
“Translation as Mutation”: Ciaran Carson’s *In the Light of*

Elizabeth Delattre
University of Lille 3, France

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Abstract. This article deals with the way Ciaran Carson has managed to translate, or rather “mutate”, some of Arthur Rimbaud’s prose poems *Illuminations* into an entirely different work, a verse collection in alexandrines, while keeping close to the original spirit. This article will follow three movements, first the form and structure, then the matter of translation proper, and finally the overall tone of the collection which relies on the music of the language itself.

Key Words. Rimbaud, Verse, Music, Language, Translating.

Resumen. En este artículo se estudia la forma en la que Ciaran Carson ha traducido, o utilizando otra expresión, ha “mutado” algunos de los poemas en prosa de Arthur Rimbaud dando como resultado una colección en versos alejandrinos que mantienen la fidelidad al espíritu original. En este artículo se seguirán tres fases, en primer lugar se estudiará la forma y la estructura de los poemas, después se analizará la traducción propiamente dicha, y finalmente el tono general de la colección, la cual se basa en la propia música del lenguaje.

Palabras clave. Rimbaud, versos, música, lenguaje, traducción.

*World is crazier and more of it than we think,
Incorrigibly plural. I peel and portion
A tangerine and spit the pips and feel
The drunkenness of things being various.*

(Louis MacNeice, 'Snow')

It is undeniable that poetic translation has long been a component of Ciaran Carson's oeuvre, "as a literary practice and a mode of cultural politics" (Alexander 175), his publication in 2014 of translations from the twentieth-century French poet Jean Follain and his own responses under the title *From Elsewhere* being a further addition to an already long list; this includes *The Alexandrine Plan* published in 1998, *Dante's Inferno Alighieri* in 2002, *The Midnight Court* in 2005 or *The Tain* two years later, the last two translated from the Irish. One should also add translations from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in *First Language* dating from 1987 together with another "version" of the sonnet "Correspondances" by Baudelaire in very long lines of 17 syllables or more in flat rhymes. The French symbolist poets of the 19th century, with their revolutionary ideas and passion for freedom seem to have struck a chord with the Northern-Irish poet from Belfast. Unusually so, Ciaran Carson felt it necessary to put an *Author's Note* at the beginning of this new verse collection published in 2012 under the title *In the Light Of* so as to inform the reader of his aim in translating Arthur Rimbaud, defining it more precisely as "mutation", meaning that he had changed or altered the French poet's writing, thus producing an entirely different piece of work.

However, probably due to the matter of the language of origin, *In the Light of* has not been given much attention so far in the field of critical studies. To quote Neal Alexander who has more particularly analyzed Carson's translations from the Irish in the first full-length study of Ciaran Carson's oeuvre published in 2010, "other words, languages and cultures project other worlds, alternative ways of saying and seeing reality" (Alexander 176) that defamiliarize one's received habits of perception. As Peter Denman wrote in an article dealing with Ciaran Carson's prosody and published in the first collection of critical essays in 2009, Carson's translation typically seeks "to enlarge the linguistic and poetic space that the poems occupy" (Denman 28). This is why words or turns of speech derived from the Irish mostly, but also from the French, Latin, German, even a whole poem in Irish humorously bearing a French title: "*La Je-Ne-Sais-Quoi*" as the opener to the collection *First Language* (9), intersperse his poetry.

More generally with Carson, poetic translation can be seen as an integral part of the creative aesthetic process; we might go as far as saying that translation becomes "an ontological condition" (Goodby 295), since it enables the writer and the reader to cross the borderline between two languages, or to reach an in-between situation that is both enticing and puzzling. For reasons of space, this article will deal mainly with *In the Light of*, while referring in passing to Carson's other translations from the French in *The Alexandrine Plan*. The latter could be defined as a bi-lingual, dialogic or rather plurivocal work in which the presence of the three 19th century symbolists Baudelaire, Rimbaud and Mallarmé is felt to the full, contrary to *In the Light of* in which Carson has created an original and authentic piece in which Arthur Rimbaud truly becomes a ghostly companion.

Form and structure

Rimbaud's *Illuminations* was published in October 1886 by the Editions La Vogue. This edition, reprinted in 1999, uses the original texts as they are kept at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France and follows the order established in the so-called definitive edition published by Mercure de France in 1949. Yet the editor acknowledges having resorted to "conjectures", in the absence of any certainty as regards Rimbaud's project, supposing he had had one... In a book published in 2014, it was even suggested that Rimbaud was not the author of *Illuminations*, but that some poems were the work of Germain Nouveau, his then companion.

In his preface to the original edition, Paul Verlaine had accounted for the origin of the title in this way: it would have come from the English "illuminations", meaning for him "assiettes peintes ou coloriées", i.e. "painted or colored plates" (Rimbaud, *Poésies* 316), in other words possibly "enluminures". It seemed to him that Arthur Rimbaud would have likely given this title to his work, although nothing proves that this was so. The text of *Illuminations* then rested upon the good will of the successive publishers, who changed the order of the poems or added or suppressed some. Moreover, this is a collection of poems in prose which are not united round one theme and whose order seems neither to have been wished nor made necessary by their author. That is why Carson has felt free to somewhat disturb their original order. The first poem of Rimbaud's collection entitled "Après le Déluge" – translated "After Me" by Carson and placed in second position –, indicated that the French poet wanted to get rid of the past, of old poetics, so as to find something entirely new as regards ideas and forms. The Northern Irish poet has chosen to replace it by "Aube", "transposed" as it were into "As I Roved Out" which is the title of an Irish song, as we shall see later in this article, – a way of introducing his musical purpose. It is also significant that Carson has translated the title of Rimbaud's fifth poem, "Antique", as "Antic", and put it in the ante penultimate position, so as to depart from the original homage paid by Rimbaud to ancient poetic tradition, seemingly preferring to lay stress on the idea of fantasy or unruliness.

In Rimbaud's work, great attention was paid to the visual layout on the page, hence the succession of hyphens, blanks, sub-paragraphs, parentheses, elliptical blanks, unequal paragraphs that introduce ruptures in the reading, all the more disconcerting since the syntax follows the same dissociating principle, as in the following extract from "Nocturne vulgaire", full of quite unusual hyphens, which delay so to speak the understanding of the reader who may further be puzzled by the occasional neologism:

Un souffle ouvre des brèches *opéradiques* dans les cloisons, – brouille le pivotement des toits rongés, – disperse les limites des foyers, –éclipse les croisées. – Le long de la vigne, m'étant appuyé du pied à une gargouille, – je suis descendu dans ce carrosse dont l'époque est assez indiquée par les glaces convexes, les panneaux bombés et les *sophas* contournés. (Italics mine) (Rimbaud, *Poésies* 229) ¹

Rhythm had in fact become the new harmony of poetry according to Rimbaud. Besides the poems that tell a story or offer a meditation, the book also leaves a large space to poems that "describe" a being, a place, or a scene. These pictorial poems concern the urban poems such as "Villes" (Rimbaud, *Poésies* 223-225), the description of imaginary characters such as "Conte" (211-212) or the evocation of scenes of theatrical shows as in "Scènes" (238). In many ways, Rimbaud's poetry brings to a climax Roman Jakobson's theoretical analysis of what poetry should be:

In poetry, verbal equations become a constructive principle of the text. Syntactic and morphological categories, roots, and affixes, phonemes and their components (distinctive features) – in short, any constituent of the verbal code – are confronted, juxtaposed, brought into contiguous relation according to the principle of similarity and contrast and carry their own autonomous signification. Phonemic similarity is sensed as semantic relationship. (Jakobson 266)

This was the challenge Ciaran Carson was confronted with, as he acknowledged in various interviews following the publication of *In the Light Of*. He therefore had to find a stylistic form that would translate Rimbaud's and this resulted in a renewed version of the alexandrine verse. Carson had already made use of the French alexandrine in versions of 34 sonnets by Verlaine, Baudelaire and Rimbaud under the title *The Alexandrine Plan*, as well as in 77 sonnets in *The Twelfth of Never*, both published in 1998. Carson translated the poems of the two aforementioned collections into 14-line alexandrines. In *In the Light Of*, however, the poems, made of rhyming couplets, sometimes veering into final tercets, are extremely varied in length, with only four poems comprising 14 lines, giving the poetry a suppleness which conveys more adequately the excesses of Rimbaud's poetry. As Carson explained in an interview published in *The Spectator* in November 2012, this peculiar use of the French alexandrine made it possible to translate the rhythm, occasional rhymes and meters embedded in Rimbaud's poetic prose: "Without that constriction of form, I could get no angle of attack on the material. I wanted the dreamlike imagery to rhyme, chime, and echo: to make some kind of music to my ear" (O'Malley). This quotation further echoes what Roman Jakobson famously wrote:

Paronomasia reigns over poetic art, and whether its rule is absolute or limited, poetry by definition is untranslatable. Only creative transposition is possible: either intralingual transposition – from one poetic shape into another, or interlingual transposition – from one language into another, or finally intersemiotic transposition – from one system of signs into another, e.g. from verbal art into music, dance, cinema, or painting. (Jakobson 266)

Moreover, as a regular feature of Carson's oeuvre, the structure of the book is quite rigorous, being made up of two parts of eleven poems separated by an Interlude made of a prose piece entitled "*Tale (Conte)*" (36). The collection is introduced by another entitled "*Vigil (from Veillées)*" (15) and is concluded by a Coda with a much longer text, the title "*Genius*" (59) also deriving directly from the original "*Génie*". These three prose parts are very close to the French versions, unlike the rest of the poems in alexandrines. Furthermore, contrary to *The Alexandrine Plan*, in which the French poems were put side by side with his own English versions, Carson has chosen not to reproduce Rimbaud's text, as the form is here radically different from the original. This is why a line by line analysis of Rimbaud's text to be put alongside Carson's would be pointless. The purpose of the French poet might be seen as a way of anticipating free verse, by visually introducing the rhythm of speech in poetry. That of Carson appears as the reverse process, since he restored the rhyming lines of verse, to the exception of the three prose texts already mentioned which are used as a structuring device. Curiously enough, the end result in both poets is a very tense scansion which contributes to the poetic tension, by conferring to it an eruptive and incantatory beat.

The book *In the Light Of* thus acquires a unity of style and form, and the music comes from the garlands of rhymes and words whose sounds hang on to each other to form endlessly modulating refrains, in short "poetry begun again", ("*la poésie recommencée*" – Bonnefoy 153).

Translating or renegotiating Rimbaud

As he explained in the introduction to the book and in the interview previously mentioned, Carson found that a literal translation was flat and without interest, as was the case in his opinion, with the recent translation of *Illuminations* published by the American poet John Ashbery – a poet whom he otherwise admires, or rather admired, it seems. Indeed, he felt comforted in his translations of Rimbaud’s prose poems by looking at the various translations into English which existed on the market. Furthermore, as he rather humorously recalled, it seems that he got the inspiration for the alexandrine verse from a dream he had in which Rimbaud advised him. Of course, it was more likely some form of association of ideas which emerged over time. In Carson’s own words, translation became “more a renegotiation, perhaps, than a reinvention” (O’Malley), which recalls Umberto Eco’s conception of translation:

Between the purely theoretical argument that, since languages are differently structured, translation is impossible, and the commonsensical acknowledgment that people, in the world, after all, do translate and understand each other, it seems to me that the idea of translation as a process of negotiation (between author and text, between author and reader, as well as between the structure of two languages and the encyclopedias of two cultures) is the only one that matches our experience. (Eco 34)

To some extent, the poetry of Rimbaud was the intertextual zone where the poet Carson found his inspiration and the source of his writing, even though the gap between the two languages was too wide to be breached, and this obliged him to add new phrases, as a complement to, or a comment on what Rimbaud had written. This addition is a frequent occurrence in Carson’s translation, which contributes to creating a new poem with different resonances or variations. Actually, the end result is sometimes “poles apart” from the original, to use Carson’s so-called translation or rather transposition of one of Rimbaud’s pieces: “*Métropolitain*” (24). In many poems, Carson has added phrases, or even entire lines, which act as commentaries or interpretations of Rimbaud’s prose poems. In the poem “*Cities*”, allusions to Belfast, his native city, which is still at times the theater of unrest and violence, can be felt when Carson mentions “security barriers. It fairly puts their backs / up, I can tell you” (46), or: “Mind / you, it’s inexplicable, this part of the town” (46). Further on, there are echoes from his famous poem “*Belfast Confetti*” in: “Where might they be found? Which way to go?” (47):

My name? Where am I coming from? Where am I going?
A fusillade of question marks. (Carson, *Collected Poems* 93)

More prosaic phrases punctuate his poetry like: “When the bit comes to the bit” (42) or personal hints like “for all the cynicism that I vaunt” (42) in the long poem “*On the Road*” which “translates” Rimbaud’s title “*Enfance*”. Humorous allusions dot Carson’s text, such as the “forty shades of greenery” (39) in the poem just quoted. In a similar vein, Carson has altered Rimbaud’s original version - “*quel ennui, l’heure du ‘cher corps’ et ‘cher coeur’*” (Rimbaud, *Poésies* 209) into a couplet concluding the first part of this poem, and this reads more like a personal address as it were: “*Quel ennui, the hours of murmuring, ‘Ma chérie, / I know just how you feel... He will come round, you’ll see’*” (39).

The fact that the titles of the poems bear the original French ones placed between brackets makes it possible for the reader to have the references to Rimbaud’s text, as there are sometimes wide variations. Thus, the first poem of Act I, taken from “*Aube*” by Rimbaud has

become: “*As I Roved Out*”(17), which is an Irish song, of which there are many versions, one by an Irish folk music band formed in the 1970s and called *Planxty*, or a much more recent one by Loreena McKennitt. Similarly, the last poem of Act II, from “Jeunesse”, has been turned into “*Twenty Years A-Growing*” (55) which is also the title of an autobiographical work published in 1933 by Maurice O’Sullivan who wrote about his childhood on the Great Blasket Island at the beginning of the 20th century, and depicted an entirely vanished Gaelic way of life. Elsewhere, the French title “Après le Déluge” becomes “*After Me...*” (18), as a pun on the French phrase *après moi le déluge*, meaning: I don’t care what happens after I’m gone... Similarly, the title of Rimbaud’s poem, “Ornières”, has been translated by Carson into “*What Goes Round*” (43), which makes one think of the English expression: “What goes around comes around”. In Act I, the poem “Phrases” is rendered as “*Phases of the Moon*” (26), a reference to W. B. Yeats’s eponymous poem (Yeats 183-188). Furthermore, where Rimbaud had sometimes given somewhat incorrect or familiar English titles to his poems, Carson has made the choice of putting French titles; thus, “Fairy” has become “*Fée*” (29); “Bottom”, with its Shakespearean echoes, has turned into “*La Bête*” (31), and the rather incongruous “Being Beauteous” is rendered as “*Être Belle*” (49). In fact, the reader’s quest is endless and even turns into a game at finding intertextual references.

In his introduction, Carson quoted one of his favorite authors, Walter Benjamin, for whom the task of the translator was to “expand and deepen his language by means of the foreign language” (13), meaning that subject matter was “only one aspect of a text, be it prose or poetry: beside the music of the matter, there is the fact that words apparently similar, can carry different cultural gravities in different languages” (O’Malley). One might even speak of a Carsonian language since some French words and phrases are inserted or fused into the English environment and chosen for their sounds. Let us quote: “haughty haute couture” falsely rhyming with “melancholic sweet amour”, in the poem “*On the Road*” (39), or else “peignoirs” rhyming with “boulevards” in “*Phases of the Moon*” (27). The term “peignoirs”, or “dressing-gowns” in English, is Carson’s choice, since it has no echo in Rimbaud’s poem, where the term “joujou” (toys) is to be found (Rimbaud, *Poésies* 219).

On the whole, there is a “cinematic” aspect to the language, be it that of Rimbaud or that of Carson, as he declared himself in 2012. This is why Carson felt that the only way he could convey the dynamic energy of Rimbaud’s text was by using rhyming couplets of about twelve syllables each, what he called the French alexandrine, although it may be longer or shorter in Carson’s verses: “The strain of the verse form grafted on to Rimbaud’s prose led to hybrid: translation as mutation” (13). As he said on the occasion of a reading of his poems at Boston University during the spring of 2013, form is essential to his poetry, as it “forces you to open that door into ‘elsewhereness’” (Tyler) and this will be my third part.

Poetry and music: “elsewhereness”

As Ciaran Carson also explained in the introduction, the origin of *In the Light Of* was an invitation by Colin Graham to translate seven of Rimbaud’s prose poems for an exhibition at Maynooth College launched under the title “Illuminations” in September 2012. This exhibition which had been posted on the website of the university combined texts and responses by graphic designers. Included were readings of three poems by Carson: “As I Roved Out”, “Fée” and “Snow.” Ultimately, this invitation gave rise to further inspiration for the poet who went on “to translate”, or rather “mutate” as he wrote in the same introduction, twenty-five poems, after having reportedly had a dream in which he was visited by his Muse. The end result is a two-part collection of eleven-line poems each, separated by three prose poems and introduced by names that belong more properly to the field of music: “intro”, “interlude” and “coda”; in other words, a kind of operatic piece in two acts. As with

Rimbaud,² Ciaran Carson's purpose is to convey a new form of music, deriving its essence from the extraneous power of language based on rhythm and harmonics contained in rhymes, consonances and assonances.

Carson has regularly indicated that writing a poem should keep a certain form of spontaneity; it should carry its author, and consequently its reader to a different place from what he thought at the outset. There must definitely be an element of surprise, unexpectedness otherwise there would be no interest or fun in a poem. This is what Carson found in Rimbaud's "prose poems" as he called them: "Poems are devices for learning what you never knew until you wrote the poem. They take you elsewhere. Rimbaud's poetry certainly does anyway: into a world that is eerie, strange, and fantastic" (O'Malley). While straying from the literal meaning of Rimbaud's original, Carson holds to Umberto Eco's theorem that a translation should strive "to create the same effect in the mind of the reader (obviously according to the translator's interpretation) as the original text wanted to create" (Eco 56). This is why Carson has repeatedly, and probably increasingly so, expatiated on the power of words and the influence of "the dream vision" deriving from the sub-genre of Irish song known as "*aisling*", the most typical example of this type of poem would be "1978" in *The Twelfth of Never* (39). This experience was recalled again in another interview:

Where a beautiful woman representing Ireland appears to the poet in his sleep and asks him to vindicate her cause. Sometimes he is accused of writing in English rather than Irish, and this has a deep resonance for me, as someone who was brought up in the Irish language and writes in English. The *aisling* is an interlingual zone, the place where poetry happens. (Michaud)

Indeed, there must be some common points on the part of both poets, in so far as they have reacted viscerally to their surroundings, to contemporary events which have inspired them, sometimes involuntarily, thereby letting themselves be carried away by the power of language; in Carson's words, poems "come out in their own weird and zany logic" (O'Malley). In such situations, the poet "follows the language, and sees where it might lead him, which is usually a very different place from what he thought at the outset" (O'Malley). This element of randomness, which may also be at the core of the process of creation, should not conceal the fact that deep attention is being paid to the music of the verse. Thus Carson has at times adapted Rimbaud's French for the sake of sound, even though this may result in a change of semantics; for instance, in "Lives (*Vies*)", the phrase "la main de la *campagne* [countryside] sur mon épaule" (Rimbaud, *Poésies* 215) becomes "my *companion's* hand on my shoulder" (32) (italics mine).

More generally, the link between poetry and music has always been paramount in Carson's work, were it only for the fact that his public readings have most of the time been accompanied by his singing, playing the flute and/or with the help of his wife Deirdre on the fiddle. In an article devoted to *Last Night's Fun*, a work in prose subtitled "a book about music, food and time" and published by Carson in 1996, Catherine Conan writes that "Ciaran Carson moves the boundaries of written literature because it is informed by his practice as a traditional musician" (91), a practice theorized in an early work, *A Pocket Guide to Irish Traditional Music*.

The numerous alliterations and run-on-lines are part of the musicality of Carson's poetry. Here are a few examples to illustrate this characteristic; the second line of the second poem "*After Me...*": "a hare halted in sweet hay where the harebell sway" (18), followed further down by

Beavers busied themselves building. Tall tassels steamed
in coffee houses. In the mansion, rain still streamed

down the windows, children dressed in mourning black
gazed at engaging images. A door clacked; (18)

There are also echoes within the rhyming pattern which sometimes verge on the humorous wordplay, thus this extract from “*Cities*”: “the waters darkening sporadically with deadly blows. / Bunches of flowers thick as guns or goblets bellow below” (21). In the poem “*Seer*” the concluding tercet rings like a bell, that of John Donne, which Carson has often used in reference to death and man’s destiny:

and more, moreover, sways like a basket let down
opposite the slope, against our face, and we drown
in the blue abyss blossoming below the town. (23) (emphasis mine)

Several factors contribute to the music of Carson’s verse. First, the constant influence of Irish music translates into a wide use of enjambments which, as Sean Crosson has written while quoting the poet, “mimics the movement in traditional music ‘from the end of one unit to the next’ where ‘the beat may be withheld or extended’” (105). The widespread use of repetitions of words or phrases, as well as the frequency of trisyllabic feet, rather than the iambic rhythm traditional to English poetry, give the poem the freedom of natural speech, a bit like the Irish musical form called the reel. Crosson has demonstrated that Carson has reproduced in his poetry the repetitive, cyclical nature of Irish traditional music. However the comparison between the sounds of music and those of language may be at times a little far-fetched, since they belong to very different registers. It might be more apposite to talk about rhythm as Derek Attridge has demonstrated in a study published in 1995:

Rhythm is a patterning of energy simultaneously produced and perceived, a series of alternations of build-up and release, movement and counter-movement, tending towards regularity but complicated by constant variations and local inflection. (3)

The words or the sentences shift from the order of discourse, of language, to the order of music and they articulate or disarticulate one into the other. Similarly the image translates into sound, such mutation, or transmutation being ceaseless. In this way, the order and chaos, coherence and incoherence, organization and anarchy that are to be found in Rimbaud’s poetry, are transmuted into Carson’s. One example among (countless) others would be the third stanza of “*On the Road (Enfance)*” which embodies the anarchic presence of elemental surroundings:

Magic flowers buzzed. Hill slopes rocked him to and fro.
Fabulously elegant monsters performed a mambo.

Clouds fattening and floating tier upon tier
over the high seas gathered from an eternity of tears. (40)

Conclusion

As Carson declared in the interview already mentioned, “Rimbaud is all analogy: one thing continually leading to or becoming another”, a fact that fascinated him in its evanescence: “A seemingly familiar landscape shifts into something bizarre; one is always pleasantly estranged, as one might be on a good drugs trip” (O’Malley). Nothing is ever fixed, the book

functions through an unresolved tension between centrifugal and centripetal forces. The dream of a pure relation with nature or the manifesto in favor of democratic urban modernity, are simultaneously annihilated into a chaos of images. Such a dream has nothing durable to offer, enunciating an image destroys it in the same time as it seems to have reached the acme of its possibilities. In this way, Rimbaud's poetic language as translated by Carson is changeable, objects change from one state to another. Indeed, it is the world itself that this poetry aims at remaking, in its paroxysms and excesses while the poet continues to assert the triumph of art in the face of evil forces but also of death as in *The Alexandrine Plan*, where he paid homage to Edgar Poe in the wake of Stéphane Mallarmé:

Having undergone His final metamorphosis,
The Poet with his sword unscabbarded commands
His generation to arise, who did not understand
Till now that Death had always been His major thesis. (61)

Notes

¹ “One breath opens operatic breaches in the walls – blurs the limits of the hearths, – eclipses the windows, – The length of the vine, one foot resting on a gargoyle, – I have travelled down in this carriage, whose vintage is shown clearly enough by the convex window, the bulging panels, and elaborately-designed seating.” (“Vulgar Nocturne”, translation by Sorrell 2001:289)

² As regards Rimbaud's *Illuminations*, one might also add that it has inspired composers such as Benjamin Britten who, in 1940, set a selection of *Illuminations* to music, using nine poems from the collection. This work, entitled *Les Illuminations for Tenor or Soprano and Strings*, has regularly been performed: at the Proms 2013, on 20th August, in the Royal Albert Hall in London, with the London Symphony Orchestra conducted by Daniel Harding, with Ian Bostridge as tenor. In 1920, the German composer, Arthur Honegger, had published *Pastorale d'été*, a symphonic piece inspired by Rimbaud's poem, “Aube”.

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Elisabeth Delattre is the author of a PhD thesis on the work of the novelist J.G. Farrell and of articles on Farrell, Derek Mahon, Michael Longley, Nuala O'Faolain and Ciaran Carson published in peer-reviewed journals such as *Etudes Irlandaises*, *Estudios Irlandeses* or *Irish Studies Review*. She is a research associate at the Centre for Irish Studies, the CECILLE Centre of the University of Lille 3.

delattre.elisabeth@wanadoo.fr