Fluid Meaning and Storytelling as Vital Preservers of History and Identity in Ciaran Carson’s “Belfast Confetti,” “Dresden” and “Judgement.”
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Introduction
Is language a satisfying means of expressing feelings and thoughts? Is it possible to put words on something as abstract - and yet so important - as silence? Is the sign really connected to what it is supposed to designate? These questions, among many, arise when taking a closer look at some of the poems by the Belfast poet, Ciaran Carson. One of the crucial issues that constantly is in focus in both Carson’s poetry and his prose works is language. As a continuation of his focus on language, a related theme in many of Carson’s literary works is the heavy emphasis on the idea of identity as something that is derived from both language and history. In line with Carson’s discussion about the idea of - and more importantly, the search for - an identity as something that is closely connected to history and language, this paper takes as its starting point the idea that identity cannot be fully present or understood without digging deeper into history. Yet, language plays a crucial role in the context of origin and history since it is the means by which thoughts and feelings about the past are expressed. In his poetry, Carson stresses how difficult it has been and still is for Irish people to express their identity in language since they cannot fully relate to Gaelic anymore, a language which has declined over the generations, as Declan Kiberd has pointed out. One outcome of Ireland’s anguished relations with Britain is that Northern Ireland has emerged, in the words of Irish critic Seamus Deane, “as neither Irish nor British while also being both.” Thus, one of the aims with this essay is to investigate how Carson uses language in his poetry in order to convey thoughts and feelings, concerning history and identity. I have chosen to examine Carson’s

1 For instance the novel Last Night’s Fun, which is concerned with Irish music and “is regarded as a classic” (Forbes, www.contemporarywriters.com) and the novel Fishing for Amber which focuses on Irish Fairytales, the power of art and the difference between fact and fiction.
2 “It was [...] only in the mid-nineteenth century that the native language declined, not as an outcome of British policy so much as because an entire generation of the Irish themselves decided no longer to speak it” (Kiberd 616).
treatment of history as closely related to identity in the context of three of his poems: “Dresden,” “Judgement” and “Belfast Confetti,” all from the collection *The Irish for No* (1987). These poems are appealing examples of how ambiguous and dissatisfying language is when it comes to describing and exploring thoughts, feelings and questions regarding one’s origin and one’s identity.

In a society where people have become more and more alienated from the vital interrelation between tradition, history and identity, Carson tries to make his voice heard in a different way from his precursors. Interestingly, Carson brings forth original works of art by telling ancient, traditional stories by means of an innovative, non-traditional language. In this respect the essay will moreover focus on the theme of storytelling in the poems “Dresden” and “Judgement,” and highlight the importance of storytelling as a contributor to preserving history and identity. By examining Carson’s poems in light of poststructuralist ideas regarding questions of identity and cultural history, the essay will highlight issues concerning the close relationship between language, history and identity. I will also examine to what extent Carson’s writing addresses truth as being something relative and unscientific, or, in other words, how it “moves away from a ‘scientific’ or empirical approach to foreground the textuality and creativity of the author,” as Kim Arnold suggests. The study will thus examine Carson’s poems in light of some of the most important features of poststructuralism, for example the decentring of the subject and linguistic referentiality, that is “the sign” as opposed to “the signified.”

As a result of his concern with language as an essential element in the expression of identity, Carson often uses historical and mythical contexts and fables. We see this, for instance in the poem “Dresden,” where light is shed on tradition and origin. Questions regarding identity, history and language become even more crucial to
Carson’s work when one considers his own background. Born in Belfast 1948, Carson was brought up bilingually, which according to himself resulted in “[an uncertainty] of what [he] was saying, because to say one thing in Gaelic, means a totally different thing in English.” Carson points out that translations from English to Gaelic are extremely problematic since some things in English cannot even be said in Irish (Lakowski 96). Thus, the problems of linguistic referentiality, which many poststructuralists are concerned with, are central preoccupations for Carson. In this context, Carson seems to suggest that the meaning of the word is lost during the process of translating, since some words simply do not exist and/or cannot be described in translation into another language. Carson’s poetry stresses the importance of history and language in the expression of cultural and individual identity. The importance of digging deeper into one’s history in order to explore one’s identity is one of the essential traditions in Irish writing, and in this respect there are some similarities between Ciaran Carson’s and Seamus Heaney’s poetry.

“Belfast Confetti” and the Presence of “Linguistic Liquid”

In the poem “Belfast Confetti” we see a clear example of how unstable and insufficient language is when it comes to depicting particular thoughts and feelings where words lose their original meaning when put in a different context. Thus, from a poststructuralist point of view, meaning becomes something fluid and variable. As Barry suggests “signs float free from what they designate, meanings are fluid, and subject to constant ‘slippage’ and ‘spillage’” (64). The well-known poststructuralist


5 See for instance Roland Barthes, who considers meaning to be liberated from intention of the author providing the possibility for the ‘[free] play’ of meanings within any text (Leitch, Cain et. al. 1457-60). Jacques Derrida, who has become synonymous with deconstruction, who has coined the term, “difference,” to explore the divided nature of the sign; meaning both to defer and to differ (Leitch, Cain et. al. 1815-19).
critic Roland Barthes has written about this notion of “play” or “free floating” of meaning in a text in terms of a vast “galaxy” of signifiers. Raman Selden summarizes this discussion as follows:

The text is a ‘galaxy’ of signifiers which the reader can open up in various ways by bringing into play the different critical languages which are available and none of which can ‘close’ the process of signification by imposing upon a signifier a final signified. (75-76)

Barthes suggests furthermore “the signifier will always remain free, always capable of being interwoven with other signifiers from different discourses, to produce a different meaning” (76). This is also why “meaning is always deferred, never fully present, always both absent and present.”\(^6\) This fluidity of meaning is particularly apparent in “Belfast Confetti.” The poem seems to be set in a military context since Carson frequently uses military terms such as “nuts, bolts, nails” (25), “explosion” (25), “rapid fire” (26), “face-shields” and “walkie-talkies” (26). Some of the most obvious references and experiences that these terms bring to mind would supposedly be war, death and fear. In *Contemporary Irish Literature*, Christina Hunt Mahony comments on the structure of the poem itself as well as the interplay between the real and the abstract:

“Belfast Confetti” uses three quite different image patterns, all conveyed as being disrupted, to try to recreate for the reader in a linear fashion the very non-linear experience of living through a bombing.

(80)

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Hence, the constant references to military terms would not be as powerful and essential to the overall meaning of “Belfast Confetti” without the dramatic shifts of contexts in the poem. The shifts and breaks of contexts that frequently occur in the poem should not only be regarded as a means of creating a specific atmosphere. These shifts can also be regarded as a feature of post-structuralism, which, according to Barry, “looks for shifts and breaks of various kinds in the text and sees these as evidence of what is repressed or glossed over or passed over in silence by the text” (73). The discontinuities that Barry mentions are sometimes called “fault-lines,” which in its turn is “a geological metaphor referring to the breaks in rock formations which give evidence of previous activity and movement” (73). Carson succeeds in describing the raw and ruthless military actions in Belfast by connecting military terms to linguistic terms, thus indicating the lack of a satisfying language to describe the feelings felt at the time of the explosion. At first glance, this discourse might seem irrelevant and perhaps even far-fetched, but the opposition between military and linguistic terms is decisive for the understanding of “Belfast Confetti.”

The very first line of the poem describes perfectly well how the military and linguistic contexts are interrelated and how Carson creates a new way of describing experience: “Suddenly as the riot squad moved in, it was raining exclamation marks [. . .]” (25). One can only imagine how powerful the feelings of fear, terror and anxiety must have been “as the riot squad moved in,” but instead of describing this experience by means of vivid adjectives, Carson seems to suggest that there are no adjectives - in fact no words at all - that can fully depict these emotions. Carson himself has in a recent interview pointed out that “to say that I believe the words are true, to the extent that they are the actual expression of a real event, to me is very uncertain” (Laskowski 96). By references to “exclamation marks,” the word/message in question is shouted
out rather than merely stated. Similarly, by referring to basic linguistic devices such as “stops,” “colons,” and “question marks” as actual words and capturing their initial function as indicators of mood, Carson suggests that the verbal sign is disconnected to a greater or lesser extent from the idea or concept it is supposed to designate. Barry calls this idea “linguistic liquid” (65). Thus, the text embodies the abstract, which in the poem are the feelings evoked in the political context of what is referred to as “The Troubles.” Carson’s methods of embodying the abstract and thereby highlighting the idea that meaning is something fluid and variable show that we live in “a university of radical uncertainty” (Barry 61), since we have no “certain standard by which to measure everything” (61) that is beyond linguistic processing.

The poem also contains many gaps where the reader would expect the speaker to express some sort of reaction or emotion related to the military context focused on throughout the poem. Instead, abstract linguistic terms that are usually associated with language as a science or structure are inserted in these gaps, in order to underline how dissatisfying language is when it comes to describing experience. We see this idea in many of the lines of “Belfast Confetti” since Carson connects linguistic terms with military terms, thereby creating a whole new perspective for understanding the poem and the feelings that it aims to convey:

I was trying to complete a sentence in my head, but it kept stuttering,
All the alleyways and side streets blocked with stops and colons
[. . .] A fusillade of question-marks. (26)

Present in this poem is the emergence of answers regarding the speaker’s own identity and history. Moreover, the poem also raises crucial questions concerning the meaning
of language, its abstract aspect and its ability to illustrate experience. As shown above, it is possible to trace a clear change in mood compared to the first stanza. As a result of tone, the focus is no longer on the action part, for instance when the explosion takes place. Rather, the focus is on the presence of an unbearable silence that occurs after the explosion has taken place, for which there are no words to describe. We see the difficulty experienced in putting words on something as abstract as the silence deriving from the explosion. It is easy to get a feeling for how difficult it must have been to put words on something as horrifying and brutally real as the scene the reader is thrown into in the poem. The second line of this stanza contributes to fulfilling the remains of this terrifying silence where Carson embodies the abstract silence by referring to “stops” and “colons.” Carson’s language mirrors the whole mood of the poem since it changes in a parallel way with the events described. As the dramatic event is presented at the beginning of the poem, the lines are short and rapid in rhythm. This particular structure of syllables, words, lines and stanzas emphasises the quick, dramatic way in which the riot/explosion was carried out. And, as can be seen, after the explosion has been described, there is a sudden change in mood. As the silence is in focus, the sentences become longer and more balanced from a rhythmic point of view. The tone is suddenly calm and filled with consideration.

The frequent use of linguistic terms which usually occur in contexts or connotations that merely concern structure, such as “exclamation marks” (25), “fount” (25), “hyphenated line” (26), “punctuated” (26) etc., is merely a way of pointing out that the sign is in fact floating free from what it is supposed to designate. In “Belfast Confetti” we see an example of what Barthes might term the “free floating sign,” that is the fluidity of meaning. When Carson describes the explosion that takes place in Belfast, he compares it to “an asterisk on the map” (26), which once again brings to
mind the context of linguistic structure. The asterisk, which is a small, star-like symbol, is often used as a reference mark in writing and printing (Webster’s). Even though the abstractness of symbols of language as opposed to the reality of violence is in focus in this poem, the reader understands perfectly well what this explosion must have been like. For example, in the following line Carson refers to “[t]his hyphenated line, a burst of rapid fire [. . .]”(26), showing more clearly that a radical change is about to take place. The line, which in fact might be interpreted as life before the explosion, has been hyphenated, which in its literal sense means that has been “divided into syllables” (Webster’s). The explosion that takes place in Belfast not just ruins the buildings and the people merely in a physical sense, but also tears up the language that these people use. The powerful explosion is reflected in language, which in turn becomes fragmented and dissatisfying in describing the feelings of terror and fear.

In the context of the language as something fluid, the title of the poem itself - “Belfast Confetti” – is a pun. In her discussion of the title “Belfast Confetti” and the meaning behind it, Mahony puts forward the idea that “[the poem] uses as its title a slang term for the ‘post'-bomb debris that too often litters the street of that city”(81). From a poststructuralist point of view, the word “confetti” is used in an ironic sense in order to emphasise the difficulty of describing how terrifying the explosion in Belfast was. The most common context of the word “confetti” is more positive, since it is associated with happy events, such as weddings, birthdays and parties. By combining the word “Belfast,” which immediately brings to mind serious connotations, such as these associated with “The Troubles,” with the word “confetti,” which when taken out of its positive context becomes purely ironic, Carson succeeds in creating an even more powerful impression. Thus the importance of titles is stressed, as Barry points
out, since “titles may well contain puns and allusions, and often the central line of the argument is based on a pun or a word-play of some kind” (63). Another connotation that the word “confetti” brings to mind is scattered pieces that cannot be put together to form the structure they once formed. This can be seen in a poststructuralist context as reflecting the fragmentation of meaning. As Storey suggests, “[poststructuralists] reject the idea that meaning is generated and guaranteed by an underlying structure” (Cultural Theory and Popular Culture – A Reader 95). This interpretation of the word “confetti” can moreover be applied to the three questions of origin, identity and future that the speaker asks himself at the very end of the poem since he does not seem to be able to put the scattered pieces of his origin and his identity together: “My name? Where am I coming from? Where am I going?” (26).

Nevertheless, critics seem to offer different interpretations of these central questions of origin. In his review of Ciaran Carson’s Selected Poems, William Pratt argues that Carson in fact does not want to escape Belfast with all its troublesome history because he wants to suffer. Pratt moreover describes Carson and his poetry as being pessimistic, complaining and self-pitying:

If it is possible to enjoy constant pain and suffering, the daily threat of bombings and shootings that is the reality of life in the North, Carson enjoys it. At any rate, he makes poetic capital of it, which is a kind of enjoyment in the midst of punishment. Carson’s poems don’t sing; they wince, and the reader winces with them, through the broken glass and mangled bodies that litter Belfast’s streets day after day. (152)

Pratt seems to disregard Carson’s fundamental endeavour to put emphasis on how important history is in the context of the search for an identity by means of an
innovative language. The three questions that the speaker of the poem raises regarding name, origin and future are not evidence that Carson in fact “chooses to stay where life is most difficult, as if to prove that nothing man creates is beyond his strength to tolerate” (Pratt 153). Rather they are essential key questions in “Belfast Confetti” since they put clear focus on why history is an important element in the process of defining one’s identity. As the poem suggests, history is vital for the creation and understanding of one’s identity and, more importantly, it is impossible to escape since it is a fundamental link in the understanding of oneself and one’s origin. Thus, Pratt’s suggestion that history is something one can choose to escape from is not a very convincing argument.

In the final stanza of the poem there is a radical shift in both time and mood. The speaker suddenly speaks in the present tense, describing his current situation and his thoughts about his history, his origin and his future. The previous stanzas of the poem, which merely focus on violence as opposed to silence, become even more powerful when juxtaposed with the very last stanza of the poem, since the reader is given a clear understanding of how familiar and meaningful these streets and places mentioned are to the speaker. As Declan Kiberd points out:

[Carson] renders the sights and smells with a real intensity, as if
photographing the scenes of a crime; but the emotion is suffused with
a conclusive tenderness that can come only from intimate knowledge.

(600)

Nevertheless, both the military and the linguistic context are still present throughout the last stanza. The speaker asks himself why he cannot escape, which seems to be more than a rhetorical question, and continues “Every move is punctuated” (26).
The reference to terms of language structure is used in order to describe the feelings of being paralysed and being unable to escape the memories from one’s past.

In the context of “Belfast Confetti,” the terms of language structure turn from being an abstract phenomenon without an embodied reference, into a signifier of an existing object/concept. Accordingly, by radically changing the connotation of a word, its original meaning is developed into another interpretation. Storey’s suggestion that “meaning [always is] in process [since] what we call ‘meaning’ of a text is only ever a momentary stop in a continuing flow of interpretations following interpretations” (71) can be applied here. Carson’s “pennant for place-names, with their Joycean propensity to “fix” actions and words forever in our minds” (Mahony 81) is obviously a central issue in this particular context, since the names of streets and places in Belfast carry with them many nostalgic memories and feelings for the speaker. Thus, due to the explosion and the resulting destruction of the places, such as “Balaclava, Raglan, Inkerman, Odessa Street” (26), which signify the speaker’s memories, the speaker of the poem begins to question his whole origin. As Mahony points out, “the total disorientation is fused in [these] three questions” (81). The explosion in Belfast causes just as much damage to the speaker’s idea of himself and his origin as it does to people, houses and streets.

However, when it comes to the more mentally affecting consequences of the explosion, Mahony seems to be of the opposite opinion. She suggests that “[The speaker of the poem] understands in a flash that it is not just his composition, but the composition of the city that is being shattered” (80). Mahony does not at all mention the speaker’s doubt about his own identity and, by depicting the destruction of the city as superior to the destruction of the poet’s own composition, she says that “[the poet] is distracted from his thoughts, which suddenly seem metaphorically just a jumble of
“exclamation points [sic],” broken type” and “question marks” (80). The violence that the explosion implies seems to cause a chain reaction within the speaker himself, since all these questions about origin and identity raise this “fusillade of question-marks” (Carson 26). It is in fact the explosion itself that makes the poet create the poem, even though he cannot find words that are strong enough to depict the feelings of terror and fear in a satisfying way. In order to mirror the state of chock and paralysis, military and linguistic terms are combined, which make the text become characterised by “disunity rather than unity” (Barry 73). Similarly, the military term “fusillade” gives the reader a picture of a rapid simultaneous discharge of firearms, which is the literary meaning of the word (Webster’s). By closely connecting abstract terms with real experience, Carson shows how crucial language is in the process of expressing cultural identity and individual identity.

“Dresden” and “Judgement”: Simple Storytelling or Fine Pieces of Poetry?
As concluded from the discussion above, by means of an innovative, capturing and emotive language, Carson succeeds in conveying thoughts and feelings closely related to history and identity. Nevertheless, when comparing “Belfast Confetti” to “Dresden” and “Judgement,” which are the first two poems in the collection Irish for No, the reader can trace a considerable difference in structure and form. The mood of “Belfast Confetti” is significantly abstract and imaginary in a poetic sense, a mood which also is evoked symbolically by the poem’s independent structure and form. However, even though Carson does not use the same emotive and poetic language in “Dresden” and “Judgement,” he still succeeds in highlighting important features and questions concerning identity as ultimately derived from history. As I hope to show in the following discussion of “Dresden” and “Judgement,” the idea of storytelling (that
is the retelling of myths, fairytales etc.) as equal to all other forms of expressing thoughts and experience contributes largely to the shaping of an identity. One of the most essential ingredients of storytelling is history, which, as argued, is closely connected to the process of finding one’s cultural and individual identity. In her discussion of the poem “Judgement,” Mahony neatly connects Carson’s storytelling mode to issues of identity and history, by addressing a theory of how Carson brings Irish past and present together:

Carson brings Irish past and present together by having the narrative sections of the poem, which represent present-day dialogue in Northern Ireland, connect with traditional ballads in their relating of expectations, mistrails of justice, treachery and bribery. (80)

Mahony suggests that Carson, by highlighting elements of storytelling in the disguise of a poetic structure, not only reinforces traditions and stories of the past, but also finds a way of expressing these stories by means of a modern, open-minded language. He thereby contributes to the preserving of traditions of the past and the form in which they can be told and understood in a contemporary society by means of a present-day dialogue. Still, Carson tells the stories in “Dresden” and “Judgement” by means of everyday language but through a poetic structure, which in its turn suggests that he believes storytelling to be as important as any other form of literature. If the poetic structure were eliminated, or reduced to a “standard” narrative form, all that would be left would be a simple story about ancient times, told the way it presumably has been told through generations. Nevertheless, the presence of a poetic structure is an ideal way for Carson to make his readers react to the non-poetic
contents and thereby realise the importance of retaining history and traditions and, accordingly, Irish identity.

“Dresden”
At first glance, “Dresden” seems to be structured in the way a typical Carson-poem is usually structured, that is, as an “extended poem [characterised by] the use of the long line” (Laskowski 93), unpredictable sentence structure, and irregular rhymes or no rhymes at all. Taking a closer look at “Dresden,” we notice the language is used as if a story of oral tradition is told. Mahony summarizes this idea by suggesting that the poem “poetic in form [and] narrative in style” (80). Her statement opens up for a discussion about the idea of the story as being “hidden” or “disguised” in a poetic structure, which is of vital importance for Carson’s view of the interrelation between history and identity. Hence, by retelling a “simple” story in terms of poetic form and tone, Carson contributes to the understanding of Irish people’s search for an identity, since he aims to expand his readers’ view of what is considered (fine) literature. In the context of “Dresden,” what the speaker of the poem tells us are not facts, but rather ideas and observations that could occur in everyday conversations, which we cannot be sure are true or not. Thus, there is nothing “elitist” or “fine” in a traditional sense about the stories conveyed in these two poems. As Roland Barthes argues: “[t]he Text does not stop at (good) Literature; it cannot be contained in a hierarchy, even in a simple division of genres” (quoted in Leitch, Cain et. al. 1471). Carson himself heavily emphasises the importance of expanding our views when it comes to what we call art. He does not regard art as merely being “on the page” (Laskowski 94); he believes that art involves more “conversation, dancing, singing [and] playing music” (92). By putting forward this extended definition of art as being “of the world and in
the world” (92), Carson highlights the importance of cultural belonging, history and identity.

Likewise, we see examples of Carson’s concern with different forms of art and their correspondence to history and individuality in many of the sections in “Dresden.” In the lines below, the speaker of the poem describes Master McGinty (presumably one of his teachers) – a good example of how history is crucial to the process of finding and depicting Irish identity:

Master McGinty - he’d be on McGinty then, and discipline,
the capitals
Of South America, Moore’s Melodies, the Battle of Clontarf, and
*Tell me this, an educated man like you: What goes on four legs when it’s young,*
*Two legs when it’s grown up, and three legs when it’s old? I’d pretend*
I didn’t know. McGinty’s leather strap would come up then,
stuffed
With threepenny bits to give it weight and sting. Of course, it
never did him
*Any harm: You could take a horse to water but you couldn’t make him drink.* (13)

Still, Carson uses everyday language to tell this story. The lines in italics reflect the spoken language, the actual dialogue. These dialogues in combination with seemingly unnecessary details create the whole atmosphere of storytelling. When the speaker talks about McGinty’s leather strap, he mentions that it is “stuffed with threepenny bits to give it weight and sting.” By emphasising details and spoken language in the poem, Carson succeeds in embracing the importance of history, even though this story
might seem plain and simple at first glance. For example, the word “threepenny” tells us that the story takes place before 1971, when Ireland adopted the decimal system of currency. This idea is supported by the fact that corporal punishment was allowed in school at that time, which in its turn explains the speaker’s indifferent attitude towards his teacher even though he knew that he was going to be punished.

Hence, by using a language that is flexible and intelligent though not forced, Carson reinforces the idea that storytelling is a form of art and that it is as important and valuable as all other forms of literature. On this matter, Eamonn Wall claims that Carson has “turned both literary forms and notions of identity inside out [by being] less earnest in tone, more formally complex, and less easy to pin down thematically” (325). As Wall points out, Carson seems to stress the idea that storytelling is equal to all other forms of expressing thoughts and feelings (for example art, music, poetry), and that the different ways of expressing these thoughts and emotions in fact contribute to the presence of an identity. Wall suggests that “it is likely that [Carson], through [his] reaction to the structures of inherited form, [is] also reacting to other failed structures which have provided [him] with inadequate, received personal identities” (326). In other words, Carson touches upon important features of tradition and history merely by means of a simple, direct language. By telling a story about ancient times, including both cultural and linguistic elements, he highlights the importance of belonging or identity within people.

“Judgement”
Similarly to “Dresden,” there is nothing particularly poetic about the language itself in “Judgement,” rather the narrative form of storytelling is “disguised” by a seemingly poetic structure. This poem is constructed similarly to “Dresden,” but, as Mahony

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7 Sunset Ennis Ireland, [http://sunset.ennis.ie/article.php3?id_article=95](http://sunset.ennis.ie/article.php3?id_article=95)
8 Corporal Punishment in Ireland was abolished in February 1982 according to [www.chirl.com/1900/1980.html](http://www.chirl.com/1900/1980.html)
describes it: “Carson’s long yarn-spinning stanzas are alternated with rhyming
coupletsthat tell related stories in ballad form” (80). As can be seen in the following
lines, cultural identity and history are revealed merely through language:

We were sitting at the Camlough halt - Johnny Mickey and
myself - waiting
For a train that never seemed to come. He was telling me this story
of a Father Clarke, who wanted to do in his dog. A black and white
terrier.
He says to the servant boy, Take out that old bitch, he says, and drown her.

(16)

Due to Carson’s use of language and form, such as traditional or non-standard words
and expressions, both historical background and cultural identity are addressed in
“Judgement.” For instance, the word “myself” in this particular context, as an
unbound reflexive, is in fact a characteristic of Hiberno-English, or Irish English,
which is spoken mainly in the south, west and southeast of Ireland. Thus, by tracing
the origin of the word “myself,” as it appears in this particular context, it also
becomes possible for the reader to trace both the cultural identity and the historical
background of the characters in the poem (and in some cases even the author himself)
and, apparently, where and when the story takes place. Similarly, the expression “to
do in someone,” in this case “his dog,” is a non-standard way of saying “get rid of” or
“kill.” Interestingly, the phrase “to do in someone” is an English expression, which
gives evidence that there are in fact two conflicting “traditions” or identities present in
this poem. Hence, the examples mentioned suggest that more than one way of
interpreting a particular word/expression is crucial to understand the overall meaning.
The non-standard expressions that Carson uses moreover contain essential information about history and tradition. As Barry points out, it is important to trace the origin of words and expressions to understand the overall meaning of a text:

[Poststructuralist critics] fix upon the surface features of words - similarities in sound, the root meanings of words, a ‘dead’ (or dying) metaphor and bring these to foreground, so that they become crucial to the overall meaning. (73)

Closely connected to the procedure of digging deeper into history to trace one’s origin, and thereby one’s identity, is Carson’s discussion of myths, fairytales and other traditional stories, which is presented in both his poetry and his prose works. As Barry mentions above, it is important to investigate the “root meanings of words,” since they carry with them a lot of information about ancient times and historical events. Thus, by inserting “live” sections as separate parts of the main story, although it is essential for the overall understanding, the reader gets a feeling of what the “real” conversation must have been like and thereby get a sample of history. For instance, in the line “[. . .] Take out that old bitch [. . .] and drown her,” the reader is thrown into something real in the context of history and culture as opposed to something abstract and untouchable. The section in italics within the quote responds to the “live” conversation in the story that the poem conveys. Thus, by letting this dialogue appear within the narrative part, and by retelling this story word for word (and presumably with a specific accent or tone), the reader is given a feeling of how life was like at the time the events related were taking place. The sections where the “live” conversations occur contribute particularly to the whole idea of storytelling as being equal to other forms of literature.
The use of everyday language is crucial also to the overall mood of “Judgement,” since the story echoes thoughts and feelings from ancient times:

He rambled on a bit - how this Flynn’s people on his mother’s side
Were McErleans from County Derry, how you could never trust
A McErlean. When they hanged young McCorley on the bridge of Toome
It was a McErlean who set the whole thing up. That was in ‘98,
But some things never changed. You could trust a dog but not a Cat. (Carson 17)

The stanza above clearly shows the importance of history in the process of depicting Irish identity. The names “McErlean” and “McCorley” are not just random surnames in the context of “Judgement”; rather they contribute considerably to the overall meaning of the poem, due to their historical significance. Carson tells us for example that the McErleans were from County Derry, a very pivotal border area, seen from a political point of view. As Kiberd argues:

Northern Irish writers are more conscious than southern counterparts of [language as a catalyst of political consequences], because they grew up in a state where the speaking of Irish was a political act, and where a person who gave a Gaelic version of a name to a policeman might expect a cuff on the ear or worse. (616)

Carson tells us that the McErleans hanged “young McCorley on the bridge of Toome,” “McCorley,” just as “McErlean,” is a name that carries with it essential
information about the background to the conflict present in “Judgement.” One can tell merely by the way Carson relates this anecdote that the conflict in question in this story has been going on for a long time. He moreover highlights the fact that “some things never changed,” pointing out that this conflict stretches back throughout history. Hence, the process of examining language, which holds the key to history and origin, can be seen as an expression of understanding one’s identity. Interestingly, Carson describes the fact that some things never change in terms of a metaphor, that is, “you could trust a dog but not a cat.” As is shown in “Dresden,” “Judgement” and many of Carson’s other literary works (for example Fishing for Amber) metaphors are common elements in storytelling. Thus, “Judgement” reveals a lot about ancient traditions and opinions, which contribute to the understanding of one’s identity.

Just as in Seamus Heaney’s poetry, the sense of place and origin is important for Carson, who succeeds in describing the importance of tradition and history and to what extent these elements affect people in today’s society. Both Heaney and Carson put forward the notion that history is everywhere, that it has considerable effects on contemporary culture, and that it is inescapable in the sense that it contributes considerably to creating and understanding one’s identity. In “Dresden” and “Judgement” we see clear echoes of a past of cultural traditions and essential historical events, which for Carson is a way of bringing history to the surface of the present. In the same way, one of the most crucial elements in Heaney’s poems is how history is preserved and constantly present⁹. The bogs, which carry with them a lot of history, is a central element in Heaney’s poetry, suggesting the importance of digging deeper into one’s history. The notion of history as something that is always present is reinforced for example in the poem “Bogland”: “Every layer they strip / Seems

campaigned on before” (Heaney 42). Heaney seems to suggest that the bog does not only preserve bodies but also consciousness. As Kiberd suggests: “Every layer, ‘campaigned on before’, tells its own history in the form of geography [and the bodies are] preserved by the share weight of all that culture [or in other words], all that layered earth” (593).

Correspondingly, Carson’s poetry also suggests a preserved consciousness of history and identity. In “Belfast Confetti,” when the speaker realises how well he knows Belfast and its many streets, he asks himself why he cannot escape (26), which in its turn seems to suggest the idea that he cannot escape history no matter how hard he tries. The intimate relationship between history and identity present in “Belfast Confetti” as well as in “Dresden” and “Judgement” referred to above, suggests that the speaker’s sense of identity is gradually flawed. This idea is described in “Belfast Confetti” as a parallel reaction to the fact that Belfast, which functions as the preserver of the speaker’s own history, is shattered. Thus, people’s sense of identity is damaged if history is absent or shattered in some way, since they can no longer relate to events of the past that eventually contributed to creating identity and cultural belonging. Similarly to Heaney, Carson highlights the importance of the process of digging deeper into one’s past as a crucial element in the search for an identity.

**Storytelling as a Contributor to the Breaking Down of Binary Oppositions**

In the context of the controversial definition of (fine) literature, Carson’s open-minded attitude towards storytelling is not universally accepted. There is a clear hierarchy between different forms of literature, even though Barthes has suggested the opposite (Leitch, Cain et. al. 1471), in which storytelling is the negative counterpart for example, to poetry. Nevertheless, the storytelling mode present in “Dresden” and
“Judgement,” which for example include everyday-conversations and non-standard expressions, is central to the breaking down of binary oppositions. Claude Lévi-Strauss argues that myths, which for Carson are closely connected to the view of storytelling as being equal to all other forms of literature, work just like language, that is, they are structured in terms of binary oppositions. Storey suggests that “drawing on Saussure, [Lévi-Strauss] sees meaning as a result of the interplay between a process of similarity and difference” (61), which basically means that in order to say what is bad we have to have an idea about what is good. This idea applies well to the view of storytelling as inferior to traditional, generally accepted forms of literature, which Carson argues against by including elements of storytelling in his poetry. As discussed earlier, Carson “disguises” non-poetic contents, that is his story, in a poetic structure to make his readers realise how important storytelling is for the process of preserving history, traditions and identity. In his discussion about “linguistic anxiety” as a keynote of the poststructuralist outlook, Barry presents the idea that words are contaminated by their opposites (64-65), but instead of regarding reality as something that we have access to merely through the linguistic medium, Barry emphasises the notion than “the meanings words have can never be guaranteed one hundred percent pure” (64). Thus, meaning is just a process of interpretations of interpretations and binary oppositions can only be defined in relation to one another. As a result, one of the two polarized terms will be regarded as positive in relation to its opposite.

In the context of “Dresden” and “Judgement,” storytelling is considered to be the negative counterpart, inferior to its opposite; “fine” literature. Elisabeth Grosz suggests that “dichotomous thinking necessarily hierarchies and ranks the two polarized terms so that one becomes the privileged term and the other its suppressed, subordinated, negative counterpart” (3). As an objection against Lévi-Strauss positive
view of regarding the world in terms of binary oppositions, Grosz discusses the harmful consequences of such a worldview. Hence, it is important to keep in mind the danger of regarding the polarized terms as something inherently positive, as opposed to something inherently negative when it comes to approaching for example “Dresden” and “Judgement.” By means of a significantly non-academic language, Carson shows that the world is far more complex than simply describing it in terms of polarized definitions. His retelling of stories and his concern with ballads, myths and fairytales are all presented by means of non-academic or conversational language - a language that includes both non-standard expressions, slang words and ungrammaticality. The fact that Carson uses these features in his storytelling makes a clear statement that also these strands of art should be included in the definition of literature.

Carson’s poems are captivating examples of storytelling as a crucial part of culture, identity and history, as well as all other forms of expressing thoughts, emotions and ideas, for instance through art and literature. Mahony suggests that “[Ciaran Carson] continues to define his place as a man, and as a writer, by means of employing Irish and ancient history and myth” (85). However, as becomes apparent when approaching “Dresden” and “Judgement” from a poststructuralist point of view, these poems contribute considerably to the breaking-down of both the binary oppositions that exist within literature and to a “univocal’ reading” (Barry 73), due to their developing and enriching of language into “[an explosion] into ‘multiplicities of meaning’” (73). Thus, the structuralist notion that words have a clearly defined meaning is thereby rejected since the text is characterised by disunity rather than unity. In other words, the meaning of Carson’s poems is both unpredictable and pioneering since he dares to go against the traditional, polarized view of “fine”
literature with his emphasis on the importance of storytelling as a preserver of history and as a link in the process of finding one’s individual and cultural identity.

**Conclusion**

Carson shows his readers that he is not afraid to go against the conventional view of literature, that is, the types of literature included in the “canon,” by introducing new patterns of writing, for example the use of narrative elements and the “long-line” in his poetry. By experimenting with language, form and structure, Carson manages to convey feelings and thoughts to his readers. By using language as something playful and serious at the same time, he succeeds in highlighting the importance of digging deeper into one’s history in order to explore one’s identity. There are in Carson’s poetry many references to important historical events as well as to ancient family names, which are, as shown, crucial to the overall understanding of the poems in the light of history, language and identity as interrelated elements.

Accordingly, the close relationship between history and identity in Carson’s poetry is present in “Belfast Confetti,” “Dresden” and “Judgement,” where it is suggested that the answers to one’s questions concerning identity can be found in history. The speaker of “Belfast Confetti” starts to question his own identity and origin as his city, and thereby his history, is shattered, which is described by means of references to familiar place names in Belfast and by innovative language. This idea is also reinforced as it is suggested that storytelling is equal to all other forms of literature even though the storytelling mode in some contexts is considered to be a “lower” form of literature, if even considered literature at all. This view is argued against in “Dresden” and “Judgement” where traditional Irish stories are told by means of spoken, non-academic language. The fact that these stories are “disguised”
by means of a conventional, poetic structure is clear evidence for Carson’s view that storytelling should be as valuable and important as any other forms of literature. Storytelling functions as a preserver of history as well as identity, and by regarding it as equally important to any other forms of literature, Carson’s poetry contributes to the expanding of people’s view of both literature in general and their view of history and language as essential means in the expression of individual identity and cultural identity.

Moreover, the poet not only goes against the view that a particular type of literature should be acceptable but, by putting words from one context into a completely different one, he highlights the idea that meaning is something fluid and variable. These shifts and breaks are particularly obvious in “Belfast Confetti,” where military terms are combined with purely linguistic terms in order to emphasise the ideas that meaning is an unstable concept and that language sometimes is insufficient in describing particular feelings and thoughts, for instance the kind of feelings that are evoked in the political context of what is referred to as “the Troubles.” Even though Carson suggests that it is difficult to make direct explicit statements about life, he expresses this experience through language, for example by putting words into different contexts to show that meaning is fluid and by using metaphors, symbols and stories to concretise abstract ideas. Thus, by embodying the abstract, Ciaran Carson contributes to expanding the view of language and shedding light on the importance of history as an element that preserves, explains and expresses our identity.
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