

Literariness Journal

A Peer-Reviewed Quarterly
Journal of Literature and Cultural
Studies

P-ISSN: 3108-1614
E-ISSN: 3108-172X

LiterarinessJournal.org

Vol. 1, Issue. 3 June 2026

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A Literariness.org Project

“Then I remembered”: Memory and Recognition in Ciaran Carson’s *Still Life*

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Abstract

“...the power of a work of art consists in the way it triggers powerful unconscious memories, buried in the amnesia of daily life—almost like the ring of recollection” (Ramanujan 93).

Ciaran Carson (1948-2019) was a poet, novelist, and translator from Northern Ireland whose poetry is often compared to James Joyce’s prose for its cartographic quality. Attentive reading of Carson’s poetic oeuvre reveals how he uses memory and recognition as tools to enhance the narrative power of his poems. A. K. Ramanujan, in his essay “The Ring of Memory: Remembering and Forgetting in Indian Literatures” (quoted above), traces the role memory plays in Indian literary traditions. This paper applies the framework provided by Ramanujan to analyze Ciaran Carson’s *Still Life* (2019), his final collection published posthumously. This paper explores how Carson uses the power of art (in the form of paintings, music, and literature, both his and the works he alludes to) in *Still Life* to evoke memory to reflect on his life, on time, and on mortality. Carson draws on various aspects of memory and this can be understood at four levels: the factual, the collective, the imagined, and the memory of things. Using Ramanujan’s theoretical meditation on memory as a launchpad, the paper attempts to understand how Ciaran Carson exposes the essential nature of language itself as memory.

Keywords: *Memory Studies, Poetry, Ciaran Carson, Northern Ireland, A. K. Ramanujan, Ekphrastic Poetry*

Because when looking at a thing we often drift into a memory of something else,
 However tenuous the link.

(Carson, *Still Life*, “Angela Hackett” 17)

Ciaran Carson’s (1948-2019) poetry is described by Seamus Heaney in the introduction to the festschrift for Carson as having something of a dual life, first in its mystery and a “second life as art, in the big belling of its language, its Joycean carnivalesque” (Irvine 13). Here Heaney highlights two core components of Carson’s oeuvre—language and cartography. These preoccupations are foundations that allow Carson to explore aspects of memory in its varied forms—personal memory, cultural memory, and the memory of the city. This exploration of memory has been a lifelong project of Carson’s as reflected in his poetry, novels, memoirs, and translations.

In *Still Life* (2019), published posthumously, Carson reflects on his life and work and revisits his lifelong obsessions and thus, it is illuminating to read the collection through the lens of memory. The collection features seventeen ekphrastic poems drawing on paintings by artists including Canaletto, Poussin, Cézanne, Monet, Velázquez as well as contemporary Irish artists. The title refers to the Still Life genre of paintings and also works as a description of the distilled life of the poet captured in the poems. It is also a declaration of life still left to live.

The circumstances in which the collection was written is stark. The poet who received his diagnosis of incurable cancer in March 2019 stares mortality in the face and embark on a journey that records the six months that follow the diagnosis and leading up to his death on October 6, 2019. The creation of the collection is an exercise that allows the speaker of these poems, through “awareness, recollection, [and] re-membering”, to reconnect with one’s self which is “largely constituted by memory” (Ramanujan 86). The diagnosis and the treatments feature as a prominent subject throughout *Still Life*. But it is also a creative force that drives the poet into a frenzy of activity: “Before the diagnosis I had written nothing publishable for four years, but when I took/ The pencil up it set me free” (Carson, *SL*, “Nicolas Poussin...*Ashes*” 45).

Carson directs this freedom provided by his mortality to look back and dwell on his past. How he does this is through a careful balancing of observations of the present circumstances and a deliberation of the past. The poems in *Still Life* are ostensibly all set in the six months from March to October of 2019 and are marked by an immediacy of narration but also are characterized by an accretion of memory. Carson’s project is to revisit his life and everything that held his interest through the lens of the present while not being bogged down by the spectre of death looming in the future. This is expressed with characteristic nonchalance in the opening line of “Nicholas Poussin, *Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake*, 1648”— “Never mind the death in the foreground” (Carson, *SL* 52). The

poems acknowledge and set aside the idea of death, only to come back to it from time and again, while focusing its energies on ideas that have always been central to Carson’s writings including walking the city, music, the Troubles, etymology and linguistic echoes, writing tools, perfumes, etc.

The nature of memories that Carson explores in this collection can be divided into four categories: factual, collective, imagined, and memory of things. These recollections are often triggered by objects or sensations that act as remembrancers. A. K. Ramanujan describes remembrancers as the object in the present that allows one to “remember, recognize—literally re-member or reconstitute the object in front of us—by reconnecting present impressions with past memories of that object” (88). All four kinds of memories explored in *Still Life* are incited by such triggering elements of memory.

The eggs simmering away on the stove in *Old Woman Cooking Eggs* (1618) by Diego Velásquez triggers Ciaran Carson’s memories of his time with Diedre Shannon, his wife, as young traveling musicians. Carson was an accomplished flautist and singer who performed in various bars and venues along with Shannon, who was a fiddler, and other musician friends. He has recorded his experiences as a musician in the 1996 book *Last Night’s Fun: About Time, Food and Music* and in his earlier poetry. This painting leads the speaker of the poem to recollect his waking up at noon and making Ulster Fry as a hangover cure which leads to the memories of the writer before becoming the writer in The Bodega Bar in Belfast, memories of friends who shared literary taste, and also the occasional eruption of violence, for this was 1973, when Northern Ireland was engulfed in the Troubles.

This recollection is escalated in the later part of the collection as the poems focus more on that period of Carson’s and the city’s past. In “Basil Blackshaw, *Windows I-V*, 2001”, Carson focuses his attention on James Allen’s *The House with the Palm Trees* which features 33 University Road, a building in which Carson had resided during the 1970s. He remembers the house in “1976 and I remember how/ They’d tremble in the aftershock of the occasional nearby bomb” (Carson, *SL*, “Basil Blackshaw” 60). This culminates in the imagery of the Bloody Friday bombings, which were a series of nearly 20 bombings in a period of half-an-hour by the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA) where 9 people lost their lives and 130 people were injured. Carson’s long lines that spill over into the next to form a shorter half line is shrunk to a single line while he is describing the imagery of the bombing. The spaces between the lines widen, the pace of the poem slows down, and the devastation of the bombings is expressed in a direct language that is reminiscent of reportage, a mode of writing Carson has previously proved he is adept at adopting to poetry in his collection *Breaking News* (2003).

Elsewhere, Carson exhibits his ability to bend the form to guide the reader through time and make what is remembered tangible. This is made explicit in “Nicolas Poussin, *Landscape with a Calm*, 1650-51” when the speaker contemplates whether the tree he has written about in an earlier poem, namely “Angela Hackett, *Lemons on a Moorish Plate*, 2013”, is a blackthorn or a hawthorn. He looks up the distinction between the two kinds of the trees leading to the memory of the tree, which is expressed as “I remembered the tree” and then “I put my finger to a thorn” (Carson, *SL*, “Nicolas Poussin...*Calm*” 27). In a matter of three lines, the remembered tree becomes material and appears at the fingertips of the speaker.

To argue that the poems feature recollections of poet’s life is not to argue that *Still Life* is a memoir in verse form. He brings his craft to bear on the ways in which he explores memory. One expression of this is when he expands the domain of memory to include others, especially Dierdre Shannon. As Ross Moore says in his review of the collection “Much of the intimacy and immediacy of the poems is due to their reflections and questions being directly addressed to his wife Deirdre. The poems arise from a present inhabited by the two of them, and the reflections throughout the volume are largely shared ones” (Moore). As Carson operates in the ekphrastic mode, deliberating on the painting that informs the title of a poem, he is contemplating them as experienced by the both of them. He often addresses Shannon in these poems and uses the collective pronouns to explicate his observations on the paintings. In “Jeffrey Morgan, *Hare Bowl*, 2018”, Carson says: “When we think of the painted hares/ We think of the hares that have entered our lives, however fleetingly.” The hares in the painting becomes a remembrancer evoking the memory of encounters with hares. The hares remembered are not only the ones in Carson’s own memory but also some shared by both Carson and Shannon, and some in Shannon’s childhood, back “when we never knew each other, never dreaming then that we/ Would end up in this here and now.” (Carson, *SL*, “Jeffrey Morgan” 22).

Similarly, the “set of bath salts, maybe, or a bar/ Of lemon soap” remembered from Shannon’s childhood are a response to the sight of Angela Hackett’s painting *Lemons on a Moorish Plate* (Carson, *SL*, “Angela Hackett” 17). This domain of shared memory is expanded when he relies on the memory of Paul Nolan to recount the events when The Club Bar opposite to 33 University Road was bombed. Nolan’s memory is the memory of a city that is engulfed in violence and where the violence has become mundane and commonplace. The violence of the bombing that led to the death of two people is punctuated by the ordinariness of Nolan’s response to it: “And I went on to a party.” (Carson, *SL*, “Basil Blackshaw” 60).

Carson further expands this aspect of memory to include the memory of things. In the same poem, he recounts how the ceiling of his flat in 33 University Road collapsed weeks after the bombing “as if it only then remembered the event” (Carson, *SL*, “Basil Blackshaw” 61). The memory of violence inscribed in things is further explored in “Yves Klein, *IKB 79*, 1959) when he describes “the shadows imprinted on the hard surfaces/ By things and people vaporized by the explosion” in Hiroshima (Carson, *SL* 64). Klein visited Hiroshima in 1953 and “paid homage to the ghostly presences of its atomic silhouettes in his imprint *Hiroshima*.” (Carson, *SL*, “Yves Klein” 66). But it is not just the violence that is remembered in objects. Carson points out that “everything gets into the painting” as he studies a reproduction of Claude Monet’s *Artist’s Garden at Vétheuil* discussed by James Elkins as “a graveyard of scattered brush hairs/ And other detritus” (*SL*, “Claude Monet” 15).

Carson is a master story teller who has the ability to create a mythos of his own and he uses that to expand his exploration into a fourth kind— the imagined. Consider the evolution of his poetic lines. Initially, Carson begins in *The New Estate* (1976) with traditional verse lines and meter similar to that employed by Seamus Heaney. From *The Irish for No* (1987) to *Opera Et Cetera* (1996) he develops a long line that becomes characteristic of his style. While *The Twelfth of Never* (2001) explores the sonnet form in Alexandrine, *Breaking News* breaks new ground in his poetic oeuvre as he adopts a fragmented line that drives down the page to explore the violence of the Troubles. This reinvention continues throughout his career and he comes back to the long lines in *Still Life*. The long lines are understood to be inspired by, variously, the rhythms of speech, traditional music, and C. K. Williams (Moore; Carson, “A Life in Poetry”). In *Still Life*, he offers a different explanation for the origin of the long lines when the doorbell ringing leads to reminiscence:

It put me in mind of the carriage return bell of my old Imperial
 typewriter, how
 Back in the 80s I measured my verse by the width of an A4 page.
 For whatever reason
 I’ve gone back to that arbitrary rule that turns your thinking
 unexpectedly. Though
 Necessarily it turns out differently when printed in a book.
 The parameters are
 Narrower. The line breaks change, and drop a hemistich. So

the landscape
Format of the stanza radically changes shape, becoming
more like a tree
Or a shrub with a dense central trunk—arboreal, in other
words, like these
Which you are viewing now, which I have written
only now.

(Carson, *SL*, “Joachim Patinir” 32-33)

This passage is initiated by the remembrancer of the doorbell and constructs a memory that imagines an explanation for the creative process. The reflexive act of deliberation on the lines being written blurs the line between the past, the present of the writing, and the future of the reader’s encounter with the lines. A similar act of constructing a memory to fit the narratives of the present can be seen in “Basil Blackshaw” as well as he talks about when he viewed *Windows* by Blackshaw for the first time:

the shifting memories,
The unreliability of exactly when it was I first set eyes on them
seventeen years ago—
Give or take a month or two—in the Ulster Museum. And were
you with me then?
I can’t remember, nor can you when I ask. But we like to think
of that first viewing
As by both of us, whether probable or possible we cannot tell
in this long retrospect.

(Carson, *SL*, “Basil Blackshaw” 57)

This passage also brings to our attention the relationship of the ekphrastic form with memory. Ekphrasis offers Ciaran Carson a unique launchpad to explore memory as remembering is essential to the act of ekphrasis. Carson’s deliberations of the paintings are not in a museum set up. He looks at them through reproductions, virtual museum tours, in memory, and in domestic spaces. He often interrogates when something has been viewed, as seen above in “Basil Blackshaw”, and how often a painting is remembered, like Cézanne’s *The Stove in the Studio* taking the act of remembering the painting and condensing it into a memory framed as a question (Carson, *SL*, “Paul Cezanne” 26). While deliberating on Klein’s painting, Carson asks, “Isn’t it strange, how we sometimes clearly remember our first viewing of a painting,/ But rarely if ever what day it was, let alone the calendar date?” and observes that “the memory of *IKB 79* floats free of/ Everything that might have been that day” (Carson, *SL*, “Yves Klein” 62).

It is also interesting here to examine how A. K. Ramanujan discusses the difference between the object that is present and the one that is absent. “In presence, there is often no perception,” Ramanujan says, “but absence is filled with images of presence, especially if there are marks that excite memory. Memory always implies absence—even when we are reconstituting a present object, for we are comparing it with a previous perception...” (93-94). Carson’s deliberation of Poussin’s *Landscape with the Ashes of Phocion* highlights this aspect of the absent object, recognized only through reproductions:

...For all the painter draws, the reader 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.

(Carson, *SL*, “Nicolas Poussin...*Ashes* 45)

This leads to him remembering how even as he was in the Walker Gallery Liverpool where the painting was housed, he could not have perceived it. “I knew nothing/ Then of Poussin, and had I come to it, it likely would have been invisible to me” implying that even in its presence the speaker would not have been able to perceive it. Instead, he deliberates on it in its absence.

There are other ways in which Carson expands the idea of ekphrasis. For example, in “James Allen, *The House with the Palm Trees*, c. 1979”, there is misremembering that astounds the speaker:

“There was no yellow in my recollection. How could that be?” He rationalizes that “perhaps my memory is plausible, and false, engendered by your tending/ To the sweet pea” accepting that the present colours the memory of the past. This relation is reciprocal, he notes, quoting Henri Bergson— ““There is no perception/ Which is not permeated with memories. But hence also springs every kind of illusion”” (Carson, *SL*, “James Allen” 70). Then there is “Gustave Caillebotte, *Paris Street, Rainy Day*, 1877” which acts as an absent ekphrasis as the painting itself is not referenced anywhere except in the title.

Carson explores, in “Claude Monet” and “Yves Klein” particularly, how the paintings themselves become objects that carry memory of the place and its creators. If Monet’s paintings carry the traces of brush hair, Monet’s hair, wood-smoke, and pollen, Klein chose the “cotton sailcloth used for the canopies/ Of Paris market stalls” because “For him it evoked the blue of Nice, where he was born” (Carson, *SL*, “Claude Monet” 15-16; Carson, *SL*, “Yves Klein” 63). In another, somewhat more obvious sense but less stressed upon by Carson, the paintings are also memorials for those who feature as its subjects, characters real or imagined. “[T]he woman and the two children [who] stand commemorated” in *Artist’s Garden at Vétheuil* serve as examples in this regard (Carson, *SL*, “Claude Monet” 14).

The paintings are also effective remembrancers, as lemons (Carson, *SL*, “Angela Hackett” 17) and hares (Carson, *SL*, “Jeffrey Morgan” 22) and windows (Carson, *SL*, “Basil Blackshaw” 58) evoke memories of the past. This is stated explicitly in “Basil Blackshaw” as Carson describes the nature of the windows painted by Blackshaw— “Abstracted windows—homages, perhaps, to Mark Rothko— they still remind us/ Of real windows, since everything we look at is conditioned by the eye of memory” (Carson, *SL*, “Basil Blackshaw” 58). Real life events also at times acts as remembrancers that trigger the memory of paintings like how the nurse finding a vein for cannula evokes the image of Vermeer’s *Lacemaker* (Carson, *SL*, “Jeffrey Morgan” 24) and how witnessing a cat killing a bird comes to be framed as “Landscape with a Bird Killed by a Cat” becoming a trigger for remembering *Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake* by Poussin (Carson, *SL*, “Nicolas Poussin...*Man Killed*” 54). In “Diego Velásquez, *Old Woman Cooking Eggs*, 1618”, the painting appears as an anachronism in memory, as it appears in Carson’s memory of The Bodega Bar in Belfast in 1973, a time before he was familiar with Velásquez (*SL*, “Diego Velásquez” 21).

Anachronism is just one of the techniques Carson employs in this collection which essentially exposes language itself as a remembrancer or trigger for memory. Carson is adept at foregrounding the palimpsestic nature of language where no utterance is, as Bhaktinian dialogism expounds, entirely new.

So, the similes, metonymy, etymological explorations, allusions, and after poems become echoes that reflect on other cultural touchstones as well as what has been explored in Carson's oeuvre before.

Deliberating on *The Stonemason's Yard* by Canaletto, Carson deals with palimpsestic nature of art directly. He discusses Tony Swain who paints on a newspaper and Julie Mehretu who also use newspaper images as sources to overpaint on (Carson, *SL*, "Canaletto" 38-39). Then he chooses Canaletto's painting "as a palimpsest to write upon" indicating that the whole ekphrastic process is palimpsestic in nature (Carson, *SL*, "Canaletto" 39). The palimpsests essentially form "an echo of the echo" triggering associations (Carson, *SL*, "Yves Klein" 62).

In the opening poem "Claude Monet, *Artist's Garden at Vétheuil*, 1880", Carson employs almost all of these techniques. For example, the identifying of the flower daffodil in his own garden is accompanied by a simile comparing it to buttercups which evokes the memory of Monet's *Garden*. Similarly, the name of daffodil is explored through its etymology and he arrives at Narcissus which has the allusive echoes of the mythological figure who is obsessed with reflections. In myth, Tiresias warns Narcissus about knowing oneself, which could lead to death. Daffodil is also the flower that grows profusely in the meadows of death. A narcissistic self-reflection tempting death is thus established as what *Still Life* represents.

Another significant poetic technique that reflects this quality of language as memory is represented by *after* poems. "Gustave Caillebotte, *Paris Street, Rainy Day*, 1877" is, the epigraph indicates, written after 'La pluie' or "The Rain" by Francis Ponge. In the tradition of *after* poems, "Gustave Caillebotte" mirrors the original where Ponge observes rain and describes it in microscopic detail. Carson follows similar descriptions and concludes with the line "the whole brilliant apparatus evaporates — it has rained" reproducing Ponge's lines almost verbatim (*SL*, "Gustave Caillebotte" 51). Carson is no stranger to *after* poems as he has employed it effectively in *Breaking News* where he writes "The Forgotten City" after William Carlos Williams's poem of the same name (*Collected Poems* 461). In *Still Life*, the ending of "Jeffrey Morgan" where traffic block leads to diversion through the less familiar part of the city evoking a sensation of strangeness alludes to "The Forgotten City", both Carson's and Williams's original. Both iterations of that poem deal with the idea of re-cognizing a city that have been made strange by rain in Williams and by violence in Carson. This re-cognition and refamiliarization also extends to another allusive poem in *Still Life*, namely, "Diego Velazquez" which has already been discussed here extensively. In the poem, Carson quotes John Keats' famous lines "to 'drink/And leave the world unseen'" evoking not only the iconic romantic poem but also Carson's own poem "The Irish for No" published in *The Irish for No* (Keats). "The Irish for No" is woven through

with lines from the “Ode to a Nightingale” and in “Diego Velazquez” Carson referencing the poem again connects his last poetic project to his earlier work (*CP* 110-111).

The poems in *Still Life* are not defined by perfect recall but rather the slippages of memory. The exact date of a first viewing (Carson, *SL*, “Yves Klein” 62) or the place where replacement leads are kept might be forgotten and the brand of pen that is in the drawer might be misremembered (Carson, *SL*, “Nicolas Poussin...*Ashes*” 47-48). Yet, there is a certain sense of optimism that Carson conveys in the following line on Poussin’s painting of Megara— “it seems the city goes on living for the moment, or forever, I go on writing.” (*SL*, “Nicolas Poussin...*Ashes*” 49). This is reflective of a Shakesperean or Keatsian idea that art will outlast death itself and, in some ways, offer immortality to the creator. But Carson, for all the boisterous storytelling, is acutely aware in this collection that he has only a few days left. “And the pencil I am writing this with, old as it is, will easily outlast their end,” he says, indicating that it is not the artist who is immortal but rather it is the material that carries the memory of the craft that is sure to survive (Carson, *SL*, “Claude Monet” 16).

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