

Nor Is He out of It

Ciaran Carson in the Wars

Until now, I had always found it most congenial to think of Ciaran Carson as a secular monk, a hunter of paradigms and a philomath whose independence from the academy enabled a determined unaccountability to voguish canons that ensured in turn the unique energy of his work. Now that he has acquired an abbotric as Professor of Poetry at Queen's University, Belfast, and has to view spreadsheets detailing the allocation of other people's money, it is to be hoped that he finds time to remain susceptible to the Faustian seductions of scholarship. This is not an untypical wish; ever since the publication of *The Irish for No* (1987), an unprecedented and unrepeatable achievement that created an entirely new land of unlikeness in Irish poetry, critics have worried about Carson's ability to keep it up. Reviewing *The Star Factory* in 1998 for the *TLS*, Denis Donoghue worried that Carson was "losing his touch". Certainly, Carson has not since produced a book of poems quite as vivid and rich in implication as those of *The Irish for No*, but it is pertinent to remark that it would have been crazy of him to want to. Part of the genius of that volume is its unbearability, and its narrative poems in particular are on the point of being dangerously compulsive, inscribing a complex circuitry of violence, unplanned and strategised, unanticipated and yet inevitable, from which no escape seemed possible. From the outset (I choose to view *The New Estate* [1976] as a false start), Carson has been alert to the traumatic potential innate within systems of language, even as he seems to exult in exploiting just what such systems can produce.

The English language is a theatre for Carson, in all senses of the word; it is obviously a performative site, but also a theatre of battle and surgery. It is not a place for solemnising about the self or sermonising about society, because it is too unstable a medium for such reflections. At the same time, language is an institution,

and Carson is primarily interested not in the arbitrariness of language, but in how it endlessly reconvenes to produce systems and organisms that cohere, even if they might not make sense. This radically pedantic enthusiasm for systems also explains his career-long interest in expressing the precedence of form over the variabilities of the word, or in the case of *Opera et Cetera* (1996), the letter. The lesson is that language is implicating us constantly, even when it appears to be at its most random or playful. The oft-quoted line from a writer in the *Irish Times* about Carson as “the circus act of Irish letters” is a blandly bone-headed evasion of this lesson, even though it shows the work is so discomforting that it needs to be understood as signifying nothing to such a pundit. To limit Carson’s work in this way, by saying that it is playful and nothing but, is to imply that it is all surface; and furthermore there is the absurd assumption that “play” is an innocent activity, symptomatic of a state of benignly egomaniacal self-delight. This phenomenon is the manifestation of a piss-weak postmodernism that wheedles for release from having to view anything as meaning anything, and from having anybody care. But there are plenty of sickos in the circus, and Carson’s most playful poetry reads as hallucinatory rather than larky. Reading *Opera et Cetera* is like being caught within the grooves of a Captain Beefheart album, but that is not a happy place to be, for all its exhilarations. The real shock of Carson’s poetry, however, does not lie in its indeterminacy (a word that has acquired a baffling simplicity of meaning in critical vocabularies), but rather in its clinging to determinacy even as it is shot at from all sides (and one of Carson’s most acute analyses of conflict is his sense of just how many sides it has). Carson’s language is not playful because there is nothing else to do, rather the relentless invention and re-invention of his writing is a necessary pursuit of poetic nirvana. As Donoghue wrote of Wallace Stevens, “the poet’s gibberish points towards a Utopia of language, in which, the poet’s dealings with fictiveness being what they are, the possible is accorded just as much authority as the actual”. Carson’s gibberish, his *lingua franca et jocundissima*, has always aspired to deliverance from the labyrinth in which he nevertheless works productively. However, history refuses to succumb quietly in Carson, and the pressure of the actual never fails to pop his blowing of Panglossian bubbles. Like Byron, a poet to whom Carson bears significant resemblance, particularly in his use of balladry and narrative, utopianism leaves the poet hypersensitive-

ly open to disappointments and a sense of affliction; the answer to such affliction is to carry on “playing”, best re-defined as a form of waiting for peace.

The recurring image of Babel in the early books suggested that Carson was a simple celebrant of language, i.e., language as a kind of activity centre; but behind that there was always an equally simple regard for the nobility of its premise, a modernist view of the Tower as a site of human achievement rather than as a site of romantic loss and desolation. On this note, then, Nimrod’s line in Dante’s *Inferno*, «*Raphèl mai amecche xabi almi*», is one that we might think Carson was born to translate, but that is because it is untranslatable, the most inscrutable and most innocent thing in all of Hell and literature. This line is as close as Carson can get to the dream of Esperanto. What Carson has to do is translate it so as it remains untranslated and untranslatable; his answer to this conundrum, “*Yin twa magbogani garpaighp boke*”, is the unlikely sound of the Pax Hibernia, a laughable and hellish combination of “Ulster Scots, pseudo-Gaelic Irish and Ulster English” that is nevertheless the sound of the future. If you want it enough.

Carson is a scholar-poet, not a poet-critic or poet-academic, although now he has to become one. The infrequency of his excursions into criticism is regrettable; his review of Seamus Heaney’s *North* rates as the most cant-free but astute notice of early to midlife Heaney ever written, and his response to Jorie Graham’s *Swarm* is about as generously irritated a review as you could read. By comparison with the confidence of Carson as a critic and scholar, some of the initial reviews of Carson’s *Inferno* strike me as a bit nonplussed. Rather than asking the real question, “what is he doing this for?”, critics chose to pretend it was a natural choice, and so set about writing down everything they knew about Dante and his history in English translation, then plonking Carson at the end of the line. The problem with this approach is that it downplays the fundamental ambitiousness and weirdness of the project, and the amount of *chutzpah* it takes to embark upon the *Inferno* (2002) but also to render it in a comparatively short period of time. Until very recently, Carson was free of any academic attachments or other work concerns outside of his writing, having retired from the Arts Council of Northern Ireland in 1998. It could be argued that setting about Dante guaranteed the maintenance of productivity while waiting for other work to appear, and is testament only to the peculiar economy of

the freelance writer. Translation work always invites this allegation, of course. Why would anybody translate, when they could be doing something original? But originality, and Carson's interest in it (which he shares with Muldoon) is not to be underestimated as a facet of his translations, and indeed of his entire output. One of the most compelling aspects of *The Alexandrine Plan's* (1998) versions of Baudelaire, Rimbaud and Mallarmé (and Carson's major work of translation prior to *Inferno*) is their defamiliarisation of these canonical totems. Carson does this through a deliberate and pedantic insistence on bringing them as close as possible to their exact formal origins, rather than rewriting them in his own image (as Robert Lowell did in his *Imitations*). Accustomed to reading Rimbaud for the brio and braggadocio, Carson insists that we read him for his Alexandrines. This seems a bizarrely insular premise for the poet who effectively created poetic Tourettes in *Opera et Cetera*. The impulse behind it is a corrective one, and is even irritating as a consequence, tampering with "our Rimbaud", but it also indicates a seriousness of regard for technique and form as a progenitor of meaning. Furthermore, it is attentive to the scrupulous pedantry and desire for omniscience of little Arthur himself, and restores it as a constituent part of his poetic temperament. The result is a less smooth Rimbaud than ever before, less facetiously rebellious but at the same time more problematic and unassimilable.

It is odd that Dante is probably more familiar iconographically than textually. Say Dante, and you see the heroically contorted torsos of Blake, the prettier sufferers of Doré, or the man himself on the Italian two Euro coin. But a visualised Dante is silent; in *Inferno*, Carson gives him his voice back, and gives us a Dante that he (and we) can read. Furthermore, we are so used to having Dante piecemeal, knowing the quotations from it in *The Waste Land* better than any of its translations, that encountering it entire comes as quite a shock. A harder taskmaster than his immediate Irish forbears, Heaney and Montague, Carson insists we take all of *Inferno* or none at all, an irrefutable academic argument. Poetry as scholarship, and scholarship as poetry; there is no division in Carson between the acquisition of learning and the expression of it. Not a didact extracting moralities, but an eternal student immersed in the intricacies of Dante's system, his infernal adventures are not dedicated to the appropriation of Dante for the expression of lyrical epiphanies apt for a twenty-first century poet

from Northern Ireland. There is no isolation of Ugolino or Paolo and Francesca for tragic effect, no Shakespearisation through soliloquy of the Florentine original. With more weight in its footnotes than its introduction (in reality more of an *apologia*, a statement that in order to read the *Inferno* he was prepared to translate it), Carson insists on the essentially Florentine character of the poem, on its ultimate refusal of translatability into other places.

A mind quick to obvious conclusions will insist that Carson implies the allegorisation of *Inferno* as Belfast (Dis on the Farsnet), as if he should have re-titled it *Five Damage* or something equally lurid. While Carson's introduction does admit a passing relationship with its references to the bastions of North Belfast, and Carson's English is accented by Belfast, he makes it very clear that *Inferno* is an engagement with a history that is particularly Florentine and particularly Dantean. Dante is not justifying the ways of God to man, rather he is manifesting demons that are the product of his own involvement in history. *Inferno* is the product of a local row and the vitriolic erudition of one marginalised against his will; and so, in particular, Canto XXV is powerful because it is so full of damned Florentines, just as Michelangelo's "Last Judgement" is full of devils he knew. Carson's exact contextualisation of his translation of that canto in Dante's account of Florence's history as a colonial city prevents us from presuming to discover too much universality in *Inferno*. His sensitivity to the parochialism of Dante re-invents the *Inferno* as a carnivalesque parade of the city-state; as in Mardi Gras, Hell revolutionises the hierarchies of Florentine society, in which the most powerful have become most wretched. Hell is other people, but they are people subject to one individual's cattle-call. Similarly, one town's vulgate remains unique, and to comprehend it, you have to view it as microscopically as possible; the alternative is the helicopter's eye-view, the conversion of the messily real to an universally flat realism. Dante's Florence and Carson's Belfast do not merge or converge, except at the meta-level where the contemporary poet's fascination with his native city has enabled him to recognise a similarly organised obsession in the work of the Old Master. Every city has its own grammar and syntax, and *Inferno* makes this point so plainly as to make us uncomfortable. You can see now what Dante's Hell resembles, but how would you map out your own?

There is also much less of a redemptive femininity about Carson's Dante than is found in other versions (perhaps

inevitably, given the omission of *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*, where Beatrice really hogs the limelight). Indeed, Carson's poetic universe has always tended to be a Mr Universe, in which female figures are obscured, and this is often what gives his work a bleakness of superficial aspect that the *jouissance* of his language has to attempt to dispel. But Carson is not an inveterately macho writer. Rather he sees that the glum scenarios that have persisted in the city-state of Belfast manifest a masculine poetics of finitude, and by way of response he has adapted a disruptive and interruptive method of representation—a poetics of the infinitesimal. You could call it Kristevan.

Carson's care in representing the origins of Dante's entire vision (of Hell, at least) means we get all of Dante, and so the classical virtues of grace, poise and poignancy have to contend with his bile and his raging disgust. Paolo and Francesca tell a beautiful tale, but Dante just as often engages in scatological knockabout with Cerberus (as in Canto VI), or produces an Ovidian idiom, as in the opening of Canto XXX (rendered with an aptly Ovidian flow by Carson). Canto XVII combines Greek mythology with Revelation and the fables of Æsop to render the excess of nature that is Geryon, while Canto VIII has Dante sounding like *Dracula's* Renfield or *Frankenstein's* Igor:

“O Master, great is my desire
to see this arrogant bastard dunked in swill
before we leave behind this lake of ire.”

There are moments when you realise the old truth that indeed English is not as melodious a language as Italian (Canto II's rhyming of “journey” and “attorney” being a case in point), and thus proving that you do need to be either a lunatic or something a good deal better to take on the translation of Dante. This is a virtue of Carson's work here, however, that as he remains faithful to *terza rima* he nevertheless relishes the rougher music of English that has been squeezed into the form.

If the translation has moments that are a little too vulgate for me—“flax machine”, “Vamoose you monster”—there are also times, and particularly in Canto XXI and XXII's depiction of the devils, where Carson's enjoyment in matching the invention of Dante's curses and *Inferno* acquires a learned balladic force that is especially reminiscent of the war cantos of *Don Juan*, the best of

Byronism. Carson senses the Cain in Dante, as Byron sensed it in himself, a consciousness of his own exile that goes beyond lament and has acquired a corrosive menace. The notion of correspondence permeates *Inferno*, then, as Carson's city-smartness allows him to connect to Dante's exiled mnemonics, and in particular to his sense of slightly disconnected witness.

This concept of witness is fundamental to Carson's latest collection, *Breaking News* (2003), a book that is set in the margin between war and peace, breakthrough and collapse. It's worth remarking the socio-economic significance of Carson's peculiarly eclectic and eccentric formalism. If Carson's expansive commonweal, so regularly identifiable in the long lines of his work in the 1980s, appears to have shrunk with the apparent objectifications of *Breaking News*, which adopts the metrics of William Carlos Williams (circa *Spring and All*), we should admit that his apparent openness and demonstrations of exuberance have always been defined by their regular confinement, and that long line was never irregularly Whitmanic. Carson manifests a Nimrodian desire to achieve ultimate expressibility, a Utopian impulse to make things cohere, refusing to permit fragments to lapse into unrelated isolation (he had already given the lie to such an unproblematic imagism, with his reminders in *Belfast Confetti* [1989] that the haiku is not a form of crystalline one-off, but rather a part of a narrative chain). Carson's impulse for hunting down paradigms and searching for an ideal language (a quest which contains a personal homage to his father's commitment to the cause of Esperanto) remains the same, whatever formal system he has appropriated, and despite whatever formal differences exist between a short and a long line, reminiscent of the Williams of your choice.

Breaking News features a return through the Anglo-Irish war correspondent William Howard Russell to the Crimean place names that provoked such excitement in *The Irish for No* and the breaking type of *Belfast Confetti*; it also regathers the Napoleonic colours of *The Twelfth of Never* (1998). Carson is attempting to reconcile what appear to be utterly alien modes of perception, the objectifications of Williams and the high-Romantic flourishes of Géricault. Yet Carson's language in *Breaking News* is still his own, and his idiolect refuses to be broken apart altogether by the apparent disruptions of Williams. This is misrepresenting Williams, however. If we think of his forms as Williams did, then

appropriating them is another attempt at finding a solution to conflict in aesthetic terms. It's worth recalling that *Spring and All* is also a sequence, a system rather than a random sample of atoms. That said, Carson writing as William Carlos Williams can be viewed as a reversal of the burning of the library in *Paterson* and its aggressive symbolic nationalism. Carson's entire *œuvre* is readable as a fastidious and exhausting process of remembering the imaginative systems that Williams had sought to destroy. But in embracing Williams's poetics in the sequence of *Breaking News*, a departure is clear. Carson has tuned into Williams's aspiration for a new poetic and mode of perception, and is apparently prepared to strip his poetry of all its old clothes. Yet as the book unfolds, newness remains elusive, and the borrowed form constrains Carson to a narrow range of expression that ultimately carries an affective force unprecedented in his work.

The first poem in the sequence of *Breaking News*, "Belfast", tunes in to the elemental juxtapositions of classical haiku, poising east against west (the real opposition in Belfast which relegates more familiar concerns of North and South), and also immediately Carson signals disagreement with Williams even as he adopts his metrics. If Williams celebrated the naturalisation of technology, for Carson the elements of nature are enmeshed messily with the desolations and isolations of obsolete technology. Belfast, or more particularly the natural landscape that is both within and surrounding it, is permeated with the rust of used-up metal. A book full of "rust", there is a strong sense of aftermath in *Breaking News*, but also one of an ineradicable stain. This is still a book about Belfast, but it is also an extended sequence exploring the corruption of pastoral. An eco-poetical Carson is the last thing I expected to find, but it is a logical manifestation of his combined impulses of cultural conservation and political idealism.

The second poem, "Home", begins with irresistible motion, as Carson describes himself "hurtling" towards the city that appears huger than ever before owing to its plural institutions ("shipyards/ domes/ theatres")—an effect that Carson gleaned from Williams's "The Forgotten City", a poem he re-writes later in *Breaking News*. In the city, a familiar melodrama appears to lie in store as he remarks a "British Army/ helicopter/ poised". However, the flying panopticon remains "motionless", and the poem grinds to a halt as well. Carson stanches rhythm, image and anything else you may call poetic or narrative, and what had

appeared familiar and inevitable is now quite the opposite. By design, the poem moves to a new page with these lines that suggest a tentative sense of peace that may or may not turn out to be a simple pause or *faux pas*:

motionless
at last

I see everything

Just as Muldoon's "Cows" announced a need for decommissioning the "Irish imagination" in the 1990s, so Carson here attempts to project beyond poetic cease-fire, imagining an end to the narratives of combat and the achievement of a discursive peace. Seeing everything conventionally signifies omniscience of a supervisory kind (helicopter vision), but here it implies both having the peace to view things in their totality and in their specificity, and Carson's attachment to all the bric-à-brac that fills the lyrics of our culture is as much in evidence here as it was in his writing before the peace. While to say "I see everything" may suggest a re-invention of himself as a poet, there is still apprehension here that this newly arrived state of consciousness requires a new language to articulate it, and that this language awaits discovery in the book.

This sequence is irresistibly drawn to re-visiting the poems and sites of Carson past, and here is where another habit of Dante's has been absorbed. "Trap" recalls the "backpack" radios of *Belfast Confetti* and *First Language* (1993), but in this volume Carson describes their static through broken, as opposed to hyperactive, English:

I don't
read you

what the

over

Superficially, this is as fragmentary a poem as Carson has ever produced, bearing comparison to the frittered text of Pound's "Papyrus", yet there is still immense suggestibility here, a menace latent in whatever context we can provide for an utterance such as "what the". As elsewhere in the book, the question is whether

“over” means “over”. Precariousness leads to a resigned pessimism at times, as when “Blink” revises the tentative celebration of vision of “Home” earlier in the book. Carson’s recognition that “everyone is watching everybody”, despite the apparent end of hostilities, in the surveillance culture of late-capitalism effectively subverts his earlier claim that “I see everything”. What good is such a claim when it is hard to find someone who doesn’t? To witness is now no longer a matter of choice, but rather an abiding phenomenon of reality, and an indictment of the passivity that such a culture normalises.

There are also poems here that witness parts of the city that he has never seen; “The Forgotten City” describes Carson’s exploration (via Williams) on a bicycle of the bourgeois Outer Ring (Dante again) Road of Belfast, a place full of bystanders and the quietly uninvolved, not to mention the Roselawn crematorium (and again). This does not mean they are innocent of what has been going on elsewhere, and they are figures that are creepily inert. At the same time, what registers most powerfully is Carson’s realisation that these people actually exist, and that they add yet another dimension to his increasingly disconcerted sense of unfamiliarity with the city, the last thing that one would have expected from him. The poem “Exile” (a word that has excited Carson more than any other) takes him back to his most familiar terrain, the streets off the Falls that were first visited in *The Irish for No* and *Belfast Confetti*. But the freakiness of the excursion to the Outer Ring remains, and Carson doubts the regenerative ability of his poetry in the face of Belfast’s place in history as yet another battleground:

it is

as much
as I can do

to save
even one
from oblivion

Perhaps death has undone too many. This accounts for the powerful sense of downbeat imminence in many of these poems, as with “Théodore Géricault: *Farrier’s Signboard*, 1814” which views Géricault’s painting as an undecided prophecy that Waterloo was

to be either a triumph or a human disaster. “Francisco Goya: *The Third of May 1808, 1814*” shares a date with Géricault, and it also questions automatic interpretation of the painting as a document of heroic revolutionary defiance. The posture of the white-shirted man is readable as a form of madness, or alternatively as another testament to the agony of witness. Whichever, the emphasis is on him as victim rather than hero, and it wipes out the workings of other poets on the same painting. It is very curious that “Edward Hopper: *Early Sunday Morning, 1939*”, which finishes the sequence of poems in the Williams mode, should be yet another one about a painting by an artist who inspired earlier Carson poems, and again provided with a date that reads as a portent, albeit a more contemporary one. What it achieves is a rejection of the sunny-side-up aspect of American modernism, and perhaps therefore a calculated rebuke again to that perception of Williams. More immediately, it reacts against the born-again belligerence of the present-day United States. The poem ends with yet another negation of the new beginning that “Home” had projected at the start of the volume:

another shadow
falls

from what
we cannot see

to what
we cannot see

dawn
before the War

The second sequence of *Breaking News*, “The War Correspondent”, contains seven poems that rely heavily on the writings of the journalist William Howard Russell, but they also read like *ancien* Carson in poetry and prose, as they provide a series of inventories (sometimes unbearable, sometimes glorious), unforgettable lists of things that you do not in fact want to remember. For all the apparent obsession with form, facts and detail that is palpably there in Carson’s writing about the city, such accumulations of data and systems are always performed in

a slippery context, and amnesia is always easy. The poems in “The War Correspondent” present Russell as a man damned to witness things that he wished he had never seen, and furthermore condemned to recreating them in language.

Significantly, Russell is appropriated in the first sequence of *Breaking News* as well, in the “The Indian Mutiny”, a poem that acts as a decisive centre for the volume’s field of concerns, exploring how history tends to prove the eco-poetic analysis that the human genius for construction is matched by its appetite for destruction. The present continuous of violence has been so compulsive in Carson’s work since *The Irish for No* that there has been no time or space for the relieving intervention of lament. Carson’s poetry is post-elegiac, post-tragic, and has always been. It has refused to convey anything about war and terror other than that it is nonsense, and therefore does not merit any effort to make it sensible. In “The War Correspondent”, he pointedly refuses to concede meaningfulness to the accumulated horrors witnessed by Russell. What this represents is hyper-responsibility, an attentiveness to the things embroiled in events rather than a narrative interpretation of them (and here is where Williams’s mantra “No ideas but in things!” acquires a particular compassionate focus for Carson). Throughout *Breaking News*, things have war stories to tell: “Some Uses of a Dead Horse” pursues a circular economy as Carson relates the conversion of carcass into goods, and a post-Marxist horror of use and exchange value is evident as well in “Waste Not”, where the natural order is corrupted through its ready conversion into *materiel*. In “Horse at Balaklava, 1854”, the horse’s bit and tackle is excruciatingly witnessed as surviving its flesh, and “Shop Fronts” details the militarisation of everyday commerce: “*Wilkinson Sword*”, “*Warhorse*” tobacco. This horror of use combines with the idea of a unsalvageable nature in “Skip”, where Carson aligns himself with battlefield scavengers, “gleaning” a skip for an unused notebook in emulation of the “harvesting” of “gold braid and buttons” described two poems earlier in “Waste Not”. A later poem, “Harvest”, demands an end to landscape, an end to pastoral and all the corruptions it invites. Spring and Nothing.

Just as the Hopper poem can be read as an attempt to retrieve a state of pre-war grace since it implies a sense of terrible immittance, Carson’s book announces that the news breaking is that of a tentative peace. But it would be premature to interpret this as

licensing an entire break from history, given the other wars (both foreseeable and unknown) lying in wait. These poems amount to an Adornoesque indictment of culture's aggressive merging of consumerism and militarism, and they combine to make a stringent, astonishing whole that is unsentimental, anti-mythic and provocatively moral in its implications. One of the paradoxes of Carson's work here is that it has taken the retrospection of aftermath to witness adequately the horror of what has gone before. From being a systematic recording angel of the processes, immediacy and nonsense of violence, *Breaking News* has Carson analysing and commenting upon its legacy, feeling exiled and dislocated by his experience of Belfast as never before, his language vulnerable to a shady verbleness. From a peace that resembles Purgatory, Carson has begun charting a hell of his own.



