The work of Ciaran Carson is inextricably bound up with Belfast, the city in which he has spent his entire life. A resolutely urban poet, Carson does for Belfast what Joyce has done for Dublin, writing a poetry which is an intense exploration of the city’s way of life. His surreal, dream-like representation of the city is deeply related to the shifting quality of Belfast, the shape-shifter par excellence, not simply because it is a war zone where buildings and streets were regularly bombed and re-routed, but also because, like many other European cities, it is rapidly recasting itself to accommodate business, industrial and residential development. Thus, if one were to identify the one image that best represents Carson’s poetry, the choice would likely fall on the map, but a map which, although it charts “the dark city of Belfast” (Irish 46), more closely resembles a labyrinth than a street-plan.

A defining feature of Carson’s work, the map is a figure which keeps changing, against the rules of logic, into something else: it can be a network of memories as well as a Gothic space where simply walking about might put your life in jeopardy; it is a film or a comic strip. Thus Carson’s exploration of Belfast is defined by the ostensibly antithetical concepts of metamorphosis and enclosure, for which the map and the labyrinth are fitting metaphors. Depending on how it is read, a map may diagram liberation or confinement; so the labyrinth, essentially an emblem of entrapment, conveys both loss and discovery. Finally, if the map as an image of
entrapment has become one of the central features of Carson’s work, this is also due to a history of harsh colonial repression.

In the literary production of the seventies and eighties in Northern Ireland the city was already perceived as a labyrinth containing all of the country’s problems, thus exasperating the traditional view of the city as the container of all that is rotten in the modern world. If Joyce’s Dublin was seen as the centre of paralysis, contemporary Northern Irish literature certainly presents Belfast, one of the most dangerous cities of the whole English-speaking world, as the centre of sectarian hatred, violence and danger. It is especially in the past two decades that the role of the city has become of pivotal importance in the literature of the North, particularly in fiction.

As a matter of fact, Belfast has only recently begun to appear in fictional representation on a regular basis. Between about 1800 and 1950, as John Hewitt has pointed out, writers who were associated with Belfast had little to say about it. Of course writers’ hostility towards it may have operated as a vicious circle and may have reinforced the unfavourable aspects of its literary image. Critic Edna Longley suggests that John Milton unwittingly set a trend, by calling the place “a barbarous nook, sight unseen, in reaction to the royalist loyalties of its presbyters” (88). But the bleakest picture of all, as Longley subsequently points out, appears in a novel by M.F. Caulfield, actually called The Black City, whose first paragraphs explain:

It is the Black City because of what is between Protestant and Catholic, between mongrel Briton and mongrel Irishman, that is, narrow hatred and bigotry. It is not much of a place as cities go, a nineteenth-century industrial profusion of shipyard gantries, linen-mills, factory chimneys, flaking pubs, oily river basins and mile after mile of narrow, mean streets... It is an awfully wet place. The wettest place on earth... The rain... persists all day almost every day. It clogs the streets, mixes with the dust to create a fine, gluey mud that adheres to everything”. (88)

The absence of Belfast from the writing of this period is also certainly due to its history as a place dominated by sectarianism, crime, murder and tribalism; in a word, by its “Troubles”. In this context, all that matters in the representation of the city is Belfast’s imputed attributes of violence, threat and mayhem. Belfast becomes accordingly a perfect setting within the thriller genre, in literature as well as cinema and television, where the city is, in the words of Gerald Seymour, an “adventure playground par excellence for the urban terrorist” (Qtd. in Hughes 141-142).
But all too often this Belfast simply functions as a place which novelists and film-makers people with stereotypes.

Another disadvantage that Belfast as a fictional location has suffered from, is the fact that in Irish culture the city has come to play a major role only very recently. Irish culture, with its predominantly rural vocation, has long been indifferent and even hostile to the city, and the industrialised character of Belfast has surely exacerbated this widespread aversion. If, as city of "Troubles", Belfast is treated by thriller writers as simply a stereotypical place, as a heavily industrialised Northern urban centre it has been equally invisible to the prevailing cultural ideology within Ireland. John Hewitt has pointed out, with reference to Belfast poets of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, that "from these voluble city dwellers there was not a word about where they lived and the people they lived among" (Qtd. in Hughes 142). Over the past 200 years Belfast has paid the price for being both the ultimate Irish site of violence and for being the Irish industrialised city *par excellence*: as such, it has therefore been a place which eludes representation.

There has been, however, over roughly the last 50 years and particularly over the past two decades, a countervailing disposition in the representations of Belfast. Carson’s work, together with that of his contemporaries writing in the North, shows an interest in city life which can hardly be encountered before. This countervailing tendency is inextricable from what has been called the "Northern Revival", a term critics employ to label the international recognition poets from the North of Ireland have gained in the last three decades. Despite the almost overwhelming presence of Seamus Heaney, whose work belongs to the rural tradition of Irish writing, the socio-economic, cultural and political changes of the last fifty years, which provided the preconditions for the Northern Revival, also work against the dominance of a rural ideology in Northern Irish culture. Among the most important changes are the growth of Belfast, more widespread educational opportunities, the development of broadcasting and electronic technologies which have given the island dwellers a wider perspective of the world they live in, making them feel that they do not simply live in a marginal place but partake of a global urban experience. Migration North and South is another factor which has played a large part in shaping attitudes to the city, which was the place where people went to seek their fortune when they lost their land, and was often the first stage toward migration out of Ireland. It is small wonder that the feelings asso-
cated with city life were those of nostalgia, regret, and a sense of loss. Laura Pelaschiar aptly corroborates this point:

Once the tie with Nature is cut, man loses the noblest part of himself, his belief in and respect for all the most precious traditional values, while the city slowly takes possession of his soul. He falls from a state of innocence into one of pride and selfishness. The myth of Paradise Lost is not far away. (71)

For all these reasons literature has had to catch up with the urban experience of the people of Ireland. What is more in Belfast the Troubles have prompted writers to find personal ways of reacting to daily violence, and as Edna Longley puts it, “Belfast confronts the writer with a spiritual, political and social complexity that is capable of testing the imagination to its limits” (Qtd. in Pelaschiar 99).

Common images for Belfast then become those of the cage, the labyrinth, the always shifting diagram, all of which convey a sense of entrapment. Carson takes up this archetype for several reasons, the most obvious being that the layout of the city is labyrinthine in design, and the experience of wandering the city streets may be likened to the following of an Ariadne trail that leads not to entrances or exits, but always back to the centre. For Belfast, and by extension Ireland, harbours its own Minotaur, whose haunting presence can be glimpsed in Carson’s early poetry.

Carson’s first collection of poems, The New Estate, published in 1976, already contains themes and images which will become central in the poet’s later work. In a sense, one of the “monsters” looming over Ireland has always been the expectation of Irish poets to write only about their country, so the opening poem “The Insular Celts” becomes a send-up of this closed and narrow-minded idea of the world. The image of the Tara brooches and Celtic gimcrackery in general is here employed ironically: the bronze age brooch with its self-involved spiral designs is emblematic of a racial tendency towards unilateralism and internal warfare:

They entered their cold beds of soil  
Not as graves, for this was the land  
That they had fought for, loved, and killed

Each other for.  
... In the spirals  
Of their brooches is seen the flight
Of one thing into the other:
As the wheel-ruts on a battle-
Plain have filled with silver water,

The confused circles of their wars,
Their cattle-raids, have worked themselves
To a laced pattern of old scars. (*New* 12-13)

The speaking voice is not that of the poet; it is the voice of a proud and foolish Celt. The poem is therefore not a representation of Ireland, but rather a parody of a narrow-minded view of Ireland.

Formally, this poem is well-crafted and, like most of the poems in the collection, is constantly striving after form. As Carson himself pointed out, the poems in *The New Estate* were written to emulate and also to mock the meticulous prosody of the early Irish verse the poet was immersed in at the time. More than ten years later the author himself described these poems as too accomplished and careful, unwilling to take many risks. As a matter of fact, in “The Insular Celts” both the subject and the meticulous attention to the rhythmic and metrical structure of the poem show Heaney’s influence. But what ultimately distinguishes Carson’s style from Heaney’s is the replacement of the latter’s mythic tone with a critical attitude toward history, hence the sceptical and bitter nature of most of Carson’s poems.

In refusing Heaney’s rural tradition Carson rejects the rural world which had played such a crucial role in the Irish tradition, and makes this clear in the poem which gives the collection its title, “The New Estate”:

Forget the corncrake’s elegy. Rusty
Iambics that escaped your discipline
Of shorn lawns, it is sustained by nature.
It does not grieve for you, nor for itself.
You remember the rolled gold of cornfields,
Their rustling of tinsel in the wind,
a whole field quivering like blown silk? (*New* 69)

Later in the second stanza we are made to know that “the corncrake’s elegy”, Heaney’s romantic poetry of the rural, has been replaced by “the swaying lines/ Of a new verse” (*New* 69). Here Carson is affirming his estrangement from romantic nationalist forms and his resolution to adopt “a new verse” and enter a “new estate”, a phrase which also reminds us of
housing estates and thus underlines a commitment to an urban, industrial and thoroughly contemporary world. Given that the ideology of romantic nationalism finds city experience highly problematic, Carson's “new estate”, that of the urban and industrial Belfast occupied by the Catholic community, is profoundly significant. His poetry gives voice to an urban Catholic population whose history has been silenced by colonial oppression and by a British nationalism which has excluded that community from traditional definitions of the word “Irish”. Thus the poem “Rubbish” affords a picture of the daily life of the poor in Belfast, as the narrator recalls his childhood spent in a poor Catholic area:

From the sick-room window, past
The leaning-sideways
Railway sleepers of the fence,
The swaying nettles,
You can just make out
The rusty fire of a crushed
Coke tin, the dotted glint of staples in
A wet cardboard box.

... Eggshells. Bricks. A broken hypodermic,
And one bit of plaster
Painted on one side
I seem to recognize from somewhere –

It is the off-white wall
I stared at as a child
As my mother picked my head for nits.
The iron comb scraped out
A series of indefinite ticks
As they dropped on a double leaf
Of last week’s Irish News.
I had a crick in my neck.

I thought that someone
On the last train might look up
And see me staring out beyond
The almost-useless strip
Between the railway
And the new industrial estate. (New 24)
Such images of ordinary life in a Catholic area in Belfast remind us that, as Burton Pike argues, the city has traditionally been seen since biblical times as an “unnatural” place representing the loss of Eden and humanity’s “separation from the world of nature” (xii). Often described as a place of corruption and sin, the city is an unstable, kaleidoscopic space in which identities are threatened and problematised. These negative associations proliferate in relation to Belfast.

Heaney’s predominantly rural sense of place and belonging is countered in Carson’s poetry by a surreal cityscape which the civil war has made fictitious. In “The Bomb Disposal” Carson makes a foray into the city, where the activity of bomb-disposal squads has become routine:

Is it just like picking a lock
With the slow deliberation of a funeral,
Hesitating through a darkened nave
Until you find the answer?

Listening to the malevolent tick
Of its heart, can you read
The message of the threaded veins
Like print, its body’s chart?

The city is a map of the city,
Its forbidden areas changing daily.
I find myself in a crowded taxi
Making deviations from a known route,

Ending in a cul-de-sac
Where everyone breaks out suddenly
In whispers, noting the boarded windows,
The drawn blinds. (New 32)

Here, for the first time in Carson’s work, the image of the map makes its appearance: there can be no other city map than the city itself; language proves insufficient and inadequate to the task and can only capture an ever changing reality which is elusive by nature. This implies that the structural conservatism of Carson’s early poems will find no space in any of his following works. Such poems as “The Bomb Disposal” and “The New Estate” already achieve that ambiguity characteristic of the later poems.
“Dunne” is another poem which prefigures the Belfast-centred accounts of the later volumes. Again, the reality of paramilitary kidnapping is a routine feature in the Northern Irish life style. Dunne is the family name of the man who has been kidnapped, hooded with a balaclava by paramilitaries whose allegiance is deliberately not specified, and is kept prisoner in a secret place. People are accustomed to hearing such news on the radio:

It was then I heard of the missing man.  
The wireless spoke through a hiss of static –  
Someone was being interviewed:  
*The missing man, the caller said, can be found*  
*At Cullyhanna Parochial House.*  
*That was all. Those were his very words.*  
*I reached an avenue of darkened yews.*  
*I reached an avenue of darkened yews.*  
*Somewhere footsteps on the gravel.*

*I then identified myself, and he*  
*Embraced me, someone I had never seen*  
*Before, but it was him all right, bearded*  
*And dishevelled. There were tears in his eyes.*  
*He knew nothing of the ransoms.*  
*He did not know who they were. He knew nothing*  
*Of his whereabouts. He did not even know*  
*If he was in the South or North. (New 33)*

Despite their structural conservatism, these early poems possess “an energetic, imaginative openness” (Pike 369-370) that anticipates the following collections. But the safe architecture of this poetry will give way, in Carson’s successive works, to complicated syntax and experimental forms which are nonetheless reflected in carefully organised lines. The reader is made to feel that the labyrinthine structure of the poems with their long, end-wrapped lines corresponds to the puzzling reality presented by the author. Carson certainly believed that some disruption of the lyric was essential if the matter of post-1969 Northern Ireland was to be adequately expressed in poetry.

There was, however, a period of eleven years between *The New Estate* and *The Irish for No*, which was published in 1987. After the publication of *The New Estate* Carson found himself dissatisfied with poetry;
compared to the immediacy of traditional music, poetry seemed to him too self-centred and too withheld. When asked about his long abstinence from writing, the poet explained:

I got a job in the Arts Council about 1975, shortly after I’d written The New Estate: the job was concerned with traditional music, song and dance, so I started to get absorbed into that whole area of experience. After a year or two it struck me that poetry, or poems, were so remote by comparison. Removed, academic. Whereas with the music – you’re right up against the stuff, it’s hitting you from all sides, it’s alive, here in front of your very eyes and ears, right now. That’s a very attractive immediacy. It’s not about withdrawing into your cell to compose these careful utterances about life. (Brandes 81)

In that period Carson started writing essays about music for The Belfast Review, and this experience, together with the employment at the Arts Council, made him think of the possibility of bringing the immediacy and density of oral expression into poetry. Talking about the opening poem in The Irish for No, Carson said: “I was quite excited when I wrote ‘Dresden’, the first thing I had done in the long line, because it seemed able to accommodate the banal and the ‘poetic’ in the same space, the way traditional music does for me” (Ormsby 7).

As a matter of fact, Carson’s second collection of poems shows that he has found a radically new way of expression, based on the long line, which facilitates the rendering of the tone and rhythm of a speaking voice telling a story. Accordingly, the mode of the poems in The Irish for No is that of narrative, of oral narrative in particular. The poems present characters and action, and especially the longer poems are developed into stories. In the “Acknowledgements” Carson thanks “John Campbell of Mullaghbawn whose storytelling suggested some of the narrative procedures of some of these poems”.

The book is divided in three sections, the opening and closing ones containing four long poems, the central section having sixteen nine-line poems which share with the longer pieces an exceptionally long line, derived partly from the example of the contemporary American poet C. K. Williams, but also from pub speech itself. The central section, which talks explicitly about the hard reality of Belfast, maps the contours of a topography of violence, sectarian hatred and British army occupation and surveillance. The experience of the North is therefore of central importance,
but some more personal themes are also relevant: themes of private memory, desire, sexuality, loss and creativity. Part One and Three of the collection are more deeply concerned with the relationship between memory and imagination, which often leads to a sense of indeterminacy.

As a matter of fact the first poem in the collection, “Dresden”, opens with a joke about the dubious naming of its main protagonist:

Horse Boyle was called Horse Boyle because of his brother
Mule;
Though why Mule was called Mule is anybody’s guess. (Irish 11)

The sense of uncertainty given by the undiscoverable origin of Mule’s nickname goes with an announcement of narrative indecision: what appears to be the opening of the story is immediately modified and abruptly interrupted: “I Stayed there once, Or rather, I nearly stayed there once. But that’s another story” (Irish 11).

Horse and Mule Boyle are two brothers who

... lived in this decrepit caravan, not two miles
out of Carrick
Encroached upon by baroque pyramids of empty baked bean
tins, rusts
And ochres, hints of autumn merging into twilight. (Irish 11)

Digression both in time and space is a fundamental feature in “Dresden”, for no sooner are we introduced to the subject of the poem, than the tin cans scattered about Boyle’s land become the shop bell of a Donegal junk shop:

... Horse believed
They were as good as a watchdog, and to tell you the truth
You couldn’t go near the place without something falling over:
A minor avalanche would ensue – more like a shop bell, really,
The old-fashioned ones on string, connected to the latch,
I think
And as you entered in, the bell would tinkle in the empty shop,
a musk
Of soap and turf and sweets would hit you from the gloom. (Irish 11)
And no sooner are we back to Horse Boyle again than Boyle tells the farcical story of young Flynn, an IRA volunteer who carries a bomb on a bus across the border and who, terrified, quite unnecessarily confesses to a policeman who has boarded the bus only because his bicycle has a puncture:

... - and so he'd tell the story
How in his young day it was very different. Take young Flynn, for instance,
Who was ordered to take this bus and smuggle some stick of gelignite

Across the border, into Derry, when the RUC – or was it the RIC? –
Got wind of it. The bus was stopped, the peeler stepped on.
Young Flynn
Took it like a man, of course: he owned up right away. He opened the bag
And produced the bomb, his rank and serial number. For all the world
Like a pound of sausages. Of course, the thing was, the peeler’s bike
Had got a puncture, and he didn’t know young Flynn from Adam. All he wanted
Was to get home for his tea. (Irish 12)

It is only towards the end that the poem reveals its true story and explains its title; it is the story of how Horse, an Irish immigrant in Manchester during the war, joined the RAF and became a rear gunner over Dresden.

The poem reaches its climax as Horse recalls his mission:

As he remembered it, long afterwards, he could hear, or almost hear
Between the rapid desultory thunderclaps, a thousand tinkling echoes –
All across the map of Dresden, store-rooms full of china shivered, teetered
And collapsed, an avalanche of porcelain, slushing and cascading: cherubs,
Shepherdesses, figurines of Hope and Peace and Victory, delicate bone fragments. (Irish 15)

Those “delicate bone fragments” are to be read both as the remains of human bodies and as fragments of broken china. This memory of shattered porcelain reminds Horse of a little statue he had had in his childhood. Etched in his mind in relation to his experience of bombing Dresden, the broken statue stands as a metaphor for all the lives shattered there along with china. Also, the statue’s beckoning, smiling and “offering him, eternally, her pitcher of milk, her mouth of rose and cream” (Irish 15) is a sign of erotic femininity which is a sad substitute for the apparently womanless, sexless, and, it is implied, alcoholic world Horse shares with his brother.

Even the very last image in the poem is one of fragmentation, as the narrator of “Dresden” makes his way out “through the steeples of rust, the gate that was/ a broken bed” (Irish 16). This story is one of broken objects as well as of a broken man, whose life becomes an emblem of diminishment and barrenness. The story of Horse, together with the stories he tells, includes therefore some of the most typical patterns of Irish experience: involuntary emigration; service in the British armed forces for want of anything else to do; recruitment into the IRA; a life of sexless, alcoholic small-mindedness and of meanness.

The title poem too is concerned with language, and while it is the shortest of the longer poems, it manages to sum up the book’s chief images and ideas. “The Irish for No” refers to the fact that in the Irish language there is no way of expressing “yes” or “no” directly; direct questions are answered by repeating the verb of the question in the affirmative or the negative. Carson equates this impossibility of conveying absolute assent or dissent in Irish with the different ways of telling a story. But it also has a political and cultural dimension, because whereas in English one can make an unequivocal statement for or against a united Ireland, in Irish any such expression will be necessarily ambiguous:

It was time to turn into the dog’s-leg short-cut from Chlorine Gardens
Into Cloreen Park, where you might see an Ulster Says No
scrawled on the side
Of the power-block – which immediately reminds me of the
Eglantine Inn
Just on the corner: on the missing h of Cloreen, you might say.
We were debating,
Bacchus and the pards and me, how to render *The Ulster Bank –
the Bank
That Likes to Say Yes* into Irish, and whether eglantine was alien
to Ireland.
*I cannot see what flowers are at my feet*, when yes is the verb repeated,
Not exactly yes, but phatic nods and whispers. *The Bank that
Answers All
Your Questions*, maybe? That Greek portico of Mourne granite,
dazzling
With promises and feldspar, mirrors you in the Delphic black
of its windows. (*Irish* 49)

The slogan adopted to express Unionist opposition to the Anglo-Irish
Agreement negotiated between Dublin and London is actually “Ulster Says
No”; however, in Irish there is no way in which Ulster can say “no”, it is
English which provides a way of saying. And how, the speaker wonders,
can one translate the bank’s advertising slogan into Irish when “yes” and
“no” have no clear linguistic counterparts in that language? What Carson
suggests here is that just as no two stories are ever the same, so there can
be no definite, objective reading of a text, no perfectly clear distinctions
between political factions or cultural differences. So “The Irish for No”
becomes a phrase for the conditional, provisional nature of experience as
well as for Carson’s resistance to absolutes. The poem opens with a quota-
tion from Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale”: “*Was it a vision, or a waking
dream?*” (*Irish* 49). The question sets the tone of puzzlement and uncer-
tainty that colours each of the poem’s four scenes, which offer a slice-of-
life shot of Belfast reality; the first stanza opens on a lovers’ quarrel:

I heard her voice before I saw
What looked the balcony scene in *Romeo and Juliet*, except
Romeo
Seemed to have shinned up a pipe and was inside arguing with
her. The casements
Were wide open and I could see some Japanese-style wall-
hangings, the dangling
Quotation marks of a yin-yang mobile. *It’s got nothing*, she was
snarling, *nothing*
To do with politics, and, before the bamboo curtain came down,  
That goes for you too! (Irish 49)

“The dangling/ Quotation marks of a yin-yang mobile” that paren-
thesesise the argument overheard through open casements suggest that there are two sides to every story, but at the same time are emblematic of a bal-
ance and harmony that are not there.

Ambiguities abound in the third stanza as well: did the Ulster Defence Regiment corporal referred to commit suicide? And the diesel smoke emanating from the harbour “might be black or white” (Irish 50).

To reinforce this sense of uncertainty the yin-yang image is recalled in the closing lines of the last stanza where “the unfed cat toys with the yin-yang of a tennis-ball,/ debating whether yes is no” (Irish 50). Earlier in the stanza the reader is confronted with one more account of Belfast vio-
lence in the evocation of an almost surreal suicide, and in the unspecific minatory intention with which “they” are coming (murder, kidnapping, extortion?):

What’s all this to the Belfast business-man who drilled  
Thirteen holes in his head with a Black & Decker? It was just  
a normal morning  
When they came. (Irish 50)

When asked about this unusual case of suicide, Carson explained:

That happened. It’s become a kind of Belfast parable. By and large, I’d say that all the stuff in the book is real. In some sense or another. It’s all based on ‘fact’ or a report of a circumstance, or something I heard on the news, or something I saw. The whole book is a form of reportage. (Brandes 84)

It is especially in the central section that the procedure of the poems becomes almost like reportage, with accounts of sectarian attacks, army patrols, murders and all that makes up Belfast’s way of life. Carson’s con-
cern with language stems from the challenge of finding a mode of expres-
sion capable of articulating the experience of Belfast. Very often any attempt at communication, at some kind of ordered construction of mean-
ing, breaks down, especially in the face of violence and utter destruction. As the speaker in “Belfast Confetti” puts it:
Suddenly as the riot squad moved in, it was raining
exclamation marks,
Nuts, bolts, nails, car-keys. A fount of broken type... And the
explosion
Itself— an asterisk on the map. This hyphenated line, a burst of
rapid fire...
I was trying to complete a sentence in my head, but it kept
stuttering,
All the alleyways and side-streets blocked with stops and
Colons. (Irish 31)

Here the experience of place is rendered in terms of language, which
provides particular metaphors and analogies for the violence in Belfast;
the more shocking the experience, the less articulate language becomes.

Carson also presents the divided city as a metaphor for human uncer-
tainty, the streets themselves being a prison from which there is no escape:

I know this labyrinth so well — Balaclava, Raglan, Inkerman,
Odessa Street —
Why can’t I escape? Every move is punctuated. Crimea Street.
Dead end again.
A Saracen, Kremlin-2 mesh. Makrolon face-shields. Walkie-
talkies. What is
My name? Where am I coming from? Where am I going? A
fusillade of question-marks. (Irish 31)

Just as Irish streets are named after British imperial victories, so
Carson seems to suggest that there is no escape from the chaos of con-
temporary violence. The title of the poem itself is an ambiguous expres-
sion, which traces its origins back to the latter years of the nineteenth cen-
tury. In Belfast the term “confetti” refers not just to the roundlets of paper
tossed at a marriage or carnival, but also to the flotilla of ammunition fired
during street riots, which may consist of anything from bricks to buckets,
stones, glass, nails and bolts. Just as it happens in “August 1969”, a poem
which recounts one of the innumerable riots at the onset of the Troubles:

As the huge facade of Greeves’s Mill is washed in a Niagara of flame
The riot fizzles out. Still smouldering as the troops march in,
this welcome,
Singing, dancing on the streets. Confetti drifts across the city:
Charred receipts and bills-of-lading, contracts, dockets, pay-slips.
The weave is set: a melt of bobbins, spindles, shuttles. (Irish 35)

Confetti fall in several of Carson’s poems, and whether they come in the shape of snow or blood, letters of the alphabet or punctuation, the shards of a blasted shop or train, they signify a state of violent fragmentation – language and location reduced to “A fount of broken type” (Irish 31).

What Carson seems to suggest is that the most appropriate way to represent the “collapsing city” is through a collapsing language. For in its nightmarish aspect Belfast is an ever-shifting world, a city where buildings suddenly bubble up out of nowhere, like the greengrocer’s shop in “Clearance”:

The Royal Avenue Hotel collapses under the breaker’s pendulum:
Zig-zag stairwells, chimney-flues, and a thirties mural
Of an elegantly dressed couple doing what seems to be the Tango, in Wedgewood
Blue and white – happy days! Suddenly more sky
Than there used to be. A breeze springs up from nowhere –

There, through a gap in the rubble, a greengrocer’s shop
I’d never noticed until now. Or had I passed it yesterday? (Irish 32)

Belfast’s rapid urban renewal makes it a place which is unrecognizable even to its inhabitants, for continuous demolitions and rebuildings alter the physical layout of the city. The poem can also be read as an intertextual play with Heaney’s “Clearances”, which involves the felling of a chestnut tree known to him in childhood, and the poet’s subsequent projection into that gap. In Carson’s poem, the hotel meets Belfast’s typical fate of demolition, to provide an urban version of the epiphanic space-creation in Heaney’s poem.

In “Smithfield Market” Belfast takes up overtly labyrinthine features:

Sidelong to the arcade, the glassed-in April cloud – fleeting,
pewter-edged –
Gets lost in shadowed aisles and inlets, branching into passages, into cul-de-sacs,
Stalls, compartments, alcoves. Everything unstitched, unravelled – mouldy fabric,
Rusted heaps of nuts and bolts, electrical spare parts: the ammunition dump
In miniature. Maggots seethe between the ribs and corrugations. (Irish 37)

The second part of the poem reveals the city as a terrifying place of destruction; this sense of disintegration increases as the speaker remains trapped within the labyrinth of contemporary Belfast:

Since everything went up in smoke, no entrances, no exits.
But as the charred beams hissed and flickered, I glimpsed a map of Belfast
In the ruins: obliterated streets, the faint impression of a key.
Something many-toothed, elaborate, stirred briefly in the labyrinth. (Irish 37)

Belfast seems to exist as an underworld which is inhabited by monstrosity: the “key” to this burning map has many teeth, like a house key, but also suggests the teeth of the mythical Minotaur, the monster in the Cretan labyrinth; bombs, like the Minotaur, feed on human flesh.

The key to the map of Belfast may offer not a way out, but simply a way deeper into its imprisoning maze. Continuous explosions and demolitions eat away the city’s fabric, until it becomes a city whose features are hard to keep in mind. When the narrator in “33333” goes on a taxi ride through a “place” which he knows “like the back of [his] hand”, he is forced to add (with a clear reference to the Ulster emblem) “except/ My hand is cut off at the wrist”, because the taxi guns “Through a mesh of ramps, diversions, one-way/ systems”(Irish 39). In these communicative tangles, the more that is seen and known of the city, the more confusing it becomes, for Belfast is made up of a flux of streets, names and memories. In “The Exiles Club” a group of Irish emigrants meets in the Wollongong Bar, in Adelaide, Australia, to drink Irish whiskey and to reconstruct an obsolete map of Belfast which keeps changing:

Every Thursday in the upstairs lounge of the Wollongong Bar, they make
Themselves at home with Red Heart Stout, Park Drive cigarettes and Dunville’s whiskey,
A slightly-mouldy batch of soda farls. Eventually, they get down to business.
After years they have reconstructed the whole of the Falls Road,
and now
Are working on the back streets: Lemon, Peel and Omar,
Balaclava, Alma.

They just about keep up with the news of bombings and demolition, and are
Struggling with the finer details … (Irish 45)

The nightmarish quality of the Belfast cityscape manifests itself once more in the closing lines of “Campaign”:

A dark umbilicus of smoke was rising from a heap of burning tyres
The bad smell was the smell of himself: Broken glass
and knotted Durex.
The knuckles of a face in a nylon stocking. I used to see him in the Gladstone Bar,
Drawing pints for strangers, his almost-perfect fingers flecked with scum. (Irish 36)

The final first-person recollection touches upon a common trope in the poetry of the Troubles, where the presentation of events is turned into elegy by the intervention of the individual poetic voice. Yet “Campaign” is not an elegy, and much of Carson’s writing tries to keep at a distance from that genre. Seamus Heaney’s poetry offers a fitting contrast: when he writes elegies for the victims of violence, the poetic voice provides first-person sympathy and consolation. The lack of this in Carson’s poetry makes violence in his writing more disturbing than in Heaney’s, and its rejection of resolution and coherence takes away from it the possibility of elegiac consolation. In “Campaign” the man referred to is the victim of a punishment shooting, but his identity and political allegiance, as well as that of his killers, proves irrelevant and is not revealed:

They had questioned him for hours. Who exactly was he?
And when
He told them, they questioned him again. When they accepted
Who he was, as
Someone not involved, they pulled out his fingernails. Then
They took him to a waste-ground somewhere near the
Horseshoe Bend, and told him
What he was. They shot him nine times. (Irish 36)

“Campaign” is an interesting poem precisely because it avoids the
labelling of politicised recognition: nobody is named, the perpetrators of
violence remain unidentified, as well as the reasons for their behaviour.
The poem also possesses a photographic clarity and distance which exem-
plifies Carson’s refusal to explain violence and offer a clear-cut answer;
rather, the stanza’s lack of emotion stresses the poet’s intention to imitate
the cold flatness of news coverage.

The collection Belfast Confetti (1989) carries the same title as the
opening poem of Part Two in The Irish for No, thus suggesting a strong
element of continuity. Although structurally more elaborate and darker in
tone, the collection continues to explore the same territory as The Irish for
No, developing the same themes and techniques. Virtually every poem in
both volumes, which are divided in three parts, touches on the conflict in
the North, but those which deal overtly with the atrocities of terrorism are
the nine-liners which make up the central section of both books. Concise
and photographic, they are like a collage of snaps exposing the entrails of
the city.

The three sections which make up Belfast Confetti are introduced by
epigraphs which create a context for the following poems and essays. The
extract from the seventeenth-century “Ordinance of the Corporation of
Belfast” which precedes the middle part, describing how mastiff dogs (one
of the oldest British breeds) savaged livestock and persons, is suited to the
historical material incorporated into the ensuing essays, and to the shorter
poems dealing with the barbarities of sectarian violence. The last section
is introduced by lines from Kevin Lynch’s The Image of the City, which
conjure up the picture of a city, Florence, sacked by time and traversed
now only in memory. As for the first section, it is prefaced by an extract
from Benjamin’s A Berlin Childhood Around the Turn of the Century, in
which the author writes about his own experience of Berlin and Paris.
Benjamin stresses the sense of impotence in the labyrinth of the city and
maps the territory according to the spaces of memory, which is perhaps the only way it can be done.

The image of the map which runs throughout The Irish for No becomes in fact more central in Belfast Confetti, whose prefatory poem, “Turn Again”, introduces the trope in the opening line, referring to a Belfast map whose details are inaccurate:

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.
Ireland’s Entry, Elbow Lane, Weigh-House Lane, Back Lane, Stone-Cutter’s Entry –
Today’s plan is already yesterday’s – the streets that were there are gone.
And the shape of the jails cannot be shown for security reasons.

The linen backing is falling apart – the Falls Road hangs by a thread. (Belfast 11)

Here we enter a labyrinth made up of what is actually present and what might have been. Belfast is an unstable territory, where the Falls Road “hangs by a thread”. The city’s “linen backing” which is falling apart refers to the fact that Belfast's economic development through the late eighteenth and the nineteenth century was largely dependent on the linen trade. In the poem the map is a version of the city which, if it ever existed at all, is now radically different, so much so that the narrator remembering the city of his own past is disorientated by its present renovation:

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. (Belfast 11)

The Belfast represented by the non-existent map remains a haunting presence whose implications of disintegration and directionlessness turn it into the ghost of a never realized possibility. It is not by accident that the poem ends with the phrase “and history is changed”, for these words
embody the poet’s concern with story-making and, consequently, with the conviction that there are different versions of the same event.

As in *The Irish for No*, ambiguity permeates most of the poems of *Belfast Confetti*, but this is also a characteristic of Belfast, a city whose urban fabric has been continuously changed by bombing and rapid industrial development; hence its dream-like nature, as Carson tells us in “Revised Version”, one of the essays which forming the central section:

Trying to focus on the imagined grey area between Smithfield and North Street – jumbled bookstalls, fruitstalls, fleshers, the whingeing calls of glaziers and coal-brick men – I catch glimpses of what might have been, but it already blurs and fades; I wake or fall into another dream. ... In waking life I expect streets which are not there. (Belfast 66)

Maps of Belfast therefore cannot be trusted as they don’t represent the city as it is now; to do so, they should undergo constant revision, for everything is contingent and provisional; and the subjunctive mood of these images is tensed to the ifs and buts, the yeas and nays of Belfast’s history ... For maps cannot describe everything, or they describe states of mind, like Dubourdieu’s ‘very incorrect’ Plan of Belfast in 1811, which shows streets and blocks of buildings which have never existed; and also a bridge across the Lagan which was proposed but not carried out. (Belfast 67)

Maps and mapping in this context stand as metaphors for the process of revisionism, for the way place and self are continually rewritten. Belfast “consumes itself”, no map can record the city as it is now: only “*The city is a map of the city*” (Belfast 69).

The members of the Falls Road Club, a group of Belfast emigrants in the essay “Schoolboys and Idlers of Pompeii”, have therefore a hard time when they try to reconstruct the Belfast which, as they remember it forty years ago, barely exists:

Remembering is one of the main functions of the Falls Road Club which meets on the first Thursday of every month in the Wollongong Bar in Adelaide, Australia. Exiled here since the emigrations of the Fifties and the early Sixties, these Kennedys and McErleans and Hugheses begin with small talk of the present, but are soon immersed in history, reconstructing a city on the other side of the world, detailing streets and shops and houses which for the most part only exist now in the memory. (Belfast 53-54)
A meditation on re-envisioning what is changed or gone, the essay extends the subject analysed in “The Exiles Club” in The Irish for No; in “Schoolboys and Idlers of Pompeii” Belfast becomes a text that “has been written-on, erased, and written-on again” (Belfast 52).

Belfast as text proves to be chaos, “the alphabet soup of demolition”. Memory and the imagination help to reconstruct the “alphabet soup” of this chaotic text and to endow it with meaning sorted into “phrases, names, buildings” (Belfast 52). At the close of the essay, Carson asks the question which rests at the heart of the collection: “— who will sort out the chaos? Where does land begin, and water end? Or memory falter, and imagination take hold” (Belfast 54). The line between memory and imagination is proverbially fine, and that narrow liminal space is where many of Carson’s poems are set. “Question Time” provides a good example of that negotiation between past and present, memory and reality. The essay opens however on a description of present-day Belfast:

For Belfast is changing daily: one day the massive Victorian facade of the Grand Central Hotel, latterly an army barracks, is there, dominating the whole of Royal Avenue; the next day it is gone … Pizza parlours, massage parlours, night-clubs, drinking-clubs, antique shops, designer studios momentarily populate the wilderness and the blitz sites; they too will vanish in the morning. Everything will be revised. The fly-specked gloom of The Elephant Bar is now a Winemark; Mooney’s Bar is a denim shop; The Gladstone has disappeared … Maps and street directories are suspect.

No, don’t trust maps, for they avoid the moment: ramps, barricades, diversions, Peace Lines. Though if there is an ideal map, which shows this city as it is, it may exist in the eye of that helicopter ratcheting overhead, its searchlight fingering and scanning the micro-chip deviations … (Belfast 57-58)

This description gives way to a Belfast of childhood, as the speaker remembers going out “for what I imagined was a harmless spin on the bike” (Belfast 60). But when he is stopped by a few locals who become suspicious of his movements back and forth through adjoining Catholic and Protestant areas, his replies to their questions take the form of a map, and only his ability to remember this old Belfast proves his identity and guarantees his safety:

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. Eventually I pass the test. I am frisked again, this time in a regretful habitual gesture. A dreadful mistake, I hear one of them saying, has been made, and I get the feeling he is speaking in quotation marks, as if this is a bad police B-movie and he is mocking it, and me, and him. (Belfast 63)

Similarly, Carson’s account of the river Farset in the eponymous essay builds out of a moment in childhood, that may be remembered or imagined:

Trying to get back to that river, this river I am about to explore, I imagine or remember peering between the rusted iron bars that lined one side of the alleyway behind St Gall’s School at the bottom of Waterville Street, gazing down at the dark exhausted water, my cheeks pressed against the cold iron. It is only years later I will find its name. For now I take it in with a child’s rapt boredom. Muck. Water. A bottomless bucket. The undercarriage of a pram. A rusted spring mattress. The river, the stream, the sewer trickles from a black mouth and disappears down a black hole. It is this which gives Belfast its name. (Belfast 47)

“Farset” stresses the fact that the ambiguity which lies at the heart of Belfast is also characteristic of its name’s origin. In the essay Carson draws on George Benn, who wrote in the 1820s that:

The utmost obscurity and perplexity, however, attend the derivation of the name ... the name of Bealafarsad, which means, according to some, hurdleford town, while others have translated it, the mouth of the pool. (Belfast 47)

Carson also draws on other sources:

Dubourdieu, writing some years earlier, claims that Belfast is supposed to have derived its present name from Bela Fearsad, which signifies a town at the mouth of a river, expressive of the circumstances, in which it stood. Ward, Lock & Co.’s Guide to Northern Ireland, a hundred-odd years later, has yet another version: While the bell in Belfast’s civic coat of arms is a feeble pun, the word ‘fast’ refers to the ‘farset’, or sandbank (also the now-covered-in High Street river). ‘Bel’ in Celtic means ‘ford’, i.e. Bel-fetirste, the ‘bel’ or ‘ford’ of the ‘farset’.

In all this watery confusion one thing seems certain: that Belfast is a corruption of the Irish Béal Feirste. (Belfast 47-48)
While in “Farset” Carson attempts to track down the origin of the word “Belfast”, in “Brick” the author brings out the “material” origin of the city:

Belfast is built on *sleech* – alluvial or tidal muck – and is built of *sleech*, metamorphosed into brick, the city consuming its source as the brickfields themselves were built upon; *sleech*, this indeterminate slabbery semi-fluid – *all the public buildings*, notes Dr Pococke, visiting the town in 1752, *are founded on a morass* – this gunge, allied to *slicken and sludge, slag, sleek and slush*, to the Belfast or Scots *sleekit* that means sneaky, underhand, not-to-be-relied-on, becoming, in the earnest *brick*, something definite, of proverbial solidity – *built like a brick shiit-house*, we say; or, in dated slang, *you’re a brick* ... The subversive half-brick, conveniently hand-sized, is an essential ingredient of the ammunition known as ‘Belfast confetti’, and has been tried and trusted by generations of rioters; ... *(Belfast 72)*

If the city is read by Carson as a series of images which shift and move in terms of perception and the perspective of the viewer, this is partly a product of and a reaction to the prominence of the camera and of the various techniques of surveillance which proliferate in Belfast. Here images are all-important: projecting the wrong image, or being caught on camera in the wrong place at the wrong time can mean the difference between life and death. Consequently, there can no longer be any distinction between the real and the imaginary, for in Belfast cameras are continually rolling. The poem “33333” *(Irish)* alerts us to the impossibilities of unmediated vision. There can be no direct apprehension of the other, but only one mediated by various surveillance procedures such as the camera or, in this case, a “wire-grilled/ One-way mirror and squawk-box” *(Irish 39)*. Human presence is almost completely obliterated and the taxi driver is simply an “invisible man” *(Irish 39)*.

Back to Belfast Confetti, in the prose piece “Intelligence” the speaker tells us that:

*We are all being watched through peep-holes, one-way mirrors, security cameras, talked about on walkie-talkies, car phones, Pye Pocketphones; (Belfast 78)*

As a matter of fact, technical innovations are being made all the time so that now people can even be observed undetected:

*and as this helicopter chainsaws overhead, I pull back the curtains down here in the terraces to watch its pencil-beam of light flick through the card-index – I see*
the moon and the moon sees me, this 30,000,000 candlepower gimbal-mounted Nitesun by which the operator can observe undetected, with his infrared goggles and an IR filter on the light-source.
Everyone is watching someone, everyone wants to know what's coming next, so the lightweight, transparent shield was a vast improvement over the earlier metal one because visibility was greatly increased and – an extra bonus – gave better protection against petrol and acid bombs which could flow through the grill mesh of the metal type ... (Belfast 78)

However, while Carson acknowledges the pervasiveness of surveillance, he also emphasises the inability of the eye of the camera to capture the totality of what is happening. Carson has spoken of this to Rand Brandes:

You would think the powers-that-be have enough information not to make mistakes, but they do. I'm constantly amazed at the amount of surveillance that goes on here. You're being watched all the time: spies in the sky, cameras, bugs in telephones. And yet for all this massive input of information, they don't appear to know what's going on. (Brandes 88)

Further on in “Intelligence” Carson ironically compares Belfast life to Jeremy Bentham's scheme for a model prison, the Panopticon, designed (as the name suggests) to facilitate constant surveillance. Carson's concern with representation, his privileging of uncertainty and instability, is grounded here in a very deep awareness of the way in which representation is, especially in Belfast, both a form of authority and control.

All through Belfast Confetti, stopped time, waste grounds, transparent borders are for Carson no-go areas of violent death. In the poem “Yes” the train does not carry its passengers safely to their destinations; the invisible border between North and South, because of IRA bomb explosions, causes sudden reversals, ruptured carriages, cracked glass:

I'm drinking in the 7-Up bottle-green eyes of the barmaid
On the Enterprise express – bottles and glasses clinking each other –
When the train slows with a noise like Schweppes and halts just outside Dundalk.
Not that unwontedly, since we're no strangers to the border bomb.
As the Belfast accent of the tannoy tells us what is happening
I’m about to quote Basho’s The Narrow Road to the Deep
North –
*Blossoming mushrooms: from some unknown tree a leaf has
stuck to it –
When it goes off and we’re thrown out of kilter. My mouth is
full
Of broken glass and quinine as everything reverses South. *(Belfast 65)*

“Jawbox”, one of the ten long poems in the collection, touches too
on the idea of the border, and a railway journey

... interrupted, for the

seventh time that week,
By a bomb on the line between Dundalk and Newry. Or
Newry and Dundalk, depending
Where you’re coming from: like the difference between
Cambodia and Kampuchea. *(Belfast 91)*

Throughout the poem this idea of the border is taken further, until it
finally comes to symbolize the conflict in language and accent through the
motif of the split self or the double. The whole poem is Carson’s retracing
of personal and family history, as the poet’s voice goes through remem-
bered objects, incidents, people and places. The poem begins in the pres-
ent tense, and this gives the reader the impression that the story is being
told in the present; most importantly, memory becomes a filming camera,
as the poet remembers himself and his father in the kitchen:

What looks to us like a crackly newsreel, the picture
jumping with flak,
Was clear as day, once. But that’s taken as read, since this is a
‘quotation’
In the main text of the film, which begins with someone
flicking open
The glossy pages of a *Homes and Gardens* kitchen supplement:
*Sink or Swim*, the caption
Says, *The Belfast sink combines old-fashioned charm with tried
and tested
Practicality... ‘Why Belfast?’*, the character begins to ponder –
he puts the accent
On the fast, as if the name was Irish, which it was (or is); this
is how
His father says it, just as, being from Belfast, he calls the sink a ‘jawbox’. (*Belfast* 90)

Later on Carson recalls a fact in his childhood and those feelings of entrapment and annihilation, and the desire to escape:

... his child’s body, hunched in the dark alcove underneath
The sink, sulking, tearful, wishing he was dead. Imprisoned by so many
Small transgressions, he wants to break out of the trap. He’s caught between
*Belfast* and *Belfast*, in the accordion pleats between two lurching carriages
Banging, rattling, threatening to break loose, as he gets a terrifying glimpse
Of railway sleepers, blotchy gravel flicking past a smell of creosote and oil and urine. (*Belfast* 92-93)

The two ways of pronouncing the word “Belfast” are symptomatic of the problematic duality of Northern Irish identity, a duality which is made even more explicit when Jekyll and Hyde, English and Irish, the face and its mirror image are mentioned. The respectful, bourgeois Jekyll is, of course, an Englishman, whereas its darker and violent counterpart, Hyde, is the Irishman. While such dualities threaten a coherent sense of self, at the same time the dominance of one over the other results in terror and brutality:

... From the cloud
A face begins to dawn: something like his own, but thicker, coarser, Jekyll
Turning into Hyde – an Englishman into an Irishman – emerging from the bloom
Behind the mirror. Breathed-on, becoming whole, the murderer is hunched
Behind the hedge. One bite from the apple, as the victim’s Ford Fiesta trickles
Up the driveway. The car door opens. The apple’s thrown away. (*Belfast* 93)
In the poem, Hyde, who is associated with Irishness, with brutality and violence, with the dark side of the self and the unconscious, triumphs in the end, and the final lines of the poem depict Jekyll being choked to death:

... Jekyll’s head
Is jerking back and forward on the rim. Red confetti spatters
The white glaze. (Belfast 94)

When language cannot provide stability for the subject, when it does not provide a kind of mirror in which the split self can find itself united, it is as though the body itself disintegrates. Carson’s exploration of multiple, fragmented selves is complicated and mediated by his concern to place that self within the unpredictable and chaotic territory of Belfast.

Carson is perhaps the most eloquent spokesman for the uncertainty, violence, fear, and frustration that plague Belfast’s inhabitants. He gives voice to a city which has often been rendered voiceless through political oppression. Although Irish is his first language, he inhabits a world where English is linguistically dominant. It is particularly in the poem “The Irish for No” that he overtly discredits this dominance through his choice of a native imagery and a technical innovation which dismiss English culture as central. Indeed, one of the most brilliant achievements of this poem is that, although there is no Irish word for “no”, Carson uses the English language to say no to English domination and to affirm the identity of Irish Belfast.
1 That this is a Catholic area is suggested by the presence in the poem of the *Irish News*, the newspaper read by the Catholic minority in the North, and by the off-white wall, which alludes at the fact that IRA activists white-washed the walls of Catholic areas to make British patrolling soldiers visible to snipers at night.

2 Jonathan Allison suggests that the term “Belfast confetti” originally meant the nuts and bolts that Protestant workers threw at Catholic workers in the Harland & Wolff shipyards (14).


