In the discourse of cultural theory it seems that there is considerable confusion, or at least deep ambivalence, concerning the status and function of maps and mapping. In this context it is important to note that mapping tends to be treated by cultural theorists less in terms of its specific histories and methodological principles than as a set of concepts that are often employed in explicitly metaphorical ways – ‘mapping’, then, rather than strict cartography. On the one hand, there is a tendency to equate mapping with the apparatuses of the state and of social control, as a sort of graphic inscription of panoptic authority that is imposed upon the territory. Certainly, the historical and strategic importance of charts, maps, and plans in the expansion of European imperialism plays a large part in determining this view. For instance, David Harvey observes that ‘the mapping of the world opened up a way to look upon space as open to appropriation for private uses. Mapping also turned out to be far from ideologically neutral.’ Similarly, Doreen Massey discusses maps as ‘ordering representations’ that operate as a ‘technology of power’ by stabilising the co-ordinates of time-space and constructing the geographical territory as ‘a coherent closed system’. This question of closure or delimitation is crucial, for the widespread suspicion of cartography on the part of cultural theorists is arguably also symptomatic of a more widespread, and loosely post-structuralist, distrust of totalisations and grand narratives. As Geoff King observes, ‘because it is founded on processes of universalizing closure, the map becomes an ideal site for a deconstructive project. […] Gaps and inconsistencies on the map can be highlighted in an attempt to undermine the wider discursive system within which it is embedded.’ A map is not simply a visual representation of space but can also be construed as a diagram and instrument of power. Indeed, for Michel de Certeau, the map does not simply represent but actually ‘colonizes space’, constituting a
‘totalizing stage’ upon which the current state of geographical knowledge is articulated, and ‘pushes away into its prehistory or into its posterity, as if into the wings, the operations of which it is the result or the necessary condition’.4 This erasure of the practices that have gone into its making, ensuring the hegemony of the map over the earlier form of the itinerary, also intimates the way in which the map will impose a particular ‘reading’ upon the territory that it maps, composing a ‘legible’ image only through violent reductionism.

On the other hand, consider the following remarkable passage from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus*, in which the authors are distinguishing between maps and tracings:

Make a map, not a tracing. […] The map is open and connectable in all of its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification. It can be torn, reversed, adapted to any kind of mounting, reworked by an individual, group, or social formation. It can be drawn on a wall, conceived of as a work of art, constructed as a political action or as a meditation. […] A map has multiple entryways, as opposed to the tracing, which always comes back ‘to the same’. The map has to do with performance, whereas the tracing always involves an alleged ‘competence’.5

The contrast could hardly be greater and, even allowing for Deleuze and Guattari’s deliberately estranging approach to their subject, this seems a very odd way to think of mapping. Far from being an extension of state power, the map is here conceived in terms of performativity, as a tool for dissidents and philosopher-guerrillas that is capable of constant modification and multiple uses rather than imposing a monolithic order ‘from above’. Rhizomatic rather than repressive, Deleuze and Guattari’s map reveals itself as an essentially dynamic and productive nexus that ‘fosters connections between fields’,6 a connective apparatus conjugating deterritorialised flows and a diagram for writing itself, conceived as a means of ‘surveying, mapping, even realms that are yet to come’.7 More soberly, but to a similar end, Franco Moretti contends that a good map is worth a thousand words ‘because it produces a thousand words: it raises doubts, ideas. It poses new questions, and forces you to look for new answers.’8

The practices of cartography and writing are thus intimately linked, and both are capable of furthering a critical enterprise that would destabilise rather than entrench hegemonic modes of seeing and understanding. On the one hand, then, mapping can be regarded as a repressive means of social control from above; on the other, it is understood to permit radical reconfigurations of a given environment from below, capable of productively estranging our habitual modes of perception. It is not my
intention here to offer a synthesis, much less a solution, for this seeming impasse in one of the lesser byways of cultural theory. Instead, in this chapter I want to use it as a sort of backdrop against which to discuss the mapping of urban space in Ciaran Carson’s work, and to examine in particular the ways in which his writing of the city itself probes the logic and limits of maps and the connections they make visible. Indeed, in what follows I will be arguing that both of the perspectives upon mapping described above serve to inform Carson’s work to varying degrees, and often do so simultaneously.

Maps recur with an almost obsessive frequency throughout Carson’s work and, at first glance, it would appear that he tends to see them as totalising forms of imposition to be suspected and, wherever possible, deconstructed. For Carson, the bird’s-eye view of the map negates human agency and ignores the kinetic energies that are evident at street level, resolving the multidimensional reality of the city in the simplified form of a static chart. Such totalising ambitions are inherently reductive, for ‘maps cannot describe everything, or they describe states of mind’ (BC, 67), betraying their ideological orientations through what they include or omit. Indeed, it is most often to the exclusions and aporias of mapping that Carson attends, as, for example, in the poem ‘Turn Again’ which opens his landmark collection Belfast Confetti:

There is a map of the city which shows the bridge that was never built. A map which shows the bridge that collapsed; the streets that never existed.
Ireland’s Entry, Elbow Lane, Weigh-House Lane, Back Lane, Stone-Cutter’s Entry –
Today’s plan is already yesterday’s – the streets that were there are gone.
And the shape of the jails cannot be shown for security reasons. (BC, 11)

The poem begins by composing a litany of names that is also a host of absent presences (or present absences), the spectral traces of a city that was planned but never built, existing suggestively on some half-forgotten plane of the imagination but having their entire material presence in the faulty markings upon inaccurate maps. Alan Gillis has described this collocation of the imagined and the obsolete with verifiably extant features of the cityscape in terms of Carson’s ‘meta-cartography’. There is an important shift of focus, however, in the last line quoted, as Carson moves from one sort of absent presence to another – that is, from those features that appear only on the map and not on the territory itself, to those that can be located in the city’s material topography but that cannot be shown on the map, ostensibly for ‘security reasons’.
In both cases, of course, absences are found to be doubly eloquent and it is precisely this asymmetry between the map and the territory that it claims to represent that provides the creative frisson of the poem itself. In this respect, the bridge that was never built and the bridge that collapsed both hold a particularly suggestive metaphorical charge, gesturing towards the simultaneously deconstructive and conjunctive nature of Carson’s aesthetic, which typically dismantles and breaks down its subject-matter only to reassemble it in some new and unexpected form. On a more immediate level, though, ‘Turn Again’ unravels the map’s implicit assertion of authority, its ostentatious display of geographical knowledge collated and assembled, simply by exposing it to the flux of history, reminding us that today’s plans are always already slipping into obsolescence because of the material reconfiguration of the city that happens day by day, week by week, year by year. The title of the poem captures the sense in which the experience of repetition or ‘re-turn’ can all too easily become an encounter with difference, disorienting rather than reinforcing a secure sense of spatial awareness, as when the speaker ‘turns’ into a side-street ‘to try to throw off my shadow’, a seemingly minor deviation through which ‘history is changed’ (BC, 11).

Importantly, however, ‘Turn Again’ is not simply concerned with history in the abstract but more immediately with the specific historical and political circumstances of the Troubles, as well as the particular spatial forms to which they give rise, forms and circumstances that would appear to act upon the processes of mapping in sharply contradictory ways. For, on the one hand, incidents of violence and political unrest in Belfast make it ever more imperative for those in power to map the city accurately and comprehensively, and yet, on the other hand, the covert activities of the police, army, and paramilitary groups make such a project increasingly untenable: ‘the shape of the jails cannot be shown for security reasons’. In the prose piece ‘Question Time’, Carson warns:

No, don’t trust maps, for they avoid the moment: ramps, barricades, diversions, Peace Lines. Though if there is an ideal map, which shows the city as it is, it may exist in the eye of that helicopter ratcheting overhead, its searchlight fingering and scanning the micro-chip deviations […]. (BC, 58)

Cartography and panopticism come together in the helicopter’s aerial eye of power, but the adoption of the conditional tense (‘it may exist’) indicates a thoroughgoing scepticism on Carson’s part about the ability of any map to show the city as it is in all its seething detail. As he remarks in ‘Revised Version’: ‘The city is a map of the city’ (BC, 69), a
collapsing of the distinction between map and territory that would seem to make a nonsense of this whole mode of representation.

Consequently, his own images of the city consistently presuppose mutation and revision, as, for example, in the following passage from *The Star Factory*:

Sometimes the city is an exploded diagram of itself, along the lines of a vastly complicated interactive model aircraft kit whose components are connected by sprued plastic latitudes and longitudes.

At the same time it mutates like a virus, its programme undergoing daily shifts of emphasis and detail. Its parallels are bent by interior temperatures; engine nacelles become gun pods; sometimes, a whole wing takes on a different slant. [...] Now that I can see the city’s microscopic bits transfixed by my attention, I wonder how I might assemble them, for there is no instruction leaflet; I must write it. (SF, 15)

Maps pretend to an authoritative verisimilitude that their distanced fixity precludes, for the city’s ‘daily shifts of emphasis and detail’ render each draft untrustworthy or obsolescent. In the face of such abstraction, history and the sheer materiality of the city are liable to reassert themselves, and Carson’s work is littered with maps in various stages of physical decay and disintegration: ‘With so many foldings and unfoldings, whole segments of the map have fallen off’ (BC, 35).

The metamorphic energies of the urban warp or distort cartographic projections, and writing the city entails the assembly of a rhizomatic narrative through which individual components can sporadically take on ‘a different slant’.

And yet, for all this, the city is a map of the city. But if it is a map, and if Carson’s own work can be said to constitute an extended attempt to map the city’s spatial and historical mutations, then it can only be on the model of Deleuze and Guattari’s rhizomatic map, with its susceptibility to constant modification and multidimensional connections. Alex Houen contends that Carson’s writing addresses ‘two levels of the city, two types of map’: ‘On the one hand streets and situations frequently explode into diagrams of their own potential; on the other hand, security forces use virtual mapping to contain the possibility of violence.’10 In broad agreement, I am arguing that maps function for Carson paradoxically both as forms of imposition to be resisted and as the means by which such resistance can be effected, for it is through mapping that his work calibrates and responds to the city’s deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation. Moreover, as Kathleen McCracken observes, in Carson’s writing ‘the map is a figure which keeps changing,
against the rules of logic and rhetoric, into something else’, and to this extent the city and the map do indeed coincide. ‘Belfast is changing daily’ (BC, 57), its built environment metamorphosing in response to bombings and demolition, decay and redevelopment, and its citizens are forced to revise their personal maps of the city accordingly.

Carson’s city is characterised by perpetual change, a ceaseless interplay of disintegration and construction through which a sense of place is conceived not in terms of certainty and stability but as a process of dislocation and appropriation through which meanings are assembled and contested. In Fran Brearton’s words, Carson’s work depicts ‘a city in perpetual motion, existing in multiple versions in time and space’. In this respect, the city in motion can be seen to disorient the mortificatory imperatives of surveillant control, opposing disciplinary stasis with a fecund dynamism that also figures as a metaphor for artistic creativity and the generation of new forms. In ‘Clearance’, the swing of a wrecking ball brings with it a proverbial breath of fresh air as the façade of the Royal Avenue Hotel collapses, opening up unexpected new perspectives in the midst of a familiar cityscape:

Suddenly more sky
Than there used to be. A breeze springs up from nowhere –
There, through the gap in the rubble, a greengrocer’s shop
I’d never noticed until now. Or had I passed it yesterday? (IFN, 32)

The play of presence and absence in the poem sets up a fertile ambiguity between the familiar and the novel, relishing the opportunity for a fresh sensory apprehension of both proximate and distant features of the urban landscape. Such comparatively minor adjustments entail a subtle shift of perspective through which the entire city is sized up anew, both in itself and in relation to its immediate surroundings.

Conversely, but in a similar vein, Carson has a building site figure as a metaphorical ‘place of writing’ in The Star Factory:

I used to watch the bricklayers ply their trade, as they deployed masonic tools of plumb-line, try-square and spirit-level, setting up taut parallels of pegs and string, before throwing down neatly gauged dollops of mortar, laying bricks in practised, quick monotony, chinking each into its matrix with skilled dints of the trowel. Had their basic modules been alphabet bricks, I could have seen them building lapidary sentences and paragraphs, as the storeyed houses became emboldened by their hyphenated, skyward narrative, and entered the ongoing, fractious epic that is Belfast. (SF, 126)

The labour of construction here figures as an analogue for writing the
city, which itself emerges as a storied space of proliferating narratives, a Babel of ‘alphabet bricks’. But if the city resembles a vast, unfinished text, then equally and oppositely the fusion of diverse genres, styles, and registers in Carson’s writing can be seen as an effort to approximate the hybrid multiplicity of urban forms. In this respect, the heterogeneous rubble of ‘Belfast confetti’ – ‘nuts, bolts, nails, car-keys. A fount of broken type’ (IFN, 31) – also refers to the patchwork of raw materials from which Carson’s texts are assembled, the linguistic and urban detritus that can be recovered from the streets, bars, and market stalls of the city. Guinn Batten aptly remarks that Carson’s poetry is a ‘poetry of the jumble sale and the bomb-site rather than the museum’.

Both The Irish for No and Belfast Confetti work these diverse materials into complex, architecturally orchestrated forms, and The Star Factory, in which chapters are named after local streets or landmarks, deliberately resembles a jumbled street directory. Indeed, that book’s ‘hook-and-eye principle’ (SF, 226) of often arbitrary or tenuous narrative connections mimics the way in which the alphabetical listings of the street directory allow for the juxtaposition of ‘impossibly remote locations’ (SF, 8). As Deleuze and Guattari remark, rhizomatic writing ‘know[s] how to move between things, establish[ing] a logic of the AND’ that multiplies transversal conjunctions, a formal characteristic that is replicated throughout Carson’sacentred network of narratives and the storytelling techniques he employs therein. His rangy, sinuous long-line, which is adapted from the urban poets C.K. Williams and Louis MacNeice but also often approximates to the 17 syllables of Japanese haiku, accommodates the rhythms of pub-talk and the brisk inflections of Belfast demotic, while the meandering, improvisatory nature of his longer narratives provides a formal analogue for the shape and texture of life in the city. This scope for rhythmical variation and narrative ‘flow’ is counterpointed, however, by a sophisticated control of poetic form, particularly in his nine- and ten-line lyrics that both invoke and deviate from the sonnet form. Discussing The Irish for No, Neil Corcoran contends that Carson’s ‘suavely sophisticated playing of control against licence is the crucial element’ in the poems’ ‘delicate manipulation of tone’. His frequent use of enjambment and zeugma also subtly reinforce the dialectic of connection and disjunction that the poems enact.

Carson’s sense of the mutability of the city is also bound up with a related interest in the slipperiness and malleability of language. In the prose piece, ‘Brick’, assonantal slippage and etymological trickery
provide a means of probing Belfast’s unstable foundations, delving into the city’s material fabric in order to delineate a constitutive dialectic between hard and soft, solid and liquid, land and sea. ‘Belfast,’ Carson reminds us, ‘is built on sleech – alluvial or tidal muck – and is built of sleech, metamorphosed into brick, the city consuming its source as the brickfields themselves were built upon.’ These binary poles – sleech and brick – become progressively conflated, bleeding into one another via an increasingly diffuse system of linguistic resemblances. Just as ‘sleech’ can be ‘allied to slick and sludge, slag, sleek and slush’, so the proverbial solidity of ‘brick’ may be undermined by association: ‘Its root is in break, related to the flaw in cloth known as brack; worse, it is a cousin of brock – not the hardy badger, but rubbish, refuse, broken-down stuff, pig-swill’ (BC, 72). As John Kerrigan has observed, there is an implicit quarrel with Seamus Heaney underlying ‘Brick’, for although Carson’s mud vision entails a form of ‘earth writing’ that lies at the root of geography, ‘his mock etymological earnestness does not find meaning in a bog but discovers a swamp in philology’.18 On the one hand, Carson draws a compelling image of Belfast from this verbal swamp; on the other, he renders the city’s earnest bulk pliable and soft. Honesty, reliability, sturdy independence: all are founded on a morass, which is itself constantly being transformed into new land, building sites for the future city.

The deconstructive potential of etymology is also elaborated in the companion piece, ‘Farset’, which elaborates the uncertainties and confusions sedimented in the name ‘Belfast’ through an eccentric version of dinnseanchas, or Irish place-lore.19 ‘Belfast’ is a corruption of the Irish ‘Béal Feirste’, but while ‘béal’ can quickly be narrowed down to ‘a mouth, or the mouth of a river; an opening; an approach’, ‘feirste’ – the genitive of ‘fearsad’, which gives the river Farset its name – is considerably more problematic. Turning to the Rev. Patrick Dineen’s pathologically compendious Irish-English dictionary, Carson finds ‘fearsad’ glossed as ‘a shaft; a spindle; the ulna of the arm; a club; the spindle of an axe; a bar or bank of sand at low tide; a pit or pool of water; a verse, a poem’ (BC, 48), so that one attractive but incongruous translation of ‘Béal Feirste’ could be ‘the mouth of the poem’ (BC, 49). Amid this welter of referents definition slides into semantic anarchy and meaning threatens to be swept away in a torrent of ‘watery confusion’ (BC, 48). Carson, however, seems prepared to go with the flow, sharing the conviction of cartographer and latter-day dinnseanchaí, Tim Robinson, that ‘misinterpretation is part of the life of a placename’. ‘As language changes course
like a river over the centuries,’ writes Robinson, ‘sometimes a placename gets left behind, beached far from the flood of meaning. Then another meander of the river reaches it, interpreting it perhaps in some new way. [...] Corruption of the name, it is called; but corruption is fertility.’

This metaphor of the river of language altering the way in which the sense of place is experienced and understood seems highly pertinent to Carson’s representations of Belfast.

Carson’s mischievous and slightly scatty way with words and word-play in ‘Brick’ is both deepened and extended in ‘Farset’ through the latter’s foregrounding of fertile linguistic cross-pollinations, as the Irish and English languages are both plundered simultaneously for definitions and semantic elaborations. The Anglicisation of the name of Belfast’s eponymous river is a case in point, and the result is a hybrid form of dinnseanchas that is, in the words of Nuala Ní Dhomhnaíll, ‘utterly modern, urban and completely credible’. But if Irish – which is his first language – flows beneath the surface of Carson’s writing in English like an underground river, then his Irish has also taken on the colouring of the latter’s more pervasive general influence. In The Star Factory, he relates how his father would cull stories from The Arabian Nights, the Brothers Grimm, Robert Louis Stevenson, and Arthur Conan Doyle, then retell them to his children in Irish, which is emphatically designated as ‘the language of the home’. In stark contrast, the public world beyond the ‘vestibule’ of the family home ‘was densely terraced with the English language’, which Carson remembers ‘learning or lisping on the street’ (SF, 269). Exposure to this external world of linguistic difference leads to a gradual seepage of English words and constructs into the speech of the Carson children, ‘bastardizing’ their Irish and provoking the stern correction of their father. This anecdote neatly dramatises the early confluence of linguistic streams in Carson’s formative years, both within and without the family home, allegorising the dynamic interplay of the two languages that frequently informs his writing, and which I discuss in more detail in Chapter 6. More importantly perhaps, it also makes a direct metaphorical correlation between language and urban form. The city is ‘densely terraced’ with the English language, which is itself learnt in the public arena of the street rather than in the domestic space of the family home, but is also infiltrated by ‘strange bilingual creatures’ like the young Carson, who appears to have a crucial linguistic edge on this monoglot world (SF, 269).

Moreover, Carson the adult poet, prose writer, and urban dinnseanchaí
discovers an embarrassment of riches in Belfast’s terraced streets, entries, and forgotten back alleys. For, quite apart from the slogans and graffiti that proliferate across sidings and gable walls, an elaborate urban text can be discerned in the city’s constellations of street names. Street names compose a ragged and fragmentary script for the city, bearing a rich freight of associations and symbolic potential that is invented, revised, written over, and erased as the city itself grows and develops. To this end, Walter Benjamin contends:

What was otherwise reserved for only a very few words, a privileged class of words, the city made possible for all words, or at least a great many: to be elevated to the noble status of a name. This revolution in language was carried out by what is most general: the street.—Through its street names, the city is a linguistic cosmos.23

Indeed, Benjamin goes so far as to claim that, in certain cases, ‘street names are like intoxicating substances that make our perceptions more stratified and richer in spaces’.24 Through their various names the city streets are invested with a form of symbolic geography, a set of imaginative coordinates conveying a sense of the deeper resonances underlying the immediate empirical realities of urban space.

Carson’s depictions of Belfast make much of such resonances and street names form an important part of the texture of his writing, mapping the nodes of semantic potential and personal significance that are to be found in his city’s literal and metaphorical landscapes. Consequently, street directories and gazetteers have a particular fascination for him, their alphabetical listings and structured indexes constituting a sort of fantastic codex through which the city’s supposedly immutable geography can be deconstructed and rearranged – yet another version of Deleuze and Guattari’s rhizomatic map. Places that are geographically distinct or socially remote are brought into close proximity, while intimate communities of politico-religious association are exploded and dispersed according to the dictates of an alternative spatial logic. There is, then, a deeper political intent behind Carson’s exuberant imaginative variations on ‘the cabalistic or magical implications of the alphabet’ (SF, 7) in The Star Factory, which culminate in his transformation into a bookworm, ‘ruminating through the one thousand, five hundred and ninety-pages of the Directory in teredo mode, following my non-linear dictates, as I make chambered spirals in my universe, performing parabolas by browsing letters and the blanks between’ (SF, 8). Beneath the superficial attractiveness of this quirky notion there is a powerful impulse towards
reinvention and imaginative engagement, an off-beat intention to stratify the reader’s perceptions and thus make the city richer in spaces.

In particular, Carson finds a singular symbolic richness in the fact that so many of Belfast’s streets are named after other towns, cities, and countries; although, as Desmond Fitzgibbon points out, the historical contexts that are attached to these names are often a matter of deep political contention. He argues that the remarkably heavy politicisation of space in Belfast makes it difficult and perhaps irresponsible to etherealise or aestheticise the city:

Peace-lines, wall-murals and bunting act as obvious markers of political and cultural difference, but the street names (for example, Balaclava, Kashmir and Odessa etc.) are part of a double-edged imperial dinneanchas which manages to integrate and alienate at the same time, depending on the cultural and political allegiance of the individual interacting with his environment.25

Fitzgibbon is right to insist on the actual historical and political context of these names over and above their superficially exotic allure, and is sensitive to the power inscribed within them and its implications for the people who happen to live in the streets they name. However, there is already something appropriately ‘double-edged’ about the whole notion of an ‘imperial dinneanchas’ that would, in the name of colonial authority, attempt to establish discursive control over the city through the medium of a specifically Gaelic tradition of place-lore.

Importantly, the examples that Fitzgibbon provides (Balaclava, Kashmir, and Odessa) are all culled from Carson’s work, indicating as they do locations in the Lower Falls Road area, where many streets are (or were) named after places associated with the Crimean War of 1853–6 (Servia, Sevastopol, Bosnia, Inkerman, Alma etc.) or the Indian Mutiny of 1857–8 (Cawnpore, Lucknow, Benares, Bombay etc.). Both of these historical events are the subject of long poems in Breaking News, a collection containing many interlinked lyrics which can be read as glossing the sedimented associations of street names on the Falls Road, past and present. Furthermore, as both ‘The Indian Mutiny’ and ‘The War Correspondent’ in that volume make clear, the historical significance of both conflicts is not simply their place in the pageant of imperial dominance, but rather that they are each instances of spectacular incompetence or vulnerability on the part of the British Empire and its military institutions, as well as massive human tragedies.26 In ‘Balaklava’, Carson’s war correspondent fixes his gaze on an especially poignant and
emblematic figure whose remains allegorise loss and mutilation rather than superior force or cultural dominance:

The skeleton of an English horseman had tatters of scarlet cloth hanging to the bones of his arms; all the buttons had been cut off the jacket. (BN, 63)

Reminders of the bloody failure that was the Charge of the Light Brigade and the ousting of the British East India Company are, therefore, at least as much a part of the historical context behind the names of these streets as is a triumphal display of imperial bombast. 27

Alienation and integration are more confused in this respect than Fitzgibbon’s overly rigid binary model allows, for even these seemingly straightforward signifiers of Unionist loyalty and imperial ambition are open to a process of contestation, misprision, and appropriation. As Gerry Smyth affirms: “The rhetorical force of the map/name is to the effect that ‘these places mean these things, don’t they?’; but such a formulation is always open to the possibility of a negative response.” 28 Carson’s response is, in fact, typically ambivalent, both acknowledging the alienation and oppression inscribed within these names – as in ‘Belfast Confetti’, where the iteration of street names associated with the Crimean War accentuates that poem’s claustrophobic sense of enclosure and danger (IFN, 31) – and also elaborating his own imaginative geographies as a way of enriching the city. So, in The Star Factory, he observes:

Streets named after places form exotic junctures not to be found on the map of the Empire: Balkan and Ballarat, Cambrai and Cambridge, Carlisle and Carlow, Lisbon and Lisburn, and so on, through Madras and Madrid, till we eventually arrive, by way of Yukon, at the isles of Zetland, whereupon we fall off the margins of the city. (SF, 8)

Here again, Carson makes effective use of the arbitrary connections that are facilitated by the street directory’s alphabetical arrangement, focusing upon those junctures, relationships, and resemblances that are excluded from, or ignored by, the map of the Empire. Indeed, as Alex Houen remarks, Carson’s linguistic explorations can be understood as producing ‘a cartography of other possible-worlds’. 29 In this way, the margins of the city may be both expanded and redefined, and street names are found to possess a rich indetermination that, according to Michel de Certeau, gives them ‘the function of articulating a second, poetic geography on top of the geography of the literal, forbidden or permitted meaning’. 30 In the case of Belfast, this palimpsestic dual geography is likely to be especially conflictual, with one layer rubbing uncomfortably against the
other, and Fitzgibbon’s warnings about aestheticising or exoticising the city need to be taken seriously. Nonetheless, it seems both significant and entirely natural that, in ‘Hamlet’ and elsewhere, Carson should connect Raglan Street less with the name and career of a British military leader than with the image of an unravelled sleeve and memories of his demolished childhood home.\[^{31}\]

Alongside this creative sense of indeterminacy and symbolic surplus, however, Carson’s lists of street names can also take on the sombre tones of litany, as they do in Anne Devlin’s short story, ‘Naming the Names’: “Abyssinia, Alma, Balaclava, Balkan, Belgrade, Bosnia”, naming the names: empty and broken and beaten places. [...] Gone and going all the time.\[^{32}\] In the face of all the linguistic fluidity and semantic flux that is celebrated in ‘Brick’ and ‘Farset’, Carson’s depictions of Belfast are also informed by a powerful undertow of loss as whole sections of the city are wiped out and memory struggles to recover something worthwhile from the rubble. If change in the abstract can be seen as a radical source of imaginative potential in Carson’s writing, it is often experienced personally in terms of pain and regret, for, as Elizabeth Wilson observes, ‘the urban sense of time and decay is a nostalgic one’.\[^{33}\]

During the period of the Troubles, the Lower Falls suffered particularly from the depredations of both planners and paramilitaries, many of its narrow interconnecting streets and busy street-corners having been reconfigured as cul-de-sacs and residential closes or reduced to shabby wasteland. Contemplating a 1923 Ordnance Survey plan of West Belfast, Carson writes:

> Even its generous scale of 208.33 feet to the inch cannot accommodate the finer detail: drapers, butchers, grocers, haberdashers, publicans, tailors, pawnbrokers and confectioners, to name some of the plethora of shops that lined the Falls, according to my memory, corroborated by the Street Directory of 1948, the year that I was born. This townscape remained unchanged in its essentials until the early Seventies, until all was swept away in a rash of redevelopment.\[^{34}\]

For Carson, even the ‘generous’ scale of this map is inadequate to register and record the ‘finer detail’ of the townscape, which is granted a kind of permanence in memory and the printed record of the 1948 Street Directory even as its eventual loss is registered. The urban topography described rebukes the generalisations of the ‘official’ plan but is nonetheless frozen in a moment of the irretrievable past.

The agents of the state and of ‘terrorism’ are deemed equally culpable for contemporary Belfast’s landscapes of surveillance and desolation in
Carson’s work. Moreover, both are equally associated, if in differing ways, with the use of maps and topographical information as modes of power and oppression. In ‘Belfast Confetti’ Carson’s speaker finds himself trapped in the familiar labyrinth of the Lower Falls, and is stopped short by an army checkpoint’s ‘fusillade of question-marks’ (IFN, 31). However, a parallel experience is described in the prose piece ‘Question Time’, where the narrator’s cognitive map of this home ground is inspected by local paramilitaries as a means of (putatively) ascertaining his political and sectarian loyalties. As a result, the role of maps in formulating a sense of identity and of the past is explored: ‘The map is pieced together bit by bit. I am this map which they examine, checking it for error, hesitation, accuracy; a map which no longer refers to the present world, but to a history, these vanished streets; a map which is this moment, this interrogation, my replies’ (BC, 63). As I discuss further in Chapter 4, for Carson’s citizen-personae, fresh encounters with these transformed landscapes and their vanished streets are characterised by shock or confusion, giving way gradually to the plangent tones of elegiac lament, as in these lines from ‘Hamlet’:

The sleeve of Raglan Street has been unravelled; the helmet of Balaklava
Is torn away from the mouth. The dim glow of Garnet has gone out,
And with it, all but the memory of where I lived. (BC, 107)

In ‘Hamlet’, all that remains of the past is ‘a cry, a summons, clanking out from the smoke/ Of demolition’ and Carson’s despairing attempt to ‘piece together the exploded fragments’ (BC, 108). In this context, memory becomes a mode of consolation and the contemporary city is haunted by the shades of demolished streets and buildings, a way of life that has been ‘swallowed in the maw of time and trouble, clearances’ (BC, 63).

But if the scarified landscapes of the Falls attest to a more general decimation of the city, then the charred remains of Smithfield market figure as a symbolic black hole in Carson’s work, the dark heart of a city collapsing in on itself. Prior to its fire-bombing on 6 May 1974, Smithfield was a longstanding and much-loved part of the city’s social and commercial life, a ramshackle maze of stalls and passageways where all manner of second-hand goods and bric-a-brac could be bought or sold. Typically, literary depictions of the place often err on the side of romantic whimsicality, but Carson’s versions of it are suffused with a brooding, uncanny malevolence, discovering in its smoking carcass a bleak prophecy of the death of the city. To this end, ‘Smithfield
Market’ rewrites Robert Frost’s ‘For Once, Then, Something’ as Belfast gothic:36

Since everything went up in smoke, no entrances, no exits.
But as the charred beams hissed and flickered, I glimpsed a map of Belfast
In the ruins: obliterated streets, the faint impression of a key.
Something many-toothed, elaborate, stirred briefly in the labyrinth.

(IFN, 37)

The atmosphere of stifling enclosure and sulphurous danger here is suffocating, and the ‘something’ stirring in the depths of the labyrinth threatens to take on a monstrous shape. Yet the poem hinges around that ‘faint impression’ of discovery, the possibility of glimpsing an image of the city as it actually is, a map that shows all its many-toothed, elaborate complexity. Something infinitely valuable may remain to be salvaged from the wreckage after all, but, to adapt Walter Benjamin’s methodology for historical materialism, this will only be accomplished if the speaker is able to ‘seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger’.37

Indeed, Carson’s Belfast bears more than a passing resemblance to Benjamin’s famous depiction of the angel of history, who is propelled backwards into the future by the storm of ‘progress’, his face turned towards a past that is apprehended as ‘one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet’.38

But if at times Carson’s writing of the city betrays a tendency towards retrograde nostalgia, then ‘Smithfield Market’ suggests ways in which this strain also modulates into a more historically engaged critical anatomy of the ‘dilapidated present’ (BC, 66), an examination of the new urban landscapes that post-industrial Belfast is becoming and an oblique inquiry into the politico-economic forces dictating these transformations. For although a poem such as ‘Clearance’ celebrates the tearing away of venerable façades as a near-Yeatsian moment of creative destruction, what Carson often discovers clanking out from the smoke of demolition is a nightmarish vista of late capitalist ‘junkspace’. ‘In Junkspace,’ writes the architect Rem Koolhaas, there exist ‘subsystems only, without superstructure, orphaned particles in search of a framework or pattern’, and the ‘soft city’ of contemporary experience is characterised by a series of hallucinatory dissolves, through which ‘sections rot, are no longer viable, but remain joined to the flesh of the main body via gangrenous passages’.39 Here there is no longer any guiding principle
of organisation for the city’s spaces but merely a shifting collection of
fragments in process of metamorphosis and dissolution.

In a near echo of Koolhaas’s imagery and register, Carson’s ‘Night
Patrol’ throws off the ‘Victorian creamy façade’ of the Grand Central
Hotel in order to reveal Belfast’s ‘inner-city tubing’:

  cables, sewers, a snarl of Portakabins,
Soft-porn shops and carry-outs. A Telstar Taxis depot that is a hole
In a breeze-block wall, a wire grille and a voice-box uttering
gobbledygook. (IFN, 34)

The flux and indeterminacies of language that are manipulated with such
creative gusto in ‘Brick’ and ‘Farset’ have here deteriorated to the point of
incomprehension, and this breakdown is reflected in the unravelling and
decay of the urban fabric itself. Behind the creamy façades of prosperous
respectability lies a blighted landscape of makeshift economics and
squalid deprivation: ‘Maggots seethe between the ribs and corrugations’
(IFN, 37). What is more, there is an inkling in Carson’s work – and in
this he anticipates Koolhaas’s diagnosis – that what is glimpsed here is
not simply the half-concealed underbelly of the late capitalist city, but
its shifting, semi-solid material substructure, and the miasma of sleech
upon which Belfast is built can consequently be reread as a figure for this
new base of flexible accumulation and service economies. To this end,
‘Question Time’ balances the utopian potential that is bound up with
the prospect of revision against what is essentially a dystopian image of
the contemporary city and its uncertain future: ‘The junk is sinking back
into the sleech and muck. Pizza parlours, massage parlours, night-clubs,
drinking-clubs, antique shops, designer studios momentarily populate
the wilderness and the blitz sites; they too will vanish in the morning.
Everything will be revised’ (BC, 57).

All of which raises the thorny question of postmodernism; its applica-
bility to the Northern Irish situation generally and to Carson’s writing
particularly. This is a notably contentious area of critical debate and
Alex Houen wryly notes that while many commentators ‘have seen
postmodernism to be an issue for Northern Ireland, […] one could be
forgiven for thinking it the last place in which postmodernism might
find a foothold’ given the part that irredentist nationalism, religious
sectarianism, and historical revanchism continue to play in its social and
political life. Nonetheless, Eamonn Hughes’s insistence that Northern
Ireland be understood as ‘a modern place with all the pluralities,
discontents, and linkages appropriate to a modern place’ usefully points
critical discussion away from the ideological dead-end that considers the
statelet as an atavistic and anomalous ‘place apart’. Elmer Kennedy-Andrews appears to be making a similar point in more emphatic terms when he describes the North as ‘an exemplary site of postmodern heterogeneity, breakdown, hybridity, dual inheritance, exile and cultural pluralism’. There is, however, a risk here of obscuring the very real material divisions, inequalities, and injustices that continue to inform the contemporary condition not only of Northern Ireland but also of late modernity or postmodernity more generally. Modernity and postmodernity may also take on very specific articulations where Ireland and (particularly) Northern Ireland are concerned. To this end, Joe Cleary contends that ‘in an Irish context the term “modernity” is stripped of its semblance of obviousness’ and points to the danger of conceiving of Irish modernisation as a process of ‘one-way traffic’ whereby global socio-economic tendencies are merely adapted to local circumstances. A similar analysis is provided by Conor McCarthy in his criticisms of what he calls ‘modernisation theory’, but, like Cleary, he also stresses ‘the continuing cultural, intellectual and political importance of critical forms of modernism in the fields of cultural production and criticism.’

Carson’s work intersects these issues at a number of points and has often been discussed as broadly ‘postmodernist’, not least in terms of its emphasis upon contingency and provisionality, its juxtaposition of ‘high’ and ‘low’ cultural forms, and its refusal of mythologising ‘explanations’ for violence and the vicissitudes of history. Neil Corcoran has called Carson ‘the most thoroughgoing postmodernist among his generation of Northern Irish poets’, whereas Richard Kirkland more cautiously sees his work in terms of ‘a Northern Irish poetic aesthetic which might be amenable to, if not complicit with, postmodern frameworks of narrative’. This is perhaps a rather fine distinction, but it is an important one nonetheless. For, while Carson’s writing does indeed reject the metanarratives of myth and of the dominant political ideologies of Nationalism and Unionism, its insistent grounding in the material specificities of time and place works to undermine any easy notions of postmodern border crossings and cultural conflations. His representations of Belfast share in and crystallise modernity’s contradictions through their compounding of kinesis and inertia, connection and disconnection, creation and destruction, and their dramatisation of the fractious relationship between art and politics. As Houen astutely acknowledges, ‘Carson’s gestures towards a “postmodern condition” are qualified by the “geopolitical”’: ‘The provisionality he explores is not a generalized disintegration of cultural borders and identities, it is a
Building upon Houen’s analysis, I want to argue that it is through his critical mappings of the city’s emergent ‘junkspace’ that Carson’s dialogue with postmodernism becomes most apparent, for his depictions of Belfast at the end of the twentieth century can be seen to reflect Fredric Jameson’s conviction that the experience of the postmodern is bound up with ‘something like a mutation in built space itself’.49 For Jameson, the spatial peculiarities of postmodernism are symptomatic and expressive of ‘a new and historically original dilemma, one that involves our insertion as individual subjects into a multidimensional set of radically discontinuous realities, whose frames range from the still surviving spaces of bourgeois private life all the way to the unimaginable decentering of global capital itself’.50 Carson’s Belfast is not Jameson’s Los Angeles, but in Belfast Confetti it is nonetheless clear that the perceptual or representational frames of the Troubles city become increasingly enmeshed with those of the postmodern city, making financial investment and expanding consumerism as much a part of Carson’s cityscapes as political murder and socio-religious segregation. The one reality coexists awkwardly and discontinuously with the other, and Carson chronicles their mutual imbrication as the spatial layout of the city warps and shifts under seemingly tectonic pressures.

‘Revised Version’ dramatises these confluences and transformations, while casting a cold eye over official proposals to market Belfast as a ‘world city’:

The jargon sings of leisure purposes, velodromes and pleasure parks, the unfurling petals of the World Rose Convention. As the city consumes itself – scrap iron mouldering on the quays, black holes eating through the time-warp – the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment announces that to people who have never been to Belfast their image of the place is often far-removed from reality. No more Belfast champagne, gas bubbled through milk; no more heads in ovens. Intoxication, death, will find their new connections. Cul-de-sacs and ring-roads. The city is a map of the city.

(BC, 69)

The planners’ and politicians’ anodyne vision of a sweet-smelling, leisure-plex Belfast sounds a decidedly discordant note within earshot of the city’s mouldering quays, and is placed under erasure by the corrosive social realities of post-industrial decline. Intoxication and death, it seems, will find their new connections in spite of superficial efforts at gentrification, while plans for the new city appear choked
with cul-de-sacs and ring-roads. Belfast has not, in fact, left its Troubles behind, and the government’s efforts at promoting a revised image of the city seem to imply their blithe indifference towards the civic decay that is everywhere evident.

And yet Carson’s own writing of Belfast is itself centrally concerned to document and bring to light those revised versions of the city that disorient official cartographies and static figurations of the city. For Carson, the ‘reality’ of the city is not to be accessed simply by stripping back the layers of prejudice and distortion that have concealed it from view, but its lineaments are to be glimpsed fleetingly from within the shifting constellations of sensory perceptions and material details he arranges and records. Thus, his mock-scholarly survey of old photographs and aborted plans, inaccurate maps and unlikely proposals in ‘Revised Version’ conjures ‘glimpses of what might have been’, a synchronic diagram of how the city never was and could become, which, as soon as it materialises, ‘already blurs and fades’ (BC, 66). This roll-call of intended streets and developers’ fantasies constitutes a finely woven tapestry of absent presences, an imaginary map ‘wavering between memory and oblivion’ through which Carson marshals the spectral traces of Belfast’s failed incarnations, holding a composite image of the dream city in productive tension with its empirical reality: ‘It lives on in our imagination, this plan of might-have-beens, legislating for all the possibilities, guaranteed from censure by its non-existence’ (BC, 67). In this respect, ‘Revised Version’ can be seen to express a (significantly unimplemented) methodological principle from Walter Benjamin’s Arcades Project, whereby he intended to ‘set up within the actual city of Paris, Paris the dream city – as an aggregate of all the building plans, park projects, and street-name systems that were never developed’. Measuring the actual city of Belfast against Belfast the dream city, Carson exposes the fissures and lapses that disrupt the putatively totalising representational grid of the map, while simultaneously deriving his own imaginative geographies from an exploration of the city’s urban unconscious. Moreover, Carson’s ex-centric concern for what has been repressed, forgotten or elided from representations of the city in ‘Revised Version’ stresses the formidably compendious conception of urban experience that sustains his version of Belfast, perhaps confirming Sean O’Brien’s perceptive remark that his work ‘consists of metonymies for an unstated (and, we infer, unstatable) whole’. This ungraspable whole both prompts and eludes Carson’s writing of Belfast, its significance remaining implied and intangible but everywhere operative as a representational framework or deep structure.
In this context, then, it becomes possible to briefly outline some of the parallels and divergences that may be discerned between Carson’s representations of Belfast and Fredric Jameson’s concept of cognitive mapping, which aims to extrapolate ‘the mental map of city space […] to that mental map of the social and global totality we all carry around in our heads in variously garbled forms’. For Jameson, ‘the incapacity to map socially is as crippling to political experience as the analogous incapacity to map spatially is for urban experience’, and this is particularly so in the present postmodern moment where the decentring of social space by multinational capital has undermined older forms of orientation and alignment. His response to this divisive sundering of spatial coordinates is to propose a synthesis of Kevin Lynch’s concept of the ‘imageable’ city and Louis Althusser’s formulation of ideology as representing the imaginary relationship of an individual to her real conditions of existence. The aesthetic of cognitive mapping that results conceives of the city as a microcosm of much larger global networks, extending the individual’s attempt to grasp the conditions of her displacement within urban space to the unimaginable totality of social structures:

Lynch’s conception of city experience – the dialectic between the here and now of immediate perception and the imaginative or imaginary sense of the city as an absent totality – presents something like a spatial analogue of Althusser’s great formulation of ideology itself […]. [T]his positive conception of ideology as a necessary function in any form of social life has the great merit of stressing the gap between the local positioning of the individual subject and the totality of class structures in which he or she is situated, a gap between phenomenological perception and a reality that transcends all individual thinking or experience; but this ideology, as such, attempts to span or coordinate, to map, by means of conscious and unconscious representations.

A possible objection that might be levelled at this avowedly macro-political approach is that in claiming to be able to map everything Jameson appears to be assuming the scopic authority of what Michel de Certeau calls the ‘solar Eye, looking down like a god’ and surveying the frozen cityscape from a point of remote detachment. But this would be both to misconstrue Jameson’s understanding of the concept of ‘totality’ and to overlook the fact that cognitive mapping, much like de Certeau’s account of resistant spatial practices, proceeds outwards from the position of the individual subject within the dislocated circuits and relays of urban space. In fact, Jameson asserts that no such ‘privileged
bird’s-eye view of the whole’ is available; rather, the project of totalisation ‘takes as its premise the impossibility for individual and biological human subjects to conceive of such a position, let alone to adopt or achieve it’, proceeding instead by way of a sort of Sartrean ‘summing up’ that remains necessarily partial and subjective.\textsuperscript{57} A more serious misgiving is voiced by Jameson himself, however, when he remarks that, instead of transcending ‘the limits of mapping’, cognitive mapping actually ‘ends up re-spatializing an operation we were supposed to think of in a different manner altogether’.\textsuperscript{58} In this sense, the powerful figure of the visual map reasserts its hypnotic conceptual sway, short-circuiting the willed emergence of new modes of conceiving and negotiating global social structures.

This dual sense of a conceptual reliance upon and fundamental dissatisfaction with the figure of the map is what links Carson’s writing of Belfast with Jameson’s attempt to grasp the unfigurable social relations of the totality. If Carson is often concerned to undermine or revise the dominant cartographies of military authority and/or public opinion, then this is also bound up with an effort to find new ways of mapping the city and its relationships within a larger, unstatable whole. And throughout this chapter I have been arguing that these new ways of mapping the city can best be thought of on the model of Deleuze and Guattari’s rhizome, a fundamentally acentred and fissiparous structure that is opposed to the ‘arborescent’ logic of the tree and root, and that ‘ceaselessly establishes connections between semantic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social structures’.\textsuperscript{59} Yet it can hardly escape our attention that, on Jameson’s description at least, the new world-space of multinational capital would itself appear to be a rhizome \textit{par excellence}, albeit one shot through with ‘knots of arborescence’,\textsuperscript{60} facilitating the flexible integration of individual subjects into its decentred networks of exchange and appropriation, and mutating ceaselessly in accordance with its own voracious inner logic. The problem for Jameson is how we might be able to represent this seemingly ‘unrepresentable’ structure to ourselves, and it is to this end that he argues that ‘conspiracy theory (and its garish narrative manifestations) must be seen as a degraded attempt – through the figuration of advanced technology – to think the impossible totality of the contemporary world system’.\textsuperscript{61}

The implications of this allegorical reading of conspiracy theory for Carson’s work, with its shadowy ‘Special Forces’ (\textit{FL}, 19) and paranoiac apprehension of an increasingly surveillant society, are highly suggestive.
Alan Gillis has written insightfully of how his narrative digressions and circumlocutions ‘suggest a broader whole (of sorts), a hinted-at, potential totality of non-tangible significance’ that appears to be both benevolent and malign. Indeed, the connections that Carson’s writing makes between semantic chains and organisations of power are at once linguistically inventive and literally lethal for the protagonists of his tall tales, converging more often than not upon the lacerating experience of political murder. ‘Queen’s Gambit’, for example, relays second-hand a labyrinthine narrative of conspiracy and violence told in a Belfast barber’s which – through its intricate weave of cinematic pans and cross-fades, sudden shifts of register, and bewildering cast of double agents, look-a-likes, and impostors – draws the reader into ‘a mental block of dog-leg turns and cul-de-sacs’ (BC, 36). The central incidents of the poem – which concern a robbery by small-time criminals, a double- or triple-crossing involving anonymous callers on a confidential telephone line, and a climactic ambush of the British Army by republican paramilitaries – can only be pieced together through fragmentary glimpses of some vast and monstrous encompassing structure that remains but dimly perceivable throughout, as if on the very edge of vision. In a sense, then, the seemingly insoluble matrix of loyalties, conflicts, and unacknowledged complicities that composes Carson’s version of the Troubles might also be read, along the lines suggested by Jameson, as a figure for the everywhere present but even more complex and elusive global networks of late capitalism itself. Or perhaps it would be better simply to say that Carson’s writing of Belfast typically locates itself at the fractious juncture between these two ‘levels’ of social reality.

I want to conclude by suggesting that it is also possible to discover another suggestive version of cognitive mapping in Carson’s work through his fascination with the postal service and its global networks of communication and intercourse. This tracery of images, structures, and tropes centres on the figure of Carson’s postman father, who is his son’s first and most important guide to both the city’s mysterious codes of orientation and the labyrinths of narrative that his writing explores. In an early poem, ‘Twine’, the child-narrator plunges his head into his father’s ‘postman sack’ and breathes its ‘gloom’ (LE, 10; NEOP, 21); while in ‘Bed-Time Story’ he literally steps into his father’s ‘creased, enormous shoes’ and imagines delivering ‘Letters, cards, important gifts’ (BC, 86; 88). ‘Post’ develops the theme further by dramatising a moment in which precious knowledge is passed between father and son:
So now he talks
Of how it’s changed:
District codes,
His mnemonics
For the various streets
Of the Falls Road walks [...]. (NEOP, 58)

Carson Snr is very frequently to be encountered in the middle of telling some yarn or passing on some precious scrap of knowledge such as this, and the postman’s ‘walk’ becomes an archetypal figure underlying and informing all of Carson’s circumnavigations of the city, his father’s mnemonics serving as a means of ascertaining his own position relative to the surrounding streets. Moreover, because it is intimately connected with supporting and disseminating the cultures of literacy and print, ‘the elaborate/ Machinery of books’ (FL, 68), the postman’s walk also features as a recurrent metaphor for writing itself. For instance, the fantastical narrative of language-learning that is spun in ‘Second Language’ includes an image of the narrator abroad on the pavements of the city:

I love the as-yet morning, when no one’s abroad, and I am like a postman on his walk,
Distributing strange messages and bills, and arbitrations with the world of talk:

I foot the snow and almost-dark. My shoes are crisp, and bite into the blue-
White firmament of pavement. (FL, 12)

Similarly, the alpine skier who narrates ‘Z’ likens the parallel tracks he leaves in the snow to the lines of the poem itself, or, in another metaphorical mode, the footsteps of a postman: ‘when I deliver all the letters, that’s the text./ The canvas sack on my back reminds me I am in the archaic footprints/ Of my postman father. I criss and cross the zig-zag precedents’ (OEC, 36)

Carson walks in his father’s footsteps, but also criss-crosses the paths trodden before him. If the postman’s walk serves as an ‘archaic’ or archetypal figure in Carson’s writing, providing patterns of orientation that can either be followed or deviated from, then the imprint that his footsteps leave on the pavements also, in some ultimately ungraspable way, gestures outwards to the global system of correspondences and deliveries with which his father’s daily walk is distantly but inextricably bound up. Hence Carson’s image of the Belfast sorting office’s ‘toponymical sages’, who are capable of ‘envisag[ing] streets they’d never seen (for who could
see all of Belfast, in all its teeming terraces and fractured loyalties?)’, receiving Christmas mail from all over the world and assigning each parcel or letter to its destination in the city (SF, 277–8). Similarly, in *The Star Factory*, Carson recalls his childhood hobby of stamp-collecting, commenting not only upon ‘the classification and taxonomy of minutiae’ (SF, 30) that is proper to philately but also conjuring a dizzying catalogue of the unacknowledged transactions and material intimacies implied in the lives of stamps, reminding the reader forcefully that ‘correspondences seethe everywhere’:

Sheets of stamps, books of stamps, coils of stamps unscrolling from antiquated cast-iron slot machines: one could make an epic documentary of one day’s issue, salivated on by thousands of tongues, vast spectral demographies of deoxyribonucleic acid chromosomed into the sticky backs of stamps, thumbprinted on to envelopes, or impressed by one delicate trembling fingertip, the aura of gum still lingering like a retroactive kiss on the tongue. All of this takes place in boudoirs, public houses, studies, cafes, libraries, ports, railway stations, hotels, aerodromes, schools, surgeries, pleasure gardens, post offices, garages, on piers and esplanades, on board trains and boats and planes […]. (SF, 37)

‘Correspondence’ thus becomes a pervasive metaphor in his writing of the city, adumbrating the (often obscure) networks by which Belfast’s denizens unwittingly take their place in larger circuits of exchange and transaction, and gesturing towards a network of spatial relationships or connections – a map – that can in some sense be ‘envisaged’ but not ‘seen’. In such aspects of Carson’s writing it is possible to discern the germ of a utopian mapping, one that is predicated not upon elevated distance but on an approach to the city, and the larger world with which it is conversant, at the level of its streets. As Carson says in ‘Ambition’: ‘I think I’m starting, now,/ To know the street map with my feet, just like my father’ (BC, 30). In this way, Jameson’s claim that the mutations in built space that characterise postmodernity stand as ‘something like an imperative to grow new organs’ is taken seriously in Carson’s work. His writing reveals a restless effort to reconfigure our understanding and apprehension of the city, and to conceive of its implication in larger territories of significance in enabling new ways.

**Notes**

1 Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, p. 228.
4 De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. 121.
7 Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 5.
10 Houen, *Terrorism and Modern Literature*, p. 263.
19 *The Concise Oxford Companion to Irish Literature* briefly defines ‘dinnshenchas’ [sic] as ‘lore of prominent places’: ‘Placenames are explained by reference to legends which are linked to them by means of pseudo-etymological techniques, where sometimes fictitious stories are adduced to explain the existing names. […] It was part of the body of knowledge medieval Irish poets were expected to master’. Robert Welch, ed., *The Concise Oxford Companion to Irish Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 90–1. Carson’s interest in medieval Irish (and Welsh) poetry goes back to his very earliest work, and is especially evident in his first collection, *The New Estate*. For an illuminating overview of modern Northern Irish poets’ engagements with the tradition of *dinnseanchas* see Houen, *Terrorism and Modern Literature*, pp. 246–59.
22 Cf. ‘Four Sonnets’, which includes the line: ‘Put your ear to the street, you will hear the underground streams of Belfast’ (*FL*, 22).


26 As Carson makes clear in his ‘Notes’, *Breaking News* owes much to the pioneering war correspondence of the Anglo-Irish journalist William Howard Russell (1820–1907), whose reports on the progress of the Crimean campaigns ‘were especially influential in shaping public attitudes to the management, and mismanagement, of war’ (*BN*, 74).

27 Fran Brearton also discusses the historical sedimentation of previous conflicts, particularly those of the Great War, informing ‘The War Correspondent’ and Carson’s poetry more generally in ‘Mapping the Trenches’, pp. 373, 382–5. In particular, she draws attention to a suggestive isomorphism between Carson’s metamorphic, multiform Belfast and the labyrinthine topography of trench landscapes.


31 Fitzroy James Henry Somerset, 1st Baron Raglan, headed an expeditionary force in the Crimea against the Russian army, winning battles at Alma and Inkerman. At Balaklava, he gave the order that initiated the disastrous Charge of the Light Brigade (1854), was blamed for the failure of the Commissariat in the fierce winter of 1854–5, and died shortly before the storming of Sebastopol. See the entry in *Chambers Biographical Dictionary* (Edinburgh: Chambers, 6th edn, 1997), p. 1527. The *OED* glosses ‘raglan’ as designating ‘a sleeve with sloping edges running up to the neck and so without a shoulder seam’ or ‘a garment with such sleeves’. Raglan Street was located at the heart of the Lower Falls Road area just west of Belfast’s city centre and was demolished, along with the surrounding streets, in the 1970s, a process chronicled and responded to in Carson’s poem, ‘Hamlet’ (*BC*, 105–8).


34 Ciaran Carson, ‘Belfast’, Ciaran Carson Papers, MSS 746, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University, Box 27, Folder 5.


40 Houen, *Terrorism and Modern Literature*, p. 239.
42 Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, *Fiction and the Northern Ireland Troubles since 1969: (de)constructing the North* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2003), p. 269. In his more recent work on poetry and place in Northern Ireland, Kennedy-Andrews stresses the degree to which ideas of place, home, and belonging are bound up with the politics of territorial contestation and social division. See Kennedy-Andrews, *Writing Home*, p. 2.
45 In his notoriously critical review of Seamus Heaney’s *North* Carson accuses the elder poet of becoming ‘the laureate of violence – a mythmaker, an anthropologist of ritual killing, an apologist for “the situation”, in the last resort a mystifier’. Carson, ‘Escaped from the Massacre?’, p. 183.
50 Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 413.
60 Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 22.
63 Carson has recently acknowledged that his representation of his father in his books 'is sometimes more fictional than biographical'. Kennedy-Andrews, 'For all I know', p. 14.