

## *Eccentric Sonnets: Ciaran Carson's poetics in The Twelfth of Never*

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**Abstract.** The dialogic nature of language use and the impossibility of an uninfluenced work of literature complicate the notion of poet-as-originator. Yet originality persists as a sought-after quality in literature for both writers and readers. The article focuses on the Northern Irish poet, writer, and translator Ciaran Carson, known for his fascination with language as a medium and his linguistic experimentalism. In 1998, Carson published two collections of poetry: *The Alexandrine Plan*, translations of sonnets by Mallarmé, Baudelaire and Rimbaud, and *The Twelfth of Never*, a sequence of his own sonnets – both in rhyming alexandrines, suggestive of simultaneous composition. In its borrowed form, *The Twelfth of Never* offers a kaleidoscopic montage of motifs and discourses from Irish history, literature, folklore, music, and myth, and flits to and fro between Ireland, France, and Japan, evoking a never-land in which “everything is metaphor and simile”.

The article adopts a neuro-anthropological view of human culture as distributed cognition and of art as a way of knowing and self-reflectively putting the world together for both artist and audience. The analysis of Carson's poems seeks to explicate how recognisable characters, emblems, and rhetoric appear in and are altered by unfamiliar guises and settings; how cultural symbols and literary forms are interrupted in the act of representing; and how the dream-like quality of the collection depends on the looping and metamorphosing of motifs, images and voices from one poem to another. I suggest that this does not generate a chaotic textual product but amounts to an engaging reflection on the nature of originality in the making and making sense of poetry.

**Keywords:** sonnets; originality; otherness; eccentricity; cognition; recognition

But open

the book and  
look into it you

shall find the words  
that are and were  
before you speaking of  
which the language

is none that you  
know or ever knew

yet even so can  
spot repeats in

it as one might  
jot notes

on a stave looking  
for its tune.

Ciaran Carson 2010: 69

## Opening words

The title of Ciaran Carson's 1998 collection of poetry *The Twelfth of Never* is an idiom of improbability or impossibility – something due to happen on the twelfth of never will never come to pass; it is also the title of a 1957 Johnny Mathis song which includes the line “Until the twelfth of never, I’ll still be loving you”, denoting a love that will never end. The expression calls into being a date that does not exist on any calendar but that is conceivable nonetheless, a time that is simultaneously a non-time. The collection opens with an epigraph (a dictionary entry for “St Tib’s Eve”) and the first poem of the collection (“Tib’s Eve”) on facing pages. The epigraph reads: “St Tib’s Eve. *Never*. A corruption of *St Ubes*. There is no such saint in the calendar as *St Ubes*, and therefore her eve falls on the ‘Greek Kalends’, neither before Christmas Day nor after it. – Brewer’s Dictionary of Phrase and Fable”. This reference source is a highly idiosyncratic work first published in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and intended for the growing number of people without higher education who wanted to understand the origins of phrases and allusions in literature. However, Carson’s epigraph confounds

as much as it clarifies, for it names and calls into being a saint and a day that have never existed and links them to the ancient Roman phrase (“the Greek kalends”) alluding to a time that will probably never come – the “kalends” was a feature of the Roman calendar that had nothing correspondent in the Greek calendar. As such, it is another naming of the nonexistent that renders it conceivable and brings it into being as a non-entity.

From the outset, the reader of this collection is alerted to the fact that words do not have the reality that they express but do have the potential to be what Blanchot terms “nothingness in action”, when a word “does not outlast itself in any way” and “disappears marvelously altogether and at once in its usage” (1982: 39–40). In cognitive terms, this usage is understood as the mental processing of the language user – both in the mind of the reader that stands between word and referent (Boase-Beier 2006: 104) and in the mind of the writer who – intuitively or in full awareness – explores and exploits the space opened up by the absence of a direct link between word and referent. This article sets out to explore this interplay of mind and language through an analysis of Carson’s sonnets that focuses on poet’s choices and reader reaction. It supplements two meticulous and illuminating studies which identify in Carson’s sonnet sequence a reappraisal of Ireland’s iconographies (Alexander 2010: 9, 133) and representations that fascinate the reader as they re-create reality and create fantasy (“the imagined unreal”) (Delattre 2013: 12, 20). I adopt Alexander’s unelaborated labelling of the sonnets as “eccentric” and develop it to accommodate my shift of focus to a reflection on the notion of and location of originality in literary creation.

On looking up St Tib’s Eve, I found plentiful explanations in a Newfoundland gazette. One cites a folklorist who claims that “Tibb’s Eve” has a calendar association with 23<sup>rd</sup> December (the eve of Christmas Eve) and the local habit of having an early Christmas tippie, thus extending the Christmas season into Advent (traditionally a time of abstinence) (Herridge) and eventually leading to a view of this as a period when “anything goes” (“tib’s eve”). Another cites an entry from Francis Grose’s 1796 *Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue*, which claims that Saint Tibb’s evening is “an Irish expression, and means ‘the evening of the last day’ as in ‘He will pay you on St. Tibb’s Eve’” (Dohey), allowing it to become an old-fashioned way of saying “probably never”. It has also been linked to the slang word “tobb” for a sexually promiscuous woman, a direct reference to a female cat. According to the same folkloric source, many English plays in the 1600s featured roles with the name Tibb; the characters inevitably provoked laughter, as the audience knew what to expect of them – if Tibb was a woman of loose morals, then *Saint Tibb* could only be a joke (Herridge). In sum, it speaks of ambiguity, incongruity, inappropriacy,

logical impossibility. And this was not the last time I would be driven to look up the origins and circulation of a word or a reference encountered in *The Twelfth of Never*.

What then of the first poem of the collection, in what sense does “Tib’s Eve” live up to its name, stripped as it is of its ill-fitting sainthood and hinting at a non-time? The poem opens with the first line of a well-known Church of Ireland hymn: “There is a green hill far away, without a city wall”, but veers away from that highly specific place in the biblical worldview “where the dear Lord was crucified, who died to save us all” (the second line of the hymn) to a mundane yet unfamiliar place “where cows have longer horns than any that we know.” The frame of reference suggested by the first line shifts once the Calvary reference is reverse-read as a rural setting at a remove. The poem then conjures up a series of images of the familiar defamiliarised, of the real and the surreal: “a moon of indigo” (almost but not quite the blue moon of the idiom of improbability “once in a blue moon”), “fairy cobblers,” “ghostly galleons” that “plough the shady Woods of True”, rivers that “run uphill to spill into the starry clouds” and “beds of strawberries . . . in the ocean blue”. Elements appear singly and in pairs, slightly altered and causing the reader to do a double-take; for example, “This is the land of the green rose and the lion lily, / Ruled by Zeno’s eternal tortoises and hares” seems to refer obliquely to the emblematic green and orange of Ireland’s opposing factions – though it is actually the orange *tiger* lily that is the symbol associated with the Northern Irish Orange Order. Likewise, the conflation of Zeno’s paradox of the tortoise that races Achilles with Aesop’s fable of the hare that races the tortoise both reveals and blurs the line between perception and association in the reader’s mind. Does the reader remember or even know that one race is attributed to a philosopher and the other to a fabulist? Or, is an alternative truth emerging with and within a line that posits Zeno’s tortoises and hares as the “eternal” rulers in a new space opened by the poem? The next line is paradoxically explicit about the nature of this land “where everything is metaphor and simile”, appearing to suggest that meaning will always be a question of deferral and indirection in the never-land of the poem.

The reader is primed to reflect on the fictionality and the reality of words while also inveigled into a consideration of source and reference, of what gives rise or root to the words on the page. One wonders at the end of the first poem who are the “somnambulists” of the last tercet that the reader is invited to accompany: “Somnambulists, we stumble through this paradise / From time to time, like words repeated in our prayers, / Or storytellers who convince themselves that truths are lies.” Whether listener or storyteller, reader or poet, believer or unbelieving, the promise and the premise seem to be that words will

simultaneously lead us on and lead us astray. It is possible, then, to read Carson's opening poem as a reflection on and of the adventure into and the encounter with the unknown that constitute both the making and the making sense of poetry. This is an endeavour that also lies at the heart of literary studies.

Reflection on the making of a work of the creative imagination is the subject and the substance of an essay by Hélène Cixous in which she writes, "I want the beforehand of a book" even as she recognises that "everything we read: remains" (1998: 25–26). She muses on the process of writing and how she loves "the creation as much as the created no, more". She writes in a fragmentary fashion that approximates her own thought processes on the creative process, which is always at a remove, always "essay", always "before" (*ibid.* 37). In flitting from "I" to "we" to "the author", she blends their roles as sense-makers in the process: "Following the pen, we advance into the unknown" (*ibid.* 26), "the author treats his or her matter without pretending to say the last word ... We don't have the last word: truth always has the word before, and we run out of breath at its heels" (*ibid.* 37). Her stops and starts, ostensibly splashed out onto the page, articulate her trust in proceeding "by apprehension, with non-comprehension ... until something breathes under the pen's beak", a practice tempered by her cautionary note that "the unhappy thing would be to believe we had found" (*ibid.* 27, 29). This view of the work as emerging from an uncertain, unknowable, and unattainable space applies to both the writer at the pre-verbal stage – that "pre-articulate sensing or intuition of the 'thing which we need to express'" (Falck 1995: 59) and to the reader encountering the words on the page – a mere "notation" for that "most elusive thing," the poem (Richards 1967: 326).

Cixous's essayistic probing corresponds to Carson's view of what he is doing as a poet: "anything I've written under the auspices of poetry involves a word-search, an exploration; and I don't know what I'll say until it's said. It's a discovery. In poetry, the destination should remain unknown until one arrives. Then one is pleasantly surprised." (Carson 2010: 235). It is that same notion of proceeding *through* not knowing but always on the alert to recognise that "something" when "it" emerges to eye and ear. This is what anthropologist Tim Ingold, in his aptly titled *Making*, specifies as "the observational engagement and perceptual acuity that allow the practitioner to follow what is going on, and in turn to respond to it"; it is "to practice an art of inquiry" (2010: 4-6). This suggests a view of poetry as a way of knowing, of art as cognition. Carson's anticipation of surprise in the face of "discovery" defeats Cixous's fear of being deluded into thinking that we have found, for to discover (from the Latin *discooperire*) is the "opposite of" or a "reversal of" (*dis-*) to "cover up" (*cooperire*) – it speaks of a forward-looking process that precedes the catching sight of that

which is there but concealed, unexposed, unnoticed. This in turn dispels notions of creating from nothing or of passively awaiting inspiration; the poet is engaged in exploratory, essayistic, “out-of-breath” searching (through language and thought) until the moment of revelation, which is actually a moment of recognition – a response – rather than some kind of divinely- or supernaturally-mediated experience.

### The Beforehand of the Book : The Mind of the Artist

The desire to understand this recognition fuels our fascination with the “beforehand” of a work. Thought processes being inaccessible to conscious reflection, most studies of literary creativity are based on connecting perceived images and ideas in literary works to images and ideas already in circulation. Another approach is to examine writers’ writing *about* their own work<sup>1</sup>. Ultimately, the dialogic nature of language use and the impossibility of an uninfluenced literary work complicate the notion of “writer-as-originator”. And yet originality persists as a sought-after quality in literature – for writers and readers. Robert Macfarlane identifies two contrasting narratives of literary creation:

One is a hallowed vision of creation as generation – which we might call *creatio* – the other a more pragmatic account of creation as rearrangement, which we might call *inventio*. [...] *Creatio* is associated with the artist, *inventio* with the artisan. *Creatio* exalts the individual author to the highest level, *inventio* abstracts the author into language, and erodes his or her powers of agency and intention. (Macfarlane 2007: 6)

He further suggests that a tension can be discerned in writers between an “egotistical affection for the idea of writer-as-originator” and an “intellectual interest in the idea of writer-as-arranger” (*ibid.* 16).

<sup>1</sup> For example, J. L. Lowes *The Road to Xanadu: A Study in the Ways of the Imagination* (1927) is a compelling and coherent account of the reading of Coleridge’s 72 notebooks (and many of the same books as the widely read Coleridge) in an attempt to glimpse “the incongruous, chaotic, and variegated jumble out of which emerged the two unique poems” (“The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” and “Kubla Khan”). He does so in full awareness that the functioning of Coleridge’s “shaping spirit of imagination” “remains intangible” and that it is he who is connecting ideas and images (Lowes [1927] 1955: 3–4).

In *The Artful Mind: Cognitive Science and the Riddle of Human Creativity* (2006), cognitive scientist and linguist Mark Turner and a team of researchers<sup>2</sup> investigate why and how the human mind evolved to be “artful”. “The artful mind” is a coinage that accommodates views of the mind as skilful in adapting means to ends, skilful in a cunning or crafty way, and artistic or characterized by creative skill; as such, it reframes Macfarlane’s distinction between artist and artisan. Turner’s point of departure is that human beings show “irrepressible impulses for artistic activity and understanding” (manifest in such things as decorative dress, art, language, mathematics, religion, and science), and his basic premise is that “to have a cognitively modern human mind is to be robustly artful, and conversely” (Turner 2006a: xv; 2006b: 94). In his chapter on “Art and Cognitive Evolution”, neuro-anthropologist Merlin Donald offers an overview of the cognitive principles, origins, and functioning of art. His assertion that art “arises” in the context of “distributed cognition” rests on his definition of human cultures as “distributed cognitive networks” in which worldviews and mental models are constructed and shared by the members of a society. This involves both the most abstract integrative regions of the brain and the “communities of mind” in which artists and audiences live; the sources of art are rooted in both. (2006: 3–4)

Art is both metacognitive, deriving individually and socially from the human capacity for self-observation and self-reflection, and constructivist, aimed at “the deliberate elaboration and refinement of mental models and worldviews” (through the brain’s integration of “perceptual and conceptual material over time”). As such, art is “instrumental” in providing societies with their “self-identifying” symbols, images, allegories, etc., expressive forms that artists both preserve and modify. Thus, Donald formulates a view of art as a form of “cognitive engineering”: an activity “intended to influence the minds of an audience” by constructing “representations that affect how people view the world” – even in the most narcissistic of cases where the only intended audience is the artist. (*ibid.* 4–5). The latter incidentally explains Carson’s anticipation of the writer’s surprise at and in the moment of recognition.

In spite of “careful crafting”, neither artist nor work can determine the cognitive outcome produced in others (*ibid.* 12). And yet, the artistic object “compels” reflection on the process that created it (*ibid.* 5) – on the mind of the artist, on Cixous’s “beforehand”. Donald sees artists as the “engineers” who start the process running and under whose “distant guidance” the audience gathers

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<sup>2</sup> A year-long research project (2001-2002) engaging fourteen prominent scholars from neuroscience, cognitive psychology, vision science, archaeology, evolutionary theory, art history, semiotics, sociology, and cultural history.

the “disparate pieces of evidence” placed before them, while ultimately drawing on their own experiences in reconstructing an interpretation or intention. Individual brains will do this in different ways and through different paths, even though the methods and designs of the artist are shaped within the larger social-cognitive network which all are part of and participate in. Likewise, even though artists may harbour or generate an illusion of separateness, the sources of their creativity remain partly personal and partly public. (*ibid.* 12–14).

Since the achievements of human culture are contingent on individual minds working together, any hope of individual originality depends on “becoming the conduit of new collisions of ideas or conjoining vectors on thoughts that have never before been brought together” (Donald 2002: 152, 299). The upshot for literary creation is that there can be no stand-alone new work, only more and other acts of self-reflectively knowing (piecing together) the world – by both writers and readers. Macfarlane highlights the inextricability of originality, influence, and reception in literary creation: “Originality is not an indwelling quality of writerly production, but instead a function of readerly perception, or more precisely readerly ignorance (the failure to discern a writer’s sources). [...] Creation is always, and appropriately anagrammatically, reaction.” (2007: 5). To define originality in terms of both perception and recognition is to locate it in the minds of both readers and writers. And yet, Cixous reminds us that the text is *all* that we have (“Everything we read: remains”): it is both the *only thing left* of the process of writing and *every subsequent reading* that it generates.

One influence on the beforehand of *The Twelfth of Never* does suggest itself. In 1998, Carson published two collections of poetry: *The Alexandrine Plan*, his “versions” of sonnets by Baudelaire, Mallarmé and Rimbaud in June, and *The Twelfth of Never*, a sequence of 77 of his own sonnets in November. The closeness of the dates of publication, the replication of the rhymed alexandrine form of the French sonnets in the English versions, and the adoption of the same form for his own sonnets are suggestive of simultaneous composition. Carson cites a desire to see “what interpretations might emerge” as his motivation for borrowing the constraints of the rhyme and metre of the French originals (Carson 2013: 12).

His approach to translating the French sonnets is exploratory and experimental; he makes explicit use of derivation (allowing French words to displace and distort the English), he shifts perspectives of time and place (allowing in a mix of contemporary Irish voices, registers, and cultural references). This blending of both language and matter extends to the conflation and othering

of poetic personae and poets<sup>3</sup>. It is most conspicuous in “Le Sonneur” (the bell-ringer), which becomes “The Sonneteer”; the new title is a neat acoustic and lexical shift that allows the poem’s “lonely campanologist” and the French and Irish sonneteers to proclaim as one: “I am that man. Alas! Most nights I dangle on / An anxious tangled cable” and “one of these fine days ... I’ll hang myself [...] with the *self-same* rope” (emphasis added). The “self-same rope” is the alexandrine line that constrains both Baudelaire and Carson as poets and that binds them together in the space of literature. This resonates with Carson’s notion of writing in one language under the influence of another, in the wake of other writers, and ultimately led on by words and the search for words that will speak to and for him:

I write in English but the ghost of Irish hovers behind it; and English itself is full of ghostly presences, of others who wrote before you, and words as yet unknown to you. Poetry’s a kind of dream-world. It is *other*, a word that the *American Heritage Dictionary* refers to the Indo-European root *al-*: important derivatives are *alarm*, *alert*, *ultimate*, *else*, *alien*, *alter*, *alias*, *alibi*, *allegory*, *parallel*, and *eldritch*, that eerie, otherworldly word. All these words will do for now. (2010: 235)

Carson’s view of literary creation and translation as “other” is not reducible to notions of arranging (putting in a row, in ranks, in order) or rearranging (the same elements in a different configuration). The Latin root *re-*, meaning “back” (to an original place) and “again”, is bound to notions of sameness not otherness; these are opposing notions.

### Carson’s Remaining Sonnets

Readers of poetry are familiar with poetic ambiguity; it engages them in juggling with meanings as they read, meanings generated by and feeding into the emerging poem. However, the epigraph and the opening poem of *The Twelfth of Never* seem less intent on providing the firm footing of a binding ambiguity than on allowing the reader to “stumble” through images and associations that multiply, directing attention to the diffraction of meaning and the very dispersal of attention itself. The remaining poems of the collection continue in similar vein, offering up a kaleidoscopic montage of motifs and

<sup>3</sup> I have elsewhere written more fully about Carson’s practice and poetics of translation in *The Alexandrine Plan* (see McIlfatrick-Ksenofontov 2016: 57–61).

discourses from Irish history, literature, folklore, music, and myth – in settings variously and variegatedly Irish, French, and Japanese.

To read these poems in order is to encounter an array of recognisable characters appearing one after another in cameos and episodes that alter familiar scenarios. A striking example is Captain Rock, an Irish rallying figure and legendary avenger of agrarian wrongs who both owes and lends his name to a rebel movement (known as the “Rockites”<sup>4</sup> after their anonymous leaders – all dubbed Captain Rock). This eponymous anti-hero (comparable to Robin Hood or Zorro) is celebrated as the personification of anonymous resistance in *The Memoirs of Captain Rock* (1824) by Irish poet and songwriter Thomas Moore. In Carson’s poem “Wallop the Spot”, he appears in disguise, in “a wig, stilettos, and a poppy frock” (raids led by men dressed as women were a common enough practice of the time) and in a mind-altered state, “the pupil of his eye was black with laudanum”; he discourses on “the future history / Of Ireland free, where beauties waited to be born” (paradoxically echoing and foretelling W. B. Yeats’s refrain – “a terrible beauty is born” – from the poem “Easter 1916”) and he undergoes a dramatic physical and political transformation after his hanging: “The next I heard of him, his skin was someone’s drum, / His tibiae and humeri were Orange flutes.” This final metamorphosis is reminiscent of the last lines of “The Lass of Aughrim”<sup>5</sup> by the contemporary Irish poet Paul Muldoon, in which an Amazonian Indian boy is overheard playing the tune of the same name on a flute, hoping “to charm / fish from the water // on what was the tibia / of a priest / from a long-abandoned Mission.” (Muldoon 1996: 108) Having departed their scenes, both priest and rebel are made to dance to another tune – Christian to animist, republican to loyalist. Although Captain Rock is recognisable in name and disguise, he adopts poses that are out-of-character, (chrono)logically impossible, and imagined by the lyrical “I” – yet conceivable nonetheless. This is a *shock* of recognition that Carson has engineered – shock in the face of otherness, as opposed to an encounter with sameness that recognition would seem to imply.

Throughout the collection the reader keeps coming across characters and emblems that appear and reappear in other guises, company, or settings or that

<sup>4</sup> Between 1821 and 1824, the “Rockites”, self-appointed defenders of the rights of labourers and poor tenants, incited rebellion and kept up a spate of attacks on the persons and property of the landowning class and their agents in the south-west of Ireland.

<sup>5</sup> An Irish version of the ballad “The Lass of Roch Royal” in which a poor and pregnant young woman searches for and is kept apart from the father, Lord Gregory; the name of the father is also an alternative title for the ballad and for another poem in *The Twelfth of Never*.

transform before her eyes. For example, the “Papists” in “The Lily Rally” who “read *their* Riot Act” (emphasis added) at a captured loyalist (actually a stolen Orange flute which self-narrates “my loyal embouchure” that refuses to play “their Fenian music”). These Papists are appropriating both the actual Riot Act passed by the British parliament in 1715<sup>6</sup> and the expression (to read someone the Riot Act) that passed into common usage as an idiom meaning to issue a stern warning or reprimand. This is a reversal of roles and an unsettling of the consensual usage of language. Then, in “Wolf Hill”, a samurai-armed narrator tracks a “rough beast” through a night fog on the Irish bog; on slitting it open he finds that “Therein lay little Erin, like one of the Undead, [...] Her gown a shamrock green, her cloak a poppy red.” The personification of Ireland<sup>7</sup> is clear but altered, for the fate of this little green and red riding hood is conflicted and ambiguous; unlike her fairy-tale precursor, she is the one who has to be liberated, only to emerge an unnatural shadow of herself. Similarly, in “Lir” (a sea god or personification of the sea in Irish mythology), the titular figure<sup>8</sup> fades out and into another when we hear that “All Ireland has been *turned into a blasted heath*” (emphasis added). This insertion of Macbeth’s words<sup>9</sup> for the desolate and forbidding place where he meets the three witches may prime the reader to hear another of Shakespeare’s kings, Lear (pronounced like Lir). Thus, a legendary king of Britain is indirectly implicated in a famine-stricken Ireland whose “green fields have been sown with these Lion’s Teeth” and where a “scarecrow”-like narrator is as weightless and potentially diasporic as “dandelion<sup>10</sup> seed”. This is an Ireland colonised by England (of the heraldic rampant lion) and now overrun by the invasive plant. This implicature is both sustained and unsteady by the different views contained in “*blasted heath*”: as well as Macbeth’s inhospitable and uninhabitable wasteland, it may be a land ravaged by battle, or a damned nuisance of a place. In similar vein, “Banners” cuts from corpse-littered Borodino to corpse-ridden famine Ireland: Napoleon’s

<sup>6</sup> The act made it a punishable offence for gatherings of 12 or more people to refuse to disperse after being ordered to do so and having been read a specified section of the act.

<sup>7</sup> Erin derives from the Irish *Éirinn*, a form of the name for Ireland that was popularised/romanticized by poets and Irish nationalists in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It is now a first name in the UK and the USA, but not normally given in Ireland.

<sup>8</sup> Lir (“sea” in Old Irish) is best known in Irish mythology as a figure who gives rise to others: the titular king in the legend “The Children of Lir” and the father of the sea god, Manannán Mac Lir (Mac Lir means “the son of Lir”).

<sup>9</sup> “Say from whence / You owe this strange intelligence, or why / Upon this blasted heath you stop our way / With such prophetic greeting” – *Macbeth*, Act 1, Sc.3.

<sup>10</sup> From the French *dent de lion* – literally “lion’s tooth”.

“*Grande Armée*” is “thirty thousand / Bodies with no eyes who devoured our glances” strewn across “ground ploughed by cannonballs, harrowed by lances” which put the narrator in mind of “dear old Ireland: / Fields of corpses plentiful as dug potatoes”. The semantic thread that runs through a Borodino battlefield tilled by weapons, eyeless bodies as dead as eyeless potatoes, and potato fields turned graveyards also binds together the differently defeated French and Irish. In the final tercet, however, the lines: “As we passed them, we *almost* took them for our foes, / And *for a moment* I thought of dear Old Ireland” (emphasis added) breaks what would have been an otherwise seamless cut. This is a vision that fractures even as it fuses in the moment of recognition, confusing the “we” (unsettling the notion of friend and foe) and confusing the “I” (now narrator, now reader primed by the narrative of the poem and the book).

But this is no straightforward narrative, even though it includes characters, conflicts, settings, and points of view. There is a disorderly stream of soldiers, revolutionaries, and rebels from or dropped into factions and fights for freedom that span the Irish Rebellion of 1798, the French Revolution, the First World War, the Northern Irish Troubles, the Napoleonic Wars, and the Opium Wars. Whether known figures or unnamed types recognisable by their emblematic accoutrements, colours (primarily red and green) and rhetoric, both protagonists and paraphernalia tend to be worn out or disarrayed. Two titled female characters make routine appearances: “the President” (always in ceremonies in Ireland or on an official visit in Japan) and “the Professor” (always in Tokyo, ferrying a visiting Irish “I” through a blur of rain, smoke, smog, and crowds and between airport and bars – where they sample “Japanese poteen”). The lyrical “I” often turns out to be that of the Irish *aisling*<sup>11</sup> (dream or vision poem), embodying that formalized feature of the genre which sees the poet wander forth and meet a fairy woman on the road: “I met an old colleen”, “I met a maiden”, “Last night Hibernia appeared to me”. This inserts an explicit dream element in the collection, but the traditional content and register are regularly subverted: “As I ... did stray / Across the ... braes, I met with Captain Rock”, “I fell in with *these Keogh Boys*”, “I bumped into the fairy host” or the traditional appeal is dislocated: “She urged me to go out and revolutionize / *Hibernia*, and not to fear the *guillotine*” (emphasis added). Literary tradition and political rhetoric are caught (identified and interrupted) in the act of representation.

<sup>11</sup> In the *aisling*, a woman (young and beautiful or an elderly mother) approaches the poet in a vision. She represents Ireland, laments her fallen and forsaken state, and incites the young man to come to her rescue.

The truly dreamlike nature of the collection lies in its “hook-and-eye”<sup>12</sup> sequencing. Carson creates a “link or bridge” from an element in each poem to the title or body of the next, “often in quite arbitrary fashion” (1997: 76, 226). Thus, reading the collection comes to feel like the seamless progression of a ballad or folk-tale, or the logic of dreams. Each new poem is projected onto those that preceded it, conferring on them another coherence. For example, in the dream encounter with Ireland personified in the poem “1798”, the lines “*Two centuries have gone, yet she and I abide / Like emblems*” anticipates the following poem, “1998”, in which “the President” consumes the sacred “host”, which then magicks into “a fairy host” in the next poem, “Drops of Brandy”; this in turn precedes “Mountain Dew” (another name for moonshine) and “Saké”. These three liquid titles stand side by side as metonymic equals but also flow into and through one another. And such linkage continues throughout: the female puppet in “Saké” is “legless” (also a slang word for drunk) but she has the upper hand insofar as “you’re the tool, and she the doppelganger hand”; then comes the advice to “Put yourself between her poppy lips to make her speak”, which harks back to the kimono-clad female of an earlier poem (“The Wind that Shakes the Barley”) who takes a “Captain Wilde” in her lap and hears him murmur with the “voice of a ventriloquist”. Who is manipulating who? These are poems that effectively articulate Carson’s view of the consensual nature of the construal and construction of meaning between users of language, between makers and sense-makers of poetry.

Motifs, images and voices loop and transform throughout the collection as a whole; they rely on the fact that meanings are both caught in and slip through the net of words. The reader is repeatedly confronted with and almost confounded by what is simultaneously there and not there. In “The Poppy Battle” (in which “the President” lays a wreath of remembrance), we see how “Red crepe fake felt paper poppy petals with their dot / Of laudanum in everybody’s button hole / Exuded empty perfumes of Forget-me-not”. The immediacy of the acoustics is matched by the elusiveness of the image of a poppy striving to be a poppy – playing out its competing forms and functions in the mind of the reader: laudanum for forgetting vs symbol of remembrance; giving off no scent vs exuding an absence; commemorating loss vs metamorphosing into another flower; being explicitly and ambivalently labelled “the emblem of Peace and the Opium Wars”. A central symbol of the collection, the poppy is indeed a *syn- + bole*, a “throwing of things together”. The collection abounds

<sup>12</sup> Carson’s term in his reflection on the mind of the storyteller and on his practice of trying to “snag a thread which might be spun into a yarn” or get sentences to follow each other.

in poppies: this “emblem of Death and the Special Powers” whose “growth [is] difficult to stem” in the fields of Flanders and Kent even extends to traffic lights “in sequences of poppy, amber, emerald”; the botanical description of “nodding buds with four crumpled petals” gives way to laudanum-addicted, “crumpled Coleridge”, who sees “words hallucinated / Into sentences” and feels “like Saul at Tarsus”. Indeed, a host of other hallucinogens accompany such revelations, second sights and conversions, though like their real-world counterparts they may not be pure, e.g., “Crack”, besides cocaine, is a borrowing into Irish of the English-Scottish dialectal word for news/gossip/fun, subsequently reborrowed into English as the pseudo-Irish *craic*. The focus remains on the multiplicity of meaning, on the poem’s capacity to alter perception; to this end, the poppy is both a centripetal force and centrifugal.

Carson borrows extensively from other writers in this collection. Many poems share titles with ballads, folk-songs, reels, hornpipes, and jigs; many incorporate lines and images from other works (medieval Irish poems, W. B. Yeats, Paul Muldoon, Patrick Kavanagh, Emily Dickinson, John Keats, Bashō, Shakespeare, Thomas Hardy, etc.). Lines may be inserted verbatim but alter as they spring from other lips in another setting – the reader experiences recollection and evocation simultaneously. In “The Arterial Route”, a pastiche of Keats’ “La Belle Dame Sans Merci”, Carson lifts original phrases and images and merely replaces the “knight at arms” with “a samurai’s returning / from an ancient war”. The new protagonist passes through a bleak landscape and recounts/repeats how “I met a Lady [...] a fairy’s child” – a scene that is now doubly familiar. The last line, “You too are in her thrall”, addressed to the “I” by the warriors of both poems, applies equally to the reader. The reader of *The Twelfth of Never* has been primed by Carson’s “dream-world” poetry, in which Keats is now yet another of Carson’s “ghostly presences”.

### Eccentric Envoys

The collection ends with “Envoy”, a poem that addresses the reader who has “travelled through the Land of Nod and Wink” and found that “everything is slightly out of synch”. Like a traditional envoi stanza (a post-script to a poem and a comment that sends the poem on its way), it looks both backwards and forwards. So, too, do the poems of the collection. Carson causes the reader to do double-takes, to reverse-read, for “to travel is to go from where you’ve been”. Disembodied and metamorphosing motifs perform a new narrative – through the unifying play of mind and language; they do not generate a chaotic textual product but are part of and participate in the eccentricity of their poems. At face

value, poems appear whimsical or odd, at odds with what the reader knows; and, true to the roots of the word in Ptolemaic astronomy (denoting a circle or orbit not having the Earth precisely at its centre), they are *ek (ex) + kentron*, “out of the centre”, not entirely accountable to known sources or culturally accepted meanings, and irregular in the company they keep. And they remain so, they are *all* that there is. Carson may not have the last word but he shows that he always has the next and another that will keep leading readers on by leading them astray so that “the first time that you read these words is sight unseen”. Ultimately, *The Twelfth of Never* is both an eccentric collection of sonnets and an eccentric *ars poetica*.

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