
“Through the Forest of Language”: *For All We Know* by Ciaran Carson

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Abstract. Since its publication in March 2008, critics have praised the quality and underlined the originality of the seventy poems that make up *For All We Know*. The book might be said to mark a new departure in the art of Ciaran Carson in so far as the tone seems to be more personal and more direct, but the choice of the words, their texture, and their sonority remain as always paramount. This article aims at analyzing how the mode of writing adopted here by the poet is directly inspired by the art of the fugue, both in its structure and in its search for a new poetic language reaching beyond reality.

Key words. Fugue, *fugere*, “sonnet”, memory, voice, images, metaphors.

Resumen. Desde su publicación en marzo del 2008, la crítica ha alabado la cualidad y ha destacado la originalidad de los setenta poemas que componen el volumen *For All We Know*. El libro puede considerarse como un nuevo punto de partida en el arte de Ciaran Carson en tanto que el tono parece más personal y más directo, si bien la elección de vocablos, su textura y sonoridad siguen siendo de primordial importancia. Este artículo pretende analizar cómo la forma de escribir adoptada por el poeta está directamente inspirada por el arte de la fuga, tanto en la estructura como en la búsqueda de un nuevo lenguaje poético que sobrepasa la realidad.

Palabras clave. Fuga, *fugere*, “soneto”, memoria, voz, imágenes, metáforas.

*Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future
And time future contained in time past.
(T.S.Eliot, “Burnt Norton”, *Four Quartets*)*

Upon its publication in 2008, *For All We Know* was variously described in the press as an “intricately-worked psychological and political thriller” (Sampson 2008), “a cryptic verse-fiction of an unusual, original kind” (Brownjohn 2008) or still “a startlingly original and mysterious work” (Emmitt 2008). It was included in *Collected Poems* published in October of the same year. Yet, it seems that the work has not since been fully acknowledged,

some critics preferring his later poetical works, *On the Night Watch* (2009) and *Until Before After* (2010). According to Helen Emmitt, the title of the book would have been inspired by an eponymous popular song dating from 1934 and later taken up by Nat King Cole. In that case one might also evoke another song written for the film *Lovers and Strangers* in 1970. Both songs underline the unreal and fugitive aspect of the relation between the two

protagonists, the two “strangers” that are Gabriel and Miranda at their first meeting.

However, it appears that the aim of the writer goes far beyond such a conjecture, however right it may have been. As Elmer Kennedy-Andrews writes, “the Carson text – open, nonlinear, non-hierarchical, ‘dimension-bending’, multivoiced – resists domination by any single, unitary or totalizing narrative or perspective” (Kennedy-Andrews 2009: 247). Ciaran Carson’s primary interest remains the language itself as he said in an interview granted to *The Guardian* in 2009: “I’m not that interested in ideologies, I’m interested in the words, and how they sound to me, how words connect with experience, of fear, of anxiety” (Eidemariam 2009: 12). Owing to the fragmented construction of his poetry, and of his prose, one may say that the writer is looking for a form of writing that is not fixed, that would leave the meaning free, suspended as it were. The polysemous phrase “for all we know” is a theme which runs throughout Carson’s work, referring to “knowledge, its nature and limits” (Kennedy-Andrews 2009: 22). Indeed, as Neal Alexander has observed, “Carson often returns to and reworks themes and forms employed earlier in his career, in much the same manner in which a musical fugue unfolds through a series of subtly modulated repeats and refrains” (Alexander 2010: 2). We shall first see what “the rules of the game” are in *For All We Know* then we’ll look at the writer’s deconstruction of the poetic narrative and the way he reaches a new reality through a web of metaphors and images.

The rules of the game

Significantly, the book’s first epigraph is an old French song, extracts from which appear at times in the course of the poems. The fact that Carson wrote in the afterword that he had misquoted a line from this song learnt by his sister during her school years at a Dominican convent in Belfast is another wink to the readers to remind them of the impossibility of conveying any certainty. As Antoine Compagnon has demonstrated, the epigraph is a means for the author to set his text in relation with other texts and to deliver it to the mirrors of literature and art: “[I]t is above all an icon, in the sense of a privileged entry into enunciation”¹ (Compagnon 1979: 337). The

second epigraph taken from Glenn Gould who is considered as one of the best specialists of John Sebastian Bach, more particularly his “Well-Tempered Clavier”, highlights the poet’s aim: “Fugue must perform its frequently stealthy work with continuously shifting melodic fragments that remain, in the ‘tune’ sense, perpetually unfinished”. Indeed the fugue, which reached a degree of perfection in the work of the Cantor of Leipzig, rests upon the principle of “imitation”, the reproduction of “a melodic fragment at the various levels of the sound edifice”² (de Candé 1977: 110), a practice that leaves absolute freedom to the musician. Here, one might (dare?) notice some similarities to Irish traditional music, which, according to Carson, remains his main source of inspiration. Yet, one should also be aware that music notes and speech words belong to quite different registers of expression. Besides, as Sean Crosson has demonstrated in his introduction to his study about the relationship between Irish traditional music and such poets as Ciaran Carson, “the presence of traditional music in modern Irish poetry reveals an anxiety regarding the relationship of poets’ work both to the tradition of Irish writing and to contemporary audience” (Crosson 2008: 4). Concerning Carson it might be better here to speak of a form of experimentation with the language, in relation to other artistic forms such as music, the aim being to reach or create “another” language, what he sometimes calls “a language beyond language” (Kennedy-Andrews 2009: 16). The term fugue is seen in the sonnet aptly entitled “Prelude and Fugue” as a polysemous term with “multiple dissonances” (Carson 2008: 43). Indeed, *For All We Know* is built on a series of recurring events, of continuously remembered moments, with variants containing also the Latin meaning of *fugere*, to flee, as Carson recalled in an internet “conversation”: “‘fugue’, both in musical and psychological terms, has all sorts of implications as to who we are and what we are doing in this world” (Kennedy-Andrews 2009: 26).

1. “Mais elle est surtout une icône, au sens d’une entrée privilégiée dans l’énonciation”. Translation mine.

2. “[M]otif mélodique aux différents étages de l’édifice sonore”. Translation mine.

For All We Know is divided into two equal parts, with each title in the first part finding its exact counterpart in the second one, thus bringing a form of echo or *déjà vu*, reinforced by the ubiquitous theme of the double, a theme which is also important in Carson's work, as for instance in *Shamrock Tea*, a work of fiction dating from 2003. The structure of the book rests upon the number seven and gives it a polyphonic echo, owing to the universal symbolism of that number. This number, which is also found in other works by Carson, has been said to symbolise "the entirety of space and the entirety of time [...] seven represents the entirety of the universe in motion"³ (Chevalier & Gheerbrandt 1994: 860). The structure of *For All We Know* is built upon a rigorous framework – each line being constituted from beginning to end of fourteen syllables –, consisting of unrhymed couplets in clusters of seven or fourteen, even twenty-eight in one instance, grouped in two sets of thirty-five poems in which each title is used twice. However, Carson deliberately plays with the rule according to which a sonnet should have 14 lines, when he inserts what might be called, double, half or triple sonnets. One might also add that the use of the sonnet is not new in Ciaran Carson's work, since it had already been adopted, and adapted, in *The Twelfth of Never* and *The Alexandrine Plan*, both published in 1998. It is also the form utilised in his later books, *On the Night Watch* and *Until Before After*. Although some poems, by reason of their length might not be considered as "sonnets" in the eyes of purists, we shall refer to them as such in the course of this article, for practical purposes.

This structural constraint helps to set the poetic text and allows the author every narrative and compositional freedom, as he explained in an interview dating from January 2009: "I was doubly helped by the format constraint of the 14-syllable line, and the various kinds of rhythm it could accommodate" (Edemariam 2009: 12). One may say that, here as elsewhere, the author invites his reader to take part in a game whose rules he himself has set up. The reference to *The Glass Bead Game* (*Das Glass Perlen Spiel*),

3. "Il symbolise la totalité de l'espace et la totalité du temps [...] sept représente la totalité de l'univers en mouvement". Translation mine.

which is the title of a major work published in 1943 by the German writer Hermann Hesse, is significant in his respect. The poem "The Shadow" which is devoted to it is probably one of the keys to *For All We Know*, even if the "explanations" given by Nina remain ironically enigmatic for Gabriel, and for the reader: "Isn't that the trouble? That I don't know the half of it?" (Carson 2008: 81), says a tongue-in-cheek Gabriel in this "sonnet" which is also the longest in the book. This sense of mystery is part of the writer's purpose, and the reader is invited to question his/her knowledge of the world and his/her place in it.

Indeed Ciaran Carson relishes interweaving the threads of time, a time which feeds a poetic narration that unfolds through "staggered repeats" (Carson 2008: 16, 111). The last "sonnet" functions as a sort of coda and its title borrowed from the game of chess, "Zugzwang", means an inextricable situation, like the one referred to in *Arthur and George*, a prose work by Julian Barnes dating from 2005. In this latter work, Arthur Conan Doyle reads in a magazine about chess of a position "in which the player is unable to move any piece in any direction to any square without making his already imperilled state worse" (Barnes 2006: 274). If that was what the protagonist of Barnes's book felt, it is also emblematic of both the narrator in *For All We Know*, and of the human condition according to Ciaran Carson.

Just like the context and the narration, the choice of the names of the two characters reflects their author's playing by the rules set by past literature and gesturing towards the subversive. We learn in the course of Carson's book that the plot, if we may call it so, is organised around the tragic event of the accidental death of Miranda, aka Nina. This double name irresistibly evokes a Shakespearian heroine from *The Tempest*, but also a poem by Arthur Rimbaud: "Les réparties de Nina" (Rimbaud 1964: 45-48). There is also probably a kind of intra-textuality to Carson's previous work, since he had translated some of Rimbaud's poems in *The Alexandrine Plan*. In *For All We Know* Nina is the beloved companion of the narrator Gabriel, an archangel's name whom Carson in *Fishing for Amber* had depicted as "Heaven's golden-winged herald", but also more prosaically as "the patron saint of postal services and of

philatelists” (Carson 1999: 348) in reference partly to his father’s job as a postman. Nina’s death which the reader learns about in the penultimate poem entitled “Je Reviens”, had been foretold, since the young woman was a reckless driver, at the wheel of a vintage model, a DS Citroën:

The phone rang. I picked it up and I knew from
the grave voice
they’d found my number in your black
notebook. The Déesse

was a write-off. I took the train to Nevers the
next day.

I looked at you. They let me pull the sheet over
your face (Carson 2008: 110).

In this poem as elsewhere Carson plays with the meaning of the words: “DS” (referring to a formerly luxurious French car) and “déesse” (the French for “goddess”), as well as “Never/Never” and “Nevers” (a town in central France); “Never/Never” being the title of two sonnets that emphasize the unreality of the events, seemingly as if everything that happened was in a never-never land.

The French title of the poem just quoted, “Je Reviens”, also has a multiple meaning, besides referring directly to a perfume. It alludes to the notion of coming back, the presence of the past, i.e. the intertextuality fore-grounded in Carson’s work, the appropriation of literary rules and their adoption or rather their bending in order to accommodate the poet’s, and the reader’s, taste. Even the language used by the protagonists, the words themselves, are subject to questioning, as Gabriel recalled concerning Nina’s French origins in “Second Time Round”: “I was grappling with your language over the wreck of the dining table” (Carson, 2008: 15). The question of the language, of the choice and use of the words are part and parcel of the writer’s preoccupations and are a source of permanent doubts. Like his narrator, he never stops wandering through what he calls here and there, “the Forest of Language”. The narration undergoes profound variations which are the reflection of a fragmented reality the reader will endeavour to re-create.

A fragmented story

Indeed, the poetic narration follows the narrator’s work of memory, which is an uneasy task as time blurs the contours, and the facts

are unreliable, as a former member of the Stasi, now a waiter, tells the young Nina, shortly after the fall of the Berlin Wall, in the poem entitled “The Shadow”: “The lie is memorized, the truth is remembered, he said” (Carson 2008: 30). The complexity of the structure of the book, originally seen as “a conventional love poem” (Kennedy-Andrews 2009: 22) and whose starting-point was a prose work – *The Pen Friend* published in 2009 –, unveils itself little by little with each successive reading. In *For All We Know*, called a “novelistic book” on the back cover, there is no linear narration but rather a shifting between the narrative passages, albeit at times barely noticeable. The facts themselves take on a metaphorical turn which diverts the narration from its investigative origins, in a parody of “roman noir”. This process of indirection is not only due to the narrator’s memorisation work, in so far as there is a reconstitution of the past or an attempt at doing so. Only fragments of memory will persist. The thread of the narration unravels contrary-wise to the passage of time, and the poetic voice becomes both inconsistent and visionary. As Elmer Kennedy-Andrews writes, “we are immediately aware of the absence of an authentic original, the need always to think otherwise about the text we are reading” (Kennedy-Andrews 2009: 240). The unexpected silences, the abrupt interruptions of the two protagonists’ discourses, their separate developments, give rise to a certain perplexity on the part of the reader. The facts like the narration become questionable and it’s up to the reader to try and unravel the skein of the narration embedded into facts that overlap each other. This is similar to the wool ball wound and unwound day by day and in the course of the book, as we can read in the very first poem, “Second Time Round”:

Then slowly, slowly we would draw in on one
another
until everything was implicated like wool spooled

from my yawning hands as you wound the yard
into a ball (Carson 2008: 15).

Although its main purpose is the evocation of the loss of the young woman, the narration remains nevertheless somewhat abstruse on the first reading, if not on the following ones. Indeed, flashbacks are constantly added to the poetic narration which might be qualified as

gapped. These question a preceding fragment or throw a new light on previously mentioned events as in the poem “The Present” where fragments from the sonnet “Second Hand”, some fifty pages earlier, are taken verbatim then developed into a sonnet. The poem “Peace” alludes to Irish history, while evoking the stylistic device used, i.e. this uncertainty about the unfolding of the narration and its truthfulness:

[...]. Everything was, as it were, provisional,

slipping from the foreseeable into tomorrow even as the jittery present became history (Carson 2008: 55).

Such a polyphonic intermingling of memories and voices contributes in the end to the narrative density of the poetic text as well as to its originality. An apparently minor notation will take on, depending on the context, a different value, with the surplus of meaning contaminating the first allusion in a retroactive way. Thus the apple whose juice refreshes one’s palate in the third sonnet entitled “On the Contrary” (“the apple bursting indescribably with juice / against the roof of the mouth” [Carson 2008: 18]), metamorphoses not without irony into a computer brand, “Apple”, symbolising the tree of knowledge (“the Tree of Knowledge looming within reach” in the poem “Proposal” [Carson 2008: 29]), then into an autumnal symbol in “Rue Daguerre” (“October was a crisp apple / bitten, with that nip in the air you walked straight out into” [Carson 2008: 47]), before the reader gets the final explanation, the apple being the occasion of the amorous meeting of the two protagonists in the second “Proposal”: “It happened over an apple. [...] This time I could taste / your mouth from it through the juice” (Carson 2008: 78).

As if to substitute for an occasionally failing memory or the frequently incomplete narration by the two protagonists, the text is thrown into perspective as it were through the numerous openings into the past or the present. Even though the fragmentation of the narration confers it a degree of ambiguity, the repetitive structure nevertheless allows the text to recover a form of unity. The end result is a fugue-like structure in the musical as well as the literal sense of the term, as Nina’s professor had taught it in the following extract from the poem “In the Dark”:

Fugue, my professor said, is a kind of trance

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

life he led unbeknownst to himself. In musical
terms
the fugue must perform its often stealthy work
with shifting

melodic fragments that remain perpetually in
abeyance, or unconsummated, so to speak, you
said (Carson 2008: 107-8).

Subject to variations and changes of voice – the personal pronouns “I”, “you”, “he”, and “she” often becoming interchangeable or referring to other protagonists –, the outlines of the narration vanish or rather fuse into each other. There is a blurring of temporal levels and the narrative voice itself no longer has any consistency as in “Zugzwang”: “so I return to the question of those staggered repeats / as my memories of you recede into the future” (Carson 2008: 111). Moreover, action and narration diverge since there is an intermingling of diegetic and narrative continuums. As for the narration, the confusion between yesterday and today contributes to folding back the past in the in-between area of an uprooted, timeless present, symbolised by the Omega watch, whose continual ticking will outlive the death of the beloved in the sonnet “Second Hand”: “I have your watch before me, your aunt’s pre-War Omega, / thirty, forty years older than me and still running strong” (Carson 2008: 76).

The fractures between the sonnets are often abrupt and disturbing, while the frequent enjambments from one stanza to the other could make one think of some continuity. The effects of rupture thus produced are all the more deceptive as they are then concealed beneath a discourse itself off balance: “If I’m you, who are you?” (Carson 2008: 83). Such is the unanswered question posed in “Second Time Round” by the narrator, at the wheel this time of a “Renault 5 Alpine” belonging to his lady passenger. The abrupt bifurcations of the poetic discourse are at regular intervals masked by a fallacious coherence characterised by the incipient use of link words: “So”, “Then”, “Still”, or still “yes”, key phrases that give the false

impression of an argumentative reasoning. Such rhetoric works without a basis as it were, since the terms named above do not put into relation consecutive poems but poems that can be very far apart. Instead of enabling the reconstitution of the course of the narration, they only play with the reader through their apparent logic.

The writing only progresses through constants flashbacks that make it somewhat precarious. Furthermore, the use of repetitions – “irrevocable”, “irrevocably”, “Never” used seven times in the poem “Je Reviens” (Carson 2008: 109-110) –, is noteworthy, all the more as it is a stylistic device which belongs to the comic register. But more generally, the reader’s imagination finds itself caught within a circle or rather a labyrinth in which the imaginary and the truth become indistinguishable. Progress and eternal return are intimately linked, just as the Dresden cathedral will be reborn from its ashes in “From Your Notebook”: “The *Frauenkirche* will rise / from the ashes and be restored to its former glory” (Carson 2008: 42). Fractured, fragmented, split, the narrations get ramified into two logics that sometimes carry away the text into contrary directions. Therefore in the sonnet whose title “Collaboration” evokes World War II “collaborators” with the German occupant in France, the narrator wonders if he is not himself the traitor that terrifies Nina in her sleep: “And as eventually you sink back into the deep well / of sleep, I wonder if by my words I have betrayed you” (Carson 2008: 41).

The principle of derivation shown on the structural level is also apparent on the semantic and metaphorical levels of the book: “Still the interminable struggle with words and meanings”, thus starts the sonnet entitled “Le Mot Juste” (Carson 2008: 28), as a (mock?) reference to T.S. Eliot who wrote in his poem “East Coker”: “the intolerable wrestle / With words and meanings” (Eliot 1963: 198). To emphasize Carson’s possibly irreverent purpose, this same line will start the mirror sonnet in the second part, a sonnet where this time Flaubert and Beethoven are mentioned, evoking also maybe T.S. Eliot in “Burnt Norton”: “Words move, music moves / Only in time” (Eliot 1963: 194).

A “language beyond language”

The dislocated architecture of the narrative structure is superseded by a more unifying one,

made of symbolical repetitions and metaphors which play a fundamental role. The metaphor can be seen, in Henri Suhamy’s terms, as “a figure of substitution” (“une figure de substitution”), that almost always shifts “the signified from the concrete to the abstract, the non-human to the human, the material to the spiritual, the sensorial to the moral”⁴ (Suhamy 1994: 229). The most significant is that of the watch or brand watches, linked to the perfumes, such as the one called “L’Air du Temps”:

[...] Spirit of the Times, it was supposed

to evoke the era, the girls in Pompadour hairstyles blowing kisses everywhere, garlanding the tank turrets (Carson 2008: 36).

In the second eponymous poem, the perfume metaphor gives rise to the evocation of the Northern Irish situation during a later stay in a hotel on the coast buffeted by the winds:

[...]. We switched off the lights to watch TV.

They were showing the latest news from my native city.

It looked like a Sixties newsreel where it always drizzled (Carson 2008: 87).

Although they do not provide any certainty, metaphors give to the disoriented memory a multiple meaning but also evoke a more promising elsewhere and future, symbolised by the everlastingness of the watch in the poem “The Anniversary”: “Omega. The gift of a lifetime. Look after it well, / it’ll still be working when both of us are gone, he said” (Carson 2008: 53). Certain recurring terms, like the vintage Mont Blanc pen, or the perfume *Je Reviens*, as well as the Rolex, or Omega watches, become leitmotifs that throw light on reality as well as the functioning of the text and its self-referring character underlined by the rather ironical remark on the part of the narrator towards the reader, a remark written in “*encre violette*”, an invisible ink which will vanish, just like its author, as we can read in “Redoubt”:

So I wrote I was a writer of fiction and poems,
and if you’re about to ask me what they’re about, I
said,

4. “[L]e signifié du concret vers l’abstrait, du non-humain vers l’humain, du matériel vers le spirituel, du sensoriel vers le moral”. Translation mine.

that's for the reader to say, whose guess is as good as mine (Carson 2008: 20).

The recurring terms of the watch and the perfume undergo endless metamorphoses, and their changing character forms a kind of homogenous tissue, such as the omnipresent "patchwork double quilt" (Carson 2008: 15). These complex modulations are similar to the harmonics and dissonances of the fugue as defined in the poem "From Your Notebook": "Melodic fragments, / perpetually unfinished, that seems to have been his style" (Carson 2008: 92). The metaphorical inflexions thus imposed on the lexis contribute to *produce* the meaning, to uncover a coherence born from the writing which gives form to things and tames their violence, even if nothingness is the ransom of every existence: "And I think of the blank darkness that descended on Bach / as the music which blazed in his head became forgotten", thus concludes the narrator in the sonnet entitled "In the Dark" (Carson 2008: 108).

Carson's poetic text weaves the threads of a metaphorical skein that turns writing into a web. If the text seems to ignore its object, i.e. the exploration of reality, it will come back to it in a more or less direct way. The present, with its incessant conflicts resurfaces by means of the "Afghan rug", in this extract from "Je Reviens" where plosives and fricatives are dominant:

At first the pattern seemed to be a Tree of Life, but
then
the warp and weft began to shift and shimmer
under us,

becoming now a dragon and phoenix in combat,
now
a snarl of vines or snakes. Ensnarled and thinking
to escape,

we plunged down through the ages till we landed
on a field
of Afghan war rug bright with helicopters, guns
and tanks (Carson 2008: 58).

Significantly enough, the geographical context itself becomes metaphorical by its indeterminate character, even if names of cities like Paris, Berlin, Belfast or Dresden can be found here and there. The representation by Clément Serveau – who was made famous for his illustrations of bank notes issued by the Banque de France in the course of the 20th

century –, of an ethereal cathedral of Notre Dame de Paris on the front cover contributes to emphasize this fact. The cerulean blue of the cover becomes emblematic of this passage through the looking-glass, this splitting which the narrator, himself a Gemini ("I'm a Gemini after all"), invokes in "Peace":

To penetrate the blue is to go through the looking
glass.

Sometimes its gravity evokes the idea of death.

Insubstantial itself, blue embodies whatever is
Caught in it. Sound and shapes disappear in it, you
might say (Carson 2008: 105).

The blue colour, which is also that of the various clothes worn by Nina, echoes the violet of the first poems, a violet that appears under diverse guises: "violette", the French term for the flower, as well as the French first name "Violette", and also the Catholic religious practice "Lenten violet" in "The Assignation" (Carson 2008: 22). Elsewhere we find "L'heure bleue", i.e. dusk, "the hour of assignations" in "Second Time Round" (Carson 2008: 63), an intermediary between night and day, life and death. The "violet" air, a forerunner of snow, which is the other dominant "tint", would be synonymous for "death as passage" ("la mort en tant que passage" [Chevalier & Gheerbrandt 1982: 1021]). The link between this colour and the Omega watch metaphor can also be traced in the following line that ends the poem "Voyelles" by the French poet Arthur Rimbaud, a poem in which language and love mingle to evoke eternity: "O, l'Oméga, rayon violet de Ses Yeux !" (Rimbaud 1964: 75).

On the whole, it would seem that the blue colour is *the* primary colour in the Carsonian universe. It is also the favourite colour of Gabriel, the narrator of *The Pen Friend* published a year later and which is a form of double in prose to *For All We Know*. If blue is seen there as "the colour of eternity", it is also "the colour of death" (Carson 2009: 241). Significantly, death, made inevitable by the passing of time, plays an increasingly bigger role in Carson's work, as his latest book of poetry published in 2010 under the title *Until Before After* testifies. Here, the poet meditates on this "same / old story" (Carson 2010: 14) but there, perhaps more insistently than elsewhere, strives to reach through the "words", "threshold / after threshold", a "room/ full of light" (Carson 2010: 119).

By means of this play of metaphors and images, the poetic text becomes an organic tissue which recovers an internal logic thanks to its very disorganisation; such is the narrator's conclusion in the last poem entitled "Zugzwang": "as the words of the song when remembered each time around / remind us of other occasions at different times" (Carson 2008:111). What emerge from *For All We Know* are the dynamics of the language, the subtle unfolding of metaphors, or what Julia Kristeva calls "*signifiante*", that "*enterprise of differentiation, stratification and confrontation at work within language*"⁵ (Kristeva 1969: 11) which produces, engenders "the texture of language" ("le tissu du langage" [Kristeva 1969: 219]). This is what the narrator means from the very start in "Second Time Round": "It's the matter of the texture. Elasticity" (Carson 2008: 15). The narrative moments and the metaphors coalesce and overlap each other, link and unlink without their point of origin being noticeable, as Gabriel remarks about the impossibility of finding the right word in the poem entitled "Le Mot Juste": "The skeins of stuff from which your family history is spun, / and what wheels there are within wheels within your vintage watch" (Carson 2008: 77). The poetic text is thus caught in a constant evolution, which delays its completion and obliges it to reiterate endlessly the moment of its emergence, a point of no return that is similar to the construction of the fugue: "in continuously unfinished tapestries of sound" (Carson 2008: 111). In this extract from the poem "In the Dark", the French word "fuyons" (from the infinitive "fuir": to flee) takes up the

leitmotiv of the fugue to give it a further and deeper resonance:

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

I remember the words of that song, I think of
something
different. *Quand vient le soir après l'orage
fuyons...* (Carson 2008: 107)

Faithful to his paradoxical and non conformist approach of representation, Carson manages to leave his work open. The intermingling of voices and narrative levels opens onto this shift outside the limits of reference, in that "in-between" (Kennedy-Andrews 2009: 19) claimed again and again by the poet. A slight shimmering will persist on the changing surface of the poems, just like the French song from old times, and the truth will be approached if not reached, similarly to the sound left by the bow of the violin when only the note is played without frills as the poet writes some time later in "Year after year", the penultimate poem of *Until Before After*:

playing the tune
over you've been

cutting out
the frills getting

to know how
the notes are more

truly told by
leaving them

alone to be
found by the bow (Carson 2010: 118)

5. "[T]ravail de différenciation, stratification et confrontation qui se pratique dans la langue".
Translation mine.

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