Grzegorz Czemiel

Limits of Orality and Textuality in Ciaran Carson’s Poetry
Introduction

In the beginning was the Word.
John 1:1

The trace must be thought before the entity.
The (pure) trace is différance.
Jacques Derrida, Of Grammatology

How things are named by any other name except themselves,
thereof I meant to speak.
Ciaran Carson, “Whisky”

Literary scholarship, as any other field of research, looks into its subject matter from two perspectives: that of present day issues and themes, and the historical point of view which regards the development of literature itself and theoretical reflection on it. Any literary theory whose ambition is to grasp the phenomenon of literacy in general cannot allow itself to reduce any of the two perspectives to another, but faces the difficult task of combining them into a dynamic paradigm. Thus, it can be argued that no reflection on literature and literary theory can be deemed complete without verifying how its tools function when applied both to contemporary problems and their historical evolution, i.e. proving the potential to shed light on its subject both in synchronic and diachronic terms. These two dimensions and corresponding approaches are central to the organization of this book and I shall return to them later in this introduction. At this point, however, I would like to address the question regarding the roots and origins of both literature and literary studies.

This book does not attempt to establish a firm basis of the phenomenon of literacy. Moreover, at some point it might even be necessary to entirely drop the very idea of a positively defined source or mythical spring from which the art of crafting words stems. What this work is in fact trying to prove is that we cannot speak of a definite centre or core that contains in itself a self-enclosed set of essential features that characterise literature. What I would like to propose is to consider the process of evolution in literature as a dynamic, self-propelling dialectic of two features, which have been at various points in history used to designate as the founding principles of literature: orality and textuality. These two models, I would argue, are specific boundaries and oppositions that can serve as signposts delimiting the field in which the phenomenon of literature emerges.
For that purpose, however, the two terms need to be redefined and reassessed – released from their traditional, commonsensical meaning. Thus, it becomes crucial to inspect the ideas that lie behind writing and speaking, so that they can be reconfigured in such a way as to describe a functional model for the production of literary texts.

It seems appropriate to present now the working definitions of orality and textuality. With regard to orality, it is not understood here as a historical stage in the development of literature, but rather its constitutive element, which links “literariness” back to an oral tradition – a cultural institution responsible for upholding the continuity of civilization. As Przemysław Czapliński argues, the distinguishing features of this type of literature are:

- anonymity – it is the whole tradition that actually stands for the “author,” while individual works are produced in a processual manner by way of a set of operations comprising the rules of oral composition,
- the fact that it establishes (and operates within) an ontological paradigm of communication, which shapes individual consciousness,
- the belief that the spoken word is also a means of action, or gesture, which emphasizes its performative, physical aspect and liberates words from being mere “thought-representatives.”

Importantly, this book does not attempt to engage in an anthropologically-inflected discussion regarding the so-called great divide, i.e. the relationship of orality and textuality on the historical plane of the development of cultures. Thus, I shall limit my scope of interest to what has been set out by the most influential scholars in this field as the general directions for conceiving orality, which Czapliński sums up as: a holistic approach to the “work,” its processual organization and interactive performance, its modes of actualizing memory, the powerful effect of live speech, as well as the articulation (and dependence on) a particular paradigm of communication. In short – orality is a mode of producing literature,

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1 I take cue here from Przemysław Czapliński’s introduction to the anthology of essays devoted to oral literature: Przemysław Czapliński, “Słowo i głos”, in: Literatura ustna, ed. P. Czapliński, słowo/obraz terytoria, Gdańsk 2011, p. 9 ff.
2 Ibid., pp. 12–13. Key figures in this approach are Milman Parry and Albert Lord.
3 Ibid., pp. 21–23. One needs to mention in this context Walter Ong, Marshall McLuhan and Eric Havelock.
4 Ibid., pp. 19–20. A complete “performative” theory of orality was developed by Richard Bauman.
5 Ibid., p. 30.
which has its own sources, structures and forms, all related to the physicality of speech and rooted in the practices of a given community.

Textuality, on the other hand, is the condition of “writenness,” according to the *New Oxford Dictionary of English* (2001). This, however, can mean many things. Firstly, as we learn from OED, in the 19th century it was understood as adherence to the text, i.e. remaining faithful to the Holy Scriptures and accepting their authoritative position. This already foreshadows the closeness to the letter, both in a semantic sense (as patient hermeneutics) and in relation to its physical aspect, by focusing on the materiality of the book and typography. I take all of those elements to designate textuality, which is – from this perspective – both a state (condition of being textual, i.e. “etched” or “weaved”) and a process (the practice of reading, i.e. following the line of the text, as well as tracing the way in which the text dynamically opens up or closes before the scrutinizing eye).

Structuralism took the word “text” to replace the old notion of “work,” while post-structuralism made one step further by showing that text is not a closed structure, but an open-ended field where various chains of signification converge.6 From this perspective, also partly adopted in this book just like orality, “textuality is one way to know the world,”7 the crucial difference being that its field of operation is the signifier. This allowed Spivak to formulate the following definition: textuality is a “sowing that does not produce plants, but is simply infinitely repeated.”8 This metaphor, developed on the ground of Jacques Derrida’s deconstruction, combines two crucial elements: the autonomous and iterative nature of text and its self-generative propelling that makes texts spread (or “disseminate” to employ Derrida’s term). This way of putting it, although rooted in one specific theory and thus prone to criticism, seems to be – as I shall try to prove – a productive approach and despite its limitations provides a firm basis for exploring the ways in which literary texts are produced.

Naturally, such an attempt is bound to be limited, as a thorough analysis would extend far beyond the scope of literary studies onto the fields of anthropology, philosophy and linguistics. It might perhaps be a utopian project to combine the knowledge from such disparate fields, since with such a large amount of data

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6 The interlacing of texts and chains of signs is particularly made visible in the theories of “intertextuality” (formulated by Julia Kristeva) and “hypertextuality” (Gérard Genette).
that these areas of study provide a complete synthesis would be an ever-receding goal, disappearing whenever we would want to finally capture it. What I propose instead is to try to retrace this model of literary production and its limits through a single narrative – that of the literary output of a single author, in this particular case – Ciaran Carson. The assumption that I am willing to admit to frankly here would be that the development of a particular “species” is reflected in the development of a single representative of that “species” – that ontogenesis follows closely the philogenesis. The premise is that if we take a closer look at the work of a single writer, whose oeuvre is large enough to perform such an operation, it might be possible to discern in it, in its themes, internal tensions and resolutions, the exact same pattern that could be observed by scrutinizing the historical development of literature. This is not to say that I shall be trying to analyse the work of Ciaran Carson as a self-enclosed entity that hovers lonely over a desert of dead signifiers. Far from that – the perspective of New Criticism that would lean towards such an interpretation seems impossible in the case of this particular poet and writer, for his work is deeply indebted to and rooted in the cultural background from which it emerges. My argument here would be that it is the notion of the literary subject that needs to be redefined in this case. Therefore, it shall be of no concern here to establish connections between particular events from the author’s life and his works. It is rather the projection of him onto that field of literature (delimited by the two poles of orality and textuality) that will be the subject of this study. This projection, I would argue, extends beyond the singular psyche of a living person. It is a “subjective field” that contains elements that have psychological, cultural and intrinsically literary origin, which have been incorporated into the image of the author, the vague entity we come to know through the signature of Ciaran Carson and his work.

A question might be raised at this point whether such an approach does not fall into the category of pure “textualism,” a trend within human sciences that follows a radical interpretation of one statement made by Jacques Derrida in Of Grammatology, namely that there is nothing outside text, i.e. that text is the fabric of reality as we know it and cannot be pierced through in order to reach some kind of an objective truth about the world. This argument could be countered with the observation that the “subjective field” I would like to use as the point of departure here is comprised not only of abstract, immaterial elements, but can also envelop within its web-like structure the physical traces of the material world, which fail to be abstracted into symbols, such as smells, textures and tastes. Thus, it could be argued that any such “subjective field” is a structure that cuts across the boundaries of space and time, incorporating elements that are both textual and not, rearranging them into a delicate network that is projected
onto the canvas of language. This, I would argue, would be the closest to any
definition of literature that I can offer at this point.

The questions of orality and textuality have been often tackled by philoso-
phers in the 20th century and proved to be inextricably linked, providing a cre-
ative tension that is centred around the most basic questions of the nature of
language, our relationship to it and the function of literature. In a lucid essay on
the subject, Joseph N. Riddel comments on the differing approaches to language
and Being in the thought of Martin Heidegger, and its subsequent criticism con-
ducted by Jacques Derrida. He remarks that for Heidegger, language is the “lan-
guage of Being,” while poetic speech is the authentic voice of that language, a
voice that articulates Being. Derrida, on the other hand, introduces the concept
of différance, through which he wants to point out the fact that language is just
a figural play of irreducible differences.9 This distinction would lie in the fact
that for Heidegger the authentic language, ripe with meaning, is the place where
Being dwells, i.e. where it announces and reveals itself. Thus, he posits a positive
approach to language and gives the poets a primary place in the world, for they
are shepherds of Being, tending to it and sanctifying it. Derrida, on the other
hand, claims that language is governed by a certain “play” and the constant reit-
eration of a lack of meaning. This tension between the two thinkers establishes
the dialectic that I would like to point out as the “engine” that “runs” literature,
transforming the poem into a space where Being and difference collide, thus set-
ing into motion something that could be called, for lack of a better expression,
a literary consciousness. This phenomenon is, I would say, the proper object of
literary studies and the final frontier of any serious poet.

Philosophical technicalities aside, I would like to point out that the question
of the meaning of literature, along with its accompanying shadow of literary
studies, is stretched between these two extremes: the orality, viewed by some as
the firm presence, a basis and foundation of all possible literatures, and textual-
ity, regarded by others as an initial “tracing,” a rift, slide or spacing that provides
the necessary impetus to the circulation of meaning and thus gives rise to a play
of meaning without which the literary work would not be capable of attaining
the crucial hermeneutic depth. Ciaran Carson’s poetry is a vast body of works,
which constantly oscillate between these two poles. The Northern Irish poet is
equally drawn to both extremes: he indulges in both the traditional aspects of

9 Joseph N. Riddel, “From Heidegger to Derrida to Chance: Doubling and (Poetic)
Language”, in: boundary 2, Vol. 4, No. 2 (Winter, 1976), Duke University Press,
p. 588.
storytelling, lyric and epic poetry, and in the modern, purely textual possibilities from which he derives his elusive, multi-faceted style.

The crucial question regarding the dynamics of orality and textuality is whether this pair (thesis and its accompanying anti-thesis – it does not really matter how we ascribe the roles) leads up to a certain synthesis. This should be carefully probed, as a positive answer might entail a certain teleological perspective on literature. It would mean that there is a goal towards which literature strives, or some ultimate deep meaning that it tries to convey. I would thus argue, avoiding the temptation to fall into a historically determined Hegelian world, that there is no such thing – that literature is ultimately the expression of an existential condition of man and his relation to language, an open-ended region of freedom that has to be constantly reinvented but resists any closing up and pinning down. Whether this freedom is in the end intimately connected with death and whether there exists a way of breaking out of this dialectic remain pertinent questions – ones, however, that I will try to relate to in the last chapter.

Ciaran Carson was born in 1948 in Belfast, Northern Ireland, where he lives to this day. He is a poet, novelist, columnist, translator and Professor at Queen’s University Belfast, where he also holds the position of the Director of The Seamus Heaney Centre for Poetry. For over twenty years he was Traditional Arts Officer of the Arts Council of Northern Ireland. He won numerous prizes, including the Eric Gregory Award, Alice Hunt Bartlett Award, Irish Literature Prize for Poetry, T. S. Eliot Prize, Forward Poetry Prize and the Cholmondeley Award. As a prolific author and accomplished musician, he has won recognition among both the reading public, poets and critics alike, making him a leading figure within the so-called “second generation” of post-war Northern Irish poets, which includes such notable figures as Paul Muldoon, Tom Paulin and Medbh McGuckian. Ciaran Carson’s diverse output is marked, however, by a significant, unique turn. Although his first poetry collection New Estate (1976) was received well, he remained silent until 1987, when he published the ground-breaking book The Irish for No. This unusual period of quietude is all the more extraordinary because the latter collection brought about a radical change in his poetic diction and thus constituted a “second debut.”

10 Detailed information regarding Ciaran Carson's career can be found on the following websites, which also served as the basis for this short synopsis: http://www.qub.ac.uk/schools/SeamusHeaneyCentreforPoetry/Staff/ProfessorCiaranCarson/; http://literature.britishcouncil.org/ciaran-carson; http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ciaran_Carson (all accessed 27 April 2012).
The structure of this book follows roughly the historical development of Ciaran Carson as a writer from that new debut on, although this does not amount to claiming that the theoretical approach must always coincide chronologically with the work of a particular author. Simply, certain themes are reiterated and reworked, introducing a vast area of self-referentiality and intertextuality in Carson's poetry. These motifs are evolving like voices in the fugue (another oral-textual pair), and cannot be understood without jumping forwards and backwards, or proceeding, like Carson himself likes to say, “two steps forward, one step back.”

The first chapter traces the chronological development from *The Irish For No* (1987) to *First Language* (1993), whereas the third chapter proceeds from the 2008 collection *For All We Know*, through *On the Night Watch* (2009) to *Until Before After* (2010). Only in the third chapter, with the exception of its third section devoted to *Breaking News* (2003), I take a step back to analyse portions of *Belfast Confetti* (1990) and *The Irish for No*. This approach allows combining the synchronic and diachronic perspectives. The former is related to the status of literature as a space extending between orality and textuality (and thus to its universal condition), whereas the latter is connected with the operation of the dialectic between orality and textuality within the poet's work, leading from one silence to another. Hopefully, the two perspectives, just like the two sides of the dialectic, are brought closer when the discussion shifts to the last significant subject of Carson's poetry – death. Literature acquires in this way the metaphorical status of a mirror to life, which also proceeds from a “debut” and silence to death (and another silence). Therefore, the diachronic perspective shall be seen to lead to the question of Being (by way of death) and dissolve, just like the structural, synchronic tension between orality and textuality winds up as its constituents converge in the death-poem which brings about the Hegelian *Aufhebung* (overcoming of dialectics) and heralds a new self-consciousness.

Therefore, I shall begin from silence – Carson's own silence – because the emergence of a voice is always preceded by a moment of stillness. This pregnant silence is a period during which Carson became – to employ his own phrase – “dissatisfied with poetry for some time,”\(^{11}\) so I gather it must have a special bearing on the whole of his work. Thus, the collection *New Estate* remains beyond the scope of this book as it does not belong to the figure whose emergence I trace in Ciaran Carson's poetry. Interestingly enough, the last two collections discussed

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in this study are leading up to another silence, which is of an altogether dissimilar provenance and was crafted for a different purpose. The evolution of Carson’s themes, as described in this book, will always be accompanied by a memory of that special silence enveloping his poetry. These two silences are necessary to grasp the meaning of the figure that Ciaran Carson’s work draws or – to speak in an alternate register preserving the duality of approaches – the kind of song that it sings. As I have already mentioned, I tend to regard this pattern to be an expression of the general movement that literature makes both individually, within a poem, and as a whole cultural formation in the history of man. Perhaps this story, figure or song (all are equally applicable in Carson’s case) is also a version of the history of man told from the angle of language.

From this first silence emerges a poet who is pregnant with ideas and ready to reinvent himself, as if awakened by the breath of a muse. The first two poetry books Carson published after 1987 – the turning point whose significance I have expounded above – lay down the most fundamental themes of his poetry. These are, according to my diagnosis: city, memory and history. The three vast fields can be interpreted to have a special significance, denoting the tension between various pairs of meaningful oppositions which accompany humankind: the personal (individual memory, oikos) and the public (history, polis), the surface (city) and the depth (history and memory), the material (city) and the immaterial (history), the present (city, memory) and the absent (history, unconscious memory). Seen from that perspective, this triad covers a large portion of ideas that have traditionally been regarded as the basic areas of reflection within human sciences.

However, what is of primal interest here is that these three areas are approached and “mapped out” by means of dissecting them on the table with two basic tools, i.e. orality and textuality. Thus, what I would like convey is that each of the three fields is probed from many sides, using many perspectives. For example, when Carson deals with history, he breaks it down into personal memory and public history. Then, he proceeds to dissect the two using the twin tools, showing how one and the other are crafted using oral and textual techniques, exposing certain inconsistencies and irregularities. When he takes up the theme of the city, on the other hand, he shows us how it is constructed and imagined by individuals by means of oral and textual means, and how that process is kept in check by collective textual procedures. By doing so, Carson constructs an interesting account of culture, showing how many-dimensional it is and how literature can reflect that because of the special place it occupies, being right in-between the oral (the physical) and the textual (the abstract).

History, addressed by Carson openly in Breaking News (2003) is another dimension where orality and textuality enter into a complicated relationship. The
first-hand oral transmission of historical events is an important element constituting the process of shaping history, which – from the moment its witnesses pass away – becomes a purely textual construct. This is especially visible in the reverence surrounding the veterans of the First World War\(^\text{12}\) or the recollections of survivors from concentration camps (e.g. works by Primo Levi). What we learn from those who still bear witness to history are delicate shades of orality painted on the dense canvas of history. That tension also permeates Carson’s writing on the subject of history, as he shows that memory (whether collective and individual) can operate in both modes: the oral and the textual.

Later on, Carson becomes more interested in the epistemological side of things. As of For All We Know (2008), he takes a necessary step back, which proves to be two steps forward in the end. By focusing on the ways we perceive things and make sense of them, Carson is finally able to combine the various themes he already touched upon into a new weave, a new song (fugue). At this point, however, he comes up to a certain halt, a moment when the barriers of language and cognition in general become finally clear. This is a turning point, as another great shift begins, leading us towards the questions of being and death, which he openly confronts in the two latest original poetry collections from 2009 and 2010.

Are the limits of orality and textuality reached at this point? In some ways he does seem to stop, but on the other hand he points out how these barriers can be overcome, or at least remodelled. They are surely put to a strong test of deconstruction, which – as Spivak remarks – “by inaugurating the open-ended indefiniteness of textuality […] shows us the lure of the abyss as freedom.”\(^\text{13}\) Is it possible to descend deeper beyond and come back with a new kind of poetry? Is it possible to die in literature and emerge as something different? Can the limits or orality and textuality be transgressed? What would it mean? Would that be inhuman? These questions should remain open until the end.

Three other things have to be shortly explained out of the necessity to preserve certain scholarly standards. These two issues regard the omissions that I have taken courtesy to make in order to develop the argument most convincingly, and the pre-existing critical points of reference in the study of Ciaran Carson’s writings.

\(^{12}\) When Florence Green, the last such veteran, died, The Telegraph notably remarked that this event is “marking the end of an era in British history.” Cf. http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/9066371/Last-surviving-veteran-of-First-World-War-dies-aged-110.html (27 April 2012).

\(^{13}\) Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Translator’s preface”, p. lxxvii.
First of all, this study does not take into account the whole of Ciaran Carson’s rich oeuvre. The early poetry books, i.e. The New Estate and The Lost Explorer are not tackled here because they precede that crucial period of silence and are – to quote Carson – “so different from what I’ve done recently [i.e. around 1991 – G.C.]”\(^{14}\) that it would be a futile exercise to try to include them in the general argument. Moreover, I have decided to exclude any discussion of his prose works. This step is justified in the light of the other important angle that this work takes, i.e. preoccupation with poetry alone and its special meaning in the history of literature, as well as the fact that it exemplarily inhabits the dialectic of orality and textuality. Nor am I taking into account Carson’s numerous translations, for their character is less intimate and original, although to a certain extent quite enlightening.

Some may consider it a bold statement, but little new light can be shed on Carson’s work in general from the perspective of the collections Opera Et Cetera (1996) and The Twelfth of Never (1998), as much as they constitute a dazzling exposition of his linguistic virtuosity. In the present study, they would only corroborate evidence gathered from other poetry books. Thus, they were accordingly disregarded, so as not to obscure the bigger picture.

Secondly, it is of course not the case that this book is a pioneering work of criticism in its field. Many distinguished commentators contributed to the critical enterprise that has been developed around Carson’s writings and many of them are quoted in the essay. There are two monographs available, one of which is a collection of essays\(^ {15}\) and the other a close study of the theme of space in Carson’s work.\(^ {16}\) Both are highly recommended to anyone interested in the subject but fail to provide a broader theoretical framework that could embrace the whole of his poetry. Of course, a detailed analysis of Carson’s works offered in those two important books cannot be underestimated, as it forms the necessary counterpart to the rather sweeping gesture made by enclosing a single writer in a single dialectical movement. The two approaches are bound to clash and inform each other, without – I hope – having to enter into conflict, as they keep themselves mutually in check.

Thirdly, I do not venture to explore in detail the wide range of Carson’s translations and adaptations. This fascinating body of work includes, among others, a

\(^{14}\) Frank Ormsby interviews Ciaran Carson in *Linen Hall Review*.


translation of Dante’s *Inferno* (which won the 2002 Oxford Weidenfeld Translation Prize), Brian Merriman’s *The Midnight Court* (2005), Old Irish epic *The Táin* (2007), as well as *The Alexandrine Plan* (1998) – a book of loose translations of sonnets by Baudelaire, Rimbaud and Mallarmé. *Opera Et Cetera* (1996) contains translations from the Romanian poet Stefan Augustin Doinas, while *First Language* features a number of adaptations from Ovid. Such an impressive dossier is a testimony to the deeply intertextual character of Carson’s *oeuvre*, again bringing to the foreground the textuality that is so often associated with his poetry. According to Julia Kristeva, intertextuality is the “interdependence of literary texts, the interdependence of any one literary text with all those that have gone before” to the effect that “discourses or sign systems are transposed into one another.” In this light, Carson’s work should be perceived as an especially dense and eclectic hub of traditions and influences, a crossroads for various discourses and points of view. This once again emphasizes the textuality of his work, creating a thick backdrop against which his unique voice is able to come to life and resonate.

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