



a fusillade of question-marks

some reflections on the art of the Troubles

A Troubles Archive Essay

Ciaran Carson



Cover Image: Rita Duffy - Big Fight

From the collection of the Arts Council of Northern Ireland

About the Author

Ciaran Carson was born in Belfast in 1948. He is the author of nine collections of poems, including *Belfast Confetti*, *First Language*, and *Breaking News*. His prose works include *Last Night's Fun*, a book about Irish traditional music; *The Star Factory*, a memoir of Belfast; *Fishing for Amber: A Long Story*; and a novel, *Shamrock Tea*, which was long-listed for the 2001 Booker Prize. His translation of Dante's *Inferno* won the 2002 Oxford Weidenfeld Translation prize, and his translation of Brian Merriman's *Cúirt an Mhéan Oíche* (The Midnight Court) appeared in 2005. A translation of the Old Irish epic *Táin Bó Cuailnge* was published by Penguin Classics in 2007. *For All We Know* (2008) was a Poetry Book Society Choice. *Collected Poems* was published in 2008. *On the Night Watch* (2009) and *Until Before After* (2010) were shortlisted for the Irish Times/ Poetry Now Award. A novel, *The Pen Friend*, appeared in 2009. Ciaran Carson is a member of Aosdána, the affiliation of Irish artists. Among the prizes he has won are the T. S. Eliot Prize, the Irish Times Irish Literature Prize, the Cholmondeley Award, and the Forward Prize. In 2011 he was awarded the honorary degree of Doctor of Literature by University College Dublin. *Exchange Place* (a novel) and *In The Light Of* (verse adaptations of prose poems from Rimbaud's *Illuminations*) were published in 2012. *From Elsewhere*, translations from the work of the French poet Jean Follain, paired with poems inspired by the translation, is due from Gallery Press in 2014.

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Some Reflections on the Art of the Troubles

1

From December 2002 to May 2003 the Ulster Museum held an exhibition of paintings by Basil Blackshaw. I visited it several times, inveigled by Blackshaw's seemingly offhand craftsmanship. One series of six paintings particularly engaged me. Entitled simply *Window I-V* and *Two Windows*, they could be said to be just what they say they are: paintings of windows. Big sash windows, typically about six feet by five, with horizontal glazing bars, the little catch visible on some, rendered in near-monochromatic hues of grey, white, grey-blue, muddied olive-grey, the dragged and scumbled paint spilling out from the ostensible glass and over the edges of the painted window-frame towards the frame of the painting, the way light shimmers at the edges of an actual window. They could be studio windows, or paintings of light, or paintings of paint for that matter, a record of the process. If they are abstracted windows – *homages*, perhaps, to Mark Rothko – they still remind us of real windows. Anything we look at is conditioned by the eye of memory. I thought of empty first-floor apartments; of schoolroom windows; of how light changes as time passes; of Philip Larkin's poem 'High Windows', beyond which lies "the deep blue air/Which shows nothing, and is nowhere, and is endless".

Nothing, it seems, could be further removed from the Troubles than these windows, or *Windows*. Yet, as I consider them now, they begin to assume other dimensions. I remember the big sash windows of my flat on University Road shuddering and trembling when a bomb demolished a nearby building. The windows held, but a few days later, in memory of the event, the ceiling of my bedroom collapsed leaving a mass of lath and inch-thick Victorian plaster on the bed where I would have been lying had hunger not driven me from it to make a late fry-up the morning after the night before. It was 1975 or so. A few years previously I'd been working as a Civil Service clerk in central Belfast, where the windows of public buildings were criss-crossed with parcel tape to minimize the fall-out from the bombing campaign that was then at its height. Every now and again a bomb alert would summon us from the tedium of the job, and we'd file out to stand behind white security tape in an empty zone of free time, sometimes to witness a spectacular avalanche of glass. And there was more to windows than met the eye, as I discovered later. When people talk in a given room, the window-glass, like the diaphragm of an old-fashioned telephone, vibrates ever so slightly in response to the sound-waves thus generated.

An infra-red beam, trained on that window from a remote location, will be modulated by the vibrations, which in turn can be converted into audio: this is the 'Laser Ear', reputedly used by British Army surveillance teams in Belfast and beyond in the 1980s. In retrospect, Blackshaw's *Windows* vibrate with messages perhaps not considered by the artist. But the artist's intention is not a reliable indicator of the artwork's 'message'. For what the artist had initially in mind often turns out to be mistaken. The art-work is not a statement, a simple transcript of reality, but a process leading to a discovery, a search for some kind of truth. What emerges will be seen differently by different people. Viewers, watchers, readers, listeners, we collaborate in what makes the work a work of art. It trembles with other meanings. Resonance.

Another painting from the same exhibition, enigmatically called *Bird on a Wire, Cow in a Field, Policeman*. It's a diptych, two modest paintings about a foot square, done in muted olive greens and ochres. On the left hand, a bird on a wire; on the right, a cow in a field. I looked hard for a policeman but could find none beyond some ambiguous blurs at the back of the field. I could maybe contact Blackshaw and ask him what he meant by it, but I'd rather not. At any rate it strikes me that if his *Windows* are a tribute to Mark Rothko, then the bird in this painting is shadowed by the ghost of the Dutch painter Carel Fabritius, whose exquisite *The Goldfinch* is one of the highlights of the Mauritshuis gallery in The Hague. Fabritius painted it in 1654. On 12th October of that year the powder magazine of Delft was accidentally ignited. The resulting explosion devastated a quarter of the town, killed the artist, and destroyed his studio and much of his work. Blown into nothingness. Only about a dozen paintings have survived. *The Goldfinch*, depicted chained to its feedingbox, has been interpreted as a metaphor of the limits of art, or a truce between art and nature. Seen from afar, it is a convincing simulacrum of a real bird; look closer, blow it up, and it dissolves into a mosaic of brushstrokes. Nothing but paint. Given our retrospective knowledge of Fabritius' fate, can we see it as a symbol of the transience of life? Or of the permanence of art, which remains when both subject and artist are long gone? These are not rhetorical questions. Art does not provide us with answers, but with real questions. Though not the kind a policeman would ask.

The other half of Blackshaw's diptych also seems to have a Dutch painting as a subtext or pretext. His cow looks to me very like one of the cows in Aelbert Cuyp's *Landscape with Herdsmen*, painted in 1650. The landscape bathed in a golden light as if of peace. I am reminded that the Dutch Golden Age – of science, art and commerce – coincided with a period of intermittent wars against trading rivals, and that war is rarely depicted in the art of that period. Though sometimes we see soldiers courting women in rooms lit by high windows. Women reading letters, perhaps from absent lovers, in that light. The light in which we see things or read things is important. A retrospective light perhaps. Windows are often depicted. Are Blackshaw's *Windows* Dutch windows? As I look at his cow again in the exhibition catalogue, it reminds me of cows painted by Dermot Seymour, sometimes in conjunction with armed surveillance helicopters, as in Paul Muldoon's poem 'Cows', dedicated to Dermot Seymour:

Now let us talk of slaughter and the slain,
the helicopter gunship, the mighty Kalashnikov:
let's rest for a while in a place where a cow has lain.

2

In January 2009 the Consultative Group on the Past, headed by the Rt. Rev. Lord Eames and the former Roman Catholic priest Denis Bradley, published its Report at a meeting in the Europa Hotel, formerly mythologized as the most bombed hotel in Europe. "Truth," said the authors, "is crucial to the prospect of reconciliation. Genuine conversations, to establish, and as far as possible agree on, what that truth is, should take place between those involved in the conflict, while recognising that complete truth is unattainable. Conversations between the divided communities must be about the conflicting moral judgements and not just the facts as put forward by one or both sides of the conflict." In other words, truth is not a matter of fact but of negotiation and dialogue. More controversially, it was proposed that the nearest relatives of all those bereaved as a result of the Northern Ireland Troubles should receive "a one-off ex-gratia payment of £12,000". The reaction of the *Irish News* was typical. Under the headline 'Butchers, bombers, victims – they are all the same', the paper carried photographs of the 'Shankill Butcher' Lenny Murphy, the Shankill bomber Thomas Begley, and nine-year-old Patrick Rooney.

Patrick Rooney was shot dead on the night of 14th August 1969 when in the course of civil disturbances the RUC fired a Browning machine-gun from their Shorland armoured car into Divis Flats. Quite likely I would have heard the shots that killed Patrick Rooney, unaware of their full impact until the next day, when the news broke. What little I remember of the events is necessarily confused, a dimly lit, flickering newsreel in which I see the armoured cars advancing, crowds screaming and retreating in shock. As I recall it, there was a rumour that night that some rioters had looted Tizard's printer's shop in nearby Durham Street and were using printing blocks as missiles. Some sixteen or seventeen years later I would recycle that shard of memory in a poem called 'Belfast Confetti': "Suddenly as the riot squad moved in, it was raining exclamation marks, / Nuts, bolts, nails, car-keys. A fount of broken type." Other details in the poem are culled from other occasions throughout the years. It's a retrospective collage, a renegotiation of whatever happened, not an objective truth.

What was I doing there that night? I must have been visiting my friend Sean McErlean, AKA Mackers, who lived just round the corner from the Flats in Albert Street, opposite the Old House bar, in whose upstairs room the fiddleplayer Sean McGuire sometimes held court. We used to gather in Mackers' parlour with other cronies to listen to folk music on Mackers' record-player: Bob Dylan, Leadbelly, Martin Carthy, Ewan McColl, Paddy Tunney

Joe Heaney, Bob Davenport, Woody Guthrie, Cisco Houston, Blind Lemon Jefferson and Blind Willie McTell and a host of other doomy, croaky blues singers mingling with Irish, Scottish and English accents. We got guitars. We had aspirations to be writers. We trawled the numerous bars of the Lower Falls in search of local character, or went further afield to other music venues – shebeens, drinking dens, the upstairs or back rooms of dark public houses, Terri Hooley’s folk session in an attic room in High Street, the Ulster Folk Music Society in a similar room in Lower Donegall Street. We got to meet Protestants similarly obsessed, among them John Kindness, known then not so much as an artist but as a singer and player of the guitar and five-string banjo. We shared a world beyond the ghetto. Folk music gave us a glimpse of alternative universes. Our cultural references were local and international, past and present, a kind of collage. Later, Kindness would use that kind of pick-and-mix technique to make public sculpture out of democratic bric-a-brac, broken bits of kitsch ceramic ornaments: *Waterfall of Souvenirs* in the Great Victoria Street bus station, *The Big Fish* at Laganside. Exploded shards of Ulster culture reassembled into something new and vibrant and organic.

Then there were the Saturday afternoons in the Abercorn restaurant, where I’d meet the likes of Kindness, Paul Nolan and Terry Canning to drink ‘Russian’ tea and smoke exotic cigarettes like Balkan Sobranie and Passing Clouds and talk about art and literature, as if the Abercorn were a Paris café. I would have been there on Saturday 4th March 1972, but went instead to Woolworth’s just round the corner, where I purchased my first typewriter, an Imperial portable, with that month’s Civil Service pay packet. Encouraged by Frank Ormsby, I was beginning to publish poems in *The Honest Ulsterman*, and decided it was time to move on to a more professional method of presentation. As I remember it, so eager was I to try out the Imperial that I took the Falls Road bus home and thus escaped the bomb that killed two and injured over a hundred. By a singular stroke of fortune every one of my friends also escaped – delayed by chance meetings, or simply unusually late, whatever. When I was trying to work out what I might write in this essay, I consulted Kindness, Nolan, Canning and others as to their memories of that day, and found some anomalies in our collective recall. Kindness, for example, remembers finding me in the Waterworks with my then girlfriend Katie Nolan, Paul’s sister, though neither Katie nor I have any such recollection. “Storytelling,” says the Eames-Bradley Report, “is an important feature of any conflict transformation process.” This particular conversation about what might have been the truth turns out to be another collage, this time of conflicting fragments, an unreliable narrative, and I wonder how much my memory of the Imperial arose from the desire for a good story. How on the typewriter that possibly saved my life or limb I typed out my first book of poems, *The New Estate*. As if poetry were a matter of life and death.

The title poem of Medbh McGuckian’s book *Drawing Ballerinas* comes from a comment attributed to Henri Matisse, who, when asked how he managed to survive the war artistically, replied that he spent the worst years “drawing ballerinas”. The poem was “written to commemorate Ann Francis Owens, schoolfellow and neighbour, who lost her life in the Abercorn Café explosion, 1972.” Ostensibly about one of Matisse’s ballerina drawings, and perhaps reflecting F. E. McWilliams’ *Women of Belfast* sculptures made shortly after the event, the poem can also be read as an altogether more grievous matter:

The body turns in, restless, on itself,
in a womb of sleep, an image of isolated sleep.
It turns over, reveals opposing versions of itself,
one arm broken abruptly at elbow and wrist,
the other wrenched downwards by the force of the turning.

3

Truth is indeed a difficult and ambiguous business, as illustrated by David Park’s novel *The Truth Commissioner*, published in 2008. Raising more questions than it has answers, it shows how the entangled consequences of a past act come to haunt those who wish to engineer the politics of the present. The reader, wanting to know what happens next, is inevitably drawn to what happened – or what might have happened – before. The novel is written entirely in the present tense, a device which can seem contrived and melodramatic. Here, it is perfectly appropriate: not so much an Historic Present as a Provisional Present, suggesting that truth itself is an ongoing narrative, subject to change and revision. Do we commission the truth, as we might a piece of writing? Do we commit the truth, as we might an act of violence, reconciliation or forgiveness? The Eames-Bradley Report, itself an attempt to set up a Truth Commission, acknowledges that the past is not a fixed entity: “The consultation has ... shown that the past, as it exists in the memories and beliefs of the people of Northern Ireland, can be changed.”

Commenting on the Report, the *Irish Times* columnist Noel Whelan concluded that “it would be best if there was no official process exploring or reconciling Northern Ireland’s past. The officials, the quangos and the lawyers should withdraw. For the time being, the events of the Troubles can, maybe, only be left to unofficial exploration by writers, artists, and, of course, film-makers.” Maybe so, maybe not. I do not know if all writers, artists and filmmakers – not to mention musicians – embark from a position of wanting to make a statement about a particular set of historical circumstances. Explore them to see what emerges, maybe. Like other writers in Northern Ireland, I have been sometimes asked what I would have written about had the Troubles not happened, suggesting, perhaps, that I might not have written at all. The question, is, of course, meaningless. It’s like asking what you’d write about had you been someone else. The writer can only respond to what’s before him or her, whatever it might be, in whatever place, and perhaps the writer’s only responsibility is to the language and to the uncertain act of writing. He or she might not know the consequences of that writing, at the time of writing. And one need not confront a situation in order to bear witness to it. Medbh McGuckian again, in an epigraph to her book *Captain Lavender*, quotes Picasso as saying, “I have not painted the war ... but I have no doubt that the war is in ... these paintings I have done.”

I began this essay by suggesting that a work of art is a zone which the viewer, reader or listener can enter as a participant, an interpreter. Sometimes he or she will invest it with meanings that might surprise its creator. A case in point is Elizabeth Frink’s sculpture on the wall of the Ulster Bank at the intersection of the Dublin Road and Shaftesbury Square in Belfast. Commissioned by the Bank in 1961, it was erected in 1964. It shows two giant cast aluminium figures seemingly caught in flight, one on a horizontal plane, the other poised below it on a diagonal, as if bound on a collision course or to embrace the other. The figures look alien, humanoid or angelic. Deliberately left untitled by Frink, a thing to be invested with whatever meaning a viewer cares to invest it with, the piece was soon dubbed “Draft and Overdraft” by local wags. Many of the citizens of Belfast were not so amused, and I remember the controversy attached to it at the time. Some thought it an affront to the divine proportions of the human body. Others thought it meaningless. However, over time it came to be accepted, and it is now an essential piece of the urban fabric – so much so, perhaps, that it is invisible to some. For me, it is among the finest public sculptures in the city – and there are precious few of those. It is redolent with ambiguity. I have no idea what Elizabeth Frink’s intentions were when she made the piece, or what she meant by it. It seems unlikely that its two figures were intended by her to represent our divided community. On the other hand, the fractures in the state of Northern Ireland were readily apparent even then, even to an outsider like Frink. And over the years, I have come to see that possibility in it. Two figures held in a static trajectory, attempting to meet the other perhaps, or bound never to meet.

When I wrote ‘Belfast Confetti’ in about 1985 it did not occur to me that whatever circumstances it emerged from might still be valid today. It was, I thought, strictly of its time. But if a poem, as I have suggested, is a zone which offers more questions than answers, then it might still be true: “What is/ My name? Where am I coming from? Where am I going? A fusillade of question-marks.”

Ciaran Carson