Ciaran Carson
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Introduction

The publication in 2008 of Ciaran Carson’s *Collected Poems*, timed to coincide with the poet’s sixtieth birthday, is an obvious milestone along the way of his development as a writer. Leafing through its nearly 600 pages, which include work from eight principal collections produced over a period of more than thirty years, the reader is likely to be struck by the extraordinary scope and resourcefulness of Carson’s writing. Experimental rather than self-consciously avant-garde, Carson’s poetry exhibits a remarkable linguistic inventiveness, formal complexity, and intellectual daring, always making a concerted effort to communicate with the reader yet also foregrounding the resistances that poetic language affords to habitual modes of perception and understanding. His writing often seems intoxicated with the myriad sensations and experiential atoms it attempts to register and record, wielding a microscopic focus upon the particular that freely transmits a MacNeicean awareness of ‘the drunkenness of things being various’ to his readers. Equally vertiginous is his almost paranoiac intuition of concealed patterns and linkages, so that it often appears that an infinity of connections may proceed from a single observation. Carson first made his name as a brilliant anatomist of the city and urban experience, topics that continue to occupy a central role in his aesthetic; but recently he has emerged as a Borgesian miniaturist of the universal, exploring the fractal worlds within worlds created in and by language.

His *Collected Poems* admirably illustrates this and other aspects of his creative evolution, yet it is also in some ways necessarily deficient in conveying the full extent of Carson’s versatility and volatility as a writer. For instance, an artificial distinction seems to be drawn between his original poetry and his books of translations, so that there is no place in the *Collected Poems* for *The Alexandrine Plan* or for the versions of poems by Stefan Augustin Doinas that originally appeared in *Opera Et Cetera*. At the same time, the volume’s inclusion of his versions of Japanese haiku in *Belfast Confetti* and translations from the French,
Irish, and Latin in *First Language* admits the prominence of translation to Carson’s own creative practice. Of course, there is no room here for Carson’s accomplished and highly distinctive prose texts, which have nonetheless assumed increasing importance within his oeuvre in recent years. Furthermore, whatever claims to comprehensiveness the *Collected Poems* might make are qualified by the fact that Carson has swiftly followed it with a new collection of poems, *On the Night Watch*, and a novel, *The Pen Friend*. Consequently, one of the key challenges that Carson’s work makes to readers and critics alike is, not of assimilating, but of engaging adequately with its sheer variorum multiplicity and miscellaneity, which can be by turns exhilarating and forbidding.

With such challenges firmly in mind, this book seeks to undertake a detailed and comprehensive study of all of Carson’s work to date, in poetry, prose, and translations. It is structured thematically rather than chronologically or on a book-by-book basis, in an effort to identify and appraise recurrent tropes or concerns as they are manifest across his oeuvre and in the different genres in which he writes. Because 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, I have found it productive to proceed by way of zigzags and switchbacks rather than in a straight line, and hope that the reader will also. As my subtitle suggests, an abiding frame of reference throughout is the nexus of concerns linking space, place, and writing; and it is primarily as an Irish urban writer that I consider Carson here, the most important figure in this regard since James Joyce. Indeed, Carson has acknowledged the influence of Joyce’s ‘rendering of the music of the city’ upon his work in a recent interview. For Neil Corcoran, Joyce’s influence is most evident in Carson’s remarkable ability to define ‘the contours of a social and psychic map of the city’.

Certainly, an astute awareness of the interdependence of topography and psychology is present in the work of both writers. Joyce famously told Frank Budgen that in *Ulysses* he wanted ‘to give a picture of Dublin so complete that if the city one day suddenly disappeared from the earth it could be reconstructed out of my book’. A similar desire to represent the city both comprehensively and in its infinite particularity is apparent in Carson’s depictions of Belfast, though, like Joyce, he is keenly attuned to the city’s symbolic overtones and oneiric potential – the fastidious recording of realistic detail is only one facet of his engagements with urban space.

Of course, Joyce wrote *Ulysses* not in Dublin but in Trieste, Zurich,
and Paris, whereas Carson has lived and worked in Belfast all of his life; yet he is also capable of seeing his home place through the eyes of an outsider or resident alien, imbuing it with a sheen of estrangement that qualifies any too easy accord between self and place. This combination of proximity and distance, intimacy and irony produces an effect akin to that of parallax, whereby shifts in perspective lay bare the processes through which a sense of place is constructed and deconstructed. As a consequence, Carson’s writing exemplifies Shane Alcobia-Murphy’s comment that ‘Northern Irish writers and artists are doing more than simply undermining the stable narratives of “place”; their work functions as intense and recondite explorations of the power relations that inhere within those narratives’. My sense of the centrality of issues of space and place in Carson’s work is intended to be supple enough that lateral and radial links to his related concerns with language and narrative, memory and history, violence and power can be forged in the chapters that follow. Nonetheless, before proceeding to consider these, it may be useful to trace in some more detail the curvature of his career arc thus far, from The Insular Celts to On the Night Watch, and to sketch in some details of the biographical, literary, and historical contexts that will be important to my readings of his texts.

Ciaran Gerard Carson was born on 9 October 1948 in Belfast, Northern Ireland, to William Carson (or Liam McCarráin as he liked to be known) and Mary Carson (née Maginn). He is one of four children and the family lived initially at 100 Raglan Street in the Lower Falls area of West Belfast, which serves as a recurrent locus in his writing, before moving in the late 1950s to Mooreland Drive, Andersonstown, the ‘new estate’ of his first book. His father’s job as a postman and flair for storytelling have both made significant impressions upon Carson’s means of navigating the city and handling narrative, while his frequent recourse to metaphors of weaving and patchworks owe something to the influence of his mother, who had worked as a doffer in a Falls Road linen mill. Both of his parents learned Irish as a second language, and it was used exclusively as the language of the home, the Carson children learning English only at school or on the streets. This formative bilingualism not only lies behind Carson’s wide-ranging interests in translation but also inflects his awareness of how social and political discourses function in Northern Ireland, making him ‘deeply suspicious of language in general’, though ‘not averse to the pleasure to be had from words’. Carson was educated at St Gall’s and Slate Street schools, then at St Mary’s Christian Brothers School and Queen’s University, Belfast, where he studied...
English and attended some of the last meetings of the Group, a now-legendary writers’ workshop established by Philip Hobsbaum in 1963.

Although the Group’s importance has been both over-stated and too-strenuously denied, Heather Clark contends that by bringing writers such as Seamus Heaney, Michael Longley, Seamus Deane, and Paul Muldoon, and critics including Michael Allen, Edna Longley, and Arthur Terry together in a context of discussion and debate, its meetings provided ‘a space within which the poets could define themselves against each other’. Similarly, Fran Brearton describes the Group as an ‘aesthetic collision ground’ that established a matrix of influences that has shaped the work of many Northern Irish poets long after its demise. Carson’s involvement with the Group in the early 1970s was belated and fairly peripheral, though it played a role in introducing him to his contemporaries. He recalls it as a less rigid affair than Hobsbaum’s original seminar, ‘a moveable feast’ that often convened in the pubs close to the university:

It would have been in one or other of these places that I first got to know the likes of the poets Michael Longley, Seamus Heaney, Trevor McMahon, Robert Johnstone and Paul Muldoon, the prose writer Bernard MacLaverty, the painter and poet Jack Pakenham and the critic Michael Allen; later Medbh McGuckian and John Morrow. We would talk books, sport, politics, music, art and the weather. I think we were mutually supportive, but heavy slagging was also par for the course.

At this time, Frank Ormsby was editor of the journal *The Honest Ulsterman* where Carson began to publish poems and book reviews, and Ormsby was also instrumental in the publication of Carson’s first pamphlet, *The Insular Celts*, in 1973. The 14 poems included therein are relatively conventional in their forms and subject matter, but announce the decisive influence of early Irish poetry and disclose their acute observations of landscape and human occupations in ways that anticipate some of his subsequent work.

A wry note appended to *The Insular Celts* described Carson, with telegraphic brevity, as being ‘at present unsatisfactorily employed as civil servant’ (*IC*, 20), and a stint of teaching would follow before he was appointed to a more congenial post as Traditional Arts Officer with the Arts Council for Northern Ireland in 1975. This was to be an immensely important role for Carson both personally and for the development of his poetry and prose writing, which have extensively adapted formal models and themes from Irish music, songs, and oral traditions such as storytelling. In the same year he also published a sharply critical
review of Seamus Heaney’s volume, *North*, the appearance of which marked ‘a watershed in Northern Irish literary relations’, igniting a series of often fierce debates over the relationships between poetry and politics, myth and history against the backdrop of the Troubles. Carson’s review set the terms in which future interventions would be made, and his criticisms are threefold. Firstly, he notes that Heaney himself ‘seems to have acquired the status of myth, of institution’, something confirmed for him by Edward McGuire’s idealised portrait of the poet, and *North* succumbs to this notion in its grandiosity and ambition. In poems such as ‘Funeral Rites’, Heaney appears to be ‘trying to emulate Eliot, or Yeats, or both, in a quest for importance’. Secondly, the collection’s unevenness arises from Heaney’s competing impulses towards precision and abstraction, with abstraction finally winning out and finding expression in ‘a superstructure of myth and symbol’ – specifically, through parallels between the Northern Irish conflict and Iron Age fertility rites or Viking customs. Carson bemoans Heaney’s transformation ‘from being a writer with the gift of precision, to become the laureate of violence – a mythmaker, an anthropologist of ritual killing, and apologist for “the situation”, in the last resort, a mystifier’. Thirdly, and most importantly, he argues that Heaney neglects the political consequences of the violence he anatomises and, in doing so, tends to elide history into myth: ‘It is as if he is saying, suffering like this is natural; these things have always happened; they happened then, they happen now, and that is sufficient ground for understanding and absolution.’ On the contrary, such transhistorical coherence is only achieved by ‘falsifying issues’ and ‘applying wrong notions of history instead of seeing what’s before your eyes’. Besides being an oblique expression of what Harold Bloom calls ‘the anxiety of influence’, Carson’s commentary on *North* reveals a good deal about his own priorities and presuppositions as a young writer. Firstly, it shows that he tends to deprecate the authority arrogated to the poet as spokesman; secondly, that he values precision and exactitude in poetry’s dealings with the world; and thirdly, that he abhors the obfuscations of abstraction and myth where matters of history and politics are concerned.

Some of these characteristics are highlighted by Tom Paulin in an admiring review of Carson’s first full-length collection, *The New Estate*, which was published the following year. Expressing a strong preference for those poems dealing with ‘the mysterious idealism’ of work and craft, culture and industry over his occasional flirtations with Celticism, Paulin praises Carson’s ‘deft realism’ and ‘mysterious, exact clarity’, affirming
that it is for ‘a realism of subject, with a novelist’s interest in ordinary life, that The New Estate is notable’.\textsuperscript{15} Paulin also remarks on the balance Carson achieves between ‘studied formal perfection’ and ‘real contact with life’, a balance maintained in his pamphlet, The Lost Explorer, which appeared in 1978 and extended his thematic concerns to take in travel and ethnographic encounters.\textsuperscript{16} However, while he continued to publish occasional poems in the following years, Carson’s increasing immersion in the culture of traditional music and song appears to have led to a growing disaffection with lyric poetry, and a long break ensued before the publication of his next collection, The Irish for No, in 1987. Commenting upon this period, he has said that poetry seemed to him ‘a self-centred, precious kind of business’: ‘Whereas with the music – you’re right up against the stuff, it’s hitting you from all sides, it’s alive, here in front of your very eyes and ears, right now. That’s a very attractive immediacy. It’s not about withdrawing into your cell to compose these careful utterances about life.’\textsuperscript{17} Ironically, the mastery of form and scrupulous concision that are evident in his early poetry may also have contributed to a sense of deadlock, the well-made poem appearing ill-suited to engaging meaningfully with immediate social, public concerns. As David Trotter has remarked, ‘an appetite for public matters means an appetite for matters that will never yield to coherence or consolation. It means learning the language in which such matters are incoherently and unconsolingly discussed.’\textsuperscript{18} While Carson was occupied in playing, recording, and writing about traditional music in the intervening years, culminating in the publication of his Pocket Guide to Irish Traditional Music in 1986, he was also, consciously or unconsciously, looking for ways of approximating its immediacy, spontaneity, and rich sociality in writing. A significant complicating factor is likely to have been the characteristic dilemma for the Northern Irish poet of ‘finding a voice that speaks to and through the conflict’.\textsuperscript{19}

The Irish for No made a significant impact upon its publication. John Goodby describes its effect as that of a ‘radical transformation of the Northern Irish poetry scene’ during the late 1980s,\textsuperscript{20} and its innovations were both formal and thematic. Immediately striking was its use of a very long line, often stretching beyond the right-hand margin of the page, for which there were several models: the work of the American poet C.K. Williams, especially his volume Tar; the rhythms and pacing of an Irish four-bar reel; storytelling and pub-talk; the 17 syllables of Japanese haiku; and the elongated phrases of ‘sean-nos’ singing.\textsuperscript{21} Equally important, however, were its decisive and imaginatively charged
explorations of the city of Belfast as both a physical place and an affective nexus. This turn towards urban subject-matter, and its dual focus, had been foreshadowed in a review article written by Carson in 1983, which began with a characteristic affirmation:

We live in the Belfast of dreams as much as the physical city. These rehearsals of reality have gone on for years, changing, recurring, twisting back into themselves in a maze of self-reference. Some places do not exist on the map, but are composed of fragments, memories, inventions, other dreams.22

This passage condenses a series of recurrent tropes, techniques, and thematic preoccupations that can be traced throughout much of Carson’s subsequent writing: the collocation of reality and dream; a conception of urban experience as both constantly changing and recurrent; an interest in maps and their telling absences; an emphasis upon composing collages of fragments rather than illusory wholes. All of these features would be amplified and refined in the poems collected in *The Irish for No*. Carson’s concentrated focus upon Belfast’s history, geography, and social life is even more intense in his subsequent volume, *Belfast Confetti*, which is also more formally diverse, including versions of haiku and prose texts alongside short and longer narrative poems employing the long line. The topics dealt with in both collections are various, circulating around memory, desire, identity, power, place and its multiple meanings, but there is also an unusually visceral engagement with the realities of civil discord and political violence, and individual poems depict sectarian murders, ambushes, suicides, street riots, and interrogations with a disturbing documentary candour. This has led to Carson being spoken of as a politically engaged ‘social’ writer, a label that he distrusts and refuses.23 ‘I can’t as a writer,’ he has said, ‘take any kind of moral stance on the “Troubles”, beyond registering what happens. And then, as soon as I say that, I realise that “registering” is a kind of morality. Nor can one, even if one wanted to, escape politics.’24 His poems attempt to negotiate this double-bind between registering what happens and implicit moral statement through their reflexive attention to the ways in which events are mediated and represented, as much in the news media as in writing or art. To this end, they tend to implicate the reader in the construction of narratives about the Troubles, raising ethical questions concerning the writer’s and reader’s shared culpability in the ‘aestheti-cisation of conflict’.25

The medium of language itself becomes the predominant focus in Carson’s subsequent collections, *First Language* and *Opera Et Cetera*, both of which include translations from several languages and otherwise
expand the parameters of English through a heady intermixture of widely divergent discourses and exuberant word-play. Nonetheless, the urgent social realities of the Troubles remain an ever-present frame of reference throughout, and the poems’ recurrent concerns with doublespeak, informers, censorship, and shibboleths ensure that their fantastic or surreal narratives often reveal an undertow of political immediacy. As Alan Gillis notes, ‘Carson’s language-games are also war-poems in which a predatory realism stalks his emancipatory drives which, nevertheless, remain insatiable’. Indeed, Carson’s linguistic experimentalism seems intended as an antidote to the stagnancy and formality of those cultural discourses and formulations of identity that predominate in Northern Ireland, a reminder of art’s capacity to enlarge our potential for expression and communication. There is also a shift of focus away from the materiality of the city and towards that of language itself, often at the level of its individual components – Opera Et Cetera, for instance, includes two poetic sequences based upon the letters of the alphabet and the radio operator’s code respectively. This is accompanied by a foregrounding of poetic form and much more extensive use of rhyme, often as a means of highlighting arbitrary connections and as a generative mechanism for narrative itself.

In 1996 Carson published the first of his several prose books, Last Night’s Fun, which gives an eccentric account of the Irish traditional music scene and much else besides. Formally, the book approximates to the social experience of a pub session, with each of the chapters named after a tune (‘Boil the Breakfast Early’, ‘The Humours of Whiskey’, ‘The Ould Orange Flute’ etc.), and its multi-layered narrative interleaves notes and observations, reminiscences and meditations, stories and songs in a deliberately digressive and non-linear manner. The Star Factory appeared the following year and made use of many of the same techniques to deal with more explicitly autobiographical material, elaborating a kaleidoscopic urban memoir that eschews any straightforward or coherent narrative of the growth of the poet’s mind. Chapters are named after streets and buildings, or other architectural features of the city, so that the book resembles an unconventional guidebook to Belfast or an annotated street index, figuring the relationship between self and place in spatial as well as temporal terms, and undertaking a series of intriguing forays into the imagined and remembered city. Both of these texts thrive on their own miscellaneity, blurring generic boundaries and defying summation while simultaneously disclosing a profound interest in systems of ordering
and classification – musical notation, songbooks, dictionaries, street plans, gazetteers, and many others.

In 1998 Carson took early retirement from the Arts Council and embarked on a period of prolific and very varied productivity. In the same year he published *The Alexandrine Plan*, a collection of supplely inventive translations of sonnets by Baudelaire, Rimbaud, and Mallarmé written in rhymed alexandrines. Three more book-length translations have subsequently appeared, each of them serving to underline the importance of translation for Carson as a mode of creative expression: in 2002 his version of Dante’s *Inferno*, then a translation of Brian Merriman’s *The Midnight Court*, and most recently his retelling of the Old Irish epic, *The Táin*. As I will discuss in Chapter 6, translation has provided Carson with a means of carrying on a dialogue with major texts from the Irish and European traditions, as well as another way of exploring the various other-worlds that open up in the fissures between languages. Shortly after *The Alexandrine Plan* Carson published *The Twelfth of Never*, a hallucinatory sonnet sequence again written in alexandrines but also drawing extensively upon the Irish ballad tradition for its rhythms, subject-matter, and the titles of individual poems. Switching rapidly between different places and times, and marshalling a bewildering cast of historical and mythological characters, the book blends history, memory, and surreal fantasy in a concerted scrambling of Ireland’s sectarian iconographies. As David Butler observes, *The Twelfth of Never* describes a never-land of intoxication and metamorphosis ‘in which two irreconcilable traditions have become entangled, their shibboleths undermined by conflation and hypallage’. The broader context of Northern Ireland’s emergent ‘peace process’ and the new political dispensation promised by the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 are important here, for the putative end of the Troubles saw a new optimism and fluidity in cultural and economic relations coexisting with the hardening of political divisions and the ‘institutionalized separateness’ of the province’s communities.

Carson’s interest in the clashing symbols, narratives, and myths of Unionist and Nationalist cultures in Ireland is pursued in another direction in his prose texts, *Fishing for Amber* and *Shamrock Tea*, which might be thought of as his ‘Orange’ and ‘Green’ books respectively. The former sustains a detailed interest in the Dutch Republic of the seventeenth century, exploring its rich achievements in art, science, and politics in order to provide oblique parallels with contemporary Northern Ireland and to implicitly rebuke the warped psychology of Ulster ‘Orangeism’. The latter, by contrast, makes a series of links
across different time periods between Ireland and Belgium as part of a baroque satire on Catholic transcendentalism and Nationalist secret societies. *Fishing for Amber* is deeply indebted to the traditions of Irish oral storytelling, whereas *Shamrock Tea* displays a science-fictional fascination with alternative realities and identities, but both texts attempt an encyclopaedic comprehensiveness that defies generic categorisation and contrasts with the narrowness and inflexibility of the ideologies they indirectly invoke.

In 2003 Carson took up the position of Professor of Poetry and Director of the newly created Seamus Heaney Centre for Poetry at Queen’s University, Belfast, roles that he connects with the need to demonstrate ‘that writing has a real and necessary place in our lives; that writing can make pleasurable sense of our lives’. In the same year he published *Breaking News*, a collection of poems inspired in part by the war correspondence of the Anglo-Irish journalist, William Howard Russell (1820–1907), and in part by the historical associations of Belfast street names with colonial conflicts in the Crimea and India. The volume’s depictions of the city’s contemporaneity are thus informed by a dense layering of spatial and temporal inter-relations. One of the most striking features of the collection is Carson’s use of a very short line, often of only one or two words, where the placing of line breaks and the shape of the poems on the page are integral to their subtle effects of disclosure and elision, connection and disconnection. Indeed, Sarah Broom observes that many of the poems in *Breaking News* ‘convey in their hesitations and silences a sense of the difficulty of saying anything at all about Belfast’. Recurrent concerns with surveillance and the consequences of war indicate a distinct sense of unease and frustration with the progress of the peace process, and Carson also displays a Wittgensteinian preoccupation with the limits of language in contexts of political pressure and social complexity.

A similar awareness of the frailties and duplicity of language is balanced against a sense of its manifold possibilities in Carson’s next collection of poetry, *For All We Know*, which also continues and develops the tendency of his later work to favour long sequences where the meanings of individual poems depend upon the intricate relations and echoes orchestrated by the whole. As Carson has said, *For All We Know* is ‘a kind of hall of mirrors with poems reflecting and commenting on others’. Formally, the book is a loose sonnet sequence written in alexandrines and divided into two mirrored halves of 35 poems each (multiples of seven recur obsessively throughout), though its structure is
also based upon the contrapuntal variations and refrains of fugue so that images, phrases, and motifs recur repeatedly in different contexts. The convoluted narrative it relates concerns two lovers, Nina and Gabriel, who meet in a second-hand clothes shop in Belfast, and follows them across Europe as their personal relationship becomes bound up with the murky world of Cold War espionage and political intrigue. This allows Carson to explore the confusions of identity and memory at the intersection of private and public worlds, besides showcasing a new-found talent for writing about love and desire in their most complex manifestations. His most recent collection, *On the Night Watch*, also employs the formal templates of the sonnet and the fugue but does so by reprising the very short line he had honed in *Breaking News*. Once again individual poems echo or rework phrases and images, making frequent references to eyebright, a plant associated with memory and clear sight. Every third poem takes its title from the final line of a preceding poem, creating a half-submerged narrative chain that Carson overlays with a diverse and fragmentary set of epistemological meditations. Read from cover to cover, the volume becomes an echo-chamber recycling themes of war and surveillance, illness and loss, memory and forgetting, as Carson pursues a restless nocturnal meditation upon the fallible resources of language. For Michael Hinds, *On the Night Watch* communicates an impression ‘that words never stop resounding, no matter how unadorned they may appear’. Indeed, while the poems’ brevity and terseness seem to promise immediacy, their syntactical ambiguities and cryptic simplicity demand the reader’s careful attention not just to what is said but also ‘what/ remains unspoken’ (*ONW*, 109).

What this brief overview of Carson’s career to date impresses upon the reader is both the variety and range of his creative output and his recurrent capacity for reinvention or renewal. Nevertheless, this book will try to show that Carson’s diverse engagements with space and place are consistently central to the vitality and originality of his writing, and it may therefore be as well to outline some of the specifically Irish contexts within which such engagements take place. Literary representations of space have long played an important role in shaping the geographical imaginations that predominate in Irish culture. Because issues of territory and the sense of place have historically been highly politicised in Ireland, writing, along with geography and history, is deeply ‘implicated in the flexibilities and fluidities of contested constructions of Irish identity’. Indeed, Richard Kirkland notes a recurrent tendency within Northern Irish culture to defer the painful process of historical
inquiry into the fractures and schisms of social division by imagining community in primarily aesthetic and geographical terms. In this way, ‘the landscape becomes a mode of redemption through which the writer can mediate the politics of identity to his/her community’. Crucial to such ‘redemptive’ strategies of mediation is an essentially sedentary understanding of place and belonging that is indebted to Martin Heidegger’s influential conjugation of being, dwelling, and making. For Heidegger, space is defined as ‘that for which room has been made, that which is let into its bounds’, and is joined, gathered, and afforded a distinctive identity by its ‘location’ here rather than there, so that it may be constituted as a familiar ‘place’. Moreover, just as space is ‘grounded’ in its location, so being and dwelling presuppose one another: ‘Man’s relation to locations, and through locations to spaces, inheres in his dwelling. The relationship between man and space is none other than dwelling, strictly thought and spoken.’ It is through dwelling, making a home, that ‘man’ is able to imbue space with meaning and thus found a secure basis for his own identity.

The core assumptions of Heidegger’s essentially Romantic conception of space and place are famously echoed in an Irish context by Seamus Heaney in his lecture, ‘The Sense of Place’, where he distinguishes between two broadly antipathetic modes of apprehending and depicting place that co-exist in productive tension within the literary sensibility. The first of these is described as ‘lived, illiterate and unconscious’, whereas the other is ‘learned, literate and conscious’. And while he acknowledges the importance of the latter understanding of place for many contemporary Irish poets (including himself), Heaney nonetheless concludes by reasserting the primacy of the former for a truly poetic sensibility:

We are dwellers, we are namers, we are lovers, we make homes and search for our histories. And when we look for the history of our sensibilities I am convinced, as Professor J.C. Beckett was convinced about the history of Ireland generally, that it is to what he called the stable element, the land itself, that we must look for continuity.

Heaney’s affirmation of the importance of a direct, perhaps primal, connection with ‘the land itself’ not only compounds being and dwelling in a conception of place as stable, fixed, and intimately familiar, but also accords special significance to rural places and the countryside generally. Yet even a more self-consciously urban and urbane writer such as John Hewitt, in an attempt to sketch out a ‘regionalist’ ethos for literature in post-war Northern Ireland, could pre-empt Heaney’s position by claiming that the ‘Ulster writer […] must be a rooted man [sic], must
carry the native tang of his idiom like the native dust on his sleeve; otherwise he is an airy internationalist, thistledown, a twig in a stream. ‘An artist,’ Hewitt avers, ‘must have a native place, pinpointed on a map, even if it is only to run away from.’

As I will show in Chapter 1, such notions of community, rootedness, and organic belonging are substantially undermined by recent geographical understandings of space and place, where ‘space’ is both a product of, and a productive nexus for, social relations, and ‘place’ is an unfolding spatio-temporal event. Similarly, the profound influence of cultural theory on Irish Studies since the 1980s has prompted challenges to such sedentary understandings of the relationships between space, place, and identity. For example, David Lloyd has famously critiqued the aesthetic politics underlying Heaney’s poetry, which rest upon the ‘foreclosed surety of the subject’s relation to place’, relocating ‘an individual and racial identity through the reterritorialization of language and culture’.

In a similar vein, Kirkland argues that Hewitt’s regionalism can be understood primarily as ‘a mode of evasion: a way of posing delusory ethical debates on the question of bourgeois identity in his work while avoiding any attempt to address political or territorial schism’. Interestingly, what both of these critical judgements presuppose is that any adequate engagement with the historical and social complexities of Northern Ireland’s contemporary situation will also require more nuanced political understandings of its contested geographies and multiple spatialities.

Consequently, critical interrogation of the ways in which ‘Ireland’ and ‘Irishness’ are constructed and constituted has come to be regarded as of prime importance, entailing as it does not only a stringently self-reflexive critical practice but a thoroughgoing consideration of Ireland’s historical and geographical particularities. Underlining this point, Claire Connolly contends that Irish Studies’ desire ‘to mobilise wider frameworks’ of theoretical analysis in recent years is bound up with ‘a concerted effort to “dislocate” Ireland’. Connolly’s self-conscious deployment of a specifically spatial metaphor here is telling, for such critical ‘dislocations’ inevitably re-focus attention upon the overlapping histories and spatialities from which ‘Ireland’ is composed. ‘As the subject of theory, postcolonial and otherwise,’ she contends, ““Ireland” must be understood as both the twenty-six-county nation-state and the six-county statelet, and furthermore, in terms of the connections and affiliations not reducible to these relatively new political creations.’

Conceptions of space and place receive a notably complex series of inflections in the Irish context: whether in terms of Ireland’s
history of conquest and colonial subjugation; its longstanding emigrant diaspora and newer immigrant populations; the legacy of partition and competing territorial claims over the North; or the discontinuous but far-reaching globalisation of Irish society since the Republic of Ireland’s and Britain’s entry into the European Economic Community in 1973. With regard to the latter circumstances, Richard Kearney contends that the interplay between national, international, and regional communities in Ireland produces a triple-layered identity as a result of which ‘Irishness is no longer co-terminous with the geographical outlines of an island’. Indeed, Kearney’s invocation of a hypothetical, imagined ‘fifth province’ turns upon the articulations and interconnections between local and global manifestations of Irish identity, the parish and the cosmos. Obvious problems attend such an ambitious ‘postnationalist’ attempt to re-imagine a unified and inclusive concept of ‘Irishness’ for a globalised world; and it is worth noting that the slippages of geography and identity Kearney identifies are nowhere more apparent than in Northern Ireland, where individual and collective identifications are frequently directed either beyond the border or across the Irish Sea, and (with the advent of dual citizenship after 1998) in some cases both. Yet it is also in the North that territorial claims have made themselves felt with most violence and insistence, as is materially evident in modern Belfast’s sectarian geography of ‘peace lines’ and checkpoints, walled estates and boundary zones. Moreover, as Scott Brewster observes, in ‘a history marked by annexation, such as Ireland’s, space becomes a site of dispute and an index of power’, while territorial tropes figure prominently in the discourses of both colonial authority and cultural nationalism. Certainly, such tropes continue to dominate the political and cultural representation of Northern Ireland’s ‘narrow ground’, but Brewster’s remarks also point to the increasing salience accorded to geographical perspectives and spatial theory within the contemporary critical practice of Irish Studies itself.

Gerry Smyth’s *Space and the Irish Cultural Imagination* is both an exemplary product of and extended critical commentary upon such cross-disciplinary developments, arguing that modern Ireland’s ‘cultural concern for space has been mirrored by important changes within the critical institutions which attend the study of Irish culture’. Smyth’s central thesis is that, although the study of Irish culture has long been dominated by temporal categories, ‘the primary theme of Irish (cultural, political and social) history would appear to be not historical but geographical – specifically, the presence and function of a “special
relationship” between people and place’. Once again, it can be argued that the various political and affective permutations taken by this ‘special relationship’ are especially fraught with regard to Northern Ireland, where the conflicting but also oddly congruent geopolitical discourses of Nationalism and Unionism both posit a series of mythologised identifications whereby land and community, people and place are understood as mutually self-affirming entities. As Aaron Kelly observes, whatever their disagreements and oppositions, Irish Nationalism and Unionism share the characteristic traits of ‘rusticative ideologies’, predicated as they are upon ‘organic and essentialist’ representations of place and social relations as a means of effecting the ‘seamless naturalization’ of the identities they underpin.

Any critical optic informed by cultural theory will, of course, seek to expose and deconstruct the ideological content informing such supposedly natural affinities. To this end, Smyth argues that the ‘special relationship’ between people and place in Irish culture cannot be claimed as a spontaneous expression of primordial belonging but is, in fact, ‘a construction of a later critical imagination intent on organising both the physical terrain and the idea of Ireland into the basis for a political ideology’. In this context, though, it is possible to wonder whether the ‘special relationship’ Smyth describes is really a distinctively Irish phenomenon or simply a local expression of a more widespread feature of European nationalisms generally. As Eric Hobsbawm notes, the unifying characteristic of nationalisms is their attempt ‘to fit historically novel, emerging, changing and, even today, far from universal entities into a framework of permanence and universality’, usually by grounding the sovereignty of the nation-state in a geographical territory that is imagined as enduring and immemorial. Similarly, Anthony Smith remarks that the nationalist spatial vision ‘demands a terrain on which nations can be built’ and a ‘homeland’ brought into being. Nonetheless, Smyth’s thesis is insightful and illuminating insofar as it underlines the extent to which literature and culture function as part of ‘a high-profile negotiation of ideological space’, major players in ‘the ongoing battle for control of the “space” of Ireland, a battle which is no less real for the fact that it is conducted in the virtual realms of language and literature’. The consideration of factors specific to the Irish context can therefore permit a more nuanced understanding of how representations of space overlay material spaces and places with a range of symbolic or metaphorical associations, which in turn inflect and condition the ways in which those spaces and places are experienced or perceived.
The particular importance of place and identity for Northern Irish poetry is highlighted in Elmer Kennedy-Andrews’s *Writing Home*, which also builds upon the recent spatial turn in Irish Studies. Discussing the work of 17 poets published over four decades, the book sets out to explore the ways in which Northern Irish poetry lends itself to being read as a species of ‘earth writing’, or *geo-graphy*. For Kennedy-Andrews, place is not to be conceived of as bounded or fixed but rather as porous and mutable, always in process of construction through social relations, and he emphasises the polysemic character of ‘home’ in much Northern Irish poetry, which often connects to more than one place at any given time. To this end, the book identifies two key transformations in how place is understood in contemporary Irish writing. The first concerns a ‘shift in the centre of gravity from the country to the city’ that is most forcefully evident in Carson’s work, but is also apparent in the predominantly urban sensibilities of his precursors Louis MacNeice and Derek Mahon. Kennedy-Andrews observes that Carson’s Belfast is both ‘a site of alienation, confusion and violence’ and ‘a place of new opportunities where questions of identity and nationality have to be re-addressed’.

The second relates to the prominence of ‘diasporic notions of culture and identity’ as opposed to stable or ‘rooted’ conceptions of belonging. Here, Paul Muldoon and Síneád Morrissey serve as exemplars, the former tending to regard home as ‘a matter of fluid improvisation’ and the latter writing out of an identity deemed to be fundamentally deterritorialised and ‘nomadic’.

There is, just occasionally, a suspicion of hyperbole about some of Kennedy-Andrews’s arguments, such as his assertion that in contemporary Northern Irish poetry ‘the materiality of place is dissolved in textual place’. If anything, Carson’s writing suggests that it is the text that often struggles to accommodate the sheer heterogeneous materiality of the city it seeks to represent. What is illuminating, however, is Kennedy-Andrews’s recognition of the interdependence of places, their mutual imbrication and co-constitution. ‘Places are inevitably more or less hybrid,’ he writes, ‘their character always influenced by relations with other places.’

This awareness of relations and connections is, I will argue, a key aspect of Carson’s representations of space and place throughout his career.

The chapters that follow approach these issues and debates from a variety of perspectives, but also seek to consider how his writing challenges and modifies the various critical and theoretical frameworks employed. Chapter 1 undertakes an exposition of recent paradigms for the study of space and place advanced in the fields of geography and
cultural theory in order to set out some methodological markers for my readings of Carson’s texts. Of particular interest will be the still various and rather fluid critical formulations for literary geography, which attend to the articulation of material and metaphorical spaces in literary texts, and map the relations between site or location and literary forms. Reading Carson’s work in the light of these ideas, I go on to describe the various ways in which he encourages his readers to plot ‘imaginative geographies’, intuiting the often hidden networks of relations linking here and elsewhere, local places and global spaces. Chapter 2 concentrates on the mapping of urban space in Carson’s texts. Maps recur with obsessive frequency in his representations of Belfast, and are often regarded with suspicion because of their complicity with the territorial prescriptions of vested interests. However, maps and mapping actually function dialectically in Carson’s work both as instruments of power to be resisted and as the means by which such resistance might be effected. By dramatising this contradiction, Carson’s acutely self-conscious meta-cartography attempts to calibrate Belfast’s deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation as it is reconfigured both by its contemporary conflict and by its uneven integration into the late capitalist space of flows.

Moving from the fixed aerial perspective of the map to the contingent sensations and potential disorientations of the city streets, Chapter 3 considers the poetics and politics implied by bodies moving through space. Carson makes recurrent use of the trope of walking in the city both as a metaphor for the act of writing and, in Michel de Certeau’s terms, as a resistant spatial practice entailing the mobile and often subversive circulation of citizens within the regulated precincts of urban space. The extent to which Belfast is subject to surveillance and the policing of movements – by representatives of the state and by paramilitary forces – produces a characteristic tension between certainty and uncertainty, where seemingly fixed social relations contrast with a parallel unfixing of meanings and interpretations. Nonetheless, the digressive and disparate trajectories of Carson’s ambulant characters and narrators gradually accumulate and intersect in a metaphorical illustration of his point that our attempts to understand or construct the worlds we inhabit involve the ceaseless making and unmaking of links, relationships, and connections. Chapter 4 examines the entwinement of place and memory in Carson’s efforts to record the complexity and variety of the city in history. The creatively positive response to urban change and the ephemeral fluctuations of modern experience that is evident in much of his work vies with a powerful undertow of loss and
nostalgia as intimately known places – indeed, whole sections of Belfast’s built environment – are obliterated or transformed. On the one hand, memory functions for Carson as a mode of consolation, and the contemporary city is haunted by the shades of demolished streets and scattered communities. On the other, however, memory serves as an always fallible but politically exigent organ of retrieval and reclamation, composing a fragmentary record of documentary investigations and anecdotes that implicitly upbraids the procedures of official historiography. In this way, that which was is measured against what might have been and Belfast emerges as a palimpsest of memories elaborated in time and space.

In Chapter 5 attention is paid to Carson’s interests in and experiments with narrative, particularly his adaptations of procedures and formulas employed in traditional Irish storytelling. Narrative appeals to Carson because it provides a means of shaping or patterning the chaos of experience, but he also distrusts its capacity to impose upon events any singular and exclusive interpretation. Consequently, the proliferating stories that his poems and prose texts bring into conjunction attest to his conviction that no one account can ever be adequate to the reality it describes. Moreover, Carson’s labyrinthine narratives of digression and divagation, moves and counter-moves are congruent with the space of the city they so often describe, which must also be navigated by way of detours and deviations, following courses that are circumlocutory and round-about. Finally, Chapter 6 considers the bilingual or multilingual basis for much of Carson’s work, focusing particularly upon his longstanding engagements with translation but doing so within the larger context of his reflexive concerns with language as a medium of representation. Throughout, I note the slippage that frequently occurs between translation as an important component of his creative practice and its status as a theme or trope requiring investigation and scrutiny. The dilemmas and indeterminacies affecting translation, which may issue in the ‘Babel-babble’ of semiotic flux, provide a tenacious parallel to the shifting fabric of social space in process of production. Moreover, the border dialogues that Carson’s translations facilitate highlight the condition of ‘ambiloccation’ or ‘hyphenation’ that is characteristic of his more recent work, its sense of being neither here nor there, existing in those spaces of the betwixt and between from which stories are generated.

The ambition of this book is to produce a coherent but flexible critical framework for reading the majority of Carson’s work to date, while also attending to the irreducible particularity and eccentricity of
his individual texts. It will be up to the reader to decide whether or not it succeeds. The pleasure of reading Carson is perhaps necessarily bound up with an experience of perplexity, for he is as interested in what might go awry in the process of communication as in ensuring its smooth functioning. Indeed, this margin for doubt, uncertainty, or even incomprehension is something that Carson values himself as a reader, for he says of the poems of Paul Celan: ‘I don’t pretend to know what the poems mean, but I’m astonished by their immense linguistic depths, their venturing into a world which seems to use language to go beyond language, or beyond our normal understanding of it.’ That sense that language might move us beyond our ‘normal understanding’ at the same moment that it abandons readily comprehensible meaning informs his own conception of poetry as ‘other’, engaged in a process of ‘exploration’ and ‘discovery’ that cannot be second-guessed. My readings of Carson’s texts are intended in a similarly exploratory spirit and seek always to acknowledge their otherness, their deliberate resistance to framing and explanation. They trace patterns of coherence and incoherence where I find them, but also, I hope, leave space for other readings to come.

Notes
1 Louis MacNeice, ‘Snow’, in Collected Poems, ed. E.R. Dodds (London: Faber & Faber, 1966), p. 30. MacNeice’s influence upon Carson is most explicitly registered in his poems ‘Snow’ (BC, 20–1) and ‘Bagpipe Music’ (FL, 50–3), which each develop skewed intertextual conversations with poems of the same titles by MacNeice. However, Carson has downplayed the importance of MacNeice’s example for his work in interview: see John Brown, In the Chair: Interviews with Poets from the North of Ireland (Cliffs of Moher: Salmon Publishing, 2002), p. 149.
5 Shane Alcobia-Murphy, Governing the Tongue in Northern Ireland: The Place of Art/The Art of Place (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2005), p. 112.
6 Brown, In the Chair, p. 141.
8 Fran Brearton, ‘Poetry of the 1960s: the “Northern Ireland Renaissance”, in


10 Clark, *The Ulster Renaissance*, p. 194.


12 Carson, ‘Escaped from the Massacre?’, p. 183.

13 Carson, ‘Escaped from the Massacre?’, pp. 184, 186.


23 ‘I don’t think I’m social at all! I wouldn’t see myself as being someone who has “something to say”. All I can do is observe things and invent stories about it all. What sort of ties my poems have to with the world I don’t know.’ Niall McGrath, ‘Ciaran Carson Interviewed by Niall McGrath’, *Edinburgh Review* 93 (1995), p. 61.

24 Brown, *In the Chair*, p. 148.


29 Nick Topping, ‘Out of the Pub and into QUB: Nick Topping talks to Professor Ciaran Carson’, *Fortnight* 420 (December 2003), p. 16.


31 Kennedy-Andrews, ‘For all I know’, p. 22.


44 Kearney, *Postnationalist Ireland*, p. 100.

45 The main stumbling block, it seems to me, concerns the ambiguous relationship between nationalism and postnationalism in Kearney’s framework. Although he is energetically critical of the conceptual foundations and political functioning of the nation-state, Kearney still appears to regard the nation as a worthwhile and necessary focus for communal identifications which should be salvaged and recuperated within the new postnationalist order. In this regard, he remains bound by the very conceptual and ideological constraints that he sets out to undermine and supersede. For a more detailed critique of Kearney’s thinking along similar lines to these see Colin Graham, *Deconstructing Ireland: Identity, Theory, Culture* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001), pp. 94–8.


Smyth, Space and the Irish Cultural Imagination, p. 20.


To this end, Brian Graham argues that ‘there is little that is conceptually exceptional about Irish nationalism’, setting his own discussion of place, culture, and identity in Ireland within wider European frames of reference. Graham, ‘Ireland and Irishness’, p. 7.


Smyth, Space and the Irish Cultural Imagination, p. 71.


Kennedy-Andrews, ‘For all i know’, p. 16.