

IMAGINARY IRELANDS IN CIARAN CARSON'S SONNET CYCLE *THE TWELFTH OF NEVER*

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Abstract. Ciaran Carson's sonnet cycle *The Twelfth of Never* is remarkable for its dense allusive texture that is not an end in itself but a means of exploring various constructs of Ireland and its history. Viewed as a body of poems, the sonnets create a metaphorical space that erodes the difference between fact and fiction, the colonial and anti-colonial clichés of Irishness and draws the reader into a game with the established literary modes. Therefore the current paper analyses the transformations of the sonnet form and the interplay between the Irish and English poetic traditions in *The Twelfth of Never* and their implications for the revision of stereotypical concepts essential to the metanarrative of Irish history.

Key words: the Italian sonnet, *aísling*, interplay between the Irish and English poetic traditions, dismantling of the metanarrative of Irish history

In 1970 the Northern Irish poet Derek Mahon wrote that in the ideal case, 'A good poem is a paradigm of good politics – of people talking to each other, with honest subtlety, at a profound level' (Andrews (ed.), 1996:19). As he clarifies, his criterion of poetic excellence does not refer to the conflict between Protestants and Catholics, which looms over the tragic history of Northern Ireland, but rather to the war 'between the fluidity of a possible life [...] and the *rigor mortis* of archaic postures, political and cultural' (Andrews (ed.), 1996:19). Yet Mahon transcends the political and cultural dimensions, implying that poetic aesthetics is essentially dialogical. His statement suggests that a poet talks not only to his readers, but also to other poets, both his predecessors and contemporaries, re-visiting the canonical texts that have shaped the poetic tradition or traditions, to which the poet belongs, and responding to them.

This vision of poetry to some extent is shared by another Northern Irish poet Ciaran Carson. Like Derek Mahon, he often moulds into his poems references to pre-existent texts in order to establish a link between the present and the past. However, he seems to be keenly aware of the fact that the dialogue can be less straightforward and balanced than Derek Mahon suggests. Especially it concerns the texts which explore themes derived from either the private or common history, because, according to Ciaran Carson, 'Our knowledge of the past is changed each time we hear it. Our present time, imbued with yesterday comes out with bent dimensions' (Carson, 1997:90). Consequently, he often undertakes the revision of the metanarrative of Irish history, seeking alternatives in the fantastic, grotesque and surreal.

The game with distorted and distorting reflections of the past has been carried to its extreme in Ciaran Carson's sonnet sequence *The Twelfth of Never* (1998). The intention to transform poetic fictions into apocryphal history and historical facts into fantastic incidents manifests itself already in the title, which contains a reference to both history and fiction. 'The twelfth of never' is a popular phrase, synonymous to 'never' but within the context of the sonnet sequence it acquires a number of other possible interpretations. The number twelve may hint at July 12, 1690, the date of the Battle of Boynes when the troops of William III defeated the supporters of James II, destroying the hopes of the Irish Catholics to see a king sympathetic to their cause on the English throne. Or it may be a reference to Shakespeare's comedy 'Twelfth Night' and the last day of the twelve day period between Christmas and the Epiphany which marks the transition from the carnival time to the everyday.

The paradoxical nature of the title captures the spirit of the whole sequence. Historical dates and events serve as a framing device of a fantastical time-space, in which the poet freely moves from history into legend and folk tales, from the present-day Ireland to Japan or Napoleonic France. As it is impossible to discuss all the allusive implications of the sonnet sequence in one paper, I will concentrate on the representations of some of the most popular and iconic literary images of Ireland because they form the thematic centre of the whole collection, and consider how Ciaran Carson has employed poetic forms and modes of expression originating from Irish and English poetic traditions to create a highly idiosyncratic version of the sonnet.

Varied, as these images of Ireland are, it is possible to point out three popular constructs that are of particular interest to Ciaran Carson. First of all, a number of sonnets explore the colonial stereotypes of Ireland and the Irish fabricated by the English, dating back to the Elizabethan Plantation in the 16th century. Secondly, Ciaran Carson recasts the plots, derived from Irish folk tales and legends that have propagated the idea of the quaint, picaresque Ireland where one can easily stumble into pocket-size Otherworlds inhabited by pucas and leprechauns. And finally he examines the heroic and tragic vision of Ireland upheld by Irish poets since the 17th century throughout the Romantic period to the Irish War of Independence and beyond it. These three images of Ireland merge with one another and anachronistically appear in scenes derived from the 20th century Irish life.

The composite nature of the contents is underlined by the formal aspects of the poems. Throughout the collection Ciaran Carson has consistently used the Italian sonnet – a closed poetic form charged with literary and cultural overtones. Yet none of the poems is a classical, unadulterated Italian sonnet. Although Ciaran Carson has scrupulously preserved the graphic division of the lines into octaves and sestet, even down to emphasizing the individual quatrains and tercets, this visual reminder of the form cannot disguise the fact that the Italian sonnet has been a point of departure for experimenting with the Irish and English poetic canon. None of the poems functions as the reader might expect it. Ciaran Carson

has trespassed on the unwritten convention that the sonnet typically represents a concentrated, deeply personal mediation or a witty poetic argument precariously reconciling incompatible notions.

A few of the poems are actually pastiches of popular poems or even prose texts. For example, the sonnet *Spenser's Ireland* has been derived from a passage in Edmund Spenser's pamphlet *A View of the Present State of Ireland*, composed in the 1590s, where he with vitriolic eloquence describes how the rebellious Irish outlaw,

'being for his many crymes and villainies banished from the townes
and howses of honest men, and wandring in wast places, far from
danger of Lawe, maketh his mantle his howse, and under it covereth
himself from the wrathe of heaven, from the offence of the earth, and
from the sight of men' (Online 1).

Ciaran Carson borrows the image of the cloak and transforms it into a metaphor for the process of cultural stereotyping that occludes a clear and unprejudiced vision of the Irish; therefore all that the anonymous voice reflecting on Spenser's text comes up with is a set of clichéd attributes of Irishness,

Rakehelly horseboys, kernes, gallowglasses, carrows,
Bards, captains, rapparees, their forward womenfolk,
Swords, dice, whiskey, chess, harps, word-hoards, bows and arrows:
All are hid within the foldings of their Irish cloak (Carson, 1999:72).

The cloak that in Spenser's text is a hyperbolized image of the Irish rebelliousness in Ciaran Carson's sonnet becomes a sign of cultural resignation to the constrictions of superficial stereotypes. These stereotypes persist due to their convenience, for they allow an outsider to satisfy their unconscious or conscious expectations of what the Irish should be, while enabling the Irish to produce a recognizable brand of Irish identity. Not surprisingly, the sonnet concludes with an ironic reflection on the 'made' or 'constructed' nature of Irishness,

[...] Forever on the make,
They drink and talk too much. Not all of it is gibberish (Carson,
1999:72).

However, Ciaran Carson willingly involves himself in the exploration of the meanings that are released through dismantling of the established concepts and discourses and plays with seemingly incompatible strata of Irish culture and history. In the companion piece to the above-analysed sonnet, figures from the colonial Irish past are caught up in a situation derived from the counter-colonial discourse. The title of the sonnet – *Sunderland and Spencer* – contains a misleading clue: Spencer here, judging by the spelling, is not the 16th century poet Edmund Spenser (spelled with 's', not 'c'), but Sir Charles Spencer, the third Earl of Sunderland who was Lord Lieutenant of Ireland at the beginning of the 18th century, hence the implication that Sunderland and Spencer is one person. While behaving in a style appropriate to the 18th century rakes, they, or rather he,

encounter Ireland or Erin in the guise of a young woman. In an absurd duel for her affections which seems to be fought with words not swords Sunderland kills off or writes off a part of his own self.

Come glim of night, they flit to rakish gambling-clubs,
Or candle-lit bordellos, as the mood would take them,
Rooms in private houses that were fangled pubs-
That garter in the mirror, that uplifted hem!

Then both were smitten by the lovely Erin, who'd
Seduced them by her words or faery glamour,
And her eyes a double-glimmer 'neath her riding-hood.

There was nothing for it but a duel. Fencer
Stuck the other with his point of Latin grammar.
"I think," said Sunderland, "we can dispense with Spencer" (Carson,
1999:73).

The sonnet draws on the Irish poetic tradition, in which representation of Ireland as a woman has had a long and venerable history. Especially popular has been the dream-vision poem *aisling*, which was developed in the 18th century as a type of political allegory, under the guise of a love poem. The poems, belonging to this genre, follow a conventional plot: the poet falls asleep and dreams of a beautiful young woman, symbolising Ireland, who reproaches him for deserting her.

Ciaran Carson obviously alludes to the traditional *aisling*, yet he has disrupted the traditional situation. Erin is transformed into a young lady of rather dubious virtue, flirtatious and deceptive. The colonial administrator Lord Sunderland is cast in the role of a lover usually reserved for the young Irish nationalists, who are ready or unwilling, as the case may be, to shed blood for love of her. The feminine rhymes in the final tercet and puns (e.g., 'fencer-spencer,' 'stabbed with his point of Latin grammar') introduce an element of light verse, undercutting the claims of gravity of both the closed forms – the sonnet and the *aisling*.

Ciaran Carson returns to the motive of an encounter with Ireland again and again, trying out different versions of the allegory and depriving it of the elevated heroic and patriotic content. In other sonnets Erin appears as an old hag (e.g., in the sonnet *The Rising of the Moon* where the poet-dreamer responds to her overture 'you might have loved me for eternity' by formally kissing 'her grass-green lips' and shaking 'her bloodless hand' (Carson, 1999:19).) and as the President of the Republic of Ireland (e.g., in the sonnet *Wrap the Green Flag Around Me* (Carson, 1999:30) where the inauguration ceremony of the President is presented as 'ordination' to stress the quasi-religious nature of the nationalist historiography). And, most fascinatingly, she becomes also a dangerous seductress, as in the sonnet *1798*, which commemorates the 200th anniversary of the bloody rebellion organized by the United Irishmen in 1798; however, Ciaran Carson has used this occasion to question the poet's obligation to adhere to the canonical version of history.

I met her in the garden where the poppies grow,
 Quite over-canopied with luscious woodbine,
 And her cheeks were like roses, or blood dropped on snow;
 Her pallid lips were red with Papal Spanish wine.

Lulled in these wild flowers, with dance and delight,
 I took my opportunity, and grasped her hand.
 She then disclosed the eyelids of her second sight,
 And prophesied that I'd forsake my native land.

Before I could protest, she put her mouth to mine
 And sucked the broken English from my Gaelic tongue.
 She wound me in her briary arms of eglantine.

Two centuries have gone, yet she and I abide
 Like emblems of a rebel song no longer sung,
 Or snowy blossoms drifting down the mountainside (Carson,
 1999:39).

1798 is a composite and eclectic poem that still manages to create the illusion of momentary unity. The encounter between the poet and the unnamed woman occurs in a setting derived from the elegant 16th century English poetry. This layer of the English poetic tradition most clearly manifests itself in the first quatrain of the sonnet, which contains a direct quotation from William Shakespeare's comedy *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Ciaran Carson has echoed Oberon's description of Titania's resting place:

I know a bank where the wild thyme blows,
 Where oxlips and the nodding violet grows,
 Quite over-canopied with luscious woodbine,
 With sweet musk-roses and with eglantine (2.1. 254-257, Online 2).

It is noticeable that Shakespeare's text is present not only through citation but also in the repetition of syntactical structures and the approximation of the rhyme scheme. The general impression of poetic sophistication is upheld by the literariness of the diction: 'pallid', instead of 'pale', 'disclose', instead of 'open'. However, the ambience of Ciaran Carson's sonnet significantly diverges from the Shakespearian text embedded in it. The vegetation, instead of evoking idyllic sylvan scenery, gains sinister connotations. Shakespearian 'violets' in the first line are substituted by 'poppies' that in the collection symbolises the seductive power of Irish nationalist rhetoric, also stupor and false historical memories.

The allegorical figure of Ireland in the poem is as much akin to Dark Rosaleen from James Clarence Mangan's influential 19th century *aisling* with its quasi-religious language of blood sacrifice and suffering, as to the impenetrable and inaccessible ladies of the sonnet tradition. In a curiously Gothic twist, she finally acquires traits of a demonic vampire lover and deprives the poet of speech, leaving him incapable of communication. The sonnet ends with a precarious stasis – the

poet and his demonic muse are suspended in time, unable to break the web of representations, in which they are caught.

Derek Kiberd in the essay *Literature and Politics* offers the following formulation of the mission entrusted to culture in the Republic of Ireland, 'culture is often seen as healing, whereas history is viewed as divisive (Kelleher, O'Leary (eds.), 2007:9).' A considerable part of this task has been shouldered by poets and writers who have acted not only as guardians of traditional values and collective cultural/historical memory, but also attempted to negotiate the rift between violence and peace/ the past and the present.

In this context Ciaran Carson's sonnet cycle can be seen as an attempt to escape the onerous duty of paving the way towards an acceptable version of the traumatic Irish history. The voice of the poet projected in the sonnets does not belong to a seer or an interpreter of the past and the future, but a subject intimidated by history who at most can be a passive, sometimes even uncomprehending, witness of events. The reason behind this evasion of the conventional role allocated to the poet in the Irish tradition is the realisation that the act of remembrance is often tinged with deception.

The sonnet cycle concludes with *Envoy* – a poem of sending that establishes affinity with the large scale narrative poems. Still the poet slips out of the stance of an epic poet and falls back into the poise of a raconteur. Instead of blessing his work and upholding its value, he invites other re-tellings that might modify his own texts.

These words the ink is written in is not indelible
And every fairy story has its variorum;
For there are many shades of pigment in spectrum,
And the printed news is always unreliable.

Of maidens, soldiers, presidents and plants I've sung;
Of fairies fishes, horses, and of headless men;
Of beings from the lowest to the highest rung –

With their long ladders propped against the gates of heaven,
They're queued up to be rewarded for their grand endeavour,
And receive the campaign haloes on the Twelfth of Never (Carson,
199:89).

By grafting upon the Italian sonnet the elements of various incongruent genres and modes, such as, the *aisling*, light verse, and Gothic fiction, Ciaran Carson has turned it into a constituent part of a fragmented verse narrative that spins a yarn across several literary traditions and cultural backgrounds. His primary interest has been happenstance, creating a maze of re-tellings, dismantling two grand narratives: that of English cultural and literary supremacy, and the nationalist version of Irish history as a heroic struggle against the English oppressors, culminating in the liberation of Ireland.

Still the formal and stylistic aspects of the sonnet cycle foreground the issue of the cultural space in which it exists. Ciaran Carson has positioned his fantasias on the sonnet in an elaborately, almost artificially constructed in-between space that is framed by his double heritage as an Anglophone Irish poet. Furthermore he consciously foregrounds the many-layered nature of the literary traditions he has drawn upon. According to Bakhtin,

‘Every type of intentional stylistic hybrid is more or less dialogized. This means that the languages that are crossed in it relate to each other as do rejoinders in a dialogue; there is an argument between languages, an argument between styles of language. But it is not a dialogue in the narrative sense, nor in the abstract sense; rather it is a dialogue between points of view, each with its own concrete language that cannot be translated into the other (Bakhtin, 1981:151).’

As in Ciaran Carson’s sonnets the dialogue is carried out in a very compressed sonnet form, it gains additional intensity. It is impossible to claim that the elements of the Irish poetic tradition dominate over the elements of the English poetic tradition or vice versa. The examples analysed above demonstrate that an essential aspect of Ciaran Carson’s aesthetics is shifting the distance between these traditions, allowing the poet to escape simplified categorizations and imbue long-established poetic forms and conventions with a new life.

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