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“Though it was a small world, it was still huge” Ciarán Carson’s Alternative Topographies of Divided Belfast

Ciarán Carson, one of Ireland’s foremost poets, grew up through the difficult years leading up to the Troubles in Northern Ireland in the rigidly divided city of Belfast. Although his surname, which echoes that of Sir Edward Carson, the Protestant Irish unionist politician who was the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party between 1910 and 1921, might lead the casual reader to assume the contrary, he and his family were clearly from the Catholic side of the fence. Not surprising, his writing is constantly engaged with the Troubles. By his own admission “a lot of the poems I wrote in the 1980s and 90s were some kind of reflection of the Troubles ... I thought of the poems as snapshots of what was going on, the sometimes surreal circumstances of the violence ... I didn’t choose to write about it, it chose me”.¹ All of his writing seeks to see “what’s before your eyes”² to borrow the phrase he used in his negative review of Heaney’s *North*. In this collection, Heaney, in Carson’s controversial view, risked becoming “the laureate of violence – a mythmaker, an anthropologist, of ritual killing, an apologist for ‘the situation’, in the last resort, a mystifier”.³ The accusation was that in favouring the lyric, the rural touch, and the well-rounded poem, Heaney was aestheticizing violence and not being true to the complexities of what was happening before his eyes.

By contrast, Carson is in a sense keener to avoid conclusions or answers, challenging the reader with a “fusillade of question marks”.⁴ He always seeks to see what the day serves up, to include the seemingly accidental and inconsequential, to embrace the loose ends, the “cast-offs, hand-me-downs”⁵ and serendipitous fragments that might challenge any mythologizing urge. All this he pitches against the ingrained black and white image of a Belfast irretrievably broken into two parts. Successive collections of poetry and his fictional memoir, *The Star Factory* (1997), in particular, achieve this by stressing images of fluidity rather than fixity. Working from the fact that the city of Belfast is built on sloop – alluvial or tidal muck that metamorphoses into brick – Carson insists on the city being in a constant state of movement and change which counterbalances the individual’s desire for fixity, return, and a sense of home with the insistent turnovers enacted by a history that renders everything, at best pro-

¹ Elmer Kennedy-Andrews: *Introduction: For all I know: Ciaran Carson in conversation with Elmer Kennedy-Andrews* in: *Ciaran Carson: Critical Essays*, Dublin 2009, p.17.

² Ciarán Carson, *Escaped from the Massacre?*, in: *Honest Ulsterman*, 50 (Winter 1975), 183-6, p. 186.

³ *Ibid.* p. 183.

⁴ Ciarán Carson: *The Irish for No*, Oldcastle 1987, p. 31.

⁵ Ciarán Carson: *Belfast Confetti*, Oldcastle 1989, p. 73.

visional or precarious. For Carson, however, as he put it in an interview with Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, provisionality can be a “redeeming quality”:

In-between, I think. I'd like to fall into the cracks in the pavement... Maybe [Belfast's] provisional nature, its ongoing dispute as to what it was, what it is and what it might have become, has provided a ground - a shifting ground, like the sleet on which the city is built - for the exploration of other modes of being, other possibilities...I have always lived here. I have to deal with the situation on the ground. I have to see some redeeming qualities - those of provisionality and change, for instance.⁶

Jonathan Highfield, speaking of this feature of Carson's Belfast, talks of the “normalcy of instability”.⁷ The concept of “in-between-ness” is reiterated several times in his 1989 collection, *Belfast Confetti*. In the opening poem “Loaf”, the speaker of the poem lauds this liminality: I liked the in-between-ness of it/ Neither/ One thing nor the other.⁸ McCracken stresses the importance of ambiguity for Carson pointing out how his work is “informed by a deconstructionist refusal to regard the poem as a finished, self-contained object; rather it is an open circuit feeling off and into its own environment.”⁹ So too, for Carson, the city of Belfast, which is always provisional. In “Turn Again” Carson writes:

Today's plan is already yesterday's—the streets that were there
are gone.
And the shape of the jails cannot be shown for security reasons.
The linen backing is falling apart—the Falls Road hangs by a thread.
When someone asks me where I live I remember where I used to live
Someone asks me for directions, and I think again. I turn into
A side-street to try to throw off my shadow, and history is changed.¹⁰

The lines in which Carson represents the Falls Road as hanging “by a thread” evoke the actual precariousness not only of that landmark, long-suffering street but of the very fabric of the city itself. They also suggest the textual instability of his own writings about Belfast, which exist in numerous material formats, and, more generally, of all the writings about the city. As a preface to *Belfast Confetti*, Carson quotes Walter Benjamin's *A Berlin Childhood around the Turn of the Century* (written in the nineteen thirties), and it is clear that this is a formative text for the poet:

Not to find one's way about in a city is of little interest. [...] But to lose one's way in a city, as one loses one's way in a forest, requires practice. [...] I learned this art late in life:

⁶ Kennedy-Andrews, *Introduction*, pp. 19-20.

⁷ Jonathan Highfield, in: *Archaeology of Reconciliation: Ciarán Carson's Belfast Confetti and John Kindness' Belfast Frescoes*. *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*. 28:2 (Fall, 2002): 168-185, p. 171.

⁸ Carson, *Belfast Confetti*, p.1.

⁹ Kathleen McCracken: *Ciaran Carson: Unravelling the Conditional, Mapping the Provisional*, in: Michael Kenneally, ed., *Poetry in Contemporary Irish Literature*, Gerrards Cross 1995, [356-72], p. 357.

¹⁰ Carson, *Belfast Confetti*, p.11.

it fulfilled the dreams whose first traces were the labyrinths on the blotters of my exercise books.¹¹

Apart from connecting the habit of walking and getting lost to that of attempting to write and producing only labyrinths in blotters, there is irony in the fact that Carson was publishing this collection in 1989, the year in which the Berlin Wall came down and a long divided city was suddenly supposedly united. This was certainly not lost on Carson, who, living in a split Belfast, was far too canny to imagine that the mere removal of a wall could cancel the divisions that it symbolised or embodied. The link between where the real ends and the textual begins is always problematized. Andrew Kuhn has commented on Carson’s attention to the materiality of Belfast as both a literary and a lived environment with recourse to Benjamin for whom

the joy of the city is not merely getting lost within it, but finding one’s own tactical way of understanding it, both tactile and strategic. [...] In Carson’s *Belfast Confetti* the poet ignores the main thoroughfares and landmarks of Belfast. Instead he introduces the reader to the side streets and dead ends of a city subject to the detailed scrutiny of international news outlets and governmental agencies that created knowledge about the geography of violence during the Troubles. To get lost in Carson’s fragmented and dynamic Belfast is not to be without a logic that underlies the turns and switchbacks.¹²

But to enter “the smog and murk” of Carson’s Belfast is to accept the inevitability of being lost. As Neal Alexander puts it: “the ways in which [Carson] writ[es] of the city itself probes the logic and limits of maps and the connections they make visible”.¹³ Carson’s vision of an estranging and disorienting Belfast – even for the native – is influenced by Benjamin’s conjuring of images of the city as a forest, a place in which one inevitably gets lost, a labyrinth. Frank Ormsby has noted “the extensive use of map imagery in Carson’s Belfast poems” used “to convey the labyrinthine nature of the city and the way it changes daily to create a nightmarish atmosphere of dislocation in a familiar place.”¹⁴ Declan Kiberd, in a typical flourish, talks of how Carson has in *Belfast Confetti* “brilliantly mapped the European architectonics of Walter Benjamin on to the streets and suburbs of that very place”.¹⁵

Carson’s estranging versions of Belfast achieve all of these things and more. Repeatedly he focuses on the post-industrial city’s liminal zones, no go zones, dog leg turns, bifurcations, cul-de-sacs, fault lines, buffer zones, changing spaces, wastelands, crossroads, ghettos, shipyards, intermediate grounds, non-places, junctures, blackened side streets, and has the reader stray into or through them or follow in the footsteps of a pedestrian protagonist. John Goodby points out that the persona of his poems is “almost

¹¹ *Ibid.* p.14.

¹² Andrew A. Kuhn *Ciarán Carson’s Books: A Bibliographic Mapping of Belfast, Éire-Ireland*, Volume 45:1&2, Earrach/Samhradh / Spring/Summer 2010, [111-127], p. 112-113.

¹³ Neal Alexander: *Mapping Junkspace: Ciarán Carson’s Urban Geographies*, in: *Textual Practice* 21.3 (2007), p. 506.

¹⁴ Frank Ormsby: *Poetry in: Stepping Stones: The Arts in Ulster 1971-2001*. Mark Carruthers and Stephen Douds (eds.). Belfast, 2001, [52-78], p. 72.

¹⁵ Declan Kiberd: *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation*, London 1996, p. 600.

invariably that of a pedestrian, frequently one reflecting upon the practice of walking in various forms [...] Walking in the poems matches the ways in which Carson narrates his stories".¹⁶ Both as walker and as traveller in the city, one risks being blindsided. If walking suggests a minimal amount of control, even this is sometimes denied and the sense of threat and danger is even more imminent:

I find myself in a crowded taxi
making deviations from the known route,
ending in a cul-de-sac
where everyone breaks out suddenly
in whispers, noting the boarded windows,
the drawn blinds.¹⁷

Carson also focuses on the role of history and time and language in the constant re-fashioning the city which is never allowed to be or to be seen to be static but is in permanent, necessary flux. This sense of change is a source of hope. While always attentive to the changing concrete realities of the city, its layout, and furnishings, as seen in minute and accurate detail through his meticulous personal gaze, Carson always also seeks to frame it in new ways, to see it, Swift-like, from new, unexpected perspectives. But he also likes to digress in a manner, which cannot but recall Sterne and his progressive-digressive method, which was also mapped out in diagrams to accompany the text of *Tristram Shandy*, a labyrinthine construction if ever there was one. Carson's poetry, just like the journeys it portrays, often proceeds by taking an unexpected route.

Writing of *The Irish for No* (1987), Peter Barry asserts that the narrative mode is "the correlative of a city in which the detour and the devious route to a desire objective are not decorative or artistic flourishes, but an often-necessary survival strategy".¹⁸ At the same time, merely wandering into or finding oneself in the wrong place at the wrong time in Carson's Belfast can mean being exposed to sudden violence and perhaps even to the threat of violent death. A wrong turn can be fatal in this divided, oppressive, edgy city "where everyone is watching everyone and there is little room for manoeuvre" as Carson curtly describes it in the Introduction to *The Inferno*. Or as he puts it in *Belfast Confetti*, in a paragraph which includes the first line of a nursery rhyme couplet originally published in Gammer Gurton's *Garland, or, The Nursery Parnassus* (1784), "I see the moon, and the moon sees me, / God bless the moon, and God bless me!"¹⁹ In Carson's hands, only the first line of this couplet is printed and is, in his hands, anything

¹⁶ John Goodby: "Walking in the City": Space, Narrative and Surveillance in "The Irish for No" and "Belfast Confetti", an unpublished paper presented at the Ciaran Carson symposium at the University of Ulster, September 2002. It is quoted in Wolfgang Görtzschacher, *The Re-invention of Belfast in the Poetry of Ciaran Carson* in: *A World of Local Voices: Poetry in English Today*, Klaus Martens, Paul Morris, Arlette Warken (eds.). Würzburg, 2003), [84-91], p. 85.

¹⁷ Ciarán Carson: *The New Estate*, Oldcastle 1988, p. 21.

¹⁸ Peter Barry: *Contemporary British Poetry and the City*. Manchester 2000, p. 229.

¹⁹ Quoted in: Iona and Peter Opie, eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes*, London 1951, p. 356.

but reassuring; rather it conveys the constant surveillance that takes place in Belfast, the city where “everyone eyes everyone’s else”.²⁰

We are all being watched through peep-holes, one-way mirrors, security cameras, talked about on walkie-talkies, car ‘phones, Pye Pocketfones; and as this helicopter chainsaws overhead, I pull back the curtains down her in the terraces to watch its pencil-beam of light flick through the card-index – *I see the moon and the moon sees me*, this 30,000,000 candlepower gimbal-mounted Nitesun by which the operator can observe undetected, with his red goggles and an IR filter on the light source.²¹

Despite the illusion of protection that surveillance should provide, the dangers lurking within Belfast are ever present, every changing and cannot be mapped. As Alex Houen has noted, “Belfast’s volatility undermines its cartography”²²: yesterday’s right turn can be today’s wrong turn and, as the poet puts it in “The Bomb Disposal”, the city’s “forbidden areas change daily”.²³ Thus, as “Last Orders” reveals, the simple act of entering a public bar is fraught with danger:

Squeeze the buzzer on the steel mesh gate like a trigger, but
It’s someone else who has you in their sights. Click. It opens. Like electronic
Russian roulette, since you never know for sure who’s who, or what
You’re walking into. I, for instance, could be anybody. Though I’m told
Taig’s written on my face.
See me. Would *I* trust appearances?²⁴

This is a theme that Dermot Healy in his masterful novel, *A Goat’s Song*, explores with considerable success when his character, Jack Ferris, the rough, Leitrim-born, Catholic Irish writer moves to the North but refuses to accept the local Belfast rules and thus places his life, and that of his distraught partner, Catherine McAdam, a North Irish Presbyterian actress, in jeopardy. And yet, for life to go on there is no real choice. As Carson’s poems illustrate, the only way to find out where one cannot go is to go there; the only reliable map of the city is the city itself and it can only be read in the first person:

The city is a map of the city
Its forbidden areas changing daily.
I find myself in a crowded taxi
Making deviations from the known route
where everyone breaks out suddenly
in whispers, noting the boarded windows,
the drawn blinds.²⁵

²⁰ Ciarán Carson: *Breaking News*, Oldcastle 2003, p. 24.

²¹ Carson, *Belfast Confetti*, p. 78.

²² Alex Houen: *Terrorism and Modern Literature: From Joseph Conrad to Ciaran Carson*, Oxford 2005, p. 262.

²³ Carson, *The New Estate*, p. 21.

²⁴ Carson, *Belfast Confetti*, p. 46.

²⁵ Carson, *The New Estate*, p. 21.

Again in *Belfast Confetti*, Carson recounts his personal terror of veering over to the wrong side of Belfast's so-called "Peace Line". Having strayed into the Protestant Shankill Road area he returns to the home ground of the "Falls" only to be stopped and briskly questioned by three men:

*You were seen. You were seen.
Coming from the Shankill.
Where are you from?
Where is he from?
The Falls? When? What Street?
What was the number of the house?
How far down the street was that?
When was that?
What streets could you see from the house?*²⁶

One of Carson's key techniques is to narrow the lens so as to allow his readers see the city close up. In *Belfast Confetti*, he describes the effects of suffering a detached retina during a game of hurling before saying that he attributes "some of my steadily progressive myopia to that accidental, or mishandled ricochet. It requires me to look closer into things".²⁷ This puts the focus on the accidental – how chance affects each individual world and each single mode of perception. But the image of the narrowing eye also functions as a metaphor for Carson's poetic or literary method. In *Belfast Confetti*'s "Question Time" the narrator says that "if there is an ideal map, which shows the city as it is, it may exist in the eye of that helicopter ratcheting overhead, its searchlight fingering and scanning the micro-chip deviations".²⁸ Carson returns to a similar image in his introduction to his translation of the *Inferno* where we see the claustrophobic city from the vantage point of a British army helicopter eye-in-the-sky. As Conor McCarthy noted, this image resembles how "Dante looks down into Malebolge from the perspective of the flying monster Geryon"²⁹:

I see a map of North Belfast, its no-go zones and tattered flags, the blackened side-street cul-de-sacs and bits of wasteland stitched together by dividing walls and fences. For all the blank abandoned spaces it feels claustrophobic, cramped and medieval.³⁰

By linking medieval Florence with Troubles Belfast, in one sense, Carson's native town becomes just another reincarnation of a previous city and there is, it seems, nothing new under the sun; in another sense, Belfast is of course a very particular city in a very specific historical moment. The helicopter is never presented straightforwardly. It is never a mere eye-in-the-sky watching traffic. It is the British army's way of surveying and dissecting the city. It represents panoptic power, not only an observing eye but a

²⁶ Carson, *Belfast Confetti*, p. 62.

²⁷ *Ibid.* p. 44.

²⁸ *Ibid.* p. 58.

²⁹ Conor McCarthy, *Ciaran Carson's Labyrinths*, in: *English* (2005) (209): 99-106, p. 100.

³⁰ Carson, *The 'Inferno' of Dante Alighieri*, London 2002, pp. xi-xii.

violent, interminable “eggbeater spy in the sky”³¹ (and its presence puts terror-torn Belfast into the unenviable position of being a forerunner of so many great cities in our post-11 September world). Much though the eye-in-the-sky may contribute to the city inhabitants feeling cramped and under scrutiny it may still fail to see much of what is going on and changing on the streets and within the buildings that exist, almost defiantly, beneath it.

It is into the ineluctable traffic of seemingly tiny deviations in the fabric of Belfast that Carson’s poetry and prose probes. Thus he says: “don’t trust maps, for they avoid the moment: ramps, barricades, diversions, Peace Lines”.³² Maps are never the neutral texts they are put forward as being but are the products of historically and politically inflected readings of a territory. Carson seeks to place a focus on his own, individual maps of Belfast, and to play it off received ways of envisioning the city which exclude much of what is to be found on the ground. By insisting on the subjective, fleeting, momentary nature of the individual map, he challenges the mythologies of the two separated communities by pointing to the simple fact that, for all their entrenched differences and divisions, they share what Carson calls “the same terrible conditions”. Sometimes he does this by revisiting wastelands through the eyes of those living on the edge, such as the “Two winos”, he describes in the poem of the same name, “reclining on the waste ground /between Electic Street and Hemp Street”³³ or a prostitute working near the General Post Office, or the small boy in “Travellers”, who is “wandering trouserless/ through his personal map –junked refrigerators, cars and cookers”.³⁴

Writing when the Troubles were at their worst, Carson’s repeatedly dusts down and focuses on mirror images and points of interconnection which swim against the dominant and separatist narratives of history and politics. He also describes time, and hence the workings of history and indeed of narrative, as being anything but progressive or straightforward but laden with surprises and wrong turns. As he puts it in *Belfast Confetti*:

For if
time is a road,
it’s fraught with ramps and dog-legs,
switchbacks and spaghetti;
here and there.³⁵

Most of all Carson’s Belfast is an ever-changing labyrinth, a kind of literary spaghetti junction that resists all attempts to be carved in two. In making it so, he enlarges the city, giving dignity and individuality to forgotten streets or streets that are little more than names with negative history hanging over them.

He also focuses on parts of landscapes that surprise, that cannot be read in the same way by any two individuals, not to mention by the two divided communities. It is a land-

³¹ Carson, *Belfast Confetti*, p. 56.

³² *Ibid.* p. 58.

³³ Carson, *The Irish for No*, p. 40.

³⁴ *Ibid.* p. 42.

³⁵ Carson, *Belfast Confetti*, p. 27

scape that is simultaneously both modern and ancient, a crossroads not only in space but also in time, with the ancient leaning or leaking into the contemporary:

Driving on the M1 at night south of Milltown, you can observe a curious optical phenomenon, as the headlights of the passing traffic bounce off the gravestone and the blank stone eyes of archangels in an orchestra of random constellated Morse, like flash outburst of Olympian photography in colossal stadiums, and you feel the dead are signalling to you.³⁶

For all the surveillance, for all the ability of the panopticon to reach into people's lives, there is always space for the imagination to reconfigure reality. Again in this passage, the focus is on sight. On reading the landscape or being signalled to by the landscape which carries unexpected echoes of the dead (a recurring motif, this). The "headlights", "gravestone", "stone eyes of archangels", the "random constellated Morse" become signals from the dead, from the Troubles dead, and the troubled dead. The landscape is shown to contain its own uncanny language which is as mysterious to the unknowing as that of Morse, translatable only into the arbitrary and reductive ordering terms like those to be found in a Street Directory. And of course, the 1948 Belfast Street Directory is a central intertextual source for Carson, functioning among the palimpsests upon which he builds his own changing city.

Carson calls it "an impressive piece of book-production"³⁷ but it is also the book that more than any other facilitates the construction of his own Belfast books, in particular *The Star Factory*. But it is not simply a book of factual description. Rather like the topography it conveys or describes it contains its own magic and is not simply an objective guide. Just as the city resists the regimentation of the directory so too the writer in giving voice to the city is engaging in an almost incantatory act of resistance:

Pondering the tome of the Street Directory, I am reminded of the cabalistic or magical implications of the alphabet, which manifest themselves in a word like 'abraxas' [...] I am reminded how the arbitrary power of the alphabet juxtaposes impossibly remote locations, [...] Waterproof Street, which runs from Fairfax Street to Byron Street, in East Belfast, some three miles away, then we have Watson Street, off Railway Street – slightly nearer, in the Sandy Row district, in the vicinity of Murray, Sons & Co., [...] Similarly, streets named after places form exotic juncture not to be found on the map of the Empire: Balkan and Ballarat, Cambrai and Cambridge, Carlisle and Carlow, Lisbon and Lisburn, and so on, through Madras and madras, till we eventually arrive, by way of Yukon, at the isles of Zetland, whereupon we fall off the margins of the city.³⁸

What Carson is doing here is juxtaposing the local and the exotic, evoking what Fran Brearton calls "a wider context and alternative time zones".³⁹ He is testing "the margins of the city" and exposing them, for all their particularity, as being just like the margins

³⁶ Carson, *The Star Factory*, p. 44.

³⁷ *Ibid.* p. 9.

³⁸ *Ibid.* pp. 7-8.

³⁹ Fran Brearton, *Mapping the Trenches: Gyres, Switchbacks and Zig-zag Cricles in W.B. Yeats and Ciaran Carson*, in: *Irish Studies Review*, 9.3., 2001, 373-386, p. 373.

of any other great city, bearing the traces of some many other places around the world. Elsewhere he writes: “I cannot help but see lots of Belfast everywhere, Berlin, Warsaw, Tallinn, New York, to name some, have Belfast aspects”. And the reverse is also true. The street names tell a global history in shorthand. If letters and words lie at the core of the Belfast of the Street directory and hence of Belfast itself, so to numbers have their part to play:

I am reminded of the importance of numbers in the Street Directory – “The Numbering of Tenements in the Streets of Belfast is not consecutive but alternative: one side is market with Odd figures, 1, 3, 5, and so on; and the opposite with EVENS, as 2, 4, 6, etc.”⁴⁰

Of course Belfast is not alone in this but that said, it’s fitting in this divided city that even the house numbers would be thus split into Odds and Evens.

Another way that Carson complicates the standard view of the divided city is to give voice to Belfast as something which is out of control, mushrooming, exploding, mutatin “an exploded diagram of itself, along the lines of a vastly complicated interactive model aircraft kit whose components are connected by sprued plastic latitudes and longitudes”.⁴¹ This allows the city to be considered bit by bit, component by component, link by link, but also, finally as a whole, and by seeing it as a whole, its constant movement, change, transformation can almost be viewed “live” as it “mutates like a virus, its programme undergoing daily shift of emphasis and detail. Its parallels are bent by interior temperatures.”⁴²

In this shifting, restless city, nothing is safe from being “swallowed in the maw of time and trouble” or, as “Question Time” puts it, being “sucked back into nothingness by the rewind button”.⁴³ The very structure of the city is overwhelmed by continuous change. Sometimes change is merely on the surface, seen, for example, in the “ubiquitous dense graffiti of public houses, churches, urinals, bonding stores, graving docks, monuments, Sunday schools and Orange halls”.⁴⁴ Such graffiti is not to be underestimated: it too forms a deeply partitioned narrative of Belfast’s past and current situation. But the city structure is even more hugely affected by the bomb damage which quite literally defaces it. That said, Belfast is not totally extraneous to the more common process of transformation, “improvement”, or modernisation that characterises the lives of the city in the modern world. The challenge for the writer of the city of Belfast lies essentially in attempting to capture in static prose or poetry an always changing collage of images and realities, in managing to “piece together the exploded fragments.”⁴⁵

Although James Joyce in a sense presented Dublin in his writings as a centre of paralysis, a city almost frozen in time (1904), in *Ulysses* he also strove to convey the bustle and movement in the city. Thus, he denied Dublin a monolithic existence and

⁴⁰ Carson, *The Star Factory*, p. 12.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* p. 15.

⁴² Carson, *The Star Factory*, p. 15.

⁴³ Carson, *Belfast Confetti*, p. 63, and p. 58.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* p. 81.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* p. 108.

conceived of his city as a polymorphic entity. He believed, as he admitted to Arthur Power, that, “I always write about Dublin, because if I can get to the heart of Dublin I can get to the heart of all the cities of the world”.⁴⁶ In a way, Joyce’s task was easier as he was not physically present to see the city evolving and growing. Carson does not have the enabling privilege of a similar distancing which is why his Belfast can seem, at times, to be almost a little undigested. But how is he to fully digest a city that is changing before his very eyes? Understandably, Carson’s Belfast like his literary texts retain a necessary quality of provisionality, refusing closure. This is also because the heart of Belfast remains elusive, it has quite literally been bombed away, bombed off the map, disassembled, emptied. The closest thing to it was probably Smithfield Market which was destroyed in a firebomb in 1974. As Carson remembers in *Belfast Confetti*: “It was great to get lost in Smithfield.”⁴⁷ Now destroyed, as Eric Falci has commented “Smithfield Market not only metonymically figures the entire city, but it also serves as a kind of metaphorical scalemodel of Belfast, going so far as to contain a ‘map of Belfast’ within it map of ruined Belfast.”⁴⁸

In “The Irish for No”, the ruins of the bombed and burnt down Smithfield market suggest a Minotaur, a frightening and potentially violent beast confined in the enclosed heart of Belfast’s labyrinth:

Since everything went up in smoke, no-entrances, no exits.
But as the charred beams hissed and flickered, I glimpsed a map of Belfast
In the ruins; obliterated streets, the faint impression of a key
Something many-toothed, elaborate, stirred briefly in the labyrinth.⁴⁹

The poem conveys, as Neal Alexander has written, an “atmosphere of stifling enclosure and sulphurous danger” but also offers the “faint impression of a key”, the possibility of glimpsing an image of the city as it actually is, a map that shows its many-tooth, elaborate complexity”.⁵⁰

This is precisely what Carson’s writings achieve: a glimpse or a collage of glimpses of a wounded city in flux, a monstrous city brimming over with what he calls “the haberdashery of loss”.⁵¹ In order to achieve this, Carson as a writer has had to engage in a creative, writerly process that mirrors that of building and rebuilding the city: “improve, wipe out, begin again, imagine, change.”⁵² In order to do so, the writer must actively live the city. In “Linear B”, we see a figure that resembles the poet himself, “[t]hread reading rapidly between crowds on Royal Avenue, reading/ Simultaneously, and writing in his black notebook, peering through/ A cracked lens fixed with Sellotape, his *rendez-vous* is not quite *vous*. The writer is both a participant in city life and an observer

⁴⁶ James Joyce, *Letters of James Joyce*, Vol. II, Richard Ellmann (ed). New York, 1966, p. 505.

⁴⁷ Carson, *The Star Factory*, p. 221.

⁴⁸ Eric Falci: *Continuity and Change in Irish Poetry, 1966-2010*. Cambridge 2012, p. 130.

⁴⁹ Carson, *The Irish for No*, p. 37.

⁵⁰ Neal Alexander: *Ciaran Carson: Space, Place, Writing*. Liverpool 2010, p. 71.

⁵¹ Carson, *Belfast Confetti*, p. 21.

⁵² *Ibid.* p. 68.

of it; he is both read and written by the city at the same time as he reads it and transforms it into poetry and prose. Mere observation is not enough:

One day I clicked with his staccato walk, and glimpsed the open notebook:
Squiggles, dashes, question-marks, dense as the Rosetta stone.
His good eye glittered at me: it was either nonsense, or a formula – for
Perpetual motion, the scaffolding of shopping lists, or the collapsing city.⁵³

To write about the city, to project an alternative city geography, the writer must be of the city. How else could Carson possibly capture the perpetual flux of Belfast? How else to be true to the succession of “pizza parlours, massage parlours, nightclubs, drinking clubs, antique shops, designer studios (that) momentarily populate the wildness and the blitz sites, they too will vanish in the morning”?⁵⁴ Carson’s method is to delve into the depths of the city by giving voice to its changing surface. Thus he can bring some form of humanity and of memory back to its scarred, fractious post-modern streets and give value to the individual and to the individual imaginations of those, of whatever religious or political persuasion, walk and inhabit them.

⁵³ Carson, *The Irish for No*, p. 33.

⁵⁴ Carson, *Belfast Confetti*, p. 57.