

“Second Time Round”: Recent Northern Irish History in *For All We Know* and Ciaran Carson’s Written Arts

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Abstract

This paper analyses how Ciaran Carson’s *For All We Know* (2008) adds to other disciplinary approaches to the challenges of re-presenting the past. The representation of history is a controversial field, as much of the radical tradition of history debates in Marx, Derrida, Foucault and Kristeva indicates. Controversies over history are also prevalent in Belfast and Northern Ireland where history seems to have intervened upon the life of individual people more brutally and insistently than in most other places in the Western world in the latter decades of the last century. Carson is one of the many acclaimed poets who try to come to terms with the almost incomprehensible historical predicament of the Troubles in Northern Ireland. What is the poet to write about in times of murder and mayhem? Why? How? How does poetry relate to the representations of the past and the emergence into unknown futures? Carson has endured the tragedies, the turmoil, and their bearings upon the peace-emerging society in Belfast throughout his whole life. *For All We Know* constitutes a historical document, which in its poetic creativity and formal strategies, supplements other attempts to account for life in Belfast and Northern Ireland during the Troubles.

Key words: Ciaran Carson, *For All We Know*, Irish Poetry, Northern Ireland, Belfast, Marx, Derrida, Foucault, Kristeva

Ciaran Carson’s remarkable volume of poetry *For All We Know*, from 2008, is an important historical document, “as the jittery present became history,” as the poem “Peace” (55) states. This poem strikes the nerve, atmosphere and uncertainties of the pivotal historical turning point in the Troubles of Northern Ireland, just as much as the volume’s multivalent title indicates collective wonder about knowledge, with assonances that range from the bible to popular music. Carson’s volume of poetry attempts to understand by aesthetic means the past from which it stems. In the multiple writing of the histories of the Troubles in Northern Ireland Carson’s volume of poetry constitutes a book of written arts and a document of history.

History, in Ireland, South and North, is not a finished project, nor a stable object. Few philosophers have contributed more to critical discourses on the concept of history than Karl Marx. His radicality,

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historical and dialectical materialism, and his theories of international solidarity and class struggle reoriented the principles for thinking history. His revolutionary theses, as Jacques Derrida and Terry Eagleton argue, still have contemporary relevance, regardless of Fukuyama's postulation of the end of history and today's prevalence of conservatism and neoliberalism.¹ Marx's revolutionary ideas offered a powerful ideological dynamo to the discussions about the past and the energetic debates of social engagement that have continued since the 1960s, a decade that also witnessed the Paris rebellion and the recrudescence of civil war in Northern Ireland. Derrida's scepticism of Western metaphysics, origins and rigid categories of research disciplines, opened up to myriads subversive histories of the suppressed and the marginalised. Foucault's introduction of the many histories of cognition, punishment and sexuality gave priority to the significance of competing discourses for reconstructions and reconsiderations of the past. Kristeva's blending of semiotics with psychoanalytics widens this pluralised perspective within the radical tradition of liberating accounts of history from old structures. Kristeva's focus on text and the feminine has altered the patriarchal myopia. The grand narratives of history have been splintered in the wake of these philosophical projects. The study of past dates, personages and events has been expanded with an interest for immaterial phenomena and cultural contours. Chronology is no longer the only imperative, and traditional historical sources have been supplemented with arts and popular culture. Feminist interests have readdressed patriarchy. The significance of language and textual characteristics in the writing of history can no longer be ignored. The previously suppressed, and supposedly marginal, more recently have come to supplement the traditionally dominant and central. History is no longer what it used to be; it has become contested and plural.

Perhaps this contention and pluralisation of history is nowhere in Europe more tangible than in Northern Ireland, since the explosion in 1968 of the historically strained relations between Ireland and England that had been temporarily curtailed by the Anglo-Irish Treaty in 1921. "The lever must be applied in Ireland. That is why the Irish Question is so important for the social movement in general," Marx proclaimed

¹ See Jacques Derrida's *hauntology* (Derrida 1994), and Terry Eagleton's vindication of Marx (Eagleton 2011). See also Fukuyama 1992.

(quoted in Golman and Kunina 1972: 284).² Ireland assumed an increasingly pivotal role in the writings of Marx and Hegel. This revolutionary Marxist tradition manifested itself in the Irish republican and socialist leader James Connolly's Irish Citizen Army and his engagement in the Easter Rebellion, 1916. Eamonn McCann has maintained the Marxist position in the Troubles (McCann 1993). Irish history has, however, been contentious for a long time before Marx's radical theories and has predominantly been divided along the traditional dichotomy of nationality, religion and politics. Poets offer different voices and views of historical events, both during the Irish Revival and the Troubles.

Throughout the Troubles from 1968-1998, poets contributed considerably to the writing of histories in and of Northern Ireland. How writers in Northern Ireland contributed continuously to writing the histories of their own place and time as they unfolded day by day has been convincingly argued by Michael Parker, in *Northern Irish Literature, 1956-2006: The Imprint of History* (2007), and John Goodby, in *Irish Poetry since 1950: From Stillness into History* (2000). No writer could possibly escape the horrendous conditions of his or her own situation. The lines of life and death in troubled times fill the poetry of 1995 Nobel Laureate, Seamus Heaney, of Paul Muldoon, Maeve McGuckian, Ciaran Carson, Michael Longley, Padraic Fiacc, James Simmons and Frank Ormsby.³ To some extent their struggle with history and poetry, violence and verse, war and arts echoes the aesthetics challenges of the poets of the Irish revival, in particular the concerns of W. B. Yeats, in the stern face of the Easter Rising, the War of Independence and the Civil War. As the poetry of Yeats, Irish and English histories, as well as the later rounds of revisionism succinctly reveal, the versions of these events depend upon a range of different positions and criteria.

The Troubles and the Easter Agreement of 1998 introduced new concerns, and retrospection provides alternative evaluation of the past.

² For easy access to the question of Ireland in Marx's writing, see "Marx and Engels on Ireland," in the *Marx and Engels Internet Archive*: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/subject/ireland/index.htm>. Accessed 20 May 2014.

³ See their respective poetry, or anthologies, such as Ormsby 1992; Ormsby 1979.

David McKittrick et al., in *Lost Lives* (2006) offer a unique scholarly and factual presentation with maps and statistics of 3720 victims of the Troubles: it is the great book of the dead of the Troubles. Graham Dawson's comprehensive *Making Peace with the Past: Memories, Trauma and the Irish Troubles* (2007) examines how individual and collective memory of a divided society deal with the enormous death toll and the widespread violence and conflict. Susan McKay's *Bear in Mind These Dead* (2008) offers a gripping insight into the lives of friends, families and communities, the damaged, the missing, the dead and those who barely survived. These three examples focus on the future, by accounting for and trying to come to grips with the complex history and human loss of the recent past. Still, poetry offers yet another dimension, and Ciaran Carson's *For All We Know* (2008), which is the focus of this essay, is not only important in the retrospective making sense of these disastrous three decades in modern European history, but his poetry also connects with Marx and subsequent radical discourses on history.

The title of Carson's historical document emphasises by its sense of laconic oxymoron exactly the opposite of what it says, that is how little we know. This is an appropriate ambivalent statement on the quest for knowledge in and of the past, and on the mêlée of fact, fiction and truth during the Troubles and their aftermath. What do we know, of ourselves, of our fellow beings, of the society in which we live, of the afterlife, and of the past processes that form our sense of self, the shape of society and the ideologies and metaphysics of our specific time and place? Such philosophical speculations upon the human condition are strengthened in the volume's title, by its allusions to the bible, for example 2 Corinthians 5: 1-21, and Romans 8:28, and the concomitant religious questions of divine omniscience and human ignorance. Allusions of the title also suggest a secular world of sweet music and romantic film, first and foremost to Karlin, Royer and Griffin's soft rock song, "For All We Know," composed for the 1970 film, *Lovers and Other Strangers*, and popularised by Shirley Bassey in the UK and by the Carpenters in the US. This song is the second hit with this title: J. Fred Coots and Sam M. Lewis's "For All We Know" from 1934 has figured in the charts at different times, with artists such as Hal Kemp, Isham Jones, Dinah Washington, Nat King Cole and Rosemary Clooney. The inquisitive affirmation of the title, which combines the sacred and the secular in a statement of collective wonder, runs like a refrain throughout the verses:

“for all I knew” (Carson 2008a: 49), “for all I know” (56), “that I don’t know the half of it?” (81), “as I knew by the end” (110). The title and its re-modulations, which point to the limitations of human reason and the uncertainty of the human condition, also include the questioning of history, the personal as well as a public that runs throughout the poems. As opposed to discourses on history and facts, assertions and affirmative notes of McKittrick, Dawson and McKay, Carson’s volume captures the intellectual quandary and emotional trauma of uncertainty—can we trust what we think we know, from the numerous presentations, fabrications and retractions of facts and statements, and our own memory?—apart from not knowing at all. *For All We Know* becomes a historical document on the doubt and precariousness of ordinary life during the Troubles.

Carson’s book was published in 2008 to great critical acclaim. The volume was selected as the spring choice of the Poetry Book Society, and was shortlisted for the T. S. Eliot Prize, the Costa Poetry Award and the *Irish Times* Poetry Now Award. The aesthetic aspects of the book were acclaimed by many. Alan Jenkins highlights Carson concern with form and describes him as “a poet of exceptional formal dexterity and élan, a kind of one-man Irish OULIPO” (Jenkins 2008: 6). Aida Edemariam comments upon the connection between form, war and history:

Artistic purity of purpose is a laudable thing to hang on to in a war zone; but perhaps it is also a fantasy, or an aesthetic form of bad faith. Carson’s poems reveal the impossibility of this kind of transcendence even as they strive for it: part of the impact of his poetry about the Troubles is that it is so troubled, all jagged edges, terse, harsh; but also, importantly, because it is full of all the layers of meaning and history, often contradictory, that the simplest words can carry. (Edemariam 2009)

Edemariam’s assessment captures well the complex and paradoxical nature of Carson’s verses, and their confusing and contradictory form. In fact, the redoubling, elusive and multi-shifting form of this narrative poem sequence complicates the contents to such a degree that a concise outline of story and plot might be helpful. A series of seventy poems in *For All We Know* charts the love relationship of Nina and Gabriel, from their early courtship to Nina’s death, against the background of the Troubles. This complexity represents on a formal level the chaos and confusion experienced by people in a society in civilisatory crisis, a

creative dimension of narrativity, which is normally always left out in chronological, logical and argumentative accounts of history. It can be argued that such formal presentations of private and public history characterise poetry much more than other types of historical documents.

For All We Know renders a great love story. The collective “we” of the title suggests wide existential and social significance. However, the first person plural pronoun concerns primarily the two lovers in Belfast. Each of the seventy poems could all be read as separate instalments of their love story. This love story is one of great possibilities and complexities—features of love that are reflected in the poem’s composition. Carson explains:

For some years, off and on, I’d been trying to write a conventional love poem, but all my efforts seemed false and contrived, and my suspicions that I was temperamentally incapable of doing anything in that genre seemed confirmed. [. . .] I began to think of the project as a journey into a mysterious forest of language and translation. Besides my native city of Belfast, the poems are set in the cities I have visited: Paris, Berlin, Leipzig, Dresden. And the lovers in the poems often wonder who they might be, what they are to each other, and how they remember each other. I found myself telling a story of the stories they tell each other, and the translations they make of each other. (Carson 2008b: 5)

This love poem, as indicated by Carson, is an unconventional one. Novelty in form reflects the poet’s artistic temperament, but also emphasises the sense of unique love—contrary to the love motif, for instance, in Yeats’s poetry, which is predominantly marked by unattainability. Furthermore, the faithful use of couplets in these verses solders the love of the couple, just as the extended fourteen-syllabic lines indicate their expansive love, and the sonnet variations of 14, 28 and 56 lines indicate the variety of their amorous experiences. This aesthetic account of individual love relations articulates an alternative to the Marxist views on base materialism, mass society and political transformation. Carson’s poetic love narrative also distinguishes itself in other ways. Against the background of any history on the Troubles, mostly focusing on accounts of atrocities, violence, hatred and murder, Carson’s *For All We Know* focuses on love in the conflict.

This love story is, nevertheless, entangled with troublesome history: “Again you are trapped in the smouldering streets” (Carson 2008a: 40). Many of the titles vibrate more with the Troubles of Belfast than echo the troubles of their relationship: “Treaty” (19, 68), “The Assignment”

(22, 71), “Never Never” (38, 89), “Fall” (35, 85), “Collaboration” (41, 91), and “Peace” (55, 105). The atrocities and the atmosphere of the Troubles surround and impinge upon the love relationship, sometimes leaving the lovers daunted and incapacitated—victims to the great powers of history, in line with Marx’s ideas of history. Foucault, alternatively, addresses the relationship between power and knowledge in more detail. He applies the concept “power/knowledge” to denote the conjunction of power and knowledge throughout his histories of clinics, madness and sexuality. On the one hand, an individual or a group—Nina and Gabriel in Carson’s love poem—are simultaneously defined by others, and, to some extent, have to accept to be someone that others have defined, to be objectified. On the other hand, power may be connected to those who define their own identity; people—Nina and Gabriel—have the power to define themselves, and knowledge may produce subjects instead of objects. In Northern Ireland, during the Troubles, identity and love could frequently depend largely upon the power/knowledge of others, as much as that of the individual. Throughout the poetic presentation of the love relations between Gabriel and Nina, helicopters hover incessantly over the scenes (Carson 2008a: 23, 25, 29, 65, 73), surveillance and suspicion are prevalent (30, 41, 55, 69, 90, 91), and double agents appear frequently (33, 52, 56). The two lovers become objects, often suspicious ones, in the eyes of the authorities, the police, the paramilitaries and the divided communities, and sometimes even in their own eyes: “we became our own shadowy police watching us” (18). Belfast is a battlefield that also affects their intimate love relations. The couple are besieged by the Troubles, their rendezvous are often disrupted, and their friends often disappear: “We were sequestered in The Crown after the explosion” (85), and “We were in the Ulster Milk Bar I think they blew up back in the Seventies” (24), two of the poems record. Explosion precipitates upon romance in “Fall”: “I watched your lips frame a silent NO / as the bomb went off at the end of the block and drowned all // conversation” (35). “Revolution” describes episodes of the Troubles: “The spinning mills going up in an avalanche of flame, the vacillating gun-turret of the Saracen tank. The tick and tack of the Remote Bomb Disposal Unit” (73). Another example of this is seen in “Second Take,” “Most of the witnesses we knew then are dead if not gone,” or “they were given a new identity” (33). “Peace” captures problems and frustration after the Easter Agreement: “the

disabled guns that still manage to kill” (55). The lovers seem victims of history also when they go abroad. Episodes in Paris, Berlin, Leipzig and Dresden often take place with WW2 as a backdrop, just as WW1 often was Yeats’s backdrop in his poetry. Undoubtedly, all the episodes of the Troubles intensify the romance, and function as a metaphor for the relationship between the two lovers, but also reveal how the events that make history shape the fate of individuals. Nina and Gabriel often seem powerless victims to the forces of history in a Marxist sense. In Foucauldian terms, they are often objectified by the power and knowledge of others, whether these others are defined as persons, social institutions, cognitive structures or political discourses.

Nina and Gabriel live in times when the powers that be impinge upon them. But they are also self-empowering individuals. They demonstrate many of Foucault’s redefinitions of the relations between power and knowledge. Power and knowledge may be connected to subjects who define their own identity and who resist or interact creatively with the powers that impinge upon them. Although the Troubles to a large extent define the conditions of the two lovers, they refuse to become merely the victims of war. Nina and Gabriel’s love stays strong among the many divisions and opposing forces. They manoeuvre deftly in the information power play and among double agents—is one of them, or are both of them double agents themselves? They improve their own situation in many ways. Their jobs are inspiring and allow for professional stays abroad. They define their own identities and relationships and they overcome tragic circumstances, cognitive strictures and the historical challenges of their own time. They assume knowledge and power and subjectify themselves in Foucauldian terms. The sense of history in *For All We Know* is also not less confining than Marx’s idea of history. Nina and Gabriel facilitate their daily lives, for instance, with the first Apple computer (29), by the development of modern means of transportation and tourism, and by shopping for second-hand clothes (25). The gender balance in the poem also generates a sense of self-empowerment from historical strictures. But it has to be admitted that traditional roles between man and woman remain intact to some extent. Their relationship is seen mainly from Gabriel’s perspective, rendering him the subject, and Nina the object of their love relations: He is the “I,” while Nina is the “she” in the poems. Still, their stories are not only his stories. Nina is an equal partner: she leads an

independent professional life, her family history is on par with his, her separate voice is heard as clearly as his, and her stories provide narrative equilibrium. Nina subjectifies herself and acts in a textual space that has been theoretically described by, among others, Kristeva. Thus the relationship breaks with the conventional gender balance, which is so often reinforced in communities in conflict, and often retained in various accounts of conflict. Carson's *For All We Know* is not only a great love story, it is also a love story that departs from many historical confinements, in a series of poems that offer an alternative historical document.

The overall organising form of the volume also reflects and interweaves romance and history. Carson's book is divided into two parts, each containing thirty-five poems—perhaps a figural mark of their years together. All thirty-five titles of the first part are repeated in the second part of the book. Both sections begin with “Second Time Around” and end with “Zugzwang.” Such a structure of separation and repetition strikes a number of possible interpretations. First of all, the division of the book into two separate parts suggests the dichotomy and the union of two individual lovers. In the larger context of Irish history, this binary structure also captures the many divisions that surround the couple: the bipartite condition of Belfast, the strained relations between Ireland and England, the powers of the Allies and the Axis of WW2, and perhaps, in the intertextual fray, the pitting of the themes of history and love in Carson against the same themes in Yeats's poetry. This creative two-fold structure also relates to the couple's own subjectification. In many cases, the poems refer more directly to the couple's family and history, while others contribute to the creative constitution of self, more by intertextual allusiveness. Furthermore, the binary composition reiterates the volume's couplets into a larger format, inviting bifocal readings and re-readings of the double poems, and replaying some of the musical motifs that echo throughout the collection. This reflects the book's sense of Kristevan intertextual duplicity, while the double structure also connects with Marx's statements on the repetitions of history.

The repetition of structure, titles and love story references two of Karl Marx's famous statements from the first paragraph of *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Luis Napoleon*. The first statement is that history repeats itself, “first as tragedy, then as farce.” The second is the

statement that “Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past.”⁴ Three poems in *For All We Know*, in both sections, include the word “second”: “Second Time Round” (Carson 2008a: 15, 63), “Second Hand” (26, 76), and “Second Take” (33, 83). “Second Time Around,” the title of the first poem in the first part of the book, is repeated as the first poem in the second part of the book, and appears as a paradigmatic poem in the volume. This enacts the legacy of Marx and engages with alternative awareness of recording history. It also suggests a second aspect to history: literature.

Both “Second Time Around” (15-16) and “Second Time Around” (63-64) offer touching stories of love. The first poem portrays a romantic evening dinner with reminiscence of earlier blissful moments. The second poem retains the same atmosphere—is it perhaps the same evening, perhaps another similar evening, or a different occasion?—but evokes different memories. The fourteen couplets emphasise the amorous two-someness of the lovers, and conjoin across the divide of pages, time, cultures and life. The admixture of French and English languages and the snippets of an old French ballad, possibly associated with war memories—“*La nuit s’approche*”—strengthen ambience and communion. Colloquial idioms and easy conversation place the two lovers as equal. The hermeneutic possibilities of bread, in the first conjugal sonnet: “The crust should crackle when you break the bread,” “the bread you bought that morning not yet broken,” (15, 16), and of car driving in the second poem: “I am learning to drive on the wrong side of the road / in your Renault 5 Alpine,” “when the man looms into the windscreen in a split second” (63, 64), include a range of erotic, sacred, cultural and morphological interpretations in the first poem, and a sense of erotics, gender role change and journeying in the second. The shadow sonnets conjoin and complement each other in affectionate and artistic harmony. However, as the title and all the reminiscence suggest, this is most likely a second attempt to maintain the relationship, a rebirth of old

⁴ Karl Marx, “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte.” *The Marxist Internet Archive*: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/ch01.htm>. Accessed 20 May 2014.

passion. This sense of secondness includes the history in which the lovers live as much as their own personal histories.

“Second Time Around” incorporates the memories of the two lovers in a larger panorama of history. The couple end their romantic dinner “spreadeagled on the patchwork double quilt / following the dips and gradients of the staggered repeats / four widow aunts had stitched into it fifty years before // the last war, one of them your ancestor” (15-16). Love and death, peace and war, ancestry and reproduction are woven together by enjambment and lacunae with sensitive textile touch in these verses. Their car drive ends as “a man looms into the windscreen in a split second / rain pouring from his glistening black ulster and black helmet” (64). The final four words allude forcefully to Northern Ireland in its naming of overcoat and description of headgear. Thus, the two redoubled sonnets point towards WW2 and the Troubles, the two periods of conflict and violence that continuously shadow the two lovers, throughout the poetic narrative. These multiple reiterations of title, love, form and history connect with Marx’s statement on the tragedy and farce of history. Carson’s generation of secondness and Marx’s adage also correspond with WW2 and the Troubles, two continuations of the tragedies of WW1 and the Irish War of Independence that can easily be seen as farcical in a resigned view of the human condition. The shadow of WW2 and the explosions and deaths of the Troubles also impinge upon the lovers in a way Marx would recognise: “Men make their own history [. . .] but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past.”⁵ Men and women are often objectified by war, a prevalent theme also in much poetry of the Troubles, where we see a pitting of the individual as second to grander narratives. Yeats’s play *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, for instance, can be seen as one of such primary texts that explores this narrative (see also Coughlan 1991: 88-111). Many of these aspects of “Second Time Around,” and *For All We Know*, run tangential to Marx’s two statements regarding the repetitive unfolding of history, and the circumscribed position of the individual in a larger picture. Nevertheless, second thought normally suggests insight and critical renewal, and Carson’s poetry also vibrates with renewed ideas of Marx’s theses.

⁵ See footnote 4 above.

In Foucauldian terms, the couple in “Second Time Around” constitute themselves as subjects in this two-folded poem, and the surrounding verses, and thereby uphold their own power, according to what they know. Nina and Gabriel make their own stories and form their own identities and life, under difficult historical circumstances. Formation of self and relationships requires diverse knowledge and personal fortitude in times of war and in relations across divides. The two lovers speak different languages but share a culture of multi-discursive awareness in times and places of war and complex alliances: France during WW2, and Northern Ireland during the Troubles. The two lovers also liberate themselves from Marx’s subjugation of the individual to the grand forces of historical circumstance. In Carson’s presentation of the story of the lovers the chronology is complicated and intermingled. Their time perspective is determined by emotional intensity and personal memory, more than clock tyranny and calendar confinement. Their love story starts somewhere in the middle by celebrating their love; the beginning and the end of their time together is secondary. The second line of the first “Second Time Around” reads: “It was our anniversary, whether first or last” (15). They create their own time and define their own significance. The two lovers are also less confined by their own conditions than Marx indicates. The couple’s self-empowerment corresponds better with Foucault’s allowance of the possibilities of the individual in his continuous address to relationships between power and knowledge, than with the objectification of individuals in Marx’s historical materialism. Carson’s imaginative recapitulation of the position of individual lovers in troubled times and places also runs parallel to Foucault’s inclusion of literature and arts as historical sources in his many critical re-readings of history.

“Second Time Around,” the first and the second poem, register Marx’s resigned articulation on repetitive history and respond to Foucault’s deregulations of knowledge and power structures. The poems also record a second dimension of history, an aesthetic one to which Marx’s historical materialism does not pay much heed, both to which Foucault’s activation of alternative historical sources opens up. The double initial poem, as so many of the poems, also records a lot of recent history in literature, not least Ciaran Carson’s own oeuvre. “Second Time Around” contains its own history of literature. There is an obvious allusion in the title to Yeats’s “The Second Coming,” with all the

thematic concerns and stylistic novelty of the 1923 Anglo-Irish Nobel Laureate's canonical poem. This reference also activates for meditation the similarities and differences between the poetry of Ireland at war in 1916-1923 and the poetry of the Troubles. Most, perhaps all, of Carson's poems in the volume record a history of literature. Other pivotal poems reflect on history in the context of Ireland North and South, then and now, or from a larger geographical perspective. Some other examples are "Collaboration" (41) and "Peace" (55), which take the 1995 Northern Irish Nobel Laureate Seamus Heaney's poems "Punishment," and "Whatever You Say," as their points of departure, and "Michael Longley's "Ceasefire," which relates directly to Heaney's "Peace;" "Filling the Blank" (104), which recites the traditional Irish poem, "I am Ireland," and "Le Mot Just" (77), which echoes Flaubert's incessant quest for the right word. Most of all, "Second Time Around" records by creative strategies Carson's own oeuvre. Its first sentence, "*Ce n'est pas comme le pain de Paris*" (15) sets the note for this self-referentiality that runs throughout the volume. Firstly, the French of this line echoes "La Je-Ne Sais-Quoi," and the priorities of multilinguality in Carson's collection *First Language* (1993). Secondly, the French language and ambience in this volume references the importance of French language, literature and culture to Carson's poetics, which manifest itself most distinctly in his translations of Rimbaud, Baudelaire and Mallarmé in *The Alexandrine Plan* (1998) but appears consistently in his writing. Thirdly, the italics of the French line suggest a concrete source of quotation, a concretisation of French in general, or a citational trick to send critics searching for a source that does not exist. "*Le pain*," which reappears in the poem as "*baton*" and "bread" raises the dough of "Loaf" in *Belfast Confetti* (Carson 1989: 13-18). The "patchwork double quilt," which reappears as "*the broderie anglaise bodice*" (63), records the poem with the eponymous title that ends *The New Estate* (Carson 1988: 70-71), and "Patchwork" that ends *The Irish for No* (Carson 1987: 59-63), as well as the metaphor of textility that weaves itself in all volumes of Carson—the great cartographer and chronicler of cultural contours of Linnenapolis Belfast. "*L'heure bleue*" (Carson 2008a: 63) recirculates the widespread colour and crepuscular setting of day that appear in numerous poems, and possibly points to the many ekphrastic aspects of Carson's poetry. Both poems, "Second Time Around," record histories of literature and Carson's own poetry. Their formal features also relate to

history, both one of literature and the one of the historical conditions from which this literature stems.

Radical novelty adds energy and change to the secondarity of Carson's two poems "Second Time Around," and *For All We Know*. The poems endeavour, very successfully, to tell an old story in a new mode, as Carson's explication of the volume's coming into being confirms: "I'd been trying to write a conventional love poem, but all my efforts seemed false and contrived [. . .]. I began to think of the project as a journey into a mysterious forest of language and translation" (Carson 2008b: 5). Love in the wars constitutes a genre of its own, and many texts can be categorised as clichés. Carson's knowledge of convention and his imaginative powers, his second thoughts on the creative challenge, result in renewal. This symphony of varied sonnets with prolonged lines suits the thematic concerns of self-empowering lovers under duress of historical circumstance, as Carson's innovative use of the sonnet renews the flexible conventional form, and distinguishes itself from the experimental use of the sonnet in the poetry of fellow poets from Northern Ireland, such as Seamus Heaney, Paul Muldoon and Michael Longley. This radical novelty, which stems from canonical insight, and which bears upon our understanding of history and adds a source to the accounting of events in Belfast during the Troubles, has a second source. Carson's citation of Glenn Gould on the form and functions of fugue as the volume's epigraph—"Fugue must perform its frequently stealthy work with continuously shifting melodic fragments that remain, in the 'tune' sense, perpetually finished" (Carson 2008a: 11)—suggests a second formal method to the composition of the two "Second Time Around" poems and the whole volume. Gould's statement also runs parallel to a nuanced and complex view of history. *For All We Know* flashes its own status, both in ground-breaking content and form, as a historical document that records the literature and artistic moods that are frequently omitted from other types of history.

Carson's great love story of Nina and Gabriel contributes to recording how "the jittery present became history." The war setting keeps them in an objectified position, whereas the romance motif provides them with an opportunity to construct themselves as subjects, not entirely victimised by the Troubles. Their conjugation also presents a parity of esteem and a gender balance their surroundings seem to lack. *For All We Know*, with Nina and Gabriel at the centre of this new

narrative, offers a different and imaginative story of the well-known dramatic events of life in Belfast during the Troubles that can be studied in the reports by historians, politicians, researchers and reporters. Carson's Foucauldian challenge of old concepts of history and power, and its post-structuralist innovation of text and narrativity, revitalises Marxist theses, and indicates new ways of understanding history. Carson's creative poetry focuses on the love and imagination of two ordinary people who enjoy arts and culture, and who refuse to be overwhelmed by a limited idea of their own time and place, in opposition to the focus on religious Manichaeism, national concerns, class struggle and individual frailty. The volume also records its own literary history, from Yeats to Carson himself. "Second Time Around," in fact, could be seen as a symbolic title for traditional history reconsidered from other perspectives. This poem presents the wisdom, creativity and change to be taken from previous texts, a sense of Kristevan radical poetics. This type of intertextuality not only allows for alternative articulations, but also signals a transposition of signifying systems and the struggle for discursive positionality—the criteria for historiography that often go unstated. Such a self-conscious and novel narrative of historical representation, which records by poetic creativity the moods, emotions and mentalities of both sexes in a particular troubled place and time, constitutes a historical source. Carson's *For All We Know* is an admirable work of art, and it is also a historical document.

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