At the end of Volume VI of *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* Laurence Sterne’s eponymous author-narrator pauses to review his progress so far, presenting the reader with a series of visual diagrams representing the course taken by his narrative in the preceding volumes. In each of these a series of turns and detours, loops and spirals indicate the various digressions, whimsical flourishes, and redundant elaborations he has made along his meandering and pointedly non-linear way from beginning to middle to end. Moreover, in a characteristically Sternean irony, it is during this digression upon his tendency to digress that Tristram determines to mend his ways and continue with his story ‘in a tolerable straight line’, one ‘turning neither to the right hand or to the left’.¹

Such deliberate self-contradictions have led Paul Muldoon to regard *Tristram Shandy* as exemplary of a wider tendency in Irish writing towards the disruption of linearity by way of ‘veerings from, over, and back along a line’ and a related affinity for ‘the notions of di-, trans-, and regression’.² To say nothing of Muldoon himself, such tendencies are prominent in the restlessly inventive interest in narrative and storytelling that has been evident in Ciaran Carson’s writing at least since the publication of *The Irish for No* in 1987. Like Tristram, Carson’s narrators rarely proceed in a straightforward manner, often getting lost in associative reveries triggered by sounds and smells, diverging from an initial train of thought only to pick it up again later in a changed context, or demonstrating the unstaunchable exfoliation of one narrative from another so that any notion of a central storyline organising the whole is ultimately undermined. Like Sterne, Carson highlights both the versatility and the inadequacies of narrative forms, revelling in the manifold connections and associations they make possible yet always acknowledging, and to an extent resisting, the artificial modes of
circumscription and ordering they enforce upon representation. Indeed, Carson’s writing is not just full of narratives – stories and yarns, anecdotes and conversations of more or less complicated sorts. It is also often centrally about narrative, incorporating a pervasive level of meta-commentary through which he probes the limitations and possibilities encoded in the processes of storytelling and the kinds of knowledge that narrative affords. These enquiries are almost always anchored in a particular geographical and historical context – Belfast and Northern Ireland during the Troubles – and the fragmentary or inconclusive character of many of Carson’s narratives reflect a society in the process of violent fracture or breakdown. Yet storytelling is also important to Carson because it offers a means of revision and renewal, of discovering coherence in difference and vice versa, and therefore of making sense differently. Hence what amounts almost to a statement of faith in the powers of narrative on Carson’s behalf: ‘I believe that the world exists in such a way that everything relates to something else. Or we make it exist in that way, making links all the time, connecting things up, one thing always leading to another.’

The antithetical principles of connection and disconnection, correspondence and fracture that vie with each other in Carson’s narratives are illustrated in the long poem ‘Dresden’, which opens *The Irish for No*. From the start the reader is put on guard as to the reliability of the narrative unfolded by the speaker, whose self-conscious checks and hesitations, tangential digressions and elisions immediately imply that this will be as much a story about storytelling as about Horse Boyle’s wartime experiences as a rear gunner in the RAF:

Horse Boyle was called Horse Boyle because of his brother Mule;  
Though why Mule was called Mule is anybody’s guess. I stayed there once,  
Or rather, I nearly stayed there once. But that’s another story. (*IFN*, 11)

If not intentionally deceitful, like the narrator of the later poem ‘A Date Called *Eat Me*’, Carson’s speaker does deliberately puncture the illusion of narrative authority he simultaneously creates in these opening lines. His proffered explanation for how Horse Boyle got his name implies privileged knowledge, but the limits of such knowledge are quickly revealed as the fragile causal chain he constructs is snapped off prematurely. Anybody’s guess, it turns out, is as good as his own, for his information – like Horse’s name – is second-hand. The narrator’s tendency to digress, to temporarily lose the thread of his story in anecdotes and reminiscences, whether first- or second-hand, is also
signalled explicitly by the untold story of how he stayed, or rather ‘nearly stayed’, the night in the brothers’ ‘decrepit caravan’ on the outskirts of Carrick. Besides hinting at the potential overlap between narration and fabulation – the poem’s generously expansive narrative seems capable of encompassing stories of what might have been, as well as what was – this interrupted digression also intimates the way in which one story always leads on to another, resisting any neat circumscription and leaving all manner of narrative loose ends: ‘But that’s another story.’

As with many of Carson’s long poems, ‘Dresden’ is composed of stories within stories, frames within frames, the narrative drifting backwards and forwards in time and space, following a seemingly arbitrary course that turns out to be both refractive and recursive. Storylines branch and ramify unexpectedly, incorporating shifts of pace and tone of voice, or employing ‘anachronies’ such as flashbacks and prolepses, before circling back to Horse – for ‘this is really Horse’s story’ – via some convenient narrative bridge, a corresponding sound or image, or a loose association of ideas. In this way, Carson amplifies and enriches what Paul Cobley calls the text’s ‘narrative space’, multiplying the turns and detours through which its progression from beginning to end is delayed, frustrated, or held in suspense. Consequently, the reader as much as the narrator is involved in making links and connections between discrete images and contexts, of relating characters to one another and to their respective times and places in the recessive narrative structure. For instance, the teetering ‘baroque pyramids of empty baked bean tins’ which surround Horse and Mule’s caravan set the narrator thinking of a village shop’s gloomy, aromatic interior, with its tinkling bell and ‘pyramids of tins’ (IFN, 11). In turn, the narrator’s mildly prurient imaginings concerning the likely whereabouts of the shopkeeper’s daughter return him to Horse, a man who ‘kept his ears to the ground’ and so might be able to satisfy his idle curiosity.

Importantly, Horse Boyle is himself both ‘a great man for current affairs’, carrying news to his neighbours every evening, and a born storyteller of a distinctively digressive bent. The report of a failed mortar-bomb attack at Mullaghbawn prompts Horse to tell a farcical tale concerning Flynn, a hapless IRA volunteer on a cross-border bombing mission. On route to his destination, Flynn imagines himself discovered and surrenders himself needlessly to a policeman who ‘didn’t know young Flynn from Adam. All he wanted/ Was to get home for his tea’, an ironic detail that humorously deflates the heroic pretensions of militant Irish republicanism for which Flynn is made to stand (IFN, 12). Flynn’s
acquisition of the ‘best of Irish’ while in prison is also gently mocked, but leads Horse on to the etymology of Carrick (‘a rock’) and his wry social commentary on life in Ireland’s depleted rural parishes:

You’d be hard put to find a square foot in the whole bloody parish
That wasn’t thick with flints and pebbles. To this day he could hear the grate
And scrape as the spade struck home, for it reminded him of broken bones:
Digging a graveyard, maybe – or better still, trying to dig a reclaimed tip
Of broken delph and crockery ware – you know that sound that sets your teeth on edge
When the chalk squeaks on the blackboard, or you shovel ashes from the stove? (IFN, 13)

The finicky precision with which this series of proliferating analogies is developed is characteristic of Carson’s writing, as is Horse’s sardonic equation of the un-pastoral environs of Carrick with both graveyard and tip. More importantly, these lines also build up a system of images and aural echoes that serve to link the scattered shards of ‘flints and pebbles’ with ‘broken bones’ and ‘broken delph and crockery ware’, inducing a queasy pre-figuration of the poem’s long-deferred climax, in which the connection between its wandering narrative and its pregnant title is finally made clear.

With Mule’s drunken return to the caravan Horse’s voice recedes and is replaced once more by that of the narrator, who relates details of Horse’s own life story. These concern emigration first to Manchester, then enlistment in the RAF and his subsequent involvement in the Allied bombing of Dresden during the war. Horse’s own narrative, and the various yarns or anecdotes with which it has been linked in the course of the poem, are thus written into the encompassing narratives of Irish diasporic identity and European history. Moreover, at a formal level his heartbroken recollections of the bombing itself serve as a focal point for the ‘thousand tinkling echoes’ that the poem, it is revealed, has unobtrusively orchestrated into a dissonant fugue of sonic particles: collapsing tin cans, a tinkling shop bell, the ‘grate and scrape’ of a spade in poor soil, chalk on a blackboard, and, finally, the ‘avalanche’ of smashed porcelain and china that alludes metaphorically to broken human bodies and their ‘delicate bone fragments’ (IFN, 15). As Neil Corcoran remarks, the sounding together of these noises not only provides ‘Dresden’ with an epiphanic crescendo but draws ‘the narrative’s different stories together too, making out of Horse Boyle’s life not only a
tale but an emblem of diminishment and depredation’. However, if the revelation of Horse’s wartime experiences and the guilt he has carried since inevitably alters the reader’s understanding of his character and circumstances, the poem is also engaged in retelling and re-appraising historical events from the perspective of the marginal and the forgotten. Through an impoverished Irish airman’s memories of the devastation of this strategically unimportant German city by Allied forces, ‘Dresden’ offers an implicit challenge to those bellicose narratives of wartime heroism that sustain one version of British identity.

The eccentricity of Horse Boyle’s story is therefore both literal and metaphorical, and ‘Dresden’ might be said to bear out Elmer Kennedy-Andrews’s point that Carson’s narrative poetics is premised upon his ‘intuition of centrelessness’: ‘He radically undermines the idea of a centre capable of providing discursive unity and fixity, and the claims of any culture to possess a pure and homogeneous body of values.’ Perhaps ‘centrelessness’ is too strong in this case, for the whirling, tendentious narrative fragments of ‘Dresden’ do find a sort of fragile coherence in the echo chamber of Horse Boyle’s memories. Yet this is a paradoxical coherence of incoherence – a reiteration of ‘melodic fragments/ in continuously unfinished tapestries of sound’ (FAWK, 111) – and ‘Dresden’ certainly illustrates the processes of decentring and displacement that characterise many of Carson’s narrative poems. Not only is the bombardment of Dresden and the killing of its citizens rendered obliquely, as if to underline the psychological difficulty Horse has in confronting the massacre in which he participated. The poem’s plangent evocation of civilian deaths caused during the military campaigns of the Second World War also provides a means of reflecting indirectly upon contemporary realities in Northern Ireland during the Troubles, while simultaneously placing local events within a broader set of historical and geographical contexts. To the extent that the historical associations connected with ‘Dresden’ provide a core or centre for the poem, then, this centre is not ‘a fixed locus but a function, a sort of nonlocus in which an infinite number of sign substitutions [come] into play’.

Appropriately enough, ‘Dresden’ ends on a note of inconclusive circularity, the speaker recalling as he takes his leave of Horse and Mule that he ‘might have stayed the night, but there’s no time/ to go back to that now; I could hardly, at any rate, pick up the thread’ (IFN, 16). This wry acknowledgement of the limitations and exclusions placed upon any narrative is telling, for, if Carson places a high value upon
the capacity of narrative to shape and order the chaos of sensations that make up experience, he nonetheless distrusts its tendency to fix events in any particular pattern of interpretation or explanation. Indeed, much of the invention and energy of his narrative imagination proceeds from the conviction that no single account of events can ever be adequate to the reality described:

Anything can be told this way or that way. There’s no final way of telling a story, or explaining the totality of whatever it was that happened at any given time. [...] I’ve lived in Belfast all my life and I still couldn’t tell you a fraction of what’s going on. All I can do is tell you stories.10

Every narrative, Carson recognises, is fractional and incomplete; like any other mode of representation, storytelling ‘allows some things to be depicted and not others’.11 The danger lies in mistaking an account or representation of reality for the thing itself, the truth of what happened, for as Alan Sinfield argues, stories ‘transmit power: they are structured into the social order and the criteria of plausibility define, or seem to define, the scope of feasible change’.12 Convincing narratives, once they have been naturalised, set limits to our historical understanding that are ultimately ideological.

Carson’s strategy is to resist such naturalisation by both stressing the provisionality of any narrative account, its susceptibility to revision or contestation, and by foregrounding the potential duplicities or deceptions of discourse, exposing the unreliability of personal memories and historical narratives alike. Telling stories – stories in the plural – cannot provide the writer with an unassailable vantage point on history, but it can serve as a means of asking questions and raising objections to those persons or narratives making such claims. Carson has said:

[M]y aim was, in that work which deals with the ‘Troubles’, to act as a camera or a tape-recorder, and present things in a kind of edited surreality. An ear overhearing things in bars. Snatches of black Belfast humour. If there’s one thing certain about what was or is going on, is that you don’t know the half of it. The official account is only an account, and there are many others. Poetry offers yet another alternative. It asks questions, it thinks. It asks about the truth which is never black-and-white.13

According to this rationale, each narrative account of the Troubles is implicated in the many others it seeks to displace; each is a fragment of an inaccessible and incomprehensible whole, and every story will bear the traces of others that have been excluded. As Carson notes in Fishing for Amber, ‘behind the story we tell today another story lies’ (FFA, 75).
Hence the tendency of storylines to overlap or bleed into one another in his writing, complicating the picture and casting doubt upon the transparency of any account, as in the labyrinthine narrative of moves and counter-moves elaborated in ‘Queen’s Gambit’:

As someone spills a cup of tea on a discarded Irish News

A minor item bleeds through from another page, blurring the main story. It’s difficult to pick up without the whole thing coming apart in your hands,

But basically it invokes this bunch of cowboys, who, unbeknownst to us all,

Have jumped on board a Ford Sierra, bound for You-Know-Where.

\( \textbf{(BC, 38)} \)

The relationship between this ‘bunch of cowboys’ and the paramilitary leader ‘Mad Dog’ Reilly, who is introduced earlier in the poem, remains unclear, while the rapid cuts and dissolves made from scene to scene and character to character mean that the reader may also find it difficult to pick up the narrative thread. Indeed, the ‘facts’ of the events related – which seem to involve a heist at Belfast’s General Post Office, combined with an ambush of British army personnel – are not just dispersed or confusingly conflated in the telling but are always shown to be enmeshed in layers of representational mediation – news stories, hearsay, video footage, ‘the wider world of disinformation’ \( \textbf{(FAWK, 24)} \) – and so always refracted through multiple viewpoints or interpretations. At one point, the poem alludes self-reflexively to its own palimpsestic narrative structure via the ‘chalky ghosts’ on a blackboard at Army HQ, which show ‘what was contemplated and rubbed out, Plan A/ Becoming X or Y; interlocked, curved arrows of the mortgaged future’ \( \textbf{(BC, 37)} \). Like these mutating plans, Carson’s narratives are typically in a constant state of becoming as identities slip and successive layers of implication are revealed, every turn and detour mapping out a different set of narrative permutations.

Narrative open-endedness can be a way of registering the eternal provisionality and uncertainty of the future, as in ‘Second Language’: ‘What comes next is next, and no one knows the \textit{che sera} of it, but must allow/ The Tipp-Ex present at the fingertips’ \( \textbf{(FL, 13)} \). Equally, though, such unstable narrative fabrications often teeter on the brink of disintegration, like the inept and outmanoeuvered paramilitaries blown up by their own bomb in ‘58, dissolving any pretence they might make to objectivity or intelligibility as sense is rendered into ‘indecipherable
bits and bods, skuddicked and scrambled like alphabet bricks’ (FL, 54). In the opening section of ‘Queen’s Gambit’ the narrative zooms in on a conversation between two soldiers and a young woman in a chemist’s shop only to break off abruptly in a narrative ellipsis: ‘Much of this is unintelligible, blotted out by stars and asterisks/ Just as the street outside is splattered with bits of corrugated iron and confetti’ (BC, 33). Such lapses rarely derail the narrative impetus and imaginative energy of Carson’s poems for long, but they do insistently register the pressures and demands placed upon available narrative models by a historical context defined by suspicion, subterfuge, and conflicting cultural imaginaries. In this regard, Alan Gillis contends that ‘Carson’s swirling narratives serve to radically undermine the idea that narration might objectively chart complex events, uncovering definite chains of cause and effect within a stabilized contextual and explanatory framework.’

Carson’s reinvention of himself as a narrative poet in The Irish for No and Belfast Confetti also implies a reaction against the perceived limitations of the lyric mode he had successfully adopted in The New Estate, and which was prevalent in much Northern Irish poetry of the 1960s and 1970s. One such limitation is the emphasis laid in some (neo-Romantic) versions of lyric poetry upon the expression of individual feeling, where the authenticity of the speaking voice is deemed to lie in its capacity to convey the immediacy of personal experience. Thus, Seamus Heaney presents his conception of poetry as ‘a point of entry into the buried life of the feelings or as a point of exit for it’, so that finding one’s poetic voice entails getting ‘your own feelings into your own words’. Such an aesthetic is necessarily introspective and self-involved, if not solipsistic, and it is this emphasis upon inner realities and personal feeling that Carson seems to regard as restrictive and, ultimately, uninteresting. ‘I don’t particularly want to write about how I feel,’ he has said. ‘I want to write down the yarn, the story. Something which is a bit beyond me. Remembering the time, and recreating the time, all the time.’ According to this rationale, then, writing involves going ‘beyond’ the parameters of the self and personal experience within which the lyric mode is usually understood to operate.

Carson’s two-fold interest in both ‘remembering’ and ‘recreating’ events or experience through narrative necessarily undermines the solidity of a stable, unitary self that would be the subject of his poetry and guarantee the authenticity of the feelings put into words. As Carson’s speaker has it (with a nod to Emily Dickinson) in ‘Letters from the Alphabet’: ‘I is the vertical, the virtual reality. I tell it slant’ (OEC, 19). Yarn-spinning and
storytelling appeal to Carson, then, because they provide opportunities for deviation and digression, for exploring otherness and exploding the ‘virtual reality’ of the speaking subject. The ‘derangement’ of identities is disconcertingly literalised in ‘Asylum’ where the narrator appears to merge with, and speak for, his mentally ill Uncle John:

Uncle John was not all there. Yet he had
His father’s eyes, his mother’s nose; and I myself, according to my mother, Had his mouth. I would imagine myself speaking for him sometimes.

("IFN", 54)

Something similarly unsettling happens in ‘Patchwork’, where the narrator ventriloquises his dead grandmother: ‘It took me twenty years to make that quilt – I’m speaking for her now’ (IFN, 62); and amid the much more diverse mimicry and ventriloquism of The Twelfth of Never Carson explicitly adopts the persona of a writerly alter-ego, Mr Stump, who, it seems, is responsible for many of the book’s ‘left hand fantasies’ (TN, 46). There is, then, a determined displacement or denial of the writerly personality in Carson’s writing that, as Richard Kirkland observes, accords with the experiences of urban alienation that often make up his subject-matter, so that ‘the poetic self as foundation of the lyric convention dissolves on the page as the city becomes an area of discontinuity or fracture’.

Carson’s willingness to undermine or at least call into question the condition of aesthetic autonomy sometimes claimed for the lyric poem is also apparent in the varieties of impurity and intermixture that his poetry cultivates, assembling a montage of conflicting generic codes and discourses which in turn further destabilises the location of the speaking voice. The formal innovations of his characteristically flexible, elastic long line, adapted in part from the American poet C.K. Williams, are important in this respect. As John Goodby observes, Carson’s apparently straggly, expansive poems are not only ‘at odds with the usual shapeliness of the lyric’; their long lines also provide an appropriate form for ‘the anti-lyric and demotic thrust of his style’, granting his writing a distinctively ‘novelistic discursivity’. To this end, Williams’s example appears to have been particularly enabling. The qualities that Carson most obviously shares with the elder poet are his observant responsiveness to mundane illuminations, and his capacity for marrying the vitality of demotic speech patterns to an underlying concern for composition, phrasing, and structure. Williams’s style, Carson astutely observes, ‘for all its apparent off-handedness, is deliberate, and composed with an eye for traditional
literary technique’.\(^{21}\) The long line practised by Williams seems to have suggested to Carson a means of productively expanding the parameters of poetry to take in pub-talk, anecdote, vernacular speech, the thrust and parry of conversation, even and especially where these are bound up with subjects and forms of expression deemed to be ‘un-poetic’. ‘If you put in enough hours in bars, sooner or later you get to hear every imaginable kind of bullshit’, remarks Williams’s narrator in ‘Bob’;\(^ {22}\) but for both Williams and Carson, ‘bullshit’ has a value of its own, encompassing as it does the ramifying narrative fabrications triggered by experience, and through which that experience must be understood. As Carson remarks: ‘We invent our lives; our accounts of them change from day to day, without our even knowing it; and it’s part of poetry’s responsibility to trace those convolutions of the brain.’\(^ {23}\) The capacious range of the long line employed in Carson’s poetry allows him to probe the shifting perspectives offered by such narrative accounts, his syntax modulating flexibly in response to context and subject-matter, and creating a sort of backwash effect at line breaks, which often mark moments of suspense or suspension, equivocation and contradiction. It also, as Shane Murphy notes, provides him with a means ‘to convey place, history and identity as palimpsests, resistant to unitary readings’.\(^ {24}\)

The inclusiveness that such a poetic implies is not only at odds with the circumscribed formality and concision that is typically associated with the lyric, but will also tend to regard literature itself as ‘just another element in a universe of discourse’.\(^ {25}\) Carson’s keen awareness of the extent to which distinctions between the literary and the non-literary are ultimately artificial leads him to incorporate a bricolage of references to diverse cultural forms in his poetry, ranging from classical allusions and literary inter-texts to advertising slogans, popular songs, science fiction, television programmes, and so on. This montage of heterogeneous elements, in which different generic codes and linguistic registers jostle one another, involves a multi-perspectivism through which disjunct social worlds are brought into sometimes fractious juxtaposition. And in this regard, Carson’s writing could be said to partake in and extend the process of ‘novelisation’ that Ian Gregson identifies as shaping one strand of contemporary British and Irish poetry. The product of such novelisation is a dialogic poetics premised upon the ‘promiscuous mingling of materials, an enjoyment of hybrid forms and images, a conflating of voices and perspectives’.\(^ {26}\) For Mikhail Bakhtin, upon whom Gregson draws, ‘novelness’ recognises the thoroughly heteroglot
nature of language itself, its existence as ‘heteroglossia’ (literally, different tongues), or the diversity of social speech types and individual voices available in a given culture at any particular time. Any utterance or act of narrativisation will inevitably reduce this linguistic variety, for narratives purposefully transform meaningless chaos into meaningful patterns by excluding some ways of saying and foregrounding others. Nevertheless, the text displays its ‘novelness’ – a property that is by no means confined to the novel – by ‘put[t]ing different orders of experience [...] into dialogue with each other’ and so preserves the impression of social heteroglossia with its plurality of possible relations to the world.

Bakhtin’s key motifs of dialogue, appropriation, and polyphony are readily identified in Carson’s poetry. If his long poems engage the reader through oral performances in which different voices fade in and out, interrupting or correcting each other, his shorter poems often manifest themselves as fragments of conversation overheard in Belfast’s bars past and present. In ‘Barfly’, for instance, the speaker buttonholes the reader from the outset, firing off a series of riddling questions, adages, and grim anecdotes:

Maybe you can figure it, why The Crown and Shamrock and The Rose and Crown
Are at opposite ends of the town. Politics? The odds change. The borders move.
Or they’re asked to. A nod’s as good as a wink. For example, in the Arkle Inn
This night, I’m getting it from the horse’s mouth, when these two punters walk in,
Produce these rods, and punctuate the lunchtime menu: there’s confetti everywhere. (BC, 55)

Notice how the garrulous conversational tone of these lines economically combines clichés and familiar turns of phrase (‘A nod’s as good as a wink’, ‘getting it from the horse’s mouth’), slang terms (‘punters’, ‘rods’), and a more obviously ‘literary’ deployment of metaphor (‘there’s confetti everywhere’). Just as the slyly resourceful narrator knows when to do a disappearing act – ‘I buzzed off’ – so the language of the poem proves capable of agile shifts of tone and register, assuming one set of discursive conventions only to shed them and adopt another: ‘For, like the menu, everything’s chalked up, and every now and then, wiped clean’ (BC, 55). The novelistic discursivity that Goodby identifies is further underscored in the prose poems included in Belfast Confetti, texts that attest to the more general cross-fertilisation between poetic and prose
genres in Carson’s writing.\textsuperscript{30} Certainly, texts such as ‘Revised Version’ and ‘Intelligence’ exemplify the prose poem’s own ambivalent generic status, and its function as ‘a vehicle for the introduction of non-literary prose into “poetic” discourse – the prose of the street, the pulpit, the newsrooms, the political arena, the psychiatrist’s office, and so on’.\textsuperscript{31}

A more immediately obvious source of dialogism in Carson’s writing can be found in its multi-layered allusiveness, his voracious incorporation of quotations from a wide range of literary and non-literary sources, such that the text is revealed always to be ‘a permutation of texts, an intertextuality’.\textsuperscript{32} Eamonn Hughes argues that Carson’s work treats all writing as ultimately ‘traceable to and a re-working or re-imagining of previous writing (or narrative, or music, or painting, or film etc.).’\textsuperscript{33} Or, as Carson himself has it, ‘the voice from the grave reverberates in others’ mouths’ (\textit{BC}, 107). Nonetheless, Carson’s use of quotation does not serve to anchor his work in a stable framework of literary-historical explanation – even if it does provide some clues as to his reading habits and influences – but rather seems directed towards the destabilisation of the very notions of literariness and canonicity. In ‘Calvin Klein’s Obsession’ a misquotation from Edward Thomas’s ‘Old Man’ rubs shoulders with lyrics from Frank Ifield’s 1962 pop song ‘I Remember You’ and references to the pop art of Andy Warhol (\textit{IFN}, 21, 23). Similarly, the documentary register adopted in a number of Carson’s poems tends to blur distinctions between literature and journalism or reportage, and this tendency is further extended in ‘The Indian Mutiny’ and ‘The War Correspondent’ in \textit{Breaking News}, which both draw extensively upon the despatches of the Anglo-Irish journalist, William Howard Russell.\textsuperscript{34}

Although the purposes directing some of Carson’s intertextual references and borrowings are not always immediately apparent, many seem to imply a logic of juxtaposition or reframing that is implicitly critical. William Shakespeare’s \textit{Romeo and Juliet} and John Keats’s ‘Ode to a Nightingale’ are alluded to in ‘The Irish for No’ in a manoeuvre that reappraises and recontextualises their figurations of love, longing, and death against a harshly un-romantic historical backdrop of suicide and sectarian murder. As Fiona Stafford comments: ‘The English literary tradition seems fragmented and impotent in the context of Northern Ireland, evoked only to demonstrate its inability to mediate in these circumstances.’\textsuperscript{35} A similar act of appropriation and recontextualisation takes place in ‘John Ruskin in Belfast’, which not only quotes verbatim from Ruskin’s speech ‘The Mystery of Life and Its Arts’, but also
pastiches his florid prose style in order to have the Victorian aesthetician record his horrified impressions of nineteenth-century industrial Belfast. In Carson’s version of Ruskin, the city emerges as a degraded place of ‘mutilated politics,/ The seething yeast of anarchy: the very image of a pit, where a chained dwarf/ Savages a chained bulldog’ (BC, 97). Carson will also often adapt the discourses and techniques of other art forms for his own purposes. In ‘Whatever Sleep It Is’ he borrows the vocabulary of painting and fine art in order to stress the essential artifice of all writing and art; the narrative jerks and jumps of ‘Queen’s Gambit’ owe something to the episodic framing employed in graphic novels; while ‘Serial’, ‘Snow’, and ‘Jawbox’ each filter their riddling, metamorphic narratives through the recording technologies of film and video, mimicking the capacities of both media for instant playback, slow-motion, and fast forward in order to undermine the reader’s expectations concerning linear narrative sequence.

Another important dialogue in Carson’s work is that between the literate cultures of print and writing on one hand and the traditions of Irish music, song, and oral storytelling on the other. His longstanding involvement in the Irish traditional music scene, both as a practising musician and as Traditional Arts Officer for the Northern Ireland Arts Council from 1975–98, has crucially shaped the idiosyncratic understanding and deployment of ‘tradition’ in his writing. Moreover, music is not only a thematic concern in poems such as ‘Céilí’ (NEOP, 51), ‘On Not Remembering Some Lines of a Song’ (FL, 27–8), or through the more extensive allusions to the Irish ballad tradition made in The Twelfth of Never; it has also had a profound influence upon Carson’s work at the level of form, particularly through the metrical approximation his long lines make to the pacing and rhythm of a four bar reel, though in other ways too. Carson has said that writing a pocket guide to Irish traditional music provided him with ‘a kind of blueprint for the shape and structure of The Irish for No’ because of the way in which it incorporates yarns and songs, asides and digressions within the format of a standard guidebook. Part of the purpose behind his writing since the mid-1980s appears to have been to find a literary format capable of approximating the social experience of a traditional pub session, with its odd mixture of formal courtesies and apparently haphazard happenings, of music and song, dance and drink, talk and craic.

Perhaps he comes closest to achieving this goal in his prose book Last Night’s Fun, in which each chapter is given the name of a tune (with which its contents will usually be only tenuously connected),
one leading into the next in an unfolding, multi-layered conversation that interweaves different times and places, songs and tunes, memories and stories. In the same book, Carson expresses his admiration for the storytelling gifts of the fiddle-player and raconteur John Loughran, ‘labyrinthine, funny, scatty, precise, scathing talk that mixed modes and genres in the way that ceili-ing itself did’ (LNF, 82). The analogy between music and narrative is made explicit here, and Carson often speaks of music or song in terms of exchange or dialogue, as part of an ongoing conversation, a debate between the community and itself and the concerns of the wider world (ITM, 47). Tradition, in this sense, is rooted in context and the contingency of each performance, subject to seemingly endless variation within its own shifting limits. For there can ultimately be no standard and each version of the tune or song describes only ‘temporary delineations of the possible’ (LNF, 2):

Each time the song is sung, our notions of it change, and we are changed by it. The words are old. They have been worn into shape by many ears and mouths, and have been contemplated often. But every time is new because the time is new, and there is no time like now. (LNF, 116)

Variation and difference are therefore intrinsic to the ways in which tradition sustains and reproduces itself. Moreover, there is and can be no final version; or, as Carson says elsewhere, ‘the same refrain is always various’ (OEC, 41). This seemingly paradoxical yoking together of continuity and deviation in the performance of tradition has led Edna Longley to speculate that ‘Carson’s “post-modernism” may really be a post-traditionalism’, whereby the very concept of ‘tradition’ is freed from some of its narrower associations with fixity or authenticity.38

The paradoxes of Carson’s ‘post-traditionalism’ translate to his handling of narrative, for it is through his adaptation of techniques passed down from the tradition of Irish oral storytelling that he develops a deconstructive form of narrative ‘which can entertain its own disruption as part of its repertoire of possibilities’.39 A prefatory note to The Irish for No pointedly acknowledges John Campbell of Mullaghbawn, ‘whose storytelling suggested some of the narrative procedures of these poems’ (IFN, 6). And Carson has described Campbell’s storytelling in the following terms:

It’s the kind of storytelling which is based on the renovation of clichéd situations, and the skill is the ways in which he constantly disappoints your expectations. The high points are more often in the apparently off-hand digressions than in the original ostensible story. Also the story changes
each time he tells it, depending where he is or who he’s telling it to … it’s constantly renewable.40

What Carson responds to in Campbell’s storytelling are the opportunities he finds for subverting his audience’s expectations while working within, but also against, a recognisable tradition or set of formal conventions. Indeed, his sense that every narrative performance is unique, that the meaning of a story is contingent upon the context in which it is told, implies a dialectic of continuity and novelty, so that the observance of tradition can supply a means of fostering surprise and constant renewal.

Walter J. Ong observes that in the context of oral tradition narrative originality ‘consists not in the introduction of new materials but in fitting the traditional materials effectively into each individual, unique situation and/or audience’.41 On this interpretation, ‘tradition’ is conceived not in terms of fixity, stolidity, or security but rather as an ‘active process’ of handing down or handing on through which inherited forms, themes, and ideas must be ceaselessly revised and reinterpreted in and for the present moment. At the level of storytelling, then, a respect for tradition does not exclude the possibility of creativity and improvisation, which is effected through the manipulation of narrative conventions or the recombination of plot details and structural elements in a tale. On the contrary, digression and deviation are part and parcel of tradition as it is practised, and so rather than a constraining orthodoxy Carson’s understanding of tradition facilitates and even demands heterodoxy. As Georges Denis Zimmermann says of the Irish storyteller: ‘Each “traditional” craftsman endowed with personality could modulate his observance of rules and norms, playing with the audience’s expectations and deciding which of the structural or verbal devices he knew should be used on a particular occasion; selectivity in itself is already a form of creation.’43

To explain how Carson’s borrowings from oral storytelling are harnessed to the distinctively urban character and concerns of his writing since The Irish for No – which strives to accommodate an impossible tally of Belfast in all its ‘teeming narrative dimensions’ and ‘atmospheric genre fogs’ (SF, 160) – it is worth considering the precedent set for his work by another important influence, Cathal O’Byrne. Indeed, Carson directly acknowledges O’Byrne’s ‘ghostly presence at [his] shoulder’ in his prose memoir The Star Factory, which notably incorporates chunks of O’Byrne’s Belfast miscellany As I Roved Out (1946) into its own textual weave (SF, 188–91). As Richard Kirkland observes, As I Roved Out is
itself a self-consciously hybrid text, a collection of short articles originally published in the *Irish News* but combining elements of the essay form, recollections, and stories to produce a circular, reiterative narrative structure that ‘can be entered at any point’.\(^4^4\) Moreover, O’Byrne’s repeated forays into the demolished streets, entries, and courtyards of Belfast in ‘the old days long gone by’ are framed by a process of historical retrieval that synthesises memory and reverie. For it was ‘within the narrow confines of these little hidden-away places,’ O’Byrne insists, that ‘Belfast’s riches were piled up, and much of its history – its worthwhile history from an Irish point of view – was made’.\(^4^5\)

Writing from a position within Northern nationalism in the bleak climate of the post-partition years, O’Byrne styles himself as custodian of this neglected and half-forgotten ‘worthwhile history’, figuring modern Belfast as ‘a site of rupture and fragmentation’ but more often evoking the city’s past in a plangent spiral of longing and loss. To this end, Kirkland argues that O’Byrne is best understood as ‘an urban shanachie: a writer deploying repetition, folklore, Ulster English, comparative and non-linear forms of storytelling to create an effect which can be near-hypnotic’.\(^4^6\) O’Byrne’s use of old maps and street directories as creative stimuli for his representations of Belfast also exemplify the way in which his work, like Carson’s, combines oral forms with a relish for the material cultures of writing and print.\(^4^7\) I have already noted Carson’s fascination with the techniques of the shanachie – or seanchaí, the Irish storyteller – but the significance of O’Byrne’s influence rests upon his adaptation of such techniques to the depiction of Belfast in a way that suggests the productive congruence of urban and narrative forms. In their multi-layered figurations of Belfast, both O’Byrne and Carson illustrate James Donald’s point that in order ‘to imagine the unrepresentable space, life, and languages of the city, to make them liveable, we translate them into narratives’. Equally, though, it is through their shared emphasis upon telling and re-telling, on stories in the plural, that each writer acknowledges the impossibility of defining or reifying the complex social relations and histories of the city in ‘a single normative image or all-encompassing narrative’.\(^4^8\)

In this regard, then, Carson’s writing is characteristically urban not merely in its choice of imagery and subject-matter but also in its use of narrative form – although, as the almost oxymoronic formulation ‘urban shanachie’ implies, the forms he employs integrate aspects of urban modernity with oral traditionalism. Simplifying greatly, urban form consists in bringing people and objects together, promoting
the concentration and increasing complexity of social relations in space, while simultaneously increasing opportunities for encountering difference. As Henri Lefebvre describes it, the form of the urban is characterised by ‘simultaneity and encounter’: ‘As a place of encounters, focus of communication and information, the urban becomes what it always was: place of desire, permanent disequilibrium, seat of the dissolution of normalities and constraints, the moment of play and of the unpredictable.’ Carson’s work reflects many of these paradigmatic urban features, but also filters them through the specific set of historical and topographical circumstances peculiar to Belfast. The narrative spaces of zig-zags and switchbacks, digressions and dog-leg turns that his long poems and prose texts describe bear an obvious resemblance to the urban spaces of Belfast itself, with its ‘knitted, knotted streets’ and ‘labyrinthine alleyways’ (BC, 97), its ‘mesh of ramps, diversions, one-way systems’ (IFN, 39).

In ‘The Irish for No’ the narrator’s turning into a side-street provides a direct parallel for the associative turns and detours taken by his own narrative, which segues neatly from perception and description to recollection and word-play:

It was time to turn into the dog-leg’s short-cut from Chlorine Gardens
Into Cloreen Park, where you might see an Ulster Says No scrawled on the side

Of the power-block – which immediately reminds me of the Eglantine Inn

Just on the corner: on the missing h of Cloreen, you might say. (IFN, 49)

Similarly, in ‘Turn Again’ the narrator turns into a side-street only to find that ‘history is changed’ (BC, 11); or, again, in ‘Jawbox’ a twist of the plot leaves the protagonist ‘caught between/ Belfast and Belfast, in the accordion pleats between two lurching carriages/ Banging, rattling, threatening to break loose’ (BC, 93). The metaphorical equation in these lines of narrative convolution with a sense of physical entrapment and danger lends a political edge to the pervasive uncertainty and confusion cultivated in Carson’s writing. Indeed, Peter Barry argues that Carson’s distinctive narrative style is ‘the correlate of a city in which the detour and the devious route to a desired objective are not decorative or artistic flourishes, but an often-necessary survival strategy’.

Hence, in ‘Ambition’, the figuration of time as ‘a road’ where ‘you’re checked and checked again/ By a mobile checkpoint’ (BC, 28), an image that also provides a self-reflexive gloss on the poem’s own narrative reconfiguration of time through repetition and recombination. Or, in ‘Serial’, the
‘loops and spirals’ of the poem’s narrative provide a formal contrast with the linear ‘invisible bee-line’ made by a bullet fired into the Falls Road Library in the opening lines (IFN, 52, 51). Moreover, Carson’s dialogic conception of the space of writing as a palimpsest, a layered network of conversant voices and narratives, parallels his depiction of the city as an urban ‘text’ that is ceaselessly inscribed and reworked by the actions and activities of its inhabitants. His mercurial, rhizomatic narratives, like the photographic images contemplated by the narrator of ‘Revised Version’, are ‘tensed to the ifs and buts, the yeas and nays of Belfast’s history’ (BC, 67).

The production of space and the production of narrative are therefore closely connected in Carson’s work. In this regard, Franco Moretti argues that geography has an important hand in shaping the kind of stories that get told, different spaces constituting ‘different narrative matrixes’. In short, geography will partially determine narrative structures and forms. For example, the city provides the necessary locus for what Moretti calls ‘the novel of complexity’, which follows the composite interactions of diverse social groups, something that is difficult, if not impossible, in a country house or village setting. This intrinsic relationship between space and narrative form is well illustrated in Carson’s unconventional prose memoir, The Star Factory, which is divided into chapters named after streets and buildings, business premises and architectural features of the city of Belfast, thus resembling an eccentric guidebook or gazetteer. Like Walter Benjamin in ‘A Berlin Chronicle’, Carson’s text eschews the usual association of autobiography with time, sequence, and continuity to dwell instead in a deliberately disjunctive manner upon the various spaces with which his memories of childhood, adolescence, and adult life are entangled: spaces of play, education, domesticity, exploration, and work. In doing so, The Star Factory illustrates Steve Pile’s point that ‘narratives of the self are inherently spatial’, for the self constructed in the text ‘is constantly being mapped in time and space, as if on a palimpsest’.

The book opens with a memory – related in the present tense – in which the young Carson is listening to his father tell a story in the outside toilet of their home in West Belfast, the cramped dimensions of which rapidly open out onto the potentially infinite ‘space of memory and narrative’. In the young Carson’s imagination material objects and spaces accumulate metaphorical significance, so that his father’s cigarette becomes a visual aid to the story he is telling, drawing ‘time-lapse squiggles on the 3-D blackboard dark’ (SF, 1), and the flushing
of the toilet prompts a vision of ‘the alternative hologram of the city described by its ubiquity of plumbing and its labyrinthine sewers, the underworld of culverts plunged in Stygian gloom’ (SF, 2). Images of undergrounds and underworlds, of labyrinthine interior spaces and networks of communication recur again and again in The Star Factory – via sewage and drainage systems, railway sidings and junctions, a capacious kitchen dresser, the ‘Toltec labyrinth’ of a wireless radio, the booths or ‘boxes’ of the Crown bar (SF, 206, 84, 67–8, 105, 131–2) – and this creates an extended analogy between the intertwined spaces of the city and the text’s ramifying narrative lines, each of which carries ‘an underground train of association’ (SF, 209). Just as the text’s portrait of the artist precludes any clear sense of linear development from boy to man, so Carson’s portrait of the city is likewise fragmentary and disjointed, proceeding chiefly by way of elaboration and digression. Emily Cuming observes that: ‘The space of the city itself provides the connective thread – or literally the “context” – which ties Carson’s autobiographical reminiscences to a sense of a wider collective history.’

The book’s refractive narrative structure allows for lateral connections to be made between all manner of seemingly peripheral subjects of interest, much as side-streets and alleyways permit deviations from the known route.

One of the drawbacks of Moretti’s otherwise suggestive argument that space shapes narrative form from within is that it appears to regard both spaces and narrative genres as stable, unambiguous, and clearly defined, so that each space can be unproblematically correlated with its corresponding genre or narrative form. By contrast, Carson’s deliberate confusions of generic boundaries and hybrid narrative forms tend, by analogy, to highlight the mutability of spaces and places, their mutual interpenetration and overlap, and also emphasise the tendency of narrative ‘always to be pushing at or beyond those constraining forms’ by which it would be defined. In this regard, his prose books elaborate versions of what Michel de Certeau calls ‘spatial stories’. For de Certeau, stories may be regarded as ‘spatial trajectories’, for they ‘traverse and organize places’, selecting and linking sites and spaces together much in the same way as they organise and arrange the temporal sequence of actions and events making up a plot. In this sense, ‘every story is a travel story – a spatial practice’. Moreover, while narratives are typically concerned with ‘marking out boundaries’, spatial stories also privilege a ‘logic of ambiguity’ that is apt to turn frontiers into crossings, rivers into bridges, boundaries into metaphors, and vice versa. Such a narrative logic of
spatial ambiguity and interconnectivity is apparent throughout *The Star Factory*, even and perhaps especially in its depictions of the city’s internal boundaries and socio-political divisions. For, although Carson’s writing insistently registers the ways in which sectarian cleavages are reproduced in the physical fabric of the city, his attentiveness to the historical and topographical particularity of such contested terrains often reveals them to be sites of unexpected convergences and surprising fluidity.

This is true even of his repeated forays into the area of high density housing between the Falls and the Shankill, a liminal interface zone where Catholic and Protestant working-class neighbourhoods are ‘joined together as unhappy Siamese twins, one sporadically and mechanically beating the other round the head’ (*BC*, 59). In *The Star Factory*, the fractious and schismatic in-between space of the interface becomes the setting for a nightmarish collision of material and metaphorical spaces:

> The dream shifts again, and I am trapped in a grey force-field between the Shankill and the Falls. A magnetic storm has skewed the normal compass of the district, and the poles are all the wrong way round, repelling when they should attract. Directions are revised, as previously communicating streets are misaligned. The powerful anti-gravitational friction has caused tectonic faults to open up, from which emerge, like flotillas salvaged from the bottom of the North Atlantic, the regurgitated superstructures of defunct, Titanic industries: tilted, blackened spinning-mills; the loading-docks of great bakeries at dawn, illuminated by the smell of electricity and yeast; waterworks in convoluted ravines – dams, races, bridges, locks, conduits, sinks, culverts, sluices, ponds, and aqueducts; tentacles and cables of Leviathan, swarming to the surface from a buried ropewalk; catacomb-like brick-kilns. (*SF*, 134)

The ‘tectonic faults’ of sectarian ideology are here materialised as a concrete fact of the physical environment, and the shifting realignments that take place among features of the cityscape serve only to increase and consolidate – in an audaciously literalised metaphor – the polarisation of different politico-religious communities. Indeed, the revision of directions taking place within this ‘force-field’ compounds division by severing former routes of communication, exacerbating the speaker’s disorientated and claustrophobic feelings of entrapment.

Yet what also ‘opens up’ from the fault-lines of this passage, via the associations and condensations of dream logic, is a Piranesian panorama of Belfast’s industrial histories that serves not only to remind the reader of those now ‘defunct’ superstructures of employment and production that underlie the sectarian geography of the present, but also
to enact a decisive shift towards metaphors of construction, connection, interaction, and communication: threads, loading-bays, bridges, sluices, conduits, tentacles, cables. In this respect, the ‘convoluted ravines’ of Belfast’s waterworks seem particularly significant, for, as Carson reveals in ‘Farset’, by ‘a conspiracy of history and accident and geography’ the river Farset itself forms the ‘axis’ running between the Falls and Shankill. Running underground, its course follows almost precisely that of the peace-line at the back of Cupar Street, a subterranean current that figuratively connects with the city’s urban unconscious, recalling the interface’s former existence as the centre of ‘Belfast’s industrial Venice […] a maze of dams, reservoirs, sluices, sinks, footbridges’ (BC, 49). Carson’s historical and topographical excavations therefore reveal even Belfast’s most rigidly divided landscapes to be contradictory and multi-layered, subject to instabilities and fluidities that, like the Farset, rarely lie far from the surface. They also recall Belfast’s origins as a fording-point on the river Lagan, a site of crossing or passage, as well as its histories as a busy seaport and a ‘Titanic’ centre for shipbuilding, all associations that add weight to the metaphors of waterways, rivers, and flux that Carson often uses to counterbalance the dominant trope of the ‘divided city’ – the city as a fixed ‘structure’ of ‘agendas, bricks and mortar, interfaces’ (FL, 18). Without its water, Carson reminds the reader, ‘there would be no Belfast as we know it, since its industries were impossible without it; and this watery condition implies that ‘interfaces’ may involve confluence and convergence as well as conflict and contestation: ‘All of Belfast murmurs with innumerable rills, subterranean or otherwise’ (SF, 45). To this end, the representational spaces his writing describes are sympathetic to conceptions of space in terms of processes, events, and flows – that is, as intimately bound up with time and history. As Jonathan Stainer notes, although Carson’s Belfast is ‘both fluid and fragmented, it is also simultaneously, necessarily interconnected and interdependent’. Another way of putting this would be to say that his texts acknowledge the dialectic of mobility and settledness, flow and fixity that structures Belfast’s urban spatiality.

In de Certeau’s terms, Carson’s narratives compose tours or itineraries, diachronic accounts of possible journeys through a landscape that contrast with the synchronic diagram of the map and its tendency to freeze space in a tableau of fixed positions. Moreover, just as there are many routes that can be taken in traversing the city, so Carson multiplies the paths that a reader may take in negotiating The Star Factory, noting in one of his many self-reflexive asides on the material practices of
writing and reading that the book has been ‘assembled in a patchwork fashion’:

It is quite possible that many readers will, in fact, approach it in a non-sequential *modus operandi*, dipping into and out of it, or skipping bits where the thread of the story gets lost; there are a lot of books I read this way (books of poems, especially, and specifically John Ashbery, whose work I have used in the past as a *sortes Virgilianae* when I got blocked, or the *Gospel According to John*, with its majestic opening: *In the beginning was the Word*...). (*SF*, 244–5)

The ‘open’ narrative structure of the book thus operates as, in Umberto Eco’s words, a ‘field of possibilities’, encouraging the reader to engage in her own spontaneous associations and re-combinations, emphasising the range of integrations to which the text is susceptible in the process of reading.63 Carson’s assimilative and improvisatory writing practices make possible such anarchic reading styles, and Cuming has described Carson’s role as that of the ‘autobiographical *bricoleur*’, the Jack-of-all-trades who collates and configures patterns of connection and personal significance from the mass of heterogeneous materials that happen to come to hand.64 Thus, in composing the ‘caravanserai’ of his text (*SF*, 226) he makes use at various times of the techniques of the *flâneur* and psychogeographer, etymologist and lexicographer, collector and archivist, fabulist and researcher, philatelist and trainspotter, and above all those of the storyteller.

Indeed, *The Star Factory* is pre-eminently a story about stories and storytelling, relishing serendipitous discoveries and producing a panoply of connections and coincidences that multiply with every turn of the page. At the heart of the book lies the Star Factory itself, which figures as a sort of linguistic forge ‘where words [are] melted down and like tallow cast into new moulds’ (*SF*, 234). In ‘stark reality’ this mythologised ‘Zone’ is a derelict shirt factory on the Donegall Road (*SF*, 246), but on Carson’s telling it becomes the architectural focus for a Babel of narratives, mapping out a discursive terrain of fractal digressions ‘honeycombed with oxymoron and diversion’ (*SF*, 70): ‘Of necessity, the story they had entered comprised many stories, yet their diverse personal narratives and many-layered time-scales evinced glimpses of an underlying structure, like a traffic flow-chart with its arteries and veins and capillaries’ (*SF*, 62). The underlying structures of the city’s urban fabric are over-written and re-inscribed through the course of the text, producing a palimpsestic ‘interactive blueprint; not virtual, but narrative reality’ (*SF*, 63) whereby Carson’s Belfast holds multiple versions of itself
in the synaptic relays of its expanding memory. Once again, space and narrative are seen to be conjoined in Carson’s writing, but here space is something like the condition of narrative itself; it is, as Doreen Massey has it, ‘the realm of the configuration of potentially dissonant (or concordant) narratives’.65

In *The Star Factory*, Carson’s affinity with the ‘rambling ambiguity’ of his father’s storytelling allows him the associative freedom to thread together the myriad experiences and sensory recollections of a childhood apprehended with the analytical distance of the adult writer (*SF*, 76). Yet just as the book’s vast accumulation of details and circumlocutory digressions appears to reach critical mass, breaching the limits of time and space, they are collapsed into the brief duration of a storyteller’s dramatic pause before the narrative proper can be resumed anew. *The Star Factory* ends as it had begun, with the young Carson listening patiently as his father tells him a story: ‘The words are ghosted from his mouth in plumes and wisps of smoke, as I hold his free hand to guide him through the story, and we walk its underworld again’ (*SF*, 292). This circular narrative form is shared by Carson’s two subsequent prose books, *Fishing for Amber* and *Shamrock Tea*, both of which also build up densely layered narratives in illustration of the fact that ‘behind every story lies another story’ waiting to be told (*ST*, 166). Moreover, as Catríona O’Reilly notes, all of Carson’s prose books combine an interest in idiosyncratic associations and aleatory combinations with a countervailing concern for systems of classification and a pronounced ‘taxonomic bent’.66 In *Last Night’s Fun* each chapter bears the name of a song or tune, while those of *The Star Factory* refer to places in the city of Belfast, past and present; the chapters of *Fishing for Amber* are alphabetised, from ‘Antipodes’ to ‘Zoetrope’, and those of *Shamrock Tea* are colour-coded, recalling a painter’s palette or an eccentric version of the colour spectrum. Both *Fishing for Amber* and *Shamrock Tea* also make extensive use of the calendar of saints as ‘a kind of universal time scale’ (*ST*, 293) in which every day or date carries some historico-religious significance. However, such systems often resemble that of Jorge Luis Borges’s famous Chinese encyclopedia, so that the ‘tabula’ or ground of comparison upon which similarities between objects are articulated and ordered is radically undermined.67 For instance, the first five chapters of *Fishing for Amber* are ‘Antipodes’, ‘Berenice’, ‘Clepsydra’, ‘Delphinium’, and ‘Ergot’, a series that concatenates geography, hagiography, chronometry, botany, herbalism and much else besides in a demonstration of the
alphabet’s powers of happenstance juxtaposition. Carson’s compendious imagination and multifarious enthusiasms are therefore exercised in profound tension with the structuring codes used to organise his material.

Considered as a pair, *Fishing for Amber* and *Shamrock Tea* might be described as Carson’s ‘Orange’ and ‘Green’ books respectively, the former taking much of its inspiration from the Dutch Republic of the seventeenth century in an oblique deconstruction of narrowly sectarian ideas concerning Protestant ‘Orangeism’, \(^6\) and the latter stressing the links between Ireland and Belgium as part of an elaborate send-up of Catholic mysticism and secret societies. Both texts are also preoccupied in one way or another with the relationship between art and reality, and with the paradoxes of mimesis. In *Fishing for Amber*, Carson’s meditations upon the genre paintings and still lives of the Dutch Golden Age turn upon their compounding of illusion and verisimilitude, the fact that their ‘accurate depiction[s] of everyday reality’ (*FFA*, 142) are dependent upon acts of framing and elision, for as his Dutch narrator Jan Both pointedly remarks, the Thirty Years’ War (1618–48) ‘is not depicted in the paintings of the Golden Age’ (*FFA*, 191). In *Shamrock Tea*, the stereoscopic effects of Jan van Eyck’s *Arnolfini Portrait* are humorously ascribed to a psychotropic compound known as ‘shamrock tea’, and the painting itself functions as a portal to other dimensions of time and reality: ‘a door to another world’ (*ST*, 247). Painting, observes Uncle Celestine, is both ‘the art of making things real’ and a means ‘to discover things not seen, and present them to the eye as if they actually exist’ (*ST*, 50).

Space and narrative are again closely connected, particularly in *Fishing for Amber*, where Holland is depicted as ‘a wondrous place, a made-up land’ (*FFA*, 4) and a ‘nether world’ (*FFA*, 6) that overlaps in obvious ways with the ‘underworld’ of dream and storytelling explored in *The Star Factory*. Besides distantly resembling that of Belfast, the cityscapes of Amsterdam, Delft, Middelburg, and Leyden that are depicted in the text, through their intricate networks of streets and canals, figuratively describe the interconnections and coincidences between the book’s multiple narrative strands:

For one thing leads to another, as it does in Holland. The cities, by means of canals, communicate with the sea; canals run from town to town, and from village to village, which are themselves bound together with these watery ways, and are connected even to the houses scattered all over the country; smaller canals surround the fields, meadows, pastures and kitchen-gardens,
serving at once as boundary wall, hedge and roadway; every house is a little port, in which you might hear stories from the seven seas. One can drift from any place to anywhere. (FFA, 152–3)

The emphasis here upon spatial mobility and interconnectivity by which the traveller ‘can drift from any place to anywhere’ clearly parallels the possibilities that open before the reader of Carson’s book. Similarly, the text’s composition of narrative frames within frames resembles that of Golden Age paintings, where ‘the eye is always drawn to a new horizon, and is forced to invent from what it sees or cannot see. So the truth of any matter is not readily discerned’ (FFA, 190).

Like The Star Factory, Fishing for Amber begins with Carson’s father (to whose memory the book is dedicated) telling a story to his children, or rather putting off telling a story by way of an elaborate opening gambit that traps its listeners in the recessive folds of a story about a story that is always about to begin. This structure of the ‘story within a story’ is, as R.F. Foster notes, characteristic of the Irish narrative mode, and is reworked in a dizzying array of permutations throughout the course of Carson’s text. At its centre is his father’s seven-part story, told in episodic instalments at monthly intervals, concerning Jack the Lad, a sort of Irish Scheherazade who tells stories in return for bed and board at a rich lady’s house. Of course, the intricate series of embedded narratives that Jack relates has already passed through many hands by the time that Carson gives his version of his father’s rendition, continuing the motif whereby every telling is to be understood as a retelling. Around this interrupted narrative Carson spins a baroque profusion of meditations and asides, anecdotes and yarns, many of them sparked off by the preservative or talismanic qualities of amber, its historical, religious, and economic importance, and told by multiple narrators who are often also characters in their own stories. In this way, Fishing for Amber inventively combines the two principal modes of Irish oral storytelling: scéal, a long, stylized narrative of some performative complexity; and seanchas, accounts of customs, local history, genealogies, and old lore that are typically more informative than entertaining. The text is also extensively indebted to the broader traditions of European storytelling via its inventive versions of Ovid and of Northern European folk tales. Indeed, as Carson acknowledges in a punctilious note to the text, Fishing for Amber is ‘as much about reading as it is about writing’ (FFA, 352).

Carson’s prose books often recall the work of a number of European exemplars, particularly Jorge Luis Borges, Italo Calvino, and Umberto Eco – all of whom are alluded to either directly or indirectly in the texts
themselves. The affinities that Carson’s prose books have with the work of these three writers are chiefly apparent in three ways: through their scholarly fascination with obscure knowledge and lists of often esoteric sources; in their pronounced metafictional concern with the processes of writing and reading and the properties of narrative; and by their compilation of diverse materials and tendency to problematise generic distinctions. They also bear a close affinity with what Steven Connor calls postmodern ‘system-fiction’, fictions that deliberately resemble encyclopedias, guidebooks, dictionaries, or games. These texts typically make possible ‘a reading time made up, so to speak, of interruptions rather than resumptions. One is encouraged to make dips and forays into the text in the way in which one consults a dictionary, rather than being carried along by the temporal line of the fiction.’

Certainly, Carson’s prose books invite just such readings, although they are also preoccupied with the temporal mechanism by which narrative can carry its readers or listeners along. For instance, *Fishing for Amber* incorporates a characteristic meditation on Henri Bergson’s conception of memory, which Bergson imagined as a series of ‘snapshots of the passing reality’ that are run together like discrete images in a cinematograph. Responding warmly to the idea, Carson elaborates his own view of how narrative works: ‘Seen in this light, narrative, which includes biography, is possible only because we make factitious links between one instant and the next: blinks of the eyelid, adumbrated by the ghosts of things already swallowed by the void’ (*FFA*, 345). As its recurrent preoccupation with amber implies, *Fishing for Amber* is centrally concerned with the capacity of memory to facilitate such unlikely associations and coincidences, enabling the mind ‘to zip from one thing to another which has no tangible connection to the first’ (*FFA*, 199), something that the reader is also encouraged to do in following the braided, recursive narrative strands of Carson’s text.

At first glance, *Shamrock Tea* appears to be the closest thing in Carson’s oeuvre to a novel, though, as O’Reilly remarks, it is one that ‘gleefully dispenses with conventional plot development or believable characterization’ and may therefore, like his other prose books, be more accurately considered ‘a narrative miscellany’. The book’s three chief protagonists are a boy named Carson – a wonky portrait of the artist as a young man – his tomboy cousin Berenice, and their Belgian friend Maeterlinck, who collectively embody the Trinitarian symbolism that suffuses the text: ‘We three are Shamrock Tea’ (*ST*, 240). While Berenice is sent to a convent school, Carson and Maeterlinck attend
Loyola House, a Jesuit school near the Mourne Mountains, in the library of which they discover three colour-coded books – yellow, blue, and green – which turn out on inspection to be distorted accounts of the trio’s own lives, recording experiments undertaken on their child selves with a psychotropic drug called shamrock tea. These books, reveals Carson’s ‘uncle’ Celestine, ‘are not mere biographies. Some passages include scenarios that failed to materialize; some describe events as they happened, but not as you remember them; and some are fictions’ (ST, 211). It transpires that Carson, Berenice, and Maeterlinck are orphans raised by members of the Ancient Order of Hibernians in order to fulfil their part in a bizarre plan to permanently alter the ‘mind-set’ sustaining the political partition of Ireland by introducing a decoction of shamrock tea into the water supply for the city of Belfast. As Celestine explains, the inhabitants of Belfast will thus see the world as it really is, a world in which everything connects; where the Many is One, and the One is Many. There will be no division, for everything in the real world refers to something else, which leads to something else again, in a never-ending hymn of praise. The world is an eternal story. (ST, 236)

For all the lunatic absurdity of this labyrinthine conspiracy, which has the ultimate aim of building ‘the new Jerusalem […] in Ireland’s green and pleasant land’ (ST, 219), Celestine’s belief that ‘everything connects’ would appear to accord with the narrative procedures of the text itself, which expands exponentially to take in aspects of philosophy, theology, politics, art history, mineralogy, apiculture, herbalism, hagiography, as well as subtly fictionalised biographies of Ludwig Wittgenstein, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Oscar Wilde, and Arthur Conan Doyle. Through narrative, as through the ‘two-way portal’ of van Eyck’s *Arnolfini Portrait* (ST, 272), seemingly impossible or inconceivable conjunctions can be forged, and ‘any point in time and space can be made to correspond to any other’ (ST, 262).

Beneath the imaginative syntheses and sheer ludic brio of the text’s surface appeal, *Shamrock Tea* appears concerned to weigh up the relative importance of chance and fate, free will and predestination, serendipity and system in determining an individual’s identity and actions. One of the entries in Maeterlinck’s Blue Book reads: ‘Meaningful coincidences are thinkable as pure chance. But the more they multiply and the greater and more exact the correspondence is, the more the probability sinks and their unthinkability increases, until they can no longer be regarded as pure chance …’ (ST, 192). In this context, the notion that
'everything is connected, *sub specie aeternitatis* (ST, 260) may actually be profoundly disturbing rather than enabling, for, as Alan Gillis comments, if 'everything connects [...] then everything connives with a totality which may be unspeakable and malign'. But this tension between utopian connectivity and totalising circumscription, which is treated with dialectical seriousness in Carson’s earlier work, receives a rather hasty resolution in *Shamrock Tea*, when Carson, Berenice, and Maeterlinck decide to accept, against all the evidence, Celestine’s assurance that their ‘free will has not been compromised’ (ST, 212) and so play their parts in ‘rewriting the history book of Ireland’ (ST, 251) by going along with the child-snatching Hibernians’ crackpot plan. Clearly, this is necessary to advance the plot, and we are still to read the kitsch Irishry of Celestine and Fr Browne ironically if not suspiciously; but it does suggest that in *Shamrock Tea* whimsy and imaginative high jinks tend to displace the deeper political conundrums that animate so much of Carson’s other writing.

In any case, the mission upon which the three children are sent goes awry, and the book’s narrator, Carson, tumbles through a wormhole to emerge in Ghent in 1952, only to discover that ‘it was not the same world as that I had left, although it was almost identical in most respects’ (ST, 297). Fittingly, he goes on to assume the identity of ‘Maeterlinck’ and becomes a librarian at the hospice for the insane at Gheel, where he spends his days in conversation with inmates who believe themselves to be famous authors, fictional characters, or historical figures – Sherlock Holmes, Napoleon, St Augustine, Wittgenstein. Such a twist in the plot obviously aligns *Shamrock Tea* with those postmodern fictions concerned to probe questions of ontology by ‘creating and exploring other and multiple worlds’, though, like Carson’s earlier prose books, it also owes a significant debt to aspects of traditional Irish storytelling. As Zimmermann observes, since the period of the twelfth-century *Acallam na Senórach*, or ‘Colloquy of the Ancients’, the Irish storyteller’s role has been to ‘mediate not only between present and past (and future, inasmuch as what they say will be preserved); but also between different levels of reality into which it is possible to travel’. In its reworking of this traditional paradigm *Shamrock Tea* conceives of stories as ‘translating device[s]’ (ST, 292) that, like van Eyck’s miraculous painting, transport the reader to unpredictable destinations and parallel worlds, the purpose of which is to call the codes by which our own version of ‘reality’ is constructed into question. One version of reality only ever exists in tension with its possible others, and Carson’s narrative imagination
highlights the processes whereby identities are formed and negotiated, insisting that human agents are ‘subject to narrative as well as being subjects of narrative’.

Notes

3 Brown, *In the Chair*, p. 142.
4 Having recalled that his first book-case was made from an apple-box covered in ‘wood-grain Fablon’ the narrator concludes by admitting the falsity of this seemingly authentic, autobiographical detail in his narrative: ‘I lied about the Fablon, by the way. It was really midnight black with stars on it.’ This of course makes the already far-fetched story concerning genetically engineered apples upon which the poem riffs seem even more dubious (*FL*, 14–15).
7 Corcoran, ‘One Step Forward, Two Steps Back’, p. 221.
10 Brandes, ‘Ciaran Carson interviewed’, pp. 84, 88.
14 Gillis, ‘Ciaran Carson: Beyond Belfast’, p. 188.
15 Some caution needs to be exercised when generalising about the defining characteristics of lyric poetry. As David Lindley notes, the typical three-fold association of lyric with personal utterance, the expression of felt experience, and brevity or concision has some basis but may also serve to obscure ‘the essentially protean character of the genre’, its historical susceptibility to modification and cross-fertilisations with other genres. In particular, Lindley argues convincingly that much twentieth-century poetry has called into question ‘the standard definition which sees lyric as the expression of a poet’s personal feeling’. David Lindley, *Lyric* (London: Methuen, 1985), pp. 13, 82.
16 Heaney, *Preoccupations*, pp. 52, 43.
17 Brandes, ‘Ciaran Carson interviewed’, p. 83.
18 Carson has described poetry itself as essentially ‘other’, as ‘full of ghostly presences, of others who wrote before you, and of words as yet unknown to you’. Such ‘otherness’ therefore offers opportunities for discovery and for intertextual dialogues, an expansion of the poet’s frame of reference that would bring the self and the other into fruitful conversation. Carson, ‘The Other’, p. 235.
29 In this regard, Michael McAteer also observes that ‘Carson’s style to date appears the poetic embodiment of Bakhtin’s idea of polyphony; dexterous, risky, generative, tight yet capable of ecstasy, a language constantly attending to itself.’ McAteer, ‘The word as object’, p. 125.
30 In an interview undertaken shortly after the publication of *Belfast Confetti*, Carson suggests that the ‘pin-ball machine narrative’ of that book might be read in a similar fashion to that of an experimental novel, and continues: ‘Does anybody know what a novel is any more? But I would like to blur the distinction between poetry and prose. Oh to be a hyphen …’ Ormsby, ‘Ciaran Carson interviewed’, p. 8. Carson’s brief experimentation with the prose poem also suggests another strand of influence connecting his work with that of the French Symbolist poets Charles Baudelaire and Arthur Rimbaud, both of whom he has translated in *First Language* and, more extensively, in *The Alexandrine Plan*. Baudelaire, in particular, explicitly linked his notion of ‘the miracle of a poetic prose’ with ‘our experience of the life of great cities, the confluence and interactions of the countless relationships within them’. Charles Baudelaire, *The Poems in Prose*, ed. and trans. Francis Scarfe (London: Anvil Press, 1989), p. 25.
34 On Carson’s intertextual borrowings from Russell’s war journalism, see David Wheatley, ‘“Pushed next to nothing”: Ciaran Carson’s *Breaking News*’, in Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, ed., *Ciaran Carson: Critical Essays* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2009), pp. 60–3 and Elisabeth Delattre, ‘“between that world and this”: A Reading of *Breaking News* by Ciaran Carson’, *Estudios Irlandeses* 3 (2008), pp. 84–6.
40 Brandes, ‘Ciaran Carson interviewed’, p. 83.
47 See, for instance, O’Byrne, *As I Roved Out*, pp. 152, 262.
48 Donald, *Imagining the Modern City*, pp. 127, 139.
49 Lefebvre, *Writings on Cities*, p. 129.
50 Barry, *Contemporary British Poetry and the City*, p. 229.
51 Moretti, *Altas of the European Novel*, p. 84.
59 The anthropologist Allen Feldman notes that in Belfast ‘the urban interface zone is in symbiosis with the pattern of sectarian residential extension, mixing, and contraction. During periods of residential entrenchment along sectarian lines, the proliferation of interfaces, the dissemination of margins, the formalization of boundaries can be expected.’ Allen Feldman, *Formations of Violence: The Narrative of the Body and Political Terror in Northern Ireland* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), p. 28.
68 Carson has made this aspect of the text explicit in interview: ‘The Dutch Republic in the seventeenth century seems to be a model of what is possible. A state overseen by the House of Orange. It seems that in the Dutch Republic of that time you could say what you wanted, within reason, as long as you did your job. If people here want to be Orangemen, then look to that as your model. Civic pride and responsibility. A willingness to explore the universe through commerce, art, science. An examination of the physical world, which brought into focus the beauty of the particulars of that world. A humility in front of things.’ Brown, *In the Chair*, p. 152. Derek Mahon’s poem ‘Courtyards in Delft’ also uses Dutch Golden Age painting – in this case the work of Pieter de Hooch – as an oblique mirror in which to consider Northern Irish Protestant identities, setting an obvious precedent for Carson’s much more extensive parallels in *Fishing for Amber*. See Derek Mahon, *Collected Poems* (Loughcrew: The Gallery Press, 1997), pp. 105–6.
71 Connor, ‘Postmodernism and literature’, p. 77.
72 O’Reilly, ‘Exploded diagrams’, p. 87.