Exchange Place by Ciaran Carson
or a sense of *déjà vu*

Elisabeth Delattre
Centre for Irish Studies, University of Lille
(<delattre.elisabeth@wanadoo.fr>)

Abstract:

In his novel *Exchange Place* published in 2012, Ciaran Carson draws upon the motif of the quest in order to weave an intricate web of threads that irresistibly attracts the reader into a world of make believe, which is perhaps the only one worth experiencing. This article will argue that in this work temporality is envisaged as composed of disjointed fragments that are so many anachronisms revealed through analogies, resemblances and correspondences.

Keywords: Carson, dream, fugue, intertextuality, memory

> Everything returns in a circle. Everything
> has been done before. It is the same pattern.
> The same music surrounds us.
>
> Peter Ackroyd (1992), *English Music*, 131

1. *Introduction*

"Trompe-l'œil" (Payne 2013) or "grateful digressions" (O'Brien 2012) or still "literary thriller", these the terms by which critics have tried to define *Exchange Place*[1], Ciaran Carson's prose work published in 2012. According to John Banville, as can be read on the back cover, the book is "gloriously

---

[1] Hereafter references to this work will be in parentheses.

uncategorisable", "a wonderful intellectual romp", and quite a few writers such as Robbe-Grillet, Queneau and Perec as well as Hammett and Chandler could have seen connections with their own works. It will also be seen as a 'fugue' in the Latin meaning of *fugere* or may echo Louis McNeice's "incorrigibly plural" world. As Carson wrote in an early prose work, *Last Night's Fun*, published in 1996 and subtitled "a book about music, food and time": "Everything is analogue, and looks like something else. Everything is *déjà vu*" (142). In this work, an account of the phrase "Exchange Place", in which the real fuses with the imaginary, was put in the following terms:

> We are in Sam's workshop at 1 Exchange Place, Belfast. Exchange Place is, in Belfast's parlance, an 'entry': a narrow lane between two streets; a backwater and a shortcut, a deviation from the beaten path. Exchange Place *is* an entry: we talk and breathe in an exhalation, a many-layered scent of shellac, beeswax, raw and boiled linseed oil, tallow, almond oil, aromatic blackwood shavings, nitric acid and ammonia. […] And this is not to speak of the unspeakable archaeological layers of things strewn and assembled on every available surface in the workshop. (Carson 1996, 50-51)

In more ways than one, this passage could be seen as emblematic of *Exchange Place* published sixteen years later. As we shall see, *Exchange Place* is a complex work because it is a direct successor of Borges, Sebald, and Calvino, among others. Drawing from Walter Benjamin, Carson practices the literary method of montage, with extracts from the former's *The Arcades' Projects*, Patrick Modiano's *La Petite Bijou* and *Rue des boutiques obscures*, or Jean Cocteau's *Round the World Again in 80 Days*[2], or even his own work, notwithstanding quotations from the Bible, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Montaigne, John Donne, etc. *Exchange Place* could also be defined as a recast of an unpublished novel entitled *X+Y=K*, which is summarized in these terms: "Common to all three sections was a fascination with memory, paranormal phenomena, surveillance, questions of identity, and the bombing campaign conducted by the Provisional IRA in Belfast in the latter decades of the twentieth century" (163). Ultimately, this rejection of a chronological logic, this taste for *bricolage* are but attempts on the part of the writer to reproduce the exact movements of a memory estranged from a linear time and recreate through the medium of language a world in which the reader might find a new 'reality' both akin to and estranged from what is felt as the one lived in, or thought to be so.

---

[2] First published as a series of personal travel reports, illustrated with photographs, by Jean Cocteau in the newspaper *Paris-Soir* between 1 August and 3 March 1936 then collected under the title *Mon premier voyage: Le Tour du monde en quatre-vingt jours* by the Gallimard Editions in 1937.

2. "*Point / Counterpoint*"

In an article published under the title "Strange Architecture" in the journal *Irish University Review* in 2013, Colin Graham makes a detailed study of the structure of Carson's *Until Before After*, which he sees as emblematic of Carson's use of numbers. Indeed, the same could also be said of the rest of Carson's *œuvre*. As always, the structure and form of the book follow a strict and regular pattern, "a template" as he acknowledged, which allows for more freedom in the writing and practically unlimited digressions that are also proper to the musical form of the fugue as developed by Johann Sebastian Bach: "The repeated or mirrored or inverted themes of *Contrapunctus XIV* intertwining, unfolding, recapitulating, as they had always done" (8). The frequent passages referring to Bach's unfinished *Contrapunctus XIV*, interpreted by the legendary Canadian pianist Glenn Gould, testify to this fundamental characteristic and wish for transcendence. In this view, *Exchange Place* is akin to a musical score by means of which the writer aims at reproducing through language, or languages, the world, or worlds the reader will be invited to wander through and perhaps live a new experience and enrich his or her own outlook. This state of 'fugue' is also to be heard in the Latin *fugere*, "that temporary amnesia in which one loses control of oneself and takes on a life as another before coming to oneself again months or years later" (8). It becomes a leitmotiv and the key to the *dénouement* of the plot in the last chapter but one as it is revealed to the main protagonist, John Kilfeather, by the painter John Bourne.

This form of composition implies a series of well-defined rules, without which the enterprise would inevitably founder. The 41 chapters preceded by an "Introduction" are each five pages long, so that the titles appear on alternate pages. This makes for a contrapuntal rhythm akin to Bach's work, or to Aldous Huxley's novel *Point Counterpoint*, published in 1928, whose different plots mixing in the counterpoint technique evoke Carson's work; there might be also a reference to the "flicker-book" mentioned in another prose work, *Fishing for Amber*:

For the illusion of the flicker-book is made possible by the optical phenomena known as persistence of vision and the *phi* phenomenon. The first of these causes the brain to retain images cast upon the retina of the eye for a fraction of a second […] while the latter creates apparent movements between images when they succeed each other rapidly, by linking up the memories. (Carson 1999, 342)

The titles of the chapters are at times in French and refer to famous quotations such as Rimbaud's "*Je est un autre*" (141), or Montaigne's "*because it was he*" (136). This famous phrase ("parce que c'était lui, parce que c'était moi") is contained in Montaigne's *Essais, livre 1*, *chapitre XVIII*, "De l'amitié", in which he writes about his short-lived friendship with Etienne de la Boétie.

Elsewhere one finds "*Les Structures Sonores*" (121), a reference to new acoustic instruments, the sound qualities getting precedence over the plastic qualities, invented by the French Baschet brothers in the 1950s and used by Jean Cocteau in his film *Orphée* (1950).

Quite significantly, 41 was the coded number of John Sebastian Bach who considered it as his signature: if A=1, B=2, C=3, therefore B.A.C.H.=14 and J.S.B.A.C.H.=41. We may therefore see the fugue-type of composition as the basis of Carson's work. Furthermore, we learn at the very beginning of the book that the address of the main character, John Kilfeather is "41, Elsinore Gardens" (vii) in Belfast, the reference to the imaginary setting for Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, indicating that this place is not likely to exist. However, the code number given for Belfast ("BT15 3FB") is that of Ciaran Carson's personal address, which may also be a way of playing with the reader who is not supposed to be acquainted with it, barring exceptions... The number "41" will recur when Kilpatrick, who is Kilfeather's alter ego, finds himself in front of 41 rue du Sentier, which is known as the garment district in Paris.

Clothes are another element which pervades the book, each character being defined by the way he is dressed, as Gordon, the so-called spy met by chance by Kilpatrick remarks: "*Le style c'est l'homme.* Though I believe the phrase originally referred to literary style, as if we clothe ourselves in language, which I guess we do after a fashion. Or disguise ourselves, for that matter" (113). The attic where his missing friend John Harland had been painting Kilfeather's portrait is situated at 14 Exchange Place, 14 being the reverse of 41. Of course, this use of numbers goes farther than a mere game with the reader. One might see *Exchange Place* as a field of experimental writing, linking past and present forms of language composition, still in a process of creation, perhaps still unfinished as was the case with *Contrapunctus XIV*, "echoes overlaying other echoes" (157).

3. "*The Library of Babel*"

As Elmer Kennedy-Andrews pointed out, there are many similarities between Carson's and Borges' worlds, since elements like "labyrinths, libraries, mirrors, doubles, games" (2009, 245) recur in their respective works. The insertion within the narrative of extracts from novels, or reports by other writers and thinkers, which is characteristic of *Exchange Place*, has been linked by Carson himself to Borges' practice, as he explained in an interview:

I sometimes insert into a book whole paragraphs taken verbatim from some erudite source; but I have the illusion that I am writing these words myself, or that they become different because I am writing them, or that they become different because they're now in a different context, a different milieu. Like Borges' Pierre Ménard, who rewrites *Don Quixote* word for word, except now it is completely different because the times are different. (Kennedy-Andrews 2009, 23)

Indeed, in this short story entitled "Pierre Ménard, Author of the *Quixote*", which is part of Borges' *Fictions*, the very same text coming from a French Decadent aesthete and from a retired Spanish soldier takes on a completely different sense, the former gaining in richness from the intervening changes in history and culture. Moreover, as Pierre Macherey puts it, in an article entitled "Borges and the fictive narrative": "Each book remains deeply different from itself since it implies an indefinite repertoire of 'bifurcations'". Thus, the narrative exists only by unfolding from the inside, since it seems to be in relation to and part of a dissymmetrical relationship. In other words, "every narrative, even in the moment of utterance, is the revelation of a self-contradictory reprise" (2006, 279).

Strictly speaking, no event is repeatable in all respects, nor is each repeated segment of the text quite the same since its new location puts it in a different context which necessarily changes its meaning. This technique – which might be defined as intertextuality in the wide sense of the term, as it includes mere literary echoes, quotations, acknowledged or not, parody and pastiche –, goes as far as collage, very close to plagiarizing. This gives a new dimension to Carson's work whose layered structure evokes a series of palimpsests. If this notion of intertextuality was introduced by Julia Kristeva in *Sémeiotikè* published in 1969, a great number of contemporary writers have used in their books what already existed while subverting or adapting it. In this view, no text can be read independently from the experience the reader has of other texts. Anyone is prone to creating fiction and tends to abolish the frontiers between dream and reality, fact and fiction. Borges and Carson turn to using uncanny, uncommonly haunting stories and narratives under the fallacious cover of erudition and research. The uncertain liminal space or "epistemological hesitation" (McHale 1987, 74) that is the norm in narration gives rise to strangeness and fantasy. This mixture of genres, digressions, going back in time, may finally be compared to the meanderings of an oral tale, similar to Salman Rushdie's technique in *Midnight's Children* (1981):

An oral narrative does not go from the beginning to the middle to the end of the tale. It goes in great swoops, it goes in spirals or in loops, it every so often reiterates something that happened earlier to remind you, and then takes you off again, sometimes summarises itself, it frequently digresses off into something that the story teller appears just to have thought of then it comes back to the main thrust of the narrative. (Ashcroft 1989, 183)

Furthermore, Carson's use of the Internet, and more particularly the research engine, Google, has led him to define a new way of extending Borges' famous "Library of Babel". Thus Carson's text becomes at times virtual, provisional, and endlessly proliferating, yet within the constraints of some rules predetermined by the writer himself who remains in control of his narration. Nevertheless, the narrator of *Exchange Place* states at one time that he has no

Facebook Account and that he rarely uses emails; thereby he distances himself from these new media of communication which rest upon virtual, non-human contacts and with the disappearance or oblivion of the real. There may also be an underlying distrust of these means of communication which have recently been assimilated to spying and surveillance, terms which are abhorred by the writer who knows the difficulties of living in a city haunted by helicopters and other MI5 or 6 spies during the period of the Troubles and most probably after…

4. "*The Garden of Forking Paths*"

The main characteristic of the book is thus the existence of parallel worlds or Chinese-box worlds. The recursive structures of *Exchange Place* raise the spectre of a somewhat vertiginous or mind-boggling "infinite regress", "bifurcation and circularity" (McHale 1987, 113), which are the hallmark of Carson's *œuvre* and are also to be found in Borges. We are presented with a fictitious theory of the narrative and the obsessive idea that gives the image of the book its form is that of necessity and multiplication. As the text of *Exchange Place* proceeds, the various narrative levels – with Kilfeather and Kilpatrick as the main protagonists, plus the narrator (i.e. author?) – begin to lose their initial clarity of definition in the reader's mind. They finally break down and merge into a single, auto-biographical figure as it were, embodied in the omnipresent use of the first name of John (or its French equivalent "Jean"). The so-called revelations at the end of the book show how misleading the various threads were, even the identities of the characters prove to be false, though the reader had been warned, not without irony, that "there was more to everything than met the eye" (165).

If the self-referential character of the narration is foregrounded by the extracts from the Book of Revelations in the last chapter but one, the textual presence of Borges is to be found in the name of Kilpatrick. In his short story, "The Theme of the Traitor and the Hero", the main character, Fergus Kilpatrick is described as a conspirator who is reported as having perished in a theatre and whose murderer will never be found by the police. As in *Shamrock Tea*, another work of fiction published by Carson in 2001, there is a fantastic element in *Exchange Place* that, in Brian McHale's analysis of postmodernist fiction, may be seen as involving "a face-to-face confrontation between the possible (the 'real') and the impossible, the normal and the paranormal. Another world penetrates or encroaches upon our world […], or some representative of our world penetrates an outpost of the other world, the world next door" (75). This is what Kilfeather does at the end of the book, by entering the mirror, after some necessary preparation with the help of a few drugs concocted by an individual named Browne, aka Bourne, aka Harland: "When the time was right, Kilfeather stepped up to the mirror,

extending his hands like a swimmer about to take the plunge, and as his fingers reached the dark glass it parted the liquid mercury to swallow him bit by bit until he vanished down a deep dark well" (204).

The metafictional dimension of the book helps us, according to Patricia Waugh, "to understand how the reality we live in day by day is similarly constructed, similarly 'written'" (1984, 18). All the fragments of novels, stories and narratives that pervade the book are there to remind the reader of the "*intertextual* existence" (47) of the book. Indeed, to put it in sociological terms, "[c]ontemporary reality, in particular, is continually being reappraised and resynthesized. It is no longer experienced as an ordered and fixed hierarchy, but as a web of interrelating, multiple realities" (51). In many ways, *Exchange Place* could be seen as a metafictional thriller mixed with some element of the detective story. The main character is looking for a missing friend who has disappeared without notice, and the reader is invited to take part in the search, although not without difficulties, as there is a danger of getting lost in the maze of the narration, comparable to that of the streets of Belfast and above all of Paris. As Patricia Waugh has demonstrated, "the existential boundary situations that recur frequently in the thriller are experienced vicariously by the reader, who is thus allowed to play through the uncertainties of his or her own existence" (84-85). As with Modiano's novels, the narrator's subject of the investigation is himself, without there ever been "a solution, or a resolution to the puzzle", which is "the way it is in life" (2012, 63).

In Borges' short story, "The Garden of Forking Paths", Stephen Albert, the narrator's interlocutor, defined the work as "a huge riddle or parable whose subject is time" (Borges 1998 [1944], 289). The remaking of the garden in the work of an author named Ts'ui Pên, was accounted for by the fact that "his ancestor did not believe in a uniform and absolute time". On the contrary, "he believed in an infinite series of times, a growing, dizzying web of divergent, convergent and parallel times. That fabric of times that approach one another, fork, are sniped off, or are simply unknown for centuries, contains all possibilities" (290). In a similar way, indeed, the question of time is paramount in the whole of Carson's *œuvre* and is parodied in the Heraclitean concept according to which one cannot step in the same river twice, for other waters and yet other waters go ever flowing on. It might be added that not only the object of experience but also the experiencing object is in a constant flux. Time is, paradoxically, subject to repetition within irreversible change. The repetitive aspect of time is taken one step further and seen as a refutation of Heraclitean unidirectionality, as in Nietzsche's, Borges' or Carson's concepts of "circular time". That's why the book starts and ends with the same sentences: "It begins or began with a missing notebook, an inexpensive Muji 16 notebook with buff card covers and feint-rules pages. On the inside cover is written, If found, please return to John Kilfeather, 41 Elsinore Gardens, Belfast BT15 3FB, Northern Ireland, United Kingdom, The World" (vii, 204-5).

Paradoxically, this meandering of Carson's narration is but a means to regain a lost paradisiacal world which may never have existed but which the writer endlessly pursues, and which he hopes to find in language or languages. His work therefore tends to be de-territorialized, emblematised by the 'situation' Kilfeather finds himself in, i.e. having to leave his Belfast lodgings temporarily after a bomb scare caused by the Provisional IRA, in reality a "fake" alert initiated by a mysterious "Other Side" (194). Carson's so-called "art of getting lost" (Kennedy-Andrews 2009, 227) may be another means of finding an anchor in some reality, possibly different from what we experience as ordinary human beings and which does not result in an aimless and fruitless quest.

5. *"Through the Looking Glass"*

The omnipresence of Belfast in Carson's *œuvre*, together with his obsession with urban places has also led him to find analogies with other cities, which is what Kilpatrick reflects upon remembering his first visit outside Ireland: "Manchester struck him as a Belfast constructed on a larger scale" (53). In a recurring way, Kilpatrick will imagine himself in his native city when walking on the streets of Paris: "Kilpatrick continued on slowly down Passage des Panoramas, blind to Passage des Panoramas. In his mind's eye he was in North Street Arcade" (44). In a similar way, in Carson's autobiographical novel *The Star Factory* published in 1997, the narrator was fond of looking, as a young boy, at a book of photographs of Paris dating from the late 1940s and was wont to compare, for example, the Eglise Notre Dame de la Croix in the Ménilmontant area in Paris with The Church of the Holy Redeemer, called Clonard, the district where he spent his youth. In the same novel, *Odd Man Out* – a 1947 British film noir set in an unnamed Northern Irish city directed by Carol Reed, with James Mason playing the role of a fugitive named Johnny McQueen –, induced him to find similarities with the current events:

If *Odd Man Out* suggests that Belfast is a universal city, I cannot help but see bits of Belfast everywhere. Berlin, Warsaw, Tallinn, New York, to name some, have Belfast aspects; and recently, in Paris for the first time, I picked up this book of photographs that I want to explore, since its various *grisailles* remind me of Belfast, or rather, a remembered light, since the bulk of the images date from the period 1947-51. (Carson 1997, 153)

Quite significantly, several extracts from the same film are to be found in *Exchange Place*, providing further echoes from previous works by Carson, a process which might be defined as "autotextuality", i.e. every relation a text entertains with previous texts by the author or his own life, according to Gérard Genette's classification in *Palimpsests* (1982). This is also the case with two other films dating from the 1950s, which marked the writer's

childhood and youth, and were likewise evoked in *The Star Factory*: *The Incredible Shrinking Man* – a 1957 science fiction film adapted from the novel *The Shrinking Man* by its author Richard Matheson –, and *Orphée*, which he had first seen in the early 1970s and saw again in 1997 in the Film theatre at Queen's University:

> It is one instance of Cocteau's magical handling of space that mirrors are portals to the underworld, and the poet's attic is approached by way of a trapdoor, or a ladder to the attic window. The ground-level garage houses a Rolls Royce Charonmobile whose radio transmits enigmatic messages from down below: '*l'oiseau chante avec ses doigts*' (the bird sings with its fingers), for instance reminding us of the winged emblem that surmounts the Acropolis portico of the Rolls-Royce radiator. (Carson 1997, 266)

Indeed, the cinema has played a major role in Carson's development as a writer, by enabling him to enter another world and live an imaginary experience, but also to try, like Alice, to go over to the other side of the mirror and attempt to catch the reflection of those elusive images in order to discover another truth. More generally it may be said that, by dint of being faced with an unstable or intolerable reality – as experienced by the writer during the Troubles –, the human being comes to find in these images reflected on the screen a reality that has become the only one that can be put up with. To some extent, the representation of Belfast becomes dream-like, to be compared with Walter Benjamin's project as regards Paris, as Kilpatrick experiences in turn when reading his notes: "images and phrases intertwining in a vast fugal architecture, echoing rooms and galleries of language" (33).

Ciaran Carson's fascination with mirrors is a recurring theme in *Exchange Place* and seems to have come directly from Cocteau's movie, *Orphée*. In *Exchange Place*, the narrator, i.e. John Kilfeather, will experience the very same adventure:

> I looked into the mirror remembering Cocteau's film *Orphée,* which I had first seen with John Harland, remembering how in that film, mirrors are portals to the Underworld, and I thought of how I might glide through the mirror in the attic to a world where I might meet Harland once again, for all that he had been dead for many years. (170)

The background to Cocteau's work, that of the ravages and destructions of the Second World War, is similar to that of Belfast as evoked by the narrator of *The Star Factory*: "The dereliction of this landscape is familiar to me from fairly recent hulks of bombed-out factories in Belfast" (Carson 1997, 267). The narrator of Carson's novel keeps "wandering its roofless arcades, looking out of glassless windows, squatting by a heap of rubbled bricks, contemplating their baroque, accidental architecture, imagining [himself] to

be of toy-soldier size in order to crawl into its fractured interstices" (Carson 1997, 267). The regular recurrence of a flash of lightning, as an emblem of the bomb explosions which had punctuated Belfast's recent history, echoes throughout Carson's writing as a form of 'provisional', precarious representation.

More generally, such geographical places as Paris or Belfast, or street names, according to Philippe Hamon, refer to "stable semantic entities […], anchoring points [… that] allow for the economy of a descriptive text, and ensure a global effect of real which transcends even any decoding of detail"[3]. In this context, language is to be compared to an old city with its inextricable network of lanes and squares, its sectors which reach back to the past, its reclaimed and rebuilt neighbourhoods, and its periphery that continually encroaches upon the suburbs. John Kilfeather/Kilpatrick's quest for a missing notebook and a vanished painter called either John Harland or John Bourne, whose work has similarities with the Irish-born British artist Francis Bacon is in many ways to be compared to that of the narrator for a missing person in Modiano's *Rue des boutiques obscures* or to the traveller Marco Polo in *Invisible Cities* by Italo Calvino. In this work dating from 1972, Marco Polo tells the emperor Kublai Khan about a journey he made through dreamed cities, imaginary or imaginable, for "cities like dreams are made of desires, fears, even if the thread of their discourse is secret, their rules are absurd, their perspectives deceitful; and everything conceals something else" (Calvino 1997, 44).

As in G.W. Sebald's novel, *Austerlitz*, published in 2001, in which the eponymous character decides to confront the limits of his memory and engages in an exploration of his past, although he is not prepared for the blow and magnitude of the entire truth, the narrator's quest is hampered by a deceitful memory symbolized by "the deteriorating mirror" (159) in the artist's studio. As another intertextual instance, this image was already included in *The Twelfth of Never*, a collection of sonnets published by Carson in 1998. In the sonnet "The Horse's Mouth", an elf had told a ghost story to the narrator:

I got that story from the Pooka, who appeared
To me last night. He stepped out from the wardrobe door,
Shimmering in its deteriorating mirror,
Shivering the fringes of his ectoplasmic beard. (Carson 1998, 64)[4]

In *Exchange Place,* memory is seen as processed by the *hippocampus* of the human brain, or the seahorse whose habitat is the coral reefs and this leads the narrator to conclude in an urban vein:

---

[3] Hamon 1982, 137. "Des entités sémantiques stables […], des points d'ancrage […] permettent l'économie d'un texte descriptif, et assurent un effet de réel global qui transcende même tout décodage de détail" (translation is mine).

[4] Reproduced in *Collected Poems* (2008, 402).

I sometimes like to think of human consciousness as one of the underwater cities whose fabric is accumulated from the skeletons of its builders: a necropolis which teems with life. Here are massive blocks and towers of stone, hanging gardens of the most varied hues, purple, emerald and amethyst, which undulate and flicker in the transparent water. (159-160)

The elegiac mood of the whole book – the "overwhelming nostalgia" (180) experienced by the narrator, standing in the vestibule of 14 Exchange Place – ties in with the traditional heuristics of narrative, the novel resorting to the archaic motif of the quest already mentioned. As is the case with Patrick Modiano's novels, the narrator starts in search of his own identity, the presence or loss of a notebook serving as a form of anchoring into what remains a blurred environment. From the start of the book, the narrator refers Modiano's work, more particularly his novel *Rue des boutiques obscures*, with which he finds some forms of analogy: "Though they all seemed to be versions of each other, he was attracted by their fugue-like repetition of themes and imagery, their evocation of a noir Paris in which the protagonists were endlessly in search of their identities" (13-14). Interestingly, Modiano will not be able to attend – as guest of honour – an evening at the British Council, where Kilpatrick had been invited, maybe reflecting the well-known discreetness of the 2014 Nobel Prize winner for literature. Coincidentally, Patrick Modiano's novel, *L'Herbe des nuits* published in 2012, starts with this same theme, as the narrator mentions a black notebook full of notes which serve as reference points, a way of translating events as accurately as possible, with the constant help of a dictionary.

In all cases, the quest motif is too insistent to be anything but ironical and consequently the task of writing is caught in an echo chamber of its own making. This is why, in chapter 5 entitled "Pilot Light", the narrator will reflect on the meaning of this expression in another language, thus suggesting a word with *double entendre* such as "*minuterie*" (22), which gives rise to variations on the word "*veilleuse*" (23), "*mettre en veilleuse*", "*veille*", "*homme de veille*" (23). This epistemological uncertainty goes even further since the French translation for "night watchman" is "*veilleur de nuit*" rather than "*homme de veille*". When the energy of creation has become exhausted, only re-creation, in the two meanings of the term, subsists.

By resorting to imaginary, absent or dead characters, Carson's writing may thus be redefined as a prosopopeia that deprives literature of any dialectical capacity. Its pragmatic effect lies almost exclusively in its ability to arouse infinite echoes, just like John Kilfeather upon hearing a melody played by a Roma fiddler encountered along his endless walking through Belfast, who embarks upon a seemingly never-ending sentence of seventeen lines (a possible reference to the haiku?): "the melody that haunts itself in its own ever-changing repetitions, intertwining, unfolding, recapitulating, speaking of Transylvania in the loops and spirals of the melody, lingering for all its quickness

[…]" (28). This triggers off a process of stylistic identification in the reader which folds the canon back upon itself and indeed forecloses the history of literary forms. Yet, appropriating and reconfiguring the past may also afford us some purchase on a meaningless present and writing is always apocryphal, as when the final "explanation" is given at the end of the book: "The Other Side have planted another alter in Belfast, a John Kilfeather who is masquerading as you, unbeknownst to himself" (194). Indeed, the reader is never told about the identities of "the Other Side" and is reduced to making hypotheses.

Moving beyond the grand-narrative of aesthetic progress may have laid bare the deceptiveness of originality, and the protagonist feels like a ghost: "Barely a soul takes me under their notice" (28). However, it has not exorcised the desire for the writer to achieve incarnation, to steal the right Promethean fire. If anything, it has made it more urgent, as the concluding chapter of *Exchange Place* testifies. Under a heavy rain storm, punctuated by flashes of lightning, Kilfeather emerges from the mirror, like Alice through the looking glass, and uncannily recovers both his former identity and his missing notebook:

> Again a flash of lightning: he needed to write. He looked in the briefcase and found a pen. Nice vintage Waterman, marbled celluloid. He unscrewed the cap and began to write. The pen suited his hand well, it could have been his own pen, and it wrote first time, the writing both familiar and foreign. He kept on writing. The writing kept on, words appearing from nowhere. (205)

6. *Conclusion*

In Carson's book, the law of the newness that sustained literary modernity has been overthrown by the melancholy, Borgesian conviction that everything has been said – "everything happening as if déjà vu" (172). As with Edgar Poe, Carson's narrative contains within itself several '*versions*', which are as many diverging directions for the reader. The meaning of the story or stories rather, is not what was expected at first and besides, it does not result from a possible choice among several interpretations. Each particular narrative evokes the idea of the labyrinth but one only gets a reflection that can just be read. The real narrative is determined only by the absence of all the narratives among which it might have been chosen. The nostalgic parody that forecloses the concept of originality encloses us in a dizzying hall of mirrors.

<div align="center">

Works Cited

</div>

Ackroyd Peter (1992), *English Music*, Harmondsworth, Penguin.
Ashcroft Bill, Griffiths Gareth, Tiffin Helen (1989), *Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures,* London & New York, Routledge.

Barthes Roland, Bersani Leo, Hamon Philippe, Riffaterre Michael, Watt Ian, edité par (1982), *Littérature et Réalité,* Paris, Seuil.

Borges J.L. (1998 [1944]), *Collected Fictions*, trans. by Andrew Hurley, Allen Lane, Penguin.

Calvino Italo (1997 [1974]), *Invisible Cities*, trans. by William Weaver, London, Vintage Books (orig. ed. 1972).

Carson Ciaran (1997 [1996]), *Last Night's Fun,* London, Pimlico.

— (1998 [1997]), *The Star Factory*, London, Granta Books.

— (1998)*, The Twelfth of Never,* Loughcrew, Gallery Press.

— (2000 [1999]), *Fishing for Amber*, London, Granta Books.

— (2001), *Shamrock Tea,* London, Granta.

— (2008), *Collected Poems,* Loughcrew, Gallery Press.

— (2010), *Until Before After*, Winston-Salem, Wake Forest UP.

— (2012), *Exchange Place,* Belfast, Blackstaff Press.

Genette Gérard (1982), *Palimpsestes*, Paris, Seuil.

Graham Colin (2013), "'Strange architecture': Ciaran Carson's *Until Before After*", *Irish University Review* 43, 2, 381-397.

Hamon Philippe (1982 [1973]), "Un discours contraint", in Roland Barthes *et al.*, *Littérature et Réalité,* Paris, Seuil, 118-181.

Huxley Aldous (1928), *Point Counterpoint*, London, Chatto & Windus.

Kennedy-Andrews Elmer, ed. (2009), *Ciaran Carson: Critical Essays*, Dublin, Four Courts Press.

Kristeva Julia (1969), *Sémeiotikè. Recherches pour une sémanalyse*, Paris, Seuil.

Macherey Pierre (2006), "Borges and the fictive narrative", in Id., *A Theory of Literary Production*, New York, Routledge Classics, 278-287.

McHale Brian (1987), *Postmodernist Fiction*, London & New York, Routledge.

Modiano Patrick (2012), *L'Herbe des nuits,* Paris, Gallimard/Folio.

O'Brien Sean (2012), "Grateful digressions", *Times Literary Supplement,* 14 December.

Payne Keith (2013), "Trompe l'oeil", *Dublin Review of Books*, <www.drb.ie/essays/Trompe-l'oeil> (05/2015).

Rushdie Salman (1981), *Midnight's Children*, London, Jonathan Cape.

Sebald G.W. (2002 [2001]), *Austerlitz*, trans. by Anthea Bell, London & New York, Penguin.

Waugh Patricia (1984), *Metafiction. The Theory and Practice of Self-conscious Fiction*, London & New York, Methuen.