

Modern Ekphrasis: Review by Hugh Haughton

Still Life by Ciaran Carson

The late Ciaran Carson (1948-2019) was a prodigiously talented as well as prolific poet, a restlessly inventive linguistic virtuoso, with an insatiable appetite for metamorphosis. His incorrigibly plural books include poetry, memoir, and fiction as well as many works of poetic translation (*The Tain*, Dante's *Inferno*, Rimbaud, Jean Follain, and many other – mainly French – poets) as well as elaborate baroque sequences of serial variations, such as *Letters from the Alphabet* and *Opera*, built respectively around alphabetic order and the radio operator's code, or the cryptic topographical Troubles poems of *Belfast Confetti*. They all involve translation, moving exhilaratingly between the topography of his native Belfast and a vertiginous phantasmagoric Borgesian Elsewhere. The effect is to turn Belfast into an uncanny magical realist's arcadia, which seems always *en route* to somewhere else, as in his *Ballad of H.M. Belfast*, or turning into a palimpsest of other forms and places. It is one of the great paradoxes of modern Irish poetry that the conflict-riven terrain of Northern Ireland should have produced in the work of Paul Muldoon, Medbh McGuckian, and Ciaran Carson, a poetry of such international range, omnivorous curiosity and polymorphous linguistic virtuosity.

Still Life is very much a last book, written in the face of terminal illness, but it shows no flagging of his protean inventiveness in the face of the complexities of the world of Belfast, deepened as it is by a ruefully humorous acknowledgement of his own mortality. The slenderness of his hold on life in his last months seems to have deepened and strengthened his sense of both life and art (and the two are never really separable for Carson, who was a gifted and sociable musician as well as erudite and virtuosic poet, and as alive to the complexities of the arts of conversation and Irish popular music as to that of Dante or Baudelaire). In one of the poems, Carson says 'Much on my mind/ regarding paintings,' and in *Still Life*, the art explicitly addressed across all the poems is plastic or pictorial. In fact, each poem takes its title from a painting, from the opening 'Claude Monet, Artist's Garden at Vétheuil, 1880' to the finale called 'Jim Allen, The House with Palm Trees, c.1979', titles that name places as well as paintings, signalling that Carson is as interested in dwelling in and on place as much as dwelling on paintings and their role in mediating both particular places and the world we inhabit. The result is a wonderfully probing as well as movingly self-conscious contribution to the modern ekphrastic tradition, and in particular the productive intermedial dialogue between poetry and the visual arts exemplified in the USA by poets like Ashbery, O'Hara, and Jorie Graham, and in Ireland by the poetry of Derek Mahon, Medbh McGuckian, Paul Durcan, Paul Muldoon, Caitriona O'Reilly, among others.

From the opening poem, where the poet is in bed at home listening to 'the tick of my mechanical aortic valve', the poetry is anchored in Carson's immediate world in Belfast, recording his 'little front garden' and the 'muted whoosh of cars on the Antrim Road' as well as the nearby 'corner shop' torched thirty years ago. Here, musing on flowers and colours ('So many shades of yellow when you look at them. Gorse. Lemon. Mustard'), he finds himself recalling James Elkins' book *What Painting Is*, noting 'I have it before me, open at this colour plate, jotting notes,' before going on to enter Elkins's painterly prose about a detail of Monet which is 'a graveyard of scattered brush hairs / And other detritus' and cross it with Poussin's remark that a 'handful of porphyry / Is Rome' and reflections on a Poussin painting. With its winding spiralling long-lined paragraphs, the poem self-consciously sets out to mirror Elkin's account of Monet's art as being full of 'fleeting momentary awareness of what the hand might

do next'. Matching the claim that 'everything gets into the painting, wood-smoke from the studio stove, / The high pollen count of a high summer's day *en plein air* by the Seine', Carson's poetry captures his own attempt to record 'whatever it is is going on' both in his own drastically fore-shortened life, where he writes (with in turn a Lady Patricia pencil, a bic biro and laptop) in between walks and trips with his wife Deidre to the park or to the local hospital for chemo. The first poem closes with the soberly understated observation that 'The days are getting longer now, however many of them I have left. / And the pencil I am writing this with, old as it is, will easily outlast their end.'

As these lines show, Carson seeks to offer the textual equivalent of Elkins's account of Monet's compositional practice as he reflects on a series of visual artworks while foregrounding his own practice of writing and writing materials in the light of his sense of aesthetic experience and mortality, as when he says in a poem about Poussin that 'Before the diagnosis I'd written nothing publishable for four years, but when I took / The pencil up it seemed to set me free.' The entire sequence of 17 poems about paintings is written in the spirit of T. J. Clarke's *The View of Death: An Experiment in Art Writing* (2006), a revelatory account of the art historian's unfolding reactions to paintings by Poussin, including two of the three Poussins tackled by Carson: 'Landscape with the Ashes of Phocion' and 'Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake'. The Snake poem begins 'Never mind the death in the foreground, for months I've been pondering the miniature / Figures in the distance, composed of hardly more than a couple of strokes or dots / Of paint'. The Phocion poem draws not only on Clarke but quotes words by Tom Lubbock and Richard Verdi on Poussin as well as words of Poussin himself (in translation) and Wittgenstein's remark that 'What can be shown, cannot be said.' This makes Carson's multi-directional inter-textual sequence about what can be said about what is shown both ekphrastic and meta-ekphrastic. It also offers a deeply self-reflexive and moving account of his own writing about looking at multiply-mediated reproductions of paintings: 'For all the painter draws, the viewer draws conclusions / repro / After Reproduction of the *Ashes*, seeing things in them perhaps not there at all, perhaps not / Seeing what there is, not ever having seen the thing itself.' As that final Kantian twist shows, Carson's complex syntax and syncopated rhythms enable him to generate a sense of the process of both viewing the painting and the composition of the poem – 'I take a closer look, and take my pencil up to jot a note when *drat!* The lead / Just broke' – giving a dynamic autobiographical sense of the viewing experience ('At last I'm on the threshold') comparable to Elizabeth Bishop's in her great ekphrastic exploration in 'Poem' ('Heavens, I recognize the place!').

All ekphrasis is a form of translation, and in his meta-textual response to '*Gustave Caillebotte, Paris Street, Rainy Day, 1877*' Carson, who is the author of a dazzling translation of the prose poetry of Rimbaud's *Illuminations* into rhymed verse in *In the Light Of* (2012), offers a luminous verse translation of a prose poem by Francis Ponge called 'Pluie', the first of his wartime *Le Parti pris des choses*, a text which had no affiliation to Caillebotte's Parisian street-scene until Carson's intervention, and in which: 'The whole ensemble pulses like a complicated, living mechanism, as precise as it is / Erratic, like a store of clocks whose springs depend on the weight of a given mass of / Constantly condensing vapour.' The same could be said of the 'complicated, living mechanism' of *Still Life* as a whole, with its palimpsest-like layering of texts, pictures, places and experiences, playing out in a dialogue between poet and artist, poem and painting, a painting by Poussin of 'the strange entanglement of man and snake in the dark bed of a stream' in a classical landscape with a 'sunlit city of Platonic cylinders and cubes' and the Belfast of Hopefield Avenue with its 'big yellow JCB in the middle of it' and 'three-foot-long pike . . . body glistening and fading in the late May sun.' *Still Life* responds to the stilled life of still lives and landscapes, seen in the light of the experience of someone who

is still alive but who might not be for much longer. Like the paintings they respond to, Carson's poems are meditations on place that are still alive to the life that is 'going on' around him in the domestic and urban world of contemporary Belfast, not only poems about paintings, like Paul Durcan's *Take Me by the Hand* but intimate painterly records of place, each one dated 2019. This memorable collection makes a wonderful finale to Carson's protean career, a last bow carried off with his usual dandyish flair and a new sense of the 'still sad music of humanity.' It is as fine as anything this wonderfully inventive poet has written, leaving us with a complex series of intricately interwoven 'living mechanisms' that is both a joyful affirmation of the vitality of the aesthetic and an admirably resourceful intellectual response to the intimations of mortality gleaned during his last months on the planet. With its sense of both death and the Arcadian dream of the artist, the book evokes both senses of the epitaphic inscription in Poussin's painting of shepherds deciphering a tomb. It could have been subtitled, 'Ciaran Carson, *Et in Arcadia Ego*, 2019.'