Second Time Round: Fugal Memory in Ciaran Carson's *For All We Know*

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Ciaran Carson's 2008 collection *For All We Know* begins with an epigraph from Glenn Gould's 1964 essay 'So You Want to Write a Fugue?' The fugue, Gould argues in that essay, 'arouses some primeval curiosity which seeks to uncover in the relations of statement and answer, of challenge and response, of call and of echo the secret of those still, desert places which hold the clues to man's destiny but which predate all recollection of his creative imagination'.[1] Through repetition and opposition, fugue goes beyond both form and memory to examine what Gould calls 'the consciousness of modern man'.[2] The relationship between call and response in a fugue, where each subject is revealed in relation to subsequent subjects through imitative counterpoint, underpins much of Carson's work. His poetry is often not directly propositional or denotative but, in the words of John Goodby, a 'patchwork quilt, or the endless, and endlessly self-revising, story'.[3] For Goodby, the 'patchwork' effect of Carson's poetry, highlighting its intertextuality and self-reflexivity, offers a way to look at memory as the way the past is restructured in the present, rather than pointing towards a pure originary source. Throughout Carson's poetry, memory — whether historical or personal — is presented not as an act of recovery, but in terms of recreation: it is a way of looking at the past through the demands of the present. This is arguably true for many poets. Susan Stewart, for instance, claims that '[p]oetry is both the *repetition* of an ontological moment and the *ongoing process or work* of enunciation by which that moment is recursively known and carried forward'.[4] By focusing on Carson's use of musical traditions, however, it is possible to see how his poetry simultaneously foregrounds this 'ongoing process' and highlights its difficulty. As Giorgio Agamben argues, rhythm introduces 'a split and a stop' into chronological time: repetition is in itself atemporal.[5] Carson's manipulation of fugue and related musical forms suggests that poetry cannot simply be used to carry the past into the present, or to point to an eventual reconciliation, but rather that both past and present must be considered simultaneously in the instant of repetition.

In this sense, as will be developed below in relation to the work of Paul Celan, Carson's work can be seen as political in form as much as in content. For Jacques Rancière, modern poetry should be thought of not in relation to the experience or sensibility of a self, bur rather as 'a new political experience of the physical world, or a physical experience of

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[1] Glenn Gould, 'So You Want to Write a Fugue?', *The Glenn Gould Reader*, ed. Tim Page (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985), 241.

[2] Gould 237.

[3] John Goodby, '"Walking in the City": Space, Narrative and Surveillance in *The Irish for No* and *Belfast Confetti*', *Ciaran Carson: Critical Essays*, ed. Elmer Kennedy-Andrews (Dublin: Four Courts, 2009), 82. The image of a patchwork quilt, highlighting the 'dips and gradients of the staggered repeats', appears in the opening of *For All We Know*. Ciaran Carson, *For All We Know* (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 2008), 15-16.

[4] Susan Stewart, *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 15 (italics in original).

[5] Giorgio Agamben, *The Man without Content*, trans. Georgia Albert (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 99.

politics'.[6] Poetry, he argues, questions the relationship between the individual subject and the place of utterance: the city, or *polis*. This relationship is explored in a canonical poem such as 'Belfast Confetti', where Carson juxtaposes political violence, language, and subjecthood: 'What is / my name? Where am I coming from? Where am I going? A fusillade of question marks'.[7] The self must be known in relation to the place of utterance, but the physical experience of violence in that place destabilises both language and selfhood. Violence, crucially, does not negate language — no political violence takes place in a vacuum, or silence — but rather disrupts it, such that the poet's sentences can only 'stutter' and repeat. Carson depicts political violence as both opening and cessation: it raises fundamental existential questions that cannot be answered within the space of the poem. In this light, repetition becomes a way simultaneously to acknowledge the disruptive power of political violence and refuse familiar narrative and contextual explanations. Carson, like Celan, constructs what Agamben terms a 'limitless' and 'double' poetry that makes the intransmissibility of the past 'a value in itself'.[8] Violence reconfigures the relationship between self and place, but cannot be reduced to linear narrative. Instead, for both poets political response must be reconfigured in relation to language itself.

As Alan Gillis has articulated, Carson's poetry avoids narrative and causality in favour of tropes of doubling and repetition, many of which obscure the very narrative structures the reader expects them to reveal. Gillis's analysis of 'Queen's Gambit', from *Belfast Confetti*, applies equally to Carson's writing more generally:

> Carson's technique is often to distort an unclear story by implying connections which turn out to be distractions. These connections, however, suggest a broader whole (of sorts), a hinted-at, potential totality of non-tangible significance, which then serves as an indistinct, mutating framework within which the narrative's fragments are related and received. Carson's poems incessantly zoom-in on idiosyncratic details which perpetually reappear in disparate contexts, thereby interconnecting these differing contexts to endow his work with the synchronous temporality implied by his idealist cartography. Thus a singular event mutates, through its telling, to become a kind of mainframe for multiple events that are unrelated by any linear sequence of cause and effect.[9]

This approach is most evident in *For All We Know*, which initially appears to be one of Carson's most sustained and linear narratives. The collection traces the love affair of the Carson-like Gabriel, a Belfast-based Catholic writer, and the half-French, half-English Nina, who meet in Belfast during the Troubles and travel to Paris, Berlin, and Dresden. As with many of Carson's recent volumes, ranging from *Opera Et Cetera* (1996) to *Until Before After* (2010), any sense of narrative or progression is provided by a foregrounded structure: the volume is divided into two parts of thirty-five poems, with the same sequence of titles in each part. The poems themselves are formally static: fourteen-syllable lines are presented in usually seven or fourteen couplets. The narrative is revealed through repetitive material and conceptual motifs — Omega watches and Mont Blanc pens, especially — which are never

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[6] Jacques Rancière, *The Flesh of Words: The Politics of Writing*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 12.

[7] Ciaran Carson, *Collected Poems* (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 2008), 93.

[8] Agamben 56, 110.

[9] Alan Gillis, 'Ciaran Carson: Beyond Belfast', *The Cities of Belfast*, ed. Nicholas Allen and Aaron Kelly (Dublin: Four Courts, 2003), 189.

fully contextualised or explained. What the reader understands of this story comes not from any declared action, but from the accumulation of repeated themes and images that almost, if never quite, cohere.

Carson states that the collection began as an attempt to write the story of a love affair from a single perspective: it is in many ways a retelling of his earlier novel *The Pen Friend*, which was not published until 2009. While writing, however, he found himself 'temperamentally unsuited' to such a project: 'The poems arrived in another voice, that of a persona, or rather two personas, man and woman, engaged in a dialogue which casts some doubt on whatever it is they are doing together. And it seemed to me that I was dealing with a new kind of language, a way of saying things I hadn't considered until then'.[10] The dialogic call and response does not clarify the situation: rather then filling out the details of a single story, the appearance of a second narrative perspective illustrates the extent to which every narrative or experience contains multiple, often contradictory, stories.

In the same series of interviews, conducted between December 2007 and April 2008, Carson speaks of Paul Celan's influence on his writing at the time he was working on *For All We Know*. Celan, Carson argues, uses 'language to go beyond language, or beyond our normal understanding of it'.[11] While establishing a formal parallel between the two poets on the grounds of line-length, for instance, might be superficial or indeed politically naïve, their shared sense of the simultaneous inefficacy and necessity of language invites broad questions of the ways both writers configure the work of memory in a time of distress. For both poets, moreover, the way to present a poem in which language goes beyond language in invoking an unnamed other is indebted to, and presented through, the conventions of fugue. Celan and Carson, in different ways, present imitative counterpoint as a way to think about the relation between poetry, memory, and violence in the modern era.

Throughout his small corpus of prose criticism, Celan frequently addresses what appears to be an irreconcilable opposition. Poetry, he claims in reply to a 1961 questionnaire from the Flinker Bookstore, is 'by necessity a unique instance of language […] hence never what is double'.[12] At the same time, as he writes in 'The Meridian', poetry invites the other, and so depends upon a necessary doubling: 'The poem intends another, needs this other, needs an opposite. It goes toward it, bespeaks it'.[13] Poetry is a singular instance made visible through opposition. As Jacques Derrida states, regarding Celan's project: 'There is in every poetic text, just as in every utterance […] an inaccessible secret to which no proof will ever be adequate'.[14] A declarative statement at the limit of language cannot suffice, and cannot serve as testimony. Instead, the poetic text reaches out to an other, through language, to convey something inherently 'inaccessible'. This idea is most directly expressed — insofar as any of Celan's writing can be denoted as direct expression — in a poem from 1963 beginning 'SO MANY CONSTELLATIONS' ['*SOVIEL GESTIRNE*']:

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[10] Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, 'For All I Know: Ciaran Carson in Conversation with Elmer Kennedy-Andrews', in *Ciaran Carson: Critical Essays*, ed. Kennedy-Andrews (Dublin: Four Courts, 2009), 22.

[11] Kennedy-Andrews 16.

[12] Paul Celan, *Collected Prose,* trans. Rosemarie Waldrop (Manchester: Carcanet, 1986), 23.

[13] Celan, *Collected Prose*, 49.

[14] Jacques Derrida, *Sovereignties in Question: The Poetics of Paul Celan*, ed. Thomas Dutoit and Outi Pasanen (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 164.

I know,
I know and you know, we knew
we did not know, we
were there, after all, and not there
and at times when
only the void stood between us we got
all the way to each other.[15]

As well as suggesting the title of Carson's collection, here Celan establishes the way knowledge can only exist in the relation between the self and the other, mediated by void. This reaching out to the other is not simply a formulation of the relation between the text and reader, however, but a way of accounting for repetition within the poems themselves. Throughout Celan's poetry, each image, word, or motif becomes its own double, and perhaps its own void. As he writes towards the end of his life: 'UNREADABILITY of this / world. All doubles' ['*UNLESBARKEIT dieser / Welt. Alles doppelt*'].[16] The text communicates through doubling, repetition, and alterity, yet these also suggest its potential insularity. As Ulrich Baer argues, Celan 'has to respond to the loss of a horizon for experience […] that occurred in language itself […] by relying on language to express it'.[17] Celan's poetry should not be considered simply as a reclamation of language after traumatic violence, but instead functions as an exploration of what remains of language when it has been used to propagate such violence. Like Carson in 'Belfast Confetti', Celan's poetry considers the relation 'between destruction and production, between recipient and sender […]. It also allows the absence of a defining horizon and stable syntax to be read as an irremediable opening within the poem rather than the poem's hermetic refusal of sense'.[18] As in the above extract, repetition and paradox allow for an opening of experience that neither ignores nor embraces the language of violence, but instead focuses on the instantiation of language at a precise moment.

The opposition between a necessary doubling of language and the need for a poem to be a unique instance of language can be exemplified through the concept of fugue, as is most apparent in Celan's early poem 'Todesfuge'. The poem is dated 1945, although many critics believe it to have been composed the previous year, and was first published in a Romanian translation by Petre Solomon in 1947; it was finally published in German in 1952. The poem, intriguingly, began as a 'Todestango', and was retitled as a fugue only after the Romanian publication. For John Felstiner, this change brings to mind not only Bach's *Art of the Fugue*, but also a tradition of German culture more generally, which the poem then 'blights':

Now Celan's term *Todesfuge* throws into doubt the acme of music, which is itself the quintessential art. That doubt was already blatant when Bach fugues were heard from the

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[15] Celan, *Poems of Paul Celan*, trans. Michael Hamburger, rev. ed. (New York: Persea Books, 2002), 137.

[16] Celan, *Selections*, ed. Pierre Joris (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005), 131.

[17] Ulrich Baer, *Remnants of Song: Trauma and the Experience of Modernity in Charles Baudelaire and Paul Celan* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 169.

[18] Baer 208.

commandant's residence at Auschwitz. […] Celan's verse undermines any high idea of music ordering our lives.[19]

This interpretation, now dominant, is a way to refute the Adornian charges that 'Todesfuge' aestheticises the Holocaust, as raised by many commentators in the first decades following the poem's publication, and even by Celan himself, who 'came to think it spoke too directly or explicitly about things that could not be said'.[20] As Karl S. Weimer claims in his technical analysis of the poem, Celan uses 'the epitome of order and integration […] to record disorder and disintegration'.[21] Celan, according to Felstiner and Weimar, reappropriates an orderly and essentially German compositional technique to speak against an idea of German order.

A fugue, however, already invites the idea of disorder. Structurally a fugue is like a canon, insofar as both compositional techniques are based on a theme that is played in different voices and different keys. As Douglas Hofstadter notes, however, the 'notion' of a fugue — for a fugue cannot be codified as a structure or static form — is much less rigid than a canon and allows for a greater degree of emotional or artistic expression. The prime feature of a fugue is that it begins with a single voice articulating a main theme or subject, which is then developed through the introduction of countersubjects that repeat the theme in different keys and in contrast to the original subject. After each of the voices has entered, they are free to do 'whatever fanciful things entered the composer's mind. When all the voices have "arrived", then there are no rules. There are, to be sure, standard kinds of things to do – but not so standard that one can merely compose a fugue by formula'.[22] The fugue offers a compositional approach that is standardised but not fixed, containing lines that both repeat upon themselves and are known through their variance and opposition, and offers a combination of rigidity and freedom.

The oppositions and freedoms inherent to a fugue are already apparent in the 'black milk of daybreak we drink it at sundown [*Schwarze Milch der Frühe wir trinken sie abends*]' that is the first subject of 'Todesfuge'.[23] The positive subject contradicts itself even in its first appearance, and grows more complicated and opaque with each reiteration. Both the physical object and linear time are instantly transformed from the reader's expectations: as the line is repeated and slightly changed over the following stanzas, it comes to stand for a set of experiences that are both familiar and defy all expectations. Each element of the poem showcases a paradoxical experience or phenomenon that nevertheless must be recorded. The poem's attempt to express the unutterable while still moving towards an inherent poeticism is noted in many appraisals of Celan's work. Werner Hamacher, for instance, argues that Celan develops a language of time that 'denies for itself the denial of its truth-content, that fulfils the false promise through its breach'.[24] More generally, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe asks: '[h]ow does it happen that in poetry, out of poetry, all is not lost, that

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[19] John Felstiner, *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995), 33.

[20] Anne Carson, *Economy of the Unlost* (*Reading Semonides of Keos with Paul Celan*) (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 1999), 115.

[21] Karl S. Weimar, 'Paul Celan's "Todesfuge": Translation and Interpretation', *PMLA* 89.1 (Jan, 1974), 93.

[22] Douglas Hofstadter, *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980), 9.

[23] Celan, *Poems of Paul Celan*, 31.

[24] Werner Hamacher, 'The Second of Inversion: Movements of a Figure through Celan's Poetry', trans. William D. Jewett, *Yale French Studies* 69 (1985): 286.

a possibility of articulating something still remains, if only in stuttering'.[25] This possibility of a stuttered articulation is developed in various ways throughout Celan's career, most notably in his neologisms and ruptured lines, but here, at the start, it is presented through reference to a fugue. A fugue offers, above all else, a subject that is not fully negated but is opposed and transformed through counterpoint and imitation: as such, it offers a way to move past pure statement towards a form of free recurrence.

There is another way to look at Celan's use of fugue, however, which is suggested through a comparison with Carson. While Carson traces his interest in fugue to Gould, he also stresses the importance of fugue as a medical condition of what Ian Hacking calls 'mad travel': strange and unexpected trips, usually in a state of obscured consciousness.[26] A fugue in this sense is simply a state in which, in Carson's words, 'unknown to himself, [a subject] becomes someone else'.[27] As Hacking notes, fugal states can be found across histories and cultures, but are most notably described in Bordeaux in the late 1880s and early 1890s. The hysterical fugue — which reappears as shell-shock after the first World War — is culturally specific and codifiable. In 1895, the year before William James's lectures on fugue states, Fulgence Raymond characterized fugues as involving 'an irresistible compulsion to travel', intelligent and non-violent action, and a complete lack of memory of the event.[28] If a fugue in musical terms foregrounds recurrence and opposition, a fugue in psychological terms is virtually the opposite, a negation of any notion of linear and intentional lived experience. The hysterical fugue is a figure, in this sense, of the impossibility of memory and causal explanation: in a fugue state, everything begins again in a repeating present. The fugue is thus a figure of repetition and escape, of stasis and freedom.

For Carson, the juxtaposition of these two senses of fugue is an inducement to poetry: 'So "fugue", both in musical and psychological terms, has all sorts of implications as to who we are and what we are doing in this world. It's from Latin, *fugere*, to flee. Are we all fugitives? "Fled is that music: — Do I wake or sleep?"'[29] For Carson as well as Celan, a fugue is not a form with which to work, or to which to make reference, but foregrounds questions of language and relation. For both poets, a fugue is a way to chart unique instances of language in opposition. Rather than a simple dialectic of order and disorder, the fugue in this way becomes an approach to those moments in history, or those aspects of identity, that we are forced to flee. To write a fugue now is not merely to match an older form onto a tempestuous or unenunciatable present; rather a fugue, as a series of constant oppositions, challenges the notion of the first subject with which it begins. Like a narrative of trauma, a fugue questions the idea of a first time, or an originary source. By showing the way voice and language can only be known in opposition and in counterpoint, both poets use the fugue to reveal the relation between the past and the present, and the impossibility of a direct approach to any one story, or word.

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[25] Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Poetry as Experience*, trans. Andrea Tarnowski (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 23.

[26] Ian Hacking, *Mad Travellers: Reflections on the Reality of Transient Mental Illness* (London: Free Association Books, 1999), 8.

[27] Ciaran Carson, *Shamrock Tea* (London: Granta, 2001), 162. Carson returns to this definition (inevitably) in his fugue- and Gould-obsessed novel *Exchange Place*, where the fugue state is exemplified by Charles Burns of Glasgow. Ciaran Carson, *Exchange Place* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 2012), 128-30.

[28] Hacking 47.

[29] Kennedy-Andrews, 'For All I Know', 26. Carson is quoting, of course, Keats's 'Ode to a Nightingale'.

Fugue in this sense provides a way to work through what Pierre Nora terms the 'fundamental opposition' between memory and history.[30] Memory, as a living bond that ties the past to the present, has been eradicated by history, as the critical or analytic reconstruction of the past. For Nora, ideas of the trace, mediation, or distance belong not to memory but to history. Memory, as lived experience, has been supplanted by a recognition of the distance and inaccessibility of the past. The fugue provides a way to bring these opposing ideas together: the original subject is at once known in the present, but always mediated by the countersubjects. The subject, as it is reiterated and opposed, becomes its own trace. For both Celan and Carson, using a fugue in this way provides the opportunity to examine a history that is impossible to describe directly but that is nevertheless a central aspect of present experience. In a discussion about Celan, Carson argues that such a poem is not necessarily 'redemptive', but 'makes the reader ponder the apparatus of language and its responsibility to communicate, if not necessarily redeem, the human condition'.[31] The fugal poem occupies a liminal space between memory and history, or between personal experience and the legacy of the past. It does not offer a reconciliation, but opens up the degree to which language can navigate this opposition. Even a sequence like *For All We Know*, which Carson claims began as a narrative that would allow him to 'put the war behind him', ultimately returns to the 'inescapable' difficulties of writing in a time of violence.[32] The fugue permits a reconsideration of these questions insofar as it highlights the inescapability of repetition – and so of history and memory – at the same time that it suggests a possible opening.

Examining Carson's poetry in light of the fugue follows from a critical tradition of attesting and contesting the influence of musical forms on his work. Lucy Collins, for instance, argues that there is a clear link between Carson's borrowing from other literary sources and his use of musical traditions; his early long-lined poems, she claims, depend on a 'musical energy […] to generate rhythm'.[33] For Collins, use of musical traditions is as essential to Carson's work as intertextual referentiality, and can be seen as part of a larger engagement with Irish culture more generally. Seán Crosson goes further in comparing the metres in some of Carson's long lines to those in particular traditional songs.[34] Edna Longley, conversely, claims that Carson's poetry 'inclines towards riddle or riddling narrative, rather than song'.[35] In her account, Carson's work seeks to complicate pre-existing traditions, and showcases its own inability to communicate directly. This indeterminacy, however, is intrinsic to Carson's own view of traditional music. In his early pocket guide to Irish traditional music, he writes: 'The same tune is never the same tune twice. […] The same tune played by the same musician on different occasions will not be the same tune. The

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[30] Pierre Nora, 'Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*', trans. Marc Roudebush, *Representations* 26 (Spring, 1989): 8.

[31] Kennedy-Andrews, 'For All I Know', 17.

[32] Kennedy-Andrews, 'For All I Know', 17.

[33] Lucy Collins, 'Marking Time: The Influence of Irish Traditional Music on the Poetry of Ciaran Carson', *Back to the Present: Forward to the Past: Irish Writing and History since 1798*, vol. 1, ed. Patricia A. Lynch, Joachim Fischer, and Brian Coates (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2006), 247.

[34] Seán Crosson, 'Performance and Music in the Poetry of Ciaran Carson', *Nordic Irish Studies* 3 (2004): 107-8.

[35] Edna Longley, *The Living Stream: Literature & Revisionism in Ireland* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1994), 262.

same tune may have many different names. The tune all depends'.[36] What attracts Carson to traditional music, then, is a similar combination of freedom and recurrence to that found in the fugue. The use of musical traditions does not simply draw upon an originary source, but draws the reader's attention to the way any idea of a straightforward origin or reference point is already complicated. In light of the focus on Belfast within Carson's early collections, it is noteworthy that even the city is figured in these terms: 'If the city [Belfast] is a piece of music, it depends on who's playing it, who's listening; and you are not the person you were a week ago, when last you visited the ornate Opera House'.[37] Neither the tune, the player, nor the audience is ever the same, and yet each to a certain extent repeats itself. This mixture of unique instantiation and repetition is a central component of all artistic, and indeed all lived, experience.

There are several ways to illustrate how Carson translates these ideas into a fugue in *For All We Know*. The most evident is his discussions of fugues themselves, beginning with 'Le Mot Juste', falling early in each part. In the first version of the poem, the narrator practises Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier*, including the concluding B-minor fugue, while envisioning his interlocutor doing the same. 'Still the interminable wrestle with words and meanings?' she asks, 'quoting from something'. The narrator makes trivial conversation about Bach's children, and his writing quills, only to be interrupted: 'You reached suddenly across the table to put your mouth / to mine, murmuring what I took for a fugue on my lips'.[38] Here a fugue is both a real piece of music that recurs through time — the figure that has been played by Bach and by Nina/Miranda is now being played by Gabriel — and also something, impossible to articulate, that goes beyond the simpler question of words and meanings. As in 'Prelude and Fugue', where an unnamed character sketches 'a Bach prelude on a napkin', Bach and fugues are used as a sign of non-linguistic communication.[39]

How the mention of Bach fugues correlates to the volume as a whole, however, can only be seen when this poem is compared to its second iteration. The latter version of 'Le Mot Juste' begins almost with the same words, here brought into a new context: 'Still the interminable wrestle with words and meanings. / Flaubert labouring for days over a single sentence'.[40] What is personal and vague in the first version is historically located and specific in the second. In neither case is the quote attributed or corrected to T.S. Eliot's original 'intolerable wrestle / With words and meanings'.[41] Instead, the importance of a line lies not in its relation to the external world, but the extent to which it is always already an internal referent, refracted on itself. Each couplet in the latter poem refers to an image or theme from poems in the first half. Beethoven's quill corresponds to Bach's quill in the first 'Le Mot Juste', while a discussion of the bubbles in a loaf of bread refers to 'Second Time Round', and 'Snow falling interminably, irrevocably on / the little village in a song your mother used to sing' reiterates a song printed as one of the volume's epigraphs and quoted in 'In the Dark'. The 'meaning' of these images and lines cannot be isolated, but is only revealed as each image within the volume is repeated and recontextualised. The poem ends

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[36] Ciaran Carson, *Irish Traditional Music* (Belfast: Appletree Press, 1986), 8.
[37] Ciaran Carson, *Last Night's Fun: A Book about Irish Traditional Music* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1996), 33.
[38] Carson, *For All We Know*, 28.
[39] Carson, *For All We Know*, 43.
[40] Carson, *For All We Know*, 77.
[41] T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets* (1944; London: Faber and Faber, 1970), 26.

almost where it begins: 'Still the interminable struggle with words and meanings. / These words foundering for now over a single sentence'. The struggle over words and meanings has by now become truly interminable, repeated across poems and pages; the point, quite simply, is that there is never a 'mot juste'. Meaning, in these poems, is a process of accumulation. As in traditional music, no single version of a song can be said to be the song itself.

These repeated elements are not chosen at random. Although a complete technical analysis of the fugal patternings in the volume would be unwieldy at best, the first three poems in each section demonstrate the way Carson introduces subjects and countersubjects. The first poem in each section is 'Second Time Round', a title that refers both to the volume's own compositional techniques and to a second-hand clothing store where Nina purchases a dress: form and content constantly play off each other. The poem centres on a couple in a restaurant celebrating their anniversary. It begins mid-conversation, in French; from the title onwards, everything in the poem comes across as a restatement of a theme that the reader has not heard before. As with 'Todesfuge', although to substantially different effect, the first subject in Carson's poem already contains oppositions, even before the countersubjects enter. In the conversation that opens the volume, 'one word never came across as just itself, but you / would put it over as insinuating something else'.[42] Even as this poem serves, in effect, as the first subject in a fugue, it also questions the idea of a first subject: all that can be known can only be known in counterpoint, or in reference to a prior and perhaps unseen source. As Elmer Kennedy-Andrews writes, by highlighting the absence of an 'authentic original', the volume's structure foregrounds the inherent ambiguity of textual representation.[43] Throughout the volume Carson suggests that this absence of an original is true not only in language and relationships, but ultimately history itself. There is no Eden or Arcadia to which one can return, no life that has not already been marred by violence and disaster.

Already, within the first lines of the collection, the political questions that underpin the poems begin to emerge. As several recent critics have acknowledged, for contemporary Northern Irish poets historical memory cannot be a refuge, but must always be reproblematised in the present. While Francesca Bovone argues simply that Carson looks for a way to align the past to the present and future, Shane Alcobia-Murphy and Alan Gillis argue that this alignment is always unstable.[44] For Alcobia-Murphy, 'writing in a time of violence [...] calls into question the ability to re-present an event', while Gillis argues that '[t]he past can only be reconfigured in a present moment, into which the future incessantly looms, and its reconstruction must therefore be perpetually unstable, always likely to be deconstructed by another sense of the past formed at another moment'.[45] This sense of the instability of both text and history, combined with the need to make sense of the past in the present, has long been a feature of Carson's writing. In 'Exile' from *Breaking News*, the first

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[42] Carson, *For All We Know*, 15.

[43] Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, 'Carson, Heaney, and the Art of Getting Lost', *Ciaran Carson: Critical Essays*, ed. Kennedy-Andrews (Dublin: Four Courts, 2009), 240.

[44] Francesca Bovone, 'Glenn Patterson and Ciaran Carson: The New Northern Irish Literature', *New Voices in Irish Criticism 5*, ed. Ruth Connolly and Ann Coughlin (Dublin: Four Courts, 2005), 16.

[45] Shane Alcobia-Murphy, *Governing the Tongue in Northern Ireland: The Place of Art/The Art of Place* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2005), 21; Gillis 186.

of his volumes to follow a Celan- or William Carlos Williams-like lineation, Carson laments that 'Belfast / is many places', but 'all lie / in ruins': the task of the poet is to save, or to try to save, just one 'from oblivion'.[46] Earlier poems, such as 'Belfast Confetti', also point to the history of violence as something no text can withstand. *For All We Know*'s most striking feature is the way it displaces this discourse of violence and textuality to what appears to be a far more normative, and even romantic, context.

This necessary fragmentation and re-evaluation is foregrounded in the two poems that follow 'Second Time Round'. The subject of a couple considering their own past is followed by a countersubject, as they witness another couple, in another restaurant, in 'Hotel del Mar': 'Did we two, you wondered, ever // come across like that?'[47] Here the narrative voice calls out for confirmation or reassurance, although such assurances are impossible. While the narrators see themselves in the other couple, this identification cannot be confirmed. The only remaining possibility, as presented in 'On the Contrary', is to go beyond language. 'It's because we were brought up to lead double lives', the poem begins, offering a panacea or explanation that is immediately unsustainable. The past cannot remain there, but resurfaces:

> As our promise was never to be betrayed by our words
> so we became our own shadowy police watching us [...]
>
> as the searchlight trawls across the bedroom window you turn
> towards me speechlessly and we look into each other's eyes.[48]

'On the Contrary' refigures the first two poems in the collection, but not towards any verbal resolution. Instead of a murmured fugue, the lovers can exchange only a speechless look, and instead of looking to the other for a response, they must become their own others. An alignment of the past with the present cannot bring what Bovone calls 'a way to move on', but instead only offers an unsteady doubling. The past re-emerges as the present, but has no explanatory power.

This doubling is re-presented in the poems' second versions. 'Second Time Round', the second time round, offers a couple on holiday, an opening line in French, and a section of the song discussed in 'Le Mot Juste'. This is familiar territory: indeed, not only are the titles of the poems in the volume's second half repeated, but many of the lines are the same, or only slightly altered. Here again, though, any hope at resolution is intruded on by an apparition of the past. Nina suggests that Gabriel pretend to be her, a suggestion that contains echoes of an hysterical fugue, as the narrator 'find[s] [himself] on a boulevard which is deserted', seemingly separated from any original identity:

> If I'm you, who are you? I say, whereupon you reply
> with a smile I have to take my eyes off the road to catch
>
> when a man looms into the windscreen in a split second,
> rain pouring from his glistening black ulster and helmet.[49]

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[46] Carson, *Collected Poems*, 466.
[47] Carson, *For All We Know*, 17.
[48] Carson, *For All We Know*, 18.

Like the 'shadowy police' in 'On the Contrary', the helmeted man appears here not as an interruption to personal communication, but as a figure who is already bound into the individual narrative. Belfast and the Troubles appear here only indirectly, unlike in collections such as *Belfast Confetti*. Instead, as in his novel *Exchange Place*, the Troubles necessitate a form of wariness: 'I look and listen, since you never know who might be watching or listening in on you'.[50] Identity is always destabilised and subject to interrogation. In *For All We Know* Carson suggests that personal or romantic poetry cannot fully offer a respite from history or politics, but neither can the past be confronted explicitly. As in 'Belfast Confetti', the self is left only with open-ended questions.

If *For All We Know* presents a vision of poetry and the world in which the past and present are forever intertwined while still opposed, and in which language can never fully surmount the difficulties of expression, Carson's perspective is neither wholly static nor despairing. The possibility for forward movement is made possible by recourse to the fugue. While *The Pen Friend* and *For All We Know* are attempts to tell the same, or similar, stories, the former has almost no references to music, barring a few allusions to Billie Holiday. Carson's concern in the prose version is the unreliability of language and memory. '[T]here is no memory that is not permeated with subsequent memories', the narrator notes: 'my memory is not so much of the words themselves, but of the flow of the words'.[51] Language becomes its own referent; memories refer only to themselves. While these notions are also appear in *For All We Know*, each section ends with an appeal to the future in the shape of a manifesto. These concluding poems are titled 'Zugzwang' — an obligation to move when any move is a disadvantage — but nevertheless suggest the possibility of motion:

> so I write these words to find out what will become of you,
> whether you and I will be together in the future.[52]

The idea is fuller, if less affirmative, in the second version:

> as the fugue must reiterate its melodic fragments
> in continuously unfinished tapestries of sound; […]
>
> as the words of the song when remembered each time around
> remind us of other occasions at different times; […]
>
> so I return to the question of those staggered repeats
> as my memories of you recede into the future.[53]

Language, memory, and song are all reiterative, and can only be known through their 'staggered repeats'. At the same time, however, this does at least open the possibility of a future, however unknown and recessive. The narrator's desire at the end of the first part to know how this relationship will end cannot be answered, for the second part of the volume

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[49] Carson, *For All We Know*, 64.
[50] Carson, *Exchange Place*, 1.
[51] Ciaran Carson, *The Pen Friend* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 2009), 49, 102.
[52] Carson, *For All We Know*, 59.
[53] Carson, *For All We Know*, 111.

is only able to repeat already-stated themes. There is still a resolution without resolution, however: if the questions cannot be answered, they can be asked again, and this ability to reengage with language and memory, or to continue to focus on the personal in spite of the past, is itself a kind of triumph.

Any forward momentum presented in the volume stems from the difference between consummation and refutation or negation. For something to be negated, in Carson's poetry, does not mean that it has come to an end. The second version of 'In the Dark', near the volume's close, lays out the two senses of the fugue with which Carson has been working. While the hysterical fugue is figured as 'a kind of trance', musical fugue contains 'melodic fragments that remain perpetually in / abeyance, or unconsummated'.[54] The poem's final image — 'the blank darkness that descended on Bach / as the music which blazed in his head became forgotten' — suggests that this abeyance ends in negation and death. Surrounding this poem, however, is the introduction of a new theme: 'never'. The theme first appears, as subject, in the second version of 'Never Never', which retells the story of Gabriel and Nina as *Peter Pan*. 'In the Dark' is immediately followed by 'Je Reviens', which places the French town of Nevers at the end of many of its lines: 'I must go to Nevers', 'longstanding unfinished business in Nevers', 'what happened in Nevers', 'the pattern in Nevers', and almost finally, 'Last week I got a letter from Nevers that made me think // more than twice of what might have been going on in Nevers'.[55] As far as *For All We Know* can be said to have a linear narrative, Nevers is where Nina dies in the wreck of a Déesse at the book's end. And yet, as 'Zugzwang' makes clear, these deaths or negations are not consummations, but the beginnings of poetry. There is something of Celan's 'no-one' [*Niemand*] here where, as Lacoue-Labarthe writes: 'From nothingness, calling the wholly other, even if he is "no one", is the very possibility of address, of "speaking to", of "saying-you"; the possibility of the poem as the possibility of "re-lating to" in general'.[56] It is only at this point of death, and of the limits of language, that the poem can begin to speak and to relate. The memory of the other becomes unbounded by time, and is instead experienced as repetition. Like J.M. Barrie, in a sense, Carson proposes a 'Never' that is not an ending as such, but a point in-between, a moment that time cannot reach. The narrator must always return to these suspended fragments, because it is only from the relation of fragments that the poem itself can emerge. The 'trance' of the fugue, providing a suspension from linear narrative, is what makes poetry possible.

The necessity of an unfinalized negation as a basis for poetry underlies much of Celan's later poetry as well as Carson's. As Pierre Joris notes, 'Todesfuge' remains 'readable' precisely because the 'relationship between word and world, between signifier and signified, is not put into question': the relation of the speaker to the world, voiced as 'we', is always recognisable.[57] Despite the poem's many internal contradictions, the reader is always aware that it has a real, historical referent. Celan's re-writing of 'Todesfuge' several years later, as 'Stretto', calls all of these relationships into question. The relationship between world and text is here directly confronted:

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[54] Carson, *For All We Know*, 107-8.
[55] Carson, *For All We Know*, 109.
[56] Lacoue-Labarthe, 84.
[57] Pierre Joris, 'Polysemy without Masks', *Selections*, by Paul Celan, ed. Joris (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005), 25.

> [...] we
> read it in the book, it was
> meaning.
>
> Was, was
> meaning. How
> did we grasp
> each other – with
> these
> hands?
>
> And it stood written that.
> Where? We
> did a silence over it.[58]

While some of the fugal texture of 'Todesfuge' remains in 'Stretto' – the poem begins and ends with the same words, for instance — each line within the poem forces the question of meaning. These fragmentary and opaque lines are full of allusions: Celan informed scholars that they refer to Dante's Paolo and Francesca, to Lancelot and Guinevere, and to Democritus, who writes that 'Nothing exists but atoms and empty space, everything else is opinion'.[59] What appears to be a negating voice, refusing the direct referentiality of 'Todesfuge', is perhaps also a more encompassing voice that brings in a variety of intertextual and self-referential allusions, to the effect that the poem emerges from these fragments. 'Stretto' demonstrates that the identification of speaker and world in 'Todesfuge' are too easy, but that nevertheless this relationship is still paramount. The poem still centres, like 'Todesfuge', on a 'we' trying to make sense of the world. This doubled narrative voice looks for a meaning (or 'opinion', as Felstiner translates the line) that must have once been apparent, and even if that meaning has been supplanted with silence, it is a silence that still must be performed.

For All We Know receives its own 'Stretto' in a poem in *Until Before After* titled 'Until and', which concludes:

> you will never
>
> know for all
> you know
>
> or know not
> not even then.[60]

Here the same questions are raised that appear in 'Zugzwang', but stripped down almost to the point of absurdity. Knowledge exists only in the form of repetition; the repeated themes have been reduced from watches, pens, and French songs to the words 'know' and 'not'.

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[58] Celan, *Selections*, 70.
[59] Felstiner 123.
[60] Ciaran Carson, *Until Before After* (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 2010), 30.

Even the varied voices of *For All We Know* are transformed into a 'you' with no real referent. As the title indicates, however, there is still forward momentum: an implicit belief that repetition and opposition will yield something, a language that goes beyond language. The 'never' in the first quoted line must be taken not as a point of finality, in which all knowledge is impossible, but rather as the 'never' of *For All We Know*, indicating a suspension of time. Knowledge is not possible in the world of linear history, but as long as the idea of knowledge persists, some attempt can be made to reach it.

The reductive simplicity of 'Until and' is suggested in the first version of 'Je Reviens', where what is given as a description of a perfume comes to stand for the volume as a whole:

> *I come again,*
>
> *Je reviens*. The overall effect is difficult
> to describe, since it seems to develop separately
>
> but simultaneously on two distinct levels, wavelengths
> of suggestion and risk as well as definite statement.[61]

This dual development, offering both statement and more obscure suggestions, not only parallels the structure of *For All We Know*, but also serves as a definition of fugue itself. For Celan and Carson, reappropriating fugue in poetry raises the basic questions of language and relation in regards to form. Fugue may disallow definitive statements or reconciliations, but it also, by showcasing the interrelation of multiple corresponding voices, suggests the possibility of continuance. Fugue not only allows the past to be seen in relation to the present, but also offers an unknown and uncertain future. As 'Stretto' and 'Until and' show, neither poet is content to rest on themes and meanings; both continually try to operate at the limits of language in order to suggest a communication which goes beyond both language and subject.

Characterizing Celan and Carson in such a manner risks a charge of mysticism or wilful obfuscation. There are times, indeed, when the repetitions and oppositions in these poems simply render the poems themselves obscure and self-referential to the point of insularity. At the same time, a fugal technique allows both poets to posit a form of negation that can never be finalized; poems such as 'Zugzwang' suggest death and negation not as the end of writing, but as its beginning. This function of poetry has been highlighted by Jean-Luc Nancy, who writes that this form of poetic negation 'denies that what is 'elevated' may be brought within reach, and that it may be possible to overcome the distance between us and what moves us (which is of course why it moves us at all)'.[62] This is in many respects a summary of the work that both Celan and Carson are doing. Any theme that is suggested must also be opposed, or even negated. As Nancy's language of distance and elevation suggests, however, this can also be seen as a way to address the divide between memory and history posited above. A negative poetry provides a way to argue that no lived

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[61] Carson, *For All We Know*, 57.
[62] Jean-Luc Nancy, *Multiple Arts: The Muses II*, ed. Simon Sparks (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 4.

experience, whether past or present, is ever directly accessible. What we know of experience is always mediated by language, even as language is itself an imperfect medium.

The opposition and repetition allowed by a fugue finally provide a way for Carson to find a new approach to documenting the Troubles. As with *Breaking News*, his preceding volume, but to an even greater extent, Belfast is one troubled city of many, with Dresden and Sevastopol functioning as the most common countersubjects. As Kennedy-Andrews notes, '[t]raversing a range of locales […], cultures and languages, the poet suggests a deterritorialized cultural space [in which] traditional categories of identity dissolve'.[63] While *For All We Know* is sometimes historically and geographically specific — 'We were in the Ulster Milk Bar I think they blew up back / in the Seventies' — more often the references in the volume are to East Berlin and assorted other locations.[64] Looking at Belfast in this way does not establish an equivalency between various historical situations, but instead suggests that the legacy of violence in Northern Ireland can be understood more broadly in terms of the relation between history and memory. The historical moment cannot be known only as itself, but must instead be seen as a function of memory. It is not merely, as Carson states in his interview, that politics has intruded upon a simple romance, but rather that the structures of romantic and political narratives are ultimately inseparable: each is formed less by actions as they take place than by they are remembered and repeated.

Fugue, then, for both Celan and Carson, becomes a way of reflecting on themes and images that can no longer stand alone. If writing in a time of violence calls into question the writer's ability to re-present an event or historical moment, the fugue allows for a development of this very inability and transforms it into the basis for a new sort of poetry. While Carson's poetry has always been reiterative and full of intertextual allusions, he here suggests that the absence of an originary source can itself be a basis for poetry. By portraying each moment in lived experience as its own trace, subject to constant re-evaluation and revision through new contextualisations, Carson offers the discipline of the fugue as a way to reconceptualise the demands the past makes on the present, and the ability of language to reflect these demands.

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[63] Kennedy-Andrews, 'Art of Getting Lost', 243.
[64] Carson, *For All We Know*, 24.

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