

# *Interviewing Ciaran Carson*

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## **Introduction**

Ciaran Carson (1948 -) is Professor of Poetry at Queen's University, Belfast, Northern Ireland. He is the author of several collections of poems, including *First Language*, which won the 1993 T. S. Eliot Prize. He has written prose books, a book about Irish traditional music, a memoir for Belfast and also a novel, *Shamrock Tea*, longlisted in 2001 for the Booker Prize. His translation of Dante's *Inferno* (2002) was awarded the Oxford Weidenfeld Translation Prize. In 2005, he published *The Midnight Court*, a translation of the classic Irish text "Cúirt an Mheán Oíche" by Brian Merriman and in 2007 he translated "The Táin" from the old Irish epic *Táin Bó Cúalinghe*, with great success.

During the summer of 2008 Prof. Ciaran Carson agreed to be interviewed in his office at Queen's University, Belfast, by María Graciela Adamoli and María Graciela Eliggi from the National University of La Pampa, Argentina who were interested in his work as poet as well as translator.

**Interviewers:** Prof. Carson, what would you say is the state of the art in Irish literature? Do you consider that there are different trends?

**Ciaran Carson:** I suppose all art, or all literature, must respond in some way, however obliquely, to whatever is happening in the larger world. In my own case, my first book, *The New Estate*, responded in part to poetry in Early Irish; but there were also some reflections on the troubled state of Northern Ireland. Having said that, the poems were somewhat formally conservative. That book appeared in 1976, and I didn't write much, for various reasons, for some ten years. My next book after that, *The Irish for No* (1987), was written in a very different style, with very long lines reflecting speech and storytelling rhythms. I think I wanted to get something of the constant disintegration and reintegration of the city of Belfast into the work. A sense of urgency. At the moment, though there is relative peace, there are many unresolved issues out there. The tension hasn't gone away.

**Interviewers:** In the fields of fiction, for example, at the end of the twentieth century there was a group of writers who believed that fiction was exhausted. In the field of poetry, do you think that that same feeling of exhaustion, that everything has been said applies to Irish poetry?

**CC:** I don't think fiction is ever exhausted. Our lives are stories. Interestingly, some of the work I was doing in the 1980s and 1990s was seen as "experimental"; but I was conscious throughout of how it depended on traditional storytelling techniques. The old myths and the old stories are still relevant, and there is little new under the sun. At the back of any writer's work is the knowledge of what has been done in the past. Writing comes out of reading and listening to others, whether in the present or in the past.

**I:** How would you define your poetry? Have you gone through different stages along your creative life? I have in mind, for example, Yeats, whose critics have identified three different stages in his writings.

**CC:** I've already mentioned the move from a relatively conservative style of writing in *The New Estate* to a looser form of writing in subsequent books. That work was seen by many as being concerned with the conflict in Northern Ireland – issues of authority, control, violence. A while back it occurred to me that I might try something different. I was tired of all that stuff about violence, maybe. I'd never written a straightforward love poem, so I thought I'd try that; but when I did, it came out somehow false, or untrue, a kind of parody of how love poetry is thought of. So I tried it again, with a series of poems in which the speakers, man and woman, were not "me", but personae. Essentially, I made up a story about a love affair, and through that fiction I found myself able to say things about love that I found impossible to say in "my own voice", whatever that might be. The book which resulted is called *For All We Know*, the implication in the title being that we really don't know that much, whether about ourselves or the world in which we live. Yet we keep on going by making up stories about ourselves. We find things out by entering the language of story and submitting to its procedures. By looking at and listening to words.

**I:** How do you go about that search for words?

**CC:** I read a lot, for one thing. Promiscuous reading, anything from poetry to science fiction to popular science books to graphic novels, to books about language. I read the signs on the street.

**I:** What are your sources of inspiration?

**CC:** Apart from the reading, I look to art and music and sport, any discipline which tries to deal with our place in the world and how we manage it. The writing comes obliquely

out of that. It is a kind of inspiration. But when the writing is being done, it's difficult to say where it comes from. For writing to be alive, you must feel that it's coming from or going into the unknown. If you begin a poem by knowing what you're going to say, it is very rarely a good poem, because there has been no adventure into the unknown. You learn things you never knew by the act of writing.

**I:** So, would you say that your writing is experimental all the time?

**CC:**It's a search all the time, certainly. We assume we know the world, that we know what we're going to say about it, or how we feel about it; but once you begin to put it into writing, you find that actually your grasp of what was in your mind is weak and tentative. Much of our ideas about anything are hazy and ill-formed. Writing is a search for accuracy. There are so many ways of saying things; usually the proper way is one you had never considered until then.

**I:** Are you methodical in your writing?

**CC:**That depends. At the beginning of any book it's difficult to know how to proceed; but once I get into it, I usually work at it more or less daily, in my own room in my own house. I need that space. The method doesn't so much arise from my ordering the words, but their ordering me. They dictate the method of the book.

**I:** Do you feel sad sometimes for not being fully inspired?

**CC:**Yes, but what can you do about it, except wait, or search, or hope?

**I:** In connection with what you have just said, writers of fiction have the pressure of having to write sometimes for the editor who urges them with a deadline. Have you ever experienced that sort of pressure?

**Ciaran Carson:** Well, before the editor ever gets on to me, I put pressure on myself. So generally it's not a problem.

**I:** While reading and re-reading your own poems, do you feel tempted to change them after a certain time?

**CC:**Once the book is printed, I never change anything.

**I:** So, you never change what you have written...?

**Ciaran Carson:** There are times when I'm tempted to, when I look back at something I wrote years ago, and see that it could have been said better. But for better or for worse,

the person who wrote those words is what he was then. And sometimes I think he's not so bad. We are always learning. If we were to revise everything in light of the knowledge we have now, it would be somehow untrue to the original inspiration.

**I:** In reference to religion and myth in Ireland as subject matter. Would you say that they still continue to be important topics for writers?

**CC:** Those topics are always there, whether we like it or not. And they tend to emerge without our even being aware of them. They're part of the deep background. A subconscious river.

**I:** You have done a huge work in the field of translation. Which were your difficulties when translating from Irish to English? Has your Irish upbringing – the fact that you were brought up in an Irish environment – been of any help at the moment of carrying out your project?

**CC:** I'm always aware that when you say a thing in one language, it's not the same as saying it in another. Each has different expressions, nuances, twists of thought. Each has its own arena in which that language operates. Writing depends on how a thing is said, so being bilingual helps one to understand different modes of expression.

**I:** How critical are you about the job of other translators?

**CC:** Some years ago I did a translation of Dante's *Inferno*, and before I embarked on it I got hold of as many English translations as I could, from the eighteenth century up to the present day. One thing I thought they all lacked was a sense of the original music. And many of them translated into a single, elevated register, whereas Dante is always moving between registers, shifting from formal to demotic. So I wanted to see if I could do something better with regard to music and register.

**I:** Did you go through moments of "aporia", of not knowing how to decide how to say something in translation ...?

**CC:** The particular difficulty with *La Divina Commedia*, for someone translating into English, is that it's written in *terza rima*, which is difficult in English. I walked a lot, trying to get the third rhyme, often abandoning the two good rhymes I already had for the sake of the third. Dante walked a lot. His poem was written on the road.

**I:** ...so you feel very much identified with Dante?

**CC:** As I understand it, his Florence was not so far removed from Belfast in its entanglements of politics and language.

**I:** If you were to decide between rhyme or meaning at the moment of translating, which one would you choose?

**CC:** The rhyme-scheme, the music, as I've already suggested, is as much part of its "meaning" as the ideas expressed in the poem. Of course one is inevitably constrained by rhyme. But so was Dante. Even though rhyming is easier in Italian than in English, there are places where you can see how Dante has bent his thought to the rhyme; that he ends up saying something otherwise than what he initially had in mind. The rhyme drives the poem as much as the sentiments or the ideas. Translating into English, one can only respond by reading the original as well as one can, trying to understand it in one's own words. And translating anything is a good way of understanding it.

**I:** What is your advice for your students?

**CC:** Read and read and read. Most student writers think that writing is about expressing themselves. They believe that they should say how they feel without appreciating the fact that throughout history our feelings have been much the same. Other writers have expressed it better, and we should always attend to those examples of style, because without examining the styles of others we can have no style of our own.