Tin-Can Hamlet and Other Shakespearean Negotiations in Ciaran Carson’s Poetry

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1 Re-writing is paradigmatic of Ciaran Carson’s (b. 1948) poetry where it has played a formative part since his debut in the 1970s. In his two early volumes, the pamphlet The Insular Celts (1973) and his first major collection of poems The New Estate (1976), Carson nods back to the Irish literary past by adapting Early Irish verse. Here, Carson installs himself in a line of 20th century Irish poets for whom versions of Early Irish poetry, as Peter Denman argues, have come to represent the test piece. In his second and critically acclaimed collection The Irish for No (1987), Carson extends scope and technique, and turns to the works of Shakespeare, John Keats, Seamus Heaney and Robert Frost. He makes use of quotations and allusions, as constitutive parts of his poems, to narrate his hometown Belfast. In the two subsequent collections, Belfast Confetti (1989) and First Language (1993), Carson develops this practice further by adapting and appropriating entire poems or longer narratives: Japanese haiku, the poetry of Baudelaire and Rimbaud, and Ovid’s Metamorphoses are subject to stylistic and thematic transformations and serve as raw material out of which Carson writes new poems. This poetic practice of re-writing is not only applied to others’ works. Carson returns to and re-writes his own previous poems, thus eschewing the notion of a final version. Neither is re-writing limited to the literary sphere but the varied material incorporated into a Carson poem includes also historical and official accounts (e.g. Belfast Confetti or Breaking News (2003)), political and commercial slogans and paintings. In a broadened sense, re-writing can also be extended to include his translations, of Dante’s Inferno (2002) and the Old Irish epic, The Táin (2007), to mention only two.

2 However, re-writing is more than a recurring phenomenon in Carson’s work: it is integral to his poetics. It is a method, whereby he constructs poems, which simultaneously affords an articulation of both aesthetic and historical issues. Through re-writing (the word itself
signalling a dynamic process), Carson challenges that which is fixed or stable in meaning, be it in art or in history.

3 By examining Carson’s use of two Shakespeare plays – *Romeo and Juliet* in the poem “The Irish for No” and *Hamlet* in his “Hamlet” – the present article aims to demonstrate how Carson appropriates earlier literary material to create new poems and how the activity of re-writing is in itself an essential part of meaning-making.

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4 The title poem of *The Irish for No* illustrates well Carson’s composite method whereby various fragments are recycled and pieced together to form a new entity. The poem – set in Belfast and relating various Belfast scenes as the speaker traverses the city – is an assembly of quotations and allusions, chief among which are references to various dramatic and poetic texts. Apart from *Romeo and Juliet*, which the present article focuses on, one encounters bits and pieces from John Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale”, Seamus Heaney’s *Door into the Dark* and Robert Frost’s “After Apple-Picking” and “Acquainted with the Night”. In addition to these literary intertexts, the poem also makes use of political and commercial slogans, and “Belfast parable”.

Through intricate interplay these varied textual components help narrate Belfast at the same time as attention is drawn to the liabilities involved in representing experience.

5 That this is a poem, which at once tells of Belfast and the precariousness of our perceptions and representations of reality, is brought to the fore in the opening stanza’s reference to Shakespeare’s play. The stanza works by juxtaposing and contrasting a Belfast scene with the play. Upon seeing a man and a woman quarrelling in an open window, the speaker of the poem is led to compare the events with “the balcony scene in *Romeo and Juliet*”:

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

6 The use of *Romeo and Juliet* sets the tenor of the poem. At first glance, Shakespeare’s tragedy about two rival families may be seen as a narrative easily assimilated with the situation in Northern Ireland, a country divided between “Montagues” and “Capulets”. Yet the reference to *Romeo and Juliet* is complicated by the fact that the speaker seems to withdraw his initial comparison between the couple in the window and Shakespeare’s play. Carson’s speaker, in the *diegesis* both observer and interpreter, first sees and compares the quarrel with the earlier narrative. Significantly, however, he then modifies his first impulse, something which is made clear in that the comparison with *Romeo and Juliet* is followed by a modifier: “except”. As a first instance, the speaker’s hesitation can be said to dramatize “visual honesty” and the “seeing what’s before your eyes” approach that Carson saw lacking in Seamus Heaney’s *North* (1975); an approach which arguably has informed his own early writings.

7 Following from this, there are two alternative ways of reading the speaker’s modification. On the one hand, the “except” might be understood as disqualifying the play’s relevance to Carson’s poem, Belfast, or, as a plausible description of the events witnessed by the
speaker. On the other hand, it may not straightforwardly discard Shakespeare’s play on the level of theme, but it might be a rejection of the play as a meta-narrative. If so, the modification suggests that perceiving, interpreting and, indeed, representing in terms of earlier narratives, models or structures may conceal what is particular. If \textit{Romeo and Juliet} is a meta-narrative, the opening stanza rejects it, emphasizing instead what is local in time and space. Consequently, the reference to \textit{Romeo and Juliet} is not there to simply establish similarities but to suggest differences.

And there certainly are differences between Shakespeare’s Renaissance play and Carson’s contemporary poem. The domestic interior that we get a glimpse of in the first stanza, the “Japanese-style wall-hangings” and the “bamboo curtain”, suggests that this is not medieval Verona. More specifically, references to “Chlorine Gardens”, “Clareen Park” and “The Eglantine Inn”, in the subsequent stanza, locate the setting to the University area in Belfast, while the slogan “Ulster Says No”, a Unionist response to the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement, suggests that the temporal setting of the poem is the mid-1980s. This slogan, by consequence, also provides us with a political context particular to Northern Ireland.

If Carson’s setting differs, neither is the window scene of the first stanza the archetypal love scene of Shakespeare’s play. The quarrel overheard is in stark contrast with the Shakespearean Juliet’s response to Romeo, in the balcony scene. This “Romeo” and “Juliet” are not declaring their love to each other in blank verse but are “arguing” and “Juliet” is “snarling”. Furthermore, in an act evoking theatrical performance, “Juliet” closes “the bamboo curtain” and hence the “scene”, suggesting that she won’t let herself be aestheticized. Nor will she let what for her is personal be interpreted as “political”, as she declares, first for “Romeo” and then for the speaker, that “\textit{It’s got nothing ... nothing / To do with politics}”. Ironically, however, politics which is omnipresent in Belfast seeps into this lovers’ quarrel if only by the woman’s emphasis that this particular domestic argument is not about politics.

The reference to \textit{Romeo and Juliet} can be understood as a guiding principle to which both poet and reader should adhere. Analogies should always come with a modifier, bringing attention to differences and what is particular, not by simply equating past with present. As a veiled instruction to the reader, the literary references of “The Irish for No”, and \textit{Romeo and Juliet} is one of them, should be seen as signifying, not only the original, but pointing slightly and significantly to the difference from the original, re-set in Carson’s poem.

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\textit{Belfast Confetti}, Carson’s third major collection of poems published in 1989, concludes with the poem “Hamlet”. The title of the poem evokes Shakespeare’s \textit{Hamlet}. One might even propose that the title sets up a contract between text and reader (Genette following Lejeune), foregrounding \textit{Hamlet} as the extended intertext or in Genette’s terminology, hypotext, of the poem. The relation between Carson’s poem and Shakespeare’s play is strengthened by quotations, given in italics to direct the reader to an intertext but, simultaneously, nested within the narrative. One detects further a certain thematic overlap and allusions to the play, especially to the ghost. Carson has, in interview, offered some interpretive details for his use of \textit{Hamlet}. To him \textit{Hamlet} “is a political play about a rotten state of Denmark that resembles our own state; and it’s a play about fathers and sons and the ghosts they have to exorcise; it’s a discussion of the morality of violence and
Certainly, Hamlet and “Hamlet” converge on these matters. Yet despite the links posited by Carson himself – between the fictionalized past and the internecine war in Northern Ireland, between the play and his own thematic preoccupations – it would be misleading to take his comments as an invitation to see Hamlet as a meta-narrative, by which contemporary violence might be explained or understood. Carson’s engagement with Hamlet is far more complex than that. To the extent that Carson is concerned with the “strange eruption to our state” (italics in original, “Hamlet” quoting Hamlet), his main preoccupation lies with its telling.

“Hamlet” both compares and contrasts with “The Irish for No”. If in the latter, the quarrelling couple evoked Romeo and Juliet to the speaker, this was a comparison – and intertext – that was soon modified (or, depending on our interpretation, disqualified). “Hamlet” is more affirmative of its prototype, than is “The Irish for No”, and self-consciously prods the reader into considering Hamlet as intertext. Sometimes overtly, sometimes obliquely, Hamlet is present throughout the poem. It is precisely in its affinities with but departures from the play that the aesthetic, historical and ethical gestures of the poem “Hamlet” are made apparent.

The difference between the use of the two Shakespearean plays as intertexts in “The Irish for No” and “Hamlet” might be sought in Carson’s conception of representation, as this is in evidence in The Irish for No and Belfast Confetti. In “The Irish for No”, in a passage that functions partly self-reflexively, Romeo and Juliet is tested as a plausible narrative for the events witnessed by the speaker. In this poem the intertext is coupled with the notion of “seeing what’s before your eyes” and the question: “what is an adequate description of reality?” A question that assumes the belief that there might indeed be one. In “Hamlet”, and the collection Belfast Confetti as a whole, the notion of “visual honesty”, sought by Carson in the beginning of his career, has been rendered problematic. If Belfast Confetti attests to an increased sensibility towards re-writing this is no longer fed by a search for adequate expression, a role re-writing partly played in earlier collections. By the time Belfast Confetti is complete, Carson’s interest shifts to an increased engagement with form, something that is made prominent in “Hamlet”.

If we take as our first premise – suggested by Carson himself – that Hamlet “is a political play about a rotten state of Denmark that resembles our own state”, “Hamlet” nevertheless constructs the politics differently from the play. In Hamlet, the ghost’s apparition to Horatio in the first scene prompts the latter – by way of exposition – to exclaim that “[t]his bodes some strange eruption to our state”. The ghost telling Prince Hamlet of the king’s murder, urging the son to “revenge” and “remember” him, becomes the impetus for the action of the whole play. It is the cause of the conflict within Hamlet (to trust the ghost’s telling or not, to act or not), and between Hamlet and the other characters. It leads in the end only to more deaths in the court of Elsinore. Embedded within the main action is the play-within-the-play: staged, not for aesthetic but, political purposes, the play not only dramatizes the murder, but is what propels Hamlet into action and revenge. Thus taking political disorder as our main theme, the violent events of Hamlet might be easily fitted into a schema of cause and effect, or the traditional structure of the drama.

In Carson’s “Hamlet”, past and present violence is omnipresent. War imagery is deployed and this poem also tells of a murder, related only four lines into the poem. It opens thus:

As usual, the clock in The Clock Bar was a good few minutes fast:
A fiction no one really bothered to maintain, unlike the story
The comrade on my left was telling, which no one knew for certain truth:

*Back in 1922, a sergeant, I forget his name, was shot outside the National Bank ....*

16 In important contrast with Shakespeare’s play, however, the poem is not driven by the murder. Differently put, it is not the murder – by extension violence, death and revenge – which moves “Hamlet” forward. Past and present violence, in Northern Ireland or elsewhere, is a constant but not what is taken to be resolved or explained. This means, to begin with, that tragic and violent events of Irish history, referenced in the poem, are not structured according to a logical or dramatic pattern that promises, in the end, a resolution. 1922 and 1969, critical years in Irish history, are given along with armoured figures, bombs, no-go zones and demolished streets – a Belfast reality since there are indeed those who cling to and act on bids to “remember” and “revenge”. Yet, following Peter McDonald’s general discussion of violence in Carson’s poetry, what we are given in the poem are historical and political details, not a coherent narrative where one event leads to another. In other words, the poem does not structure the events of Irish past and present within a pattern of cohesion. The poem refrains, thereby, from interpreting, from making sense in a logical way. This might be set in relation to the fact that the references to 1922 and 1969 are slightly off-centre: 1922 saw the outbreak of the Irish Civil War but the year appears here as a temporal marker for when the sergeant was shot, and whose murder is only the prelude to the main story. And whilst the 1922 events in ways led to those of 1969, the year 69 is put forward with the slightly mischievous image of “two dogs meeting in the revolutionary 69 of a long sniff”. It is rather the reader of the poem, with his or her knowledge of Irish history, who makes the connections, construes a coherent narrative from the details, and is the arbiter of any historical narrative. In this respect, “Hamlet” exemplifies and makes poignant Neal Alexander’s claim that Carson “implicate[s] the reader in the construction of narratives about the Troubles, raising ethical questions concerning the writer’s and reader’s shared culpability in the ‘aestheticisation of conflict’”, a claim that I endorse.

17 This means that if “the clock” running fast in the opening line of the poem bears any relation to Hamlet’s realization that “time is out of joint – O cursed spite, / That ever I was born to set it right!” Carson does not purport to be able to set time right. In “Hamlet”, Carson shifts the focus from the historical and political realm to the complexities of representation. The clock – an everyday object – is an important case in point. Hamlet’s metaphorical, yet ontological, claim about the world’s order and state of affairs in Denmark – summed up in “time is out of joint” – is here reconfigured as a clock running fast. Tellingly, the clock measures and represents time, but is not time *per se*. To put it differently, it is not “time” which “is out of joint” in Carson’s poem, but its representation. The clock is by extension a flawed representation of reality. It denotes in the poem not political turmoil but the discrepancy between reality (“real time”) and representation (a fast running clock), between reality and lived reality.

18 Whereas the clock running fast is “[a] fiction no one really bothered to maintain”, the story of the sergeant who was shot is, by this logic, nonetheless important to “maintain”. Yet in the next lines we learn that the “nub” of the comrade’s story is in fact not the sergeant but “[h]is tin-can” (italics in original) which since the night of the murder has been heard “trundling down” (idem) the streets on nights of civil unrest and disorder. On this matter, the comrade’s story in the *diegesis* and Carson’s poem converge for although violence is registered and felt throughout the poem, the primary concern lies with this
mundane object, the tin-can. This tin-can, paralleling the ghost in Hamlet, is set to work on two levels in the text: as the story of the tin-can ghost and as the tin-can itself.

The story of the tin-can ghost in Carson's poem partially inverts the story of the ghost in Shakespeare's play. To begin with, Carson's inversion of the first scene of the play – with its notions of “seeing”, “believing” and “imagining” – is suggestive. In the opening of the play, the ghost of late King Hamlet appears to two officers, Marcellus and Barnardo, and Prince Hamlet's friend Horatio. The ghost's apparition, however, is preceded by the verbal account of its two earlier appearances, i.e. in the play the ghost exists first as a “story” which is only later visually corroborated. During two preceding nights, it is said that the ghost has appeared to Marcellus and Barnardo whilst attending to their nightly guard of the castle. On the night with which the play opens, Horatio has come to see the ghost for himself, so as to witness and verify what the guards claim to have seen, not trusting their “story”.

In “Hamlet”, truth-claims seem, unlike in Hamlet, uncalled-for. The story of the tin-can ghost is a story related by “[t]he comrade on my left” (the comrade performing Barnardo's role) “which no one knew for certain truth”, and the general tenor of the poem is that the story's significance lies not with its empirical accuracy. It is a “fiction” which the comrade and the speaker seem willing to engage in. In contrast to Shakespeare's ghost, the tin-can has never been seen for whilst “thousands heard” “no one ever / Saw” (italics in original). And as the poem goes on, we learn that the ghost has disappeared along with the demolition of the streets, and it exists now only in memory, as a story. In this context, reference can be made to a similar episode in the prose piece “Schoolboys and Idlers of Pompeii”, included in the collection, where a group of Irish immigrants in Australia entertain each other with different versions and interpretations of the tin-can. Functioning as a local myth, the story matters to the immigrants because it is a story of home and it becomes thus a vehicle for their memory work. Given the situational similarities between “Hamlet” and “Schoolboys”, it does not seem amiss to suggest that this is how the story of the tin-can works also in “Hamlet”. It is not truth which is at stake here – “fiction” entering into the poem in the very first lines – but storytelling itself.

The ghost in Hamlet exists first as a “story” then as an extant ghost “armed [...] so like the King”. It has a story of its own to tell but one intended for Hamlet solely; that of the King's murder by his own brother Claudius. It should be noted, of course, that the spirit is an image of the King, not the King himself. This is why Hamlet wonders about trusting the ghost’s words, allowing the possibility that it might be the devil that has assumed his father’s shape. In pursuit of truth Hamlet resolves to set up a play in which will be dramatized events that he has only learnt second hand. As Hamlet says: “For murther, though it have no tongue, will speak / With most miraculous organ. I’ll have these players / Play something like the murther of my father / Before mine uncle.” Unable to see the
factual events of his father's death for himself, so as to verify the ghost's report, Hamlet resorts to representation as a means of re-enactment and as a means to simulate the factual event. Here Hamlet insists that the play will be a "mirror up to nature". He assumes further that truth will unfold before his eyes; if Claudius is guilty of murdering his own brother he will not be able to watch the play without disclosing his crime. As Hamlet declares in a well-known passage: "I'll have grounds / More relative than this – / the play's the thing / Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King." Tellingly, the play – this "purest form of mimesis" and "imitation of human action" – is not staged for aesthetic ends but with a political intent behind it.

In "Hamlet", the tin-can's presence announces death, for "when it skittered to a halt, you knew / That someone else had snuffed it". Yet the tin-can does not have a story of its own to tell, as does Shakespeare's ghost. Furthermore, whilst the tin-can was first heard on the night when the sergeant was killed, we cannot be certain whether it is the ghost of the dead policeman (like Shakespeare's king/ghost) urging "revenge" or whether his death and the tin-can's first appearance were merely coincidental. The poem points towards the latter, however. The tin-can, the poem intimates, is a construction – maintained through communal storytelling – and a form by which we give shape to experience.

Towards the poem's close the speaker himself bears witness to the story of the tin-can ghost saying that "I, too, heard the ghost". In one respect, it evokes Horatio's testimony in the first scene of the play but in "Hamlet", truth has since long been made redundant. Subsequent lines strengthen the initial interpretation that the tin-can ghost is a form by which we give shape to experience. The lines read in full: "I, too, heard the ghost: / A roulette trickle, or the hesitant annunciation of a downpour, ricocheting / Off the window; a goods train shunting distantly into a siding, / Then groaning to a halt; the rainy cries of children after dusk." Here the tin-can is merely a form by which the speaker interprets and gives shape to the sounds of the city.

At this stage it is worthwhile returning to the beginning of the poem where the tin-can is first introduced. It is of particular note that the telling of the tin-can is partly intertwined with the etymological inquiry into the meaning of the "place-name" the Falls, a Catholic area in Belfast where Carson spent part of his childhood. In a sequence, the English "Falls" is re-translated into the Irish word *fál* which is in turn explained as follows: it can mean "a hedge", "any kind of enclosed thing", "frontier, boundary, as in the undiscovered country / From whose bourne no traveller returns, the illegible, thorny hedge of time itself". On the one hand, this might be taken to suggest that the "meaning" of the tin-can might be as various as the name the Falls. On the other hand, it should be observed that the alternative translations are tightly knit as they all denote some kind of enclosure. One is led to assume, by extension, that names can be like hedges, putting a hedge around reality.

The poem culminates with a sequence of meta-poetic reflections. Here *Hamlet* the play works partly as a theoretical framework against which Carson articulates his aesthetic and historical attitude. When by the end of the poem Carson writes – "So we name the constellations, to put a shape / On what was there; so, the storyteller picks his way between the isolated stars" – he expresses the idea that we give form and meaning to experience. The sergeant, by which the poem and the comrade's story opened, is one of these isolated stars. His name is forgotten but the bullet has his name on it: "a name drifting like an afterthought, / A scribbled wisp of smoke you try and grasp, as it becomes
diminuendo then / Vanishes.” If we remove the name we might no longer see the constellation. Perhaps, the poem implies, we only see something because we put a name on it.

“We try to piece together the exploded fragments.”, writes Carson. Yet the piecing together of fragments intimates sense-making, generally understood, not representation. Furthermore, when Carson says: “Let these broken spars / Stand for the Armada and its proud full sails, for even if / The clock is put to rights, everyone will still believe it’s fast”, he stresses further his concern with sense-making rather than representation. It is no longer verisimilitude that is sought but, rather, we need “names” and “forms” to “[see] what’s before [our] eyes”.

In “Hamlet”, questions such as “Was it really like that? And, Is the story true?” are made superfluous. These questions are, in a way, variations of the Shakespearean Hamlet’s questions as he evaluates the ghost’s telling, resorting to another representation in his pursuit of truth. By the time Carson composes his “Hamlet”, however, the idea of mimesis has been dispelled. Moreover, in Carson’s poem there can be no “mirror up to nature” for “reality” itself is partly a fiction. We cannot reach exactitude in our representations because our interpretations of reality are disjointed. This idea underpins the poem as a whole and is aesthetically formulated in the clock running fast.

In conclusion “Hamlet” is a most self-reflexive poem. By taking its title from the play Hamlet, Carson names his constellation “to put a shape on what” is “there”. Hamlet becomes a tin-can “trundling down” the slope of Carson’s poem; Carson having “pick[ed] his way” through Shakespeare’s play. It follows that if we remove the name “Hamlet”, if we “tear off the iron mask”, what becomes of Carson’s poem? The Carson papers at the Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library at Emory reveal two variant titles of the poem: “Hamlet’s Father’s Helmet” and “The Meaning of the Falls Road”. In their own way, these titles focus the issue of representation. In “Hamlet”, Hamlet’s father’s helmet appears in the repeated references to armoured figures – the bomb-disposal expert with his “strangely-mediaeval visor”, the “helmet of Balaklava / Is torn away from the mouth”, and “the iron mask” – but also indirectly in the tin-can with its connotations to form. In the etymological sequence, meaning collapses into the manifold explanations of the Falls as “hedge”, in the sense of enclosure. Thus, both the tin-can and the hedge point to form as the main focus of the poem. In “Hamlet”, Shakespeare’s play as a thematic model is less at issue than it is a starting-point for a demonstration of form as an instrument of sense-making. The contract sets up the reader to search for a re-writing of Hamlet when in fact the reader might have to use the idea of the contract as something more elastic.

Carson’s use of Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet and Hamlet manifests how meaning-making partly lies within his method of re-writing. This method, in turn, shows how his poetics is both an aesthetics and ethics. Art is an on-going, continuous activity allowing for that which is particular in time and space.
NOTES


2. In interview Carson has said that the story of the Belfast businessman related in the concluding stanza “happened. It’s become a kind of Belfast parable”. Rand Brandes, “Ciaran Carson Interviewed by Rand Brandes”, The Irish Review 8 (Spring 1990), 84.

3. Ciaran Carson, The Irish for No (Loughcrew: Gallery Press, 1987). In the article, all quotations from this poem are from this edition.

4. Set in relation to the poem as a whole, it would seem that the “Romeo” and “Juliet” of the first stanza are part of a Northern Irish theme. The second stanza addresses translation from English to Irish and the third and fourth stanzas report what might be sectarian murder(s).

5. Carson, “Escaped from the Massacre?”, The Honest Ulsterman 50 (Winter 1975), 186. In this well-known and oft-quoted review of Heaney’s North, Carson critiques Heaney’s parallels between the violence in Northern Ireland and ritual killings and sacrifices in Iron Age Denmark and what he sees as “the desire to abstract, to create a superstructure of myth and symbol”, 183. Towards the end of the review, Carson writes that: “No-one really escapes from the massacre, of course – the only way you can do that is by falsifying issues, by applying wrong notions of history instead of seeing what’s before your eyes”, 186.

6. Gérard Genette, Palimpsests. Literature in the Second Degree, transl. Channa Newman and Claude Doubinsky (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 3. Genette writes in a footnote: “The term pact is evidently somewhat optimistic with regard to the role of the reader, who has signed nothing and must either take it or leave it. But the generic or other markings commit the author, who, under penalty of being misunderstood, respects them more frequently than one might expect.” 430.

7. Ibid., 5.


10. Ibid., 185.


14. The traditional five act drama is structured accordingly: exposition, complication/rising action, climax, falling action, and denouement/resolution.

15. Carson, Belfast Confetti (Loughcrew: Gallery Press, 1989). In the present article, all quotations from “Hamlet” are from this edition.

17. Neal Alexander, *Ciaran Carson. Space, Place, Writing*, (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010), 7. A similar claim is made by McDonald in *Mistaken Identities*. Writing on “Campaign” of *The Irish for No* and “All Souls” of *First Language*, McDonald says that “narrative coherence belongs to the questioners who translate ‘Who?’ into ‘What?’, rather than to the poetic voice, which clings to particulars of memory and experience, however unpalatable or disconcerting these may be”, 63.

18. *Hamlet*, act I, scene v, ll. 188-190.

19. *Hamlet*, act I, scene i, l. 32. Barnardo says: “Sit down a while, / And let us once again assail your ears, / That are so fortified against our story, / What we have two nights seen.” Act I, scene i, ll. 30-33.


22. *Hamlet*, act I, scene i, ll. 110.

23. “The spirit that I have seen / May be a [dev’l], and the [dev’l] hath power / T’assume a pleasing shape”, act II, scene ii, ll. 578-580.


25. *Hamlet*, act III, scene ii, ll. 16-22. Hamlet instructs the actors: “Suit the action to the word, the word to the action, with this special observerance, that you o’erstep not the modesty of nature: for any thing so o’erdone is from the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is, to hold as ‘twere the mirror up to nature: to show virtue her feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure.” In the Bedford/St Martin’s edition of *Hamlet* “pressure” is explained as “Impression (as of a seal), exact image”, 86.


28. David Benine has written on the constellation as a model for storytelling in “Ciaran Carson’s Constellations of Ideas: Theories on Traditional Culture from Within”, *The Brazilian Journal of Irish Studies* (June 2006), see section on “Constellations of Meaning”, 125-127. See also Ciaran Carson, *The Star Factory* (London: Granta Books, 1997) where he writes: “It has been suggested that the mind of the storyteller is inhabited by constellations of such crucial points, whose stars are transformed or regurgitated into patterns of the every day”, 67.

29. Indeed the idea is accentuated by the epigraph to the third part of the collection, Carson quoting there from Kevin Lynch *The Image of the City*: “…people … in their daily walks continued to follow streets that no longer existed, but where only imaginary tracks through a razed and empty section of Florence.” *Belfast Confetti*, 84.

30. The Ciaran Carson papers at the Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University: http://findingaids.library.emory.edu/documents/carson746/series2/subseries2.2/subseries2.2a/ Accessed 11 December 2012.
RÉSUMÉS

En examinant l’usage fait par Ciaran Carson (1948-) de *Romeo and Juliet* et de *Hamlet* de Shakespeare dans deux de ses poèmes, l’article analyse comment Carson s’approprie des textes littéraires antérieurs afin de créer de nouveaux poèmes, et comment l’activité de la réécriture constitue une partie essentielle du sens créé. Dans “The Irish for No”, *Romeo and Juliet* est juxtaposé et mis en contraste avec la réalité de Belfast pour en souligner les particularismes historiques et géographiques tout en attirant notre attention sur la précarité de nos perceptions et de nos représentations. Dans “Hamlet”, *Hamlet* sert de point de départ à un examen de la forme comme instrument porteur de signification. Les réécritures de Shakespeare faites par Carson lancent un défi à l’idée d’un sens fixe ou stable, que ce soit en art ou en histoire, et montrent que sa méthode de composition des poèmes à partir du recyclage est aussi bien éthique qu’esthétique.

Exercising Ciaran Carson’s (b. 1948) use of Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* and *Hamlet* in two of his poems, the article demonstrates how Carson appropriates earlier literary material to create new poems and how the activity of re-writing itself is an essential part of meaning-making. In “The Irish for No”, *Romeo and Juliet* is juxtaposed and contrasted with Belfast reality in order to emphasize what is particular in time and space as well as to draw our attention to the precariousness of perceptions and representations of reality. In “Hamlet”, *Hamlet* is taken as starting-point for examining form as an instrument of sense-making. Carson’s re-writings of Shakespeare Carson challenges the notion of stability in art, history, and convey that his method of composing poems through recycling is both an aesthetics and an ethics.

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Jenny Malmqvist is a lecturer in English at the Department of Culture and Communication, Linköping University. She teaches English Literature, History and Cultural Studies at the English Department and at the Master’s Programme Language and Culture in Europe. She is currently completing her doctoral dissertation on Ciaran Carson’s poetics where she examines Carson’s poetic method and its development since his debut in the 1970s. She has previously published an interview with Carson, in *The Notre Dame Review* (2009). Coco2013-02-24T16:01:00