The importance and complexity of memory in Carson’s aesthetic is apparent when, as in ‘Ambition’, time is conceived as a road that rarely runs straight, its course marked by manifold obstructions and convolutions. After all, the action of taking one step forward, two steps back can be understood in temporal as well as spatial terms, and in Carson’s writing the past typically manifests itself as ‘a trail of moments/ Dislocated, then located’ (IFN, 58) that precludes a commanding overview. This much is clear in the opening lines of ‘Ambition’, where the narrator and his father have climbed Black Mountain in order to survey Belfast’s cityscape from an elevated vantage-point: ‘Now I’ve climbed this far, it’s time to look back. But smoke obscures/ The panorama from the Mountain Loney spring.’ That the poem should begin with an act of ‘looking back’ invites a reading in metaphorical terms, for during the ascent the two men have been ‘smoking “coffin nails”’ and the speaker’s father has been recalling ‘his time inside’. Mistaken for his brother, he had been interned without trial for seven weeks in August 1971, an experience that ghosts the whole of the narrative and is the source of a series of quips and asides, adages and practical knowledge – ‘seven cigarette ends made a cigarette’ – but is only ever relayed indirectly and in a deliberately fragmented or ‘dislocated’ form. As the narrator wryly observes at one point, ‘my father’s wandered off somewhere. I can’t seem to find him’ (BC, 27). Indeed, the poem’s intricate choreography of gestures, movements, and exchanges between father and son on the mountainside can be read as allegorising the fraught negotiations and framings that characterise any attempt to articulate the past with the present in Northern Ireland.

Bringing the crisis period of Internment and the subsequent collapse of the Stormont government during 1971–2 into focus through the lens of family history and personal anecdote, the narrative views those events self-consciously from the perspective of a contemporary situation
further destabilised following the contentious Anglo-Irish Agreement of November 1985. Yet any clarity of ‘focus’ in the poem is always precarious, likely to blur or fade as quickly as it is resolved. The speaker’s various interruptions and interpolations, which are disrupted in turn by still other voices, fleetingly register both a contemporary fixation with the past – ‘the present is a tit-for-tat campaign, exchanging now for then’ (*BC*, 30) – and the fundamental irreversibility of time and actions in periods of political violence:

Isn’t that the way, that someone tells you what you should have done, when

You’ve just done the opposite? *Did you give the orders for this man’s death?* On the contrary, the accused replies, as if he’d ordered birth or resurrection. (*BC*, 29)

It is as a consequence of these variously imbricated historical contexts, then, that the glass of memory into which Carson’s narrator peers is clouded and cannot give a clear or uninterrupted view of what has been: ‘The window that my nose is pressed against is breathed-on, giving everything a sfumato air.’ Moreover, this blurred obscurity pertains because ‘the issue is not yet decided’, the past altering as perspectives shift and the present opens onto the future (*BC*, 28). As Carson has it in an early poem, ‘The Alhambra’: ‘There is a smoky avenue/ Of light that leads to history’ (*NEOP*, 43).

What such a reading of ‘Ambition’ makes plain, then, is that determinate historical circumstances condition the obscurity and uncertainty that attends upon Carson’s recurrent forays into the ‘vast, inconsequential realms’ of memory, ‘where the laws of time and space work in reverse’ (*SF*, 208). Just as panoptic aspirations to map the city in its totality are frustrated by its complexity and mutability, so efforts to render the past immediate and stable as an object of mnemonic contemplation are revealed to be futile by the vicissitudes of Northern Irish history and politics, and by the limitations of human memory itself. Carson’s ‘eye of memory’ (*SF*, 103, 274) may frequently aspire to control of, and unimpeded access to, the past, but the temporal disjuncture that pertains between the recollected past and the present moment of recollection can only ever be bridged in a makeshift and temporary manner that requires constant adjustments of ‘focus’. He describes the process in the following terms:

The eye is not a camera, the eye of memory still less so. There is no fixed viewpoint. The eye flits and flickers around all over the place, taking in
bits of this and that, weaving in and out, picking, choosing, shuffling, negotiating, building up a picture that is never static, for everything moves through time and space.\(^1\)

In this seemingly counter-intuitive formulation, memory does not congeal or freeze the past in an image, ‘a neat slice of time’, as a photograph would,\(^2\) but seeks to track its metamorphoses in tandem with those of the present and, crucially, to interpret these transformations. The past, like the city itself, is not a site of origin or identity but exists in a series of revised versions that are ceaselessly reconstructed. In this regard, Carson’s writing echoes Paul Ricoeur’s conviction that ‘the phenomena of memory, so closely connected to what we are, oppose the most obstinate of resistances to the hubris of total reflection’.\(^3\) Nonetheless, the issue of the reliability or unreliability of memory involves important ethical and political considerations – perhaps particularly so in Northern Ireland during the Troubles – and it is therefore significant that Ricoeur should connect memory with ‘a specific search for truth’ entailing faithfulness, or at least the ‘ambition’ of ‘being faithful to the past’. ‘If we can reproach memory with being unreliable,’ he writes, ‘it is precisely because it is our one and only resource for signifying the past-character of what we declare we remember.’\(^4\)

As we have seen, Carson’s writing is often acutely aware of the potential unreliability of memory – even rhyming ‘memory’ and ‘duplicity’ in one poem (\(AP, 67\)) – but I want to argue that this awareness is always held in tension with the ambition of being faithful to the past that Ricoeur describes, resulting in an always equivocal attitude that carefully sifts the claims of memory to be a veracious record of past events. Absolute fidelity to the past may ultimately be unachievable but as an ambition or intention it is the precondition for any ethics of memory; and something like a search for truth seems to be evident in the near-obsessive impulse to record that is ubiquitous in Carson’s work. Indeed, the hazy or ‘sfumato’ outlines of Carson’s image of the city become discernible through a meticulous piecing together of details, a montage of textual fragments that includes anecdotes, yarns, snatches of song, brand-names and advertising jingles, political slogans, half-familiar smells, names and places, times and dates, not to mention seemingly endless lists of ‘stuff’. Or perhaps it would be better to speak of the constellation of diverse material, discursive and sensory traces in his writing, where ‘constellation’ is understood as a procedure that ‘safeguards particularity but fissures identity, exploding the object into an array of conflictive elements’, emphasising the materiality of its composition at the cost of its integrity.\(^5\)
To this end, David Lloyd observes that Carson’s 1989 collection, *Belfast Confetti*, ‘suggestively assembles the deep and sedimented histories of the city […]’, but does so not so much through a diachronic archaeology as through a synchronic section of their continuing play in the history of the present’. As a compendium of Belfast, however, this heterogeneous constellation of elements is constantly in danger of being overwhelmed both by the material it is forced to digest and by the internal contradictions it holds in tension. Consequently, Carson’s city tends to be self-consciously ‘a bit out of sync’ (*BC*, 35) as time lapses and everything is revised.

This process is illustrated with concision and ironic humour in the poem ‘The Exiles’ Club’, which can to an extent be read as a self-reflexive allegory for Carson’s own deployment of memory in his writing. Meeting regularly in a bar in Adelaide, South Australia, a group of Belfast expats indulge their gastronomic nostalgia with expensively imported Irish whiskey, stout, cigarettes, and a ‘slightly-mouldy batch of soda farls’ – the almost-authentic, but not entirely savoury, tastes of home – before getting down to the serious business of reminiscence, a collective effort to ‘make/ Themselves at home’:

> After years they have reconstructed the whole of the Falls Road, and now
> Are working on the back streets: Lemon, Peel and Omar, Balaclava, Alma.
> They just about keep up with the news of bombings and demolition, and are
> Struggling with the finer details: the names and dates carved out
> On the back bench of the Leavers’ Class in Slate Street School; the Nemo Café menu;
> The effects of the 1941 Blitz, the entire contents of Paddy Lavery’s pawnshop. (*IFN*, 45)

This finicky zeroing-in on ‘the finer details’ is familiar in Carson’s writing – characterised as it is by his ability ‘to look closer into things’ (*SF*, 44) – although here such introspection begins to appear unhealthy, like the elderly soda farls. The painstaking detail with which the exiles reconstruct their version of the Falls – whether as a scale model, a map, or simply a tightly woven fabric of memories – attests to the hypnotic power of nostalgia, and suggests a desire to replace, perhaps erase, their Australian present through immersion in this carefully remembered and inventoried image of the city. But if this is one way for inveterate exiles to visit home, it is very difficult to know exactly which Belfast they are hoping to return to.
Different temporalities jostle together in the poem (the Blitz, schooldays, the Troubles) creating a sense of simultaneity that is, in turn, directly contradicted by the exiles’ express attempts to ‘keep up with the news of bombings and demolition’, revising their mnemonic map in tandem with diachronic shifts in the actual city’s fabric. The intimately known, all-but-vanished city of their personal experience here becomes enmeshed with the contemporary Belfast of media reports and second-hand information, a place from which they are at least doubly removed, yet with which they ‘just about’ keep up. In this way, ‘The Exiles’ Club’ exemplifies in a peculiarly condensed manner the dialectic between recollection and revision that informs so much of Carson’s writing about Belfast. For if his own struggling with the finer details of obliterated streets and pubs, ‘all the haberdashery of loss’ (BC, 21), indicates a desire to turn back the clock or at least salvage something from the wreckage of the past, Carson nonetheless refuses to regard place as a point of stability or suture, but rather evinces a determination to remain ‘faithful’ to the kinetic, metamorphic, often alienating energies that constitute the ‘truth’ of modern urban experience: ‘Improve, wipe out, begin again, imagine, change’ (BC, 68).

Noting the unreliability of memory in Carson’s work, Conor McCarthy observes that ‘the instability of narrative versions of the past […] is signalled by the way that some of Carson’s stories of the past are retold in a number of versions’. It is fitting, then, that ‘The Exiles’ Club’, itself a narrative about narrative reconstructions of the past, should be retold and revised in the later prose piece, ‘Schoolboys and Idlers of Pompeii’. The title refers to the likely creators of graffiti, and in the text’s opening paragraphs Carson presents the urban graffito not merely as a sign to be read and deciphered, but as a ‘bid to be remembered’, perhaps the mnemonic inscription par excellence: ‘Remember 1690. Remember 1916. Most of all, Remember me. I was here’ (BC, 52). However, it can hardly be ignored that these appeals to memory and remembrance make divergent and sometimes incompatible demands upon their readers. As Ricoeur notes, memory is ‘object-oriented’ – ‘we remember something’ – a point that draws our attention to the distinction between memory as intention (la mémoire) and memories as the things intended (les souvenirs): ‘Memory in the singular is a capacity, an effectuation; memories are in the plural.’ So, while the memories evoked by the graffiti that Carson reads on Belfast’s gable walls (and that we read transcribed, imagined, or remembered in his texts) vary widely, and often serve to reinforce the polarisation of politico-religious identities within the city – the Battle
of the Boyne (1690) versus the Easter Rising (1916) – the intention to remember and to leave lasting traces are common to all. Les souvenirs typically act as markers of division, but la mémoire can serve as a basis for solidarity.

Having thus established the commonality of intentions to remember within Northern Irish culture, Carson introduces the members of the Falls Road Club who, during their monthly meetings in the Woolongong Bar, ‘begin with small talk of the present, but are soon immersed in history, reconstructing a city on the other side of the world, detailing streets and shops and houses which for the most part only exist in the memory’. On one level, such mnemonic ‘reconstructions’ are merely a convenient focus for exilic sociability and the pleasures of nostalgic reminiscence, a means of getting ‘lost in the comforting dusk and drizzle of the Lower Falls’ (BC, 53) – something that Carson is fond of doing himself (SF, 160–7). On another, they are attempts to shore up a sense of identity that is bound to place in a Heideggerian equation of being and dwelling. But just as their status as emigrants raises the problem of geographical distance, so the fact that the place to which their identities are ostensibly bound exists only in memory pits them in a desperate bid against the onward flow of time: ‘Fortified by expensively-imported Red Heart Guinness and Gallaher’s Blues, they talk on, trying to get back – before the blitz, the avalanche, the troubles – the drinker interrupted between cup and lip – winding back the clock …’ (BC, 53–4). This effort to reverse the course of history culminates in a visionary resurrection of the city of the past in which ‘each brick, each stone, finds its proper place again’, an impossible restitution that not only conflates memory with imagination but, more importantly, ignores the complex tessellation of temporalities and spatial forms – ‘bridges within bridges’ – that composes the city in history and renders the assignation of a ‘proper’ place perennially suspect. ‘Where does land begin, and water end?’ asks Carson’s narrator, ‘Or memory falter and imagination take hold?’ (BC, 54).

For Walter Benjamin, memory ‘brings about the convergence of imagination and thought’, a point that seems highly relevant to Carson’s writing but that requires careful unpacking. To begin with, we can say that the commonality of memory and imagination consists in ‘the enigma of the presence of the absent’ that both are capable of expressing, although to different ends. Distinguishing between the two is more difficult, as Carson’s writing often demonstrates. ‘Farset’, for instance, begins by treating ‘imagine’ and ‘remember’ as synonymous verbs:
Trying to get back to that river, this river I am about to explore, I imagine or remember peering between the rusted iron bars that lined one side of the alleyway behind St Gall’s School at the bottom of Waterville Street, gazing down at the dark exhausted water, my cheeks pressed against the cold iron. (BC, 47, my emphasis)

The danger of such confluences is that the ambition of memory to be faithful to the past is jeopardised, and so the always provisional but no less necessary distinction between memory and imagination rests upon Aristotle’s assertion that ‘memory is of the past’, whereas imagination is not. Memory alone can give us, in Ricoeur’s words, the ‘experience of temporal distance, of the depth of time past’.14

The affinity between thought and memory is perhaps most evident in the latter’s function as anamnesis, the work of recollection conceived as ‘an active search’ entailing a ‘traversal of planes of consciousness’, which can be contrasted with the passive evocation or ‘mémoire involontaire’ of mneme. This search for a particular memory-image in anamnesis is analogous to thought in the sense that both constitute a specific search for truth; anamnesis is an attempt to verify that ‘something has taken place’.15 Such verification is inevitably fraught in the Belfast of the Troubles, and is further complicated by Carson’s acute awareness of Northern Ireland’s ‘already overburdened sense of the past’.16 In ‘Gate’, for example, there are indeed signs that something has taken place near the city centre – an explosion, some kind of ambush involving army personnel – but the all-important details of what, where, when, and to whom remain the subject of conjecture and approximation. Moreover, it is chiefly in terms of its absences, distortions, and abrupt terminations that the poem’s urban tableau is to be read:

The stopped clock of The Belfast Telegraph seems to indicate the time
Of the explosion – or was that last week’s? Difficult to keep track:
Everything’s a bit askew, like the twisted pickets of the security gate,
the wreaths
That approximate the spot where I’m told the night patrol went through. (BC, 45)

If ‘Gate’ reveals the difficulties involved in keeping track of events that are both reiterative – ‘or was that last week’s?’ – and the subject of disinformation, it also indicates why memory is both vitally important and a vexed enterprise in Carson’s writing, subject as it is to confusion and temporal derangement under the pressure of political circumstances.

Recollection and revision coalesce in the double movement of remembering – one step forward, two steps back – which, as Homi
Bhabha observes, ‘is never a quiet act of introspection or retrospection. It is a painful re-membering, a putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present.’ This painful labour of remembering is central to ‘Question Time’, which deals initially with the ‘disappointed hunger for a familiar place’ experienced by the ‘returning native’ (BC, 57), but also unfolds a parable on the abuse of memory and the potential distortion of its truth claims. In the course of a seemingly ‘harmless’ bicycle ride from North Belfast, via the Unionist heartland of the Shankill Road, to the Nationalist Lower Falls where he spent his childhood, and following a route he often travelled as a boy, the narrator initially enacts a nostalgic return to a once-familiar, originary place. However, his encounter with this place is conflicted and deeply ambivalent, while the place itself has become estranged and faintly uncanny, as if to underline the point that the realities of the present cannot be straightforwardly articulated with his memories of its streets and buildings, landmarks and axes of passage: ‘Where I remember rows of houses, factories, there is recent wasteland, broken bricks, chickweed, chain-link fencing. Eventually I find a new road I never knew existed – or is it an old street deprived of all its landmarks?’ (BC, 60). History has intervened, as it never fails to do in Carson’s Belfast, rendering familiar territory treacherously unfamiliar and the narrator’s memories of place unreliable if not obsolete.

However, the reconfiguration of the landscape between the Falls and the Shankill since the late 1960s – the combined result of inner-city decline and redevelopment, depopulation and forced relocations, rioting and bomb damage – has led not only to the erosion or disappearance of a cherished sense of community but also served to harden the lines of demarcation segregating adjacent localities along sectarian divisions. And because the narrator’s freewheeling cycle ride has infracted these closely policed boundaries, he arouses the suspicion of local paramilitaries and is subjected to an impromptu interrogation:

You were seen. You were seen.

Coming from the Shankill.

Where are you from?

Where is he from?

The Falls? When? What street? […]

What streets could you see from the house? (BC, 62)

Under duress, the narrator reconstructs the demolished streets and buildings of the Lower Falls from memory, composing a narrative map that is checked and checked again for errors or hesitations. Yet
this act of mnemonic reconstruction clearly does not attest to any straightforward sense of rootedness in place, as the paramilitaries appear to believe it does, nor does ‘Question Time’ acquiesce in the implicit conflation of dwelling, identity, and political allegiance that their interrogation posits. As Richard Kirkland astutely observes, although Carson’s work frequently invokes ‘the idea of residency’ through its dense cataloguing of the city’s topographical and social histories, it is also engaged in a thoroughgoing problematisation of received notions of organic belonging: ‘Folk-memory is present in the poetry but is handled as “quotation” and operates under the sign of perpetual erasure.’ Indeed, in ‘Question Time’ Carson’s narrator is both a ‘native’ and an interloper, defined not in terms of self-evident familiarity – otherwise there would be no need for an interrogation – but through the condition of ‘inhabit[ing] without residing’, ‘a habitation without proper inhabiting’ that Jacques Derrida attributes to haunting and the spectre or ‘revenant’ which, like memory, ‘begins by coming back’. To the extent that this is true, then, Carson’s narrator figures as an (unwelcome) ghost haunting the places of his childhood, the loci of his own past. And thus, to ‘return home’ in Carson’s Belfast is not, as John Kerrigan notes, to ‘re-experience in-placeness’ but ‘to encounter an interrogative gap’.

The memories that Carson’s writing exhumes are often haunted, and haunting is a recurrent component of his narrators’ encounters with the past. In ‘Smithfield’, for example, a photograph album triggers seemingly repressed memories – ‘I have forgotten something, I am/ Going back’ – that pass by way of reflections in an undertaker’s window before resolving themselves in the uncanny image of ‘Sunlight on a brick wall smiling/ With the child who was not there’ (LE, 7; NEOP, 65). Similarly, ‘Apparition’ conjures a subtly poignant atmosphere of loss by juxtaposing two images of what could be ghosts. One is of an ‘angelic old woman’ at a second-hand market inspecting a 1940s pin-stripe suit ‘as if measuring a corpse’; the other concerns a ‘character’ in a Falls Road bar wearing a battered flying jacket, a sort of refugee from times past: “Just back from Dresden?”, cracked the barman./ “Don’t laugh,” spat the character, “my father was killed in this here fucking jacket” (BC, 76). These metonymic references to the losses of the Second World War are famously extended in ‘Dresden’. Moreover, much of the dramatic tension of this long poem resides in the way in which the speaker’s digressive and circumlocutory narrative habits conjure up a series of interlinked stories, anecdotes, and nostalgic reminiscences but cannot forestall indefinitely – ‘now I’m
getting/ Round to it’ (*IFN*, 14) – the encroachment upon consciousness of Horse Boyle’s memories of his participation in the bombing of Dresden as a rear gunner for the RAF:

All across the map of Dresden, store-rooms full of china shivered, teetered And collapsed, an avalanche of porcelain, slushing and cascading: cherubs, Shepherdesses, figurines of Hope and Peace and Victory, delicate bone fragments. (*IFN*, 15)

As in ‘Smithfield’, some element of repression, at the level of the narrative if not in Horse Boyle himself, appears to be at least partially overcome in the course of this poem’s meandering disclosures. Moreover, the cascade of broken porcelain that Horse remembers or imagines not only refers metonymically to the wider devastation of the city and its citizens’ bodies during the bombing raids, but might also be read (more positively) as a metaphor for the shattering of psychic bonds and consequent release of ‘blocked’ memories in which character, narrator, and reader are each implicated. In this regard, it would seem that Carson concurs with Sigmund Freud’s affirmation concerning the persistence of memory-traces that ‘everything is somehow preserved and that in suitable circumstances […] it can be brought back to light’. In which case, forgetting does not entail obliteration or erasure but only necessitates the work of remembering.22

The conjuncture of memory, place, and haunting is, however, at its most profound and complex in the long poem ‘Hamlet’, with which *Belfast Confetti* closes. The poem’s braided, elegiac narrative, which swells and folds back on itself in elaborate repetitions, or drifts onto parallel lines of thought, is situated, appropriately enough, in The Clock Bar on the Falls Road, where the story of a ghostly urban myth is told and memories of yesteryear interfere with ‘the beer-and-whiskey/ Tang of now’ (*BC*, 105). This story contrives to link the murder of a sergeant in 1922 – during the pogroms and sectarian clashes that followed partition23 – with a spectral tin can, the sound of which on the cobbled streets of the Falls was supposed to announce the imminence of rioting or a death in the neighbourhood. Like the ghost of King Hamlet haunting the Danish Court, this more mundane apparition indicates that the time is ‘out of joint’, or rather that it has been rendered dangerously explosive – a ‘strange eruption to our state’ – as the emblematic figure of a bomb-disposal expert shielding himself from ‘the blast of time’ suggests:
Moreover, throughout ‘Hamlet’ temporal disjunction is closely linked to experiences of spatial dislocation and the alienation or estrangement of a formerly secure sense of place. In this respect, it is significant that the narrator’s etymological excavations of the Falls, ‘from the Irish, fál, a hedge’ (BC, 105), gradually shift away from ideas of enclosure and self-sufficiency towards thinking of both word and place in terms of a frontier or boundary – even as ‘the illegible, thorny hedge of time itself’ (BC, 106)– before terminating in a bleak summary of the dilapidated present: ‘A no-go area, a ghetto, a demolition zone’ (BC, 107). The tin ghost, it transpires, has been ‘abolished’ along with the streets it haunted, and it is the vanished thoroughfares and buildings of the Falls lost to time – including The Clock Bar itself – that impress their spectral presences upon the narrator’s memory, engaged as he is in ‘celebrating all that’s lost’ (BC, 107). In this regard, ‘Hamlet’ illustrates Derrida’s idea that ‘haunting implies places, a habitation, and always a haunted house’.24 On the other hand, in ‘Hamlet’ and elsewhere in his work, Carson’s childhood home at 100 Raglan Street might be regarded less as a haunted house than as a house that haunts, a place that has been abolished in reality but remains the source, subject, and repository of countless memories.25

Indeed, the contemporary city as a whole is typically haunted by multiple articulations of itself in Carson’s texts, manifesting not only in its various and always provisional revised versions but also, as we shall see, through the unrealised projections of its ‘futures past’.26 As Fran Brearton remarks, “Belfast” thus works as both literal and symbolic site in which past and present co-exist in perpetual flux, as more than one place in more than one time.’27 Such superimpositions of symbolic coordinates upon an actual topography, and the co-existence of differing articulations of space and time, are often regarded as characteristic of the relationship between place and memory generally. For Peter Middleton and Tim Woods, places are ‘loci of memory; reference points of narratives, propositions and emotions; signs of the passing of time and the histories that mark it’.28 This is perhaps especially true of the city and urban spaces, where the complexity and multiplicity of architectural forms and human interactions compose an unusually rich and variegated ‘text’ in which different temporalities constantly interact. The point is well made by Lewis Mumford:
Through its durable buildings and institutional structures and even more durable symbolic forms of literature and art, the city unites times past, times present, and times to come. Within the historic precincts of the city time clashes with time: time challenges time.\(^{29}\)

Such clashes or challenges may be dramatised particularly effectively in textual representations of the city, for, as Andreas Huyssen contends, the temporal reach of the urban imaginary will often ‘put different things in one place: memories of what was there before, imagined alternatives to what there is’; and consequently: ‘The strong marks of present space merge in the imaginary with traces of the past, erasures, losses, and heterotopias.’\(^{30}\) Such a conception of the urban imaginary usefully alerts us to the politics of memory practices, both actual and possible. On the one hand, Huysen diagnoses a hypertrophy of memory affecting contemporary Western societies, which arises from the ‘increasing instability of time and the fracturing of lived space’ attendant upon capitalist modernisation and globalisation. On the other, he also argues that there may be modalities of ‘productive remembering’ which can be opposed to the widespread ‘museumization’ of contemporary culture.\(^{31}\)

Such ‘lived memories’ would not only provide some minimal ‘temporal anchoring’ amid the accelerating time-space compression of a globalised world, but also involve a reflexive awareness that memory itself ‘is always transitory, notoriously unreliable, and haunted by forgetting, in brief, human and social’.\(^{32}\)

Huysen’s urban imaginary and lived memory are illuminating concepts with which to read Carson’s texts, helping to identify the manner in which the explicitly nostalgic tone of much of his writing is joined to a more politicised appraisal of the insistence of the past on the present, and its utility for constructing the future. In this regard, memory and imagination converge once again, the inventory of ‘what was there’ opening onto an exploration of ‘what might have been’. This last phrase recurs often enough and in such a variety of contexts across Carson’s work as to constitute a leitmotif, and is arguably central to the politics of memory that informs his writing. It first occurs in ‘Dunne’, where the fate of a hostage is ‘etched/ At last into the memories of what might have been’ (\textit{NEOP}, 33); in ‘Hairline Crack’, what ‘could have been or might have been’ shadows an unpredictable present of splits and splinters among paramilitary factions (\textit{BC}, 50); for the narrator of ‘Hamlet’, to contemplate ‘what might have been’ is to plumb the ‘murky fathoms’ of history (\textit{BC}, 107); and in ‘X-Ray’, ‘the might-have-been of long-forgotten, long-abandoned chances’ linger
somewhere in the synapses of the city or in the memories of its citizens (OEC, 90). Perhaps most interesting of all in this context is ‘Revised Version’, which opens with the narrator’s attempts to bring the city’s past into focus:

Trying to focus on the imagined grey area between Smithfield and North Street – jumbled bookstalls, fruitstalls, fleshers, the whingeing calls of glaziers and coal-brick men – I catch glimpses of what might have been, but it already blurs and fades; I wake or fall into another dream. (BC, 66)

What is conjured up fleetingly in this text is a composite and ever-changing dreamscape of the past, an amalgam of historical texts and photographic images, remembered experience and conjecture that obliquely registers ‘the ambivalence of this dilapidated present, the currency of time passing’ (BC, 66). Through an ironic survey of a mass of superannuated proposals, plans, and projections, in each of which a miraculously transformed Belfast is ‘distilled from thin air’, Carson’s narrator demonstrates how the ghosts of futures past haunt the always-passing present, implicitly placing its certainties under erasure and measuring it against other possibilities (BC, 68). Thus, if Carson’s writing often confirms Elizabeth Wilson’s view that ‘the urban sense of time and decay is a nostalgic one, and reminds us of our own lives unreeling out behind us like cigarette smoke’,33 ‘Revised Version’ demonstrates that this nostalgia need not be conceived as either passive or conservative, at least in the political sense. Indeed, as Huyssen observes, the ‘memory of past hopes […] remains part of any imagination of another future’.34

I have already noted that memories are regarded as neither static nor stable in Carson’s work, for while the events of the past can be considered over and done, the ways in which they are perceived and understood may vary greatly from time to time. To this end, Reinhart Koselleck argues that: ‘Experiences overlap and mutually impregnate one another. In addition, new hopes or disappointments, or new expectations, enter them with retrospective effect. Thus, experiences alter themselves as well, despite, once having occurred, remaining the same.’35 If, as Freud and Carson both seem to believe, memory-traces persist in spite of our tendency to forget the events they record, then past experiences deemed inconsequential or irrelevant might be re-evaluated and re-activated in the present. Walter Benjamin famously argued that ‘nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history’.36 Yet Carson’s interest in ‘what might have been’ is not in any straightforward sense historical but chiefly imaginative, indicating
a fascination with the unrealised alternative versions of the present encoded in the past, possibilities that would have been fulfilled had history taken a different course.

It is in this regard that his writing is most clearly informed by what Svetlana Boym calls ‘reflective nostalgia’. Boym distinguishes between two forms of nostalgia, restorative and reflective, which characterise an individual’s relation to the past. Restorative nostalgia aims to undo or reverse the painful experiences of temporal distance and displacement, proposing to ‘rebuild the lost home and patch up the memory gaps’. In this desire to recover and reconstitute times and places that have been lost it places a premium upon wholeness and continuity, evincing abiding anxieties about ‘historical incongruities between past and present’, and is associated by Boym with the mechanics of national memory. By contrast, reflective nostalgia is linked to cultural memory and does not aim at recovering a sense of unity and plenitude, but rather gravitates towards a critical or ironic ‘meditation on history and the passage of time’, one that explicitly ‘cherishes shattered fragments of memory and temporalizes space’. Moreover, for Boym, reflective nostalgia incorporates ‘a utopian dimension that consists in the exploration of other potentialities’ and, what is perhaps most pertinent to Carson’s work, may nurture an urban imagination that not only ‘allows one to long for the imaginary past that the city never had’ but also suggests how ‘this past can influence its future’. To this end, reflective nostalgia would seem to provide a critical basis for measuring present realities against the possibilities encoded in what might have been without capitulating either to the restorative conservatism of local culture or to the alienations of capitalist globalisation.

But might Carson’s writing not often be regarded as less reflective than restorative in its emphases and ambitions? If the impulses informing restorative nostalgia are well exemplified by the collective reminiscences of the Falls Road Club in Adelaide, then Carson’s writing doesn’t always clearly distinguish its own procedures from them. And Peter McDonald has remarked upon the elegiac timbre of his representations of Belfast, ‘the losses in whose fabric are detailed with something like grief’. Indeed, it is sometimes a moot point whether such grief is to be regarded in terms of the work of mourning or the circular refrains of melancholia. The ambulant narrator of ‘Exile’, for instance, walks the ‘smouldering/dark streets’ of Belfast in an almost trance-like state of desolation, embarked upon an impossible mission of salvage and recuperation:
Belfast
is many
places then
as now
all lie
in ruins
and
it is
as much
as I can do
to save
even one
from oblivion (BN, 51–2)

But such salvation, however much it is willed and desired, is always deferred, for although memory entails the presence of that which is absent it cannot furnish unmediated access to the thing remembered. As Michael Parker observes, Carson’s texts frequently perceive ‘the city and province as a site of fragmentation and fragmented perception’,41 a point that is well illustrated by ‘Smithfield Market’, where the state of the fire-bombed building’s interior arcades and passages allegorise a wider condition of disintegration affecting the city in its entirety: ‘Everything unstitched, unravelling – mouldy fabric,/ Rusted heaps of nuts and bolts, electrical spare parts: the ammunition dump/ In miniature’ (IFN, 37).

Nonetheless, there is no possibility of a return to primordial unity, and it is precisely because the condition of disintegration and fragmentation is general rather than merely local that it must be grasped, understood, and lived rather than denied or wished away with fantasies of recovery and continuity. As Doreen Massey affirms, rather than ‘looking back with nostalgia to some identity of place which it is assumed already exists, the past has to be constructed’.42 What connects Carson’s writing much more closely to reflective rather than restorative modes of nostalgia, then, is his vigilant recognition of the always transitory, and potentially unreliable, nature of memory and memories. In this regard, it is crucial that the narrator of ‘Hamlet’ should, in the final stanza of the poem, move beyond his restorative effort ‘to put a shape/ On what was there’ (BC, 107) and towards a critically reflective meditation on how the ‘reality’ of the past is to be represented: ‘But, Was it really like that? And, Is the story true?’ Memory is revealed as an inevitably precarious
and provisional labour ‘to piece together the exploded fragments’ and the time will always be out of joint, for ‘time/ Is conversation; it is the hedge that flits incessantly into the present’ (BC, 108).

The piecing together of exploded fragments of experience is often figured metaphorically in Carson’s work in terms of ‘patchworks’ of memory, recalling the common root shared by ‘text’ and ‘textile’ in the Latin textus, which suggests a tissue, or woven fabric of language and images. Accordingly, ‘Second Language’ evokes ‘the gritty, knitty, tickly cloth of unspent/ Time’: ‘I feel its warp and weft. Bobbins pin and shuttle in Imperial/ Typewriterspeak. I hit the keys. The ribbon-black clunks out the words in serial’ (FL, 12–13). Indeed, this poem’s metaphorical linkage of the functions of writing and communication – typically gendered masculine and associated with his postman father – with those of knitting and weaving – gendered feminine and associated with his mother, who is described as ‘a great woollier’ (SF, 229) – is pervasive in much of Carson’s writing.

43 ‘Interior with Weaver’ and ‘Linen’ from The New Estate stand as early examples (NE, 10, 11), while in ‘Stitch’ a box of odd buttons serves as an analogy for the heterogeneous materials that the writer must work into art, ‘the shimmering/ Shifting hourglass/ Of everything mismatched’ (NEOP, 56). ‘The Patchwork Quilt’ and ‘Patchwork’ both elaborate the metaphor at greater length (NEOP, 70–1; IFN, 59–63), and in ‘Travellers’ the very fabric of the city is once more unravelled and recomposed: ‘Belfast/ Tore itself apart and patched things up again’ (IFN, 42). This metaphorical pattern has also been reworked more recently in For All We Know, where Gabriel’s ‘interminable wrestle with words and meanings’ is counterpointed by the memories sewn into Nina’s patchwork double quilt, which is conflated in turn with ‘the patchwork quilt of Paris: parks, avenues, cemeteries, temples, impasses, arcades’ (FAWK, 28, 37). In each of these cases, the metaphors of stitching and patchwork, ravelling and knitting serve, either explicitly or implicitly, to illustrate the complex intersections of writing, memory, and place. Through them, Carson’s revised versions of Belfast are revealed to be ‘palimpsests of history, […] sites of memory extending both in time and space’.44

Here too, the reflective nature of Carson’s nostalgia is evident, for it is not merely that memory serves as an impetus for his representations of Belfast, but that the city itself functions in his writing as a kind of memory-theatre, the site and occasion for a wider exploration of the phenomenology of lost time. And in this connection the recurrent figuration of ruined spaces as loci of memory in his writing is significant.
Aside from the vanished streets, shops, and pubs of the Lower Falls, these spaces and buildings include the Grand Central Hotel on Royal Avenue, which served as an army barracks during the 1970s prior to its demolition, and Greeves’s Mill, burned down along with hundreds of Catholic homes during sectarian riots in August 1969; the charred remains of Smithfield market and the neo-gothic interior of the ‘ruinous Gasworks’ (BC, 69); and even the eponymous Star Factory itself, which in ‘stark reality’ is revealed as the derelict premises of a clothing manufacturer (SF, 246). For Tim Edensor, industrial and architectural ruins such as these cannot be dismissed as spaces of waste (or wastes of space) but rather function as ‘spaces of defamiliarisation’ that challenge and undermine the normative attributions of value expressed in the spatial ordering and regulated practices of everyday life. Moreover, because they foreground the materiality of matter, its sensuous qualities as well as its tendencies to decay and decompose, ruined spaces not only evoke the past, they powerfully convey ‘a sense of the transience of all spaces’: ‘Ruins are signs of the power of historical processes upon a place and reveal the transitoriness of history itself.’ Consequently, if the ruin can be understood as ‘an allegory of memory’, then memory is revealed to be necessarily fragmentary, partial, and imperfect; but equally, this recognition suggests that ruins may serve as ‘places in which to remember otherwise’.

Carson’s representations of ruined spaces are a means both of remembering Belfast’s industrial histories and the working-class cultures they fostered, and also of recording the process of their erosion and depletion in the post-industrial present. But this is not all, for, particularly in The Star Factory, Carson is also engaged in an exploration of the interior spaces of memory itself, a terrain belonging to science fiction that is riddled with wormholes and parallel dimensions, ‘lulls or slips of time’ (SF, 204):

Over and over, though we flit incessantly into the moment, our pasts catch up with us, and apprehend us at the endless intersections, where fingerposts are unreliable, and mileages are tilted. […] In this non-Euclidian geometry, the interior of a surface is infinitely greater than its exterior. There are boxes within boxes, elaborately carved versions of each other […] (SF, 208)

This motif of ‘boxes within boxes’, the spatial structure of a mise en abyme, is a favourite of Carson’s, implying as it does that there can be no conclusion to any writing that aspires to trace the ‘endless intersections’ of the city and of memory. Yet it is undoubtedly important to recall that the elaboration of this fantastical, fractal space in the
text is suggested and made possible by memories attached to a ruined building that is located in the physical topography of Belfast with pedantic accuracy – ‘322 Donegall Road, between the streets of Nubia and Soudan’ (SF, 246) – and which carries with it a very specific set of historical resonances.

The emotional and imaginative resonances conveyed by or crystallised in objects and sensory perceptions constitute another key facet of Carson’s reflective exploration of memory. Neil Corcoran considers Carson ‘a superb poet of evocation’, noting that his work is studded with ‘moments where the almost forgotten and the almost inconsequential are given their accurate names’, frequently through the incorporation of brand names and lists of commodities.48 Sean O’Brien has similarly remarked upon the importance of the senses of smell and taste to Carson’s richly textured apprehension of the realm of things, which he believes marks Carson out as ‘a secular mystic’.49 As if to illustrate precisely this point, in Shamrock Tea Carson’s narrator observes, with just a hint of self-mockery, that an ‘aroma can induce visions’: ‘Of all the senses, that of smell is the most intangible and yet the most deep-rooted, the most quick to waken long-dormant memories’ (ST, 128). This capacity of smells to awaken dormant memories is the subject of ‘Calvin Klein’s Obsession’, in which the narrator’s efforts to grasp the significance of ‘a long-forgotten kiss’, as part of a deliberate act of anamnesis, are repeatedly frustrated by a series of involuntary memories, each of which is sparked off by a different smell – beer, whisky, incense, commercial perfumes. The interference of one kind of memory with the other through the course of the poem ensures that as soon as one image of the past has been called up the narrative is constantly ‘drowsing[ing] off into something else’ (IFN, 22)50 in a series of flashbacks and leaps sideways that economically illustrate both the power of memory – its ‘obsessions’ – and the unpredictability of its effects:

For there are memories that have no name; you don’t know what to ask for.

The merest touch of sunshine, a sudden breeze, might summon up
A corner of your life you’d thought, till then, you’d never occupied.

(IFN, 24)

Similarly, the symptomatically titled later poem ‘On Not Remembering Some Lines of a Song’ addresses the play of memory and forgetting as the past comes back ‘in dribs and drabs’, and the narrator affirms that ‘nothing ever/ Is forgotten: it’s in there somewhere in the memory-bank,/ Glimmering in binary notation’ (FL, 27).
Michael McAteer argues that Carson’s poetry witnesses ‘not to the autonomy of signifiers but to that of material objects, including speech and language’.51 Certainly, ‘Calvin Klein’s Obsession’ at times exhibits an almost Warhol-esque fascination with commodities both as commodities and through their functions as aides-mémoire, but is also alert to what Karl Marx called the ‘metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties’ of commodity fetishism52 in a consumer culture dominated by the imperialism of the brand: ‘Or maybe it’s the name you buy, and not the thing itself’ (IFN, 25). But what is less often noted about Carson’s work is that, like Derek Mahon,53 he also betrays an abiding interest in what commodities become when they are consumed: waste, rubbish, trash. In ‘Rubbish’, for instance, the poet-narrator is depicted ‘sifting through/The tip at the bottom of Ganges Street’, discovering amid the ordinary detritus a fragment of plaster from a wall of the house in which he used to live (NEOP, 24). More characteristically, ‘Travellers’ is set amid a landscape of ‘junked refrigerators, cars and cookers, anchored Caravans’ (IFN, 42); the nocturnal urban landscape of ‘Snowball’ includes ‘a litter of white plastic cord, a broken whiskey bottle’ (IFN, 44); and in ‘Brick’ the heterogeneous rubble and rubbish of the city are recycled as the basis for its new foundations:

As the tall chimneys and the catacomb-like kilns of the brickworks crumbled back into the earth, the very city recycled itself and disassembled buildings – churches, air-raid shelters, haberdashers, pawnshops – were poured into the sleech of the lough shore to make new land; vast armies of binmen or waste-disposal experts laboured through the years transforming countless tons of brock into terra firma; the dredged up sludge of the Lagan became Queen’s Island, that emblem of solid work and Titanic endeavour. (BC, 73)

The effect of this recurrent preoccupation with rubbish is not simply to create a palpable atmosphere of urban degradation – indeed, rubbish is shown to be a viable basis for manufacture and habitation, if not civic principles – but also to demystify the commodity form itself, for, as matter out of place, rubbish is ‘a reminder that commodities, despite all their tricks, are just stuff; little combinations of plastics or metal or paper.’54 Rubbish is tangible evidence of the material consequences of an egregious contemporary materialism and, as such, is a ubiquitous and unavoidable presence on the streets of Carson’s Belfast.

Carson’s work is also often minutely attentive to the ways in which history is ‘consumed’ and recycled in the form of textual representations and visual images. Indeed, his depictions of Belfast during the Troubles illustrate Victor Burgin’s point that in ‘the memory of the
place and memory

Teletopologically fashioned subject, actual events mingle indiscriminately not only with fantasies but with memories of events in photographs, films, and television broadcasts. In ‘Cocktails’, for example, the pub-talk of a group of journalists settled in the bar of the Europa Hotel deftly conveys the drift of conversation towards the improbable or fantastical, implicitly drawing attention to the feedback loop whereby media reports of the Troubles relay and reinforce a ghoulishly sensationalist version of events:

There was talk of someone who was shot nine times and lived, and someone else
Had the inside info. on the Romper Room. We were trying to remember the facts
Behind the Black & Decker case, when someone ordered another drink and we entered
The realm of Jabberwocks and Angels’ Wings, Widows’ Kisses, Corpse Revivers. (*IFN*, 41)

Here, the narrator’s effort ‘to remember the facts’ is less about remaining faithful to the past than it is about concocting a good story, a process common to the popular media whereby ‘news’ is subordinated to the demands of ‘entertainment’. Nonetheless, as Burgin observes, even individual memories cannot remain unaffected by such influences, nor can the ‘facts’ of a given situation or event be neatly extracted from the contexts of their transmission and reception, the discursive formations through which they are assembled and articulated. Consequently, Carson’s work frequently seeks to foreground the qualities and capacities of the various media through which the past is represented, including their abilities to distort or mislead. Film and television feature prominently, particularly in their documentary registers: in ‘Serial’, Carson’s narrator comments self-reflexively, ‘I am hunting with a telephoto/ Fish-eye, shooting, as they say, some footage’ (*IFN*, 52); while the surreal montage of memories and ‘quotations’ that are projected in ‘Jawbox’ relies upon ‘that effect where one image warps into the other, like the double helix/ Of the DNA code’, and a split screen suggests ‘the parallels of past and present’ (*BC*, 93–4).

Carson is also fascinated by photographs, in part because, as Susan Sontag notes, photographs ‘turn the past into a consumable object’ by abbreviating history and presenting the world in terms of an anthology of images. As ‘both a pseudo-presence and a token of absence’ a photograph can act as a powerful catalyst for memories: ‘Like a wood fire in a room, photographs – especially those of people, of distant
landscapes and faraway cities, of the vanished past – are incitements to reverie.’56 Hence, in ‘The Gladstone Bar _circa_ 1954’ Carson’s narrator is overwhelmed by a pungent memory when looking at a photograph depicting a once-familiar scene from Belfast’s vanished past:

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two men are
unloading beer
you can smell
the hops and yeast
the smouldering
heap of dung
just dropped by
one
of the great
blinkerdrayhorses (BN, 14)
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However, like the work of many Irish visual artists, Carson’s writing does not conform to a naively realist aesthetic,57 and another facet of his interest in photography lies in identifying the manner in which the photograph’s apparently self-evident claims to verisimilitude are qualified by the details of focus, framing, tint, and selection that inevitably mark it out as an interpretation of reality rather than a mere reproduction of it.

‘Question Time’ deconstructs a press photograph that purports to document ‘the savage Lower Falls riots of 3–5 July 1970’ with dispassionate objectivity and accuracy:

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But the caption is inaccurate: the camera has caught only one rioter in the act, his stone a dark blip in the drizzly air. [...] The left-hand frame of the photograph only allows us the ‘nia’ of Roumania Street, so I don’t know what’s going on there, but I’m trying to remember – was I there that night, on this street littered with half-bricks, broken glass, a battered saucepan and a bucket? (BC, 58–9)
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What this examination discloses is that a photograph may hide as much as it reveals, denying the interconnectedness of experience and events by freezing the flow of time and cropping details that do not fit its agenda. The narrator’s ‘trying to remember’ is, in this context, an effort to redress such deficiencies and an acknowledgement that it is only through the risky, partial, and imperfect medium of memory that one can hope to be faithful to the past in all its complex ramifications. And, as Ricoeur
points out, ‘remembering is not only welcoming, receiving an image of the past, it is also searching for it; to remember is to ‘exercise’ memory rather than to passively accept the self-evidence of the ‘facts’ as they are presented.58

Much depends, however, upon how memory is exercised and to what ends, particularly where remembering joins remembrance in the national politics of commemoration. The issue is perhaps especially fraught in the context of Northern Ireland where commemoration functions as ‘a contradictory site of conflict and conflict-resolution’ and the fault-line between mythic and actual pasts becomes especially difficult to discern.59 This conflictual and contradictory situation undergirds and provides a context for the dizzying bricolage of history, memory, and fantasy that Carson composes in The Twelfth of Never. Indeed, the volume’s eccentric sonnet sequence involves a thoroughly ironic reappraisal of the politics of remembrance developed in nineteenth-century Irish cultural nationalism as described by Joep Leerssen:

Supernatural characters stalk the literary imagination, who in their trans-individual or trans-historical identity preside over historical change and fleeting centuries: Captain Rock, Melmoth, Dark Rosaleen in all her different renderings, Kathleen ni Houlihan. They are personifications of the act of remembrance, walking and living (or at least undead) memories that haunt successive generations from century to century.60

In this way, according to Leerssen, remembrance of a special kind performs a crucial role in the imaginative unification of history and national tradition.

Carson’s text includes most of the emblematic literary figures that Leerssen mentions, alongside a supporting cast of leprechauns and cluricaunes, vampires and fairy folk, marching bands and revolutionaries, creating a hallucinatory mish-mash of folklore and history in which the myths of Irish Nationalist and Unionist culture clash, become mutually entangled, and undermine one another. For instance, in ‘Wallop the Spot’, Thomas Moore’s republican hero Captain Rock not only comes to resemble the laudanum-addicted Samuel Taylor Coleridge but, following his hanging, also undergoes a further ironic metamorphosis: ‘The next I heard of him, his skin was someone’s drum,/ His tibiae and humeri were Orange flutes’ (TN, 27). The volume’s progressive conflation and intermixture of incompatible discourses and traditions is accompanied by elaborate use of colour coding, particularly the counter-pointing of reds and greens, complementary colours that nonetheless symbolise warring national imaginaries. Thus ‘Wolf Hill’ figures ‘little Erin’ in
terms that recall both red riding hood and wicked stepmother – ‘A pair of bloody dancing shoes upon her feet,/ Her gown a shamrock green, her cloak a poppy red’ (TN, 25) – and in ‘Nine Hostages’ the narrator is confronted by a dream vision of ‘a red dragon, a green gossoon’ (TN, 18). Other poems, such as ‘The Rising of the Moon’, ‘1798’, and ‘The Display Case’, equate the visionary apparitions of the aisling tradition with nightmare and intoxication, casting Mother Ireland as a cross between Keats’s belle dame sans merci and Joyce’s old gummy granny (TN, 19, 39, 74). Indeed, David Butler has drawn attention to the ways in which the ‘general bricolage of sign and discourse’ that characterises The Twelfth of Never suggests parallels with Joyce’s Ulysses, its ‘oneiric, mutable progression’ through the sonnet sequence recalling the novel’s Nighttown episode in particular.61

As Carson’s epigraph from Brewer’s Dictionary of Phrase and Fable indicates, the ‘twelfth of never’ refers not only to a placeless place, the never-land of fairytales and fables where ‘everything is metaphor and simile’ (TN, 13), but also to a temporal dimension outside of or beyond calendrical time. It is fitting therefore that the text should not only switch between a range of geographically remote settings (Ireland, France, Russia, Japan) but also constellate references to a multitude of seemingly discrete historical events, including the Battle of the Boyne, the French Revolution, the Rebellion of the United Irishmen, the Napoleonic campaigns, the Opium Wars, the Irish Potato Famine, the American Civil War, the Great War, and, more distantly, the Northern Irish Troubles. In fact, the text frequently deploys a species of simultaneous time in which the icons and images that consecrate these events in the national memory overlap or blur together. In ‘Banners’, for example, the poem’s concluding image of ‘dear old Ireland’ is one in which the bodies of soldiers killed in the Napoleonic Wars and those of Irish peasants who starved to death during the Great Hunger are merged together with grim irony: ‘Fields of corpses plentiful as dug potatoes’ (TN, 84). At the same time, this imagery of wastelands, battlefields, and poppy meadows cannot help but recall the trench landscapes of the Great War, ‘these fields of ’14’ where the ‘dreams of warriors blow through the summer grass’ (TN, 69).

Nonetheless, two dates seem especially important: 1798 and 1998. These serve as the titles for consecutive poems in the volume (TN, 39, 40) and draw the reader’s attention not only to the bicentennial anniversary of the failed republican rising led by the United Irishmen (1798), but also to the signing of the Good Friday Agreement and the official institution of
a peace process in Northern Ireland (1998). In this respect, the volume as a whole can be seen as Janus-faced, torn between commemorating the past and remembering the future, and it is notable that Carson’s narrators are as interested in the possible consequences of turbulence on Japanese markets for the global economy of the present as in the enduring legacies of sectarian disputes and conflicts between states. Consequently, it is difficult to know if the text’s recurrent allusions to ‘the imminent republic of the future’ (TN, 21) and ‘the yet-to-be republic’ (TN, 47) refer to futures past or a future yet to come. In any case, it is significant that its central symbol, the poppy, which in Ireland tends to be associated with the Unionist tradition, is rendered ambivalent, unstable, and cannot be comprehended within a singular or exclusive framework of meaning. One moment it is depicted as ‘the emblem of Peace and the Opium Wars’ (TN, 14), the next as that of ‘Death and the Special Powers’ (TN, 17). Poppies signify remembrance and forgetting, solemnity and intoxication, while the passage of both characters and reader through ‘the Forest of Forget-me-not’ (TN, 49) leads ultimately to ‘fields abounding in high cockelorum’ where memories and stories are revealed in their variorum multiplicity (TN, 89). Besides its sheer linguistic and imaginative brio, then, *The Twelfth of Never* is a text that remains alert to the potential for abuses of memory that lies in the politics of national commemorations. For remembering one version of the past can often mean forgetting another or someone else’s, or forgetting the future altogether. To this end, Ricoeur affirms that if there is a ‘duty to remember’ then it consists not merely in remembering not to forget but, more importantly, entails ‘the duty to do justice, through memories, to another than the self’; it is the assumption and fulfilment of a debt to the victims of history, but always ‘the other victim, other than ourselves’. The titles, refrains, and structural ordering of poems in *The Twelfth of Never* derive in large part from the Irish folk-song tradition, although these elements are incessantly dispersed, combined, or re-contextualised in the course of the sequence’s contrary progressions. A similarly elaborate musical architectonics also underlies Carson’s 2008 collection, *For All We Know*, although here inspiration is derived, uncharacteristically, from baroque classical music and specifically fugue. Fugue entails an intricate contrapuntal composition in which an initial theme is first introduced then imitated at intervals by a succession of ‘voices’, each adding tonal or harmonic variations and embellishments. *For All We Know* is a brilliant attempt to approximate such formal intricacies by means of an unconventional sonnet sequence written in alexandrine
coupletts, its echoes and reprises, counterpoints and elaborations following ‘a score/ of harmony and dissonance’ (FAWK, 93). The book is divided into two parts, so that each of the 35 poems in part one has its non-identical twin in part two, the two halves mirroring and refracting recurrent themes, phrases, and images – a patchwork quilt, footprints in snow, an old watch – in a scintillating play of repetition and difference. Even more so than *The Twelfth of Never*, then, *For All We Know* asks to be considered as a dispersive but also strangely integrated whole, for while some poems can be read and understood individually none of them conforms to the isolate self-sufficiency of the lyric. In this respect, the book might be regarded as a version of the verse novel, although fugue probably remains the best analogy, for it is chiefly through the relationships and resonances between poems, their mutual harmony or discordance, that meaning is conveyed. As the volume’s epigraph from the pianist Glenn Gould makes clear, fugue involves the constellation of continuously shifting musical fragments that are only ever partially or provisionally integrated.

That this shifting constellation of fragments also functions as an allegory for the equally intricate and partial workings of memory is underlined not only by the text’s recurrent preoccupation with ‘registering elapsed time’ (FAWK, 27) but also more directly in ‘Peace’, which broaches the contemporary problems of memory and forgetting that confront Northern Ireland’s peace process:

> And all the unanswered questions of those dark days come back
> To haunt us, the disabled guns that still managed to kill,
>
> The witnesses that became ghosts in the blink of an eye.
> Whom can we prosecute when no one is left fit to speak? (FAWK, 55)

Here again, the imperfect present is haunted by the past, by a silencing of memory that renders justice impossible and the duty to remember unfulfilled. Thus, while much of the text is concerned with personal and familial memories, the plural connotations of its ‘staggered repeats’ (FAWK, 77) insistently place these fragmentary recollections within the larger contexts of social and cultural memory, where remembering is conjoined to the aims of justice and restitution.

At the same time, through its novelistic unfolding of the story of two lovers who meet in a second-hand clothes shop in Belfast during the 1970s, but whose complicated personal and professional lives take them to Paris, Berlin, and Dresden, *For All We Know* also explores fugue as a psychological condition. In this context, ‘fugue’ is characterised...
by profound confusion over personal identity, dissociative amnesia, and the abandonment or flight from familiar contexts and places; or, as Carson has it in *Shamrock Tea*, ‘unknown to himself’, the subject ‘becomes someone else’ (*ST*, 162). To this end, Carson’s protagonists, Nina and Gabriel, find themselves living ‘double lives’ (*FAWK*, 66) in more senses than one, not only because both grew up bilingual but also because the unpredictable and not always readily comprehensible course of events in the narrative provides them with frequent occasions to question their own identities, not to mention each other’s. Intermeshing depictions of Belfast during the Troubles, post-1968 Paris, and the febrile world of Cold War espionage in Eastern Europe, the text bristles with double agents and aliases, doppelgangers and look-alikes, deceptions and misrecognitions, while the relative fixity or fluidity of identity presents itself as a central and multi-faceted political problem.

In ‘Birthright’, for example, sectarian or ethnic identity figures as an inscription of filiation and belonging that can neither be erased nor ignored: ‘For all that you assumed a sevenfold identity/ the mark of your people’s people blazes on your forehead’ (*FAWK*, 40). But while Carson never underestimates the material claims and limitations that the cultural production of identity entails, his recasting of ‘Birthright’ in part two deliberately re-opens a dialogue that implies that identity is never as ‘irrevocable’ as Gabriel initially thinks:

> In any case, they’ll find you out no matter what, for there are other indicators of identity. Such as?
> you said. Colour and cut of clothes, I said, the way you talk
> and what you talk about, the way you walk, your stance, or how you look askance, the set and colour of your eyes and hair.
> Just look at you, you said, you’re talking through your hat. Look at what you’re wearing, that good Protestant Harris tweed jacket.
> The black serge waistcoat a linen broker might have cast off.
> The grandfather shirt no grandfather of yours ever wore. (*FAWK*, 90)

The dialogic counter-pointing that is evident here is crucial to the volume’s multi-layered effects, particularly its rich and complex imbrication of the personal and the political. Throughout *For All We Know*, allegiances or betrayals in the public or political spheres are paralleled and balanced by Carson’s sometimes astonishingly subtle explorations of the confusions of identity that arise in a love relationship characterised as much by separation as by togetherness, and ultimately marked by a sense of
'irrevocable’ loss. Following Nina’s death in a car accident, Gabriel returns inevitably ‘to the question of those staggered repeats/ as my memories of you recede into the future’ (FAWK, 111).

In formal and thematic terms, then, For All We Know would seem to constitute a significant departure within Carson’s oeuvre, further evidence of his willingness to reinvent himself, breaking with established patterns in order to ‘blossom with new constellations’ (FAWK, 107). On the other hand, particularly on re-reading, the volume is also uncannily familiar, full of echoes, correspondences, and ‘re-memberings’ not only within itself but also via intertextual reworkings of motifs or preoccupations from Carson’s earlier work. For instance, Nina’s patchwork quilt and references to the bombing of Dresden recall poems in The New Estate and Other Poems and The Irish for No; the volume’s metonymic use of watches and time-pieces to explore the vagaries of time expands upon a theme first introduced in ‘Four Sonnets’ from First Language; its retellings of French fairytales and songs are reminiscent of The Twelfth of Never; and the recurrent image of a helicopter hovering above the rooftops of Belfast is familiar from Breaking News. Such refrains or slight returns are always instances of reworking and recasting, however, never mere repetitions, and the staggered rhythms of the fugue that Carson adopts and adapts in For All We Know therefore serve purposes that are at once aesthetic and political.

In a manner that is broadly contiguous with Carson’s previous excavations of place and memory, ‘The Shadow’ makes a crucial distinction between memorisation and remembering, whereby the ambition of being faithful to the past rests upon the repeated exercise of memory in contexts where it will always be provisional and potentially unreliable. For, as a former Stasi agent confides to Nina, liars merely repeat their stories verbatim, whereas those who tell the truth can always engage in retelling their accounts of the past. Truth depends upon reformulation rather than restatement, the recognition that there will always be multiple perspectives upon a single event, that there is more than one way to tell a story, and more than one story to tell. In turn, the story that Nina tells and retells to Gabriel is itself a reworking of the past that establishes a precarious connection with the truth of events only by means of its repeated self-transformations:

You’ve told me this story more than once, more than once telling me something I never heard before until then, telling it so well I could almost believe I was there myself, for all that I was at the time so many miles away. (FAWK, 31)
This means that there can be no end to visiting and revisiting the past, telling and retelling its stories; no once-and-for-all where the essence of what has been is isolated and displayed in perpetuity. Memory is a process rather than an event or instrument, requiring ‘the capacity for endless interpolations into what has been’, and it is here that the dialectic of recollection and revision that I have been tracing in this chapter most clearly opens onto Carson’s concerns with narrative and the multiple roles of the storyteller.

Notes
2 Susan Sontag, On Photography (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2002), p. 17. Sontag contends that ‘photographs may be more memorable than moving images’ precisely because they arrest the flow of time.
4 Ricoeur, Memory, History, Forgetting, pp. 55, 21.
6 Lloyd, Ireland After History, p. 51.
7 Cf. ‘Envoy’, the final poem in The Twelfth of Never: ‘You’ll find that everything is slightly out of synch’ (TN, 89).
8 The choice of location here is neither random nor accidental, for Adelaide is also the name of a district of South Belfast lying adjacent to the Lisburn Road, and a ‘halt’ on the railway line leading south to Dublin. In ‘Adelaide Halt’ Carson’s speaker wonders: ‘Adelaide? The name? A city or a girl, who knows?’ (TN, 16).
10 Ricoeur, Memory, History, Forgetting, p. 22.
11 ‘Man’s relation to locations, and through locations to spaces, inheres in his dwelling. The relationship between man and space is none other than dwelling, strictly thought and spoken.’ Heidegger, Poetry, Language, Thought, p. 155.
13 Ricoeur, Memory, History, Forgetting, p. 8.
14 Ricoeur, Memory, History, Forgetting, pp. 15, 6.
15 Ricoeur, Memory, History, Forgetting, pp. 17, 29, 21.
16 Kirkland, Literature and Culture in Northern Ireland Since 1965, p. 45.
17 Bhabha, The Location of Culture, p. 90.
18 Adopting a tone of regretful nostalgia that is always qualified or ironised in Carson’s writing, the journalist and local historian Robin Livingstone comments: ‘The late 1960s, 1970s and early 1980s were not a good time to be living on the Falls. In the shadow of the hated [Divis] flats, people moved around half-demolished streets, their faces as grim as the landscape. Old brick was replaced by corrugated iron and with each and every demolition phase the spirit of the Falls sagged a little more.’ Robin Livingstone, The Road: Memories of the Falls (Belfast: The Blackstaff Press,

19 Kirkland, Literature and Culture in Northern Ireland Since 1965, p. 44.
25 Perhaps it is something like this that Gaston Bachelard means when he writes: ‘[B]eyond all the positive values of protection, the house we were born in becomes imbued with dream values which remain after the house is gone. […] The space we love is unwilling to remain permanently enclosed. It deploys and appears to move elsewhere without difficulty; into other times, and on different planes of dream and memory.’ Gaston Bachelard, The Poetics of Space, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), pp. 17, 53.
26 I borrow this term from the work of the intellectual historian Reinhart Koselleck, for whom the historical temporality of a given present may be inferred from ‘its condition as a superseded former future’. Reinhart Koselleck, Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time, trans. Keith Tribe (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), p. 3.
27 Brearton, ‘Mapping the Trenches’, p. 373.
29 Mumford, The City in History, p. 98. Following a similar line of thought to Mumford, Freud famously adduces the layering and sedimentation of buildings, structures, and architectural forms from different historical periods that is evident in the city of Rome as an analogy for the encrustations of memory in the psyche. Freud, ‘Civilization and its Discontents’, pp. 725–7.
31 Huyssen, Present Pasts, pp. 18, 27.
32 Huyssen, Present Pasts, p. 28.
33 Wilson, ‘The Rhetoric of Urban Space’, p. 151. The simile Wilson employs here is particularly apt for Carson’s work. Aside from his numerous poems that take smoking as their subject or point of departure, such as ‘Blues’ and ‘Grass’, and the
even more numerous texts in which smoking and cigarettes play more minor roles, Carson has explicitly drawn attention to the relationship between music, smoking, and time in *Last Night’s Fun*, where the process of lighting, stubbing-out, and relighting roll-ups is described as creating ‘hyphenated pauses’ that punctuate the musical session: ‘And I’m a moving present dot between the shifting staves of past and future’ (*LNF*, 76). And in *Fishing for Amber*, smoking is described as a means of ‘pausing’ *time* that plays an important part in the narrative vocabulary of the storyteller (*FFA*, 151–2).

35 Koselleck, *Futures Past*, p. 262.
40 McDonald, *Mistaken Identities*, p. 63.
43 Kathleen McCracken also notes a similar, but not identical, gendering of functions in her essay, ‘Ciaran Carson: Unravelling the Conditional, Mapping the Provisional’, p. 371. McCracken’s distinction is between the masculine activity of wandering in the city and the feminine domestic work of stitching and knitting.
53 In this connection, see Hugh Haughton’s stimulating essay, ‘“The bright garbage on the incoming wave”: rubbish in the poetry of Derek Mahon’, *Textual Practice* 16.2 (2002), pp. 323–43.
56 Sontag, On Photography, pp. 68, 16.
58 Ricoeur, Memory, History, Forgetting, p. 56.
61 Butler, ‘Slightly out of Synch’, pp. 343, 339.
63 In this connection, Derrida’s remark that ‘the injunction of memory’ is directed towards ‘the anticipation of the future to come’ seems relevant. Derrida, Archive Fever, p. 79.
64 Ricoeur, Memory, History, Forgetting, p. 89.
66 ‘The crushed carapaces of watches ticked on the pavement. Passers-by ignored them.’ ‘All over the city, the stopped clocks told each other the different wrong times’ (FL, 22).
67 Benjamin, Reflections, p. 16.