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Under (Re)Construction – Belfast in the Poetry and Prose of Ciaran Carson

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Abstract

Ciaran Carson's poetry is deeply concerned with the city of Belfast, as many of the poems unfold their twisting itinerary against the active background of this northern urban location. In addition to the poems Carson has published a fair number of prose pieces and a tentative autobiography, which also resurrects the city in its dynamism, though on a different timescale. The poems and the prose pieces together constitute a narrative of the changing city with the conclusion that the most apparent element of permanence in the context of the city is change itself, which leads to a strained relationship between the city and the map representing it.

"The city is a map of the city" (Carson, 1976, p. 21) asserts the speaker in one of Ciaran Carson's poems, but in a later prose piece he warns "don't trust maps, for they avoid the moment" (Carson, 1989, p. 58). Carson's poetry is closely tied to a particular location, the city of Belfast, thus it is not a surprise that he shows an interest in the concept of the map as a possible representation of a city. The concept of the map, however, offers him not only help in his attempt to capture the city in his poems but also offers some potential traps in doing so. Maps indeed can complement the chronicler's temporal mission, yet their limitations tend to work not only in favour of the poet but against his intentions as well. The map in turn becomes a dynamic image as it demands that the poet continuously resituate it, reconfigure it and in the end redefine it.

Maps are by definition two-dimensional representations of the environment, translating the real world into an abstraction with the help of symbols and according to a scale. Maps are spatial items which by their apparently static nature exclude the temporal dimension, yet each map is a function of time since there is a point in time in which they correspond to reality. This also involves a paradox since each map is immediately outdated after its completion, as it represents a certain place in a certain moment with no possibility of revision after that. Still, as the map is intended to provide a reliable basis for orientation, its state of being fixed is considered more of a merit than a limitation, and it also boasts a potential of offering a tangible overview of an extensive area by revealing its pattern on an interpretable scale.

In contrast with the spatial nature of maps, literary representation is essentially temporal. Carson's interest in recording his city in poems necessarily has to contend with the temporal nature of literature, yet the continuously changing face of Belfast turns him into a chronicler of change rather than a cartographer. Still, the recurring motif of the map is present as the image implies stability, which is an increasingly desired feature in the case of a city that is so spectacularly exposed to the moulding effects of a virulent conflict. The apparent stability that a map represents can provide the illusion of the possibility of freezing time and thus eliminating change if only for a brief moment so that further change can be noticed and properly recorded.

The source of Carson's plight lies in the nature of the city itself. As Kevin Lynch explains, "Like a piece of architecture, the city is a construction in space, but one of a vast scale, a thing perceived only in the course of long spans of time. […] At every instant, there is more than the eye can see, more than the ear can hear, a setting or a view waiting to be explored" (Lynch, 1960, p. 1). A city is a dynamic system existing in both space and time, thus a representation of it will have to involve techniques that can address all these dimensions. The temporal potential of poetry thus requires the help of the spatial potential of maps in Carson's works as his intended renderings of Belfast can only succeed as the result of the simultaneous presence of both concerns.

Though Carson's poetry is essentially lyric in its features and interests, his genuine approach relies heavily on special techniques of story-telling. His trademark long lines indicate a preference for digression and a conscious undermining of linearity; remarks, etymologies and frequent hints at other stories create the impression of a network of relations instead of a coherent narrative line, resembling a labyrinth rather than a clearly marked itinerary. Thus the frequent use of the image of the map can provide an element which balances the divergent narrative technique, yet the limitation of maps regarding the temporal dimension is not overlooked and Carson never settles into the comfortable illusion of accepting the map as an absolute point of reference. Instead, as Kathleen McCracken comments on Carson's use of the motif of the map: "the map is a figure which keeps changing, against the rules of logic and rhetoric, into something else: a network of stories, a nest of memories; […] the city as it used to be, the city as it is becoming" (McCracken, 1995, p. 356).

The relation between map and city is explicitly made in the early poem "The Bomb Disposal": "The city is a map of the city, / its forbidden areas changing daily" (Carson, 1976, p. 21). The correspondence is a rather unusual one since the three spatial dimensions of the real world are seen as identical to the flat surface of the map, and as a result the speaker attributes the feature of change to the map, though that belongs undoubtedly to the city. In this act of declaration both city and map are redefined and the insistence on the element of change as an essential feature of the life of the city outlines Carson's approach in his representation of Belfast.

The majority of poems which focus on Belfast can be found in the collection *The Irish for No* (1987). The opening piece of the volume, entitled "Turn Again", duly returns to the relation between city and map, but the return is at once a reconsideration, as the former relation of identity is replaced by a seemingly more traditional case of representation: "There is a map of the city which shows the bridge that was never built, / A map which shows the bridge that collapsed; the streets that never existed" (Carson, 1987, p. 7); and "Today's plan is already yesterday's – the streets that were there are gone" (ibid). The city is the object of representation and the map is what represents it, but this traditional relation is challenged by those items of the map which do not have their corresponding elements in reality. The "bridge that collapsed" is one such element, but "the bridge that was never built" is more intriguing together with "the streets that never existed" since these cannot be attributed to palpable change in the city. In this way there is immediately a lack of correspondence between map

and city; the inadequacy of the map is pointed at and pointed out, and the elusive change that frustrates the attempts of fixing details at once undermines the concept of the map as well – since a map that does not correspond to what it is supposed to represent is questionable in its function and essence.

The relation between city and map, however, is not fully severed, as the disintegration of the map is paralleled by the disintegration of the city itself: "The linen backing is falling apart – the Falls Road hangs by a thread" (ibid). The cunning reference to the decline of the textile industry of Belfast and the subsequent civil unrest prepares the way for a self-reflexive closure in the poem in which the elusiveness of the present eventually leads to the destabilisation of the past as well:

> 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. (ibid)

At the end the act of changing direction is accompanied by the changing of history. Though no explicit reference is given concerning the causal relation between these two, the speaker's choice of expression hints at the story-teller's choice, his freedom and responsibility in recording reality and in constituting it in discourse.

In the poem "Belfast Confetti" the temporal aspect of city life is fronted by focusing on a usual event of the Troubles. Accordingly, the image of language takes prominence over that of the map, yet it is principally the graphic signs used for recording language in writing that are mentioned by the speaker of the poem. The explosion becomes "an asterisk on the map" (Carson, 1987, p. 31); the "burst of rapid fire" (ibid) is a "hyphenated line" (ibid), and the city itself is punctuated with "All the alleyways and side-streets blocked with stops and colons" (ibid). In opposition to the distillation of language into writing, the image of the map is replaced by that of a labyrinth – the experience of being in the city in a time of conflict unsettles the order implied by a map, and is rather akin to being lost as implied by the concept of the labyrinth.

The association of the process of writing with the constant change characteristic of the city of Belfast continues in the poem "Linear B." Carson finds the proper chronicler of Belfast in the form of a rather eccentric character: it is a man constantly on the move, "peering through / A cracked lens fixed with Sellotape" (Carson, 1987, p. 33) and recording everything in his notebook. The notebook is eventually glimpsed by the speaker – to his great surprise the notes consist solely of various punctuation marks and other graphic markers: as the speaker concludes, "it was either nonsense, or a formula – for / Perpetual motion, the scaffolding of shopping lists, or the collapsing city" (ibid). The inclination to accept the last suggestion is strengthened by the earlier reference to the Rosetta Stone in relation to the marks in the notebook, with the hint at its as yet unintelligible nature but with an indication of the recognition of some kind of a pattern in it, which implies a backward reference to the experience of the city as a labyrinth.

In the poem entitled "Night Patrol" the menacing experience of constant threat comes in the form of a dream, but it is the location which is more intriguing than the dream itself. The setting is the former Grand Central Hotel of Royal Avenue, originally a building with a Victorian façade. The building is transformed into an army barracks, but the façade eventually disappears and the gap reveals what has been hidden so far – a whole world of diverse items constituting a very different kind of city-scape than the earlier Victorian one. Even the fact that the building is used as an army barracks provides a curious case since it is the function,

and consequently the interior of the hotel, that changes, yet the shape and the size of the building remain unaltered, thus a map would indicate the same item in the same location. The clearing of the building, however, causes not only the map to become inadequate but it facilitates the discovery of what was so far hidden, thus the labyrinth is altered too.

In "Smithfield Market" the fate of the eponymous shopping centre becomes the occasion of reflecting on the relation between map and city. The once busy and bustling centre, itself a kind of a labyrinth, goes up in flames and only a heap of ruins remains. The speaker, however, notices a map of Belfast among the ruins which survives in spite of the devastation of the rest. This stubborn act of survival suggests another paradoxical feature of the map: though in terms of its original function it no longer corresponds to the city, in its physical form the representation still outlasts what it represents.

The map accidentally surviving the city becomes a memorial of an earlier period. The emigrants of "The Exiles' Club" have a similar goal to achieve as they attempt to reconstruct the image of the city in their new home. The difficulties of such a project are clear from the outset since both space and time work against them, yet they persist in their effort and the result is a partially reconstructed model of the city. The attempt, however, will inevitably come up against insoluble problems: while recent "news of bombings and demolition" (Carson, 1987, p. 45) is possible to manage, small details of everyday life present a real difficulty since they evade proper recording. The reconstruction then will inevitably be incomplete and inadequate as it can only reflect a city of the mind, a city no longer existing or perhaps a city that never existed in that particular form.

Carson's accounts of Belfast continue in his next volume of poems entitled *Belfast Confetti* (1989). The title of the collection refers to the trademark Belfast mixture of brick, nails, bolts and other solid items used in times of rioting, yet on another level it also hints at the accounts that are offered: the structure of this volume is different from that of the previous one as several prose pieces complement the poems. The poems similarly record episodes of Belfast life while the prose parts trace etymologies or revisit moments of earlier poems to trace new possible directions from the same point of departure. This is in accordance with Carson's general tactic of constructing narratives with the concepts of both map and labyrinth, and the result is a broader scope than before.

In a curious way Carson uses the same poem to open the collection as he does in *The Irish for No.* "Turn Again" remains unchanged as a text but the closure of the poem becomes its own verification, as the act of turning leads to an altered history, one which is to be told in the new volume. The same point of departure reinstates the motif of the map as a point of reference in relation to the city, yet the new occasion offers a new opportunity for reconsidering and even redefining the map in terms of its potential as a representation of the city.

In the poem entitled "Queen's Gambit" writing is brought into an analogous relation with the map. The occasion is that of the examination of a suspicious car which was intended to be used for a minor robbery but which accidentally ends up in the middle of a fight with British soldiers. The seen but unheard conversation of the two soldiers is transcribed as "unintelligible, blotted out by stars and asterisks" (Carson, 1989, p. 33), which once again employs the motif of writing and its way of attempting to represent what cannot be properly represented. Though the story is curious enough, Carson's preoccupations lie principally with time and remembering, thus writing is focused on as the means of recording experience, yet the limitations and traps of such recordings are made clear: arbitrary points of departure and the faltering of memory question and undermine the trustfulness of remembering. The resulting accounts find their analogue in names carved into the surface of school desks one on top of another repeated until all become impossible to read, and in a similar manner paper used for scribbling on too often is soiled and thus made useless. However, photographs may suffer the same fate as well as the map: "With so many foldings and unfoldings, whole

segments of the map have fallen off" (Carson, 1989, p. 35). The result is a partial account, inaccurate and inadequate due to the gaps in it and the poem's storyline becomes a reflection of this. The end, with the speaker having had his beard and hair cut, contains a backward reference to "Turn Again", with a healthy deal of irony included: "Turning into Tomb Street, I began to feel a new man" (Carson, 1989, p. 40).

In the poem "Gate" the closing down of a recently opened shop provides the opportunity for the contemplation of change. The actual picture has its bitter irony as letters go missing from the name of the shop, "Terminus" becoming "e minus" as a result, yet the original name is one that carries its own undoing in itself. In fact the shop now closing down replaces an earlier one at the same spot, and the item originating from that previous shop has shifted in its function too (wedding suit used now for funerals), all pointing to the omnipresence of change. In contrast with this comes the image of the stopped clock of *The Belfast Telegraph* which is supposed to show the time of the explosion – but which one precisely is the question. With time becoming uncertain, space does so too, and the city becomes a flux, like the already familiar image of writing on top of earlier writing, map imposed on map, and the city itself becomes a labyrinth on a labyrinth.

The same idea is repeated on a smaller scale in "Barfly", with the menu chalked up and then wiped clean as an analogue of change. The apropos is a frequent event of the Troubles, when people from one side visit the public places of the other side and intimidate those present there; in this instance "two punters walk in, / Produce these rods, and punctuate the lunchtime menu" (Carson, 1989, p. 55). The event is read as a "message. Or an audio-visual aid" (ibid), but it is enough to propel the speaker into escape, yet his escape is a special one as he identifies himself as a "hyphen" (ibid) which translates him into an in-between figure who keeps moving around from one pub to another without settling and belonging to any one of them. The city as flux draws the inhabitant and chronicler in, compelling him to perpetual motion.

The shorter poems of the collection alternate with prose sections which tend to focus on the city and its aspects in a different way. Carson's prose allows for a less concentrated approach, his essay-like pieces move along even less strictly confined lines, but it is exactly this tactic which allows Carson to reinforce the ideas expressed in the poems.

The section entitled "Farset" opens with the image of a river and comes to focus on the etymology of the name of Belfast. Eventually no final verdict is made since etymologies are reminiscent of rivers, thus the resulting experience is similar to that of trying to record the present of the city. In another prose piece the omnipresence of graffiti in Belfast is seen as the means by which the city becomes written, with the frequent use of the word "remember" in several of these instances to reinforce the otherwise obvious function of slogans and murals. Remembering, however, can be problematic as poems already indicate and Carson returns to the motif of the emigrants of the Falls Road Club in Adelaide engaged in the attempt of reconstructing their city from memories and recent news. The challenges have already been outlined in the poem "The Exiles' Club" but this time the questions are explicitly made: "who will sort out the chaos? Where does land begin, and water end? Or memory falter, and imagination take hold?" (Carson, 1989, p. 54).

The constantly changing city would thus provide a returning native with a strong sense of being lost. The task of proper orientation is a challenge even for the resident native in spite of such items as maps and street directories. The advice is clear yet there is a tentative hope expressed including its own unmaking: "No, don't trust maps, for they avoid the moment: ramps, barricades, diversions, Peace Lines. Though if there is an ideal map, which shows the city as it is, it may exist in the eye of that helicopter ratcheting overhead […] Or it may exist in photographs" (Carson, 1989, p. 58). Yet the example of the 'proper photograph' is found inaccurate, and photographs serve rather different purposes than maps do, thus the concept of

the ideal map at once vanishes. Still, the photograph reminds the speaker of an experience of being interrogated by officers during one of his ventures in a particular part of the city, and the recollection of the event brings together images of photograph and map:

> The questions are snapped at me like photographs.
>
> The map is pieced together bit by bit. I am this map which they examine, checking it for error, hesitation, accuracy; a map which no longer refers to the present world, but to a history, these vanished streets; a map which is this moment, this interrogation, my replies (Carson, 1989, p. 63).

The section with the fitting title "Revised Version" completes Carson's circle. Contemplating a book on changes in Belfast, the idea of a proposed map of the city is found, but from the eventual failure in completing that map a new conclusion can be drawn: the proposed but never realised map "lives on in our imagination, this plan of might-have-beens, legislating for all the possibilities, guaranteed from censure by its non-existence. For maps cannot describe everything, or they describe states of mind" (Carson, 1989, p. 67). As a result there can be a lack of maps showing what there is, and there can be maps which show items which do not exist, which leads to the consequence that maps lose much of their supposed objectivity and subsequent authority. Maps in the end are seen as human constructs which can show similar anomalies as any other human construct and the conclusion is drawn: "*The city is a map of the city*" (Carson, 1989, p. 69).

Carson's treatment of Belfast takes another turn in his tentative autobiography entitled *The Star Factory*. This work operates on a different scale in terms of the temporal dimension, as it is principally concerned with the poet's childhood and early youthful experiences, and such a timescale offers a broader perspective. Paradoxically the image of the city appears less prone to change over this expanded timescale, and Carson is ready to produce the illusion that over time the essence of the city is unchanging and stable, unlike in the more recent context of the Troubles addressed in the poems. The autobiography, however, does not create an unchallenged pattern of linearity – rather it presents sets of pictures from across a period of time, similarly to the Joycean pattern of *The Portrait*, and it employs a digressive and associational technique in which one memory quickly launches a set of other memories into motion, creating a web rather than a tangible narrative line. This works towards the stabilising of the image of the city, since the elimination of the observation of subtle details as functions of time allows for the overlooking of minute change, leading to an illusion of permanence.

The poles in relation to which Carson constructs and reconstructs his Belfast are the pairs of map/labyrinth and language/writing. The city as represented in literature requires the recognition and the addressing of the conflict of spatial and temporal, but as cities are themselves located in the matrix of these categories no final resolution can be made as to which takes precedence over the other. The literary reconstruction of a city is thus always a construction at the same time, but as cities themselves change, their literary equivalents are required to do so too. Both the city and its literary counterpart can be seen as a process rather than a finished product, which echoes the conviction of Kevin Lynch: "There is no final result, only a continuous succession of phases" (Lynch, 1960, p. 2).

Ciaran Carson's Belfast, both the real and the literary one, reflects this dynamism of the city as being a process rather than a product, as is indicated by his simultaneous acts of reconstruction and construction. Though the concept of the map that he so frequently employs to illustrate the city in literature is apparently a stable and objective point of reference, he increasingly considers it as writing, which opens up the concept to allow change to be represented. The map becomes an imaginative construct, unreliable on occasion, yet with the possibility of an ideal state, though such a possibility is only a tentative idea. As an

imaginative construct, however, it can achieve what seems highly unlikely at first thought: it can become identical to its object of representation, since eventually "*The city is a map of the city*" (Carson, 1989, p. 69).

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