

**“A MINEFIELD SALTED WITH EYEBRIGHT” : AN URBAN POET’S MUSINGS IN
ON THE NIGHT WATCH AND UNTIL BEFORE AFTER BY CIARAN CARSON**

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Abstract: This paper aims at showing how in *On the Night Watch* and *Until Before After*, two verse collections published respectively in 2009 and 2010, Ciaran Carson used new forms of exploring language and reached another depth while retaining most of the themes and preoccupations that pervaded his whole work.

Key words: verse, language, inter-text, time, memory, vision

*We live in each other’s long shadows.
(Ciaran Carson, *Last Night’s Fun*)*

Very often depicted as the Belfast writer par excellence, Carson has always been deeply interested in form, renewing it regularly upon successive publications. Critics have noticed that the versification adopted in *On the Night Watch*, published in 2009, and *Until Before After*, published in the following year – with (very) short couplets without punctuation – was coeval with the coming of the “Pax Hibernica” in his native country. It appears that Carson had become more “interested in the linguistic nitty-gritty of how things are said”, as he declared in an interview¹. The voice of the poet seems to have become paradoxically much darker and conflicting. Although the writing was spurred by personal events that were a source of deep anxiety, it was dotted with puns and humorous word-plays. On the other hand, the two collections may be seen as heralding a point of arrival, insofar as they take the

¹ In this interview, Carson spoke in somewhat ironic terms of the Peace Agreement: “The comparative peace could be said to have come about because politicians were able to come up with a form of words that appeared to be agreeable to both sides of the conflict. In any event artists respond to whatever is happening”. (Michaud, Jon, “Ciaran Carson interviewed”, *The New Yorker*, May 18, 2009).

poet, and his reader, to the “threshold” of enlightenment. In this search for a meaning beyond life and death, Ciaran Carson departs from the use of the long verse which had been the hallmark of his poetry in the eighties and nineties, in favour of a more minimalist way, already present in *Breaking News* published in 2003. The non-conformist and at times dishevelled form and style of the past has given way to a miniature symphonic portrayal of the human condition constrained by the implacable absurdity of time’s watch. The fugal form of writing, which was central to *For All We Know*, published in 2008, as well as *The Pen Friend* published a year later, has led to a more restrained and compact stylistic composition.

This paper aims at showing the way in which Carson reaches a new depth while retaining most of his themes and beliefs. I shall first examine the form and structure of the books, then see how the burden of the past, and the present, consists of “elegiac repeats”. And finally, it will analyse the depth of his poetry through the prism of the “mask” and its “dispossession”.

Form and structure

On the Night Watch consists of 126 poems of 14 lines each, grouped into three equal parts. As Carson acknowledged upon its publication, the style was

a new departure for me, very short lines of two or three words. In some ways, the lines are like those in my book “Breaking News”, but more ordered: they gesture towards conventional sonnets, if in a skeletal fashion. They all have fourteen lines, written in couplets with space between the couplets. Among other things, they’re about how gaps and silences can affect the syntax of what appears to be said. (Michaud, 2009)

As in *For All We Know*, the sonnet form is subject to transformation or de-creation. This process is further exemplified in *Until Before After*, since only one out of three poems has 14 lines. The second collection is also divided into three sections, each consisting of seventeen groups of two poems of ten lines each, plus a third of 14 lines. The poems are grouped in threes on facing pages. The word “until” appears in every poem of the first part “Until”, just like the word “before” in every poem of the second part – “Before” – and “after” in each poem of “After”. As in *On the Night Watch*, the poems are made up of short couplets dominated by the use of monosyllables. Thus, the sentences follow a slower rhythm, allowing for the unfoldment of new meanings on each successive reading.

More strikingly in *Until Before After* is how familiar phrases become disjointed, as the conjunction “and” is absent, so that individual words are fore-grounded before their place in the sentence becomes apparent. The “seventeen steps” of the last poem refer to the 17 syllables that compose a haiku, a favourite model for the poet. Furthermore, the 153 poems that make up the book have a biblical resonance. It is the same number of fish that Christ’s disciples had caught after casting their empty net to the right side of their boat. The word “cast” is also repeatedly used in Carson’s poems, as well as a multiplicity of ways to catch a fish. This represents an important moment in theology since John (like Carson) thereby signified the full extent of the earthly world, as there were reputedly 153 known species of fish in the New Testament.

As elsewhere in his work, Ciaran Carson’s use of numbers is quite significant. By giving his poetry a strictly repetitive framework he allows freedom of expression for every variation. This technique may derive from a Neo-Platonic medievalist tradition. In this context, according to Paul Zumthor, numbers “govern space and time, as well as the individual being, society and things to which one and the other are joined”² (Zumthor 402). By using a number to “integrate it to an order”³

² “régissent l’espace et le temps, de même que l’individu, la société et les choses auxquelles sont joints l’un et l’autre” (Translation mine, as well as for all subsequent translations from the French).

(Zumthor 405), one witnesses “the latent harmony in objects, souls, acts, that is to say the solidarity that unifies them.”⁴ (Zumthor 406).

Elegiac repeats

The grieving, elegiac tone of the opening group of *Until Before After*, caused for the most part by the fear of losing someone, gives rise to a series of remembrances and evocations of memories. It considers the possibilities of loss and death, while stressing the significance of time and hope. The presence of past writers might be seen as a way for the poet to find solace in previous literary experiences. A few poems in the volume, nine in all, cite, verbatim, parts of Gerard Manley Hopkins’s journals. Let us take the example of “Before the storm” (Carson 2010, 63) taken from Hopkins’s Journal written during the summer of 1873:

July 22. Very hot, though the wind, which was south, dappled very sweetly on one’s face and when I came out I seemed to put it on like a gown as a man puts on the shadow he walks into and hoods or hats himself with the shelter of a roof [...] (House, 233).

Carson has reproduced, with two minor alterations, this fragment from Hopkins’s very long and abundantly punctuated sentence. However, he has broken it up, giving it a skeletal aspect that emphasizes the words. Here, Carson is doing what Edward Thomas did, after Robert Frost’s suggestion: turning prose into poetry. It is to be noted that some of Carson’s poems came from his reading of a recently edited version of Thomas’s poetry by Edna Longley, as he indicated in the post-face. Indeed, the importance of memory is central to both poets, as well as the role of Nature in its relation to Man. Memory is also related to a licence to play with

³ “ pour l’intégrer à un ordre”

⁴ “l’harmonie latent dans les objets, les âmes, les actes, c’est-à-dire la solidarité qui les unifie”

syntactical order, the “inversion, reversion and other quirks of sequence” (Longley 23). Moreover, as in Carson’s previous work, one should not forget the influence (or presence?) of James Joyce. Or others, such as Borges or Italo Calvino, as regards the evocation of a landscape, whether urban or rural:

James Joyce’s ‘Dubliners’ or ‘Ulysses were always an example for me as a boy as to how to render the sounds of a city – bar talk, street-noise – into language. W. G. Sebald is also a writer I much admire. Italo Calvino’s depiction of an imaginary landscape, in his ‘Baron in the Trees’, is wonderful. (Michaud, 2009)

As for Belfast, which had been central to his work, it seems to have been relegated to the background, although it comes back in the form of references to *The City and The City* by China Miéville, published in 2009. The following extract from *Until Before After* mirrors the dystopia of Carson’s city, a place where parallel worlds can coexist and never get together:

If Presently

is not before us

where does it reside

if not at present

for the present

as the present city

holds another city

in its interstices

where the hour is

not of the clock

but measured

by indeterminate

distances the distances

by epochs of before

fattening in the now (Carson 81)

The following extract from Miéville's thriller seems to echo the poem just quoted:

But pass through Copula Hall and she or he might leave Beszel, and at the end of the hall come back exactly (corporeally) where they had just been, but in another country, a tourist, a marvelling visitor, to a street that shared the latitude-longitude of their own address. (Miéville 86)

As Carson indicated in the Afterword, some of the poems of *Until Before After* depend on the terminology of Irish traditional dance music, ie 'the tune' and 'the turn'. This is a technique that is also characteristic of *On the Night Watch* in which the last line of a sonnet is taken up verbatim three sonnets later in the title of the poem. As Sean Crosson has demonstrated, Carson's work is frequently characterized by "this sense of returning, a sense of circular motion, that often brings the reader back to the point from which they began, or where beginnings are but a returning to, or

remembering of points left previously” (Crosson 67). This gives the impression of a never-ending series with a constant return to what occurred previously. But there is also an evocation of the “flicker-book” that was at the core of *Fishing for Amber*, a prose work published in 1999.

Carson’s later poetry may be viewed as a meditation on the passing of time, the proximity of death and the persisting character of love. If the human being is subject to degradation, love is undying. The present moment is constantly threatened and therefore defeated. The human being is at a loss when trying to find a reference point that might ease his anxiety in the face of the unknown. A haunting presence and continuing present shared by the protagonists and the reader are interspersed, or emphasized by a series of hospital scenes. Language becomes a music that is made and played together. Through his writing Carson reaches what Maurice Blanchot called “a pure approach”. This involves “the shapeless presence of that absence, the opaque and void opening onto what there is when there is no longer any world, when there is not yet a world”⁵ (31). With this new minimalist approach, Carson expresses his fascination with the timeless otherworld of creation.

Mask and dispossession

According to Samuel Beckett in *The Unnameable*, what matters, at the end, is what remains unspoken and unsaid. The unspoken is also used by Carson, and it questions the territoriality of the character-narrator himself, since it is through language that he may exist (or not). What cannot be named might be this luminous path opening onto a threshold which cannot be transgressed, but which the narrator helps to cross. He leaves us with the desire for silence as language becomes effete and non-existent, and which is exemplified in the sonnet entitled “*Year after Year*”:

⁵ “ devient l’informe présence de cette absence, l’ouverture opaque et vide sur ce qui est quand il n’y a plus de monde, quand il n’y a pas encore de monde.”

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)

Finding himself in the grip of anxiety, i.e. "a siege of sickness", the poet talks about the storms and calms. He also mentions waiting periods and the agony of not knowing the result of a surgery. The tone ranges from fear to the reprieve from fears, before birdsongs make themselves heard in the small hours:

It Is
never

as late as

you think

you think

you know

the small hours

grow

into decades

measuring

eternity

or dawn

to the chink

chink

of the first bird (Carson 2009, 15)

As a cure, all the poet has is a frail key-note of resistance that resounds throughout the book. I.e. "eyebright", the herb that clears vision.

Through a poetic art of exhaustion and extenuation, the writer exorcises the romantic and modernist mystique of originality and thereby, the mad ambition of reincarnating the writing. Thus, he recovers the full materiality of the incarnate voice. By agreeing to be haunted by the language of an ideal and spectral Other, the poet is empowering the challenge of writing. Yet the reflexion conveyed by Carson on originality and exhaustion cannot be reduced to the use of a sterile meta-fiction or meta-poetry. This is because the writer cannot entirely exorcise this dream of incarnation which induces one to write. One sonnet, among others, would exemplify this wish:

Backtracking on

what one

thinks one said

or what one thinks

or thought one

thought was that

said before

the words

in hindsight

now the story comes

out otherwise

the door you walked
through then long

since closed and all

the truer for that (Carson 2010, 67)

The intertextuality in Carson is related to an overcharged and overburdened voice. This voice, which can be called “the ventriloquist”, implicitly embodies a dramatic and prophetic tone. The anxiety of influence that Carson’s work seems to condemn is the one that employs a series of renunciations into which founders the old mystique of writing act as a place of renewal. Far from pushing back the frontiers of the linguistic and aesthetic map, this experience of haunting obliges the writer to retrace the same palimpsest, as we can read in the first poem of *Until Before After*:

It's the Same

old story

but not

as we know

it we thought

it was

a box

until we found

the key on

the verge of

these words (Carson 2010, 14)

Ciaran Carson creates rhapsodies, in the etymological sense of the term. He sews together apparently heterogeneous texts whose idiosyncrasy is transcended into a cultural whole. Poetry cannot escape the exhausting repetitions in which the whole of literature is caught. These repetitions seem to be curiously similar to the poet's ghost that haunts and is condemned to an oxymoronic identity. The writer enters into communion with the dead, or the living, and talks through their voices. Be it that of Hopkins or Miéville, the changeable or motionless, the private or collective voice of the writer revives the past as an infinite substitution work. The myths of literary simultaneity, of eternal return, and anxiety of influence are demultiplied and refracted until exhaustion. Inspiration is always a second even a third hand, because writing is itself caught in an exponential and perennial economic exchange. The literary universe of Carson is a closed one. Insofar their poems and novels reference one another, each becomes analogous to the principle of declension that governs that universe.

Indeed, if the two books may be seen as a new departure as regards the form, they also enclose Ciaran Carson's preoccupation as a writer, since they present themes that occur in his poetic and novelistic work. As suggested in the short parable with which Harold Bloom chose to open his essay *The Anxiety of Influence*, the presence of the possessed voice is merely a memorial trace for the late comers. The bereaved voice is here a cryptic voice, from the Beyond, the sorrowful voice of Mnemosyne. Memory would then, look for amnesia and be condemned to an infinite

elegy, whose metaphor would be the flower “eyebright”, or “euphrasia” or else its goddess “Euphrosyne”. As we can read in the poem entitled “*What Then*”:

what now

ask Euphrosyne

Euphrosyne is good

for memory

& eyesight

flowering as

a common herb

a parasite

of meadowgrass

feeding off

the roots for

remember

to forget is

a common verb (Carson 2009, 139)

Reduced to a form of prosopopeia, the voice of the poet gets exhausted and becomes toneless, as it tries to escape from itself and become something else. The voice of the writer is that of the mask, blurred and strange. Some undeniable nostalgia finds itself expressed in it. Ciaran Carson's voice is an infinite questioning of the power of incarnation of the poetic discourse, because it precedes speech and articulation, standing close to the metamorphosis of the dead into the living. However, this incarnation can only be reached under the degraded form of remembering and foregrounded by the mask of a mechanical rhetoric. To illustrate this we might quote the poem "*Night after Night*":

in room
after book-

filled room
upon storey

after storey
I scan spine

after spine
upon shelf

after shelf
trying to locate

a volume

lodged at

the back

of my mind (Carson 2009, 127)

The poet seems to be searching for a tone that expresses the paradoxical bereaved imagination and the power of the poetic voice. This is shown in the anxious dialogue with death, in which the exacerbated and degraded echo reflects an imaginary of disembodiment. A disembodiment that is powerless to metamorphose the absence.

Conclusion

As Derrida wrote, in conclusion to *La Voix et le phénomène*, the *phoné* is the voice of Icarus who burnt his wings by drawing too close to the white sun of the presence (117). Carson's writing is increasingly characterised by an ever absent presence of pale metaphorical ghosts. The phantoms of the pianist Glenn Gould or the philosopher Walter Benjamin or still that of the contemporary French writer, Patrick Modiano will haunt *Exchange Place*, a fiction work published in 2012. Just as Arthur Rimbaud's last prose work, *Illuminations*, will be the source of *In the Light of*, a verse collection also published in 2012. Carson's poetic voice has become that of the bereaved, looking, perhaps in vain, for what has been lost forever:

From the Larynx

comes the word

articulated by

the vocal tract

configured by

according to

the tongue

the lips the mouth

& pharynx

chords of antiphon

resounding down

the darkling nave

to search out

what

remains unspoken (Carson 2009, 109)

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