

## **The Transfiguration of History: Knowledge, Time and Space in Northern Irish Poetry**

By Viviane Carvalho da Annuniação (1)

*"I will go back where I belong, / with one foot first and one eye blind,  
I will go back where I belong / In the fore being of mankind"*

*Louis MacNeice*

### **Abstract**

*This article seeks to explore the various ways in which the poets Seamus Heaney and Ciaran Carson have creatively responded to a painting by the Spanish artist Francisco Goya entitled: 'Shootings of the Third of May 1808' (1814), by transplanting it into the medium of poetry. I will argue that in 'Summer 1969' (Heaney North, 1971) and 'The Third of May, 1814' (Carson Breaking News, 2003), both poets dislocate categories of time and space in order to produce a poetic translation that projects Goya's Spanish shootings onto the political conflict of Northern Ireland at the time of the Troubles.*

In the twilight of what was going to be denominated artistic Modernism, Charles Baudelaire, in his visionary criticism, 'The Salon of 1846', asserted:

*Memory is the great criterion of art; art is a kind of mnemotechny of the beautiful. Now exact imitation spoils a memory [...] A memory is equally thwarted by too much particularization as by too much generalization" (Baudelaire 1995: 84).*

Through his appreciation of painting and arts in general, which was conceived even before T. S. Eliot's revolutionary essay 'Tradition and Individual Talent', the poet called the critics' attention to the relationship between specific aesthetic features which are likely to last and others which are prone to get lost due to their historical transitoriness. He affirms that they contain in themselves an element of the absolute and of the particular. By the end of the article, he concludes that in all centuries people had their own idea of whether or not a piece of art was considered beautiful, though he emphasises that artists and critics must turn to a 'new and special beauty' that exists in the life

of the cities, which configures 'modern beauty' [...]. (Baudelaire 1955: 84,127).

Although Baudelaire was the first to perceive the modern beauty encapsulated in the streets of Paris, it was the German philosopher Walter Benjamin who envisaged them, alongside their idiosyncrasies and ambiguities, as revolutionary instances. Thus, for the first time poetry was interpreted not simply according to its formal structure but to its capacity to capture and transcend historical determinations. After the collapse of the promises of innovation and technology prompted by modernism, postmodernism is faced with the task of preserving what is still legitimate in its premises. This is the point where I turn my attention to another consideration made by the poet in the same article. In his words, modern beauty is simultaneously associated with the creation of a 'weird and particular genre' called 'historical landscape'. which is 'neither free fantasy, nor has it any connection with the admirable slavishness of the naturalists; it is ethics applied to nature' (Baudelaire, 1995:112). If, in accordance with such a premise, the depiction of a historical landscape is irrevocably bound up in ethics and nature, it is relevant to

ask, “in an age of bare hands/ and cast iron” (Heaney 2006:3) if poetry that apprehends the themes and motifs of historical painting is capable of resisting the chains of time? In other words, what do its weirdness and ethics have to offer to poetry? Such is the insurmountable crisis of representation brought about by the postmodern predicament that it is also pertinent to question its effectiveness in the world today, since cultures and traditions are in a constant flow of exchange and translation.

With a view to starting my exploration I would like to affirm that the concept of translation and cultural difference I am taking into consideration is not the neoliberal multiculturalism that praises and celebrates diversity. On the contrary, I wish to employ the term as developed by Homi Bhabha and based on Benjamin’s considerations on the task of the translator. The Indian critic, grounded in a differentiated perception, claims that comparison between different cultures is possible ‘because all cultures are symbol forming and subject constituting, interpellative practices’, thus, in order to transpose their local historical borders, the artists are required to go through a ‘process of alienation and of secondariness in relation to itself. (Bhabha, 1990: 210). Thus, cultures are constantly in a state of continuous translation. As regards art’s transformative capacity to go beyond historical and geographical borders, there is an extremely insightful case in which that tension becomes clearer: contemporary poetry produced in Northern Ireland.

Apparently, against all odds, northern Irish poetry more than ever proves to be hustling and bustling around the world. Not so much for its capacity to conceive ‘works of lyrical beauty and ethical depth, which exalt everyday miracles and the living past’ (<http://www.seamusheaney.org/>), as the Nobel Academia praised Heaney, but for its inexorable need to translate the past, and place it, as Kiberd pointed out ‘into a disturbing relationship with the present’. Irish memory has often been derisively linked to those historical paintings in which Virgil and Dante converse in a single frame (Kiberd: 1996: 630).

In the light of the conclusion drawn by the critic Declan Kiberd, the present article wishes to explore the ways in which the authors Seamus Heaney and Ciaran Carson pick up on the theme of historical painting – as the genre described by Baudelaire – and transplant it into the formal structure of the poem. In my view, this is the strategy through which they dislocate categories of time and space in order to produce knowledge and reflexive thought. Thus, more than a discourse which seeks to find Beauty beyond all means, poetry remains a powerful piece of art. Nevertheless, due to the different tonalities and shades created by both lyrics, I am going to focus more clearly on two poems that describe the same canvas by the Spanish painter Francisco Goya: ‘Summer 1969’ (*North*, 1971) and ‘Francisco Goya: The Third of May 1808, 1814’ (*Breaking News*, 2003).

In his own lifetime, the French writer and Spanish descendant Charles Yriarte (1832 – 1898), wished to cast a new reading of Frederico Goya’s paintings, especially as regards ‘Los Desastres’ – etchings of the Franco-Spanish civil war. According to him, his political canvases were not ‘facts, particular episodes’ based on Verism, but ‘general ideas, analogies, sometimes true, always believable compositions’ (Yriarte apud Luxemburg 1998). Through the apparent chaotic placement of figures with no heroic action, and who are buried in a dream-like atmosphere of defeat, fear, and suffering, the painter sceptically portrayed life from a political outlook. In this sense, Goya became a special ‘modern philosopher’ who exploited the theme of war, despair and lack of hope. According to David Sylvester, Goya was modern, and intrinsically connected to the present times for, in addition to conveying stark landscapes inhabited by anonymous characters, he was the first to give importance to subtle details that change the broader picture. Apropos of that, the critic mentions his special shaping of the mouths and their expressiveness. More than being simply a stylistic feature, it figures prominently in Goya’s work due to its capacity to catch the viewers’ eyes, reminding them of residue of humanity left in those fluctuating bodies.

Bearing the critics' conceptualisations in mind, *The Third of May 1808* can be interpreted as an emblem of peace and mainly because it captures a particular moment of the Spanish resistance against the French invasion and goes beyond its historical determination. However, such transcendence is not going to be associated with a mystical salvation but, as Walter Benjamin observed, a dialectical awakening from the continuum of history (Benjamin 1996: 255). At a first glance, the observer is overwhelmed by the contrast of the people who compose the picture: on the one hand there is an aligned firing squad and on the other, a mass of citizens who have been, or are yet to be executed. The disproportion was commented upon by Kenneth Clark: "by a stroke of genius [Goya] has contrasted the fierce repetition of the soldiers' attitudes and the steely line of their rifles, with the crumbling irregularity of their target" (Clark 1960: 123). However, suddenly the Jesus-like peasant at the centre of the frame, whose arms are cast open in the shape of an X, and whose mouth nervously tries to beg for his life, takes over his or her sight. Differently from the other characters, he wears light-coloured shirts and trousers, and is notably illuminated by a mundane lantern situated on the ground between the two groups. In the same way, the light draws attention to the bodies on the left and some victims who resemble more shadows than humans at the back.

Perceptibly, Goya was not simply preoccupied with the representation of a specific day, "Los fusilamientos de la montaña del Príncipe Pío", or "Los fusilamientos del tres de mayo", but with its importance in the mythical-historical chain. Even though the painter alludes to Jesus Christ's crucifixion, the peasant not only stands in a position similar to that of Jesus Christ, but also has stigmas on the right hand. The light which stems from the ground can be seen as a reference to the Holy Spirit, and the firing squad, as the Roman Empire – since Napoleon and his army's victories were compared to the ancient ones. Nevertheless, instead of delivering the image as a symbol of salvation, the artist is inclined to view it as an ultimate failure. Thus, the man's rendering to the Christ

is troubled as long as the French take over the land and the Emperor's militia slaughter innocent citizens. Thus, as uncertain and contradictory as the future of Spain, the canvas remains an *Andachtsbild* – or visual allegory, in Benjamin's suppositions. The term surfaced when the theoretician formulated his theory on the nature of Brecht's epic theatre. Accordingly, it is an image that, due to its idiosyncrasies, promotes reflexive thought and sirs up new discussions regarding society and art. Moreover, it is the perfect metaphor for the artist's quandary:

*vacillating between historical abstraction and political projection, between despondency and defiance, between assault and retreat. The image keeps the aggressive tension inherent in such a mentality in an abeyance that allows it to stay put within the politically disenfranchised, and hence ideologically overcharged, realm of culture (Werckmeister 1996: 242).*

In this fashion, due to the fact that the canvas questions traditional visions of history while proposing new challenges to the public, Seamus Heaney and Ciaran Carson decide to immortalise it in their poetry. There is a substantial likelihood that they chose this picture in order to detach themselves from their own personal dilemmas and comprehend the ins and outs of the Anglo-Irish conflicts from a distanced point of view. However, although both poems experiment with techniques from different traditions, both are built around the idea of symbol as proposed by another modern writer, William Butler Yeats. If on the one hand, the traditional literary analysis tends to envision that as a fixed instance that captures a single meaning, Yeats understood it as the manner in which the artist could resolve the intricate relationship between tradition and modernity. In the essay 'The Symbolism of poetry', the poet asks:

*How can the arts overcome the slow dying of men's heart that we call the progress of the world, and lay their hands upon men's heart strings again, without becoming the religion as old times? (Yeats 1999: 162, 163)*

And after a long prelude he answers that there must be a change of nature, a 'return to the imagination, the understanding that the laws of art, which are the hidden laws of the world, can alone bind the imagination'. (Yeats 1999:163) Probably because both poets have been brought up and raised in the same cultural landscape, their sensibility was highly affected by Yeats's poetic and theoretical oeuvre. However, the result of such intake is going to differ enormously: if on the one hand the Nobel Laureate employs a more 'emotional symbol', Carson applies the 'intellectual' one. Once again, I am taking advantage of Yeats theories in order to examine the effects of such procedures in the re-writing of the historical painting. All the same, even though their interpretation of the canvas comes through the symbolist approach, their view is also associated to an emblematic event in Northern Ireland: the repression of the Civil Rights Movement of 1969 and the subsequent civil war which lasted until the beginning of the nineties.

According to J. H. Whyte, the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association, founded in 1967, did not question the existence of Northern Ireland as a state, nor did they act in confrontation with the contemporary system, but they did demand equal rights for the population as a whole, for the bulk of public posts were occupied by Anglo-Irish people. Inspired by the American Civil Rights Movement, the organisation promoted marches and protests in various towns. Nonetheless, due to the tense state of affairs between England and Ireland, the Protestant right wing interpreted these acts as a libertarian campaign and violently repressed the movement. As the plot thickened, the Irish Republican Army went on the offensive, and responded to the assaults with more aggressive acts. The situation reached its peak in March 1972, when 'the British government suspended the Northern Ireland government and parliament, and introduced a direct rule from Westminster... Violence during the spring and summer of highest level' (Whyte 1995, p. 346). Unsurprisingly, such a grievous situation affected the arts world in general and the artists were required to give their account

of the issue. Under pressure and constrained by public opinion, both Heaney and Carson interpret those acts differently; while the former found peace in a cottage in the interior of Wicklow, as an *inner émigré*, the latter dissolves his poetic persona within the dark corners of the city of Belfast.

The poem "Summer 1969" is inserted in the second part of the book *North* (1972) by Seamus Heaney. Quite polemical due to its slight deviation from actual history in order to expose the human motivations for violence and war, the book was, paradoxically, both heavily criticised and highly praised by the general reviews. While Christopher Ricks claimed that *North* was a powerful source of civilisation, 'bending itself to deep excavations within the past of Ireland and of elsewhere [and] achiev[ing] a racked dignity in the face of horrors' (Ricks 1979: 5), Ciaran Carson disapproved of the technique of 'applying wrong notions of history' which transformed the poet into 'the laureate of violence – a mythmaker, an anthropologist of ritual killing, an apologist for "the situation", in the last resort, a mystifier' (Carson 1975: 84). Both outlooks are quite constructive in view of the poem in question, as it resorts to myth to capture the essence of the work of art. However, by implicitly tackling the situation of Northern Ireland – the artist used the Viking rites as a metaphor – it perpetrated the liberal stance that wars, violence, battles and rapes have always happened, and will continue to happen whether we wish them to or not.

Nonetheless, with the intention of undertaking a sensible account of the poem, I will seek to pay heed to what I consider its most important characteristic: subjective displacement. Even Carson acknowledges that the second part of the volume does justice to Heaney's talent, since it shows someone "trying to come to terms with himself instead of churning it out" (Carson 1975: 86) and I quite agree with him because Heaney portrays the dilemmas of the exiles in the same way that Edward Said sees it: in a contrapuntual manner. According to the Palestinian critic:

*Most people are principally aware of one culture, one setting, one home; exiles are aware of at least two, and this plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions. (Said 2001: 186)*

Even though the poet was not forced to leave his country, his poetic consciousness reflects this perception of simultaneity in the first three lines of the poem:

*While the Constabulary covered the mob  
Firing into the Falls, I was suffering  
Only the bullying sun of Madrid.  
(Heaney 1999: 141)*

While the poet feels that he is indeed suffering very little in comparison to his countrymen, his vision is expanded for he is forced to translate himself in the culture of the Other – of Spain. While this transition seems to have been smooth as he is comfortably settled in Spain, his guilt for leaving his country is intense and, producing a lyric piece that naturalises violence, he is forced to go through a process of subjective annulment and to find a new means of representing the Northern Irish conflicts. The manner in which this configuration is achieved is the emotional symbol Yeats conceives. But before bringing the two laureates together, I wish to describe briefly the overall tone and structure of the poem, which also hints at the symbolic version he portrays. The speaker of the poem, through five asymmetrical stanzas, expresses his loneliness in Spain at the moment that he hears about the marches on the Falls Road. Relentlessly, the author compares Northern Ireland and Spain: first it is the heat and fish market with Joyce, ladies in shawls with the Guardia Civil and then Federico García Lorca and the television news. Nevertheless, in the last two stanzas, he summons up both entities in a single symbol: the canvas by Goya. It is as if Heaney erases his name from the poem and in its place, writes Goya.

*He painted with his fists and elbows, flourished  
The stained cape of his heart as history charged.  
(Heaney 1999: 141)*

Through the excerpt the reader perceives the total dissolution of the speaker's identity, mainly for the reason that the poet's wish to emphasise Goya imprinted his personal dilemmas and tones in the Spanish war against the French. By stating that the poet painted with his fists and elbows, Heaney conveys he was not just an ordinary painter, but also a fighter, whose emotions and motifs were affected by the war. Hence, he has not just simply represented the conflicts, but also critically conceptualised the sensation of producing art at the moment that his country was compared to a battlefield. Through this last part, the poet also builds forms of solidarity between Spain and Ireland because his experience becomes part of a greater whole, whose effects and vibrations are seen and felt elsewhere. It is associated to what Bhabha identifies as the concealing of the subjectivity's sovereignty:

*the fragmentation of identity is often celebrated as a kind of pure anarchic liberalism or voluntarism, but I prefer to see it as a recognition of the importance of the alienation of the self in the construction of forms of solidarity. (Bhabha 1990: 211)*

If on the one hand, Heaney depicts his personal anguishes and antinomies, which are embodied and endured in the structure of the poem – the poetic foot indecisively oscillates between ten, eleven and twelve and its stanzas follow the same pattern, having two and fourteen verses. On the other hand, because these are symptoms of guilt, typical of someone who left the battlefield for the cool breeze of the Prado Museum, his arguments are more emotionally bound than intellectually: they “call down among us certain disembodied powers, whose footsteps over our hearts we call emotions” (Yeats 1989: 157). Thus, while the poet apparently seems to be building bridges of solidarity between the communities, he is in fact embellishing a reality that seeks precise answers – or questions – such as Carson dares him to do in his criticism.

Despite the fact that Heaney destabilises a simplistic discourse present in both the parties that promoted the conflicts in Northern

Ireland, he ends up falling into his own trap. No sooner does he deviate from the original motivation of the poem, which is the painful feeling of not being in his homeland while the Constabulary takes over Falls Road, than he praises the ethereal aspect of art which is enduring in spite of historical circumstances. This fatalistic tone is reached after he makes poignant descriptions of two of the canvases he saw:

*I retreated to the cool of the Prado.  
Goya's 'Shootings of the Third of May'  
Covered a wall - the thrown-up arms  
And spasm of the rebel, the helmeted  
And knapsacked military, the efficient  
Rake of the fusillade. In the next room  
His nightmares, grafted to the palace wall –  
Dark cyclones, hosting, breaking: Saturn  
Jewelled in the blood of his own children,  
Gigantic Chaos turning his brute hips  
Over the world. Also, that holmgang  
Where two berserks club each other to death  
For honour's sake, greaved in a bog, and sinking.  
(Heaney 1999: 141)*

It is precisely the focus on the individual character of the artist that hampers the collective notion of history. Therefore, the last two verses are exemplary of a return to the laws of Beauty, such as explored by Frederic Jameson in his article regarding the End of Art. According to the American critic, postmodernism is defined by a double-edged sword: at the same time theory invigorates literary criticism, art falls back on pre-modern and romantic notions. In this way, they promote the Beautiful 'as a decoration, without any claim to truth or to a special relationship with the Absolute' (Jameson 1998: 84). Likewise, Seamus Heaney refers to the Real as simply a wound that is taking too long to heal in the face of the grandiosity of art and aesthetic. The indecisiveness of the formal structure evokes not the need for transcendence, but nostalgia for an art that is

concerned with its own nature and is 'non- or a-political' (Jameson 1998: 131)

I do not wish to dismiss Heaney's accomplishment completely out of hand, which is precisely getting away from simplistic views and trying to find other means to represent reality. And this is indeed achieved through a flabbergasting process of annulment of the subjective voice. However, where aesthetic and history is concerned, I feel quite obliged to support Carson's conspicuous attempt to reach the Sublime as Jameson explains. I would like to stress also that this deviation of tone stems precisely from their use of the symbol. While Heaney uses the painting emotionally, almost in a contemplative way, Carson pushes it to such a limit that it is inserted into that very space between symbol and allegory, as Yeats affirms: "It is hard to say where allegory and symbolism melt into one another, but it is not hard to say where either comes to its perfection" (Yeats 1989: 148). This is the point where Carson reaches the perfect symbolisation of the canvas: there is a unit of representation through which the reader sees or hears nothing but the unfolded eyes of the prisoner. Together with that, the audience does not have any idea of the poet's emotions, feelings and state of mind, it is a total erasure of outside references in order to invigorate more than the painting, the idea, or the leap of the Sublime from the canvas to poetry, but ultimately, a trans-aesthetic illumination.

Distinctively from Heaney, Carson's poem was published in 2003, long after the onset of the Troubles, in a book called *Breaking News*. Given the name of the volume, the author is evidently interested in revealing something of a unique weight, but contrary to what the reader might expect, it presents a sequence of 33 completely bare poems, as if they had been written by a poet who is just experimenting with the technique. Most of them have short poetic feet – two or three, maximum – and present short and brief stanzas. In one of the reviews of the volume, which received awards, John Taylor asserts:

*The book evidently aims at getting poetry back to the immediacy of perception, also an age-old*

*preoccupation for the war poet. Yet despite the austere poetic form employed here, many images lastingly haunt, not least of all the leitmotiv of hovering British military helicopters. Such is Carson's "home," and the eponymous poem sums up the redoubtable clear-sightedness that he has attained, and must accept. Like blind Homer, he can "see everything." (Taylor 2004: 371)*

Even though the review does not go into the depth of such a resourceful poetic collection, it manages to capture its central truth: the aspiration to see everything and report everything with just a few words. The comparison with blind Homer is also quite appropriate, for the main idea behind the enterprise is to view Belfast as “The war correspondent” would. Nevertheless, as opposed to the journalist who would go on about facts, the poet-reporter stares melancholically into the dark corners of the city and, as a ragman, collects the pieces of what was left after the battles and confrontations. Clearly inspired by the Baudelarian *flânerie*, the poet wanders in the city, where according to the French author, Modern Beauty should be found. This ragpicker stumbles on trash; he uncovers lost rhymes and old chants to compile a dissonant poetic symphony. Equally, it is in its utter failure that the poet reaches his ultimate breakthrough: the vision of the canvas by Goya. The first two lines, “behold/ the man”, highlight the mythic tone of this figure – as observed above – but, as soon as he pays heed to him, the lantern light assumes the next stanzas and give space to the description of his flung arms. Towards the end, the speaker of the poem states that he is offering his soul to the officer: like a spectre of a past whose shadow still imprints its sorrow in the present.

To sum up, Carson urges the readers to notice that “he is not/ blindfolded” and with that simplicity, calling “the mind’s eye [...] to see a capricious and variable world” (Yeats 1989: 151), he inserts a symbol within the canvas – which is already framed into a symbolist figuration of violence. As is widely acknowledged, the vision of the blindfolded lady carrying a balanced scale is the typical symbol of justice. Nevertheless, when the detail

of the vision becomes clear, the reader is forced to think about the canvas not in accordance with the historical period it was conceived, or with the atrocious bombings in Ireland, but according to its meaning in a post-war and post-history world. Generally speaking, the actuality of the painting is recuperated through “a construction whose place is formed not in homogenous and empty time, but in that which is fulfilled by the here-and-now [Jetztzeit]” (Benjamin 1996: 230). It is valid to point out the poem was published in 2003, a time when values such as justice and equality were totally compromised since inequality and unjustified killings prevailed.

Through the artistic translation of the canvas not into a symbol, but into an allegory, the poet recaptured what I believe to be a political function of art, like that of the canvas painted by Goya. As an alternative for the nostalgia presented by Heaney, the poet resorts to the Benjaminian melancholy, resuscitated by the ghost, in order to aspire not to the Beautiful, but to the trans-aesthetic Sublime, which might be conceived as the absolute mode through which truth comes into being ‘it believes that in order to be art at all, art must be something beyond art’ (Jameson 1998:83). In this sense, the poet finishes in a nothingness: ‘it ends, in other words, not by becoming nothing, but by becoming everything: the path not taken by History’ (Jameson 1998:83). This path is collectively represented by this man: the ethical and social system of justice – either colonial or post-colonial or imperial or post-imperial – that societies and cultures are subject to. At the same time, it poses a question on a global level: how can justice be signified and re-signified in the inequitable course of history? In other words, how can it “brush history against the grain” (Benjamin 1996:230) while the *continuum* of history still seems intact?

On the other hand, by trying to go beyond art and its laws of representation, Carson loses what Heaney gains with his piece: Beauty, a new aesthetic formed by the transfiguration of history into a distressing portrait of an artist in search of artistic bonds at a transcultural level. Through the subjective displacement, the split

Heaney/Goya who reconfigures Ireland in Spain and gives back Spain to Ireland in a new light becomes the very image of the subject exploited by imperialism. What is implicit in his formal indecisions or metrical oscillations is exactly the difficulty of producing art and beauty in a world grieved by war. On the other hand, Carson gains the Sublime, the notion that art must question the current state of affairs of the world.

Going back to Baudelaire's statement that art is about memory, continuation and losses, which poetry is more likely to last? Whose transfiguration of history, whose translation of history will answer the postmodern crises of representation? Maybe the answer is still to be found.

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## Notes

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