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'strange architecture': Ciaran Carson's *Until Before After*

In many ways any structure for a book is arbitrary. But at the same time, I like to structure the thing in some way. It gives you a template, a constraint.¹

In the past decade or so Ciaran Carson's books have adopted increasingly elaborate yet elusive structures. Each volume, whether in poetry or fiction, hints at patterns and 'templates' which have potential and often seductively esoteric meanings. Carson's work offers the reader the chance to pass over its skeletal textual frameworks as the mere fancy of a playful remnant of postmodernism, and often enough criticism of Carson has allowed itself merely to note these designs in his work and assume that they are part of his ludic, self-referential method. Carson's volume of poetry *Until Before After* (2010) offers a chance to reassess the anatomy of his writing and his ordering of individual volumes, because *Until Before After* is arguably the most purposefully structured book of poems which he has published. It is also a collection in which textual allusion, a defining feature of much of Carson's writing, is submerged into the constitution of the book and, having disappeared into the text's fabric, coalesces with its thematic concerns in ways which have accumulated in Carson's writing over the past ten years and more.

Until Before After, this essay will argue, could be said to be built around an idiosyncratic form of numerology which Carson hints at occasionally in the poems, dropping clues here and there in a knowing, sometimes jokey way. His long-standing interest in detective stories, and very specifically Sherlock Holmes, provides a path towards the unearthing which is necessary in order to see the logic of the patterning of the verse in *Until Before After*. This, in turn, leads to an associative accretion of references and bookish remembering which bring the work around to its central concerns. *Until Before After*, by Carson's own admission, is a book about illness and the possibility of a loved one dying.² In its tender consideration of a time of personal

trauma it sees themes and points of reference which have long been part of his work (the possibility of parallel universes, the crossing of time periods, the expressive and semantic limits of language; and all of these as explored in the writings of Augustine, Wittgenstein, and Hopkins) revisited with a new seriousness. *Until Before After* returns to an idea which animates the magic realism of Carson's novel *Shamrock Tea* ('everything in the real world refers to something else, which leads to something else again, in a never-ending hymn of praise'³), and weaves a textual pattern which is both the accumulation of recent tropes and methods in Carson's work and a very new kind of writing.

Carson's individual books have long had deployed conscious ordering devices, some 'template' to which they are written. His 'novel', *Fishing for Amber* (1999), for example, uses alphabetical indices for its chapter headings, while the sequence 'Letters from the Alphabet' (published in *Opera Et Cetera* [1996]⁴) also makes play with the arbitrary codification of an A-Z order. *Shamrock Tea* (2001) has as one of its epigraphs a description of Jacques de Gheyn II's method for apportioning the one hundred colours in his paintings,⁵ and *Shamrock Tea's* one hundred and one chapters then each have a colour as their title, with a 'Blank' added for the last chapter. Such structural elaborations have become ingrained in Carson's prose books – *The Pen Friend* (2009) creates an obsessive, probably delusional narrator whose epistolary narrative is built around the self-conscious description of the different pens he uses to write each letter/chapter.

In his poetry Carson stretches the meaning which resides in poetic form. His variations on the sonnet are perhaps the most obvious example of this, from his engagement with French traditions of the sonnet form, as in *The Alexandrine Plan* (in which the source texts by Mallarmé, Rimbaud, and Baudelaire are themselves examples of poems pushing at the boundaries of the form they inhabit), to sonnets which are not quite sonnets but still seem to have the sonnet as their poetic unit of sense. For example, in an interview with Rand Brandes in *The Irish Review* in 1990, Carson points out that his nine-line stanzas in *Belfast Confetti* often spill over onto the next typographic line giving them 'almost exactly the same shape as a conventional sonnet'.⁶ Such license with the sonnet is made use of in a new way in *Until Before After*.

The sonnet offers variations on a (formal) theme, a pseudo-musical trope picked up in Carson's recent volumes of poetry in which there are book-length patterns and repetitions. *For All We Know* (2008) has a two part structure with thirty-five poems in each section. The two sets of thirty-five poems have the same titles in the same order, though the poems resist a simple pairing with each other across the two sections;

and this swirled doubling fits the book's love story which works, it seems, in two time frames. *For All We Know* is prefaced with a quotation from Glenn Gould:

Fugue must perform its frequently stealthy work with continuously shifting melodic fragments that remain, in the 'tune' sense, perpetually unfinished.⁷

The fugue form has been much commented on in recent Carson criticism, and in reviews of his work – though that commentary has largely been 'just' commentary, with an underlying sense that there may be some looping, repetitive musical structure at work which is technically beyond the descriptive capacity of most of those who write about, or find themselves reviewing, Carson.⁸ Whether or not Carson is working to a format which makes his poetic repetitions equivalent to, or evocative of the musical fugue is something of a distraction from a much clearer allusion in the 'fugue' references in Carson's work, and one which he himself signals in *Shamrock Tea*. In that novel the narrator wishes but fails to tell an anecdote about someone who 'unknown to himself ... becomes someone else. It is a condition known as fugue'.⁹ If *For All We Know* takes the form of a 'fugue' it does so in both senses, aspiring to the musical structure of fugue and simultaneously contemplating the psychiatric, ontological condition of loss of identity. This is a pattern repeated, in its musicality at least, in *On the Night Watch* (2009), a book which Carson suggests is linked to *Until Before After* by its preoccupation with his wife's diagnosis of cancer. *On the Night Watch* is in three parts, or 'Three Movements', shifting the collection from the solo intricacy of the fugue to something more elaborately orchestral.

Reading poems, or books of poems, for their numerological structure is an outmoded and eccentric activity, but it has been given new life very recently in France by the publication of Quentin Meillassoux's *Le Nombre et La Sirène* (2011), a consideration, or 'decipherment', of the structure of Mallarmé's *Coup de Dés*. Meillassoux, deliberately courting controversy with his intricate analysis of Mallarmé's poem, suggests that, to put the case very bluntly, the number 707 lies behind the typographical and conceptual structure of Mallarmé's work. Meillassoux's route to this conclusion is tortuous, but his reasoning less so. He suggests that a poet is, first of all, 'one who submits language to the count of syllables'.¹⁰ Mallarmé, to précis Meillassoux's case, is in search of a number, an echo of old poetic order, which will bring meaning and pattern to poetry after the 'shipwreck' which is free verse, as against the comforting strictures of Alexandrines.¹¹ But, for Meillassoux, this is also a larger form of

signification, since Mallarmé is, he argues, not just writing a poem which hunts amongst the wreckage of poetry for patterns now lost. The 'throw of the dice' in Mallarmé's poem is a 'throw undertaken by the writing of verse after the death of God'.¹² And this will be exactly my argument about Carson's *Until Before After*. Like Mallarmé's poem, Carson's collection takes itself to the edge of the wreckage, to death, and in doing so considers the desire for both order and life beyond death. Its threads of meaning are interwoven through a specific (numerical) framework, and through other texts which also can be thought of as yearning to reach the limits of materiality. In doing this, its central concern is to think about, not revel in having passed over, the 'threshold' of meaning 'after the death of God'. And to do that, it considers 'God' as part of the pattern.

So this brings us to the pattern and structure of *Until Before After*, a book of poems which, like its predecessor, is also in three parts, titled sequentially, 'Until', 'Before', and 'After' (the book, according to Carson's own description, aspires to the status of a 'minimalist symphony'¹³). That the reader is to take real cognisance of this three-part division is emphasised by the fact that each poem in the section 'Until' contains the word 'until', each poem in 'Before' contains 'before', and in 'After' each poem includes 'after' (and some poems in the volume include two, or indeed all three of the title words). Each of the three parts has the same number of poems (fifty-one), though, unlike *For All I Know*, there seems to be no way in which the three units in any way replicate each other through direct correspondence between poems.

The most obvious curiosity about the form of *Until Before After*, beyond this seemingly random set-up of fifty-one poem sections repeated three times, is the curious page construction. The poems in the book are constituted by double-page (verso-recto) units. These form repeated individual wholes made up of three poems (in keeping with the book's title and its three-part division). The verso pages contain two poems of 10 lines each, in couplet stanzas. Each recto page is a poem in 14 lines, divided into seven couplets. The recto poems are, obviously, versions of sonnets. The verso poems, ten lines long, often read as if they are partial sonnets, leading up to the full fourteen-line recto sonnet. As such, the verso poems perhaps nod to the 'curtal-sonnets' of Gerard Manley Hopkins (which are eleven, or ten and a half, lines long). As we will see, Carson arguably has his own reasons for working out the double-page spread of poems in this singular way, but the allusion to Hopkins is hardly accidental, since Hopkins is one of the presiding textual presences in the book and is recognised as such in the 'Acknowledgements' to *Until Before After*.¹⁴

Hopkins himself explained the means by which he arrived at the curtal-sonnet, not through any philosophical or formal reasoning but through outlining the mathematical formula by which he calculated the length of the sonnets (the formula, according to Hopkins being a proportionate reduction of Petrarch thus: $\frac{12}{2} + \frac{9}{2} = \frac{21}{2} = 10\frac{1}{2}$. Carson's poems too might be regarded as ten and a half, or eleven, lines long once the title is included, the titles forming part of the syntactical units of the poems).¹⁵

Hopkins' interest in working out his poems through mathematics is a spur to thinking further about the numbers by which Carson organizes *Until Before After*.¹⁶ The numbers of *Until Before After* are, then, that there are double pages of three poems. There are seventeen groups of these in each fifty-one poem section. And there are three sections of fifty-one poems, making one hundred and fifty-three poems in total. To set out a volume of poetry in this way seems instrumental, perhaps obsessive. But that potential mania, the compulsion to give or to perceive an order, may be part of what Carson is playing with in his structuring of this book. Of these numbers above, only 'seventeen' is actually mentioned in a poem in the volume – the final poem of *Until Before After*, as it happens, entitled 'I open the door':

I open the door

into the hall and
over threshold

after threshold
slowly oh

so slowly I bring
you heavy

step by step up
the seventeen

steps of that
flight once trodden

so swiftly as
year over year

to our room
full of light

This poem can be read alongside and as a return to the first poem in the collection, entitled 'It's the same', in which 'we' did not 'know' 'until we found/ the key of/ the verge of/ these words'. The possibility of an authorial nudge, or joke, lies herein – a pointer to the enticing 'key' which unlocks the book and which the readerly sleuth is asked to find at its edge. And it is that clue which I want to follow, at the other 'verge' of the book, in the final poem's self-referential mention of 'seventeen/ steps'.

Carson has a long-standing interest in literary detectives and, in particular, Sherlock Holmes.¹⁷ In a review of Bidy Jenkinson's *An tAthair Padraig O Duinnin*, Carson delights in her construction of a fictional meeting between the compiler of the great Irish dictionary, a book which is a constant reference point in Carson's work, and Sherlock Holmes. In that review Carson notes that Holmes, in Jenkinson's book, 'defines himself not as *bleachtaire* but *lorgaire*, which according to the *Dictionary* is a "tracker or sleuth, a follower, a pursuer, a searcher; an author who follows in the track of, adopts the statements of another"'.¹⁸ The attraction for Carson of this version of Holmes is not just that Holmes here defines himself from Dineen's dictionary but that Dineen typically offers two, seemingly divergent, definitions of a word, divided and joined on the hinge of Dineen's semi-colon, which meld in Carson's own imagination. And in this case they allow for Carson, whose method is often enough (as in his treatment of Hopkins) to follow very literally and liberally 'in the tracks of' another author, to segue into Holmes, to be a writer defined using the same word which is used by Holmes to describe himself.

Holmes then, as sleuth and as cipher for the author, is always a potential route to follow in Carson's work. Sure enough, Holmes is a 'clue' of sorts in deciphering the 'key' in *Until Before After*. In one of Conan Doyle's best known Holmes' stories, 'A Scandal in Bohemia' (the opening story of *Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* [1892]), Dr Watson, recently married, returns to visit Holmes in 221b Baker Street. The following exchange takes place between Holmes and Watson:

'Quite so,' [Holmes] answered, lighting a cigarette, and throwing himself down into an armchair. 'You see, but you do not observe. The distinction is clear. For example, you have frequently seen the steps which lead up from the hall to this room.'

'Frequently.'

'How often?'

'Well, some hundreds of times.'

'Then how many are there?'

'How many? I don't know.'

'Quite so! You have not observed. And yet you have seen. That is just my point. Now, I know that there are seventeen steps, because I have both seen and observed.'¹⁹

There are, then, 'seventeen steps' up to 221b Baker Street, if, as Holmes urges us, we are observant enough to notice. Inasmuch as it is possible to be 'sure' that Carson is alluding to this moment in the Holmes canon, we can at least be certain that he has a very detailed knowledge of Conan Doyle's work. For example, his poem 'November' in *Opera Et Cetera* (1996) ends with the lines:

The detective measured his hypodermic for a second jag,
and found a vein.
Watson turned to the 'Agony' column. *I say, Holmes!*
he said. But Holmes was entering Cockaigne.²⁰

'A Scandal in Bohemia' is one of the relatively few stories in which Holmes' cocaine-taking is discussed – indeed, it is mentioned by Watson just a few paragraphs before this conversation about the seventeen steps.

If the 'seventeen steps' are an allusion to Holmes they are primarily to Holmes's methodology – observation as opposed to mere sight, a form of detection in tune with its own the parenthetical pairing with the word 'key' in the first poem in *Until Before After* – a detection of unlikely but readable clues. Which leads to the question of what, if anything, is to be 'observed' by the detective-reader of *Until Before After*.

The number seventeen by itself is, thus far at least, merely a possible pointer to Holmes and a sleuthful way of reading. But seventeen's importance in the volume does not stop there. In his 1990 interview with Rand Brandes, Carson talks about his own attempts at haiku and the nice irony that the short seventeen syllables of the haiku resemble his own long lines, as if each line in those early, sprawling poems were a poem in itself.²¹ Seventeen has, then, been part of the visual sense of the printed poem for Carson, formulating the look of the poem on the page. A second glance at those oddly patterned verso-recto pages of *Until Before After* shows that the two ten-line poems, and one fourteen line poem, all in couplets, are also double-page units of seventeen couplets. '[Seventeen]/ steps', if read in this way, is thus self-referentially about *these* poems, which are written in discrete groups of seventeen steps/couplets, with seventeen groups of the units of three verso-recto poems in each section of the book.

In *Shamrock Tea* the mention of the Sherlock Holmes story 'The Cardboard Box' (the box in question arrives in London, containing a

human ear, having been posted in Belfast) leads immediately, in the strange logic of *Shamrock Tea*, to St Helena, 'mother of the Emperor Constantine and finder of the True Cross', and to Helena's uncovering of the site of Christ's crucifixion and the establishment on that site of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.²² Here too we meet 'seventeen steps', since in the nineteenth century, first in travel literature and then in religious encyclopedias, common wisdom established that there were 'seventeen steps' up to the site of Christ's cross.²³ As I will suggest below, this potential allusion to the crucifixion makes absolute sense in the overall context of *Until Before After*, and in the appearance of the 'seventeen/steps' at the end of the volume.

The 'seventeen/ steps' may end the volume and bring together the detective and the crucified, but as a number in itself 'seventeen' does not quite explain the curious shape given to the entire volume. The tripartite division of the book might most immediately seem to allude in some way to the Trinity, or look back to the 'Movements' of *On the Night Watch*, but even that provides no full sense of why the book might be structured as it is. And equally the fact that there were, supposedly, seventeen steps up to the site of the crucifixion does not quite make sense of the thinking in the book, since the poetry, in its straining syntax and sense, wants to contemplate transcendence, and thinks about existence not just at but beyond the point of death, just as that final poem of *Until Before After*, ascending the steps, imagines the couple finally moving, one supporting the other, into 'our room/full of light'.

It is a different set of numbers, also with a religious significance, and even more specifically placed after the crucifixion, which arguably give shape to *Until Before After*. The sets of three (verso-recto) poems (in their seventeen couplet 'steps') are repeated seventeen times in each section to make fifty-one poems per section. The entire book then contains one hundred and fifty-three poems – an unremarkable number, at first glance. One hundred and fifty-three has a curious religious history, as discussed below, and one that relates it specifically to Christ's existence after the crucifixion. But one hundred and fifty-three, as a mere mathematical entity, is a 'triangular number', such a number being described by the OED as 'the first series of POLYGONAL numbers ... obtained by continued summation of the natural numbers 1,2,3,4,5,6, etc.'. One hundred and fifty-three is, appropriately enough, the seventeenth triangular number. That is, if one were to add all the numbers from one to seventeen together the cumulative total is one hundred and fifty-three. Triangular numbers are thus named because they are often represented as a triangle. In the case of 153, this would mean an apex of '1', a second line of '23', a third line of '456' and so on, until the bottom line, and indeed all sides of

the final triangle, contain seventeen numbers. One hundred and fifty three is then a triangle with seventeen numbers, seventeen steps, it might be said, on each side, leading up to the apex of '1'.

Pleasing as this symmetry might be, it is hardly in itself an explanation for the number choices in *Until Before After*, even when the three-sidedness of the volume and the reoccurrence of the number seventeen are taken into account. This 'triangle' is not just a game with numbers, though. It points, in turn, to something much more profound, much more in keeping with the concerns of the book, and brings us back, once again, to Carson's obsessive reading.

If it might be wondered, in the first place, whether the numbers of poems in Carson's book even merits attention, then it is worth bearing in mind that in an interview with David Laskowski in 1999, Carson talks about his then recently published collection *The Twelfth of Never*:

The issue of form, the sonnets, in the new book, came about because I continued to do these translations of Baudelaire, and Rimbaud, and I thought, there is only one way to translate them, and that is in their original form . . . So I said, fuck it, I will . . . I thought I'll do two, three, and before you knew it, I had seventy-seven, half of 154. Shakespeare wrote 154 sonnets, so I guess I'm half as good [laughs].²⁴

In translating Baudelaire, Mallarmé, and Rimbaud, Carson chose to engage with three poets who all, separately, dabbled with numerology as what Baudelaire refers to as a 'strange architecture' for individual poems and for collections.²⁵ And in his reference to Shakespeare Carson clearly, laughingly, has numbers in mind. Perhaps the one hundred and fifty-three poems of *Until Before After* are a continuing joke, still falling one short of Shakespeare, still counting the numbers as a (silent) 'template, a constraint'.

To understand the potentiality of the 'triangular' structure of *Until Before After* to its fullest it is useful to step back for a moment from the numbers themselves and pay attention to one particular discursive and theological strain within the volume, a drawing of the volume towards life after death, which is already signalled in the connection between the 'seventeen steps' and the site of the Crucifixion; because *Until Before After* entwines a theological interest in Christ's death, resurrection, and reappearance with its personal narrative, its fear of the shadow of death. *Until Before After*, I will suggest in the remainder of this essay, is built around a 'strange architecture' which leads up the 'seventeen steps' to the moment of death and then, haltingly, to the resurrection, or at least to the desire to know what might lie outside, above, beyond, or 'after' death.

Until Before After entwines its own language with that of crucifixion from the first page. The second poem in the collection reads:

So it is

as when
death draws

nigh death
draws a hush

upon the house
until the one

who is about
to die

cries open
the door

The overlapping, unpunctuated, staccato verse allows for the syntax here, and in all the poems in *Until Before After*, to build and break and to become a labour of careful construction for the reader, piecing together the rhythm of thought and language which is often fragile in its grip on grammar and semantics. In this way the phrase 'death draws/ nigh' suggests a source in an archaic, Biblical language (the phrase is not Biblical, but does appear in some, now disused prayerbooks) and leads on to the phrase 'the one/who is about/ to die', gathering a double sense of both the loved one, who is the subject of the poems, and the 'One', Christ, who, Biblically speaking, 'cried with a loud voice, and gave up the ghost' (Mark 15. 37; see also Matthew 27. 50, Luke 23. 46). In the gospel accounts the natural order of things is disrupted, the 'veil of the temple was rent in twain' (Matthew 15: 51), and heaven and earth intersect momentarily. In this poem, placed second in the volume, this awful borderline moment of death is a signal for the volume's tremulous thinking about the places and languages, the metaphysical possibilities which might lie beyond the 'world' – the space that is seen, the sounds that are heard, when the veil is rent. In John's Gospel, Christ simply says, at the moment just before his death, 'It is finished' (John 19.30). Carson's next poem, in contradiction, begins:

His last words

Were the story is not
Over

And of course in the gospels the story is far from over, since the resurrection is yet to come. The same poem goes on:

Yet whereof
we cannot

speak until
we hear

the words from
one who has

died
before

whereupon
we begin to

tell what once
was told²⁶

Those 'words', which 'we' cannot speak until they have been narrated by someone who is dead, come from the impossible place of 'after', the spiritual state which the volume climbs to the verge of. Christ's visits to his disciples after his resurrection then become the signalled model for this unimaginable conversation. Wittgenstein's words on the incapacity of language, those which end the (1922 translation) of *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* ('Whereof we cannot speak, thereof one must be silent'²⁷) are here counterpointed to, even trumped by, the 'proof' and theological reverberations of Christ's return from the dead. If we were in any doubt that the post-Crucifixion appearances of Christ to the disciples are 'in' the poem at this point, then the following poem's title and first line '*According to // the book*' and its irreverent mention of someone whose 'whereabouts [are]/unknown until// he pops/ up unexpectedly', and the fact that the poem after this has the title 'The gospel', might allay those fears.²⁸

This interweaving of the gospel texts, and specifically the moment of Christ's death as the beginning of the story, leading on to his pre-Ascension appearances to the disciples, is central to understanding the number-based structure of *Until Before After*. The seventeen-step, triangular pattern and its mimicking of the steps in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, is only part of the significance which Carson may have in mind. The other post-Crucifixion gospel text which is

important, indeed central, here is one of those moments, in John's gospel when Christ, as Carson puts it, 'pops/ up unexpectedly':

But when the morning was now come, Jesus stood on the shore: but the disciples knew not that it was Jesus. Then Jesus saith unto them, Children, have ye no meat? They answered him, No. (John 21. 4–5).

Christ, unrecognized, recommends they cast their net to the right of the ship. Simon Peter realizes he is confronted with Christ. When the nets are pulled in they are full. They land the boats and Christ asks them to bring the fish they have caught:

Simon Peter went up, and drew the net to land full of great fishes, an hundred and fifty and three: and for all there were so many, yet the net was not broken. (John 21. 11).

The significance of the number of fish caught in this net has, not surprisingly, been much debated by theologians. The entry on John's Gospel in *The Oxford Bible Commentary* (2001), offers the following:

The 153 fish have been interpreted as the totality of the kinds of fish known at that time (Jerome, *In Ezekiel* 14.47.9–12). A better explanation is to see 153 as the sum of all the numbers up to 17. Moreover there were 12 baskets filled with the fragments of the 5 loaves in 6:13, and that makes a total of 17.²⁹

This entry compresses an early Christian scholarly debate on the passage. Jerome's explanation counters the numerological theory, which was first proposed by St Augustine. Jerome and, even more so, Augustine are no strangers to Carson's texts. Jerome, patron of libraries and librarians, and archetypal translator (and therefore, in his bibliophilia and movement from one language to another, a potential alter-ego for Carson) is, for example, discussed at length by the narrator of *The Pen Friend*.³⁰ Augustine meanwhile is a constant presence in Carson's recent work, his image of the 'cloisters of memory' being central to the method of *Shamrock Tea*, a book in which Augustine is constantly referenced, both explicitly and silently, and often through Wittgenstein's engagement with Augustinian thought.³¹ It is Augustine, in his own 'Tractate' (on John's Gospel), who may provide the 'key' to unlocking the trail of association which gives '153' its significance in *Until Before After*. Augustine writes:

For if you add 2 to 1, you have 3 of course; if to these you add 3 and 4, the whole makes 10; and then if you add all the numbers

that follow up to 17, the whole amounts to the foresaid number; that is, if to 10, which you had reached by adding all together from 1 to 4, you add 5, you have 15; to these add 6, and the result is 21; then add 7, and you have 28; to this add 8, and 9, and 10, and you get 55; to this add 11 and 12, and 13, and you have 91; and to this again add 14, 15, and 16, and it comes to 136; and then add to this the remaining number of which we have been speaking, namely, 17, and it will make up the number of fishes.³²

In *On Christian Teaching* Augustine offers another explanation of the same incident. Ten, seven and three are the numbers which Augustine sees as central to a numerological understanding of scripture – and 153 becomes a cumulative expression of this divine purpose. ‘In this way’, writes Augustine, ‘expressed in a variety of numbers, there are in the sacred books certain abstruse analogies which are inaccessible to readers without a knowledge of number.’³³ Augustine’s wider interest in Book II of *On Christian Teaching* is not numerology itself (his next example is music) but specifically how to differentiate human superstition from divine order, and more widely ‘Book II’ of *On Christian Teaching* contemplates the nature of the linguistic sign:

a sign is a thing which of itself makes some other thing come to mind . . . So when we see a footprint we think that the animal whose footprint it is has passed by; when we see smoke we realize that there is fire beneath it.³⁴

It is exactly this proof of the invisible, on the verge of divine revelation (or figured through divine revelation), which *Until Before After* circles around, and it is in this context that the collection stitches the number one hundred and fifty-three into its fabric – as a possible sign of the divine, as tempting evidence of something which, when closely ‘observed’, points beyond language to what lies outside and ‘after’ this world.

Into this foundation is embedded the poetry of *Until Before After*, in its mixture of textual allusion and personal narrative, its looping, circling thought and language. The Holmesian signs of detection and the numerological triangles in *Until Before After* are part of an integral structure and not just an eccentric patterning. They point to death and resurrection and the Wittgensteinian problem of the impossibility of speaking thereof. And some of the other, sometimes hidden, allusions in the volume gravitate towards the same consideration, a sense that the poetic word, like the artistic image, looks to the unsayable afterlife.

So source after source which is pulled into the intertextual fabric of *Until Before After* is marshalled into these variations on the theme of transcendence, always failing, always yearned for. In his adaptations, sometimes very literal, of Hopkins' *Journals* in *Until Before After*, Carson extracts moments when Hopkins looks to the sky, or to phenomena of ascension, things 'rearing straight up/ like/ an immeasurable cliff', as Carson's 'From below' puts it, quoting directly from Hopkins in 1869. The cacophony of textual allusion that weaves through the poems continually attests to a desire to come to the edge of materiality, to death, just as the final poem in the collection rises up the steps towards a renewed life. It is no accident that Carson is drawn to the example of Rothko, and those paintings of Rothko's which most clearly shimmer on the edge of religious belief without ever moving into full-blown faith. Rothko's Seagram murals were exhibited at Tate Modern, London, in 2008-9. Their influence is felt, without acknowledgement, in a set of poems near the beginning of *Until Before After*. 'We see', a poem placed early in the first section of *Until Before After*, is 'about' Rothko's Seagram mural show at Tate Modern in the sense that its words are almost entirely derived from Adrian Searle's review of the exhibition in *The Guardian*.³⁵ Searle's review is, as it happens, a relatively muted appreciation of Rothko. Despite the headline which suggest he was 'blown away' by what was at Tate Modern, most of Searle's review expresses his reservations about Rothko and the veneration of Rothko, especially when Rothko is regarded as a religious painter. Carson, however, pursues this aspect of Rothko more willingly than Searle. The tenth poem in the first section of the book is 'Leaning into':

Leaning into

the picture
of a portal

looming from
the fog

so close we
breathe

on it
the threshold

lost until
we step back³⁶

Both the words 'portal' and 'threshold', signifying that edgeland at which life and death meet, and also visually describing the effect of Rothko's murals, are themselves probably derived from Dominique de Menil's dedicatory speech at the Rothko chapel: 'only abstract art can bring us to the threshold of the divine', said de Menil, in her homily to Rothko.³⁷ Carson's volume equally moves towards that 'threshold' – the very word reappears in the final poem of the volume, in which 'threshold/after threshold' is crossed, up the seventeen steps, 'to our room/ full of light' – so that, like Rothko, Carson is a secular artist who understands the desire for the divine.³⁸

If all this might seem to imply a Carson who is surprisingly religious then this is only partially true. The check on Carson's persistent Augustinianism has, since *Shamrock Tea*, always been that great admirer of Augustine, Wittgenstein. And Wittgenstein, as we have seen above, is part of the textual web of *Until Before After*. Wittgenstein, though, should not be understood just through the apparent linguistic fatalism and materialism of his best known pronouncement ('Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent'). Before this pithy sentence, which is the entirety of the final section 7 of the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein ends Section 6 with these words:

My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes them as senseless, when he has climbed out through them, on them, over them. (He must so to speak throw away the ladder, after he has climbed up on it).

He must surmount these propositions; then he sees the world rightly.³⁹

'Even' Wittgenstein imagines this final climb up the steps to the unknowable hereafter beyond life and language. In 6.522 Wittgenstein writes: 'There is indeed the inexpressible. This *shows* itself: it is the mystical'.⁴⁰ The 'strange architecture' of *Until Before After*, a superficially unelaborate book by Carson's standards, is mathematical, matted with textual references, bibliophilic, and, in a theological sense, numerological. But where numerology asserts significance and divine pattern, as Augustine believes, *Until Before After* is a secular book wishing for evidence of the hereafter, putting together the strands and words of a life at a possible moment before death, and straining to see and hear what lies after death, in the 'blue void'.⁴¹

NOTES

1. Ciaran Carson in an interview with John Brown, in John Brown, *In the Chair: Interviews with Poets from the North of Ireland* (Cliffs of Moher: Salmon, 2002), p.148.
2. Interview with Matt Libretti; <http://www.wfu.edu/wfupress/An%20interview%20with%20Ciaran%20Carson.html> [accessed 23 February 2012].

3. Ciaran Carson, *Shamrock Tea* (London: Granta, 2001), p.236.
4. Originally published as a pamphlet: Ciaran Carson, *Letters from the Alphabet* (Loughcrew: Gallery, 1995); and then in Ciaran Carson, *Opera Et Cetera* (Newcastle-Upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1996).
5. The source given by Carson for the epigraph is 'Karel van Mander, *Het Schilder-Boeck*, Haarlem, 1604': Carson, *Shamrock Tea*, n.p.
6. Rand Brandes, 'Ciaran Carson' [Interviewed by Rand Brandes], *The Irish Review*, 8 (1990), p.84.
7. Glenn Gould in Ciaran Carson, *For All We Know* (Loughcrew: Gallery, 2008), n.p.
8. See for example Benjamin S. Grossberg, '[Review of] *For All We Know*', *Antioch Review*, 64:4 (2008), 793, and Barra Ó Seaghdha's review of the same collection, 'Rhapsodic Leap', *Poetry Ireland Review*, 94 (2008), 82–7.
9. Carson, *Shamrock Tea*, p.162. On the fugue state in art see Mark S. Micale, *The Mind of Modernism: Medicine, Psychology and the Cultural Arts in Europe, 1880–1940* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004).
10. Quentin Meillassoux, *The Number and the Siren: A Decipherment of Mallarmé's 'Coup de Dés'*, translated by Robin Macaky (Falmouth/ New York: Urbanomic/ Sequence, 2012), p.49.
11. Meillassoux, *The Number and the Siren*, p.37.
12. Meillassoux, *The Number and the Siren*, p.8.
13. Carson's description of *Until Before After* in his interview with Libreti <http://www.wfu.edu/wfupress/An%20interview%20with%20Ciaran%20Carson.html> [accessed 23 February 2012].
14. Ciaran Carson, *Until Before After* (Loughcrew: Gallery, 2010), p.121. Carson notes here the poems which are adapted from Hopkins' *Journals*.
15. Gerard Manley Hopkins, 'Author's Preface' [to *Poems, 1876–89*], in *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. by W.-H. Gardner and N.H. Mackenzie (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), p.49.
16. To the example of Hopkins can be added the esoteric interests, including numerology, which criss-cross Carson's work – a glance at the bibliography in *Fishing for Amber* shows the extent to which Carson is *au fait* with the outer reaches of occultish and cultish scholarship. See Ciaran Carson, *Fishing for Amber* (London: Granta, 1999), pp.352–60.
17. Holmes is prominent, for example, in *Shamrock Tea*. In his 1990 interview with Rand Brandes Carson recalls that his father would adapt stories from Conan Doyle: 'Ciaran Carson' [Interviewed by Rand Brandes], *The Irish Review*, 77.
18. Ciaran Carson, 'Tracking the Words', *Fortnight*, 459 (May 2008), 18.
19. Arthur Conan Doyle, 'A Scandal in Bohemia' in *The Penguin Complete Sherlock Holmes* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981), pp.162–3. 'A Scandal in Bohemia' also has a central moment in the plot in which, as Holmes looks for his 'key' outside 221b Baker Street, he is addressed by name by a passing, mysterious young man – this later turns out to be a disguised Irene Adler, 'the woman', as Holmes calls her.
20. Ciaran Carson, 'November' in *Opera Et Cetera* (Newcastle-Upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1996), p.80. The poem 'T' (p.19) in the same volume also makes references to Holmes' drug habit.
21. Carson discusses C.K. Williams's prosody in a similar way in a review of Williams's *Flesh and Blood*: Ciaran Carson, 'Against Oblivion', *The Irish Review*, 6 (1989), 114.
22. Carson, *Shamrock Tea*, pp.23–4.
23. One of the first references to the seventeen steps in this context is in Charles Boileau Elliott, *Travels in the Three Great Empires of Austria, Russia, and Turkey*, 2 vols (London: Richard Bentley, 1838), II, p.445.

24. Ciaran Carson interviewed by David Laskowski: 'Inventing Carson: An Interview', *Chicago Review*, 45: 3/4 (1999), 94.
25. Mallarmé used numerology as an ordering principle in his aborted *Le Livre*, described as 'a vortex of incoherent numerology and verbal calculations' by Albert Sonnenfeld (Albert Sonnenfeld, 'Mallarmé: The Poet as Actor as Reader', *Yale French Studies*, 55 [1977], 161). Baudelaire used numerology as part of what he called the 'strange architecture' of *Les Fleurs du Mal*; see Rosemary Lloyd, *Baudelaire's World* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2002), p. 61. Rimbaud's interests in numerology are dealt with in Françoise Meltzer, 'On Rimbaud's "Voyelles"', *Modern Philology*, 76:4 (1979), 344–54.
26. Carson, 'His last words', *Until Before After*, p.15.
27. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner), p.90.
28. Carson, *Until Before After*, p.16.
29. René Kieffer, 'John', in *The Oxford Bible Commentary*, ed. by John Barton and John Muddiman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p.999. See also Robert M. Grant, 'One Hundred Fifty-Three Large Fish', *The Harvard Theological Review*, 42:4 (1949), 273–5.
30. The narrator of *The Pen Friend*, for example, notes Jerome's patronage of translators and interpreters: see Ciaran Carson, *The Pen Friend* (Belfast: Blackstaff, 2009), p.21.
31. See Carson, *Shamrock Tea*, p.2. Wittgenstein as a character in the novel draws extensively on the real Wittgenstein's discussions of Augustine's theory of language (especially in *Philosophical Investigations*). At one point in the novel Wittgenstein calls Augustine's *Confessions* 'the most serious book in the world' (p.149).
32. Saint Augustine, from the *Tractate on John*, cxxii, quoted in E.W. Bullinger, *Number in Scripture* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1894), p.274.
33. Saint Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, trans. by R.P.H. Green (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p.46.
34. Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, p.30.
35. See <http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2008/sep/24/rothko.tatebritain> [accessed 21 February 2012].
36. Carson, 'Leaning into', *Until Before After*, p.20.
37. Quoted in Jacob Baal-Teshuva, *Mark Rothko* (Köln: Taschen, 2003), p.75.
38. Carson, 'I open the door', *Until Before After*, p.119.
39. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, p.90.
40. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, p.90.
41. 'When you come to it', *Until Before After*, p.91. The phrase 'blue void' derives from the work of the painter Yves Klein: see the discussion in Carson, *The Pen Friend*, pp.125–31.