



Ciaran Carson. *The Pen Friend*. Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 2009.

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Walter Benjamin, in his *Arcades Project* states “the collector dreams his way not only into a distant and bygone world, but also into a better one – one [...] in which [...] human beings are no better provided with what they need... but in which things are free from the drudgery of being useful”(8). This is the principle in which the unflinching exploitation of the private memories of Belfast in the eighties, *The Pen Friend*, is grounded on. Following back on the notion that postcards, perfumes, fashion, sensations are able to unravel obscured layers of memory and history, the well-acclaimed Northern Irish poet Ciaran Carson inserts his hometown in the chaotic and disgruntling experience of modernity. Nevertheless, in an age when the artistic artifact has lost its aura and the writer is no longer seen as a special being, the readers who are involved with the correspondence between Gabriel and Miranda are going to stop and reflect upon the function of the small niceties of contemporary existence.

At the outset of the novel, like a collector obsessed with the particularities of the objects he accumulates, the author gives the tone of his narrative: If on the one hand the sentence *It's been a long time* is the content of the first of the thirteen postcards Miranda sends Gabriel, on the other hand it is also the main preoccupation of the narrative: what is the past? How can you return to it? How can you fill in the intervals of existence with meaningful spaces? The narrator, disguised as *the Angel*, provides details of his private and public background in order to answer those questions: his retirement from the Municipal gallery after his father's premature death; his fondness for Nina's handwriting; his vintage clothes and details of their first encounter. Making a clear allusion to *Du côté de chez Swann*, the first tome of *À la recherche du temps perdu* (1913) by Marcel Proust, the narrator places the encounter in a café in Fountain Street where Nina is dunking a biscuit into tea, in the very same way Marcel dipped his Madeleine into hot tea. By doing that, the character in question reveals a trait of her personality.

Through their first conversation another striking stylistic feature of the novel is presented: the use of free indirect speech. According to Roy Pascal (1977), it is an aesthetic device which has the function not only of expressing the characters' subjective experience, but also of communicating this very same experience to the readers. With a view to depict a reliable portrait of Gabriel and Miranda's relationship, the author uses free indirect speech as the fictional manipulation of a *dual voice* that provides the immediacy of a character's inwardness without abdicating the narrator's overview.

Another factor which contributes to the *dual voice* is the dialogue between postcards and pens: while the reader is aware of Miranda's voice through her postcards, he or she becomes acquainted with "the Angel" through his responses to those cards. Interestingly enough, Carson places in the middle of the narrative – chapter six, or postcard number six – the canvas *Lady Writing a Letter with Her Maid* by Jan Vermeer. The portrait located in the National Gallery in Dublin was stolen by I.R.A. in the seventies. In this sense, the Vermeer reproduced by Carson is a metaphor for the novel as a whole: at the same time it represents and recollects the lover's story it also pays heed to Belfast's history and its inhabitants through a human condition, which is loneliness and impotence in face of the propelling march of history. Furthermore, it also subtly inserts the private world of labour in the portrayal of the maid who is mysteriously glancing at the window, while her mistress is anxiously writing a response probably to the letters scattered on the floor.

Along those lines, it should be also understood that the pet name chosen by Miranda to refer to Gabriel is also a reference to Walter Benjamin's Angel of History. In one of his most famous texts, "On the Concept of History", he compares history with Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus*, in which the artist portrays an animal-like deity who is ready to take flight but is prevented from doing so because of his solidarity: its face is turned towards the past and it wishes to go back to it and undo the wrong deeds, however the fugacity of the present blows it to a frightening and uncertain future. In a mysterious intertwining of facts, history and fiction, the book also serves the purpose of recollecting emblems of high art and beauty which have constantly been disregarded due to the extreme importance given to mass culture. In chapter five for instance, named, "Eine Kleine Nachtmusic" as a reference to Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart composition, Gabriel is reminded of Nina's preparation for her mother's wake after she committed suicide. Mentioned twice in chapter ten, the French poet Charles Baudelaire reminds the author of his voyeurist *flanerie* around the hotels and pubs. Nonetheless, the chapter that was supposed to be dedicated to beauty and pleasure, twists into pain and suffering when the couple bump into their old friend Hugie Falls, with whom Gabriel attended the civil Marches in the sixties. As the narrator observes, that was a turning point in their relationship; however, more than that, it is also a defining moment in the narrative as well, for the reader starts to perceive that the characters are interesting metaphors for the actual state of affairs in Belfast. At this moment, through the argument started by Hugie, Dublin is not only compared to Belfast, but also incites a courageous debate between art and politics which culminates into the very essence of art: an act of civilization and barbarism. While the couple is talking, Miranda states: "You see, Gabriel, you really are rather naïve. You really do think that art exists in superior realm, untouched by politics, without the intervention of the Powers That Be. But I'm different, I know what I've got into, and I go along with it." (p. 183).

The discussion about art, politics and commitment comes to the surface again and acquires a new light, for it is not the author that is explicitly discussing those

matters, but the characters who have had their lives and destinies deeply altered by the city where they sojourn – Belfast, Paris and Dublin – and by art, since he works with painting and she with fashion. Consequently, the characters, more than representing a naïve love story, are remarkable portrayals of a post-troubles Belfast obsessed with art and politics. Fundamentally, the image of a love affair which did not quite work due to the personality incompatibilities represents the present melancholy of a contemporary city which struggles to find its identity after a long overdue peace process. If on the one hand Belfast is presently absorbed by culture, refinement and commerce, on the other hand the vulture of the bombs of the past still haunts its dark corners and narrow alleyways.

Either touching on delicate points of Irish history, or portraying a love story, *The Pen Friend* manages to remain new, not due to its political references or its mentioning of facts and art, but to the collector's tone that invigorates the strength of the narrative with a utopian ideal of reunification. It is as if every postcard wished to unify the lovers, cities, experiences, and surprisingly, languages. In chapter ten, Gabriel describes Nina's articulate use of French, which he admired and envied in his lover:

And, half-jokingly, I'd purpose that the whole world should indeed have learned Esperanto, for then we would not need to learn languages of different nations in order to communicate with them. But that's precisely the point, you'd say, the point is the difference *Vive la difference*, as they say. (167-168).

This passage is a perfect example of the desire of unification of both lovers. However, the ironic tone of the expression *Vive la difference* changes the narrative thoroughly and their emotions drift apart. At an ultimate level, the longing for union is part of the Irish history, for Ireland is characteristically known for its division between South and North, republicans and loyalists and, more specifically in Belfast, the Falls and Shankill. The book recollects the memories of the city throughout the eighties.

In short, *The Pen Friend* remains highly committed to literature and to the nuances of language meaning. Carson's book will bring a lot of pleasure for the ones who are enthusiastic about paintings and music but, unsurprisingly, it will still remain as an emblem of pain and sorrow for neither Nina and Gabriel are unified, nor the Angel of History is able to go back and save what has been miscarried.

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