FINDING A HOME “IN-BETWEEN”:
RECONSIDERING CIARAN CARSON’S EARLY WORKS

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ABSTRACT

Finding a Home “in-between”: Reconsidering Ciaran Carson’s Early Works

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Ciaran Carson’s *The Irish for No*, published in 1986, was heralded as a verse map of his home city, Belfast, during the Troubles. Its urban setting and modern context, long lines, and patchwork form incorporating diverse sources is typically considered a drastic departure from his previous work. Some critics refer to it as his ”first" book after a false start of typical and competent Northern Irish verse and an ensuing decade of silence. But his earlier writings reveal continuities with the breakout volume and his evolving ideas about the poet’s role, particularly during a time of conflict.

The (Northern) Irish writer has often been characterized by a divided mind. This dissertation will provide a close, chronological analysis of Carson’s early works to examine his developing understanding and acceptance of an “in-between” position. *The Insular Celts* centers on the hermit-scribe, isolated from human contact. Subsequent works turn to domestic scenes, craftwork, and exploration through travel and memory as his speakers consider how to represent the world around them and preserve what is in danger of being lost. Early anxieties about division give way to gradual acceptance of a hybrid position. His essays and reviews reveal the writers and works that led him more directly to employ Belfast, with its landmarks and a past fundamentally tied to Carson’s

identity, as a source and setting. They also show the influence of his work with traditional music. The mix of present-day experiences, personal associations, and layers of the past that a performance creates parallels the mapping of a person's or place's identity.

While his Belfast volumes stand out for their depiction of the modern city and for a new form, considering his earlier works enables a reading that moves beyond seeing them simply as "Troubles poems." The books are set in Belfast but are not just about it; the city serves as a context for Carson's ongoing investigation of how identity incorporates the specific and particular, joining elements from the past and present into something new and characteristic of a moment in time and place while subject to continual change.

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ABBREVIATIONS

BC	*Belfast Confetti*
BT	*Belfast Textiles*
IC	*The Insular Celts*
IFN	*The Irish for No*
NE	*The New Estate*
LE	*The Lost Explorer*
NEOP	*The New Estate and Other Poems*
SPW	*Ciaran Carson: Space, Place and Writing*

Chapter One: Carson and the Poetry of Conflict

THE SILENCE OF THE TROUBLES POET?

Upon Ciaran Carson's passing in 2019, Martin Doyle, Books Editor of *The Irish Times,* published a collection of tributes and reminiscences. Many recount Carson's fascination and facility with language and translations, but a recurring topic is the poet's abiding ties to and close identification with Belfast. Glenn Patterson comments, "If the city is, as he wrote, the map of the city, Ciaran drew Belfast better than anyone I ever read" (qtd. in Doyle). Gerard Smyth notes that, in *The Irish for No* and *Belfast Confetti,* Carson produced "a wonderful homage to his native city." For John Kelly, Carson "revealed Belfast, and by extension the North, as a place with far more interesting ingredients than were immediately evident," offering "hope and suggest[ing] possibility." He "constructed a shadow-Belfast out of language," Nick Laird offers, where "the word and the world continually merge." In a review of a collection of critical essays on Carson's work, Hugh McFadden calls him "Belfast's unofficial poet laureate" (114).

Carson's work has also been specifically linked with the Troubles, three decades of intercommunal, paramilitary, and state-sponsored conflict and violence from 1968 to the Good Friday Accords in 1998. Symth calls Carson's Belfast volumes "responses to the historic moment of the Troubles" (qtd. in Doyle). David Cooke accounts Carson as the Northern poet "most directly affected by the day-to-day experience of living with sectarian violence and military occupation" (Cooke). Conor O'Callahan labels him "the Troubles' greatest laureate" (qtd. in Doyle), and Carson's poems are often included in collections of Troubles poetry, such as Frank Ormsby's *A Rage for Order* (1992). Ormsby, in a 2022 lecture, observes that "it is generally true that the course of Ulster poetry since the 60s has been dictated" by the conflict ("Poetry of the 'Troubles'"). He

includes Carson with other poets who wrote about "Ulster as a divided society" but points out that Carson captures "the menacing atmosphere of the city . . . more intensely than in the work of any other Northern Irish poet." Carson has reinforced this characterization in interviews and in print. He tells John Brown that he wanted to "act as a camera or a tape recorder," offering an "alternative" to the "official account" of "what was or is going on" (*In the Chair* 148-9). To Elmer Kennedy-Andrews he explains that he "never thought of leaving" Belfast, as some of his peers did ("For All I Know" 17). It seemed "inevitable" to him that "a lot of the poems written in the 1980s and 90s were some kind of reflection of the Troubles."

The Irish for No and *Belfast Confetti* are also often considered what Ormsby calls "a new beginning" (Ormsby interview 7). Many critics and reviewers refer to the period between the publication of his first book, *The New Estate* (1976), and *The Irish for No* (1987), or between his pamphlet *The Lost Explorer* (1978) and the latter as a time of silence. Christian Wiman points out that "[m]ost young poets face at least ten years of writing in the dark," when it is "impossible to publish poems in magazines, never mind a whole book" (74). The demands of "a few demeaning jobs," the daunting presence of older, more established poets, and "relatives wondering what the hell you're doing with your life" combine to create a "mismatch between the Everest of your ambition and the Sahara of your circumstance." But Carson had already achieved acclaim as a poet, and his "ten years of . . . dark" came after almost a decade of publication in journals and the release of two pamphlets and a book-length collection. His work with traditional music was also fulfilling and productive, leading to many articles and reviews that formed the basis for his pocket guide, *Irish Traditional Music* (1986) and the later, more anecdotal work, *Last Night's Fun: About Music, Food and Time* (1996).

John Drexel, in *The New England Review*, characterizes the "nearly ten year" span as a time of "unpredictable and radical metamorphosis" for Carson (183). He observes that other Northern Irish writers "held center stage" during that period, suggesting that Carson may have felt the burden of comparison, something Carson has also jokingly proposed. Barra Ó Seaghdha recognizes a new voice in *The Irish for No* and wonders whether Carson's period of silence was due to "the competitiveness of the Northern poetry scene, to his own long-term ambition for his poetry, to the intimidatory grip that [Paul] Muldoon has always exercised over other writers, or to some combination of the above" (82).

Ben Howard similarly notes a "sea-change, . . . a radical departure, structurally and thematically" in "tone and his approach to form" and a shift in focus from "Celtic heritage to the condition of contemporary Belfast" ("Evolving Art" 33). John Goodby considers that Carson's "reappearance" with "urban subject matter" heralds "the most radical transformation of the Northern Irish poetry scene of the late 1980s" (290). Rui Homem points out that "critical accounts" have made *The Irish for No* a "de facto inaugural book" (166). Each critic seems surprised by the volume, and several hint at something strategic in Carson's pause, but the unforeseen results garner welcome and acclaim.

Jenny Malmqvist counters in *Belfast Textiles* (*BT*) that Carson's "unfolding poetics . . . took its beginning" in his 1970s poetry, particularly in *The Lost Explorer* (70). While the Irish hermit-poet or scribe is the main figure in many of the poems in his first pamphlet, *The Insular Celts*, in the final, title poem of *The New Estate* Carson writes of a "new verse" that "now runs through" the standard pastoral imagery of the "laurel hedge" (*NE* 41). "The Patchwork Quilt," concluding the subsequent pamphlet, *The Lost Explorer*,

introduces the "patchwork technique" that Carson employs in later volumes (*BT* 70). This "composite method" of recycling and piecing together fragments to "form a new whole," explained metaphorically in a monologue about the creation of a quilt, becomes a model for his writing when he turns more directly to Belfast as a setting and subject. Kathleen McCracken considers the process of "unravelling and stitching" in the poem as an "analogy with Carson's praxis" (370).

McCracken, like Malmqvist, finds continuity in Carson's writings before and after his "silence." She admits that the long gap between publications "would seem to imply that Carson's debut was something of a false start" (369). But she admonishes readers and critics that "disregard[ing] the importance of either *The New Estate* or *The Lost Explorer"* would be "wrong" and "mistaken." Both "tonally and contextually," his "voice and preoccupations are already formed" in his early poems. They display the "wry, occasionally black humour, the penchant for irony and pastiche, [and] the celebration of the local set against admonitions of insularity and intolerance" found in his later works. While Carson infrequently addresses Belfast and the Troubles directly in his early poems, he questions traditional Irish tropes, themes, and symbols that contribute to the rhetoric and language of division. The labyrinth metaphor he later uses in writing about the confusion of the street grid of Belfast is central to his examination of "familial relations no less convoluted" than the street maps (370). His interest in music, the visual arts, craftsmanship, and other forms of representation also appears in his poems of the 1970s. "[K]ey images such as linen and china, mouths and hands, mirrors and snow, . . . self and place" appear throughout his works, as well as the complementary metaphors that become models for his writing: "the maternal inheritance of unravelling and stitching, and the paternal one of discovery and mapping" (369, 371).

Despite concluding that the early poems "seem unlikely antecedents," McCracken finds an "energetic, imaginative openness" and "willingness to assume a range of voices and to experiment with different formal patterns" (369, 370). His earliest poems, like the "St. Ciaran" sequence and the title poem of *The Insular Celts*, are rooted in the "early Irish verse Carson was immersed in at the time," but they "alternatively . . . emulate and mock" their models' "meticulous prosody." Other poems ("Linen," "The Bomb Disposal") display the "resonant ambiguity characteristic of the later poems" (369). A "clutch of longer narratives" ("Dunne," "At the Windy Gap, 1910," "The Patchwork Quilt"), which she feels are "among the most interesting," reveals where "the 'talky voice' begins its utterance, . . . prefigur[ing] the Belfast-centered accounts" (370).

Mark Ford, reviewing *The Irish for No*, also sees some relationship between Carson's first and second books: "His themes are pretty much the same in his equally impressive new book, but his approach to them has changed radically" (14). Nick Laird, like McCracken, identifies a writer searching for the right voice and form, noting that the "early books show a mind trying to get to grips with what had happened to his city and community" (qtd. in Doyle). To Laird, Carson's speaker is "a flaneur out of Kafka," observing and responding to a confusing and sometimes surreal or absurd situation. Laird offers "Turn Again," the first poem in *The Irish for No*, as an example. It opens with the image of a map of the city that fails in its role as a guide—"Today's plan is already yesterday's – the streets that were there are gone"—yet many of Carson's poems before that volume adopt a similar perspective of a speaker caught in a moment of uncertainty or change, without an explicitly modern, Belfast context.

Before and after his decade of "silence," as well as during it, Carson explores the foundations of individual and community identity, the ways the present and the past

intersect, and the writer's role in a society in conflict. Changes in his writing reflect not only growing pressures to respond to the Troubles but also his gradual discovery of how to do so effectively. *The Irish for No* and *Belfast Confetti* are often referred to as verse maps of the city, the speakers and subjects (buildings, streets, residents) serving as the elements assembled to create those representations. But Carson had already been negotiating labyrinths in his earlier works. Malmqvist notes that it is "the typical method within criticism" to "quickly glance over" what she refers to as his "juvenilia" and to focus on later publications (*BT* 34). Close examination of his early collections, uncollected poems, and prose (essays and reviews) before *The Irish for No* reveals the context for his later volumes, helping trace his development and challenging the claim that the period between *The Lost Explorer* and *The Irish for No* was a time of silence.

The generally accepted explanation for Carson's "silence" is that he, as he has stated, was "dissatisfied" with poetry which, in comparison to his work with traditional music, seemed "a rather anal and furtive pursuit" (Ormsby interview 7). He admits that he "did write the odd poem in that interval" but "scrapped most of what was written" because it did not "particularly excite" him. After a decade in retreat, his voice emerged in a new form and with a fresh start. But in "Farset," from *Belfast Confetti,* he recalls "[t]rying to get back to that river," the Farset of his childhood (47). Reflecting on the sources and meanings of its name and the different forms it took as it both shaped and was shaped by the city, he describes how, in the present, it "disappears down a black hole," "lost" and "walled-in" by the modern landscape (49). Yet it still flows, a "hidden stream" that both "sinks and surfaces" (47, 49). Carson's voice was also not silenced. Like the Farset, it continued in different, sometimes unseen forms and courses, eventually emerging in what seems something entirely new but is a variation flowing out of what

had been submerged but not stopped.

Carson's main metaphors for identity (of the city and of the self)—the patchwork, labyrinth, and palimpsest—are based on change, choice, and provisionality. Dismissing his early works marginalizes their role in his development and obscures the layers, meanderings, and discoveries that leave their traces. It also overlooks the fact that, while Carson is often considered a Belfast or Troubles poet, when he writes about those subjects more directly, the city and its sectarian conflict reflect a widening set of materials and experiences he draws on to continue to explore the sources of identity, the divided self, the influence of memory and the past, and the challenges of representation. John Banville comments that because "he never left for Dublin, say, or London, he is probably less well known than he should be," but Belfast, "while it informs everything, does not limit it" (Edemariam). *The Irish for No* and *Belfast Confetti* are not a new beginning but the reemergence of a voice that had quietly been creating its course, the development seen in the close examination of his earlier writings, both poetry and prose.

FINDING A MIDDLE GROUND: WRITING DURING AND ABOUT CONFLICT

John Banville calls Carson "a delightful kind of hybrid" (qtd. in Doyle). Sinéad Morrissey comments that he "operated in a magical vortex[,] . . . a zone of happenstance, serendipity, [and] coincidence." This in-between or mixed position relates not only to Carson and his writings but also, less fortuitously, to the Northern Irish poet and to the condition of the North itself. Carson's development reflects the challenges of writing during a time of conflict and change, whether living in or leaving a divided state. Is a poet a champion of art and aestheticism or a spokesperson for a community? Could there be a middle ground, and what would that entail? Carson's early writings offer examples of his attempts to reconcile art and the role of the poet with the contemporary political

and social conflict.

In the 1960s, an active and vocal civil-rights movement modeled on the struggle for equal rights in the United States challenged nearly fifty years of single-party control of political, economic, and cultural life in the North. Institutions that had been dominated by the Ulster Unionist Party, working in favor of the majority-Protestant population that identified itself as British, faced demands for reform. But marches and protests were considered threats against the state and the status quo, sponsored by republicans seeking a united Ireland and challenging British, Protestant identity. Community and institutional reactions became increasingly contentious and repressive, resulting in physical confrontations and the destruction of homes and businesses. Many Catholic families were driven out of increasingly single-community neighborhoods, some taking refuge across the border in the Republic.

In 1969, British troops were brought to Northern Ireland as a peacekeeping force. Initially welcomed by the Catholic community, they eventually became symbols of British rule and targets of republican paramilitary groups, further escalating tensions and violence. In 1971, Stormont, the Northern Irish government, urged Britain to introduce the controversial policy of internment, the arrest and detention of suspected paramilitaries without trial. Operation Demetrius, intended to halt aggression on both sides, was mainly aimed at the Catholic community, which made up nearly 1900 out of almost 2000 of those detained (Melaugh). Many of those arrested were identified through faulty intelligence and eventually released without charges. But the brutal treatment some prisoners experienced and the uneven targeting of one community hardened resentment and opposition, leading to acts of civil disobedience, including a “rent and rates strike,” and increased support for the Irish Republican Army (IRA) within the Catholic

community. Rising violence involved sectarian killings and clashes between citizens and security forces, including the deaths of fourteen civilians at the hands of the British army during a rally on 30 January 1972, referred to as "Bloody Sunday," and the introduction of car bombs aimed at both civilian and military targets. Northern Ireland's Parliament, able to provide neither "security success nor political progress" towards an end to the conflict, was dissolved in 1972, replaced by direct rule from Westminster that lasted until 1998, aside from several months of home-rule in 1974 (McKittrick and McVea 82).

Over three decades of sectarian and anti-British conflict changed the cityscape and the residents' lives. Division and tension still remain, even after the Good Friday Accords of 1998. In 1972, 99 per cent of Protestants and 75 per cent of Catholics "lived in streets where they were in their own majority" (Wright 205). 78 per cent of the former and 70 of the latter lived in neighborhoods where they were "part of a 90 per cent plus majority." In 2019, 94 per cent of public housing was still divided along religious lines, and more than 90 per cent of children were in segregated schools (Nagle). By the end of the conflict, approximately 3,700 people were killed and 47,000 injured, and more than half of the casualties were civilians ("Fact Sheet on the Conflict"). Around 1,400 British military died during deployment as well, along with 319 Royal Ulster Constabularies ("The Troubles").

Writers found it a challenge to incorporate contemporary events and conditions into their work, if they were considered at all. For Gerald Dawe, the "big question" in his own development as a poet during the Troubles was "how to redress artistic desire with the very real and immediate social consequences of historical conflict, political failure, and violence[,] . . . and encroaching . . . sectarianism" ("Finding the Language" 17). Seamus Deane points out that the artist is expected to provide the "civilizing or clarifying

influence of art" through "some kind of 'comment', 'vision', [or] 'attitude'" (43). Yet if artists engage with politics, they may serve as "sponsors, participants or as opponents," distorting their work "into a propaganda exercise" (44, 43). Disengagement from politics and the conflict is another option. The poet can focus on aesthetics and "stylishness," adopting the traditional role of the scribe in the woods or the poet in an ivory tower, removed from the conflict altogether (47).

Some writers and critics support this separation. Edna Longley feels that "the poetic artefact" needs "autonomy," rising "above its context" to separate "the political and the poetic spheres" (qtd. in Goodby 8). Others, as Deane points out, believe that "the artist who avoids or evades a confrontation with the crisis is in some sense irresponsible or cowardly or insufficiently an artist" (43). Frank Ormsby explains that failing to "'confront' the realities directly" can lead to the perception that the artist is "limited by the horizons defined by the colonial predicament, . . . 'insulated in some university shelter-belt or . . . ensconced in some cultural oasis such as the Arts Council or the BBC' and therefore cut off from the majority of ordinary lives" (*Poets from the North* 20). The artist risks being pigeonholed or being regarded as out of touch.

Longley's view aligns with W. H. Auden's argument that poetry cannot solve Ireland's "madness and her weather . . . / For poetry makes nothing happen" ("In Memory" 248). But Auden adds that, while poets do not provide "answers" and cannot "create a united and just society," their work can reflect "the world they live in" ("The Public v. the Late Mr William Butler Yeats" 7, 6). Poets have "the power to make personal excitement" about their "social and material environment . . . socially available," "exciting others, different though their circumstances and beliefs may be" (6). Given the Irish "'bardic' tradition" and the "centrality of literature to Nationalist discourse," poets

were seen as "natural choices as spokesmen," called on to offer "oracular pronouncements," despise the sentiment that poetry is "peripheral" to politics and war. (Goodby 143).

Finding a middle ground that is neither "political commitment" nor "evasion" allows for writing that is "definitively Irish" but not "defined" by that term (Deane 48, 49). For Deane, finding this balance supports a "species of humanism" instead of an ideology (48). Dawe recalls the "common ground" between the communities before the Troubles and his "determination . . . *not* to bow to history's grand imperatives" when the conflict started ("Finding the Language" 12). Instead of retreating or simply accepting the divisions, the writer can "make sense of the civic chaos" by examining the "intellectual, cultural, musical, philosophical, and artistic traditions that lie buried beneath the imprisoning stereotypical images of society in the North" (11, 14). Seamus Heaney, commenting on his generation's indirect treatment of political issues, claims, "All of us, Protestant poets, Catholic poets . . . probably had some notion that a good poem was 'a paradigm of good politics', a site of energy and tension and possibility, a truth-telling arena but not a killing field" ("To set the darkness"). A poet could contribute "subtleties and tolerances," facing contemporary issues indirectly. "For most poets," Goodby points out, "obliquity was a strategy and autonomy a desideratum" (145). Conflict then becomes context rather than subject, "more insistently part of [the] mental furniture, . . . incorporated and worked out within the poetry itself" (9).

Carson's writings prior to the publication of *The Irish for No* show his progress in negotiating the poet's role and responsibilities and making the conflict part of his "mental furniture." In his earliest work, particularly in *The Insular Celts*, he frequently adopts the persona of the hermit-poet, a traditional version of Ormsby's sheltered, ivory-tower

academic. Instead of celebrating isolation, his figures reveal that a possible cost of withdrawal is irrelevance and detachment. Life is empty when reduced to "one's own immediate surroundings" (*BT* 41), separated from what Auden calls a wider "social and material environment." Carson pays tribute to cultural and literary heritage while questioning their legacy. But he also indirectly comments on the state of the North. In *The New Estate*, Carson turns more often to the human world as an external observer or through the lenses of memory and speculation to consider craftwork, workers, and artists in domestic and contemporary settings. His speakers reflect on change, the imminence of death or loss, the intersections between past and present, the writer's process, and the challenges of representation. These are not new subjects, but increasingly his speakers seek or discover connections instead of escape. In *The Lost Explorer* and in the new poems added to *The New Estate and Other Poems*, the speaker is often a traveler in search of those connections in other lands or in memories.

Carson also plays the role of explorer as a critic and reviewer, encountering fellow writers and subjects that become models and themes that he integrates into his work. His review of Heaney's *North*, "Escaped from the Massacre?" is often considered his view of the responsibilities of a poet. But other prose writings, generally overlooked, reveal the strokes and impressions that contribute layers to his poetic practice and poet-persona. Writing about poetry, history, personal experiences, and music before and during his "silence," he identifies and, at times, employs some of the techniques and themes that later feature prominently in his Belfast- and Troubles-centered works.

In 1985, *The Honest Ulsterman* published "Dresden," which became the first poem in *The Irish for No*, announcing on the cover, "Amazing Poems (Carson's long line)." While Ben Howard considers Carson's new voice a "sea-change," and Drexel calls

its arrival "unpredictable," there are clear markers in his earlier writings of his progression from pastoral to urban subjects and settings and to a looser, more discursive form. The works leading up to his so-called "new beginning" in *The Irish for No* grapple with Dawe's "big question" about the writer's role and Carson's own "in-between" position, suggesting progression rather than a sudden shift.

With the exception of "The Bomb Disposal" and "Dunne," Carson's early works address the conflict obliquely, mainly avoiding direct references, yet he admits that the "fractured history" of the North kept "impinging" on his writing as it moved into a second decade. Eventually, the divided city becomes both context and a main subject in *The Irish for No* and *Belfast Confetti*. But it also serves as a metaphor for topics he had already been considering. A chronological examination of Carson's pre-*Irish for No* works, as published independently in individual volumes, not just as they are collected, culled and reorganized, in the reissue, *The New Estate and Other Poems*, reveals his movement from a "divided" position into a more integrative "hybrid" one.

IS THERE A NORTHERN IRISH POET OR POETRY?

Many of the tributes in *The Irish Times* stress Carson's importance as a chronicler of his city's character and history, and he is typically classified as a Northern Irish or Belfast poet. In *The Chosen Ground*, Neil Corcoran wonders about the validity of labeling or categorizing the region's poetry as "Northern Irish" (7). Some critics and writers, like the Dublin-born poet Thomas Kinsella, consider the term as simply a "journalistic entry" (qtd. in *Chosen Ground* 7). Taking exception to distinguishing "Northern" Irish from "Irish" poetry, they prefer to consider it part of what Peter Fallon and Derek Mahon present in their *The Penguin Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry* as "a national body of work" (xx). But Fallon and Mahon also question the idea of poetry being

"national" at all, suggesting that poetry from the North belongs instead to a "global community," since the "poets from the North" are "tied less to particular places – or parishes – than ever before" (xx).

For others, the label is used to prevent assimilation and for embracing a particular hybrid status. Corcoran points out that "the quality of the work produced in Northern Ireland since the mid-1960s constitutes one of the most remarkable facts in contemporary literary history" (*Chosen Ground* 7). Fitting into "neither an exclusivist Irish account nor an exclusivist British account," it should be considered a "special case" (8-9). Blake Morrison and Andrew Motion, selecting six poets from Northern Ireland for *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry* and pointing out that "several others might also have been" included, recognize that something important was happening in the region (16). Northern Irish writers were the "new spirit in British poetry" during the 1960s and early 70s and put "discussions of English poetry" in their "shadow" (12, 16). But even though Morrison and Motion open their collection with a selection of Seamus Heaney's poems, including Northern Irish poets in a "British" compilation makes it clear that, in some circles, poetry from the North is considered as British, not as a distinct literature.

In response to his inclusion, Heaney rejects this imposed "national identity" (*Chosen Ground* 8). Early in his career, the "'British' tag" was an "imposition" with an "element of coercion" that he dismissed as "a mere convenience" ("To set the darkness"). But by the 1980s, the continuing violence of the Troubles led him to reject becoming a "representative of British literature," not wanting to "fly Margaret Thatcher's union flag for her." Publishing "An Open Letter" in verse in *Ireland's Field Day*, he offers a "well-known demurral at his incorporation," identifying in it the tang of colonialism. Addressing "Blake and Andrew, Editors," Heaney points out that his "anxious muse / . . .

/ Has to refuse" being considered "British" ("Open Letter" 39). Citing earlier times when she (Ulster) "acquiesced," Heaney alludes to his poem from *North*, "Whatever You Say, Say Nothing," in which the speaker identifies and seems to regret the "famous / / Northern reticence, the tight gag of place / And times" that makes you "hold your tongue" rather than speak up against injustice (214). In "Open Letter," Heaney draws a distinction between "United England, Scotland, Wales, / *Britannia* in the old tales," considered "common ground," and "*Hibernia* . . . where the Gaels / Made a last stand / / And long ago were stood upon" (39). He abandons "reticence" and makes a stand once again as an Irish poet.

While he admonishes the editors, "be advised / My passport's green," Heaney does not reject those who would characterize themselves as "British" (40). But he identifies with "Traumatic Ireland!" and prefers to "be at home / In my own place and dwell within / Its proper name." "[P]roper naming," he adds, should be something simpler, "not for negotiation," but for "telling truth." Being identified as British would reduce "the significance of the Northern work," as would being collected in "all-Ireland anthologies" (*Chosen Ground* 7). He anticipates "a new commonwealth of art" that is of "independent heart" ("Open Letter" 39), suggesting a new category for poets of the North that reflects Corcoran's idea that it is a "special case" (*Chosen Ground* 9).

Gerald Dawe explains that the concept of "'Northern poetry' did not always exist in the minds of critics and commentators" ("History Class" 76). During the 1970s, though, it became a "critically accepted term of reference." Citing Frank Ormsby's introduction to *Poets from the North of Ireland*, Dawe observes that the Northern poets "register, directly and obliquely, the time and place that produced them" (qtd. in "History Class" 83). This leads to cultural debate, a dialectic "battle between an authentic, local (Irish)

cultural self-expression, and the malign historical intervention of metropolitan, foreign (English) political will" (83). What marks writers as Northern Irish is their treatment of the ongoing negotiation of an identity that draws from Irish, British, and Ulster traditions and is complicated by the divisions created by the island's internal border and a thirty-year conflict.

According to Ormsby, Northern Irish poets of the 1970s faced mixed reactions. They garnered praise for showing "restraint in not allowing the brutal realities of their place and time to impair their sense of aesthetic responsibility" and for their "common sense and down-to-earthness" (*Poets from the North* 20). Yet these qualities were also "deplored," blamed for "hold[ing] their imagination back from flight." This predicament, Dawe notes, added to the tension over the "responsibilities of writers, and poets in particular, to 'respond' to the unfolding events" of the period ("History Class" 80). They were further challenged, Ormsby points out, by the belief that "any poem by a Northern Irish poet since 1968, on whatever subject, could be termed a Troubles poem, in that it may, consciously or unconsciously, reflect the context in which it was written" (qtd. in "History Class" 79).

Thomas Kinsella characterizes the Irish writer as possessing the "'divided mind' of a dual heritage and allegiance" which could lead to either a "gapped, discontinuous polyglot tradition" or to "dynamic interaction" (qtd. in *After Yeats and Joyce* 12). The term suits the Northern Irish writer as well, seeking a space between the "poetic and the political" (*After Yeats and Joyce* 141). While some poets were able to write with "unapologetic decidedness and immediacy," Neil Corcoran points out that "some of the best poetry written out of the situation of the North . . . proceeds with great tentativeness and hesitation" (*After Yeats and* Joyce 140).

Heaney claims a "green" passport and identity and calls it his "deep design" to live in his own place with its own name, but he later admits that his home is limited by its divided position ("Open Letter" 40). With ties to both Britain and Ireland, Northern Ireland "has had family by them both" but is "scared that both have turned against her." Ulster, the divided province from which Northern Ireland was created, is like Leda, giving birth to twins after being raped by Zeus. Heaney imagines "twins too / For the hurt North, / One island-green, one royal blue." These imperial versions of the mythical rape are set into conflict at birth: "One's a Provo, one a Para, / One Law and Order, one Terror." Calling for an end to the division—"It's time to break the cracked mirror / Of this conceit"—he seeks a "middle way that's neither glib / Nor apocalyptic." But even if "this conceit" is removed, the conventional choices for the North—"Ulster is British" or "Ulster is part of Paddyland"—are like "Scylla and Charyb," persistent and limiting stereotypes that threaten to pull one in. There is a "hidden Ulster," but she "lies beneath . . . / . . . collapsed" under the weight of Britain.

Earlier, in his "Editor's Note" to the anthology, *Soundings '72*, Heaney suggests a middle ground that is both inclusive and individual, claiming that "a writer has no country – every poet will sooner or later create his own country with its own language" (5). Prefiguring Carson's patchwork process, he imagines the creation of "Irish poetry" as the "retrieval of ancestry, and [an] attempt to shore up more than fragments against the ruins, an attempt to make poetry once again an act of faith in the land and language that the poet shares with his dead." But the past also contains "the monster" and its "rage" which, when combined with its counterpart, "beauty," forms a variation of the twins in "An Open Letter" (6). In contrast to the fatalism he critiques in "Whatever You Say" and to Auden's claim that poetry "makes nothing happen," Heaney is more optimistic about

poetry as a reaction against sectarianism and violence in its ability to create "new feelings, or feelings about feelings." "[R]efinement" is the goal, leading to the possibility of communication across boundaries rather than a contentious "re-framing of policies or of constitutions."

In a 1984 lecture, Heaney explains how the act of composition allows the poet to gain distance from the experience of living through trauma, turning what Carl Jung calls "affect" into "object" ("Place and Displacement" 2). This involves what Anthony Storr calls "a certain degree of . . . . [emotional] detachment" without removing or avoiding the source of distress entirely (qtd. in "Place and Displacement" 2). This allows for an inner dialogue between conflicting impulses and "a story of feelings and aspirations within an individual life, at a certain place and time," in a "diction that is ornate and elevated" ("Place and Displacement" 3). Being "symptomatic of the historical moment," it avoids "abstractions" and does not seek to be "representative," "self-exculpat[ory] or self-dramatis[ing]." But this leads to "the strain of being in two places at once, of needing to accommodate two opposing conditions of truthfulness simultaneously," like "Scylla and Charyb," the British and Irish identities of Northern Ireland. By writing about a moment or situation that affects the writer from a "new consciousness," the poet acknowledges the moment and the "surge of disruptive feelings" it creates (4). But the demands of working in a form that turns "affect" into "object" offers a perspective that "prevents one from becoming identical with the affect," allowing the writer to consider the "different history, heritages, cultural identity, [and] traditions" that led to the situation. This is the role of the detached observer.

Commenting on his early work during an interview in 1999, Carson remarks, "The stuff I had been doing . . . in terms of writing seemed a bit thin, pale, contained, too

aesthetic" ("Inventing Carson" 92). His self-assessment echoes Heaney's warning against being too removed, retreating into an "ivory tower" or developing a "holier-than-thou" attitude as a poet ("Place and Displacement" 5, 3). Heaney also claims that "'pure' poetry is perfectly justifiable in earshot of the car-bomb" (5). This "purity" seems to contradict his admonition against abstraction, and he admits that a poem filled with "hermetic wit, . . . riddles and slips and self-mocking ironies" might seem "culpably miniaturist or fastidious to the activist with the microphone at the streetcorner." But the decision to adopt a different, less strident voice can be a form of protest in itself: "it still implies a politics." A poet can adopt "a fierce disdain" for the "amplified message" or a "distressed sympathy with it" in an "inaudible way" to try to reach the "higher ideal" that moves above the "coarseness and intolerances of public life" (5, 4).

These options can compromise what Carson emphasizes as the writer's "need to be precise" ("Escaped" 183), and Heaney notes that the "proper concern of art" is the "naming of things" ("Place and Displacement" 9). The writer risks becoming too insular and self-absorbed, or too involved in creating "superstructure[s] of myth and symbol" that mystify or absolve the current situation by establishing it as "something that has always happened, everywhere" ("Escaped" 183, 184). When emerging from his "silence" with *The Irish for No,* Carson opts to explore and experience the city from the street level. But that viewpoint is only one of several, as he also draws on history, memory, and intertextual allusions to create webs of associations and, at times, employs a wider, bird's eye view. The speaker operates as a hyphen, like the musicians Carson worked with as Traditional Arts Officer for the Arts Council of Northern Ireland who draw from musical heritage as well as the atmosphere of the pub or the concert hall in their performances. During the period when he was writing, or publishing, little verse, Carson draws on new

sources and influences, adding to what Alan Jacobs terms his "bandwidth," which eventually includes Belfast and the Troubles (13).

The appearance of *The Irish for No* supports Heaney's claim that "pure poetry" can exist "within earshot of the car-bomb." It can also incorporate it directly and work it into what Goodby calls the "mental furniture" so that it becomes part of the context, without reducing the writer's work to just "Troubles" poetry (9). Delving into memories and history as well as chronicling the details of a city in conflict, Carson offers insights into the circumstances as well as the "affect" of the moment, combining a ground-level view with a broader one in a sort of double-vision. He writes about the "Ulster of the actual present" and uncovers links to past versions and alternatives as well, revealing it as something subject to constant change. Examining the steps that Carson took to reach this point by looking more closely at his early works reveals layers that comprise the earlier versions of the poet and poet-persona and make up the base for "Belfast's unofficial poet laureate" (McFadden 114). His early writings are also reminders that Carson does not write solely about Belfast or the Troubles. While the city and the conflict provide a backdrop, and sometimes become the subject, they also serve as metaphors of a divided or hybrid self and for the fluid interactions between past and present.

A DIVIDED MIND OR A HYBRID?

Kinsella's "divided mind" is acknowledged as a fundamental characteristic of many Northern Irish poets and writers, the region's residents, and Northern Ireland itself (*Chosen Ground* 9). John Kerrigan refers to it as the "state of between-states" that leads to recurring feelings of displacement and questions about identity (qtd. in *Chosen Ground* 9). What does "home" mean? How is identity (for an individual or a community) related to place or language? What role does the past play in relation to the present? Are these

states oppositional by nature, or can they be integrated? If they are integrated, what does each component lose in the process? Forces that seek stasis and certainty are in conflict with constant change, what Carson calls the idea that "everything is contingent and provisional" (*BC* 67). Even the name of the region varies, referred to as "the six counties," "Northern Ireland," "the North," and "Ulster," each version possessing its own historical and emotional significance.

In *The Stranger's House: Writing Northern Ireland,* Alexander Poots considers how several writers treat Northern Ireland as an "elusive home" that they fail to grasp or are unable to inhabit (xviii). "[T]hat failure," he states, is inevitable but "becomes the subject of their work." For Poots, those who "write well about this place" and can convey the "real story" must find it "in the gaps between the blanket terms and the binary opposites" (xiii). But even as Northern Ireland is a place of division, he adds, it is "water country leased to solid ground" (xv). "[W]ater is a constant companion, . . . the writer's natural reference and resource" (xv, xvi). Trying to establish order and reduce Northern Ireland to "thumbnail sketches" of political positions and cultural identities is doomed to failure, like "bungalows built on floodplains" (xvii). The Northern Irish writer, he concludes, experiences and chronicles a "deep awareness of change, uncertainty, and even threat," as well as "homesickness" (xviii). "The best northern writers have rejected the answers that their respective communities offer up," exchanging "certainty for doubt" and a sense of a lost home (197). While he uses a passage from Carson's "Schoolboys and Idlers of Pompeii" as an epigraph, emphasizing that "every inch of Belfast has been written-on, erased, and written-on again" in a "bid to be remembered," Poots curiously does not include Carson in his study, although uncertainty and change are at the heart of his work.

The Irish for No and *Belfast Confetti*, using his native city as a subject, source, and backdrop, accept and address the elusive and changing nature of the city and of the self. While Carson tries to map the city as well as his poet-persona, he is aware that there cannot be a definitive or authoritative version. Any attempt to limn the city's framework or define the self faces many layers as well as gaps, both seen and unseen, which may reveal spaces or hidden elements. The political and social discourses that dominate the city and the lives of its residents, based on defining one's self against an "other," limit the scope of one's outlook and are like Poots' "thumbnail sketches." By collecting many snapshots of the city and assembling these fragments in patchwork form, Carson provides versions from multiple vantage points, including from different moments in history and from its margins and gaps.

Charting its changes and "provisionality" are essential to recognizing it as a place in flux. Carson's poems are amalgamations, combining multiple and sometimes conflicting or compromised elements while preserving what makes them unique and individual. Corcoran observes that Carson's works do not cohere into conclusive "structures, forms and presumptions" that offer resolution but rather circle, repeat, digress, and mirror ("One Step Forward" 215). Constantly moving "[o]ne step forward, two steps back," they engage with the past in dialogue with the present, revealing the layers of the palimpsests that form the city, the individuals who live there, the poet-persona, and history (BC 27). Instead of chasing an elusive home that proves to be a "delusion," he finds one in the always-changing mosaic. The "memory of the lost home" is replaced by a collection of different versions, their traces still discernible (Poots 197, 201). While taking one step ahead then moving backwards might seem retrograde, in Carson it reflects an expansion that looks both forward and to the past.

Carson's early speakers display elements of what Kinsella and Poots identify as characteristics of the "divided mind": feelings of displacement, nostalgia, awareness of change, and uncertainty. But his works reveal a progression towards acceptance and appreciation of fluidity. Kinsella points out that this in-between position could lead to "dynamic interaction" instead of just disorientation. The isolation and separation of *The Insular Celts* gives way to the inclusivity of "The Patchwork Quilt." The final poem in both *The Lost Explorer* and *The New Estate and Other Poems*, it is a monologue describing describes how the speaker incorporates her past and others' pasts into a quilt through her stitchwork, creating something new. Similarly, "Voices, Voices, I Think I Hear," Carson's 1985 account of a traditional music festival, synthesizes the experience of live performance, the history of the music being played, the rural landscape and setting known as "bandit country" due to its control by the local IRA, and the lingering presence of the British Army on the margins (9). In both works, disparate elements are worked together into a new construction, preserving elements of the different components in a form that also includes the speaker's own creative efforts and experiences—the quiltmaker's stitches. Although Carson's treatment of Belfast as a place of fragments gathered and reassembled is often heralded as something new and unforeseen, overlooking the influences and precursors risks ignoring the stitches and strokes that lead to it.

MONTAGUE'S "FULCRUM" AND BEING IN-BETWEEN

Henri Cole, interviewing Seamus Heaney in 1997, asks whether the "state of in-betweenness" he identifies in his poem "Terminus" is necessary for a writer, particularly in a time of conflict ("Art of Poetry" 12). Heaney agrees, but laments how others

perceive him. Some Northern Unionists see him as "a typical Irish nationalist with an insufficient sympathy" for their majority's position. Likewise, an uncompromising "strain of republican separatism" considers him "insufficiently devoted to their program and . . . insufficiently vocal." In a polarized society, the middle ground is viewed with suspicion or disdain. In a later interview with Carson, Elmer Kennedy-Andrews refers to Heaney's poem and comment, as well as John Montague's "The Water Carrier," and asks if he felt, like those other poets, the "tension [of] . . . being 'balanced as a fulcrum between two buckets" ("For All I Know" 13). Carson agrees to an extent but adds that "the buckets, for me, were not so much religious as linguistic, as I teetered between Irish and English." Irish was the language of home, and "the other world was English, both alien and familiar."

For Carson, the sectarian conflict is contemporary; his childhood seems more defined by the "common ground" Dawe recalls from his own early years in Belfast. Explaining that "there was much more intercourse" between the two communities than at the time of the interview, Carson offers an account of a childhood visit with his mother to a Shankill Road pawnshop to get "Protestant shoes" ("For All I Know" 13). "Falls Road people shopped on the Shankill and vice versa," he recalls. Yet he still recognizes distinct communities, even if the boundaries are somewhat blurred. Each side believed that "there were better bargains to be had on 'the other side'." By identifying the shoes as "Protestant," he admits to an awareness of difference, even if there was not widespread and open hostility and violence between the two communities at the time.

He continues with a second memory that seems more typical of what might be expected when growing up in an interface area. "[B]eing stopped by a gang of small boys" carrying two "little handmade charity-type flags, one a tricolour and the other a Union

Jack," he was asked to pick one. His choice would reveal his community affiliation. Instead of responding, he "evaded the question and ran away," realizing that any choice would probably earn him a beating. "At the time I assumed they were from the 'the other side'," he explains, and knew where he was from. But by adding that, "in retrospect, perhaps they were from my own [community]," he questions his own assumptions and suggests that dangers came from both sides. What is unfamiliar or unknown is a potential threat. Carson does not deny that sectarian tension existed, but the repeated use of single quotes in the transcript when mentioning "'the other side'" emphasizes that the term is not his own and implies disapproval.

The boy's position is a version of what Deane identifies as the dilemma of the artist "troubled by a crisis" (42). Not writing about "the present state of affairs," or facing the gang directly, in the child's case, risks being labeled a coward. Taking sides is also a risk. Running away is evasive and self-preserving. But it avoids choosing sides and gives an opportunity for reflection and the realization that, "in retrospect," his own understanding of the situation might have been wrong ("For All I Know" 13). Offering anecdotes that challenge assumptions about growing up in a divided city, he uses versions of the past to highlight the prospect of change or alternatives. West Belfast *is* and *was* dangerous, but conditions and relations between groups were once different.

Heaney's "Open Letter" addresses the issue of community affiliation, and he makes a choice. "Terminus" focuses more on finding the middle ground, expressed in the metaphor of carrying water from a river: "Two buckets were easier carried than one. / I grew up in between" ("Terminus"). The buckets represent the urban and the rural or the past and the present ("a factory chimney / And a dormant mountain"; "an engine . . . / And a trotting horse"), as well as nationalist and unionist traditions. The position of the

speaker "between" provides a link between the two, favoring neither. "Protestant, Catholic," Heaney explains to Cole, "the point is to fly under or out and beyond those radar systems" and find "some just, disinterested point of reception" that allows the writer to reach "the reader in posterity," regardless of affiliation ("Art of Poetry" 13). While this balanced position draws criticism from both sides, it offers a chance to consider different views and engage in dialogue with both from a "central stepping stone" ("Terminus") without denying what Heaney calls his "Catholic minority background" with an "Ireland-centered view of politics" ("Art of Poetry" 13, 12).

"Terminus" draws from John Montague's "The Water Carrier," a pre-Troubles poem. Montague recalls a childhood chore: "Twice daily I carried water from the spring, / Morning before leaving for school, and evening; / Balanced as a fulcrum between two buckets" (21). The "slime-topped stones" require him to step "carefully," like Heaney's speaker balanced in the middle of the river. Both poems offer alternatives to choosing sides. For Heaney, the in-between space, considered by others as political ambivalence, aesthetic neutrality, moral negligence, or simply caution, offers neutral ground. Montague, imagining himself as a fulcrum, also recognizes his position between two worlds. One bucket he carries is filled with "rust-tinged" water "for washing and cattle," and the other is for the "pure and cold" spring water for drinking. It is the latter that he "comes to" again as a "living source" when recalling the scene, but the more utilitarian bucket has its place in the poem as well, and his memories are both "half-imagined and half-real." Negotiating the space between these two worlds requires a delicate balance, as Heaney describes being "in midstream," and Montague has to manage "slime-topped stones." For each, writing is something that occurs in this middle space. Heaney's "horseman" is left "[s]till parleying" between two (or more) influences, and Montague creates a mix of

imagination and memory. Poetry becomes a place for discussion instead of division. And while each refers to two separated buckets, the contents of each are more alike than different, comprised of the same basic element. The fulcrum serves as a balance, but it also has the potential to establish connections or acknowledge similarities.

Kennedy-Andrews' question imagines the poet as balanced or caught between opposing traditions. John Brown asks Carson a similar question about the "juncture between poetry and politics" in his work, citing lines from "Jacta Est Alia," from Carson's 1996 collection, *Opera Et Cetera* (*In the Chair* 152). The speaker, inside "The Half-Way House," a pub that straddles the border, imagines himself similarly divided: "my heart lay in the Republic / While my head was in the Six, or so I was inclined" (*Opera* 44). Describing a conversation, with himself or with another patron taking an opposing position ("We stagger on the frontier. / He is pro. I am con"), he ends with an image similar to Heaney's horseman: "Siamese-like, drunken, inextricable, we wade into the Rubicon." Unlike "the last earl" in Heaney's "Terminus," though, the speaker is *with* another in the river. The house and speaker contain elements of both sides, not separated but not smoothly blended either.

In response to Brown's question, Carson explains that he feels he is "in the Rubicon. Maybe we all are. It's a big river, and sometimes the other bank seems very far away" (*In the Chair* 152). Instead of feeling pulled to one side or the other, his goal (reaching the "other bank") is to challenge division. He adds that a model for "what is possible" would be the "Dutch Republic in the seventeenth century," when "you could say what you wanted, within reason, as long as you did your job." He imagines a place of "[c]ivic pride and responsibility" combined with a "freedom to be many things, because of . . . humility and reverence for the bounty of nature, and its humanly created

counterparts." Until that can be achieved, if it ever can, the "Siamese-like" alternative allows for the interplay of joined but distinct identities instead of a choice between opponents. Inhabiting the "frontier" or operating on the margins allows Carson to write about a divided and sometimes polarized and polarizing world, calling attention to confining choices and considering alternatives. "The Halfway House" in "Jacta Est Alea" is one structure with a foot in each community and tradition, and Carson himself, he admits, is a combination of "heart" ("the Republic") and "head" ("the Six") (*Opera* 44).

The sense of being divided or containing multiple identities *does* cause tension, but it is not exclusively between Catholic/Protestant or Irish/British backgrounds. Carson explains to Kennedy-Andrews that the "buckets" he was forced to balance were more linguistic than religious or identity-based ("For All I Know" 13). Raised by a mother and father who "learned Irish as a second language" in their early adulthoods "as an aspiration, an ideal" ("Inventing Carson" 94), he spoke Irish "exclusively" when at home ("For All I Know" 13). Before he went to school, the only English he learned was "from the street" ("Inventing Carson" 98). Since he did not learn to read Irish until secondary school, his primary access to the written word was in English. His childhood was a mix of heritages and influences, filled with "English public school stories" as well as "incessant stories and yarns and songs" (Brandes interview 77). Versions of Irish folk tales, and adaptations from "popular authors like Conan Doyle, Robert Louis Stevenson, Rider Haggard and the like," were interpreted and translated by his father (78).

Carson likens "being brought up in Irish when most of the outside world spoke another language" to "a kind of schizophrenia" (Brandes interview 77). Whether they were "one of only four families in all of Belfast who spoke mainly in Irish" (Edemariam) or "one of only five Irish-speaking families on the Falls Road" (Miller), his situation

offered a "tinge of the exotic or the strange" (Brandes interview 77). Constantly negotiating between two languages, Carson learned that "to say a thing in one language was different to saying it in another," since there "always was a gap between the form and the reality, the thing expressed." The way of speaking at home did not correspond to the "outside world," and vice versa. The process of translation changes the original, but while something is lost, a new form emerges. The same holds true for other modes of representation Carson considers in his writing, including visual images (drawings, paintings, stamps, maps), films, literature, history, and memory.

His name, "emblematic" of "whatever" he is, added to a sense of disconnection or of feeling in-between ("For All I Know" 13), even as, John Banville notes, "he used to joke that his name ensured him immunity on both sides" (qtd. in Doyle). Carson calls the combination of the Irish "Ciaran," meaning "little dark-headed one," and "Carson," the name of the Protestant Unionist anti-Home Rule leader William Carson, "an oxymoron of a kind" ("For All I Know" 13). On his wedding day, his father added to the patronymic confusion. Explaining that his family had originally been "Gaelic McCarrons, but had been Anglicized to Carson," his father revealed that Carson's great-grandfather had been "a Carson from Ballymena, a Protestant who had converted when he met the Catholic woman who would be his wife" ("From Both Sides" 169). "So we turn and turn again," Carson concludes. Identities are blurred or complicated by language and history, and certainties are challenged by alternate versions.

Carson acknowledges that uncertainty is essential to who he is, and this indeterminate state is more inclusive and representational than the binary classifications of *us* and *other*, or *now* and *then*. What might be considered opposite or separate elements can be brought together to form, if not an amalgam, then an aggregate. Distinct

parts add to a greater whole, just as an oxymoron brings together two words or phrases that seem incompatible but, on reflection, reveal a deeper meaning without obscuring the meanings of the component parts. Instead of being an apparent contradiction, his name serves as "an emblem of some kind of fruitful linguistic ambivalence, Carson being ultra-Catholic and Carson ultra-Protestant" (Malmqvist interview 52). Similarly, his early reading experience was a mix of the "classic English tales" his father would translate into Irish at bedtime shared with "more conventional fare of Fenian sagas, Irish folk tale, and anecdotes" ("For All I Know" 13-14). Adding to the uncertainty of identity, his father would bring the family on every Twelfth of July to "the Protestant Lisburn Road . . . to watch the annual Orange Walk," a triumphalist celebration of the 1690 victory of Protestant King William over Catholic King James. According to Carson, they were "the only Catholic family in our neighborhood that made this pilgrimage." And on Easter, "in some perverse act of homage," he brought the family to Carson's statue at Stormont to roll Easter eggs.

Stephen Dedalus, in James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, identifies his "self" through expanding circles of influence that are like a nesting doll:

Stephen Dedalus
Class of Elements
Clongowes Wood College
Sallins
County Kildare
Ireland
Europe
The World
The Universe[.] (15-16)

By the end of the novel, he imagines the inner circles as nets "of nationality, language, religion" that hold the soul "back from flight" (203). Vowing to "fly by those nets," he evokes his namesake ("Old father, old artificer, stand me now and ever in good stead") as

he anticipates his escape from this prison or labyrinth (203, 253).

In "The Language Instinct," Carson offers a reverse process of self-identification, moving inward rather than outward: "Within Ireland there was Northern Ireland; within Northern Ireland, Belfast; within Belfast, the Falls Road; within the Falls Road, the Carson family, or Clann Mhic CarrÁin, a household with its own laws, customs and language" ("Language Instinct"). Location, language, religion, community, and family telescope to provide "[a]n island within an island," a "home circle" that offer identity, familiarity, and protection (*In the Chair* 142). "The Falls Road and its wee streets were the known world" and "beyond that lay monsters."

At the same time, Carson also adopts a more expansive view that corresponds to Dedalus' progressively widening circles. School, the streets, and stories introduced different history, language, and culture, and the chance to uncover similarities and differences. "[T]he Falls and the Shankill were very near to one another," he tells Brown, so "one could slip quite easily from one to the other. And they had a shared industrial landscape." The "[m]ills, factories, [and] lots of coal-smoke" were familiar to both communities, and Carson notes that, "if you see it [the world] with the right eyes[,] . . . everything relates to something else[,] . . . making links all the time, connecting things up, one thing always leading to another." Divisions and distinctions blur when the individual comes in contact with the day-to-day world. The combination of observation, imagination, and memory leads to connections that challenge those boundaries, just as he and his mother (and other residents) regularly shopped on "the other side" before the hard divisions created by the Troubles.

In his writing Carson combines these micro- and macroscopic (or "bird's-eye") perspectives, calling attention to details while looking for the ways they tie together or

intersect. Comparing the city and memory to a labyrinth, he examines them from the ground level as well as from a more holistic viewpoint. But he also considers history and other versions, as well as personal memories of places and experience. In a sense, he follows his father's example. "William Carson" becomes "Liam Mac CarrÁin" when he chooses an Irish identity. But as a Royal Mail employee, he learns the layout, while on foot, of a maze-like grid of streets, many named for sites from imperial history. His father forbids the use of English at home but learns Esperanto "as a weapon against the growing domination of English, . . . a shield for minority languages" ("Language Instinct"). Instead of leading to division, this "universal language" becomes "a means of communication between strangers," giving him the chance to pursue a dream of "universal brotherhood." The bedtime narratives that Carson's father translates into Irish and the "English public school stories" Carson encounters at school and in the library may seem out of context for a Falls Road child (Brandes interview 78). But Carson notes that their emphasis on "tradition, and codes of behavior[,] . . . of speech, of clothes, of sport[, and] the notion of fair play" is "not unlike Catholicism" and offers the opportunity to read something "outside yourself" that "you can put yourself into." Learning the particulars of different groups allows for a more inclusive view while maintaining individual qualities.

The fulcrum Montague introduces in "The Water Carrier" suggests a position distinct from the two worlds it balances. A loss of footing or a misstep would upset that balance and risk a tumble for both the water carrier and the contents of the buckets. The fulcrum can also be a tool used to convert force in order to move an object or to cause change, which suggest more active engagement in political themes. Carson's notion of being a fulcrum is a little different, reflecting his background and feeling of being

someone and somewhere in-between. In his poem "Barfly," the speaker calls himself a "hyphen, flitting between here and there," not settling in one community because "[t]he odds change. / The borders move" (*BC* 55). But in "Question Time," the adult narrator, on an innocent bicycle ride to visit sites from his youth, is stopped when he crosses the line between communities and asked to identify or define himself: *"Who are you? / Where are you coming from?*" (61). Carson, as a fulcrum, hyphen, or hybrid, draws from and integrates multiple influences and backgrounds. Belfast is a polarized place, though, and he recognizes that an individual may be forced to choose sides or be ascribed one. The tension he feels seems less about choosing sides and more about keeping options and alternative versions open.

An in-between or hybrid identity might not offer certainty, but it enables one to explore different perspectives and experiences. Elmer Kennedy-Andrews uses the term "oscillating" to describe Carson's movements, particularly in *Belfast Confetti,* between "narrative" and "lyric," and "fact" and "fiction," "fusing the conventionally discrete categories of 'prose' and 'poetry'" to cross boundaries and create a "hybridization" ("Preface" 9). His father's stories were also hybrids, and Carson recalls that it was an "odd thing" to hear them "re-invented," translated from English into Irish and modified with personal additions ("Inventing Carson" 95). They were a "whole hodgepodge, mish-mash of stuff" ("Inventing Carson" 95), terms he reuses in "The Irish for No" to describe a possible murder scene—"Mish-mash. Hotch-potch"—but that highlight the challenge of translation and the potential confusion of intertextuality (*IFN* 50).

Identity then becomes "the result of storytelling, of invention," a combination of elements and influences that contribute to one's sense of self and world-view ("Inventing Carson" 96). But there is an inherent danger when stories take on the role of myth or are

accepted as fact. “You hear stories when you’re a kid, your father says you did this, you did that, and yet you have no memory of it. But because you’ve heard it so often, you think that it is what happened,” he cautions (95). If a view-point is only one-sided, confined to a narrow ground, it can divide or isolate. Many of the poems of *The Insular Celts* offer examples of and are critical of this perspective and tendency. Carson opens up his range of subjects in *The New Estate,* as he does in “Wheel” and “Interior with Weaver” in the earlier volume, considering different perspectives and forms of representation while acknowledging the challenges in understanding or translating them. *The Lost Explorer* turns outward, to travel, but inward as well, to memories. In the patchwork quilt he finds an analogy for the writing process and for integrating the past, creating Kennedy-Andrews’s version of a hybrid (*Writing Home* 10). The hybrid does not reject history and roots or accept one definitive version but recognizes that they are factors that contribute to identity, what Kennedy-Andrews terms “contact zones.” Composed of “layers” that serve as “bedrock,” they establish “horizontal connections” with each other that create networks, webs, fabrics, and translations (9). Without openness to other myths and narratives and the willingness to accept identity as a “process,” not something settled or definite, those factors can lead to “entrenchment and further polarization” in order to avoid contamination or change (10).

Considering Carson in the role of Montague’s water carrier, the “buckets” he was burdened with at the start of his writing career were Irish tradition and modern, urban life. Many critics suggest that Carson’s early poetry leans more towards the former. Heather Clark calls *The New Estate* an “accomplished exploration of Irish themes” and adds that the “influence” of Seamus Heaney and other Northern Irish poets “weighs heavily” (“Review of *Collected Poems*”). Nicholas Hinds comments that his early poems did not

"immediately suggest anything more than traces of a viable poetry of the city" and "placed him in the familiar and predominant 'rural' strain of Irish poetry" ("Carson City" 148).

Danielle Barrios also notes that there is an "ivory tower" element to the poems, characterized by "tropes of check and enclosure" (19). She adds that *The New Estate,* containing five of the poems from the aptly titled *The Insular Celts*, is "concerned with the islanding of the creative faculties and with the acceptance of 'outer limits', suggesting an early attachment to insularity." But Barrios also points out that Carson emerges from the image of home as a "closed circle, the island or ivory tower" in later books (25). Mark Ford notes that *The New Estate* reveals "an intricate, lyrical poet intensely aware of traditional Irish cultures . . . concerned to connect them meaningfully with the sprawl of modern living" (14).

Several early poems prefigure this move outwards and his later turn to an urban and contemporary setting. In particular, "The Bomb Disposal" invokes the dangers in his contemporary Belfast, as a British soldier or member of the Royal Ulster Constabulary is tasked with defusing a bomb. Eamonn Hughes sees a shift in Carson's subject-material after "The Bomb Disposal," finding that the poems that follow it are "often urban" and "commonly set in domestic interiors, versions of home" ("'The mouth of the poem'" 87).

Carson's preoccupation with "home," which both Barrios and Hughes point out, seems to fit Poots' claim that, for the Northern Irish writer, home is "elusive" (Poots xviii). Barrios calls it a "preoccupation with possession and dispossession of the home space" and a sense of "exile" within a closed circle (24-5). For Hughes, home is not presented as a "refuge" but rather as "a place of childhood fear, violence, decay or defilement"—a "trap" that parallels the "dead ends and cul-de-sacs" of "The Bomb

Disposal" ("The mouth of the poem" 87). He offers that the "Muldoon-like gestures to travel" in *The Lost Explorer* are "the only alternative" to confinement (88). But Carson uses the domestic sphere as settings for travel through memory and imagination, just as objects (paintings, stamps, advertising signs, photographs) become triggers for speculation and attempts at empathetic understanding. Home is a source of anxiety but is a critical element of identity as well.

Hughes claims that Carson's earlier writing offers an "unfocused allegiance to tradition" (88). Different "'crafts'" become "analogues for poetry and isolated monks are models for the poet." In *The Irish for No* and the "revised collection" of his first book (*The New Estate and Other Poems*), he adds, the juxtaposition of urban and traditional "is made thematic," along with other potential "oppositions": "the here and now" and "history and memory"; imprisonment and freedom; individual identity and community identity. These are not "contradictions," though, but opportunities for links across space, time, and experiences. Carson's early work, which McCracken warns against seeing as a "false start," shows the development of a more inclusive view and Carson's interest in discovering the connections and layers that define and create both a place and an individual. It also reveals an increasing need to respond to the contemporary conflict and changes in Northern Ireland. Critical of exile (internal or physical), he addresses, indirectly at first, the impact of division, violence, and loss. Urban and modern topics and imagery become more standard elements, made explicit in poems like "The Bomb Disposal," "Dunne," and "Rubbish," until they become the backdrop for and metaphorical subjects in *The Irish for No*.

In "Exile," from his 2003 collection *Breaking News*, Carson laments,

Belfast
is many

places then
as now

all lie
in ruins[.] (*BN* 42)

The purpose of the poet-reporter in a place and time when everything is uncertain and changing is to strive to save "even one // from oblivion." While "Exile" refers to the destroyed streets of west Belfast, this preserving impulse or goal applies as well to the myriad versions of the world and its narratives. It appears in "The Patchwork Quilt" through the quiltmaker's attempt to record the lives of her family through incorporating bits of their garments that contain stories from their lives. Carson comes to imagine those fragments and scraps as stars that make up the constellations, what Naomi Marklew refers to as "small works of salvation" that offer "some consolation in the promise of poetry" (362).

THE HYPHEN AND THE "LOGIC OF THE *AND*"

The Irish for No and *Belfast Confetti*, produced by a writer living amidst tensions among languages, political viewpoints, and cultural and religious identifications, reflect the threat of the car-bomb as well as earlier versions of the palimpsestic maps of the city and the self that came before. Carson does not retreat into the consolation of cultural myths and symbols that identify different sides of the conflict. He questions them in his earlier works even while being praised for writing in what Nicholas Hinds calls a "familiar . . . strain of Irish poetry," avoiding the sort of "amnesia" of which Northern Irish writers were sometimes accused and that they sometimes saw in themselves (148). Nor does he produce what Colin Meir terms as "embarrassingly self-confessional," "self-dramatising" or "self-regarding" lyrics (8). Carson turns to the particular and the urban,

the local and the directly-experienced, avoiding the conflict but playing the role of chronicler. Meir finds that his poems offer "Belfast, past and present, pictured literally or imaginatively," with its "many-sided views . . . [that] testify to the dignity of the individual living in a densely fraught urban environment" and also to the "poet's love of his city, bombs and all." According to Carson, writing about Belfast and the Troubles is rooted in who he is and in his past. "I never thought of leaving," he notes, adding, "I didn't choose to write about it, it chose me" ("For All I Know" 17). Yet reducing him to a "Belfast poet" or "Troubles poet" is the sort of pigeonholing that Heaney reacts to in "An Open Letter" and that Carson also resists, opting for the metaphor of the palimpsest or the image of the Siamese twins in "Jacta Est Alia."

The fulcrum metaphor discussed earlier suggests that the poet, in relation to political and social issues, often occupies a position between but distinct from two sides. Carson ultimately turns to the hyphen or the hybrid. Not being simply positioned between but joining different selves, spaces, and times allows him to cross boundaries and to create an identity and a perspective to see how they can not only co-exist but connect. Perhaps a star or asterisk, with multiple points radiating out of the center and serving as an interstice in a lattice, would better serve as a representative symbol.

Neal Alexander, in *Ciaran Carson: Space, Place, Writing* (*SPW*), offers the rhizome as a model (63). Suggested by Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus* as an alternative to binary logic, the rhizome moves "between things" and establishes "a logic of the AND" rather than the "OR" (28). The rhizome makes "connections" (7). Carson's early work often considers connections across time and place and the ways representation both succeeds and fails in establishing those links. His speakers become not only observers but nexuses where direct experience, imagination, personal memories,

and alternative histories and narratives intersect. In *The Irish for No* and *Belfast Confetti,* Belfast becomes a subject and also a metaphor for the self that reflects Jonathan Harden's depiction of the city since 1969, where places carry "a particular, often-disputed significance" based on "competing cultural memories and conflicting visions" (36). Like "images on postcards," they are "metonyms for the city as a whole." Patching together these different postcards offers a view of his city that Carson claims is "[n]not so much about Belfast as *of* Belfast" ("For All I Know" 20). They also offer a map of the poet-persona as well, as the materials and their combination bear traces of the artist's craft. This mix leads to a fluid patchwork that maintains elements of each of its sources.

Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill calls Carson a modern *seanchai,* or "tradition bearer," providing a view of his city and of the divided self by passing knowledge down through generations (116). "[A]ssociation, chance, and . . . memory" (McDonald 128) replace "formal linear logic" (Ní Dhomhnaill 117). Relations may seem "arbitrary," but "[o]ne thing leads to another thing, just as one word can lead to another word" (McDonald 128). The city and the self become places "where the stories of place, identity and nation become mobile, encyclopaedic, multivoiced" ("For All I Know" 20). They are still "site[s] of alienation, confusion and violence," but the logic of the "AND" and being positioned "in-between" offer alternatives to "remain[ing] eternally divisive or exclusive" (Reid 521).

In *The Irish for No* and *Belfast Confetti,* Carson finds a form that adequately reflects his subjects—the Troubles, Belfast, and divided identity. He examines history to reveal past versions of what may seem familiar and stable in the present and examines etymologies of words to explore what is overlooked or forgotten, taken for granted, or used for political purposes. Offering scenes of violence and destitution without lapsing

into commentary, he shows aspects of the city that threaten to dominate its map or get lost in the margins. He operates as a fulcrum or hyphen, shifting between places, times, and viewpoints to raise questions and challenge assumptions. If the narratives, maps, and representations assumed to be true or authentic are unreliable or provisional, the most accurate versions are multifold, transformative and inclusive, founded on "shifting ground, like the sleech on which the city [Belfast] is built" ("For All I Know" 19). While part of the narrative is disturbing or threatening, change is a part of the system and is always occurring. But a break from the polarized systems can only come when those involved can see how the realities on the ground are not static but fluid and influenced by the past. It is like the difference between a taped performance, fixed in time and never different, versus a live performance, the product of a living and dynamic setting. But finding the form is a process not unlike creating the palimpsest he employs to describe the city and the self.

His earlier works form layers that build on one another and leave their traces on later volumes. Ormsby terms *The Irish for No* "a new beginning," but elements that characterize his Belfast-themed books are evident in his earlier work. His poetic "silence" is not total silence or inactivity, and the influence of his work in traditional music and as a reviewer also is significant in his poetic development, increasing his number of "AND[s]" (Deleuze and Guattari 28).

In an essay contributed to a *festschrift* in honor of Carson's sixtieth birthday, Eamonn Hughes comments that while he, like Carson, is a product of Belfast, he left instead, only to find that he "couldn't quite cut the cord, or Belfast wouldn't quite let [him] go" ("On First Looking" 44). The city was a "reference point" for Hughes but a "contradictory one, . . . [a] place of a loved and loving family, home, friends, cherished

memories and simultaneously a place of violence, of sickening smugness, lack of generosity, meanness of spirit paraded as righteousness." He discovers that to write about place means to document its "minutiae and ephemera, both in their civilised and their barbaric forms," echoing Heaney's pairing of the "beauty" and the "monster" he associates with place and history.

Unlike Hughes, Carson did not leave Belfast during the Troubles, but while he felt its pull, he also experienced what Shane Alcobia-Murphy (paraphrasing Paul Muldoon) identifies as the "often disabling tension between the urge to express private concerns . . . and the compulsion to address identity politics, inherited atavisms and the legacy of sectarian strife" (189). During the early years of the conflict, as he grappled with Dawe's "big question" about the artist's role, he wrote about it indirectly, using forms and metaphors rooted in early Irish poetic tradition and "observations of landscape and human occupations" (*SPW* 4). In *The New Estate*, *The Lost Explorer*, and the poems later collected in the reissued and expanded version of the former, he turned to more domestic and personal themes, using experiences and memories to consider the "nodes of time" and the intersections of the different "circles" of past and present and of self and other (*Last Night's Fun* 90). Alcobia-Murphy credits his later use of the long line for "allow[ing] him to convey place, history and identity as palimpsests, resistant to unitary readings" (189). But this layering of meaning is already present in the shifts in time, often from the present to childhood memory, in some of his early work, and in his interest in translating language and visual images. His so-called period of silence suggests the aptness of Muldoon's comment about artistic paralysis, but it is during that time that Carson finds models for understanding and writing about the conflict and the self in a manner that allows him to consider the "inevitable combinations" of diverse elements as

well as its "shaping and re-shaping" ("On First Looking" 46).

A close examination of his writings before the publication of *The Irish for No* allows a glimpse into Carson's progress as a writer and his treatment of contemporary concerns. It also serves as a form of "[r]emembering," "reconstructing" or preserving a past that provides the foundational layers that would otherwise be "cancell[ed out]" (*BC* 52-3) by the label, "the Troubles' greatest laureate" (Doyle), and by the publishing world. The poems in *The Insular Celts, The New Estate,* and *The Lost Explorer,* products of distinct phases in Carson's development, were republished as *The New Estate and Other Poems,* obscuring their history and context with a new arrangement and the omission of a number of poems. When becoming part of his *Collected Poems*, his early work was further truncated.

While Carson states that "everything is contingent and provisional," the maps to be "revised again," he also strives to preserve and protect previous and alternative versions "from oblivion" (*BC* 67, 69; *BN* 52). Looking back at the earlier works despite his concerns ("I'm not so sure if re-issuing *The New Estate* was such a good idea because it's so different") reinforces the idea that "*The Irish for No* didn't come entirely out of nowhere" and that, as Frank Ormsby suggests, his period of "'silence'" was not "complete" (Ormsby interview 7). In "Turn Again," the first poem in *The Irish for No*, he offers a list of what otherwise might be forgotten over time:

> There is a map of the city which shows the bridge that was never built.
> A map which shows the bridge that collapsed; the streets that never existed.
> Ireland's Entry, Elbow Lane, Weigh-house Lane, Back Lane, Stone-Cutter's Entry –
> Today's plan is already yesterday's – the streets that were there are gone. (7)

Carson makes it clear that there is a value in what *was* and what *might have been*. They

also play a role in what is there now.

Considering his early works as distinct publications, versions that are later overwritten, revised, or simply considered *juvenilia*, is a form of what Carson calls for and practices. He looks into the past to preserve what might otherwise be lost and to identify the traces and layers that become part of what Kennedy-Andrews calls the "bedrock" of identity for a place, a community, or an individual (*Writing Home* 10). In "Farset," Carson writes of "[t]rying to get back to that river" to "explore" the foundations of the city and of the speaker's self. A closer examination of Carson's first volumes and other early writings offers a look at his growth and change rather than deeming *The Irish for No* something entirely new and unforeseen. When the Farset "surfaces finally in Millfield," it is after Carson considers its history and past versions *(BC* 49). It has been "hidden" but there all along, flowing beneath the structures that conceal it.

Chapter Two: Early Poems and *The Insular Celts*

FIRST INFLUENCES

Carson's earliest published poems, prior to his first full collection, *The New Estate* (1976), appeared in literary journals and in his pamphlet, *The Insular Celts* (1973). Neal Alexander calls them "relatively conventional in their forms and subject matter, . . . announc[ing] the decisive influence of early Irish poetry" (4). He adds that, with Carson's focus on "landscape and human occupations" and interest in history and the writer's craft, they "anticipate some of his subsequent work." Raised in an Irish-speaking household where his father shared traditional tales and translated English-language writers into Irish, Carson "rebel[led] a little" in his teens against what he "perceived" as the "moribund nineteenth-century nationalistic implications" of his upbringing ("For All I Know" 14). His reading turned to more conventional fare, particularly the poets in *A Galaxy of Poems Old and New*: Gerard Manley Hopkins, Frost, Dylan Thomas, Edward Thomas, and T. S. Eliot. But by the time he was at university, Carson realized his background offered a "uniquely empowering heritage" (15). Citing the influence of Gerard Murphy's anthology, *Early Irish Lyrics*, his first poems were "inflected or infected by the metres and assonances of Early Irish verse."

At Queen's University, Carson participated in the Belfast Group, a writer's workshop founded in 1963 by lecturer Philip Hobsbaum and later run by Seamus Heaney. His work with the Group and informal contact with other poets reinforced the influence of familiar and traditional forms and themes. Carson explains that he and his peers came "from much the same backgrounds. If it wasn't Catholic upwardly aspiring, it was Protestant downwardly-aspiring – that is, Protestant aspiring to a pan-Irish notion of

culture, which we Catholics always had, or thought we had" (Brandes interview 79-80). As leader and an established, acclaimed poet, Heaney was also considered "a big force, naturally" (79). Carson admits that "we all felt his presence and must have been influenced by his example."

Elmer Kennedy-Andrews points out that Heaney's poetry is "rooted" in the "rural native place" that is "sacral as well as ancestral" and provides a "grounding force for both self and community" ("For All I Know" 19). Carson, he adds, later turns to the "urban ground of plurality and difference," but his first poems are more clearly situated in Irish tradition and pastoral landscapes. While honoring those influences, he also is critical of them, questioning their relevance in a modern world. The shared "pan-Irish" sentiment, reflecting the idea that harmony could be reached when both communities embrace their "Irish" side, was also exposed as idealistic and unrealistic during the violence of the Troubles that escalated in the early 1970s. His poems before and contained in the pamphlet *The Insular Celts* reveal the influences of early-Irish verse and themes while betraying uncertainty about them and about the role of the poet.

Many of Carson's early poems present variations of the hermit from the ninth-century poem, "The Scribe in the Woods." Carson adopts the persona of his namesake, St. Ciaran, or a similar figure from a more modern context to reflect on the consequences of isolation. Often set in the West of Ireland or on an island, these poems are characterized by imagery of snow and rain, wind, trees and woods, birds, the sea, and solitude. But despite the apparent association of the poet with the hermit-scribe, Carson "seems intent on telling the reader who he is *not*, . . . distancing himself from easy identification with certain notions of 'Irishness' and the (Irish) poet" (*BT* 40). He describes the individual's withdrawal, one possible role for the poet in a time of conflict, but emphasizes the costs.

Alexander sees his speakers' "mania for solitude and self-annihilation" as almost "pathological" (186). The early poems, instead simply celebrating the past, offer "veiled self-criticism" and "satires on the 'isolated', conscience-racked figure of the Northern Irish poet."

Two of his earliest-published poems, "Spring Fancies" and "Wenceslas," appearing in *The Honest Ulsterman* in 1970, somewhat surprisingly avoid the hermit-poet, turning instead to the value of human contact. In the former, the speaker recalls a moment of harmony and peace. Celebrating a companion's return from England, the two walk along the river at dusk. The natural and man-made worlds merge as "[e]mbankment lights and stars seem wed" and "settle their difference," and the "images [of the couple] lock, still" in their reflection in the water's surface ("Spring Fancies" 18).

The question "Shall we walk?" at the end of the first stanza signals the poem's shift from past to present as the speaker returns to the moment at the riverside. This setting differs from the bleak landscape of many of the poems in *The Insular Celts*, and the couple is free from conflict and concern. The scene recalls Wordsworth's "Composed upon Westminster Bridge." Depicting a moment of peace and calm before London awakens, the natural and man-made worlds are in harmony, and the "City" wears, "like a garment," the "beauty of the morning" ("Westminster Bridge" 170). Yet despite the fortunate connections (a reunion, the "good / weather" brought from England, the "wed[ding]" of lights and stars in the reflecting river), Carson's title is a reminder that not only will the season change, but the moment is possibly just a "fanc[y]" ("Spring Fancies" 18). The last sentence highlights the temporary nature of this harmony: "It's not often one / can take advantage of such spring weather."

The "[t]enseness" and "cold" that opens "Wenceslas" are in contrast with the

"warmness" in "Spring Fancies" ("Wenceslas" 18; "Spring Fancies" 18). Two figures move through a snow-filled forest, and each step is "a labour of love." Images and forms meld once again, but the relationship is not of equals. "Direction is impressed on me," the speaker notes, as he "[u]nwillingly" drifts "into the matrix" of footprints that, like "gaping craters," create a "phosphorescent map" across what seems like "the crust of the moon." Yet the speaker discovers harmony and beauty, despite the conditions. The comment, "Your love folds me in a cocoon," echoes the line, "we spooned ice-cream together," in "Spring Fancies." Frosty breath is transformed through imagination and moonlight into something "[f]ilament-spun," woven "into gold."

The subtitle of "Wenceslas" ("for my mother") suggests that the poem is about influences and learning how to respond to adversity. The "map," an important motif in later poems, offers a way to navigate through a cold and featureless landscape, and the speaker's companion "decr[ies] indifference." In the story of King Wenceslas, also set in a moonlit night of "cruel" frost, the king and his page head out to bring aid to the needy (Neale). The page, struggling in adverse conditions, fears that he can "go no longer," but the king's advice is to "[m]ark my footsteps" in the midst of the "winter's rage." The page finds "[h]eat . . . in the very sod which the saint had printed," and their mission to "bless the poor" engenders its own "blessing."

These two early poems stress the importance of making connections. The former, with its "summer talk" and spring "warmness," describes a moment of peace that is fixed in memory. The latter provides a way through a forbidding, wintery landscape towards a meaningful purpose. The dedication of "Wenceslas" also presages Carson's later emphasis on family figures, particularly the mother and father, as guides or models. While the poems seem to be outliers or false starts, as subsequent poems turn away from

human companionship, both indirectly relate to the contemporary conflict in the North. In "Spring Fancies," the speaker stresses the temporary nature of the scene, and its presentation as a memory makes the wish, "We hope it lasts," somewhat ominous. The wintery and hostile setting of "Wenceslas" implies that it does not, and the speakers of many of the poems that appear after the pair center on a speaker in seclusion. Set in landscapes as inhospitable as that of "Wenceslas," they reflect on the "role and responsibility of the poet" and are critical of isolation (*BT* 41).

"Winter," an adaptation of a ninth-century Irish poem, and "The Writing-School," published together in *Caret* in 1973, utilize the hermit-scribe as the speaker and focus on the poet's craft and the "condition or situation of the teller of the tale" (Sewell 188). Without mentioning the Troubles or modern life directly, they display the "obliquity" that Goodby, Dawe, and Ormsby cite as typical responses to the Troubles (Goodby 144; "History Class" 83; *Poets from the North* 20).

As a "mood piece" (Sewell 188), "Winter" relates a bitter time of ice and cold that "holds / the wings of birds" to the speaker's own difficulties ("Winter" 20). "News to tell," the speaker urgently and breathlessly announces at the start of the poem, but he is halted when he finds that the cold, which grounds the birds, has also "seized my words, / so ends my tale." A revised version in *The New Estate* omits the original second stanza, a list of characteristics typical of winter:

> wind: high, cold;
> low is the sun,
> short its run;
> tides run strong[.]

Frank Sewell wonders if Carson was "unhappy with his own version" of the stanza and wished to avoid cliché (Sewell 187). But Carson also changes the penultimate line of the original Irish version. Turning "*aigre ré*," typically translated as "icy time" or "seasons of

ice" (Murphy 160-61), into "has seized my words" emphasizes the effect of winter on the speaker rather than the characteristics of winter itself ("Winter" 20).

The speaker's urgency to communicate is stifled by an atmosphere and setting that limit expression. Even the birds that appear in other poems as symbols of inspiration (the blackbird, the cuckoo, gulls, the corncrake) cannot take flight. To represent the "zeitgeist" of Northern Ireland in the 1970s (Sewell 188), he reworks a traditional poem, conveying the "near-paralysing effect" of the "political climate" (*BT* 51). The poem echoes Stephen Dedalus' complaint in Joyce's *Portrait* about the "nets" that hamper expression and hold "the soul of a man . . . back from flight" (203). Dedalus and Joyce choose exile. Carson stays, but like the geese he cannot escape the cold. The speaker is eventually silenced, foreshadowing the poet's later frustration with poetry's effectiveness and his own temporary retreat from publishing verse.

"The Writing-School" also compares the calls of birds to the writer's craft, but the speaker fails when he falls short of his models. In nature's classroom, the "sound of beaks" is compared to the less-adept scratching of "thin pens" on "parchments" ("Writing-School" 21). The "glitter" of birds' reflections "in the white lakes" as they turn silent when night approaches is like a blank page that "glints / as light wanes." "Nightfall" and "darkness" bring the "writing-school" to an end, and the writers' "heads . . . fill with obscurity" as visibility diminishes.

In both poems, the writer is prevented from continuing his "tale" ("Winter" 20). The "news" is too bleak to relate, the environments is hostile, or, more simply, the problem is writer's block. But Carson presents a moment in a cycle—the change from fall to winter, the day's progress from light to darkness—implying that silence or "obscurity" is only a temporary pause, even if the poems end before the cycle begins

once more. Spring or daylight, along with the sounds of birds and pens, will return. The birds also do not disappear. In "The Writing School" they still "weave / in and out in silence" and "darkness," and the speaker's thoughts are not gone, just clouded (21).

In *The Irish for No* and *Belfast Confetti,* Carson exchanges bird songs for the sounds of bullets and explosions that lead to moments of confusion, paralysis, and muteness. The speaker in "Belfast Confetti" struggles to articulate his thoughts as he faces the "stops and colons" of "the riot squad," although using the language and terminology of punctuation allows him to convey the experience (*IFN* 31). In "Yes," the speaker is temporarily prevented from reciting one of Basho's poems when a "border bomb" explodes during a train trip but is able to complete it when retelling the experience in his own poem (*BC* 65). "Night Out" offers a pub scene where the conflict is integrated into the "ragged chorus" of singing, as gunfire becomes part of the setting and atmosphere in "rounds of drink, of bullets, of applause" (77). Cold, silence, and darkness in the earlier works represent the "political climate," and Carson is concerned about their impact on poetic expression. When he is able to shift from traditional nature imagery to a more contemporary setting and context, silence is broken. Birdsong is replaced by the staccato of gunshots and applause, but these new sounds are integrated into daily life.

THE INSULAR CELTS

In *The Insular Celts,* a pamphlet of fourteen poems published by Ulsterman Publications in 1973, Carson continues to explore the figure of the voluntary exile, the "scribe in the woods" introduced in "Winter" and "The Writing-School" (*IC* 5). Choosing isolation and simple life in nature and in dedication to God, his hermit-figures represent a version of the writer, separated from domestic affairs and contemporary conflict. In one series, "derived from" Gerard Murphy's translations, as Carson points out in his "Notes

on the Text," adopts "St. Ciaran" as the speaker (*NE* 42). Jenny Malmqvist considers these poems as "self-conscious portraits of the artist" (*BT* 40-41). But other poems in the pamphlet center on craftwork and human occupations. Adopting the voice of the legendary "Tara Brooch" and depicting encounters with a disused water-wheel and a pre-industrial weaver in "Wheel" and "Interior with Weaver," he signals an increasing interest in objects as sources to explore identity and the writer's craft. In the title piece, he extends the isolated world of the hermit to characterize a group, the "Insular Celts," satirizing the myths and symbols often ascribed to and adopted by them. Carson sets up an "affiliation" (with "St. Ciaran" and the "Celts") only to, through "subversion," question the consequences of isolation and insularity (40).

The pamphlet opens with "Letter from Alaska." The speaker is not in Ireland but expresses some of the same goals and concerns as the hermit-scribe. Seeking simplicity ("Here, you get away from it all"), he finds occupation and purpose in a basic task or craft ("To fish") (*IC* 3). Fishing also serves as a metaphor for writing. The speaker "break[s] new ground" amid miles of "[s]ilence," and the "undistinguished white" of the seas stands in for the blank page. The "line" in both activities serves as "our lifeline: breaking white to find a deeper blue," where fish or suitable phrases are the targets. As in "Winter," distance and weather make communication with others a challenge. "Our letter may have trouble / getting through: / the snow covers everything," the speaker complains, and in such a secluded setting, "[l]and and sea / have lost all meaning." In place of community and the familiar, he gains access to "the world's last infinity" of imagination and space. "[W]e build from what we see" and hear, though, so whiteness and "[s]ilence" predominate. Human connections are confined within "igloos."

"Letter from Alaska" reveals the tension between the contrasting impulse to

escape and the need to have "[o]ur letter" get through. "Alaska" as a place or idea serves the same role the woods and the island play in subsequent poems. The speaker is a modern form of the hermit-scribe, who Heaney later imagines in "Exposure" as a "wood-kerne / Escaped from the massacre" ("Exposure" 228). Wondering, "How did I end up like this?" he considers what he has sacrificed by his retreat (227). Carson, in his critical review of Heaney's *North* several years later, calls "Exposure" "one of the real successes" in the volume for giving "the impression of someone involved in writing, of trying to come to terms with himself" ("Escaped" 186). The uncertainty Heaney describes—over whether to become a "hero" with a "gift like a slingstone" or to take "protective covering"—is what Carson's own hermit-figures experience ("Exposure" 227, 228).

"Marginalia" replaces the fisherman with an Irish monk illustrating manuscripts. Life is "pare[d] back / to the bone," as "children," "women," "love," and "humanity" are sacrificed for the "pure / spirals" he produces (*IC* 4). The "flesh" is "stripped bare / for penitence," in emulation of a world before the "traceries // of trees and leaves," like "the blankness / of the hills before men." Nature and God's word are his models, particularly the birds that represent imagination and whose movements are mirrored in the hermit's garb:

> Poems have flickered
> like gulls in
> the white margins
> of the early lakes,
>
> or the fluttering
> of surplices
> pinned to our lines[.]

The speaker's purpose is to "trace his [God's] given word / to fill the empty page," producing "[m]arginalia" that "describes our loneliness," just as God created "human faces" to "fill his loneliness." The repetition of "loneliness" and the sketched-out copies

("traceries") he creates convey a sense of emptiness. Instead of poems, the speaker "fill[s] the empty page" with "pure / spirals," symbols of faith and devotion. They are copies of God's work, not individual creation. But even though he sacrifices human contact for spiritual purposes, he does not ask the question Heaney's wood-kerne does: "How did I end up like this?"

"The Scribe in the Woods," a poem "[a]fter the 9th century Irish," follows "Marginalia," again comparing the scribe's craft to bird-song. The blackbird, a traditional Irish symbol of poetic inspiration, "sings a dawn / of parchment held to the light," "[b]ehind the hedged lines" of the speaker's own work (5). While it offers a model, it also is a reminder that his own song (the "hedged" one) is confined and tentative. The cuckoo has also "pushed its trill / into the hush" of his "nest." Just as the cuckoo displaces other birds' young with its own, his voice or themes have been supplanted by the invasive song. The distance between the natural world and the writer's spaces collapses as the two bird-songs combine with his own writing voice, yet he is reminded that his work is secondary to his companions' (*BT* 47). As in "Marginalia," where the speaker's works are only tracings of the divine, the scribe's voice is a "hollow bell" to the "[c]learer" call of the cuckoo (*IC* 4, 5).

"Marginalia" and "The Scribe in the Woods" convey humility. The speakers appreciate nature and God's models, recognizing the inferiority of their own work and, in "Marginalia," the sacrifices made in order to do it. But the "St. Ciaran" poems ("St. Ciaran and the Birds," "St. Ciaran and the Trees," and "St. Ciaran's Island") reveal an increasing concern about the costs of "retreating from the edge / of the known world" (*IC* 7). The speaker is a "hollow bell" in "The Scribe in the Woods"; in "St. Ciaran and the Birds," he is a "tongueless bell" (6). The birds above him, turning the trees in which he

lives into "[s]inging branches," are still an inspiration but also become a burden:

> They pin me down,
> yet make me live;
> they love, and cover me
> for the squares of bread I give.

His human companions are "the dead," offering only "silence" and "white stones on their graves." As in "Marginalia," he turns from the "love of women," although he points out that his "love / is not the love of death"—his retreat is to gain a connection with nature, not a self-negating impulse. The price, as he repeats, is "silence."

"St. Ciaran and the Trees" focuses on the process of stripping away human influences, leaving the "known world" and his "lost innocence" behind (7). "[B]ecoming ignorant / of the ways of men," he compares others to "trees of the wood" that he loved but which blinded him so that he "could not see for the trees." "[R]etreating" and "going green," St. Ciaran gives himself over to the elements, calling on them to erase his past: "It is better that human forms / should be blown away with the wind; / it is better cold, than warm." This choice brings doubts, though: "I feel, I feel / that once I am a lonely man / I will begin to love my trees." He has not fully broken his connections with the "known world," and the use of the present progressive ("I am retreating," "I am becoming ignorant") indicates that he is a work-in-progress. He "feels" that he will "begin" to love this new life, but he has not arrived there yet, the repetition indicating optimism or the need to convince himself.

"St. Ciaran's Island" offers a later view of the exile as he takes stock of his life. He is no longer "retreating"; the "big world has receded," and he must "accept" that the "reeds" that line the island's shores mark his "outer limit" and "bind" him to the place (8). Rather than having access to "the world's last infinity," as the speaker in "Letter from Alaska" hopes for, he is fixed to one place that gradually shrinks. "[S]oon my hut may be

the only island," he realizes, imagining the sea's encroachments, and "it seems as if the island itself / is muttering with the sound of water," no longer the songs of birds. God offers no overt sign, providing only "Silence," the leaves and "green things" around him, and the stars and branches above him. Even the "trellis" of branches that he transforms into "this fine lace shell" for shelter has "holes" through which "falls thin rain" (9). Optimism in the face of hardship has given way to resignation, as he no longer speaks of "love" but rather what is lost. Having "meant // to lose the written word / in the appearances of art," referring to the illustrations that would adorn the scribe's copied texts, he finds that the "wind" and "this island weather" have "disordered me" and "changed my heart" (8). His final note is that he will endure but not that he will thrive, a message the rain delivers:

> [. . .] What drizzles
>
> slowly into my skull is this:
>
> I will acclimatize.
> My head will shrink in size. (9)

Even the stars are reduced, appearing to him as "small spaces / of light" (8).

St. Ciaran and the other hermit-figures represent the artist, removing himself from humanity for the silence and solitude necessary to "break new ground" and find the "deeper blue" (3). The natural world—wind, rain, sea, cold, the birds—is an inspiration and gift from God, but it ultimately proves to be a distraction and impediment. In imagining the island as a "brooch set in / a silver plain [sic]," the speaker in "St. Ciaran's Island" turns to figurative language and human craftwork to reimagine his situation (8). The final stanza offers St. Ciaran's realization and resignation ("I will acclimatize. / My head will shrink in size") but also suggests a failed attempt to escape the human world to focus on art in isolation (9). He "will" manage and change, he asserts ("I will be myself

alone"), but this seclusion leads to silence and to contraction rather than expansion.

Frank Sewell suggests that Carson's "adapted" works are "apprentice pieces" by a "fledgling poet" (198). Peter Denman offers that "versions from early Irish" often "constituted the test pieces for twentieth-century Irish poets," much as "versions of Dante represent *the* test piece for poets in English" (42). Yet Carson's poems are more than simply translations or literary exercises. In giving voice to a familiar figure—the poet as hermit—he questions the relevance of that role, particularly in a modern context. Retreat from society or "the big world" is a loss, not a gain. The speakers are determined and aware of the costs, but ultimately they are not satisfied. While "Spring Fancies" and "Wenceslas" show the value of human connection, the opening poems of *The Insular Celts* seem more like case studies about choosing self-exile over the "known world" and "human forms" (*IC* 7).

St. Ciaran's vow in "St. Ciaran's Island," "I will be myself alone" recalls the English translation of "Sinn Féin"—"ourselves alone" (9). Including the name of and "separatist credo" for what was once the political arm of the Provisional Irish Republican Army "implies criticism of much Irish Nationalist ideology" (*SPW* 40). While the slogan defiantly celebrates independence, for St. Ciaran it means insularity and detachment. The "St. Ciaran" poems offer a "warning of the dangers attending poetic solipsism or self-isolation" and the political and cultural exclusion that ensues. St. Ciaran resigns himself to "forever be alone / with the green things of the world" (*IC* 8). By extension, he seals himself off from human "things" and those of a different color, backgrounds and traditions possibly associated with the orange and white that accompany the "green" on the Irish flag.

Many of the poems in *The Insular Celts* focus on the diminished view gained by

"shrink[ing]" one's world, and Carson's treatment of this impulse is skeptical and ironic. St. Ciaran's comment about turning to the stars, shown to him by God as "small spaces / of light" that he "set[s] . . . / down as illuminations" and "ornaments" to his "sacred texts," anticipates Carson's later use of constellations to composed of individual stars that represent narratives and maps that are composed of distinct and individual elements. But facing "God's Silence," St. Ciaran loses the ability and chance to find meaning through making connections. In *The New Estate,* Carson more frequently incorporates the natural world into "depictions of domestic interiors" and, later, "more explicitly urban, public spaces," adding different details from the city, memories, and history to the constellations (*SPW* 41). He may be "disordered," like his namesake, by what he encounters, but instead of lapsing into silence, he incorporates that disorder into his writing in a manner that he later relates in "The Patchwork Quilt" to composing a quilt out of "anything / That came to hand" (*IC* 8; *LE* 13)

"Towards Aranmore" anticipates some of these changes. The island is once again a destination, but the speaker, no longer a religious hermit, is "going outwards" to the western islands with a companion (*IC* 10). At the "mid-point" of the journey, having reflected on what they have "left behind," they are, as the speaker terms it, "coming to ourselves." The setting they leave is also more contemporary. With references to their obliging "last lift," the "flickering of the wind-/screen" and "the fluttering of papers like gulls" caught up in the vehicle's "slipstream," automobiles and trash supplant natural imagery of birds.

Despite their escape, a sense of urgency and anxiety persists. Aranmore may be their goal, but their future is unseen and uncertain. The departing "lift" has "left us stranded," the speaker notes, and the travelers have gone through "the violence of

separation" from their former lives, leaving them as "disjointed" as "a shattering of glass" (10, 11). They count themselves "not dead // by accident," the enjambment suggesting a threat escaped and a lack of agency in their former lives. The break or retreat comes with its own problems. On the cliffs overlooking the Atlantic, "there is no ground not taken from our feet" (11). Abandoning their past lives leaves them rootless, separated from the places that had been their "bones" and "spine." The final line does offer the consolation of companionship. The assertion, "We will be together, and apart from land," seems to counter St. Ciaran's affirmation of solitude ("I will be myself alone"), but the repetition of "will" across several poems adds to the sense that the speakers are giving themselves a pep-talk. The travelers seek a return to "beginnings" and a place that has "slipped its skin," casting aside its past to return to a state of innocence (10, 11). It is an opportunity faced with a companion, not alone, but it still brings uncertainty and instability as they find themselves without a "ground" or place tied to identity.

"The Island Revisited" serves as a follow-up to the escape in "Towards Aranmore" and reimagines the symbol of the island. While the earlier speakers renounce the company of others or leave something behind, the speaker's goal in "The Island Revisited" is to be present, not absent. Apparently returning home to attend a childbirth, he finds a place far different from the hermit's makeshift shelter of branches. Offering a "barred gate" that is "unlatched," "clean lines," white walls, a door, and lamps, it is a welcoming place (12). The "half-door swings back" to let him in, and the cast of light from the lamp "stills" him. This reconsidered (or "revisited") island is a place of connections, where two can be together and can create something new ("your child, my child"). The speaker watches the child, a product of what St. Ciaran turns from ("the ways of men" and "the love / of women"), "break free" in an expansion of life that counters the images of loss

and confinement in the earlier poems (8, 7, 12). If St. Ciaran is left "tongueless" and in silence, "having meant // to lose the written word / in the appearances of art," the figure returning to the "island," now a shared home and the scene of a birth, has been given an opportunity to create (6, 8). While it is a child that emerges at the end of the poem, the first stanza—"I open the clean lines"—alludes to a writer setting out to work (12). The culminating image of the speaker "draw[ing] back/ the sheets" to watch something new "break free" reveals the finished product, a child or a poem. While that process is associated with suffering ("your pain"), the speaker incorporates it rather than retreats from it, leading to something new and "free."

In the final poems of the pamphlet, the eponymous "The Insular Celts" and "The Lost Island," Carson uses the trope of the island to consider broader stereotypes of the Irish and the limiting and narrow-minded mythology that fuels them. Rather than focusing on the artist or the hermit-scribe, he writes more broadly of "they" (the "Insular Celts") and "we" (presumably modern Northern Irish).

"The Insular Celts" offers "one view of Ireland" that is sometimes misinterpreted (Brandes interview 80). Alexander notes, "On first reading, [the poem might convey] a fairly conventional Irish Nationalist frame of reference" (38). Peter Barry agrees, commenting that the general "rural focus" of his early poems "registers and consolidates" the "'Nationalist' identity" that is "embodied in rural imagery and symbolism" (227, 226). This was the "predominant register" of other poets at the time and "the only vocabulary available," he adds (227). Alexander acknowledges that Carson's early work is "engag[ed] with the early Irish poetic tradition," but he contends that Carson uses that tradition for "ironic pastiche" rather than to consolidate and support a Nationalist perspective (38, 39). Seamus Heaney points out that, while the poem "may have been called 'The Insular

Celts',' there is "nothing insular about the intelligence it issued from" ("Introduction" [Heaney] 13). Carson is quick to remind readers that the voice "isn't me" (Brandes interview 80).

"The Insular Celts" charts the development of a conquering people. Leaving "hard ground behind" (changed to "solid ground" in the version published in *The New Estate*) and the "hardness of their placenames," they establish a new island home and identity (*IC* 17). Over time, they give places and things "possessive names" that connect features of the land with the human body ("hard hills of stone" become "breasts," the rivers' sounds become "tongues"). Mingling their dead with "soft beds of soil" (*IC* 17), they establish "authentic communal identifications" that supersede any later claims on the land (*SPW* 39). Their boats' sails become "covering / for the first houses that they build," and the vessels themselves dissipate into "the smoke of their first fires," establishing them not as explorers but as settlers who "come back to the warm earth" (*IC* 17). Their connection to place is primal. The soil that falls as "the hail beneath hooves / of horses" contains the decayed bones of their dead, and "their limbs . . . drift down / as the branches that trees have loosed" (18). Connection to place is also reflected in their craftwork: "In the spirals of their brooches is seen the flight / of one thing into the other," and "their bronze swords took the shape of leaves; / their gold spears are found in cornfields, / their arrows are found in trees."

Several stanzas, omitted from the version included in *The New Estate*, highlight an aggressive nature. Their "landing" is compared to "red blood falling," and "their speckled parchments" offer tales "of how these people loved to fight" (17, 18). Also omitted is their mysterious downfall, when their "fine houses" have been "hammered into the ground," later to be "laid bare by the plow" (18). But both versions comment on

"their brooches," which Carson gives voice to in "The Tara Brooch" (to be discussed later), as representations of an endless cycle of battles and "cattle-raids." "[C]onfused circles of their wars" appear as a "laced pattern of old scars" in their handiwork. To Alexander, Carson exposes this "insular world" as narrow, little more than "a sterile and reiterative sham-death" and "fixed and futile circularity" (40). There seems to be no escape, as death and burial are considered as "arriv[ing] again," returning to "the land / that they had fought for, loved, and killed // each other for" (*IC* 17). Their concept of death, "since it is no real / death, will happen over again / and again," as the stories of the "Insular Celts" feed the cycles of violence (18).

Despite their places and placenames, graves, ornaments, weapons, and parchments, the "insular" Celts are still a mystery: "We cannot yet say who or how / they could not take things as they were." Something significant lies in the relationship between the things they create and the natural world, but "how" that came about is something that will only be learned "[s]ome day." The final stanza, noting the connection between their weapons and nature, hints at a different meaning in the brooches' "spirals" besides endless battle scars. The title offers more ambiguity. "Insular" identifies them as being related to or from an island, and "insular Celts" is a term for the language group that developed in the British Isles. The descriptor also passes judgment, categorizing the people as narrow and uninterested in other cultures or ways. For Alexander, Carson uses the concept of a "Celtic unity of place and community" as a "de-mythologising commentary," offering a "tongue-in-cheek rendition of romantic stereotypes of Irishness" (39). Carson, asked if it is "purely a poem about Ireland," points out that "not a lot of people see the irony in it. Or the humor" (Brandes interview 80). He adds that it "speak[s] much in inverted commas," in the "voice of a proud and foolish Celt" (81) Instead of a

celebration or affirmation, it is a "send-up of Tara brooches and Celtic gimcrackery." The title should make that clear, he points out, stressing the word "*Insular*": "It implies that the idea of the world is finally closed and small-minded."

While drawing on "myth and symbol," "The Insular Celts" questions the notion that a propensity for violence is inevitable and hereditary, and previews his critique of those who suggest that "these things have always happened" ("Escaped" 183). In reviewing Heaney's *North*, Carson warns that, by applying "glib analyses," a poet can become "mythmaker" and "apologist for 'the situation'" (the Troubles). Employing the "parallels of ritual" and historical comparisons can lead to the conclusion that "they [acts of violence and suffering] happened then, they happen now, and that is sufficient ground for understanding and absolution" (184). The ironic title and tone of the poem, including the claim that "death. . . is no real death," and the final, puzzled wonderings about "why" and "how," challenge the complacency of viewpoints that turn "insular" and shut out other "contexts and connections" that are the keys to history and identity (*SPW* 40). Alexander argues that the speaker's comment that, before they found the island, they originally came from "hard" or "solid ground," a place with its own history and ties, is a reminder that, despite the insularity of the Celts, change is part of their heritage. The "spirals / of their brooches," can represent solipsism and stasis, but the speaker also sees the movement between states, "the flight / of one thing into the other" (*IC* 18). The earlier poems in the pamphlet focus on the effect of isolation on an individual; "The Insular Celts" imagines the consequences for a culture or people confined by a proud, myth- and tradition-laden self-perception and self-definition.

The last poem in the pamphlet, "The Lost Island," responds to the parochial view of "The Insular Celts" and calls for change, without offering a clear solution. As in the

previous poem, the "island" has been reached, the "boat's hull stilled," and the search for a place is over: "All seas have been crossed. / There is no other island" (19). In "St. Ciaran's Island," the "reeds / . . . bind" the speaker and mark an "outer limit" as his world steadily shrinks (8). The speaker in "The Lost Island," speaking collectively, views this differently. "[W]eeds stretched tendrils / to hold us," but what they end up finding is "a continent" (19).

If this is home, the speaker warns, it must be preserved. Repeating and revising the phrase "There is no other island" ("There is . . . ," "There was . . . ," "There will be . . . ," "There can be …") conveys growing urgency and an awareness of the need to break the cycle of violence described in "The Insular Celts." The repetition of "no other island" is a warning, as is the image of the moon, reflected in the "upturned hull" of the beached boat, that "floats with the face of a drowned man, / a face turned downward, // silent, to the green earth." The heavens may be offering judgment, or, like the boat's hull that is "stilled in its reflection," the moon is frozen in self-absorption like Narcissus transfixed by his own image. The concluding line, "There can be no other island," is a plea for change. "[W]e" must find a way to end "the confused circles" of war or else the island will be "lost" (18, 19). There is no consolation or answer given, though. A poem, as Auden points out, offers a reaction but "makes nothing happen" ("In Memory" 248).

While the majority of the poems in *The Insular Celts* examine the effects of different forms of insularity, Carson culls those poems from later collections until only "The Insular Celts" and "St Ciaran's Island" remain, along with "Interior with Weaver," in *Collected Poems (*2008). Their portrayal of "the poet-saint as withdrawal or exiled" and of a people trapped in their own cyclical past shows how the "disinclination to engage with the world outside one's own immediate surroundings . . . obstruct[s]

imagination" and leads to silence or death (*BT* 41). If these poems reflect one way of responding to contemporary conflict, he is critical of this option but, by including examples, he reminds his readers that this is one possibility. In *The New Estate* and *The Lost Explorer*, Carson turns more frequently to images of the craftsman, artifacts and object, and domestic settings, focusing more on connections between past and present, as well as between the speaker and the subject or object being considered. Three poems from *The Insular Celts* prefigure this shift.

A monologue from the point of view of a piece of seventh-century Celtic jewelry, "The Tara Brooch" emphasizes the brooch's connections to the natural world and its role as a receptacle for the stories of those who wore the clasp. The brooch also represents the enduring nature of art. "Lover after lover" and "generations" have been "outlived" and "outlast[ed]" by the brooch (*IC* 13, 14). The "tight coils" recall their stories turned into "patterns abstracted as the stars / or tongues of flame" that "writhe in the bright curve" of its "body" (13). In "St. Ciaran's Island," the "illuminations" of the scribe represent the stars and serve as "ornaments" to the text he works on (8). The strands and patterns of the brooch represent stories that intertwine and seem to repeat, as the speaker defines "the living as the dead" (13). They are cautionary tales, the "tongues of flame" that "writhe," recalling suffering souls in Dante's *Inferno*.

The brooch's tone and language are dark and menacing. Its "face" is "wrenched," but not "from the human need for love." It employs imagery of violence and suffering, as well as lust. Its intricacies represent reeds that are "twisted" and lover's hair that is knotted. Each "woven" sheaf of corn is like "a head / thrusting from the yellow field." Its "first lover" used it to secure a cloak to "cover her shame" as "her white skin, / the living shape of her limbs / were twisting, twisting." If human life and art take shape through

metaphors from the natural world, the comparisons suggest that rape and violence are central to the stories that repeat. Even death is depicted as sexual violence, as the "living shape" of the brooch's "first lover" twists

> against the length of my gold pin
> till death and the damp soil
> stripped her flesh clean,
>
> clean as the bony roads
> that slither through the hills. (13)

Carson tasks Heaney for trading the concrete and specific for "glib analyses" that gloss over troubling connections between the past and the present ("Escaped" 185). The brooch's comment, "I define the living as the dead" (*IC* 13) may suggest that "these things always happen" ("Escaped" 184). But by choosing the Tara Brooch to deliver this message, he uses an iconic object considered the epitome of early Irish artisanry and metalworking to question the validity of certain notions of "Irishness."

Despite the brooch's small size, Liam De Paor notes, it served as a "model, constructed to demonstrate every skill the eighth-century jeweler knew" and was later used to instruct "eighteenth-century cabinetmakers' apprentices" in making "fully developed" ornamentation (138). Considered one of Ireland's "greatest piece[s] of jewelry," it is a "popular symbol of Ireland and the country's rich ancestral past" (O'Brien). Yet its name is misleading, as it has "no connection" to the Hill of Tara, the traditional seat of the High Kings of Ireland. Discovered on the seashore in County Meath in 1850, the name came from "a jeweler through whose hands it passed" (De Paor 137). Following a Celtic Revival trend, calling it the "Tara Brooch" made it "more alluring," feeding "the Irish middle-class fantasy of being descended from them [ancient Irish kings]" and sparking an interest in goods using its designs as a template for "Celtic" works.

Giving voice to the brooch and allowing it to speak of death and suffering challenges idealized, romantic images of ancient Ireland. It even tells the reader, "Do not ask to understand / the tight coils of my face," as if the real story is something unknown or far different from "the human need for love" (*IC* 13). If there is a meaning, the brooch contends, it is subject to interpretation, since "no thing living" but "my maker's hands" gave it "shape." The brooch's creator and even its "first lover" are long gone, though, just as the roads that once crossed the hills "have disappeared / again into the green rushes." The stories and meanings from the past are transitory, although the artifact remains, set to be reinterpreted. Even that, the brooch concludes, will pass: "I will outlast your words, // the soft clasp of your hand" (14). Attempts at translation are bound to fail or fall incomplete, the brooch suggests, but still engage the mind in an empathetic, imaginative process.

"Wheel" involves a different sort of translation, as the speaker discovers a deteriorating mill wheel and race, relics of the early linen industry. Concentrating on "process rather than product," the poem is more about the speaker's interaction with the ruins than about the site itself ("Evolving Art" 33). Through the "course of time / the wheel has run down," and what is left of the millrace is a "choke of earth, a whisper of weeds" (*IC* 15). The speaker imagines a different time, when the now "rotted slats" of the chute "were once tongue for clattering water" that "spun a fine sheet" and provided "power / for mill and linen loom." As in "Winter" and "The Writing-School," "Wheel" is a reflection on the writing process, the machinery driven by water replacing the natural world alone as a metaphor. The diminished flow of water and power reflects the poet's voice, now also blocked and quieted.

Even though the millwheel is neglected and in disuse, the speaker uses his body's

weight to set it in motion again. Physical contact with the wheel seems to offer inspiration:

> I touch the rusted hoop
> that collars warped wood;
>
> half-afraid,
> step inside, then begin to stride,
>
> leaning all my weight; tread,
> Till the wheel answers[.]

The personification of the wheel's tentative and painful return to motion, indicated by the extra space between "weight" and "tread" and by a "racking cough // and a scrape that shudders spine," echoes the poet's efforts. The "past springs to life" when the "wheel turns" again with his assistance, and the encounter with the abandoned site leads to creative expression after a similar pause indicated by added space in the line: "I am its water; its voice mine, / spilling down the throat of a century." The "tongue" of the millrace and the "fine sheet" that was its end-product are the voice of the poet and the poem itself, speaking for and through the silenced past and bringing it alive again.

Unlike his later depictions of Belfast's textile industry, in which "factories churn out Titanic gouts and cataracts," "Wheel" evokes a simpler process, yet one that still involves humans harnessing nature ("West Belfast"). Setting the neglected millwheel in motion initiates the flow of water and the poet's voice as well, unlike the hermit-scribes who find themselves surrounded by and engulfed in nature but silenced or diminished. He finds his "stride" or poetic meter. The speaker in "Wheel" is alone, but he has not broken from the world of man. Through his physical and imaginative encounter with the past he sets the wheel in motion, his voice joined with and standing in for the sounds of the past.

The wheel is a symbol of the past but also takes on different meanings. It is a mechanical object that uses the natural world for utilitarian and commercial ends. Its

deteriorated form is a reminder of the forces of time and nature, and of the impermanence of human endeavors. The wheel also represents the circularity of time and the seasons. History can repeat itself. In the poem or the speaker's voice, "the past springs to life," but not in its original form (*IC* 15). When the millwheel turns again, it is not in to produce power for "mill and linen loom." Instead, in its "warped" form, it powers the imagination in a combination of the natural world and the man-made object.

The ekphrastic "Interior with Weaver" is also set in the world of textiles, with the speaker playing the role of observer and guide watching a weaver at work. Based on or inspired by Van Gogh's *Weaver, Interior with Three Small Windows* (1884), it offers a gloomy scene of a cottage-based figure behind his loom, the outside world reduced to partial glimpses through an open door and two windows. As in "Wheel," "Interior" is about both the object or scene described and the creative or imaginative act. The weaver, predating the water-driven loom, "intimates an analogy . . . between the poet and a craftsman," as the speaker wonders about the weaver's thoughts and feelings (*BT* 42). The poem also marks, as Tom Paulin notes, Carson's "governing fascination, reminiscent of Dutch painting, with domestic interiors and people working" and "a culture embodied in its industries," reflected particularly in the poems of *The New Estate* but also in several poems from *The Lost Explorer* (Paulin 87, 88).

If there is a story in the scene, it must be constructed from observation and speculation, and the speaker begins with a call to the reader or viewer to pay attention. "All we can see of him / are his arms, his shoulders, / and his head," he points out, later instructing his listener to "see how the light . . ." (*IC* 16). The natural world, "the grass and trees, / that blur outside the door" offer a contrast to the focused and intent weaver, turned "away from the door" and caught up in his "endless repetitions" (16). The

weaver's work is painstaking and painful. His head is "hunched," his fingers "clenched," and the "tautness" of his face is "edged" by the light from outside. His loom's "cross-frame" is "repeated / in the bars of the window," giving the impression that he is imprisoned by his craft. Even the light

> lies along the loom
> shaping it out of the darkness,
> till the wooden beams
> seem to fill the room[.]

The machinery of his craft appears to dominate his confined world.

The speaker's fascination with and need to understand the nature of the weaver's work suggest his identification with the artisan. The speaker imagines ("you'd think") that the efforts at the loom might reflect "the loneliness / of human passion" and that the weaver's pain "must / in the end give meaning" to the world outside, translating the "blur" into a new form. The weaver becomes a Christ-figure, tied by "cord" to the "wooden beams" and "cross-frame" of his loom. The cramped and crabbed posture of the weaver also reflects that of a writer bent over a page and similarly separated from the world outside to dedicate himself to his art. But even as the observer has access to the weaver's workspace, the "interior" life of the artisan is blocked. The speaker concludes or hopes that the "endless repetitions" are in the service of some higher goal, but as "The Tara Brooch" warns, "Do not ask to understand" (13). Any understanding of the weaver is only what "you'd think"—projections, not certainties (16).

In Tennyson's "The Lady of Shalott," the weaver is the victim of a curse, doomed to work at her "magic web" or else face some ambiguous punishment. What she produces is a mirrored reflection of the world outside, and despite being "half sick of shadows," she "still delights / To weave the mirror's magic sights" (Tennyson 124, 125). Carson's weaver is not given a romantic treatment, and despite the speaker's attempts to link his

craft with some emotional expression that has a deeper meaning or purpose, he reminds the reader that this is simply a surmise (*IC* 16). If the poet is a cognate of the weaver, devotion to craft risks a life of "endless repetitions" performed in near-isolation. These seem to be the speaker's unspoken fears. The "light" that outlines and defines the features of the weaver and his loom, he hopes, is a sign that the figure is not wholly isolated, but it also makes obvious the weaver's physical strain.

A NARROW "BANDWIDTH"

The island and hermit poems in *The Insular Celts* reveal the dangers and limitations of a narrow-minded perspective. "Wheel" and "Interior," as well as "The Island Revisited," illustrate attempts to engage rather than disengage, expanding what Alan Jacobs refers to in "No Time but the Present" as one's "temporal bandwidth" (13). Jacobs notes that the individual in modern society faces a barrage of demands for time and attention. "[E]verything is moving so fast," and turning to the past can help counter "social acceleration." "[S]ocial structures and patterns of life" can also create patterns of behavior and responses that serve as prisons and prevent "meaningful choice." Life is reduced to the "Now." In Carson's poems, St. Ciaran and other similar figures, even though they have removed themselves from the demands of society, are similarly restricted, not by a glut of stimuli and demands but by narrowed circumstances and traditions.

Jacobs's book takes its title from Auden's essay, "Some Reflections on the Arts." Auden argues that every "genuine work of art" contains two essential qualities: "Nowness," its relation to the "date of its making," and "Permanence," its existence "long after its maker and his society have ceased to exist" (644). The "history of Art" does not tell of "Progress," only "Change." No period "supersede[s]" another in importance or

correctness, an idea that is paralleled in Carson's view of history and identity as a palimpsest. Through experiencing a variety of forms of art from different eras, or "breaking bread with the dead" and engaging in dialogue with the "words on the page," Auden explains, one can attain a "fully human life" (664-5). But too great a focus on art, which he sees as the "danger of aestheticism," can lead to the neglect of "one's duties to society" (644). The context of art, its "Nowness," is also important to understanding. An "interpretation" can be "false," such as when a reader "does not know the contemporary meaning of the words in a poem" (645). A "genuine work of art" must operate in-between, representing the time of its creation and being relevant in the present.

For Jacobs, "breaking bread with the dead" means "listen[ing] to the voices of those from long ago and far away," connecting with "people with concerns and hopes and fears quite different from ours" but who are "nevertheless recognizable" (14, 15). He advises that one cannot "understand the place and time you're in through immersion; the opposite is true. You have to step out and away and back and forward, and you have to do it regularly. Then you come back to the here and now" (15). This shift in time, place, and perspective, reminiscent of Carson's admonishment later in "Ambition" that life's journey is often "one step forward, two steps back" (*BC* 27), allows for an expansion of one's temporal bandwidth (Jacobs 13). The speaker's engagement with the weaver is an attempt to "recogniz[e]" something familiar in an "other's" voice or actions.

Taken from Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, the term "*temporal bandwidth"* refers to "the width of your present, your *now*" (Pynchon 517). Widening the range of one's perception of time leads to a greater "[p]ersonal density." The "more you dwell in the past and in the future, the thicker your bandwidth, the more solid your persona. But the narrower your sense of Now, the more tenuous you are." By engaging

with the past, one encounters different views and experiences while also finding connections with the present. Instead of having an insular or closed-minded perspective, one can appreciate and learn from alternatives and variations, or, using Carson's term, "revisions."

Citing the German sociologist Gerd-Günter Voss, Jacobs identifies three "models" for living: the traditional, the situational, and the strategic (14). In the traditional model, "life takes the form that the lives of people in your culture and class have always taken." "[S]ecurity and regularity" provide structure. The situational model focuses on negotiating a "dynamic and fluid" situation and managing "the moment." A strategic model, more future-looking, is based on "clear goals" and follows a "detailed strategic plan" to achieve them. Overreliance on any one model narrows one's bandwidth. Focusing on the past alone is an ivory tower exercise, ignoring contemporary conditions. A solely situational outlook disregards what could be learned from the past and the consequences of one's actions. A strategic model sacrifices the present for the future. By engaging with the past, Jacobs claims, "we decenter ourselves," but a combination of all three models is ideal (15).

In a time of conflict, pervasive threats and surveillance lead to a situational response. *The Irish for No* and *Belfast Confetti* chronicle the "now" through details from the contemporary city but also counters them with digressions, memories, and historical and etymological explorations, widening the bandwidth in the process and adding layers to the palimpsest or different pieces to the patchwork. The characters and speakers in *The Insular Celts* are, as the title indicates, mainly "insular," defined by tradition and history, and their lives incline to stasis. Relying on the traditional establishes the myths and the beliefs of ancestors, or the early Celts, as the way things are. Individuals and

communities lose the opportunity for change and neglect what Auden, in referring to the danger of the over-aestheticization of art, terms "duties to society" ("Some Reflections" 644). The hermit-scribe, separated from the human world, struggles to find his voice and to survive the rain and cold. The "Insular Celts," as a group, are caught in a cycle of violence. The weaver, too, appears trapped in his responsibilities as a craftsman, although Carson's speaker seems to hope that some light from the outside has an effect on him, and what the weaver produces has a practical use.

Jacobs's prescription for those filled with anxiety and hopelessness is to read books and engage with the past and with others, finding time to pause and take "a few deep breaths" in an eddy amidst the chaos of modern life (15). He ascribes one of the main causes of that chaos to "the Gods of the Market Place," those who determine "what your situations will be and how you will respond to them." The "Gods" of Troubles-torn Belfast are the divided communities and their different traditions, security forces, paramilitary groups, and economic forces. In *The Insular Celts*, characters turn from these "Gods" to create their own solipsistic models that circumscribe their thoughts and actions. But Carson uses their withdrawal to comment on the "nagging question of political commitment" for the writer, the choice between Edna Longley's "separation of poetry from politics" and Tom Paulin's call for "partisan engagement" ("After the Coronachs" 58). Separation leads to silence and disconnection from the world. Engagement risks reinforcing divisions and getting too caught up in the "Now." Critical of both options, Carson seeks a middle ground that Heaney defines as something "neither deliberately provocative nor culpably detached" ("Place and Displacement" 11), allowing one to write about the "Now" but also to engage with other voices and views. In these early poems, Carson uses Irish literary tradition and heritage to reflect indirectly on the

"Now," or life during conflict and change, but also consider the effects of removing oneself from the contemporary world, and the writer's role. The "Now" plays an increasingly greater role in his subsequent work, but not at the expense of continuing to engage in dialogue with the past.

EXPANDING THE "BANDWIDTH"

Between *The Insular Celts* and his first full collection, *The New Estate* (1976), Carson published in regional journals, mainly in *The Honest Ulsterman*, but also in *Phoenix*, *Caret*, and the Heaney-edited *Soundings*. Several poems, not included in *The New Estate*, are parts of series that draw on themes and imagery from *The Insular Celts* or ones that later appear in *The New Estate*. Collectively, they reveal Carson's ongoing interest in traditional Irish themes and models but also indicate his increasing use of contemporary settings.

A trio of adaptations, "Homeless," "Housed" (later renamed "Tuaim Inbir"), and "Eaves" (based on a Welsh poem and discussed later), appeared in *The Honest Ulsterman* in the fall of 1973. "Homeless" returns to the exile in nature. The parenthetical comments following the poems, "After the Early Irish" for the first two and "After the Welsh" for the third, indicate that, like his earlier hermit-poems, they are his own versions, not literal translations.

"Homeless" compares life in nature to the human world, using imagery of deprivation and scarcity to highlight its precariousness. There are no "soft beds" in a "house of frost" with a "cold wife" ("Homeless" 5). At first glance, it seems that the speaker may have been cast out of or left a poor marriage, the "house of frost" referring to a life without amity or love. The enjambment between the first and second stanza suggests that he is speaking metaphorically. With the natural world as his family ("A cold

wife // I call the wind"), he receives "[p]oor shelter from a "single tree." The wind and rain are his companions, his ways are the "deer-paths," and the "frosted grass" is his bed. His life is one of "silence," like that of the earlier hermit figures. But in the subsequent poem, "Housed," the hermit is not alone. The home and marriage may be cold, but "God is not aloof" and has "made this place for me" ("Housed" 5). Even without a roof, "no rain falls," and "[p]ointed spear-points are not feared." "[A]ll [is] gifted with brightness," and the stars are "all in scansion." With God's care and, eventually, in death and laid in his grave (a "garden without garden walls"), physical suffering is ended. The repetition of "all" reinforces the impression that the speaker is describing a heavenly or Edenic setting.

While "Housed" offers consolation to the speaker in "Homeless," it does not solve the problem of trying to live in the inhospitable situation suggested in the opening stanza of the earlier poem. Alluding to the political and social disharmony and conflict in Northern Ireland at the time of its writing—a cold house ruled by sectarian politics—the speakers face a choice of life in a "house of frost," exile, or, as "Housed" suggests, death. These options have historical resonance. Paul O'Dwyer, in his review of the 1970 film *Cromwell*, notes that Oliver Cromwell's seventeenth-century treatment of the native Irish population parallels the situation in the "six northern counties, still under the crown, three centuries later" (27). Cromwell's apocryphal pronouncement, "Go to hell or to Connacht," his solution to the presence of Irish Catholics in a land planned for Protestant plantation, reflects a common perception of Protestant and British sentiment about the Catholic community. With the minority population "deprived of a place to live and to employment and to franchise," O'Dwyer notes, there still seems to be no humane answer or practical plan. Carson's speakers reflect contrasting attitudes towards their situations—quiet suffering or religious optimism—but their basic situations do not change.

In *Soundings 2* (1974), Carson published "The Car Cemetery" (included in *The New Estate* and discussed later), "Gaeltacht," and "The Well of Saints." The contemporary setting of the first poem, the loss of native language and connection to place and nature in the second, and the reconsideration of the relevance of the model of the hermit-monk in the third indicate a more modern focus. While the latter two describe rural settings and deal with Irish themes, the speakers, while expressing admiration and appreciation, are aware of a changing world and question the value of tradition.

"Gaeltacht," referring to the Irish-speaking regions located primarily in the West of Ireland, depicts a simple but difficult life. While it is not the stripped-down world of the hermit, it is still far from the urban setting of later poems. Carson's diction emphasizes nature's power and permanence in describing what residents see, hear, and feel:

> The wind still shimmers,
> over the tin roofs
> and white walls,
>
> and Atlantic gales
> bring the same
> horizontal rain[.] ("Gaeltacht" 23)

"Horizons are endless, / tide after tide / of the same ocean." Even the "flecks of our homespun" clothing are "mirror[ed] in "the wet fields and the stones." Life is not all burden and gloom, though, "[f]or there is always the light, / shifting and redefining, / life after life" appearing at times in "flakes" drifting from fish scales.

Despite the impression of continuity, the overall tone is elegiac. Nature endures, but what is being lost is a way of life and a language. Modernization has caused changes. "[O]n moonless nights," the "far-off headlamps // of the young priest's Volkswagen" are used to determine distances. Houses are identified not by natural landmarks, hearth-light,

or the illumination of the stars and moon but "by the flickering of their screens," as residents are shut inside watching television. The speaker does not lament the loss of place. He makes it clear that nature persists in the endless wind, rain, waves, and light. What he fears is the loss of the ability to hear ("when we have not ears / to hear heart- / break") and to give "voice" to the natural world ("ours is a dying tongue") (24). Artificial light and television are barriers to more direct links, and the decline of the Irish language has threatened the ability to "give them song."

The loss of language is not the death of nature or of a human connection to it. "[E]ven when" the voice is lost, the messages the natural world has to convey still resonate, even if just in memory or thoughts. Traditional symbols still have power:

> And in the darkness
> we still think of love
> not as love,
>
> but as a white petal
> laid on
> a snowy hillbreast;
>
> passion
> as the white rush of the river;
> departure
>
> as the last thrush of winter
> singing its frail song
> to the last[.] (23-4)

The use of anaphora accentuates the endless quality of nature symbols, and the pauses after the abstract ideas ("love," "passion," "departure") suggest that the speaker is conjuring the natural images that represent them.

The impulse to write "Gaeltacht" is evidence that the "song" might be sung, if only in translation. While Carson emerges as an "urban" poet with *The Irish for No* and *Belfast Confetti*, his desire to record and preserve what has been and what is being lost

persists. “Gone forever are the mills, the forest of smokestacks,” he notes about Belfast, but they can be preserved in writing (“West Belfast”). Photographs and other visual representations offer alternative ways, as do maps: “everyone, looking at a map, will have their own story about that particular corner of the universe. Maps can sometimes tell us where we are; they can help us remember.” Even before he writes about the maps of the city, his concern is to preserve what is in danger of being silenced or forgotten. The new forms are adaptations, though, filtered through individual experiences and combining elements of the original and the contemporary.

“The Well of Saints,” following “Gaeltacht,” is also about change. Instead of lamenting “a dying tongue,” it offers a modern response to the figure of the hermit-scribe, or “those saints” (“Well of Saints” 25). “[W]e would not imitate” them, “nor their lack of wives,” the speaker proclaims. For those “who buried / their love in prayer” and “their sadness / in the pure air,” he decides, “[i]t must have been / a holy kind of madness.” Seeing the moon reflected in pools of rain on the road, he thinks of “[p]ale faces / in their cells.” Rather than being rooted in the landscape, they seem to him as “solitary, lunar / . . . their strange faces forever circling / the green earth,” shining “distantly.”

There is something noble and praiseworthy in their sacrifice, “seeking birth again / as luminaries // to our night,” but the double negative used to explain this feeling offers a critique as well: “It is not // that this silver host / is not lovely –” (26). While he *does* admit that what they represent is lovely, parenthetically adding, “it is, more than most,” he qualifies his approval. The moon shines, but “more distantly,” with a “reflected glory.” It offers a “dimmed radiance / of a story” that is “removed from the real sun” (“Well of Saints” 26), like the tracings of God’s “given word” the speaker produces in “Marginalia” (*IC* 4). The speaker admires their lives and “would wish” for what they have, “this

illumination, / the hush // of prayerful silence," but he recognizes that their way is not his (or "our[s]"):

> Gazing at the moon
> in the waters,
> we have not seen
>
> ourselves[. . . .] ("Well of Saints" 25).

Choosing life over retreat and the sun over its reflection in the moon, we "cannot / be other than ourselves" (26). As in "Gaeltacht," the poet straddles the worlds of what *is* and what *could be* or *was* through writing about what is being lost (a language connected to place) or what is beyond reach (the asceticism of the saints). He records and honors a way of life that is, in a modern context, mysterious and distant as the moon itself but opts for human contact instead. Together, "Gaeltacht" and "The Well of Saints" pay tribute to the past while acknowledging its diminishing relevance. It does not disappear, though, and it is not without purpose or significance. Attunement to the natural world is altered but does not go away, and the moon, while outshined by the sun, is not replaced by it. Each poem emphasizes that what endures is basic—"love," "passion," "departure," "heartbreak," and "sadness"—even if the forms used to express them alter. Writing about the past becomes a form of widening the temporal bandwidth.

A trio of poems published in *The Honest Ulsterman* in 1974 along with "Agianapa," a reworking of a poem by George Seferis, reflect Carson's interest in crafts and trades, taking the reader forward in time from a community creating a new church bell to the lasting impact of a modern limestone quarry. "The Casting of the Bell" celebrates a community coming together to create something new. Contributions to the "glittering ore" come from things mundane and holy, common and precious: "chalices and plates," "tin and copper, silverware" (*NE* 9). "Personal 'offerings'" are transformed

into “a communal object, and private property yields to the common good” (“Evolving Art” 33). The casting process becomes sacred, sexualized, and life-giving. The “steady hush of the bellows / draws breath; halts,” and the “sluice-gates of the furnace / are sprung open,” releasing “runnels of molten light / . . . into the cupped darkness” that find “the mould of clay,” the bell-maker’s version of a womb (*NE* 9). Cooling is the gestation period, “the shape, the hidden note, made / Irrevocable,” and the finished bell takes on a holy power. It has human features (“the ear, the iron tongue, / The mouth”) and becomes a central presence in the lives of the parishioners, “ringing out unchanging noons” and “the long procession of the days / swelling and dwindling across / the listening parishes.” In contrast with the divisions within Northern Ireland, Carson’s poem offers a utopian alternative, where the community unites in a creative, unifying act.

For Ben Howard, “The Casting of the Bell” conveys “a preservationist’s sense of values” and mourns the loss of a “coherent culture” whose “‘listening parishes’ found unity and meaning in a central sound” (“Evolving Art” 33). But the process also represents the writer’s craft. The bell is an amalgamation, as pieces with different properties and provenance are melted down to make something new. Howard’s point is valid, as Carson treats the bell’s creation as something sacred, a formal herald of the progress of time and of harmony. But creating the bell requires the effacement of individual elements and their particular qualities, and Carson later turns to the palimpsest or patchwork (or mosaic) as a model. The accumulated layers of texts and the scrap- and rag-based quilt make something that is more like a conglomerate, retaining clear and identifiable aspects of the sources and of the maker’s hand. The bell’s toll also rings out “unchanging noons,” taken in by the “listening parishes” (*NE* 9). While this represents a “unity,” it does not correlate with the divisions within Northern Irish society or Carson’s

own hybrid background. The scene in the poem is aspirational, but monotonal. Carson's ideal, as he states in his interview with John Brown, is a place with "the freedom to be many things" (*In the Chair* 152).

Following "Casting," "Linen" takes another look at the world of the textile worker. Unlike "Interior with Weaver," which it follows in *The New Estate,* rather than voyeuristically observing an individual artisan at work in a cottage or commenting on a painting by Van Gogh, it uses photographs of a more modern textile factory as its inspiration. In both poems, the weaving mechanisms seem to dominate the scene. The "wooden beams" and "cross-frame" of the weaver "fill the room" in the earlier poem (*IC* 17). In the modern mill, the "shapes of wheels and spindles shine / In darkness" (*NE* 11). Yet both poems are about more than the observed scenes. In "Interior," the speaker's subject is really the state of mind of the weaver and of the narrator, and "Linen" is only partly about the mechanization of the industry and the condition of its workers.

Buildings and mills are prevalent in Carson's later poems, but "Linen" begins with the "bleach-greens," the open spaces used to allow newly-woven linen to dry and whiten and where, in the photographs, the "[m]ill-hands stare across the snowy acres. / In a frieze" (11). The workers are aestheticized, appearing "white as marble" (originally "cold as marble") in their fixed poses and roles. The figures are not in solitude, like the weaver is. But unlike the community in "Casting," brought together from different levels of society to produce the bell that, in turn, links them through its routine tolling, the mill-hands seem trapped: "Their lives are ravelled and unravelled – / Golden straw, bright thread, the iron looms / Are cast in tangled cordage." The placement of the phrase "the iron looms" suggests that the machinery is made up of the materials it works with ("cast" out of the mass of strands). The enjambment also gives the impression that the machinery

itself (the "iron") "looms" over the workers. Controlled by the millworks, they are defined by their occupations. The individual weaver is shown concentrating and hunched over his loom; the more modern linen workers are caught up in the machinery itself and are also captured or frozen by the photograph that seems to turn them to stone.

Despite the workers' situation, their products are basic and necessary: "When the weave is finished, / Light will fall on linen simply, as it would / On glass, or silverware, or water." In "Casting," the church bell marks the "procession of the days" (9). The fabrics in "Linen" become symbols of pivotal life-events: "Things needed for a wedding or a funeral" (11). Yet the last line adds a fatalistic note, as the speaker collectively comments, "We will be reconciled to those cold sheets." Coming after "funeral," the remark expresses a reluctant acceptance of the inevitability of death and the funeral shroud. But the phrase "cold sheets" links the second stanza to the photographs from the opening line and the image of the mill-hands as caught in a "frieze." "Interior" questions whether the weaver's sacrifices for his craft "give meaning" to the world outside. "Linen" similarly wonders about the effects of the more modern textile industry. Both also relate to the writer's craft. The efforts involved in the creative process can be hidden by the final product. Carson hopes for a link between the object created and the wider world, but if the work turns out to be "cold sheets," does it lack something vital? Or does a poem about the linen industry capture an aspect of life otherwise lost amidst the sectarian conflict and the attention of the "Now"?

"Limestone," not included in Carson's later collections, brings the speaker into a more contemporary setting. Instead of focusing on creation, it considers the spreading effects of modern industry. "From miles away" the speaker can hear the "muffled boom / Of the quarry, and then its echo" ("Limestone" 20). The sound "hangs" in the air,"

replacing the sound of the church bell in "Casting." Even from a distance, he imagines the "dust clouding, falling, [and] settling" on the equipment. Instead of describing the people who work on the wooden or iron looms, he notes only the "winches and steel and tautened wire," as well as the "lorries [that] travel outwards / On the routes marked by powdered limestone." Despite their movement "[a]cross the province," the "going-tracks" of stone dust fade "[i]nto the airy twilight of the moors." Like the bell, "swelling and dwindling across / the listening parishes" (*NE* 9), the dust is "erased by distance" ("Limestone" 20).

The three poems, as well as "Interior," consider the process of transformation. In "Casting," something imagined as living is created out of inanimate objects to serve as a voice for the community, but the other poems are more ambivalent. The weaver's room, the linen mill, and the quarry each produces something necessary, but mechanization has an increasingly dehumanizing cost. But the repeated image of light aestheticizes the scenes, breaking the gloom and darkness. The weaver's face is "edged" by it, and it "lies across" his loom, giving it shape (*NE* 10). In "Linen" it "falls on" the finished textiles "simply" (11). Even the dust in "Limestone" is "clouding, falling, settling" on the machinery "[w]ith the ease of drifted sunlight" (20). The workers are transformed as well, as the weaver becomes a Christ-figure, and the mill-hands are changed in the photographs into a modern frieze. The three mark a significant shift from the hermit-figure and reflect a growing interest in not only traditional craftwork but also mechanization. The progress in time from "Casting" to "Limestone" foreshadows the structure of *The New Estate* as well, as that collection begins with "The Scribe in the Woods" and moves forward to the contemporary setting of "The New Estate" and, in the expanded version, "The Patchwork Quilt."

"Agianapa" (or "Agianapa I"), published with "Casting," "Linen," and "Limestone," breaks from the themes of creation and transformation but, indirectly, is the poem most related to contemporary events. An adaptation of a poem by George Seferis, its setting and context, far from Troubles-torn Northern Ireland, serve as acknowledgments of the conflict.

The speaker describes arriving at a beach town on Cyprus, characterized by "sun" and "light" (*IC* 17). He "recognized" it by "word of mouth," but when he is "[h]ere," he is dazzled. The sun "confounds" his ears and blinds him in a confusion of ringing bronze, "stone echoing stone," and "rivers sounding." Sound, smell, and touch are enhanced, "telling" him stories without words. While the poem begins with light and ends with "nets / Of heaving gold," darkness is present as well, of "muffled nights" and "hidden pulse[s]," each containing their own stories. The history of the place is contained in the environment and in sensory detail.

For Seferis, going to Cyprus was an inspiration and a spiritual homecoming, helping to break a "period of six or seven years" in which he did not produce any poetry ("Always Ayia Napa"), so it seems ironic and apt that Carson adapts this work before his own period of silence, similarly broken by his engagement with place. Originally known for its monastery dedicated to the local icon of the Virgin Mary but abandoned in 1758, Ayia Napa eventually became the small fishing village that is the poem's setting. The character and form of the place changed after a long period of anticolonial unrest followed by intercommunal violence between Turkish and Greek populations after the end of British control in 1960. In 1974, Cyprus was invaded by Turkey and eventually divided into two administrative zones ("What Caused the Division of the Island of Cyprus?"). An influx of refugees transformed Ayia Napa, and over the decade that

followed the invasion, "displaced Cypriots [were] given land in the town and many set themselves up in the hospitality trade," eventually turning it first into a "clubbing mecca" and then into the biggest tourist resort on Cyprus (DeBoick).

Selecting Seferis' work for adaptation could be a matter of timing and affinity. When Carson's "Agianapa" first appeared in 1974, as Belfast and Northern Ireland faced their own anti-British struggles and sectarian conflict, Cyprus was being formally divided. Seferis discovered and wrote about Cyprus before its independence but during its struggles against the British, and he was an outspoken supporter of its and his Greek identity and heritage. The poem is about a time of light in contrast to the "darkness" of the past associated with "strangers" in "shining armour," and the speaker yearns for this simpler life (*NE* 17). Although he was a Greek diplomat, Seferis admitted to a fellow Greek writer, George Theotokas, "I find it more honorable and 'moral' . . . for . . . someone to craft a fine table, for example, than to leave the hammer and chisel to go to a coffeehouse and talk politics" (qtd. in Liukkonen). He also feared "the triumph of commercial culture," telling of a dream "in which the Parthenon was auctioned off to become an advertisement, 'every column a gigantic tube of toothpaste'" (Liukkonen). Sefaris, like Carson and other poets from the North, faced Dawe's "big question" about the balance of art and contemporary affairs.

While Sefaris died in 1971, before the official division of Cyprus, Carson's adaptation seems a tribute to a fellow poet who experienced the impact of sectarian conflict as well as to the past. It is also a reminder of another divided region. While Ayia Napa and Cyprus inspire Seferis to write again, Carson is drawn out of his later silence by Belfast. The city is not the central focus of his early works, but it does linger in allusions and is addressed more directly in poems, like "The Bomb Disposal," in *The*

New Estate. And when Carson, as critics claim, finally finds his "voice," it is when he makes the city the subject of and background to his work. Before that change, though, he had already been addressing the concerns that Seferis had about the loss of "craft," the dominance of politics in discourse, the impact of sectarian division, and the commercialization of culture

Chapter Three: *The New Estate* and Finding a "New Verse"

AN "ACCOMPLISHED" WORK: CRITICAL RESPONSES TO *THE NEW ESTATE*

While many of the poems in *The Insular Celts* center on the theme of isolation and are set in the past, *The New Estate* (1976) is loosely organized "chronologically from the medieval to the modern" (Brandes interview 80). Opening with a poem about a solitary figure in nature ("The Scribe in the Woods," from the earlier pamphlet), it ends with "The New Estate," contrasting a pastoral setting and a bird's song (the "corncrake's elegy") with a modern housing estate and a "new verse" (*NE* 41). By "confin[ing]" poems from his earlier pamphlet (five in total) to the beginning of the book, Malmqvist suggests, Carson marks his "artistic development" (*BT* 52), distancing himself from traditional themes and influences but not rejecting them entirely. Alexander agrees, pointing out that the arrangement of the poems indicates "a gradual shift from the world of early Irish saints and scribes to that of modern, secular Belfast" (*SPW* 41). "[P]redominantly natural landscapes . . . become progressively intertwined with depictions of domestic interiors and the rituals of home-making," family relations, and craftwork. Several, particularly "The Bomb Disposal" and "The Car Cemetery," are urban in setting, the latter describing "street-scenes of traffic flow and parked cars." Carson's growing concern for "the human processes" through which places and objects are "made and remade, encountered, negotiated, and transformed" shows the expansion of his bandwidth. Multiple versions and viewpoints often situate the speaker and the reader in an in-between position that creates uncertainty and unease.

In an interview with Rand Brandes in 1990, Carson explains that he felt *The New Estate* to be "too 'accomplished' (80). "[It is] well-done, but it's too reserved," he adds.

Goodby, while noting that the book is considered "an accomplished debut," largely agrees with Carson's self-assessment (191). Its "chief characteristic" is its "conformity to the generic tone of Northern Irish poetry of the time" (191-92). Yet he notices something different in Carson's approach. The poems are "well-made, formal, avoid overt emotion and offer lyric closure" in a "slightly offbeat way" (192). Carson's book calls attention to the "difficulty of manouevering in [the] increasingly congested space" of Northern poetry and reveals "a set of personal and distinctive concerns." His humor and willingness to oppose "Heaneyesque notions of mythic history" by questioning the value of the "insularity" ascribed to the hermit-scribe and to a people "raise it above the ruck" of other contemporary voices. But Goodby also acknowledges that a "new style," or what Carson refers to as a "new verse," is needed to write and speak in a time of change and conflict, rather than sticking to old forms, symbols, and myths and relying on "what it [the poetry] is negating to escape the terms of the argument generated by its targets" (192). When making this observation in 2000, he points out that Carson has already found the style and subject "in foregrounded commercial detritus, in the bricky streets and alleys of Belfast." In 1976, though, Carson was still considered by Goodby to be in Heaney's "gravitational power," figuring how to work his way out of it.

Tom Paulin also recognizes the persistence of traditional influences and, like Malmqvist and Alexander, sees the poet's progression. The first poems, drawn from *The Insular Celts*, might, he feels, make a reader think that the poet is following the "all-too-familiar recipe which mixes poems about saints and scholars with praise of unpopulated, rather than depopulated, Irish landscapes" (Paulin 86). Paulin's distinction between "unpopulated" and "depopulated" reveals his concern that such poems evade contemporary contexts and the human world, opting for the natural one instead. But he

views those early poems as anomalies. Carson's poems about "work and craft" reveal the workers' "mysterious idealism" and "cultural creativity," challenging the "bourgeois pastoral" that reinforces traditional images (86-7). Despite writing *about* landscape at times, Paulin explains, Carson recognizes that it "alone can never be an aesthetic" and that "nature can only have meaning in relation to people" (88). His assessment of *The New Estate* is that it "must be easily the best first volume to appear in a long time," adding that calling it his "first collection is not to imply a qualification" (86).

Other reviewers and academics offer praise but are critical of what they consider Carson's detachment and cautiousness. Frank Sewell considers *The New Estate* to be "a strong but formally conservative volume . . . reminiscent" of Seamus Heaney and John Montague (186). According to Peter Denman, it is in "the standard idiom of Irish poetry" of the time, "competent, but unremarkable" (29). James Simmons, the founder and first editor of *The Honest Ulsterman*, agrees with Paulin, remarking in *Books Ireland*, "Another new poet confirms the healthy state of Irish verse" (126). He offers a back-handed compliment, though, when he notes, "I don't mean it as a criticism when I say that there doesn't seem to be any urgency of things to say in this book." His comment echoes Paulin's contention that the poems display a "certain political and cultural content" that conveys "an ambiguous identification . . . with a middle-class culture" (Paulin 87). John Drexel recalls that, when *The New Estate* came out, it gave the "impression of a modest lyric talent, a generally self-assured if slightly self-conscious voice" (182). Carson shows "abundant signs" of "Irishness" and a sensitivity "to the myths and moods and landscapes of his island," but what "one missed was a sense of individuality, a larger vision, . . . a defining direction, the tang and bite of life."

Like Drexel, George McWhirter, a Belfast native, balances praise with criticism.

He compares Carson's caution and care to the "art of inlay. . . . The skill to tell like a tongue hidden in a bell, that's Carson's objective. Skill and perception he has; competence, containment" (59-60). But as indicated by the title of his essay, "Five Ulster Poets: The Martyrdoms of Modesty," he believes that these qualities come with a cost. Alongside contemporary volumes by Paulin, Muldoon, Ormsby, and Dawe, Carson's poems appear "tethered" by his "carefulness" (60). McWhirter compares "the usual habitat of his craft" to a "neat incarceration," even though his work still "has the power to alter our way of seeing." Lacking the "fierceness" that McWhirter recognizes in Dawe, Carson settles instead for an "accurate and remarkable appreciation of things" and works towards "effect." What McWhirter feels is necessary for "Ulster poetry" to address the Troubles, or to reach what the title of Paulin's collection suggests, *A State of Justice,* is a "flight" that "accommodates the opposites, the pure contrariness, and stretches the language into a 'feud of exultation'." Carson, he argues, offers "Ulster practicality and reliability" instead. McWhirter points out that "the world awaits for and expects rhetoric, prophesy, raucous self-destruction," but Carson, and the "Ulster poet" in general, provides just a "modest reaction."

McWhirter, having left Northern Ireland in 1965 before the outbreak of the Troubles, seems to side with those who feel the poet's place is to speak out, not to adopt the role depicted in Derek Mahon's "Rage for Order." Mahon envisions a poet at work, "far / From his people" and hidden behind the "fitful glare / Of his high window" (47). His "is a dying art, / An eddy of semantic scruple / In an unstructurable sea," and his "silence" is that of "enforced humility." McWhirter admits that, even as the public may call for emotional pronouncements, "the wise poets say: let them wait" (61), and Mahon's poem ends on a similar note. Those who "tear down / To build up" still

recognize the value of "order" (48). They will eventually seek it out, "[k]nowing it cannot be / Long" until there is a need for the poet's "[t]erminal ironies." McWhirter's concern, reflected in Carson's own feelings about his early work, is that "this virtue is being taken to sad extremities" (61).

While some of the poems may lack "urgency," as Simmons claims, working in and with the past allows Carson to comment indirectly on the present, raising questions without reinforcing sectarian division. The result is an expansion of his source material, rather than a reduction to the "Now" in offering angry responses to political and social conditions. Robert Johnstone, co-editor of *The Honest Ulsterman*, finds a common theme of "trying to encompass the past we have inherited while making a life of one's own – a new estate" (14). Instead of just providing what McWhirter calls the "inlay" for his subjects, Carson shows "an awareness that the artefact . . . is a tool which can help us to better understand what we perceive."

Carson's early focus on ancient Celtic tradition does not simply celebrate or reaffirm the past but is used to "define the limits of what it means to be Irish" (Johnstone 14). Identity, for the individual or a group, is something dynamic rather than static, and Carson uses objects, places, and occupations as subjects for exploration, not just description or confinement. Vernon Young hears "a voice of resonant clarity" and "precocious wisdom" speaking about the "virtual subject" of "*artifice*, . . . aspects of beauty . . . which are visibly present in a host of established or unexpected places and objects" (624-25). These sources include "old prints, postage stamps or fading photographs." Carson's interest takes a more modern and urban turn in his later fascination with the industrial past and present of Belfast, but the small or unexpected turn up there, too, and even in *The New Estate*, elements of the city and modern life make

their appearance.

Ben Howard, charting the evolution of Carson's art two decades after the initial publication of *The New Estate*, also sees that Carson's work "honors traditional craftsmanship, . . . construction, building and making" ("Evolving Art" 33). But he feels that what underlies these studies is discovering the "beauty, meaning and sometimes anguish in ordinary lives" ("Evolving Art" 33), conveying what Johnstone calls "a real sense of pain, and a compassion for the poverty—spiritual and financial—of both past and present" (14). Writing about Carson and his contemporaries in "After the Coronachs," just before the appearance of *Belfast Confetti,* Howard identifies the familiar chord of "tragic resignation" in much of the previous generation of Northern poets (57). He hears that "elegiac note" in the younger poets as well, tempered by "a keen sense of irony and a guarded sense of privacy." Without turning from "Irish problems" or "the longings of an earlier generation," their perspective is "more knowing, less patient, and often less insular" (57-8). While Carson does not give way to the "disgust, or despair" that Howard finds in other writers, his challenges to "heroic postures" and "familiar Irish constraints" are clear in *The New Estate* as well as in his earlier pamphlet (57, 72). He is not yet writing in "the crackling, despairing, self-mocking voice of contemporary Belfast" (and "despairing" is open to question) that Howard hears in *The Irish for No* (67). But he is also not "look[ing] away from political unrest," concerned solely with "the solidities of care and craft" (66). Many of his subjects hint at the problems in Northern Ireland at the time and that have been "Irish" ones for centuries as well.

TRADITIONAL THEMES AND THE ARTIFICE OF THE OBJECT

The four poems from *The Insular Celts* that open *The New Estate* establish the "Irishness" of the text, a base layer upon which Carson builds. "The Scribe in the Woods"

reintroduces the hermit-poet figure, and "The Insular Celts" offers Carson's ironized "history" of the early Irish. Two of the "St Ciaran" poems, "St Ciaran and the Birds" and "St Ciaran's Island," imagine the poet as the isolated scribe. Each of these republished poems is critical of the stereotypes it presents. But Goodby's point that it is hard to "negat[e]" something while relying on its terms (192), helps explain Carson's comment that many readers miss his ironic tone, particularly in "The Insular Celts" (Brandes interview 80). The selection of poems reveals the consequences of insularity: "Death will happen over again / And again" in "confused circles" of wars, the poetic voice will be "silenc[ed]," and the individual's world will shrink into self-contained solipsism: "My head will shrink in size" (*NE* 3, 4, 6).

The first new poem, "O'Carolan's Complaint," a monologue from the perspective of Turlough O'Carolan, a legendary seventeenth- and eighteenth-century blind harpist and bard, is a recitation of regrets and lost opportunities. Following themes from the earlier poems, the speaker, having lost his sight at eighteen due to smallpox, is isolated by his blindness and the concessions he makes in his art. Famed for his *planxties,* tributes to wealthy patrons from elite Irish and English families (Earley), O'Carolan speaks of sacrificing his "great tunes," "lost" for "monied patronage" (*NE* 7). He also thinks about "all the girls I might have loved / Instead of music" and equates "finding melody" with his hand to "making fluent gestures" of love. His overall disappointment lies in his inability to produce "real performances" in music or romance. He cannot "embrac[e] an actual beauty," settling instead for "mere competence" and popular acclaim.

Despite success and fame, his "inward ear / And theirs heard better." O'Carolan imagines the musical notes themselves mockingly or sorrowfully appealing to him to fulfill his goals as he envisions his audiences and potential loves

Like intervals of silence
Between the notes,
Their upturned faces wanting more,
The lives I never lived.

O'Carolan's "complaint" echoes the concerns of the hermit-scribe and Dawe's "big question" about the role of the poet—whether to engage with the world or focus on one's art. Although he achieves fame and fortune, his willingness to turn his talent to financial ends sacrifices the "great tunes" he might have composed. O'Carolan's position in the middle leaves him discontented but popular and financially successful, sacrificing artistic potential for patronage.

The three poems that follow—"The Casting of the Bell" (later retitled "Casting the Bell"), "Interior with Weaver," and "Linen," each discussed in more detail in Chapter Two—focus on craft and on discovering human connections, what Johnstone considers Carson's "readiness to . . . learn from old things" (14). The bell created in "Casting" marks time and calls the community to prayer. Carson's observant speaker in "Interior" tries to find "meaning" in the "endless repetitions" of the weaver who works in isolation and seems to see him as a surrogate. And in "Linen," the speaker imagines the "tangled" lives behind the photograph of the mill-hands. But in the subsequent series of poems, the view is more personal and hands-on, as in the uncollected "Wheel." The speakers turn to what Young identifies as unexpected objects—old wallpaper, a stamp collection, and a child's encyclopaedia—as subjects for exploring memory and reflecting on different ways of perception and representation (625).

"An Early Bed" shifts to a domestic scene involving a childhood memory and "personal anguish" ("After the Coronachs" 66). In later poems, encounters with a familiar scent, sound, word, or object draw the speaker into his past or into imaginative identification with another. "An Early Bed" begins with the memory before revealing the

trigger. When the poem shifts from the past to "[t]his evening" in the last stanza, the narrator explains how "re-papering" his room brought the memories "to light" again (*NE* 13).

Starting out as a story about a disobedient child sent to his room, "An Early Bed" considers the way memory operates and introduces the father as a recurring influence on Carson's poet-persona. "To pass the time" during his punishment, the speaker recalls, he "counted the flawed petals" on a "bubble of damp" on the wallpaper, comparing their markings to the angry, red flecks on his father's face (12). The father appears in the poem only in "disembodied phrases" as "[h]is voice unravelled from below," not yet the storytelling-mentor he becomes in later poems. The child, who may have disobeyed or even hit his father (he recalls his father telling him that "A child who struck his father, / . . . died / soon afterwards"), thinks of "dying out of spite" and imagines the "threadbare lace" of his grieving parents' faces. Carson's use of textile imagery to describe the scene reflects the breakdown of family harmony, but by holding his breath and trying to will his own death or disappearance, he attempts to gain control of his own story. He wants "to sink below the surface / of myself, into somewhere else," but something independent persists. Like the deformity in the wallpaper pattern, "[o]ne white flower / in a grave of flowers" that "struggled / upwards through the clay / as if to fend off judgment," his "disobedient hand" refuses to "sink." It "stayed where it was, / the final speck of air / blossoming above the figure," as if the "bubble of damp" from the deformed wallpaper is what keeps him alive. Survival and defiance go hand-in-hand.

In the last stanza, the scene advances to the present as the speaker, "re-papering" his room, recalls "those early failures" (13). Peeling off the "[t]issued layers" of wallpaper" reveals the earlier versions of the room and sparks his memory of his

disobedience and his father's angry response, as well as the child's persistence. The action is painful, as the old paper is cut away "beneath the decorating knife / like fronds of skin," but this process allows him to reclaim the past: "Beneath, / gauzed over with old paste, / I found the yellowed flowers again." A domestic scene of home-renovation becomes a portal to an earlier self. In its references to weaving and "papering," the poem points out ways identities are created. The past can be covered over, but those layers can be "unravelled" or "peeled" off to reveal their original elements.

"Collecting Stamps" and "Engraving from a Child's Encyclopaedia" are also rooted in the child's world. Instead of recalling a personal experience, they focus on objects that, like the "bubble of damp" of the wallpaper, allow the speaker to consider the stories they contain. In the former, stamps take on a role similar to the one that maps play in the Belfast poems, categorizing and classifying while revealing the intentions of their creators. Both have a functional purpose in facilitating communication, and they capture and preserve images considered valuable or important. Depicting the queen's profile, the stamps commemorate a public figure but also reinforce institutional authority, disseminating a symbolic representation of the British polity.

Like the mill-hands in the photos from "Linen," the images on the stamps are frozen, idealizing or aestheticizing the figure: "These regal profiles were more shapely / Than they had been in life" (14). As two-dimensional versions and "variations" of a real person, they represent the queen in soothing "emerald / And rose, sage-green, plum and lilac." Symbols of an institution (the crown) and the empire's reach, they also serve a propagandistic purpose. But the stamp collection also marks the passage of time. Older stamps bear the likeness of a younger queen, and the speaker imagines that the different series represent the progress of a "fading Empire" that "shone through" in the "crown

watermark."

The collector's goal is to find "rarities" that contain flaws, revealing the "printer's lapse." As variations from a standard, they are evidence that "what should have been / Happened wrongly, unexpectedly." The mistakes, the speaker points out, are "desired" because they confirm "what we had seen as perfect beauty." This seems paradoxical, but it expresses what Carson contends when considering the variety and uncertainty of memories, histories, maps, images, and etymologies. Different versions and interpretations are possible, or even inevitable, and no one representation is correct. Turning the "regal profile" to a mass-reproduced and idealized image or using it as a symbol of a "fading empire" eliminates the uniqueness of the person depicted. Frozen in her engraved form, the queen becomes as lifeless as the "frieze" of the mill-hands in "Linen." The printer's mistake produces something more beautiful because, admitting the "[e]rrors of the die," it is both "unique and flawed." The imperfections are important, since they are evidence of particularity, not simply duplication, and also bear the mark of the creator, or "printer," in this case, even if only through error.

The image in "Engraving from a Child's Encyclopaedia" is not as obvious a symbol of authority and commerce. Yet the etching of an alpine scene leads the speaker to wonder about the choices made in producing it. What is given value? What is obscured or omitted, and what questions and alternative narratives emerge when examining it closer? Employing the perspective of an adult speaker revisiting a child's reference book, the poem does not give the title of the corresponding entry nor any of the accompanying text. The image itself is the focus of attention, and the speaker draws the reader into the scene to witness the moment depicted and to consider the artist's choices. In "Interior with Weaver," a voyeuristic glimpse of an artisan at work leads an onlooker to wonder

what is beyond "[a]ll we can see of him" (10). "From the photographs" the speaker in "Linen" considers the mill-hands' lives (11). "Here is a glacier," "Engraving" begins, as if delivering a lesson to a child, continuing in the second stanza with the interpretation, "You can clearly see . . ." (15).

The image is of a glacier (a "terminal moraine"). Three travelers also appear as "tiny, human figures on a precipice," carrying "alpenstocks." One of the trekkers points to "the snowy pyramid above," leading the viewer's gaze to the "silver, pewter-shadowed / clouds, that carry messages of further snow." Rather than offering information, as the encyclopaedia's text might, the illustration provokes the speaker's questions and speculations. What seem to be "*roches moutonnées*," rounded masses of rock shaped by glacial ice flow, "might perhaps be taken / for black sheep, resting furtively on pinnacles / of ice, after their long journey." One figure, "seated, looking towards them," might be "counting them" as a sleep aid or could actually be asleep. The speaker's imagination extends to the engraver as well. "You can clearly see" the "hours of trouble" spent in making the etchings on the plate. "[T]he walls, the towers, the minarets of ice / and cloud" catch his attention. Yet some elements are less defined: "The Alpine flowers – scratches that could be / edelweiss, or grass – must have been obscured / By boredom; they were unimportant." The artist, or those who commissioned the image, valued the more impressive natural structures that are described in terms of the man-made ("walls," "towers," "minarets") over smaller details. The guide emphasizes this point with his "grand gesture" to the peak and sky as he "ignores" what is below them. "He is concerned for higher things," the speaker notes, a possible reference to both the guide and the engraver.

The tone and diction identify the speaker as an educated adult casually calling to

the reader or listener to pay attention ("Here is . . ."; "You can clearly see . . ."; "You can see . . ."). But a child's voice and perspective emerge in the sympathetic conclusion: "They seem a long way from home." As in "An Early Bed" and the later poem, "Rubbish," the speaker navigates between adult and childhood perspectives. While the adult thinks of the geological and natural features depicted in the engraving and the artistry of the representation, the visceral reaction to the image (the hills look like sheep, and the men must be tired and homesick) is more child-like. But each version is flawed or incomplete. The image cannot capture the feelings, intentions, or the back-stories of the figures, and a more empathetic reading of the scene leads to speculations that rely on what "could be," "might perhaps be," "must be," and "seem[s]" likely. The encyclopaedia, considered a source of authority, does not offer certainty but instead, for a close reader or viewer, leads to questions and possibilities, just as maps only provide one version of a place from a particular perspective at a given moment, influenced by the goals and intentions of the mapmaker.

As in "Linen," in "At the Windy Gap, 1910" an old photograph serves as a portal into the past and an opportunity for imaginative empathy, just as the visual representations in "Interior" and "Engraving" also do. Yet the poem reminds the reader that the medium also is a barrier that hinders understanding. More possibilities emerge than certainties, and meaning or significance turns out to be a combination of details and interpretations.

The poem begins with another speculation: "It seems they have all met here at a crossroads / quite by accident, and – bored with the 'Grand Atlantic' / tour – agreed to have their pictures taken" (23). The result is another tableau. Women, dressed in "frills and lace," sit "very correct" on their coaches as the men stand. Two men "look sideways"

at the others, and some "smile seriously, looking at the camera." Three others, smoking, "scrutiniz[e]" a cyclist who has "wandered in at the edge of the picture." Two tea-selling girls "have turned away from what / they should be doing" to face the camera directly and "look towards us." The scene is presented in a matter-of-fact fashion, the travelers' behaviors and appearance noted but not really notable. What captures the speaker's, and Carson's, attention is the one anomalous figure.

Vernon Young deems the poem the "most ceremonious" example of the poet's interest in "*artifice*" (625). The photograph, "ghosted by time," turns into a "stilted image" that still "teases fancy" and becomes "Carson's Grecian urn." Carson is interested in the details and the captured moment but is drawn to the questions that the posed picture generates. Most of the figures seem of a type, but the speaker intuits a story or tries to offer one for the man he notices who enigmatically "turns away from us" (*NE* 23). His posture draws the viewer into the scene, as if the man has some secret that is being withheld that needs deciphering. The speaker wonders if he is turning "in shyness, or disinterest, / or in contemplation," or if something else has caught his attention. "Does he watch the weather[?]" he thinks. Or "[p]erhaps he came to look at poverty, the barren stone, / the rain-clouds thickening" above the mountains and the "one patch of sunlight" appearing "through the mountain gap"? Imagining himself in the man's position, the speaker projects his own thoughts and sense of separation from the others, wondering if "perhaps, if someone came to photograph hours / later, would he still be there, the charabancs gone back / to where they came from, to the safe hotels?"

The question implies the speaker's criticism of the other travelers for a lack of curiosity or alertness. They do not really see their surroundings, like those who might rely on the mediated view the "Guidebook" provides in his later poem, "The Excursion." Yet

the "one man" who captures his attention is separated by time and by the photographic medium. There is no way to know what the figure is really thinking. In considering the possible stories behind the flat image, the speaker projects himself into the setting as if he is that man. But by dismissing the others, he highlights his and our empathetic limitations as well. They are reduced to roles, similar to the identical "regal profiles" of the queen in "Collecting Stamps." Only the "rarit[y]" stands out and merits the speaker's full imaginative attention, without achieving any certainty (14).

The figures and setting depicted in the photograph "[tease the] fancy" of the speaker in "At the Windy Gap," leading him to wonder about the figure turned away from the camera (Young 625). But some of the objects, like the wallpaper in "An Early Bed," contain information that is more certain but covered over. In "Belleek," fine china draws the speaker into self-reflection and a consideration of what is "Irish." Contrasting flat stereotypes with the stories or pasts that lie or are hidden behind them, he acknowledges the inherent tensions in an identity that is comprised of different elements and the inescapability of the past as part of it.

"Belleek" opens as the speaker, "[w]aiting for dinner, or for tea," turns his attention to the room filled with "'Character Pieces'" (*NE* 36). The term refers to the company's decorative and elaborately styled china figurines based on classic types, aimed at "raising the aspiration appeal of Belleek to the wider market" ("Museum"). But the speaker also seems to be commenting on the people in the parlor, viewed as types that correspond to the Belleek figures: "The Tobacco Brewer, 'Jack at Sea', / The Prisoner of Love" (*NE* 36). Like the tea scene in Eliot's "Prufrock," in which "the taking of a toast and tea" is reduced to "the cups, the marmalade, the tea, / Among the porcelain, among some talk of you and me," discussions of weightier topics are staved off by awkward

formality and propriety ("Prufrock" 4, 6). Carson's "Character Pieces" do not speak but only mime "with their crimped hands / The minute elaborations of the afternoon" (*NE* 36). Time is measured not by spoons but by the "crinkling of the table linen" that accompanies their soundless gestures.

Like Prufrock, Carson's speaker is conflicted, a participant and also a semi-detached judge. Prufrock wonders if he should challenge the complacency of the parlor scene by speaking about the world outside. In "Belleek," the speaker, "[f]ingering the 'bound leaves and grasses' / Motif on the covered muffin dish" and "on the milk-jug and the tea-pot," feels that his hands are "touched by beauty, and by guilt." Looking at what he calls the "spider's-web-on-thorn / Design upon the dinner-plates," he wonders if he should "escape" the entrapment of these fineries to find "satisfaction" instead in the "heavy-duty earthenwares" also made by the company. Should he reject the beauty that he finds appealing for something more solid and practical?

The mountain scene in "Engraving" and the photograph in "Windy Gap" lead the viewers to consider the thoughts of those depicted and imagine what, if they were in their settings, would capture their attention. But the fine porcelain in "Belleek" sparks an identity conflict in the speaker. Drawn to the delicate beauty of the tableware, he also remembers the company's past. In its early decades, Belleek produced utilitarian pieces, including "heavy sanitary wares" ("Museum"). He recalls "the slop basin, the spitting mug / And the French bedpan" (*NE* 36) once supplied to "hospitals and asylums" for "everyday use" ("Museum"). They are, he parenthetically adds, "(mentioned only / By the servants, or a bad patient)," presumably not suitable for polite society or conversations (*NE* 36). Belleek discontinued producing stoneware in 1919 and earthenware in 1946 to focus solely on fine Parian china, but the speaker seems troubled

by the contrast between his attraction to those expensive pieces and the "satisfaction" he gets from the more utilitarian works. While they are "also / Covered with that iridescent glaze" of the higher-end products, reminiscent of "[t]ints of rose and soured cream" and "replete evenings," he is reminded of their purpose: to serve the "incontinence of early hours." Both he and the company straddle or inhabit the dual worlds of the parlor and the sickroom, or the fine and the mundane.

Prufrock's paralysis or indecisiveness stems in part from the conflict between the appeal of higher society and his awareness of its superficiality. He wonders, hyperbolically, "Do I dare / Disturb the universe?" by challenging it ("Prufrock" 4-5). Carson's speaker asks, "Should I escape [?]" but then points out that both the "heavy-duty" and finer Belleek pieces bear the maker's patented glaze (*NE* 36). Instead of an either/or choice between fine china or practical pottery, Carson offers the "logic of the AND" (Deleuze and Guattari 28). Drawn to the beauty of the china even as he knows about the more common or baser products that are like lesser relations, he compares the sensation to "those moments of sickness," when one is in a state of transition (*NE* 36). Like the "gold-edged cloud / Suddenly visible at the breathed-on window" that appears as "milk and pearl," it "blooms and blooms / Into the lens of suffering." While the suffering eventually "dims back into nothingness, / The sky remembering its eggshell blue," both states still exist. When the "sickness" passes, the memory of it "dims" but does not disappear. The sight of the company's signature glaze on the dinner plates summons thoughts of the slop basin. And when the "eggshell blue" of the sky is obscured, it is not gone but remains behind the fog, eventually "remember[ed]." The speaker feels compelled to choose at first but comes to recognize the possibility that two states or versions can coexist, even if one is temporarily occluded. The present does not eliminate

the past, and memory, even an unpleasant one, does not replace the feelings of the moment.

The history of Belleek is complicated by the question of how to market itself. Its physical location is also problematic. It is a company located in a border town, having a toehold in the Republic but mainly situated in the North. Belleek markets fine goods with Irish themes, yet its past is more prosaic or utilitarian, and the town is geographically linked to Britain. Carson's speaker is similarly divided. This struggle between different identities and allegiances is also reflected in shifts between the present and the past. Belleek's china serves as a reminder that nothing is fixed. The wallpaper in "An Early Bed" is peeled off to reveal earlier versions of the room's decor and a forgotten or suppressed memory. The encyclopaedia illustration of "Engraving" and the photo in "Windy Gap" (and the images in "Interior" and "Linen") provoke the speaker to consider untold narratives and to project himself into the settings, identifying with the figures depicted. In the end, though, the speakers are left with possibilities and alternatives, not certainties.

MORTALITY AND TRANSLATION

In "The Half-Moon Lake," a location and a story, not an object, evoke the speaker's curiosity and speculations. Drawing on myth, imagination, and a local tragedy, the poem introduces the character type of the lost child, revised in *The Lost Explorer's* "Smithfield." It also begins a series of poems that deal with darker themes of mortality and violence.

"The Half-Moon Lake" opens as the speaker points out the probable site of a boy's "[d]isappearance from our lives": "It was here" (19). Seeing the lake and the hole in the ice leads him to ponder what drew the boy to the "tentative / Pane of ice there

might have been that morning," and the boy's fate seems less important than the possible stories that lead up to it. The speaker imagines his fall through the ice as a passage through a "star-shaped hole." Instead of drowning, he "entered the skylight / And was gone, into the reversed world / Of his dreams," a moment of transcendence rather than death. Maybe the boy was "hoping that life there might // Prove otherwise," the speaker thinks, his departure an escape from the ambiguous "otherwise" of his present life.

The "silence" that accompanies his disappearance, the fact that he "left so quickly, not leaving any word," and the lack of a body add to the mystery. Even when they "dragged for him, deep as a chance / Allowed," there was no "trace." The speaker, in contrast with the others who pragmatically but unproductively search the lake and then fill it in out of fear "for the other children," continues to consider the boy's possible motivations and state of mind. He compares him to Narcissus, "diving for the moon / Of his own face rising through the water," and wonders if the boy had a fragile "soul" that had been "frailed too taut / For human heart." He might have been pursuing his own dream-world by passing through the portal or, caught up in "his own forgetfulness," ignored the dangers. The speaker's thoughts turn an individual's disappearance and a community's loss into potential myth and alternative narratives. But even though the boy's vanishing recalls the Irish legend of the "stolen child," taken by fairies, this option, curiously, is not proffered. No definitive answer is given, even one with cultural resonance.

The speaker's final suggestion seems atypical of Carson's reluctance to find solace and closure, what he finds fault with in Heaney's *North*. The speaker offers that "[d]eep / In the unseen water it is possible / He lies, with himself at last asleep." While this is a comforting thought, it clashes with the image of the lake being filled in,

"altogether disappear[ing]" along with the boy. But the qualification "it is possible" casts doubt and is more indicative of the uncertainty that is at the heart of many of Carson's poems, more wishful thinking than a practical or likely solution or answer. The decision to fill in the lake, in contrast to the speaker's projections, suggests that what is lost is more than a child. It is "necessary" that the lake, which sparks the speaker's empathetic imagination, and possibly the boy's own impulses, disappear. The story is about a missing boy but also about the difference between the perspectives of the townspeople and the artistic or sympathetic mind. While not addressing the Troubles directly, "The Half-Moon Lake" hints at a world that "might / Prove otherwise" to the present one, offering "dreams," "forgetfulness," and sleep "at last." At the present moment, though, it is an option that has been eliminated, or "[f]illed in."

The woodcut accompanying the poem on the facing page, from Georgius Agricola's sixteenth-century mining textbook, *De Re Metallica*, complicates how to consider the poem (*BT* 43). One of several images that appear within the pages of the Blackstaff edition of *The New Estate* and on the cover as well, it depicts a trio of men removing gold from a stream, using a sheepskin to trap the particles. Agricola explains in his accompanying text that this practice led to the myth of the Golden Fleece, and the figures are even labeled in the caption as "Argonauts" (330). Despite the pragmatic subject—the mining of metals—the imaginative world is briefly incorporated into a scientific and technical treatise, and a story that seems fantastical (the quest for the Golden Fleece) is found to have roots in reality.

The image also contains several ships, castles, islands, and assorted men at work, closely resembling a sketch of Bruegel's *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus.* What is missing from the Agricola illustration, however, is the figure of Icarus. Bruegel's

painting suggests that daily life supplants the magical, or, as Auden concludes, that "everything turns away / Quite leisurely from the disaster" ("Musée des Beaux Arts" 179). The ship "had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on." Yet the mythical and fantastical are still part of the painting, even though Icarus' fate is overlooked by most figures in the scene. Agricola's woodcut serves a different purpose, to illustrate one method of extracting precious metals from the earth, yet even that contains references to mythology. Carson's poem calls attention to the contrast between the world of imagination, symbolized by the lake and represented in the speaker's theories about the boy's disappearance, and the practical, evident in the decision to cover over the site to protect other children but preserves both. The illustration from Agricola suggests that the two are not exclusive.

"The Half-Moon Lake" also uses a boy's mysterious disappearance to highlight the challenge of understanding others and interpreting events. If it is about a death, it is a bloodless one that might allow the boy to find his "dream" world. In contrast, "The Holiday," following "The Half-Moon Lake," is rooted in disturbing imagery of a repulsive encounter that haunts the speaker and cannot be covered over. Remembering over breakfast the "mutilated sheep we found" the day before, he recalls the "pus" that "thickened to a sour cream / In the pink-lipped wounds" of the sheep and "[t]heir fixed stare" (*NE* 20). The disappeared boy cannot reveal his story except through his absence and through others' speculations—the "star-shaped hole" and the dredged lake offer no answers—but the sheep speak through their wounds and dead, staring eyes, offering evidence of an act of violence and a story to be interpreted.

In *Julius Caesar*, when Antony stands over Caesar's body, he asks the public to imagine what tale the wounds, Caesar's "poor poor dumb mouths," would tell (III. 2.

232). He wishes he could "put a tongue / In every wound of Caesar, that should move / The stones of Rome to rise and mutiny" against the killers (235-37). The sheep's wounds reveal a story of violence as well, and even if the cause of death is unknown (they might be a victim of some predator, some modern incarnation of the atrocities committed against livestock during the Land War, or some other unknown cause), the basic message is clear. Something appalling has occurred.

The sheep's "fixed stare" also evokes Coleridge's ancient Mariner, whose "glittering eye" keeps the Wedding-Guest in place until he hears the Mariner's story. Punished for heartlessly slaying the albatross, the Mariner explains,

> I pass, like night, from land to land;
> I have strange power of speech;
> That moment that his face I see,
> I know the man that must hear me:
> To him my tale I teach. (*Rime*)

The Wedding-Guest, "stunned" and "of sense forlorn" at the end, is transformed into a "sadder and a wiser man" by the Mariner's cautionary tale.

While Carson's speaker is not motivated to act, as Antony's crowd is, by the silent stories of the wounds, the images revisit him, and the poem itself passes the story on to the reader. "At breakfast," he explains, the scene comes back to him, suggesting that, while sleep might have offered respite, the details are "re-membered" the next day as he sees aspects of them in the world around him. The sheep's gaze

> [. . .] recalled
> The waitress's eyes, the frivelled [sic] lids
> Still bleared with sleep, the net
> Of veins running through the white. (*NE* 20)

Even the weather outside and the meal itself become associated with the gruesome sight:

> The clouds beyond the window
> Curdled suddenly; a whey-colored skin
> Had crawled and wrinkled

On the coffee. [. . .]

The thickening pus becomes an *idée fixe*; he sees it in the tired eyes of the waitress, the changing weather, and the cooling coffee.

Returning home should offer a reprieve, but the break after "Going home to Belfast" at the end of the third stanza is followed by a less morbid but still unwelcoming situation. They discover

> [. . .] a house denied our presence,
> The door-handle cobwebbed –
> The papers lying, unread, in the hall,
> The milk turned sour on our doorstep.

While these details could describe the normal results of time spent away from home, links between the holiday scene and home indicate how violence filters into one's perception of the world and the language used to express it. The "thickened" pus is echoed in the "cobwebbed" handle, the waitress's "bleared" eyes in the "unread" papers, and the "[c]urdled" clouds and "whey-coloured skin" on the coffee in the "sour" milk. The line, "We would find a house denied our presence," explains what they discover when they get home, since a house left untended may suffer for its neglect. But "denied" also can be the verb for "house" as a subject, suggesting that the returning travelers have been shut out. While they expect a return to normalcy, they cannot escape what they saw. The phrase, "papers lying, unread," while describing the piled-up editions from their time away, indicates their disconnection from daily events in Belfast and also implies false news (the "lying" papers).

If the "holiday" is intended as a break from everyday life, the travelers find more than they planned for. In the context of the Troubles, leaving "home" (Belfast) for a more pastoral setting might seem a reprieve. What they discover is that violence and death cannot be escaped. It exists in rural settings as well as urban ones, and the events

chronicled in the newspapers continue, even if they leave. “Going home to Belfast” implies that “home” would be away from the story told by the sheep’s wounds. But “home” denies easy comfort, since the speaker has carried what he has seen with him.

For the ancient Mariner, telling his story is the only means to relieve his condition, but Antony’s use of Caesar’s wounds to manipulate the crowd shows the dangers of using stories as tools for political manipulation. Carson’s speaker cannot banish the image of the sheep, but how can he explain his experience without seeming gratuitous? “The Holiday” reinforces Carson’s claim, “No-one really escapes from the massacre, of course” (“Escaped” 186). The dilemma the writer in the North faces is how to write about something that is part of one’s milieu without either dismissing it or fueling the problem. If the media’s reports are inaccurate or misleading (“lying”), or no longer have an impact (“unread”), how can one communicate what is happening?

One possible way emerges in “The Bomb Disposal.” Along with “Dunne,” first published in 1981 and appearing in The *New Estate and Other Poems* in 1988, “The Bomb Disposal” offers evidence that Carson’s interest in writing about Belfast and the Troubles, and in mapping the city and the self, began well before the publication of *The Irish for No*. While it lacks the long lines he eventually employs, it offers, “in embryo,” a depiction of the city as a labyrinth (McCarthy 99). He returns to the metaphor in “Turn Again,” the poem that opens *The Irish for No,* and in many later works. He reuses the line, “The city is a map of the city,” in the prose piece, “Revised Version,” in *Belfast Confetti (NE* 21; *BC* 69). The bomb disposal expert, whose purpose is to directly confront and defuse potential violence, also becomes a recurring figure.

“The Bomb Disposal” is located right on the streets of Belfast, its subject playing a direct role in the conflict. The poem also is self-reflectively about the writer’s process,

trying to find the right words to express an experience, and about the way one must navigate the maze of possibilities and dangers of the city itself. Earlier poems represent the writer in the figures of the hermit-scribe or artisan. "The Bomb Disposal" marks a shift to a more contemporary metaphor and setting. Nicholas Hinds notes that, in a "deviat[ion] from the rural conventions," the poem employs imagery of the "expert craftsman, crafty cat-burglar, questing knight-errant, master surgeon[, and] navigator" in deciphering the bomb expert's actions and in describing Carson's sense of the poet's work (148). He fittingly points out that the poem strikes a "significantly discordant, pessimistic and 'urban' note" in the collection, although his claim that the rest of the poems provide "otherwise gentle and rural 'songlines'" misses their turn to darker and more unsettling aspects and themes (149).

The first two stanzas are extended questions. As apostrophe, they imagine the thoughts of the bomb disposal expert at work. As the speaker searches for the right metaphor to express the tension and uncertainty the soldier feels, he first wonders if his work is like "picking a lock," requiring "slow deliberation," a deft sense of touch, and awareness of the results of his careful probings (*NE* 21). The mindfulness of "deliberation" leads him to think of a funeral procession, mourners "[h]esitating" as they make their way "through a darkened nave." But the final destination of that journey is the grave. The body of the deceased is the "answer" to the "deliberation," and the search for a metaphor appears to fail, as one comparison slips into another, leading to death.

In the second stanza, the speaker imagines the unexploded bomb and "the malevolent tick of its heart" as a hospital patient. The wires are transformed into "threaded veins / like print," and he wonders, "[C]an you read / the message of the threaded veins / like print, its body's chart"? Given the right chart, or map, one could

defuse the bomb, determine the patient's state, find the right combination of words, or make one's way through the streets safely. But the opening of the third stanza abandons answers or solutions for a state of permanent uncertainty: "The city is a map of the city, / its forbidden areas changing daily." The "configurations constantly change," so the only way to navigate is in real-time, adjusting to circumstances (Barry 227). Any map or chart is bound to be inadequate, as it is never a permanent or complete representation.

In a place where everything is mutable, it is easy to get lost, and making adjustments is essential. "I find myself in a crowded taxi / making deviations from the known route," the speaker explains (*NE* 21). The enjambment makes it unclear whether he is changing his patterns so that others cannot predict his location or if the taxi's progress is varying from what the speaker expects, leaving him at the mercy of the driver and possibly the others in the car. Improvisation or acceptance of being subject to another's control are two possible responses to uncertainty.

The final stanza is inconclusive but suggestively sinister. The speaker's "deviations" end

> [. . .] in a cul-de-sac
> where everyone breaks out suddenly
> in whispers, noting the boarded windows,
> the drawn blinds.

The "cul-de-sac" marks the end to the journey—the attempt to disarm the bomb, pick the lock, deliver the deceased to the grave, save the patient, write a poem, or navigate the city safely—but does not offer a clear outcome. Aside from the death in the funeral metaphor, the only certainty in the poem is change. The urgency of the moment is heightened by the juxtaposition in the description of what could be the passengers' reactions to their destination or the reactions of those already there. When "everyone breaks out suddenly in whispers," the intensity of their words escapes the riders' attempts to avoid attracting

attention, or onlookers react to the new arrivals. And while the "boarded windows" indicate that this might be an abandoned part of the city, the "drawn blinds" suggest something or someone unknown lurking behind the glass or shutting themselves off from what is to come.

Given the title, the poem could certainly be taken as the thoughts of a bomb disposal expert, a figure Carson revises in "Jump Leads" and "Hamlet" in *Belfast Confetti*. Imagining his work as a lock-picker or a doctor, he faces unforeseen problems (the "deviations") and the pressure of those around him (the "crowded taxi") until he hits a snag or barrier without an apparent way out (the "cul-de-sac"). The figure could also serve as a metaphor for the residents of a conflict-torn city that is imagined as a bomb "which the inhabitants have to 'decode' daily in order to survive" (Barry 227). "The Bomb Disposal" offers an early example of what comes to dominate later works, the metaphor of the city as a map and a labyrinth, continually shifting and offering choices and dangers that "could be fatal to misread." The deliberations of the speaker also relate to the writer's task, trying to find the "message" that is "like print" in a tangle of thoughts and stimuli, only to arrive at a dead-end, surrounded by "whispers" and "drawn blinds" (*NE* 21). "The Bomb Disposal" is not about the success or failure of navigation, or what happens after the arrival of the labyrinth-goer at the heart of the maze, but rather the process of getting there.

The final image in "The Bomb Disposal," of "boarded windows" and "drawn blinds," represents barriers to communication in an inhospitable setting. In the subsequent poem, "Fishes in a Chinese Restaurant," those barriers are the glass walls of a fish tank and the different mediums in which the fish and their human observers live. The opening line, "I wonder if they see me," serves as a continuation of the speaker's last

thoughts in "The Bomb Disposal," as he suggests he is being watched (22).

Separated by glass and the "invisible // Curtain of water," the fish exist in their own atmosphere, "fluttering like swallows / Behind a window." They move "[h]eavily as silk, as air / Before a storm, for their / Own weathers move them only." He imagines their "thin bubbles" as birdsong, "[r]ising in scales to the surface" and miming "various bird-musics" unheard by him. Their world, where they "nest / Half-asleep," is an "ornamental garden" filled with "[m]iniature trees" that flower "as paint through water." Yet even though he can see them, his understanding is filtered and blocked by the glass walls and by the fact that they are a different species. Thinking of them as birds and translating their experience into forms and terms that provide more common ground (their shared air-breathing milieu and musical notes) bring him closer but still proves unsuccessful. The effect is disorienting, as the speaker explains that he "felt helpless." Like someone "seeing an accident / Outside" but unable to speak, he is reduced to "utter[ing] / Dialects of silence" with his hands.

Carson does not explicitly refer to the divided communities in Belfast and the North in "Fishes." But the different elements in which each group exists reflect the literal separation by peace walls, barricades, and armed patrols, as well as the social divisions that turn their counterparts into the "other." Robert Johnstone points out that the poem in a "quiet and careful way finds us a telling image for how most of us look at 'the troubles'" and offers a "frank admission of the personal inadequacy we all of us feel in that connexion" (14). The occasionally supercilious tone towards the "others" (the fish, opposing communities) comes across as both tongue-in-cheek and critical of stereotyping. "They" certainly do not have "their / Own weathers," especially in the working-class communities that bore the brunt of the conflict and faced similar threats and dangers (*NE*

22). Describing their environment "as air / Before a storm" creates a foreboding mood. Even in moments of peace, change and disruption are certain.

The final image of the speaker with his "mouth . . . pressed / To the glass" (*NE* 22) and trying to mime a warning with his hands calls for an end to complacency or silence, a rejoinder to Heaney's ironic comment, "Whatever you say, say nothing," and a reminder of the challenge of writing about the Troubles ("Whatever You Say" 214). He wants to call attention to "an accident," an unfortunate euphemism for violence that reflects growing desensitization. What comes across are only "[d]ialects of silence," unheard because they are characterized by linguistic traits or simply spoken in voices unrecognized or unacknowledged by the other side (*NE* 22). The speaker is helpless due to his inability to translate effectively. Feeling a sense of urgency, like the speaker in "Winter" with "[n]ews to tell" but blocked by the cold, he lacks the means or ability to get through the barriers other than through metaphors.

"AGAINST OBLIVION"

Change, violence, mortality, and isolation create barriers to communication and understanding. A recurring figure is the speaker as an outside observer, attempting to translate across those barriers. David Wheatley notes that, in Carson's works, particularly his Belfast-centered collections, "whole streets come and go, leaving only waste land and ghosts" (qtd. in Doyle). Carson's response is to create an "urban archive against oblivion," recording the past and the mutable present to preserve what otherwise would be lost to time, destruction, and redevelopment. Instead of just following Jacobs' advice to engage in conversations with the dead through active reading, he incorporates them into his poems. "Gaeltacht" is about the loss of language, and in a trio of poems from *The New Estate*, "To Margaret," "Visiting the Dead," and "Sickness," Carson focuses on the

human figure facing its own "oblivion," the uncertain relationship between the living and the dead or dying, and the challenge of remembering properly.

In "To Margaret," the speaker, presumably comforting a dying friend or relative, initially refers to mortality as an end to suffering, when others can "stop / Wishing you an easy death" (*NE* 24). "Your pain will be forgotten," the speaker promises "Margaret." Yet the use of passive voice makes it unclear whether this promise benefits the deceased or those who live on, no longer having to witness another's struggles. If the poem is taken as apostrophe, addressing "Margaret" in the abstract, the speaker is convincing himself that the death will offer him relief. Instead of focusing on her pain, the speaker vows that he "will remember" specific, pleasant details about the deceased. The scents of "[h]oney, snuff and whiskey," and the "copper bracelet" on her wrist will endure beyond the memories of suffering.

"Visiting the Dead," on the facing page, complicates these assurances. The body of the dead woman was found temporarily frozen in a grotesque pose: "Her tongue protruded from her gums; / Her face was knuckled / Her hand clenched on the sheet" (25). Once the deceased's skin "has eased out," it is compared to ironed, "[n]ew-washed cloth in which the wrinkles fade" that complements the "clean linen" she is laid in. This is not an "easy death," though, despite the eventual smoothing of the corpse's skin, and the image of prolonged suffering is bound to stay with those who discovered the corpse, just as the memory of the mutilated sheep does for the speaker in "The Holiday."

Both "To Margaret" and "Visiting" offer the possibility that time will alter or filter memories, leaving behind pleasant associations and images. Suffering and sorrow, like a grain of sand in an oyster, will be transformed into "an unintended beauty" (24). What remains, the "pearl," "[f]orgets the suffering that made it." Yet the speaker in "To

Margaret," imagining the scents that will remind him of the deceased, will also remember "[t]he clarity / of the tainted water / You had sent from Lourdes." The contrast of "clarity" and "tainted" highlights the failure of a hoped-for remedy. Despite his positive assertions, the speaker is left with a question that implies he is thinking of his own death as well: "Will it be like this, / A cold, sour taste, reminding me / Of disappointed cures?" The metaphor of the pearl seems a hope or wish rather than a certainty, or just a case of selective memory. The statement "I will remember" is more likely just reassurance, a mantra in the face of grief and disappointment that might lead him beyond the suffering to the "pearl." Yet the poem, ending with "beauty," also contains and is a reminder of the "pain" and "suffering" that are essential to its creation. Both need to be remembered.

The darkly slapstick fate of the dead woman in "Visiting" is more disturbing. The deceased's transformation and release from her "knuckled" and "clenched" position makes the speaker think of the "iron's hiss" that removes wrinkles with a combination of heat, pressure, and steam (25). A standard mourning scene, with the "best china" brought out for tea, a "knot of mourners" and "starched handkerchief[s]" for tears, is bound to be remembered more for a grotesque mishap than its formality. When the body is carried down the stairs, "[t]he coffin [gets] stuck in the crooked staircase." A stately procession turns into a moment that could be found in William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, in which Addie Bundren's corpse and coffin undergo numerous indignities on the way to the gravesite. Instead of the "unintended beauty" of the memories from "To Margaret," the mourners are left with something grimmer: "We hesitated, awkward in our best suits, / Then rushed to help, and freed her."

In one respect, the speaker in "To Margaret" is right. Death brings an end to pain and suffering for the afflicted. Memory, though, stays behind for the living and operates

separately from intentions. Carson does not allow for a simple response to loss, either moving on or choosing what memories to preserve. Margaret will be associated with pleasant scents but also with the "cold, sour taste" of tainted holy water (24). Likewise, the woman in "Visiting" will be remembered for her "knuckled" face and "clenched" hand as well as the smoother visage she presents at her viewing (25). The image of a "maiden aunt . . . weeping softly" is countered by one of attendees struggling with a stuck coffin. Given the importance of storytelling in many of his works, the tale of the coffin's "rescue" from the stairs, which has the last word in the poem and in her passage to the grave, is bound to become a bit of *craic* to share with others, and a truer but darker version of an event that carries with it certain expectations of gravity and solemnity.

"Sickness" reverses the relationships of the previous poems. The speaker seems to be the one who is ill, attended to by an unidentified listener. At the heart of the poem is a difficulty in communication and understanding, as well as a suggestion of the question from "To Margaret": "Will it be like this[?]" (24).

When the companion opens a window, the speaker hears the "clotted whispering and murmuring" that "[b]roke the stillness after rain," "a cloud of red amber" that follows a cycle: "water falling and retained / And lost again through infinite recessions." The sound represents the natural cycles that suggest a return to health, but the repetition of the sound of "clotted whispering and murmuring" implies labored and impeded breathing and calls to mind the "thickening pus" of the mutilated sheep and the "[c]urdled" sky, coffee, and milk in "The Holiday" (26, 20). It also may relate to the sounds of others in attendance, quietly expressing their concern for the sick speaker. The listener, however, "lie[s]" about what is heard, claiming to hear "[a] noise like leaves like wind like rain / A noise like crying / The noises people make when sleeping" (26). Confusing things further

is the enjambment after the speaker's request for water: "I asked for water, clearly. / You did not understand // The clotted whisperings and murmurings." The speaker's voice may be reduced to unintelligible sounds, and despite the insistence that he speaks "clearly," the companion hears the sounds differently. The "lie" might also be in agreeing with the speaker in order to soothe him during an illness.

If there is a pearl that emerges from the scene, it is the care and concern offered to the sick: "And your face loomed quietly into mine / Like a white pillow like a white cloud." But even that face is distorted:

> Your mouth and nose and eyes
>
> Were wrinkled like a wedding dress,
> The pores of lace you see through
> In the cataract.

The break between stanzas allows the image to transform from soft, white pillows and clouds to wrinkles and tears, reversing what happens to the dead woman's face in "Visiting." What could be a tender moment of closeness changes, and something is lost in communication, as words and facial expressions relay different messages or emotions.

Despite the promise or hope that death brings an end to suffering and leaves polished, pearl-like memories of the deceased, the different perspectives and tones in the three poems reflect a more complicated reality that challenges clear understanding or communication. The poems that follow and make up most of the final pages in the volume turn mainly to "depictions of domestic interiors and the rituals of home-making" (*SPW* 41). Not just poems about places and routines, they consider the processes of negotiation between individuals, the natural and man-made worlds, and the past and the present. But lurking behind many is a sense of mortality or loss that can be covered or masked but not avoided.

THE DOMESTIC AND THE FAMILIAL

"Eaves," a preview of Carson's use of *haiku* as interstitial pauses between the longer poems in *Belfast Confetti,* is another adaptation, this time from the Welsh. Returning to the pastoral world, it contrasts summer and winter in two *haiku*-like tercets. The summer's rain is compared to "the sound of a thousand cows / Being milked," and the winter's ice provides a "heavy . . . / . . . drip[ping} silence" (27). Form comes from the "eaves" of the house they outline and from the metaphors Carson employs, an example of Paulin's comment that, for Carson, nature's aesthetics need a human context. Following the enigmatic noises of "Sickness" that come after rain, "Eaves" imagines a relationship with nature that is a mixture of appreciation and apprehension. The cows' full udders require attention, and their counterpart is the winter image of the house's eaves weighted with icicles, their own "snowy teats." The mood recalls the "rumbling sound / Of load on load of apples coming in" during harvest that haunts the speaker in Robert Frost's "After Apple-Picking," a poem Carson draws on in "Whatever Sleep It Is" in *The Irish for No* ("After Apple-Picking" 69).

"Eaves" also sets up a transition to the domestic sphere, centered on the family and on creating or renovating a home. "Moving In," about a couple preparing a new house, contrasts their step-by-step process (painting, tiling, insulating, unpacking) with the uncertainties of a fresh start. In a departure from the "St. Ciaran" poems, in which the isolated speaker learns how to "acclimatize" to his new, austere life (*IC* 9), the goal in "Moving In" is to make an "empty" and "bare" place habitable (*NE* 29). Instead of stripping down the self, the couple modernizes and restores the structure. The linen cupboard is painted, the bathroom "will be tiled," "eggshell finish" is on the walls, and there is, "[b]etween the floorboards in the roof-space, / Fibre-glass, for insulation." If the

home of the hermit-scribe is a "fine lace shell" of branches that still cannot keep out the wind, rain, and cold, the renovated home in "Moving In" promises many more comforts (*IC* 8). Solitude is replaced by a relationship, as in "The Island Revisited."

The substitutions bring their own problems. The unnamed companion appears "[a]s if behind transparencies of skin, / As various papers are held to the light" (*NE* 29). Whether the "papers" relate to documents (contracts or plans) or wall-coverings, or even serve as a metaphor for a labile emotional state, his view of her is obscured. This double meaning continues when the speaker reviews their progress on the home:

> Things are falling into place,
> Though much remains unfilled –
> I am feeling my way around
> The eggshell finish of the walls.

His need to be careful as he turns off the light before bed parallels a cautiousness with his companion. He has to reach for an unfamiliar light-switch and thinks about marring the new paint, but the "eggshell finish" suggests "walking on eggshells" and a possible delicate tension between the two. The line, "We have unpacked, careful not to break," adds to the tentativeness. "[B]reak" lacks an object, and the line is end-stopped, serving as the end of a stanza as well. "Break" could refer to the contents of the boxes or to the relationship itself.

Carson captures the ambivalent feelings accompanying a move and a new home. "Moving In" offers the chance to create something new with the purity of "white sheets whiter than snow," but this opportunity creates a space without a history. The home is described in terms of what it lacks, being "empty," "bare," "off-white," "cold," and "silen[t]." While it is being prepared for a new life, the speaker realizes, "As yet there is no heat" within the double glazing of the windows designed "to keep out / Wind and ice." For now, the windows just keep the cold in and create "silence in the space between,"

implying both within the double-glazed windows and between the couple. The speaker declares, "I will shift her body over // For my warmed place," but that is something for the future.

"Tuaim Inbir," another adaptation from Early Irish (discussed earlier with its original title, "Housed"), offers a contrast to the couple's new home and serves as another bridge or pause between poems set in modern dwellings. It is also a change from its earlier pairing, as "Housed," with "Homeless," a poem that stresses the speaker's isolation and the burden of living in a "house of frost," not the preparations for a place that will soon be warm ("Homeless" 5).

The hermit of the poem, like the speaker in "Moving In," is not alone. "God is not aloof" and has provided shelter and security (*NE* 29). "Tuaim Inbir," referring a place from the *Buile Shuibne* (*The Madness of Sweeney*) poem cycle, is translated in Carson's "Notes on the Text" as "The mound (or funeral mound) by the inlet" *(*42). Carson's speaker returns, in death, to God, nature, and peace. Whether caught up in the turmoil of society or seeking isolation, being human involves conflict, so a truly peaceful place can only be found when life is over. Yet even if the dominant mood and tone of "Tuaim Inbir" is positive and hopeful, its new title associates it with the legend of an Irish king. Driven mad by a priest's curse after acting against the church and violating rules of combat, he is doomed to wander for years. He takes refuge in the tree-tops and sometimes assumes the form of a bird. While he finally finds a home at a monastery and lives there for a year, he is killed by a jealous husband, receiving last rites as he expires at the door. The home in the woods is associated with his madness, and it is only when he is brought back into society and, in the end, sanctified right before his death that he finds peace and a place. If the speaker in "Tuaim Inbir" stands for Mad Sweeney, his words serve as a prayer

celebrating the end of roaming and conflict, a life of solitude and homelessness. “Moving In” recounts efforts to create a warm, safe place against the cold world outside; “Tuaim Inbir” suggests that this only ends when life does.

“The Car Cemetery,” like “Tuaim Inbir,” is also about a journey home. The house in “Moving In” is a work-in-progress, but the opening line of “The Car Cemetery” positions a couple further along in time, with established routines and expectations. “On winter nights,” the speaker begins, “the cars bring in snow from the hills” as the drivers return home (31). The speaker watches them and can recognize his partner’s arrival: “From miles away / I see you coming in, a distant star.” Back in the house, “my warm light and your cold are married,” and two worlds are merged.

The title challenges the security and safety of that image. Outside the house, the cars are first described as capped with quaint “bonnets white.” Each displays a grille that seems like a “smile.” When parked, they seem “hushed.” “Robed in white, these brides of silence” come to their rest “at every door.” But their smiles are of “chromium,” not flesh, and are “wide [and] cold.” Beneath the snow the cars face a “soft corrosion,” reminding the reader of the “cemetery” of the title. From their fate the speaker generalizes that

> All around the world
> there is a graveyard of defunct bodies,
> wide smiles curled
> in sleep. [. . .]

The drowned or missing boy, the speaker hopes in “Half-Moon Lake,” is “possibl[y],” just “asleep,” as the cars are imagined to be (19). But they are slowly rusting away. By shifting the perspective from the cars to “the world” and the “graveyard,” Carson suggests that “the house” and its “warm light” only offer a temporary respite (*NE* 31), an idea he returns to in “Snow,” contrasting a parlour scene with the “white confetti” that “seethes” outside (*BC* 21). We may possess “wide smiles” as we sleep, he implies, but

"corrosion" of time and decay continues.

Winter and snow, despite the peaceful imagery in this poem, represent mortality, and the poem ends inconclusively. Invoking the "heaven" of the "sleep[ing] cars," he notes that it "is like ours, a detritus of lights," a jumble of stars rather than something orderly and organized (*NE* 31). The house brings the couple together. "[W]arm light" and "cold" are married, taking away a little of each in the process. But even in this equilibrium, the "solitary noise" of the returning partner "is lost among the rushing of the wind" outside. The closing image of a snow-covered graveyard also anticipates the speaker in "Slate Street School," envisioning himself as an "avenging Archangel" set to "bury the dark city of Belfast forever under snow" in order to purify it (*IFN* 46). If home is a safeguard against the forces outside, the cold, wind, and snow are still persistent and potential threats. In the isolated settings of "Wenceslas," "Letter from Alaska," and the "St Ciaran" poems, they are more immediate ones, but they persist in the modern domesticity of "Moving In" and "The Car Cemetery."

The snow-covered cars in "The Car Cemetery" serve as a *memento mori* in an urban or mechanized world and a reminder of the forces just beyond the walls and windows of a presumably secure home. Like "The Holiday," "Our Country Cousins," with its rural setting peopled with an extended family structure, is a reminder that, despite the sense of community and identity in the pastoral world, mortality and violence exist there as well.

Family events like birthdays or leave-takings (celebrating "goings-away" from the country home to become "black sheep") bring relatives together (*NE* 32). "[M]others" become "sisters again, / Lying apart from their men," and essential blood-ties are restored. There is comfort in knowing that "our real kin" lies "beneath the skin." But the last

phrase leads the speaker to think of a graveyard, where the family connection is finalized, the bodies lying under the "skin" of earth. The true family reunion, he suggests, is when "[o]ur ones / Would be buried with your ones," reminiscent of the final peace of "Tuaim Inbir" and also the mingling of bodies and soil in "The Insular Celts."

Children's games of make-believe are redolent of death and violence: "Someone, pretending an accident, / Wore bandages, sent // His partner with a knife in her head," and "[a]nother painted his body red." Accidents, violent partners, or even domestic abuse, suggested in "An Early Bed" and later in "Twine," in the expanded edition of *The New Estate*, intrude. "Even your eggs were flecked with blood," the speaker notes. In some ways, the "countryside" is similar to the city, as the stereotype of pastoral innocence used to counter urban or modern corruption fails (Annunciação 134). The quiet, peaceful scene of "The Car Cemetery" gives way to thoughts of junkyards and graveyards. The disparate settings of the two poems are linked by the image of the cemetery, unifying both distanced "country cousins" and the "defunct bodies" from "[a]ll around the world" (*NE* 32, 31).

"To a Married Sister," addressing a sibling, also blurs divisions, just as the blood-flecked eggs do. Like "Moving In," the poem is about setting up a new home, but in this case it is the sister's new, old home. Despite the fact that he is "proudly shown the bedroom," what he notices, "[p]atches / Of damp stained the walls a tea colour, / Like the sluggish tints of an old map," is in contrast with his sister's feelings (33). The speaker ends the first stanza with a critical judgment: "Our mother would have said, 'A new bride / And a through-other [untidy or disheveled] house make a bad match'."

The speaker seems to agree with or at least to recognize the conventional wisdom of the old saw, since he repeats it directly. But something about the house captures his

attention and interest. His mother's colloquialism about a disorderly home is what *she* "would have said," but the speaker finds value in what might be considered to be worn or out of date. The enjambment at the end of the first stanza in the original version provides a pause for the speaker to reconsider his mother's saying. Her opinion is not final, and the second stanza continues with an alternative view: "But you like dilapidation, the touch / Of somewhere that's been lived in." The specificity of his description of the home and the effects of its being "lived in" suggest that the speaker feels the same, as he appreciates

> [. . .] the gloom
> Of empty hallways, the shadow of the fanlight
> Fading dimly, imperceptibly
> Along the flowered paper; the hairline net
> Of cracks on worn enamel; a tree-darkened room.

Indications of the passage of time and the effects of use are signs or markers of the lives spent in the house. The "damp patches" on the walls seem like an "old map" and with other details create narratives that would be lost or hidden by restoration, like the layers of wallpaper covering the past in "An Early Bed." While the speaker comments that the fanlight's shadow on the wallpaper, the effect of years of sun-bleaching, came about "imperceptibly," he still notices it. The house may be a "bad match" for a "new bride," but it contains traces of stories that capture the speaker's imagination.

He also observes how his sister, despite being "cluttered with gifts – crockery, / Knives, the bed-linen still in its cellophane," picks her way through the items to make the home her own, "to trace [her] new initials / On the spidered window-pane." Whether the line, "[w]atching you in that obscure privacy," refers to the speaker's distance from the scene or the sister's preoccupation with her new home, it conveys a sense of distance between the siblings as well as a private but shared perspective. The speaker takes on the

role of detached observer, despite being involved in the moving process, and the sister operates in her own world, but both see something of value in the house's condition.

Plans to renovate or restore the house and make it something new are expected of a new couple in a new home:

> Your husband had talked of mending
> Broken doors, the cheap furniture
> That bore the accidents of others' lives,
> That were there before you.

Using the past perfect ("had talked"), though, indicates that "mending" has been abandoned, at least temporarily. The sister's gesture, making her mark on the window, connects her with the earlier residents. The "cheap furniture," the speaker notices, also contains its own secrets and past, as a "gold resin / Leaked from the slackened joints." The final line in the poem suggests that, despite plans to repair the "accidents of others' lives," those lives may stay in the house with the new couple, as the husband's "new saw glittered like your wedding-silver." Both items are signs of the future, but they, for now, lie unused.

The stained bedroom walls and the different marks and imperfections are signs of other narratives. Given the importance of maps and history for Carson, as well as the value of preserving memory, the speaker seems caught between what he *should* feel—that this place is a "bad match," something he might not agree with but still repeats—and his fascination with the traces of the past, another version of the internal division in "Belleek." Like the "gold resin" he sees on the cheap furniture, the house bears elements that are worth preserving, or at least noting and recording. The sister's movement through the wedding gifts to leave her initials on the window reveals her desire to leave something of her own behind. The title of the poem suggests that the brother, in writing to his sister, understands this impulse and the tension between preserving and moving on,

which he explores further in subsequent poems, “House Painting” and “Soot.”

The short poem, “The Moon Parlour,” offers a contrast to “To a Married Sister.” Set at a dinner party in a home that is apparently well-established and furnished, it opens on a noted absence: “Still no sign; she has quietly forgone / Our invitation.” While “she” is never identified, the poem’s placement after “To a Married Sister” suggests that it could refer to the sister from the previous poem, avoiding the occasion. Instead of stains, clutter, and worn furniture, what stands out in this scene is the “expensive china” that is handled “reverently” (34).

The overall tentativeness of the host and guests replaces the “lived-in” feel of the home in the previous poem (33). The host “gestures / As if dusting glass,” “pockmarks” of rain “drizzle on the window,” and the shadows of the party appear faintly to any possible onlookers: “Our illumination mists upon the lawn outside.” The curious title suggests a variation of a “sun room,” without the same warmth and light. When the speaker points out, “My watch ticks / Slowly,” the enjambment indicates the slow passage of time in a setting so muted that he can hear the hands move. The allusion to the “malevolent tick” of the bomb’s “heart” in “The Bomb Disposal” also creates a sinister mood (21). If the sister’s home recalls the lives of past inhabitants and summons the words of the absent mother, in this “Moon Parlour,” the host and guests just mark time and cast a diffuse impression. The speaker is attracted to the finery, or at least appreciates it (handling it “reverently”), but as in “Belleek” (discussed in Chapter Two but following “The Moon Parlour” in *The New Estate*), he is also drawn to the more prosaic and earthy.

The tension between these impulses is made more explicit in “House Painting,” Evidence of the human “touch” in a “lived-in” place, his sister’s new-old home in “To a Married Sister,” turns to signs of decay in “House Painting.” The “soft rot in the glazing

bars" of the windows "[a]ppall[s]" the speaker (37). Rather than repair the windows, he just paints over them in "[d]ove-gray and white," repeating the names to himself as a sort of mantra used to drive off the thought of deterioration.

When the job is finished, he returns to "sniff his fingers all day" to catch the smell of turpentine. Despite the clean-up, "[o]ne fleck of white [is] ingrained" in his skin, a reminder, like the whiff of turpentine, of the cover-over. As in "Belleek," something about the old sticks with him, and he admits how he wants to "touch again the stillness / Under eaves, the sooty emptiness / That gathered there invisibly." In the end, though, he explains that he "brushed it off without a word." The decision to paint over the rot rather than replace the decayed wood in the windows, the stubborn white bit of paint that remains after clean-up, and the desire to connect with the soot combine to reinforce the ambivalence of the speaker. He is not quite ready or able to part with the past. He does brush it off, but it is done "without a word," as if the past has been consigned to silence. Yet the speaker and reader know that it still lies beneath the fresh coats. The "early failures" can come to light (13), as they are lodged in memory or history, even when "brushed . . . off," or painted or papered over (37).

The "soot" reappears in the aptly titled poem that follows "House Painting. " A modern (but not contemporary) version of a Greek flower legend, "Soot" centers on an exchange between a woman and a chimney-sweep, while also explaining the source of the pansy's dark center. On a broader level, just as "House Painting" reflects a tendency to cover over basic problems in society (the "soft rot") without addressing them directly, "Soot" offers another glimpse of the barriers that prevent real communication.

The main character, tentative about allowing a chimney-sweep into her home, is "[a]fraid his roughness might disturb" the "staid fragility" of her ornaments on the

mantelpiece and, by extension, her life, but her concerns seem unfounded (38). When his task is finished, "the fire burned clearly," and "[e]verything was spotless." Even the soot is put to good use. "Hearing that soot was good for the soil," she throws it on her flowerbeds and watches it "dissolv[e]" until it "emerge[s] softly" again in the spring in her flowers. Everything seems to have a purpose. Flowers grow from discarded materials, the dark heart of the pansy serving as a reminder.

There is no revelation or epiphany, although there are missed chances for communication. When the woman says "something / About the weather," the sweep "did not answer." He is "[t]oo busy with his work for speech," although the stanza break between the lines (after the enjambed "answer") offers space for a response. The sweep also attempts to connect with the woman when he pauses to ask her to "go outside and look," revealing "[a]bove the roof, . . . the frayed sunflower" of his brush "bloom[ing] triumphantly." Without a comment, the woman simply comes back inside and, treating him transactionally and dismissively, asks what she owes, "grimacing / As she put[s] the money in his soiled hand." Once he is gone, though, a "weightless hush / Lingered in the house for days" until it slowly "settled." It is not clear whether the hush refers to dust, traces of the worker's presence in her home, as if his roughness disturbed the fragile atmosphere, or her silent recognition of a lost opportunity.

When the "soot" and the man are out of her house, all is restored ("spotless" again). But the soot is not gone, slowly "dissolving" instead into the flowerbeds and eventually revealing itself in the "ink-bruise" in the center of the pansy, a reminder of the encounter but also a symbol of synthesis. In origin myths, the pansy's color comes from Cupid's arrow, and the flower possesses love-causing powers. Carson's version adds the sweep's sunflower as a man-made parallel, despite the fact that the woman does not

respond to his gift. Like the observer who vainly tries to understand the fishes encased in glass in "Fishes in a Chinese Restaurant," the two are prevented from real communication, in this case by class and gender.

"Winter," discussed earlier with "The Writing School," appears in a shortened version as the penultimate poem in the collection. Like "Eaves," it serves as pause or break, and the emphasis on "ice" and "cold" that has held "the wings of birds" and "seized my words" relates to the sense of division between the two figures in "Soot" (39). But it also offers a transition to the final poem, "The New Estate." If the hermit-scribe has stopped speaking or writing ("so ends my tale," the poem concludes), a new voice must emerge, which the speaker in the poem that follows acknowledges. As the title-poem and, in the original edition of *The New Estate*, the final poem, "The New Estate" serves as a capstone, expressing the need for change from "old" to "new." In two stanzas, it moves from rural, pastoral imagery to a more modern context.

Opening with the injunction, "Forget the corncrake's elegy" (41), Carson uses the distinct call of a bird, once common in agricultural settings but increasingly rare in the North, as a marker of change and a symbol of the past ("*Crex crex*"). A "secretive" bird, "rarely seen, except when grass was being mown," its decline is "linked to . . . the switch from hay to early cut silage" in farming practices. "[S]ustained by nature," the speaker points out, the corncrake survives, having "escaped your discipline / Of shorn lawns," but has lost its relevance and place in a modern setting (*NE* 41). Unsentimentally, the speaker asserts, "It does not grieve for you, nor for itself." If the hermit-scribe is both inspired and humbled by birdsong, those calls are now compared to "Rusty / Iambics," verse forms that are out of date. "[S]horn lawns," or new verses that are spare and "discipline[d]," do not serve as habitat for the corncrake and are not suited for pastoral

themes. Yet the first stanza ends with a question that asks the reader or listener to preserve the memory of what is being lost: "You remember the rolled gold of cornfields, / Their rusting of tinsel in the wind, / A whole field quivering like blown silk?" What starts as a dismissal ("Forget . . .") turns to an evocative description of an idyllic setting that needs to be remembered but not mourned or clung to. Unlike in "Gaeltacht," in which the speaker wonders if modernization has caused the loss of "ears / to hear" or "voice" to give "song" to the natural world in a "dying tongue," Carson calls for remembering, but not elegizing ("Gaeltacht" 24).

Modernization and the move to the "new estate" drive out the call of the corncrake and the "iambics" of older verse, announced by a "shiver" that "now runs through the laurel hedge" (*NE* 41). Corn tassels "rustling" and "quivering" in the wind are replaced by "washing" that "flutters like the swaying lines / Of a new verse." Despite being described as "high-fidelity / Music of the newly-wed," not the silence or birdsong associated with the hermit-scribe, this new music has a different purpose: "Dedication to a life of loving / Money," which the "fidelity" to form only "obscures." This new world, where the corncrake is no longer relevant, is more modern, yet the speaker wonders what is really gained: "What could they be for, those marble / Toilet fixtures, the silence of water-beds, / That book of poems you bought yesterday?"

Alexander concludes that the poem is about moving from the "countryside to a new urban housing estate," resulting in "elegiac pangs of loss and a certain sense of disorientation" (*SPW* 41) despite Carson's call to "[f]orget the corncrake's elegy" (*NE* 41). But those feelings of loss or change are accompanied by the "stimulus" for a new way of writing, he adds (*SPW* 41). Adding a "book of poems" to the list of things gained from this new life suggests disdain for or at least skepticism about the "new verse," but

the old has been reduced to "elegy," and is equally inadequate (*NE* 41). The poems in the initial version of *The New Estate* explore the consequent tensions between the appeal of the traditional and the need to adapt to a new and modern or contemporary context. "The New Estate" reveals an awareness of that need but raises the question of how to address the "shiver" felt from the present without abandoning the past or getting stuck in old ways. Adopting the method of "The Patchwork Quilt," which ends *The Lost Explorer* and is also the last poem in *The New Estate and Other Poems,* offers some answers and a new form or model to serve as a bridge, not choosing one "verse" over another but rather finding a way to piece together different elements into something new.

As a collection, *The New Estate* advances in time and setting from the adaptation of an early Irish verse, "The Scribe in the Woods," to the modern housing estate. The placement of "Eaves," "Tuaim Inbir," and "Winter," each a revision of a traditional poem, breaks the order, but those poems tie in thematically with those that precede and follow them, anticipating Carson's use of adapted haiku as interstitial works in *Belfast Confetti*.

Two poems, however, break from the Irish, domestic, and craftwork themes: "King's Lynn" and "Agianapa I" (discussed in Chapter Two as "Agianapa"). The Cyprus setting of the latter sets it apart, and while it is included in the expanded reissue of *The New Estate* in 1988, it is not included in Carson's *Collected Poems*. "King's Lynn," published first in the July/August 1971 edition of *The Honest Ulsterman*, is part of both later volumes. While set outside of Ireland, it serves as an early example of Carson's use of catalogues of names and his interest in *dinnseanchas,* what John Montague translates as "place wisdom," considering topography and containing "a sense of the historical layers and legends which gives character to an area" (qtd. in McDowell 59).

"King's Lynn" (originally "King's Lynn III"), begins with a list of villages

located near the town of the same name. Located in "the Wash," a bay in eastern England, it was, according to Gerald Dawe, one of the places young people from Belfast went for summer jobs ("Finding the Language" 15), and Carson himself worked in a canning factory in England when 18 or 19 ("Language Instinct"). Reciting the names highlights their repeated, alliterative hard syllables and relates them to tidal erosion and the towns' struggles to survive in a place where land and sea are in constant conflict over their borders:

> East Winch, Holbeach,
> Clenchwarton, Heacham:
> they squelch and rasp like shingle,
> coarse-grained syllables
> disputing every inch
> back from the Wash. (*NE* 16)

The "squelch and rasp" of the sounds, "like shingle," recalls Matthew Arnold's comparison of the "grating roar" of the pebbles flung by waves to the shore (the "naked shingles") to the "tremulous cadence" of the "eternal note of sadness" and "human misery" ("Dover Beach" 192). While writing about a location in England, Carson hints at his own home, where groups clash, defining lines shift, and some claim that pronunciation is a marker of community identity.

The towns also serve as a metaphor for the artist's work. Combatting the tides, the towns "[s]triv[e] for form" and seek permanence in a "perennial art," working against change and erosion as

> The wind whorls
> to a Van Gogh sky.
> Estuaries silt up
> lost in a choke of mud.
> Fields mutate
> to another branch of the sea. (*NE* 16)

The artist seeks to create something lasting, but "inspiration," like the tides, is subject to

"ebb and flow," controlled by external forces. "[R]eceding daily," and possibly "sweeping clean" earlier efforts in the process, it is bound to return, but with a similarly destructive potential.

If the human attempt to create something lasting is viewed as a constant "striving" against unending forces that disrupt it, nature has some success. Unlike the villagers and the artist who battle against their respective "tides," "whelks bear / The sea's convolution" and reveal their results in their shells. They

> are ribbed and spiralled,
> realising perfect beauty:
> delicate cages
> hooding flesh and water.

Like the whelk's shell that contains ("cages") both "flesh and water," art, he suggests, resists the opposing forces of stasis (the land) and change (the tides) by incorporating both.

Carson returns to the theme of "King's Lynn" in *Belfast Confetti* when he considers the origins of Belfast. Founded on the "sleech" that forms the confluence of the Lagan and Belfast Lough, a mixture of water and soil, it is also built out of bricks made from that sleech—"alluvial or tidal muck" (*BC* 72). Human struggles to "disput[e] every inch" also reflect the battle over neighborhoods in the North *(NE* 16). If seeking order amidst change and flux is a "perennial art," and "striving for form" is ultimately bound to fail, a possible answer is in the whelk's shell, working within two different states. The effects of the tides (of the sea and of "inspiration") also can be considered in a positive sense, not just as destruction. Even though the towns fight against "the Wash," in the end the tides are "sweeping clean" the forms (buildings or poems) that were there before, leaving a chance to build something new.

David Cooke, in a review of Carson's *Collected Poems* reprinted upon the poet's

death, notes that *The New Estate*, "a wonderfully achieved debut," reflects "what he had in common with his elders, Heaney, Longley and Mahon," particularly a "concern for craftsmanship, clarity, and cadence." "King's Lynn," he adds, bears "the influence of Heaney." Barra Ó Seaghdha also commends *The New Estate* for its "craft, consistency and confidence" that "aligned [him] with other makers of the so-called well-made poem," like Derek Mahon (82). Carson, he adds, eventually abandons the "unified tone – the voice – that seem to stamp poems with the mark of authenticity and trustworthiness," turning to "multiplicity" and "trying to fit memories, stray thoughts and scraps of language into a pattern" (83).

Ó Seaghdha cites "King's Lynn" as an example of Carson's earlier style and form, noting that "Carson no longer chose to work like this" (82). Yet in many of his early poems, he questions certainty and authority, dwelling on what is unknown, hidden or covered over, forgotten, or unable to be communicated. Objects convey meaning but incompletely, leading to possibilities and alternatives as well as misinterpretations. Carson returns to lists of names and places, as well as the theme of constant change, in later poems. But the notion of "perfect beauty" found in the whelk's shell (*NE* 27) and "confidence" in a consistent point of view or outlook (Ó Seaghdha 82) is something he questions within *The New Estate*. Before his period of relative inactivity in writing poetry and subsequent emergence as a writer with a "trickier, speedier, more colloquial and improvisatory" voice, he also published the slim pamphlet, *The Lost Explorer*. The volume turns both outwards, in travel poems set away from Ireland, and further inward, in domestic poems that, instead of emphasizing insularity, explore the personal past as a source of self-discovery. In the last poem, "The Patchwork Quilt," he reveals the idea he later adopts for his own writing, of bringing together "memories, stray thoughts and

scraps" to capture "the multiplicity of the world" (83).

Chapter Four: *The Lost Explorer*

CRITICAL RESPONSES TO *THE LOST EXPLORER*

The ten poems of *The Lost Explorer,* a pamphlet printed in 1978 by Ulsterman Publications, display Carson's attempt to follow his injunction in "The New Estate" to "[f]orget the corncrake's elegy" and create "a new verse" (*NE* 41). The pamphlet's title and the subject matter of several poems (travels to Borneo in "The Great Fitzpatrick," expeditions in "Africa," and to somewhere "East of Cairo" in the poem of the same name) suggest that moving from Irish themes and models might offer a solution. But other poems in the volume are set in the domestic world of family, home, and childhood memories. Distancing himself further from the self-isolated figures of *The Insular Celts*, Carson explores identity by examining what is close at hand as well as imagined, far-away places. While characters still experience dislocation and confusion, they often find connections in their immediate and recreated or remembered worlds.

Since each of the poems is collected and reshuffled in *The New Estate and Other Poems (*1988), the pamphlet has received limited critical attention as a stand-alone work. Neal Alexander's *Space, Place, Writing,* which the author describes as a "detailed and comprehensive study of all of Carson's work to date," makes only one reference to *The Lost Explorer* in his analysis, although he lists it as one of Carson's "Texts" (6, 216). Citing Tom Paulin's praise of *The New Estate,* which describes it as a balance of "'studied formal perfection' and 'real contact with life'" (qtd. in *SPW* 6), Alexander concludes that the poems in the subsequent pamphlet "maintain" this balance while extending Carson's themes to "travel and ethnographic encounters" as well (6). But while Alexander includes the title in the book's index, he only discusses three of the ten poems

("Smithfield," "Twine," and "The Patchwork Quilt"), listing them under *The New Estate and Other Poems*. Patricia Horton, in a short overview of Carson's early works, finds a continued "preoccup[ation] with boundaries," particularly between "past and present, . . . primitive and civilized, . . . the traditional and the new" (163). Yet she, like Alexander, refers to the poems from *The Lost Explorer* (and *The Insular Celts*) as coming from the later collection.

Some critics consider *The Lost Explorer* to be a transitional work. Jenny Malmqvist notes that "little has been written" on Carson's poems from the mid-1970s but points out that some of them "foreshadow" his later collections (*BT* 61). They "may be read as early examples of ideas pursued, while others deal with themes abandoned." Carson's "travel poems," to which she adds "Letter from Alaska" from *The Insular Celts,* are among the latter. She does not mention later poems about travel, such as "The Excursion" and "Excerpts from a Tourist Handbook," which appear in *The New Estate and Other Poems*. Their inclusion further illustrates her point, though, that the poems in *The Lost Explorer* "reveal both continuities and marked discontinuities with the earlier work" and indicate a "midpoint between the two earlier volumes and *The Irish for No*." Overall, Malmqvist concludes that *The Lost Explorer* is "a compilation of test pieces . . . [that] does not quite hold together" (60).

Others also find evidence that Carson is developing a "new verse." Peter Denman notes that "there is already a progression from the generally tight and contained poems" of *The New Estate* (29). Although some consist of "carefully blocked-out stanzas," they are more "inconclusive and open-ended as if hinting at other forms." In "Unravelling the Conditional, Mapping the Provisional," Kathleen McCracken praises "The Patchwork Quilt," the last poem in the pamphlet, as a "fitting coda" and identifies it as the piece that

"forges the strongest link with *The Irish for No*" (371). Yet she regards it "a recent (and previously uncollected) piece," not one already in print in 1978 (qtd. in *BT* 62n219), and attributes it to *The New Estate and Other Poems*. John Goodby, like Malmqvist, also notes "continuities" (191). He refers to McCracken's comment that "reading back" into Carson's works republished in 1988 would offer "confirmation" of Carson's progress as a poet (qtd. in Goodby 191n56), but his only mention of *The Lost Explorer* is as "a further pamphlet" (191). In general, *The Lost Explorer* is considered an example of Carson's *juvenilia*, its poems often overlooked or taken out of context (*BT* 33).

While all of the poems in *The Lost Explorer* are included in *The New Estate and Other Poems*, several ("The Great Fitzpatrick" and "Africa") are not reprinted in 2008's *Collected Poems*. Malmqvist suggests that "they are not part of Carson's self-fashioning" (*BT* 61). But she finds "a certain sense of self-reflexivity" in the volume, "the narrators and explorers" standing in for the poet "in search of a poetic expression." Poems with more domestic settings or themes also fit into Carson's development and serve as sources for later revisions as new poems. "Twine" reprises the father-son relationship from "An Early Bed," identifying the father as a postman but not yet a storyteller or mentor, roles that gain significance in later works, when the "postman-father becomes a model for the poet" (*BT* 61n216). "The Incredible Shrinking Man" and "The Patchwork Quilt" introduce the theme of mending and patching, an important element in his later poetic form and technique. Other poems depict childhood experiences and the individual's developing sense of self.

The New Estate builds on the early themes of Irish history and heritage from *The Insular Celts*, adding more "modern" pieces, mainly about craft and home, and organizing them in a roughly chronological order. To Malmqvist, *The Lost Explorer*

seems more "disparate in subject matter," without the direction and organizing structure and themes that hold together the earlier works and, more evidently, *The Irish for No* and *Belfast Confetti* (60). While the ordering in *The Lost Explorer* seems less purposeful, each poem relates to the pamphlet's title, as the speakers explore the past, memory, or distant lands, often in a process of self-discovery. The traveler or explorer is not limited to external journeys. When reprinting the poems as a part of *The New Estate and Other Poems*, Carson intersperses them with earlier works and ones written after 1978, creating more thematic groupings but losing the sense of the development of his voice and subject matter as he expands his bandwidth.

EXPLORING ABROAD – THE "TRAVEL" POEMS

The first of the travel poems, "The Great Fitzpatrick," offers the story of the eponymous character who leaves Ireland for Borneo and returns with fantastic tales. While his journey forms the bulk of the poem, Fitzpatrick is the subject, not the narrator. The first-person speaker recalls what Fitzpatrick told him, framed by comments about the man's character and the speaker's reactions to Fitzpatrick's experiences. While it is a story about a man who says he was made into a "god," it also can be read as a poem about the poetic process.

According to the speaker, Fitzpatrick's exploits "came as no surprise," since he had always "been singled out for praise" (*LE* 4). In school pictures he "is the one / who never smiles," wearing the "perfect dragon in gold braid / shin[ing] on the crest of his perfect uniform." The stories he returns with are the stuff of legend. Fitzpatrick survives a plane crash in "a mountain-range of virgin forest" and follows the paths of "the Clouded Leopard, / the elephant and pangolin," carrying "the sole survivors of the crash – / some food supplies; a mirror and a camera; / a microscope in a blue velvet case." Like the

mythical Sweeney, he sleeps in a tree, disguising himself with foliage and mimicking bird calls. When he eventually finds a village, the men smash his mirror, enshrine his camera, and "banish" the microscope. While they make him "their god," he becomes a captive, "allowed to take photographs" of the villagers at noon each day.

When he escapes, he comes home with

> [. . .] the only memoranda
> of his time as god:
> a tortoiseshell box, a comb of ivory, a fertility goddess
> with a black teak stomach. (5)

The narrator's reaction to Fitzpatrick's evidence deflates the image of the "Great" man that his reputation and tales establish. In a short stanza of end-stopped lines in simple and direct language, he turns the magical and exotic items into mundane objects: "The tortoiseshell box was a cigar box. / The comb of ivory was an ornament. / The goddess was a paperweight." In the end, Fitzpatrick's stories may be just fictions. While he might just be putting his "memoranda" to utilitarian purposes, they could also be common items transformed by imagination into something greater. The couplet that follows does not resolve that question: "He opened the box and lifted a cigar; / he slipped the gold band on his finger, absentmindedly." Maybe, the speaker suggests, a cigar box may be just a cigar box, nothing more, the "gold band" simply a cigar label.

The last stanza reinforces the suspicion that Fitzpatrick's story is just a shaggy-dog tale. The "explorer" was allowed to photograph his captors, but the camera and the pictures, evidence of the villagers' existence, remain in Borneo. The speaker imagines the device "turning rust and ochre in the perpetual damp," the lens "filmed" with dew and "pointing to the clouded sun." Any images remaining would likely be vague or over-exposed, if recoverable at all. In the only direct quote in the poem, the speaker explains that the "useless spools" contain "'some pictures he [Fitzpatrick] had taken / of a native

girl'." Since "the ladies" in Borneo "did not wear so much as a vine leaf," the "undeveloped" photos were basically nude shots that the explorer claims to have taken but cannot produce (4, 5). Did Fitzpatrick ever go to Borneo? Did the camera exist? Does the speaker believe his tales? The only use of a direct quote ("'some pictures he had taken'") suggests that the speaker may not even have heard about the photos from Fitzpatrick directly and is citing someone else's account instead (5). The title suggests that this "Great" man might be a version of Gatsby, a self-made creation of his own desires and ambitions, straining credulity with his narrative. Early in the poem, the speaker notes that Fitzpatrick's journey to Borneo was "no surprise," and that "we all assumed" that he returned "for a want of company," but then adds, in a separate line and sentence, "It wasn't true" (4). The statement raises questions about everything that follows, which is mostly unbelievable to begin with.

"The Great Fitzpatrick" recalls Yeats's "The Circus Animal's Desertion." Yeats's speaker admits that his "masterful images" came out of "the foul rag and bone shop of the heart" and were then transformed into a "dream" ("Circus Animal's Desertion" 213). Even if Fitzpatrick's "cigar box" is just a cigar box, and the "goddess" is only a paperweight, his stories, along with the props (real or improvised), pique the narrator's imagination. At the end of the poem, he can "visualize" the decaying camera, "useless spools," and undeveloped photos.

Carson also raises questions about the value and purpose of art and narrative. The mirror, camera, and microscope are tools for close examination and representation, and the poet and storyteller may use the observational gaze and language for the same purpose. The villagers, however, destroy the mirror and microscope. They allow Fitzpatrick to take photographs but only on their terms— "at noon," when there are no

shadows *(LE* 4*).* Disregarding the product, their representation, they are "happy never to see themselves" and content with simply "the knowledge of their captive likeness." Art may strive for mimesis, but people either do not want to "see" themselves, whether in a mirror or in more microscopic detail, or just want to know that they are worthy of attention as objects, not subjects. If Fitzpatrick, or the artist, is considered a "god," he has status without much influence, aside from the prurient interest the undeveloped photos evoke and the story the narrator tells. The artist's perceived role is to record and preserve but, echoing Auden again, can make "nothing happen" aside from within the imagination ("In Memory" 242).

"Africa," following "Fitzpatrick," offers a scene of a possible expedition. Emphasizing the moment *before* anything of note happens, it calls attention to the narrative possibilities of the scene as well as to the "explorer" genre. The narrator does not offer a typical adventure story of "crusades / down torrential rivers, the wounds, / the meeting with another woman," elements that might fit into Fitzpatrick's tales (*LE* 6). "It is still / too early" for those, he comments. "Things have yet to happen," and "the window / with its louvred shutters has not yet / been left ajar." Instead of action, the story focuses on tropes and conventions: "The mosquito net is swaying / over mantled light," "[t]he fan is blowing, the cicadas / are whispering and churring," and the moon casts shadows "among the trees like searchings / in dark water."

The speaker first suggests that the scene involves a couple ("the blur of faces could be / those of man and wife") but narrows down to "more likely, one face." Carson presents what could be a sketch for the opening shot of a film, giving the outlines and setting for a story to be told later or to be filled in by the reader or listener. The narrator describes the "one face" as that of "someone who will be / important as the story goes on

saying / what it has to say." He is "someone who has suffered," the speaker posits. "We guess that he is far from home, that he has left / another life for this. A girl perhaps." What would cause someone to travel to an unknown place? Some sort of life-changing event, likely a broken heart and a chance to discover himself or find a new companion.

Later in the pamphlet, the speaker in "East of Cairo" recounts his attempts to "find" himself by traveling to "the East" (11). In "Africa" though, nothing happens. The speaker sets up a possible story and proceeds no further. The ending creates tension and uncertainty, leaving an undefined central figure in a moment of internal conflict, but with no release: "It needs time to get back / where you started, to the net, the face, the pillow / flickering with someone else's touch." But while "Fitzpatrick" is driven by events reported second-hand, without Fitzpatrick's emotions or reactions, "Africa" brings the reader into the scene as an observer. Using "we" and "you," it asks the reader to fill in the backstory and the events to come, guided by the setting, details, and expectations of an adventure tale.

Taken together, "The Great Fitzpatrick" and "Africa" seem to be experiments. Malmqvist refers to them as examples of a theme abandoned (*BT* 61), but they take two different forms. One is focused on events, and the other on the setting and atmosphere. "Fitzpatrick" also introduces a shifting narrative, the final four stanzas no longer just recalling what the speaker's companion told him but *showing* the two of them together, moving the story from Borneo to the storytelling scene itself. While it is more typical for Carson to include multiple voices or perspectives in his later, longer narrative poems, resisting any single authority, the speaker's comments after recounting Fitzpatrick's exploits raise doubts and uncertainties. He wonders about Fitzpatrick's "memoranda" and also reveals some of his own character, such as his final interest in the "undeveloped"

spools and the potentially risqué pictures they contain—the narrator's own version of Fitzpatrick's story *(LE* 6). "Africa" captures a moment in the life of "someone who has suffered" and calls attention to the possibilities that lead up to and follow from it. Abandoning narrative for a specific setting and moment in a compressed vignette becomes a possible basis for the nine-line Belfast sonnets in Part Two of *The Irish for No* and *Belfast Confetti*. The use of hypotheticals, anticipating what is "yet to happen," considering what is "more likely," and pointing out what "[w]e guess" or "perhaps" is the case are also characteristic of the provisionality within Carson's poems.

The only travel poem to be included in his *Collected Poems*, "East of Cairo" is critical of the spread of modern technology and Western culture, as is the earlier, uncollected "Gaeltacht." As a monologue, though, it mocks the type represented by the speaker, an "explorer" who reveals an insular and self-interested nature that persists despite his world travels. Even as he laments his inability to escape the world he left behind to find a pure and untouched people or place, he holds a shallow and blinkered view of others. He judges them for their failure to live up to the image of the noble savage, or at least the simple native, that he expects them to embody.

What annoys him is that, when he walks into the "village compound" in Sarajasthan, he finds "the headsman and his family watching television" (11). It is unclear what he expects, but he comments that "it was pouring rain, but no-one seemed to mind." Watching television is bad enough, but the program, "one of those travelogues on French Cambodia" showing a policeman directing traffic and offering images of "[t]emples, / cows and awnings" as well as dancing maidens "with bangles on their arms" makes the scene more intolerable. "The usual stuff," he concludes, as if the listener or reader would agree with his judgment. He wants something authentic, not typical

television fare or a scene he could find at home.

Any irony or insight is for the reader alone, since the disenchanted traveler does little more than complain and insist on conformity to his expectations. When he carps, "Why did these people sit here, watching this? / Could they not be themselves?" his use of the pejorative term "these people" and his demand that they "be themselves" highlight his narrow view. In giving his real reason for being there—"I had come to the East, after all, / to find myself, and there was nothing there"—he reveals his shortcomings. "[N]othing there" is what he finds and also an unwitting self-assessment. Like the speaker in "Gaeltacht" who discovers that navigating distances at night is now done by identifying headlights and the glow of television screens, not relying on the moon and stars, the explorer discovers that the places considered authentic and untouched are rare, if not gone. But in "Gaeltacht," the physical elements—the wind, sea, landscape, and birdsong—persist, and the speaker laments the gradual separation from them. In "East of Cairo," place itself is of little importance and garners almost no attention.

The speaker rejects Sarajasthan, planning to head to Lhasa, where "[t]hey say the only wheel there is a prayer-wheel," to learn from the Dalai Lama how to "separate the spirit from the body." His answer to the spread of modern society is to seek the most remote and undeveloped places. But the final stanza, shifting from first person to third, offers a glimpse of what he will find there: the "god-king" peering "[a]ll day long" through "Swiss binoculars / at three monks gliding on the river / on ice-skates left them by the last explorer." The traveler may be dismayed by the spread of modern culture, but there is something magical or fantastical in the scene Carson presents. His real target is the speaker and his expectations of the "other"—those who exist simply for his own enlightenment. While the patron in "Fishes in Chinese Restaurant" is frustrated that he

cannot communicate with the fish sealed off by the tank's glass walls, the explorer in "East of Cairo," when he discovers that the villagers are, in some respects, like him, turns away. There is nothing for him to learn from there, he concludes, but the "nothing there" really refers to him.

TURNING INWARD AND THE "HOME CIRCLE"

The remainder of the poems in *The Lost Explorer*, while they do not take the reader to some distant location, are also concerned with exploration. Rather than searching for meaning or identity abroad, or escaping the conflicts and pressures of contemporary life by retreating to uninhabited spaces, as in the earlier hermit poems, Carson's speakers turn inward to memory and to the domestic sphere. In "The Patchwork Quilt," the last poem in the volume, he writes from the viewpoint of the grandmother of the speaker of his later poem, "Patchwork." Her comments about making a "textile" serve as an analogy for the poet creating a "text" that is inclusive, preserving various fragments, stories, and memories from her family and working them into a new form. Instead of traveling abroad to "find" oneself, she suggests, the sources are in daily life and familial connections.

Opening *The Lost Explorer*, "The Rosary Rally" juxtaposes global and individual concerns of nuclear annihilation with the practical and family-based "rosary rally" of Father Patrick Peyton's Family Rosary Crusade and with the home circle. Father Peyton's Crusade sought to muster ten million families worldwide to pray together in order to bring an end to World War II and later conflicts (Hunter-Kilmer). Beginning as a letter-writing campaign before turning to radio, film, and television, it centered on the slogan, "The family that prays together stays together." In 1954, the Crusade came to Ireland for a months-long tour, stopping at Our Lady's Hospice in the Falls for a rally

("Rosary Crusade"). Considered "the greatest gathering of Belfast Catholics ever known," it assembled over eighty thousand in person, with several thousand more viewing a broadcast of the rally in a nearby park and a cinema.

The poem sets the rally against the general contemporary mood and atmosphere. The speaker recalls,

> It was the first of May.
> The crowd spilled out from the Convent Field;
> white flowers nodded on the tarred road.
> Everyone was praying hard. (*LE* 3)

Despite the dedicated crowd, the threat of global disaster looms: "The World War was to come / if not tomorrow, then the next day, or the next." The speaker imagines a "white cloud" drifting "nearer, nearer," the haunting legacy of the fallout from "Nagasaki, Hiroshima": "It was the cloud of my dreams, thick / and noiseless, everywhere." Even prayer is tainted, linked to thoughts of Red Army Victory Day Parades: "Decades of the Rosary passed. / We saw the troops march on the Red Square of Russia." What seems a non-sequitur makes sense, given Fr. Peyton's belief that "[t]he Rosary is the offensive weapon that will destroy Communism—the great evil that seeks to destroy the faith" (McDermott). The combination of images of the drifting cloud and the military display in Moscow suggests inexorable movement towards conflict, in parallel with the repeated prayers to stave it off.

What breaks the tension is a return to home and family, the basic focus of Fr. Peyton's message. In mid-line, the scene moves from "the Red Square / of Russia" to "[m]y mother," as she "wiped her hands, / then went to make the tea" (*LE* 3). The family does kneel to recite the Rosary, but only after tea is finished and when "everything was cleared away." Their domestic routines restore a sense of normalcy and balance. Earlier in the poem, the speaker's nightmares and fears are "noiseless, everywhere," but now,

even though his prayers fail or falter ("I tried to think of the words"),

> All there was, was the sound
> of coming rain, a light touch on the window,
> then the clouds, and the stars
> between the clouds.

Thoughts of the nuclear cloud are replaced by the rain and then clouds that part to reveal the "stars" behind them. These stars become, in later poems, representations of the fragments of life that Carson imagines coming together as constellations, multivalent representatives of narratives to be explored, or the ever-changing map of the city.

Beginning with the crowds at the rally, the poem shows the speaker's increasing anxiety over global tensions dispelled, if only temporarily, by his mother's simple actions. In a world perceived as under threat, family routines offer the child security. Those dangers in "The Rosary Rally" come from the Cold War and the Soviet/Communist bloc. In later works, the speakers' dreams and nightmares are about the Troubles as well as the "industrial landscape" of the Falls and its "maze of spinning mills, foundries, factories" ("West Belfast"). Carson's characters similarly turn to the past, memory, and the home as sources to help navigate or make sense of that labyrinth, although not always successfully.

The travel in "The Rosary Rally" is into memory and history, moving from a global perspective to a domestic and personal one. In "Smithfield," the speaker's journey is both figurative and literal, as the speaker recalls a trip into the warren of shops in the Smithfield Market that becomes a metaphor for memory. The speaker in "The Rosary Rally" fears global war and an atomic cloud, an ambiguous but real threat. Mortality in "Smithfield" is closer to home.

Beginning with the announcement, "I have forgotten something, I am / going back," the speaker notes his return to Smithfield to retrieve a misplaced item and, at the same time, signals the adult narrator's entry into the past (*LE* 7). The titular location,

Smithfield Market, had been, until the mid-nineteenth century, a notorious site of overcrowded and unsanitary dwellings and a bustling livestock market (Muldoon). It attracted visitors not only with its "wares and curiosities" and its "stalls, nooks and crannies" but also its characters, craftsmen, and entertainments. Considered in modern times to be a "living museum" in the city and a "cultural icon," it was destroyed by incendiaries in 1974 and left vacant for over a decade, a loss felt by many Belfast residents.

The young narrator in James Joyce's "Araby" imagines the bazaar as a magical place: "The syllables of the word *Araby* were called to me through the silence in which my soul luxuriated and cast an Eastern enchantment over me" (24). Carson's narrator recalls similar feelings about his own trip. He is drawn in by the gate's "wrought iron flowers" that seem to "breathe open to sooty alcoves, the withered shelves / of books" and imagines the market as something coming alive (*LE* 7). Inside, he discovers

> [. . .] There is a light
> that glints off tin and earthenware
> reminding me of touch, the beaded moulding
> of a picture-frame – [.]

Whether it is the light or a real person, he finds that, mysteriously, "a hand that beckons from / an empty doorway" summons him into the place and his own past.

The em-dash that ends the opening stanza (following "picture-frame") suggests that the speaker's "going back" may be more a journey through memory rather than a physical one. "Smithfield" is a place, destroyed by the time the poem is written, but it also represents his store of memories. His description of Smithfield's gates evokes thoughts of a picture-frame, possibly containing the image of what he had "forgotten." When he accepts the hand's invitation, the picture-frame transforms into a photo album, and he "[o]pens the gild clasp" to discover images of his family. Instead of well-known

figures, they appear now as "the book of strangers," depicted in roles that they have moved beyond or grown out of,

> the families arranged with roses
> the brothers, the sister
> in her First Communion frock, their hands
> like ornaments in mine beneath
> the muffled ribs of gloves: [.]

The colon ending the stanza serves a similar role to the em-dash, signaling his progression deeper into his personal maze as the remembered photographs evoke specific scenes from his childhood.

Moving deeper into Smithfield, or one's personal past, involves risk, and the unsettled feeling turns ominous as the First Communion scene gives way to a one of the four siblings together:

> We are all walking to school
> past the face of a clock, linked
> together in the dark glass of the
> undertaker's window: one, two, three, four
> figures in the gilt lettering.

The clock's symbolic measurement of the passage of time, the children's reflections in the "dark glass of the / undertaker's window," and the counting of the siblings foreshadow the poem's ending. "One of us has fallen in the river," the speaker explains, and he recalls "the stream of my mother's veil," suggesting mourning dress and tears. What the speaker had "forgotten" seems to be a repressed memory of loss.

The image of the four siblings walking hand-in-hand in the morning turns to "dusk," when "all of us are sent / to find each other, though each / of us is lost in a separate field." The day has disrupted their unity and their individual identities within the family. What reorients the speaker is the "light." Mentioned in the first stanza in connection to the market and reminding him of the picture-frame and the photo album, it

returns in the final stanza to guide him. He describes feeling lost, like being alone in a "waving meadow," a forest, or a landscape of "branches" and "inlets," but this "gap of light" appears "like a face, a hand discovering itself." It reorients him, like the glint and the hand that beckon to him in the first two stanzas. The "branches and the inlets" relate to the jumble of shops within Smithfield and to his own internal state. In his later poem, "Smithfield Market," the speaker, as an adult, returns to the site after its destruction. He repeats the image of Smithfield as a warren, made up of "shadowed aisles and inlets, branching into passages, into cul-de-sacs, / Stalls, compartments, alcoves," now reduced further to a ruined "labyrinth" by the fire (*IFN* 37). But in his memory, Smithfield, as a place and as a metaphor for his recollections, is confusing but navigable. When he "go[es] back," the "light" leads him to a specific moment (*LE* 7). The actual, destroyed site offers little guidance.

The poem is a map of the process of remembering. Each stanza takes him deeper, as the em-dash of the first is followed by colons to end the second and third. The light that "glints off tin and earthenware" reminds him of the "touch" of a frame, which leads him to thoughts of a photo album and childhood. The "gap of light" finally brings him out of darkness to the smile of one "who is not there" but appears in the "sunlight on a brick wall." Alexander writes that the last lines, offering "an uncanny image," restore what seems to have been repressed and that Carson often "exhumes" memories that are sometimes haunted (120). This is true for the image of the mutilated sheep in "The Holiday," but "Smithfield" suggests that "going back" can turn up treasures that otherwise would have been forgotten. He finds images from his past and a child's smile.

"Smithfield" offers a different sort of exploration, using a landmark from his native city to evoke memories and to spark the imagination instead of traveling abroad to

find something new and exotic. When Carson returns to Smithfield in *The Irish for No*, though, it is a "labyrinth" of "ruins," a place with "no entrances, no exits" (*IFN* 37). The nightmare is not what he might recall from the past, or what he might "exhume," but rather the idea that memory itself would be lost or that he might be trapped there. In "The Half-Moon Lake," the drowned boy is never found, and the lake itself is filled in. The speaker turns to his imagination to create possible narratives, although none prove definitive. In "Smithfield," the search is not for a body but a memory, which proves successful.

"The Rosary Rally" and "Smithfield" offer methods and routines that help stave off the fear of mortality and the grief of loss. The speakers find comfort and a sense of place in family, memory, and specific sensory details. In the former, tea-time soothes the young boy, anxious about the threat of nuclear war, and while he cannot recite the rosary prayer, he finds its "Mystery" in the stars that emerge "between the clouds" (*LE* 3). "Smithfield," recalling a lost sibling, takes the speaker through a labyrinth of recollections that eventually lead him to a spot of sunlight on a wall that represents the missing child's smile. In "The Incredible Shrinking Man," Carson continues the theme of family as a central source of identity. Modern media becomes a touchstone as well, and the poem reintroduces the mother as an influential figure in a role that later becomes a model for the writer and a counterpoint to the postman-father.

The poem's reference to the 1957 film of the same name initially suggests that the speaker is experiencing the floating Cold War anxieties that trouble the speaker in "The Rosary Rally." In the film, the Shrinking Man's problems begin when he is exposed to a mysterious "electric / cloud" that, "like a silver teapot, shining, // like nothing on earth . . . whistled over him" (8). The four central stanzas of the eight-stanza poem review the

man's predicament which ends, as Carson's speaker recalls, "as he climbed a blade of grass." This allusion is something of a red herring, though. The young man is not really thinking about the effects of nuclear fallout but rather the fact that he does not seem to be growing.

Having been given a "navy gaberdine . . . one size big," he finds that "the cuffs reached to [his] knuckle." His mother alters the garment until it fits well enough, giving "an extra eyelet in the belt," adjusting the buttons, and assuring him that his "hands would grow." With a child's focus on the immediate, he monitors his body for changes, but it does not meet his expectations:

> I watched my progress anxiously.
> I looked in the mirror every morning. Still,
> I didn't seem to grow. Was there something
> wrong with me? I ate lots of spinach.

Although he notes that he observed himself "anxiously," the last comment reveals a hopeful or naive belief in the wisdom of the cartoon character Popeye the Sailor (spinach makes one strong) as well as self-deprecating sarcasm. The adult's perspective of a childhood concern conveys both the frustration of the lived moment and the ironic humor in the situation when considered from the distance of time.

As if he had found a solution to or reason for his problem, the speaker remarks, "Then I remembered the Incredible Shrinking Man." Despite this connection, the film does not lead him to an epiphany or even a fatalistic conclusion. Instead, the speaker summarizes the main points of the man's story. Gradually shrinking after his encounter with the cloud, the character adapts to his new form, facing different challenges each month. The poem's tone and diction do not convey or emphasize the conflict or danger the man faces, and a key life-or-death battle is treated off-handedly, with minimal suspense: "he fought a spider with a darning needle."

The speaker finishes his account of the film by simply noting that "the film ended as he climbed a blade of grass." What he leaves out, along with the drama, are the character's thoughts in the last scene, presented as a voice-over. At first, the Shrinking Man considers a nuclear future and finds relief in the thought that others may experience the same changes and "follow [him] into this vast new world" (*Incredible Shrinking Man*). He would not feel alone anymore. Looking at the sky, a common trope in Carson's poems, the movie character then wonders about his position in the universe and the contrast between "the infinitesimal and the infinite." He realizes that they are "really two ends of the same concept" that "meet – like the closing of a gigantic circle." "[F]ears" turn to "acceptance," and he is consoled: "All this vast majesty of creation, it had to mean something. And then I meant something, too. Yes, smaller than the smallest, I meant something, too. To God, there is no zero. I still exist!"

While the poem neither mentions the Shrinking Man's final words nor offers a similarly empowering assertion, the speaker's conclusion is similar. Matter-of-factly, he mentions, "Within a year, everything had changed," as if his earlier anxiety was just a matter of scale (*LE* 8). The boy expects noticeable growth daily, but a broader perspective allows him to see what has actually occurred. A new baby makes them "four." As "the eldest boy," he passes down the "threadbare gaberdine" to his younger brother. The Shrinking Man comes to understand, from contemplating the heavens, that everything has a place and a role in an interconnected universe. The speaker, by looking at his newly expanded family, realizes his own position, without the Shrinking Man's grandiose language or exultant response:

> I looked at his face and then the baby's face.
> They both looked different and yet the same.
> The baby was shrivelled and very wise.
> My brother's hands drooped in the mirror.

Carson's lines typically run on, but each line in the final stanza is end-stopped, conveying the certainty of the boy's observations. He has a clearly established position in the family and recognizes that identity is a combination of unique and inherited traits. He sees both kinship as well as individuality in his brothers. The passage of time inevitably leads to change, even if not noticeable in the moment, and his "younger brother" takes on the wearing of the too-large garment, relieving him of that burden. Like the Shrinking Man, he discovers his "own limited dimension" that still "mean[s] something" (*Incredible Shrinking Man*). "Smithfield" challenges this conclusion, as the "four" are amended to three, leaving them to feel, "each / of us . . . lost in a separate field" (*LE* 7). But despite feeling adrift, memories and the places and details that can trigger them have the power to bring him back, no longer "forgotten."

The boy in "The Incredible Shrinking Man" is not really shrinking, just worried about growing up and impatient with the slow progress of time. But the series of domestic, family poems *do* move backward in time, the speaker-subject becoming younger and younger. "The Rosary Rally" offers an adult's glimpse of a moment from his childhood past. "Smithfield" is based on memory as well, as the speaker goes back to his childhood when he and his siblings were "four / figures" captured in the reflection of a glass pane. The subject of "The Incredible Shrinking Man" is a child worried about growing up. In "Visitors" and "Twine" the main character is an even younger child, wondering about where he fits in a world of adults.

As in "Smithfield" and "Shrinking Man," "Visitors" centers on a disruption. The speaker's home environment and sense of who he is are threatened when "Aunt Rose" comes calling. Like the narrators of the earlier poems, the child in "Visitors" is highly attuned to his environment, noting the sounds and movement of the clock, the reflection

of his aunt as she "nods and waves in the bowed glass / of the china cabinet," and the "glint of gold rims" of tea-cups. The adult world attracts him, but he is still a child, "sprinkl[ing] sugar on [his] bread and butter" as the grown-ups take tea. The "curved wrist / of her [his aunt's] walking stick" beckons him to touch it, and he does, even though it is "not allowed" (9).

Unlike the child in "Shrinking Man," who frets about growing into a new role when he cannot see any daily progress, the child in "Visitors," watching as Aunt Rose is "shown photographs" of him, sees himself actually getting smaller. The pictures in the album move back in time, "decreasing like the thin smile of the dogs / perched on the mantelpiece." A photo of him in a "new blazer on my first day / at school" leads to one in which he is "already walking," and finally to a shot of him "in the cradle." Incrementally, the images strip away his identity. The use of present tense and the string of sentences beginning with "I am . . ." or "Now I am . . ." reflect his progressive sense of loss and diminishment, not only in the representations but as he identifies himself at that moment. By the last photo, he realizes, "You cannot see my face."

In response, he declares, "I will escape to the kitchen larder," a place of familiar smells where he will "inhale the treacle depths, the snuff of cloves / and cinnamon." Free from Aunt Rose and his earlier selves, he is somewhat soothed, "already half-asleep again." But the larder only offers a partial reprieve. He is "thinking how [his] fingers will not close" as they poke through the "air-grille," as if part of him recognizes that the "visitors" cannot be fully escaped. A "light breeze comes from nowhere," making its way inside his sanctuary. In "An Early Bed," the child, sent to his room by his father, still hears the "disembodied phrases" from below and finds that he cannot slip "below the surface / of myself, into somewhere else" in order to escape his parents and their

judgment (*NE* 12). For the child in "Visitors," his fingers betray the recognition that his identity is, in part, determined by who he was and by how others perceive him. The larder, a place to escape and fill himself with something certain and stable, is also a prison, keeping him from the different layers of his past (*LE* 9). If the speaker in "Shrinking Man" comes to recognize that identity is progressive and ever-changing, the boy in "Visitors" fears retrogression, incremental steps backward in time until he becomes a faceless figure in a cradle.

Each of the domestic poems, including "The Rosary Rally," emphasizes the importance of family and the home space in creating identity. They offer what Carson calls a "home circle" of stability (*In the Chair* 142). He is one of four children, and the eldest. Routines are comforting. But that stable base is not fixed in time, as roles and identities change and evolve. The home also serves as a repository of the past, as collective memories (symbolized by the photo albums and the handed-down gabardine) contain or represent previous versions of the self that, like the wallpaper in "An Early Bed," form layers. Carson's speakers struggle to accept what Rachel, the speaker in Sandra Cisneros's "Eleven," realizes about growing up. It is "kind of like an onion or like the rings inside a tree trunk or like . . . little wooden dolls that fit one inside the other" ("Eleven" 6-7). She also compares it to "pennies inside a tin Band-Aid box" (7), a metaphor echoed in Carson's later poem, "Stitch," when he describes his mother's "*Quality Street* / Chocolate-tin button-box" that collects "everything mismatched" (*NEOP* 56). Carson's speaker in "Visitors" understands but resists the idea that "all the years inside," or all the different version of self, are, as Rachel explains, "pushing at the back of my eyes," possibly fearing that he will be stuck in an earlier version of himself ("Eleven" 8).

"Twine" brings back the father, the disciplinarian in "An Early Bed," and Carson introduces his recurring role as a postman, whose maps of the city and stories eventually become models for the poet-persona. The "twine" of the title also juxtaposes the father and mother as representatives of different worlds that help shape who he will become.

The "postman sack" that hangs "on a nail behind the kitchen door" is a metonym for the father (*LE* 10). An object of curiosity that is just out of sight, it is also a connection to the outside world, and the boy sticks his head inside it to breathe "the gloom." What he finds is "[t]he smell of raffia and faded ink" that he concludes is "like the smell of nothing," since the sack is empty of the "undelivered letters" that "were returned to sender." There are none of the "postcards left in limbo," marked "*Not Known At This Address*" on one side and containing mysterious messages on the other, or "promises of stories" that the postman-father brings home with him in the later poem, "Bed-Time Story" (*BC* 86).

The smell of the sack reminds him of the twine used by his mother to "tie the turkey's legs" for baking (*LE* 10). Like the sack, it has its accustomed place, tucked away "in my mother's bottom drawer," where the child presumably has discovered it. Peter Denman notes that the twine operates as a "closed image" (31). It has "a clear and stated function" in helping to prepare the Christmas dinner and figuratively "suggests the ties and conjunctions of family relationships." It also "remains in the poem with the bottom drawer, the raffia and the title," operating "within the space circumscribed by the text." The sack is another closed image, its purpose and place established and certain. Like the family's tea-time routines, it helps ground the speaker.

Denman considers "Twine" as an example of Carson's move to more open-ended poems, despite the stable images or symbols and the generally "closed" structure of the

poem's four quatrains, each end-stopped and "firmly closed syntactically" (30). The final stanza, comprised of four "self-contained units," as in the ending of "The Incredible Shrinking Man," contains a "regularity" that might mark "closure." The repeated structure of the last two lines, beginning with the confident reassurance of the phrase, "There was the . . . ," sets up an apparent connection between the mother's and the father's worlds, between the "twine" and the "postman sack" (*LE* 10). But a change in the last line calls attention to "the tawse" that, like the sack, is "behind the kitchen door."

The tawse "springs out . . . unexpected, strange and sinister," taking the place of his father's sack in the poem and in the speaker's thoughts, becoming, to Denman, an "open" image (31). Its purpose, to punish, links the poem to "An Early Bed" and the angry father, forcing a reconsideration of the earlier stanzas. When the boy finds the sack behind the door and breathes "the gloom" inside it, he confirms that his father is home and realizes what that return might mean for him (*LE* 10). His thought about being "shut up under stairs" anticipates his fate in a sort of time-out or indicates his desire to avoid his father, to disappear into a secluded space like the larder in "Visitors." When he imagines his father's hands "blue with cold" from being outside in the snow, he thinks, "Soon he would return, / his hands would warm me." Logically, the boy's body would warm his father's cold hands, but the lines offer an implicit, "unfulfilled" threat that will be enacted at "a time beyond that enclosed by the poem" (Denman 31). A beating with the tawse would certainly "warm" the father's hands and the child as well. What seem at first to be a child's reflections on the "twine" that ties the family together becomes something more like Theodore Roethke's "My Papa's Waltz," offering a double-reading of a relationship between father and son that could be a drunken dance or a scene of abuse.

"Twine" also sets up the parallel worlds of the father and mother, linked by the fabric of his raffia sack and the twine used in cooking preparation. Infused with both nostalgia and implied fear triggered by familiar objects and scents, the poem establishes both parents as important figures. Later poems leave out the father's disciplinary role; what becomes more prominent is his position as a postman. His job is to know the streets and to deliver mail, teaching his son about navigating the city safely when he returns home. He becomes a storyteller as well, a mentor for the speaker's own narratives, particularly in "Post," from *The New Estate and Other Poems*, and "Bed-Time Story," from *Belfast Confetti*. The mother and other maternal figures also become models for poetic form. The motif of sewing, stitching, and quilting, introduced in "The Incredible Shrinking Man," appears again at the end of *The Lost Explorer* in "The Patchwork Quilt," in "Stitch," from *The New Estate and Other Poems*, and "Patchwork," the final poem in *The Irish for No*. The female family members work with scraps and fragments, mending and repurposing garments, and Carson adopts the patchwork method in his approach to form and content in writing the city and the worlds of imagination and memory.

THE WOMEN IN THE FAMILY

The mother plays an important but peripheral role in "The Rosary Rally," "Smithfield," "The Incredible Shrinking Man," and "Twine." Each is focused on the child's experience, but the final poems in *The Lost Explorer* center on women in the family instead. The penultimate poem, "Great-Grandmother," is a short, two stanza vignette that appears in *The New Estate and Other Poems* as the first of a sequence about different generations of relatives. Offering a glimpse of life from an earlier or simpler time, it depicts the woman as she is "about to collect the eggs" for the family's breakfast. Her face turned away, she reveals the "plaited coils of her hair" and the "folds and

edgings of her crinoline," which he recognizes as inheritances of another time, out of place now (*LE* 12). "Elaborations gone for ever," he concludes. Given the position of the poem in the pamphlet, after "East of Cairo," the presence of crinoline on a farm might initially seem out of place.

The frozen moment is one of anticipation and respect, not disappointment or frustration, and the poem is not critical in tone. Her chores start the day for her and for the family. They do not "eat breakfast" with the eggs she will gather. Instead, the formal diction and tone of the opening lines, "She is about to collect the eggs / With which the family will break / Their fast," turn the morning meal into something more ceremonial. The second stanza adds to the solemnity of the moment, creating a tableau:

> Here is the morning, interrupted
> By the waiting eye, the sunlight broken by
> the open shutters of the henhouse door.
> The basket not yet filled with eggs.

Reminiscent of William Carlos Williams' observation that "so much depends / upon" simple things ("The Red Wheelbarrow" 56), the morning is "interrupted," awaiting the completion of her chore (*LE* 12). Even the sunlight is "broken" by the shutters. Just as several of the poems from *The New Estate* pay tribute to craft workers and their tasks, "Great-Grandmother" captures the daily chore of collecting eggs and finds value and significance in small things. The speaker in "East of Cairo" feels that all places to explore are gone. In "Gaeltacht" and "The New Estate," Carson also calls attention to changing times and what is lost, but in "Great-Grandmother," the effect is more of eulogy or respect rather than elegy.

"The Patchwork Quilt," a monologue about the process of making a quilt, is the final poem of both *The Lost Explorer* as well as *The New Estate and Other Poems*. Just as "The New Estate" calls for a "new verse" and signals a move away from traditional Irish

themes, "The Patchwork Quilt" sets out a model for the poetics that Carson employs in *The Irish for No*. It also ends up being used, like the scraps and bits that make up the grandmother's quilt, in "Patchwork," the poem that concludes that volume in a more fragmented and multi-voiced form.

Jenny Malmqvist sees a clear connection between the poem's description of making a quilt and "one of the ways in which a poem can be made" (*BT* 63). The mother explains that it took "twenty years" to make the quilt, working at night with the "children all in bed" (*LE* 13). Choosing "[s]craps" from the past and "anything / that came to hand," including items that contain histories that she "forgot about," she constructs her quilt from pieces from her own life and the lives of those connected with her. Starting with a "pattern / in my head," she admits that "maybe I think now / it changed. For when I look at it, it's hard / to see where I began, or where I ended." Details look familiar, but then get confused, since they also look "like something else." "There are so many / lines, so many checks," she laments.

This process of gathering experiences and details, coming up with a "pattern," altering it, and trying to keep a sense of order in the "lines," offers a model for the writer. "[T]he needle / thin as thin between my thumb and finger" stands in for the writer's pen. In "Digging," Seamus Heaney, inspired by his father and grandfather, swaps the shovel used to unearth potatoes and cut peat for his own pen. He describes excavating sources and materials, "[n]icking and slicing neatly, heaving sods / Over his shoulder, going down and down / For the good turf" (4). Heaney's physical metaphor suggests violence, as he imagines, "Between my finger and my thumb / The squat pen rests; snug as a gun" (3). The pen could become a weapon, "producing militant verses that would advance the nationalist cause" (Doherty 64), but Heaney ends by returning to his father's lesson: "I'll

dig with it" ("Digging" 4). Carson opts for "another, predominantly feminine activity" as an analogy for writing (*BT* 64), one based on stitching and mending "different / Bits and pieces" together, not digging (*LE* 13).

The patchwork technique relies on bringing together different materials at hand and integrating them into a single work. Yet the quilt also bears evidence of the creator's work and life. It serves as a record as well as an *aide-mémoire*. "Scraps of John's old shirts, / a curtain, a flowered dress," and "Janie's blouse / the day she fell in the river" go into it. Experiences and related emotions are also sewn into the quilt. Intended "to be a present / for Janie's wedding," it was not completed in time, so the mother decides, "Now I suppose it's mine." Yet the inspiration for the quilt is a personal loss: "My mother had just died when I began. / It took my mind off things." The "times I hated John" are also there, as "John is stitched / into that quilt." Negative and positive experiences are integrated, although they remain distinct and individual. The quilt represents her life and others' lives, and it is a marker of the artist's craft as well, as the quilt-maker remarks that "sometimes I look back," and "the stitches / Shine in everything I've made" (14).

As an object, the quilt calls attention to both the materials from which it is made and to the act of creation. The quilt also is a work in progress, an "intimate, ongoing, improvised activity" that can always be "recycled and rewritten" (*BT* 65). When "a stitch goes wrong," it can be taken out to "start again," and patterns change as the quilt is assembled (*LE* 14). While Carson draws connections between quilt-making and writing, the speaker, in repeated references to a tree outside her window, also sees a parallel to her work in the natural world. At first the tree is just another potential distraction, "rustling / At the window" while "the clock ticked," and "someone / Cried upstairs" (13). But then it catches her attention: "That tree. Someone should trim it, it's been there / So long, you

can hardly see in here" (14). The leaves and branches of "[t]hat tree" are like the scraps and rags, or memories and details, that go into "that quilt." If left untrimmed, they can obscure the work. She then thinks, "The leaves can fall, all the different / Bits and pieces that were joined can join." Assembled in one pattern (on the tree), they form a new one on the ground when the tree drops its leaves. Each season brings different versions, and the tree, growing as it cycles through the seasons, changes as well. To Malmqvist, the quiltmaker's tree is a counter to the tree in Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" (*BT* 64). Keats's tree "cannot shed" its "happy, happy boughs" ("Ode on a Grecian Urn" 282) and exists as a "pictorial representation" that "remains permanent in a world of change" (*BT* 64). Art, Carson suggests, "is not immune to change," and "if it is to be true to life, art must be change itself."

Carson's use and reuse of materials become a central element in the patchwork technique used in *The Irish for No* and other works, but he had begun this practice earlier in using and adapting Irish poetry and themes, personal memories, craftwork, and contemporary, historical, and cultural references. While he maintains an interest in those traditions and in the metaphors of weaving, quilt-making, and needlework, what eventually comes to the fore is the notion, from "The Bomb Disposal," that "The city is a map of the city, / its forbidden areas changing daily" (*NE* 21). Mapmaking goes hand-in-hand with the patchwork metaphor, since no one version of a place is definitive. The map itself is composed of elements selected and shaped into a pattern but is able to be reworked in various configurations as conditions and situations change.

Eamonn Hughes calls the travel poems in *The Lost Explorer* "Muldoon-like gestures" ("'The mouth of the poem'" 88), and Malmqvist contends that Carson eventually abandons the form (*BT* 61). But Carson *does* return to the theme of external

travel in several poems written during his period of "silence," collected in *The New Estate and Other Poems*. In *The Irish for No* and *Belfast Confetti*, the global traveler is replaced by the local observer who conducts a different sort of journey. Exploring the streets and stories of Northern Ireland, and Belfast in particular, he uncovers often-overlooked elements of the urban environment. Comparing them with the past and with their previous versions, he considers how change has made a familiar place unfamiliar, if not exotic, and also how times and places that seem disparate are linked in essential ways.

The maze of memory is a frequent site for exploration in later poems as well, as his narrators shift between various presents and pasts. In the two Belfast volumes he also employs the monologue form, particularly in "John Ruskin in Belfast," "Narrative in Black and White," and "Bloody Hand." Adopting perspectives other than that of the poet-persona reveals, as in "East of Cairo," the narrow-minded and self-justifying reasoning that helps perpetuate division.

The poems in *The Lost Explorer* may be overlooked as *juvenilia* or, when shuffled into the expanded volume, *The New Estate and Other Poems*, get lost within a larger work. The grandmother's comment in "The Patchwork Quilt," that she is "in the middle somewhere," trying to figure out how to put together all the different pieces, offers another way to look at them. Rather than considering them as examples of "test pieces" or "ideas [and] themes abandoned" (*BT* 61, 60), they can be seen as providing the materials Carson later reuses or repurposes in different patterns or layers, overwritten but not erased. The decade he spent focused more on traditional arts rather than verse, instead of being considered a period of silence or inactivity, leads to another set of resources that are integrated into his later work, along with the poems he did write during that time and the works by other writers he read and reviewed. That period is his own version of being,

like the quilt-maker, “in the middle somewhere, working / [His] way out” (*LE* 14).

Chapter Five: Poetry during the Silence

THE NEW ESTATE AND OTHER POEMS: THE "OTHERS"

Carson has referred to the time between the publication of *The Lost Explorer* and *The Irish for No*, lasting nearly a decade, as a retreat from "the whole idea of being a 'poet'" ("Inventing Carson" 92). If he was grappling in his early work with what a "poet" is and does, especially when living in a divided and conflict-torn city and region, his time working with "live, spontaneous, art" (traditional Irish music and dance) and continuing to read and review authors who became models led him to discover a way to "include the real world" along with imagined and remembered versions into his poetry. Carson also continued to write in verse, although he did not publish often, leading to Frank Ormsby's question in a 1991 interview, "How complete was the 'silence' during that time?" (Ormsby interview 7).

The release of *The New Estate and Other Poems* in 1988 adds only twelve poems not included in the original 1976 edition, aside from those published as *The Lost Explorer*. "Dunne" and "Rubbish" move Carson closer to adopting Belfast as a primary setting or source. Other poems "seem at home" with his earlier writing and are grouped thematically, focusing on family members and childhood memories and developing the poet-persona (*BT* 102). Two travel poems are added, further critiquing official narratives (or guidebooks) and their representation of other places and cultures. Only "The Insular Celts" and "St Ciaran's Island" remain from his first pamphlet, and just one work "adapted from Early Irish" ("Tuaim Inbir") is in the expanded edition, although though Carson keeps "Agianapa I," originally in Greek, and adds two adaptations of Welsh poems. Aside from "Excerpts from a Tourist Handbook," none utilize the long line form

that later catches the attention of critics and reviewers.

Appearing a year after *The Irish for No,* the poems in *The New Estate and Other Poems*, when "read against the achievements of the later collection," were considered "'standard' Northern Irish poems" by most critics (*BT* 35) and judged "very competent" (Denman 29). Rui Homem calls the volume an expanded "relaunch" of the 1976 book and notes that "neither this retrieval . . . nor the inclusion of it at the beginning of the *Collected Poems*" have "revoked the perception" that the publication of *The Irish for No* was a "deferred beginning" (166). Carson, as noted earlier, expressed his concerns about reissuing his earlier work because "it's so different" from the poems in *The Irish for No* and *Belfast Confetti* (Ormsby interview 7). The omission of many of the poems from *The Insular Celts,* the rearrangement of the order of presentation, and the insertion of the "newer" pieces, several of which were considered for *The New Estate* and *The Lost Explorer,* suggest a re-vision of the poet and his voice, adding new layers while obscuring or overwriting others.

The volume begins with an "Advertisement," a variation of the "Notice" that opens Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, jokingly warning the reader to resist seeking a "motive," "moral," or "plot" (3). Announcing his intentions, Carson claims,

> *This ink*
> *Prevents gumming, clogging, metal corrosion and rubber-rot.*
>
> *It dissolves sediment.*
>
> *It cleans your pen as it writes.* (*NEOP* 10)

As a tongue-in-cheek epigraph, it mocks modern advertising. At the same time, it calls for the reader to be alert to what the "ink," the poems that follow, will do. "Gumming," "clogging," and "rot" are not only problems for pens and other physical objects but also

for the mind and the heart. "[S]ediment" calls to mind "sentiment," a reminder of his charge to "[f]orget the corncrake's elegy" in "The New Estate" (69). Since the "Advertisement's" promise, or warning, is followed by "The Insular Celts" and "St Ciaran's Island," two poems that challenge the romanticization of Irish tradition and stereotypes, Carson asks the reader to be aware to read critically and with a sense of skepticism and irony, something he felt that some of his early readers failed to do (Brandes interview 80).

TRAVELS IN TIME AND PLACE

"Rubbish" is the first new poem in the collection after the two Irish-themed poems and a series of craft-based poems ("O'Carolan's Complaint," "Casting the Bell," "Interior with Weaver," and "Linen"), followed by a trio about a young boy's experiences with his family. Originally published with "Blues" in *The Honest Ulsterman* in 1982, "Rubbish" serves as a bridge, joining a contemporary setting and experience with memories from the past in the associational narrative style of his later volumes. Coming after "An Early Bed," "Twine," and "The Incredible Shrinking Man," each about a childhood memory and feelings of dislocation, it echoes the speaker's experience in the first—returning to his past after encountering a specific detail in the present.

From a "sick-room window," the speaker sees the "leaning-sideways / Railway sleepers of the fence, / The swaying nettles" outside and is drawn to specific details just beyond them (*NEOP* 24). It is clear that the setting is not rural Ireland:

> You can just make out
> The rusty fire of a crushed
> Coke tin, the dotted glint of staples in
> A wet cardboard box.

This is the city's detritus, the cast-off, damaged refuse of a modern, commercial world.

The "glint" comes off trash, not from Smithfield's wares or the gold rim of a teacup, as in "Smithfield" and "Visitors." He imagines he "could be sifting through / The tip at the bottom of Ganges Street," uncovering "[e]ggshells. Bricks. A broken hypodermic." It is a dismal scene, no better than an impromptu garbage dump. But the speaker singles out "one bit of plaster / Painted on one side" that he seems "to recognize from somewhere." The em-dash at the end of the second stanza, after "somewhere," signals a flashback.

The painted plaster returns him to his childhood: "It is the off-white wall / I stared at as a child." The moment is far from sublime or pleasant—when "my mother picked my hair for nits"—and equally bleak as the present scene. Specific sensory details reappear as well:

> The iron comb scraped out
> A series of indefinite ticks
> As they dropped on a double leaf
> Of last week's *Irish News*.
> I had a crick in my neck.

The poem ends as the speaker considers how "someone / On the last train" passing by might see him standing in seeming abstraction at the window. The "crick" in his neck, appearing in the end-stopped final line of the third stanza, structurally relates to the speaker as a child. But it could also be what pulls him back to the present day in the fourth stanza, a result of straining to make out the familiar "bit of plaster." He realizes how odd it must seem to see him "staring out" at a "strip / Between the railway / And the new industrial estate." But he does not dismiss the site completely, referring to it as "almost-useless."

Despite being a space "[b]etween" urban structures, the strip of neglected land engages his imagination and memory, according it value for the memory it evokes. The reference to "the new industrial estate" also alludes to his thoughts about "a new verse"

in "The New Estate" *(NE* 41). "Rubbish" finds inspiration for this new form in unforeseen and certainly unlovely and unromantic sources. As in "An Early Bed," it explores the connection between sensory experiences and unbidden memory (*NEOP* 24). The speaker's reference to "sifting through" a garbage tip parallels the writer's own process of sorting through impressions, experiences, and details, looking for connections and inspirations.

"The Alhambra," originally written with the poems included in *The New Estate* ("The Alhambra" MS), offers a more conscious rather than involuntary bridge between past and present. Visits to a picture-house located next to a laundry allow access to the exotic and transport the individual from the mundane world into imaginative realms, transcending time and place. In "Rubbish," the speaker shifts between the sickroom and his childhood home, triggered by a familiar sight and context. The boy in "The Alhambra" seeks out imaginary and historical worlds through cinema as a temporary escape and is disoriented when the films are over, unable or unwilling to return to the real world. Placed in *The New Estate and Other Poems* after the travel poems from *The Lost Explorer*, it is paired with "The Rosary Rally," offering another view of the poet-persona as a youth. The speaker is another type of "explorer," experiencing the world through art and imagination rather than actual world travel.

Reaching the theater, which takes its exotic name from an Islamic fortress in Spain, is a near-magical process as the speaker passes "through clouds / Of boiling steam" from the adjoining laundry (*NEOP* 43). When he arrives at "a foyer / Marbled like the palaces of Pompeii," he discovers a "smoky avenue / Of light that leads to history," created by the projector's beam. Traveling through time, he can visit "the Fall of Rome, / The death of Al Capone," and experience "the instant / Where the chariot-wheels" of the

past "collide," suggesting the "wheel-ruts" of the "Insular Celts" and their battles (43, 12). In the theater, history can repeat itself or offer alternative versions: "The *Titanic* [can] founder for the second time," and he can "kiss / A girl who will never be my wife" (43).

The impact and importance of the cinema and its world of imagination on the speaker reflect Carson's interest in history, memory, and representation. The young man is swept up in the spectacle of the ship's destruction, experiencing its movement "[t]hrough cascades of broken ice." When he emerges from the theater, the feeling of being transported in time lingers. He is one of the shipwrecked passengers, "washed back into daylight / To the laundry." This ordinary setting mixes with his experience in the cinema, leaving him in a liminal state, seeing "sea-foam on the lens, / Shirts and underwear revolving / In my struggle to escape the glass." The Titanic's portholes and the glass doors merge, and he feels trapped, confused by the sensation of drowning from the film and his reflection in the washer's "glass" that reminds him that he is back in a laundry in Belfast. The "smoky avenue" of the projector's lamp that "leads to history" also represents the blurring of the film world and the real world. The speakers in "Rubbish" and, later, in "Loaf," are aware of being in two worlds simultaneously, as is the filmgoer, but he "struggle[s]" to stay in the imaginative one. Resisting the "daylight" that draws him out of it, he is like Prufrock imagining a world of "sea-girls" and "mermaids singing" but fearing the "human voices that wake us," leaving us to "drown" ("Prufrock" 7).

While movies and art can provide distractions or alternatives, the references to shipwrecks, collisions, and drowning reflect the dangers of getting lost or in overlooking the everyday world. Representations can also fail, offering incomplete or faulty versions that are stand-ins for real experiences and direct engagement with the world. "The

Excursion," coming before "The Holiday," imagines a traveler's experience in the alpine landscape depicted in the earlier poem, "Engraving from a Child's Encyclopaedia." Elements are repeated or recycled. "[S]ilver, pewter-shadowed / Clouds" become "[s]ilver crests on silver clouds," and "[t]hree tiny human figures" carrying "alpenstocks" turn into an imagined "traveller on foot . . . assisted only / By an alpenstock" (*NEOP* 26, 30). The image in "Engraving" is a reproduction or representation, and the viewer's curiosity takes him into and beyond the scene depicted. In "The Excursion," the speaker is actually at the site, accompanied by "the Guidebook" (30). Capitalized to indicate its authority, it provides an official interpretive voice that serves as a guide or map, a complement to the speaker's or traveler's direct experience of a place.

The travelers are not as shut off from their surroundings as the speaker in "East of Cairo" is by his self-centeredness. Even as they escape a climber's efforts, confined instead within a "funicular / Car" during their "ascension" on a linear track, they can "appreciate with what laboriousness / A traveller on foot might climb" and understand "his wish to be alone." The speaker also notes that the setting confirms the description in the Guidebook, which had "foreseen" how the landscape becomes "'picturesque'." The single quotes emphasize that this is someone else's term, yet the speaker finds that the word choice is appropriate.

The second stanza describes the scene from the top, and the speaker turns to more concrete details rather than the Guidebook's interpretation. Above are mountain peaks, clouds, and "snowcaps almost / Airborne, precipitously vanishing." Below, a "green field momentarily made clear / By sunlight," a "white church like a delph church," and "cows like toy cows, leaden" offer an aestheticized view, like the marble frieze of the photographed workers in "Linen." When a sudden rain shower is followed by "a rainbow

[that] glazed upon the air like aerosol," it "[d]istract[s]" the travelers, drawing their attention. They rub the fogged windows to see more clearly and try to capture the moment on camera, but they are "too late."

Carson contrasts a direct experience with a mediated one and recognizes that the latter, despite its limitations, is the only form that can be shared with others. The speaker has missed the opportunity to capture an image on film that could help answer the questions others will ask: "*What did you do?* and *What was it like?"* But in "Engraving" and "Windy Gap," the visual representations raise many unanswered questions. Language is also problematic, as the speaker in "The Excursion" realizes he is stuck "searching / For the words" that could convey his experience. "Picturesque" works, but it offers a general idea, like the birds-eye view in "Patchwork" that provides a "map of the city" and its landmarks, without specifics such as "the invisible speck of our house" (*IFN* 59). When the speaker does provide details, he reworks language and an image from an earlier poem (the illustration in "Engraving"), but the scene rapidly changes, and the experience is transitory.

The speaker's frustration leads to his lament, "I almost wished we had not come" (*NEOP* 30). He compares himself to the solitary traveler who, "perplexed" by his own experiences of the "snowy mountains, gorges and defiles" and, "think[ing] of home," is also lost, circling back as dark approaches to the "downward footprints" of his earlier wanderings "[o]nce again." In "Springfield," the maze of shops becomes a metaphor for the confusion of memory and experience; in "The Excursion" it is imagined as a similarly disorienting alpine landscape. Finding the language or some other form to represent or map out a moment in a distinct and relatable way is a challenge due to continual change. Even in the second stanza, the most descriptive in the poem, Carson returns to language

used in "Engraving," a poem about an already mediated image, yet the details he describes are "precipitously vanishing" and only "momentarily made clear." Communication involves a sort of translation and a dual vision combining specific details connected to a moment and a more generalizing view.

"Excerpts from a Tourist Handbook" offers a satirical example of what a modern "Guidebook" might contain and how it might be used for more propagandistic or commercial rather than informative or interpretive purposes. Placed after "At the Windy Gap, 1910" and before the travel poems from *The Lost Explorer,* its tone and structure mark it as something new. Most of Carson's poems are regular in their stanza length. Tercets and quatrains are common, as are sestets and octets, with some variations, but the stanzas in "Excerpts" vary from one to three lines. Several reveal what might be Carson's first use of the long line, the poem's appearance on the page resembling one of the longer pieces from his later volumes.

Presented as a handbook to Blaenau Ffestiniog, a slate-producing Welsh town once known as "The Town that Roofed the World," "Excerpts" mocks the promotional language and boosterish tone used to attract tourists and reflects on the costs of industry and war. Beginning with a call to visitors, "Here, for the first time, the outside world can see / The faith and triumph of the God-fearing quarrymen of Blaenau Ffestiniog," the Handbook's grandiose diction is like the banter of a sideshow barker (*NEOP* 37). The location is turned into a spectacle rather than a real town, and the intermittent use of the long line conveys a sense of breathless enthusiasm. The Welsh miners are presented as exemplars of faith and industry and, by contrasting them with the "outside world," as curiosities to be gawked at. Repeating the descriptor "God-fearing" for the men, and the children as well, conveys approval of their perhaps unanticipated devotion. Their

character is revealed in their production: "130 miles // Of tunnels linking hundreds of caverns – the caverns like / A series of cathedrals, the cathedrals like a series of caverns." To the people of Blaenau Ffestiniog, work is religion, and religion is work, the Handbook suggests.

The tone shifts in the middle of the poem with the mention of 1917 and the town's "Memorial to the Dead," honoring the "363 quarrymen who became soldiers." Working to construct the greater empire ("roof[ing] the houses of five continents, the outside world") turns to more direct sacrifice. The loss of one-quarter of the "skilled slate dressers" is euphemistically termed a "serious setback" for the industry and a "fail[ure] to return" from the unstable "Sands of Sinai, or the Mud of Flanders." The handbook's voice and tone turn more sober in noting that, "For every ton of goods is ten tons' waste." The memorial and the slate tips that remain unused are reminders of the price of empire. Yet the children "continued to write" on their school slates, presumably on the same topics ("Arithmetic and Geography, the names of continents") that would educate them on the building blocks of a nation. Ending with three single-line stanzas that take stock of the town after its "serious setback," the poem moves from celebration to more sober and satirical or ironic accounting.

The turn to Wales, in "Excerpts" and in two adaptations of Welsh poems at the end of the volume, seems uncharacteristic, but Blaenau Ffestiniog and the surrounding region may serve as a smaller version of Belfast. Linen production, ship-building, and other industries, as well as extensive global trading in tea, tobacco, and other goods, led to Belfast's expansion from 20,000 residents in 1800 to 98,000 in 1851, and almost 350,000 by 1901 as it became an imperial city of brick (Bardon 48). Blaenau Ffestiniog, formerly a farming village, grew from a population of around 3,500 in 1851 to nearly

11,500 in 1883 due to the quarrying industry that brought it slate homes, railroads, and heaps of stone waste ("Rise and Fall"). Due to a decline in demand for slate, the loss of workers to enlistment in World War I, and cheaper tiles mass-produced in other countries, the population dropped, and tourism became the main economic engine.

For Belfast, a similar combination of factors led to its decline and eventual transformation into a commerce economy and a shopping and tourist destination. The sinking of the *Titanic* in 1912 and the "slaughter" at the Battle of the Somme in 1916 (around 5,500 casualties, with nearly 2,000 dead, out of the 15,000 men of the 36th Ulster Division) were literal and symbolic disasters (Grayson Ch. 7). The Troubles of the 1920s, the War of Independence, civil war and partition, the economic depression of the 1930s, deindustrialization throughout the twentieth century, and three decades of the more recent Troubles all contributed to "very considerable pounding, . . . economically, politically, socially, militarily and indeed psychologically" (Boal and Royle 6). Carson's poem mocks the transformation of a place and its people into curiosities to fuel tourism, and the final lines consider the price. The "slates . . . unwritten-on" represent the stories not told but also the endurance of the children who "continued to write" (*NEOP* 37). While "Excerpts" was written during the Troubles, before Belfast would become "Titanic-town" and a site for conflict-based tourism, Carson anticipates the costs there as well. In "The Excursion," Carson is critical of the limits of mediated experience. In "Excerpts," he suggests how representations can be used for economic and political ends, dehumanizing and commodifying the subjects.

"DUNNE" – FACING THE TROUBLES DIRECTLY?

"Excerpts" offers an oblique approach to the contemporary situation in Northern Ireland, as do most of the new poems in the volume that are set in Belfast or the

contemporary North. Even the earlier poem, "The Bomb Disposal," can be read as a metaphor for the writing process. "Dunne," an occasional poem about a Troubles-related kidnapping, with references to military installations ("Camlough, Silverbridge and Crossmaglen"), invokes the conflict more directly. The poem also stands out due to the revisions made when it was collected in *The New Estate and Other Poems,* following the ominous and inconclusive poems, "The Holiday" and "The Bomb Disposal." Most of the poems in that 1988 edition underwent minor changes, if any, mainly in capitalizing the start of each line. The initial version of "Dunne," first published in *The Honest Ulsterman* in 1981, contains two full stanzas that were later omitted.

Both versions of "Dunne" center on the story of a "missing man," based on the kidnapping of Ben Dunne, the director of the Dunnes Stores supermarket chain ("Dunne" 52). Taken by the Provisional IRA in 1981, he was held for seven days before being left in a graveyard, along with the two bullets given to him by his abductors as reminders of how close he was to being killed ("Ben Dunne Kidnap Bullets"). The uncertainty surrounding his abduction and release is part of the story's appeal, offering opportunity for speculation. While the IRA asked for a £1.5m ransom, officials and family insisted that none was paid. Years later, a friend indicated that he had been directed to pay a sum by the future Taoiseach, Charles Haughey, later rumored to have received payments from Dunne when he was in office (Sheridan). Haughey, when serving as Minister of Finance in Ireland during the start of the Troubles, had been linked to a plan to import guns and ammunition for the republican side. Although he was acquitted of charges, he was sacked from his position in 1970 (Kelly).

The final version of the poem is introduced by the narrator's account of how he learned about Dunne's story, but the opening two stanzas of the original offer background

about the speaker and the poem's history and include allusions to a Celtic myth and to the labyrinth and maze motifs prevalent in Carson's later work. Removing them makes the poem more about the victim and the event than a more "meta" reflection on the writing process.

The omitted stanzas begin with a confession and explanation: "I had lost the first draft of this poem / Somewhere between the first pub and the last" ("Dunne" 52). Literally or figuratively, the speaker tries to relocate or recreate the original, as if reading traces of earlier markings on a palimpsest or map: "I tried to trace my way back through / The fading calligraphy of steps / I might have taken." He seeks "glints of tiles and brass" that might lead him to a lost document or evoke memories of "conversations" of "things lost and found again, / Turning up where they were least expected." Like the speaker in "Springfield" who, having "forgotten something," is drawn to the past by a familiar "light that glints," he employs a sensory mnemonic system (*LE* 7).

The draft, he then suggests, is somewhere inside him and just needs to be uncovered. He compares his predicament to the Scottish tale of the Queen of Cadzow who, having been presented a ring by the king, later gives it to one of his men ("City Crest"). During a hunting trip, the king notices the ring on the sleeping knight's hand and removes it. When he throws it into a river, it is swallowed by a salmon. Upon his return, the jealous king demands that the queen show him his gift, but she cannot. Imprisoned and threatened with death, she wins her release only once she enlists a monk to catch the salmon. Miraculously, he does so, and she is saved when she reveals the ring.

Carson's speaker explains that he feels "like the ring in the salmon's belly, / Gleaming in the darkness, undiscovered," only to be released "by fork and knife" ("Dunne" 52). The creative process, he suggests, is part work and part luck. Searching the

streets or his memory for reminders of a lost manuscript or idea, or fishing the waters for a discarded piece of jewelry, relies on things "[t]urning up where they were least expected." The reference to the "fork and knife" also suggests a personal cost in producing and telling one's story. Something must be sacrificed and then consumed by others. Carson also compares the writer to "a sailor, / Returning after seven years with tales" of exotic places but "whose lover / Would not recognize him" upon his return. Even when the writer finds the words, unless a listener or reader has also been in "Hindoostan and Araby," those experiences can only be told through a sort of translation that loses or changes something in the process.

What saves the missing draft or leads to a new one is, in fact, something "least expected." As the speaker lies in bed, staring at the ceiling, he wonders, "Maybe its dints / And wrinkles would have something to say to me." The 1988 version begins after that thought, when the speaker hears about Dunne's release on the radio: "It was then I heard of the missing man." The pause between the stanzas in the original gives the impression that the speaker's hopes have been answered.

As with the stories of the weaver in "Interior," the alpinist in "Engraving," the enigmatic traveler in "Windy Gap," and the missing boy in "The Half-Moon Lake," Dunne's tale is one of uncertainty and distortion. It comes "through a hiss of static," told on-air by "[s]omeone being interviewed" who, tipped off by an anonymous caller, had been told where the missing man could be found (*NEOP* 33). "That was all." He recounts finding the missing man disoriented, "bearded / And disheveled," with little to reveal about his ordeal:

> *He knew nothing of the ransoms.*
> *He did not know who they were. He knew nothing*
> *Of his whereabouts. He did not even know*
> *If he was in the South or North.*

Despite the lack of information and the repeated assertions that Dunne "knew nothing," the poem's speaker proceeds to describe what the captive endured. Kept in an "outhouse filled with plows and harrows" and hooded with a balaclava, he "felt like a beaten child" who was "[s]hut up under stairs," like the child in "Twine" or the boy hiding in the larder in "Visitors," but "without a hint of hope." Further details contain allusions to other poems. He is compared to "[s]tiches dropped that no-one could knit back," unlike the ones that go wrong but can be re-worked in "The Patchwork Quilt." Like "the paste on the wallpaper," he was covered over and out of sight, "etched / . . . into the memories of what might have been," recalling the repressed childhood memories and "re-papered layers" in "An Early Bed" (*NEOP* 33; *NE* 13). But the speaker notes several times that this is only what "[i]t seemed," calling attention to the fact that only the victim, Dunne, knows the truth (*NEOP* 33). The story is only the poet's interpretation, drawn from speculation, spare details, and imagination.

The last stanza describes the "seven days" the man spent alone and in darkness, as he "turned, again / And again, to an image of himself as a child / Hunched in bed" (34). But while the child in "An Early Bed" lies fruitlessly wishing for his death, the missing man envisions his childhood self, staring at the ceiling and its "enigmatic pits and tics" and imagining the stars beyond. This image, closing out the poem, revisits the speaker's own thoughts in the original version as he lies in bed searching for his "lost" draft in the "dints / And wrinkles" of the ceiling ("Dunne" 52).

Including the original opening stanzas makes the story of an abduction a metaphor for the solitary and elusive nature of the creative process. The poet is like the kidnapped man, first blinded by his hood and then uncomprehendingly staring at the marks on the ceiling that have somehow "scored the blankness," leaving signs to be read and patterns

to be deciphered like a musical transcript *(NEOP* 34). Beyond the confines of the outhouse or toolshed he is kept in are the "stars," unseen but still present. In later poems, Carson collects and transforms these individual bits of light into constellations that have their own stories, just as the ring lies hidden in the salmon, "[g]leaming in the darkness, undiscovered" until something releases it ("Dunne" 52). At this point, for the imprisoned Dunne and the poet, they remain "enigmatic" (*NEOP* 34).

By deleting the opening, framing stanzas and starting the poem with the line, "It was then I heard of the missing man," Carson makes the poem more about Dunne than the creative process. Given his criticism of Heaney's *North* for straying from the "specific" to write about "the parallels of ritual," this excision makes sense ("Escaped" 184). Equating the poet and the hostage risks "rather odd historical and emotional conclusions" and diminishes the real trauma of Dunne's ordeal. The revision eliminates elements that might detract from the shock or seriousness of the missing man's story. It leaves out the speaker's somewhat comical, labyrinthine journey after a night out drinking and his attempts to recall where he had been and what his "lost draft" contained. It also avoids the clichéd use of the Scottish myth about the ring and the salmon, also related to the Irish myth of the "salmon of knowledge," and references to distant lands, keeping specific places in the North. Yet the final version is still a composite of comments from the radio program, the speaker's imaginings, and intertextual allusions that connect the speaker and the captive. Carson avoids the easy comparison that would "distract from the subject matter," but Dunne's story, unless told by the victim directly, is ultimately filtered and translated, bearing evidence of the writer's experiences and decisions (*BT* 57). The original version of "Dunne" displays the grandmother's quilt-making technique from "The Patchwork Quilt" employed in writing; the final version, by

omitting the stanzas about the poet's search for his "first draft," hides some of the "stitches" used in the process, but they appear there nonetheless.

THE DOMESTIC SPHERE AND FAMILY

While "Dunne" refers to an actual event from the Troubles, most of the other new additions to *The New Estate and Other Poems* follow domestic themes. Mainly centered in family and home, they draw attention to the forces of change and a looming sense of mortality. In "The Holiday," a trip away from Belfast leads to an encounter with a mutilated sheep, a *memento mori* that he cannot shake off. The warm house of "The Car Cemetery" is a metaphor for a place where people smile in their sleep as the world outside slowly corrodes. Memory increasingly becomes a resource to draw on to preserve what time and other forces will otherwise erase, and human connections replace the isolation that figures in earlier poems turn to for escape.

"Céilí" stays in the rural world of the preceding poem, "Our Country Cousins." The informal tone and diction suggest that the speaker is celebrating a stereotype, offering a nostalgic view of rural Ireland as a place of music, dance, and traditions. He boasts of what "[y]ou'd see," as if bragging to a companion about life at home. Any gathering is an excuse for celebration: "If there was a house with three girls in it, / It only took three boys to make a dance" (*NEOP* 51). Inside is "a power / Of poitín," "good and clear like the best of water," and music, "a big farl of bread" and "Tate and Lyle's *Golden Syrup*." Outside, "[t]here might be courting going on."

A simple scene of revelry changes when the speaker considers that world outside. With all the "twistings and turnings, / Crossroads and dirt roads and skittery lanes" in the countryside, any house would do for an impromptu *céilí*: "You'd be glad to get in from the dark." The "[w]hisperings and cacklings in the barnyard" add a familiar but also

ominous note. The night is one of "promises, or broken promises," and the fiddler is left "fiddling with no bow," too drunk to notice or, metaphorically, to find a partner. The *céilí* might not be perfect, but it offers a chance to connect with others and to escape from the unknown or unseen.

While it is specifically related in the poem to the countryside, the social gathering is also a necessary refuge in urban settings. The ominous and confusing "twistings and turnings" of country roads are "cul-de-sacs," "threaded veins," and "obliterated streets" in "The Bomb Disposal" and "Smithfield Market," and the sounds from the barnyard give way to more explicit threats from guns and bombs (*NEOP* 51, 32; *IFN* 37). Given Carson's experience in playing and promoting traditional music in "pubs, houses, buses, cars and aeroplanes," getting "in from the dark" and gathering for an "evening visit" offers an escape, regardless of the location (*Last Night's Fun* 109, 82). The country *céilí* is replaced by Thursday night gatherings "punctuated" by the "broken rhythm" of gunfire outside in *Belfast Confetti's* "Night Out" (*BC* 77). Meetings of the Falls Road Club at the Wollongong Bar in Adelaide, Australia, in "Exile's Club," from *The Irish for No*, and "Schoolboys and Idlers of Pompeii," from *Belfast Confetti* take place far from the Irish countryside, as the men gather to re-create the Belfast of their youth. The final image in "Céilí," a "spider thread of gold-thin syrup" that trails "out across the glowing kitchen tiles" from a bottle that was not closed right, validates the scene and approves of the stereotype while also recognizing its limitations (*NEOP* 51). As the sweet syrup heads out into an uncertain and potentially dangerous world, "a night of promises, or broken promises," it is a sign of a temporary pause or a sweetness that offers relief, but it is the product of carelessness, a bottle not screwed on right.

The darkness in "Blues," following "Céilí," comes from a death in the family, and

the poem offers a speaker who, along with those in "The Alhambra," "Rubbish," and "The Bomb Disposal," embodies the persona Carson often adopts. Attending an uncle's wake, he reflects on the peculiar connections between the past and present, and between objects and memories in an allusive and associational process that brings the deceased back to life in the web that it creates.

The title suggests that the poem might, shifting genres, pick up on the musical theme from "Céilí," but the opening stanza returns to a place from the speaker's past, putting "Blues" in both a commercial and personal context:

> Gallagher's corner shop
> Had a brass snuff scales
> And a pitted blue enamel sign
> For *Gallaher's Blues*. (52)

The place and the product, a Belfast-produced brand of cigarette, root the poem in an urban setting. The title's significance, though, changes as the poem progresses. The second stanza shifts from Gallagher's store to memories of his uncle. With the same attention to detail, he describes him as a smoker with an "ochre / Stained" moustache and with a "mantel nicked / By cigarette burns, one terminating in / A worm of ash." Alluding to the earlier poem, "Collecting Stamps," he explains how the two bonded over a shared interest in stamps:

> On Sunday afternoons
> He'd slip out the half-morocco
> Loose-leaf album from between
> The Pelicans and Penguins[.]

"Blues" refers to a rare stamp and a shared knowledge: "There was the *Blue Mauritius* / That we both knew for a forgery," despite its "delicate engraving."

The title becomes more significant in the fifth stanza, as the speaker's thoughts of *Gallaher's Blues* and the *Blue Mauritius* come together when he observes the body of his

uncle:

> He lay in the coffin, his face
> A posthumous blue stubble.
> The parlour was a gloom
> Of nicotine and ivory – [.]

The accumulation of details leads the poem to this moment. He starts off thinking about a corner shop and what it "had," then links its merchandise to his uncle's nicotine stains. The "worm of ash" adds an ominous tone, just as the stamp, "[h]inged to one blank page," suggests the tenuousness of life and anticipates the man in the coffin. "Blues" becomes a collective reference to the tobacco, the stamp, his dead uncle, and, possibly, "the blues"—the emotion of the moment (the "gloom" in the parlour) and the musical form that expresses it.

The final stanza forces the reader from a neat conclusion about the power of details and memories to keep the dead alive, or "from oblivion" (*BN* 42), another example of what Denman notes as indicating a move to more "open-ended" poems (29). The pause at the end of the fifth stanza, an em-dash after the description of his uncle's viewing, offers time to think. When he continues, he claims, "I could hear his smoker's cough, / The clink of a half-ounce weight / On the scales" (*NEOP* 52). His uncle and the shop remain alive or present for him in sense-memory. The visual images of the "brass" scales and the sign, and the sounds of the cough and the scale, which he associates with his uncle, are links between past and present, much as the images in the cinema are for the boy in "The Alhambra."

In "*Céilí*," an impromptu social gathering is one way a community responds to uncertainty and solitude; the wake in "Blues" offers a response to loss. Yet the last two lines challenge a conventional ending about coming to terms with death. After "[h]ear[ing]" those sounds, he returns to a linguistic puzzle left without comment in the

first stanza: "I wondered, once again, / About the missing *g* in *Gallaher."* The poem, apparently headed towards elegy, turns to emphasize the character of the poet-persona. While aware of change and loss, and the peculiar and specific details that are lodged in memory, what catches his attention is a linguistic peculiarity. Instead of gaining closure, the speaker is left with a question that seems tangential to the situation. "Blues" *is* a tribute to a family member, but it is also a reminder of both memory's associative web and the uncertainties and peculiarities that characterize life and that occupy the speaker's thoughts.

"Grandfather," filed as a manuscript with materials from *The Lost Explorer* and paired with "Great-Grandmother" on the facing page, is part of a sequence of family poems ("Grandfather," TS). Unlike "Great-Grandmother," it is not a vignette, confining itself to just one moment. The speaker is in a liminal state, like the boy caught between the worlds of the Titanic and the laundry in "The Alhambra" or the speakers in "Rubbish" and "Blues." Different versions of the grandfather appear, blurring distinctions between past and present. Beginning with the lines, "For a moment it was twenty years ago / And I heard your voice," the perspective shifts in the second stanza to a more distant time when his grandfather was at his prime (*NEOP* 55). By the third stanza, the speaker reveals, "It is not years ago but now / Though I can see you," as he experiences sounds and sights related to his grandfather as if he is there, the past tense ("heard") becoming present tense ("can see").

The speaker initially recalls his grandfather as someone diminished by age, "heard . . . mumbling / About tea, the scarcity of milk" while "outside, through / A curtain, was a glint of drays and hearses / Over cobbles." In the final stanza, he is

> [. . .] shaking out a handkerchief
> With its bruise of snuff, or buttering

> A piece of bread, then pausing, looking round
> At me, your face as empty
> As that clock on the mantelpiece**.**

The world outside is "curtain[ed]" off from him, and the "glint" of "hearses," combined with the comparison to the clock, suggests his time is short.

As the speaker explains the presence of the passing vehicles that may be real or only in the grandfather's imagination ("They were coming from the mill"), the reference to the mill leads him to the image of his grandfather at work there. Having spent his life "in copperplate / Accounting for its yards of linen," he is characterized by "[t]wo polished shoes on the rungs of a high stool" instead of a soiled handkerchief. Mumbling is replaced by confidence and importance:

> You gave authority to wheels and ratchets
> In receipts and bills-of-lading, hours declined
> And weighed at every page;
> The spindle and the thread.

His position is compared to the Fates, overseeing the mechanisms that control the workings and measurements of the factory's lifeline, "the spindle and the thread."

"Now," "twenty years ago," and an earlier, indefinite time come together in the speaker's imagination and with the symbolic presence of the clock. Bearing "[a] date, a name and two gold hands," it is likely a retirement gift and serves as a reminder of the grandfather's past importance. The circling hands that "almost touch each other every hour" call attention to the passage of time and to mortality. While distinctions between past and present are blurred, they also only "almost touch," moving in close but parallel planes. He cannot get his grandfather back, just as his grandfather cannot reclaim his earlier importance. The memory is not the same as what has passed, but something close is better than the alternative—being forgotten.

The clock serves as an *objet de mémoire,* a reminder of a former life and

importance and, as a *memento mori,* of inevitable decline. The melancholy tone and imagery of depletion, particularly in his later state, suggests that the grandfather, defined by his occupation, is not freed but lost when that role ends. The speaker can see his face "as empty / As that clock on the mantelpiece." But the clock also has the power to bring the past back. Three different time periods *almost* coincide, not in a one-off experience but one that is repeated when the speaker sees the object and in the cyclical movement of the hands that nearly touch as they circle. The absent grandfather—the mumbling older version and the "copperplate" accountant—come together in the speaker's mind in the "now" in a palimpsestic manner. While time is typically measured linearly, like the progress of the mill workers and the "thread" they produce, the clock hands' movements are a reminder of its cyclical nature as well, echoed in the image of "wheels and ratchets" and "[t]he spindle."

"Stitch" and "Post" bring the family sequence a generation closer, as the members move from the uncle and Aunt Rose, then to Great-Grandmother, Grandfather, and finally parents. Like "Blues" and "Visitors," the titles do not highlight their lineal relationships, as "Mother" and "Father" would, but identify, as Malmqvist notes, "practices associated with" them (*BT* 102). These characters recur in Carson's poems, and the importance of their "practices" in the development of the speaker "invites us to read them symbolically." Having appeared in previous poems (the mother in "Twine" and "Rubbish," and the father in "An Early Bed" and "Twine"), they become increasingly more significant in their roles in the development of the poet-persona.

"Stitch," a son's recollection of searching through his mother's "button-box" for a replacement for his shirt cuff, adds to the idea introduced in "The Patchwork Quilt" that needlework is a metaphor for the writing process. The boy is not looking for a match,

> [. . .] not the twin
> Of this lost button,
>
> But something very like:
> Near enough to do[.] (*NEOP* 56)

He does discover a suitable option, but much of the poem is about the wonders he finds in the repurposed "*Quality Street* / Chocolate-tin." The contents, like the button he finds and the box itself, are recycled, and some are just imitations of something more precious ("mock / Tortoiseshell and mother-of-pearl, / Clouded amber plastic" and "synthetic horn"). Rather than dismissing them as cast-offs or second-rate objects, he sees them as a "shimmering / Shifting hourglass / Of everything mismatched," counterparts to the "[s]craps" and "[b]its and pieces" of cloth containing elements of the past that the grandmother uses in "The Patchwork Quilt" (56, 71-2).

Finding the right replacement is an epiphanic moment. As he pours the buttons back into the chocolate tin, a "hailstorm drum-roll / Herald[s]" the appearance of "what I had been / Looking for" (56). He seeks a button "[n]ear enough to do" that also can "speak / That moment when the thread / Was loosed, that look" (56-7). A match or simple replacement is not the goal. The new button needs to serve its purpose on the garment and fit the general style but also must suggest, through slight but perceivable differences, the lost original at the same time. The shirt, damaged and repaired, is made whole again but in a revised version that contains a reminder of its change, a stroke left on the palimpsest.

The description of the son extending his "dangling cuff" to his mother as "Lethargic Adam // In the Sistine Chapel" is hyperbolic, but for a young boy, a mother's restorative powers may seem all-powerful. Her matter-of-fact manner may also make it more amazing: "She sews the button / Back, then snips / The thread" (57). But if the

son's inheritance from the mother is transformed from needlework to language, something else is transferred from mother to son, aside from a repaired shirt. Beginning the poem with the line "Again I sifted" indicates that this has happened before. Since the reason he is looking through the "button-box" is not made clear until later in the poem, the act of searching for something to "speak / That moment" implies the writer's own search for the right word, phrase, or image (56-7). An exact match in meaning, as in a literal translation, is not the goal. The right button or word must serve as a bridge between the past and the present, bearing traces of the original and the new versions as well as signs of the creator's craft.

The comparison of the scene between mother and son to *The Creation of Adam* also relates to the separation or gap between the fingers in the painting. Symbolizing the creation of life and also the distance between the divine and the mortal figure made in his image, for the artist it represents the differences involved in any attempt at representation. The speaker notes that he did not want the "twin" but something "very like" it. For the parent and child, the separation is a reminder of their independent identities, apart from any common genetic or environmental traits. His gesture, extending his "dangling / Cuff to her," bridges that gap, but that connection is broken when she cuts the thread, an image that once again recalls the Fates (57). As with other moments when he feels a convergence of past and present, their coming together is temporary and incomplete, yet stays with him, like the passing hands of the clock in "Grandfather" that "almost touch."

"Stitch" identifies the mother's influence and the way the box of "mismatched" buttons and her needlework offer one model for the writer, turning "heterogeneous materials . . . into art" (*SPW* 127). "Post" turns to the father and to a different model. Malmqvist points out that the alternative title was "Waste," relating to the "plastic

rubbish-bin" in the poem but also to death, as both the speaker and the father seek to preserve the memory of the deceased (*BT* 103; *NEOP* 58). The original title also relates to the mother's box of buttons saved for reuse and her task of mending damaged garments, and to the trash site in "Rubbish" that summons memories of a mother's care.

As both postman and storyteller, the father uses "mnemonics," turning "Falls Road walks" into stories and wordplay to help him navigate the city, despite "how it's changed" (*NEOP* 58). Words and places are connected through and to memories. The link between father and son is made explicit when the son is hired by the post office for a "Christmas break" position. Explaining that "I was taken on / Because I was / My father's son," he implies not only nepotism but also inherited traits and interests. Carson expands on the father-son connection in *The Irish for No's* "Patchwork" and *Belfast Confetti's* "Ambition" and "Intelligence," as the father points out Belfast's landmarks for his son during a hike up Black Mountain. In "Bed-Time Story," the son wears his father's postal uniform and puts himself in his shoes, literally and figuratively, as he creates his own stories while his father sleeps. The father in "Post" is a step toward that model.

The father also apparently passes down a sensitivity to loss. The speaker mentions wearing the "black arm-band // Of the casual worker" and the "dead-letter box" for undeliverable mail, a reminder of the "undelivered / Letters" in "Twine" (*NEOP* 59; *LE* 10). The father, at funerals, recalls "those absent / Workmates," and the son "retrieve[s] / Yesterday's *Irish News*" from the trash to read over "The Deaths column," finding stories amidst "the sodden tea-leaves // And broken egg-shells" (*NEOP* 59). Given the variant title of the poem, both men share an impulse to "recall" the dead, not to "let them vanish and . . . [fall] into forgetfulness," or become just "Waste" (*BT* 103).

Together, "Stitch" and "Post" indicate the direction of Carson's work. *The Insular*

Celts displays the influence of traditional Irish themes and forms, although he adapts them for his own critical view of their limitations, particularly in the figure of the hermit-poet and of the narrow-mindedness of sectarianism. The poems in the original version of *The New Estate* continue with this theme but also turn to crafts and the home as sources to explore identity, memory, and representation. *The Lost Explorer* offers travel poems, with adventures away from Ireland and, more significantly, into the past and memory to reflect on the speaker's development. But the combination of the "button-box . . . [o]f everything mismatched," recycled garments and old newspapers, stories of "those absent / Workmates," and the "mnemonics / For the various streets / Of the Falls Road walks" offers materials for his own "new verse" that integrates past and present and finds a new use for what would otherwise be considered "Waste"(*NEOP* 56, 58, 69).

Before ending the book with "The New Estate" and "The Patchwork Quilt," Carson replaces "Winter" with two new adaptations of poems by the Welsh writers Dafydd Jones and Robert ab Gwilym Ddu. The first, "Epitaph," is a short reflection on mortality:

> Now I am bereft of answers
> Your questions have gone astray
>
> Your roofs are open to the wind,
> My roof is but cold clay. (67)

The sentiment echoes the suggested *carpe diem* sentiment of the preceding poem in the volume, "Soot," pointing out that death closes off opportunities. Unlike in "Tuaim Inbir," death does not bring freedom and God's protection but emptiness and enclosure. The speaker is "bereft of answers," since whatever wisdom he could provide is lost. Yet the epitaph itself is evidence that something *does* remain, like the "ink-bruise in the pansy's heart" in "Soot" (66). Writing allows the voice to live beyond the body, and the speaker,

through the epitaph, does get to deliver a last bit of advice, if not answers.

The second of the adaptations, "The Lost Girl," also deals with loss. The speaker uses the house as a metaphor for memory and as a place to search for her. With an "open window" and "door unhinged," the "lintel gleaming like a silver bone," it leads the figure inside, in contrast to the "miles and miles of empty space" outside (68). To "find her face," he searches "her chambers" and "dark recesses," looking for reminders. Like the speaker in "Smithfield" who has "forgotten something" and ends up discovering the smile of a missing child in a spot of light on a wall, he is not seeking *her* but an image or memory in the place he associates with her.

The New Estate and Other Poems republishes many of Carson's early works along with poems completed during his allegedly "silent" period, allowing the reader a chance to confirm both "continuities and departures" between his early work and *The Irish for No* (McCracken 369). While some critics have noted the importance of his early writings in understanding how *The Irish for No* was not, aside from his use of the long line, unforeseen, many take the "standard approach" and consider the later work to be a "major reorientation . . . both formal and thematic" (*BT* 69). Rui Carvalho Homem calls *The Irish for No* "a *de facto* inaugural book, . . . the inception, in diction as much as in themes, of a distinctive poetic writing" (166). Maryann Donahue admits that *The Irish for No* is "often seen as a departure in style and form – rightfully so" (41). But she also finds that his early work "offered signs of the impact of the Troubles and his experimentation in form, subjects and themes." She points out how several poems, in particular "An Early Bed," "House-Painting," and "Moving In," "focus on the impact of sensory details that trigger recollections of an earlier event . . . [and] offer elusive epiphanies," characteristic of the later, "Belfast-centered works" that emphasize "the author's resistance to confirm

or claim the possibility of unified truth." "Twine," "Rubbish," and "Blues," and other poems also published later than these poems from *The New Estate* also resist closure or certainty.

Closely examining the early works reveals Carson's interest in traditional Irish themes and subjects that gives way, although not completely, to more modern and personal ones. The "voice" of the poet-persona changes from the hermit-scribe to one more interested in the relationships and tensions between the past and the present, and the connections between places, people, things, and memory. He maintains an interest in craft, particularly textiles, but also turns to more modern occupations and activities. Drawing in cinema, stamp collecting, photography, and needlework, but not for a focused study, he considers their relationship to artistic creation and issues of representation. Even his later exploration of Belfast and the Troubles has precursors in his early work. "The Bomb Disposal," from 1976, and "Dunne," from 1981, reveal a willingness to confront the topic more directly, although he does tie it into how it relates to the creative process. Several poems, particularly "Fishes in a Chinese Restaurant," address the key issues of division and lack of communication between communities that are at the heart of the conflict.

Positioning "The Patchwork Quilt" as the final poem in *The New Estate and Other Poems* reinforces the importance of the patchwork or mosaic form that is at the heart of *The Irish for No* and d *Belfast Confetti*. The growing importance of the mother/needleworker and father/postman figures in his works also reveals themes that become central. "Stitch" and "Post," not collected until 1988, are prominent. Both poems, along with "Rubbish," also stress the significance of mundane and even cast-off objects as sources for inspiration and memory. The alternative title of "Post" ("Waste") makes

that even clearer. The city did not play a central role in his early work except mainly as a symbol of the world that the hermit-scribes and explorers seek to escape. “The New Estate” marks a turn away from the pastoral or natural worlds and an acknowledgment that they do not represent the contemporary. The “new verse” that is needed in a modern setting of conflict and change emerges from the patchwork and labyrinth models that come to characterize both the subjects and the forms of his next collections. But other voices and influences from literature, history, and music, encountered before and during his poetic “silence,” also contributed to his reemergence in verse. His work as a reviewer and in the traditional arts offer another view of the different layers that make up the “Belfast poet” of *The Irish for No* and *Belfast Confetti*. If his poetic voice went mainly underground during the decade before *The Irish for No* appeared, his bandwidth was constantly expanding in other areas.

Chapter Six: Models of Form and Subject

EARLY REVIEWS AND MODELS, AND "ESCAPING THE MASSACRE?"

Despite the modest output in verse during the period between the publications of *The Lost Explor*er and *The Irish for No,* Carson was an active reviewer and critic, a role he began in the early 1970s. His most well-known or infamous review of Heaney's *North* appeared in 1975 before the publication of *The New Estate* and is often used in considering Carson's views on the role of the poet. Other reviews and prose pieces, particularly from the early 1980s, reveal his engagement and encounters with works that influenced his development, adding to the range of subjects and models for writing. His introduction to the work of C. K. Williams, particularly his collection, *Tar,* has been heralded as a turning point by critics and by Carson as well. But his prose writings reveal that the voice, subject, and form that emerged in *The Irish for No* has roots in early affinities and sensibilities and reflect his widening "bandwidth."

In his 1973 review of Wes Magee's *Urban Gorilla* and Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin's *Acts and Monuments,* Carson identifies elements that become features of his own writing. He praises Magee's role as a detached observer that allows him to watch "something happen – an entirely feasible incident which soon becomes a nightmare" ("Still and Not So Still Lives" 46). Magee is effective, Carson points out, when he "forgets to shout about the inadequacies of modern society." He adds, foreshadowing critics' later classification of his speakers as modern *flâneurs*, "I especially like the idea of the poet as the invisible spectator" who avoids making direct judgments: "Nothing is imposed."

Carson admires Ní Chuilleanáin's attempt at an "integrated sequence" of poems, which he loosely creates in *The New Estate,* with its progression through time, and in

both *The Irish for No* and *Belfast Confetti* (47). In his review of the last work, Colin Meir cites Carson's satisfaction when being told "that his book can be read as a novel" (8). Carson also appreciates the "beautiful pictures" Ní Chuilleanáin creates, although he feels that she does not succeed in her project because her poems do not extend outside their frames ("Still and Not So Still Lives" 49). She is reluctant "to be personally involved" and to move away from the "imagined islands" of her poems (47, 48). "[S]he acts like a hermit towards the real world," he sums up.

The tension between a need to be "involved" in the real world and a desire to remove oneself is a central theme in *The Insular Celts*, and Carson admits, "I like and sympathize with hermits even when they commit themselves to writing public poetry" (47). Early in his career, he experiments with the self-critical voice of the hermit-scribe who is aware of his sacrifices. His complaint about Ní Chuilleanáin is not that she writes about isolation but that there is "no progression of feeling" and that she is "dangerously near plunging over the edge into total silence," something his own St. Ciaran and other speakers fear. He later culls this hermit figure from his works, replacing it with the distant or detached observer, inhabiting the margins. Objects and scenes become sources for reflection and *aide-mémoires* or *lieux de mémoire*, "items, places and words" that are "repositories of individual and collective heritage" and memories (Cuming 22). In particular, "Interior with Weaver," "An Early Bed," "Engraving from a Child's Encyclopaedia," "The Alhambra," and "Blues" each center on a description or encounter that sparks memories, thoughts, and questions, leaving him feeling "in two places at once," what he later compares to the impact of "the memory and the presence of a musical phrase" ("Learning to Read" 17). This position allows for responses to modern society as well as on earlier times, making connections rather than pronouncements,

without the "shout[ing]" or polarization that fuels division. The isolated speaker becomes a voice on the fringe or, symbolically, in the hidden space beneath the stairs or behind a layer of mediation that allows some distance without total separation.

His review of Seamus Heaney's *North*, "Escaped from the Massacre?" in the Winter 1975 issue of *The Honest Ulsterman*, questions Heaney's use of myth and symbol. According to Carson, Heaney avoids or negates treatments of the specific by relating contemporary conditions in Northern Ireland to their equivalents in the distant past. As a result, "the real difference between our society and that of Jutland in some vague past are glossed over" (184). Yet he praises Heaney when he is writing effectively, trying to figure things out with "humanity and honesty," and when he "does not posture" in his "understanding" (186, 185). *North* is not a bad book, he concludes, but he quips that it was made into an "Ulster '75 Exhibition of the Good that can come out of Troubled Times" by critics and readers "anxious that *North* should be a great book" (186).

The review's title is taken from a line in Heaney's "Exposure" in which the speaker questions his decision to become like a

> [. . .] wood-kerne,
>
> Escaped from the massacre,
> Taking protective clothing
> From bole and bark[.] ("Exposure" 136)

Choosing not to become a "hero" and identifying himself as "neither an internee or informer," Heaney's figure withdraws into the woods. The decision parallels Heaney's own move from Northern Ireland to Wicklow in 1972, where he explains, in his 1995 Nobel Lecture, he was,

> for years . . . bowed to the desk like some monk bowed over his prie-dieu, some dutiful contemplative pivoting his understanding in an attempt to bear his portion of the weight of the world, knowing himself incapable of heroic virtue or

> redemptive effect, but constrained by his obedience to his rule to repeat the effort and the posture. Blowing up sparks for meagre heat. ("Crediting Poetry" 30)

This image in prose is strikingly similar to that of Carson's own hermit-scribes. Carson's point, though, is that "No-one really escapes from the massacre" ("Escaped" 186), or what Heaney later calls "the dolorous circumstances of my native place" ("Crediting Poetry" 31). Heaney had left the North just weeks after Bloody Friday, the IRA's August 1972 coordinated detonation of twenty-two bombs throughout Belfast (Doherty 65). The question-mark in the title of the review is the equivalent of a raised eyebrow, a skeptical view towards what Carson views as an attempt to stay out of the conflict, continuing to write while clad in "protective clothing" of natural imagery. Violence catches all in its blast in some fashion, he notes, unless one is "falsifying issues, by applying wrong notions of history" instead of addressing the present ("Escaped" 186). Comparing "atrocities in Iron Age Denmark" to "sectarian violence in contemporary Northern Ireland" leads to a "deterministic view of history – a sense of inevitable repetitiveness" or "cyclical notion of history," something he critiques in "The Insular Celts" (*BT* 56). While violence and mortality are inescapable, as the speakers discover in "The Holiday" and "The Car Cemetery," they cannot be explained away or justified.

Neal Alexander notes that Carson's critique of Heaney reveals an "oblique expression of what Harold Bloom calls 'the anxiety of influence'" (*SPW* 5). That observation seems partially valid. Carson had published poems and book reviews in various journals, and his first pamphlet appeared in 1973, but Heaney had produced four volumes with Faber & Faber, and the arrival of *North* was considered a "watershed in Northern Irish literary relations" (*Ulster Renaissance* 194). Carson had also been a participant in the second incarnation of the Belfast Group, a workshop of young writers initially working under Queen's University Belfast lecturer Philip Hobsbaum and later

continuing "under the aegis" of Heaney until he left for Wicklow ("How to Remember?" 267). Carson's review questions the poet's role in the "political arena," as well as the "contesting factions" that arose over it, and were "rumoured to have greatly upset Heaney" (*Ulster Renaissance* 194, 195).

Wayne Miller, an American poet and editor of the journal *Copper Nickel* writing as a self-identified outsider in 2021, defends Carson's critique, even if he does not agree with it:

> It's certainly an interesting and valid position for Ciaran to take, particularly when we remember that Ciaran was writing from well inside the violence of the Troubles. Though I find the historical long-view that Heaney takes in *North* to be deeply valuable from my own position outside the daily horrors of that place and period, my understanding of the book significantly enlarges through Ciaran's criticisms. (Miller)

Miller highlights the difference between the "long-view" that may lead to broader understanding of a subject and the attention to what Carson has called "what's before your eyes" ("Escaped" 186). But he senses that, while Carson sees problems with Heaney's work, he also expresses praise that reveals his own goals: "But the tenor of that criticism—at least to my ear—leans toward what he saw as the larger good of poetry and keeps in sight what he believed were Heaney's virtues alongside what he thought were Heaney's failings" (Miller). "Honesty of observation" is what Carson lauds, "precision" instead of abstraction ("Escaped" 185, 183).

The review may be viewed as fueled partly by jealousy, as Alexander suggests, but Carson calls Edward McGuire's portrait of the poet "on the literary pages, beside the reviews . . . an advertisement and as a record of literary achievement" (183). Rather than realistic, it is "[i]dealized almost to the point of caricature" and "forestall[s] criticism," and the poet is not represented as a person but as "myth" and "institution." Carson warns against "the abstracting, reductive powers of representation and kitsch," as he also does

in “The Insular Celts” and “The Tara Brooch,” and even in “Excerpts from a Tourist Handbook,” and is concerned that such ”reductive representations can obscure” what is intended and what poets “actually say and do” (Miller). His fear, it seems, is that Heaney has been co-opted by those who romanticize elements of Irishness and that his poetry has and will be diminished by his elevation.

MULDOON, O’BYRNE, AND DREAMS OF BELFAST

Carson also questions the authority of terms like “Renaissance” or the “Group,” which have been turned into myths as well. In a review of Heather Clark’s study of the Belfast Group, *The Ulster Renaissance: Poetry in Belfast, 1962-1972*, he points out that the “workshops ceased” when Heaney left (“How to Remember?” 267). In its place, a “loose clique of sorts continued to operate in various drinking establishments” that included Michael Longley, Paul Muldoon, and Frank Ormsby. The informal gatherings lasted through the 1970s, “or maybe it was the 1980s,” less about poetry (“not necessarily at the top of the agenda”) than about conversation and “slagging” (271, 267). Yet he points out that “[m]emory plays tricks. . . . [I]t is altered by the act of remembering” and admits that his work with the Group did influence his writing (267). He was “daunted” by Muldoon “from the beginning,” noting that “half of the poems” from the “single worksheet” he presented to the Group in 1971 “are near enough Muldoon pastiches” (273). Acknowledging “the necessary anxiety of that influence,” he feels “grateful” for it and finds proof to counter the vagaries of memory in the contents of his archive at Emory University.

Heaney was certainly also an influence. They translated some of the same poems from the early Irish, and each writes about Irish history and tradition, the relationship between identity and place, and the impact of the Troubles. What he sees in Heaney’s

North, both positive and negative, reflects his own concerns. Rooted in Irish traditions and tropes, he faces the dilemma of how to find "a voice that speaks to and through the conflict" that is around him in a way that does not lead to abstraction or to closed-minded boosterism (Broom 142). "Escaped from the Massacre?" is ostensibly a hard-cutting review of a peer and a poetic influence, but it also serves to help understand the changes in Carson's own writing. It addresses his fears of the impact of his own "escape" from the contemporary situation in his poetry and presages the period when he retreats from verse.

Carson's comments on Tom Matthews' *Dr. Watson as an Arab*, published in the Winter 1975 issue of *The Honest Ulsterman* along with his review of Heaney's *North*, make it clear that writing about the world and its problems is a goal, but resolution is not. In Heaney, he sees a dilemma between precision, which he praises, "and the desire to abstract" or to "justify" by creating a "superstructure of myth and symbol," which he castigates ("Escaped" 183). But Matthews, he notes, does not "attempt to make poetic virtue out of tragedy" ("Private but Sulphurous" 55). Instead, he writes about "struggling for perfection in a mediocre world" while bearing "an almost healthy acceptance of failure" and an "awareness of limitation." He questions "why things are as they are" without developing grand answers or offering "understanding," aside from the knowledge that most of life involves dealing with "circumstance and accident and boredom."

Two phrases stand out in his review of Matthews that relate to Carson's own practice. Matthews "makes us listen," he writes, through "epistemological excursions" and "witty analyses of pretension." In a 1980 review of Paul Muldoon's *Why Brownlee Left*, he refers to these practices again. Muldoon, he observes, engages in "epistemological" enquiry throughout his collection, revealing that "exact knowledge always remains a rumour" ("Past Imperfect" 83). "[O]ul' yarns have as much authority as

anything you might read in the papers," and as a result, "there is no self-conscious gesturing towards a tradition, but a recognition of one's place in it" (83, 84). The pretension he criticizes is found in all sources of authority, including the "oul' yarns," newspapers, dictionaries, maps, and historical records. They provide information that is important, just not definitive or authoritative. When collected as different voices or viewpoints, they lead to his palimpsest, patchwork, and constellation models. Carson also notes Muldoon's "delight in *dinndsheanchas*, the lore of place names" (84). These "speculations of history and etymology," instead of providing meanings that reveal a "one-to-one correspondence with what we imagine to be the world," allow for possibilities and alternatives (84, 85). When turning to Belfast as a primary subject or theme, those "speculations" fuel some of the short "Part Two" poems (the "Belfast sonnets") in both *The Irish for No* and *Belfast Confetti* as well as the prose pieces in the latter. Founded on the multivalence of the meanings of names and their sources, they lead to confusion and uncertainty but also the richness of possibilities and associations they create.

Carson identifies the voice he wants to adopt or adapt before his well-acknowledged introduction to C. K. Williams at "[s]ome time in 1985" ("Against Oblivion" 115). In describing Muldoon's verse, he points out that his "apparently conversational, anecdotal tone" is matched with "changes of mood and tense, and, at times, by downright misdirection" ("Past Imperfect" 83). These shifts and changes remind the reader that, while the speaker might claim, in a personal and confidential manner, "I am telling this exactly as it happened," this is only one version of many, and "you'd do well to suspect it." The narratives are subject to change based on the whims and in-the-moment associations within the speaker's mind. While they may contain an

element of truth, they do not serve as truth itself.

Carson's recollection of the "uncountable, and sometimes unaccountable, times we [he and Muldoon] spent together" drinking "Dark Rum and Coke" justify his claim that it is "no coincidence" that many of Muldoon's poems "read like someone talking in a pub" ("How to Remember?" 271; "Past Imperfect" 84). Carson's return to poetry with *The Irish for No,* with its twists and turns, digressions and repetitions, reflects his own desire to capture the demotic. The shifts in Muldoon's poems lead to self-reflexive inquiry and a web of intertextuality, which Carson also appreciates and admires, particularly in Muldoon's long poem, "Immram": "I have come to see how beautifully self-contained a commentary it is on itself; one might, for instance, play the game of seeing how many references there are . . . to all the other poems, or see how the poems are all essentially versions of the one story" ("Past Imperfect" 85). It comes as no surprise, then, that the first poem in *The Irish for No* is "Turn Again," about history's revisions and the choices made in navigating the city, containing echoes of "The Bomb Disposal" and its oft-revised and recycled lines, "The city is a map of the city / Its forbidden area changing daily (*NE* 21). "Dresden," first published in 1985 before its inclusion in *The Irish for No,* is characterized by shifting, multiple narratives in an oral storytelling style. Even the title of his review, "Past Imperfect, Future Conditional," while applied to Muldoon's work, hints at the uncertainty at the heart of Carson's work.

If Muldoon's verse offers models for voice and style, a group of books about Belfast, reviewed by Carson in 1983, may have sparked or re-ignited his interest in the city as a subject, setting, and medium. In "Interesting Times," Carson discusses a book of historical sketches by the singer and writer Cathal O'Byrne, the republican leader Gerry Adams's memoir about growing up in west Belfast, and two historical works about the

city. What stand out are not only Carson's thoughts about the reviewed books and the impact they have on him but also the form he employs. "Interesting Times" is a hybrid of personal memory and review. The books' contents, as well as O'Byrne's book itself (as a physical object), summon memories and serve as "dream-fodder" for his reflections and his responses to the other writers' experiences and observations (36).

Carson begins with a lengthy meditation on the intersection of memory and the present that could be a preview or excerpt from his later work:

> We live in the Belfast of dreams as much as in the physical city. These rehearsals of reality have gone on for years, changing, recurring, twisting back into themselves in a maze of self-reference. Some places do not exist on the map, but are composed of fragments, memories, inventions, other dreams. Such an area lies between Smithfield and York Street: a maze of linen mills, broken-down shops, entries, Victorian collonades, porticos, temples, soot. It has the comfort of age, decay, and gaslight. I am always disappointed when, waking in life, I find it is not there – or if it is, it is reduced to names and lines on a map. The true city is a maze to which the solutions are always different; each dream resolves itself in different strategies, or perhaps not at all. Sometimes the two worlds coincide: the unrenovated gloom of the Elephant Bar; the rust and dereliction of the gasworks; the brown lino floor of the Linenhall Library.

The imagery of the industrial city as a "maze" to navigate is central to both *The Irish for No* and *Belfast Confetti*, as is his recognition that the experienced place is a mixture of past and present, expectations and memories, and the real place (what it *was*, and what it *is*, and what it *could have been* or *could be*). Elsewhere he refers to Belfast as a "nightmare" ("West Belfast"), but it is also a dream that can be found in the quickly disappearing places and spaces where "the two worlds coincide" and where the past has not been renovated, torn down, or replaced ("Interesting Times" 36). It becomes increasingly critical to Carson to capture what still exists before it becomes memories alone or disappears altogether.

While details about Belfast's past are important, Carson also reveals that O'Byrne's book itself, as well as the recollection from his childhood of "a different

edition, nesting, appropriately enough, between Dineen's Irish Dictionary and the Irish Bible" atop his father's bookshelf, conjures his dream. His initial encounter with O'Byrne "coincided with long Sunday walks" with his father while learning about Belfast as the city "hovered between itself," the writer's "Georgian prose," and "the memories and speculations of what might have been." This image of a father passing down knowledge to his son, particularly about the city's geography and grid, was introduced in "Post" and becomes more prominent in some of the longer poems in *The Irish for No* and *Belfast Confetti,* and in the prose pieces of the latter. Carson sees Belfast as a city with multiple versions, including what he experiences himself, what he reads in O'Byrne (as a child and as an adult), and what his father shares.

O'Byrne's "semi-rural" Belfast of the past offers Carson a "Saturday night's curriculum," informal tutorials about the city's past (37). His accounts of "rows and rows of butchers' shops," a "maze of twisting lanes and alleys and byways," "pedlars' stalls and barrows," and "the old, vast cowsheds and stables" with their smell of hay and hedges contain lines and imagery that find their place in Carson's work (qtd. in "Interesting Times" 37). Carson notes that O'Byrne also "fulminates" against "informers and traitors and the bad effects of the industrial revolution" while describing this city "that has not yet lost its innocence" but is undergoing change ("Interesting Times" 37). O'Byrne envisions an "ideal city" as "a republic of the imagination, all ease, contentment, and, if possible, Irish-speaking; its industries would be home crafts and butter-churning, . . . as much prescription as description." This hope is similar to Carson's speculation that the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic would embody "what is possible" (*In the Chair* 152).

But *As I Roved Out* does not just offer what Carson says he "succumb[s]" to when

reading it—feelings of "essential gentleness," "passion," "self-involvement, and occasional sentimentality." One chapter, "'Body Snatching' in Old Belfast," is about the practice of "body stealing" (O'Byrne 50). Another is about "Belfast's Unruly Rivers and Waters," chronicling the role the Farset plays in Belfast's history (and vice versa) and about the city's foundation on a swamp, topics Carson explores in his later prose works, "Farset" and "Brick" (29). In his "Foreword" to *As I Roved Out,* John Hewitt calls O'Byrne's sketches "the only pages to which we can conveniently turn for a readable account of the past of our own city, and the adjacent countryside, a book which will help us to make some sense of the streets we traverse, and their street names which encapsulate so much of its tangled history" ("Foreword" to *As I Roved Out* iii). As a portal to the city's and his own family's past, the work is one that Carson admits, "I have read and re-read affectionately" ("Interesting Times" 37). It serves as a model for Carson's own project, capturing and preserving other versions of Belfast as well as the one in which he lives and examining where they both intersect and diverge. Carson also frequently cites Dineen's Irish Dictionary, the volume next to O'Byrne on his father's bookshelf, as he explores different meanings and sources of words and place names.

Gerry Adams, Carson figures, is also "under this benign influence" of O'Byrne when he writes about the bygone Belfast or Falls Road community of the 1950s in *Falls Memories.* It was a "curiously closed world" of "Gaelic Leagues, hurling, Redemptorist Missions and Confraternities," where children were told by clergy that "Ireland was the most Catholic nation in the world; the Falls Road was the most Catholic part of Ireland; and Clonard Monastery was the most Catholic part of the Falls" (38). Carson praises Adams's memoir as a "conscientious and basically honest book" that he can "vouch for" as a contemporary who grew up in the same neighborhood.

What Carson singles out, though, is Adams' memory of watching, while hiding behind "a barricade of burning tyres," the 1969 petrol bombing and burning of a linen mill. Adams recalls that the "enormity of it all frightened me a wee bit as the huge place began to blaze. I didn't really understand then what was burning. I know now." This scene triggers Carson's own memories: "Well, I was there too, at the same barricade, and I remember the odd mixture of horror and elation I felt then." Adams views the burning as a sign of the loss of innocence and, suggestively, as a spark for the Troubles that became a defining role in his life. Carson also sees it as a potentially transitional event, but it has a different meaning for him: "I thought I knew then what was burning and why: it was the dawn of a new age; the dark Satanic mills would be abolished. Now, I don't know. The innocence of that momentary conflagration is gone forever." As if channeling O'Byrne, he felt "elation" because the fire, he believed, would erase the industrial city, allowing for a "new age" to emerge. Carson draws on this scene later in *The Irish for No* in "August 1969," describing the celebration and danger of the fire, the riot, and the confetti of company papers that rain down. It appears again, in a different form, in "State Street School." The fires are changed to snow with which the speaker, as "avenging Archangel," plans to "bury the dark city of Belfast forever," covering over its "mills and factories and barracks" (*IFN* 46). But what he comes to understand is that each new version of the city bears traces of the ones that came before. A truly "honest" book has to remember all of them.

The two other books Carson reviews in "Interesting Times," Jonathan Bardon's *Belfast – An Illustrated History* and Appletree Press's *Belfast – The Making of the City: 1800-1914*, chronicle the city's development. While he is somewhat critical of the latter, a collection of essays by a variety of authors that he characterizes as "conscientious, if

occasionally dull," he notes that, as with O'Byrne and Adams, the contributors "are not satisfied with a mere catalogue of facts" ("Interesting Times" 40). Instead, their essays serve as part of the "cognitive map" of the place that includes elements beyond what a general "historical and cultural study" might offer, becoming the "dream-fabric of lost possibilities" (38). But just as Carson mentions that, in Muldoon's work, "exact knowledge always remains a rumour," he uses an illustration contained in both histories of the city to demonstrate different ways that history can be presented or interpreted, or the map can be drawn ("Past Imperfect" 83).

Considering an image of the inside of a linen mill, Carson recognizes that Bardon includes it to emphasize the "appalling work conditions and early mortalities" that came with the city's industrial prosperity ("Interesting Times" 39). The picture, "intended, at the time, as a model of a factory interior," when paired with Bardon's prose detailing the physical ailments that women in the spinning room experienced, seems "shrouded in ecclesiastical gloom." With spinning frames "ranged like pews," each tended to by a "female acolyte," a "servant of the Protestant ethic," it is a model of order and obedience that eliminates the individual. But in *The Making of the City*, the same image is accompanied by the comment that Chartres' Mill was "one of the most 'elegant' [mills] operating" (39). Instead of highlighting the physical effects of working there, it points out the "average working life was 16.8 years" (40).

The image evokes a personal response in the reviewer: "It brings back a recurrent dream of mine, of being trapped in a huge linen mill: a maze of tortuous complexity, with ingenious cul-de-sac and false passageways; everywhere there is noise and darkness, steam, vapour, fire, iron, pipes, gutters, looms, wheels, racks . . . It is not unlike an image of hell" (39). This is the nightmare version of his opening description of "the Belfast of

dreams" and recalls his reaction to Adams' passage about the burning mill, its destruction marking the beginning of the end of the "Satanic mills" (38). Yet Carson then recalls his mother's account of working "in such a mill" (39). While it was "hard work," it was "made tolerable, and even happy, sometimes by the crack and the company of the other girls." What he concludes is that, despite efforts to and circumstances that reduce people to objects, "the power of common humanity" can "overcome the worst machinations of its overlords." In "August 1969," he draws on his mother's memories, explaining how she sums up her time with "the mill-girls chattering, linking arms": "Happy days, my mother claims" (*IFN* 35).

The four books Carson reviews intersect in their common subject, Belfast and the people and peculiarities that characterize it, and each preserves the past through narratives and details rather than just facts and figures. O'Byrne writes about the diversity he discovers, and Adams offers his own experiences and what he "culled from O'Byrne, Benn and others" for early history ("Interesting Times" 37). Bardon, "for all his inclusion of facts and statistics," does not neglect "quotations . . . ranging from the homely . . . to the touching" (38). *The Making of the City* includes essays on "popular entertainment," including "Easter frolics" and "'[d]isreputable female vocalists'" who performed "'before the very lowest audience that could be collected in Belfast" (40). Each offers an opening into "closed avenues of the past" that intersect with or lie beneath the "physical city" and leads to the title of the piece, taken from "the ambiguous Chinese curse, 'May you live in interesting times'" (40).

Understanding those "interesting times" requires awareness of Belfast's past as well as its contemporary condition, seeing beyond conventional representation. In a 1985 review of a photographic collection by Liam Blake, with text provided by Brendan

Kennelly, Carson appreciates how Blake challenges the image of Ireland presented to outsiders, "the usual photo-cliches" such as pictures of the Giant's Causeway and of an "unpeopled landscape" that would be "at home in a standard tourist brochure" ("Not-Quite-Real Ireland" 64, 65). The review's title, "Not-Quite-Real-Ireland," is a give-away. Carson does not reject images of the pastoral or the natural world but suggests that they only provide one glimpse or version. He points out that Blake achieved notoriety with a series of postcards in 1979 that "caused a minor revolution in our perception of the tourist image" (64). Offering pictures such as a "parish pump" or "four plastic supermarket bags stacked on a windowsill," his photographs "depended not so much on a view as on a point of view." Instead of a perspective that appeals to the outsider armed with a guidebook, as in "The Excursion" or "Excerpts from a Tourist Handbook," Blake offers what a "casual but educated passer-by," turning from "mountains and skies," begins to see: the "quotidian, the minor human adjustments to a personal inscape, . . . a world we had always known but had never really noticed." His comments recall Paulin's remark that Carson's work reminds the reader that nature only gains meaning "in relation to people" (88).

This vision seeks "the mundane and the vernacular," and Carson finds that the "best" (and most "real"?) involves a human element ("Not-Quite-Real Ireland" 66). He cites a song, "The Trip to Gougane," in which a group of visitors complains, "We thought we would see sights would dazzle our eyes, / But divil the one, only mountains and skies . . . [.]" In an urban setting, "mountains and skies" are replaced by architecture and the grit of the streets. But what *should* "dazzle" and represent "real Ireland"? He wonders, "Where, after all, is the Ireland of the hamburger stand, the mock-Dallas hacienda, the slag-heaps of rusting baked bean tins? Where are the forests of television aerials? Where

are the abandoned cars? Where are the tinkers' camps and their fall-out of scrap iron?" Blake offers the tinkers, he admits, but one of the portraits sanitizes them with "nice folksy horsedrawn caravans." In poems like "Gaeltacht," "Rubbish," "The Car Cemetery," and "Belleek," Carson points out the mundane and human in urban and rural landscapes and contexts. Details from individuals' lives go into the grandmother's stitch-work in "The Patchwork Quilt," and the "bean tins" and "tinkers' camps" whose absence from Blake's images he wonders about become some of the scraps he uses for his own mosaics of Belfast, particularly in "Dresden."

HEARING "VOICES," "SCRATCHES IN TIME," AND "INTERDIGITATION"

Carson's question about Blake's idealized landscape photographs, "Where is [the] real Ireland?" may be self-reflexive. His treatment of the Troubles and the contemporary state of Northern Ireland prior to *The Irish for No* is mostly indirect. In early poems he writes about how change, modernization, and sickness and death are part of daily life and reflects on the tensions between past and present. But the Troubles offer another world and perspective, that of the paramilitary groups, British troops, sectarian conflict, and violence that are also part of "the mundane and the vernacular." In "Voices, Voices, I Think I Hear," a 1985 article for *The Belfast Review* about the Slieve Gullion Festival of Traditional Singing, Carson recognizes the different "voices" that cannot be overlooked and, in fact, have woven themselves into the fabric of the everyday.

The "voices" in the title, a line from a song he heard at the festival, are those of the performers. But they are also of the characters in the songs, the festival-goers, the past, and those he imagines hearing from the British military outposts nearby. The festival, taking place in South Armagh, often referred to as "bandit country" for its reputation as an IRA stronghold, becomes something surreal:

> South Armagh is a place of odd perspective: the very light is tricky, shifting between awkwardly-shaped blue-black hills, cloud-shadow, and eddies and swirls of sheep. Dotted along the skyline, at seeming random (but no doubt carefully mapped) intervals are the little concrete pillboxes from which the British Army observes the local activity: a Gaelic football match, a lone swaying bicyclist, a man digging spuds in a patch of sunlight. ("Voices, Voices" 9)

Aside from the "pillboxes" and the surveilling helicopters, Carson points out, the setting, what could be a typical, postcard image of rural Ireland, is complicated by "tricky" light that makes describing it problematic. But the more modern and military intrusions change the experience for the festival-goer:

> The collusion of these small events is expressed in sunlight, flashing ever so often on a pair of binoculars; its random morse suggests that someone, somewhere, is being watched; to what purpose, we cannot tell. Perhaps the medium is the message; it is sufficient that the mere signs of observation are there. There is something dream-like about the whole thing.

The use of "collusion," a term used for clandestine operations between civilians and security forces, is a reminder of the Troubles, but the echo of "collision" conveys the jarring effect of the just noticeable presence of the military. It is also ironic, Carson points out, that the "most celebrated song of the area" is an *aisling,* or a dream-vision. Set in a "graveyard between the living and the dead," the song is about the poet's visit from a "personified Ireland" telling of "history and possible futures." In the present, the future of that area is actively contested and always monitored. Everything is "tricky."

Another "archaic ballad" he hears, a "tale of love and murder," creates "a curious sense of bi-location," or even tri-location. The listeners experience the "tragic actions and emotions" expressed in the old song while sitting in a modern hall, as "the lines of the ballad are punctuated and underlined by the ratchety sounds of helicopters homing in on the army depot on the top of O'Neill's Hill, the site, it is rumoured, of a nuclear base." Ironically, Carson notes, someone "has made up a song about [the base]," proving the power of oral history and alternative narratives: "Rumor becomes story, a way of dealing

with what happened, or what might have happened." The songs themselves "exist beyond the world of books, of text, of authoritative versions; they bear the stamp of the personal, the handed-down, the twists of idiolect."

Carson's article is an example of how past and present, pastoral and modern, and rumor and fact are woven together to create a surreal and layered version of events. He cites lyrics from songs at the festival and local stories about the area and points out the ever-present sound of helicopters and the glint of sunlight off binoculars. He even notes that he would "like to think" the parish's name, "Forkill," comes from "the Irish *fo-chill*, or minor graveyard." A personal experience of the festival offers a way of "speaking about the world." The "medium is the message: the songs are an expression of solidarity between friends, between singers, between company." But by pointing out the continued presence of helicopters and binoculars that monitor the festival and the area, he acknowledges that the songs, stories, and performances exist in a space where the Troubles are part of the context and background. The "bi-location" of listening to live performances of "archaic" songs," a "mediation between the past and the present," is complicated by the realization that, while they are being sung, "[a] few miles away, over Slieve Gullion, a helicopter wavers uncertainly, with its own internal logic." The sound of the helicopter is a reminder of one version or element of life in Northern Ireland—the military and governmental authority that becomes part of the experience he records.

This awareness of intersecting alternatives is evident in Carson's early work but becomes more important when he employs more directly the map and the palimpsest as metaphors for the city and the self. On the street level, life is focused on immediate concerns and choices. Separated from the past, it may also escape contemporary political and social conditions. But the past does not go away, nor do the constant surveillance and

potential dangers, or even the impact of industrial Belfast. They may, in fact, become intrusive and of immediate concern. Carson's works about life in Belfast operate as "Voices" does, revealing the pauses and places that seem outside of or contained within eddies away from the influence of greater forces while also reminding the reader that those forces still linger and can exert their power. Carson's challenge is to find and chronicle those moments as well as the potentially forgotten past and the current tensions in a manner that shows their interconnections as well as their independence.

Carson conceptualizes this interconnectedness in "Learning to Read between the Notes," an essay about traditional music in *The Belfast Review* in 1986. It appears to him in another "recurrent dream" embodying the form of a pub ("Learning to Read" 17). Modeled on a real place, "perhaps, on the pre-renovated gloom of Robinson's in Great Victoria Street," it has "licence for many other elements, some of them now vanished into the abyss of bombings and 'improvements'," as well as "features which exist only in the dream universe." Drawn from multiple sources, it is "a palimpsest, a cypher, a description of the possible." But it is "constantly renewing itself, . . . recalling the might-have-been" as well as what has been, "speculat[ing] on its future, while celebrating its presence." It is a space for connections, for promises "of companionship, of chance encounters, conversations, stories, bets, diversions, scandals, deals, propositions, tricks, arguments, jokes." He compares this to traditional music, where "the memory and presence of a musical phrase" abolishes time and a person can be in "two places at once," where the "schizophrenia" stemming from the separation of past and present is united.

One example he gives of this sensation, in an essay from 1983 significantly titled "A Doll Called Madeleine," relates to the first record he ever heard, Slim Whitman's "China Doll," which he discovered during a family holiday. This song becomes a means

of accessing the past, and hearing the song years later, or even just thinking about it,

> the cottage comes back, bit by bit – curiously, not so much in the eye, or the ear, but as a catalogue of lingering smells. . . . They are antique smells, new smells, and savouring them again, I can now recollect lying in the faintly-damp bed, listening to the tick of the clock and my parents' low, blurred talk in the next room, or playing interminable games of rummy while the rain trickles and spatters in the laneway outside. Twenty years are abolished. ("A Doll Called Madeleine" 22)

The tune triggers olfactory memory, which in turn evokes other experiences. But it is seeing "old photographs" brought out "twenty years later" in his parents' house that sparks the thoughts, sounds, and smells associated with that first record. A picture of the cottage leads to the song, which draws forth other sense-memories, all inextricably connected. The passage about the cottage is also redolent with allusions to Carson's verses. The "tick of the clock" and the "abolished" two decades appear in "Grandfather," the "antique smells" recall poems about refurbished homes ("To A Married Sister" and "House Painting"), and the child in bed listening to the voices of others echoes "An Early Bed," "Visitors," and even "Dunne."

Another photograph, of his mother and sister, and the author as an "invisible, hidden" baby in a pram, leads to an imagined journey "into the photograph." Heading to his childhood home, he finds his father playing "The Rose of Arranmore" on a melodeon. "Two weeks later," after his daydream, his father visits and "absent-mindedly" starts playing the same tune on an old instrument Carson had just bought, with the "same click of bone buttons, the same nicotine on his fingers" as in the dream (23). "Strictly speaking," Carson admits, "these are not musical memories at all" but rather "private ciphers, scratches in time" that could be summoned by other triggers, like "the feel of a new shirt, or the taste of licorice." They suggest, he continues, "that music has the power over time, that the present can be defeated, or that it can extend itself indefinitely." This

can be applied to narrative as well, and any means of transmitting an experience across time, through the "scratches" that cross over its strata or markings.

Carson cites a passage about the "absence of a present tense" in Scots Gaelic, from James MacLaren's "Gaelic Self-Taught," as an analogy: "Time being like space, continuous and uninterrupted, it is divisible in idea only. Present time does not exist any more than a mathematical point can be composed of parts. What we call present time is only the intermediate limit which the mind fixes between the past and the future" (qtd. in "Doll Called Madeleine" 23). The "scratches in time" are a "temporary halt" to the imagined or fabricated delineation of time ("Doll Called Madeleine" 23, 25). Something in the subconscious emerges, and "the present is what is forethought, anticipated, dreamt about perhaps," like the apparently spontaneous actions of an athlete who has anticipated a "dreamed-of moment" through rehearsing what he or she would do before a match (26). Divisions in time are collapsed into a single moment. In Carson's early writing, this is evident in particular in "An Early Bed," "The Alhambra," and "Grandfather." In "Calvin Klein's *Obsession*," from *The Irish for No,* and "Loaf," from *Belfast Confetti,* scents operate as both voluntary and involuntary triggers that work similarly on the speaker.

Skips and scratches that appear at first to be deviations or digressions serve as means of escaping or slipping out of the authority of time. They are often accompanied by narrative structures that reflect the "pub talk" Carson finds in Muldoon's work and in various texts by the writer, artist, and cartographer Tim Robinson. In his work on traditional Irish music, *Last Night's Fun,* Carson refers to Robinson when explaining the concept of "interdigitation" (89). In music, it refers to two hands working in unison or when a piece is performed in conversation with earlier versions, making variations to the original while preserving its authenticity. Robinson uses the term when describing

indefinite and shifting regions or landscapes where two environments or elements, particularly water and land, come together: "land and sea not only entwine their crooked fingers but each element abandons particles of itself temporarily or permanently to the clutch of the other" (qtd. in *Last Night's Fun* 89). Carson, in discussing the "interdigitation of tunes," sees a song as part of a "family tree" that allows the "renegotiat[ion of] lost time. Our knowledge of the past is changed each time we hear it; our present time, imbued with yesterday, comes out with bent dimensions" (*Last Night's Fun* 90). Carson also employs that meaning when exploring Belfast's origins and adapts it to those moments when past and present meet, in the "scratches." In these "nodes of time . . . our circles sometimes intersect with others," but we "do not know how far or deep its palimpsests extend."

In 1987, the same year that *The Irish for No* appeared, Carson reviewed Robinson's book, *Stones of Aran*. His comments in "Into the Labyrinth" make it clear that, if his work was not influenced by Robinson, he at least found someone like-minded. Beginning with an anecdote inspired by Robinson's subject, the Aran Islands off the coast of Galway, Carson describes the challenges of getting from the mainland to Inishbofin, another small island north of the Arans, for a wedding. Recounting a conversation with a local boatman, he lists the challenges one faces on the sea and realizes that "a journey – especially a sea journey – is, never a simple matter of getting from A to B: in between we might go from Z to Q to Y and back again; the alphabet of travel holds infinite permutations, subject to countless natural or human interventions" ("Into the Labyrinth" 94). Part of the journey is the planning, including "the scrutiny of charts," setting a starting point which is "that which has happened or existed," and considering changes to the shoreline "since this map was last revised" as well as the

distortions or modifications of the map that are a product of "verbal provisions and conditional clauses." Journeys between two points can never be exactly the same, and often end up very different from what was intended.

Carson uses the sea-journey metaphor to describe Robinson's writing about "'our craggy, boggy, overgrown and overbuilt terrain'" (qtd. in "Into the Labyrinth" 94). Carson has already indicated his interest in maps—particularly in their utility and their mutability, claiming that "The city is the map of the city" in "The Bomb Disposal"—and the artificiality of a linear notion of time *(NE* 21). Commenting on *Stones,* he notes that Robinson tries to map out a place in which "every step carries us across geologies, biologies, myths, histories, politics, etcetera" (qtd. in "Into the Labyrinth" 94). Layers of the past accrue and influence the present-day experience of the place, and the "trailing *Rosa spinosissima* of personal associations" add further complications. Something "innocuous" may lead to "conceal[ed] red herrings, circuitous by-roads and devious linguistic pitfalls," like the confusion caused by etymological inquiries into place names ("Into the Labyrinth" 95).

As he describes Robinson's writing style, Carson seems to be defining the method for his own work, mapping an urban or an internal setting rather than a natural landscape that, when dissected or analyzed, also exposes its many layers and resists one settled form. While *Stones of Aran* appeared at the same time as *The Irish for No,* Carson was already familiar with Robinson's work, as he mentions "his beautiful book *Setting Foot on the Shores of Connemara*," published in 1984. He points out that Robinson shows himself to be "adept in these modes of discourse," exploring "the whys and wherefores of map-making" and scrutinizing "the concrete world" in prose that displays "linguistic and scientific curiosity and precision." The combination of narrative complexity due to an

associative rather than a linear story-telling process, a desire to move deeper than just "the tip of the iceberg" when conducting inquiries, and a tendency to get sidetracked by "personal associations" (his "own *Rosa spinosissima")* is characteristic of Carson's work as well as Robinson's.

Alongside Robinson's work, Carson considers Albert Rechts' *Handbook to a Hypothetical City*. With a title curiously similar to Carson's "Excerpts from a Tourist Handbook," his mock-guide to Blaenau Ffestiniog, *Handbook*, in its "explorations of a Belfast glimpsed as an alternative universe," utilizes a "Byzantine, catalogue-making style" (96). Commenting on the city "like a kind of knowledgeable Gulliver," Rechts makes "exact observation[s]" of a city and its history. Rechts' description of the city's fortifications from "three or four centuries ago" that were "dismantled over the years" and have since "reappeared in a slightly different guise, but along almost precisely the same lines," reinforces Carson's claims that everything is a "revised version."

Carson even does some revising of his own in his review. Citing another "recurrent dream of Belfast" that he had the morning before writing about Rechts' book, he explains that the city is a "maze which I know like the back of my hand," a line used in "Question Time," a prose piece published in *Belfast Confetti* but that first appeared in the same edition of *The Honest Ulsterman* as "Into the Labyrinth." Describing an interrogation scene on the street as an adult that reminds him of a similar childhood confrontation, "Question Time" highlights the dislocation and disorientation felt in a familiar place that is undergoing change but also the sense that some things remain the same. The "returning native" and "the little piggy who stayed home" are paradoxically both locals who feel out of place while at home (*BC* 57). Carson concludes his "dream" with a comment, fitting in its meaning and significant in its self-referentiality: "Even my

father, who as a postman once knew every street in Belfast, is starting to suspect his whereabouts" ("Into the Labyrinth" 96). Being able to map the city is important to know where you are, and understanding older versions help with one's footing, under which many different past and potential obstacles lie. But changes due to time, urban renewal, or "blowing up the Lisburn Road police station" challenge one's reference points and landmarks.

The fact that "Question Time" appears in *The Honest Ulsterman* two years before the publication of *Belfast Confetti*, alongside "The Knee," also found in that volume, and "Turn Again," the first poem in both *The Irish for No* and the subsequent book, is not a surprise. Carson had published many pieces in *The Honest Ulsterman* and other journals before collecting them in book or pamphlet form. The poems' relationship to the works reviewed also makes sense, given Robinson's focus on mapping and names, and his and Rechts' practice of "catalogue-making." The speakers in both "Turn Again" and "Question Time" try to figure out the layout of the city and refer to the names and places that are there or have been replaced; thematically, the works tie into the books he reviews.

Given the attention to what has been called Carson's period of "silence," though, what is somewhat surprising is that, prior to the publication of *The Irish for No*, several other of the longer pieces from that work had already appeared in *The Honest Ulsterman*. "Patchwork," adapting parts from his earlier poem, "The Patchwork Quilt," came out in 1986, and both "The Irish for No" and "Serial" appeared two issues later in the same year. Before that, "Dresden" came out in 1985, in a volume announcing "Amazing Poems (Carson's long line . . .)" before it became the first poem in Part One of *The Irish for No*. Adding "Dunne," and "Blues" and "Rubbish," which appeared in the journal in 1981 and 1982, respectively, reduces the length of the "silence." His articles on music and book

reviews are often filled with the sort of "trailing *Rosa spinosissima* of personal associations" that grab his attention and lead to his own anecdotes ("Into the Labyrinth" 94). They offer chances to work out themes from earlier poems in a more discursive and informal style that leads to the long line used in much of his later verse.

Carson's work with traditional music also influenced his poetics. In "A Doll Called Madeleine," from 1983, he cites the composer Sean O Riada's claim during his 1962 radio talks that traditional music "exists outside" the concept of "development" typical of narratives (qtd. in "Doll Called Madeleine" 23). Not moving from "tension" to "crisis," then on to "resolution" and "catharsis," it lacks the conventional "tragic hero [who] undergoes psychological change and realization" ("Doll Called Madeleine" 24). A song ends up moving like "the serpent with the tail in its mouth," with the beginning becoming the end" (23). For written (or spoken) narratives following this logic, while the ending may not repeat the beginning, the course of a story or vignette raises questions without offering solutions.

O Riada also compares a tune to a day: "Every day possesses the same basic characteristics, follows the same fundamental pattern, while at the same time each day differs from the last in its ornamentation of events" (qtd. in "Doll Called Madeleine" 23-4). Carson explains that these differences come from "subtle changes of rhythm, melodic variation, a slight change in intonation," or even a pause, and can be used again and again, but "they are never quite the same" ("Doll Called Madeleine" 24, 25). To characterize "traditional music," he suggests in a 1984 discussion of Francis O'Neill's *Music of Ireland*, it is necessary to consider all sorts of sources, including ones "noted down from memory, from printed sources," and from live and even recorded performances ("Playing It by the Good Book" 14). "Music comes from circumstance, from the actual, from

personal encounter," drawing from "many different dialects, idiolects, and accents," he adds, praising O'Neill for his eclectic collection of materials and his "magpie instincts." In reviewing Carson's volume, *Pocket Guide to Irish Traditional Music* (1986), Nicholas Carolan extends this allusion to Carson himself. He notes that the information in the book "has been acquired in magpie fashion" ("Tuneful Magpie" 110), the technique introduced in "The Patchwork Quilt," recycling and piecing together fragments "for writing Belfast" and memory (*BT* 70).

Carson's job with the Arts Council initially took him away from verse and into the world of "traditional music, song and dance," a place that was more immediate and "alive" than the "remote, academic," and "removed" realm of poetry that he compares to "withdrawing into your cell to compose these careful utterances about life" (Brandes interview 81). Facing Dawe's "big question" about the poet's role during conflict, he seems to side with Edna Longley's instruction that poetry should operate "above its context" yet still needs to feel connected to that world. Instead of writing poems that might be considered to come from what Ormsby dismisses as some "university shelter-belt or . . . cultural oasis," he turns his attention to other forms of art and to reviews. Carson facetiously admits, "I didn't write very much between 1976 and 1985. Paul Muldoon was doing the thing so well, so why bother?" (*In the Chair* 145).

His experiences as a traditional arts officer eventually made their own translation into his verse. Promoting, organizing, recording, performing, and writing about music made him realize that the "circumstances" in which music is played are "just as important as what is played" ("For All I Know" 15). Performances are a "mix of tunes, songs, stories, drinking, eating, whatever happens to be going on" ("For All I Know" 15), and "everything [is] constantly digressing" (Brandes interview 82). Each performance is

unique but based on a form that is "very fixed and traditional" (Brandes interview 83). Deviating from that fixed form, musicians feed off the "conversation and anecdotes" around them that, in turn, "are sparked off by the tunes and are essential to a good session," a temporal, ephemeral experience rather than one fixed in time or simply a reproduction ("For All I Know" 15). After a decade away from actively producing, or publishing, verse, the pressure to write about contemporary conditions drew him back, and what he learned about the essential hybrid nature of traditional music offered one model for his writing (17). Reading and reviewing contemporary writers and contact with oral storytellers also offered subjects, forms, and models that he admits, "[c]ertainly woke [him] up from some kind of poetic slumber" (*In the Chair* 147).

Around 1985, Carson notes, he began to believe that "maybe poetry could borrow from the whole musical experience" (Brandes interview 82). Performance, as he tells Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, combines the "talk and chat and stories as well as the actual music" while still maintaining a "deep acknowledgement of the history and practice" ("For All I Know" 15). With "an attachment to the vast reservoir of what has been done in the language," not only in English but in Irish and other languages, and a desire to write "in the light of the now," he could address the divided identity of Northern Ireland, Belfast, and the self.

C. K. WILLIAMS AND JOHN CAMPBELL

Probably the most cited influence on *The Irish for No* and *Belfast Confetti* has been the American poet C. K. Williams, credited for introducing him to the long line. This "proved an imperative" for his return to verse (O'Neill 202). Williams' work also showed him that poetry could establish "a story, a narrative" that would "include the real world" ("Inventing Carson" 93). Owing something to "traditional oral narrative," it

"provided the opportunity to experiment with, even fuse the conventions of both 'yarn' and traditional 'reel' in verse" (O'Neill 202). Williams writes not about "art, or form, but the world," Carson tells David Laskowski in 1999, "not too far removed from the storytelling you heard in bars" ("Inventing Carson" 93). Based on personal experience, memories, overheard conversations, and rumors, it is similar to what he notes earlier in Muldoon's writing.

Reviewing Williams' *Poems 1963-1983* and *Flesh and Blood* for *The Irish Review* in 1989, Carson points out "typical Williams qualities: the laconic, observant, democratic speaking voice; the long, apparently straggly lines which turn out, on closer observation, to be exactly rooted in syntax; the way the onward thrust of the line is slowed down, deliberated on, by 'thingy', concrete nouns" ("Against Oblivion" 114). Williams' style, he concludes, "for all its apparent off-handedness, is deliberate, and composed with an eye for traditional literary technique," employing "occasional *longuers*," "rhetorically inverted syntax," and "repetition of key words." His "eight-line units" can be considered "extended *haiku*," and the lines themselves, "in their nitty-grittiness and poise, make gestures toward" the form as well, typically running to "about 25 syllables with eight or nine main stresses."

Turning specifically to *Tar*, Carson points out that Williams focuses on "[n]arrative, anecdote, and the moral implications of all storytelling," and he acknowledges the volume's effect on his writing. While his review was published in 1989, he cites his initial encounter, near the end of his period of silence:

> Some time in 1985, I think, the Irish poet John Hughes loaned me this book by a hitherto unheard-of (to me) poet; reading it, it struck me with the force of revelation. I had not, for various reasons, written any poetry for many years; but, for various reasons (the same ones, maybe) I was, at the time, toying with the possibility of writing in a mode which would owe something to traditional oral narrative, as exemplified by innumerable characters in pubs throughout the length

> and breadth of Ireland; at the same time, it seemed that the dislocated, spoken narrative of the American crime-writer George V. Higgins, was a model of how demotic can be elevated into something intricate, dark, humorous and terrifying. . . . Further, I had been listening to archive recordings of Appalachian music, song and story-telling; my ear was full of this beautifully modulated, drawled speech: laconic, deadpan, tongue-in-cheek, underpinned by a dead-sure sense of rhythm and structure. Williams' poetry seemed to unite all these concerns. (115-16)

The "voice" he discovers in Williams (and in Higgins' prose) is that of "someone thinking, working things out, trying to say it right; a voice which for all its assurance, was strangely modest, puzzled, saying, well, I finally don't know any more about this than you; the voice of the storyteller who leaves the listener to draw his own conclusions" (116). This voice allows for "dirty realism" tempered with an "almost Proustian sense of recall, or the impossibility of recall," an attempt to trace the "convolutions of the brain" as "[w]e invent our lives," even as "our accounts of them change from day to day, without our even knowing it."

Carson's own work shows that his "critical encounter" with Williams helped him to re-articulate his own "artistic ideals" (*BT* 82). His earlier reviews, particularly of Heaney's *North* and Muldoon's *Why Brownlee Left,* reveal that he had already been considering much of what he values in Williams. Effective poetry is a means of working things out, not arriving at solutions, employing a "conversational, anecdotal tone" in a sometimes non-linear form ("Past Imperfect" 83). He wants to write about "what's before your eyes" ("Escaped" 186) in a language that "can accommodate the blackly humorous, the wry, the witty, the intensely nostalgic, the murderously brutal, the near-slapstick, all in the same poem-space" ("One Step Forward" 218). But at the same time, the landscape in front of the observer is made up of changing maps and labyrinths. Acknowledging that it is mutable and uncertain is essential to allow him to find or make "a model for writing Belfast" and expose the precariousness of "our representations of experience," avoiding

"summary judgements" (*BT* 181). Neal Alexander calls Williams' model "particularly enabling" for Carson, suggesting that the voice he finds for *The Irish for No* was already there but just not utilized (151). Carson openly points out the connection: "Within a year of reading *Tar*, I had written a book called *The Irish for No*: I hereby acknowledge a debt" ("Against Oblivion" 116).

Colm Tóibín questions the importance of this link between Williams and Carson. In his positive review of *Belfast Confetti* for the *Irish Review*, he begins with Carson's recollection of his first encounter with Williams' poems (cited above) but considers it as a "fascinating misreading" of Williams (121). Tóibín relates Carson's "attributing [his] re-awakening" as a poet "so emphatically to [the] influence" of Williams to Robert Lowell crediting his emergence out of his own silence to his discovery of Elizabeth Bishop, Seamus Heaney's reading of Patrick Kavanagh as "confirmation and revelation," and Philip Larkin's declaration of the "undramatic, complete and permanent" impact of Thomas Hardy on his work. Each admission, Tóibín feels, involves "some strange process of mis-directing their readers." While he recognizes that both Williams and Carson use long lines in an "attempt to approximate . . . the rhythms of speech rather than the traditional iambic music of English poetry" and are "interested in the haiku form," Tóibín stops there: "And that's about it: there's not much else between them." He finds Carson's voice to be "public, jokey, full of delight," keeping the reader "at bay" and never feeling "sorry for itself." Williams' voice, on the other hand, is "a voice of the self": "private, meditative, often elegiac, often deeply sentimental." "In trying to read Carson correctly," he adds, "it is important to dispense with Williams as a major influence."

Tóibín suggests the storyteller John Campbell of Mullaghbawn as a "more serious influence" on Carson than Williams. Conor O'Callaghan agrees, adding that Carson's

"signature . . . long line owed as much to the circuitous storytelling of John Campbell of Mullaghbawn as it did to Allen Ginsburg" (qtd. in Doyle). "Campbell's method," according to Tóibín, "is to let the mind wander, to let a word, or a figure, suggest another, until the story becomes the story of a mind at work" (Tóibín 121). Like Campbell, Carson uses "loose associations," partly fueled by "local idiom," but only as a "stop on the road elsewhere." Words and names, "snatches of songs," smells and sights all offer a "range of echo and suggestion," and "[b]ehind every word," or experience, there is another one "trying to come to the fore" (122). For Tóibín, the "best" of Carson's poems serve as "huge echo-chambers, great celebrations of the connection between things." Yet even as he sees the influences of Williams and Campbell on Carson's work, he is cautious about giving them too much credit, lest they diminish or obscure what Carson does with the "framework[s]" they offer.

Neal Alexander also recognizes Campbell's influence, as Carson finds opportunities "for subverting his audience's expectations while working within, but also against, a recognizable tradition or set of formal conventions" (157). The resulting impression is that "any narrative performance is unique" and that "meaning is contingent upon the context." Carson himself gives credit to Campbell in his "Acknowledgements" in *The Irish for No*: "The author is grateful to John Campbell of Mullaghbawn whose storytelling suggested some of the narrative procedures of some of these poems" (*IFN* 4). He notes that Campbell's storytelling is "based on the renovation of clichéd situations," the "high points" coming in the "apparently off-hand digressions" rather than in the main story or in any resolution, and in its "renewable" nature, since stories change each time they are told (Brandes interview 83).

To Alexander, this process of digression and recycling leads to a "dialectic of

continuity and novelty" that fosters both "surprise and constant renewal" (157). Frank Sewell notes that this dialectic also involves the practice of sounding out and looking up words "for their layers of meaning," then associating them "by sound or sense with words from the same, or from another, language" (183). This intentional patching-together allows a found word to "stick to, or connect with, the original word" while opening up other possibilities in meaning or narrative direction. The result is a "clear sense . . . that there are *at least* two ways of saying and, therefore, of seeing everything" (184). In the "telling and re-telling" of stories through the use of oral forms, "the material cultures of writing and print," and what is found and encountered during urban forays, he is able to bring "people and objects together," highlighting the complexity of the urban environment and social relations within it (*SPW* 158-9). In Carson's work, writes Sewell, pluralism offers "a world of possibility, some room for negotiation, at least, beyond flat or deadly absolutes" and "any single, too-simple, too black-and-white" meaning (Sewell 185). For Carson, the combination of "the long line thing" and the "deliberate sort of rhythm" in songs and in Campbell's style "gave him permission to return to poetry" (Edemariam). "I could do poems that were of that understanding of the world," he realized, and "you could apply that to stuff about the violence" (qtd. in Edemariam).

Calling the period between *The New Estate* and *The Irish for No* "silence" is misleading, as it passes over the poems in *The Lost Explorer* and those published in *The Honest Ulsterman* as well as the new pieces eventually included in *The New Estate and Other Poems*. Ignoring the work Carson produced in prose also misses the influences from other writers and his use of the review as a testing ground. His articles often display the digressive style, use of lists, and the "bi-located" moments triggered by different sources, including objects, senses, and landmarks, that eventually are characteristic of his

work when he adopts the long line in verse. As a "magpie," Carson also uses these pieces, as well as his earlier poems, as elements he incorporates into *The Irish for No* and *Belfast Confetti*.

Chapter Seven: Conclusion

When Ciaran Carson published *The Irish for No* (1987) and *Belfast Confetti* (1989), he received critical acclaim for his depiction of Belfast and of life in a time of division and conflict. Utilizing childhood memories and history as well as impressions and experiences gathered on the streets of the contemporary city, the poems exemplify the model introduced in "The Patchwork Quilt," taking nearly "anything / That came to hand[,] . . . snipp[ing] them all up," and stitching them together into a pattern (*NEOP* 70). Each volume features longer narrative poems, often with shifting settings, time-frames, and speakers, and shorter nine-line poems, vignettes about figures, places, or moments that serve as "snapshots of what was going on, the sometimes surreal circumstances of the violence" ("For All I Know" 17). *Belfast Confetti* also adds interstitial haikus and longer prose reflections on names, places, and origins. Taken together, Neil Alexander notes, the "hazy or 'sfumato' outlines" of the city emerge from "a montage of . . . anecdotes, yarns, snatches of song, brand-names and advertising jingles, political slogans, half-familiar smells, names and places, times and dates," and "seemingly endless lists of 'stuff'" (114). Carson often refers to the process of compiling distinct, particular, and sometimes conflicting elements into a shifting and changing map. Alexander agrees, adding that "perhaps it would be better to speak of the constellation of diverse material, discursive and sensory traces in his writing," another metaphor Carson employs.

Rebecca Solnit, in describing the writing voice she seeks, explains that she is "fond of sentences less like superhighways than winding paths, with the occasional scenic detour or pause to take in the view" (125). She wants to be able to "map how the world is connected by patterns and intuitions and resemblances[,] . . . to trace the lost

patterns that came before the world was broken and find the new ones we could make out of the shards." Those fragments are found in "the shadows and the fringes" and on the "margins" (144). Elmer Kennedy-Andrews refers to these as the "contact zones" that the hybrid utilizes, the nodes that facilitate access to memories, alternate histories, intertextual references, and etymological explorations (*Writing Home* 10). Together they create what Andreas Huyssen calls "palimpsests of history, . . . sites of memory extending both in time and space" (qtd. in *SPW* 127). Carson's work is grounded in these connections and their accumulated layers.

The result is not just found poetry, a chronicle of the Troubles, or a depiction of the city. It is "*of* Belfast," not always "about" it ("For All I Know" 20), and the city forms what John Goodby refers to as the "mental furniture" for his work (9). The books also map the poet-persona. Alan Jacobs discusses the importance of expanding one's "temporal bandwidth" by "breaking bread with the dead," reading voices from the past, especially when they differ from one's own (13, 14). Carson goes further, incorporating the past and Alexander's previously mentioned, non-exhaustive list of references and allusions to broaden more than just his temporal scope. Having turned away from writing verse because he found it too "aesthetic" ("Inventing Carson" 92), he found that poetry is, as Heaney claims, "perfectly justifiable" during a time of conflict ("Place and Displacement" 5). It can exist alongside the "car-bomb" but also can incorporate it and other elements of contemporary life to offer a more intricate and layered representation ("Place and Displacement" 5). It must address both, as Heaney terms them, the "beauty" as well as the "monster" of the past and the present ("Open Letter" 6).

Examining Carson's works before and during what Ben Howard refers to as his "sea-change" and others call his period of silence reveals not only the evolution of his

poetry but the expansion of his bandwidth to accommodate more of the world around him and his understanding of his role as a poet. The feeling of being in-between that is associated with the Northern Irish poet and Northern Ireland itself can compel one to choose sides. The hermit and island poems reflect one option: withdrawal into narrow-minded isolation. But many other of Carson's poems consider the space between and the tensions that arise from this position, whether examining a visual image (the weaver in "Interior," the mountain climbers and tourists in "Engraving" and "Windy Gap") or recalling a childhood experience ("Twine," "Visitors," "The Alhambra"). In "The New Estate," the choice is between "the corncrake's elegy" and "a new verse," and in "Belleek" the satisfaction found in earthenware and the more aesthetic appreciation of fine china. What is presented as "either . . . or" eventually becomes the "AND" of the hybrid.

John Montague writes in "The Water Carrier" of feeling like a "fulcrum between two buckets," and Heaney explains the "state of in-betweenness" in "Terminus" that he later rails against in "Open Letter." Carson, bearing a name that combines two traditions and backgrounds and growing up with the "schizophrenia" of languages, does not escape what Kinsella terms the "divided mind." But he gradually inhabits and accepts the in-between or hybrid position, incorporating different elements into a constellation, map, or quilt that, as Terry Eagleton explains in discussing Walter Benjamin, "safeguards particularity" (qtd. in *SPW* 114). The deceased grandfather in "Grandfather" returns to the speaker appearing and sounding aged and "empty" but also as his earlier self, possessing authority and polish. The Slieve Gullion Festival Carson writes about in "Voices" mixes present and past versions of songs in a rural setting, accompanied by glimpses of and sounds from the nearby military base. Everything may seem surreal or "a bit out of sync," reflecting both the contrasting elements and the unreliability of memory

and experience (*BC* 55). Eventually, the image emerges of the city and the mind as a labyrinth, palimpsest, or constellation, setting "Irish traditional culture . . . in constant dialogue with world literature, from Japanese Haiku to the philosophy of Walter Benjamin" and creating a "web of motifs" that are "juxtaposed and accumulated" in a "mosaic technique" that avoids singular interpretation (Benine 117).

The poetic voice and form of *The Irish for No* and *Belfast Confetti* are often treated as unpredicted or unforeseen. Critics who do see some continuity between Carson's early works and his Belfast volumes, aside from his use of Belfast as a primary setting and his adoption of the long line, often focus on the later collection, *The New Estate and Other Poems*. This volume not only omits earlier published poems but also the timeline of their publishing history. The progression from the poems of *The Insular Celts* to those appearing in *The Honest Ulsterman* in the 1980s ("Waste" and "Blues," in particular) reveals a change in setting (rural to urban) and a perspective that, once concerned about divisions, is more accommodating and easily handles shifts between times, places, and perspectives. The speaker in the "St. Ciaran" poems, separated from human contact, has to convince himself that he has made the right choice; the nephew in "Blues" slides between memories of a local shop, his dead uncle, and peculiarities of language in an example of associative thinking.

Close readings of his early poems reveal Carson's interest in Irish literary tradition accompanied by a basic skepticism about its romanticization, which give way to more focus on craftsmanship and memory. Throughout his works, his speakers are explorers, whether leaving the known world behind, scrutinizing objects and sites (paintings, photos, old mills) to speculate about their untold stories, or delving into the past and into memories. But he admits that Belfast "chose" him for his subject or setting,

and his reviews of works about the city make it clear that not only is it a place of interest, but that his identity is inextricably tied to its street-grid and landmarks. C. K. Williams has been credited for showing Carson the form necessary to integrate the sprawl and labyrinthine layout of the city, as well as of memory and the past, into a more discursive form. But he had already identified the voices he values, ones that are digressive and demotic, non-judgmental and willing to forego authority for provisionality and possibilities. Some of those voices he finds in poets like Muldoon and, at times, Heaney, and in prose writers like O'Byrne and Robinson, concerned with exploring a past that is hidden by time or by societal and geologic change. Treating the voice found in *The Irish for No* and *Belfast Confetti* as a distinct break from his earlier work or a fresh start elides Carson's progression from *The Insular Celts* to his Belfast volumes. Examining the early works as they appeared chronologically and in their original contexts, in pamphlet and book form rather than as culled, collected, and reorganized in the reissue, *The New Estate and Other Poems* reveals the stages in Carson's development and the influences that led to them.

When asking Carson about the role of art in "moral, social or political terms" and the "importance of stories," a variation of Gerald Dawe's "big question" about writing in a time of conflict, Elmer Kennedy-Andrews points out that Heaney "believes in art's redemptive or curative force – the 'redress of poetry'" and that Muldoon "jokes about art having such elevated function" ("For All I Know" 24). Carson explains that his goal instead is to

> put the reader into another place, to make them consider possibilities, to imagine what it might be like to be someone else, or to see the world through another's eyes. To make them think again. To make them examine their preconceptions. To disturb them, sometimes without their knowing. To leave them wondering. To see their world anew.

Instead of redressing wrongs or just avoiding them, he would rather raise questions, offer new ways of seeing, and preserve versions that would otherwise be missed or lost. He wants, above all else, to "communicate, if not necessarily redeem, the human condition" (17). The "world" has roots in Irish literary tradition, but his movement in a "one step forward, two steps back" fashion allows him to expand his margins (or "bandwidth"), eventually incorporating the contemporary city and the models he finds in writers like Tim Robinson and in music. "[E]very step" and song note bears traces of the past and the present.

Conor O'Callaghan calls Carson "the Troubles' greatest laureate" but adds that he was "too much too multitudinous, to be confined by the merely political" (qtd. in Doyle). Looking at some of the works that follow *The Irish for No* and *Belfast Confetti* confirms that, despite writing during conflict, his goal is to "make personal excitement" about the world "socially available," what Auden identifies as the basics of "poetic talent" and "a good poem" ("The Public" 6). This makes the act of translation, beginning with his versions of early Irish poems in *The Insular Celts*, essential to his overall poetic project, creating new constellations from an expanding array of sources. In *The Alexandrine Plan* (1998), he adapts Rimbaud, Baudelaire, and Mallarmé, and *In the Light Of* (2012) provides verse interpretations of prose poems by Rimbaud. His translation of Dante's *Inferno* (2002) leads him to see Belfast as a version of Florence, similarly "claustrophobic, cramped and medieval," where "everyone is watching everyone" with "little room to manoeuvre" (xi). But Dante also appeals to him as a traveler and explorer, heading into the forbidding depths of the underworld and returning with tales otherwise lost to the living (xvi).

Approaching the early Irish epic *The Táin*, or *Táin Bó Cúailnge, or The Cattle*

Raid of Cooley (2004), allows him to engage with a text that he describes much as he does the city or the past: "a magnificent ruined cathedral, whose fabric displays the ravages of war, fashion and liturgical expediency: a compendium of architectural interpolations, erasures, deliberate archaisms, renovations and restorations; a space inhabited by many generations, each commenting on their predecessors" (xiv). It is a "compilation of various styles," a "conglomeration" or a "procedure," "obsessed by typography, by place-names and their etymologies," offering further explorations into different pasts and variations (xv). Many of the poems in *Breaking News* (2003) eschew the long line for short, staccato lines and stanzas, juxtaposing modern Belfast with scenes from the Crimean War, whose battle sites are memorialized in street names. His final, posthumous work, *Still Life* (2019), combines his reflections on his "death in the foreground," as he is undergoing cancer treatment, with paintings by Monet, Cézanne, Constable, and others, as contemporary life and art merge (57).

When discussing *The Alexandrine Plan* with Carson, David Laskoski comments that it never seemed like the poems were translations: "It seemed so much like your own work" ("Inventing Carson" 97). Remarking that "word for word" translations are "mostly done by academics," he finds them "very stiff, dead, wrong even," since they approach the poems as "old fashioned and "in the past," or "art for art's sake" (98). "They don't allow for shades." Carson uses the term to apply to subtleties of language, but it fittingly suggests more, relating to the spaces created when light is blocked, and to shelters, reminders, hiding places, spirits of the dead, and slight gradations in color or quality. While the exact meanings of the words in a literal translation might be dictionary-perfect, nuances in meaning and tone, idiomatic expressions, and connotation are lost.

Approaching Carson's early work chronologically reveals the widening

bandwidth of experiences, influences, and subjects that facilitates connections and breaks down barriers. Increasingly he explores the "shades," where certainty is replaced by blurred lines. In *The Irish for No* and *Belfast Confetti*, while the city is often considered the main topic, it is a "provisional" place, engaged in an "ongoing dispute," of which the Troubles are only one part ("For All I Know" 19). It is founded on "shifting ground, like the sleech" from which its bricks are constructed, constantly subject to transformation and carrying its past in its basic structure. While the two volumes *do* offer a new voice for Carson, it is not unforeseen. Belfast becomes the metaphor or symbol for expressing topics and themes with which he had already been grappling and provides an answer to the question about how to respond to the Troubles. But underlying those works are the layers that come from earlier versions of Carson and influences on him. Just as he should not be reduced to being just a "Troubles" poet, neither should his work before he earned that designation be elided.

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