, there is something that beckons to the narrator, something that we can also catch a glimpse of:

Since everything went up in smoke, no entrances, no exits.
But as the charred beams hissed and flickered, I glimpsed a map of Belfast
In the ruins: obliterated streets, the faint impression of a key.
Something many-toothed, elaborate, stirred briefly in the labyrinth.
(IN 99)

This passage heralds a very dangerous possibility – that violence can erase entrances and exits to and from the text, hindering its spinning, blocking communication and depriving people of a space in which their narrations can unfold. Generally speaking, violence is jamming the movement in which the text unfolds, thus disabling us from naming and understanding that movement. However, as the whole construction collapses, we glimpse a synthetic result of this dialectics. The “obliterated streets” – erased, covered, overwritten as in a palimpsest – form a “faint impression of a key.” This key is definitely not a unifying idea, a passport into a world of firm, motivated transcendence, but rather a possibility of finding one’s way. It is a

88 Ibid., p. 12.
key of a map that can be put to use to navigate one’s individual way through the labyrinth. The paradoxical element here would be that the key to the “map of Belfast” is the multi-layered text of the city itself. This Freudian, “uncanny” effect is enhanced by the types of epithets that Carson employs in this case: “many-toothed” and “elaborate.” The first suggests a possibility of danger, biting, something entirely un-homely, as if guarding a boundary that is not to be trespassed, whereas the second promises its exhaustive nature, a certain plenitude, if only in the formal aspect. Something “stirs” in the labyrinth – there is a movement not unlike that of the Minotaur, a guardian of the secret centre and the escape route. An uncannily strange-via-familiar movement is emulated in those last two lines, through which a disturbing equation is being made about the meaning of the labyrinth. J. Hillis Miller in his fascinating discussion of the motif of labyrinth and narrative line, contained in the essay “Ariadne’s thread,” points out a possibility that perhaps the Minotaur is not really there and the centre is occupied by an altogether different entity – a dualistic condensation of Ariadne, the one who leads out of the labyrinth, and Arachne, the one who spins and produces the labyrinth. This interpretation remains in accord with the ambivalent character of the text itself – it can both entrap subjectivity in a circular repetition of violence and lead the way out of such a vicious circle, dialectically stitching and unstitching itself. Similarly, the textual labyrinth of Belfast – encompassing its metamorphoses in relation to time, violence and ideology – has at its vacant centre the twin image of Ariadne and Arachne, the entangling and disentangling forces. Miller remarks:

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The line of Ariadne’s thread is at once the means of retracing a labyrinth which is already there, and at the same time is itself a labyrinth, [...] spun from the belly of a spider in mid-web, Ariadne anamorphosed into Arachne. The line, Ariadne’s thread, is both the labyrinth and a means of safely retracing the labyrinth. The thread and the maze are each the origin of which the other is a copy, or the copy which makes the other, already there, an origin: *Ich bin dein Labyrinth...*  

What Carson seems to be suggesting here is that we need to refocus on the city itself: read from it the story of its metamorphosis, marked by violence and the undoing of violence. This would constitute a primarily *textual* process of weaving the society back together. To achieve this ethical goal, Carson employs a purely textual device – allegory. It seems like an unlikely diagnosis, but in fact it depends on the understanding of the nature and function of allegory. To interpret those, I shall once more turn to Walter Benjamin and J. Hillis Miller.

The basis of this argument is the assumption that, as Derrida claims, “the semiological text comes to designate the unstable process whereby experience and representation (whether linguistic or not) engage one another in a radically undecidable manner,” implying that “there is no experience that can be separated from the systems of representations developed for its expression.”  

In view of this, the textual disasters that Carson describes – the cuts, breaks and holes in the text or discourse of the city and Northern Irish society – pose serious problems of representation. They are merely symptoms of an experience that does not easily come to the fore. As Miller observes, “[s]tory-telling, the putting into language of man’s «experience» of his life, is in its writing or reading a hiatus in that experience.”  

Text (writing) obliterates that experience and situates itself comfortably as the middle term in this dialectic relationship, engaging us, as language-oriented subjects, is all kinds of complications that are essentially

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90 Ibid., pp. 67-68.
part and parcel of the textual practices we employ as a culture or ideological formation. Carson brings to the foreground those problems and points out, as in “Belfast Confetti,” that much of what we might conceive of as violence is in fact a discursive formation developed by our subjectivity. In order to symbolically dismantle that problem, he dialectically opens up those texts that are employed in the Northern Irish conflict, by destabilizing them in their ambiguity and ambivalence. He resists all compartmentalization by retracing the argument of Roland Barthes, who was so successful at “establishing how one might read from the inside out, that is, with an eye towards grasping how reading is also always an engagement with its social and psychic conditions.”

The reading/writing solutions I have been tracing in Carson’s poetry, however, are also a means of showing an intuited way out – he does spin his poetic web, but he never fails to leave traces and allegorical images which show a possible way out, or at least a means of understanding the Troubles. He is both the Arachne and Ariadne of his poems.

Walter Benjamin opposed strongly the Romantic concept of a symbol, because it presupposed a certain unity, a coherence whose metaphysical guarantee proved to be inadequate in the turbulent interwar period, especially in the face of rapid sociological and political changes. Thus, he prefers to use the figure of an allegory as something that is essentially more fragmented and dissipated. J. Hillis Miller picks up on that theme when he diagnoses the narrative as the “allegorizing along a temporal line of this perpetual displacement from immediacy.” Allegory is therefore “the impossibility of expressing unequivocally.” In this light, allegory connotes a radical separation of reality and language. Thus, it would fully embody the textuality exhibited by Carson in his poetry. The allegorical “map of Belfast,” which refers only to itself, is its own key; it is both the city and the map:

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94 J. Hillis Miller, “Ariadne’s Thread: Repetition and the Narrative Line”, p. 72.

95 Ibid.
“The city is a map of the city.” (BC 176) By placing the origin and representation before each other in a mirror-to-mirror relationship, Carson offers a paradoxical allegory of “a displacement from one sign to another sign which in turn draws its meaning from another figurative sign, in a constant *mise en abyme.*”\(^96\)

This allegory of textuality has two definite ends. One is to expose the textuality of those problems that are often dealt with as if they did not belong to the realm of textuality, thus showing that perhaps literature, especially poetry, is the place where they can be successfully problematized. The other is to show that the textual paradigm has also a powerful mythical and political dimension. As John Scheid and Jesper Svenbro show in their study on mythical weaving, ancient Greeks imagined “weaving as a metaphor for political unity.”\(^97\)

Weaving, the argument goes, also “provides a metaphor for statecraft and political stability in Plato’s *Statesman.*”\(^98\) Thus, with the discussion of the relevance of textual metaphors, the argument has made a full circle, coming back to the aim of ancient *mythos* and the oral tradition. This synthesis is a hopeful result of the dialectics of orality and textuality that Carson employs. It marks the onset of his poetic project, as part of which he will continue to explore the themes set in motion in *The Irish For No* in further collections, with special regard to the questions of ethics, personal and national identity, memory and history, as well as the city and narrative procedures. However, one more step is necessary before that analysis can be undertaken. The synthesis is, in this particular case, not a new quality that enters the stage, but rather a step back, for – according to Carson’s logic – once a step has been made, two steps back should follow. It is necessary not only to uncover the mechanics of orality and textuality in their traditional sense, but also to delve deeper. Carson’s dialectic is not circularly fruitless. On the contrary, it is one of a deconstructive type, i.e. self-reflective and

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\(^96\) Ibid.


\(^98\) Ibid.
deeply attuned (because of the “violent” training) to the metaphysical assumptions underlying certain dichotomies. Thus, it seems fitting to follow a deconstructive path and observe closely how some procedures of the Northern Irish poet can be set as a parallel to those of Jacques Derrida’s notions that pertain to writing and systems of signification. This does not lead us away from the problem, but beyond it.
III Reversed dialectics in *First Language*

*There is no mother tongue, only a power takeover
by a dominant language within a political multiplicity.*

Deleuze & Guattari

*Jerome imagined Babel with its laminates and overlapping tongues
And grooves, the secret theatre with its clamps and vices, pincers, tongs.*

Ciaran Carson

The tower of Babel

Ciaran Carson’s 1993 collection titled *First Language* begins with a poem in Irish, whose title is French: “La Je-Ne-Sais-Quoi” (meaning: I-don’t-know-what-it-is). It could be understood as homage to the Irish language, which the author of the book was brought up in. However, what would be the meaning of its title? It already introduces certain confusion because, by requiring the reader to take a French detour, the poem at the very beginning sabotages the intention it heralds by the title of the collection. If the subject matter of the book is to be the “first language,” then the English title of the collection (“First Language”), the French title of the first poem (“La Je-Ne-Sais-Quoi”) and its Irish contents form an impossible triangle that locates the subject matter of the book elsewhere – not inside any of those languages, but rather somewhere in between them, in the space of translation, transition from one language to another. Thus, as I will argue, Ciaran Carson tries to venture beyond the traditional lines that demarcate the boundaries of our reflection on languages, dislocating the concept of “first language” and showing that there is yet another kind of language beyond – something that I would designate by Jacques Derrida’s term of *archi-writing*, which he developed in his book
Of Grammatology in order “to designate not only the physical gestures of literal pictographic or ideographic inscription, but also the totality of what makes it possible; and also, beyond the signifying face, the signified face itself.”⁹⁹ Thus, what is at stake here is a kind of writing that precedes and makes possible all communication. This kind of writing, I argue, unveils itself in Ciaran Carson’s poems from beneath the dialectics of orality and textuality.

The stage on which this problem is presented is that of translation. No wonder then that the original cover of First Language features a painting by J. Dobosz, a Polish primitivist painter, which depicts nothing else but the Tower of Babel itself. This particular picture, radically simplified and iconic, has one distinctive characteristic – the workers are clearly terribly enslaved. They are carrying heavy loads onto the top of the tower and are observed by numerous guards wielding huge whips. Although it may seem obvious that a tremendous amount of violence is involved in the raising of the Biblical tower under the despotic king Nimrod, the scale with which the figures are presented on this particular painting, as well as the distribution of details on this otherwise childish picture, bring that violence to the surface, placing it on a par with the general, linguistic subject of the motif – the mixing and spreading of human languages. Thus, if we add the painting to the initial triangle with which I began the discussion, the question involved here receives yet another dimension – apart from origin and translation – namely that of violence. As it turns out, Derrida’s concept of *archi-writing* embraces all of those aspects and reveals a peculiar new layer in Carson’s work.

Jacques Derrida’s interpretation of the Tower of Babel revolves exactly around those topics. He focuses on the fact that it is not the tower itself that causes the problem, but the translation of its name: there is a confusion between the proper name Babel (Bavel), given by

God, and the verb *balal* which means “to mix, confuse.” The ambiguity between the two names is the conflict between a proper name and a general noun. As Derrida claims in *Of Grammatology*, an inscription of the proper name into a linguistic system constitutes an elementary act of violence. A Midrash about the intention of the people building the tower, quoted in Pardes Lauder, points to a war against God, who in turn punishes people by introducing the necessity to translate and the impossibility of a perfect translation. People wanted to introduce one, dominant language that would not only allow them to subordinate the other tribes in geopolitical terms (horizontal movement), but would also go as far as to challenge God’s power in the world (vertical movement). These two intentions cross and converge in the Tower of Babel. Such an imperial gesture is hindered by the “scattering” of people and the “confusion” of languages, as God forbids the adventurous tribe to overtake all languages and install a single, overarching meaning. In this way, a totalization of sense is made impossible. In order to communicate, we are forced to translate, but absolute, perfect translation is never to be achieved. Geoffrey Bennington observes that this makes the multiplicity of languages a new foundation – the remnant of Babel – and the need of writing a necessary prerequisite for any individuality. The irony of the word “babel,” Bennington argues, is that it becomes a language trick, a way of inscribing an inimitable signature on the face of language. This tension opens up a space that is demarcated by absolute transparency (death) and complete idiosyncrasy (life), neither of which can be of course fully achieved. Thus, we are located in between, in the area where translation is a necessary precondition for existence.


It becomes clear that Carson is excavating a truth that Derrida expressed by saying that in every language there is always more than one language.\textsuperscript{103} Indeed, we are doomed to translation, because prior to all “speech” there are “languages” – in order to say something we need to enter a linguistic contract and accept the fact that all “original” texts are indebted to their translations, and vice versa.\textsuperscript{104} Translation is not transcription, but writing – its goal is not adequacy but the very fact that language is, it is a bringing forth of that sphere where everything emerges. This is why Eugene Vance said that if one renounces translation, he should also renounce life.\textsuperscript{105} In an influential book titled \textit{After Babel}, George Steiner claims that translation is a rudimentary mental operation and whether “inside or between languages, human communication equals translation.”\textsuperscript{106} The word \textit{translatio} is related to transferring one thing to another place; it is essentially a form of separating two texts by introducing a difference, a delay, which is summed up by Derrida in the concept of \textit{différance}, an amalgamation of the words \textit{différer} and \textit{difference}, suggesting simultaneously a delay, spacing and differing. \textit{Différance} “does not exist” – it is that pure movement of separation that becomes not a sign of anything but “its possibility”; it “is by rights anterior to all that one calls sign” and in this sense can be called “the formation of form.”\textsuperscript{107}

The story of the Tower of Babel has yet another aspect that is relevant for Carson’s work – namely that of technology. Many of his poems feature detailed descriptions of the pieces of equipment used by the army and the police (e.g. the poem “Apparat” [FL 233] featuring a bomb disposal robot). All kinds of cameras, night-vision goggles, robots, materials from which they are made, etc. are described with utmost precision. There is a strong fascination with their ominous functionality and, sometimes, lack of it. Carson is eager to call

\textsuperscript{103} Ibid., p. 310.
\textsuperscript{104} Ibid., p. 314.
them by their proper names, exposing their linguistic materiality. Of course, in the context of the Troubles, they acquire a special meaning. They are the proper protagonists of the conflict – their names are bricks in the Tower of Babel that the extreme nationalist and loyalist discourses are constructing. The Midrash on Bereshit 11:4 says that bricks used to build the tower were valued higher than the lives of the workers. When a brick fell down from the tower and smashed on the ground, everyone would lament how difficult it is to replace it, whereas the loss of a man on the construction site would be usually ignored. The technocratic nature of the Babel venture, displayed already in the Biblical text, points to a correlation between the violent nature of language itself, the use of proper names in an ideology-propelled conflict, and the untranslatable nature of the effects of violence. Carson seems to eagerly join those concepts in his works, as in the following example from “Latitude 38° S”:

Fletcher cut the nib of a quill with a Stanley knife and sliced the palp
Of his finger off. It quivered with its hinge of skin, then rivuletted
On the parchment […]
In fact, he’s been trying to copy the Inquit page off the Book Of Kells
(FL 270)

This little passage intersects and connects the various dimensions of this problem. Fletcher (seller of arrows), we can imagine, is someone who prepares himself to write (prepares the weapon), by sharpening his tool, i.e. making sure that his “stylus” is sharp enough to inscribe himself into a system. However, that operation requires a sacrifice – a part of one’s identity and individuality has to go, as figured in the sliced palp of the finger, where the dermatoglyphics are traditionally found. The cut piece lands on the parchment, becoming

108 Tora Pardes Lauder, ibid.
110 Wittgenstein argued that pain is not a state we can communicate logically.
a symbolic representation of the violent effect entailed by that textual circumcision – an operation that bridges the raw and cultured state of human existence, i.e. nature and culture. As we learn a few lines later, however, the whole process is that of translation, even before the first utterance (inquit), which also points to the fact that this operation is prior to all language. In fact, it is the process of elementary differentiation. As the essence of the proto-writing, it contains a certain amount of violence, making it inseparable from writing and, in broader terms, culture itself.

Christopher Johnson, in his discussion of Derrida’s philosophy, remarks that violence is inscribed in the very act of describing by differentiating, classifying and suspending of the explicitness of reference. Naming is essentially the creation of something unique within a system, and an inscription of that uniqueness into the system. In this way, it is a proto-writing, or a proto-violence\(^{111}\) – an effect of the loss of uniqueness that is guaranteed by appearing in person.\(^{112}\) The word is a tomb on the thing it designates, we learn from Hegel. The very structure of the sign signifies death, because the sign must evacuate itself in order for the meaning to appear. Thus, Derrida can claim that “the trace must be thought before the entity” and “the movement of the trace is necessarily occulted, it produces itself as self-occultation.”\(^{113}\) For something to emerge, something else must be relegated into the background and every “appearance” thus unavoidably rests on a “disappearance” which serves as the mute background that makes it possible to produce meaning.

Violence, figured in the necessity of death, is inscribed in language. It is inherent in the mechanics of signification. The story of the Tower of Babel, including the one painted by Dobosz, reminds us of this in an acute manner. Moreover, we are touching here the heart of

\(^{111}\) Also a proto-rape in psychoanalytic terms, the fantasy scene of copulating with the mother, which constitutes the nucleus of the Oedipus complex and, according to Freud’s *Totem and Taboo*, lies in the state of repression at the heart of all civilization.


\(^{113}\) Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 47.
human subjectivity as well. Derrida observes that “spacing as writing is the becoming-absent and the becoming-unconscious of the subject” and “as the subject’s relationship with its own death, this becoming is the constitution of subjectivity.”\textsuperscript{114} In this way, the process of differentiation, which entails violence and is rooted in language, is finally the formative force in the shaping of human consciousness. In \textit{Speech and Phenomena}, Derrida concludes: “this movement of \textit{différance} is not something that happens to a transcendental subject; it produces a subject.”\textsuperscript{115}

### The Second Language?

The poem that follows “La Je-Ne-Sais-Quoi” is titled “Second Language.” In what terms is it secondary? Is it the literally second, foreign language? Is it the second language in historical terms? Or maybe in formal terms, e.g. is it poetry itself? I would argue that we are dealing here with a complete genealogy of writing, one that would take us back to the space where writing is made possible, to the fundamental point where difference is introduced and identity secured, a writing which “implies the framework of the instituted trace, as the possibility common to all systems of signification”\textsuperscript{116}, be they oral, graphic or gesture-based. At the beginning, the poem takes us back to an embryo-state, “English not being yet a language,” when the lyrical subject is “brain-deaf” and “comfort-blanket dumb.” (FL 214) It would be possible to propose an interpretation that this resembles the natural state of man, a Rousseau’s fantasy of the innocent condition of humanity before the advent of technology, violence and law.\textsuperscript{117} The next stanza shatters that idea, as the “child,” linguistically unborn, is surrounded by ominously looming “growling figures,” who watch over it and toll “carillons of bronze /

\textsuperscript{114}Ibid., p. 69.
\textsuperscript{116}Jacques Derrida, \textit{Of Grammatology}, p. 46.
\textsuperscript{117}Derrida paraphrases Rousseau: “Natural writing is immediately united to the voice and to breath. Its nature is not grammatological but pneumatological. It is hieratic, very close to the interior holy voice of the Profession of Faith, to the voice one hears upon retreating into oneself: full and truthful presence of the divine voice to our inner sense.” (Ibid., p. 17)
Sienna consonants embedded with the vowels *alexandrite, emerald and topaz.*” As soon as the child becomes conscious, it is enveloped in a monstrous system of ideology *qua* language; it is exposed to the workings of the “elaborate / Machinery of books.” (FL 271) The precious gems are likened to vowels, which already points towards the fact that speaking a language is a game of exchange, whose currency is not “natural,” innocent and evaporating into thin year, but constitutes both a materiality of sorts (because they are minerals) and entails a certain alienation (just like the *italics* in the poem and the alien etymology of these words in the English language). The latter feature, i.e. etymologically alienating quality, is suggested in the next stanza: “convoluted genealogy; / Wordy whorls and braids and skeins and spiral helices.” Words cannot be easily traced back to the realm of things – the further we move backwards along the historical lines of the development of languages, the more dense and resistant the linguistic material becomes. Ultimately, the concept of source fails us, as we are left with traces only. This seems to be the place where one or another system of metaphysics installs a source of meaning that helps establish a certain firm basis. Derrida’s deconstruction, however, tries to show that such gestures are arbitrary and we cannot penetrate difference itself, which is postulated as the ultimate source and basis: “the trace is in fact the absolute origin of sense in general. Which amounts to saying once again that there is no absolute origin of sense in general. The trace is the *différance* which opens appearance and signification.”

Returning to the “convoluted genealogy” contained in the poem “Second Language,” there are other interesting traces left in that couplet. The word “whorls” suggest fingerprints, shell-like forms, leaves branching off and spirals; “braids” involve “emplotment” and a fraying at the fringes; “skeins” send us back to the intractable balls of wool, whereas “spiral helices” connote DNA, information, reproduction and translation (as in the case of RNA). Where is Carson heading by evoking such a semiotic network? It seems that he is traversing

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118 Ibid., p. 65.
the level of words themselves and suggests an even more abstract, deeper aspect of “writing” – one that is remarkably reminiscent of the archi-writing proposed by Jacques Derrida. Ciaran Carson seems to be the kind of a poet who sees writing everywhere around him and captures it vividly in his poetry. His poems contain versions of writing that we can discern in “seagulls’ white ms” (FL 226), omnipresent “name tags” (FL 228), “bursts of steam – / Ampersands, asterisks, and glottal stops – puff round / The words” (FL 231), in the “gabbled alphabet of stars” (FL 232), in the cloudy cityscape, as the “fancy skywriter lets the message bloom and fluff / And the dissolve before our eyes / Until everything is indecipherable” (FL 232) and in “arrows of the wind upon the water, / Written on the water” (FL 272). In his poems, “everything was finger-printed” (FL 228) and “evening draws in like a hyphen” (FL 232). “It was raining on the neon writing”, he writes and “the drizzly sound of the words seeped out.” (FL 257) This dense network of glyphs covers the entire universe and constitutes a living text that goes beyond the traditional dualism of orality and textuality, establishing a new scene of primordial writing.

**Carson’s archi-writing**

One has to keep in mind that for Derrida the concept of archi-writing is a “quasi-transcendental” problem. On the one hand, this type of writing goes back beyond the traditionally understood uses of language, i.e. exchanges of intelligible portions of information: “différance is therefore not more sensible than intelligible and it permits the articulation of signs among themselves within the same abstract order – a phonic or graphic text for example – or between two orders of expression. It permits the articulation of speech and writing.”\(^{119}\) It is an underground movement that provides a transcendental condition of possibility, in the Kantian sense. On the other, however, it is not rooted solely in some kind of

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an abstract realm that is entirely removed from the empirical plane. This last element is also especially emphasized by Carson, who – although he endows the world with many layers of textual signification – holds immediate materiality very close to his heart and does not dispense with it. On the contrary, there is a strong sense that his textuality is particularly dense and empirical. As he himself claims in a rendition of Rimbaud’s “Drunk Boat”: “I’ve been immersed, since then, in Sea Poetry, anthologized by stars.” (FL 238) In another important poem of reference, “Correspondances” (after Baudelaire) we read that “Nature is a Temple” which speaks to us in a “verdurous babble” as its “dark symbolic forest eyes you with familiarity”; it is a kingdom where “Vowels, perfumes, stars swarm in like fireflies.” (FL 243) Thus, there is something almost natural about this ancient writing; it is ambiguously located on the “verge of a parable,” (FL 243) where nature and culture meet by way of a primordial story or narrative.

The meaning of the quasi-transcendental nature of writing is also connected with the confusion of the general law and particular instances, as provided in the impossible relation between the original text, which calls for being translated – rooting its ability to survive in that condition – and the impossibility to translate it fully. The image of the Tower of Babel is iconic in that respect. It reaches up to the heavens, establishing a new relation with the residue of meaning, but is at the same time rooted firmly in the ground, marking a spot, a particular place and a cut on the face of the Earth. For Derrida and Carson, there seems to exist a proto-level of signification, where the signs are made possible by a certain movement, not an entirely decipherable one, but just differing, setting routes and branching off. The movement and imagery of the poem seems to embody that original “tracing,” which “does not depend on any sensible plenitude, audible or visible, phonic or graphic.”

Consider the following stanza of “Second Language” and an excerpt from Of Grammatology:

120 Ibid.
Leviathans of rope snarled out from ropeworks: disgorged hawsers, unkinkable lay,
Ratlines, S-twists, plaited halyards, Z-twists, catlines; all had their say.

(FL 215, my emphasis – G.C.)

The outside, “spatial” and “objective” exteriority which we believe we know as the most familiar thing in the world, as familiarity itself, would not appear without the *gramme*, without *differance* as temporalization, without the non-presence of the other inscribed within the sense of the present, without the relationship with death as the concrete structure of the living present. Metaphor would be forbidden.\(^{121}\)

As Bogdan Banasiak observes in his book on Derrida, textuality and *archi-écriture* are the same thing: a tissue of differences and traces, the “indecipherable bits and bods, skuddicked and scrabbled like alphabet bricks,” (FL 257) in which discourse articulates itself – not a synthesised whole. Text, he continues, is a scene on which the gestural, non-mimetic writing is staged. It has nothing to do with representation or making manifest. It rather erases or blurs any presence.\(^{122}\) Literature, as it turns out, is a “textual labyrinth wallpapered with mirrors”\(^{123}\) whose “walls are sentences.”\(^{124}\) (FL 255) Curiously enough, in Carson’s poem that primary level is also the place where we encounter a complete confusion of senses. It is synaesthesia that rules here, as in Rimbaud’s poetry:

Tobacco-scent and snuff breathed out in gouts of factory smoke like aromatic camomile;
Sheaves of brick-built mill-stacks glowered in the sulphur-mustard fog like campaniles.

(FL 215)

\(^{121}\) Ibid., pp. 70-71.
\(^{123}\) Ibid., p. 153.
\(^{124}\) “We see the three walls and the fourth is glassy us,” adds Carson. (FL 255) We are a part of the labyrinth – this puts a whole new perspective on finding the way out.
The density of description is so great that it evacuates any realism. What we are left with is a labyrinth of words whose meanings reflect and uncover infinity, as in mirrors set against each other. In such moments, the writer takes us back to that quasi-transcendental sphere where, as Banasiak rightly observed, syntax rules over semantics and the text describes its own scaffolding, its own brickwork, or to use Banasiak’s term, “instauration.” We are engrossed in the random collage which unveils the entropy of language, its mutability, as well as potential for de-composition and re-composition: “for you can deconstruct all sorts of words from «England»: angel, gland and dangle.” (FL 236)

Carson continues the breakdown of reality:

> Things are kinks that came in tubes; like glue or paint extruded, that became
> A hieroglyphic alphabet. Incestuous in pyramids, Egyptians were becalmed.

(FL 216)

Why are things kinks? They are folds, bumps on the flat surface of the page – places where meanings converge and make unexpected jumps, as from “kinks” in pipes or tubes, to “kinks” denoting perverse, sexual inclinations. The logic of perversion is not entirely inappropriate in this context. In a sense, language is perverse, as it makes all possible connections, although some of them are of course – from a rational perspective – relegated as unacceptable and misled. Poetry, however, unearths that aspect of language – namely the free, uncontrolled “dissemination,” to use Derrida’s term. Banasiak notes that dissemination represents that which does not return to the father, the supervising authority. Hence, one can refer to in this context to the logic of sexual perversion, which can be illuminated by reference to

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126 Ibid., p. 159.
psychoanalysis, especially that of Jacques Lacan. Dissemination is a process of spreading, but one that freely spills without sinking in, for there is no depth on that primal, textual plain, but scattering itself, which disallows any final pinning down. The fertile and prolific logic of dissemination is also devoid of any sense of origin: “There is no first insemination. The semen is already swarming. The «primal» insemination is dissemination”; it is a dance of the “trace, a graft whose traces have been lost.”

This ultimate breakdown of signification instantiated in the poem Second Language reaches its height at the point when we enter, together with the lyrical subject, the “sepulchral interior,” “whose perfume I exhumed in chancy versions of the I-Ching.” (FL 216) At the end of the day, we find only chance, pure differentiation, différance, non-meaning propelled into movement by pure tracing. Immediately after that, the poem changes its tone – the lyrical subject wakes up to a different reality and returns to the conscious surface: “I woke up, verbed and tensed with speaking English; I lisped the words so knowingly.” The abrupt and violent dive under the surface of everyday language is over and finally “I am like a postman on his walk / Distributing strange messages and bills, and arbitrations with the world of talk.” The postman of course is the one who delivers letters in both meanings of the word. What is at stake here is, to borrow a term from Jacques Lacan, a version of the “symbolic” order, i.e. a structurally organised system of meanings and values centred on the symbolic authority of the father. It is a reliable signifying network that ensures the stability of the represented world by virtue of the Oedipus complex. This is done by eliminating free desire, i.e. the repression of the sexual love for the mother. The sense of stability and coherence is provided by the constant generation and reproduction of meaning within that system, the weaving of the all-covering textual cloth: “Bobbins pirn and shuttle in Imperial Typewriterspeak.” The fully

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127 Jacques Lacan points to a relationship between the structural psychic position of a pervert and his or her relationship with the father. Perversion is a negation of the fact of castration. Thus, it could be connected to an artificial (perverse) construction of poetry, which negates the lack on the mother’s part by erecting a fetish, i.e. poem.

formed subject can thus declare itself another signifier in the long chain: “I hit the keys. The ribbon-black clunks out the words in serial.” (FL 216) Thus, the subject emerges as a socialised being, but there is a price to be paid for that: “unspent Time” and “the noise of years”, i.e. a desire that can never be satiated because of the never-ending logic of signification. That desire ultimately leads us towards death – the only thing that signification cannot save us from, because it is in fact intimately married to it. This is connected to the fact that signification entails the notion of death, which is located at the heart of being, since

that becoming – or that drift/derivation – does not befall the subject which would choose it or would passively let itself be drawn along by it. As the subject's relationship with its own death, this becoming is the constitution of subjectivity. On all levels of life's organization, that is to say, of the economy of death. All graphemes are of a testamentary essence.129

Tak – yes

The rhythm of language, propelled by difference and unveiling in time, measured by the “syllables which tick their clock as condensation drips in mushroom mines” (FL 260), is profoundly captured by the experience of travelling by train, especially if it is a train that glides through a foreign language, as in the case of the poem “Tak, tak.” Its title, given in italics, is a linguistic memoir from the author’s journey to Poland, where he went on a trip on board a “crackly line from Sulejówek.” (FL 267) It seems fitting that the poem is dedicated to Piotr Sommer, the translator of Carson’s poems into Polish, who seems to perform the function of a guide and local presiding spirit on the Babel-like trip into the denizens of Polish language. Carson recalls in this poem his astonishment at the fact that the simple Polish phrase “tak, tak” can have such an array of different connotations, “Meaning Yes, Of course, or Is that so?” One of the simplest expressions to be found in any language, denoting

129 Jacques Derrida, Of Grammatology, p. 69.
affirmation, as a result of redoubling, i.e. repetition, a folding upon itself, twists itself and loses its innocence by becoming ambiguous. This reminds us of the linguistic entanglement of “double language” – a problem that the book First Language tackles. The simple reaction of saying “yes” thus becomes something more than just a confirmation. Michał Paweł Markowski, who wrote a book on Derrida’s philosophy of literature, devoted an entire section to the problem of Derrida’s own “tak, tak” (“oui, oui”). For the French philosopher, as it turns out, it is an affirmation of something more profound – not just a confirmation of the statement that preceded this utterance. Markowski claims that it could be the affirmation of the Nietzsche’s “eternal return,” of the coming of the Other (for Blanchot) and finally, in Derrida’s terms, a combination of the two – the eternal return of the Other, which prevents the reign of the Same. In other words, it is an affirmation of the language that always already surrounds us, prior to the order we might try to impose on it and the desire that we project upon it in an attempt to bend its curves along the lines of our own needs and demands. Thus, it is yet another assertion of the existence of a “writerly” regime that is prior to our appearance on the stage of language. This domain is the archi-writing, which conditions our existence in language and hence our subjectivity. It is another instance when Carson’s poetry presents and stages poetically the quasi-transcendental condition for the possibility of speech and literature.

By way of free associations, Carson develops that theme throughout the poem. “It put me in mind of the Queen’s own brand of blotting-paper, which is black, / So nobody can read the mirror image of Her private correspondence. Tak?!” (FL 267, my emphasis) The passive form suggests that it is the language that plays the active part here, not the lyrical subject. Perhaps the way meaning functions is adequately captured by the metaphor of the intransitive black blotting-paper, which forbids us to go back and decipher the full code of the message. A

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130 Michał Paweł Markowski, Efekt Inskrypcji, p. 320.
frequent prop in detective stories, the blotting paper certainly has metaphorical connotations – it removes the excess of ink, suggesting a means of purging language from the unnecessary overdose of meaning. We always tend to say too much or too little – this logic of speech is often recalled by psychoanalysts, who point to the fact that desire, which operates in language, turns every message into an expression of demand, basically a demand for love. There is an asymmetry between what we say and what we consciously mean, which Carson captures in the paradoxical statement: “if words related what the mind knew, none would be neighbours.” (FL 247) However, in this particular case, in order to keep to Derrida’s line of thought on writing, the blotting-paper reveals something that is usually left out (especially in power-oriented discourse, perfectly embodied in the figure of the Queen). This “supplement” is the materiality of language, that indecipherable trace which makes language possible, the archi-writing of scattered signs, meaningless leftovers, marks that refuse to be incorporated into a symbolic network of coherence and order. Tak? is yet another entrance to that shadow sphere of archi-writing, where pure difference, tracing and rhythm – protoplasts of the poetic line – operate in a constant flux, serving as the condition of all possible communication and signification.

The word “line” provides us with a range of associations: from Derrida’s pure tracing, the poetic line, its originally agricultural antecedent “versus,” to the lines of thought and communication, even phone lines and train lines. Carson condenses them in the third stanza: “Black line, impenetrable-bakelite-black phone: viridian-beetle-black, the tak, tak, tak / As someone lifted or abandoned a receiver.” (FL 267) So, in this configuration, a line is joining two different spots – be they train stations or two telephones. “Tak” is a prototypical

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131 Or perhaps the next part of the poem, as the doubled couplet-stanzas are intersected by – strangely familiar in this context – an image of a quill with a sharp point, reminding us of the stylus that I discuss elsewhere. This sign also reminds us of the space between the stanzas, marking the place from which everything emerges – the blank page. Banasiak observes in his book on Derrida that this is the lesson of Mallarmé: the blank page takes on itself the meaning, its emptiness denotes a drawing aside and spacing into a “polymodal” network of meanings – “dissemination,” in Derrida’s vocabulary. Cf. Bogdan Banasiak, Filozofia "Konca Filozofii", p. 153.
“yes?” – the automatic response given when someone lifts the phone upon a call from someone (or something) on the other side of the line. Therefore, the “tak” is an answer to a call that is being made possible via the “black line,” the line of black ink leading us through the poem on the page or the line linking us to some kind of alterity – an “Other” who calls out to us. In Derrida’s view, Markowski argues, this “tak” defines the possibility of that Other and is simultaneously a response to it. Even this simplest utterance testifies to the fact that there is no expression that would not be open to the voice of the Other – both in speech and writing there is a necessity to travel via this Other (language). Markowski inscribes this fact into Derrida’s general economy of trace and differentiation. “Tak, tak” can be read in this context as the primordial rhythm – of the poem, of the train cart rolling down its track and of the “buzzing” telephone line. All of those lines are “crackling” with interferences, static and garbled noise which is omnipresent in Carson’s poetry. “In the beginning was the telephone,”132 writes Markowski, twisting the line from the Bible – we are waiting for someone to call or responding to that cry. We are always already connected to a multitude of voices, even within ourselves, as the experience of speaking, or listening to ourselves speak, is the basic differentiating movement in our use of language. In the beginning, we might thus say, there are always the two “tak, tak,”133 whose redoubling is in fact the basis of all cognition as there is no unmediated beginning, no Oneness which would guarantee the stability of meaning and the full transparency of communication. The “beetle-black” “tak, tak, tak” comes across as the nonsensical ground of sense, the quasi-transcendental archi-gesture of someone who “lifted or abandoned a receiver.” (FL 267) It is the underground movement of language which is moved by Carson to the foreground. In this way, he employs poetry to show what makes it possible. As it turns out, it is the “poetic” approach that enables this kind of self-reflection on language.

132 Michal Pawel Markowski, Efekt Inskrypcji, p. 329.
133 Cf. the way negation and affirmation work in the Irish language. Carson plays on that theme in the book The Irish For No and the poem under the same title, which are discussed earlier on in this chapter.
This takes us back to the Babel-root of this subject. A few lines later Carson is quoting from the Genesis in Latin, “verbatim,” asserting in a yet another “first language” the multiplicity of that which underlies the unity of experience. Meaning is always re-doubled, folding on itself; the logic of signification is rooted in waste, misspending and dissemination. The logic of this process is summed up later in the poem: “They went from A to B by way of Zed, as far as they could figure it, / Which caused their ruination; they became a nation of abandoned ziggurats.” (FL 268) This type of a progress is marked by mediation, which always forces us to make a detour, go “by way of Zed,” i.e. through translation, interpretation, an act of reading (or rather mis-reading). “Abandoned ziggurats” are allegories of that state of ruination which we find in the fallen world, where words are hollowed out and left in the state of materiality. Acknowledging that state of affairs is to admit to the existence of language and constitutes a confirmation, “yes” (“tak!”), to the fact that Babel conditions all communication. “And it was on a crackly line from Sulejówek that I learned these lines of Polish, / Scrawled by Someone’s moving finger in the urinously monumental palace – ” Who is that “Someone”? He is the Other and his finger is moving, incessantly scribbling the “noise of years,” desecrating the transcendental palace of immediacy. That mythical castle is “urinously monumental,” which is an ironic way of saying that it is polluted. What with? By-products, because that is what urine is – a left-over in a process that I have discussed in relation to the ink left on the blotting-paper. It is yet another, repressed, repulsing but enduring remnant of the archi-writing, that underground movement of “tak, tak, tak of trains relinquishing The Underground.” Is it possible to map out that underlying tube system? Not entirely, for it resists systematization on the ground that it is difference itself – its nature is fluid as it operates by separating and linking, differentiating and combining – welding words and meanings.

134 See the discussion of the poem “Second Language” earlier in the chapter.
The Rhizomatic Underground

The lines that form the core of the imagery in the poem “Tak, tak” are also a potent motif for the philosophy duo Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari. These two thinkers approach this subject, which is so important for Carson, in their book *A Thousand Plateaus*. In the “Introduction: Rhizome,” they observe that in books “there are lines of articulation or segmentarity […] but also lines of flight, movement of deterritorialization and destratification.”135 Carson’s trains that are relinquishing The Underground (capitalized and formalized) are skidding off the rails of meaning, falling off-course, derailing the traditional lines along which words are put together in the “sane” and orderly discourse. Poems such as “Second Language” and “Tak, Tak” move along a different trajectory, always taking the detour “by way of Zed.” They move according to the logic of rhizome, which is described by Deleuze & Guattari as a way to “analyze language only by decentralizing it onto other dimensions and other registers,” because “language is never closed upon itself, except as a function of impotence.”136 The rhizomatic structures are multifarious and interconnected, “there are not points or positions in a rhizome, such as those found in a structure, tree, or root. There are only lines.”137 Similarly, in Carson’s poems we find no overarching structure, but many lines, poetic lines to be exact (whose length acquires yet another layer of significance as certain “lines of flight”), which lead in many directions, celebrating ambiguity and refusing to subject themselves to a single reading. This, however, is not a purely accidental activity. Although there is no possibility to enclose such models of thought in a rigid system, they embody the narrative work of life, as was the case in the poem “Dresden.” Moreover, Deleuze & Guattari seem to fall close to Todorov’s concept of “hommes recits” in this respect, because they see those lines and their combinations as an “interplay” that “approximates the pure activity of weavers attributed in

136 Ibid., p. 8.
137 Ibid., my emphasis.
Thus, the poem connects in some specific way to life and, as we read in “Rhizome,” it is not specifically “an image of the world” for it “forms a rhizome with the world.” Thus, it is possible to say that through their artificiality those poems join life and become a part of it, just like traditional music, so much beloved by Carson, which is too a means of connecting with the world rather than a dispassionate and purely abstract “self-conscious” commentary that detaches the author from his or her audience. It is a living branch, open onto the transformations of language, context and mentality.

The motto for Deleuze & Guattari is: “Always follow the rhizome by rupture; lengthen, prolong, and relay the line of flight; make it vary, until you have produced the most abstract and tortuous of lines of $n$ dimensions and broken directions. Conjugate deterritorialized flows.” Such a statement, or rather imperative, could be the motto of Carson’s investigations of languages in First Language and other poetry books, as in Belfast Confetti which featured the following dictum: “Improve, wipe out, begin again, imagine, change.” (BC 175) Carson unveils before his readers a pulsating network of linguistic material. In the poems that I have proposed for this interpretation, we encounter a plethora of diverse linguistic material: specialized vocabulary, strange words, whose etymology is almost invariably un-English, passages in Latin, French, Irish, Polish, proper names from ancient history, bits of Italian, all locked in a dynamic movement of translation and free juxtaposition. The linguistic material of these poems is deeply confusing and “deterritorializes” English either by means of infusions from other languages, or by exposing the uncanny, surprising elements in English itself. As Jerzy Jarniewicz argues, for Carson, language is a process of permeating and piling up of different languages. He reveals that

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138 Ibid.
139 Ibid., p. 11.
140 Ibid.
142 Ibid., p. 44.
the so-called “national” language, which would be frequently regarded as a basis for a fixed identity and a solid ground for thought, is indeed a moving labyrinth, a rhizomatic structure that extends itself in all directions without any underlying hierarchy and possibility of enclosure. There is no final solid state, “nor are there any linguistic universals, only a throng of dialects, patois, slangs and specialized languages.” Caron’s poetic idiom is not a clear figure, a conventional poetic gesture. It is rather a pure wall of words, a constant “peripatetic buzz of static,” or “loud and unclear garbled static” (FL 244); a bundle of meaningless forms which shine with different colours in a constantly changing light. Compare the following passage from “Tak, Tak”:

And in the bas-relief of Babel, serried regiments of Babylonian lions blink lazily
From lion-coloured tiles, imprinted on a ground of lapis lazuli.

(FL, 64, my emphasis)

In the Babelonian logic, “any point of rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be.” Thus, in the bas-relief “mise-en-abyme,” the connections made by the sounds form a tower of Babel on their own, reciting the sound-bricks with which Babel was built. Special tension is also introduced by way of “serried regiments […] imprinted on the ground,” the sound of which introduces an attempt at imposing certain fixity within this humming background noise of language. Carson’s poetry is to a certain extent an exercise in showing us how meaning is produced from non-meaning, how a linguistic figure can appear from a melted magma of words, a chaotic river of language that flows underground. It is also the economics of this flow that interests Carson very much.

This “economy” is related to how we approach the fundamental instability and nihilistic nature of language. It has been traditionally opposed by rationalisms of all sorts as a

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144 Ibid.
force that should be mastered and definitely not cherished on its own terms. Carson’s poetry is moves in an opposite direction. It is not another attempt at building the Tower of Babel – a unifying fortress in which meaning and reason could hide from the fierce attacks of nonsense and violence. As it turns out, that violence, traditionally blamed on the outside, in fact resides in the very attempt at building that Tower, i.e. imposing a finite image of language or, in other terms, manufacturing the image of God, the image of Logos. Carson advocates a different approach – that of dismantling, “deterritorializing” or “deconstructing” the Tower of English. He turns that language against itself by exposing its baffling heterogeneous richness and making it foreign, alien to itself, “defamiliarized.” As John Rajchman puts it in his book on Deleuze, one has to “create a foreign language in our language” so that it “shakes up the doxa and gives something new to be thought” in order “to deliver us from our communicational stupidities, our informational «automatisms». ”\textsuperscript{145} This is the task of poetry, if any such thing could ever be formulated. This task is also exactly what Walter Benjamin and Franz Rosenzweig thought was the task of the translator. Both addressed the old question of a tension between an exact, faithful translation (which usually lacks the right phraseology and seems a bit alien) and a free one (which can deviate from the original because of its faithfulness to the target language). They both answered that a certain infusion of alterity and alien structures is necessary to reinvigorate the target language, to keep it alive and in movement.\textsuperscript{146} Every translation is thus a renegotiation of the terms on which we assume the target language works, forcing us to creatively re-set those boundaries. It is impossible to “eliminate the element of «stupidity» once and for all,”\textsuperscript{147} Carson seems to tell us. That stupidity is the excess that disables everyone from taking hold of language. It seems that


\textsuperscript{147} Ibid., p. 10.
Carson, following Deleuze, “opposes the «illusion of communication»” and procures for us a non-mimetic poetry which rather looks towards the future and new possibilities (the “noise of years”) than towards the past. It does not stick to old forms of thinking that are interlocked in static binary oppositions, as it is clearly put in the final stanza of the poem “Two to Tango”:

One side says this, the other that. You work it out yourself and walk between the story lines.
What’s true is what you do. Keep your head down. Know yourself. Ignore the starry skies.\footnote{Ibid.}

(FL 224)

As was shown earlier, the poem “Dresden” is propelled by a logic of parataxis which abandons the vertical plane in favour of a horizontal one. It is governed by a mechanism of addition, without superimposing layers of hierarchical valuation based on some predetermined ontology. Rajchman notices a similar logic in the work of Deleuze, who favours a cognitive movement by way of “connections rather than sets and functions,” one that operates “through the convergence and divergence of open or ramifying series. The basic logical operator becomes «And», working prior to the «Is» of predication of identity.”\footnote{Ibid. John Rajchman, The Deleuze Connections, p. 56.} Carson collects the various bits and pieces of language, and weaves them together to form an explosive, idiosyncratic idiom which favours those “lines of flight” that extend “between the story lines.” In this sense, his poetry is pre-mimetic, as it does not reproduce ideological systems of “ontological determination”\footnote{Ibid.} but makes space for the rise of new identities and meanings, ones that open up towards the future and are inclusive in their political dimension. Carson eagerly likens himself to a “hyphen, flitting here and there.” (BC 163) Thus, by “connecting
«this» and «that», moving «here» and «there»,” as Rajchman summarizes it, Carson establishes “a different relation to language that Deleuze likens to the stammering of another language, not yet spoken, never completely understood.”152 Carson is stammering in his own language, he makes it stutter and reveals that it is never a finite mathematical set, or an organic whole, but, as Deleuze prefers, a “series” that is “always «starting again in the middle» rather than moving from a beginning to an end.”153 This is what might be at stake in one of the phrases – frequently repeated by Carson, as Neal Alexander observed – describing movement: “one step forward, two steps back.” Within this paradigm, the questions that are asked of the lyrical persona in the poem “Belfast Confetti,” discussed in the second section of this chapter, become useless, as they are based on ontological pre-determination that Carson-a-flitting-hyphen evades and undermines. Deleuze gives the following answer to questions quoted by Carson in that poem: “Where are you going? Where are you coming from? What are you heading for? These are totally useless questions.”154

**The answers and the contract**

These questions are obsolete once we move onto the plane that precedes logic and sense in their traditional meaning. Carson’s poetry touches upon an area in which the conditions of sense and nonsense are formed, as it sends us back to that sphere where “precisely there is and can be no code.”155 What we witness in those poems is a staging of a virtuality from which new things can arise and where new connections are made. Carson, in accordance with what Rajchman observes about Deleuze, “tries to envisage a semiotics that would be diagrammatic or cartographic rather than symbolic and iconic,”156 for all iconic and symbolic relations are overburdened with meanings that trap the Northern Irish society in a vicious circle of

152 Ibid.
153 Ibid., p. 58.
156 Ibid., p. 67.
sectarian violence. His logic is not that of extended dialogue or a symbolic reconciliation that covers up the whole issue with a new layer of additional hierarchies and limitations. The aim is to expose the place where it is possible to shake off all ontological givens in favour of multiplicities and connections that are potential and await realization or discovery. “What’s true is what you do” is an apotheosis of the idiosyncrasy and individual “symptom” that is prior to any symbolic order and cannot be reduced to that plane where the chief operating forces are the ever-shifting forms of oppression and standardization. His own style is indeed also “symptomatic”, as it breaks away from poetic clichés and foregrounds the self-propelling nature of discourse, that “murmur” (in Foucault’s terminology) which envelops us.\textsuperscript{157} This, of course, entails what has been traditionally understood in the history of poetry as a certain movement away from the Cartesian \textit{ego cogito}, be it in the “dark night of the soul” in the case of mystical poetry, Rimbaud’s “I am another”, T.S. Eliot’s depersonalization etc. As Rajchman has it, “it is not a generality that abolishes difference but, on the contrary, a condition that frees difference from the determination of habit, memory, routine, and the practices of recognition or identification within which we are caught, opening up other vital possibilities.”\textsuperscript{158} This sentence could serve as a mental map of some of Carson’s main themes: (i) He breaks away from habit in terms of the language he employs in his poetry by infusing it with foreign and nonsensical elements, exposing its materiality. (ii) He abolishes any rigid, essentialist identity both in personal and national terms, thus saving history from a potential totalization by those in power, creating at the same time a space in which the society can form a safety net of freely-moving and localized tradition. (iii) He frees his memory from compartmentalization by virtue of Proust’s “involuntary memory.” (iv) In his poems about the city he reconfigures routines of walking and thinking in the post-industrial reality of Belfast.

\textsuperscript{157} Already at this stage, enveloping acquires a special meaning here. We envelop letters, i.e. signs – language surrounds us and “it speaks.” We dive into language, never able to make it fully our own, though we do try. Poetry stages that question with great force.

\textsuperscript{158} Ibid., p. 86.
Finally, (v) he envisages and probes new approaches to epistemology, expounding a dialectical image of identity and human relations. These elements form the nucleus of Carson’s work, the raw material with which he consistently works in all of his books.

These issues, however, have to be located in the context of the linguistic frame that braces all of Carson’s poetry and serves as its backbone. In this respect, Carson’s work is a profound critique of the traditional notions of the nature of language and its usage. He is undoubtedly an advocate and propagator of traditional aspects of culture, but he operates with greater precision – he extracts from them a living, ever-changing component. On the other hand, he stands firmly in an avant-garde tradition of pushing the linguistic barriers and dismantling the fossilized language. Is that just a conflict between the formal and material aspects of poetry? I would venture to say that in Carson’s work we witness a more profound process at work, as he manages to evade the easy traps of the two extremes of poetic craft and navigates safely between the Scylla and Charybdis of innocent, transparent poetry and purely postmodern, naive and playful babble. Instead, he investigates the tension that is underlying the whole problem, a tension that is the condition of possibility, not only for literature but also, in more general terms, speech and thought. This is what makes this poetry so powerful and worthwhile. This tension is the tautness of voice and text. “Tautness” is an especially apt word in this context because it exposes the mutual dependence and tightness of the “strings” linking the two concepts, as they are the place where subjectivity and intersubjectivity are formed and sustained. The relation between the voice and the text is of course one that sends us back to the very roots of literature and defines the lines along which poetry has been changing over the years and will be evolving in the future. It might be feasible, though outside the scope of this work, to formulate a history of literature alongside poetry’s fluctuations between the two poles. It is of course not the case that one of those aspects ever becomes fully dominant and the tension is finally resolved, for this is a never-ending dialectic. Nevertheless,
Carson’s poetry contains traces of what might be termed a yet deeper level – signs of the contract that human beings have to sign in order to enter this tension and inhabit it. These can be identified, after Derrida, as marks of an archi-writing, not writing in the usual sense, but a movement of difference that is more primordial than voice and text. The uncovering of that level is especially important to see how Carson’s views on ethics and epistemology are formed, which of course entails a whole new vision of identity and social problems that are frequently the focal point of his poems. What this “contract” reveals is not only our relation to language, and thus history, memory and identity, but more basically – our relationship with death. This is also why the later chapters of this dissertation will be dealing with that particular problem. Perhaps it is also the final frontier of writing, as Maurice Blanchot would argue. Perhaps this is why Until Before After is the last poetry book by Carson so far.

However, even if there is going to be a certain poetic postscript after that 2010 collection, Carson’s ouevre already forms a certain arch of thought, one that is marked by a special movement, “one step forward, two steps back,” – one that is circular but traverses the question of poetry and language, allowing us to reinvent ourselves on the way, achieving something that Paul Celan expressed in “Meridian,” which will be discussed later.

Nevertheless, the point of departure is given to us in the form of a contract and it is perhaps fitting to sum up those issues in an analysis of the poem titled “Contract” from the book First Language. Now, already the juxtaposition of the title of the poem with the title of the book is a revealing move which suggests a “first language contract,” one that we are obliged to sign in order to receive our signature, i.e. identity in language and a subjective position in the symbolic system. The poem opens with the following couplet-stanza:

Demosthenes climbed the rungs of Larynx, diminuendo in its double helix.
He buzzed with words like gremlin, glitch, Zeno’s Paradox, and genetrix.

(FL 253)
Demosthenes was an Athenian orator, one of the greatest rhetoricians in history. His political engagement against the domination of Macedonia makes his presence in this Northern Irish a significant appearance in the context of British and Irish struggle for supremacy on the island of Ireland. It is both striking and imaginative that he is “climbing the rungs of Larynx,” suggesting not only his career in the art of rhetoric (via the larynx as a physical source of the voice) but perhaps also, in an ironic allusion, mounting an early unmanned British aircraft called by this name, which was developed in the 1920s. These two contexts seem reconcilable from the perspective of the anonymous, depersonalized (“unmanned”) discourse of language which can be to a certain extent operated by a skilful rhetorician, an apprentice in the use of words, for the purpose of either installing a certain symbolic value or attacking it. Demosthenes would thus become a rather universal figure of a human being that enters the heterogeneous field of language in an attempt to become its pilot, spearheading the quest for identity and argumentation. Moreover, Demosthenes became famous for his practicing (and thus fighting with his speech deficiency) with pebbles in his mouth, which makes us wonder whether Carson is not guiding us towards an equation between pebbles and words, once again drawing attention to the materiality of language. The Greek orator is homo rhetoricus, a proponent of a subjectivity that is born already in language, whose sounds and letters are in fact the “double helix” that forms the core of human existence. The “buzzing” of words is also interesting because it suggests not only vibration, liveliness and bodily movement but also, informally, calling on a telephone and rejoicing at something thrilling. The choice of words that emerge from Demosthenes’s “Larynx” is quite telling: “gremlin”, “glitch” and “Zeno’s Paradox” suggest a certain paradoxical error of logic in the desire to emerge as linguistic subjects, an Erros\textsuperscript{159}, i.e. a desire that is erroneously set in motion and propels our labyrinthine endeavour to navigate our lives through the maze of language. This error,\footnote{Agata Bielik-Robson proposed the term in the book \textit{Na pustyni. Kryptoteologie późnej nowoczesności} (Krakow: Universitas, 2008), which denotes human sexuality, which seeks its fulfilment, but is basically both homeless and lost.}
“glitch” is the “genetic” “genetrix” (Latin for mother or ancestress) of the rhetorical interplay that is the foundation of speech and being-in-language. Yet, the mistake (Lacan’s *meconnaissance*) is the necessary step, a contractual necessity if we are to begin our story or, as in this case, to begin a poem and make a signature. This fundamental differentiation is expressed in the division of labour at the metaphorical Tower of Babel, where we witness the operation of “sparks and plumbers, carpenters and glaziers” who “vocalized their trades’ vernacular.” Vernacular is the language that is traditionally opposed to Latin, so it reiterates the logic of Babel – a resistance against the totalization of speech, which at the same time is a struggle for defining one’s *trade*, a local parlance or dialect. These stand in an opposition to “funicular,” a “lined-up” language of ropeworks and elevation, hymned by the priests. The vernacular and funicular form two planes: a horizontal and a vertical one, respectively. One is about everyday work, practices and expression, the other focuses on the elevation, transcendence, a power struggle that is symbolized by the ladders, scaffoldings and complicated mechanisms (meticulously portrayed on Breughel’s painting), whose purpose is to erect the sky-reaching tower. Ultimately, God’s intervention is a way of stopping the vertical movement and curbing the ambition to totalize and universalize. God is, as I expounded earlier on, putting up a prohibition against the possibility of speaking his full name and the workers are turned to translators. Thus, in the first two stanzas of “Contract,” we find the full image of the Tower of Babel, which at the same time is an extended commentary on the origin of languages, suggesting: (i) a certain error at the root of our entry into language, which sets up desire and the necessity to establish our identity in a symbolic system, and (ii) an impossibility to achieve a totalizing whole in that respect, as well as the need for *difference* within language, which makes translation indispensible:

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So this was Breughel’s *Babel*, Lego-kit-like Pharaonic phasia-bricks, where everything is built in stages, ages, scaffolding, and phrases.

(FL 253)

*Lego* bricks, which fit each other perfectly, are a modern symbol of the illusion of linguistic transparency and the ability to form perfect wholes with “phasis-bricks.” This is a truly pharaonic
dventure – one that cannot fully materialize and is buried under its own scaffolding in a never-ending struggle to finish the construction. The last two stanzas of the poem repeat the genealogy of the “first language” on the example of an eighth-month infant, who at that age usually starts to babble with his or her “unstung tongue” and whose “gummed-up syllables” are born with the help of forceps. Thus, the child is delivered linguistically, producing “bumble, blunder, umbilicals, and garbled labials.” Again, certain crucial ideas about language converge in this catalogue, as it includes references to an elementary linguistic violence that helps install the subjectivity (“forceps”), the nonsensical (“bumble”) and erroneous aspect of speech (“blunder” and “garbled”), and a severance of a “transcendental” link with a mythical, divine source of language (“umbilicals” – the cutting of the umbilical cord). Myth comes later, with “Principalities of angels” who “put the thumby, stumbling bees in Plato’s mouth,” as the father of modern metaphysics is forced to train a bit more, feeling perhaps how words can become stingy. This last, abstract image of the poem is deeply unsettling, as it shows, with drastic irony, the shutting, or muting, of Platonic idealism by the “stumbling bees” that make those who wish to utter the “full” meaning stutter and stammer. Paradoxically, the inability to express oneself offers the possibility to retain a garbled idiom, a linguistic signature that is based on difference and not on some transcendental unity. As the child is trained and disciplined to be a human subject, exposed to

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161 In other words: paranoiac and harmonic, just as “moth” and “myth” in the last stanza suggest both grandeur and blindness.
the process of “subjection”\textsuperscript{162} by way of which Logos is installed and we are doomed to obey and wrestle with it. That struggle for individuality, perhaps ultimately our own death, and the chance to pave one’s own way towards nothingness, is also a part of the Sisyphus vision Carson hints at when he observes that “they began to strain / Against the shackles of his language, his sentences, his full-stop and his chain.” (FL 264)

This would constitute the conditions of the contract; in order to express ourselves as subjects we need to accept the desire, which is never to be fulfilled, of expressing ourselves fully. Although we speak with our voice, we need to accept the fact that the language is not ours. We try to slide into the anonymous discourse but there is always a stumbling block of the materiality of language, which makes us bumble, mumble and stutter; a pebble that cannot be bitten. The Tower of Babel, based on the wrong assumption that it was possible to unite our efforts and achieve the transcendental sphere of communicational immediacy, will never be complete and will remain perpetually unfinished, covered with its scaffolding of ideology and power. The infancy of language is not an innocent state but a stage on which a violent operation is being conducted on us by language. Just like the prisoners in Kafka’s “Penal colony,” we are inscribed with aspirations that are doomed to fail. Still, they provide us with a chance to find the vernacular idiom with which we can try to produce a signature and remain subjects in language. Coming back to Carson’s catalogue of trades, one could say that humans – as speaking beings – are at the same time not only the language’s sparks, plumber, carpenter or glazier but also its prisoners.

There are many prisons which Carson alludes to in his poetry. However, all of them are highly ambiguous. Once turned inside out, they prove to be labyrinths in which people are simply disoriented. However, it transpires that it was actually their own fear that turned their minds into labyrinths. Getting lost is not essentially a bad thing – the only problem lies in the

fact that the possible ways out demand that we shift our attitude and start to perceive the world, as well as our means of expressing it, altogether differently.

These questions form the core of the first part of the next chapter. City is indeed an oppressive labyrinth, a morbid glimpse of which we had during the discussion of the poem “Belfast Confetti.” However, once we accept Baudelaire’s aesthetic call for the purification of our perception in order to attune our senses to the modern reality, it is possible to engage in such practices of thinking and walking that would allow beauty and joy to resurface, even if the context seems most unfit for them. What I shall try to show is that Walter Benjamin’s quasi-religious and quasi-materialistic approach to the experience of the city can throw an interesting light on the Belfast poems of Ciaran Carson.

Another traditional labyrinth in which everyone gets lost once in a while is memory, firstly the personal one and finally our collective memory which at a certain stage congeals into what we call history. These two labyrinths also have their own Minotaurs, be they real or imaginary. However, Carson’s poems act as maps that help us reorient ourselves in those mazes according to new metaphysical coordinates.

The following chapter is an attempt at a rearrangement and refurbishing of those three labyrinths. The text and the word serve here as the map and torch. They are indispensable both in the poetic navigation and in the critical dissolution of certain problems. Their weave, tangle or – to speak more humanely and anatomically – plexus, is the logic and motor behind the adventurous investigations that form Carson’s ouevre.
Chapter Two – The three mazes: city, memory and history

I City

His passion and his profession is to merge with the crowd. For the perfect flâneur, for the passionate spectator, it is an immense joy to set up house in the heart of multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement, in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite.

Charles Baudelaire

Demonic intimations went on daily; routine, undercover orchestrations Of the nominated discipline of alphabetic, proscribed areas That ended, as they always do, in tragic, tired recriminations; rhetoric.

Ciaran Carson

The Belfast flâneur

The definition of a flâneur given by Baudelaire in “The Painter of Modern Life,”1 which is quoted in the motto of this section, has become the ground for the characterization of the literary experience of modernity. It is to this day seen as an accurate diagnosis of the epistemological value of the city both in terms of an ordinary passer-by and the artist. Baudelaire was among the first to observe that “in the daily metamorphosis of external things, there is a rapidity of movement which calls for an equal speed of execution from the artist”2 whose new task is to become the “painter of the passing moment.”3 The arrival of modernity was concurrent not only with the industrial progression, but also in the development of the

2 Ibid., p. 4.
3 Ibid., p. 5.
cities and the dawning of an urban revolution, heralded by the reshaping of Paris by Baron Haussmann and John Nash’s innovations in London. Baudelaire gave credit for the first literary responses in those areas to Edgar Allan Poe, the author of the short story “The Man of The Crowd,” which established the figure of the city wanderer – flâneur – as the new model of a literary hero. This character is a keen observer, whose consciousness establishes a new perspective, one that is in tune with the mutating city, because “crowd is his element, as the air is that of birds and water of fishes.” That free spirit, who keeps an eye on the city, tracing its transformations and recording their impact on human life, is to a certain extent a “model reader” of the city, an interpreting mechanism not much unlike Stendhal’s “mirror on the highway” – a “kaleidoscope gifted with consciousness.” The difference between Stendhal and Baudelaire, however, lies in the fact that the latter rules out the possibility of an “innocent” mimesis that would reproduce life in literature. The flâneur is always already immersed in the street, experiencing everything at first hand. This feature is especially important, because the truly modern hero is the one whose life was has been deeply affected and who was subjected to the shock of a radical change which took place within society. The modern hero has been wrecked by the city he loves, which plants in him the seeds of a new sensibility, for “every sublime thought is accompanied by a more or less violent nervous shock.” Thus, there is a certain trauma at the root of this model, stigmata of engagement with the hustle and bustle of the urban space.

A deep sense of immersion in the fabric of the city, its everyday life and its catastrophes, is also a recurring motif in the poetry of Ciaran Carson. This Belfast-based poet has been recording the life of his home town, which is omnipresent in his work, from a variety of angles, combining the private and the public, past and present, beauty and nightmare. Belfast serves him not only as the source material for his poems, but also as a literary vehicle

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4 Ibid., p. 9.
5 Ibid.
6 Ibid., p. 8.
for presenting ideas about the issues that have been at the heart of post-war Northern Irish poetry during the last decades, i.e. identity, violence and history. Carson’s poems are not photography-like snapshots which capture Belfast at a specific moment. His poems freely merge the childhood memories of the 1950s and contemporary times, which results in a certain blurring of time boundaries. Even the riots and outbursts of violence usually bear no marks of time. They are all drawn from experience, filtered through the subjective mind and reshaped into poems which meet the criteria demanded by Baudelaire from the “painter of modern life,” such as the ability to fuse the transitory and the elusive with an eternal, intransitive component – an operation which secures the truly modern element of beauty in these poems.

Thus, the city is incorporated into literature and transformed in it, as Hanna Wirth-Nesher put it, “by multiple acts of the imagination; it is constantly invented and reinvented”\(^7\). As Murray Baumgarten observes, the flâneur is a creative subject, one that not only records, but also creates, for he “shares in the novelist’s fictive power.”\(^8\) This results in a certain blurring of the boundary between the literary “text” and the physical “texture” of the city. Reading becomes a variety of walking, and vice versa. Map-making and poetic devices become interchangeable, exposing both the materiality of the literary text and the interpretative ambiguities of real urban space. Baumgarten rightly concludes that “neither city nor text is lucid; both are hieroglyphic,” because “the city is metaphor, metonymy, and symbol, a literary trope, as well as a physical entity.”\(^9\) These themes also form the nucleus of the kind of poetics that Carson developed in his works with regard to the city of Belfast, where he was brought up. He is definitely immensely in love with the city, as is discernible from the fact that he published a separate book featuring a selection of his Belfast poems,


\(^9\) Ibid., pp. 94-95.
which encompasses an astounding range of topics and perspectives on a city that is usually perceived as provincial and boring.

**The transient city**

Carson’s Belfast is unstable and metamorphic. He records that “transitory, fugitive element, whose metamorphoses are so rapid” and which “must on no account be despised or dispensed with”^10:

> For Belfast is changing daily: one day the massive Victorian façade of the Grand Central Hotel [...] is there, dominating the whole of Royal Avenue; the next day it is gone. [...] Everything will be revised.
> (BC 165)

Although Carson pays great attention to detail and is an extremely close and careful observer, his Belfast is always on the move and escapes fixity:

> Trying to focus on the imagined grey area between Smithfield and North Street [...] I catch glimpses of what might have been, but it already blurs and fades; I wake or fall into another dream.
> (BC 173)

In this way, the city ceases to be a fixed entity and becomes a work in progress, a poem that is being written on the spot and can be likened to a dream. The lyrical subject of Carson’s poems is a dreamer, who participates in the creation of the city. However, the final effect is as elusive as the images that we find in dreams, where each element can easily metamorphose into another, forbidding a convenient generalization. What is rather exposed is the textual

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surface that the city constitutes. The poem “Jawbox” comments on that dream-like logic: “It’s that effect where one image warps into the other, like the double helix / Of the DNA code.” (BC 196) Carson resists the temptation of reductionism and assumes the positions of a basically anti-essentialist thinker here. Consequently, his vision of Belfast is a dispersed one. In an important manifesto of psychogeography, Ivan Chtcheglov remarks that the ability to accept this fluid state provides a possibility of witnessing how urban space is organized on the basis of a fragmentary logic: “certain shifting angles, certain receding perspectives, allow us to glimpse original conceptions of space, but this vision remains fragmentary.”

Jeffrey Shaw and Tjebbe van Tijen observe, from a similar perspective, that if the city is a text, or a book, it resists finite interpretations. Even more than that, it is impossible to read it thoroughly and provide explanations purporting to uncover a firm basis, a “trunk” or a “stem” from which the streets grow, be they imaginary or real:

Cities no longer are single books but multiplicities of books. Who is able to read all of them?
Cities initially purporting to be unities dissolve into multiplicities. They are like trunks of trees disappearing under their foliages.

The city itself always regresses in infinity, beyond our scope of investigation. In “Ambition” we read: “Now I’ve climbed this far, it’s time to look back. But smoke obscures / The panorama.” (BC 138) In terms of space, Carson is acutely aware of the fact that it is impossible to totalize and enclose the city from a bird’s-eye view. Rather than stepping into the role of a detached observer, Carson follows Baudelaire (or Guy Debord for that matter) and adopts an attitude of active participation. His urban poetics is not objective in the traditional sense, but rather purely subjective. He lives the city, always placing himself at the

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very centre of events, merging elements of autobiography and geography, mixing facts with untrustworthy, second-hand narratives. He allows himself to be guided by the peculiar, local logic of Belfast rather than by an all-encompassing rationality. His experience of the city is continuous – information is not sorted, except for the organization of the poem. In this way, he forms a model of a lyrical “I” that merges with the crowd and incorporates the city, transgressing the boundary between himself as the subject and the city as an object. This dialectic between the city (represented in its transience by the crowd) and the flâneur, who pieces it back together into a subjective narrative, was diagnosed already at the beginning of the 20th century by the German sociologist Georg Simmel. He remarks, in line with Baudelaire, that the basic effect of the new metropolis on its inhabitants is that of “intensification of nervous stimulation which results from the swift and uninterrupted change of outer and inner stimuli.”13 As a result of the radical increase of the number of information we are bombarded with, a profound shift in the sensibility of city-dwellers has taken place. Modern men are forced to invest large amounts of mental energy into the sorting of outer reality so as to construct a subjective culture amidst the constant flux of the objective one. The operation performed “to preserve subjective life against the overwhelming power of metropolitan life”14 requires special intellectual means, as it “branches out in many directions and is integrated with numerous discrete phenomena.”15 However, this dialectic is usually unfavourable to the individual, as the objective culture grows out of all proportion, encroaching on the subjectivity and threatening it with obliteration. Simmel observes that “the metropolis is the genuine arena of this culture which outgrows all personal life.”16 Thus, the city becomes a place where this struggle is set and the site of a probable reconciliation which

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14 Ibid.
15 Ibid.
16 Ibid.
can be achieved by way of a reflection on how the city shapes us and how we can in turn re-shape the city. Poetry, as Carson shows, is an apt vehicle for such reflection and can provide tools that help dismantle the logic of objective culture, reintegrating it on different terms into a new subjectivity. Its status, however, remains as yet unclear and serves as the basis of Carson’s urban investigations, especially in the 1990 poetry book *Belfast Confetti*.

Carson adopts a very special strategy in this respect, one that is perhaps counter-intuitive, but nevertheless provides a new entry into the problem. He elevates the city to the level of a subject which speaks to us in its own language through poetry. In his poems, he exposes the way in which city can be a correlative of the human psyche. It has its own personal traumatic history and deserves a psychological treatment as much as a topographical one. This tension is developed in the theme of the map.

**Mapping out**

Jorge Luis Borges remarks on maps in his prose piece titled “On Exactitude in Science”:

> In that Empire, the Art of Cartography attained such Perfection that the map of a single Province occupied the entirety of a City, and the map of the Empire, the entirety of a Province. In time, those Unconscionable Maps no longer satisfied, and the Cartographers Guilds struck a Map of the Empire whose size was that of the Empire, and which coincided point for point with it. The following Generations, who were not so fond of the Study of Cartography as their Forebears had been, saw that that vast Map was Useless […].

> No, don’t trust maps, for they avoid the moment: ramps, barricades, diversions, Peace Lines. Though if there is an ideal map, which shows this city as it is, it may exist in the eye of that helicopter ratcheting overhead, its searchlight fingering and scanning […].

*(BC 165-166)*

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The city is a map of the city.

(BC 176)

As it arises from the juxtaposition of Borges and Carson, maps are always a version of a city, an interpretation. The ideal map coincides with reality and is impossible, “[f]or maps cannot describe everything, or they describe states of mind.” (BC 174) The realistic mode of description is just another “legend” – it reveals that a metaphorical, poetic mechanism lies at the core of “mapping out.” Thus, a topographical analysis merges with the linguistic dimension. This comes as no surprise since Carson often sees the city specifically as a text, in the Latin understanding of the word – *textus*, i.e. woven cloth, or a web. In an essay entitled “This is what libraries are for,” Carson returns to the theme of textuality and makes the following two remarks:

Under the microscope, the interwoven tendrils, tangles, and filaments of paper look like galaxies, or a synaptic map of the brain, replete with the threadlike extensions of the nerve cells known as dendrons […]. This is the beauty of a text. It is a textile thing, a weave. And I, as reader, weave myself through space and time. I am both here and there […].

The text of the city is yet another such network, or wickerwork, which Carson “weaves” into. Every text, however, is structured like a nervous system and endowed with a capability to rise as a subject, especially if we accept the psychoanalytic definition of subjectivity, offered by Jacques Lacan, claiming that the “subject is never more than fleeting and vanishing, for it is a subject only by a signifier and to another signifier.” In this sense, Carson is playing with his subjectivity by being “here and there,” “fleeting” and “flitting” in

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18 Ciaran Carson, “This is what libraries are for”, *The Dublin Review*, No. 4 (Autumn 2001). Online: http://thedublinreview.com/this-is-what-libraries-are-for/ (12 October 2011).

the discourse of the city – immersing oneself in its texture and re-emerging from it as the lyrical subject of his works. In the poem “Loaf,” he relishes in this intermediary state of being: “I liked the in-between-ness of it, neither / One thing nor the other.” (BC 127)

Thus, neither the city, nor the map of it is at stake, but a living textual tissue that is a product of the phenomenological reduction which Carson proposes. In one of his best-known poems “Belfast Confetti,” Carson employs the metaphor of overlaying the city with its purely linguistic map, showing how violence operates in the very gesture of mapping and how the city is always constructed as a textual entity:

[…] And the explosion
Itself – an asterisk on the map. This hyphenated line, a burst of rapid fire…

[...] All the alleyways and side-streets were blocked with stops and colons.

(IN 93)

Carson usually interprets the terrible impact of the Troubles on the city of Belfast in terms of maps and weaves that are falling apart, as if the violence was taking place equally on the symbolic and material level. He relates that “[t]he sleeve of Raglan Street has been unravelled,” (BC 209) “[t]he linen backing is falling apart – the Falls Road hangs by a thread” (BC 125) and “[m]uch of this is unintelligible, blotted out by stars and asterisks / Just as the street outside is splattered with bits of corrugated iron and confetti.” (BC 144) Carson’s Belfast, although decidedly particular, is to a certain extent an unreal city, much like the ones that are the product of Marco Polo’s imagination in Italo Calvino’s *Unreal Cities*, where everything is covered in a “thick coating of signs”\(^{20}\) that work on their own, since memory is

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diffuse: “it repeats signs so that the city can begin to exist.”\textsuperscript{21} The city is constantly weaved and unravelled by a purely textual, unending semiotic process that Carson is putting in the foreground rather than hiding it behind a veil of a stable, self-assured Cartesian subjectivity.

Belfast is always a narration – time seems to be the key element here, but this dimension is left out in the topographical thinking, “[f]or 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.” (BC 173-174) The city is construed as an indecipherable hieroglyph, a “ubiquitous dense graffiti of public houses, churches, urinals, bonding stores, graving docks, monuments, Sunday schools and Orange halls.” (BC 186) Ewa Rewers observes that it is only thanks to the historical account of the city that it becomes narratively available to us.\textsuperscript{22} Still, Carson stresses the fact that the tale of Belfast cannot be reduced to a single map, a single narrative. The city is for Carson the site of a constant linguistic struggle between opposing forces: “At times it seems that every inch of Belfast has been written-on, erased, and written-on again: messages, curses, political imperatives.” (BC 160) Thus, it can be both read and written on, while its texture can be both torn apart and mended. This might seem as a fragile condition, which would not leave place for a constructive approach. However, Carson once again assumes an unconventional approach and sees in this “cartographical” technique not only a poetic device that helps capture the spirit of modern Belfast, but also a therapeutic \textit{modus operandi}, a means of intervention for the purpose of reinventing the “torn” city of Belfast. As Guy Debord remarks, “among various more difficult means of intervention, a renovated cartography seems appropriate for immediate utilization.”\textsuperscript{23} What is so special in the map, making it such a useful tool for re-imagining Belfast? Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari provide some hints as to the nature of maps and

\begin{footnotes}
\item[21] Ibid., p. 19.
\end{footnotes}
mapping, in relation to their concept of “rhizome,” which has turned out to be useful earlier on in the discussion of various aspects of Carson’s poetry. In this context, their approach is again a fruitful methodological means, shedding new light on Belfast Confetti.

**The rhizomatic map**

In the introduction to *A Thousand Plateaus*, we read that “writing has nothing to do with signifying. It has to do with surveying, mapping […].” Carson’s urban poems can be read as poetic maps, which are at the same time their own legends. These pieces work out a plane on which the city, its interpretation and the experiencing subjectivity converge, forming something like a *rhizome*; not a simple schema, but something “altogether different, a map *and not a tracing.*” Tracing is a simplification of the urban labyrinth, a political rendering that erases the subtleties and multi-dimensional nature of the city, because the “map has multiple entryways, as opposed to the tracing, which always comes back «to the same». Also, the reduction to sameness is, according to Jacques Derrida, a deadening operation, one that mutes alterity and installs a single-sided structural dominance. The introduction of such a bias is politically unwise, for it breeds oppositions and hostility. Carson does not want to secure the eternal return of the same, for it locks the city and its inhabitants in a deadly vicious circle of sectarian violence. The mental map, which he pieces together in his poems, is meant to “plug the tracings back into the map, connect the roots or trees back up with a rhizome,” so as to open the city towards new potential meanings that lift the political curse from it. Rhizome, which I proposed as the model for some of Carson’s ideas of language, is also the model of the map – one that is not an arbitrary, totalitarian rendering which violently imposes its own legend. This model does not block all possible communication by erecting

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25 Ibid., p. 12.  
26 Ibid.  
dead-ends and strictly controlling the flow of thoughts along the textual streets or – as Roland Barthes puts it – “avenues of meaning.”\(^{28}\) On the contrary,

the rhizome pertains to a map that must be produced, constructed, a map that is always detachable, connectable, reversible, modifiable, and has multiple entryways and exits […]\(^{29}\)

The urban neurosis

Having granted Belfast a linguistic status and proposed a new model of understanding it, Ciaran Carson lifts it to the level of a subject, not just a mere object of study and contemplation. Thus, its changes and internal movements – “intestine war,” as he calls it (BC 181) – can be read as symptoms of the processes that are taking place at the “unconscious” level of the society and nation as a whole. In order to perceive them, a new map is needed, one that allows us to understand that a “map does not reproduce an unconscious closed in upon itself; it constructs the unconscious.”\(^{30}\) By way of metaphors that lead us along such lines of thinking, Carson establishes certain interesting relations between the dynamics of the city and the more general mechanisms of violence, identity and history.

In the essay “Walking the city,” John Goodby investigates an interesting connection between walking, thinking and writing, showing how Carson’s Belfast is at the same time a narrative and real space.\(^{31}\) The turns and directions that the flâneur of Carson’s poems takes, or the obstacles he runs into, are very telling if we treat the Belfast of these poems as a psychic space that can be psychoanalyzed. This idea was suggested by Sigmund Freud, who considers in the essay “Civilization and its Discontents,” among other things, the “problem of


\(^{29}\) Ibid., p. 21.

\(^{30}\) Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus, p. 12.

preservation in the sphere of mind.”

Freud argues that the unconscious is in fact all-preserving and contains its own history, much like a city whose substrata, if uncovered by a meticulous archaeologist, would yield its history. The history of Rome is inscribed and frozen in the remains that “are found dovetailed into the jumble of a great metropolis which has grown up in the last few centuries.” The city of Belfast can also be considered, like Rome, “not a human habitation but a psychical entity with a similarly long and copious past.”

It has undergone a series of traumatic events, whose meaning has been on many occasions condensed and displaced, ultimately forming an “urban neurosis.” The two technical psychoanalytic terms are not accidental in this context, since their Freudian meaning – originally applied to the analysis of dream-work – was linked by Roman Jakobson to metaphor and metonymy, the two basic linguistic and, consequently, poetic operations.

By looking at the city from this perspective, we can observe that its libidinal economy is seriously disrupted. In “Queen’s Gambit” the gun is stashed “somewhere in a mental block of dog-leg turns and cul-de-sacs,” (BC 147) whereas in “Turn Again” the protagonist relates: “I turn into / A side-street trying to throw off my shadow, and history is changed.” (BC 125)

Andrzej Leder, who has undertaken a fascinating psychoanalysis of Warsaw, remarks that its “streets are like chains of associations; the flow of thought is smooth and clear in some areas, whereas in others it is stuck in a melancholic, poisonous inertia.”

His diagnosis of the urban neurosis, which reveals an underlying trauma, can be applied to Carson’s Belfast as well. The Peace Line, the no-go areas and the obsessive tensions are all symptoms of a repression that envelops the traumatic impact of violence. It is not our task to determine how far back in history it goes. The uncovering of difficult events from Ireland’s past is not the kind of a preoccupation that Carson would approve of. He seems to be unsettled about such a view of

33 Ibid., p. 17.
34 Ibid.
history: “there’s any God’s amount / Of Nines and Sixes: 1916, 1690, The Nine Hundred Years’ War, whatever.” (BC 145) The usual historicist attitude seems to be trapped in a repetition compulsion that perpetuates violence and sentences the Ulster society to a vicious circle of war and oppression. The litany of Ireland’s heroic failures is not only a worn out cliché, but also a mechanism of slowly stiffening the culture: “[w]ith so many foldings and unfoldings, whole segments of the map have fallen off” (BC 146) and, as Ivan Chtcheglov remarks, “it is almost impossible to use them in a symbolic urbanism without rejuvenating them by giving them a new meaning.”

Carson proposes a fresh approach to this problem by devising new maps and reinventing Belfast on a whole new level. He points out the need for a new, participatory attitude towards the city (by way of psychogeography) and a reparatory, ethical way out of the political labyrinth (in other words – the panopticon). These two elements form the core of Ciaran Carson’s “geopoetics.”

**Playing with the panopticon – Carson as psychogeographer**

In “Intelligence” Carson observes that “[k]eeping people out and keeping people in, we are prisoners or officers in Bentham’s Panopticon, except sorting out who’s who is a problem for the naïve user.” (BC 185) The panoptic structure of the society is not only a relationship between the army and the local people, but also between the paramilitaries on both sides, which amounts to the creation of “panopticons within panopticons.” (BC 185) The result of this process is an “ultimate nightmare” in which the city is “made totally transparent and

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36 Ivan Chtcheglov, “Formulary for a New Urbanism.”

37 This term, introduced by Kenneth White in the essay “Elements of Geopoetics,” refers to a “higher unity” of the two components: poetry and geography. Arthur Rimbaud’s work, which makes a haunting presence in Carson’s work, serves here as the necessary bridge. As White notes, “Arthur Rimbaud’s last published text were geographic reports sent to the Societe de Geographic,” which symbolically opens up a new possible field, where the two disciplines can meet and coexist. See: Kenneth White, “Elements of Geopoetics,” in: *Edinburgh Review* 88, 1992, p. 174.

38 In which everyone suffers from a decentred gaze that disciplines them and makes them feel observed, thereby establishing order and a mechanism of self-guilt.
accessible to power,“ meaning also that it is open to uncontrollable violence. This power struggle, which bases on fear and feeds on trauma, is what Carson abhors mostly. The panoptic mechanism, which metaphorically recurs in his poems in the form of a circling helicopter, is freezing the city in a stasis of terror. This image appears, for example, in “Queens’s Gambit,” where in the “starry night” “a helicopter trawls / Its searchlight.” (BC 145) Its all-seeing eye brutally intrudes upon the privacy of Belfast people and installs an omnipresent, oppressive eye that is looming over the city. Similarly, there are the smaller panopticons, like in the poem “33333,” where we encounter the ominous “invisible man behind the wire-grilled / One-way mirror and squawk box.” (IN 101) In “Last Orders,” the visitors in the bar have to get past another panopticon in order to enter: “Squeeze the buzzer on the steel mesh gate like a trigger, but / It’s someone else who has you in their sights.” (BC 154) Even once inside, the game of shibboleths during the ordering of beer (some, as it turns out are more republican and some loyalist) is again played out in the field of a panoptic bar, where everyone is aware of others, lest someone might “blow the whole place, and ourselves, to Kingdom Come.” (BC 154)

The surveillance and disciplining of the urban space by way of a “Gyroscope-tank-type-surveillance technique” (FL 244) was acutely felt by psychogeographers – members or supporters of The Situationist International, an avant-garde movement led by Guy Debord. To a large extent they have inherited the tradition of flânerie, which was transmitted from the thought of Baudelaire by Walter Benjamin onto the surrealists and ultimately to situationists. Anna Zeidler-Janiszewska observes that flânerie is not only a “certain practice of reading the streets” but can also be understood today as the experiencing of the city as a labyrinth in order to criticize its architectural and urban functionalism.40 Deron Albright in his discussion of situationism quotes the so-called “unitary urbanists,” who claimed that what we lack today is

a “living critique” that would help us “defend ourselves from the poetry of the bard of conditioning” and “jam their messages, to turn their songs inside out.”41 Psychogeographers, whose activity boiled down to “the act of urban wandering” in “the spirit of political radicalism, allied to a playful sense of subversion”42 were thus challenging the panoptic mechanism and propagating a different experience of the city – one that would work through the oppressive mechanisms and bring up the pleasures that a walk can provide. Such an approach has also been proposed by Michel de Certeau, who advocates such practices in his influential book titled *The Practice of Everyday Life*. He argues that place names are crucial in this respect, because they help defamiliarize space and reshape it as one’s own, thus relieving it from the curse of violence by forming a new cognitive map, a personal urban poetics:

> Linking acts and footsteps, opening meanings and directions, these words operate in the name of an emptying-out and wearing-away of their primary role. They become liberated spaces that can be occupied. A rich indetermination gives them, by means of a semantic rarefaction, the function of articulating a second, poetic geography on top of the geography of the literal, forbidden or permitted meaning.43

In her analysis of works by Bernard Tchumi, Ewa Rewers notes that there is no architecture without violence, but at the same time there is no architecture without pleasure.44 Indeed, the practice of psychogeography is “an analysis of the space itself – the pleasures it affords, the difficulty it raises, the violence it renders.”45 It is the restoration of the fullness of experience and a means of transgressing the guilt- and fear-ridden mechanics of a society that has been

44 Ewa Rewers, “Zdarzenie w przestrzeni miejskiej”, ibid.
45 Deron Albright, “Tales of the City”, p. 93.
paralyzed by an ongoing power struggle. It is an attempt at an insubordination that is rooted in everyday practices and that allows us to change the rules of moving and thinking that have been imposed by certain ideological forces. Guy Debord claims that it is not a total deregulation of movement, but rather a strictly controlled act of overwriting the existing topography with new routes and lines, ones that could transgress the peace-line or the symbolic boundaries erected in the heart of the Belfast community. This is, yet again, a strictly textual operation, one that combines thinking and walking into a single ethical act of civil (or urban, for that matter) disobedience:

The production of psychogeographic maps […] can contribute to clarifying certain wanderings that express not subordination to randomness but complete insubordination to habitual influences […].

A similar combination of the subversive and the aesthetic can be found in the work of Walter Benjamin, whose quotation from *A Berlin Chronicle* serves as an epigraph to *Belfast Confetti*. He is also in favour of that technique which entails a freeing of subjectivity and a simultaneous liberation of the city. This act, political in nature, acquires in Benjamin’s memoir also an aesthetic dimension, making the experience similar to Joyce’s epiphanies:

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46 Guy Debord, *Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography*.

47 Their nature is also connected to the fact that a sensibility of this type can be achieved only by someone, as Baudelaire argued, who managed to invoke within him- or herself a child-like, innocent, or “purified” perception. Walter Benjamin’s reflections on his childhood are in a way a search for that “genius” which “is nothing more nor less than childhood recovered at will.” (Charles Baudelaire, “The Painter of Modern Life”, p. 8) Michel De Certeau also points out that childhood experience, when projected onto the adult version of the city map, has the potential to open up meanings – it “undoes their readable surfaces”, creating a distinctly unreal, metaphorical city inside the city itself. (Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. 110)
Not to find one’s way in a city may well be uninteresting and banal. It requires ignorance – nothing more. But to lose oneself in a city – as one loses oneself in a forest – that calls for quite a different schooling. Then, signboards and street names, passers-by, roofs, kiosks, or bars must speak to the wanderer like a cracking twig under his feet in the forest, […] like the sudden stillness of a clearing with a lily standing erect at its center.48

It is a moment when, as Baudelaire puts it in the prose poem “The Crowd,” the “solitary and thoughtful stroller finds a singular intoxication in this universal communion,” one of those “feverish delights that the egoist […] will be eternally deprived of.”49 Following the usual routes – the kind of automatism that everyone, under the all-seeing eye of the panopticon, is forced to adopt – was diagnosed by Benjamin as utterly alienating, because it eradicates “all the joys and all the sorrows that chance offers.”50 The criticism of commodification and urban estrangement is taken up by Carson in many ways, especially in the form of free wandering that allows him to detach from symbolic violence and, by losing oneself, eventually find one’s way out of the “labyrinthine alleyways” that “are bloody with discarded bandages.” (BC 199) Only through the defamiliarization of the city can one find oneself anew and reinvent both personal identity and the identity of the city. “Fruitless searching is as much a part of this,” writes Benjamin, while Carson is deeply aware that if he wants to shed and expose the language of violent ideologies that perpetrate hate, he has to “proceed in the manner of a narrative” and “delve to ever-deeper layers.”51 Yet, there is no fixed and stable omphalos at the bottom, similar to the one that Seamus Heaney sought. Benjamin speaks of a negative, quasi-mystical experience of “dark joy.”52 A counterpart to this kind of epiphany can be found in the poem “Smithfield Market,” which contains a description of an exploded market. After everything got “unstitched, unravelled” and showed its “mouldy fabric,” (IN 99) he:

50 Ibid.
52 Ibid.
[…] glimpsed a map of Belfast
In the ruins: obliterated streets, the faint impression of a key.
Something many-toothed, elaborate, stirred briefly in the labyrinth.
(IN 99)

[…] it was either nonsense, or a formula – for
Perpetual motion, the scaffolding of shopping lists, or the collapsing city.
(IN 95)

Thus, the map that he proposes is a fluid and ever-shifting entity that cannot be transmitted otherwise than in a poetic language. The same goes for identity – its map is not a fixed construct. Whoever fashions it in that way is crossing out the possibility of a difference that allows people the space necessary to live a normal life.

In the prose poem “Question Time,” Carson describes the experience of roaming freely through the city, which is interrupted by a violent intrusion of paramilitaries, who subject the narrator to a questioning so as to establish his identity. They are verifying his map against theirs:

The map is pieced together bit by bit. I am this map which they examine, checking it for error, hesitation, accuracy; a map which no longer refers to the present world, but to a history, these vanished streets; a map which is this moment, this interrogation, my replies.
(BC 170)

The result of this sectarian, panoptic mania is pure, unjustified violence. Carson’s political and ethical struggle is set against the deadness of constant surveillance that erases any authentic experience and is based on a violent imposition of maps that are always out of date and miss out on real life. Such rigid maps are fixed upon the inhabitants by violent means.
They are inscribed on the minds and bodies by the authorities in order to maintain control. Others are maintained and propagated by the political dualism which institutes its own system of sectarian justice: “I know this place like the back of my hand, except / My hand is cut off at the wrist.” (IN 101) In sharp contrast to them stands the rhizomatic, open map, brought about in a spirit of play, free-association and randomness. This kind of a map is not imposed, but has to be worked out by everyone on his or her own. It is negotiable and flexible: “open and connectable in all of its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification. It can be torn, reversed, adapted to any kind of mounting, reworked by an individual, group, or social formation. It can be drawn on a wall, conceived of as a work of art, constructed as a political action or as a meditation.”

Carson manages to draw such a multi-faceted map with his feet, from bottom up, by way of psychogeographical intervention, i.e. threading his own way through the city until he can claim: “I think I’m starting, now, / To know the street map with my feet.” (BC 141)

Zygmunt Bauman has a great deal to say about the political side of map-making. He notes that maps are always drawn from a specific point of view that assumes its own privileged status – an assumption that hides behind a seemingly “objective” approach. The negation of all other possible maps, like the ones drafted by psychogeographers, which show the emotional impact of certain areas of the city, marks a totalitarian approach that has only one aim: to subject everyone to a single, unitary vision of space and block all other sense-making initiatives. Both Carson and Bauman, though employing different discursive modes, point to the same task. They claim that the opening up of urban space to various interpretations does not necessarily lead to chaos. It is rather a different kind of balance,

55 As Guy Debord puts it in his manifesto: “the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals.” (Guy Debord, *Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography*)
possibly one that might be free from the violence that lies at the heart of the division in the Ulster society. This new equilibrium is a dialogic state that allows the flourishing of otherness and thus lets freedom be born, outside the trap of an “in or out” approach. Carson’s flâneur, in this light, is a special agent, who “slipped / Through a hole in the security net,” (NE 41) for “[l]ike a fish-net stocking, everything is full of holes…” (IN 106) In order to detect these holes, one has to shed the routine ways of seeing and experiencing the urban realm, because they speak in a special, hieroglyphic language, whose knowledge comes with a purified perception. Such “readings” of the city, facilitated by the textual approach, allow Carson to tell a new, better fortune from such unexpected omens like the “puffs of steam which leak out / From the broken pipes and vents.” (IN 102)

**The mouth of the poem**

“He’s caught between / Belfast and Belfast,” (BC 195) observes Carson in an attempt to overthrow this damaging separation which hinders the peace process. He does not want to stand on any side. His task is to link, combine and bridge, provide that symbolic “bridge that was never built” (BC 125) – one that is present, symbolically, on a map, but has to be transferred onto the social sphere and become a real one. In another prose-poem “Farset,” he plays with the etymology of the name “Belfast” and arrives at a surprising conclusion: “let Belfast be the mouth of the poem.” (BC 156) In a mood for inclusiveness, established by this creative genealogy, he goes on: “the river Farset, this hidden stream, is all these things: it is the axis of the opposed Catholic Falls Road and the Protestant Shankill.” (BC 156-157) Thus, Carson imagines a poetics that would allow the city to overthrow its artificial, ideological burden and speak through verse (overcoming the antagonistic “vs.” element in it), coming alive not in the form of an official map, but rather a hybrid labyrinth of narratives.
In this light, the task of the poet is to “try to piece together the exploded fragments.” (BC 209) However, it is not a matter of shoring fragments against our ruins (to employ T.S. Eliot’s phrase), but rather of participating in the reconstruction of new wholes. Joining loose ends is the position that Carson occupies most eagerly: “I am a hyphen, flitting here and there: between.” (BC 163) He is aware that “the flâneur can no longer stand at the wayside or retreat to his armchair but must face up to the destruction of his city.” 56 The role of the poet is not to produce streams of ideology-infested slogans on the basis of a repetition automatism, but rather rest as a voice-box to the constant, unintelligible, but chaotically meaningful text of the city of Belfast. To live in Belfast is to embrace it lovingly in urban poetry, where walking is thinking and restoring; to pick up the pieces, return them to “the general, Heraclitean flux” (FL 257) and “to live the plurality of the text” 57 of Belfast.

**The poetics of loss and junk**

Carson’s loving attitude towards the city of Belfast is in many ways similar to the one adopted by Charles Baudelaire. Both accept the fact that a successful artist is the one who acknowledges in art the fact that material reality is an emanation of spiritual in its epoch. 58 Every historical period has its own specific type of beauty, one that has to be discovered and reunited with the eternal component. Thus, Carson begins at the lowest possible level, by excavating and putting on the foreground all the elements of material culture that have been scattered and dispersed. These components of everyday life, neglected and sentenced to oblivion, underpin the city and form its true bedrock – not a stable foundation, but a fluid basis which Rem Koolhas termed “Junkspace”:

Junkspace exposes what previous generations kept under wraps: structures emerge like springs from a mattress, exit stairs dangle in didactic trapeze, probes thrust into space to deliver laboriously what is in fact omnipresent, free air, acres of glass hang from spidery cables, tautly stretched skins enclose flaccid non-events.\(^59\)

In his poems, Carson often plunges into that urban sub-realm which is not considered to be “just” a rubble dump, but a residue of the aesthetic components of modernity. They give testimony to the changes of Belfast and provide an opportunity to glimpse the text of the city in its fullness. This is what Michel de Certeau called a mnemonic “anti-museum”\(^60\) – a dispersion of stories that form a structure which is not localizable but is alive and forms the image of society. Such “[p]laces are fragmentary and inward-turning histories, pasts that others are not allowed to read, accumulated times that can be unfolded.”\(^61\) Carson writes:

> The Royal Avenue Hotel collapses under the breaker’s pendulum:
> Zig-zag stairwells, chimney-flues, and a thirties’ mural […] Suddenly more sky
> Than there used to be. A breeze springs up from nowhere –
> (IN 94)

The breeze – embodied in the poem not only semantically, but also as a pause, a breath at the end of the line – is the breeze of history. Walter Benajmin imagined the “angel of history” to be facing backwards, contemplating in sorrow the accumulating rubble of history, but pushed forward by the wind of progress.\(^62\) That angel haunts the Belfast flâneur, not allowing him to

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\(^{60}\) Michel de Certeau, The Practice of Everyday Life, p. 108.
\(^{61}\) Ibid.
\(^{62}\) This parallel has been also noted by Neal Alexander. Cf. Neal Alexander, Ciaran Carson. Space, place, writing, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010, p. 71.
forget the dump which thus becomes the allegory of history. In “Turn Again,” Carson observes that “[t]oday’s plan is already yesterday’s – the streets that were there are gone.” (BC 125) It is impossible to keep up with the destruction and waste that have become synonymous with the post-industrial capitalist logic of dispensability. However, the task of the poet is that of a Kabbalist, who picks up the pieces (broken vessels – kelipot) and restores them to the divine light through the process of tikkun. According to this Gnostic strand of Jewish mysticism, the creation of the world was a cosmic catastrophe, the result of which was that divine light got trapped in the material world and the vessels which once held it are now cracked. Thus, the process of mending, a task assigned to men by God, should begin at the lowest level. Carson explores, for example in the poem “Travellers,” the “waste ground / Between Electric Street and Hemp Street” and the “waste ground that was Market Street and Verner Street, wandering trouserless / Through his personal map – junked refrigerators, cars and cookers, anchored / Caravans.” (IN 104) He navigates through that desolate urban space not in the spirit of mourning, but rather that of hope, which is especially clear in the mystic vision of resurrected Belfast: “on the last day, not only bodies are resurrected whole and perfect, but each brick, each stone, finds its proper place again.” (BC 161) It is an affirmative type of mourning, fully acknowledging the imminent metamorphoses and accepting the constant loss of space, memory and beauty, but at the same time recognizing the “waste ground” as the ultimate reservoir of shifting meanings and intermingling traces that produce new possibilities. From the point of view of deconstruction, Carson’s observations testify to the fact the “living present springs forth out of its nonidentity with itself and from the possibility of a retentional trace.” The magma of junk is the condition of all things,

63 Ivan Chtcheglov observes that the void created by the demolition is also tangible: “the absence of the object becomes a presence one can feel.” (Ivan Chtcheglov, “Formulary for a New Urbanism”) There is nothing like pure emptiness – every hollow is a site of memory or a potential home.


including especially beauty, poetic beauty, as “the alphabet soup of demolition sorts itself into phrases, names, buildings.” (BC 161) The textile weave of junk in the city is its *archi-writing*: “[t]his interweaving, this textile, is the text produced only in the transformation of another text. Nothing […] is anywhere ever simply present or absent. There are only, everywhere, differences and traces of traces.” At the end of the prose poem “Schoolboys and Idlers of Pompeii” Carson asks rhetorically: “who will sort out the chaos? Where does land begin, and water end? Or memory falter, and imagination take hold?” (BC 162) It seems that the boundary is fluid – it cannot be located, crossed or traditionally demarcated. It is has to imaginatively inhabited and the poem is a perfect means with which to build there a new “home.”

The devastation of the city is inscribed in its existence, as Carson suggests in “Brick”:

“a necessary condition of the city was its eventual destruction.” (BC 181) That Heraclitean flux, in which “the city consumes itself,” (BC 175-176) is its true and only face. In “Question Time,” “[t]he junk is sinking back into sleech and muck,” as “[e]verything will be revised.” (BC 165) Carson argues, however, that this condition can be embraced, because literature provides a space where new maps can be formed, tested and negotiated; literary psychogeography is a “method to bring all those scattered images within reach” – it is both an ethical and aesthetic counterpart of the *tikkun* – the mystical mending of evil. Rem Koolhas reminds us that “materialization is provisional: cutting, bending, tearing, coating: construction has acquired a new softness, like tailoring.” The metaphor of poetic tailoring of Belfast – its “knitted, knotted streets” (BC 199) – is realized by Carson in verse, as he picks up the loose threads and patiently ties them together to form new connections, establish a weave that would provide a safety net in which a new life can be born. Carson’s poet- *flâneur* is indeed

67 Jeffrey Shaw & Tjebbe van Tijen, “Literary Psychogeography – A project in development.”
Baudelaire’s rag-picker, a textual mystic or divine tailor, who does not smooth out the creases on the fabric of the city, but dismantles that which is oppressive and darns new stories, new narratives which, piece by piece, provide a remedy to the pierced face of Belfast. Carson’s “Travellers” are the ones who made it possible that “Belfast / Tore itself apart and patched things up again. Like this.” (IN 104) Thus, at the bottom of the junkyard there can be found the spring of poetry, a fountain of inspiration which transforms the muck of Farset into Arethusa. Belfast, seen through the eyes of John Ruskin, is:

[…] crammed with old shoes, ashes, rags, smashed crockery, bullet casings, shred
Of nameless clothes, rotten timber jaggy with bent nails, cinders, bones and half-bricks,
Broken bottles; and kneaded into, trampled, or heaving, fluttering, dancing
Over all of these, the tattered remnants of the new, every kind of foul advertisement,
The banner headlines proclaim an oceanic riot, mutilated politics,
The seething yeast of anarchy
(BC 199-200)

Carson’s greatest achievement is the overcoming of that cliché by reformulating the “yeast” as the city’s greatest creative potential, a mycelium from which other texts can grow.

The Belfast Ballad
The most far-reaching transformation of Belfast is to be found in the long poem “The Ballad of HMS Belfast,” which concludes the collection First Language. This phantasmagorical dream-vision is an aisling of sorts (as suggested in the last stanza), where the poet is lulled and visited upon by Ireland in the guise of a woman. In this particular case, however, it is not a beautiful lady but rather Rimbaud’s “drunken boat,” on board of which the poet travels across an ocean of imagination. As “Belfast disengaged her moorings, and sailed away / From old Belfast,” (FL 274) the poem records a flight from the city on a Utopian ship. The “ideal”
crew, composed of “Catestants and Protoholics,” “loved each other nautically,” (FL 274) forming an idealistic Christian community. The boat is driven by a literary engine, in which “each system was a back-up for the other, auxiliarizing verse with prose.” (FL 274) The distant “cruises to the Podes and Antipodes” are in fact tautological and self-repeating, as the crew takes “[i]ce to Archangel, tea to China, coals to Tyne.” (FL 275) After many long detours and being lost on the way – “we’d drift for days” (FL 276) – the poem, ship and crew return to the point of departure, closing the circle. As the lyrical subject wakes, he calmly observes:

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

Grey Belfast dawn illuminated me, on board the prison ship Belfast.

(FL 277)

The poem’s conclusion comes entirely unexpected. What is the meaning of this fantastic voyage into the unknown, which turns out to be the ultimate nightmare, since it is just a prisoner’s flight of fancy? Why would Carson conclude a book of poems with a piece that invokes such a bitter sense of imprisonment and inevitability of being trapped in a circular, repetitive logic of an anxiety dream?

Some light on these questions is shed by Michel Foucault, who made some insightful remarks on the theme of the ship. He observes that:
The boat is a floating piece of space, a place without a place, that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the sea and that, from port to port, from tack to tack, from brothel to brothel, it goes as far as the colonies in search of the most precious treasures […] [it] has been simultaneously the greatest reserve of the imagination. The ship is the heterotopia par excellence.⁶⁹

The heterotopia, a term which Foucault develops in that text, is a specific space, a counter-site, located somewhere on the border between the mythical and the real, whose role is to create a space of illusion that exposes every real space, all the sites inside of which human life is partitioned, as still more illusory […]. Or else, on the contrary, their role is to create a space that is other, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled.”⁷⁰

It might be inferred that the prison ship Belfast is indeed a conflation of these two ideas, which makes it all the more ambiguous. However, the final resolution is in line with Foucault’s first idea, i.e. that it exposes, by virtue of its illusory nature, the illusions that are cherished in the real city of Belfast. It is only “on the way through the poem,” en passant, that we conceive of the prison ship as something ideal, perfect and desirable. This arc of interpretation makes the poem even more sober and ironic, turning it into a bitter political remark on the widespread inability to conceive of Belfast in a programmatically new way, one that would free its inhabitants and “readers” from the elusive utopia of unity and harmony.

There is no possibility of truly “disengaging” from Belfast, leaving behind its rubble of history and discarded material culture. Every attempt at cutting off from the actual architecture in the name of “emancipating” from the city is doomed to failure, as it only fuels

⁷⁰ Ibid.
indifference and repression. The logic of the Belfast dream is governed by repetition
automatism, an unwilling return to the trauma that has to be dealt with on a different basis.
The city has to be lived in and “dreamed” from the bottom up, not the other way round. Re-
inventing Belfast is not done by way of erasing, because this has always short-term effects
and the ghosts of the past return to haunt the society. Paradoxically, Carson’s poem shows
how to dream reality, but in a negative way, by exposing the fact that the colonial promise of
overthrowing history is yet another utopia. We carry our traumas inside us, on board every
vessel of imagination, even the most elaborate one. The poem transgresses Rimbaud’s
“Drunken Boat,” by rejecting his decision to stop writing poetry. Everyone should participate
in the writing of Belfast’s text, but in a sober way, not cherishing this art for its own sake or
shackling it in ideology. The transformation of sensibility, if it is to occur, has to proceed
from the material roots, not from idealistic postulates. The drunken, “nautical love” will not
provide the basis for a harmonious society, as it only sweeps all problems under the rug of
ideology. Imaginative inhabiting is necessary to build a better future, but it cannot be brought
about by rejecting reality and indulging in fantasies of sameness, hinted at in the “coals to
Tyne” metaphor. There are no identities but only differences which have to be traced to their
root – there, in the midst of tectonic geopoetics of the city, can one find the means with which
to build a better reality:

The man of the cities thinks he has escaped from cosmic reality, but there is no corresponding
expansion of his dream life. The reason is clear: dreams spring from reality and are realized in
it.71

Such an approach is possible when we realize that the mechanics of the city and the individual
is mediated, to a large extent, by the dialectic of orality and textuality. The text of the city can

71 Ivan Chtcheglov, “Formulary for a New Urbanism.”
be accessed, read and written upon, when we begin to thread our way through that labyrinth by following our own story, trying to piece together a negotiable, inhabitable space that is open to people. Carson puts forward a difficult truth, which has to be taken in for the sake of the future of his home city: “the more a place is set apart for free play, the more it influences people’s behaviour and the greater is its force of attraction.” Belfast needs to be exposed as a text so that it can be re-inhabited with a voice – this forms the core of Carson’s poetic transformations of Belfast or, to employ the term used by Jeffrey Shaw & Tjebbe van Tijen, is the heart of his urban “literature machine” by way of which “what has never been known can be remembered and that which was known before gets a new meaning.”  

72 Jeffrey Shaw & Tjebbe van Tijen, “Literary Psychogeography – A project in development.”
II Memory

*The important thing for the remembering author is not what he experienced, but the weaving of his memory, the Penelope work of recollection.*

Walter Benjamin

The amount of work that Ciaran Carson has put into the poetic elaboration on the question of memory is symptomatic of a more general trend in human sciences and psychology. Memory, since the pioneering works of Hermann Ebbinghouse, has been one of the prevailing topics in the history of psychology, philosophy and in literary works throughout the twentieth century and up to this day. Memory, it transpires, is one of those subjects that open up and pave the road towards a better understanding of the human condition, both from the perspective of an individual and the higher vantage point of collective memory, history and society as a whole. Moreover, it is one of the areas which are intensely saturated with various methodological approaches, ranging from biological and neurological ones, through psychology, psychotherapy and psychoanalysis, to phenomenology, hermeneutics and their adaptations in literary studies. Especially the humanistic discourses have been centred around this subject for a long time, with Marcel Proust as the founding father of a discipline that could be characterised as a poetic, truly literary attempt at drawing the reader’s attention to some of the inexplicable phenomena which we all experience on a daily basis, but still lack a language that would allow for a thorough conceptualization. Perhaps literature is the sphere where the experience of recollecting can find its deepest expression, for it provides a space in which such mental processes can be staged directly, constituting in the acts of writing and reading a reflection of the mind at work.
Ciaran Carson has already firmly located himself in a long-standing tradition of dealing with the subject of memory in literature, especially because of his prose works, where the work of memory is clearly visible and serves as a springboard for a more general reflection on autobiographical history and its implications. However, this is not to say that his poetry does not tackle the subject. Far from that, from the onset of his “self-conscious” career as a poet, by which I mean the publishing of the book The Irish For No in 1987, he is deeply concerned with the nature of memory which, as the previous chapter has shown, is related at some level with the questions of subjectivity and the dialectic between orality and textuality – an issue that lies at the heart of Ciaran Carson’s work. Just like the other three poems from the first part of The Irish For No (discussed in previous sections) have been crucial in establishing a distinct poetic voice on the basis of some procedures lifted from the oral storytelling tradition, the poem “Calvin Klein’s Obsession” is entirely devoted to the questions of memory and, as such, demands a close reading. The density of the poem requires that we go step by step, or since it is verse – foot in foot with the delicate moves of the long lines – in an attempt to recapture details with which the poet is obsessed (vis a vis the title) and which in turn demand an obsessive criticism, one that would not stop short of drawing certain implications from even the tiniest details, for such is also the progression of memory. Elusive bits and pieces return to haunt Carson’s poems and the first critical task is to rescue their meaning, tracing those moments when fleeting glimpses of past surface in the poem, establishing discrete connections with life. These “correspondences,” to use Walter Benjamin’s term, send us back to the realm of eternal meanings, where personal truth is revealed, as “a remembered event is infinite, because it is only a key to everything that happened before it and after it”73: “a name drifting like an afterthought, / A scribbled wisp of smoke you try and grasp, as it becomes diminuendo, then / Vanishes.” (BC 207)

The first stanza of “Calvin Klein’s Obsession” reads:

I raise my glass, and – solid, pungent, like the soot-encrusted brickwork
Of the Ulster Brewery – a smell of yeast and hops and malt swam up:
I sniff and sniff again, and try to think what it is I am remembering:
I think that’s how it goes, like Andy Warhol’s calendar of perfumes,
Dribs and drabs left over to remind him of that season’s smell.
Very personal, of course, as Blue Grass is for me the texture of a fur
Worn by this certain girl I haven’t seen in years. Every time that Blue Grass
Hits me, it is 1968. I’m walking with her through the smoggy early dusk
Of West Belfast: coal-smoke, hops, fur, the smell of stout and whiskey
Breathing out from somewhere. So it all comes back, or nearly all,
A long-forgotten kiss.
(IN 21)

The poem begins with the word “I,” which of course designates and sets up the lyrical “I” of the poem, but at the same time immediately introduces a bar, also by way of the letter’s shape, which stands literally and metaphorically for the problem of a boundary between the experience and its linguistic equivalent. As the poem will show, this “I” is also emblematic of the barrier that separates the recollecting subject and the subject of recollection, marking a strong tension between the status of the past, including our past selves, and the ever-changing horizon of the present consciousness. Thus, memory is intricately linked to the question of mimesis, in this case an internal mimesis of the past in its relation to the present. Carson introduces an interesting theme here – a strong statement is already made in the very fact of titling the poem with a brand name. As I will try to prove later on, the proper names can serve, because of their status as empty linguistic tokens, as vehicles of memory and referential
points through which a certain configuration can be established. This configuration – in other words, that which we come to know as our subjectivity – is essentially always a conjunction of the past and the present, mediated by the agency of the linguistic shifter “I” that is born in language. On the other hand, the proper name of the perfume – *Obsession* – signals not only the product, but also incorporates its more general meaning. The word denotes compulsion – a habit of repeating which, from a broader perspective, reflects the repetitive nature of memorizing as an “obsessive” act, whose recurrence guarantees a continuity of memories that can be reintegrated into an identity of sorts. What this identity designates might be difficult to establish – is it the identity of the author, the subject of the poem, the identity of the poem, or just a point in discourse which is capable of attracting and entering relationships with other such identities? These questions will have to guide any endeavours to pin the poem down and, although it will probably remain unanswered, it should not be left unvoiced.

So, a glass is raised – we should perhaps proceed in the passive voice – and the first sensory data are introduced into the poem: “solid, pungent.” These characteristics are presented in the form of a parenthetic remark and are immediately followed by a simile which is guiding our attention to the quality of being “soot-encrusted.” Only after these first three moves (first phase – motor movement, second phase – incoming of sensory data, third phase – associative simile) comes the moment, when we learn that it is “a smell” that has “swam up.” This sequence of events is quite telling in this context. The “solid, pungent” feel is ambiguous here, for it comes before we learn what kind of a sensory experience it is. The inner excitation that is described is in a fluid state, its spring is multifarious and difficult to pin-point. The quality arrives at the conscious level prior to the identification of its nature, its categorization in language. The simile which precedes the arrival of “smell” is a radical continuation of that process. Carson seems to capture an incredibly complex onset of a feeling which at the very moment of its birth is already entangled in an intricate web of associations, both sensory and
linguistic. The movement from the empty “I” towards one that is filled with unintentional material, which comes from some kind of an inside (although we shall later problematize the dyad of inner/outer) is a process that escapes easy categorization. It has been greatly troubling psychologists, philosophers and literary scholars, at least since Marcel’s Proust dipping of a madeleine in his cup of tea and having found himself in a past world, a world of memory. Carson returns to that original literary myth of memory in an attempt to dissect it somehow and observe how memory works. His findings, served on the backdrop of the dialectic between orality and textuality, shall be the main subject of this section.

**Proust’s souvenir involontaire**

The referential game with Proust and his *A la recherche du temps perdu* is already very clear at this stage. The French author is definitely the most steadfast point of reference for anyone writing, as Carson is in this case, about the phenomenon of involuntary memories. The aforementioned German philosopher Hermann Ebbinghouse referred to these in 1885 as “mental states once present in consciousness [which] return to it with apparent spontaneity and without any act of the will.” The fullest experiential expression was most probably given by Proust, whose great work contains a whole plethora of references to various types of remembering, including many examples of involuntary memory out of which the most notable one is probably the passage with the madeleine. It is worth quoting even for its opening words which strike an already familiar note, found in the poem by Carson that is quoted above:

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74 The opening reference to a glass of beer acquires significance in this context – experiencing is likened to drinking, while memory is intoxication.

75 Dorthe Bernsten, *Involuntary Autobiographical Memories*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 5. It may also be interesting to note that Ebbinghaus arrived at his observations *en route* an interesting, but altogether different research. He observed “that the recall of nonsense syllables seemed to cause others to come to mind automatically.” (See: John H. Mace, “Involuntary Memory: Concept and Theory”, in: *Involuntary Memory*, ed. John H. Mace, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007, p. 3) The possible linguistic link that can be inferred at this point as regards poetry being exactly a semi-automatic production of syllables is extremely interesting but would require a separate study, though elements of that interpretation will surface later on.
I raised to my lips a spoonful of the tea in which I had soaked a morsel of cake. No sooner had the warm liquid mixed with the crumbs touched my palate than a shiver ran through me and I stopped intent upon the extraordinary thing that was happening to me. An exquisite pleasure had invaded my senses, something isolated, detached, with no suggestion of origin [...] And suddenly the memory revealed itself. The taste was that little crumb of madelaine which on Sunday morning at Combray [...] my aunt Leonie used to give me [...].

The strong parallel between the structuring of the two texts is obvious, but what I would like to point out specifically is the same structure of the experience. Carson shares with Proust some of the key features related to involuntary memory, as enumerated and categorized by scholars in this field. One such characteristic is the shock and suddenness that accompanies these spontaneous recollections, but at the same time their “freshness and pure experiential quality.” They evoke a strong sense of originality and singularity, for “they are generally more specific (less generic) and may appear as more novel and more emotionally engaging than their voluntary counterparts.” With an almost uncanny vividness and a strong sense of disturbance, these memories transport the one who experience them with the force of an exstatic movement away from the present moment and directly into a certain period in the past. Carson’s recollection of the Ulster Brewery, as well as the odours that accompany it, is definitely a sensation where detail plays a crucial role. It is the background of the experience and not its structured, intellectual concept that we are dealing with here. Contrary to voluntary efforts, the mnemonic work is oriented towards the setting itself, not the spatial and temporal coordinates that we usually use when reminiscing something in a highly controlled, self-conscious manner. Carson’s “I” travels back in time to a memory that is at once dispersed and specific. Such a combination of features may suggest that a deeper sense of place is evoked – not just an encyclopaedic formulation of a particular day or event.

77 Dorthe Bernsten, Involuntary Autobiographical Memories, p. 47.  
78 Ibid., p. 22.
This difference is vital in the context of the discussion as to whether memory is a storage of facts or a subjective set of characteristics that are inextricably linked to the uniqueness of the experiencing “I.” This tension will later be resolved on a higher plane – that of history. Involuntary memory furthers the theoretical breach between the organization of ideas around some single guiding principle, usually of an ideological nature, and a network of irreducible sensations woven together by the subject. Memory, to put it bluntly, is something altogether different from a hierarchically managed reformulation of data that we encounter in the form of History. The former dissolves, whereas the latter erects boundaries between facts, emotional states and sensory data. This argument is even more suggestive when we consider the modern psychology’s standpoint, whose evidence “suggests that involuntary remembering is a basic mode of remembering the personal past.”79 Although the impression that most people have after coming in contact with theories on memory is that such “magic” moments of involuntary recollection are rather rare, both statistical data and Carson’s (just like Proust’s) elaborations testify to the fact that this is exactly what happens to us on a daily basis and among the most common of circumstances. This argument can be extended even further to claim that, as Bernsten puts it, “[h]aving involuntary autobiographical memories helps to keep our temporal horizons wide,” because “being stuck in the present is a clear disadvantage from an evolutionary point of view.”80

Another interesting feature visible in Carson’s first couple of lines is that “sometimes the memory will trigger another related memory, which in turn might trigger another.”81 Immediately after the smell “swims up,” the lyrical subject in Obsession is guided towards the words of a song – another level of recollection, albeit this time an auto-referential one. The

79 Ibid., p. 3.
80 Ibid., p. 4.
81 John H. Mace, “Involuntary Memory: Concept and Theory”, p. 3. This effect is also called “memory chaining.” (Ibid., p. 7) It is worth noting that there is a strong similarity between some of the associative procedures used in Carson’s works (see previous two chapters) and the effects of chained memory links which are scrutinized here.
question is very accurate – what is exactly that we are remembering? Is it possible to smell something that is really not there? Is it a self-induced illusion that we are experiencing something in a sensory way, whereas in fact we are far removed from that point in time and space? Is it a re-visiting of the past, a transport into the meaning of that experience, or just a random renewal of a certain neural connection? It seems that Carson is not willing to resolve those questions in a scientific manner, but he leaves us enough traces to try to theorize upon the subject. Moreover, these questions relate to the problem of how we align experience itself with its description or systematization. Perhaps there is no way to make the two compatible, since to experience something always entails a certain risk. Experience equals stepping outside oneself, whereas re-experiencing through the work of memory would be a reintegration of the self – a process aimed at establishing continuity between the past selves and the present one, so as to preserve a coherent image of oneself. Again, as it frequently happens in Carson’s poems, it is necessary to take one step forward and two steps back within the dialectic that he wants us to follow in his poetry. We are again left with a strong tension between opposing poles which are miraculously resolved on the plane of the poem. Therefore, it is the poetic line itself that should be the guide in understanding the implications of “Calvin Klein’s Obsession.”

First of all, just after recalling the words of a song, the “I” of the poem makes a side remark which not only can be read in two different ways, but has to, in order to keep the poem syntactically intact and going. “I think that’s how it goes” is, on the one hand, a comment on the inaccuracy of memory when it comes to remembering lines of a song. However, on the other it is a more general commentary on the structure of the mnemonic phenomenon that I have just described. It is only the second reading that makes the second part of the line cohere with the first. Read in this way, the comparison to Andy Warhol’s calendar of perfumes can be interpreted as a sophisticated remark on the actual meaning of involuntary memories. We
learn that they are “[d]ribs and drabs left over to remind him of that season’s smell.” (IN 85)

So, the smells are to a certain extent a trail of signs that we leave behind ourselves so as to retrace the passage of time, a loose network of signification that allows for a swift orientation in time. In the essay “The Image of Proust” Walter Benjamin likens the reminiscing author to a fisherman who prepares his nets but never really knows what he will catch. One thing is sure, though: “[s]mell – that is the sense of weight of someone who casts his nets into the sea of the temps perdu.” 82 Surely, this fisherman’s “calendar” is in no way similar to the one we use on a daily basis, but a subjective one, a personal web of associations (a private net), where the various stages of our past are marked and a synaesthetic rhythm of textures, emotions and tastes stands for the traditional sinusoid of workdays and holidays. In Carson’s calendar, for example, Blue Grass is a texture of a fur. Whenever that odour “hits” him (the violence suggests something compulsive and unexpected about it), he is transported back to 1968, or perhaps more accurately, because tenses are of high importance here, “it is 1968.” The enjambment works exactly on the tension between something being present and re-presented. Blue Grass is the trigger and a cue for the memory which, immediately upon evocation, right after the slightest pause at the end of the verse, “hits” and it is now 1968. A new correspondence, a mysterious link is discovered in this way and will forever remain an “eternal” part of the subject’s identity.

The internal structure of the recollection is also enlightening. It begins with a smell and continues in a rather narrative fashion, but only seemingly so. The phrase “I’m walking with her” presented in the continuous aspect never really kicks off into a story. On the contrary, it branches off into a detailed catalogue of that memory’s components – sensory sensations. The image dissolves when there is nothing else to smell – the catalogue has been emptied and exhausted. The breath, which carried the series of sensations (including the

poetic line), must now draw to a close. A new inhale (or gulp, to continue the original metaphor) awaits and will bring a different sort of excitations. The girl has never been the most important element here – a voluntary memory would certainly furnish some interesting narrative role for her, a twist in the plot, a part to act. Here, she has only been a passing spectre, a looming presence evoked alongside a series of smells. Her story belongs to a different memory, to a different train of involuntary thoughts. The gradual progression from these thoughts back to the conscious site of control and restraint is perfectly embodied in this stanza. A new tone sets in, one marked by a distanced approach and resignation. Although the lyrical “I” clings to the rupture in an intellectual fashion with the final attempt at a sweeping generalization, exclaiming “so it all comes back,” the consciousness of the fact that the memory is gone reinforces a realistic view. This tone permeates the delicate cadenza of this stanza, as it descends from an explosion of senses to a melancholic mood, perfectly embodied in the rather cliché phrase “long-forgotten kiss.”

**Bergson’s expansions**

The second stanza, as is typical for Carson’s procedures, locates some kind of a lack, an emptiness demanding explanation, or a surplus that keeps the poetic mind going:

Never quite. Horses’ dung is smoking on the cobbles. Cobblestones?
I must have gone back further than I thought, to brewers’ drays and milk-carts,
Brylcreem, *Phoenix* beer. Or candy apples – rich hard dark-brown glaze
Impossible to bite at first, until you licked and licked and sucked a way
Into the soft core. A dark interior, where I’d also buy a twist of snuff
For my grandma. She’d put two pinches on a freckled fist, and sniff.
Then a sip of whiskey, and, as always, *I’m not long for this world.*
My father could make a face: a whingeing gate, he’d say, hangs longest-
Hoping it was true, perhaps – a phrase he’s said so often, he’d forgotten
When he said it last. That Gold Label whiskey – nearly like a perfume:

*I go crazy because I want to smell them all so much*

(IN 85-86)

This stanza illustrates a further expansion of the work of memory, which was most accurately rendered in Henri Bergson’s *Matter and Memory*. In that book, the French philosopher developed an ever-expanding model of a retrieval system. Moreover, he postulates that recollection is a crossroads between the material and spiritual. In this sense, soul and matter converge, to an extent that “it is actually memory, not the senses, that facilitates the perception of the world – the meaning and structure of our contact with reality comes from memory.”

In the end, memory is soul which connects to matter in order to use it. Carson’s poem, as I would argue, stages an exact same model of epistemology, but not in terms of soul and matter, but “text” and “voice.”

Bergson claims that if A is the initial point which stands closest to the direct object of perception (O), memory is constructing ever-larger circles B, C and D which encompass further associations and represent the increasing effort of intellectual expansion. After having sketched in the mind the memorized object as a distinguished whole, we are reconstructing its conditions which build a system. Then, elements B’, C’ and D’ emerge. They are situated outside the object, but are virtually given together alongside it. As the circles B, C and D are expanded, their reflections B’, C’ and D’ reach out towards ever deeper layers of reality.

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84 Ibid., p. 74.
85 Again, for Bergson all past is virtual and is actualized in recollection, which in turn is conjoined with memory. All perceptions are already memory, albeit actualized and, as Bergson puts it, condensed. What we perceive is always already history and man is a condensation of history.
Thus, Bergson concludes, the same psychical life is repeated an infinite number of times in consequent layers of memory, as visualised on the graph:

(Bergson’s schema of memory)

We can observe this process at work in the second stanza of “Calvin Klein’s Obsession.” “Never quite” represents a surplus of meaning that opens up further recollections, in this case it is horses’ dung. By means of contiguity, a metonymical process, other elements of the scene crop up and thus expand the image so that it includes cobbles and cobblestones. This chained recollection unveils further layers of memory: brewers’ drays and milk carts, Brylcreem etc. The process ends with the image of candy apples, whose meaning can be read in two ways: as a part of the stream of unfolding memories or as another self-referential, self-conscious metaphor that aptly summarizes the whole process. “Impossible to bite at first,” the image yields to a conscious elaboration that is suggestive of a sensory movement (“licked and licked”) and whose meaning can be finally “sucked,” revealing a “soft core.” In this way,

Carson furnishes a sensory model of how memories arise in the consciousness and form ever-expanding circles of meaning.

The way in which involuntary memory unfolds has been elaborated on by another veritable scholar in this field, Susanne K. Langer. She advocates a view that what is taking place in such contexts is a process of symbolization, allowing to “transform sensory experiences into symbolic representation.”87 Curiously enough, Langer herself used the metaphor of a certain whirlpool of consciousness that sucks sensory data into a linguistic machine of symbolization:

The current of experience that passes through it undergoes a change of character, not through the agency of the sense by which the perception entered, but the virtue of a primary use which is made of immediately: it is sucked into the stream of symbols which constitutes the human mind.88

Such an interpretation of the human psyche as a symbolization machine that transforms experience into discourse fits well with the Lacanian and Derridean models of subjectivity, which I have diagnosed as present in Carson’s lyrical subjectivity in the previous chapter. Also, taking into consideration their emphasis on the textual mechanism of epistemology, it is possible to forward a thesis that Ciaran Carson obliterates the body-soul dualism in favour of a memory-text one that lies at the heart of human subjectivity.

Derrida’s notion of the mind as the scene of writing was developed in the previous chapter. Lacan’s teaching, however, can now shed some more light on the question of symbolization. According to Lacan, there are three structural layers that constitute what we know as the subject. He calls them the three registers: the real, the imaginary and the symbolic. The real is the inaccessible level of biological functioning and bodily jouissance,

88 Ibid.
the imaginary is connected with the Gestalt understanding of reality in the form of images, be it a self-representation of the body or the imagos that arise in the consciousness and form a kind of a pre-conceptual level of thinking in images. The symbolic, on the other hand, is governed by language and semiotic mechanisms. These layers are not phases in human development, but operate side by side. The passage of “thought” in this second stanza of Obsession can be interpreted as a movement from the inaccessible real, embodied in the lack/surplus that set us out on this path (“Never quite”), through the imaginary visions of vague recollections (“smoking dung” and “cobblestones”), up to the final linguistic elaboration and compartmentization in the symbolic by means of language (adequately represented by proper names Brylcreem and Phoenix). The perception/memory system is inhaling and internally expanding itself in this stanza and we are witnesses to this kind of movement – a bodily-like cycle of consciousness – as it works in the process of recollection.

Deleuze’s boxes

Yet, despite its breath-like sequencing, there is nothing essential to recollecting, Carson argues. The soft core that would seem to be the promise of a final reality, at last within the grasp of the lyrical subject, is not the thing in itself, the ultimately “real” piece of factual data, but just another reference point, a springboard that sends back to some other experience, another memory. It acts like a signifier, referring to another element in an infinite chain, turning memory into a version of text. No enlightenment falls upon the subject – quite the opposite, it just opens another level of memory. This “dark interior” is the ultimate wall of the unconscious – an inaccessible region of the real which bounces off the ray of light shed by the consciousness onto a different remembrance – in this poem it is that of a shop, where “I’d also buy a twist of snuff / For my grandma.” At this point we are reminded of the two different types of circulation, which Gilles Deleuze vividly described in his book on Proust as: (i) the
opening of boxes and (ii) the revolving of closed vessels.\(^{89}\) The former is associated with involuntary memory. He claims that things, persons and names are like boxes, out which we take out something altogether different, perhaps even of a different nature.\(^{90}\) The latter mechanism, however, is linked to the force of desire, an empty circulation governed by the constant movement towards an ever-receding goal. The former is structured like a metaphor, whereas the latter – like metonymy, which once again reminds us of the fact that these two governing mechanisms of language structurally underlie many processes. In thus sense, language plays a crucial role in cognition.

As these recollections become more and more conscious, a certain awareness of the passage of time sets in. The grandma, who appears as part of a yet another memory-chain, is a *memento mori* that lies behind every time travel and reminds us of the fact that death is the inevitable end. Still, as the father in the poem says by means of a proverb, life is speech. It is the linguistic work of recollecting and packaging memories that is the sign of a lived continuity. Life is a story – when we cease to tell it, the register of the *real* swallows us back into the void. The repetition compulsion is also exposed by the father who repeats his favourite phrase “so often, he’d forgotten / When he said it last.” The uncertainty about the origin and the certainty of the goal is a truth that lies at the core of the human condition. This is perhaps why we so eagerly repress the final aim of death and erect a mythological theory about the beginning in its place. All three generations follow the same path in the poem: complaints of the grandmother and the father’s repetitive phrase certainly induce the lyrical “I” to re-enter the realm of speech, the realm of desire, where the circulation of smells opens up a lifetime of memories with which one can fill the terrible gaping hole at the very heart of our subjectivity. This linguistic condition of culture is neurotic. No wonder then that the borrowed phrase reiterates both the inability to encompass life, the fundamental lack and the

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\(^{90}\) Cf. earlier discussion of Tzvetan Todorov’s concept of *hommes-recits* and Carson’s narrative strategies.
desperate attempt at re-living oneself at all possible stages so as to exhaust the internal fear: I go crazy because I want to smell them all so much. These words are Andy Warhol’s – he said that “I get very excited when I read advertisements for perfume in the fashion magazines that were published in the 30s and 40s. I try to imagine from their names what they smelled like and I go crazy.” This quotation introduces into the poem yet another dimension – that of imagination – which I will explore further on.

Phenomenological memory

To recapitulate, the previous two stanzas have displayed a gradual, imperceptible shift from voluntary to involuntary “ruminescing.” The third stage, by virtue of the Warhol reference, embraces another level of intellectual activity that can be discerned in the self-reflective process. The term “ruminescence” was introduced by Edward S. Casey in his influential study on memory titled Remembering – A Phenomenological Study. Casey coined a neologism which is a blend of two terms: “reminiscence” and “rumination.” By this expression, he designates a “special mood or emotional state that remembering may occasion.” He observes that it “ranges from active nostalgia to tepid wistfulness” – something we can detect in Carson’s lines – and consists of “semi-memories” that are “flooding back” into the consciousness. Though vague and incalculable in number, they do not fail to move the one who experiences such a state. Another facet of such a condition is a distinct feeling that the “experiences I was recalling were unrepeatable.” One of the reasons for this may be the fact that it is the process that counts here, not its particular elements. Casey, in his self-analysis of ruminescence, says that he “was not so much entertaining this thought [about the past] […], as ruminating it, «chewing it over,» reflecting upon it, albeit inexplicitly and unselfconsciously.”

“Such rumination,” he continues, “helps bring about the complex state of ruminescence.”

These traits can definitely be observed in the third stanza of Carson’s “Obsession,” where he considers, after Warhol, and “chews over” “all those exhalations of the Thirties and the Forties” which bring bottle-colour-induced associations with the “cemetery gate lodge.” (IN 86) He then goes on to disassemble the colour “palest lilac” through a sensual association with Baudelaire’s “Exotic Perfume” into partial fragrances which take him away, with another narrative turn, into his childhood:

[...] a rush of musk

And incense, camphor, beckons from the back of the wardrobe; I’d slipped

Through the mirror in a dream. Opium by Yves St Laurent? More than likely,

What my mother used to call a guilty conscience, or something that I ate:

(IN 86)

Casey quotes Freud saying that “the recollection of the remote past is in itself facilitated by some pleasurable motive” and adds himself that this “motive stems [...] precisely from the way in which events of the remote past encourage a ruminescent attitude on the part of the rememberer.”

Thus, we may arrive at the conclusion that the rumination of the past leads the lyrical subject towards childhood memories – an imaginary landscape of distant feelings and emotions. However, there is no potential coherence looming on this imagined or remembered horizon, as each memory sends off to another one, as the rememberer slips deeper and deeper into his remembering. Contiguity is established on an often arbitrary resemblance and the memories which come “flooding back” never establish a clear hierarchy. The “wheaten farls” are “looking, if I though of it, / Like Boots’ Buttermilk and Clover soap – // Slipping and

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93 Ibid., p. 47.
slipping from my grasp, clunking softly downwards through / the greying water; I have drowsed off into something else.” (IN 86) As Neil Corcoran put it, these lines perfectly embody what the poem is about: an “expansive drowse through the processes of memory and sensation provoked by the Proustian mnemonic spurs of taste and smell.”94 Once again, the process-like nature is stressed in this critical account, as Carson seems to be guiding us through a bewildering world of memory, where the narrative process seems to be present at some structural level, but is not entirely identical with what we know from the literary tradition as the proper narrative voice. Casey observes that memories have a quasi-narrative character which is of a twofold nature. On the one hand, it “refers to the implicitly or possibly narrative form that a memory, or a portion of a memory, may possess even though the manifest form is non-narrative.” On the other, “[w]hat is lacking in memory is a proper narrative voice, the voice of an authoritative narrator who spins the tale.”95 He concludes that in memories there is nowhere present an all-controlling narrator who “knows the entire story in advance,” while memories “tend to narrate themselves.”96 This interesting observation gives us a possibility to interpret this poem as another example of a self-propelling narrative – a genre which Carson specializes in. This time, its motor would be built around the remembering faculty and its facets.

**The aura and its geology**

Just as in the other narrative poems, which unfold in an off-hand, associational, inter- and intratextual way, Carson’s aim here seems to be at least twofold: he is exploring the machinations of memory, but is at the same time probing whether there is a possibility for language to feed on that material, pondering at the boundaries of representation and the horizons of *mimesis*. His discursive endeavours seek different types of knowledge, often

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95 Edward S. Casey, *Remembering – A Phenomenological Study*, p. 44.
96 Ibid., pp. 44-45.
evoking non-literary, or extra-literary meaning. Joe Milutis observes, whilst commenting on Warhol’s fascination with perfume, that “[s]mell, then, is this kind of a «nothing» message, like an aura: it telegraphs out; communicates a wordless fascination [...] identity without knowledge, mixed in with the «auratic» value of another (Elizabeth Arden, Helena Rubinstein [...] merging with the ecosphere of aristocratic old ladies).” He diagnoses the fascination with the old perfumes as a longing for “unretrievable essences,” a “nostalgia for «essence».” Of course both Warhol and Carson are perfectly aware of the impossibility of reaching these essences and are in this way problematizing the very question of representation and representability. It is the boundary of traditional mimesis that is put to a test, not the question of metaphysical values on which a safe philosophical position could be built.

One of the paradoxes of representation is that the more one goes into some topic or area, the more blurred and irresolvably intertwined are its basic parameters. The problem of art, especially contemporary art, is that throughout its development it has never come towards a more serious barrier. It is the fundamental recognition that there is no meta-language and that consequently reality cannot be encompassed by a system, be it a scientific or aesthetic one. This idea was aptly formulated by William Carlos Williams, who says in the long poem Paterson: “Dig in – and you have / a nothing.” Trying to delve for meaning in a single place is a futile task, he claims. Meaning, if it exists, is in movement and constitutes a process, for what is meaningful is alive and that which has been stabilized and pinned down is dead and meaningless. As an internal movement of recollection, memory is always a chained process, as “Calvin Klein’s Obsession” seems to argue. However, it does not generate meaning, but rather an aura. In the case of a poem, it is a textual canvas that is the backdrop of memory from which different thread can be picked up, followed, stitched back elsewhere, or reshaped

98 These ideas are of course related to Gödel’s theorem, as well some of the ideas formulated by Wittgenstein, Russell and, later on, reformulated on a different ground, by Jean Francois Lyotard.
99 William Carlos Williams, Paterson, Book III, l. 124.
into something else. Walter Benjamin’s notion of aura developed in the 1936 essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” is a useful device in this context, as it does not refer to some inherent, essential elements present in the work of art, but rather to the backdrop out of which that work emerges, its contextualized, material meaning and network of relationships out of which its potential signification can emerge. Thus, the “wordless fascination” that is encapsulated in the names of perfumes to which Carson and Warhol are eternally returning, is exactly the product of the aura which that symbolic construct from the past exudes. There is nothing essentially magical or special about Sous la Vent or Opium, as they are just tokens, vehicles for memories, emotions and feelings which circulate freely in the process of recollection. These little boats can be laden with memory loads on any particular occasion, so long as it triggers the right association and cues the remembering subject at some point of his or her past, bringing back the past self, together with the whole structure of that being, the whole Dasein of it, the whole configuration of Being, to speak in Heidegger’s terms. To summon another term from Walter Benjamin’s vocabulary, what emerges from the work of recollection is an image, an image of the past, but also the image of a person and of time itself.

The kind of fluidity of memory and consciousness was widely elaborated on by the Hungarian mythographer Karl Kerenyi. He analyzed the metaphors of the rivers Mnemosyne and Lesmosyne, and arrived at the conclusion that it is emptiness and desire that stimulate this flow. That which is always flowing and cannot be stopped is experienced as eternal emptiness and desire. We are experiencing ourselves through the work of memory, which is compared to drinking from the waters of Lethe. The self-consciousness is intimately connected with a

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100 Bernsten notes in her book that the trigger of memory does not have to share anything in common with the produced recollection: “[t]he access key has no propositional relationship with the content of the memory.” (Dorthe Bernsten, *Involuntary Autobiographical Memories*, p. 42) Moreover, Schank claims that “[w]e are reminded of a particular experience because the structures we are using to process the new experience are the same structures we are using to organized memory.” (Ibid., p. 41)

constant desire to fill oneself with experiences that make up our life. However, what we drink in this way is always irretrievably disappearing into thin air. Still, we never cease to drink and are thus able to forget the calamities of life. We drink from the river and in this way participate in its flow towards disappearance. Lethe is the river of oblivion, but it is Mnemosyne, the embodiment of memory, that lies at its spring. Kerenyi argues that they are indeed one and the same thing – the flow allowing life to fill us with experience, but at the same time erasing memory. Memory is spun and unspun at the same time, as part of the same movement, in a process which unites opposites in the name of a positivity which we call life. In the essay on Proust, Walter Benjamin remarks that in the creation of that “tapestry of lived life,” “remembrance is the woof and forgetting the wharf,” as “the day unravels what the night has woven.”

The textile garden of memory

The work of memory is, as it transpires from these metaphors, a textile venture, whose logic is that of Penelope’s work. In order to remember we need to forget – oblivion is the background on which memories can surface. What the Proustian recollection reveals to us is the vacillation of the subjective position, as the lyrical subject waxes and wanes in cycles of discovery and loss. This dialectic presents itself most fully within the framework of a poem, where the oral drive to enunciate and formulate the subjective position in a narrative shape, in response to the sudden “breach” of the memory’s texture, reveals the fictional and linguistic nature of experience. In broader terms, Carson’s poem shows that speech is an instrument which fixes the subject to its identity-positions and allows him or her to thread an individuated story of life from the textual tapestry of experience contained in memories. This operation is always a surprise, as the chains of signification follow a logic of their own and

cannot be easily controlled from a firm, Cartesian position. Indeed, such moments reveal both
the instability of identity, which is governed by chains of signification, and the necessity of a
surprise by which, as Lacan puts it,

[…,] the subject feels himself overcome, by which he finds both more and less than he expected
– but, in any case, it is, in relation to what he expected, of exceptional value.

Now, as soon as it is presented, this discovery becomes a rediscovery and,

furthermore, it is always ready to steal away again, thus establishing the dimension of loss.\(^\text{103}\)

The weaving and un-weaving of memory generates spontaneous moments of recollection, by
way of which a subjective position is established, but which also reveals the fundamental lack
that lies at the heart of all consciousness. What this amounts to is that “it wasn’t all quite real.
Like looking at my derelict back garden” with its “scraggy ranks of docks and nettles” and
“camomiles / Erupted from the paving-cracks, billowing from half-forgotten corners.” (IN 87)
Carson’s Garden of Memory is a semi-real reservoir of meaning from which the conscious
subject incidentally formulates its own speaking position. In Gestalt terms, the garden is a
textual labyrinth of signifiers which erupt, exploding with meaning, in the form of
split, the stroke of the opening makes absence emerge […].”\(^\text{104}\) Carson calls these ruptures
“memories that have no name” which “might summon up / A corner of your life you’d
thought, till then, you’d never occupied.” (IN 87)

This dialectical process guides us to the impossibility of revealing oneself fully. Every
recollected event, though it adds to the self-image, is based on an error, an “[i]mpediment,
failure, split. In a spoken or written sentence something stumbles.”\(^\text{105}\) The over-abundant

\(^{104}\) Ibid., p. 26.
\(^{105}\) Ibid., p. 25.
catalogue of flowers\textsuperscript{106}, which fill the stanza to the brim, is emerging from the paving cracks, summoning only presences of words, a purely linguistic reality which overgrows everything without any logic, apart from that of signification itself (or “dissemination” for that matter). The implicit question is whether this is indeed a tangible reality. Carson suggests, at the end of the poem, that “maybe it's the name you buy, and not the thing itself,” (IN 88) thus reconciliating with the fact that the resurrected reality is not a castle of the ego, which can be safely inhabited, but a parabola of desire, stretched in words over a fundamental emptiness.

Language becomes the factor that blocks access to a mythical totality. Memory is an “image of an assignation, where it all comes back, / Or nearly all” (IN 88) – the word “assignation” conveniently ambiguous in this context, somewhere between a “meeting” and “transfer” or “cession.” Every meeting with the past is a severance of some experience, as it is transformed into something different – a story, a narrative construct upholding, for a moment, life itself. Thus, as Benjamin comments, “[l]anguage shows clearly that memory is not an instrument for exploring the past but its theatre. It is the medium of past experience, as the ground is the medium in which dead cities lie interred.”\textsuperscript{107} Therefore, the metaphor of digging returns, in an entirely un-Heaney context, as it is in Carson’s verse a strictly existentialist project, which has more in common with the myth of Sisyphus, especially its interpretation by Camus, not with a modernist archaeology of identity. Carson’s “eye of memory” is a signifier revolving around itself and sending back to other signifiers only:

\textsuperscript{106} Carson’s take at the technique of the catalogue is at its height here, as he enumerates at least eleven different names of flowers. Still, his attempt at “exhausting” the garden brings about, even more forcibly, the lack that is present at the root of desire. Moreover, the fascination with proper names, which secure the particularity of the world, sends us back to his fascination with the basic mechanisms of language. For an extended discussion of the meaning of proper names, see Chapter 1.

\textsuperscript{107} Walter Benjamin, Reflections, p. 26.
The eye is not a camera, the eye of memory still less so. There is no fixed viewpoint. The eye flits and flickers around all over the place, taking in bits of this and that, weaving in and out, [...] building up a picture that is never static [...].

It is this revolving, in which the fundamental lack reveals itself, that forms the true subject of the poem. It is also the essence of the work of memory, in which the text promulgates its weeds, as speech performs the trimming and reveals the form of man. Benjamin commented that the one “who has once begun to open the fan of memory never comes to the end of its segments, [...], and only in its folds does the truth reside [...].” This truth is expressed in the folding of speech upon text, and Carson exploits that dialectic fully in the context of personal memory and identity.

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III History

The dialectic of orality and textuality takes a yet another interesting turn as Carson begins to investigate the questions of history and its relationship to literature, language and the community. He proposes a radical transformation of historical discourse and provides a pragmatic solution to the problems of historical relativism, imperialism and expropriation – quandaries that are especially troubling for poets of Northern Irish origin. It can be argued that he attempts a symbolic restoration of history by adopting a particular, deconstructive stance in the area of philosophy of history, which is inscribed in his highly self-conscious works. Ciaran Carson has been preoccupied with the questions of history and its representations for natural reasons. Like many other Northern Irish poets, he was witness to the violent events of the Troubles and the transformations which changed the face of Ulster in terms of sociology and ideology. Thus, consciously or not, he has become himself a historian, albeit not a traditional one, but rather as a man of letters. To the poets of his generation it was literally impossible to omit the question of what stance poetry should assume in the face of the conflict. He attempts a linguistic deconstruction of historical discourse, which lays the foundations for annulling the arbitrary divisions that separate the society and foster violence. In this way, his work could be seen as reparatory, insofar as we assume, alongside the poet himself, that the problem is essentially a linguistic one. The inability to escape, the sense of entrapment and the urge to somehow make sense of history remains a marked trait within the work of Ciaran Carson as he relegates that struggle onto the field of language.

Narrative technique is particularly fraught with implications, especially with regard to the question of historical truthfulness. The task is to establish what kind of relation does a narrative bear to history. Carson appears to trace elements of this relationship and constructs quite a coherent philosophical stance around these issues. The point of departure is the
fundamental necessity of making sense of all the surrounding violence. Carson understands very well that vengeance is not an option, because that would entail erasing a part of himself in that process. As it should stand clear from the previous section, Carson is to a great extent a poet of memory, including personal memory, and is aware of the intricate ways in which it shapes both human identities and poetry in general. Thus, the negation of the past would mean a form of suicide, both as an individual and a poet. What is more, the tit-for-tat nature of the Northern Irish conflict was probably a discouraging factor that did not allow adopting a vengeful outlook. The other option would be repair. However, the sense in which history can be repaired is unclear. It certainly cannot be undone. Many historians point to the fact that some processes go so deep that it is virtually impossible to talk of cause and effect, just as in the case of the colonisation of Ireland. It is doubtful whether there exists a possibility to achieve some kind of a historical compensation. It might simply fuel the sectarian conflicts by instilling a sense of social injustice. The first generation of post-war Northern Irish poets attempted to super-impose a complex web of meanings that would make history palpable.¹¹⁰ However, Carson is a representative of the so-called second generation, which did not stop there, moving the problem to an entirely different sphere and locating it inside language, rather than outside, i.e. in a tangible reality. His diagnosis is that the primary axis of violence is situated at the point where historical discourse – the representation of history – meets the events themselves. The almost absurd and arbitrary divisions, which have torn asunder the fabric of the Northern Irish society, have inspired the poets of that generation to seek the solution not in facts themselves, but in people’s interpretation of them. In this way, one could say that the linguistic turn that we are dealing with here is really a hermeneutic one that revolves around the question of interpretation.

¹¹⁰ Seamus Heaney adopted the attitude of an anthropologist and tried to explain the modern conflicts by taking the violence to an abstract, almost mythological level in his Bog poems. Michael Longley responded with a flight to nature in which he found a degree of peace and a force that has enough strength to oppose the ways of man. Derek Mahon, on the other hand, sought a more cosmopolitan approach.
This linguistic element in the violence stirred a revolution in the approach towards traditional discourses which have instantly become dubious and dangerous. This is perhaps why such writers as Paul Muldoon, Carson’s poetic peer, utterly abhor any totalizing grand narratives and display an unparalleled suspicion towards all kinds of “-isms.” However, every group needs its own history – a story that would make the lives of its members more coherent and allow them to enter into a narrative which would encompass their lives and enable them to feel a part of the historical process. Thus, Carson immerses himself in the pivotal issue of history, striving to re-shape it, re-tell it in a way that would smooth out the violent creases generated by radical, opposing ideologies. Of course, he is not a traditional historian and is unable to literally re-write the history of the nation. Yet, he actually presents how history can be pried open and how a re-formulation, a re-narrativisation can help us understand ourselves and our histories better – without having to resort to arbitrary, violence-generating divisions.

Jean-Francois Lyotard diagnoses the modern world as suffering from the delegitimisation of the so-called “grand narratives”\textsuperscript{111} which have broken down into a whole range of individual stories, no longer governed by any strict principles, but rather a loose hierarchy. He himself does not hint at the ethical dimension of this phenomenon, but this state of human knowledge does not necessarily have to be of a pejorative nature. It seems that Heaney, Longley and Mahon understand it very well, but are not sure whether such a change will bring about anything positive. If presented with a choice, they would rather opt for the organizing, coherent discourses: mythology, nature and European liberal cosmopolitanism, respectively. However, poets of the second generation, including Carson, who are to a certain extent more critically preoccupied with the questions of memory and identity, eagerly welcomed the new freedom as a breath of fresh air. This transitory state of euphoria they somehow found themselves immersed in within the post-industrial reality, the possibility to

spin various stories and playfully pit them against each other without the necessity to make everything meaningful, made them burst creatively forth with a stream of narratives. This new, free narrative, not necessarily mimetic, but rather governed by the natural momentum of story-telling, has confirmed to be a groundbreaking experience with far-reaching implications. The new narrative poetic school, as defined by Blake Morrison and Andrew Motion,\textsuperscript{112} is not an entirely new phenomenon. On the contrary, telling stories is a tradition in Ireland – one that reaches back to ancient times. The power of oral (or semi-oral) literature and its function in upholding tribal, and later national identity, cannot be underestimated. But it is not the epic literature that is at stake here, but the minute and the individual – the particular story each of us may want to tell. “Spinning yarns,” the maritime pastime, is one instance of such an activity – open-ended in its nature and individual, as no single story gets repeated faithfully, thus allowing for an infinite series of variations.

Some philosophers of the twentieth century have taken up and pursued this issue. Katarzyna Rosner argues in her book \textit{Narracja, tożsamość i czas} that these attempts have their roots in Heidegger’s ontology of Dasein, namely that the world exists for us only as an interpretation. Being is inseparable from understanding and interpretation. Moreover, following Husserl’s analysis of time, Rosner shows\textsuperscript{113} that this process of interpretation has a retrospective quality. We always verify the past events according to the present-time data and thus project our expectations onto the future. Following this line of thought, as guided by Rosner\textsuperscript{114}, one can reach back to Vladimir Propp, who claimed that the same model is the essence of a folk tale – the most basic type of literature. It can be argued that our identity is itself a narration and that it is a time-susceptible story beginning with birth and ending with death. Rosner remarks that narration “as a teleological and closed structure in time,


\textsuperscript{113} Katarzyna Rosner, \textit{Narracja, tożsamość i czas}, Krakow: Universitas, 2006, pp. 91-93.

\textsuperscript{114} Ibid., pp. 9-13.
corresponds to the time-governed human understanding. That is why narration is the form in which this understanding takes place.\textsuperscript{115} In this sense, the retelling of history and/or histories would place us right in the middle of the recovery process, just like psychoanalysis offers the analyzand a tool necessary to retell his or her life in new terms, bringing about the desired, reconciliatory effect.

The breakdown of History

In Carson’s poetry reconciliation is achieved through means that seem subversive on the first glance but upon closer inspection unfold a deeply ethical attitude motivated by a new approach to history. This is clearly visible in the poem “Dresden,” which has already served as an epitome of Carson’s narrative technique, but deserves a closer investigation as far as its relation to history is concerned. The title of the poem and its opening stanzas seem to be completely out of synch. A Northern Irish cast of characters, rambling in and out of the narrative, loosely brought together by way of the title character – Horse Boyle. It is only at the end of the eighth stanza (out of a total of ten) that we learn, finally, after having followed a myriad of retardations, that Horse “had joined the RAF […] became a rear gunner” and “Dresden broke his heart.” (IN 80) It seems as if the whole background of Horse’s story was just a preparation for that particular recollection – the bombing of Dresden. The winding narrative is pieced together slowly, bit by bit, before a suitable fissure opens up itself and allows a glimpse into History which, by way of that operation, is levelled with all histories, even the one of Master McGinty giving his pupils a thrashing at school. What Carson emphasizes here is the continuity between the realm of everyday narratives, anecdote or yarn, and the grand narrative of History, which relates to the epochal event from the end of the

\textsuperscript{115} Ibid., p. 73.
Second World War. Such an approach is advocated by some modern historians and philosophers of history, among whom Hayden White holds an especially prominent position.

The author of *Metahistory* claims that history is “accessible only by way of language,”\(^\text{116}\) making interpretation and narrative the fundamentals of all possible historical writing and obliterating the boundary between literature and history. This, however, is not done in order to overthrow history but rather to disarm some of the totalizing tendencies present in its discourse. Such absolutizing manners of expressing the past are today often accused of something that Jean-Francois Lyotard put forward against Jürgen Habermas’s consensus, i.e. that it “does violence to the heterogeneity of language games.”\(^\text{117}\) The plurality of discursive strategies used to embed historical experience comes to the fore, as the “narrative function is losing its functors, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages.”\(^\text{118}\) Historical truth is no longer considered to be within reach of a single, authoritative account, but rather “is being dispersed in clouds of narrative language elements” – “language particles” and “patches” governed not by an overarching, imposed logic but “local determinism.”\(^\text{119}\) The angle from which Horse perceived Dresden is emblematic in this respect – there is no finite meaning attached to a political stance but a “thousand tinkling echoes,” (IN 80) which resonate and form a “cloud” of meanings that can be variously configured, rather than an all-inclusive picture. The objectivist bird’s-eye view is deprived in this context of its all-encompassing aspect and reduced to a subjective perspective of a scared, empathising sublime experience of a regular gunman, whose road to the army was accidental and motivated by events of a personal nature. Horse, as a quasi-historiographer, is an anti-hero, who is unable,


\(^{118}\) Ibid.

\(^{119}\) Ibid.
as Lyotard put it, to “establish stable language connections”\textsuperscript{120} save for arbitrary, subjective associations with which he covers up the giant hole blasted in his subjectivity by the very bombs that were dropped from the RAF plane he boarded.

Hayden White suggests that “every history is first and foremost a verbal artifact,”\textsuperscript{121} which amounts, in his view, to the fact that “there is no such thing as a real story.”\textsuperscript{122} All stories are governed by the logic of language, which forms a necessary, indispensable filter at the threshold of every chronicle and narration, i.e. plot structures which White terms “emplotment.” In the debate over the “epistemic status of narrativity,”\textsuperscript{123} Carson seems to be firmly standing on the side of the history in the lower case, one that does not claim to be the repository of infinitely stable and unquestionable meanings, but instead offers a constellation of possible “emplotments” which always take as their basis the individual experience, a particular history. In this way, history can be interwoven into, or incorporated inside the personal narratives that form the nucleus of every identity. Such an approach allows an inclusive mechanism to operate freely, one that does not deprive anyone of the right to speak in his or her own voice about the past. Every story can cut in this way across the traditional frontier that lies between the public and the private, merging them and introducing a sense of continuity between the personal and the collective – a separation which has proved to be pathogenic and threatening as the debates over events such as the bombing of Dresden have proven. Language, as Elizabeth Ermarth remarks, “is not neutral and not single.”\textsuperscript{124} This might seem to be anathema to all proponents of Truth in the upper case, but it has to be kept in mind that as this decentring process may seem threatening, it is actually the opposite, as it “opens a sense of alternative possibility foreclosed by History.”\textsuperscript{125} The ability to build more private,

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{120} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{121} Hayden White, “Literary Theory and Historical Writing”, p. 4.
\item \textsuperscript{122} Ibid., p. 9.
\item \textsuperscript{123} Ibid., p. 19.
\item \textsuperscript{124} Elizabeth Ermarth, “Sequel to History”, in: The Postmodern History Reader, p. 48.
\item \textsuperscript{125} Ibid., p. 51.
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personal bridges between historical experience and the public domain of history is especially important when the multiple sides of the debate are locked in a vicious circle of mutual accusations that lead to a violent “tit-for-tat” strategy, as was the case in Northern Ireland.

A vital commentary on this subject is provided by Carson in his *Belfast Confetti* collection, where he continues to develop, apart from longer narratives and prose pieces, his own particular version of the sonnet – an individualized sub-genre he already introduced in the ground-breaking book *The Irish For No*. The poem “Yes” consists, like others in the series, of two stanzas, the first five-line-long and the second four-line-long. The delicate balance of the two parts is achieved also thematically by means of introducing the public and the private dimension in equal measure. These poems encapsulate the sudden crux of a subjective experience, as it is being wrapped in objective history, forming a whole which, from that point on, can never be dismantled, because this is its particular emplotment, to which the poem serves as a testimony. By taking this route, Carson frees the particular from the reign of the general but does not obliterate history – only makes it “a” history, showing how every event, be it tragic or not, can be made sense of only by nestling it within another story which has to be a personal one, for there is no story that ultimately is not bound to its narrator. Thus, a history unfolds before our eyes and the only guarantee of its truthfulness is its artificiality and subjectivity. The poem notably begins with a praise of that mouldy, inexplicable emotional content – a stubborn detail that refuses to be reduced to being a “minor” fact – in the form of a brief intoxication: “I’m drinking in the 7-Up bottle-green eyes of the barmaid / On the Enterprise express.” (BC 172) The train symbolically links Belfast and Dublin, thus showing how a real, feeling subject is moving along a spectrum whose political or ideological boundaries are artificial and, ultimately, violent. It stops and, after a brief moment, a “Belfast accent of tannoy” begins to explain what is happening, but suddenly – and the tension is underlined by the stanza break as well – just as the narrator is about to
quote from Bashō, “it goes off and we’re thrown out of kilter.” “My mouth is full / Of broken
glass and quinine as everything reverses South,” (BC 172) the poem concludes, as the
Japanese poet’s “Narrow Road to the Deep North” is derailed.

What actually happens in the poem? Does the train actually explode or is it just a
terrible pun played out by Carson, who wants to lure the reader into this kind of a suggestion?
“We’re no strangers to the bomb,” the narrator says, making it quite clear that the threat is
real. Still, this sense of familiarity with the violence, the intimate relationship that is
established between the sudden eruption and the subject of the poem who is trying to
understand what is happening en route. How that relationship is made possible? By way of a
poem – a metaphorical artifice. This is achieved not only with the means of the poem as a
whole, but also within the poem, which contains, in its pivotal point, a quotation from
Bashō’s haiku: “Blossoming mushroom: from some unknown tree a leaf has stuck to it –.”
(BC 172) The quoted poem provides an oasis in the midst of Troubles, a momentary
withdrawal from the politically polarised world organized around the extremes of the twin
cities broached by the train. For that slight second, there is present a will to stop,
paradoxically, the train with the poem. Of course, such a magical reversal is not possible. It is
the train that will reverse, heading back, never really entering Northern Ireland, as if the
“narrow road to deep north” were somehow inaccessible. Is it the failure of poetry? It might
be read so, if we were to believe that poetry can “make things happen.” However, it has a
different, albeit equally important task to perform. It can serve as a reconfiguration of the
positions in the whole situation. The narrative emplotment of the poem, by staging some of
the crucial political tensions that underlie it, saves at least one thing – the thinking and feeling
subject, who gains in this way a stronger voice. It is important not because it carries a clear
interpretation of the political situation on the border, but because it is an attempt to imagine
the situation creatively and subjectively, so as to disarm it and render it harmless. It is as if the
poet-subject swallowed the bomb himself, gulped down the explosion, including the broken bottles and the quinine from the *Schweppes*. In this way, the poem confirms (as its title – “Yes” – suggests) that it has retained the ability to digest everything.

This affirmative state, not unlike that “yes” of Molly from the last chapter of Joyce’s *Ulysses*, is at the same time an expression of faith in the inclusive power of the narrative. In this way, it becomes capable of lifting the weight of “History in the upper case,” which proves to be the source of many tensions that have finally led to the escalation of violence. The reparatory potential of the narrative lies in the fact that it proceeds from a personal perspective, rooting the historical experience in a network of private meanings. Although they may seem trivial, they put the “grand” things into a necessary humane perspective, at the same time enabling a deeper understanding of the nature of historical events. This is well illustrated by the short poem by Bashō. The leaf from an “unknown tree” is a condensed image of the arbitrary, uncontrolled nature in which history unfolds. The causality we usually attach to the chains of events is probably looser than we might think it is, engendering the need to refigure it in terms of some teleology. However, if we were to abandon this category as an expression of post-Enlightenment optimism, one of the sole aspects of human experience that could never be wrecked by a hermeneutics of suspicion are those particular details that are seemingly devoid of any meaning. They are like mushrooms: nearly identical, ever-growing, omnipresent and humble. Yet, when the wind of history makes a leaf fall, it can stick, just as in the haiku, to the mushroom of experience. Then, though inseparable, they form a meaningful whole which is like a gate towards a minimal meaningful historical experience. This is the foremost function of the narrative and perhaps of subjectivity as well, as Elizabeth Ermarth put it:
By refiguring fiction-making as the primary mode of consciousness (it replaces mirrors, lamps, and other such metaphors), postmodern narrative emphasizes the power of invention and fabrication to the point, as Robbe-Grillet says, of making it the foundation of discourse, the subject of the book.\textsuperscript{126}

A particular sense of history and fabrication are also the topic of another powerful poem from the same collection – “Apparition.” It has a familiar twofold structure, but this time each stanza is presenting a different image, both of which are linked by the narrator on the basis of an association. The seemingly offhand turn at the beginning of the second stanza – “It reminds me of” (BC 182) – is deeply motivated by the same structure of both images, i.e. an inability to bring to the public the discourse the traumatic historical experience (an apparition which inhabits clothes), which is ultimately rescued and saved from oblivion by the poem (in the manner of a narrative cleansing). In the first stanza we get to know an “angelic old woman,” who is cherishing a jumper, a blouse and a suit, which belonged, as we might infer, to her husband who died during World War II. The metaphors guide us towards an interpretation that she is trying to extract something from them, as she “plucks little balls of fluff [from the jumper],” “holds it [the blouse] to the light” and “dangles [the suit] […] at arm’s length.” The woman is trying to make sense of death and the unmotivated violence of war, looking for an answer inside memories, which are all that is left to her. However, things fall apart and remain silent – it is only the narrative, the poem itself that can both save the memory and release the trauma. Again, the subject of the poem enters the position of a voice-box for those random, private histories that should be made a part of the public discourse in order to help achieve a sense of meaningfulness and belonging – a continuity that saves history without doing so at the expense of identity. Historical writing, if it is to be fair and non-threatening, has to proceed from the tiniest detail, like the balls of fluff which become the

\textsuperscript{126} Ibid., p. 50.
minute grains that are put together to form a reparatory narrative – not a reversal of history, but its redressing. “[A] redressing of the figure of history,” remarks Iain Chambers, “leads to a less universalistic, less positivist, more modest sense of practice and knowledge.”\textsuperscript{127} It is not surprising then that the second part of the poem is also dealing with a piece of clothing that has to be exorcised narratively.

The random guy in a bar, “wearing a beat-up World War II flying-jacket frayed and split at the seams” (BC 182) appears to be freak, a curiosity and the barman makes fun of him by saying “Just back from Dresden?” This, however, turns out to be an utter miss, as we learn from the mysterious patron that “my father was killed in this here fucking jacket.” He is therefore clearly unable to throw down the burden of memory as history oppresses him and locks in burning armour. It is not entirely unlike the Shirt of Nessus which caused the death of Hercules and symbolically represents ultimate fate, a sense of doom and entrapment, which – as I would argue – can be equalled in this context with the post-war trauma. T.S. Eliot’s “intolerable shirt of flame / Which human power cannot remove” (from “Little Gidding”) is the oppressive apparition of history, which consumes the minds and souls of people from inside. Thus, the poetic act of redressing those stories in a narrative that releases a historical meaning is a gesture of removing that burning shirt, the “burning jacket” of WWII. Following the line of thought of Michel de Certeau, Iain Chambers observes that such a bow to the past is a way to “honour and exorcise it by inscribing it in the possibilities of language and discourse” and by virtue of it, not only “make a place for the dead, but also to redistribute the space of possibility […] and consequently to use the narrativity that buries the dead as a way of establishing a place for the living.”\textsuperscript{128}

By way of such poems, Carson achieves several goals. Firstly, he shows how great history can be best understood by beginning from the bottom of an experience, not from the

\textsuperscript{127} Iain Chambers, “Migrancy, culture, identity”, in: The Postmodern History Reader, p. 77.

\textsuperscript{128} Ibid., p. 77-78.
abstract top of ideology. Secondly, he puts forward the notion that a reparatory re-narrativisation of history can be achieved by saving all those minute detailed experiences and recollections, all of which have their final say in the construction of a healthy identity that is based on continuity. Last, but not least, he re-formulates a strong belief in the imaginative and creative power of the poem, which becomes a perfect vehicle for that process of “redressing.”

In some poems Carson even goes to a far greater extent, as he enters the minds of the extremists and penetrates, in a narrative fashion, the discourse of the executioners. In the poems “The Mouth” and “The Knee,” whose titles already suggest a certain violent dismemberment of the torn Northern Irish political body, he uses the first person plural to spin a story of the “other” – the victimizing sides of the conflict. “We thought it was time he bit off more than he could chew” (BC 177) and “Two and two were put together; what they added up to wasn’t five” (BC 178) sound ominous and gloomy, but this is exactly the kind of operation that allows him to disarm that kind of talk, to become a bomb-disposal expert in narrative. It does not amount to the acquitting of those who employ violence to political purposes, but it helps integrate all kinds of experiences as fundamentally human. In a sense, he exposes the banality of evil, pointing out the harming force that might just as well find expression in words, and simultaneously shows how such utterances can be transformed into poetic speech. By incorporating “bad talk” into a work of art, Carson fulfils an important goal – to “make the premises of discourse evident”¹²⁹ and build new linguistic relations that could help overcome the current political and historical problems. Moreover – to “renew the social codes by restoring powers that have been suppressed” and to surmount “the assumption that history is a public medium, to which private histories are tributaries.”¹³⁰ The poems discussed so far in this section aim to provide a remedy to a certain “dissociation of sensibility,” which operates at the breach between the private and the public. The minor stories are part and parcel of the

¹³⁰ Ibid., p. 60.
larger historical plane and vice versa. This observation is best captured metaphorically in “Queen’s Gambit”: “As someone spills a cup of tea on a discarded Irish News // A minor item bleeds through from another page, blurring the main story. / It’s difficult to pick up without the whole thing coming apart in your hands.” (BC 148) All stories, be they personal or political, are interwoven and in order to preserve, not to destroy, we cannot put them apart.

Another instance of a poem in which a historical fusion can be observed is another para-sonnet “Cocktails.” This is an example of a narrative which, according to its title, shows how history can be made palpable, or “drinkable” by way of a strange narrative mixology. The first part of the poem begins in medias res with a galloping relation of a risky escape by car. The identity of the fleeing is vaguely hinted at only in the fourth line, where we learn that they “disappeared before the Brits knew what hit them. So the story went,” (BC 103) the narrative changes gear and the story is nested in yet another frame – this time that of the Whip and Saddle bar of the Europa Hotel. It turns out that the story was just another digression in a long bouquet of similar narratives revolving around the Troubles – “Romper Room” or the “Black & Decker case” – all of which ultimately deal with violence, aggression and loss. Then, “someone ordered another drink and we entered / The realm of Jabberwocks and Angels’ Wings, Widows’ Kisses, Corpse Revivers.” Is it the alcohol that sends the bar patrons into a surrealist world of strange drinks? I would argue that Carson might suggest something more profound, namely that the stories themselves are intoxicating but, at the same time, provide a necessary relief, a step back which helps symbolize the violence better and forget it. Oblivion is, as Nietzsche argued, as much needed in a healthy society as memory. However, there are different ways of forgetting and the ambiguity between just getting drunk and a more profound way of transforming the pain is clearly hinted at in this poem. The latter option is the more sensible “mixology,” which is based on the ability to narrativize the stories and make them circulate. It is the reparatory function of being able to participate in history by
retelling it that makes these “drinks” so powerful – they can be used to resurrect unwanted ghosts of the past, but they also have the beautiful effect of releasing the tension in a country, where “the civil and the military have fused.”¹³¹ A fruitful discharge needs the story to be altered – tailored to suit the individual emotional needs.

Thus, the breakdown of any grand narrative that could embrace all of those individualized approaches entails a reassurance of the belief in the power of the private story and its ability to contain historical experience. Frederic Jameson observes in the foreword to Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition* that the “narrative is affirmed, not merely as a significant new field of research, but well beyond that, as a central instance of the human mind and a mode of thinking fully as legitimate as that of abstract logic.”¹³² Narrative is a new cognitive approach to history. The obliteration of the difference between the private story and a fictional account results in a shift of the way in which we make sense of history. Hayden White underscores that value, showing how it can lead to a more empathy-oriented standpoint. He remarks that the transformation of the chronicle of events into a story

personalizes (humanizes) the agents and agencies involved in those events – by transforming them into the kind of intending, feeling and thinking subjects with whom the reader can identify and empathize, in the way one does with characters in fictional stories – and generalizes them, by representing them as instantiations of the types of agent, agency, event¹³³

This move puts in the foreground the figure of the storyteller – both the narrator of the poems and the narrators of stories from the poems. In this way, they are given a prominence as producers of an oral discourse that helps re-establish the text of history on a new basis. That

new figure, emerging strongly from Carson’s poetry, is not a dispassionate chronicler of events, but an imaginative subject who wields the narrative power sufficient to revolutionize, in small steps, the way history is conceived, thus freeing it from the deadly aspect of finitude. This vision of history defends a processual and negotiable approach to the crucial questions of the truth, as well as national identity.

**Storyteller’s dissemi(nation)**

In order to achieve the above-mentioned goals Carson needs to put the storyteller in the foreground. Indeed, the narrators figure strongly in many of his poems, sometimes acquiring a self-referential feature, as in the *Belfast Confetti* poem “John Ruskin in Belfast,” which is an imaginary account of the great art critic’s visit to Carson’s home town. The poem, where there are longer passages lifted verbatim from the Englishman’s writings, contains an especially distressing image, as Ruskin comments: “See how in the static mode of ancient Irish art, the missal-painter draws his angel / With no sense of failure […] and, I regret to say, the mouth is left out altogether.” (BC 200) It is highly ironic that Ruskin, who has been patronizing Ireland, is evoked in this context to comment on the fact that there is no self-conscious modern way of expressing the Irish experience. The naivety and childishness of the missal-painter suggest a lack of verbosity that could attract serious political and historical attention. The silenced, blank mouth commented upon by a pompous visitor from London, is a reflection of the political configuration eagerly unearthed by post-colonial critics. Such theorists usually point out how the inability to speak for oneself in the dominant discourse relegates certain subjects to the margins, depriving them of their history and sentencing their culture to the status of a minority. No wonder then that the narrator of the poem, always one move away from Ruskin, remarks with dread, seeing how the ability to speak in one’s own voice is a historical necessity, and noticing that he is himself called to that post:
That blank mouth, like the memory of a disappointed smile, comes back to haunt me.
That calm terror, closed against the smog and murk of Belfast: Let it not open
That it might condemn me. Let it remain inviolate.
Or let that missing mouth be mine

(BC 200-201)

The last two lines of this fragment contain a radical shift of attitude. The “inviolate” silence, the closed tomb of deadened discourse is resuscitated and animated to life by a strong, poetic gesture. Literature receives a special function in this context – that of a voice-box of a community which needs to wake up narratively, take a deep breath and find its own language, its own stories – in a word, re-invent itself poetically. Immediately after that realization of the sovereign narrative power comes the epiphany in the form of blossoming images: “fireflies moved like finely-broken starlight” and “gusted everywhere, mixed with lightning, / Till I thought I’d open up my mouth and swallow them, as I might gulp the Milk Way.” (BC 201)

This sense of elation is reminiscent of the one described by Søren Kierkegaard in Either/Or, where the Page’s “longing detaches itself from the home soil and takes to wandering” and as his “heart beats faster, the objects appear and disappear more rapidly, but still before every disappearance there is an instant of pleasure, brief but happy, gleaming like a firefly, inconstant and fleeting as a butterfly.” The fireflies in both cases are symbolic harbingers of a plenitude that cannot be totalized, as it is grounded in loss. However, this flickering abundance forms sublime constellations, each giving its own light and stirring a great appetite for life, acknowledging at the same time its multitudinous nature. The storyteller opens up a treasure trove of stories which suddenly surge in demand of being told, each upholding some particle of historical experience, all of which are vital and can serve as the basis for the construction of ever new narrative assemblages. This is the natural habitat of the narrator,

whose task is to look up, “detach himself from soil” and combine the atoms to form new historical, narrative substances. In “Hamlet,” Carson continues to use the starry metaphor, as he remarks: “So we name the constellations, to put a shape / On what was there; so, the storyteller picks his way between the isolated stars.” (BC 209) In this way, the Irish angel of history can finally utter – not a magical formula that fixes everything – but a string of stories, doing justice to history. He erupts with all the narratives that the storyteller can gulp and swallow, transforming them poetically. In this way, Walter Benjamin’s angel of history, whose face is turned towards the past where he sees “one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet,”135 is granted a voice, or rather a multitude of voices. And as “the pile of debris before him grows skyward,”136 there is a chance that the long, winding story will save some of that wreckage and turn it into building blocks of a new sense identity, a new hope.

Nation and national identity, seen from this perspective, are the bits and pieces of the “historical debris” reformulated into new constellations. Homi K. Bhabha points out the fact that all national and nationalistic standpoints have to be perceived as arbitrary, which rules out their full coherence. There is no such thing as a “primordial nation,” but just piles of signs. The blank mouth precedes the strong national subject, as “nation fills the void left in the uprooting of communities and kin, and turns that loss into the language of metaphor,”137 while the “historical necessity of the idea of the nation conflicts with the contingent and arbitrary signs and symbols that signify the affective life of the national culture.”138 This is not to say that there should be no attempt to reflect the “affective life” of a “nation.” On the contrary, it should be done on a daily basis – it is an everyday toil of transforming Benjamin’s piles of

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136 Ibid., p. 258.
138 Ibid., p. 142.
history’s debris into a meaningful site for peaceful subjective life. That work is best expressed
in the narrative form – one that propels a ceaseless reformulation of identity and is constantly
making new place for the living by turning history into something palpable – not by
repressing it and compartmentalizing experience under an aegis of enforced, silencing
notions. Bhabha summarizes this ambivalence, stressing the need for a narrative solution:

The scraps, patches and rags of daily life must be repeatedly turned into the signs of a coherent
national culture, while the very act of the narrative performance interpellates a growing circle
of national subjects. In the production of the nation as narration there is a split between the
continuist, accumulative temporality of the pedagogical, and the repetitious, recursive strategy
of the performative. It is through this process of splitting that the conceptual ambivalence of
modern society becomes the site of writing the nation.\textsuperscript{139}

Writing of the nation is a process which requires the storyteller to submerge in what Paul
Ricoeur terms, after W. Schapp, a “living imbrication” of lived stories from which countless
others emerge. As these stories make their way to the surface, subjectivity is formed, because
“the story stands for the person” as human beings are “entangled in stories”: “[t]elling,
following, understanding stories is simply the continuation of these untold stories.”\textsuperscript{140} Paul
Ricoeur also alludes to a possible psychoanalytic interpretation of that process, suggesting
that as the analyst helps the analyzand re-tell his or her life story in order to integrate diverse
stories within a single subjectivity, the storyteller embarks on “the quest for this personal
identity that assures the continuity between the potential and inchoate story and the actual
story we assume responsibility for.”\textsuperscript{141} That last element – responsibility – is exactly what
Carson considers the most urgent element in history, as the inability to formulate stories that

\textsuperscript{139} Ibid., pp. 145-146.
\textsuperscript{140} Paul Ricoeur, \textit{Time and Narrative}, volume I, trans. K. McLaughlin & D. Pellauer, Chicago: The University of
\textsuperscript{141} Ibid., p. 74.
are inclusive and do not divide the society is the key factor in the failure of joining the split society. What he offers is not a “pedagogical” solution, to use Bhabha’s distinction, but a performative one – the retelling of history from a more humble, humane perspective that accepts both a fundamental loss at its heart and the plenitude of possibilities contained in the myriad histories that beg to be released and retold, all of which reflect a particular experience. Such new constellations form the crux of Carson’s approach to history.

The performative and recursive aspect of rewriting history is contained metaphorically in the poem “The Exile’s Club” which depicts a group of expatriates who meet every Thursday in the Wollongong Bar and, despite being uprooted, “make / Themelves at home” and after many years “have reconstructed the whole of the Falls Road.” (IN 107) Their meticulous archaeological memory research leads them deeper and deeper and they are now “[s]truggling with the finer details: the names and dates carved out / On the back bench of the Leavers’ Class in Slate Street School; the Nemo of Café menu; / The effects of the 1941 Blitz, the entire contents of Paddy Lavery’s pawnshop.” In their “imagined community”\textsuperscript{142} they are transforming the traumatic history (marked by “news of bombings and demolition”) into a graspable constellation of memories and quasi-memories. The meaning of their “struggle” lies in the fact that they are not just re-living the past, but try to refigure the past with the present in a quest for an identity that could uphold both. In this sense, “history is not «about» the past as such, but rather about our ways of creating meanings from the scattered, and profoundly meaningless debris we find around us.”\textsuperscript{143} This procedure is narrative at its core, i.e. linguistic. The aim of spinning such stories is to creatively assemble a structure that does not care for being a perfectly true historical account, but a crutch that enables to figure one’s way, narratively, through the gloomy labyrinth of history. This is the moment when literature and history combine, because “it is the mental protocols, always linguistic at base, that are

\textsuperscript{142} Benedict Anderson’s term, eagerly taken up and expanded by Homi K. Bhabha in The Location of Culture (p. 157 ff).
\textsuperscript{143} Hans Kellner “Language and historical representation”, in: The Postmodern History Reader, pp. 136-137.
infrastructural, while the facts are the superstructural materials used in creating some expression of this structural vision.”\textsuperscript{144} Such an approach is a means of forgetting as much as it is about remembering, for an obsession with total remembrance locks people in the prison house of history. The goal is not to store the past as a frozen museum piece but to consume it in the form of a narrative.\textsuperscript{145} This process has all the features of a narrative, whose ways cannot be straight, as Hans Kellner emphasises:

contemplating history in this manner is active and creative precisely because of the essentially meaningless face behind what is contemplated. There is no story \textit{there} to be gotten straight; any story must arise from the act of contemplation.\textsuperscript{146}

In a corresponding poem titled “Exile” from the book \textit{Breaking News} (2003) Carson fashions himself as an exile in Belfast. He defamiliarizes his home town and turns it a starting point for some far-reaching historical investigations. Wandering through the streets, whose names bear blatantly post-colonial names: Sevastopol, Crimea, Inkerman, Odessa, Balkan and Lucknow, the lyrical subject is suddenly struck with a deep sense of historical interrelations that link Belfast to the Crimean campaign – a dark and ambiguous chapter in the history of the British Empire. The historical struggle of the Irish, embedded in the streets of Belfast by means of a metaphorical alignment with Crimea, leads the subject of the poem to a conclusion that “Belfast / is many // places then / as now” (BN 466) – a symbolic crossroads where the mechanism of history is revealed. Walking repeatedly down the “smouldering / dark streets,” Carson turns into a \textit{flâneur}-version of the angel of history, as he observes that “all lie / in

\textsuperscript{144} Ibid., p. 136.
\textsuperscript{145} Frederic Jameson, following Nietzsche, points out the dangers presented by the “debilitating influence of historiography and of the fidelity to the past and the dead that an obsession with history seems to encourage” and argues that those pitfalls might be omitted with the help of a narrative precisely because of its artificiality, since its “formal properties become magnified in prosody and in the rhythmic features of traditional tales, proverbs, and the like.” (“Foreword to Jean-Francois Lyotard’s The Postmodern Condition”, p. 247)
\textsuperscript{146} Hans Kellner “Language and historical representation”, p. 137.
ruins // and / it is // as much / as I can do // to save / even one // from oblivion.” (BN 466) The double exile from history thus demands a bold step – a re-writing of the history of the Crimean campaign, which Carson undertakes in a series of seven poems under the joint title “The War Correspondent.”

**The War Correspondent from Belfast**

In the “Notes” section at the end of *Breaking News* Ciaran Carson openly admits that his work is indebted to the reports from the Crimea sent to be published in the *The Times* by the Anglo-Irish journalist William Howard Russell, one of the founding fathers of the art of war correspondence. “In many instances I have taken his words verbatim,” Carson confesses, thus making a sly point about his “deconstructive” approach to the topic. For what he does is quote and provide a rhythmical (thus, poetic), narrative framework to Russell’s dispatches, by way of which he is able to subtly underline some key elements and overturn certain underlying propositions in the original author’s account, exposing the ideology behind it, as well as the basic human sensibility. Carson confirms Roland Barthes’s thesis that “historical discourse is in its essence a form of ideological elaboration, or to put it more precisely, an *imaginary* elaboration.”

By turning the political stance back on itself, Carson manages to rescue the imaginary element in Russell’s writing, showing how a slight alteration of perspective can free the text and allow it become an imaginary, sensual gate to historical experience. Such a gesture rescues the correspondent’s writing as literature and helps unveil a deeper sense of how history can be accessed through non-orthodox means: sensory images and narrative turns.

The first poem in the sequence – “Gallipoli” – problematizes the representational aspect of historical writing, as the description of the title city is exposed to be strictly

metaphorical and resting on comparisons. Instead of trying to invent that urban space anew, the poem proceeds in following manner, each of the first four stanzas beginning in the same manner: “Take sheds and stalls from Billingsgate,” “take an Irish landlord’s ruinous estate,” “take a dirty gutter from a back street in Boulogne,” “take the garlic-oregano-tainted arcades of Bologna.” (BN 470) The next four stanzas urge the reader to use his own imagination and “populate this slum with Cypriots and Turks,” “dress them in turbans,” “requisition slaughter-houses for the troops,” “let the staple diet be green cantaloupes.” (BN 471) This kind of a mechanism is essentially metaphorical and literary. It is a transaction between the reader and the author, one that cannot be predicted and rests on a number of predefined points of reference that these people share. Bouncing back and forth between the exotic otherness of Gallipoli and more familiar cityscapes, the subject of these poems puts into motion a gigantic hermeneutic wheel which keeps on turning and can never stop. No wonder then that the poem ends by acknowledging the processual and contextual nature of all historical understanding: “I have not even begun to describe Gallipoli.” (BN 471) Historical representation is, as Iain Chambers has it, “in both its political and aesthetic dimensions, a process of continual construction, enunciation and interpretation.”

It is not only the city that undergoes such a process, but also the world of nature as well. In “Dvno,” which begins with a Romantic line “Once I gazed on these meadows,” we learn after a couple of stanzas that “I though I was in Eden, / happily stumbling about / in a green Irish garden / knee-deep in potato flowers.” (474 61) Such elements of domestification become uncanny when serious violence and taking of sides is considered, as in the poem “Kertch,” where the narrator declares “Thus did we force the straits / of Kertch […] And we spread terror and havoc / along the peaceful seaboard / of that tideless sea.” (BN 480) The unashamed, matter-of-fact manner in which such a declaration is delivered brings back the

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148 Iain Chambers, “Migrancy, culture, identity”, p. 78.
most dreadful aspect of war and history – a sense of cause and justification that emanates even on the one who can only symbolically associate with such deeds. In “The Indian Mutiny” this reaches the height of absurd, as the anonymous victims are obliterated from the picture and the narrator, amid an ongoing bloody plunder, declares – after a brief reflection on his luck that allowed him to survive – “we freed Lucknow.”¹⁴⁹ (BN 448)

That single line carries in it a whole package of contrasting meanings. Was Lucknow freed or imprisoned? Is the language used here to render history or rather to absolve the ones who are responsible for a terrible crime? The violation is at least twofold – the physical side of it is rather obvious, but the subtle sentencing of the victims to oblivion is just as much important. This comes back to haunt the narrator, who – in the poem “Dvno” – recalls how he wrote his name with a stick on the sand “and discovered / the rotting face of the corpse” (BN 475) This tension between the willingness to put one’s name in history and a profound sense of mortality that returns like a ghost, figures also in the necessity to write. And if nobody writes the history of the “choleraic dead,” “their names have been unravelled / like their bones, whose whereabouts / remain unknown.” (BN 475) Survival is achievable only through language, an inscription – this is another hidden mechanism of history. By exploring this double-edged nature of historical writing, Carson stresses the need to be able to write one’s own story, despite circumstances, for it is the only way of saving identity. The self-referential short poem “Skip” provides a vital comment on this matter, as it presents a subject in process, writing in the face of death: “I’m writing / this // in a black […] notebook / I gleaned // from the / bomb- // damage.” (BN 453) The narrative mechanism which saves identity among the countless deaths is also employed by the soldiers themselves, as Russell’s account proves. In “Tchernaya,” some officers are depicted hunting in a no-go area, which “was deemed highly exciting sport.” (BN 482) Sayings were coined and bets were made – “There was never

¹⁴⁹ Carson grants it a special meaning, because he puts that line apart from all the other 33 3-line-long stanzas.
enough,” the narrator comments, until “each had two or three life-stories to tell.” (BN 482) These stories, made up long before the battle actually took place, assure us that “as other histories emerge from the archaeology of modernity to disturb the monologue of History, we are reminded of the multiple rhythms of life that have been written out and forgotten.”150 It is those narrative stances that make up the stuff of history, not the result of the battle itself.

The unabashedly colonial attitude is indeed put in the foreground but it does not constitute the entirety of Carson’s deconstructive reading of Russell. He goes much further than that because by exposing his logic, he disarms it, allowing different aspects to emerge from the background, such as the games played by the soldiers or the images of Chasseurs in Kertch, who “pranced about / the gardens like princesses.” (BN 479) These details, omitted from official handbooks and scientific monographs, have been nevertheless granted by Carson the ability to become ways of entering history as if from a backdoor. This could be done only by manipulating the stories and reconfiguring them. In this sense, Elizabeth Ermarth is justified in saying that “the postmodern restoration of language attempts to bring back from repression an enduring creative power.”151

Another vital aspect which Carson rescues from Russell is its imaginary element, which is realized fully in the sensual descriptions of nature and long, elaborate catalogues of material culture. Both of these aspects are not traditionally regarded as essential to war correspondence, but their persistence and deeper meaning, perhaps one that Russell was even unaware of, makes his writing historical paradoxical, because they do not fall within the controlling domain of ideology and could have been recorded in the most thoughtful, humane manner. Frank Ankersmit, a theorist of history, considers such aspects of historical writing as indispensable and providing a most immediate insight into history. To him, historical

150 Iain Chambers, “Migrancy, culture, identity”, p. 80.
experience is, first of all, a variation of an aesthetic experience.\textsuperscript{152} He regards “sensitivism” in historical studies to be the right direction, as it is oriented on a particular thing and constitutes an attempt at identifying or merging with the reality.\textsuperscript{153} Carson’s poetical tweaking of Russell’s writings emphasises and foregrounds exactly those aspects of his work. The literary aspect of many descriptions in his accounts from Crimea is thus fused with a historical relevance.

In “Dvno,” where the narrator felt as if in Eden, after the descent of night reveals that “woods breed miasmas, / and slithering through the brush / are snakes thick as a man’s arm,” (BN 474) while “vapours rise and fatten / on the damp air, becoming / palpable as mummy shrouds.” (BN 474-475) Such a description stirs the imagination and provokes an emotional response that has, according to Ankersmit, a power to transport us right into the middle of that scene, allowing us a glimpse into a collective state of mind, which reveals the final truth of history which no longer can be expressed in language. The “delicate / perfumes wafted into the air” by the flowers that were crushed with the creaking boots of advancing Turkish infantry in “Balaklava” (BN 476) or the birds singing “in the lulls between the thud of bombs” in Tchernaya (BN 481) are the sensual capsules containing a condensed version of what it really was to be there. The long catalogues of the things that were burned in the fire of Varna (BN 472), the leftovers of a ransack in Kertch (BN 478) and the silent heaps of junk after the battle of Sedan (BN 483) are so detailed and extensive that they acquire a materiality of their own. What we thus witness is a de-intellectualization and materialization of language.\textsuperscript{154} That moment precedes a mystical revelation when the ripped history opens up and gives something away, like the butterfly which crept out of an empty eye socket of a shot horse in the poem “Campaign.” (BN 455) Ankersmit argues that such experiences, evoked in


\textsuperscript{153} Ibid., p. 228.

\textsuperscript{154} Ibid., p. 233.
rare moments and attained only by some historians, reveal to us that truth rests in reality, not in what we say about it. What historical writing needs is a move towards reality, not towards abstraction, as historical truth is attained via a quasi-mystical union with reality.\textsuperscript{155} It is the imaginative transformation that opens up the truth – its mechanism is literary and its most natural carrier would be poetry. In “Varna” the narrator describes a fire which consumed, among many other things, a consignment of cavalry sabres which were, as a result, “fused into the most fantastic shapes, looking like an opium-smoker’s cityscape / or a crazy oriental fairground.” (BN 472)

That image, in which the debris is consumed by, firstly, the real flames and then by the flames of imagination, is an apt summary of the visionary nature of historical experience. “What debris a ruined empire / leaves behind it!” (BN 484) exclaims the narrator of “Sedan.” Indeed, but it requires a deep imagination and great sensitivity to transform that debris creatively and turn it into a time machine that reveals its historical meaning in a condensed manner that is at the same time devoid of all ideological layers. The ethical purification of history can be achieved only by assuming a strictly subjective point of view. Ethical “seeing” is possible only when history is accustomed by way of an aestheticized perception. And although, as Ankersmit has it, we are then verging on the possibility to express that experience in words, it is literature and its transformative, narrative potential that guide the way. In \textit{Breaking News}, Ciaran Carson manages to purify his verse in a way that helps him perform those issues in a limited space and show, rather than teach, how history can be tamed with a view to some of the reconciliatory and peace-oriented effects in the future.

Two quotations from Frank Ankersmit’s writings illustrate and summarize this point in a thorough manner, putting in the foreground those issues that seem to be of primary importance for Ciaran Carson:

\textsuperscript{155} Ibid., p. 236.
Historical writing is, so to speak, the experimental garden where we may try out different political and moral values and where the overarching aesthetic criteria of representational success will allow us to assess their respective merits and shortcomings. And we should be most grateful that the writing of history provides us with this experimental garden, since it will enable us to avoid the disasters that we may expect when we would have to try out in actual social and political reality the merits and shortcomings of different ethical and political standards.\textsuperscript{156}

And, thus, instead of fearing subjectivity as the historian’s mortal sin, we should welcome subjectivity as an indispensable contribution both to our knowledge of the past and to contemporary and future politics.\textsuperscript{157}

\textsuperscript{157} Ibid., p. 100.
Chapter Three – The limits of knowledge and the space of the poem

I Revision of epistemology in *For All We Know*

“Scrawled hieroglyphs elaborate the black slick of the road. Witnesses
Are called upon, but the ink has lightened into amethyst, and soon its blue will be
Invisible, as new ideas dawn across the moss.

Ciaran Carson

The aim of the previous chapter was to show how Ciaran Carson uses the dialectic of orality and textuality in the three large areas he explores in his work: city, memory and history. By presenting these topics as textual canvases, he shows how a poet can both weave a thread from these broad textures (a walk, a recollection and identity, respectively) and at the same time expose the general backdrop of those individualizing processes. Such a comprehensive stance regarding human cognition obviously entails far-reaching claims in epistemological terms. No wonder then that Carson’s next logical step is a quasi-philosophical revision of how we “know” the world. His investigations on this subject, the analysis of which forms the first part of this chapter, lead him towards the question of death. It is implicated both in terms of a philosophical reduction that is undertaken in poetry – a version of a phenomenological stripping of subjectivity – and the subject matter of that verse. In the end, as it turns out, story and text, the narrative and its womb – which are all figures of orality and textuality – come to signify life and death. In this way, the poem becomes the space in which their cycle is clearly visible and can be meditated upon in a most profound way. The second part of this chapter examines the elevation of the poem to the level of a vehicle for that primordial dialectics, as
well as the generally ontological preoccupations of Ciaran Carson – an area in which he achieves a rare goal, for he manages to encapsulate life and death in the space of the poem.

The subject of the book

Ciaran Carson’s tenth poetry book *For All We Know* marks not only an important anniversary in the career of this prolific author. It is also a summary of some of the themes which he has been elaborating throughout his body of work. This book combines in an artful way the questions of memory, identity and history, but does so in a unique way, both in terms of its craftsmanship and the treatment of its material. The unusually architectonic construction of *For All We Know* makes it, as some have tried to argue, a sort of a long prose-poem, but I would rather argue a more radical thesis – that it is indeed an attempt at a certain epistemology, veiled in the form of a series of poems.

Such an interpretation invites a whole lot of questions and doubts, but whereas in most cases they would endanger this approach by drowning it in a torrent of scepticism, in this particular situation they seem to pertain to the topic in the most welcome and direct fashion. First comes the question of how literature can embrace issues that have been elaborated so thoroughly in a different discourse – that of philosophy – and whether there exist interpretative mechanisms that would allow translating the literary language into that of philosophy. The second thing is whether such strict boundaries between discourses are really a scientific necessity or an ideological construct born out of a purely academic need to distinguish its own field of work. These considerations naturally lead to the question of truth – whether it is a transcendental notion of an objective character or an immanent one with an irreducibly subjective nature, and how can the results of both literary and philosophical investigations be compared and on what ground.
These questions have achieved a fundamental status in twentieth century philosophy and literature, after the so-called “linguistic turn,” which revolutionized the way scholars and writers perceive their work and the meaning effects they generate. Literary criticism has grown to eagerly tackle questions of philosophical nature on the basis of a purely literary material, pointing out the various affinities between eternal epistemological questions and their material realization found in poems, stories and novels, which “perform” the problems that are normally considered in an abstract manner within the paradigm of traditionally oriented philosophy. On the other hand, many modern philosophers have come to realize that their discipline, when realized in writing, may not necessarily differ that much from the endeavours of more self-conscious writers, thus pointing out how literature and philosophy essentially overlap, a fact which is grounded in the common basic material they use – that of language.

Those who use language in an attempt to grasp some portion of reality in a meaningful fashion may adopt various strategies to produce the “effect of truth” in their writings, but on the most rudimentary level they all share the condition of being rooted in the mechanism of “language games,” as Wittgenstein put it, or an underlying structure of language, an idea that was advanced by structuralism. Now, my aim here is not to reconcile these various approaches, but to show, on the basis of Carson’s book For All We Know, that through a certain carefully structured emulation and performance of epistemological problems, poetry can enter a discussion with philosophy in a dialectical manner, pointing out both particular issues and reformulating the extent of areas that we are able to cover not merely as philosophers, writers or critics, but as human beings who seek answers to some of the most basic questions about human cognition, its potential and limitations. It is these last questions that are of primary importance for Carson, not the theoretical dispute which he elegantly leaves out of the picture. As was the case with other topics, he approaches his subject from a
seemingly off-hand perspective, rooting the vital themes in particulars and beginning from a highly subjective position, only later moving up in the ladder of abstraction. The bottom-up strategy he utilizes always begins from details, idiosyncratic elements – in short, the debris that a rigorous analytic would undoubtedly dispense with.

The architecture of the book

*For All We Know* is a poetry book that consists of 35 pairs of poems under the same names, arranged into two sets mirroring each other. All poems are arranged in couplets, each line having 14 beats. The number of lines is either 14 (in 22 poems) or 28 (in 12 poems), and there is one poem in each part which is 56 lines long. The numbers themselves of course do not herald anything about the content of the book, but they do show how self-consciously and intricately the whole book is crafted. One key aspect that characterizes this series of poems is the duality or dialogic nature of the whole construct. Poems in both parts mirror each other not only through their construction and titles, but also through the intra-textual recycling of phrases and concepts. Moreover, such an arrangement makes it possible to read the whole collection at least in two dimensions – jumping back and forth between the corresponding poems in Part One and Part Two, or alternatively reading the collection in a linear fashion, following the order in which the poems appear.

This initial, architectonic sketch of the multi-dimensional nature of the book already takes us right into the middle of the epistemological argument. The twofold continuity of both thought and narration presents a barrier to our cognitive powers, as we are unable to simultaneously cohere the multifarious threads into a whole, at least not during the first reading. Return, repetition and reformulation is unearthed here as the crucial element in the process of understanding. We constantly re-present, re-interpret and re-state what we know and how we know it. Making sense of the world is not a linear activity following *a priori*
rules of synthesis that enable a fully rational understanding of reality, as Kant would suggest. The *a priori* rule of Carson’s synthesis would be the rule of adding the title of the book – “for all we know” – to the end of each sentence we utter or each thought we formulate. There is never any synthesis taking place, we just piece a story out of what comes in hand, never really being able to say that this is what happened for sure. For all we know, this is what the story might sound like.

The book tells the story of two protagonists – Gabriel and Nina. They are strangers who engage in a romance and are prematurely separated by the death of Nina, who is killed in a car accident. We follow their steps as they dine, talk, make love, meet other people and stroll down the streets of Belfast, Paris and Dresden. However, the love affair is not just a sentimental story with an unhappy ending, but an interesting account of some of the basic facets of human cognition and interaction. The couple’s story is also a certain recreation of the past; a lengthy memoir spun from the bits and pieces of memory, sometimes the tiniest residues of meaning and details of everyday life, which surprise with their delicate nature and symbolic potential. The basic question, asked at a meta-narrative level is stated already in the very first poem in the book:

> For how many seasons have we circled round each other
> like this? Was it because you came from there and I from here?
> (FA 493)

The answer symmetrically closes the whole book:

> so I return to the question of those staggered repeats
> as my memories of you recede into the future.
> (FA 587)
This question and answer frame the concept of the book. It is a mnemonic effort to capture the circling of two people, or two minds, in “staggered repeats” of a dialectic process of cognition. This process is sketched in the first poem, where Gabriel says that “I was grappling with your language,” “[t]hen slowly, slowly we would draw in on one another / until everything was implicated like wool spooled / from my yawning hands as you wound the yarn into a ball.” (FA 493) The mutual exchanges of words, gestures and signs in general are envisioned here as a process of threading stories or weaving networks of meaning around each other. This activity is conducted in language, “behind the screen of reasons.” (FA 493) Love serves here not only as an incentive to getting to know each other, but also as a mysterious figure of desire which sets the whole dialectic process in movement. This desire is not oriented towards any particular, predefined higher aim (like some essential truth about the protagonists), but is a picture of life itself – pushing ceaselessly against the boundaries of knowledge, truth and affection that people construe. In this way, Carson achieves a very interesting goal. Namely, he stages for us some of the philosophic problems regarding the ways we perceive, construct meaning and enter into relationships with the world. Taking the raw polyphony of life as his point of departure, Carson shows how people come across the irreducible questions of philosophical nature:

1. Why do things happen the way they happen? Are encounters with strangers meaningful or purely coincidental? (the question of causality)

2. How does language prefigure, help and hinder our understanding? (the question of transparency of language and mimesis)

3. What are the grounds and possibilities for establishing and re-establishing our identities? Can we trust appearances?

Already at this point it is possible to suggest that it might be an internal dialogue, out of which arises subjectivity, as in the case of Hegel’s dialectic of Master and Servant.
4. How do things connect, what **bonds** do we form and how do they function? (the question of making connections – eventually the question of **knowledge**)

5. What are the possible alternative realities and could life look different, if had we done something else in the past? (the question of **irrevocability** and **choices**)

6. What is left of us? What kinds of **traces and signs** do we leave behind? What can we make of them and do they enable us to put forward any statements about the past? (the question of **interpretation**)

These questions do not receive a full answer, nor are we expected to find one. It is rather the path itself that is brought to the foreground. Its signposts, however, as it is observable in the above listing, are primarily of philosophical origin. Literature becomes the tool in which philosophical theorems can be set in motion and put to a test, or – in Carson’s words – a sphere where it is possible to “[i]mprove, wipe out, begin again, imagine, change.” (BC 175)

**Strangers, doppelgangers and identity**

Meeting strangers is a predominant theme in *For All We Know*. However, these strangers are almost on no occasion real strangers. The protagonists meet their doppelgangers; they encounter semi-real, spectral images of people or spy-novel-like mysteriously “meaningful” agents or double agents. In “Redoubt” Gabriel meets a stranger in a bar, who makes a telling slip by saying “I travel in fountain pens.” (FA 498) The poem leaves a lot of doubt as to whether the whole scene is really a meeting in a bar, or an imagined scenario seen in the eye of the mind after staring too hard in the “en suite mirror.” The mirror acts here as a central element in the construction of the scene. There is also a mirror behind the bar, making it possible to see oneself in conversation, thus multiplying the number of interlocutors or just redoubling the lone Gabriel who just as easily might have wandered off into some kind of an
internally narrated story inside himself, or telling it to his counterpart in the mirror. The mirror “Redoubt” poem in the Second Part further complicates the situation, as the two – Gabriel and his other – meet during breakfast in the same hotel. Carson uses here a strategy that is utilized throughout this book, i.e. he plays with shifters, mixing direct and free indirect speech in such a way as to construct impossible or illogical situations out of the linguistic mapping of very simple ones. Consider the following quotations: “You said you thought he looked at you twice but he said nothing. / But for the two of us the white dining room was empty,” “Yes, you said, and you sat staring at each other across / an empty table,” “Your eyes dropped. Still he said nothing. When I looked up, he’d gone,” “I looked at you. I wonder what became of him, you said, / looking into my eyes as you once might have done with him.” (FA 545-546, my emphasis – G.C.) One cannot resist the temptation as to see a triangle here. Whether it is a me-and-my-double situation or a real encounter with a stranger, both are haunted by the presence of a third entity. Moreover, the third party is moving discretely in and out of the foreground, troubling and mixing the whole situation. The conversation or meeting thus becomes a journey towards an exit in a labyrinth with moving walls, while constantly being surveyed and watched over by a third party – a spy, an “another,” or perhaps “the Other,” i.e. the structural window opening to language, i.e. symbolic register itself, or the field of language, to use Jacques Lacan’s term. Many poems in the book also feature instances of such overlooking, spying figures, for example the helicopter circling overhead, i.e. in the poem “Revolution.”

This step is aptly conveyed in the poem “On the Contrary” from the first part, where we read: “so we lost ourselves in the dark forest of language” and “so we became our own shadowy police watching us.” (FA 496) This would suggest that with the advent of language we not only install within ourselves a public, political panoptic entity, but that it is at the same

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2 Cf. Derrida’s commentary from Of Grammatology, p. 36: “The origin of the speculation becomes a difference. What can look at itself is not one; and the law of the addition of the origin to its representation, of the thing to its image, is that one plus one makes at least three.”
time an instance of our personal, unconscious superego watching over us, never quite leaving us alone to ourselves. In many poems we find instances of watching oneself as if from a third-person perspective, which destabilizes the usually assumed personal point of view. The subject is split in turn into a subject and object, an instance that is looking and a part that is being watched. Upon introspection, we are “redoubling” ourselves in our own eyes, making it impossible to pinpoint a stable sense of being “here and now.” In “To” we read:

[...] Your man my double

was like that. I watched him jiggle the key in the wrong lock

before he made his way to another and opened it.

(FA 571)

Such a dislocation of perception is epistemologically interesting, because it shows how often we actually look at something from a myriad of perspectives, erecting a spatial reality which is not ego-centric, but shifts its points of view. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty argues in his *Phenomenology of Perception*³, we look at things not only from the castle of the rational mind, but we assume multiple points of reference, positioning our gaze within our imaginary doubles, or stepping into someone else’s shoes, so as to “look over your shoulder to see what you are seeing.” (FA 573) “It’s because we were brought up to lead double lives,” says Carson in “On the contrary,” (FA 542) suggesting a certain split at the heart of our consciousness. We constantly oscillate between our bodily selves and the image of ourselves, thus displacing our cognitive position, which is not stable but becomes a dialogic, dialectic faculty, as in the poem “To”:

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I could see you when I shut my eyes, remembering you
As you were – this wordless annunciation of yourself
clothed momentarily in the body of another,
thinking in another language had you been spoken to –
as strange to me as when I first saw you in your own flesh,
as we go with each other as we have done, fro and to.
(FA 524)

Perception thus loses its fixed home and becomes a wandering affair. This would answer the important question asked by Carson: “What is it in us that makes us / See another in another?” (FA 523). Our gaze travels from one person to another, making us virtually a series of ourselves reflected in others, just as Paul Ricoeur envisioned it in *Oneself as Another.*

Otherwise, there would be no “us.” But what does “us” mean anyway?

In the poem “Treaty,” Carson plays with the concept of identity, showing that the tension between constructivism (that is freedom in becoming what one would like to) and essentialism (that is the necessity to accept some identity givens), is still an important theme, especially in the context of “locality.” He says that we may fantasize about the possibility of being whomever we want to, but eventually, “to bask in the equable sun / in happy ignorance of the language” means that “[t]here you are not.” Whereas in the context of a locality, “the insignia are all too familiar” and “roads are walked in circumspection to music / in order to encompass the other’s territory.” (FA 497) As the constructivists say, we do invent ourselves, but always with the mediation of the other; there is no escaping from the agency of language and, consequently – ideology and politics. The process of identity formation is a narrative one, making our subjectivity readable like a book. In this sense, as well, the material which is

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used to construct that story cannot be rendered entirely transparent. It shows through and there is no hiding of that fact. We find proof of this in the poem “Peace”:

   Everything was in the way you said a thing, your manner
       and your mannerisms, even the way you cocked your head

   spoke volumes.
   (FA 581)

On the other hand, we are irreducibly marked and cannot cleanse ourselves so as to achieve a higher, pure consciousness; there is no escaping from the chains of locality, although Carson displaces them into the realm of language, turning them into chains of meaning and signification, as it transpires from the poem “Birthright”:

   For all that you assumed a sevenfold identity
       the mark of your people’s people blazes on your forehead.
   (FA 518)

In its counterpart poem we read:

   Just look at you, you said, you’re talking through your hat. Look at
       what you’re wearing, that good Protestant Harris tweed jacket.
[...]
   The grandfather shirt no grandfather of yours ever wore.
   (FA 566)

The condition of humanity is a twofold dramatic process; we are “inventing / that which we might have been had we been born as another” but in the end “we tell them a name that
sounds like one of theirs.” (FA 497) The “treaty” from the title of the quoted poem is exactly that concession we make so as to become full subjects. We have to exile a part of ourselves so as to become socialized beings, just as Adorno and Horkheimer have pointed out in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. We have to forfeit the dream of being “another” and of an alternative reality, but we are guaranteed to be haunted by those spectres of possibility throughout our life. Moreover, this mediation allows us to obtain any subjectivity at all.

Becoming others is a figure in which Carson captures his notion of identity as internal dialectics. In “Collaboration” he sets up a very important relationship between knowing and being – i.e. he concludes that:

You **knew** by the cut of her clothes it was 1940.

**Before you knew it you** entered her clothes and **became her**.

(FA 567, my emphasis – G.C.)

Knowledge is mutually exclusive from being – we “know” only as “others,” while the seemingly “natural” knowledge of the world is dependent on a never-ending process of identification and identity-formation. The final unnerving question asked in “Second Time Round”: “If I’m you, who are you?” (FA 540) might thus be answered in a following way: we are each other as far as we communicate and hold ourselves to be other to each other. There is no identity without an identity dialectics, which is its fundamental mechanism. Difference precedes identity, as Derrida would put it. We have to extend beyond ourselves to become what we are. This puts the process of mediation at the heart of Ciaran Carson’s epistemological project.

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6 Cf. footnote 72 to Chapter I on Jacques Lacan’s account on this subject.
Linguistic mediation

The profound sense of expulsion from Eden and eating of the fruit of knowledge of good and evil is another predominant question which Carson obsessively returns to. His “Tree of Knowledge” is the threshold of experience and, curiously enough, also of language. In “Proposal,” we learn that after “the Tree of Knowledge” was “looming within reach” “all too soon you were plucking data from the air, […] putting your life in order.” (FA 507) The Apple opens up the possibility of an orderly knowledge, but at the same time cuts us off from the vital core of experience, as we no longer can react directly, but always and only through the agency of language – the Other. The Apple serendipitously “puts words into your mouth / to say what you wanted to say but could not until then.” (FA 507) In short, it puts us inside the infinitesimal abyss of meaning, opening up “Options” (allegorized menu popping up in the Apple computer operating system), but at the same time eliminating the core of every “Discovery” (type of an apple eaten in the sister poem, the core of which the couple throws away after tasting each other in the shared apple) and opening up questions “we’d never asked before.” (FA 554) The “Proposal” from the title was made – man and woman are introduced to their bodies which are gendered and infused with desire. This sets up a language mechanism that will now inescapably mediate all reality.

The mediation and third-party-agency are highly emphasized throughout the book. One particularly striking example is the poem “Pas de Deux” in which the love affair is retold from the perspective of the clothes which Gabriel and Nina are buying and which, through their appearances, mediate their affair. Appearances acquire special meaning in the context, as they become equally important in the system of symbolic exchange on the plane of language. This is summed up at the end of the poem, where the couple goes to bed and the poem closes off not with a blissful unity of the lovers, but with an altogether different image:
the second-hand pencil skirt on your side of the wardrobe,
the second-hand tweed jacket brushing against it on mine.

(FA 504)

Generally speaking, Carson seems not to believe in any direct communication. If not clothes, some other language can serve that function, for example smoke: “as with the glow of our cigarettes we’d scrawl neon signs / to each other on the dark, the words fading instantly.” (FA 503) Nevertheless, we are in a situation where all possible exchanges are governed by signs which spread communication on an infinitely expanding plane, “one side revolving the other’s words for other meanings.” (FA 503) Especially important for Gabriel are the brand names and names of shops, which abound in the Second Part version of “Pas de Deux.” There, memory of Nina is spun around the various names of places, where she was buying things – things that eventually seem to make up what she is (or was), or at least are the only possible gateways through which memory can recover an image of her:

The boxes of hats from Déjà vu and Pandora’s Chest.
The boxes of gloves from La Belle Epoque and New to You.

(FA 551)

The list goes on, until Gabriel’s reminiscing reaches back and uncovers a fleeting moment of transcendence, where his other is looking him in the eye, but still, with the mediation of the mirror: “my standing at the pier mirror looking at you askance, / as you watched me” (FA 551). Here, Gabriel leaves himself for a moment and finally sees himself looking both ways – at his lover and at himself, proliferating the number of returned glances. The overall effect is that of being enclosed in a system of mediating exchanges that upholds all meaning. This network, the symbolic order, is the indispensable background for all possible signification to
be valid and legible. It is the unthought ground of thought, as Richard Boothby terms it, the “dispositional field” on which objects can become discernible, but which itself invariably recedes into the background whenever a figure needs to emerge, thus becoming locked in a dialectical relation with it. This field is precisely the field of the Other, i.e. language itself, a matrix of coordinates which has no positive values and has to remain unconscious. This dialectic can be reformulated in the terms of text (the background) and the voice (the figure).

**Time**

The process of measuring ourselves against things reaches its metaphorical height in the images of clocks, which haunt Gabriel. The detailed descriptions of their construction and design lead straight in the direction of considerations of time, especially its inevitable flow and irreversible nature. Watches are in this context especially endowed with meaning, as they measure out the time which is simultaneously objective and personal, “two-faced,” as is suggested in the poems “Revolution” and “The Present”:

> The untrustworthy public clocks, stopped at various times.
> The hands sometimes missing or the face pockmarked by shrapnel.

(FA 549)

> I think men and women run to different times, you’d say.

(FA 577)

Time and clocks are objective in the sense that they are “registering elapsed time with a dispassionate tick,” (FA 505) but on the other hand they remind of the time that is left, or the fact that time leads to death that is always a personal one. This is a strongly Heideggerian,

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existential motif of life leading to an individual death, whose meaning lies in the fact that
shaping our life is eventually the preparation for it. The road to death is inevitable, but
everyone wants to make it his or her own story. All life seeks its end, but always an
individuated one, says Freud, while Carson concludes:

Your death stands always in the background, but don’t be afraid.
For he will only come to fetch you when your time has come.

(FA 510)

The watch on Nina’s hand is exactly that kind of a vehicle of death, as we learn in the second
poem of the pair called “Second Hand.” The watch, tied irremediably to the hand of its bearer
is a reminder of the fragility of being and its eventual dependence on time. Even when
removed, “your wrist bears the ghost of a strap when you take it off.” (FA 552) “You drove
too fast,” says Gabriel, wondering “how long it would be before they’d pull you from the
wreck […] and know […] that your watch was still working.” (FA 552) In “Present,” watches
are imbued with stories, life-stories: “If watches could speak, […] what tales could they not
tell?” (FA 529-530) In “Anniversary,” the brand name “Omega” is endowed with a very
special meaning, i.e. that of an “end”: “It’s the last word in watches,” it’s a “gift of a
lifetime.” (FA 531) This particular metaphor resonates with a sense that time is the ultimate
alpha and omega – the beginning and end, the only stable thing in the world, the only element
that allows human life to be what it is. In this sense, watches come to mean life in its aspect of
finality, its end which is at the same time the cause of its meaning. Paradoxically, it is the
eternal flow of time that secures the possibility of life. Time pushes us ever closer to death,
but it is our task to translate this time into a narrative which, although provisional, remains
our story and our shelter, as in the poem “Peace”:
Everything was, as it were, provisional,

slipping from the unforseeable into tomorrow
even as the jittery present became history.

(FA 533)

For time to have meaning, we have to domesticate it, individualize it – in short, make a story out of it. In this sense, being towards death, to use Heidegger’s idiom, is ultimately being in a time that is inscribed in experienced, a time which is being written out. We make our home in time by way of narrativizing it, attaching meaning to this otherwise absurd, inhuman category. In the end it is language that helps us tame time and translate it into life, but it would not be possible without death, which marks the end of that “interminable wrestle.”

**The Art of Fugue**

“Still the interminable wrestle with words and meanings?” asks Carson. “Rather than answer, I put my pen aside / and poured the miniature jug of milk into my coffee. / You watched over it quizzically as it became *au lait*. (FA 506) It is possible to shed some light on the metaphorical answer from the poem “Le Mot Juste” by taking a closer look at a passage from Glenn Gould’s *So you want to write a fugue*, which is quoted as the second epigraph to the book:

> Fugue must perform its frequently stealthy work with continuously shifting melodic fragments that remain, in the “tune” sense, perpetually unfinished.

(FA 491)

The basic tenet of fugue, in Gould’s interpretation, is the interplay between time and strictly controlled variation. The mechanical operations on the tune, which is never fully realized, are
a means of creating an original content that moves in time. In this sense, Gould’s notion of fugue is not far from what Carson would call the “interminable wrestle.” In the poem “Prelude and Fugue” he also employs an optical metaphor to explain this kind of a structure: “The fugue that follows has some interesting dissonances. / I found myself gazing at the optics in the mirror.” (FA 521) The perpetual motion across a plane of dissonances is similar to the losing of oneself within a network of optical effects and also resembles the way we try to make our way through the moving labyrinth of speech, wrestling with words. Endless possibilities of variations lurk and emerge from every corner, leading sometimes to unexpected resolutions, such as the surreal ending that poem:

and so to the zoo where a keeper was running amok
among the burning monkeys and the teetering giraffes.

(FA 521)

Fugue thus becomes a structural metaphor for both our linguistic endeavours, because of the aspect of variation and constant traversing of meaning boundaries, and our lives, because of the strictly controlled time aspect which, as we have seen, is in Carson’s work deeply interwoven with the themes of death, inevitability and the struggle for individuation. More generally speaking, fugue is also an epistemological model in which the data “plucked” from reality undergo endless variations and are constantly reassessed and reinterpreted, “retold” in various discourses, be they public or private. As we read in the poem “The Shadow,” “when they tell the truth it’s never the same twice.” (FA 508) The fusion of the time aspect and the formal mechanics of perception and cognition seems to underlie the world-view erected by Carson in *For All We Know*.

The above process is also reflected in the composition of the book. The regularity and fixed frame of the whole story presupposed some kind of an order, but it turns out that it is
just a formal framework within which a certain set of variations can be performed. The tension between the formal aspect of writing and the freedom within it comes here to the foreground, exemplifying the notion that we are only free within certain boundaries. Human life and human cognition do not rely on absolute values, but on that which is contingent and provisional. In order to become human we need to restrain ourselves, we need the overhanging helicopter which endows us with a sense of moral duty and an *ethos*. Repression gives rise to a subjectivity which otherwise would never have come to be. The story of a manikin who becomes a man, told in the poem “Never Never” is emblematic in this respect.

The manikin, who lived deep in the Forest of Language, fed and stabled a mare who later turned out to be “the King’s daughter bewitched.” (FA 516) She offered him three wishes, but manikin wanted just one – that he could become a man. He then ventured to the city and became a joiner, “skilled at his trade,” whose “heart was in all he made.” His last wish was “to be buried in the Forest of Language, / his body to be laid in a box of his own device.” (FA 516) This story shows that the only dream of or in language is to become real – a true human subject. However, after one becomes a “joiner” of words and acquires subjectivity, an insatiable desire sets in, which was previously unknown to the manikin. After the transformation, the former manikin “never looked at a woman until the day he died” but is forever bound with his princess in a ghostly eternal dialogue, for “[t]o this day if you happen to pass that shadowy glade / you may see a ghostly rider riding a ghostly mare.” We find an interesting comment on that in the poem “In the Dark,” where disappearance and return are theorized as a trance in which we are redoubled. It is a game of finding and losing (Freudian fort-da), which can be viewed from a psychoanalytic perspective as a commentary on the introduction of desire – not instinct or a purely “sexual” libido. The recognition of that desire is also the birth of consciousness, to what every human being is called. In that poem we read:
[...] Fugue, my professor said, is a kind of trance

in which the victim disappears for years on end, until
he comes to himself in a strange town and quits the double

life he led unbeknownst to himself.

(FA 583)

Life proceeds like a fugue. However, just as Gould once remarked, it is very difficult to end a fugue and the “double life” we lead ends and finds its thematic resolution in death, “in the dark” as the title of the poem suggests. In the poem “From Your Notebook” Carson comments that we may try to follow “the curve of one of its recurrent figures / trying to figure out the resolution that is never // there in any proper fugue of Bach’s.” However, it is impossible to deduce any final meaning apart and all that we are left with are “[m]elodic fragments, perpetually unfinished.” (FA 568) It is from them that we piece together a story which is life. This is also why Carson would usually begin with details and seemingly disposable elements. They are testimony to an impossible resolution – death which we will not experience ourselves for there will not be any experiencing subject at all.

**Signs and the limits of language**

The epistemological condition of humankind is reliant on the mechanics of signs, which is likened in the poem “The Assignation” to the “malfunctioning violet neon pharmacy sign” that is “jittering away all night through the dimity courtains.” (FA 500) The incessant, pervasive nature of signs is brought to life in many poems in *For All We Know*. However, although they form an image of life, its “picture would break up into unreadable pixels” (FA 501) on closer inspection. “Noise is what surrounds us,” says Carson, pointing to “the wider world of disinformation.” (FA 502) Making sense is like trying to “separate the grain from
the chaff of / helicopter noise” (FA 501) – a task both arduous and impossible, yet one that everyone has to undertake. Language always branches off in many directions, opening up possibilities of meaning, but at the same time hindering the emergence of a full subjectivity, as in an excerpt from the poem “Je Reviens”:

The overall effect is difficult
to describe, since it seems to develop separately

but simultaneously on two distinct levels, wavelengths
of suggestion and risk as well as definite statement.

(FA 535)

All communication is risky, as it gives rise to unpredictable and unreliable channels of meaning, but this condition is essentially human and should be recognized as such. We are surrounded with all kinds of signs and we constantly leave traces behind us. This palimpsest-like nature of that pan--semiotic processes is haunting Carson, who is keen to track all foot marks, but nevertheless gives up any hope of organizing them into a causally coherent narrative. Take as an example passages from the poems “Redoubt” and “In the Dark”:

I imagined snow
Outside, the footsteps that brought you there already erased

(FA 499)

Just before I reached the hotel I looked back, and I swear
there were footprints in the snow that had not been there before.

(FA 534)
From these signs we build stories that in turn uphold our identity. This is clearly accentuated in the poem “Zugzwang,” where “the choreographer charts out moves on a dance floor / like the chalk marks on a snooker table, play having ceased.” (FA 537) The possibility of making mistakes in this context is a part of the whole process. In fact, there is no chance of establishing one finite story from such provisional traces. The misidentifications and misconceptions follow our endeavours just like some invisible doppelganger, who follows us in our steps. What is found can be momentarily lost, like apparitions haunting old photographs from the poem “Rue Daguerre”: “The dream I’d found you in faded like breath from a mirror.” (FA 525) What is lost, in turn, never ceases to work from an unconscious level, dissatisfying our desire to reach any definite knowledge. This “disease” is, as Carson puts it in “Second Take,” a “cancer of the inner ear, / A steady creep of secrets invading the labyrinth.” (FA 511) The forgetfulness and transience of all signification processes is the epistemological condition of all inquiry that takes language as its basis and starting point, so we are always making ourselves anew and constantly revising our knowledge, trying desperately to find the right words, as in the poem “Le Mot Juste”:

Still the interminable wrestle with words and meanings.
These words foundering for now over a single sentence.

(FA 553)

**Love**

How can love be positioned within such a paradigm? Love, as has been observed earlier on, is in *For All We Know* not only a topical matter, but more primarily the first cause of both reminiscing and writing, i.e. the work of memory and a struggle with language, respectively. Therefore, it can be understood as something primordial, as Carson himself suggests in
“Treaty” by saying that love, or perhaps the drive for love, comes before the splitting of languages:

Whether I spoke to you in my first language when I said I loved you, I don’t know, but I do know the words were true.

(FA 544)

Thus, love is at some deeper level platonically associated with truth. However, since truth as an absolute, fulfilling sense evades being pinned down, so does love which, in Carson’s work, never seems to find its place. Curiously enough, it may be that it does have the kind of spatial nature which would endow it with a possibility of inhabiting a particular subject. Or, as Carson suggests, it rather moves through people, crossing easily those borders that people may have carefully devised in order to uphold their identities. It is a reverse of what we may think stands before us. Love, if it is to be taken seriously, should be considered on a larger scale – as something that is supra-human and only sometimes surfaces in a form that is graspable for two people. In “Hotel del Mar” Carson invokes a following image:

we two seas foundering into one another over the neck of a peninsula, making it an island.

(FA 495)

Love is an island which we shut off from the rest of the world. It is a sanctuary in which bonds are celebrated. However, every time love is invoked, a sense of transience is evoked as well. This is because Carson heavily bases on metaphors of waves, as in the poem “L’Air du Temps,” where the middle part of the poem – its exposition – is devoted to a meticulous description of the sea. It serves as an image of suddenness and unpredictability, against which
are set the feeble human efforts of trying to “comb” that mass of water whose “laps […] doubled / on themselves, plied and purled in their folded crash and back-swash.” (FA 562)

The only way to experience love is to let oneself get “soaked with spindrift and spray,” (FA 562) immerse in an experience which, just like death, demands the impossible – an obliteration of subjectivity. Love is an erasing force, one that destroys consciousness, obliterating memory in an ecstasy of forgetting. Thus, it becomes logical why memory does not help love. The Penelope work of recollection, as signalled in the poem “The Story of Madame Chevalier,” is a way of dealing with it, but the result is just a pattern, a version of it:

I tore up your old shirts the day you enlisted, I said,  
and sewed the scraps back together in this crazy pattern.  

(FA 526)

Love defies patterns and rather demands blood. In this way, it is both saving and destructive. This is astutely put in the poem “Anniversary,” where the actual celebration takes place outside the symbolic realm, in a silent attempt to unite that which cannot be united – to close the wound of desire that cannot be silenced in any other way than, paradoxically, by the ultimate “blood” sacrifice, i.e. “death”:

Before I could protest you put your mouth to the deep cut.  
When you raised your head I kissed my blood on your open lips.  

(FA 579)
Causality

Another topic central to Carson’s epistemological project in *For All We Know* is causality. Traditionally, philosophy oscillates here between questions of will and determinacy. Carson seems deeply disturbed by the fact that the branching off of possible actions and words is always taking place at some level which is imperceptible to the consciousness in question, as the poem “To” illustrates:

 [...] the flowered bedroom wall-paper
 I remember studying before I could speak, seeing

 in its arboured trellises a route to the other world
 where things that bore no name looked at each other, as they would,

 for any hint of a family resemblance, reaching out
 to touch each other in lieu of words.
 (FA 571)

Carson notes in “Through” that all of us are “blind to what would become of what we had been. / What turn did I take that led me to meet you when I did?” (FA 550) We are lost in the labyrinth of reasons in the same way that we lose track of foot marks in the snow, which leads the poet to the conclusion that chains of events might be initiated much deeper than our logical cognition can reach back, so that our life was perhaps “determined in some other waking life.” (FA 547)

This gives rise to an urge so as to go back to where it all began, or at least imagine the possibility of a world where the paths of life are re-traceable. “I must go back to where it all began,” Carson writes. However, in “The Fetch” he notes that this is an impossible task, one that drowns us in the past: “[y]ou waded in / thigh-deep, waist-deep, breast-deep, head-deep,
until you disappeared.” (FA 558) The restatement of the causal chains leads back into emptiness, into a void where we dissolve in the primal, oceanic feeling of womb (just like Freud saw it), as the above quote seems to say. Otherwise we are left to the devices of our imagination only, where in dreams, as Carson claims he can in “To”: “I’d go back / to see my parents before they had contemplated me.” (FA 571)

The maze of determinacy is thus either a dark, impenetrable forest or an artificial mosaic, laboriously reassembled from the shattered pieces of memory, the faded light of experience whose roots disappear deep beneath the mind of reason. Such narratives spun from memory are, just like the book For All We Know itself, careful assemblages of stories and broken pixels of life. It is the form that holds them together. Narratives need an arbitrary framing, since otherwise they would dissolve back into the indecipherable babble of life. Like the aunts, who were “made widows by the War,” Carson assembles a mosaic of stories and memories which can be cut, extended or restated, but the final effect will always bear the mark of a fracture. The above-mentioned aunts from the poem “The Story of the Chevailer” “pieced back together the light of the shattered windows,” (FA 570) but the mended glass will never let the kind of light it used to. Memory sets the broken chains of reasons back so that they may fit:

The work is done from memory.

(FA 585)

The memory referred to here is manifold, for it can refer to the unconscious memory of that which it was impossible to remember (like love), repressed traumas (of choices that could have been made better), consciousness of death, shared memories that help us form images of people and ourselves, as well as the uncontrolled memories which swim up from the ocean of the unconscious, providing insight into the workings of the mind and desire.
However, the work of memory is always delayed. It comes too late and the meaning worked out by this spinning does not reach back to the core of the reality, nor does it really have to. The final questions are always already lost in the darkest recesses of mind. Thus, Carson concludes, confirming Wittgenstein’s assumption that the boundaries of our experience are laid down in the form of the language that we are using:

Nothing I could have done would have been any different,
for deeds are irrevocable, if not words.

(FA 583)

What is crucial here is that Carson achieves one particular goal – he reintroduces the traditional questions of epistemology and does not shy away from answering them in his own words, relying both on the typically poetic measures as well as some techniques borrowed from the discourse of philosophy, blending them together and exposing both the literary nature of philosophy and the philosophical aspirations of poetry. He revitalises the Socratic tradition of asking questions and makes his poems imaginative and intellectual, alluring and thought-provoking, thus achieving one of the tasks of philosophy, namely the stirring of the eternal fire of the mind, keeping thought alive and flexible. In this way, he lives up to his own words from the poem “The Shadow”:

With a luminous gold stylus he writes a hieroglyph
on the dark, and so initiates a constellation

from which blossom countless others.

(FA 555)
II Approaching the subject of death in *On The Night Watch* and *Until Before After*

*Awareness is the natural prayer of the soul.*

Malebranche

*Enlarge art? No. On the contrary,*

*take art with you into your innermost narrowness.*

*And set yourself free.*

Paul Celan

The great shortening of the line

After the 2008 poetry book *For All We Know*, Ciaran Carson’s poetry has taken yet another turn. Although it has been already anticipated both formally and content-wise in previous collections, it is an original step further along an experimental and adventurous line. In terms of form, Carson revisits William Carlos Williams’s short, condensed line which he employed in large portions of *Breaking News*. However, he perfected its usage, making it a suitable vehicle for some of the most serious topics to be tackled in his whole body of work. Among them are some motifs predominant in *For All We Know*: epistemological issues and questions of love or knowledge. However, they are approached from yet another perspective, which I would say is more fundamental and runs even deeper into the philosophical debates of the twentieth century. Carson seems to operate on a very low, existential level and examines issues of ontological and existential sort. In *On The Night Watch* (2009) and *Until Before After* (2010) it is primarily time, being, death and their relationship to language that seem to stay in the very centre of Caron’s focus. As is the case with refined poets, these two collections invite a self-referential reading that would constitute a sort of poetics or, to put it
in less systematic terms, a kind of a commentary on the usage of language, especially poetic one. As I will try to prove, such deliberations are in the end inseparable from Carson’s core outlook on the questions of being and death, linking them and consolidating his philosophical poetic project.

Such an intellectual venture is of course heavily indebted to some of the most heated debates and controversial discussions in the history of twentieth-century philosophy. The question of death, being and time was re-thought and opened anew primarily by Martin Heidegger in *Sein und Zeit*. He took a special interest in literature after the Second World War, which resulted in a difficult and challenging body of work about the relationship between being and poetry. The influence of his ideas was far-reaching. Heidegger initiated a large number of polemics and was carefully read by both poets, among them Paul Celan, as well as other philosophers and critics, i.e. Maurice Blanchot, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, Hans Georg-Gadamer and Jacques Derrida, all of whom I would like to posit as points of reference in the discussion of the slimmest, but perhaps most intense poems published by Ciaran Carson in the two aforementioned collections.

Both books utilize the same format: scarce, condensed and stripped poems are composed of couplets and display an unusually short number of words per line: usually no more than three or four. Both books rely on a tripartite division and retain a sonata-like movement, with the first part setting the tone and the themes, the second developing into a slower, more sombre section, while the third recapitulates the motifs and joins them in a rather low-key counterpoint. The classical structure of both collections performs the role of a functional background, since poetic tension and formal equilibristic is reserved for the micro-movements within the poems themselves. However, since the formal aspect of the poems is inseparable from their contents, their separate discussion would be a rather tiresome and worthless venture. Such an approach would also go against some of the major claims that are
put forward both by Heidegger and Carson, namely that some such divisions, grounded and formulated in an outdated and confusing language of traditional metaphysics, are misleading and should be scrupulously examined. The distinction between form and content would be precisely one of such dichotomies that demand a rigorous revision.

What draws immediate attention upon first contact with the book On The Night Watch is the deceptive simplicity of its language. The poems, usually conjured out of thirty or forty words, do not go far as to the choice of their vocabulary, relying primarily on the basic verbs and nouns, giving at the same time a good amount of space for prepositions and articles. The smallest particles are in this way elevated to the level of poetic devices, as Carson plays with their positioning, exploiting their often ambiguous semantic character. Having previously played with a wide range of unusual and etymologically complicated vocabulary (as in “Second Language” for example), he now seems to explore the innermost, “Celtic”-like basic units or building blocks of language. This intuition remains in accord with the general idea of the book, since it is a kind of an egological contraction or a purification of the self. One could risk a claim that it is a kind of a linguistic *epoche* – a phenomenological reduction of all contextual matters, so as to grant access to the workings of the pure transcendental ego. Whether there is something there to be found remains an open question which is being asked throughout the two collections.

Carson begins his new poetic venture from a zero-degree level. It might seem that adding simple words to each other, like adding the basic natural numbers, cannot lead to a serious aesthetic deliberation and should eventually lack any evocative power. However, Carson picks up the little pieces and tries to examine how they fit with other linguistic shreds, which is reminiscent of a larger puzzle, or a stained glass broken into a myriad of fragments. In the speech, delivered upon receiving the Georg Buchner Prize, Paul Celan alluded to an “absolute poem” which certainly cannot exist. However, he claims that “in every real poem
There is this ineluctable question, this exorbitant claim.”

Carson’s shattered, fragmented poems can be regarded as pieces of that impossible great work – fragments that are arranged in a cubist manner, an idea reinforced by the Georges Braque painting featured on the cover of On The Night Watch. Its title – Woman Reading – can be thus read as a suggestion that it is not only the poetic work but also the interpretative act that is in pieces and represents a discursive totality that is impossible within the realm of being. Timothy Clark argues in his book on Heidegger that such a poetic dispersion is a way “to bring the power of language itself to word,” which should not be perceived in purely nihilistic terms as “an infinite regress but something as elusive and yet fundamental as trying to see, not any thing, but sight itself.”

Heidegger himself defends in the “Letter on Humanism” such procedures as phenomenologically valid, because a poetics that enacts an epistemological reduction of the kind that we encounter in Carson achieves the task of a “liberation of language from grammar into a more original essential framework” which is traditionally “reserved for thought and poetic creation.”

The dregs and leftovers Carson uses seem to be remains of a lost civilization, or archaeological excavations from a different era. Such an approach might also be a symptom of a serious traumatic experience, a premonition of which can be found in the work of such poets as Paul Celan or Tadeusz Różewicz, both of whom seem to loom somewhere behind those poems. There is a sense of discontinuation, a certain distrust of the encountered status of language – we find it in pieces, deconstructed. Carson enters here the position of a careful and patient philosopher, who sifts the plethora of dictionaries to find that which will suffice. In Heidegger’s terms, this undertaking is an attempt at rethinking Being itself – not the being of particular things but the being of being itself – something that tends to be overlooked and

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forgotten by modern ontology. “As the destiny that sends truth,” he writes, “Being remains concealed. But the world’s destiny is heralded in poetry, without yet becoming manifest as the history of Being.”\textsuperscript{11} In this sense, poetry is an original way of rethinking Being.

What is found as a result of this cautious operation is arranged into sonnet-like piles of words. Kabbalah, the Jewish Gnostic-infused mysticism, provides us with an interesting metaphor for such work. According to its teaching, the task of the Kabbalist is to gather the broken vessels – \textit{kelippot} – and put them carefully back together, so as to restore God’s grandeur in the deepest recesses of the material world, where the light of the divine being almost does not reach and even if it does, it is stuck inside the stubborn matter. In this light, the slim, but still 14-line-long poems, resemble Jacob’s ladders, propped up against the blank of the page, which might symbolize the open but also frighteningly unguided ocean of possibilities that is human life. Of course, a strictly religious interpretation would only be a means of guiding ourselves towards a metaphysical reading of the collection, a reading that would go far into the basic tenets of human existence, probing the relationship between – on the one hand – writing and language, but on the other – Being and death. The eternal task of poetry (and all serious thinking for that matter), is to return to this relationship and make some sense of it from our limited, historical perspective. “To bring to language ever and again this advent of Being which remains, and in its remaining waits for man,” claims Heidegger, “is the sole matter of thinking.”\textsuperscript{12} This has to be an arduous and humble task. Terry Eagleton remarks in a review that “Beckett’s works take a few sparse elements and permutate them with Irish-scholastic ingenuity into slightly altered patterns.” In this way, “[c]omplete dramas are conjured out of reshuffled arrangements of the same few scraps and leavings.”\textsuperscript{13} Carson seems to follow suit and definitely fits that description. He too has learned the lesson of

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Ibid., p. 219.
\item Ibid., p. 241.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
“scrupulous meanness” and probably has achieved the “secret compact with failure.” Entering them, as each shelters a shard of being and truth, is a necessary step in understanding the poetic and philosophical implications of *On The Night Watch*.

**From in Behind**

*On The Night Watch* opens with the poem “From in Behind”:

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the wall
hangings

watched
through slits

is what
is innermost

a voice box
wire grille

crackling on
the darkness

harrowed by
dragon’s teeth

a minefield
salted with eyebright
(ONW 14)\(^{14}\)
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This poem sets the tone of the collection and brings us right in the middle of all questions. The title, as in most instances in this book, is already a part of the poem, the first line picking up the thread and winding its way down among the ambiguous enjambments which constantly force the reader to look both upwards and downwards, as if luring the attention to remain concentrated – not to keep reading but to halt and meditate. The twin verbs “is” in the fourth stanza bring the poem into focus and lend credence to the first two stanzas. The title itself is composed only out of prepositions which suggest a kind of paradigmatic, empty *atopon* – an aporetic space where the work of interpretation and understanding begins. Thus, already the title positions the reader in the midst of a space that demands an expenditure of interpretative energy, a space that requires our awareness, keeps us on guard.

The note of anxiety is further developed as we read on and try to position ourselves and our gaze somewhere within the poem. Where is the lyrical “I” speaking from? From in behind? Behind the array of words, behind the blank page, behind the words? The first line reads “the wall,” so there has to be some kind of an obstacle, perhaps even one that cannot be easily crossed, one that we perhaps would like to get past, but are somehow unable. The process of building meaning is further complicated by the use of enjambments. One cannot be sure whether “watched” refers to “wall” and “hangings,” or maybe “wall / hangings.” Such deliberations are of course matters of minute details, but the cognitive process of arranging meaning and attaching a semantic frame to the poem is thus never finished, it stops short of a finite solution almost at the point of every line. Such an effect could not have been reached only by placing line breaks every two or three words. It is a result of a careful structuring, one that is characterised by a certain “trembling,” if not of the voice, then of the general structure. This movement of concealing and uncovering is a theme that will run throughout the book. The resulting poem is clearly a work of art, but one that exposes its own fragility. It can collapse if we attach too much meaning here and too little there.
We are thus looking “through slits,” though curiously enough from behind a curtain or a tapestry of sorts. We are looking at “what is innermost,” though it requires us to position ourselves “from in behind.” If we are to read the poem in the light of Heidegger’s poetics, which also extends far beyond literary scholarship, the “innermost” characteristic of life is Being. As Heidegger has it, it is revealing itself only insofar as it is hiding from our eyes. It “flits” like a ray of light, dancing on the curtains. If we take into account another claim made by Heidegger – namely that it is language where ultimately Being resides since “language is the highest and everywhere the first” and it “beckons us, at first and then again at the end” – we have to position ourselves somehow “in behind” language. Where would that be? It seems that poetry is the locus which offers us this curious, twofold perspective. In poetry we can both stay in language, the primordial home of Being, and at the same time achieve a “defamiliarized” point of view that is necessary to bring it to the foreground and thematize it properly. As Timothy Clark put it, it is only poetry that is “engaged explicitly with the very kind of disclosive power […] of revealing deep history, those most basic and unthought modes of being which are normally too close, or too obvious, for us to see.”

In light of this interpretation, it is possible to grant a special meaning to the “voice box” which is strangely coupled in the same stanza with another image – that of a “wire grille.” If we are to follow Heidegger’s interpretation of a cleavage between the ontological and the ontic, i.e. the realm of Being and the realm of its actual, particular realizations, i.e. beings – this middle stanza is an expression of that particular shift of focus. In this revolving centre of the poem we are right in the middle, midway between the “innermost” of Being which expresses itself through language, and the “wire grille” – a down to earth image which is a mere “articulation” of Being, stuck in the midst of everyday life and material world. The transitional point is “voice box” – a part of human body through which we articulate our

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16 Timothy Clark, Martin Heidegger, p. 105.
position and a “slit” through which our subjectivity positions itself through language in relation to Being itself. Without this special relationship to Being, which we can attain through poetry, the speaking subject, the Dasein, would only resemble a wire grille “crackling on / the darkness.” However, this special relationship to Being is possible within the paradigm of human meanings only because of our relationship to death. The finitude of human existence is like a shadow looming over our condition. Paradoxically, our subjectivity can thus be meaningful only when we are “harrowed by / dragon’s teeth.”

From this perspective, it is possible to witness the intimate relation between language and death. They all converge in the space of the poem, opening us towards Beings and at the same time putting the “impossible” threshold of death at the very end of our lives. Death is what is most certain and at the same time quite unimaginable. We are all bound to die, yet death is what we least expect – it always comes unexpected, is an un-timely in-experience, as we never know its time and will certainly not be able to live through it to the very end so as to include it among our life experiences. The unexpectedness of death is very aptly formulated in the very last stanza of the poem in the image of a “minefield.” Life is a way, if we are to follow Heidegger’s metaphors of being-in-the-world, a way which is winding its way in a myriad of directions, as we follow our paths towards death, making “our way,” living the life towards the final goal. Such a zigzag type of a movement, which recurs as an image in Carson’s poetry, is exactly the kind of a trajectory that we might expect from someone making his or her way across a minefield – an affair which is invariably linked to the inevitable nature of death. A similar figure is also made by the poem itself. Stanzas wind their way down the page in *versus*, finally finding its end in the blankness of the white space, the silence of the poem’s ending. In this way, poetry offers a certain insight or intimate knowledge: “a «poetic» knowing that brings nearer but by allowing distance, joins together by
acknowledging separateness and «understands» in yet holding a reserve of the non-intelligible.”17

Thus, we constantly “tra-verse” ourselves in our reaching “beyond,” both as humans, who locate their aims in the future and orient themselves always by what is in view, and as readers, who are looking over to the next line to find the meaning of the previous. Notably, this effect, which we might try to read in light of Husserl’s analysis of the structure of time18, is underlined and strengthened by the way Carson structures his poems. The enjambments in the poem require a meticulous analysis of both the coming lines and the preceding lines, locking the reader in a time-strained stasis capsule, playing with the way we form expectations of meaning and construct our understanding of the poem on the basis of what we have already read in the previous lines. This syntactic labyrinth, elegantly phrased in the dynamic form of a sonnet (a rather Shakespearian one for that matter) produces a meaning effect that both exposes the finitude (death aspect) of poetry and life, and puts to work the transitoriness (time aspect) of the poetic line and our winding passage through the world we have found ourselves in. This, I would argue, is the meaning of being “on the nightwatch.”

Coming back to the last stanza of the poem “From in Behind,” we learn that the “minefield” is “salted with eyebright.” How does it fit in with the above reading? Eyebright is a plant that can be found on many meadows. Its primary characteristic trait is that it has a good effect on the eyes and aids memory. Thus, we can infer that the last couplet is indeed a confirmation of the two intertwined themes that are developed in the previous six stanzas. If the mortal aspect of life is captured in the image of a minefield, then the above-mentioned possibility that the finitude of existence opens before us is retained by the flowery “dots”

17 Ibid., p. 106.  
18 Husserl’s analysis distinguishes retention – the immediate past – and protention – the expectance of what immediately follows the ever receding point of “now.” His definition of consciousness moving through time like a comet, its tail equalling retention, is a metaphor that informs much of later phenomenological attempts in twentieth century philosophy. The effects of retention and protention, also described by Husserl with the help of the model of melody, in which we both retain past tones and expect their follow-up, perfectly fits Carson’s poems of this type, in which we constantly have to re-adjust our position and are reminded of the structures of temporality itself.
flickering on this deathly meadow. The dark way to death has its own number of little clearings – places where Being shines through, as if through curtains. These are places or moments revelation, when the interplay of revealing and covering allows Being to show through. These are moments when we can see more clearly and are reminded of our deep, though sometimes forgotten, intimate relationship with Being. It is only through death that we learn the full sense of being-in-the-world. Such memory aids are painful, which is conveyed by means of the verb “salted.” It evokes both a sense of ache or discomfort (e.g. like in the saying “salt tears”) and a deep sense of belonging and adequacy (e.g. like in the phrase “salt of this earth”). When Heidegger comments on Georg Trakl’s poetry in the essay “Language,” he underlines the importance of the close relation between pain and threshold (“Pain has turned the threshold to stone”) – a place where pure light explodes and we are reminded of what and how we are:

What is pain? Pain rends. It is the rift. But it does not tear apart into dispersive fragments. Pain indeed tears asunder, it separates, yet so that at the same time it draws everything to itself, gathers it to itself. Its rending, as a separating that gathers, is at the same time that drawing which, like the pen-drawing of a plan or sketch, draws and joins together what is held apart in separation. Pain is the joining agent in the rending that divides and gathers. Pain is the joining of the rift. The joining is the threshold. It settles the between, the middle of the two that are separates in it. Pain joins the rift of the difference.19

The motif of a threshold, or aperture, runs throughout the collection. In “Between,” this theme returns as “an aperture / of silence” (ONW 16), in “Were I to Add” as the “steps between / the cracks” (ONW 18) and in “Beware” as “the slip // betwixt this / split chink // & the next.”

(ONW 19) All of these examples suggest that being on the verge, on the threshold itself, is a painful experience that beckons us and seems to reveal something of great importance.

The poem “Come In” extends this subject, positioning the reader again in front of a door which reveals “from behind / a crack // of light in / the blackout” – there is “someone / gesturing beyond // the vestibule / a presence // offering a pact.” (ONW 36) The play of light and darkness, the beckoning of the unknown and the desire to look through the door return in “Still Trembling,” where “the slits / of each shutter” are “resounding with // divided darkness.” “I peep through to see the outside,” (ONW 55) the narrator of the poem says and these words conclude the poem, as if that secret “pact” or “compact” could be valid only if an oath of silence is preserved. Other poems also rely on the metaphor of dwelling on the threshold, such as “Mining,” where “the seam” is visualized as “a deep / vein reached // by shaft or adit,” where it is possible to encounter that “which bears what / you seek.” (ONW 128) The light flickering and guiding towards some kind of darkness, which has to be taken account of, finally returns in the poem “Bells Sound,” where “against the / blinding light // I look into / the absolute // darkness of / an open aperture.” (ONW 100) The oscillation between darkness and light is a fundamental metaphor for Heidegger, for whom Lichtung – clearing – is the elementary mode in which things come to be and are perceived. Every revelation, however, involves a process of covering up, concealing, so whenever we are on the brink of fully knowing what stands before us, it flickers away into the darkness which bred it. The task assigned to the one who is on a night watch rests in the probing of the nothingness and emptiness into which everything recedes. The disappearance of the subject back into the white page is a deathly condition of writing and knowledge. As much as the book On The Night Watch is about death, it is also about those revelations of Being, where language, especially poetic language, transports us deeper into the home of Being, a place we inhabit but are not always aware of it, as we are constantly reminded by the fact that the history of our Being is
at the same time the history of forgetfulness. Memory and loss are thus the coordinates of Carson’s “minefield” – the space of life and the space of the poem.

To sum it up, Carson formulates in this single, opening poem the whole spectrum of his interest contained in this poetry book. The setting of the collection, its mise-en-scene is laid down in the next poem “It Is,” where we learn that it is the “small hours” that especially inspire such recollections of Being and the fragility of the world. This part of the night is the period when hours “grow / into decades // measuring / eternity.” (ONW 15) Time stretches both ways – it almost comes to a standstill, but only to procure a void in which the whole past and future can be contained in a single stroke of thought. The process of waiting is a meditation oriented towards a certain aperture, a “chink” of light or the “chink / of the first bird.” The dialectical movement of time, similar to breathing or some grand cosmic movement – contraction and expansion – finally opens up a space where a ray of light may shine through, or a bird (traditionally associated with a muse-like quality) can accentuate its presence. Then, the poems enter into silence, a space of in-betweenness, where the wandering mind is haunted by an “afterthought” marked by the “blue / of night // becoming morning.” (ONW 16) It often gives the poems an anxious ending, evoking some kind of a primordial fear of nothingness, a dread of the terrible void that is heralded by sudden breaks with which many poems end: “beware,” “what now,” “on what,” “another &,” “trembling,” etc. (to quote only some examples from the First Movement). However, as Heidegger reminds us in “Language” when he discusses Trakl’s threshold, such a seeming destruction is an essential expansion of this aperture, as it allows the true light to shine through. This is a moment when things receive their full names and become harmonious, while the fugue of their final fitting-in is pain. As Paul Celan put it in “Meridian,” this “[p]ain, which is not exactly suffering, affects and touches man’s «heart»; it is what is most intimate in him; the extreme interior
where, in his almost absolute singularity, man – and not the subject – is pure waiting-for-another.”

This pain, however, demands a revision of our attitude towards language.

**The language of Being**

Carson codes those small hours in a language that could be called, to use his own expression from “Beware”: “Braille / or Morse” (ONW 19). Indeed, the short line and regularity of these poems evokes a sense of a coded cipher, the short words being the dots and long ones the dashes. These sonnets are thus silently “crackling on” in the darkness, their long and slender shapes reminding of “the ticker tape / punched out” on the white page. Obviously, there is no “secret,” hermetic message contained in those poems. On the contrary, their slow, stubborn movement is drawing our attention to the materiality of the poems. Words become ticks of the clock, or drops falling on the parapet, as “the rain beats / on the rain // noise beats on noise.” (ONW 51) Reading those poems is just like “listening to the drip / drip // measuring / the silence.” (ONW 23) This last phrase comes from a notable poem whose title is “Remembering Being.” Although its title is a run-on-line and is linked to the first lines of the poem, inviting a reading that would form a syntactical unit “remembering being hunkered under the sink,” it also invites a special reading – one that would stress the importance of the poem’s title on its own terms. Such an interpretation would turn this particular sonnet into an interesting instance of Heideggerian overtones I wish to emphasize in this collection. The intimate relationship between being and time forms the foundation of Heidegger’s account of human subjectivity which he reformulates in terms of the concept of *Dasein*. In his view, we are what we are exactly because we and our consciousness are structured by time. “Remembering Being” can be said to equal in many ways “measuring / the silence.” The final quasi-question with which the poem ends: “how many times / [...] have I / remembered this” reverberates with echoes of

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anxiety about our humanism. Its ambiguity is again related to the dialectics of revealing and covering that shrouds the fundamental question of Being, inscribing the effort of memory and the inevitable loss into the space of literature, where the existential drama our humanity is staged in a most acute manner.

This poem is also a good exponent of the type of inhale-exhale dynamics that was already mentioned above. It is a meditation that begins from an image taken out of childhood years. However, after this timeless (“whatever age / I was”) contraction into the flickering dot of subjectivity (“encloistered / in myself”), it expands by means of time (“how many times”) into a myriad of past selves, perhaps as many as sixty of them (“in three score / years”). Such a dispersion of identity into time-parcelled selves is evident throughout the whole collection. What makes these distinct instances of subjectivity feel like an individual being? It is probably narration, that modest thread of a story that we weave from our histories, our experiences. In the poem “I Looked into That” the lyrical subject can see “within / your death // unfold / your life // untold as yet.” (ON 48)

However, it seems that this life story cannot be rendered in terms of traditional mimetic literature which remains locked within the paradigm of “being” – the ontic realm – and does not always allow the light of Being to shine through. Carson seems to struggle with the mimetic tradition of poetry in order to rediscover, or recall to memory what might be called true Being. As Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe remarks in Poetry as Experience, the “[p]oetic act consists of perceiving, not representing.”21 In order to do that, he metaphorically strips his poems of all traditional content, destroying the image-ridden traditional vein of lyrical poetry. In its place he institutes what could be called a “Braille or Morse” poetics. In this type of a poem, whose pattern is repeated steadily and invariably throughout the collection, the words lose their primary meaning and become something like stones thrown

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into the depths of a well: “stone // upon stone / dropped // soundlessly” (ONW 41) in order “to plumb // what was / immeasurable.” (ONW 53) The rhythmic patterns of this type of a poem resemble the dripping of the rain, or the delicate (or even unheard) splashes of stones thrown down the well. Other metaphorical instances of such auto-poetics are the beep of a radar – a “blip & echo” (ONW 22) – or “a blip [...] shown / by the scan” (ONW 118) on an uncanny medical apparatus. The poem becomes in this way something like a “display panel” (ONW 25) on which appear words that are joined in the meticulous, patient process of laying down line after line until “a beam / of intermittent // light flits / across // the window.” (ONW 50) What is thus articulated, or “broadcast” is “a beam / in phased array // entering the mind / as arrows.” (ONW 25) Thus, we once again return to the mechanics described above. The poem is like a searchlight that searches the dark regions (“minefield”), looking for something, or someone until the lyrical “I’ is “Transfixed // by the searchlight / of your word.” (ONW 110) The counterpart to this is a flickering of light, something that escapes our direct gaze, our direct reading (the “beam” of the reader’s eye). Something happens, but it occurs in-between, in the “light,” or the spaces that separate the words, on the edge of our gaze, just like in the painterly technique of anamorphosis – a kind of “looking awry” that is demanded by the optical illusion to reveal the full contents of the artwork.

The poem “As arrows” offers an illuminating commentary on this. The title simile refers to the way people perceive their lives. We, as humans, are hung somewhere between the “finger posts” of future and past, and “[...] we / speed onwards / always looking // back at what / our destination // might have been / except for this // except for this / but still.” (ONW 28, my emphasis – G.C.) What is of primary importance here is the space in-between signalled by the strange aperture (“an aperture / of silence”). This gap, or stretch, is where transcendence is possible. In this light, the intimate meditation on being during “the small hours,” when time is not counted in purely technological terms, but by the internal sense of
our personal time, the one dictated by the intimate *Dasein*, i.e. our mortality, measuring “one & two // & three / & more” and “calculating / incremental // steps between / the cracks.” (ONW 18) The cracks are openings, crevices left out in the poems, moments when we leave ourselves just in order to come back to our most intimate, “forgotten” Being. It invites us, although it seems “unheimlich” – strangely familiar, but evoking anxiety. This motif finds a proper formulation in the poem “Come In” which offers an invitation to look behind the poem, or rather look through the “Sprachgitter” (title of Celan’s poem) – the bars of language or “the bars / of a cot // thumb / in mouth” (ONW 60) – at what may be looming behind and what is left out of the picture when we focus only on the surface. It is an invitation to search for a deeper meaning, albeit not a secretive one, but a truth that is contained in the very gesture of inviting contained in poetry. The poem, quoted already in the context of the motif of the threshold, is worth quoting in full, as it fully pertains to this discussion.

*Come In*

- says the knock
  - on the door
- from behind
  - a crack
- of light in
  - the blackout
- someone
  - gesturing beyond
We, ek-static beings, are always on the verge, on the threshold, “becoming,” says Heidegger – our life proceeds as “darkness dawns / with yet another.” (ONW 17) However, we are invited to move also along the vertical dimension of transcendence. It is not necessarily a metaphysical struggle, as the collection gives no promise of a communion with “God” – for example in the poem “With My Head on a Stone,” which ends with the image of “the open tabernacle / empty,” (ONW 20) evoking a sense of loss of the traditional place of religion. Still, the necessary direction is there. The metaphysics should be transcended, if we are to return to Being, reconsider it in fullness, “think it” properly. The secret is not in an otherworldly promise of salvation and immortal life, but is a “dark / knowledge / of the apple” that can be achieved only “through / toothsome // flesh” (ONW 26), i.e. by overcoming traditional metaphysics. The image of teeth here is a telling echo of the dragon’s teeth from the first poem, establishing itself as an image of mortality. It is biting through the flesh that allows to “reach the core // the code / of tree” – the mythical apple from the Tree of Knowledge – and learn that its secret message is not a linguistic revelation contained directly in the prophecy of words, but it is their taste, or aftertaste, the materiality “encapsulated / in each pip.” (ONW 26) In a sense, a widely understood orality – both in terms of biting, teeth and voicing words from the larynx of Dasein – is a means inscribing individuality and
meaning on the nameless face of death and text. In this way, the dialectic of orality and textuality is reinforced here from a greater perspective and serves as the dialectical figure of living and death, defining the manner and mode of being-in-the-world. Carson’s achievement lies in the fact that he transcends metaphysics and redefines for his poetic purposes the relation between the subject and the poem, turning the latter into a space where death can be approached from a radically new perspective. This, it transpires, is his final goal – to find a new life in the poem, where death is faced on its own territory – that of language. These preoccupations weigh heavily on the second part of the collection, which – taking into account those deliberations – deserves our attention.

The death-poem

In the *Second Movement* the mood of the collection becomes more intense and death-focused. It is concentrated on “Operation Imminent” – the title of the first poem – which is of course death. The meditation takes place “on / an iron bed” and the lyrical subject is “measuring the / span” before the “theatre hour.” (ONW 57) This measuring is, in Heidegger’s words, an operation “by which man first receives the measure for the breadth of his being.”²² The word “theatre” reiterates the paradox about death – something we can all be sure of, but cannot live through it, so we envision it in a theatrical manner, appropriating it into our being. However, after a certain turn of phrase, “when they / come to / lay me out,” (my emphasis – G.C.) we might begin to wonder if it is not the poem itself speaking: “each cut / stitch & snip” are, as was often the case in Carson’s case, signs of textuality, so the final, sudden halt to which the poem draws – “what span” – might also suggest a different kind of death – a textual one, i.e. an unstitching, unmaking of the cloth of words, the “undoing” of the poem. Literature, with its looming, ghost-like presence of the author, is a space where death is enacted, it is its theatre.

²² Martin Heidegger, “… Poetically man dwells…”, p. 222.
The “measuring” is done in verse and Carson seems to have found the right rhythm for conjugating death in the seven-stanza sonnet of characteristically short lines.

Another turn to that interpretation is given in the following poem titled “It’s Called Needles.” Life is carried on along the lines of the poem in a curious game, the author seems to suggest. We read on and we “jump from / one black patch / to another,” walking along the verses and jumping from stanza to stanza over the emptiness of the white page, but “if you step // on a white patch / you die.” (ONW 58) When the process of reading is over or otherwise halted, when we leave the labyrinth of the words, we embark on nothingness, an abyss which is the backside of the poem, its nihilistic background. “In this sense, the poetic act is ecstatic” and thus offers “the pure transcendence of being,” comments Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, adding that “the poetic act is catastrophic; an upsetting relation to what is an upset, in being, in the direction of no-thingness (the abyss).”23 He goes on to say that every poem “is turned towards the open, offered up to it” — this openness is “the place without place of the advent,”24 the space of death which converges with the space of the poem. Of course, our grasp of firm ground is always engendered by the moving meanings, we may literally “slip” on the wetness of the word (“there are // black patches / where it’s still wet”), but we have to jump, move, trace the ever-emerging new patches where we find temporary shelter. “It’s Called Needles” and rightly so, since the movement across the shifting ground of the poem evokes a whole array of interrelated meanings. First of all, needles are sharp and easily sting us, never allowing us to feel basically at “home” in language, although it is indeed our only home (a reservoir of meaning), because outside it there is a terrible void of reality — unbearable and alien. Needles are also tools with which we fashion our lives, knitting various motifs and themes into a rug, carpet or tapestry of history. The needle is also a pointer, for example in the compass, orienting us towards that abstract direction — North, the pole, the

23 Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, Poetry as Experience, p. 67.
24 Ibid.
final meeting point, the mythical realm death – the place where all meridians – to employ Celan’s metaphor – meet. Thus, at the same time it is the imaginary place, where all “styles” cease, giving place to death and final silence, as “the poem clearly shows a strong tendency towards silence.” Needle can be also found in a gun, suggesting that words can be a means of hurting, perhaps killing, or on the other hand – defending oneself or fending off other words. The needle of the gramophone is again an apt comparison. It bounces on the groove, following its lead, just like we follow the lines of the poem, its ups and downs, the bumps and grooves of the words. Each life, each history has its own “music,” its own vibration, but all lead down the slow spiral towards the end, the silence at the end of the record. As Derrida pointed out in Spurs, needle is also related to the “stilo” – the point of the knife, the sharp ending with which we engrave our individuality: not only a “quill or a stylus,” but also “a stiletto, or even a rapier” – generally speaking, such “objects might be used in a vicious attack against what philosophy appeals to in the name of matter or matrix, an attack whose thrust could not but leave its mark, could not but inscribe there some imprint or form.” It is “style” itself, the unique manner of making the cut, leaving a mark, imprinting oneself in language, “signing” the poem or the book. We all play needles when we talk, making our points, piercing other people’s words and arguments, pointing to what we find important, leaving our trace. Needles are at the same time intoxicating, alluring, narcotic-like; they touch our blood, import that which is desirable but is threatening. They bring oblivion, forgetfulness, but at the risk of bringing about the false paradises of illusion and fear. In this aspect, they are closely related to the pharmakon. Derrida interestingly points out that the pharmakon is, by virtue of its etymology and function in Plato’s philosophy, a truly ambiguous term – both a soothing medicine and a deadly poison. Pharmakon, in the light of this reading, is a bitter potion of knowledge, a variation on the fruit from the tree of knowledge, administered to us with the

precision and lightness of a needle — in short: piercing, stinging verses which are the
trademark of Carson’s style in *On The Night Watch*.

In “All In All Out,” the game (the dying game, we could say) continues in the form of
childish, yet uncanny, nursery rhymes: “knitting needle / click clack // skipping rope / cut the
slack // razor blade / close shave.” (ONW 61) These images reiterate the pointed sharpness of
death which cuts our lives. Stitching, i.e. writing, both in the basic sense and in the sense of
“writing one’s life,” is always at the same time unstitching, following the two-sided logic of
the *pharmakon*. Memory and forgetting in writing and speech are all interwoven, as we get
lost in the city, in our private memories or in history, as I pointed out in the previous chapters.

We thread the path of our existence, but piecing it together is simultaneously a process of
covering up death, its light showing through every stitch, every little hole that reminds us of
its saving artificiality. This is conveyed in the last two couplets of that poem: “thread the
needle / close one eye // pierce my heart / & hope to die.” Again – being, writing and death
coalesce in a strangely topological space of the poem, where the poet stages the weaving work
of speaking individuality on the blank page of textual oblivion.

The second movement of the book continuous in that vein, evoking images of sudden
death: that of a man whom we observe on CCTV who walks “aisle after aisle” “until / shot
dead” in “Frame by Frame” (ONW 62), “the smoking man / who will // be dead / tomorrow” in
“Yesterday” (ONW 66) or the soldier who “went kaput” in “Rank.” (ONW 67) These
deaths mark the passage of time, as the Moirés — “three journeywoman / cloaked in black”
knock on our doors “armed with distaff // scroll & shears” (ONW 64) – as the hours tick away
incessantly, even if we are not there to measure them out, “it all ticks on // without us / being
there.” (ONW 82) Through this remorseless time we travel with the help of words which “are
borne // from mouth to ear.” (ONW 87) Their mission is to cover our spans of time with
memory, which is like a well inside which all those moments and words resound, “declining
in // the memory yet / still resounding” with their vibration. This movement which might be
called time, as we are led on to believe in terms of St Augustine “in whose book // of hours
the hours / are sentences.” (ONW 79) It could also be related to what Emmanuel Levinas
would call “a kind of temporal pulsing movement that continues to resist collapsing into a
settled expression.”27 This elemental rhythm is, as Andrzej Leśniak claims, the basic tenet of
subjectivity which forms it, but simultaneously destabilizes it. A rhythmical subject, he
argues, is based on infinite repetition, but that experience of rhythm constantly confronts it
with what is other to it.28 He refers to Derrida, who would claim that there is no rhythm
without repetition and spacing, but this rhythm is multifarious – it does not have a beginning
or end, it cannot be mastered, it just oscillates, making it impossible to define it, as the subject
“disappears in the echo, resonance and repeating difference.”29 In this sense, repetition and
difference are prior to any identity, so “autobiography and rhythm turn out to be the two
figures of the experience which is responsible for the deconstitution of the I.”30 How can we
approach that rhythm and measure it? It seems that it is the poem that serves the best purpose
of the clock, as it expresses the most intimate relation to Being, not the one governed by
techne. Time, poetry and death are thus closely interrelated through rhythm. This fundamental
tripartite configuration also returns under the guise of the accessories carried by the Moirés:
distaff – time, scroll – poetry (language at its fullest, in its “ripeness”) and shears – death.
(ONW 64) Only through this equation can we truly approach the subject of life and Being.

What kind of a vision of life do these poems convey then? It is a blip, a mark or trace,
whose dimensions, as has been elaborated on above, are twofold – both immensely small and
at the same deepened by the circling and enlivening work of language. In “Upon What Scale”
we read that “our span” is “contracted to // uncertainty / eternity.” (ONW 63) The human

72.
29 Ibid., p. 73.
30 Ibid.
existence is the meeting point between the “uncertainty factor,” which denotes the provisional and temporary, fleeting character of our lives, and “eternity” – the realm of Being to which we belong, but at the same time are expelled from it, as if from paradise. Of course, there are hardly any traditionally religious overtones to that approach, since it is language that marks a “destruction” of metaphysics in the meaning that Heidegger gave to this expression. Thus, the “commensurable / blip,” (ONW 63) which stands for human condition, opens towards both dimensions – the existential condition of “being thrown in the world” and the post-metaphysical opening towards the question of Being and the acceptance of life on its own terms. The poem closes with two other images which are similes to the “blip”: “marrow / of the bone” and “a needle / stuck between // two knuckles / of the spine.” (ONW 63) They reiterate this double nature of life, or blip, as it is both something inherent, essential, productive – “marrow” – and a separating entity – “needle / stuck between” – which marks a threshold, division, an opening. It is a slit, or a crack between being and Being, the space of anticipation in between stanzas, or a hyphen “flitting” between and connecting ideas or words. This needle can also be read, again, as the needle of style – the pointed device used to mark the time and place – coordinates of a the transient subjectivity – making “a cut or incision which the poem bears in its body like a memory […], the mark of a provenance, of a place and of a time.”

This cut is described by Derrida as a *shibboleth*, a mark of all difference inscribed in language, metaphorically extended from the Biblical story of Ephraimites, who judged others on the basis of the pronunciation of that particular word. In a way, the needle is a *shibboleth* because it introduces the threshold and inscribes difference. The needle, as that ambiguous cut, slit or crack in the poem, is like Derrida’s *shibboleth* which “is not only a cipher, and the cipher of the poem; it is now, emerging from non-meaning where it keeps

itself in reserve, the cipher of the cipher,”32 turning our attention finally to the fact that “in the poetic writing of a language, there is nothing but shibboleth.”33 The poem is, in this light, an individualized mark made on the surface of language, which performs the double task of poetry. To quote Derek Attridge, it “signifies the condition of language” and “commemorates that which is destined to be forgotten.”34 From the perspective of this dissertation, this statement reinforces the dialectic between the anonymity of the text (language in general) and the particularity of voice (date, encounter, the call of the other).

The question hidden in the title of the poem “Upon What Scale” also refers to that split marked in the third stanza: “uncertainty / eternity.” (ONW 63) It problematizes the point of view from which we are to look at ourselves, exposing the strangely torn double-scale of human life: its trifle-like nature and the incomprehensible depth of thought enveloping the self-reflective subjectivity of an individual and the society as a whole. This distance may also be read as an interesting reworking of the nature-culture dichotomy. Anyway, it does not allow for an easy “technologizing” of the question of Being, as it can neither be approached from a purely scientific, quantitative perspective, nor from a traditional, purely onto-theological point of view. The potential of poetry resides precisely in the ability to inhabit, at least from time to time, this area that is in-between, which bears with itself the promise of approaching Being in a more intimate and non-biased way.

This issue is explored further in the poem “For How Long” which is another example of a syncretic poem where the meditation on “the days & hours / we counted” (ONW 74) opens up windows towards new understanding. As the lyrical I moves in a fort-da-like movement – “backwards / to the scan // & forward to the scan” – and meanders “between the blip / & blip”, “eternity” suddenly opens up, “or time arrested / justified by // what we / do not

32 Ibid., p. 405.
33 Ibid., p. 413.
know.” (ONW 74) The stretching of time that can be exercised in the space of the poem opens up spaces of “time arrested,” where understanding is withheld and attentiveness (especially in the sense that Malebranche gave to this expression) allows for “what we / do not know” to present itself. The nothingness, the backdrop of life is finally brought to foreground and we find ourselves in the position where we once again look from behind “the bars / of the cot // thumb in mouth” and let ourselves be once again enveloped in the holy terror of looking in the death’s eye. This sublime feeling where all knowledge is suspended has a truly overcoming power. Its dazzling quality and the visionary aspect of this revelation is summed up by Carson in the image of “eyebright” in the poem “We Do Not Know”: “we do not know / how all this // came to be / nor how we stand // dazzled in / this field of eyebright.” (ONW 77) This field, the space of illumination, as I understand it, is the space of the poem.

The final and most overtly philosophical conclusion to the Second Movement is contained in the poem “In Each Other’s Eyes” which is worth quoting in full:

*In Each Other’s Eyes*

we are what
we remember

of each other
more than that

the increments
by which time

gains on us
& then retracts
into a darkness
that we never
knew till now
in whose light
dawning
in whose eyes
(ONW 86)

The poem combines many of the elements discussed above and establishes interesting links between them. First of all, we find here the thesis that “we are what / we remember,” confirming Lacoue-Labarthe’s statement that “[…] the poem commemorates. Its experience is an experience of memory.” 35 It is our memory traces – echoes in the well of memory – that compose our subjectivity. However, these have to be reflected in someone else’s eyes – there is a structural need for the position of the other inside human subjectivity, which is overtly expressed in Hegel’s philosophy. Can this position of a mirror be occupied by the poem? It seems so, since it is the rhythm of language and words laid upon words that “gains on us / & then retracts,” allowing us to feel the heartbeat of Being, the pulse of life which beats “into a darkness / that we never knew” and gives us a profound premonition about our position in the world. Thus, the small hours, where the “increments” of time can be deeply felt, become a meditation towards a “dawning / in whose eyes.” At this point the poem breaks off, because the light that shines through cannot be rendered aptly, as traditional mimesis cannot faithfully render that kind of an experience. We are thus led towards a space in which darkness and light coalesce, all dialectic is opened from inside and the final illumination of the eyebright is born. In this light, the poem, acting as the other, a mirror that upholds our identity in the realm of

35 Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, Poetry as Experience, p. 21.
language and the dialectic of life and death, can be viewed as the closest imitation of the dynamic of becoming. The reader, whether he/she is an implied or a real one, is caught *in flagranti*, in the exact moment where attentiveness, or self-awareness is born, as the poem “intends another, needs this other, needs an opposite. It goes toward it, bespeaks it.” The poem is the space in which time is inscribed in words which give the subjectivity a rhythm, a heartbeat. Paul Celan confirms this interpretation in “Meridian,” where he claims that “in the here and now of the poem […] in this immediacy and nearness, the otherness gives voice to what is most its own: its time.” Human life is becoming somewhere in between this silent map of traces and the silent eyes that slip along its lines. The “dawning” is a promise of a reserved, retracted intuition of non-knowledge, Hegel’s Death, an *Aufhebung*, as in the conclusion of the poem “The Pit”:

for years I have
been digging so

to find myself
no further on
(ONW 96)

A similar note is struck in Paul Celan’s poem “There Was Earth”:

O someone, o none, o no one, o you:
Where did it lead to, that nowhere-leading?
O you dig and I dig, and I dig towards you,
and on our finger awakens the Ring.

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36 Paul Celan, “Meridian”, p. 47.
37 Ibid., p. 50.
The Ring, which closes off Celan’s poem is a coming full circle along the meridian to the place of synthesis, where negation is overcome. The last line in Carson’s poem is reminiscent of this type of return because of its ring-like structure – it begins with “no” and ends with “on,” which brace and bracket the poem.

Poetic dwelling

The Third Movement, as the poem “The Pit” suggests, brings a reconciliation of the first two and serves as a vital commentary on the power and powerlessness of words in the context of the dialectic process which oscillates between death (as the final frontier) and life in words, logoi. As the poem that immediately follows “The Pit” – i.e. “The Floor” – makes clear, a new ground has been covered by the lines of the poems. The landscape it evokes – “the absolute / ground whereon // you stand […] beyond the threshold / in the middle // of a meadow” (ONW 97) – gives a strong sense of having entered upon a clearing. This “ground” is the firm basis on which thought can rest. It is not a heavenly sanctuary, for “[p]oetry does not fly above and surmount the earth in order to escape it and hover over it,” as Heidegger claims – on the contrary, it “is what first brings man onto the earth, making him belong to it, and thus brings him into dwelling.”39 “There was Earth in them,” we read in the opening of the above-quoted poem by Celan and “and / they dug.” The grounding or rooting of the poem is a matter of utmost importance for both Celan and Heidegger, who constantly reuse such metaphors, e.g. when Celan claims that “the poem holds its ground on its own margin”40 and the meridian is “immaterial as language, yet earthly, terrestrial,”41 or when Heidegger says that “[i]n poetry there takes place what all measuring is in the ground of its being.”42 (my emphasis – G.C.) This leads us to the question of dwelling and inhabiting, which are central to

39 Martin Heidegger, “… Poetically man dwells…”, p. 218.
40 Paul Celan, “Meridian”, p. 49.
41 Ibid., p. 55.
42 Martin Heidegger, “… Poetically man dwells…”, p. 221.
those thinkers and form an interesting outlook on language by subverting some of the traditional approaches to the human’s mastery of words and meanings.

The first poem in this last part of the collection is “Bells Sound” and, as its title might suggest, it heralds a metaphysical moment – it is an echoing call to listen, concentrate and focus, in line with what Heidegger has to say about patience in poetry, claiming that “[t]he more poetic a poet is […] the greater is the purity with which he submits what he says to an ever more painstaking listening.” Just like the rhythmic tolling of the bell, the imagery with which the poem begins – a row of windows “staggered” “at intervals” (ONW 100) – evoke a transcendental and lofty mood. In the penultimate stanza the lyrical “I” appears and guides our eyes, unsurprisingly by now, towards “the absolute // darkness of / an open aperture.” The paradoxical image joins two seemingly contradictory elements – openness and darkness. However, on close inspection this dichotomy becomes meaningful, as long as we think about words and language. The row of closed windows is like a series of unfinished, unwritten poems, whereas the black ink of words on the page is metaphorically referred to as the dark window. Indeed, words open before us a special space, where possibility and death are combined. Celan ponders on the “«open» question «without resolution», a question which points towards open, empty, free spaces” and finally remarks that “[t]he poem also searches for this place.” Writing is thus envisioned as the final frontier, the place where meridians meet. It sucks in the blinding light and disperses it into a darkness, which is a reworking the dichotomy of light and dark. Writing levels everything, allowing thought to travel endlessly along the tracks of ever-receding meaning, at the same time freezing everything into a complete stillness.

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43 Ibid., p. 216.
44 Paul Celan, “Meridian”, p. 50.
45 It is in Maurice Blanchot’s philosophy that “language is to be understood as negation” and we can speak of the “negativity of the word,” but those themes will be taken up further on in the next sections. See: Ullrich Haase & William Large, Maurice Blanchot (Routledge Critical Thinkers), New York: Routledge, 2001, pp. 74-79.
This dance of tropes, which inevitably leads to the stasis of death, is transposed onto the realm of relationships in the next poem “The Globe of Death,” but the core mechanism remains the same. People keep “whirling” and “missing / each other // till at last / they meet.” (ONW 101) This image brings to mind the kind of metaphoric set of props which Paul Celan employs in the “Meridian.” He compares the lines of longitude to the work of poems, which take us on a ride across the globe and leave us at the exact same spot from where we departed. Still, something is truly and deeply changed within. No wonder, since this “ride” along the lines of the poem is a metonymic repetition of the circle of life. This final meeting, joining of two points, two minds, or perhaps two parts of the metaphor, heralds the end of the collection, the overcoming of dialectics.

Of course, the above-sketched figure of the poem is an ideal form. Usually, as is visible in Carson’s poetry, we truly keep on missing each other – “I Tell You // too little / too late” (ONW 35) – and walking “resoundingly” through empty rooms (ONW 102) with a moth bumping against us “as if we / were its light”, or gazing “on the clouds” like an augur, divining prophecies from clouds and looking “to find // the hidden key.” (ONW 103) What is at stake here is an attempt to defend ourselves from the “still // more deadly weapon / silence.” (ONW 107) “In order to endure,” explains Celan, the poem “constantly calls and pulls itself back from an «already-no-more» into a «still-here». […] This «still-here» can only mean speaking.”

Silence is understood here as a state of inertia, in which what is unspoken can no longer be vocalized. This concept is well illustrated in the poem “From the Larynx” as it performs a very telling reduction of the language production process by exposing its physical nature. What seems to be of greatest importance here is the actual physics of meaning, the way in which “the lips the mouth / & pharynx” are “resounding down // the darkling nave / to search out // what / remains unspoken.” (ONW 109) The enigmatic ending

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46 Paul Celan, “Meridian”, p. 49.
closes the frame of the poem, which began on a biblical note with the phrase “comes the word,” reminding us of the first line of the Gospel of St. John. However, what kind of *logos* are we dealing with here? It is definitely a voice “from the bowels,” a deeply intimate, physically produced voice that represents who we are to others. This voice is a means of probing, a tentacle that we unfold onto the world in order to touch, see and make sense of the reality that surrounds us. It enters the darkness, trying to name the “unspoken.” Thus, the voice is not only a means of articulation, but a tool of cognition, an apparatus that allows us to inhabit reality. This brings us close to Heidegger’s understanding of language as the proper site of Being, the place in which we can witness the coalescence of the private and the public, the physical and the metaphysical, and, finally the oral and the textual aspects of language.

Poetry’s task is quite visible in this context, for it is a means of using language, which – being self-referential – brings us closer back to Being. However, in order to become that, poetry has to overcome the technological trap that the modern, nihilistic society has procured for itself. In the poem “Transfixed” Carson points out this danger, showing that words can also function as a “searchlight” (ONW 110) – a tool of illusionary control over the world, the use of which is a temptation offered to us by technology. The “electrolarynx,” a voice that is “amplified / a thousand watts,” is not a “natural larynx” and the result of its use is “phonemes drowning / in the noise.” (ONW 110) The task of poetry is to build for itself a natural larynx which amplifies the voice through the reverberating echo-labyrinth of words themselves, without any unnatural props. Poetry is the architecture of words, which enables us to produce a natural magnifying apparatus by means of word- and syntax-configurations. Poems are thus “reverberated / like a drum roll // down the echolaliae / blind alley.” (ONW 112) They make us from what we might call the inherent remembrance of words, i.e. the way in which every word paradoxically does not remember and at the same times carries with it its own past. In “This Bullet” Carson asks rhetorically about the bullet: “does it / remember” and points out
the “hundreds of drops / of molten lead // pouring down / the blind shot.” (ONW 113) Every word is like this – a bullet that will not remember every drop of lead it was made from. People, however, as conscious beings, are capable of thinking about this, i.e. the forgetfulness that is inherent in our mode of being – a forgetfulness whose outcome is that we forget Being. Although it is a task impossible to accomplish in its fullness, we have to try to embrace the fact that our words and, consequently, large portions of our identity, are of a fathomless origin which it will never be possible to pierce them neither with intellect nor with emotion.

This theme is picked up in the poem “Day In Day Out” which reiterates the meditation on the material world and words, exposing again the hard work of putting the right words together with a view to building a house, a home in language, or, in other words, a poem. Heidegger directly compares poems to buildings by saying that “[p]oetic creation, which lets us dwell, is a kind of building.”47 This poem is itself a certain metaphor of such a house and of the difficulty of laying the strong foundations: “I lay stone / upon stone [...] I wrested from / the stony field [...] to build this / wall around myself // with no cement / but chinks of light.” (ONW 115) This poem, with its steady pace and careful use of words and line breaks, brings to the fore the existential truth about the hardship of everyday life; the building of a sense of homeliness, a dwelling place in which mankind can lead its life towards the final goal of death. This process is just like building a poem – both have at their stake a certain intimate contact with Being, for “poetry, as the authentic gauging of the dimension of dwelling, is the primal form of building.”48 The bricks of the house and the word-bricks of the poem have to be carefully arranged so that no cement is necessary. It is the rhythm – in the sense of careful measuring – that provides the necessary link in this context. The steady pace of the poems and their drip-drop logic of measuring time – “darkness / on darkness // echoing / a soundless track” (ONW 20) with “each step // extrapolated / to within // an inch of time” (ONW 38) – is

47 Martin Heidegger, “… Poetically man dwells…”, p. 215.
48 Ibid., p. 227.
the essence of Heideggerian measuring. Its meaning is architectonic in both a poetic and literal sense of providing shelter, since the “taking of measure is what is poetic in dwelling. Poetry is measuring. [...] a high and special kind of measuring.” Their true binding material is “light”: the see-through pulses of revelations in which Being shows through. “Poetry builds up the very nature of dwelling.” Heidegger concludes, “poetry and dwelling belong together, each calling for the other.”

Language, as the locus of Being, is of course not always a self-exposing means of touching reality. It has to be used, like a tool, or intellectually pierced by the poem. Words should be put to use for the purpose of “fathoming the deep / of a well” (ONW 116) and sometimes even turned against themselves. Hans Georg Gadamer in his discussion of Celan’s poetry observes that language acts as a roof under which we all live and shelter ourselves. However, it frequently gains on weigh and becomes muddy, obscuring the light from above. This means that we sometimes want to pierce it, dismantle this cover in order to look the darkness above in the eye in a sublime moment of transcendence. This, notes Gadamer, is the task of the poet: to try to undo the web of stifling meanings and remove the deadening layers of everyday mannerisms and clichés which cover the full view. The battle with those used-up, covering functions of language is exactly the task of poetry. In the course of that struggle, it turns out that words, as well as whole expressions and meanings, as the building blocks, have been used and will be re-used for much more than a single life span. In this context then, the question arises whether language is not primordial in relation to Being.

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49 Ibid., p. 221.
50 Ibid., p. 227.
52 Ibid., p. 84. It is not the case, he claims, that certain poets are obscure and hermetic – on the contrary, they want to uncover something. By building elaborate constructions, poets release the multi-dimensional structure of meanings which are often suppressed by the pragmatics of our everyday language use. (Ibid., p. 168) For example, Celan’s wording is penetrating deep into the phraseology and offers new etymologies and syntaxes, which the reader can learn only from the poems themselves. These meanings are interrelated in such a way as to disable a steady and safe relationship with the world, making the poem, its “saying,” come to the foreground. In a sense, Gadamer claims that in such condensed type of poetry, the enunciation and the enunciated are the same thing. (Ibid., p. 136)
Heidegger argues that this is exactly the case and man is mistaken because he “acts as though he were the shaper and master of language, while in fact language remains the master of man.”

“For strictly,” Heidegger continues, “it is language that speaks. Man first speaks when, and only when, he responds to language by listening to its appeal.” Language is, but it exists in a different way than men. It serves as the ability to name, i.e. address. Without language we would not be capable of referring to each other, as we would not know how to differentiate reality. We should remember that it is the arche-language of Derrida that provides the necessary gap, or aperture which allows difference to emerge. Thus, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe can easily claim that “[l]anguage is the other in man; it constitutes him as man himself,” because without language the otherness, which gives rise to our subjectivity and the bond with the fellow man, would not be possible. Therefore, “language is what is proper to man,” meaning that “man is constituted beginning with language.” However, because language is what makes us and is still something other than man, our subjectivity slips away from our grasp and has to be located somewhere else, beyond the traditional metaphysical outlook: “language is the essence, the inhuman essence of man; it is his (in)humanity” and “can be considered man’s origin.” The inhuman origin of humanity, the non-being which founds all being – the paradoxical nature of language affects our understanding of poetry, as well. For if poetry is language in its purified, self-referential state, it is otherness itself, or perhaps even a nothingness that can be offered to the other: a “gift of nothing or present of nothing.” Therefore, language as we know it has to be constantly surveyed and scrutinized, as its roof – though providing the necessary home and shelter – falls

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53 Martin Heidegger, “… Poetically man dwells…”, p. 215.
54 Ibid., p. 216.
55 Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, Poetry as Experience, p. 95-96.
56 Ibid., p. 96
57 Ibid.
58 As poetry “strains to «dig» right to language’s possibility; it encounters, […] the naked possibility of address.” (Ibid.)
59 Ibid., p. 20. Cf. a passage from Paul Celan’s “Psalm”: “A Nothing / we were, we are, we shall / be still, / flowering: / the Nothing–, the / No-man’s-rose.” (Paul Celan, 25 Poems)
victim to the oblivion of humanity’s “inhuman” origins. This relationship and the consequent re-formulation of the poet’s task are metaphorically alluded to in another poem called “Nooks & Crannies”: “the roof itself” is something to which the poet himself will “put / a stethoscope // to see what ticks within.” (ONW 120) A masterful poem is the one which offers to us “the firmament / stripped so bare // the quiet you hear / is the frost.” (ONW 126) In order to clear up, strip that firmament, one has to travel through language and following its course, return home.

Homecoming

The frost, a gentle and delicate image with which the second part of the book ended, is the metaphorical crystallization of the passage of time; it exposes the now, frozen for a moment in a sad anti-climax, an anti-revelation “when now / is forever.” (ONW 132) The collection’s final poems are full of such images: “the vestibule […] to founder in / the storm within // to keep at bay // the storm without” in “The Storm Without” (ONW 121), “the now // moonlit road / that fades away // just before it gets to the wood” in “I’m Trying to Remember” (ONW 125) or “the bastion […] wherein // we drowned / its king” in “Siege Over.” (ONW 124) These images remind us of the elegiac (or melancholic) mood of the Old English poems, such as “The Wanderer” and “The Seafarer,” in their subtle existentialism. They evoke a sense of passing and a profound inability to achieve the ultimate metaphysical goals. The motif of the path is exemplary here, as it is picked up in the poem “Often & Often,” which is about the search for a path: “the path / I had to find // would come / to mind // by half gaps / betweenwhiles.” (ONW 131) Now, the path we are dealing with here can be interpreted as the path of life. However, its end, although obvious, disappears somewhere before the path “gets

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Poem is a way of pushing the boundary of time, of measuring it and attempting to transcend it. Celan remarks in the Brema speech that the poem is not timeless – it strives to be infinite and thus timeless, but only by trying to pierce through time, not by attempting to soar over it. See: Paul Celan, *Utwory wybrane* ed. R. Krynicki, trans. S. Barańczak [et al.], Krakow: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1998, p. 317.
to the wood” and the focus is shifted to the fact of remembering – the only “pace” which keeps us on the right track: “I’d lean upon / my stick wherever // I might be / remembering // or remembering / remembering.” (ONW 131) It is the art of remembering being that allows us to stay focused and conscious in the stream of time as it “flits from / split to split.” (ONW 132) What is the role of poetry here? If we assume that language, and poetry at most, is a crucial factor in keeping alive the remembrance of Being, we can just as well imagine our lives as a journey along the shelves in a library, like in the poem “Night after Night.” The Sisyphus-like drudge is adequately formulated in the poem’s monotonous pace: “in room / after book– / filled room / upon storey // after storey.” (ONW 127) We travel along the lines of the library, trying to find the other and whether we name it God or Library, it will remain a structural part of ourselves, as it all comes down to self exploration, “trying to locate // a volume / lodged at // the back / of my mind.” Indeed, as Gadamer reminds us, poems speak about that which drives this tirelessly “digging” creature we call life down the “narrow stairwell” of human existence. Carson asks rhetorically “what do I know / of death” (ONW 136) and remains silent “about what– / ever brought us // here & you there” (ONW 138), for he is no prophet or seer. Still, he reminds us that to “close our eyes // for fear // of seeing // the immortal cell” (ONW 133) is to miss the “eyebright” – “something // to remember / me by” (ONW 137) and thus to lose oneself, one’s sensibility, or ability to be fully in the world. “[T]o forget is / a common verb,” (ONW 139) we read in “What Then”, because remembering and forgetting is the most fundamental aspect of our lives. To remember Being is to be located at the exactly balanced spot, in-between: “between two leaves” or “between two doors.” To remember is to remember oneself in Being, “to walk with flowers” along the corridor where, as the concluding poem reads, we can “find the one / I’m looking for // between two sheets / you.” (ONW 141) These last lines of the whole book mark a profound moment when the

61 Hans-Georg Gadamer, Czy poeci umilkną?, Ibid., pp. 75-76.
circle comes to a close – the journey from “I” to “you” ends and the full dialectical swing draws us to an Aufhebung which takes over, destroying the oppositions. As Gadamer puts it, we come to learn that the “you” I am for myself becomes apparent when I let myself feel the border of that which is real, brushing against death.\(^\text{62}\) This, as I would like to claim, is the ultimate meaning of the encounter that both Carson and Celan projected into poetry. As the author of “Meridian” put it:

> Is it on such paths that poems take us when we think of them? Are these paths only detours, detours from you to you? But they are, among many others, the paths on which language becomes voice. They are encounters, paths from a voice to a listening You, natural paths from a voice to a listening You, natural paths, outlines for existence perhaps, for projecting ourselves into the search for ourselves… A kind of homecoming.\(^\text{63}\)

This homecoming, a return to the starting point by taking a memory trip, is an overcoming of a certain homelessness, which

> so understood consists in the abandonment of Being by beings. Homelessness is the symptom of oblivion of Being. Because of it the truth of Being remains unthought.\(^\text{64}\)

Hans-Georg Gadamer also links this topic with the question of death, or a broadly understood sensibility and awareness:

> If, in dying, which is always mine, I am one with you, this unity, even in depths of loneliness, indicates closeness and alliance.\(^\text{65}\)

\(^\text{62}\) Ibid., p. 87.
\(^\text{63}\) Paul Celan, “Meridian”, p. 53.
Now, in this sense, the final closing of the circle is not just a reflection of homecoming. It is that process itself, just as Heidegger’s interpretation of Hölderlin’s poem on this subject, which – as Timothy Clark remarks – “is not a poem about homecoming; rather, the elegy, the poetic activity which it is, is the homecoming itself.” Poems are essentially dialogic, meaning that they rely on otherness as such, be it a reader, language, or some other kind of exteriority. Poems provoke encounters, demand attention and listening, thus establishing a date, a unique moment that is an anniversary, celebration: “the words the name / the date the place.” (ONW 65) Celan is right in saying that poems, being “essentially dialogic,” always “keep a course on something,” a place that can be inhabited or a piece of reality that can be named, spoken to. The poem seeks to be washed on some kind of a shore. The poem is “lonely” and “en route,” argues Celan. “[T]he poem has always hoped […] to speak also on behalf of the strange […] on behalf of the other, who knows, perhaps of an altogether other.” In order to achieve that task, it has to set out on a journey, a strange venture by way of which its subject has to depart from him- or herself, cross a dangerous territory (“minefield”) in order to be able to come back and meet again. “Art makes for distance from the I,” as it is the road along which the poem makes its pilgrimage. “Art requires that we travel a certain space in a certain direction, on a certain road.” The distance that Carson needs to cover in his ouevre is, I would argue, the road from speech to writing and back, traversing this dichotomy, overcoming this special dialectics. Exploring the diverse variants of “art,”

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66 Timothy Clark, Martin Heidegger, p. 106.
67 Paul Celan, Utwory wybrane, p. 317.
68 Paul Celan, “Meridian”, p. 49.
69 Ibid., p. 48.
70 Celan says that poetry “moves with the oblivious self into the uncanny and strange to free itself” (Ibid., p. 44, my emphasis – G.C.), suggesting that an estrangement and a certain metaphysical destabilization or trembling is absolutely necessary for the journey to be complete. In On The Night Watch it is the intense meditation on death, contained in the Second Movement that serves the role of this exposition.
71 Ibid., p. 44.
72 Ingeborg Bachmann said that “art has moved many times; from the house beautiful to bateau ivre; this is its progression, its wandering.” (“The Buchner Prize Speech”, trans. J. Ekier, in: Literatura na Świece 1-2/2010, p. 255) Indeed, art is changing, but poetry, in the deepest sense of “encountering” and “facing the other” does not. Moreover, her description of that essential poetry as “cognitively sharp and bitter from longing” (p. 256) perfectly fits Carson’s late poetic endeavours.
Carson finally finds and settles in “poetry” through which he is capable of providing the humblest but at the same time deepest commentary on language and being. Though inconspicuous, the poems from *On The Night Watch* are marked by a profound intellectual effort to transcend the ossified, traditional approaches to poetry and turn the otherwise post-modern art-for-art’s-sake play into a potential experiment which, taking place in language, results in re-discovering that “connective which, like the poem, leads to encounters.”

Every poem is thus elevated to a status of a sincere handshake (Celan), a true act of remembrance (Derrida) and an interpretative gesture that puts our lives in a meaningful perspective (Heidegger and Gadamer).

**Radical alterity – Emmanuel Levinas**

The theme of alterity, which forms the core of Carson’s late works, is also the leitmotif of the philosophical investigations of Emmanuel Levinas. The figure of the other is for him the source of all ethics which, in his radical overturning of traditional philosophical hierarchies, precedes ontology. In *Otherwise Than Being Or Beyond Essence*, Levinas argues that a response to the other is in itself a fundamental ethical act which only in turn engenders the thinking of essences, or being. This elemental response, which he terms “saying,” is not a result of an encounter of entities, but itself makes them possible and prefigures them. Saying, he claims, is not just communication or representation of facts, for it “signifies otherwise than as an apparition presenting essence and entities.”

Thus, the basic language of a responsive gesture – a response to the other, the “you” – opens up the other as a neighbour, a comrade in being, setting up that figure as the source of responsibility: “relationship with a neighbour, incontestably set up in saying, is a responsibility for the neighbour.”

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73 Paul Celan, “Meridian”, p. 54.
75 Ibid., p. 47.
being responsive to another: an opening up to the other, granting him a meaning that is not just a subject of interpretation – the “said,” i.e. the actual content of the communication, which is only a secondary effect and should therefore be relegated as something of a different nature. The moment of opening up is the moment of exposure, when we grant signifyingness to the other without an objectification, or substantialization. In this sense, “[s]aying is communication, to be sure, but as a condition for all communication,”76 meaning that the act of exposing oneself and finding the other calling us to responsibility is the necessary prerequisite for the formation of all identities, or the world of “essences” in general.

Carson’s preoccupation with the “you,” the “other,” which is reminiscent of the similar obsession in Paul Celan’s poetry (pointed out by Gadamer), thus makes up for a deeper argument in favour of the ethical side of this poetry. By opening up towards the other, Carson achieves an important ethical end – he fosters and warrants a contract with otherness that has as its basis the ethical opening, which is free from any content whatsoever, but reinstates an elementary fragility and understanding, piercing through the traditional obstacles of communication, especially the ones that hinder the process of accepting otherness and taking responsibility for it:

The unblocking of communication, irreducible to the circulation of information which presupposes it, is accomplished in saying. It is not due to the contents that are inscribed in the said and transmitted to the interpretation and decoding done by the other. It is in the risky uncovering of oneself, in sincerity, the breaking up of inwardness and the abandon of all shelter, exposure to traumas, vulnerability.77

Carson’s lyrical subject is no longer encloistered in a safe haven of some presuppositions about the reality and metaphysical givens. It is a subject “deconstituted” from those beliefs

76 Ibid., p. 48.
77 Ibid., p. 48.
that would safeguard a simpler sense of belonging and truth. Its new coordinates are “vulnerability,” “exposure to affection,” “sensibility,” “passivity,” “exposedness,” “exposure to expressing,” “to saying, thus to giving” – i.e. “the most passive passivity” which “is inseparable from patience and pain.”78 By encompassing the other with a responsibility, the subject of those poems allows the other to enter him, inhabit his intimacy to provide a ground for mutual responsibility and respect: “you seethe into / my inner ear // the vestibule // wherein we meet // to founder in // the storm within.” (ONW 121) This provides a basis on which proper intersubjective relationships can be established, giving firm ground for a truly ethical acceptance and mutual sheltering, making it possible to find, amidst all struggles, a fresh place of refuge: “we lean into // one another / whatever wind blows.” (ONW 123) In the poem “Syntactical,” this joining is located in a syntax, whose meaning – I would suggest – is to be located in those elementary gestures of responsiveness that Levinas writes about: “a moment / of conjunction // & / communion // […] an ampersand.” (ONW 84) In this sense, Carson proposes a new language, or a new grammar of ethical pre-communication that we have to re-learn in order to create new, stable ethical bonds. Thus, this kind of poetry provides – as Seán Hand put it – the “actual means to express responsibility for the other and the precedence of the other, without effectively suppressing them in the process.”79 This also crowns the argument that Ciaran Carson is a poet, whose task is not to offer “pure innovation” but who tries to rethink certain themes in poetry, turning himself into a poet-philosopher in the kind of tradition that Heidegger considered most important in his late works. For, as Seán Hand concludes, if what we are dealing with is “an interrogation of, and a seeking for, the Other,” then “poetry and philosophy can now be viewed as sharing the same unrealizable ideal.”80 Although it cannot be denied that it is indeed a certain appropriation of that unattained ideal, the new setting of the path and the redefinition of the goal is in fact the vital

78 Ibid., p. 50.
79 Seán Hand, Emmanuel Levinas, p. 53.
80 Ibid., p. 76.
input, of which poetry is capable, into the discussion over ethics and politics in a country torn by a violent conflict. The task assigned to us by the other is the one of patience and disavowal, or absolution, of all identities that might entail a harming of the other. On the other hand, by offering one’s suffering as the ultimate gift, we are freed of affect which is consumed in the “burning for the other.” This disinterestedness is possible only when a serious attentiveness and patience to the call of the other is preserved. Then, we may find out that “[t]he subject is inseparable from this appeal or this election, which cannot be declined.” Carson shows in his poems how this encounter is made possible through the work of a poem.

Until Before After – the coda

The last poetry collection by Ciaran Carson to date is Until Before After (2010). It continues in the vein of On The Night Watch in terms of poetics and provides a good occasion for the recapitulation of some of Carson’s central themes. This collection, which is divided into three parts – Until, Before and After – focuses on the subjects already developed in previous works, especially the preceding book. “It’s the same // old story,” we read in the opening poem, as we return to the search for “the key on // the verge of // these words.” Therefore, Carson again draws our attention to the matter of language and its twofold resounding as a textual artefact and a life-saving story, installing the dialectic of orality and textuality at the core of his poetic practice. These two themes are exposed to their limit in a pair of poems from the first part. In “His last words,” we are sent back to the Heideggerian notion of living towards death by means of a story. The poem offers a certain paradox, showing that “the story is not / over // yet” until death deals its final blow. However, this is possible only when “we hear // the words from // one who has // died // before.” There is a strange

81 Ibid., p. 53.
relationship between the story, its narrator and language. We pick a thread from language in order to turn it into our story, but upon our undoing others “begin to // tell what once / was told.” Stories, in this way, are circular, but each re-telling is unique. The price for this individuality and its precondition is death. In this sense, every story we tell is indebted to all the other stories and death itself. Each story cannot be complete on its own, it requires a frame which is only made possible “when / death draws // nigh death / draws a hush.” (UBA 7) We keep enveloping each other in stories, depending on our mutually winding, coiling narratives: “wrap me in // whatever / warp of words,” we read in “Cast a spell.” (UBA 10) The truth is not located in the stories themselves, but in the very process of spinning them, for we “imbibe // what neither / had in mind.”

Thus, each story is a “gospel”: “the story of how / flesh became // the word until / the end of // time when / it decayed.” (UBA 9) This short passage contains the carefully constructed tripartite balance that the book puts forward as the equation which defines life: a triangle whose points are: “flesh,” (the material) “word” (the linguistic) and “time” (the temporal). Life can be defined as the passing of words through a body in a certain amount of time. In this sense, “death […] shows itself only in the experience of literature,” as the latter unfolds that passing of words through awareness in the most acute and visible way. In literature we can see “words fail // bereft of what / we should // have left / unsaid.” (UBA 15) Poetry stages that “eternal torment of our language, when its longing turns back toward what it always misses, through the necessity under which it labours of being a lack of what it would say.” That inability to express fully, which is profoundly marked by the touch of death, is clear, “as written / in the text” which heralds “each day / drawing // nearer next / to nothing.” (UBA 15) Literature is, as Carson hints at in the next poem a “calculus” or “a reckoning / of pebbles // dropped soundlessly […] until never / happens never.” (UBA 16) Images of

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84 Ibid., p. 59.
throwing pebbles and laying word upon word is in this light an acknowledging of the fact that “[l]anguage inscribes the distance that separates us from the reality of the world,” showing that “reality is an illusion that words make possible only by forever also banishing us from this reality”85 and foregrounding the difference that Carson points out at the end of the poem “The calculus”: “what / you thought // but what / you knew.” (UBA 16) Therefore, literature is the site of death, where words are weaved together and unmade in steady rhythms – “the story // going on / until told” (UBA 17) – “skein becoming / ball […] spun into […] a garment / worn until cast // off whereupon / it is unravelled […] into skein.” (UBA 19, my emphasis – G.C.) Skein comes back full circle to become skein again – the same goes for words.

In her article on Maurice Blanchot, Agata Bielik-Robson remarks that literature is conscious of the fact that its deathly space allows words to become material, freeing them from their meaning. However, as she wittingly points out, we should not say that words live their life in that sphere, but that they all die their own death. To each word its own death.86 The same goes for the word “I,” which signifies the melting of all identity in language. The fear of anonymous death by drowning in the ocean of dead words provokes a strange game that is played in language. The “I” drives round that forbidden place, the void that would swallow it, postponing the sentence and withholding – for some time at least – death by writhing, slithering, i.e. weaving round that empty hole, un-weaving oneself into nothing.87

This process is illustrated in the poem “A line,” in which the line, “the more / you labour it // becomes a ball of linen // thread / unravelling // itself to / nothing until // the labyrinth of / this line.” (UBA 21) The line can be read as the line of life, or the poetic line which encapsulates the process of poetic circling sketched above, whose final outcome is the unstitching of thought and the disappearance of subjectivity back into the labyrinth of

85 Ibid., p. 61.
87 Ibid., pp. 147-148.
language. This is a logic of Arachne – the thread of the narrative spinning for itself, like the gyre, whose logic is in the movement itself as it “still spins about // its sense of where / it is” (UBA 26) – not the one Ariadne, because there is no other way out of this entanglement than death, which is already inscribed in the line. The portal through which we leave the labyrinth is “a frame / of words and not / the thing // itself if thing / it be.” (UBA 28) There is no “nothing,” i.e. there is no-thing, nothing beyond and “whosoever // utters it / until it / swings to / has not yet // gone into beyond / the words.” There is no knowledge of death without words, but when it is met, the darkness obliterates all words and unravels our labyrinth. Cortázar’s dictum “I swing, therefore I am” from Hopscotch reverberates in the above passage. Swinging on the line of the poem is thus elevated to the position of a central metaphor which captures the movement of life on the thread of the story. In this way, the poetic line is the tie with which man “ties himself tight to his death with a tie of which he is the judge. He makes his death; he makes himself mortal and in this way gives himself the power of a maker and gives to what he makes its meaning and its truth.”

88 The line is what links the writer’s pen to the paper, making him the “master of his pen,” but this mastery serves only one purpose, “keeping him in contact with the fundamental passivity where the word, no longer anything but its appearance – the shadow of a word – can never be mastered or even grasped.”

89 This struggling with the shadows is the sense of writing in which every attempt is already a missed one, “saying what / comes out is not // what oft / you thought but // afterthought until / this cast of words.” (UBA 29) The ambiguous “cast” can be understood both as the “mould” of words and a “cast of dice” – a scattering of meanings which emerge and radioactively contaminate our discourse with unintended overtones. Whichever way, thought is “cast” in words and by the time it congeals it is alienated, becomes something different and the writer suffers from an estrangement that kills something he thought his own.

89 Ibid., p. 24.
“Write to be able to die,” explains Blanchot, “die to be able to write.” Writing is a risky business for it lures us into a territory where words take over and death reigns supreme, erasing or overwriting our story. Still, we have to write our narrative in order to survive.

In view of this, punctuation becomes the art of retaining a sense of direction. “At the comma,” Carson notices, “comes a pause / as if of breath [...] to collect oneself / or recollect.” (UBA 31) The hyphen, on the other hand, is “a slip of link / between // an interim // of thought” whose function is “to carry / one between // words whether until / to or fro.” (UBA 31) Punctuation is the space in-between, where we can slip in and steer the discourse, carrying out our fort-da game of symbolically comprehending the inevitability of loss and accepting that steady work of repetition that is the sole carrier of our brittle identity.

These are the signposts on the road, the space we have to carry – “our travelling // from twilight / into twilight // mile after mile / time out of mind.” (UBA 42) This is a pilgrimage of sorts, “time measured / footfall by footfall // drip by drip / until not at all.” (UBA 39) The sense of that road: “sounding that // deep” “measure / after measure // on what scale / not known yet.” (UBA 52) The measuring of the immeasurable is the task of echoing, in poetry, the abyss, attentive listening to the passage of time, until it opens up its negativity and shows through. This, in other words, is the giving of voice to nothingness and turning it into a part of ourselves:

To write is to make oneself the echo of what cannot cease speaking – and since it cannot, in order to become its echo I have, in a way, to silence it.

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90 Ibid., p. 93.
According to Blanchot, the author’s aim is to

make perceptible [...] the uninterrupted affirmation, the giant murmuring upon which language opens and thus becomes image, becomes imaginary, becomes a speaking depth, an indistinct plenitude which is empty.91

The acknowledging of the nothingness which breeds all possibility and the imaginary reckoning of that giant murmuring is at the same time an introspective travel and a probing of the boundaries of humanity. This is the highest work of self-consciousness, which becomes able to confront with the interminable flow of language, the dark spring of time and subjectivity. This is both a way forward towards death, accepting it, and a road back along the linguistic steps of the words that made us, formed us into what we are. This “road before” and “road behind” equals “scaling / one’s mind // by footholds not / there until found” (UBA 88) and “encompassing / being in time // after which time / is ever thereafter.” (UBA 83)

This peregrination is done in writing for it is the only space in which we can both estrange ourselves from the habits of language, thus recognizing the abyss beneath our feet, and retain the right, poetic rhythm which can set us on a right course towards understanding. “We are drawn, by too strong a movement, into a space where truth lacks,” remarks Blanchot, “where limits have disappeared, where we are delivered to the immeasurable.”92 The recognition of the depth comes when we “find the words / that are and were // before you,” when we finally come to terms with the fact that “language // is none that you / know or ever knew.” (UBA 61) “And yet it is there,” continues Blanchot, “that we are required to maintain an even step, not to lose a sense of proportion and to seek a true language by going all the way down into the deep of error.”93 Thus, the role of poetic writing is to “spot repeats” (UBA 61)

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92 Ibid., p. 183.
93 Ibid.
and write them out, as Carson does in his compact, echoing poetic lines. There is no sense in trying to appropriate reality, for speaking is just like “throwing // pebbles at / an unanswered // window.” (UBA 104) Words do not come naturally to us, but are “stolen,” as Carson notices: “If I stole // some things / from you I felt // I was given them / as words are.” (UBA 68) We are not their masters, because all we can do is try to appropriate them to what is our experience, but the rift that separates the life oriented-attempt of the consciousness from the death-infused indifference of the language makes it ultimately impossible. This error of desire, founded in the fact that “what speaks in me is always more than me,”94 generates that curious effect, the result of which is recognized by Carson in the poem “What becomes”: “the thought is / how it’s dressed,” (UBA 68) meaning that language is, in all its artificiality and inhumanity, our only tool for thinking. Accepting that fact entails a dark knowledge that it is only the “inch[ing ever] / forward foot by foot” (UBA 67) towards death, or the deepened awareness of it, that makes life possible and meaningful. The paradox of writing, this “stitching and // unstitching,” (UBA 68) is that it demands from us a subordination to the logic of words which, although allowing us to come to be, constantly obliterate our subjectivity. Blanchot recognizes this pull of language as the “demand of writing,” wherein “the «I» of the author is replaced by the anonymity of language that refers neither to his or her consciousness, nor to the consciousness of the reader, but to an incessant and interminable language that precedes them both.”95 This language, which is allowed to come to the foreground in Carson’s poetry, is a shadow-language, in which we are confronted with “the double absence of literature, which is the negation both of the things themselves and the concepts that represent them.”96 This sense of being utterly bereft was already heralded in On The Night Watch, where the dislocation of subjectivity in poetry was put forward in a straightforward manner: “the first words / I ever read […] / I find them / stolen by // this thief

94 Ullrich Haase & William Large, Maurice Blanchot, pp. 63-64.
95 Maurice Blanchot, The Space of Literature, p. 77.
96 Ullrich Haase & William Large, Maurice Blanchot, p. 74.
/ in the night.” (ONW 21) This “thief” is, paradoxically, the “I” itself. In the poem “I looked upon,” the lyrical subject finds himself lonely on a road, “on either side / becoming dark // no traveller but / me upon it.” (UBA 71) Suddenly, however, there is a sense of doubling, as if the narrator saw a doppelganger: “it is him I see / who walks into // the night and I / his shadow // always watching over him.” (UBA 71) This is the experience of the “I,” the shifter which invites death, the dissipation of identity in the anonymity of language. The subject splits into a rootless narrative voice and a shadowy identity it tries to catch up with. In this sense, “[t]he narrative voice […] is not the externalization of the inner thoughts of the writer, but the unfolding of language. The author experiences this […] as the movement of the «I to the he».”

The space in between, the twilit road is that unfolding, the work of the poem. The narrator is called up to witness it and, by allowing himself to evaporate in discourse, bring out that mysterious murmur of non-language, non-knowing, the inexpressible fragility of intimacy with death, the ultimate self-knowledge. The full recognition of this comes in “From what,” where we find a meditation on both the strange calling and the abyss to which one is drawn:

From what

elsewhere am I
summoned up
to tell of what
it is you ask

that I unfold
one thing after

97 Ibid., p. 81.
The writer is summoned to testify to “a language with no silence, for in it silence is spoken,” the “infinite murmur opened near us, underneath our common utterances, which seems an eternal spring.”98 By following the promise of recovering those words that have been stolen by the thief of the night, the poet moves, in rhythmic “unfolding” of language, towards that origin which turns out to be a non-origin – a space, revealed by the poem, “where speaking precedes not one of another utterance but its possibility – where speaking always precedes itself.”99 Blanchot underlines that the access to that sphere is granted by the dissolution of the “I” into “he.” We may add that in Carson’s poetry this is done by way of “you,” an address of the other which is the other within – our death-shadow, our mortality. In “Asleep,” Carson continues to investigate that relationship: “I find you / next to me […] I walk […] to see you as you // always were / surrounded by // your own space / you allow me into.” (UBA 78) The “you,” I would argue, cannot be read simply as an instance of addressing another person – it is, by the anonymous mediation of language, turned into an otherness which gives rise to subjectivity and, through its radical otherness, as death – “you are / my nearest timeless” (UBA 77) – puts us on the road of life. The measuring of that road is the tracking of time – “I still keep / your time in mind” (UBA 87) – the time that we are left with and which is all we have and know: “we only know / before until / the thing that // shall befall / becomes //

99 Ibid.
another stroke / after reverberating / stroke as of a bell that tolls / ceaselessly / upon its echo.”

(UBA 86)

Emmanuel Levinas, a friend to Maurice Blanchot, observed that literature allows putting into the foreground that ceaseless tolling of the bell which calls what is no longer the world, but the being of being. It finds its fulfilment in presenting its disappearing. Poetic language, by negating the world, allows that infinite murmur to emerge, bringing us closer to death, because this is what it ultimately is; the poem allows the murmur to echo in its lines.

In this sense, literature does not hide anything inside, for it is the radical exteriority and expulsion itself. “To See the Outside // look in / the writing desk,” (ONW 59) Carson says. Thus, literature washes us ashore to a place where no thought can reach and opens us up towards that which remains unthought – being itself, not as an ultimate truth of it, but rather its erroneous nature: being as a site of wandering, an uninhabited realm of authenticity, but not of truth. “[A] stumble // brings us ever / deeper in // to aftertouch / resounding,” or in other words “the after-/knowledge of not // knowing.” (UBA 107)

That relationship, metaphorically phrased in the dialectic of “you” and “I” of these poems, is summed up in the poem “Teaching me it,” where the “you” is teaching “me” a tune. The following of the tune of the “other” is the ek-static process of catching-up, reiterating “note after note // before note / repeating it until // I play it after / you until with you.” (UBA 108) This short passage sums up many aspects of Carson’s approach – the patience, the repetition and the careful weaving of the thread. The incessant attempts at being “on time,” to become one with the other, are contrasted with the unavoidable falling back, or stepping out of synch. As Levinas puts it, “identity lies in the total patience of the one assigned, who,
patient, despite himself, dies continually, lasts in his instant.” The renunciation of mastery and an exposure to vulnerability that is at stake here – underlined by Levinas – finds its confirmation in the next poem, where we encounter yet another plea for the dislocation of subjectivity: “the notes are more // truly told by / leaving them // alone to be / found by the bow.” (UBA 109) When projected onto the sphere of language, this diminishing and retracting turns out to be the necessary step in order to make space (via the poem) for “the neutral, indistinct word which is speaking’s being.” The “being of speaking” cannot be expressed in words, but when the writer opens up – as Carson opens “the door // into hall” – it is possible to gradually approach it – “threshold / after threshold / slowly oh” – and lift its burden – “I bring / you heavy” – to the place where it might shine through: “to our room / full of light.” (UBA 110, the last poem of the collection) This light is what Blanchot calls the “neuter of language,” which expresses itself through that anonymity – achieved by taking that long, winding road away from oneself, towards the other – which is ultimately diagnosed as the “anonymity of language that seems to be spoken by no one.” In this sense, the “you” carried by up the flight of stairs, is indeed a figure of homecoming, heralded by the previous poem “You only,” where “one day you heard / it turn thinking / of going home.” (UBA 109)

That “you” is a cipher, as in Celan’s poems, because the women implied by the poems can be interpreted as consciousness come back on itself, a Hegelian contentment, wherein a certain satisfaction is found by locating “in extreme negativity – in death become possibility, project, and time – the measure of the absolutely positive.” This is the self-knowledge achieved by subordinating to the “you” and answering to its call. It is not only the high point in an auto-poetic philosophical venture and an ethical turn, but also an artistic achievement. This is where, as Blanchot claims, being, art and desire converge, for “[u]nder a name that

104 Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being Or Beyond Essence*, p. 50.
hides her and a veil that covers her, she is the profoundly obscure point toward which art and
desire, death and night, seem to tend.¹⁰⁸ They cannot meet, but Ciaran Carson is able to
express what that “tendency” reveals – the non-language which serves as the basis for all
possible languages, one that finally transcends the dialectic of orality and textuality. It is a
void which hums, the murmur of Being as it unfolds itself in flashes of insight. This is what
he has been listening to while being “on the night watch,” measuring out the time, exploring
the paradoxes of “until before after.” He stepped into the night and found within it, as
Orpheus did, the other night, where the other language reveals itself in the space of the poem.

He who, having entered the first night, seeks intrepidly to go toward its profoundest intimacy,
toward the essential, hears at a certain moment the other night – hears himself, hears the
eternally reverberating echo of his own step, a step toward silence, toward the void. But the
echo sends this step back to him as the whispering immensity, and the void is now a presence
coming toward him.¹⁰⁹

What recoils against me is language as the neuter, which is neither spoken nor written by
anyone. It is the murmur or rustling of language.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 170.
¹⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 168.
¹¹⁰ Ullrich Haase & William Large, Maurice Blanchot, p. 82.
Conclusions

In this dissertation, I attempted to explore the limits of orality and textuality in Ciaran Carson’s poetry. These two reference points, which are the traditional signposts demarcating the field that is literature, are also – as I would argue – the right points of entrance into Carson’s oeuvre. However, their examination does not stop short of a certain movement, for the exploration of those boundaries of discourse leads the poet to the field where language, as well as poetic practice in general, is redefined on a different ground. This is where Carson becomes a rather philosophizing poet, who obliterates the traditional distinctions in the field of human studies. He shows that it is possible to think in language, as his work progresses, in a zigzag manner, between the posts of orality and textuality, pointing to the realm of the unthought.

In this sense, he overcomes traditional metaphysics and installs in its place an original insight into the questions of expression and communication. It entails a certain displacement of subjectivity, as the self-referential angle in his work becomes ever stronger, albeit not erasing or ignoring the foremost preoccupations and stimuli that set his pen in motion, i.e. ethical issues that are part and parcel of the Northern Irish political situation during the Troubles and later on. Retaining that twofold perspective, one leg standing firmly in the here-and-now of a piercing geopolitical diagnosis, the other venturing far out into epistemological and ontological areas of interest, Carson encompasses an unusually large field of inquiry. The ability to venture deep beyond the clichés and schemata governing mainstream reflection is married in his poems to an almost obsessive attention to detail and particularities. In this way, his poetic project is an experimental venture, where easy solutions are rejected in favour of a careful, ethically-oriented examination of the grounds of certain problems and not their
immediate outcomes infected by a biased and limited approach embodied by the sectarian narrow-mindedness which is so visible in the history of Northern Ireland.

Beginning from *The Irish For No* and *Belfast Confetti* (i.e. after the “second debut”), Carson extensively feeds on the tradition of storytelling and music-making, rooting his poetic practice in the most primeval functions of oral literature, i.e. community-formation and circulation of stories that uphold both the individual and local identity, but not some abstract notion of a political state. The anti-essentialist strain in his thought comes out strong as far as these matters are concerned, stripping all nationalist and totalizing outlooks of their ideological cover-up and exposing their susceptibility to deconstruction and critical overturning. By exploring the workings of memory and history-making, he undercuts the presupposition that there are certain givens in the way we narrate histories, placing in the foreground the fabricating power of language, which rules out any pretensions to exactitude and finiteness. On the other hand, as a result of the appreciation of the imaginative power of stories, he elevates the narrative procedures to the rank of serious instruments that prove to be helpful in overcoming both personal and collective traumas. This reparatory aspect is of special importance, as it allows Carson to envision a way out of the political stasis that has materialized itself in the form of the vicious circles of violence governing the tit-for-tat politics in Northern Ireland.

In this way, Ciaran Carson fuses his poetic investigations with the immediate ethical concerns, never falling back into the deadening and immobilizing stance of *a priori* judgments passed upon reality from a distanced, self-containing position. His reworking of the problems of guilt, penance and political responsibility takes place in language, not in the sphere of abstract ideas formed on the basis of some metaphysical preconceptions. By putting the linguistic aspect in the foreground, he is capable of dislocating political violence from the street, where everyone suffers equally, to the sphere of speech, showing how it can be turned
to serve reconciliation or mutual understanding, and not the perpetration of dangerous notions that denigrate the discourse of otherness. These insights, I would claim, would not be possible without the careful scrutinizing of the diverse aspects of language that we find in his poems.

Returning to the discursive inquires Carson makes, it is clear that he confronts in his writing two approaches that could be tagged, for the purposes of this conclusion, with the names of two thinkers who stand in radical opposition to each other, i.e. Walter J. Ong and Jacques Derrida. The former considers literature a supreme manifestation of the human “voice” – a most subtle indication of presence that is a mask which objectifies the literary work and paradoxically is a stronger call than that of another human being speaking to us. Ong claims that the voice is not only a physical matter, but also carries the emotional inside of the speaker. Moreover, it has the capacity to penetrate into the interlocutor. It is an almost magical medium through which intimate contact between two people is established. He does not refrain from speaking of a certain “mystery” of the voice, its inherent secret.\(^1\) Carson certainly highly values the qualities that direct speech offers, but he exposes the fact that this kind of “mystery” can easily fall into the trap of a metaphysics that favours essentialist thinking, because it attributes certain qualities to the person, ignoring the fact that in many cases it is the ideology, *qua* language, that carries seeds of destruction. Jacques Derrida, who criticised Ong’s preoccupation with the voice, claims that such a “phonocentrism” is consequently a “logocentrism” and it entails belief in the “absolute proximity of voice and being, of voice and the meaning of being, of voice and the ideality of meaning.”\(^2\) This, he concludes, is a threat because “phonocentrism merges with the historical determination of the meaning of being in general as presence.”\(^3\)


\(^3\) Ibid., p. 12.
graspable and understandable. As it transpires from Carson’s writings, this is a source of suffering, because it provokes an attribution of a finite identity and obliterates otherness as such, i.e. the ability to ethically confront what we do not fully understand without erasing and downgrading that very difference.

On the other hand, however, the precedence of the *différance*, a differentiating force which makes identity possible but puts it on unstable ground, installs a textual perspective on reality, which is so characteristic of post-structuralism. This forms the other extreme in Carson’s poetry – an astounding fascination with text, which surfaces on all occasions, turning the reality into an endless book. This, however, gives rise to a fear that everything can all too easily dissolve in the weaving factory of anonymous language, especially when it is run by those who try to install a panopticon within it and turn it into a surveillance mechanism wherein there is no longer any freedom. The city and history provide apt metaphors of such a struggle between the individualizing story that animates personal life and the identity-parcelling linguistic machine run by the powers-that-be. The saving aspect of the particular story, which always begins from the bottom of personal experience, becomes a necessary counterbalance to the linguistic subjection that is carried out in politics. In this sense, Carson can be perceived as an anti-political writer, who remains suspicious of all segregating types of discourse. This confrontation, however, is carried out to a different plane. First, it leads to a sceptic breakdown of epistemology in the collection *For All We Know*, but is ultimately rethought in ontological terms.

Carson asks himself a question similar to that voiced by Derrida: “What happens […] when the deciphered text inscribes in itself *additionally* the scene of the deciphering?"⁴ This procedure opens up the field of being itself and the being of language. It turns out that it is in fact our relation to being and – to be more precise – our forgetfulness of the fact that it is a

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pre-existing language which shapes what and how we are. The work of memory, re-oriented towards the question of remembering being, thus transcends the dialectic or orality and textuality towards that which was already signalled by Jacques Derrida – a proto-language that houses being and has to be given precedence in all inquiries. At this point, Carson’s work acquires a new dimension, as it stumbles upon its last and greatest subject – death. “Only a relation to my death,” Derrida suggests, “could make the infinite differing of presence appear.” Thus, in his last two collections Carson enters a final path towards the understanding of death and its intimate relationship with writing. It is only then, at the most difficult point in the evolution of thinking and self-knowledge, that literature is revealed to be the most precise language in which it is possible to shed all external problems and perform an “attack on the border,” a hunt which, as a struggling with solitude and language, leads to the furthest boundary of this world, towards the boundary of what is human. This exploration leads Carson towards the conclusion, suggested in the thought of Maurice Blanchot and Emmanuel Levinas, that it is only the deepest confrontation with the inhuman abyss that opens up before any writer, as he or she comes to terms with that “unthought ground of thought,” a silent murmur of that proto-language which makes subjectivity possible. This is, as Levinas claims, a variant of phenomenological reduction, a movement back “to that hither side […] in which everything shows itself. […] In it the indescribable is described.” This gesture of homecoming, a return to oneself via the space of literature, where one has to confront with the ultimate negativity, is embodied in Carson’s last two books. There, by way of facing up to the radical otherness, it is finally possible to see that “saying, before it conjugates a verbal sign, is already an ethical gesture.” It is a discovery of a language that

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transcends the traditional dichotomy of orality and textuality, for “verbalization does not exhaust the signifyingness of saying. Instead, a philosophy of otherwise than being can raise the game, precisely by elaborating a new «saying that must also be unsaid».” In this way, Carson finally goes beyond himself and emerges, like Orpheus, with a new perspective that restores Being to its primary place and recovers language, as the inhuman foundation of humanity, putting it on the right level – somewhere beyond our ability to grasp it, but in contact with the profoundest aspects of human life.

Does the end of that intellectual road annul the space that it has covered? Certainly not, for it constitutes a meridian, to employ Paul Celan’s metaphor, which encompasses human experience and allows one a return home from that odyssey with a deepened outlook on our own humanity and, what is of greater importance, with a renewed attitude towards otherness. The discovery of an absolute alterity within ourselves – transcendence in immanence, so to speak – is a source of renewed ethics that forces us to retain an attentive, open attitude towards it. The kind of responsibility for the other – a fundamental tenet for Emmanuel Levinas – is the only ethical position one can safely assume. The promulgation of such philosophy, derived from experience and reinforced by intense meditation conducted in poetry, is in my opinion the highest literary achievement of Ciaran Carson. His unrelenting search shows that it is possible to experiment and think in literature – a conclusion that is most pertinent when we consider the post-modern quandary of simulacra and radical cutting off from reality in favour of post-historical intellectual games and puzzles that receive much of today’s critical attention. Carson proves that a writer’s journey, a movement of thought in verse, can be as fascinating, thought-provoking and insightful as life itself, without losing sight of both ethics and aesthetics, the dissolution of which is usually proclaimed as the downfall of true reflection.

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Streszczenie

W rozprawie doktorskiej pt. „Granice oralności i tekstualności w poezji Ciarana Carsona” zamierzam podjąć problematykę, jaką wyznacza ewolucja twórczości poetycznej pisarza północno-irlandzkiego, Ciarana Carsona (ur. 1948). Punktem wyjścia jest analiza napięcia pomiędzy oralnością a tekstualnością, która stanowi podstawę do dalszych rozważań. Problem ten naświetlam z różnych perspektyw krytycznych, od Waltera Onga do Jacquesa Derridy. W pierwszym rozdziale badam wpływ irlandzkiej muzyki oraz tradycji opowiadania historii na zwrot, jaki dokonał się w poezji Carsona ok. roku 1987 (data publikacji tomu „The Irish For No”). Podnoszę przy okazji kwestię różnych teorii formułujących związek pomiędzy opowiadaniem a człowieczeństwem, w szczególności ideę „hommes recits” Tzvetana Todorova, jak również poststrukturalistycznej rewizji relacji podmiotowości i języka. Rozważania te wzbogacam o płaszczyznę poetyki i rozważań formalnych w twórczości Carsona. Sprawę tekstu omawiam w kontekście „sceny pisma” (termin zaczerpnięty z pism Jacquesa Derridy), którą odnajduję w wierszu „Confetti Belfastu” (przel. Piotr Sommer). Wprowadzam tutaj takie wątki jak metafora labiryntu, która wyznacza strukturę języka i myśli, oraz metafory tkania, szycia i wyplatania, które z kolei funkcjonują u Carsona jako desygnaty pisania i myślenia.

W kolejnych częściach pracy poddaję analizie te wątki twórczości Carsona, w których realizuje się zarysowane powyżej napięcie między oralnością a tekstualnością, a mianowicie: pamięć, miasto oraz historię. W kontekście pamięci nawiązuję do konceptu „pamięci mimowolnej” i twórczości Marcela Prousta, oraz do filozofii pamięci Henriquego Bergsona. Posiłkuję się też analizami fenomenologicznymi Edwarda S. Caseya, szczególnie pojęciem „ruminescence” („przypominanie-przeżuwanie”) oraz komentarzami Waltera Benjamina na temat świata rzeczy materialnych i tzw. „aury” przedmiotów i dzieł sztuki. W omówieniu wątku miasta poruszam kwestię jego tekstu, labiryntowej konstrukcji oraz kreślenia map jako formy poznania i metafory kryzysu epistemologicznego ponowoczesności. Analiza wątków urbanistycznych ujawnia też polityczny wymiar poezji Carsona, a w szczególności kwestię nadzoru, tresury i panoptikonu społecznego (w nawiązaniu do myśli Michela Foucaulta), rozszczepienia społeczeństwa północno-irlandzkiego oraz możliwych strategii przekraczania tego bolesnego podziału, które odnaleźć można w twórczości Baudelaire’a (idea „flaneura”) oraz Guya Deborda (idea „psychogeografii”). Z kolei w przypadku historii badam w poezji Carsona, idąc za myślą tzw. szkoły filozofii historii New Historicism, status doświadczenia historycznego oraz relacji pomiędzy historią publiczną a prywatną.
Kwestia oralności i tekstualności, która realizuje się praktycznie w wątkach pamięci, miasta i historii uzyskuje ostatecznie status samodzielnego problemu epistemologicznego w tomie „For All We Know” (2000 r.), który to traktuję właśnie jako samodzielną meta-refleksję w twórczości Ciarana Carsona. Zbiór ten interpretuję jako tekst o filozoficznym wydźwięku, w którym takie wątki jak spotkanie między dwojgiem ludzi, ich wzajemne relacje, opowiadanie historii i słuchanie muzyki poruszają kwestie dialektyczności ludzkiego poznania, uniwersalności pewnych form narratywistycznych oraz nieskończonego procesu hermeneutycznego, który pojmowany jest jako sedno kondycji ludzkiej.

Ponieważ pojmuję tom „For All We Know” jako swoistą barierę, którą Carson osiąga, definiując granice wiedzy i miłości, dwa kolejne tomy czytam jako próbę przekroczenia tychże ram wyznaczonych przez język i jego dwa wymiary: oralność i tekstualność. W książkach poetyckich „On The Night Watch” (2009 r.) i „Until Before After” (2010 r.) dopatruję się prób wyjścia poza dotychczasową problematykę w kierunku bardziej zasadniczych kwestii, tj. czasu, bycia i śmierci, oraz chęci przekroczenia tradycyjnej metafizyki, w takim rozumieniu, jakie nadał temu gestowi Martin Heidegger. W analizach tych dwóch tomów posilkuje się twórczością poetycką, krytyczną i filozoficzną takich myślicieli jak Paul Celan, Hans Georg Gadamer i Maurice Blanchot, wykazując, że w poezji Carsona dopatrzyć się można projektu wiersza jako przestrzeni doświadczenia i śmierci, gdzie za sprawą oczyszczonego języka poezji zawiązać się może głębsza relacja między człowiekiem a Byciem.