CHAPTER THREE

Deviations from the Known Route: Reading, Writing, Walking

Given his desire to know the street map with his feet, it is unsurprising that the act of walking should play such a prominent role in Carson’s writing. Indeed, his is a distinctively peripatetic aesthetic. Time and again walking serves not only as a means of registering urban experience, the medium through which all manner of encounters, associations, and sidelong observations are made; it also functions as a figure for the meandering, digressive nature of Carson’s narratives, in which ‘one thing leads to another’ (FFA, 152) much as the pedestrian wends her way through the divagating and interconnecting streets of the city. Form and content echo and reinforce each other in this respect, and in both his poetry and his prose Carson’s wayward stories are very often told by narrators travelling on foot. This is true even of his translations, as the opening lines of The Inferno and The Midnight Court respectively show:

Halfway through the story of my life
I came to in a gloomy wood, because
I’d wandered off the path, away from the light. (IDA, 1)

’Twas my custom to stroll by a clear winding stream,
With my boots full of dew from the lush meadow green,
Near a neck of the woods where the mountain holds sway,
Without danger or fear at the dawn of the day. (MC, 19)

The implicit connection here between ‘strolling’, ‘wandering’, and ‘straying’ is important, for, as Rebecca Solnit observes, walking need not necessarily have a fixed destination but may serve as ‘a subversive detour, the scenic route through a half-abandoned landscape of ideas and experiences’.¹

Certainly, walking allows the mind to wander – and for Solnit, ‘the mind, like the feet, works at about three miles per hour’² – but
it also encourages a heightened awareness on the part of the walker concerning her status as a body moving through space, with all the possibilities and prohibitions this entails. Urban walking in particular immerses the walker in the quotidian practices and social life of the city, initiating random encounters and unexpected events that may be, by turns, stimulating, alarming, or obscurely revealing. For example, in ‘Gate’ Carson's pedestrian narrator opens with a ‘passing’ remark that seems freighted with dark meaning: ‘Passing Terminus boutique the other day, I see it’s got a bit of flak:/ The T and the r are missing, leaving e minus, and a sign saying, MONSTER/ CLOSING DOWN SALE’ (BC, 45). Here, the disintegrative effects of damage and decay upon the façade of a city-centre building reveal glimpses of an alternative urban semantics, and the surreal or sinister conjugation of discrete signs in the shop window is made possible by the ‘wandering’ eye of the pedestrian narrator.

Walking, then, is a vehicle for the sort of happenstance conjunctions, affinities, and juxtapositions that are characteristic of figurative language; but in Carson’s work walking is also a recurrent figure for writing itself, a means of tracing the physical patterns and ‘psychogeographical contours’ of the city. As John Goodby comments, Carson’s personae are ‘self-propelled and perambulatory, negotiating a path through Belfast of the Troubles. His and his subjects’ means of locomotion are a major factor in shaping the encounter with the world and individual subjectivity, and our readerly encounter with these.’ The notion of walking as ‘subversive detour’ is variously articulated in Carson’s writing, from Mule’s ‘careful drunken weaving’ in ‘Dresden’ (IFN, 16) and his father’s characteristic ‘stiff-handed walk’ as described in The Star Factory (SF, 27) to the diverse band of ‘somnambulists’ who ‘stumble’ their way through the kaleidoscopic historical phantasmagoria of The Twelfth of Never (TN, 13). Perhaps the best encapsulation of Carson’s tendency for contrary progressions, however, and of his chariness of taking the shortest route between two points is the repeated phrase ‘one step forward, two steps back’, which, as Neil Corcoran notes, draws our attention to the fact that ‘movement by digression’ is characteristic of his aesthetic. In this chapter I will argue that such digressive or circumlocutory habits are neither incidental nor merely rhetorical, but also have important political implications that bear directly upon his representations of space and place. Walking is a mode of perceiving and navigating urban space that precludes any privileged position of detached or passive objectivity in favour of active engagement in the
writing and re-writing of the city-text. Moreover, although Carson’s poetry and prose contains unusually sophisticated representations of Belfast as ‘a social laboratory for the emergent “strong” or repressive state’ and its surveillant technologies, walking in the city also implies for him a utopian spatial politics through which resistance to various forms of socio-spatial regulation might be both imagined and effected.

Carson’s propensity for wandering and diverging is accommodated and perhaps initiated by the heterogeneous and overlapping architectural forms of which Belfast’s urban fabric is composed. For the narrator of ‘Intelligence’, who has one eye on the map and the other on the territory described, the city’s now-faded industrial histories are manifest as a ‘ubiquitous dense graffiti of public houses, churches, urinals, bonding stores, graving docks, monuments, Sunday schools and Orange halls’ interspersed with ‘terraces and terraces of kitchen houses, parlour houses, town houses, back-to-back and front-to-back and back-to-front houses’ (BC, 81). Reading this tangled and intricately detailed text entails navigating it on foot, and thus becoming a figure in the landscape, because maps are suspect and knowing the city involves being of the city. This has less to do with the nativism of local allegiances and passwords than with the sort of active engagement with varied spatial environments that is proper to walking. Indeed, while the narrators of Carson’s earlier work often confine their perambulations to a fairly restricted ‘home ground’ of south-west Belfast, bounded by Black Mountain to the west and the River Lagan to the east, Carlisle Circus to the north and Andersonstown to the south, this intimately known terrain is subject – as all spaces are – to the play of historical forces, and so retains an ineluctable capacity for surprise and disorientation. Such experiences are integral to both the pleasures and the politics of walking in the city, and in an autobiographical essay accompanying the artist John Kindness’s book Belfast Frescoes Carson recalls mornings of thick smog over West Belfast when he would savour ‘the prospect of my being lost on the way to school’:

After breakfast, muffled in my overcoat and balaclava, I would step into the incandescent wall of coalsmoke smog. I’d inhale its acrid aura through my woollen mouthpiece. Launching tentatively into it, I’d feel my way with fingertips: doors and hyphenated window-sills; verticals and horizontals; the untouchable gloom at the end of a gable wall. […] As I come on to the Falls Road, I try to visualize its shop-front sequence: Angelone’s Ice Saloon; Muldoon’s the Barber’s; McPeake’s ‘Wallpaper, Radio and
Drugs; Kavanagh’s the Butcher’s; O’Kane’s Funeral Parlour; Smyth’s the Tobacconist’s; the haberdashery whose name I can’t remember.⁸

Interestingly, in this passage walking is a means of getting lost and thus achieving a state of pleasurable spatial disorientation, whereas memory provides an equally valuable and pleasurable means of reorientation and re-composition, allowing the young Carson to ‘visualize’ the Falls Road’s 1950s shop-front sequence in his mind’s eye.

The conjunction of libidinal and political aspects of walking is perhaps more immediately apparent in Carson’s recurrent forays into the narrow alleyways or ‘entries’ that connect High Street with adjacent streets in the city centre. These entries are distinctive architectural features of the Belfast cityscape, surviving since its seventeenth-century expansion, and several housed the meeting places used by the republican United Irishmen during the late eighteenth century.⁹ Carson is drawn to these interstitial spaces both because of their symbolic importance in the city’s political history and public geography, and because they provide yet another figure for the associative logic of his ambulatory narratives. Significantly, then, he defines the Belfast entry as ‘a narrow lane between two streets; a backwater or a short-cut, a deviation from the beaten path’ (LNF, 50).

In a memorable chapter of his prose book Last Night’s Fun, the liminal space of the Belfast entry serves as a portal onto a cityscape in which past and present, dream and reality are bewilderingly conflated:

Time is never called in my recurring dream of pubs. The Belfast which these dreams inhabit is itself recurrent, changing, self-referential, in which the vestiges of antique maps become the map. I wander streets I try to rediscover in the waking world: dog-leg alleyways and laneways, early-electric downtown avenues, apparent cul-de-sacs which lead you through the colonnaded entrance to a shopping arcade. […] Because you think you know your way around, you end up sometimes getting lost – the city constantly evolves through synapses and mental lapses, forming bridges, short-cuts, contraflows and one-way systems. If the city is a piece of music, it depends on who’s playing it, who’s listening; and you are not the person you were a week ago […]. (LNF, 33)

The dialogue that is foregrounded here between the similar but disjunct spatial environments of the waking world and the world of dreams elicits a sense of disorientation that is at once exhilarating and disconcerting. In the passage quoted, walking entails a derangement of the senses that figures the individual’s relationship to place as a process of dislocation and realignment that must be repeatedly enacted. Each
encounter with the city’s streets, alleyways, and arcades entails adjusting to its changing spatial and temporal coordinates, and such adjustments will necessarily have a destabilising effect upon the identities of both city and individual: ‘you are not the person you were a week ago’. The analogy with music, and specifically Irish traditional music, is important, for while tradition ‘implies continuity, the creation of new music within an established framework’ (ITM, 6) it is also true that ‘variation […] is a principle of traditional music. The same tune is never the same tune twice’ (ITM, 7–8). And a similar dialectic is present in walking; for even the act of retracing a route walked before will always involve a sense of spatio-temporal disjunction that makes a deviation from the beaten path inevitable: the same walk is never the same walk twice.

This interest in deviating from the beaten path draws our attention to the abiding influence of the work of the German critic and theorist Walter Benjamin on Carson’s writing. In particular, Carson shares with Benjamin a fascination with the politics of the everyday and a desire to probe the shifting textures of urban experience; he also adopts Benjamin’s strategy of writing texts that model their formal structures upon the city and urban spaces. Moreover, for both writers walking becomes an important and recurrent theme in their writing. Carson famously appropriates the following excerpt from Benjamin’s memoir, _A Berlin Childhood Around the Turn of the Century_, and uses it as an epigraph to part one of _Belfast Confetti_:

Not to find one’s way about in a city is of little interest […]. But to lose one’s way in a city, as one loses one’s way in a forest, requires practice […]. I learned this art late in life: it fulfilled the dreams whose first traces were the labyrinths on the blotters of my exercise books. (_BC_, 14)

Not to find one’s way indicates a passive failure on the part of the urban walker, and also implies an abiding impulse for keeping to the straight and narrow. On the contrary, losing one’s way requires practice, dedication, and an active decision to break with established paths in order to immerse oneself in the unfamiliar, but potentially revelatory, landscapes of the modern city. There is, Benjamin insists in a related context, an ‘art of straying’ that may be learnt at the knee of the city, for to become lost there is to generate an unusually acute or heightened perception of the surrounding environment. As a pattern can resolve itself from traces of ink, so the freshly apprehended city can reveal itself in new forms, forms that might themselves be translated into labyrinths of print.
An understanding of Benjamin’s techniques for interpreting the city’s social life and historical transformations helps to illuminate the representational procedures adopted in Carson’s writing of Belfast. For Benjamin, straying is both an art and a point of critical departure, as the following methodological note makes clear: ‘What for others are deviations are, for me, the data which determine my course.—On the differentials of time (which, for others, disturb the main lines of inquiry), I base my reckoning.’

This willingness to plot a wayward course and break with the main lines of inquiry is in keeping with his determination to ‘brush history against the grain’, and also leads him to concentrate on the minutiae and marginalia of the city as a means of constructing a fragmentary picture of the social forms taken by capitalist modernity. Throughout much of his work, and particularly in the analysis of Second Empire Paris undertaken in his massive but ultimately unfinished *Arcades Project*, Benjamin is drawn less to the monuments and main thoroughfares of the capital city than to its seedy side-streets and decrepit arcades, detailing modern urban experience through peripheral or despised figures – the rag-picker, the prostitute, the *flâneur* – whose perspectives are discounted or suppressed by the dominant order.

In an aside to his seminal revaluation of the Parisian Symbolist poet Charles Baudelaire, he notes a homology between the rag-picker and the poet through which refuse, the obsolete and the discarded, becomes the material for writing: ‘Ragpicker and poet: both are concerned with refuse, and both go about their solitary business while other citizens are sleeping; they even move in the same way.’ In Benjamin’s ‘multilayered reading of the city’ the residues and detritus of the past serve as sources for writing the secret history of the metropolis, and walking is a crucial means in elaborating such alternative narratives.

A broadly similar bent can be discerned in Carson’s depictions of Belfast, which often visit and revisit the city’s neglected districts and recent wastelands through the eyes and actions of its eccentric, marginal, or dispossessed inhabitants: a barfly haunting demolished pubs (‘Barfly’); a prostitute working the streets around Belfast GPO in ‘Snowball’; two winos ‘reclining on the waste ground/ Between Electric Street and Hemp Street’ (‘Two Winos’, *IFN*, 40); the Brock-man and the coal-brick man trawling the streets of the Lower Falls, itself a ‘world of cast-offs, hand-me-downs, of new lamps for old’ (‘Brick’, *BC*, 73); a small boy on a travellers’ encampment, ‘wandering trouserless/ Through his personal map – junked refrigerators, cars and cookers, anchored/ Caravans’ (‘Travellers’, *IFN*, 42). In ‘Box’ the poet-speaker’s sleep is
haunted by the strange vision of a man ‘with a cardboard box perched/
On his head – no hands, his body bent into the S or Z of a snake-
charmer’s/ Rope.’ This contorted, possibly mutilated figure crops up in
various areas adjacent to the city centre, ‘hen-stepping out of a pea-soup
fog’ and always bearing the enigmatic box that fascinates the narrator:

In all these years, don’t ask me what was in there: that would take
A bird’s-eye view. But I get a whiff of homelessness, a scaldy fallen
From a nest into another nest, a cross between a toothbrush and a razor.
Open-mouthed, almost sleeping now. A smell of meths and cardboard.

(IFN, 43)

That ‘smell of meths and cardboard’ is, of course, contiguous with the
‘whiff of homelessness’ the speaker catches, and the box carried on the
man’s head is its stigmatised emblem, the comfortless ‘nest’ into which
he has fallen. Just as sight gives way to smell in the second stanza of
the poem, so the speaker’s riddling curiosity softens to sympathetic
observation, an attempt to understand and identify with this ‘scaldy’,
but also a refusal of any transcendental knowledge: ‘that would take/ A
bird’s-eye view.’ A gulf remains between observer and observed, then,
but Carson’s eschewal of an elevated perspective for one that remains
uncomfortably close to the street implicitly restates a rhetorical question
first posed by Benjamin: ‘For what do we know of streetcorners,
curbstones, the architecture of the pavement – we who have never felt
heat, filth, and the edges of the stones beneath our naked soles, and have
never scrutinized the uneven placement of the paving stones with an eye
toward bedding down on them.’

Richard Kirkland astutely remarks that it is ‘at the point of tension
between observer and inhabitant that Carson’s poetry has located itself’, an
intermediate position that Benjamin identifies with the ambiguous
figure of the flâneur, the bourgeois city-dweller who ‘goes botanizing
on the asphalt’, spending his time in aimlessly walking the streets.
‘The city,’ writes Benjamin, ‘is the realization of that ancient dream of
humanity, the labyrinth. It is this reality to which the flâneur, without
knowing it, devotes himself.’ The flâneur is both citizen and artist, a
member of the urban crowd and its chief anatomist, for the ‘revealing
presentations of the big city […] are the work of those who have traversed
the city absently, as it were, lost in thought or worry.’ Paradoxically,
distraction or disconnection from the spatial environments he traverses
allows the flâneur to tap into the city’s unconscious currents and axes
of passage – what Guy Debord would call its ‘psychogeographical pivot
points’ – and in flânerie the relationship between body and city is
therefore necessarily oblique or even awry. I have already observed that this peripatetic disposition is prominent throughout Carson’s writings on Belfast, but his recasting of the Benjaminian flâneur is perhaps most evident and interesting in the poem, ‘Linear B’.

In this text, Carson skews the traditional features and trajectory of flânerie as they are described in Benjamin’s work but retains the constitutive ambiguity between observation and participation, allowing this tension to play across the stanza break at the centre of the poem. Initially, the speaker watches a familiar figure:

   Threading rapidly between crowds on Royal Avenue, reading
   Simultaneously, and writing in his black notebook, peering through
   A cracked lens fixed with Sellotape, his rendez-vous is not quite vous.

Reading, writing, and walking all fuse together in this character’s rapid movements through the crowd of which he is and is not a part. Engulfed and self-absorbed, there is something ‘cracked’ about him, although his seemingly random course eventually reveals a larger pattern: ‘But from years of watching, I know the zig-zags circle:/ He has been the same place many times, never standing still.’ The uncertainty is carried over into the second stanza, but here there is a decisive shift in the perspective of the speaker, who finally abandons his ‘years of watching’ and takes to the streets:

   One day I clicked with his staccato walk, and glimpsed the open
   notebook:
   Squiggles, dashes, question-marks, dense as the Rosetta stone.
   His good eye glittered at me: it was either nonsense, or a formula – for
   Perpetual motion, the scaffolding of shopping lists, or the collapsing city.

   (IFN, 33)

The wayward crank who is the focus of attention in ‘Linear B’ satirises the heroic figure cut by the urban poet as he strolls through the busy streets, his glittering eye implying the possibility of epiphanic insights or the delusions of a mind thinking in code. If there is a formula for ‘the collapsing city’ then it hovers between the nonsensical and the indecipherable, for the city resists easy textualisation, requiring the invention (and reinvention) of new languages or codes by which it may be represented. As Henri Lefebvre comments: ‘The city writes itself on its walls and in its streets. But that writing is never completed. The book never ends and contains many blank or torn pages. It is nothing but a draft, more a collection of scratches than writing.’24
'Linear B’ – the title of which alludes to issues of decipherment and translation\textsuperscript{25} – raises questions over the relationships between representation, textuality, and urban forms, particularly the common metaphor whereby the city is conceived of as a written text or a system of signs.\textsuperscript{26} For example, Richard Lehan’s sweeping survey of *The City in Literature* is informed throughout by his guiding principle that ‘the ways of reading the city offer clues to ways of reading the text, urban and literary theory complementing each other’.\textsuperscript{27} Similarly, but from a different disciplinary perspective, the urbanist Kevin Lynch has famously proposed the following formula for a clarified image of the city: ‘Just as this printed page, if it is legible, can be visually grasped as a related pattern of recognizable symbols, so a legible city would be one whose districts or landmarks or pathways are easily identifiable and are easily grouped into an over-all pattern.’\textsuperscript{28} Attractive as such parallels between the urban environment and the literary text undoubtedly are, however, it is worth retaining some scepticism about the metaphorical correlations upon which they depend. It might be objected that because Lynch’s notion of the legible city-text is underwritten by a desire for order and security he runs the risk of subordinating the formal and social complexity of the city to the visual space of rationalism and transparency. Similarly, Lehan’s neat analogy between reading the city and reading the text would appear to obscure a number of conceptual difficulties that require attention. For instance, if the city *is* a text, what sort of text is it? Who can be said to ‘write’ it? And what kinds of readings does it invite? The work of Henri Lefebvre is helpful in addressing at least the first of these questions, and goes some way towards explaining the representational politics underlying Carson’s depiction of Belfast as a palimpsest of conflictual and often contradictory signs. Both elaborating and qualifying the metaphor of the city-text, Lefebvre insists that to apply literary-critical codes ‘as a means of deciphering social space must surely reduce that space itself to the status of a message, and the inhabiting of it to the status of a reading. This is to evade both history and practice.’\textsuperscript{29} ‘Both natural and urban spaces are,’ he contends, ‘if anything, “over-inscribed”: everything therein resembles a rough draft, jumbled and self-contradictory. Rather than signs, what one encounters here are directions – multifarious and overlapping instructions.’\textsuperscript{30} In this respect, the city-text is understood as elliptical and opaque rather than unified and transparent – more akin to a rebus than a neatly calligraphed page – requiring interpretation and subject to revision as the walls and
streets upon which it is ‘written’ are demolished and rebuilt. Like Roland Barthes’s ‘writerly’ text, the city is ‘a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds’.

Similarly, Carson’s Belfast is a city bristling with jumbled and mutually incompatible inscriptions that, paradoxically, announce both a desire for permanence and the knowledge of their inevitable ephemerality all at once:

At times it seems that every inch of Belfast has been written-on, erased, and written-on again: messages, curses, political imperatives, but mostly names, or nicknames – Robbo, Mackers, Scoot, Fra – sometimes litanized obsessively on every brick of a gable wall, as high as the hand will reach, and sometimes higher, these snakes and ladders cancelling each other out in their bid to be remembered. Remember 1690. Remember 1916. Most of all, Remember me. I was here. (BC, 52)

As Robert McLiam Wilson has it in his novel Eureka Street, Belfast ‘keeps its walls like a diary’, but one whose pages may be blank, torn, or over-inscribed to the point of illegibility. The city is a palimpsest of desires and directions, but the overwhelming impulse to remember through writing is also one that entails erasure or tragic forgetting as new messages inscribe themselves into the old. In ‘Queen’s Gambit’, Carson’s narrator laments: ‘It’s so hard to remember, and so easy to forget the casualty list –/ Like the names on a school desk, carved into one another till they’re indecipherable’ (BC, 35). Because ‘every stick and bit implies a narrative, and we ascribe their provenances’ (SF, 12), the writing of the city demands a tortuously exacting historiographic aesthetic, an absorption in ‘realms of minutiae unknown to the layman’ (SF, 16) if an attempt is to be made at recording the teeming events of Belfast’s day-to-day life in sufficient detail. The collapsing city may collapse under the weight of its own fractal narratives. To put this another way, an impulse towards composing the city’s material and historical multiplicity as a text to be read and deciphered is always qualified in Carson’s writing by his acute sensitivity to the contingency and specificity of its changing situations. As Peter Middleton and Tim Woods remark: ‘The city challenges an ordered and coherent narrative, yet it also represents a space or matrix of confluence where the status of textuality is constantly being articulated and tested.’ The problem therefore becomes one of balancing the desire for knowing Belfast in its totality against the necessity of knowing it in terms of its provisional details.

As we have already seen, in Carson’s work the practice of walking in the city is intimately bound up with the effort to depict it in writing,
and may in fact offer a way of balancing such contradictory imperatives. As Raymond Williams observes, ‘perception of the new qualities of the modern city had been associated, from the beginning, with a man walking, as if alone, in its streets’; throughout the nineteenth century the city was regarded not simply as the distinctive locus of modern life, but as ‘the physical embodiment of a decisive modern consciousness’, and walking through the streets provided a means of tracing its semantic convolutions. Williams’s examples range from Blake and Wordsworth, through Dickens and James Thomson to T.S. Eliot, Woolf, and Joyce. A relevant contemporary use of such techniques is to be found in the work of Iain Sinclair, whose psychogeographical investigations of London’s borderlands employ walking as the impetus for a condition of ‘alert reverie’:

Walking is the best way to explore and exploit the city; the changes, shifts, breaks in the cloud helmet, movement of light on water. Drifting purposefully is the recommended mode, tramping asphalted earth in alert reverie, allowing the friction of an underlying pattern to reveal itself. [...] Walking, moving across a retreating townscape, stitches it all together: the illicit cocktail of bodily exhaustion and a raging carbon monoxide high.

Although he does not exactly share Sinclair’s Blakean occultism and pseudo-mystical investment in ‘the vagrant shamanism of the streets’, Carson’s writing does echo both his notion of purposeful drifting and the emphasis he places upon pattern-making as a result of the intersection of multiple trajectories. When, in ‘Patchwork’, the protagonist’s mother notes ruefully that ‘the stitches show in everything I’ve made’ Carson is also alluding to the way in which his narrator’s traversals of the city – in the narrative present and in memory – serve to roughly stitch together a host of disparate experiences, not all of them his own (IFN, 63). Similarly, in an unpublished poem, ‘To the German Language’, Carson’s narrator describes a border route ‘Snarled up with ramps and dragon’s teeth, impedimenta, broken bridges’ and remarks that ‘the way from A to B is often via X, where X is/ The unknown’. And yet such pattern-making and forays into the unknown are always fraught in Carson’s work, for his adaptations of the pervasive and longstanding literary convention of the urban walker take place in the specific contexts and circumstances of late twentieth-century Belfast. Because of this they expose the Benjaminian flâneur to very particular historical and political intensities that require careful calibration.

In this regard, Carson’s writing of Belfast can usefully be understood in relation to Michel de Certeau’s discussion of walking in the city as
a resistant spatial practice, one that opens up ‘a space for maneuvers of unequal forces and for utopian points of reference’. For de Certeau, the city is both the focus for the repressive apparatuses of state administration and a terrain that is ‘left prey to contradictory movements that counterbalance and combine themselves outside the reach of panoptic power’. In this way, the urban environment is understood in explicitly dialectical terms as a mesh of overlaid and competing networks of power through which both carceral and libidinal impulses are articulated. On the one hand, de Certeau equates the panoptic power of control with lofty detachment, the elevated, panoramic viewpoint of the ‘voyeur god’ looking down on the city below; on the other, he identifies a challenge to such power in the street-level perspectives of the ‘ordinary practitioners of the city […] whose bodies follow the thick and thins of an urban “text” they write without being able to read it’. To gain a point of eminence is to be ‘lifted out of the city’s grasp’, and this distance conspires with the fiction that ‘makes the complexity of the city readable, and immobilizes its opaque mobility in a transparent text’ – precisely the approach that, Lefebvre argues, evades both history and practice. Complexity is sacrificed in an effort to make the city legible and therefore more amenable to scopic control. Conversely, the everyday practice of walking in the city makes use of ‘spaces that cannot be seen’, tracing paths that are ‘unrecognized poems in which each body is an element signed by many others’: ‘A migrational, or metaphorical, city thus slips into the clear text of the planned and readable city.’ Furthermore, de Certeau conceives of walking as ‘a space of enunciation’, thus drawing a suggestive analogy with both oral and written forms of narrative:

The walking of passers-by offers a series of turns (tours) and detours that can be compared to ‘turns of phrase’ or ‘stylistic figures’. There is a rhetoric of walking. The art of ‘turning’ phrases finds an equivalent in an art of composing a path (tourner un parcours).

Walking in the city entails the delineation of a spatial trajectory that, in its twists and turns, evasions and circumlocutions, tells a story about the spaces traversed, one that (in an echo of Benjamin) is ‘composed with the world’s debris’. Carson’s writing of Belfast can be seen both to respond to, and complicate, de Certeau’s extremely suggestive account of urban experience. For example, walking in the city is described as a crucial aid to poetic composition in the introduction to Carson’s 2002 translation of Dante’s *Inferno*. 
The deeper I got into the *Inferno*, the more I walked. Hunting for a rhyme, trying to construe a turn of phrase, I’d leave the desk and take to the road, lines ravelling and unravelling in my mind. Usually, I’d head for the old Belfast Waterworks, a few hundred yards away from where I live. The north end of the Waterworks happens to lie on one of Belfast’s sectarian fault lines. Situated on a rise above the embankment is the Westland housing estate, a Loyalist enclave which, by a squint of the imagination, you can see as an Italian hill-town. Flags proclaim its allegiance. A gable wall bears the letters UFF – Ulster Freedom Fighters - flanked by two roundels, each bearing a Red Hand within a white Star of David on a blue ground. Often, a British Army helicopter eye-in-the-sky is stationed overhead. (*IDA*, xi)

On Carson’s reading, the Italian or Florentine of *The Inferno* goes to ‘a music which is by turns mellifluous and rough, taking in both formal discourse and the language of the street. [...] As I walked the streets of Belfast, I wanted to get something of that music’ (*IDA*, xxi). Lines suggest themselves and phrases are construed as Carson takes to the road, and the streets of Belfast provide a point of access into the Inferno for the solitary walker. Moreover, it takes little more than ‘a squint of the imagination’ for his ‘divided city’ (*IDA*, 40) to become conflated with the schismatic milieu of medieval Florence or the darker regions of Hell, and Carson’s Inferno is self-consciously viewed through the eyes of a Belfast: ‘Consider a citadel, heavily fortified/ by rings of ditches, moats, trenches, fosses,/ military barriers on every side’ (*IDA*, 119). However, as this imagery of fortification and blockade reminds us, the streets of Belfast are both fortified and closely policed, and those who choose to walk through them will be fixed by the watchful eye of the army helicopter patrolling overhead, and perhaps also by the eyes of hostile neighbours. Imagining the helicopter’s aerial, bird’s-eye view, Carson sees ‘a map of North Belfast, its no-go zones and tattered flags, the blackened side-streets, cul-de-sacs and bits of wasteland stitched together by dividing walls and fences’ (*IDA*, xi–xii). Contemporary Belfast, like Dante’s Florence, ‘feels claustrophobic’, and can easily become a twitchy, oppressive place ‘where everyone is watching everyone, and there is little room for manoeuvre’ (*IDA*, xii).

De Certeau’s utopian attempt to discover, or produce, such room for manoeuvre, and to discern a coherent micro-politics of disobedience in the practice of everyday life, finds an answer in Carson’s insistent recourse to ‘bifurcations and alternatives’ (*BC*, 73). However, Carson’s writing also illustrates some of the limitations that necessarily impose themselves upon such a utopian project, for it recognises that Belfast’s militarised and closely scrutinised landscapes can, more often than
not, shut down such options, turning the city into a ‘murky prison zone’ (*IDA*, 66). Carson’s Belfast is perhaps more tightly enmeshed in the technologies of surveillance and regulation than de Certeau’s New York, and its streets seem more likely to close in upon those who walk through them. An early poem, ‘The Bomb Disposal’, compares the spatial layout of the city to the close-packed and deadly circuitry of a bomb, listening to ‘the malevolent tick of its heart’ and wondering on the possibility of reading ‘the message of the threaded veins/ like print, its body’s chart’. Just as the bomb disposal expert moves with ‘the slow deliberation of a funeral’, knowing that one false move will be fatal, so travelling through unknown areas of the city can lead abruptly to a very literal dead end:

> I find myself in a crowded taxi
> making deviations from the known route,
> ending in a cul-de-sac
> where everyone breaks out suddenly
> in whispers, noting the boarded windows,
> the drawn blinds. (*NE*, 21)

Here, of course, the mode of transport is not walking but the Belfast black taxi. In another taxi poem, ‘33333’, the speaker again ‘finds himself’ in a Ford Zephyr, ‘[g]unning through a mesh of ramps, diversions, one-way systems’, on a journey that also quickly deviates from the known route, scrambling familiar coordinates in order to arrive at another portentous terminus: ‘I know this place like the back of my hand, except/ My hand is cut off at the wrist. We stop at an open door I never knew existed’ (*IFN*, 39). A sense of orientation that is taken for granted may be undermined as easily as a worn cliché, for the city’s ‘forbidden areas chang[e] daily’ (*NE*, 21) and, like those of the Westland housing estate, are often marked symbolically by a bloody severed hand.

The dangers are even more acute, and certainly more immediately tangible, for the pedestrian wandering through the meaner streets of the inner city on foot, as ‘Punctuation’ makes clear. This poem follows a man walking, as if alone, on a frosty night ‘jittering with lines and angles, invisible trajectories’. Enveloped in this tense, crackly atmosphere, and seemingly caught out ‘in the gap between the street-lights’ as echoes of gunfire ring out, the speaker-protagonist discovers too late that he is just far enough away from home for it to matter: ‘I can/ See my hand, a mile away in the future, just about to turn the latch-key in the lock,/ When another shadow steps out from behind the hedge, going, dot,
This metaphorical play on the material qualities of print and typography is made more elaborate in ‘Belfast Confetti’, which also places its speaker on foot in the midst of violent events:

Suddenly as the riot squad moved in, it was raining exclamation marks, nuts, bolts, nails, car-keys. A fount of broken type. And the explosion itself – an asterisk on the map. This hyphenated line, a burst of rapid fire …

I was trying to complete a sentence in my head, but it kept stuttering, all the alleyways and side-streets blocked with stops and colons.

I know this labyrinth so well – Balaclava, Raglan, Inkerman, Odessa Street –

Why can’t I escape? Every move is punctuated. Crimea Street. Dead end again.

A Saracen, Kremlin-mesh. Makrolon face-shields. Walkie-talkies. What is

My name? Where am I coming from? Where am I going? A fusillade of question-marks. (IFN, 31)

The sudden reconfiguration of the cityscape in this poem, as the result of a violent confrontation, serves not to illuminate new connections but rather to shut them down, and the speaker finds his home ground rendered dangerously unfamiliar, a labyrinth of dead ends and one-way systems. Moreover, the agents of this spatial circumscription, the British Army, are figured as the representatives of an aggressively hi-tech modernity predicated upon the regulation and surveillance of the population’s movements.

The poem’s extended analogy between the built environment of the city and the material composition of the printed text seems to parallel this debilitating sense of physical constriction and entrapment with the frustrations of inarticulacy and the disintegration of sense. Yet if Carson’s writing of Belfast is here decomposed to a ‘fount of broken type’, then that writing nevertheless remains charged with a riotous, explosive energy that is distinctively modernist in character, connoting as it does an instance of ‘creative destruction’. And while the speaker finds his every move punctuated, ending at a military cordon where his origins and destinations are interrogated, the ‘fusillade of question-marks’ with which the poem concludes manages to leave its onward trajectory at least minimally open to interpretation. “Belfast confetti” is slang for the miscellaneous rubble thrown during street riots – ‘nuts, bolts, nails, car keys’ – but also refers, self-reflexively, to the patchwork of raw materials
from which Carson’s texts are themselves assembled, the fragments of language and scraps of narrative that litter the streets of his city. The aesthetic self-consciousness involved here is, of course, pointedly ironised and undermined by the political urgency of the poem’s central situation.

The British Army is a ubiquitous and menacing presence in ‘Belfast Confetti’, bristling with hi-tech equipment and brusque demands while attempting to impose its authority on a hostile labyrinth of tightly packed streets. Carson has an appalled fascination for the jargon of modern technological warfare, recording the precise name and number for a weapon or device, as well as their often incongruous nicknames, because in this highly specialised use of language a particularly sinister kind of logic can be glimpsed.

Yet if the military are often portrayed as the representatives and enforcers of an invasive administrative power in Carson’s work, they are also shown to be victims of the very panoptic apparatus that they impose upon the city’s streets and help to maintain. Patrolling ‘the smog and murk of Belfast’ (BC, 98), Carson’s soldiers can seem as exposed and vulnerable as the speaker in ‘Belfast Confetti’, hunters who are also hunted and lost. In this, Carson diverges from more typical nationalist representations of the British Army through which soldiers patrolling the streets are apprehended simply as alien intruders, an unwelcome, violently penetrative force embodying the military dominance of a colonial power. For example, Seamus Heaney’s ‘The Toome Road’ famously depicts an early morning convoy of armoured cars, ‘warbling along on powerful tyres’ near the outskirts of a rural town in Catholic-nationalist South Derry. Because of the poet-speaker’s vigilance, however, this military invasion can be confronted with the grounded phallic monument of an ‘invisible, untoppled omphalos’ that guarantees the rural community’s organic relationship to place.

And Gerry Adams adapts a more basic version of the same paradigm to the streets of the Lower Falls when he observes ‘the omnipresent foot patrols of British soldiers treading carefully through the back streets, a threatening intrusion into an area hostile to their presence’. For Adams, ‘the Falls remains a place apart, a state of mind and even, at times, a political statement’, although he also resentfully notes that the area is nonetheless subject to the aerial scrutiny of the British Army post at the top of Divis Tower.

Carson’s attitude to his particular home ground is considerably less proprietorial than Adams’s, recognising that that ground is shifting and contested rather than sealed or magically bounded by communal ties.
Moreover, in ‘All Souls’ he goes out of his way to parody Heaney, adding a tongue-in-cheek science fiction twist to the notion of alien invasion that the elder poet implicitly invokes: ‘You can see they come from the Planet X, with their walkie-/Talkies, the heavy warbling of their heavy Heaney tyres’ (FL, 40). Characteristically, where Heaney’s poem draws a line between residents and interlopers, natives and colonisers, Carson’s is centrally concerned with those confusions of identity and communication that are integral to the political dynamics of the Troubles. Thus, his soldiers use their ‘unWalkman headphones’ to tune into ‘a form of blah/Alive with intimations of mortality, the loud and unclear garbled static’ (FL, 40), but are nonetheless caught off guard by a group of paramilitaries disguised as firemen, and wearing Hallowe’en masks: ‘They were plastic, not explosively, but faces. Then/They tore their faces off. UnWalkman-like. Laconic. Workman-like’ (FL, 41). It is also productive to contrast Carson’s poem ‘Army’ with Heaney’s ‘The Toome Road’, for this poem similarly stages a military intrusion into the poet’s native place. However, rather than expressing outrage or alarm, Carson employs the coldly observant gaze of the concealed sniper in order to record a decidedly nervous, desultory procession through the back streets of the Falls:

The duck patrol is waddling down the odd-numbers side of Raglan Street,
The bass-ackwards private at the rear trying not to think of a third eye
Being drilled in the back of his head. Fifty-five. They stop. The head
Peers round, then leaps the gap of Balaclava Street. He waves the body
over
One by one. Forty-nine. Cape Street. A gable wall. Garnet Street. A gable
wall. (IFN, 38)

The rhythmic syncopation of the short sentences and clustered monosyllables in the final line of the poem mimics stop-start heartbeats and faltering steps, and as the ominous countdown continues it becomes increasingly clear that this unit are not waddling but sitting ducks.

Once again, walking provides Carson with an ideal means of describing the topography and atmosphere of the streets adjoining the Falls Road, though it is also a dangerous mode of locomotion that can lead the pedestrian to more than one kind of dead end. The ambushed soldiers in the more recent poem ‘Trap’ find themselves in a similar position:

   backpack radio
   antenna
twitching
rifle
headphones
cocked
I don’t read you
what the over. (BN, 15)

In the wrong place at the wrong time, a breakdown in communication can be fatal, and Carson parallels the experience of spatial disorientation with the violent foreshortening of language itself. Crucially, though, it is Carson’s imaginative empathy with such experiences of disorientation and exposure in the labyrinthine city that most clearly mark his difference from both Heaney and Adams.

The narrator of Jorge Luis Borges’s story ‘The Immortal’ remarks that a labyrinth is ‘a structure compounded to confuse men; its architecture, rich in symmetries, is subordinated to that end’. Carson’s Belfast often appears to have been built to a similar design, the sectarian geography of its architectural forms and the actions of military and paramilitary agents alike combining to produce an extensive carceral system of regulation and control predicated upon the ubiquity of surveillance and the insertion of individual civilian subjects into a fixed and segmented space.

To this end, his prose piece ‘Intelligence’ begins:

We are all being watched through peep-holes, one-way mirrors, security cameras, talked about on walkie-talkies, car ‘phones, Pye Pocketfones; and as this helicopter chainsaws overhead, I pull back the curtains down here in the terraces to watch its pencil-beam of light flick through the card-index – I see the moon and the moon sees me, this 30,000,000 candlepower gimbal-mounted Nitesun by which the operator can observe undetected, with his red goggles and an IR filter on the light-source. (BC, 78)

The Troubles have created a minatory atmosphere of edgy paranoia in which trust has been tempered with fear to such an extent that ‘everyone eyes everyone’ else (BN, 24), policing each others’ movements and internalising the logic of subjugation embodied in the surveillant technology lacing the city’s thoroughfares and buildings. Belfast has become ‘a Twilight Zone’ in which ‘Special Powers’ are exerted and betrayal lurks at every corner (FL, 19), so that paranoia becomes a common reflex for many of Carson’s characters and a dominant note
in the poems themselves. In ‘Cave Quid Dics, Quando, et Cui’ – the title of which translates roughly as ‘beware what you say, when, and to whom’ – Carson’s spooked narrator counsels gravely: ‘Make sure you know your left from right and which side of the road you walk on.’ For, in Belfast during the Troubles both the city streets and the treacherous terrain of language itself are planted with hidden traps for the unwary, and even minor slips of the tongue or foot will be recorded and processed in invisible databases by persons unknown for purposes that remain undisclosed: ‘Watch if they write in screeds,// For everything you say is never lost, but hangs on in the starry void/ In ghosted thumb-whorl spiral galaxies. Your fingerprints are everywhere. Be paranoid’ (OEC, 46).

The paranoid subject, David Trotter explains, is engaged in a search for structure and certainty, typically developing an internally coherent delusional system of ‘concealed motives and intentions’ which ensures that ‘even the most obviously accidental occurrences are incorporated into delusion, and thus made meaningful’. Paranoia is thus a means of absorbing or deflecting the disorienting effects of historical contingency, and it is certainly the case that the accelerating pace of events – ‘Daily splits and splinters at the drop of a hat or principle’ (BC, 50) – and the apparently random nature of violent actions contribute to the pervasive sense of anxiety and fear that Carson’s poems articulate. Consequently, his writing appears to encompass a dialectic of certainty and uncertainty, determinism and contingency. On the one hand, anxiety arises from a surfeit of fixity in terms of social behaviour and spatial mobility; on the other, from a contrary unfixing of meaning and the resulting conflict of interpretations.

This situation is neatly encapsulated in ‘Last Orders’, where the narrator’s entry into a Belfast bar precipitates a tense negotiation of identities and allegiances:

Squeeze the buzzer on the steel mesh gate like a trigger, but
It’s someone else who has you in their sights. Click. It opens. Like electronic
Russian roulette, since you never know for sure who’s who, or what
You’re walking into. I, for instance, could be anybody. Though I’m told
Taig’s written on my face. See me, would I trust appearances? (BC, 46)

The poem’s punning title carries both demotic and liturgical connotations – to the last drink of the evening and to the last rites for the dead. Spatial demarcations between inside and outside parallel social and sectarian divisions, and although the speaker squeezes the door buzzer
'like a trigger’ he finds the roles abruptly reversed: ‘It’s someone else who has you in their sights.’ Once inside, he and his companions will also find it difficult to make a quick or inconspicuous exit. Surveillance imposes a sense of constriction that has tangible psychological effect in these lines, yet the locus of anxiety shifts in the next line to uncertainty and the absence of secure coordinates. Post-structuralist notions about the impossibility of a stable conception of self are here reconfigured as potentially threatening rather than liberating; if the narrator can ‘be anybody’ then his fellow drinkers are likely to distrust him, a distrust of ‘appearances’ that he shares himself. Moreover, although elaborate precautions have been taken to contain or defuse anything out of the ordinary, the speaker finally realises ‘how simple it would be for someone/ Like ourselves to walk in and blow the whole place, and ourselves, to Kingdom Come’ (BC, 46).

Dwelling more explicitly upon the subjects of surveillance and sequestration, ‘Intelligence’ draws parallels between the carceral reality of Belfast during the Troubles and Jeremy Bentham’s plan for a new type of prison, the Panopticon, an open circular structure penetrated by light from all angles, which makes it possible to isolate and observe prisoners constantly from a central command tower in which officers and administrators remain concealed from view. For Michel Foucault, Bentham’s Panopticon is ‘the diagram of a mechanism of power reduced to its ideal form’, the architectural expression of a disciplinary power that seeks to transform ‘the whole social body into a field of perception: thousands of eyes posted everywhere, mobile attentions ever on the alert, a long, hierarchized network’ effacing all sign of its own operations. In Carson’s work, the eye of panoptic power is most often, and most succinctly, represented in the form of a British Army helicopter – ‘the eggbeater spy in the sky’ (BC, 56) – hovering overhead and scanning the city with powerful night-vision technology, its flickering static translating to throbbing interference for those on the ground as Belfast is bathed in ‘the grey light/ of surveillance’ (BN, 24). As Carson recalls in The Star Factory, the white noise of surveillance constitutes a sort of ambient background that not only shapes the waking world of Belfast during the Troubles, but also ‘infiltrates’ the unconscious of its citizens: ‘And last night, as I slept, my dreams were infiltrated by the atmospheric throb of a surveillant helicopter, vacillating high above the roof of the house like a rogue star’ (SF, 134). The theme is reprised in a number of poems from Breaking News, such as ‘Spin Cycle’ where the narrator inserts ear-plugs to escape the noise and everything goes ‘centrifugal’
The extent of the city’s transformation into a regulated field of perception – as a legible text or image – is illustrated even in poems such as ‘Breath’ and ‘Minus’ which, in noting the novel absence of the helicopter’s ‘thug thug’ overhead, paradoxically attest to the ubiquity of its presence as a representative of surveillant power in the psyches of Carson’s citizen personae (BN, 23, 46, 40). Most recently, the ubiquitous military helicopter ‘hovering on its down-swash of noise’ features as a recurrent image in For All We Know, a book that extends Carson’s previous concerns with surveillance and paranoia into the murky world of Cold War espionage (FAWK, 73).

Henri Lefebvre comments that ‘the visual space of transparency and readability’ is inherently repressive as ‘nothing in it escapes the surveillance of power’, and Belfast typically comes into focus as a carceral city in Carson’s work through the tyranny of the visual. But while his approach to the city is itself often mediated through ocular observation and the visual arts of film and photography, it is also characterised by an extraordinarily rich sensory apprehension that frequently borders on MacNeicean synaesthesia. On the tongue, on the eyes, on the ears, in the palms of one’s hands, Carson’s Belfast is crazier and more of it than we think, approximating to what Donatella Mazzoleni calls the ‘total aesthetic’ of metropolitan experience: ‘In the metropolitan aesthetic the eye fails in its role as an instrument of total control at a distance; once more the ears, and then the nose and skin, acquire an equal importance.’ Carson’s writing at times seems literally intoxicated with the myriad of sensations and experiential atoms it attempts to register and record, and this insistent pressure of the sheer multiplicity and miscellaneity of urban life suggests for him a means of resisting, if not entirely escaping, the surveillance of power as it is exercised in (and upon) Belfast by state forces and paramilitaries alike. In ‘Calvin Klein’s Obsession’, for instance, the scent of Blue Grass perfume worn by a former girlfriend takes the narrator instantly and vividly back to 1968:

I’m walking with her through the smoggy early dusk
Of West Belfast: coal-smoke, hops, fur, the smell of stout and whiskey
Breathing out from somewhere. So it all comes back, or nearly all,
A long forgotten kiss. (IFN, 21)

As we will see in the next chapter, the sense of smell is a powerful prompt to memory in Carson’s writing, and here it serves to superimpose the city of the past – but a precisely remembered past – upon that of the present. Nonetheless, the qualification of ‘nearly all’ stresses the gap between
experience and its representation, and accepts the necessary provisional character of any attempt to write the city.

Furthermore, for all his acute awareness of the ways in which any genuine freedom of movement in the city tends to be restricted or curtailed by a host of socio-political factors, Carson ultimately refuses Michel Foucault’s pessimistic insistence that the surveillant society’s carceral system is omnipotent, all-pervasive, and unchallengeable. ‘We are neither in the amphitheatre, nor on the stage,’ claims Foucault, ‘but in the panoptic machine, invested by its effects of power, which we bring to ourselves since we are part of its mechanism.’

By contrast, Carson’s intense awareness of the inherent contingency of urban life leads him to assume that the panopticon’s over-reaching totalisations will become increasingly untenable, and begin to unravel in ways that may be exploited. This is apparent in the fundamentally dialectical narrative elaborated in ‘Intelligence’, which both constructs and deconstructs an image of Belfast conceived as a Foucauldian carceral city:

We track shadows, echoes, scents, prints; and in the interface the information is decoded, coded back again and stored in bits and bytes and indirect addressing; but the glitches and gremlins and bugs keep fouling-up, seething out from the hardware, the dense entangled circuitry of back streets, backplanes, while the tape is spooling and drooling over alphanumeric strings and random-riot situations […] (BC, 78–9)

Although its sectarian geography of ‘peace-lines’ and enclaves, checkpoints and walled estates would appear to lend itself to the logics of segmentation and fixity, the city’s ‘dense entangled circuitry of back streets’ entails a profusion of details and narratives that resist encryption and processing. Walking these streets can therefore offer opportunities for identifying the blind-spots and ambiguities affecting the supposedly complete and austere institutions of government. As the speaker of ‘Opus 14’ remarks: ‘The googolplex security net had been full of innumerable holes held together by string, to be frank’ (FL, 33). Carson’s paranoia is therefore fundamentally ironic, voicing legitimate fears and anxieties but also exhibiting the kind of pervasive self-awareness that Peter Knight identifies in contemporary ‘conspiracy culture’, whereby a genuine suspicion of authority and government actions is inflected by ‘a cynical and self-reflexive scepticism about that suspicion itself’. Indeed, while Carson’s writing is concerned to delineate in detail the forbidding panoptic apparatus in which Belfast is embedded and of which it is a part, he also attempts to turn the
system’s very elaborateness and complexity against itself, revealing the extent to which its ‘immense framework of socioeconomic constraints and securities’ are in fact riddled with ‘a proliferation of aleatory and indeterminable manipulations’.64

Although Carson’s writing of Belfast notably complicates de Certeau’s account of walking in the city, therefore, he ultimately retains the potential for contradictory movements and utopian points of reference, discovering the seeds of a city of refuge within the panoptic machine. And if deviations from the known route are frequently marked by danger in Carson’s work, they are also the data that determine his course, for in such bifurcations he finds aesthetic and political alternatives to a malign status quo. The key figure in this respect is perhaps that of the labyrinth, which Conor McCarthy notes is ‘an enduring motif’ in Carson’s writing. For McCarthy, however, the enduring importance of this motif has paradoxically to do with its mutability and transformative potential, and Carson’s Belfast is thus best understood as ‘a temporal labyrinth as well as a physical one: constantly changing, never fixed, and hence unmappable’.65 Because of the intricacy of its changing design, the labyrinth is not simply a space of confinement and delimitation but can also serve as a place in which to lose one’s way, re-opening the possibility of chance encounters and unlikely conjunctions. Moreover, as Rebecca Solnit observes, one of the symbolic functions of the labyrinth is to ‘signify the complexity of any journey, the difficulty of finding or knowing one’s way’.66 By following his own ‘non-linear dictates’ (SF, 8) within the narrative labyrinth of the city Carson eschews a legible image of Belfast that would render its complex social life as a passive and inert ‘text’ in favour of a more dynamic, street-level engagement with its contingent and multiple specificities, the shifting coordinates of time and space that compose its fractious history.

Carson’s distinctive writing of the city as walking in the city is therefore predicated upon the articulation of what Richard Sennett calls ‘narrative space’; that is, spaces that are ‘full of time’ and therefore open to an unfolding experience of frustration and exposure, complication and elaboration.67 This complex imbrication of space and time, where the layered spatiality of the city corresponds to a series of radically disjunct temporalities, is alluded to self-reflexively in ‘Ambition’ when the speaker observes that ‘often you take one step forward, two steps back’:

For if time is a road,
It’s fraught with ramps and dog-legs, switchbacks and spaghetti; here and there,
The dual carriageway becomes a one-track, backward mind. And bits of the landscape keep recurring […]. (BC, 27–8)

What ‘Ambition’ also illustrates through its deft deployment of anecdote and reminiscence, cinematic cross-fades between the narrative present and the recalled past, and central focus upon the relationship between father and son, is the extent to which the labyrinth of the city is contiguous with, and overlaid by, the labyrinth of memory, that vast ‘space of fractal variation’ (LNF, 89) through which so many of Carson’s peripatetic narrators grope their way towards the future.

Notes
2 Solnit, Wanderlust, p. 10.
5 The phrase recurs at least three times: see ‘Calvin Klein’s Obsession’ (IFN, 2), ‘Ambition’ (BC, 27), and ‘Narrative in Black and White’ (BC, 102).
7 David Lloyd, Ireland after History (Cork University Press, 1999), p. 47.
9 Jonathan Bardon records that the inaugural meeting of the organising committee for The Society of United Irishmen of Belfast was held at Peggy Barclay’s Tavern in Crown Entry, off High Street on 1 April 1791. Jonathan Bardon, Belfast: An Illustrated History (Belfast: The Blackstaff Press, 1982), p. 54.
10 The obvious examples in Benjamin’s case are One-Way Street and The Arcades Project. For the notion of the ‘text-as-city’ in Benjamin’s work see Graeme Gilloch, Myth and Metropolis: Walter Benjamin and the City (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), pp. 5, 94, 102.
13 Benjamin, Illuminations, p. 248.


17 Carson, *The Irish for No*, p. 42.


25 Linear B was a script used for writing Mycenaean, an early form of Greek, which resisted decipherment until the 1950s. The Rosetta Stone is a multilingual stele from the Ptolemaic era of Ancient Egypt that played a crucial role in the translation and decipherment of hieroglyphs during the 1820s. Rosetta is also, incidentally, a district and electoral ward of South Belfast.


29 Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, p. 7.

30 Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, p. 142.


37 Ciaran Carson, ‘To the German Language’, Ciaran Carson Papers, MSS 746, Manuscripts and Rare Books Library, Emory University, Box 20, Folder 15.


43 De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, pp. 98, 100.
45 John Goodby also provides suggestive readings of Carson’s poetry in relation to de Certeau’s work on walking in the city. See Goodby, *Irish Poetry Since 1950*, p. 328 n. 30; and, for a much more detailed and sustained critical discussion, Goodby, ‘Walking in the City’, pp. 73–85.
46 Cf. ‘Question Time’: ‘I know this place like the back of my hand – except who really knows how many hairs there are, how many freckles?’ (*BC*, 57).
47 The Red Hand of Ulster (or *Lámh Dhearg*) is a heraldic symbol denoting the ancient province of Ulster. Its origins are uncertain, but a popular myth tells of a boat race for the kingship of Ulster in which one of the contestants cut off his hand and threw it to the shore to claim victory. Since the 1970s the Red Hand has been prominent in the sectarian iconography of loyalist paramilitary groups, such as the Ulster Defence Association (UDA), the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) and the Red Hand Commandos. However, it has much older roots in Ulster Gaelic culture and is also used by some nationalist organisations such as the Ulster Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA). For some of Carson’s variations on this multivalent symbol, see ‘Bloody Hand’ (*BC*, 51) and ‘Nine Hostages’ (*TN*, 18).
48 Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, p. 16.
50 See Ormsby, ‘Ciaran Carson interviewed’, p. 6.
53 Adams, *Falls Memories*, p. x.
56 Given this, it is difficult to assent to Temple Cone’s argument that Carson depicts Belfast ‘as a panopticon whose structure is in perpetual flux’, for the urban flux of the city’s transformations through time and the rigidity of the panopticon’s spatial layout and regulative ideals are more persuasively regarded as embodying sharply opposed historical forces. Temple Cone, ‘Knowing the Street Map by Foot: Ciaran Carson’s *Belfast Confetti*, *New Hibernia Review* *Iris Éireannach Nua* 10.3 (autumn 2006), p. 72.
59 Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, p. 147.
61 Donatella Mazzoleni, ‘The City and the Imaginary’, trans. John Koumantarakis, in...


63 Peter Knight, Conspiracy Culture: From Kennedy to the X Files (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 55.

64 De Certeau, The Practice of Everyday Life, p. 40.

