
**“A Fusillade of Question Marks”:
(re)presenting the present or the poet as a chronicler in
The Irish for No by Ciaran Carson**

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Abstract. This paper aims at showing in what way *The Irish for No* is both a testimony, a record of events as witnessed by the poet and a means of transcending a fundamentally monstrous reality through the power of words. Carson's writing is first and foremost a writing of violence, which uncovers an uncommon reality dominated by suffering, madness or death. The normative representation gives way to a form of representation of excess, which is bound to be confronted by limitations, but which the poet-chronicler's voice allows to reconcile by means of the metaphor.

Key words. Poetry, language, representation, time, metaphor.

Resumen. Este artículo se propone mostrar como *The Irish for No* es tanto un testimonio, una crónica de los acontecimientos observados por el poeta, como una forma de trascender una realidad profundamente monstruosa a través del poder de la palabra. La obra de Carson es ante todo una obra de violencia que revela una insólita realidad dominada por el sufrimiento, la locura o la muerte. La representación normativa deja paso a una forma de representación del exceso destinada a afrontar limitaciones, pero que la voz del poeta-cronista permite reconciliar gracias a la metáfora.

Palabras clave: Poesía, lenguaje, representación, tiempo, metáfora.

The present has no duration. The past and future do not exist
(Ciaran Carson, *Shamrock Tea*)

The Irish for No dates back to the 1980s, and was thus composed within the context of 'The Troubles', after an interval of about a decade during which Ciaran Carson published little poetry. This hiatus was partly due to the fact that he was engaged in work with the Arts Council but mostly because he was trying to find a new form of inspiration and writing after his first volume of verse, *The New Estate*, published in 1976, in which he had tried to recapture the flavour and medium of early Irish

poetry, under the influence of Derek Mahon's poetry to some extent. He later rather humorously tried to justify this ten-year near-silence in an interview granted in 2000: "I didn't write very much between 1976 and 1985. Paul Muldoon was doing the thing so well. Paul Muldoon wrote – writes –, with such enormously impressive, underhanded knowledge about language" (Brown 2002: 145). *The Irish for No* is generally regarded as

a stylistic masterpiece: “the most perfectly constructed and articulated of his books” (Corcoran 1999: 180). It was reprinted in several editions and twenty poems out of the twenty-four were reproduced in *The Ballad of HMS Belfast* in 1999, then nine poems in *Selected Poems* two years later and it was finally included whole in *Collected Poems* in 2008. This judgement by Corcoran should not of course leave out the fact that Carson has since produced other considerable pieces in prose and verse, such as the widely acclaimed and prize-winning *Breaking News* in 2003 or the “novel poem” (Kennedy-Andrews 2009: 240) *For All We Know* in 2008, or still the minimalist poems of *On the Night Watch* in 2009. We could contend that *The Irish for No* was deeply representative of Carson’s manner and thought, and that it would help shed light on his later work, even if there have been new stylistic departures since then.

Indeed, as Neil Corcoran again points out, the title of the book alludes to the absence in the Irish language of Yes or No while there is an Ulster English for No. This is also what Carson himself had explained:

There’s no word in Irish for *No*. Nor is there for *Yes*. Of course, you can express assent or dissent, but in a slightly roundabout way [...]. For example, ‘have you eaten yet?’ and you reply ‘I have eaten’ or ‘I have not eaten’, except you leave out the ‘I’ which strikes me as important. All this implies conversation and alternatives. There can be no brutal ‘noes’ since any conversation implies deference to the terms of that conversation (Brandes 1990: 84).

Ciaran Carson wished to see how language can hold out hope since, according to him everything is structured in the language. One of his purposes in this book was to act as a recorder of sounds, a chronicler of events, to be an eye on the scene as it were. His intention was to witness things occurring in the city where he was born and where he has lived and worked all his life, and which he has no intention of leaving in order to settle somewhere else, all the more so as he was appointed director of the newly founded Seamus Heaney Centre for Poetry at Queen’s University in 2003.

In the 1980s the situation in Northern Ireland was rife with violence and anxiety and the poems he wrote then were, to some extent, a response to this atmosphere, but they also

contain a degree of irony and a sense of the absurdity of things. Besides, Carson was aware of the fact that there cannot be an objective account of events taking place under your very eye, and the human being is often the victim of things which lie outside his understanding; the emphasis is also put on the ordinariness of life which goes on despite the unspeakable horror and cruelty. Carson’s purpose was not to take sides, but to record events as he encountered them, in a kind of haphazard way, seemingly without any definite purpose, using poetry to ask questions. Although the following commentary refers more specifically to *Belfast Confetti* published in 1989, it is also apposite to *The Irish for No*:

I can’t, as a writer, take any kind of moral stance on the ‘Troubles’, beyond registering what happens. And then, as soon as I say that, I realise that ‘registering’ is a kind of morality. Nor can one, even if one wanted to, escape politics. But my aim was, in that work which deals with the ‘Troubles’, to act as a camera or a tape-recorder, and present things in a kind of edited surreality. An ear overhearing things in bars. Snatches of black Belfast humour. If there’s one thing certain about what was or is going on, it’s that you don’t know half of it. The official account is only an account, and there are many others. Poetry offers yet another alternative. It asks questions, I think. It asks about the truth which is never black-and-white, because no one can escape events¹ and find refuge elsewhere (Brown 2002: 148-9).

As T.S. Eliot somewhat jokingly wrote, “[p]oetry begins, I daresay, with a savage beating a drum in a jungle”. The task of the poet may be to “help to break up the conventional modes of perception and valuation which are perpetually forming”, as well as “make people see the world afresh, or some new part of it” (Eliot 1967: 155). Fascinated as he is by the combined effects of the failure of meaning, the dissolving of codes, the loss of any reference point, Carson becomes faced with the difficult divorce between the facts and the words, with what cannot be named. And this will be the first part

1. Indeed, the phrase “escaping events” probably refers to Carson’s now famous article published in 1975, “Escaping from the ‘Massacre?’”, in which he reviewed Seamus Heaney’s *North*, and accused him of being a “mystifier”, instead of witnessing and relating what occurs under one’s very eyes.

of this essay: “Writing the unnameable”. Another form of logic, far more poetic than referential, appears then, which responds to the disorder of violence by offering the more conciliatory map, or thread, of a metaphorical language. By trying to give a new shape to reality, the metaphor becomes a transfiguring power, which sets up the world but also destines it to be always changeable, and this will be the third part: “repetitions and metaphors”. But first I want to start with a few words concerning the form and structure of the book, which I have entitled “The Garden of Forking Paths”; this alludes indeed to Luis Borges’ masterpiece, which Carson has often mentioned as a work he particularly admires. Reality cannot be represented in one way as it is necessarily multiform according to Carson, and contradiction and paradox are part and parcel of it.

I. “The Garden of Forking Paths” or Form and Structure

The Irish for No is indeed a complex work, a tragic arena in which the narrator is seen struggling to recompose the shattered puzzle of an unbearable present and past. The ternary structure of the book is seemingly a way of apprehending reality and poetic narration. The book is made up of twenty poems, with a middle section of twelve much shorter poems of nine lines divided into two stanzas, which all tell stories of violence. The first and third parts are each composed of four poems of unequal length which are of a more private character. Private and public histories coexist side by side and finally coalesce in the reader’s mind. If this apparently rigid structure gives a sense of enclosure, it was merely a means for the author to “file things accordingly”, since it gave him, as he said in the interview already referred to, “a template, a constraint” (Brown 2002: 148). However, through the use of unrhymed rhythmical lines of unequal length, there might also be a wish on the part of the poet to refuse any traditional rhetoric and to develop his own. As we shall see later on, this creates a movement made up of successive waves which the narrator’s rebel voice rides in accordance with the syntax, a movement largely based on repetition and parallel grammatical structure.

The Irish for No is built on a questioning – “A fusillade of question-marks” (Carson 1987: 31) –, which purports to reconstruct the thread of causes and effects, to draw meaning from the meaninglessness of things and events. The poetic narration keeps wandering along with associations of ideas, additional pieces of information that enlarge the story and events, and this appears in the first poem entitled “Dresden”, the reference to the bombing of this German city being an indirect way of broaching upon the main theme of the book. Here is the first stanza:

Horse Boyle was called Horse Boyle because of
his brother Mule;
Though why Mule was called Mule is anybody’s
guess. I stayed there once
Or rather, I nearly stayed there once. But that’s
another story.
At any rate they lived in this decrepit caravan, not
two miles out of Carrick,
Encroached upon by baroque pyramids of empty
baked bean tins, rusts
And ochres, hints of autumn merging into twilight.
Horse believed
They were as good as a watchdog, and to tell you
the truth
You couldn’t go near the place without something
falling over:
A minor avalanche would ensue – more like a shop
bell, really

(Carson 1987: 11).

The narrator is confronted with a veritable chaos of events; therefore he has to choose the elements of his story. This method of proceeding may be related to a contextualisation of historical phenomena, a mode which is explained by Hayden White in those terms: “The Contextualist proceeds to pick out the ‘threads’ that link the events to be explained to different areas of the context”, a task which is far from easy, since “the historical field is apprehended as a ‘spectacle’, or richly textured arras web which on first glance appears to lack coherence and any discernible fundamental structure” (White 1973: 18). There is thus no given and fixed explanation to events, since no importance is granted to the ultimate meaning of links uncovered; this method of analysis relies on its own dynamics alone. Meaning is not arrested, far from it, but provisional, unstable and shifting as configurations proceed and vary, and this is shown in the last lines of the last poem significantly called “Patchwork”: “The

quilt was meant for someone's wedding, but it never got that far. / And some one of us has it now, though who exactly I don't know" (Carson 1987: 63).

This last phrase may be seen as reminiscent of Beckett's ending of *The Unnamable* ("where I am, I don't know, I'll never know" [Beckett 1994, 418]). Indeed, as Neil Corcoran has pointed out in detail, the text of *The Irish for No* can be regarded as a patchwork of inter-textual literary references: to Keats or Heaney for instance in the opening poem of the last section, "The Irish for No", but also to Robert Graves, or Edward Thomas (Corcoran 1999: 178-195), to name but a few; as Carson himself has acknowledged, the long verse technique is inspired by the American poet C. K. Williams, as well as the haiku which continues to be a major reference for his poetry. The Irish musical form of the reel and the gig which will form the basis of *The Twelfth of Never* (1998) may also be felt, mixed with snatches of bar talk and extracts from advertising material; in short, the poet behaves like a magpie, a practice he may himself have borrowed from others. The humorous effect created by this method of "emplotment" (White, 1973: 11), this endless game with the reader, is also a means of subversion. One might be tempted to offer a further hypothesis: the non sequitur thus produced within the poetic narration, called "Mish-mash. Hotch-potch" (Carson 1987: 50) by the narrator, would then imply that the old order, the past, symbolised by the great writers whose purpose was also to enlighten the world, might contain within itself a part of responsibility for the present-day troubles.

II. Writing the Unnameable

To the appeasing certainties contained by over-determined schemes is opposed the unacceptable violence of reality. In *The Irish for No*, the poems are constructed around occurrences which are almost unreal by their very excessiveness. The poem "Campaign" is one such episode, whose laconic and bare style reveals the barbarity of life and the derisory end of an anonymous human being tortured by other faceless beings:

When they accepted who he was, as
Someone not involved, they pulled out his
fingernails. Then
They took him to a waste-ground somewhere
near the Horse Shoe bend, and told him

What he was. They shot him nine times
Carson 1987: 36).

Another theme is introduced here, that of abjection when the subject's terror turns upon itself and the physical revulsion felt by the victim is expressed in the smell: "The bad smell he smelt was the smell of himself" (Carson 1987: 36). The human being is thus irretrievably tempted to abandon himself to nothingness. Death and life become twins and this loss finds its echo in the third section, in the poem "Asylum" with the narration of the birth of the poet by his mad uncle, the "panting cries" induced by child-labour merging with those of a dog finding its home again; the whole story is summed up in an irreconcilable image: "The acrid spoor of something that was human" (Carson 1987: 58). Against this deconstruction of space and meaning, the human being finds himself at a loss, and the language used becomes symptomatic of brutal failure and unnameable acts of violence. Revenge seems to be the only possible solution and the narrator only thinks of destroying the city itself, by taking on the role of the avenging Archangel, whose function as harbinger of divine birth in "Whatever Sleep it was" is much derided: "I will bury the dark city of Belfast forever under snow: inches, feet, yards, chains, miles" (Carson 1987: 46). The blurring, the uncertainty of meaning go side by side with a kind of semantic frenzy: "Everything unstitched, unravelled" after the explosion of a bomb in "Smithfield Market" (Carson 1987: 37).

The notion of resemblance being destabilised, the text reveals within its own texture the instability, the precariousness of things, embodied in the narrator's arrest by the police and his arrival in a place which he thought he knew, as he states in the poem "33333": "I know this place like the back of my hand, except / My hand is cut off at the wrist. We stop at an open door I never knew existed" (Carson 1987: 39). The abolition of temporal and semantic contours and the indirection of the narration bear witness to the versatility of a reality that cannot be accommodated. Indeed, the work of Carson in many ways reformulates the purpose of representation. The discrepancy between the representation and the represented unveils in a startling way the density of reality. The interweaving of the temporal levels and the

the structural circularity of the book, like a mechanical piano, “tinkling in its endless loop” (Carson 1987: 24), leave out the question of origin, form being caught inside a constant movement, without beginning or end. By multiplying the narrative fragments, by interrupting them and taking them up again, form becomes more precarious, de-multiplied in order for it to start again: “I could hardly, at any rate, pick up the thread”, muses the narrator at the end of the poem “Dresden” (Carson 1987: 16). This feeling of incompleteness gives rise to the impression of being uprooted, of being “neither here nor there”, of not belonging, of being caught between two worlds, two ways of being, neither having the upper hand, as in the poem “The Irish for No” which ends on the poet’s somewhat deadpan meditation regarding the “campaign to save the English frog”; the spawn shut inside a refrigerator might be seen as metaphors for mankind:

Refrigerators stocked with spawn are humming
quietly in wait; the light
Goes off with a click as you shut the door. The
freezing dark suggests
That they are dying anyway, perplexed by their
bifocal vision, as next week,
Or the last week, are the same, and nothing can
be justified
As the independent eye of the chameleon sees
blue as green (Carson 1987: 53).

Throughout the book therefore, the human being, either the poet or one of his creations, is shown struggling to put into words memories, facts and events which obstinately resist rationalisation. These fluctuations give rise to a rhetoric of the unnameable whose purpose is to try to make do with the present, to have the upper hand over oblivion and silence, however painful the remembrance of things past and present may prove to be, however intricate and tenuous the thread of poetic narration is, as in this extract from the poem “Calvin Klein’s *Obsession*”: “For there are memories that have no name; you don’t know what to ask for. / The merest touch of sunshine, a sudden breeze, might summon up / A corner of your life you’d thought, till then, you’d never occupied” (Carson 1987: 24). The narrator tries here to find out the past through the various perfumes which have marked his life. Throughout the book, memory appears as a paradoxical element, both frightening and seminal, as an inescapable burden one must carry and put up

with. A common desire to narrate is thus felt by all the characters in turn, who are tempted to close their minds to the unbearable weight of being, like the stories told by mad Johnny Mickey in the poem “Judgement”, or by Uncle John who “was not all there” in “Asylum”. Against the dangerous attraction of oblivion may be pitted what could be termed the poet-narrator’s compulsive memorising. The resurgence of the past is anchored around concrete details crystallising the past, standing for what cannot be told or named and thus supplying what verges on a rewriting of the present. Memory soon becomes indistinguishable from story-telling, from invention: “So it all comes back, or nearly all, / A long forgotten kiss. / Never quite” in “*Calvin Klein’s Obsession*” (Carson 1987: 21).

By (re)writing the present and the past, the narrator attempts to appropriate and tame them. This is why *The Irish for No* might be defined as the difficult struggle of language over oblivion, fear and, possibly worst of all, silence. The narrator’s story-telling certainly introduces some element of fantasy into the past. Moreover, the fragmentation of the narration further contributes to the subversion of memory. What is ultimately paradoxical is that the text manages to create its own memory through a network of repetition, hints, clues which gradually cohere and establish a temporality within the narration itself.

III. Repetitions and metaphors

The apparently rambling stories leave nothing to chance, since every detail gets its place and its role to play in the narration and the symbolical perspective. The accumulation of notations and details contributes to saturate the meaning and the frequent repetitions of the same terms from one section to the other give it an archetypal architecture. Repetition, moreover, emphasises the sense of a close concatenation and brings into relief the linguistic substance and cohesiveness of the chain of signifiers. Its general effect is to open up the poetic dimension of the text. *The Irish for No* is thus closely-knit, repetitive, but at the same time subject to various metamorphoses. The meaning is there for the reader to grasp, but it is often obscure and difficult, fragmentary and problematic, interrupted by the operations of the letter, as in the poem “Belfast Confetti”:

Suddenly as the riot squad moved in, it was
raining exclamation marks,
Nuts, bolts, nails, car-keys. A fount of broken
type. And the explosion
Itself – an asterisk on the map. This hyphenated
line, a burst of rapid fire...
I was trying to complete a sentence in my head,
but it kept stuttering,
All the alleyways and side-streets blocked with
stops and colons (Carson 1987: 31).

On the level of the semantic organisation and functioning of the book, the same principle of repetition and cohesiveness is also at work, and thus serves to enhance an excessive actualisation of the reality that surrounds the narrator and his text. The text builds up, gets deformed in the same time as it takes shape and undoes itself by building itself, just like the streets and monuments of Belfast, in the next poem entitled “Clearance”:

The Royal Avenue Hotel collapses under the
breaker’s pendulum:
Zig-zag stairwells, chimney flues, and a ’thirties
mural
Of an elegantly-dressed couple doing what
seems to be the Tango, in Wedgwood
Blue and white – happy days! Suddenly more
sky
Than there used to be. A breeze springs up from
nowhere –

There, through a gap in the rubble, a
greengrocer’s shop
I’d never noticed until now. Or had I passed it
yesterday?

(Carson 1987: 32)

This structural metaphor of the map offers constant analogies with the stratified structure of the book, with the construction of meaning. Only when they are exiled can people reconstruct a definitive, unchangeable map of the city, this is what happens in “The Exiles’ Club”, far away in Australia: “After years they have reconstructed the whole of the Falls Road, and now / Are working on the back streets: Lemon, Peel and Omar, Balaclava, Alma” (Carson 1987: 45). Similarly, the map of language, far from imprisoning, from fixing it, pulls it apart, defers it all the time. Thus in the long opening poem entitled “Dresden”, the map of Dresden being subject to a total upheaval, the image of china emphasises the precariousness and fragility of life itself: “All across the map of Dresden, store-rooms full of china shivered, teetered / And collapsed, an

avalanche of porcelain, slushing and cascading” (Carson 1987: 15). This is to be found likewise in Belfast which can only be glimpsed at; there is no definite map, reality cannot be circumscribed, as we can read in “Smithfield Market”:

Since everything went up in smoke, no
entrances, no exits.

But as the charred beams hissed and flickered, I
glimpsed a map of Belfast

In the ruins: obliterated streets, the faint
impression of a key.

Something many-toothed, elaborate, stirred
briefly in the labyrinth (Carson 1987: 37).

Ultimately, the text becomes a braid, a metaphorical spinning yarn which turns upon itself, always the same, always changing, one oxymoronic spiral that deviates and de-familiarises language: “a room that is a room knocked into other rooms” as in the poem “Night Patrol”(Carson 1987: 34). Thus, to the structural metaphor of the map is superposed that of the yarn, the thread, which forever spins forward and backward. The stitches on the poet’s navel after his appendectomy are similar to those on the quilt made with odds and ends during her life by his grandmother. This patchwork² has thus become a testimony to the family’s genealogy, as he writes in the long closing poem also entitled “Patchwork”: “*It took me twenty years to make that quilt – / I am speaking for her, now – and, your father’s stitched into that quilt, / Your uncles and your aunts*” (Carson 1987: 62). The thread of language takes on a particular significance, since it defines both the story of the narrator and the history of mankind. In this way the text becomes an organic web which is substituted to a reality which cannot be retrieved and represented in its entirety, being impossible to accommodate and excessive. Like history (and his story), the text progresses by going backward: “I am taking / One step forward, two steps back” (Carson 1987: 23) says the narrator trying to remember a girl he had known in his youth, in the poem “Calvin Klein’s *Obsession*”. But the “weave”, literally speaking, was “set” upon the arrival of the

2. This image is indeed quite common in literature, but in Carson it acquires further specificity, as it becomes part of the very texture of language. The patchwork metaphor is a major motive in the fugue-like *For All We Know*.

British troops in the poem “August 1969” and ironically summed up in two words: “this welcome” (Carson 1987: 35).

A feeling of uncertainty pervades the text, which turns to the certainty that nothing can be held for certain, with the emphasis on the absurdity of human destiny, the fact that time is not linear but circular, even similar to “the zig-zags circle” made by the spy-informer in the poem “Linear B”, neither past nor future remain, humanity is suspended in the tenuous present of simultaneity: “I think the story is starting to take shape”, writes the narrator-creator in “Whatever Sleep it is” (Carson 1987: 27). For language is itself unreliable and words are changeable, just as the map of Belfast is obsolete the moment it has been drawn. And this is a major concern of the poet as he has repeatedly said: “How can we know that what we say until it’s said? Even the meaning is uncertain. Words are a code. The word is from codex, the trunk of a tree, a set of tablets, a book” (Brown 2002: 141). This is why something said in one language can be quite different in another or difficult to render, as is shown in the following extract from “The Irish for No”: “We were debating, / Bacchus and the pards and me, how to render *The Ulster Bank – the Bank / That Likes to Say Yes* into Irish, and whether eglantine was alien to Ireland” (Carson 1987: 49). This poetic uncertainty is reflected in the very texture of the lines, in the act of reading itself which can be seen as a semiotic circularity, as Michael Riffaterre explains: “In the reader’s mind it means a continual recommencing, an indecisiveness resolved one moment and lost the next with each reliving of revealed significance, and this it is that makes the poem endlessly readable and fascinating” (Riffaterre 1980: 166). In front of the drifting of the world and of the signs, there remains only the narrative dynamics whose cathartic value becomes paramount and which alone can give meaning to reality. “Spinning yarns” would be a means of giving sense to what seems illogical and senseless as the narrator’s uncle John did, he who “seemed to see things that we didn’t see” (Carson 1987: 54). The “dark umbilicus of cloud” (p. 56) or “of dung” (p. 42) or still “of smoke” (p. 36) becomes the link between the individual and his environment, Mother Earth, life itself, even if the thread has been severed between the narrator and his own mother, whose life was devoted to stitching up holes in

his shirts and unravelling old jumpers so as to knit new ones. She thus left her son with a heritage of memories as fragmented as the “milkmaid’s creamy hand, the outstretched / Pitcher of milk” (Carson 1987: 15-16), all that had survived from Horse Boyle’s porcelain figurine in the first poem “Dresden” mentioned at the beginning of this paper, and the loop will be looped:

Now I saw my mother: the needle shone
between her thumb and finger, stitching,
Darning, mending: the woolly callous on a sock,
the unravelled jumper
That became a scarf. I held my arms at arms’
length as she wound and wound:
The tick-tack of the knitting needles made a
cable-knit pullover.

(Carson 1987: 61)

Conclusion

It appears that Ciaran Carson’s quest is of a singular nature indeed, since putting into question the concept of mimesis leads in fact here to a renewal of its modalities. While representing a world order in chaos, Carson deconstructs a formal and conventional conception of the words and tries, within the void thus created, to give rise to a wilder reality in which writing metaphorically becomes the only source of strength and hope. The text questions the power of the words as well as that of reading and tries to confront reality by playing on an aesthetic of excess which manifests itself as much in the breaking up of poetic narration as in the violence of some events narrated by the poet. The wanderings of a metaphorical language can alone accommodate the world and the “dodginess” (Brown 2002: 151) of the words is thereby able to tame the violence of things. The task of the poet is therefore dual, since the apprehension of reality cannot be dissociated from the questioning of poetic representation. His aim is to translate the world into metaphors, to give it shape through the shimmering play of the word as the only means of accounting for the outside reality. Thus the poetic chronicle of the narrator becomes at the same time transfiguring and revelatory, purporting to metamorphose our vision and hopefully to be a factor of peace and reconciliation for, to quote T.S. Eliot again, “poets only talk when they cannot sing” (Eliot 1967: 156).

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