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# The Erring Archive in Anne Carson

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## Résumé de synthèse

L'archive erronée dans l'œuvre d'Anne Carson enquête sur les effets que peuvent entraîner l'archive classique sur la poésie d'Anne Carson et révèle que le travail de cette dernière est issu de l'espace situé entre la critique et la créativité, ce qui génère ce qu'on appellera une « poétique de l'erreur ». La poésie de Carson se démarque par sa prédilection pour les accidents, les imperfections et les impondérables de la transmission. La présente dissertation émerge des attitudes critiques ambivalentes face à la dualité de l'identité de Carson, autant poète qu'universitaire, et leur offrira une réponse. Alors que l'objectif traditionnel du philologue classique est de reconstruire le sens du texte « original », l'approche poétique de Carson sape en douce les prétentions universitaires d'exactitude, de précision et de totalisation. La rencontre de Carson avec l'archive classique embrasse plutôt les bourdes, les mauvaises lectures et les erreurs de traduction inhérentes à la transmission et à la réception de traductions classiques.

La poésie de Carson est ludique, sexuée et politique. Sa manière de jouer avec l'épave du passé classique torpille la patri-archive, telle que critiquée par Derrida dans *Mal d'Archive* ; c'est-à-dire cette archive considérée comme un point d'origine stable grâce auquel s'orienter. De plus, en remettant en question la notion de l'archive classique en tant qu'origine de la civilisation occidentale, Carson offre simultanément une critique de l'humanisme, en particulier au plan de la stabilité, du caractère mesurable et de l'autonomie de « l'homme ». L'archive, pour Carson, est ouverte, en cours et incomplète ; les manques linguistiques, chronologiques et affectifs de l'archive classique représentent ainsi des sources d'inspiration poétique.

La présente dissertation étudie quatre dimensions de l'archive classique : la critique, la saphique, l'élégiaque et l'érotique. Grâce à ces coordonnées, on y établit le statut

fragmentaire et fissuré du passé classique, tel que conçu par Carson. Si le fondement classique sur lequel la culture occidentale a été conçue est fissuré, qu'en est-il de la stabilité, des frontières et des catégories que sont le genre, la langue et le texte ? L'ouverture de l'archive critique de manière implicite les désirs de totalité associés au corps du texte, à la narration, à la traduction et à l'érotisme.

En offrant une recension exhaustive de sa poétique, *L'archive erronée* dans l'œuvre d'Anne Carson tente d'analyser l'accueil hostile qu'elle a subi, contribue à renforcer la documentation sans cesse croissante dont elle fait l'objet et anticipe sa transmutation actuelle de médium et de genre, sa migration de la page à la scène.

Mots-clés : Anne Carson, poésie contemporaine, critique féministe, archive, réception classique, Grèce antique, traduction, saphisme, psychanalyse, déconstruction

## Abstract

*The Erring Archive in Anne Carson* investigates the responsiveness of Anne Carson's poetry to the classical archive and argues that Carson works from within the space between the critical and the creative, generating what I call a "poetics of error." Carson's poetics is distinguished by a predilection for accidents, imperfections, and the contingencies of transmission. My dissertation also responds to and emerges from the ambivalent critical attitudes to Carson's dual identity as both a scholar and a poet. While the traditional aim of the classical philologist is to reconstruct the meaning of the "original" text, Carson's poetic approach self-consciously undermines scholarly pretensions to accuracy, precision, and totalization. Rather, Carson's encounter with the classical archive embraces the mistakes, misreadings, and mistranslation inherent in classical transmission and reception.

Carsonian poetics is ludic, gendered, and political. Her play with the wreckage of the classical past undermines the patri-archive, as critiqued by Derrida in *Archive Fever*; that is, an archive that is considered to be a stable, governing point of origin. Furthermore, by challenging the notion of the classical archive as the origin of Western civilization, Carson simultaneously offers a critique of Humanism, particularly the stability, measurability, and autonomy of "Man." The archive, for Carson, is open, ongoing, and incomplete; the linguistic, temporal, and affective gaps of the classical archive are thus opportunities for poetic production.

My dissertation examines four dimensions of the classical archive: the critical, the sapphic, the elegiac, and the erotic. By means of these coordinates, I establish the fragmentary and ruptured status of the classical past, as conceived by Carson. If the classical bedrock upon which Western culture has been conceived is fractured, what does this mean for the stability, borders, and categories of genre, language, and the text? The openness of the archive

implicitly critiques related desires of totality associated with the textual body, narrative, translation, and Eros.

*The Erring Archive in Anne Carson* is keen to analyze Carson's own vexed reception and contributes to growing Carsonian scholarship, as it provides a comprehensive entry into her poetics and anticipates her current generic and media shift from the page to the stage.

Keywords: Anne Carson, contemporary poetry, feminist criticism, archive, classical reception, Ancient Greek, translation, Sappho, psychoanalysis, deconstruction



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## List of Abbreviations

<i>AF</i>	Jacques Derrida, <i>Archive Fever</i>
<i>AP</i>	Walter Benjamin, <i>The Arcades Project</i>
<i>AR</i>	Anne Carson, <i>Autobiography of Red</i>
<i>BH</i>	Anne Carson, <i>The Beauty of the Husband</i>
<i>CC</i>	Gilles Deleuze, <i>Essays Critical and Clinical</i>
<i>CCR</i>	Lorna Hardwick & Christopher Stray, <i>A Companion to Classical Receptions</i>
<i>CL</i>	Roland Barthes, <i>Camera Lucida</i>
<i>D</i>	Anne Carson, <i>Decreation</i>
<i>GIG</i>	Anne Carson, <i>Glass, Irony and God</i>
<i>I</i>	Walter Benjamin, <i>Illuminations</i>
<i>INW</i>	Sappho, Trans. Anne Carson, <i>If Not, Winter</i>
<i>LD</i>	Roland Barthes, <i>A Lover's Discourse</i>
<i>MOH</i>	Anne Carson, <i>Men in the Off Hours</i>
<i>N</i>	Anne Carson, <i>Nox</i>
<i>NA</i>	Wallace Stevens, <i>Necessary Angel</i>
<i>PT</i>	Roland Barthes, <i>The Pleasure of the Text</i>
<i>PW</i>	Anne Carson, <i>Plainwater</i>
<i>RL</i>	Roland Barthes, <i>The Rustle of Language</i>
<i>ST</i>	Anne Carson, <i>Short Talks</i>

for Manish, as always

*sic erit; haeserunt tenues in corde sagittae,  
et possessa ferus pectora versat Amor.  
Cedimus, an subitum luctando accendimus ignem?  
cedamus! leve fit, quod bene fertur, onus.*

–Ovid (*Amores*, I.2.7-10)

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## Introduction

*“The beginning has as its purpose to set us on the road  
that leads to the end.  
It directs our attention*

*to our feet  
and asks us to remember  
the art of stepping along.*

*[...]*

*Stories and roads have something in common,  
an important delusion:*

*that this is the only way to get there.”*

–Anne Carson (“Shoes: An Essay on How Plato’s *Symposium* Begins”)

### **“A Joke about the Metre”**

In 1913, Marcel Duchamp produced *3 Standard Stoppages*. He took three pieces of thread (each measuring one metre long) and dropped them onto canvas strips. Next, he attached the threads, however they landed, to the canvas. Duchamp then took the canvas and cut along the curved profile of the threads, thus creating a new template of measure while still adhering to the length of one metre. Duchamp’s premise was that “if a straight horizontal thread one metre long falls from a height of one metre onto a horizontal plane distorting itself *as it pleases*, [it] creates a new shape of the measure of length” (Joselit 27).

By complicating our understanding of the metre as “a given,” Duchamp sought to undermine the ordered and rational basis of *measure* as a compositional procedure. Renouncing the linearity of the metre (and, by extension, its application for precise measure), he offers in its place an alternative model. Duchamp described *3 Standard Stoppages* as “a joke about the metre” and referred to it as “*du hasard en conserve*” ([“a bit of chance in a can”]) (qtd. in Spieker 54). Crucial to the work is the play of chance and accident.

In an interview in *The Paris Review*, Anne Carson says: “I’m happy to do things by accident” (Aitken). Indeed, Carson has received notable attention for the surprising and odd pairings in her works: Simonides and Paul Celan (*Economy of the Unlost*); tango music and Keats (*The Beauty of the Husband*); Catullus and her brother’s death (*Nox*); Sappho and television (*Decreation*). Carson makes clear that these links are both “totally arbitrary” and “totally careful”:

I have a sense of following, like a hound dog with my nose to the ground, but looking not for a track of scent, but a track of shapes. I think of ideas as having shapes and

when I sense that two different texts or writers have the same shapes in them, I know I can bring them together. (Aitken)

Carson's ideas come in a variety of sources: film, visual art, Japanese epigraphs, modernist texts, and psychoanalysis. Most prevalent in her growing body of work is a continual engagement with the classical archive. As a classicist, philologist, and translator, Carson has privileged access to antiquity, as one would expect of a well-trained scholar. Her comfort and proficiency with Latin and ancient Greek have led her to describe the classical world as "a home in [her] mind" (Aitken).

But Carson makes clear that her poetic deployment of classical material is in tension with the expectations of her scholarly training: "I was taught that objective reportage of academic questions is the ideal form for scholarship to take, but in pursuing scholarship myself I never found that possible" (Aitken). Carson's teachers describe classical antiquity as an object that can be handed down without contamination (the word "tradition" comes from the Latin "tradere" meaning "to deliver, hand over"). Reception studies, however, tend now to contest "the idea that classics is something fixed, whose boundaries can be shown" (Martindale 2). Similarly for Carson, the classical past is not just "a given" or an object of "tradition"; rather, it is *generated* by a complex process of reception, translation, and sedimentation. How we understand the classical archive is dependent on, and differentiated at, each point of its reception.

While Duchamp manipulates the traditional shape of the metre stick, Carson engages with the classical archive in such a way so as to undermine its monolithic construction and venerable position as the font of Western intellectual culture. The current state of classical reception studies corresponds to Carson's inability to acquiesce to an "objective" and "ideal



form” that is purely transmissible. Her poetry ironizes the philologist’s aim to reconstitute an integral, authoritative text from surviving fragments and instead responds to and embraces the mistakes, accidents, and loss that inevitably take place in transmission and translation.

Duchamp, as Carson well knew, experienced directly the contingencies of transmission. In the opening poem of *The Beauty of the Husband*, Carson quotes him directly:

‘Use delay instead of picture or painting –’<sup>1</sup>

...

So Duchamp  
of *The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors*

which broke in eight pieces in transit from the Brooklyn Museum

to Connecticut (1912). (5)

Also called *The Large Glass*, Duchamp’s installation shattered on its way to the museum. Rather than replacing the glass, he repaired it in such a way that the glass retained evidence of the accident. In fact, Duchamp “claimed to like it better that way” (Rourke). The imperfect surface of the artwork defies and defers the expectation of perfection and unmediated transfer. Both Carson and Duchamp find a rich artistic resource in this “delay.”

### **Doing Things by Accident**

*“Incidental benefit of my imperfect method.”*

–Anne Carson (Wachtel)

Carson, who is “happy to do things by accident,” is also happy to do things *with* accidents. Her creative praxis counters classical philology’s concern with “recover[ing] the meanings that ancient texts had in their original contexts” (Kallendorf 2). Indeed, if the dream of the

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<sup>1</sup> This quotation from Duchamp is one of the notes in his work, *The Green Box*, which is placed beside *The Large Glass* in the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

classicist is to access the past directly and reproduce an “original” text, Carson is more interested in the delay that prevents the fulfillment of this dream. These delays and deferrals come in the form of misreadings, mistranslations, errors in transcription – in short, the inevitable mistakes by means of which the classical archive comes down to us. Carsonian poetics is, to borrow Duchamp’s phrase, “*du hasard en conserve*,” or what I have termed a “poetics of error.”

Carson’s poetics of error thus works within the framework of accident, contingency, and play. Departing from the sombre image of the enlightened, humanistic scholar working in the dusty archives and libraries in order to reconstruct the Truth of the past, Carson delights in error. As the speaker in the poem, “Essay on what I Think About Most,” responds to the question of what preoccupies her: “Error / And its emotions” (*MOH* 30).

What Duchamp calls “delay” is, in fact, a space and opportunity for productive accidents. An accident, as Carson shows us, doesn’t just shatter an artwork into pieces; it reveals that art *is* fragmentary. No doubt, the classical archive is received in a state of wreckage, consisting of papyrus fragments preserved by chance. But, more importantly for Carson, this fragmentary survival tells us much about its “original” state. The integral archive is the philologist’s fantasy. The archive is always already fragmented. For Duchamp, the accidental damage done to *The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors* was considered an improvement. Carson similarly asserts, “In surfaces, perfection is less interesting” (Aitken).

We can consider, for example, the section “Stops” in *Decreation*, which, as with Duchamp’s *3 Standard Stoppages*, allows space for imperfection. In a series of fourteen short poems, Carson constructs a series of lyric moments that participate in an overarching narrative of the relationship between the speaker and her mother. Their relationship is marked by

distance (long-distance phone calls) and recurring images of sleep, light, and cold. The fleeting and ephemeral quality of their interactions is further punctuated with absence and emptiness. The poems conclude with phrases such as “hollow distances,” “stones go blank,” “Me, as ever, gone,” “Nothing for it just row” and “no sign of you” (*D* 4, 8, 12, 13, 16).

Carson presents fourteen “temporal stoppages,” which provide reflection and expression, but resist a *totalizing* narrative, or perfect story. Between each poem, or “stop,” are gaps, hollows, blanks, and negations. Carson addresses the fragmentation of this chapter, and poses a question which aptly concerns the archive: “In the sum of the parts / where are the parts?” (7).

In this dissertation, I investigate Carson’s engagement with the classical archive via her poetics of error in order to pursue a critical question: what does Carson’s predilection for imperfections, accidents, and error suggest with regard to the archive and classical reception? Carson’s responsiveness to Latin and Greek antiquity, I suggest, is a politically radical manoeuvre, not the mere self-indulgence of an expert classicist. Though, as we will see, Carson has been charged with useless erudition, her project involves destabilizing the mythical origin of Western Humanism. Humanism since the Renaissance has returned to the Greco-Roman archive and revived classical learning in order to establish the elusive category of “Man.” The return to antiquity that constitutes the humanistic project is inevitably a gendered consolidation of masculine privilege. As Rosi Braidotti puts it:

At the start of it all there is He: the classical ideal of “Man,” formulated first by Protagoras as “*the measure of all things*,” later renewed in the Italian Renaissance as a universal model and represented in Leonardo da Vinci’s Vitruvian Man. (13; emphasis mine)

Just as Duchamp tampers with the measure of the metre, Carson undermines Man as the measure of all things – that is, “man” as founded by the classical patri-archive.

Origins are particularly important to Derrida, a key figure for my interrogation of Carson’s deployment of the classical archive. In *Archive Fever* (which opens with, “Let us not begin at the beginning” [1]), Derrida’s critique of the traditional configuration of the archive as a point of “commencement” and “commandment” (derived from the Greek ἀρχή [*arkhē*]) is simultaneously a critique of Humanism. The archive, as Derrida argues, is not a self-enclosed entity, or what Spieker imagines as a “dream of total control and all-encompassing administrative discipline, a giant filing cabinet at the center of a reality founded on ordered rationality” (1). The past is not collected, ordered, filed neatly away, and guarded by a superior magistrate. “‘Archive’ is only a notion” (Derrida, *AF* 29) because the archive, in fact, is continually changing by what is added. Open to the future, the archive is always almost formed; “order is no longer assured” (5). Spieker concurs: “When an archive has to collect everything, because every object may become useful in the future, it will soon succumb to entropy and chaos” (xiii).

Carson’s poetics reassesses the traditional paradigms of the classical archive and the humanistic measure of “Man,” and calls into question notions of origin, stability, and fulfillment. I have linked “delay” with her poetics of error, and, in the course of this dissertation, shall also describe her “errancy” in terms of spatial, temporal, and linguistic divides (such as “gaps” and “leaps”), boundary-crossings (“leakage,” “rupture,” “spillage”), and excess (“residue,” “trace,” “dirt”). “Madness,” too, is found, quite literally, in the recurring figure of the demented father. Indeed, the strong and healthy father is initially

aligned with concepts that oppose Carsonian poetics, such as order, conservation, and containment:

To make up new stories, Celan's father thought, is a waste of words. This father's sentiments are not unusual. My own father was inclined to make skeptical comments when he saw me hunched at the kitchen table covering pages with small print. Perhaps poets are ones who waste what their fathers would save. But the question remains, What exactly is lost to us when words are wasted? And where is the human store to which such goods are gathered? (*Economy* 3)

Here we see an explicit conflict between the father, who is dubious about Carson's process, and the daughter, whose work as a poet seemingly "wastes" words. She does not collect, archive, or gather. Rather, she squanders and misuses language. Her query regarding the locale of where "such goods are gathered" echoes her earlier query in "Stops": "In the sum of the parts / *where are the parts?*" (*D* 7; emphasis mine). Strikingly, this passage anticipates the "waste of words" issued from the father when he succumbs to dementia. By extension, the broken father is a useful trope when discussing the chaos and madness manifested in the archive, the text, and eros. Finally, if the stable point of origin is brought into question, the projected point of finish is equally as uncertain. Carson, I shall demonstrate, is concerned with pursuits of *non-arrival*, be they translational, elegiac, or erotic.

### **Miswriting the Archive**

In an imagined interview with the ancient Greek poet, Mimnermos, Carson provides an arresting exchange about history that aptly consolidates her poetic concerns:

M: ... you can't dismember everything

I: Dismember

M: Sorry I meant remember (*PW* 23)

The dialogue demonstrates, firstly, the mistakes and slippages of language. In place of “remember,” Mimnermos erroneously uses “dismember,” immediately likening memory and history to a body that can be pulled apart. “Remember,” then, is not simply to recall, or commit to memory a past event, but to “re-member,” as in, to put a body back together. The past is no longer conceived as a single entity under the header, “History,” but is multiple, composed of building blocks that are disassembled as often as they are reassembled. History is not a “whole” made up of a sum of parts. This exchange enfolds error, history, and a resistance to totalization, motifs that are essential to my project.

In order to elucidate Carsonian poetics, the following coordinates organize my reading of her work and its encounter with the classical past: the critical, the sapphic, the elegiac, and the erotic.

### **The Critical**

Thus far, Carson’s reception has been generally bifurcated: some readers are thrilled by the experimentally donnish quality of her works, while others question the success of her use of scholarship. William Logan describes Carson as a poet who “moonlights as a classics professor (unless she’s a classics professor who moonlights as a poet)” (“Victoria’s Secret”). Logan, among others, expresses doubt as to whether Carson can indeed occupy both vocations equally, or if she is simply “moonlighting,” favouring one over the other. But critics who are uneasy about how Carson fits as both poet and classicist unknowingly play into the old Platonic divide between poetry and philosophy.

My opening chapter investigates Carson's reception and explores further the anxiety surrounding her dual vocations. I argue that Carson artfully and playfully confuses the two identities in a manoeuvre that is both aesthetic and political. Working between the writerly spaces of the critical and the creative is essential to her poetics. Furthermore, her process knowingly subverts this fundamental Platonic binary, while undermining the traditional standpoint of the classical past as the cradle of Western civilization. Crucial to my argument is an understanding of Carsonian poetics as contrasted to Virginia Woolf's classicism in "On Not Knowing Greek." While Woolf respects the temporal and linguistic gaps that separate her from antiquity, Carson locates her poetics within this space, appealing to the errors of classical transmission and reception. Carson engages with classical fragments not as a philologist who aims "to reduce all textual delight / to an accident of history" (*MOH* 34), but rather attends to and exalts such accidents *as* textual delight.

I conclude the chapter with an analysis of an earlier poem by Carson, entitled "Now What?" which deliberately yokes the voice of the scholar and the voice of a poet. Carson's translation of Sappho's fragment 55 in this poem demonstrates the necessary co-existence of the poet and the scholar. The scholia section, traditionally a marginal text, assumes the central body of the poetic text. The poem, I argue, is an exemplary illustration of Carson's work in general, as she situates herself within the liminal space between scholarship and poetry in a vital confusion of the distinctions between realms.

### **The Sapphic**

In *Nay Rather*, Carson states, "As a classicist I was trained to strive for exactness and to believe that rigorous knowledge of the world without any residue is possible for us" (32). In

my second chapter, I continue to explore the linguistic and temporal gaps discussed in the previous chapter, but this time, I address Carson's praxis in terms of "residue." Starting with Carson's gendered reading of Sappho's fragment 31 in "Dirt and Desire" and "The Gender of Sound," I adopt her analogies of the female body to "dirt," "leakage," and "rupture," and understand her use of the sapphic fragment as textual "residue" that breaches the given boundaries of the body of the text and categories of genre.

While Sappho has always been an important predecessor for female writers and artists, "Sappho," I argue, indexes not only her (imagined) personage, but also a textual and affective system characterized by absence, fragmentation, incompleteness, and chaos. As Carson states, "I think with Sappho, the main thing to do is to hold off giving a sense and let the sense emerge for the reader from what's left there and from the spaces around it" (Fleming). The "spaces" surrounding Sappho are precisely where Carson works from, as they provide opportunity for continuous, experimental play.

In this chapter, I trace the sapphic afterlife in Carson's poetry and demonstrate that the ancient poet's fragments are essential in producing a poetics of error. Furthermore, I argue that the fragmentary and spectral state of the sapphic corpus threatens the traditional constitution of the classical as a point of origin. Carson's engagement with Sappho resists the scholarly task of preserving and presenting a "world without any residue."

### **The Elegiac**

My discussion of Sappho addresses the poetics of absence, at once material and conceptual. With all but one of her poems received in fragments, "Sappho" gestures toward a perpetual lack. The textual residues, or traces, of the ancient poet and Carson's preference for "imperfect



surfaces” anticipate her intriguing work, *Nox*. Shifting from the classical and the sapphic, Carson turns to the familial and explores the possibilities of mourning and memorializing her late brother, Michael. Appropriating the state of wreckage that is associated with the classical archive, Carson presents in *Nox* a more personal archive consisting of the collected fragments of her brother.

My third chapter focuses on *Nox* and its strange materiality. Interwoven between the scraps of a personal archive are translations, definitions, and meditations upon each Latin word in Catullus’s elegy 101. Carson’s exploration and expression of her grief for Michael is simultaneously a perfectly literal attempt to translate the thematics of a grief that is felt by Catullus for his own brother. The more recent history of the lost brother lies adjacent (spatially, temporally, textually, psychologically) to the more distant and classical past of Catullus, thus allowing Carson to position herself and the reader within this temporal and linguistic tension. In this chapter, I argue that the grief felt for the lost brother is also grief for what is lost in translation, as well as grief for what is lost in the process of archiving.

While *Nox* is a more personal project, the book lends itself to a larger commentary on history, narrative, and memory. The private loss felt by Carson returns to the looming question of reconstruction: how do we reconstitute or re-member the past? The design of *Nox*, particularly its accordion pleat, suggests that the notion of a successful reconstruction (situated at some imaginary end point) is impossible. All that can occur is a folding and re-folding. “The prowler” supplies a remarkable metaphor for both Carson’s grief, her access to the past, and her writing. She prowls for the correct translation, just as she prowls for her brother. Prowling is, for Carson, a pursuit of non-arrival. We do not so much “translate,” “mourn,” and

“archive,” as prowl endlessly between languages, between losses, and between the untotalizable fragments of the past.

### **The Erotic**

The prowl is most emphatically present in Carson’s love narratives. Carson’s preoccupation with eros (beginning with her own study of love in *Eros the Bittersweet*) recurs throughout her work. The experience of love is a pursuit of non-arrival in which the lover yearns to become one with the beloved. Love, as Lacan has famously argued, is an ongoing search spurred on by the fantasy that there is, indeed, a corresponding half that can fulfill us.

Carson’s approach to her love narratives entails a necessary and vital engagement with memory and history. Her “love-gone-wrong” poetry is where her lyric impulse turns firmly toward the narrative. To recount or to write love is to “confront the *muck* of language” (Barthes, *LD* 99). In my final chapter, I draw a connection between the erotic and the archival and argue that to write love is also to confront the muck of the archive. My preceding discussions of the fragmentary state of the classical past are further nuanced by my exploration of the erotic dimension of the archive. Eros does not only refer to sexual desire, with the hopes of total consummation between lover and beloved, but also to a desire for wholeness that extends to memory, narrative, and the archive. While Carson considers eros as residing in between lovers and preventing the perfect dissolve of their boundaries into One, eros, I argue, is also the liminal poetic, affective, and conceptual space for error and errancy.

At the nexus of love, the archive, language, and the text is the recurring figure of the demented father. The father’s madness is a useful trope when discussing the collapse of the love fantasy and the impossible self-enclosed text. The father’s failing grasp of language

signals a weakening of the “Law of the Father,” as well as the disabling of other phallogocentric configurations. I conclude Chapter 4 with an analysis of *The Beauty of the Husband*. The narration of a failed marriage draws attention to the speaker’s struggle to navigate through a personal archive, as well as the Keatsian archive. A narrative of love, as Carson demonstrates, is always adjacent to other love narratives, be they literary or classical. A text is never a closed system, but is open to other texts. The archive is never complete, but reaches out to other archives. As Carson puts it, “Desire moves. Eros is a verb” (*Eros* 17).

### **Some Notes on Writing Carson**

*“... you leap off the building when you think poetically; you don’t amass your data and then move from point to point, you have to just know what you know in that moment. Something freeing about that.”*

–Anne Carson (Wachtel)

According to Carson, “the world is constantly giving things to you that you could be giving back” (D’Agata, “A\_\_\_” 18). The writing of this dissertation closely investigates the “things” Carson has received and given back, primarily her scholarship, engagement with, and creative renderings of the ancients, among them Sappho, Catullus, Mimnermos, Alkman, and Longinus. In addition, she reaches out to other writers, such as Keats, Gertrude Stein, and Emily Dickinson, as well as to visual artists, filmmakers, and philosophers. To read Carson is to read what she has read; to write on Carson is inevitably to read alongside her.

Narrative – its errors, stumbles, and stutters – is central to Carson’s work. My own narrative impulses in this thesis are no doubt borrowed from Carson who, in the above epigraph, likens poetic thought to leaping off a building. While I organize my chapters in a conventionally scholarly way that enables me to move from “point to point,” Carson has her own way of “spilling,” so I cannot quite collect every drop. For this reason, my discussions of

the critical, sapphic, elegiac, and erotic dimensions of the classical archive, as presented by Carson, are lengthy – as I pull (and continue to pull) on the many narrative threads she offers. This dissertation, in turn, is essentially a narrative of my attempts to trace the contours of several threads, or *films conducteurs*, in her writing.<sup>2</sup>

Carson’s experimental play with the useable and fragmentary past is a continual negotiation with time. To use her analogy, time is a “transparent loop” in which the past is laminated with the present: “the videotape jerks to a halt” (*GIG* 8). Likewise, I was aware of my own process of reading and writing Carson as a complexly temporal process. Tucked within my time frame of writing is a shared involvement with Carson, her texts, and, of course, the intersecting texts. Kathy Acker provides a precise account of the multiple aspects of time in regard to writing narrative:

... clock time and chaos in writing narrative are more complex. To begin, consider one aspect of time in the novel: the time it takes to write a novel. A novel’s a big thing. It usually takes at least a year, often many years. During that time the writer’s life changes. So there’s the time of all the actual changes the writer is going through – the time it takes to write the novel.

It takes time to read a novel. A novel is very rarely something you read in one sitting. So, that time incorporates all the reader’s memories, all the interstices, the time lapses between readings, all the returns to earlier parts of the novel, etc. Finally: the

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<sup>2</sup> My use of the word “films” is deliberate. Spieker provides a wonderful analysis connecting Duchamp’s *3 Standard Stoppages* with the configuration of the archive: “The French term *fil* (thread) is related to the English term ‘file,’ which in some Romance languages (such as Spanish and Portuguese) is translated as *archivo*. Its threads thus link *3 Standard Stoppages* to the archive in a very concrete way. Whereas in the registry threads were used to stitch files together, in the archive proper, special ‘archive knots’ that only archivists knew how to tie properly kept file folders closed. As I mentioned above, the earliest known archives contained objects neatly strung up on suspended threads, ‘one thing after another.’ These archive strings functioned as navigational tools – a kind of cybernetic feedback – that allowed their users to keep their bearings in time and space, much like the thread that once helped Theseus navigate his way through Daedalus’s labyrinth” (54-5).

fictive tie. The time within the story or the narration ... So in this sense a novel, structurally, is a time triad.<sup>3</sup> (17)

While I was mindful of Carson's time as writer in conjunction with my time as reader (including "all the interstices, the time lapses between readings, all the returns to earlier parts") – for a dissertation, too, adopts a parallel temporal model. The time it takes to write a dissertation encompasses "the time of all the actual changes the writer is going through" as well as the subject's changes, developments, and evolution.

Indeed, since I began work on this project in 2012, Carson has produced three more poetry collections, a booklet of two essays, and a modern translation of Euripides's *Iphigenia among the Taurians*.<sup>4</sup> Forthcoming publications include a collaborative collection that will accompany a group exhibition at the Aspen Art Museum.<sup>5</sup> In addition, the first book of critical essays on Carson will also be published this spring.<sup>6</sup> During this prolific period, she has received an honorary degree from the University of Toronto (2012) and was awarded the 2014 Griffin Poetry Prize. Finally, to add to this swelling interest and attention surrounding Carson, in 2014, two more fragments of Sappho were discovered.<sup>7</sup> I anticipate their appearance at some point in Carson's work.

My project comes at an exciting time in Carson scholarship. *The Erring Archive in Anne Carson* provides, I hope, an almost-comprehensive entry into her growing corpus. I address directly Carson's own reception, her long-standing (ir)reverence for the Greeks, and how the classical archive generates her poetics of error. Carson not only favours the ludic by

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<sup>3</sup> A "time triad" is something that would appeal to Carson, as she herself is continually concerned with the triangular structure of eros (lover, beloved, and that which comes in between).

<sup>4</sup> Poetry titles include: *Antigonick* (2012), *Red Doc* (2013), *The Albertine Workout* (2014), *Nay Rather* (2014).

<sup>5</sup> *The Blue of Distance* will be published in June 2015.

<sup>6</sup> *Anne Carson: Ecstatic Lyre* (Ed. Joshua Marie Wilkinson) will be published at the end of February 2015.

<sup>7</sup> See J. Romm (*The Daily Beast*): "Scholars Discover New Poems from Ancient Greek Poetess Sappho." See also Daniel Mendelsohn (*The New Yorker*): "Girl, Interrupted: Who was Sappho?"

way of plain accident, but also encourages a shift away from a humanistic attitude to one that is post-human.

Finally, there is no way to read anything without subjugating oneself and one's own time to the "clock time and chaos" of the narrative. To borrow Carson's own words:

dear shadow, I wrote this slowly.

Her starts!

My ends.

...

Watch me fold this page now so you think it is you. (*BH* 145)

## Chapter 1

### Reading Anne Carson: Scholia and Poetry

*"Poetry is the scholar's art."*  
–Wallace Stevens (NA 61)

It is a well-known and oft-reiterated fact that Anne Carson is both a poet and classics scholar. Her use of the Ancient Latin and Greek archive in her poetry has been a significant point of contention for critics. While Carson has been praised for her bookish references, some consider such esotericism inaccessible and rebarbative.<sup>1</sup> It strikes me, however, that much of the tension arising from these two vocations results from traditional expectations of the philologist's position toward history and language compared to that of the poet. The philologist's task is one of restoration, or "resurrection," in order to piece together the "original" text and establish its meaning. The precision and fidelity required in philology seemingly contrasts to Carson's poetic approach, as she tells us: "I'm happy to do things by accident" (Aitken).<sup>2</sup>

But this division amplifies a more general and traditional attitude toward ancient literature and raises the question: how can we understand Carson's stance toward antiquity, both as a poet and scholar, and how are these differences reconciled or mediated? In this chapter, I shall explore Carson's attitude toward this split in order to demonstrate that she, in fact, elides the scholarly and the poetic via a "poetics of error." I shall begin with discussing Carson's particular reception of the ancient past (in contrast to Virginia Woolf's approach in "On Not Knowing Greek"). Their differing approaches signal Carson's move toward a poetics of error, which jibes with how reception studies trouble and break down traditional notions of

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<sup>1</sup> Poet David Solway, in an interview published in *National Post*, states: "Carson has two styles: She is either very plain spoken, that is to say she writes something between prose or speech, or she is very esoteric, so you don't understand what the hell she's saying. These are her two styles, and neither of them is especially compelling" (Heer). Countering Solway are women writers such as Susan Sontag and Alice Munro, the latter stating: "I haven't discovered any writing in years that's so marvelously disturbing" (Heer).

<sup>2</sup> Perhaps the best way to illustrate the distinction between "scholar" and "poet" made by a number of critics is found in Mary Gannon's first impression upon meeting Carson: "When I saw her in person she looked every bit the classics scholar that she is. With crossed arms, glasses, and a cardigan sweater draped over her shoulders, she watched me from the landing of her second-story apartment while I fumbled to pay the cabbie in Canadian dollars. She looked serious, stately, and, I feared, humourless. Once we were inside she led me to one of her desks (she has three, each with a different purpose), where we sat by an open window. It was then that I noticed the vibrant pink of her lipstick, her unmatched earrings, and, pinned on the wall, her rendering in acrylic of a llama on wheels, details about her that conveyed an unexpected playfulness."



the “classical” and the archive, and call into question what has been traditionally deemed “fixed” and “definite.” In fact, Carson’s use of the classical archive from the position of a scholar is itself part of and essential to her poetics of error. I shall finish the chapter by closely examining two texts: “Life of Towns,” in which Carson discusses the role of the scholar, and “Now What?” in which the voice of the poet is also at once the voice of the scholar. “Now What”, an early poem by Carson, takes a Greek fragment by Sappho and reproduces it twice: once as a word-for-word Greek-to-English translation, and again with the inserted commentary of the scholiast. The juxtaposition between the two versions creates a productive tension between the literal and the creative, the scholarly and the poetic.

### **Reading Wrongly: Woolf, Carson, and the “Greek Original”**

*“My craft as you call it would have gone nowhere without the study of Greek, Latin, and language in general as a formal procedure.”*

–Anne Carson (King)

In order to gain insight into Carson’s nuanced stance toward the Greeks, it is instructive to consider, by way of contrast, Woolf’s “On Not Knowing Greek,” in which she describes the lure of Greek, the limitation of translating Greek, and the impossibility of knowing Greek. In this section, I shall also distinguish Carson from Woolf by way of Carson’s poetics of error and elucidate how their attitudes to the Greeks are embedded in reception studies.

In the case of the inherited intellectual archive, both Woolf and Carson are concerned with the Greek “original,” addressing Greece as an originary locus, an attitude that has dominated Western culture.<sup>3</sup> Greece, according to Woolf, is the site at which Western customs

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<sup>3</sup> While the “search for roots” has always preoccupied artists and thinkers, the nineteenth century demonstrated notable fascination and discoveries in all areas such as evolutionary biology and Darwinism, and psychoanalysis wherein Freudian theories are constantly tracing back to childhood in order to determine from what traumas adult neuroses stem. Such

and legends first began and thus provides the “originals,” or models, in their literature. Similarly, Carson describes the ancient language as “pure,” “older,” and “original” (D’Agata, “A\_\_\_” 7). Greek is always at some point of origin that gives rise to something else.<sup>4</sup> From both Woolf and Carson, we derive a sense that the Greeks are circumscribed in ancient history, marked as a point of commencement in language and literature. They are not just literary ancestors, but the first people to denominate their surroundings. It is no surprise that discovering and establishing meaning is a “Greek task” that situates the ancient people at the beginning of a Western intellectual archive.

When it comes to the ancient language, meaning for Carson and Woolf is described in spatial (and figurative) terms. Meaning, for Woolf, is located at a distance, “just on the far side of language” (14). She defines this as “meaning which in moments of astonishing excitement and stress we perceive in our minds without words” (14). What inhabits the “far side” cannot be ensnared; rather, the Greek word (and its translation) “points at but cannot indicate” (14) the meaning. According to Carson, Greek is “at the roots of meaning.” The “compacting” effect of a Greek metaphor is “just on the edge of sense and on the edge of the way language should operate” (Brockes).<sup>5</sup> For both women, Greek is on the “far side” of language, at an “edge,” and across a “chasm” (Woolf 11). When encountering Greek, there is a stretching of the mind and imagination across some void, a *reach* that crosses vast time and linguistic

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discoveries added and significantly shaped modernity; as Angelique Richardson points out: “With the publication of Darwin’s *Origin of Species* in 1859 the quest to know what and why and how it was to be human, moved, with dramatic speed, to center stage” (50). Modernity, thus, can be understood, in part, as a growing sophistication about the hypothetical and constructed nature of “origins.”

<sup>4</sup> As Carson states: “But as far as we can take any language back there is always a thing called Greek. And you can feel a sense of beginning from these people who were stumbling around in the world saying, ‘The name for this is blank and it’s just the right name for it’” (D’Agata, “A\_\_\_” 7).

<sup>5</sup> Both Carson and Woolf use the word “compact” to qualify the Greek language. Woolf states: “... there is the *compactness* of the expression. Shelley takes twenty-one words in English to translate thirteen words of Greek” (16). In an interview, Carson states: “There is something about the way that Greek poets, say Aeschylus, use metaphor that really attracts me ... It’s a kind of *compacting* of metaphor, without a concern for making sense” (Brockes).

difference. The act of reading Greek is neatly embodied in Woolf's use of the word "fling": "We can never hope to get the whole *fling* of a sentence in Greek as we do in English" (16). For Woolf, our minds cannot fling out across the void and lasso in the full meaning of a Greek sentence; rather, the force with which one "flings" is not entirely recoverable. As a result, Greek comes out distorted, "a vague equivalent," and Woolf poses a question that Carson takes up: "are we not reading wrongly?" (16).

Despite their shared recognition of the "originality" of Greek words, there is an important difference in the way Woolf and Carson approach the language. Woolf regards the leap from English to Greek, from the present to the past, as an impossibility that may lead to "reading wrongly," or error.<sup>6</sup> The homage paid to the Greeks as a primordial font suggests the impossibility of penetrating the hermetic status of the language. Carson, on the other hand, undermines this privileged position. Unlike Woolf, who is cautious around Greek translation because it poses a "source of glamour and perhaps misunderstanding" (16), Carson derives her own poetics precisely from this gap. She once described Greek as a "home in [her] mind" (Aitken) and comfortably navigates between the two languages. In contrast to Woolf, whose concern is "losing our sharp sight in the haze" (16) of time and translation, Carson underlines the ludic interaction between English and ancient Greek.<sup>7</sup> According to Carson, "words bounce" (*AR* 3). While the verb "fling" is a one-directional movement, "bounce" suggests that what moves up, will inevitably come down. Language offers, in Carson's metaphor, a reciprocity. In contrast to Woolf's "fling" of a Greek sentence, which suggests a difficulty in understanding, Carson's own choice of verb – "bounce" – is far more playful. Greek is an

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<sup>6</sup> Woolf makes it clear that "reading wrongly" arises from our inability to cross the temporal gap that separates us from the Greeks: "Those few hundred years that separate John Paston from Plato, Norwich from Athens, make a *chasm* which the vast tide of European chatter can never succeed in crossing" (11).

<sup>7</sup> As Carson states, "Greek is ... the best experience in the world, there's no reason to ever stop. It's just some amazing combination of the kind of puzzle-solving that goes into crosswords and amazing literature" (Brockes).

endless play, a game of puzzle-solving which, in its fragmented state, provides an infinite number of readings, as evidenced in her translations and retellings of Stesichoros, Catullus, Sappho, and Mimnermos.<sup>8</sup> Carson, herself, describes it as “translat[ing] badly” (McNeilly 12). Carson deems non-pejoratively the space between languages as a “place of error or mistakenness, of saying things less well than you like, or not being able to say them at all” (12).<sup>9</sup> Thus, when Woolf questions if we are reading “wrongly,” we would assume that Carson’s response would be, “Yes, and we prefer it that way.”

In addition to Carson’s great facility with the language, she recognizes, more importantly, the fertility of the gap (what Woolf terms “not knowing Greek”) and produces, renews, and rewrites from within its language, literature, and mythology. More importantly, what makes Carson’s poetic creations distinct and distinctive is that she never works alone. She thinks and writes through earlier texts, which is the point and resonance between the poet and the scholar. We should understand Carson, then, as a poet who dares to enter the gulf between present and past, English and Greek, and constructs meaning according to the parameters of error and misunderstanding.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Walter Benjamin notes that translation is also a mode that produces *change* within the original, thus accuracy and fidelity to the original can give way. See “The Task of the Translator” in which he writes:

If the kinship of languages is to be demonstrated by translations, how else can this be done but by conveying the form and meanings of the original as accurately as possibly? To be sure, that theory would be hard put to define the nature of this accuracy and therefore could shed no light on what is important in translation ... it can be demonstrated that no translation would be possible if in its ultimate essence it strove for likeness to the original. For in its afterlife – which could not be called that if it were not a transformation and a renewal of something living – the original undergoes a change. (172-3)

See also Sherry Simon’s “Crossing Town: Montreal in Translation” where she includes Anne Carson in her discussion of translation and the multilingual city: “When translation takes place onsite, between neighbours, it does more than communicate meaning. The closer to the borders where communities meet, the more translation exceeds its conventional role, expands into mixed forms, becomes an active participant in cultural history” (21).

<sup>9</sup> According to Carson, the purpose of dwelling in this linguistic and temporal space is to open oneself to possibilities and play, or to “put [one]self off balance, to be dislodged from ... complacency.” For Carson, Greek and its translation “continually does that dislodging” (McNeilly 12).

<sup>10</sup> D’Agata also uses the word “gulf” in his review of *Men in the Off Hours* and describes the book as “a very long lay-over in the gulf between scholarship and art” (“Review: Men in the Off Hours”).

What is this “space” for Carson, or what Woolf calls a “chasm”? Perhaps we can begin thinking about spaces and gaps by how they are conceived physically in Carson’s poetry. “In surfaces, perfection is less interesting” (Aitken), she states.<sup>11</sup> The distance in time that Woolf describes manifests itself in the wreckage of ancient Greek texts. According to Carson, this quality, as seen in its long process of deterioration, re-assemblage, and finally archivization, “add[s] up to more life” (Aitken). Reminiscent of Sappho, whose work comes down to us in fragments, Carson, too, resists a perfect surface where “meaning is all padded, costumed in normalcy” (D’Agata, “A\_\_\_” 14). We can better understand her approach to history and the Greeks via her attraction to ancient texts such as those of Sappho. She describes these broken texts as: “bits of papyrus with that enchanting white space around them, in which we can imagine all of the experience of antiquity floating but which we can’t quite reach. I like that kind of surface” (14). In the case of Sappho, the fragmented text is always accompanied with a void that is both textual and contextual, a loss that renders her work in, and as, a state of incompleteness.<sup>12</sup>

Carson’s own work embraces poetic surfaces pocked with absence. Indeed we encounter “imperfect” surfaces of varying typographical and aesthetic styles such as the strikethroughs found in “Appendix to Ordinary Time” (*MOH* 165), and the more obvious production of fragments in *Nox*, where the “enchanting white space” (D’Agata, “A\_\_\_” 14) lends itself to the reader’s imaginative construction of Carson’s dead brother. In addition to physical imperfections, or gaps, in her poetry, absence is an important component of her poetics. When reading Carson, we continually encounter an absence of *something*, or the space

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<sup>11</sup> Discussing the visual composition of *Nox*, Carson states: “A page with a poem on it is less attractive than a page with a poem on it and some tea stains. Because the tea stains add a bit of history” (Aitken).

<sup>12</sup> Carson is, in fact, seduced by this void: “[T]he space of not knowing has always been seductive to humans” (McNeilly 12).

that something once took up. For example, her first collection, *Short Talks*, begins: “Early one morning words were missing” (9). Carson’s narrator resides in this wordless world and takes up the “Greek” task of naming things and “beg[ins] filling in the parts” (ST 10). Absence also figures in her work as stolen or missing objects such as fascicles and notebooks, as well as those who have left, such as the faithless husband in *The Beauty of the Husband*, and those who have died, including Carson’s late mother and late brother. It is worth noting that for Carson, absence is something tangible, visible, and marked. Histories and memories also pervade the present as objects one can touch and hold. In “The Glass Essay,” for example, when the speaker’s mother tells her, “You remember too much...[w]hy hold onto all that?” (GIG 7), the speaker replies, “Where can I put it down?” In *Men in the Off Hours*, she describes death also as being like a “crossed-out line”: “by a simple stroke – all is lost, yet still there” (166). Death is even described in spatial terms: in *Nox*, Carson’s search for her dead brother is compared to “prowling” a room that does not end. Prowling absence, or the gaps in space and time, is endless. What accrues within this environment of lack or incompleteness is a process of speculation that always and inevitably opens up to an embracing of error and its creative potentiality. Carson, unlike Woolf, finds comfort in this “aura of incompleteness” (Steiner 27).

While Woolf searches for a linear and direct access to the past, Carson is more interested in leaps and jumps. What predominates this space are the various avenues her poetry takes. Considering herself a “messy writer” with “a basket of stuff that eventually looks like it has some informing idea,” Carson finds significance in the “connections between thoughts” (Brockes) which bring forth newness. Like the “*enchanting white space*” (D’Agata,

“A\_\_\_” 14) that surrounds Sappho and serves as a *tabula rasa* for imaginative possibilities, a similar movement can be found in the jumps between thoughts, which Carson seeks out.

To return to the analogy that Carson provides about Greek words as being within “the roots of meaning,” we can initially connect Carson’s use of “root” with its connotation of origin, cause, or source. However, considering her deliberation within the space between English and Greek, the word “roots” also suggests a network of plurality and variety, a matrix of infinite and rhizomatic possibilities and direction.

Carson’s diversion from Woolf’s philosophy of reception participates in a larger discourse on classical reception and touches on a question that has long preoccupied scholars of the classical age: how do we engage with the past – more specifically, an ancient past – that has been endowed with an “inherent superiority” (Hardwick and Stray 3)? Carson, a North American poet writing in a later time, has a historical and cultural distance not afforded to Woolf.<sup>13</sup> Woolf’s position toward the Greeks is rooted in a long history of the use of words such as “classical” and “canon.”<sup>14</sup> “Classical” texts – a term that strictly refers to ancient texts written by Greek or Latin authors – bring with them a sense of authority and value. In the same period when Woolf was writing “On Not Knowing Greek,” a series of forty-four books entitled *Our Debt to Greece and Rome* was published. These books were dedicated to the influence of “virtually all the great forces ... of the Greek and Roman civilizations upon subsequent life and thought and the extent to which these are interwoven into the fabric of our life today” (qtd. in Schein 75). Needless to say, Woolf and her contemporaries were following

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<sup>13</sup> Woolf studied Greek under Clara Pater, sister of Walter Pater. Walter Pater had a major impact on the development of the Aesthetic Movement. He is also the author of a number of Greek related texts such as *Plato and Platonism* (1893) and *Greek Studies* (1895).

<sup>14</sup> See Seth L. Schein’s “‘Our Debt to Greece and Rome’: Canons, Class and Ideology” (*CCR*) on the etymological history of “*kanon*” and “*classicus*.”

in the footsteps of their predecessors who also owed “a debt” to Greece and Rome, directly inheriting a Victorian veneration of the classical past.<sup>15</sup>

Classical texts have set a standard for what scholars have deemed valuable and authoritative and have served as models of literary excellence. Classicism’s early instalment into educational institutions (such as the highly influential work of Virgil and Ovid during the middle ages) reified its elite status and, as Seth Schein points out:

the “classical” ... came to be seen as a commodity, the consumption and conspicuous display of which could help students fulfil their desires for upward social mobility. It was as if classical works had an “aura,” to use Walter Benjamin’s term. (83)

Classicism implied influence and inheritance, or “a ‘meaning’ which could be grasped and passed on” (Hardwick and Stray 5). It is no surprise that even the word “tradition” suggests something that can be “grasped” and “passed on.”<sup>16</sup> This determination of the classical tradition as being already-made, already-available to be handed over from generation to generation, seals it off from the present. To establish something as a standard or measure of excellence (what Woolf calls the “stable,” “permanent,” and “original”) is also to prohibit revision and dialogue.

Reception studies, however, have turned our understanding of “tradition” (and “classicism”) on its head; how we regard the past is no longer so rigid.<sup>17</sup> Tradition, as explained in *The Invention of Tradition* (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983), is not something

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<sup>15</sup> See Budelmann and Haubold (*CCR* 17): “Renaissance or modern engagements with antiquity are shaped by many centuries of cumulative earlier engagements, starting in antiquity itself.”

<sup>16</sup> As Kellendorf makes clear, “The idea that the classics could be ‘handed down’ derives from the etymology of the word ‘tradition,’ which comes from the Latin *tradere*, meaning ‘hand down, bequeath’” (1).

<sup>17</sup> See Budelmann and Haubold (*CCR* 24): “[T]he concept of ‘tradition’ is both epistemologically and politically problematic. Traditions, as Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger influentially put it, are often invented, individually or collectively, consciously or unconsciously (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). There are few traditions whose existence cannot somehow be questioned, and there is no objective way of establishing whether something is a tradition, or what is and what is not part of a particular tradition.”



merely passed down and passively received, but is constantly undergoing change, making and re-making itself. Transmission of classical texts is accompanied by their reception and “dialogical reconstruction” (Hardwick and Stray 4). The fixed tradition of the classics opens up to the future and is no longer inherently “superior,” but is also governed by the present.<sup>18</sup> Reception, if anything, *closes* the temporal distance between antiquity and modernity.<sup>19</sup> The closing distance between the present and antiquity shifts the interface of meaning from between text and author (the moment of composition), to text and reader. The text opens up and extends from the author to include the reader, who becomes an active agent in its reception and meaning.<sup>20</sup> Roland Barthes also makes a similar point in his distinction of the work from the text: “the work is held in the hand, the text is held in language ... *the Text is experienced only in an activity, in a production*” (RL 57-8). While this is the case for all texts, it is more of a matter of *degree* when we confront ancient texts where there are other processes at play: historical transmission, translation, and material reproduction. A text written in our own time and in our idiom is less culturally and linguistically remote than a poem written by, for example, Sappho. As a result, the chain of reception affects a work and operates across history in varied and interesting ways.<sup>21</sup> The primary question, thus, is not necessarily what the text meant *then*, but what it means *now*.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> See Hardwick and Stray: “Once value is decoupled from one-directional transmission through time, then the cultural authority of the ancient work and hence of concepts such as ‘authenticity’ and ‘faithfulness’ is bound to be changed in some degree, although the question of how the reception relates to its Greek and/or Roman springboard is still vital” (5).

<sup>19</sup> See Martindale and Thomas’s “Thinking Through Reception” (*Classics and the Uses of Reception* 5-6): “Antiquity and modernity, present and past, are always implicated in each other, always in dialogue – to understand either one, you need to think in terms of the other.”

<sup>20</sup> See Roland Barthes’s *S/Z* in which he distinguishes the “writerly text” from the “readerly text.” The “readerly text” has a unitary meaning that is accessible by the reader. The “writerly text” requires the participation of the reader.

<sup>21</sup> See Martindale and Thomas’s “Thinking Through Reception” (*Classics and the Uses of Reception* 3)

<sup>22</sup> See Kenneth Haynes’s “Text, Theory, and Reception”: “[T]he question of what a classical text meant – either to members of its original audience or to readers in subsequent periods in history – is not in principle unrecoverable, though we may happen to lack evidence to treat it persuasively. The question of what a text means now, however, is another matter” (45).

The reciprocal exchange between past and present, transmission and reception, is something that should be kept in mind when we consider the archive, as conceptualized by Derrida. The question of the archive, for Derrida, is one that begins with its etymology: the Greek ἀρχή [*arkhē*]. The word, *arkhē*, “names at once the *commencement* and the *commandment*” (*AF* 1), that is, the pure origin in which the archive is retrospectively imagined to have begun as well as the commandment of the law installed “as” and “at” such origin. Already, we can understand *arkhē* in its relation to Woolf’s perception of the Greeks as a “stable,” “permanent,” and “original” point in history. The “original human being,” according to Woolf, is to be found among the Greeks, and it is from that that we derive our models as they now appear.

While any given culture may strive for an archive that is singular, unified, authoritative, and original, Derrida troubles this “patriarchal” operation by arguing that the archive is *not* a neutral assemblage of historical traces, but rather is a *techné* of legitimation, oriented toward the preservation of the status quo. Recalling my earlier discussion of the interlinearity of tradition and classicism, we should observe the implication of the archive in this pairing. Just as Derrida argues that the archive’s legitimation is crafted, and is a politically-motivated construction of the past for conservative purposes, Schein argues that “the ‘classical’ is an ideological construct” (76). In response to both concepts of the archive and tradition, we must question their “neutral,” already-given status and “resist the institutional construction of a self-serving literary canon and classical tradition” (Schein 84). While there has been a historical tendency to isolate the “origin” and regard it as a starting point distanced from us in the past, “the archive should call into question the coming of the future” (Derrida, *AF* 33-4). It is always future-directed: in the same way that an utterance can repeat itself, the normative

subject will be endlessly reproduced by the ritualistic “event” of the archive. Similar to tradition, which is made and re-made and not simply inherited, “archivization produces as much as it records the event” (*AF* 17).<sup>23</sup>

The interrogation of an assumed superiority of ancient works (what Hardwick and Stray call “the democratic turn” in classical reception [3]), Derrida’s conceptualization of the archive, and the dissociating of value from the one-directional transmission of “Tradition” all contribute to a possible reading of Carson. Prying the ancient text from its lofty position as an original or standard “classic” suddenly opens it up to other creative possibilities. The development of reception theory draws attention to the “active participation of readers ... in a two-way process, backward as well as forward, in which the present and past are in dialogue with each other” (Martindale 298). While the reader participates with the text at hand actively and in an infinite number of ways, the writer, too, engages with ancient texts in a manner that is varied and plural. Carson’s own engagement with classical texts is best illustrated in Barthes’s analogy of the onion:

if hithero we have *seen* the text as a fruit with its pit (an apricot, for instance), the flesh being the form and the pit the content, it would be better to see it as an onion, a superimposed construction of skins (of layers, of levels, of systems) whose volume contains, finally, no heart, no core, no secret, no irreducible principle, nothing but the very infinity of its envelopes – which envelop nothing other than the totality of its surfaces. (*RL* 99)

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<sup>23</sup> As Derrida states: “the logic and the semantics of the archive, of memory and of the memorial, of conservative and of inscription which put into reserve (“store”), accumulate, capitalize, stock a quasi-infinity of layers, of archival strata ... are at once superimposed, overprinted and enveloped in each other” (*AF* 22).

As Barthes indicates, reading for absolute and univocal meaning is to imagine literature as an apricot, where meaning can be found waiting in the centre. However, the pit is an illusion. Reading otherwise, as Carson does, is like peeling an onion: there are layers and layers, but nothing at the centre. There is no end point, or ultimate “truth” to a text, just a continual peeling, or “playing.” Indeed, many factors come into effect, such as the text’s history, its importance in its present socio-political milieu, earlier creative collaborations, and the writer’s own subjective response to the text. As Budelmann states, “there is no one single kind of relationship between tradition and reception; different texts require us to define this relationship in different ways, depending on the value they place on continuity, cultural authority and political relevance” (*CCR* 23). Carson’s analogy of Greek as being at “the roots of meaning” takes on a more etymological and archival register than strictly cultural or literary.<sup>24</sup> Her fascination with Greek and translation is reminiscent of what Emerson once said: “The etymologist finds the deadest word to have been once a brilliant picture. Language is fossil poetry” (26). The archive, as Carson demonstrates, *is* the word.

In *Eros the Bittersweet*, for instance, Carson peels back the layers surrounding the Greek word γλυκυπικρον [*glukupikron*] (“sweetbitter”) to reveal an endless play of meaning, intentions, and phenomena:

It is hard to translate. “Sweetbitter” sounds wrong, and yet our standard English rendering “bittersweet” inverts the actual terms of Sappho’s compound *glukupikron*. Should that concern us? If her ordering has a descriptive intention, eros is here being said to bring sweetness, then bitterness in sequence: she is sorting the possibilities

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<sup>24</sup> Carson’s use of “roots” does not quite fit with Deleuze’s conceptualization of the root as that which “plots a point, fixes an order” (*A Thousand Plateaus* 7), but is better compared to Deleuze’s rhizome: nonlinear and anti-genealogical, the rhizome splits off in unpredictable directions, and thus frustrates the imposition of order or *arkhē*.

chronologically. Many a lover's experience would validate such a chronology, especially in poetry, where most love ends badly. (3-4)

Carson's interpretation and understanding of the word, *glukupikron*, sets the stage for her study of eros in classical literature, returning to etymological roots and inverting our notion of "bittersweet."

Carson's ease with translating "badly" and with occupying the space between thoughts, languages, and literatures dovetails with the inherent "wrongness" or error in classical tradition. As Kallendorf argues, "If interpretation is not simply grounded in original meaning, the different readings of a classical text over time become not misreadings, but the only readings we have, ours being simply the last in a chain of receptions" (2). The active participation of readers, translators, and writers engaging with a given ancient text invariably tampers with the full recovery of the "original" meaning, if such a thing can even be posited. What results in Carson's poetry is what I wish to call *a poetics of error*.

Carson complicates and disrupts the traditional approach to the past as she provides an alternative way of engaging with history. The useable past, for Carson, is one that is absent, and, at most, incomplete. I use the word "useable" to give the sense that what is useable, or useful, is what remains. For Carson, a useable past is that which comes to us in shards or fragments and which catches our curiosity. The nature of this curiosity is not simply to reconstruct something that is believed to have existed, but to replicate that which was once present. Curiosity is not totalizing in its effort – rather, the shards and fragments become a point of departure for speculation, meditation, and resonance.<sup>25</sup> Carson's sense of the classical

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<sup>25</sup> Lydia Davis puts it best when she writes: "We can't think of fragment without thinking of whole. The word *fragment* implies the word *whole*. A fragment would seem to be part of a whole, a broken-off part of a whole. Does it also imply, as with other broken-off pieces, that enough of them would make a whole, or remake some original whole, some ideal whole?" (36).

archive begins with the scholarly, academic, and archaeological, but parts company with its goal to become the poetic and the inventive.

Carson's particular engagement with Greek fragments suggests a mode of reception that does not coincide with Woolf's reception of the classical archive. The Greeks are not used as stable models; rather they are in flux, giving rise to alternative narratives. Classical texts, as Julia Gaisser notes, are "not only moving but changing targets" (qtd. in Martindale and Thomas 4). This continual existence of difference is exemplified in *Autobiography of Red* when Carson discusses the variety found in the corpus of Stesichoros's fragments, which have been published thirteen times by different editors since 1882: "No edition is exactly the same as any other in its contents or its ordering of the contents" (*AR* 6). In fact, one reads the fragments of *Geryoneis* as if Stesichoros had "ripped [the poem] to pieces and buried the pieces in a box" (7). What results is a number of ways and combinations of re-composing and reading the text. While Carson has provided one way in her collection, she is aware that "you can of course keep shaking the box" (7).

Carson's deployment of Greek fragments not only counters the philological approach to the ancient archive but also undermines its accuracy and authority. We can get a sense of Carson's praxis in a reading of her poem, "Essay on what I Think About Most," which begins:

Error.  
And its emotions.  
On the brink of error is a condition of fear.  
In the midst of error is a state of folly and defeat.  
Realizing you've made an error brings shame and remorse.  
Or does it? (*MOH* 30)

In the first stanza of this poem, which is (incorrectly?) labelled as an "essay," Carson considers error and its associated, affective states: fear, folly, defeat, shame, and remorse. While we find evidence of these consequences in Woolf's essay as she describes the ineptness

of our translations, our inadequate understanding and recovery of the Greeks, Carson takes a “democratic turn” and questions our conventional approach toward error, thus opening up an alternative and revisionist dialogue: “Or does it?” The following stanza proceeds to investigate: “Let’s look into this.”

Going back to Aristotle and his discussion of metaphor in the *Rhetoric*, Carson regards error as “an interesting and valuable mental event” (*MOH* 30):

Aristotle says that metaphor causes the mind to experience itself  
in the act of making a mistake.  
He pictures the mind moving along a plane surface  
of ordinary language  
when suddenly  
that surface breaks or complicates.  
Unexpectedness emerges. (30)

Error (what she also calls “metaphor”) is essential in the creation of poetry and “making it new.” The experience of error is essential in allowing the mind to deviate from its regular path (“a plane surface / of ordinary language”) to unexplored territory. The deviation in which the “surface breaks or complicates” allows for newness. What at first looks “odd, contradictory or wrong,” may eventually make sense: “How true, and yet I mistook it!” (31). Thus, what is worthwhile is not reaching “the thing itself” but the process of mistaking it: “such mistakenness is valuable” (31).

For Carson, mistakes and metaphors go hand in hand in poetry. In line with Stevens’s description of the poem as “the act of the mind” (*The Collected Poems* 240), metaphors not only cause the mind to “experience itself / in the act of making a mistake,” but they also “teach the mind / to *enjoy* error” (*MOH* 30, 31; emphasis mine).<sup>26</sup> While Woolf steers clear of

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<sup>26</sup> Carson’s description of metaphor as the mind “experience[ing] itself / in the act of making a mistake” is reminiscent of the first line in Wallace Stevens’s “Of Modern Poetry”: “The poem of the mind in the act of finding / What will suffice” (*The Collected Poems* 239). Stevens’s poem itself contains a long extended metaphor of poetry as a stage.

translations and the unachievable recovery of the original meaning of a Greek sentence, Carson embraces the “unexpectedness” that emerges from mistakes. The example she provides in her poem is the fragment from Alkman’s Greek lyric, in which the speaker notes three seasons, but lists four.

*[?] made three seasons, summer  
and winter and autumn third  
and fourth spring when  
there is blooming but to eat enough  
is not. (MOH 32)*

According to Carson, Alkman’s “computational error” in counting the seasons is a way of expressing hunger. More than that, however, is the form of the fragment that Carson praises. In her reading, Carson elucidates not only the mathematical error found in the poem but the formalistic and grammatical imperfections that are transmitted in the poem as it is presented to us:

You notice the verb “made” in the first verse  
has no subject: [?]

It is very unusual in Greek  
for a verb to have no subject, in fact  
it is a grammatical mistake. (MOH 32)

The division between poet and scholar extends also to the difference between poet and philologist. As we shall see, Carson delights in the error found in Alkman’s fragment, unlike the philologist whose work stops at “the threshold of technical detail” (Gurd 5). The scholar, described by Gannon as “serious, stately ... humourless,” also shares these qualities with the philologist and her respective field:

[W]hat have come to be seen as the most characteristic hallmarks of “*serious*”  
philological scholarship [are]: the *dutiful* noting and cataloguing of alternative views,



the compilation and *responsible* reporting of bibliographical references, and, in critical editions, the presentation of textual variants.<sup>27</sup> (Gurd 10; emphasis mine)

Counter to the usual approach that a philologist undertakes in her claims that “this mistake is just an accident of transmission” and that this is “surely a fragment broken off / some longer text” (*MOH* 33, 34), Carson dwells on this error. The speaker states:

Well that may be so.

But as you know the chief aim of philology  
is to reduce all textual delight  
to an accident of history.  
And I am uneasy with any claim to know exactly  
what a poet means to say.  
So let’s leave the question mark there

at the beginning of the poem  
and admire Alkman’s courage  
in confronting what it brackets. (*MOH* 34)

What we have here is not only a cutting commentary on the work of those philologists who minimize “all textual delight,” but praise for error. Carson’s engagement with Alkman is a unique point of contact in the long chain of reception, and rather than considering the fragment’s form as a deficient or accidental product of its transmission (the original longer text being better or more “complete”), Carson regards the text as is and praises the courage of the poet in committing an error. Alkman “sidesteps fear, anxiety, shame, remorse” (*MOH* 35) and does what a poet is expected to do: imitate.

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<sup>27</sup> I should note that Sean Gurd’s *Philology and Its Histories* (2010) is an important work in reconsidering the philological field; philology is “no longer just a mode of scholarship, but has become one of its objects” (5). Just as the “democratic turn” in classical reception questions the inherent authority of ancient texts, Gurd also investigates the dynamics of philology:

What the history of philology has the potential to reveal is that the choices made in adjudicating the mutually informing paradigms of history and philology constitute a crucial element in the poetics of culture generally, and can influence not only how modern conversations about the past are conducted, but also the very nature of that past and the specific dynamics of its reconstruction and appropriation. This means more than that philology and history are generative of historical consciousness. It means in addition, and more worryingly, that the relationship between past and present, between the means of study and its object, are much more convoluted and interpenetrating than is often assumed. (7)

I offer Gurd’s definition as it illustrates the presumed “seriousness” of philology – something that Carson illuminates in this poem.

he is a master contriver –  
or what Aristotle would call an “imitator”  
of reality.  
Imitation (*mimesis* in Greek)  
is Aristotle’s collective term for the true mistakes of poetry.  
What I like about this term

is the ease with which it accepts  
that what we are engaged in when we do poetry is error,  
the willful [sic] creation of error,  
the deliberate break and complication of mistakes (*MOH* 35)

Metaphor, then, comes into play in similar ways for Woolf and Carson in considering meaning and poetry, both of which find their nexus in Greek. Woolf compares the Greek language to metaphor, where “meaning is just on the far side of language ... and points at but cannot indicate” (14). Aeschylus, whom Woolf uses as an example, deploys metaphor to “amplify and give us, not the thing itself, but the reverberation and reflection which, taken into his mind, the thing has made; close enough to the original to illustrate it, remote enough to heighten, enlarge, and make splendid” (14). For Carson, her understanding of poetry derives from Aristotle’s consideration of metaphor and its role in mistakes, *mimesis*, and the “unexpectedness” that emerges.

However, there is some anxiety on Woolf’s part about the figurative distance that is intrinsic to metaphor (“close enough ... remote enough”) that translates into the distance between the Greeks and us. There is great difference “between this foreign people and ourselves” in “race and tongue” (10), Woolf points out, and that quoting and extracting does damage to the Greeks (15). Woolf’s inclination toward seeking out “the original,” maintaining wholeness and completion of the Greek inheritance, is a long-established mode of thinking about the classical past and archive (as is philology). Carson, on the other hand, welcomes the loss, absence, and gaps of Greek culture and incorporates such imperfections within her own

poetics. “Consider incompleteness as a verb” (*PW* 16), she states. Her use of the Greek past forces us to reconsider our understanding of tradition, inheritance, and the archive by troubling their assumed inherent superiority and wholeness. By drawing attention to the errors of reception and taking a critical distance from the *illusion* of perfection, Carson destabilizes the Greek’s authoritative position. For Carson, the importance of error is one that is prevalent in poetry and, more importantly, basic to the human condition: “The fact of the matter for humans is imperfection” (*MOH* 35). Imperfection is universal and “incompleteness” is something we are continually *doing*, confronting, and exploring. There is no pit to be reached, just endless peeling of layers and layers.

Woolf begins “On Not Knowing Greek” by drawing attention to the space between the Greeks and ourselves: there is “a tremendous breach of tradition” (10). Woolf describes the temporal and linguistic breach, or gap, that separates them from us. The Greeks endure in their idyllic place in history while “we are of a ruthless fate” (17). Carson, I would argue, demonstrates another sense of “breach.” “Breach” is also a breaking of a law or agreement. So while Woolf reinforces both the law and authority of the Greeks, Carson works *against* this authority. Her departure from Woolf’s traditional stance toward the classical past is itself a break from the conventional understanding of tradition, and is thus more open to innovative and playful engagements with the archive. The “tremendous breach of tradition” is also a linguistic gap that Carson dwells in, where reaching the Greeks is secondary to the experience of productive errors that arise in our readings. Woolf describes the Greeks as “drawing us back,” but Carson resists this passive movement and actively participates in creating something alternative and new. Instead of seeking out a linear current, Carson attempts to “find the line and go someplace else” (D’Agata, “A \_\_\_” 15). The importance of error in her

poetics is not simply to mean *a mistake*, but error as in *to err*, to wander, and go astray. What we see in Carson is more precisely the “errant” error.

### **Carson’s Reception: Scholar vs. Poet**

A number of critics have drawn attention to Carson’s biography – particularly the lack of available personal information.<sup>28</sup> Carson has been known to withhold details in her author biographies providing, at most, a quick sentence, as seen in *Antigonick*, for instance: “Anne Carson was born in Canada and teaches ancient Greek for a living.”<sup>29</sup> These slivers of personal detail make her appear mysterious and elusive. In *Closer to Home*, a book of author portraits by Terence Byrnes, Carson “placed a surprising restriction on [their] shoot” and told Byrnes: “You can only take one picture of my face” (28). Her avoidance of such attention has given her the reputation of being somewhat of an enigma, and a recent interview in *The New York Times*, aptly titled, “The Inscrutable Brilliance of Anne Carson,” encourages this impression. The interview, conducted by Sam Anderson, opens with the fact that “Carson is a private person.” Anderson even attempts to answer the question, “Where does Anne Carson come from?” and supplies three possible answers: Canada (where she was born), Michigan (where she lives), or ancient Greece (where “she has spent a large percentage of her mental life inhabiting that distant world”). The final possibility is interesting in that it situates Carson alongside poets of antiquity who have also been studied in the hope of reconstructing a biography. The desire to know Carson (or know more from what little is collected) is

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<sup>28</sup> To name a few, see Burt (2000), Stanton (2003), Rae (2003), Ward (2001). Perhaps the most notorious criticism of the lack of Carson’s biographical information comes from David Solway who states sarcastically in his article, “The Trouble with Annie: David Solway Unmakes Anne Carson”: “we learn that ‘Anne Carson lives in Canada.’ That’s it! No more information is needed for so illustrious a personage. The implication is that Canada is fortunate for being put on the map by virtue of its association with Anne Carson” (26).

<sup>29</sup> When asked to tell readers more about herself, Carson responds: “I am tallish with brown hair. I am not very interested in biographical data. ‘Today is most of the time,’ as Gertrude Stein said” (di Michele 7).

comparable with the desire to *know* the lives of ancient poets from their fragments of poetry, mainly because that's all that remains. But the study of poetry becomes problematic when biography becomes a primary issue.<sup>30</sup> Ellen Greene points out that with regard to women poets in ancient Greece, "Early twentieth-century scholars often focused on women's biographies" (*Women Poets* xii). Sappho, for instance, has been cast in a number of roles such as schoolmistress, lesbian, musician, lover, among others.<sup>31</sup> Her fragments have been used by scholars to glean details of a personal life. As Holt Parker writes, "We have always approached Sappho looking for traces of her private life" (5).

In her own translation of Sappho's fragments, *If Not, Winter*, Carson draws attention to this preoccupation with the ancient poet's biography and states, "Controversies about her personal ethics and way of life have taken up a lot of people's time throughout the history of Sapphic scholarship. It seems that she knew and loved women as deeply as she did music. Can we leave the matter there?" (*INW* x). While Carson, in this case, is speaking for Sappho, perhaps the matter of "personal ethics and way of life" can also be applied to Carson herself, who actively resists autobiographical revelation the presence of her own personhood. In "Stanzas, Sexes, Seduction," she writes:

I want to have meaningless legs.  
[...]  
I do not want to be a person. (*D* 72)

The opening sentence of *Economy of the Unlost*, too, suggests that the "failure" in her poetry is that "[t]here is too much self in [her] writing" (vii). Indeed, in an interview in *Publishers*

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<sup>30</sup> See Mary R. Lefkowitz's "Critical Stereotypes and the Poetry of Sappho" in *Reading Sappho* (Ed. Ellen Greene), which begins: "Criticism of creative art seems curiously dependent on biography" (27). Lefkowitz compares criticism of Sappho to criticism of Emily Dickinson (another poet who also figures in Carson's work). Her argument that "biographical criticism, in the case of the women poets Dickinson and Sappho, may keep us from seeing what the poets say" (35) also pertains to my comparison of Carson to Sappho.

<sup>31</sup> See Margaret Reynolds's *The Sappho Companion* (2001).

*Weekly*, she expresses an aversion to blurbs on the back of her books: “I want to have a blank book. This is my aim. Nothing. No biography, no author’s photos, no quotes from whoever, just the book ... [Reviews] take up space, they become a process of manufacturing a persona, which I want to avoid” (Burt 56). Nevertheless, persona and biography still creep into how readers approach Carson’s work. As in the case with Sappho, the matter of biography also hounds Carson. What is known (and frequently mentioned) about Carson is that she is a poet as well as a classics scholar. She herself does not pay much heed to these titles, calling herself a “visiting [whatever]” when she appears at a university.<sup>32</sup> However, her work as a poet and her position as an academic become a point of interest for critics, some of whom struggle to reconcile the two vocations.<sup>33</sup> David Ward, for instance, makes the distinction between a classicist and a poet: “Classicists work from texts, post-modern poets from within their heads, and Carson’s unstable attempt at marrying the two disciplines continually jars” (14). Robert Stanton, too, asks, “Can Carson bring the two sides of her own work – her scholarly accuracy, her poetic ‘mistakes’ – into a similar congruence?” (28). Most notably, David Solway, who criticizes Carson’s “celebrity” status, bluntly states: “Carson may be our newest pedestaled inamorata but the fact is, and I say this unabashedly, she is a phony, all sleight-of-hand, both as a scholar and a poet” (24). The division between classicism/scholar and postmodernism/poet is reminiscent of the dialectic that exists between “tradition” and “reception,” as well as the opposing views of antiquity held by Woolf and Carson.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> See Carson’s interview with Anderson (“The Inscrutable Brilliance of Anne Carson”) in which he states: “In her day job, Carson, who is 62, is a professor of erratic subjects (ancient Greek, attention, artistic collaboration) at various universities around North America, where she appears for a semester at a time as — as she often puts it — “a visiting [whatever].” (Even when she says this out loud, she makes the bracket sign with her hands.) This, I think, is the best catchall description of Carson. Wherever she goes, whatever she does, she is always a “visiting [whatever].”

<sup>33</sup> Neil Corcoran also touches on something similar here: “The imaginative and the critical or philosophical impulses in this writer form a single creative urge or push. This has made for some controversy regarding [Carson’s] status as ‘poet’” (373).

<sup>34</sup> See Martindale: “[R]eception’ was adopted precisely to underline the dynamic and dialogic character of reading ... ‘Tradition,’ by contrast, might imply that the process of transmission is comfortably uncontested” (300).

While poetry is imagined to be unstable and even frivolous, the scholarly pursuit is decidedly in an opposite camp and involves restorative processes that aim for wholeness, as elucidated by Page duBois:

Classical scholarship and biblical scholarship have always been in part efforts of restoration. Philologists have tried to *make whole what was broken* – to imagine and guess at the missing parts, to repair what was transmitted inaccurately, to change, excise, add, to return to the *original and perfect* text that we can never know.<sup>35</sup> (37-8; emphasis mine)

Setting the philologist against the poet is evocative of the ancient quarrel between poetry and philosophy, which goes back as far as Plato's *Republic*. Poets, the harmful imitators of truth, are considered dangerous, and we are warned that "poetry is not something to be taken seriously, as something important, with some bearing on the truth" (608a7-b1, 329-330). On the other hand, philosophers, like scholars, are not "makers" but discoverers of truth on account of their capability of recognizing it. As asserted in the *Republic*, to be one or the other is important: a philosopher is worthy to rule as king. A poet, however, would be expelled. Carson, no doubt familiar with this opposition, finds herself in the middle. The platonic division slips in and affects Carson's own reception.<sup>36</sup>

It is worth speculating that Carson's aim at "a blank book" is really an attempt to remove herself from these discourses on personal detail (recall her coming to Sappho's defense: "Can we leave the matter there?") as Ward, Stanton, and other critics place

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<sup>35</sup> Page duBois goes on to express the importance of this type of scholarship, and inquires into our desires for wholeness: "Their efforts at restoration must continue, as labour over textual mysteries, as supplementation of our ignorance. But until the day of glorious resurrection, when all the bodies of ancient poems are miraculously restored in their integrity, what are we to do with the fragments of such a poet as Sappho? Are we to leave them aside until they are miraculously restored? Are we to continue to long for wholeness, to imagine, for example, what the whole poem that surrounds a two-line fragment must be?" (38).

<sup>36</sup> Ward insists on the division between scholar and poet and struggles to decide where Carson fits. He describes *The Beauty of the Husband* as "a conditional breakthrough for Carson as a poet, instead of a scholar writing as a poet" (16; emphasis mine).

importance on Carson's life outside of poetry over the work itself. Just as Sappho has been reductively summarized as "poet," or "lesbian," or "schoolmistress," Carson has been titled as "poet" and/or "classicist," and the attendant qualities of each moniker are, as critics quickly point out, incongruous.<sup>37</sup> Reactions to her work, thus, are split. Is Carson *too* scholarly for poetry? Logan states, "Carson is a classicist with avant-garde longings ... [she] is a great believer in blather" ("The way of all flesh"). He describes *Decreation* as having "the burnt-toast reek of academic air" ("Victoria's Secret"). But by pitting the poet against the scholar, these criticisms drive a wedge between the two crafts. How does Carson reconcile or respond to this? Just as she is mindful of the distance between herself and the Greeks (which I've argued is a source of play and creative accident), Carson is also mindful of the platonic dichotomy between Truth and poetry. As a classics scholar, she is well-acquainted with this ancient opposition; what critics have highlighted is not Carson's "unstable attempt at marrying the two disciplines" (Ward 14) but *their participation* in this age-old struggle between the two disciplines, which marks and limits their readings of her work. Ultimately, Carson's scholarly "(in)accuracies" are *intrinsic* to her poetics, as we have seen in her reading of Alkman's fragment.

Preceding the poet and scholar divide, however, is Carson's orientation toward language. Carson's poetry and scholarship are intertwined and driven by her fascination, not only with poetic forms, but, primarily, with words. Working among multiple languages, she is always dipping into etymology, philology, translation, and grammar. Carson is interested in

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<sup>37</sup> Not only is Carson both a poet and a scholar, but perhaps also at play in her reception is the fact that Carson is a *female* classicist. See Barbara McManus (*Classics and Feminism*) in which she provides the first book-length study of gender and classic scholarship, including statistical studies of various aspects of the profession. There has been, as she notes, anxiety "to preserve the masculinity of the category 'classicist'" (39).



how language works, how it connects, whether poetically or academically. Language is, as Carson makes clear in *Plainwater*, a route to the strange:

Language is what eases the pain of living with other people, language is what makes the wounds come open again. I have heard that anthropologists prize those moments when a word or a bit of language opens like a keyhole into another person, a whole alien world roars past in some unarranged phrase ... The research comes alive in unexpected ways. (232)

More importantly, the work of language (“work” as in the language-creation, as well as its labour) is inexhaustible. Carson’s primary concern, which she highlights in her first collection, has always been words:

I emphasize this. I will do anything to avoid boredom. It is the task of a lifetime. You can never know enough, never work enough, never use the infinitives and participles oddly enough, never impede the movement harshly enough, never leave the mind quickly enough. (ST 9)

### **Towns: Painting the Lines of Position**

For Carson, both the poet and the scholar operate on the same level. By undermining the authority of the classics, she is also undermining the clichéd role of the scholar. In the introduction to “Life of Towns,” Carson turns the figure of the academic on her head:

A scholar is someone who takes a position. From which position, certain lines become visible. You will at first think I am painting the lines myself; it’s not so. I merely know where to stand to see the lines that are there. And the mysterious thing, it is a very mysterious thing, is how these lines do paint themselves. Before there were any edges

or angles or virtue – who was there to ask the questions? Well, let’s not get carried away with exegesis. A scholar is someone who knows how to limit himself to the matter at hand. (*PW 93*)

Indeed, this description ties in closely with the scholar who works within the limits and boundaries of reconstruction. The mode of scholarship Carson describes as “limited” is specific to her context of classical studies, specifically the hermeneutics of a text. However, Carson speaks about the critical task of the scholar in creative terms. The speaker here is “a scholar of towns” – a curious vocation – but what is that exactly? Carson defines a town as “matter which has painted itself within lines” (*PW 93*). A clearer definition, I propose, is that a “town” is any point (a quotation or an argument) within a given discourse. Just as Carson speaks of the Greeks in spatial terms, academia is also presented in terms of space and locality. In this metaphor, a scholar is one who, by postulating, chooses and resides in a town.

However, Carson makes clear that the painted lines of a “town,” or a given position, are not fixed. “But what about variant readings?” (*PW 93*) the speaker wonders. Variety, or the multiple readings and interpretations of a text, suggests instability. Thus, “Towns are the *illusion* that things hang together” (93; emphasis mine). To illustrate the variety of “towns,” Carson quotes a passage, translated from the Chinese, from Chapter 23 of Lao Tzu’s *Tao Te Ching*.

*A man of the way conforms to the way; a man of virtue conforms to virtue; a man of loss conforms to loss. He who conforms to the way is gladly accepted by the way; he who conforms to virtue is gladly accepted by virtue; he who conforms to loss is gladly accepted by loss. (PW 93)*

The passage is what she terms the “Town of Lao Tzu.” However, a scholar by the name of Kao contests the translation of a word found in the quoted passage: “The word translated ‘loss’ throughout this section does not make much sense ... It is possible that it is a graphic error for ‘heaven’” (94). Indeed, re-reading the passage again by replacing the word “loss” with “heaven” alters the whole meaning entirely. By taking a different position than Lao Tzu, Kao makes up his own “town,” which Carson calls “Town of Kao.” Resulting from this mistake, or “graphic error,” are two distinct “towns.” Whichever scholar the reader sides (or resides) with may differ from Carson’s speaker: “The position you take on this may pull you separate from me. Hence, towns. And then, scholars” (94). This separation, or distance, that arises plays right into Carson’s preference for leaps and jumps. What Carson is interested in is the “between-ness” that separates towns, or the space that exists and disunites Lao Tzu’s “loss” with Kao’s “heaven.” But this error also unites “loss” and “heaven” – while they are separate “towns,” they participate within the same discourse, or, to continue with this metaphor of place, the same “district.”

Considering this example, we begin to understand what is meant by “my pear, your winter” in the first line of the introduction: “Towns are the illusion that things hang together somehow, my pear, your winter” (*PW* 93).<sup>38</sup> Things “hang together” neatly, but the illusion is that adherence is brought about by error. In the Lao Tzu and Kao example, “loss” and “heaven” are separate towns, but as a result of error, each is also a replacement of – and for – the other,

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<sup>38</sup> A good question to ask is, “Why these two nouns?” I have understood Carson’s use of “pear” and “winter,” or “loss” and “heaven” as linked via “graphic error” and “illusion” of coherence. While it is difficult to say for certain, some insight into this can be found in *Plainwater* where Carson also discusses language in reference to “towns” and “districts”: “I have heard that anthropologists prize those moments when a word or bit of language opens up like a keyhole into another person, a whole alien world roars past in some unarranged phrase ... you hear a Berliner say ‘squat town’ – and suddenly, see sunset, winter, lovers coking eggs in a grimy kitchen with the windows steaming up, river runs coldly by, little cats go clicking over the snow. You can fill your district notebook with these jottings, exciting as the unwary use of a kinship term ... The research comes alive in unexpected ways” (232).

creating polysemic results. At the end of her introduction, Carson inquires into this “in-between” space between “loss” and “heaven,” and “my pear” and “your winter”:

What if you get stranded in the town where pears and winter are variants for one another? Can you eat winter? No. Can you live six months inside a frozen pear? No. But there is a place, I know the place, where you will stand and see pear and winter side by side as walls stand by silence. Can you punctuate yourself as silence? You will see the edges cut away from you, back into a world of another kind – back into real emptiness, some would say. (*PW* 94)

In the introduction to “Life of Towns,” Carson’s speaker has established herself as someone who seeks out the midpoint between words and semantics. If a town is “matter which has painted itself between lines,” then Carson stands at a point where the view is indistinct, illusory, a point where “pear” and “winter” are interchangeable. This “illusion,” as she calls it, is reminiscent of St. Peter’s Square where Bernini marked two spots, halfway between the fountains and the obelisk, so that if someone were to stand on one of these spots and view the four-column-deep colonnade, the columns would precisely line up and create the illusion of a single column. Language, too, is not tautological, but dialogic and dynamic. The “place” the speaker occupies can be considered the “poetic,” where, via metaphor, we can meditate upon language’s possibilities, limits, and slip from the literal to the hypothetical. Carson’s speaker seeks this place where “winter” and “pear” overlay and become “variants for one another.” One can indeed “eat winter” and “live six months inside a frozen pear.”

To demonstrate the task of “a scholar of towns,” Carson provides in this section of *Plainwater* a series of towns named after individuals (“Lear Town,” “Freud Town,” “Sylvia Town,” “Emily Town”), popular themes (memory, luck, death, love) and obscure phrases

("Finding Out About the Love of God," "Man in the Mind at Night," "the Sound of a Twig Breaking"). What is striking is not only the random juxtaposition of these poems (there do not appear to be any clear links, just that they are all under the header of "towns"), but how Carson plays with punctuation.

Each line appears to be a complete sentence, with each line ending with a period and the next line beginning with a capital. However, it becomes apparent that Carson has broken up her sentences (arbitrarily?), giving the *illusion* that each line is complete and coherent, or "hanging together." Below is the first poem of the section, "Apostle Town":

After your death.  
It was windy every day.  
Every day.  
Opposed us like a wall.  
We went.  
Shouting sideways at one another.  
Along the road it was useless.  
The spaces between.  
Us got hard they are.  
Empty space and yet they.  
Are solid and black.  
And grievous as gaps.  
Between the teeth.  
Of an old woman you.  
Knew years ago.  
When she was.  
Beautiful the nerves pouring around in her like palace fire. (*PW* 95)

The reading of the poem is clumsy, as we have been conditioned to pause at the periods, to take a breath at the line breaks. The period, or "telia" from the Greek τέλος ("end"), marks the end of a complete thought.<sup>39</sup> But what Carson has done with the period is mark the middle, thus, stuttering our reading and creating a difficult experience. We can read this poem using

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<sup>39</sup> Teleology (from *telos*), or an account of a given thing's end, may be of particular interest for Carson. The "end," much like the "beginning," is a concept that she complicates. Her use of the period in these poems denies both a conventional end and a conventional beginning.

Deleuze's concept of the stutter. For Deleuze, the stutter puts the majoritarian language on a line of flight. The stutter is created when the writer defamiliarizes his or her own language, making the familiar language strange and thereby becoming a stranger in that language. It marks an unprecedented deviation.<sup>40</sup> Language becomes more than a vehicle that delivers a message; rather, language "trembles" and becomes "an affective and intensive language" (Deleuze, *CC* 107) – in short, the poetic:

Creative stuttering is what makes language grow from the middle, like grass; it is what makes language a rhizome instead of a tree, what puts language in perpetual disequilibrium ... Being well spoken has never been either the distinctive feature or the concern of great writers. (Deleuze, *CC* 111)

As we can see, Carson's "towns" quite literally put language in "disequilibrium" by placing the period in the middle. Our reading becomes strained and the end of each line forces us to confront a definitive pause. The limit of language, or the limit reached at the end of each line, is silence. For Deleuze, the stutter, too, creates a silence. Silence is not necessarily the absence of language, but occurs when language is no longer message-vehicles:

When a language is so strained that it starts to stutter, or to murmur or stammer ... then language in its entirety reaches the limit that marks its outside and makes it confront silence. When a language is strained in this way, language in its entirety is submitted to a pressure that makes it fall silent. (*CC* 113)

What Deleuze notes as the "limit" in language which demarcates it from silence is a similar limit discussed by Carson in her analogy of the boundaries, lines, or limits of a town. The limit where "pear" meets "winter," for example, is where "walls stand by silence" (*PW* 94).

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<sup>40</sup> We can also consider Carson's use of the archive as another demonstration of the "stutter."

Stuttering and silence, as Deleuze makes clear, are implicated in each other. In her introduction, Carson's speaker asks, "Can you punctuate yourself as silence?" (94). This can also be understood as a question of stuttering. The poems stutter and make language strange, but also force silence into each line by means of Carson's unconventional use of punctuation and line breaks.

Reading is made new again as our eyes scan each line, reverting back to the previous lines and skipping ahead to figure out the breaths and pauses necessary for extracting sense from Carson's "sentences." This alienating process of reading is reminiscent of Claire Huot and Robert Majzels's *85 Project* in which the English translation of Chinese poems are presented in the same form as the Chinese: each character runs vertically and is read from top to bottom and right to left.<sup>41</sup> The visual poem, thus, forces the viewer to make out the translation by reading in a way that is culturally different. These readings, which are videotaped, are as such:

These readings are marked by stuttering, echoes, reversals and repetitions. The eye hesitates over the continual enjambment; meaning slips, stumbles, multiplies. The reader is implicated in the work as she or he is forced to slow down, to recognize and enact the value of individual letters and relations between them. The performer seems to be learning to read all over again; in fact, the reader is writing. (Huot and Majzels 8)

Huot and Majzels's project is another example in which the Deleuzian stutter (defined as "a repetition, a proliferation, a bifurcation, a deviation" [CC 55]) is at play. I bring up the *85s*

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<sup>41</sup> See the project's website (<http://www.85bawu.com>): "The "85" project is a poetic multi-media investigation into the reception of the Chinese language and culture into English. The operation involves several transfers: from the original Chinese text into a literal character-for-word translation, then into 85 English letters, and into a visual poem. The visual poem is subsequently read aloud, and that reading is videotaped. Readers struggle to assemble words and phrases, creating if only for a moment the strange experience of speaking another culture. Concomitantly, the potential of reading English is unlocked by the permutation of letters. The reader of an 85 becomes a writer who manipulates language in its materiality."

poetry project because its description befits our reading of Carson's town poems. The process is also characterized by "stuttering, echoes, reversals and repetitions." The 85s aim to reinvigorate language, challenge or frustrate expectation, and break from the norm – the "norm," in this case, is the usual mode of reading in English. Here we witness a defamiliarization and re-invention of reading, as Carson's "towns" also have this faltering quality (in Huot and Majzel's words, "continual enjambment"). Though they are poems, the "Life of Towns" section is also a way for Carson to talk about scholarship. The creative work of the scholar (the establishment of new towns and the reassessing of older ones) is like that of poetry. Both endeavour to discover lines, "edges or angles or virtue," and work between and within them: "You will see the edges cut away from you, back into a world of another kind – back into real emptiness, some would say" (*PW* 93, 94).

The limits and "between-ness" of language give rise to silence and emptiness, but also novelty and error. Carson describes a similar experience of accident and creative mistake in *Economy of the Unlost*, a study that brings together two surprising figures: Simonides and Paul Celan. In the "Note on Method," Carson writes:

I have struggled since the beginning to drive my thought out into the landscape of science and fact where other people converse logically and exchange judgments – but I go blind out there. So writing involves some dashing back and forth between that darkening landscape where facticity is strewn and a windowless room cleared of everything I do not know. It is the clearing that takes time. It is the clearing that is a mystery. (*Economy* vii)

In an early interview, Carson describes her workspace as consisting of two desks: one for her poetic work and the other for her scholarly work (D'Agata, "A\_\_\_" 9). But the "dashing back



and forth” between the two desks, “that darkening landscape,” is a rich opportunity for surprise, creativity, and, most of all, accidents. When asked how she thought to connect Paul Celan with Simonides, Carson reveals that it ultimately came down to accident.

The things you think of to link are not in your own control. It’s just who you are, bumping into the world. But *how* you link them is what shows the nature of your mind. Individuality resides in the way links are made ... You know, I could list things I saw but that’s not why I put them together, that would be an afterthought. I put them together by accident. And that’s fine, I’m happy to do things by accident. But what’s interesting to me is once the accident has happened, once I happen to have Simonides and Paul Celan on my desk together, what do I then do with the link? What I do with it depends on all the thoughts I’ve had in my life up to that point and who I am at that point. It could be Simonides and celery, it doesn’t matter; it just matters in so far as I’m going to make a work of art out of it. It seems totally arbitrary on the one hand and on the other, totally careful about who I am as a thinker. (Aitken)

Here Carson describes an apt experience of classical reception, underlining “the dynamic and dialogic character of reading” (Martindale 300). How she reads Simonides has everything to do with chance, her life up to that point, and accident. The link she has drawn between Celan and Simonides is as arbitrary and potential as a hypothetical link between the ancient poet and celery. Furthermore, the playful leaps that inform her creative work are also evident in her scholarly interests, and, more importantly, are the vital links within her poetic praxis as a whole. Though Carson has two separate desks for these endeavours, I wouldn’t consider them so neatly distinct. Ward states that Carson, in her poetry, “cannot resist showing off her erudition” (16), but there is something more than just spectacle. Carson’s use of ancient

Greece within her parameters of accident and error is at once “totally arbitrary” and “totally careful.”

Despite the ancient division between poet and philosopher set up in the *Republic*, Carson’s techniques of “accident,” “error,” and “arbitrariness” collapse her scholar and poet personas. Critics express uneasiness with such a joining and insist on “divided selves”: “It will be intriguing to see where Carson goes from here, especially if she continues to wrestle with her divided selves: scholar/poet, transgressive/submissive, wife/woman, dancer/danced. Scholars live by rules and Carson has to break them now” (Ward 16). Just as the archive and tradition are assumed to fall under stable Law, Ward also places scholars under this header as one who “live[s] by rules” and whose work is marked by precision. However, this is a misguided way of reading Carson. This notion of “wrestling with her divided selves” suggests that Carson experiences difficulty when it comes to her identity, exclusively as poet or as scholar. It also suggests that poetry must fit into a clear and defined category, when, in fact, this apparent struggle between scholar and poet is so productive.

### **Now What?**

A poem that demonstrates the mutual and necessary co-existence of the poet and scholar in Carson’s work is one that was published before her first collection, *Glass, Irony and God* (1992). Appearing in the Spring 1990 issue of *Grand Street Journal*, the poem “Now What?” is typical of Carson’s play with the Greek fragment, translation, and Sappho. While Ward remarks upon Carson’s “wrestle with her divided selves,” “Now What?” makes clear that scholarship is *part* of her poetic play and creation. Though I would not say that this poem serves as an early model for her later work (Carson is too generically diverse to be pinned

down to just one thing), I will argue that the poem establishes her as someone composing from within “that darkening landscape” (*Economy* vii) that exists between the work of a poet and the work of a classicist and anticipates the donnish yet ludic manner of works such as *The Autobiography of Red* (Stesichorus) and *Antigonick* (Sophocles).

“Now What?” is divided into three parts. The first part, titled “Sappho,” is the ancient poet’s fragment 55, which Carson labels and provides in its entirety. The second part, “Translation,” is Carson’s translation of this fragment. Up until now, everything is fairly straightforward. The reader, likely unable to read the difficult Aeolic Greek, will skip over it and move on to part II of the poem.

One thing worth noting is that part I of the poem is devoid of punctuation. In fact, such is the case with all ancient Greek texts. Though Modern Greek uses such punctuation as the full stop, comma, colon, and semicolon (which functions as a question mark), the ancient Greeks would not have recognized these conventions. Furthermore, there are no gaps between words, making the reading even more difficult.<sup>42</sup> The presentation of ancient Greek brings to mind Majzels’s project, which complicates reading as it, too, is free of punctuation and spaces between words, thus, creating the halting and stuttering effect.

Carson points out in her introduction to *If Not, Winter* this precise difficulty and challenge of reading ancient Greek: “On a papyrus roll the text is written in columns, without word division, punctuation or lineation. To read such a text is hard even when it comes to us in its entirety and most papyri don’t” (ix). The translation in part II of the poem, consequently, is

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<sup>42</sup> The difficulty of reading ancient Greek is pointed out in a reference grammar book: “Consequently the act of reading for an ancient Greek must have required a high level of intelligence and concentration, especially since the endings of the words are so crucial for meaning. It is bad enough in English: here is a translated extract from Plato’s *Republic*:

FARLESSIAGREESOWECANTHAVEHOMERSAYINGOFTHEGODSANDAFITOFHELPLESSLAUGHTERSE  
IZEDTHEHAPPYGODSASTHEYWATCHEDHEPHAESTUSBUSTLINGUPANDDDOWNTHEHALL[...].” (Joint  
Association of Classical Teachers 373)

striking in that Carson takes it upon herself to include full stops at the end of her lines and even italicization. Similar to the poems in “Life of Towns,” the punctuation appears before the break, and marks the interruption of a complete thought. Her decision to do this, in turn, reproduces the difficult experience of reading Greek texts, which requires a higher level of concentration or density when translated into English.

Dead and you will lie dead.  
And there will be no memory of you none.  
No desire none.  
Not ever.  
For you.  
Have no share in the roses.  
Of Pieria I tell you no.  
Invisible.  
*Too.*  
In the house of Hades you will.  
Go your way among the blotted dead.  
Like something.  
Breathed.<sup>43</sup> (“Now What” 43)

As the fragment and its translation stand, a few basic questions immediately spring up: whom is the speaker addressing? What is this fragment part of? What is often unanswerable in ancient scholarship is clarified when Carson settles these matters by way of a carefully placed epigraph (the first of two) at the beginning of the poem. William Saroyan, five days before his death, said:

Everybody has got to die but I have always believed that an exception would be made  
in my case. Now what?

His final query is borrowed as the title of this poem and Sappho’s fragment provides an answer. Thus, the ancient poet is brought into dialogic proximity with Saroyan. The inherent

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<sup>43</sup> For the purpose of this chapter, I focus on how this fragment responds to the epigraph by William Saroyan and in the context of this poem. For more discussion of this fragment, see Denys Page, *Sappho and Alcaeus: An Introduction to the Study of Ancient Lesbian Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1955) 137; R. Jenkyns, *Three Classical Poets: Sappho, Catullus and Juvenal* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1982) 76–77; T. Compton, “The Barbed Rose: Sappho as Satirist” *Favonius* 1 (1987); and Calame, “Sappho’s Group” 117.

ambiguity that surrounds the ancient fragment is resolved by the more recent paratext, which Carson supplies, allowing Sappho to participate in a new dialogue. Another translation of this fragment that Carson offers is found in *If Not, Winter*. Though similar in diction and general meaning, the second translation follows more closely the four-line construction of the Greek fragment. I provide it, as it is useful in smoothing out the sense of Carson's earlier translation:

Dead you will lie and never memory of you  
will there be nor desire into the aftertime – for you do not share in the roses  
of Pieria, but invisible too in Hades' house  
you will go your way among dim shapes. Having been breathed out. (*INW* 115)

How do we understand Sappho's response to Saroyan, a reply that though logically follows the question, was written in antiquity, long before Saroyan's death? The strange temporality is part of the pleasure in the poem, and is reminiscent of how Carson's speaker in "The Glass Essay" visualizes time as "an old videotape" running beneath the present: "Time in its transparent loops as it passes beneath me now / ... / the videotape jerks to a halt / like a glass slide under a drop of blood" (*GIG* 8). The past, or Sappho, loops back and "jerks to a halt" at Saroyan.

The work of interpreting Sappho's fragment in relation to Saroyan is done for us: in the final section, Carson's speaker provides her *own* notes on the Sapphic fragment. That is to say, a close reading is supplied as *part* of the poem. In a gesture that is self-aware and generically playful, the third section, aptly titled "Scholia," makes up the bulk of the entire poem and is a thorough and careful examination of the original Greek.

Unlike hypomnema, which refers to an ancient self-standing commentary, and gloss, which generally refers to a short definition found between the lines of a literary text, the

scholium consists of “commentary or notes written in the margins of a text” (Dickey 11).<sup>44</sup> Its basic elements include:

- i. the lemma (i.e. the verbatim quotation of the passage under discussion);
- ii. a translation of (part of) the passage;
- iii. a paraphrase of (part of) the passage;
- iv. quotation(s) (e.g. of parallel passages);
- v. the commentator’s own words (e.g. explanations). (Nünlist 8)

For Carson, who is captivated by gaps and omissions in ancient Greek, the “heterogeneous ‘genre’” (Nünlist 10) of scholia is attractive to incorporate into a poem, as it too is vulnerable to loss: “even when they were copied, the scholia suffered many kinds of corruption. They were frequently abbreviated, displaced, miscopied, or inappropriately run together” (Dickey 14). These sorts of jumps and errors in transmission are poetically rich and Carson’s use of punctuation (similar to part II) highlights this irregularity. While there is extensive literature on scholia and its distinctions from hypomnema, glosses, treatises, and other categories of secondary material in ancient scholarship, for now I want to focus on two characteristics of scholia: 1) the location of the margins and 2) the external voice provided by the scholiast, scholar, or philologist.

Much of Carson’s oeuvre involves not only the use of ancient fragments, but also other textual materials such as letters, drafts, and diaries of scholars and writers. These marginal

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<sup>44</sup> There is much work on the historicity and treatment of scholia in ancient Greek scholarship and its different meanings when used by various groups of scholars. See *The Ancient Critic at Work* (René Nünlist), *Ancient Greek Scholarship* (Eleanor Dickey) and *From Scholars to Scholia* (Ed. Franco Montanari and Lara Pagani). My definition of “scholia,” is based on the original meaning of the Greek, *σχόλια*, meaning “notes.” My emphasis is on its secondary nature, its placement in the margins, and its addition of an external voice (usually that of a scholar) to a primary text.

paratexts find their way into Carson's work as paramount.<sup>45</sup> For example, the poem "Sumptuous Destitution" (*MOH* 13) is composed by alternating Carson's lines with snippets of letters culled from the correspondence between Emily Dickinson and Thomas Higginson. Margins, too, are a visual element in *Red Doc* in which "text runs like a racing stripe down the centre of the page, with a couple of inches of empty space on either side" (Anderson, "Inscrutable"). This effect, as it turns out, was created by accident in a very Carsonian fashion: "Carson hit a wrong button, and it made the margins go crazy. She found this instantly liberating. The sentences, with one click, went from prosaic to strange" (Anderson).

There is also the marginalized position of the woman to consider, and that dimension is undeniably present as Carson is handling the fragment of one of women poets' earliest ancestors. Furthermore, her methods of interpreting Sappho can be considered a feminist response to the patriarchal archive as she gives way to intertextuality and generic free play. The focus on scholia in this poem is a feminist play with textual inversion. As Theodorakopoulos states, "The probing and the collapse of the categories of public and private, inside and outside, center and margin, have been of considerable importance to feminist thought and to women's writing" (156). But for the purpose of this chapter, I would argue that the use of scholia demonstrates, more generically, the convergence of Carson's scholarly and poetic practices and how they are undifferentiated. The marginalized secondary notes *become*

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<sup>45</sup> I should note that margins are part of the process of reading and serve as a kind of ongoing archive as the readers' imprints are left in the space. Craig Dworkin provides a beautiful passage about the physical engagement with the book: "The margins of the page have always been a fundamental part of the phenomenology of the codex, since they are the primary site of the reader's physical interaction with the book. Readers typically manipulate a book at the margin, holding it open, adjusting its position, keeping a place with the index finger turning pages, thumbing through. Reserved for the activities of the reader's body, the frame around the text further encourages the reader's active participation by providing an uninked space ideal for writing entries keyed to particular printed passages. The margin of the page invites a written record of the ongoing dialogue that constitutes all reading" (39-40).

the centred primary text.<sup>46</sup> The division between scholia (which happens to be written in the same faltering style as part II) and poetry becomes blurred.

Carson's scholia introduce a voice that, like the translator in part II, is not Sappho, but someone else who comments upon the primary text itself. Part III of "Now What?" examines the semantics of Sappho's fragment and provides an interpretation in order to clarify the linguistic and temporal meaning of her response to Saroyan: "It is a poem about how the present imprints the future" (44).<sup>47</sup>

Scholia, which typically reside in the margins, become significant as part of the poem. Unlike typical scholia, Carson includes marginal notes that, in fact, drive the poem forward. By following the commentator's meditative exploration of Sappho's fragment, facilitated by her expertise in the Greek language, we also follow the "you," or Saroyan, and his movement from the "aorist instant of death" ("Now What" 44) to afterlife.<sup>48</sup> The scholiast's close reading of Sappho's tense use and negations contains in itself its own poetic conceit: death and entrance into the afterlife, as the third part demonstrates, map onto the linguistic structure of the Greek fragment (or "your act and your afterword").

Like part II, the scholia section is written in the same style, with each line punctuated with a period thereby interrupting the natural flow of thought:

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<sup>46</sup> Indeed, this switch in "importance" recalls Derrida's definition of *parergon* in *The Truth in Painting* as something that at first glance appears to be an external supplement to the work: "A parergon comes against, beside, and in addition to the *ergon*, the work done [*fait*], the fact [*le fait*], the work, but it does not fall to one side, it touches and cooperates within the operation, from a certain outside. Neither simply outside nor simply inside. Like an accessory that one is obliged to welcome on the border, on board [*au bord, a bord*]. It is first of all the on (the) bo(a)rd(er) [*Il est d'abord l'a-bard*]" (54).

<sup>47</sup> See "Characteristics of Scholia" in Nünlist in which he states: "Linguistic questions also play a very important role in the scholia. Thus, critics regularly discuss topics such as spelling, breathings, accents, prosody (sometimes in connection with meter), morphology (incl. conjugations, principal parts, declensions, word formation, etc.), dialects, parts of speech, syntactical questions of all kinds, word order, punctuation (i.e. the determination of 'intonation units' in the oral delivery of the text), etc." (15).

<sup>48</sup> A note on "aorist" – it is a tense that does not exist in English. Typically, the aorist implies that the speaker or writer conceives the action as a completed whole. There is no emphasis on the progress of the action; rather, it shows a simple occurrence, or "happenedness." Carson's own definition is, unsurprisingly, more cryptic: "The Greek verb system includes a tense called aorist (which means 'unbounded' or 'timeless') to capture the aspect of action in which, for example, a man at noon runs directly on top of his own shadow" (*PW* 16).



You go quickly.  
From an aorist instant of death.  
(*Dead*) to a verb in the future.  
(*Will lie*) unfolding your afterlife.  
In two negations.  
(*No.*  
*No*).  
That reach like two arms.  
Toward memory and toward.  
Desire.  
A single verb yokes them.  
(*There will be*) they never arrive: why?

A cause explains.  
(*For I tell you no*) the reason now.  
The dark corridors.  
Then.  
Unfolding your afterlife.  
In two negations.  
Of which the first locates you firmly.  
In the present tense.

(*Have no share*) but the second.  
Flips you rather fast ahead.  
(*Will go your way*) too fast?  
Look at the crisis.<sup>49</sup>  
It is after all a time-saving device.  
A point of contact.  
Between present and future.  
It syncopates.  
Your posthumous nonentity.  
(*Invisible*) upon its counterpart in present life  
One *too* so quick.  
That by the time you know it.  
You've already floated.  
On to Hades.  
And the future. (43-44)

As the scholiast points out, Sappho's fragment moves back and forth between the present tense and the future, between "dead" and "will lie dead." The temporal shift is also aligned

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<sup>49</sup> At the end of the poem, Carson provides a note on "crisis" and its function in the fragment:

*Crisis*: a mixture or convergence. It is a prosodic tactic allowing two vowels, contiguous at the end of one word and the start of the next, to merge as a single sound for the sake of metrical economy. Here, the words for "too" (*kai*) and "in" (*en*) come together to form a spacious nonword (*kan*) at the junction of present and future. It is a gliding motion, untranslatable, almost invisible. ("Now What" 45)

with the physical movement from earth to “the house of Hades.” This intermediate space that the scholiast focuses on is founded on the Greek word, *κάν* (*kan*). “Look at the *crasis*,” the speaker points out so as not to be missed.

The *crasis* (*kan*, which is formed from the merging of *kai* and *en*) is, as the footnote states, “at the junction of the present and future” (45). In part II, *kan* is translated as italicized “*Too*,” indicative of the middle point and the intersection from which “it syncopates” (45). *Kan*, as the scholiast describes, is a “time-saving device. / A point of contact” (44) between the space of life and the house of Hades, and between *kai* and *en*. The *crasis* is a fitting metaphor for the event of death itself as Carson suggests in the footnote: “It is a gliding motion, untranslatable, almost invisible” (45). The quickness of death is evident in the contraction of *kai* (and) and *en* (in), as the vowels between the two words merge into a “spacious nonword” (45).

The scholiast notes the frequent use of negation by Sappho (οὐδέ, οὐ), which is translated in part II as “no memory,” “no desire,” “not ever,” “no share in the roses,” “I tell you no.” Negation itself is implied by words harbouring absence such as “dead” and “invisible” and “breath(ed).” Sappho, by way of Carson, highlights the “no” in death.<sup>50</sup> The temporal and spatial junction that hinges on the word *kan* is characterized by negation. The shift from “dead” to “will lie” unfolds in two negations:

*(No.*  
*No).*  
That reach like two arms.  
Toward memory and toward.  
Desire. (44)

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<sup>50</sup> In Chapter 3, I will argue something similar, but in that case, we will see the “no” in *Nox*.

Memory and desire represent two ends of a spectrum, the first reaching out to the past, the second reaching out to the future. But in death, “you” will have neither of both. The arms reach out but “never arrive” (44). “*Too*” is used as a way of demonstrating *shared* negation, as if to say: “There will no memory of you, and there, *too*, will be no desire.” But the crisis, “*Too*,” as I suggested earlier, also stands in for the event of death itself and its swift and sudden appearance, as seen in the fourth stanza of part III:

Your posthumous nonentity.  
(*Invisible*) upon its counterpart in present life –  
One *too* so quick.  
That by the time you know it.  
You’ve already floated.  
On to Hades. (45)

“One *too* so quick” can be understood as “One *dies* so quick.” The moment from present to future, or life to afterlife, is so nearly imperceptible that when one finally realizes what has happened, one is already a “posthumous nonentity.” Given the play of tenses and negations of this fragment, Carson’s use of these lines by Sappho is a clever and fitting reply to Saroyan who thought that he would “be an exception with death” (to which Sappho would say: *No.*). His question, “Now what?” creates a perfect opening to consider the “now” of death, which, as the scholiast emphasizes, is quick and almost invisible.

Part III of the poem is highly metatextual in that the scholiast remarks upon the fragment but also addresses it as an object that can be viewed from a temporal and physical distance. It begins:

It is a poem about how the present imprints the future.  
Looking back from here the effect is clear.  
For.  
The text that lies open.  
Holds you nameless to this day.  
Yet the cause of this connexion.  
Between your act and your afterword.

Is hard for you to see.  
From your dark apostrophe.  
Watch: and keep watching.  
What tense you want to be. (44)

According to the scholiast, the fragment is better understood when “you” step out “from your dark apostrophe” and look back. The phrase “looking back” is layered and ambiguous: does one look back and flip to the previous page of the fragment and its translation in order to follow the scholiast’s commentary? Are we looking back to the time it was composed by Sappho? Is Saroyan looking back after entering the house of Hades to better see “the cause of this connexion. / Between [his] act and [his] afterword”? As we can see, the apostrophe as a vantage point is both spatial and temporal. In addition, “your dark apostrophe” is a slippery example of prosopopoeia: who is addressing whom? Is it the poet’s address to the absent and dead? Is it the dead’s address to the living? Is it “dark” because the speaker is already dead? Or is it a foreshadowing of the death to come? The temporal and spatial ambiguity is highlighted in these lines as Sappho and Saroyan are joined together in this “dialogue” between the dead. The final two lines in this section serve to anchor the ambivalence of the preceding lines. From a distance, “the effect is clear,” and the scholiast continues for three stanzas to demonstrate how the Greek fragment reflects the temporal and physical movement of death: “Watch: and keep watching. / What tense you want to be.” The mingling of desire and identity (“want to be”) and their position in time, suggested by the tenses in the penultimate line (“watch ... watching”), contributes to the discourse of death between Sappho and Saroyan. The poem is “about how the present imprints the future” – or at least *desires* to imprint.

Tense and distance become particularly tricky at the end of the poem. After documenting the movement of “you,” the scholiast poses a question in the final lines:

Tense leaving.  
Behind you.  
That whole deathbox.<sup>51</sup>  
Of your life without roses.  
Now tell me.  
Is it.  
Because you are not even visible.  
That you can slip so eerily back.  
Even deeper in time.  
To end the verse.  
The poem.  
Your life.  
As a participle.  
Perfect: never.  
Flown.  
Yet already.  
(*Breathed*) gone? (45)

Indeed, once the subject enters Hades and moves from present to future, he leaves behind him “That whole deathbox. / Of [his] life without roses.” It is suggested that he also leaves behind time – at least time that can be measured in the grammar of language (“Tense leaving,” i.e. leaving all tenses). However, troubling to the scholiast is that the dead returns at the end of the poem, indicated by the final word of the fragment, *εκπεποταμένα*. The word is a perfect participle and suggests that the action comes from “[e]ven deeper in time,” as evidenced in both of Carson’s translations:

“Now What?” (*Grand Street Review*):

In the house of Hades you will.  
Go your way among the blotted dead.  
Like something.  
Breathed. (43)

Fragment 55 (*If Not, Winter*):

you will go your way among dim shapes. Having been breathed out. (115)

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<sup>51</sup> Later, we will see the “deathbox,” or “archival box,” in *Nox*.

This surprising use of the pluperfect (“having been breathed out”), to which Carson draws attention, might have been clarified if we had received these lines from Sappho in their entirety and not as a fragment. However, like Alkman’s lyric, Carson delights in this accident of history and looks no further than what is already there. A possible justification for this use of participle, which implies an action that precedes the main action of the poem, is that the dead is “invisible,” thus, allowing “you” to “slip so eerily back” and finish the poem.<sup>52</sup>

Carson emphasizes the importance of the gaze in these two stanzas, as indicated by the imperative, “Watch,” and the invisible re-appearance of the dead. The second epigraph of the poem, a quotation from German author and film director Alexander Kluge, provides some insight into the relevance of the gaze and its ties to language:

Je näher man ein Wort ansieht desto ferner sieht es zurück.  
[The closer you look at a word the more distantly it looks back at you.]<sup>53</sup>

We return, once again, to distance – not only distance in death, but also distance in language and in translation. Carson could have written a poem devoid of ancient influence, but it is deliberate on her part to incorporate Sappho and a fragment that comes to us incomplete and written in a dead language. Why the use of ancient Greek? While this poem can be read as a response to Saroyan about his imminent death, it is also a response to textual loss: the loss of meaning in translation and the physical loss of papyrus. Kluge’s epigraph introduces the “non-arrival” of meaning and its interplay with the ungraspable desire and memory experienced by the death of “you.” The closer we look at a word, the more difficult and distant its meaning, which is precisely where the poetic and the scholarly are conjoined for Carson as she returns to the word. The struggles of loss offered by Kluge’s and Saroyan’s epigraphs are similar and

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<sup>52</sup> ἀφάνης is also defined as “unseen, especially of the nether world.”

<sup>53</sup> In another discussion of Sappho, Carson finishes “Dirt and Desire,” with Dorothy Parker’s famous epitaph: “If you can read this, you’ve come too close” (*MOH* 152). It appears that both the Greek language and the poet Sappho have an interesting role in distance and appearances. I will discuss this further in the following chapter.

both muddle our sense of time. The “you” slips “eerily back” (as the unusual grammar of Sappho’s fragment indicates) in the same way that the Greek language for Carson is also an experience of strangeness in time. In an interview, she discusses the meanings of the word *kai* and returns to distance and the gaze:

When you’re in Greek you can somehow dig down to the very earliest morning of the words, which gives you a different sense of validity when you’re messing around with those meanings ... That’s one aspect of Greekness that’s fixed in their language that we can’t get. We have to decide between *and* and *either/or* [for the meaning of *kai*]. For them they’re just two sides of one coin—as soon as you think into that fact you realize that the world could be completely other than it seems. There are a lot of those little things in Greek. I wouldn’t feel confident saying there are quantitatively more, but there are a lot of those moments where you enter a fact but then you just think, “Oh, there’s a whole other way to look at this element of reality,” and then you think of the world through that lens for a while and everything is slightly different. (Gannon)

The scholia section in this poem is a lens through which Carson invites us to look at Sappho’s fragment. The scholarly task of commenting upon the Greek is simultaneously a poetic task of moving the “you” through the sudden act of death. The scholium is no longer a marginal note situated on the side of academia; rather, it is the central vehicle for the poet to accommodate this movement from life to death. This poem is “about how the present imprints the future” but it is also how the “past-ness” of Sappho imprints the present and, subsequently, the future. As classical reception anticipates, we read Sappho through Carson and her inclusion of Saroyan and Klüge. Sappho takes new life when juxtaposed with the later texts. The Greek language slips eerily back into the poem as a way to view the reality of loss.

## Conclusion

In a later chapter, we shall see again the eerie reappearance, or haunting, of the dead in other works by Carson, such as *Nox*. *Nox* is a larger and more recent work that ties in the death of her brother, Michael, with the textual and semantic struggle that Carson experiences with Catullus. Presented as an elegy, *Nox* is better understood as a collection of archival notes *toward* an elegy. The ongoing status of the book is also indicative of Carson's processes of grief and translation.

Carson's engagement with Catullus in *Nox* is in line with what I have discussed here – that is, integral to Carson's poetry is her continual borrowings and response to other texts, be they ancient or modern. What makes Carson distinct and different from other poets is that she is never working alone; rather, her creative work is deliberately coupled with her scholarly training. The complex intersections between academic connoisseurship and creative flights of meditative writing (which frequently uses classicism as a point of departure), has posed an interesting problematic when it comes to Carson's own reception, resulting in critics puzzled as to how to interpret her experimental and erudite works. Is she a scholar “moonlighting” (Logan, “Victoria's Secret”) as a poet, or vice versa? More importantly, is it necessary to uphold one over the other?

I have linked the apparent separation between scholar and poet back to an ancient division between philosophy and poetry, as well as a long held acceptance of the classics as an authoritative and originary locus of the Western intellectual archive. Ultimately, I attempt to demonstrate how Carson's use of the archive, in both her capacity as scholar and poet,



participates in what I call her poetics of error. The past and its errors, misreadings, translations, and transmissions are all sources of creativity and irreverent play.

Carson's "Life of Towns" troubles the notion of scholarship as she draws attention to the instability and error that accompany thought. To take up a position is, as she analogizes, to situate oneself as a "town." What is ironic about this comparison is that a town does not, in fact, suggest any sort of permanent or stable residence. There are, as Carson makes clear, numerous and various towns to be found:

There are regular towns and irregular towns, there are wounded towns and sober towns and fiercely remembered towns, there are useless but passionate towns that battle on, there are towns where the snow slides from the roofs of the houses with such force that victims are killed, but there are no empty towns (just empty scholars) and there is no regret. (*PW* 94)

The spaces and limits found in language and thought ("towns") are also the spaces and limits in translation and time from which Carson works. Her appreciation for the temporal and linguistic gaps between English and Greek, the present and antiquity, is central to her poetic creations. Scholia, as seen in "Now What?", is a vital and critical metaphor for Carson's work in general. The scholium of a text possesses its own genealogy of corrections, corruptions, transmissions, and interpretations. They participate with the original text from, literally, a marginal position. Indeed, Carson's translation and exegesis of Sappho's fragment 55 finds and plays within the liminal space between scholarship and poetry, the critical and the creative, as she transforms the marginal secondary text to the central primary text.

In the next chapter, I will continue with Sappho and examine how the ancient poet fits into Carson's poetics of error. Sappho, often adapted to represent the creative foremother, has

been an important figure for women writers and artists who view themselves as partaking in a lineage that descends directly from the Lesbian poet. The most important fact about Sappho is that she exists today in fragments. Her ambiguous biography adds to her allure. To engage with Sappho, thus, is not to reach the poet herself, but to reach the limit of what is speculated and survived. While the “Sapphic” has come to refer to lesbian desire, in Chapter 2, I will, more generally, investigate how Sappho appears and reappears in Carson’s oeuvre and, in the end, narrow in on another definition of the “Sapphic” as it relates to Carsonian poetics.

## Chapter 2

### Sapphic Poetics: Carson, Reception, and Error

*“If it begins, a trickle, this thin slow falling of the mind.  
If you want to know why the sliding affects your nerves.  
If you want to know why you cannot reach your own beautiful ideas.  
If you reach instead the edge of the thinkable, which leaks.”*  
—Anne Carson (D 99)

In the previous chapter, I demonstrated that Anne Carson's use of the archive, in both her capacity as scholar and poet, generates what I call a poetics of error. I want to begin this chapter by drawing attention to a passage that describes how Carson's vocation as a scholar gives rise to a desire for and delight in what she terms "residue":

As a classicist I was trained to strive for exactness and to believe that rigorous knowledge of the world without any residue is possible for us. This residue, which does not exist – just to think of it refreshes me. To think of its position, how it shares its position with drenched layers of nothing, to think of its motion, how it can never stop moving because I am in motion with it ... to think of these things gives me a sensation of getting free. (*Nay* 32)

The "exactness" and rigour for which Carson has been trained to strive in her scholarship maps on to precisely what Page duBois notes in her description of the philologist as one who "makes whole," "original," and "perfect" (37-8). The scholar wants to return – or *believes* she can return – to what Carson calls "the world without any residue."

I have understood Carson's working within the parameters of error and misunderstanding as a poetic aesthetic, and would argue that "residue," too, is positioned within these same parameters. Indeed, it is the traditional role of the scholar that gives rise to and abuts Carson's creative production. If the scholar's aim is for totality, or a perfect sum, then residue points to the remainder, the leftover, the "something else" for which cannot be accounted. Residue refers to not only the unknown, or "layers of nothing," but also to a mistake. Residue allows Carson to *err* and experience the "sensation of getting free." The attendant margin of error in scholarship becomes, for Carson, a desired margin *for* error.

The necessity of error structures Carson's response to classical antiquity. Her consideration of residue, which takes form in misreadings, translations, and loss in transmission, is often a beginning point for her work. Carson's predilection for the temporal and linguistic gap found in Greek and Roman texts destabilizes the classical past as a point of origin (residue, as Carson points out, is "in motion"), and undermines the traditional role of the philologist as one who strives for "exactness."

Sappho is a seductive point of departure for Carson as much of what we have gathered of the ancient poet – her ambiguous biography, the long, complex transmission and survival of her poetry – adamantly resists a "world without residue."<sup>1</sup> Sappho is mentioned a number of times as a paradigm of Carson's own fondness for "imperfect surfaces," much like the papyrus on which we read Sappho. As Margaret Williamson notes, Sappho's texts "are all damaged ... with a multitude of editorial markings to show gaps and reconstructions" (xii).

Sappho, the personage, has also undergone a long chain of reception in which each scholar's interpretation of and dialogue with the ancient poet forms a link that reflects the scholar's own time, circumstances, and preoccupations. This chain, Williamson makes clear, will continue, for the reason that "other generations will recreate Sappho in their own image" (x) and connect their own links to the chain.<sup>2</sup> The number of ways in which Sappho is "re-incarnated, revived, resuscitated, recalled, remembered, reinvented" (Reynolds 8), keeps the

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<sup>1</sup> In line with Carson's description of the classicist as striving for "exactness," Williamson elucidates the scholar's approach to Sappho's work: "Faced with these collections of tattered fragments, scholars have continually laid *optimistic claim to the truth* each time they manage to sketch in a missing letter or piece together a new hypothesis" (ix; emphasis mine).

<sup>2</sup> See Williamson in which she notes her own position in relation to her predecessors: G. Merula, a scholar studying Sappho in 1485, and Henry Wharton in the late nineteenth century: "At the same time, it struck me how much a product of our own circumstances each of us was: the early humanist with his competitive polemics against other scholars, the Victorian amateur with a classical education, and enough leisure from his profession to become an expert on Sappho; and me, a feminist academic writing in the late twentieth century. And each of us was engaging Sappho in a dialogue that reflected the preoccupations of our own lives no less than hers" (x). We can, of course, include Carson in this chain.

ancient poet in constant flux.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the continual reinvention of “Sappho” from generation to generation recalls what Carson says of residue: that which “can never stop moving” (*Nay* 32).

More basic to my description of residue as being the excess that makes impossible the “original,” the “perfect,” and the “whole,” residue also refers to the trace of something left behind. While the fragments and biographical details of Sappho all contribute to the mystery surrounding the poet, “these Sapphic details can rub off on other writings like bits of red dye” (Kenner 59). The residue we discover in “Sappho” – the persistent mystery of her biography, the missing text in her poetry, and the intertextual resonance in other works – makes her a suitable candidate for embodying a Carsonian poetics of error, which is characterized by obscurity, omission, and polysemy.

We have already seen Sappho in “Now What?” revealing the importance of scholia in Carson’s poetry. In that poem, Carson’s translation deconstructs the opposition between the philological and the poetic. In this chapter, I want to return to Carson’s poetics of error and to examine how it operates in relation to Sappho. While the ancient poet has been commonly regarded as the classical representative of lesbian desire, I shall open up the definition of “Sapphic” to connote not only transgressive female desires, but also other ruptures of a more textual and archival register. The Sapphic suggests an inherent “wrongness” as it strays, or errs, from dominant modes of desire, and we will see other how this “wrongness” plays out in Carson’s poetry.

In this chapter, I examine the presence of Sappho in Carson’s work and provide another definition of Sappho that goes *beyond* same-sex desire. “Sappho,” I argue, does not

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<sup>3</sup> As Snyder puts it: “[I]n effect, all readings of Sappho are really fictions of Sappho” (3).

only refer to Sappho-the-ancient-poet, or Sappho-the-lesbian, but “Sappho” as a creative praxis that encompasses rupture, incompleteness, and chaos. It is not Sappho-of-Lesbos, but, as Carson’s poetry demonstrates, a catachrestic, self-referential “Sappho” that contorts language and repeatedly calls attention to its own wrongness.<sup>4</sup> When Carson alludes to Sappho and her fragments, we are immediately alerted to a poetics that is non-linear, non-cohesive, and elemental of continuous, experimental play.

I shall begin by providing some background on Sappho in the context of antiquity and modernity by examining “Dirt and Desire” and “The Gender of Sound,” two essays in which Carson portrays the “Sapphic” as “rupture” in the social realm. I will then adopt the terms Carson uses in her social critique regarding “boundaries” and “leakage” and join them to the material “unboundedness” of the fragment, as well as to her poetic consideration of the sublime as “spillage.” I shall conclude the chapter by closely analyzing four poems by Carson in which Sappho (and fragment 31) appears. Carson’s use and reuse of this fragment is multi-stratified: each successive emergence of Sappho adds a further dimension to what the ancient poet codifies: feminine elusion, textual rupture, and poetic “madness.”

### **Sappho: Discourse and Desire**

*“[S]he may write in Greek but she is really not speaking in a foreign tongue.”*  
–Jane McIntosh Snyder (*Lesbian Desire in the Lyrics of Sappho* 2)

Sappho has been an important figure for feminist approaches to antiquity. She is often set against the “masculine,” “epic,” and “Homeric” poetic tradition of ancient Greece and forms

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<sup>4</sup> There are a number of instances where Carson refers to “poetic failure.” To name a couple: “My personal poetry is a failure ... fragment of foil” (*D* 72-3) in “Stanzas, Sexes, Seduction,” and “I am writing this to be as wrong as possible to you” (*PW* 45) in “On Shelter”.

the basis for feminine experience.<sup>5</sup> As Marilyn Skinner asserts, Sappho's writing establishes "the missing half of the Greco-Roman gender dialectic" ("Women" 138).<sup>6</sup> While this may be an overly binaristic formulation, Page duBois points out the more important factor of the ancient poet: Sappho is an anomaly. She offers something different. The subjects in her poems are uncommon, intimate, and oppose the familiar conception of Western tradition:

Sappho ... sings not of democracy and philosophy, not even of work and war, not of the instrumentalizing of the eroticized body, but of the individual and her subjective body, of "the most beautiful," of erotic desire and yearning. Sappho writes of Aphrodite the goddess of sexuality, of soft beds, roses, groves sacred to the goddess, of jealousy, desire, and the absence of one's beloved. Setting themselves against the warrior culture of the epic poet Homer, against the values of labour and reproduction emerging in the nascent city-states of the Greek world, Sappho's fragmentary, broken lines celebrate pleasure and women's bodies. (duBois 24)

Constructed as a representative of "otherness," Sappho occupies a position outside the dominant tradition. Her celebration of women and her own femininity was attractive for women throughout time; her long historical shadow has provided a strong alternative identificatory position for women with same-sex desires.

The adaptability and appropriation of Sappho have intensified since the nineteenth century when there was a marked increase of "lesbian visibility."<sup>7</sup> Sappho, regarded as the "original lesbian" (Blanshard 155), came to dominate the historical field of female same-sex

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<sup>5</sup> The gendered opposition between Sappho and Homer as well as their status as "chief" writers have been long established. As Williamson notes: "the medical writer Galen tells us in the second century CE that you have only to say the Poet and the Poetess, and everyone knows you mean Homer and Sappho" (22).

<sup>6</sup> Marilyn A. Katz also notes the importance of and immense pressure on the poet we know as Sappho – "Greek antiquity's 'leading literary lady'" (520) – to make up for what Skinner calls "the missing half": "As the principal female voice to survive from Greek antiquity, Sappho is pressed into service to speak for all women" (520).

<sup>7</sup> See Alastair Blanshard (2010) and the section on "Sapphic Love" (149).



desire. Since then, her name has become a brand, or a “queer signifier to mark out lesbian clubs, bookshops, reading groups” (159). Margaret Reynolds, in *The Sappho Companion*, explores the numerous incarnations of Sappho, which a scan of the contents quickly illustrates: “The Tenth Muse,” “The Learned Lady,” “The Lady with the Lyre,” “The New Woman,” and “Swingers and Sisters.” What is striking about Sappho is not so much the ancient poet as such, but how she has come to stand in for heterodox female desire and behaviour.

In the twentieth century, as the sapphic was brought into relation to the modern, a more nuanced understanding of “Sappho” emerged. Desire was not limited to the sexual realm, but came to have a bearing on poetic practice and modernist experimentation. Joanne Winning states that literary women such as Sylvia Beach, Gertrude Stein, Marianne Moore, and H.D., are key figures of literary lesbianism from the modernist period: “This is not surprising since the movements of modernist art and literature are notable for the unprecedented number of women who were both engaged in aesthetic experimentation and at the same time either living out or representing same-sex desire” (56). But “Sappho” and its cognates have come to refer to more than just “homosexual relations between women,” as is pointed out by Laura Doan and Jane Garrity (3). Diana Collecott, too, recognizes the “multiple meanings” in the word “sapphic” as pertaining to “*aesthetics* and *intersubjectivity* as well as sexual practice” (2; emphasis mine). Susan Stanford Friedman (1990), in her reading of H.D., draws a connection between erotics and poetics, and sexuality and textuality, thus, “structurally binding these together so that the figure of writing becomes a coterminous destination with lesbian identity” (Winning 58).<sup>8</sup> H.D.’s admiration for and reception of Sappho has been well established, and Friedman’s reading of the modern poet parallels Skinner’s argument of Sappho: both poets

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<sup>8</sup> Indeed, H.D. states: “There is no great art period without great lovers” (*Notes* 21).

“invest Aphrodite with the functions of a Muse, endowing her with a simultaneous command of both desire and discourse” (Skinner, “Eros” 64).<sup>9</sup>

The link between desire and discourse did not begin in the twentieth century, but was always already present in our understanding of “Sappho.” Indeed, what we encounter foremost in reading Sappho is not desire of a sexual nature, but one that pertains to textual wholeness. As duBois points out, Sappho’s corpus, which exists only in fragments and quotations, forces the reader to confront “her desires for wholeness, for more, for coherence, for linear, narrative familiarity” (53). The desire for wholeness and textual restitution is at once a poetic, an editorial, a feminist, a lesbian, and a historical desire. The correlation between the fragmentary and the lesbian that is perceived in the figure of Sappho is unsurprising: her fragments trouble our conception of a “homogeneous, coherent” (duBois 163) culture in a similar way that the lesbian troubles a hetero-normative society. Sappho, thus, makes room for complexity and multiplicity, disturbing any universal or shared ideology.<sup>10</sup>

I believe that a potent concept to describe this disturbance is “rupture,” as used by Shari Benstock in her understanding of sapphic modernism. Needless to say, the correlation between modernism and lesbian sexuality has resulted in various labels used by critics, such as “lesbian modernism,” “sapphic modernism,” or “queer modernism.” A broader definition is put forward by Benstock who describes it as a movement that “constitutes itself through moments of *rupture* in the social and cultural fabric” (198; emphasis mine).<sup>11</sup> The sapphic, here regarded as a disruption in the modern social context, is unsurprising as Sappho and her

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<sup>9</sup> See Diana Collecott’s *H.D. and Sapphic Modernity* (1999).

<sup>10</sup> Perhaps most interesting about Sappho’s reception is how synecdoche, a trope literalized in the fragment, becomes metonymy (“Sappho” for Queer, Dyke, the Non-normative).

<sup>11</sup> Rupture is also of great import for Friedman, as it is at the crux of modernism. See Susan Stanford Friedman (2001): “‘What was modernism’ to a graduate student in English and American literature in the heady days of the 1960s? Modernism was rebellion. Modernism was ‘make it new.’ Modernism was resistance, rupture. To its progenitors. To its students. Modernism was the antidote to the poison of tradition, obligation” (493).

verse also rupture what is known about the past: they “disrupt various paradigms of Western civilization” (duBois 25).<sup>12</sup>

I introduce the term “rupture” because it allows us to consider also the material rupture that is constituted by Sappho’s literary remains, which itself is exciting as we become conscious of “the possibility of dismemberment, of the fragility of wholeness” (duBois 21). Rupture refers not only to the ragged edges of the fragment, but also to the *instance* of breakage, that is to say, not rupture as *after* the moment of eruption, but *in the act* of eruption. Thus, we shift from regarding the fragment as a stationary artifact, to something in the midst of kinesis. It is continually at work with the movement of the text in which it is embedded, the writer’s intention, and the coherence of narrative. The fragment is acted upon, but also acts on. This dynamism is seen more clearly in Carson’s statement, “Consider incompleteness as a verb” (*PW* 16). “Incompleteness,” intrinsic to the fragment, is not simply a noun, but becomes a verb (as in “to incomplete”). Rupture gives way to movement. Rupture, resulting in what Carson describes as “imperfect surfaces,” may then be studied in more “active” terms of border crossing, such as “polluting,” “leaking,” and “spilling.” More importantly, the presence of Sappho and Carson’s undertakings of rupture destabilize the “stationary” point of origin and calls into question the stability and coherence of social laws, the archive, and logic.

### **Social Leakage in Sappho’s Fragment 31**

Rupture is a matter of boundaries and borders. The social and cultural disruption associated with the sapphic in Benstock’s definition is familiar to Carson and is explored in two of her

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<sup>12</sup> See duBois for more on the paradoxical status of Sappho: “She is a woman but also an aristocrat, a Greek, but one turned toward Asia, a poet who writes as a philosopher before philosophy . . . She is named as the tenth muse, yet the nine books of her poetry survive only in fragments . . . We need to read her again” (25).

essays: “Dirt and Desire,” in which Carson discusses the danger of “female pollution” for the ancient Greeks, and “The Gender of Sound,” in which Carson explores how a woman’s mouth and voice disrupt masculine order. Both essays underscore the cultural anxiety about maintaining boundaries and the danger women pose by transgressing these limits.

Women were perceived as “transgressors of boundaries” (*MOH* 130), and those who violated borders, including guests and strangers, evoked fear and anxiety. Carson first highlights the importance of order for the ancient Greeks:

... any instance of contact is that of violating a fixed boundary, transgressing a closed category where one does not belong. The ancient Greeks seem to have been even more sensitive than we are to such transgressions and to the crucial importance of boundaries, both personal and extrapersonal, as guarantors of human order. (*MOH* 130)

Women were considered particularly dangerous and posed a great threat, as a female was a “mobile unit” (*MOH* 131) in society, moving from her father’s home to her husband’s home. Marriage facilitated and ensured this movement. This “transgression,” though necessary and legitimate, also has its attendant flaws. Carson points out that marriage creates a scenario for more illicit female movement, such as adultery. As a result, the ancient world possessed many strategies, rituals, and customs when it came to women and their isolation or movement within society. Carson examines one of these rituals – the ancient wedding ceremony – in Sappho’s fragment 31 at the end of “Dirt and Desire,” but first establishes some common perceptions of women in antiquity.

Carson cites ancient poets and thinkers in order to distinguish women from men. The difference between the two genders is, consequently, binary. Women are wet, whereas men

are dry (Hippokrates). Aristotle goes further to describe women, characteristically wet, as “unbounded” and “polluted,” whereas men are “bounded” and “pure.” Women are formless and contribute matter, or content. Men, being bounded, provide form. The binary structure set forth by these philosophers, as Carson points out, has a basis in mythology:

In myth, woman’s boundaries are pliant, porous, mutable. Her power to control them is inadequate, her concern for them unreliable. Deformation attends her. She swells, she shrinks, she leaks, she is penetrated, she suffers metamorphoses. (*MOH* 133)

Just as a woman’s physical body cannot contain her, a woman’s mouth is a contraption that should remain shut, lest sound should erupt:

In general the women of classical literature are a species given to disorderly and uncontrolled outflow of sound – to shrieking, wailing, sobbing, shrill lament, loud laughter, screams of pain or of pleasure and eruptions of raw emotion in general. (*GIG* 126)

Women are often seen metamorphosing, such as in the myths of Io, Kallisto, and Medusa. The monstrous threat of women is a result of the instability of their borders: Io turns into a cow, Kallisto into a bear, and Medusa, who has snakes for hair, has the ability to even threaten the borders and bodies of men. Female sound has also been associated with “monstrosity, disorder and death” (*GIG* 121). Carson’s examples include a fragment from Alkaios that mentions “an otherworldly echo of women’s awful yearly shrieking,” and an anecdote of Gertrude Stein, who was said to have “a laugh like a beefsteak” (123, 121).

The “wet” quality of women – their ability to “leak” and to adopt other shapes – is best imagined as a sieve, which recalls the myth of the daughters of Danaos, whose punishment for murdering their new husbands was to gather water in a sieve or leaky jar for eternity.

According to Carson, “the sieve of the Danaids sums up in a single hellish image all that is problematic in the relation between women and boundaries” (*MOH* 135). A related image that Carson provides is “a boat filled with holes” (144). As she states, women are regarded as “formless creatures who cannot or do not or will not maintain their own boundaries and who are awfully adept at confounding the boundaries of others” (135).

“Wetness” does not only pertain to women, but is also associated with emotion. Carson describes the liquefying and dissolving qualities of emotion which may threaten man: anxiety “falls in drops” (*MOH* 136), for instance. A Hellenistic epigram describes envy as “melting” the eyes and heart. Being porous creatures, women are more affected by emotion, and succumb easily to tears, jealousy, fear, and so on. The most harmful emotion is Eros: “desire is variously said to melt, flood, soften, loosen, boil, broil, roast, drown and disintegrate the lover who is his victim” (136).<sup>13</sup> Carson draws a connection between “wetness” and “wantonness,” both of which are disastrous for men’s mind and body. Manliness, aligned with dryness, is vulnerable to “wet” Eros as it may threaten or dissolve its borders. Women, on the contrary, already share this quality with Eros. It is unsurprising, as Carson points out, that “Greek poets find sexuality in women a fearsome thing” (140).

Of course, this binaristic framing of women and their sexuality has been perpetuated throughout history and informs much, if not all, of Western culture.<sup>14</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, most notably, offers an extensive study of man’s gradual domination of women, which involves the ancient Greeks, among them Pythagoras who states, “There is a good principle,

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<sup>13</sup> See Anne Carson’s *Eros the Bittersweet*, particularly the chapter entitled “Finding the Edge.” It begins: “Eros is an issue of boundaries” (30). In my fourth chapter, I will address eros in broader terms as it relates to my thesis.

<sup>14</sup> Carson also draws attention to the perpetuation of this binary in “The Gender of Sound”: “I do not imagine that these polarities or their hierarchization is news to you, now that classical historians and feminists have spent the last ten or fifteen years codifying the various arguments with which ancient Greek thinkers convinced themselves that women belong to a different race than men” (*GIG* 124).

which has created order, light, and man; and a bad principle, which has created chaos, darkness, and woman” (de Beauvoir 80). Carson, too, notes in both “Dirt and Desire” and “The Gender of Sound” the influence of the “so-called Pythagorean Table of Oppositions” (*MOH* 133) on thinkers such as Aristotle.<sup>15</sup> Culture, responsible for creating and restating the unbounded-ness of women, is also responsible for providing boundaries: “since woman does not bound herself, she must be bounded” (142) in clothes, gestures, and customs. Carson reiterates this in “The Gender of Sound”: “Putting a door on the female mouth has been an important project of patriarchal culture from antiquity to the present day” (*GIG* 121).

A popular and ancient method in which a woman is “bound” is marriage. The “bonds” of matrimony are put in place to provide a domestic and sexual perimeter for women; marriage dictates how a woman is bound to her husband, restricting her from leaving him, but also restricting anyone else from entering. Any occurrence of “leakage,” such as adultery, is described as “pollution,” “contagion,” or, as Carson puts it, “dirt.”

The “dilemma posed by female dirt” (*MOH* 131) is of interest for Carson. She defines dirt as “‘matter out of place’ ... Dirt is matter that has crossed a boundary it ought not to have crossed. Dirt confounds categories and mixes up form” (143). What intrigues Carson about dirt is how it violates borders and troubles the division between inside and outside. She concludes “Dirt and Desire” with an interpretation of Sappho’s fragment 31, a fragment that we will encounter again in Carson’s poetry when I discuss its relation to the sublime. Here, Carson draws attention to the ancient wedding ceremony, a controlled ritual of female borders, and the disruptive revelation the speaker experiences when the bride is unveiled. The wedding

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<sup>15</sup> See also *Glass, Irony & God*: “...in the document cited by Aristotle that goes by the name of The Pythagorean Table of Opposites, we find the attributes curving, dark, secret, evil, ever-moving, not self-contained and lacking its own boundaries aligned with Female and set over against straight, light, honest, good, stable, self-contained and firmly bounded on the Male side” (124).

ritual itself is a series of borders and liminal spaces in which all transgressions are carefully managed. As Carson points out, marriage rites emphasize the importance of “doorways, thresholds, lintels, exits, entrances” (148), and involve various practices, or “ruptures,” such as the *unveiling* of the bride, the *opening* of the gifts, and, of course, the *breaking* of the hymen.

Carson translates fragment 31 as follows:

He seems to me equal to gods that man  
who opposite you  
sits and listens close  
to your sweet speaking

and lovely laughing – oh it  
puts the heart in my chest on wings  
for when I look at you, a moment, then no speaking  
is left in me

no: tongue breaks and thin  
fire is racing under skin  
and in eyes no sight and drumming  
fills ears

and cold sweat holds me and shaking  
grips me all, greener than grass  
I am and dead – or almost  
I seem to me ... (*MOH* 150)

This poem, as many critics have asserted, “has proved to be an engrossing text to many readers, arresting in its physicality yet elusive in its description of what is happening between the speaker, the addressee, and the man” (Budelmann 1). The first line hints at a possible (heterosexual) desire on the part of the speaker, but the second to final stanzas shift and displace the “I’s” assumed desire for “he,” to a definitive (homosexual) desire for “you.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> This reading has been provided by a number of critics. Colleen Lamos writes: “This well-known poem describes a triangular relationship in which the female speaker burns with desire for a woman who is occupied by the attention of a man” (157-8). See also Barbara Goff (*Citizen Bacchae* 93): “an unnamed man (*keinos*) is represented as sitting opposite the beloved and listening to her, but is quickly replaced in the dynamics of the poem by the (presumably female) speaker, who experiences far more dramatic reactions to the beloved than the apparently stolid *keinos*”; and Alistair Blanshard: “[the fragment] recounts the pangs of jealousy that Sappho feels when seeing a woman that she loves being courted by a man” (155).



According to Carson, Sappho's speaker uses the opportunity of the unveiling of the bride to explode her own boundary between inside and outside. "At the moment of unveiling, for the first time, the intact boundary of her person is violated by contact: the contact of vision" (*MOH* 149). The bride is penetrated by the glance of the groom. This breaking of borders typically occurs between the two parties; however, Carson argues that Sappho structures the poem in such a way so that the speaker is also *involved* in the "contact of vision," thus, breaking her own boundaries and exposing her own desires.<sup>17</sup> The dynamics of desire and the physical position of the speaker, which Carson categorizes as the poem's "notorious oddities" (151), are clarified if we consider the poem as taking place during the unveiling ritual of a wedding ceremony.<sup>18</sup> The irreverent timing of the speaker's display of desire is not lost on Carson who states: "Sappho has chosen the most solemn and authoritative of the rituals that sacralize female boundaries and used it to explode the distinction between outside and the inside of her self" (152). Her observation recalls Benstock's definition of sapphic modernism as a disruption in the "social and cultural fabric." Here we have an example from antiquity of female desire as disruptive to the marriage ceremony, which is rooted and maintained in society and culture.

"Dirt and Desire" and "The Gender of Sound" provide some useful coordinates to consider rupture. As Carson makes clear, rupture is characterized as feminine, threatening,

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<sup>17</sup> The physical arrangement of the subjects in the poem is key to Carson's reading. The "staging" of the fragment will prove to be more important later on in the chapter when I turn to Carson's metaphor of film and cinema. For now, see Carson's description of the placement of figures:

The man is the initial subject and visual focus of the poem because Sappho, if positioned behind the bride's back, is looking straight at him over the bride's head. For the same reason, namely her rearguard position, Sappho does not at first respond to what the bride looks like, since she cannot see her face, but rather to the bride's voice and laughter, which is well positioned to hear ... Yet it is not the bride who stands revealed at this wedding. It is not the material boundaries of a bridal veil that fall open. It is not the bridegroom who suddenly sees what he has not seen before. Sappho has constructed her poem as a play upon the ritual formalities of the unveiling ceremony in order to situate her own emotions, which are intensely personal and properly hidden emotions, at the single most extraordinary moment of exposure in female life and so to bend its ritual meaning onto herself with an irony of reference as sharp as a ray of light. (*MOH* 151-2)

<sup>18</sup> See Jane McIntosh Snyder, "The Wedding Song Theory" (*Lesbian Desire in the Lyrics of Sappho* 29-30).

contaminated, and disruptive to masculine “order.” Females are “pollutable, polluted and polluting in several ways at once” (*MOH* 143), playing both passive and active roles; women’s borders are vulnerable, and other borders are vulnerable to women. Indeed, this gender binary that splits and adopts opposing characteristics is the basis of our intellectual heritage and continues to inform twentieth century thinkers. While I would like to move away from these models and to move beyond the feminized readings of Sappho’s fragments, they are useful to keep in mind as I explore Carson’s particular use of the Sapphic archive and the ancient poet’s participation and role in Carson’s poetics of error. I want to turn instead to the material borders of Sappho’s textual fragments and to the manner in which they “contaminate” and threaten the borders of other texts.

### ***If Not, Winter: Material Rupture***

*“[S]he plays havoc with boundaries and defies the rules that keep matter in its place.”*  
—Anne Carson (*MOH* 152)

The social disruption of women established in Carson’s essays is useful to keep in mind as we move ahead and look at Sappho’s fragmentary corpus. If Woman is a social pollutant that disrupts civil boundaries, then we can think of the sapphic fragment as a textual “pollutant” that disrupts the boundaries of a coherent archive, while threatening the boundaries of other texts.

Carson has described Sappho as a “representative of the whole mysterious, polluted species of ancient womanhood” (*MOH* 152). But Sappho, as mentioned earlier, has evolved and has been adapted to suit other scenarios. Reynolds argues that “‘Sappho’ is not a name, much less a person. It is, rather, a space. A space for filling in the gaps, joining up the dots,

making something out of nothing” (2). What Sappho appears to represent for Carson is an opportunity for pollution, or “leakage,” of another kind. The appearance of Sappho and her fragments opens up a space in which Carson experiments with order, definitions, established structures, and the ensuing possibility of error.

Why would Sappho be an ideal candidate for such a project? Similar to Reynold’s conception of Sappho as “a space,” duBois notes that when researching the ancient poet, “we realize that there is no there there” (82).<sup>19</sup> What we discover in Sappho is not only fragments, but a persistent absence:

Her poems have come down to us only in the most fragmentary of forms, quoted in other poets’ work, translated by Catullus, cited by rhetoricians as exemplary texts, found in shreds of papyrus stuffed in sacred crocodiles at Oxyrhynchus in Egypt. There is no text of Sappho, really, just reports, distant sightings, rumours, a few words reputed to be hers. Even many of the poems assigned to her by scholars have features that make attribution questionable – words from the wrong dialect, even her name spelled variously in different situations. (82-3)

With Sappho we encounter distance, not only in the incompleteness of her poetry, but also in the way she is always separated from us by two or three degrees of reception and transmission. Quoting Sappho often entails what others have already quoted, and at times in the wrong dialect. The reception of her work is accompanied, to a great extent, by error. More

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<sup>19</sup> duBois is (intentionally) plagiarizing the famous line from Gertrude Stein’s *Everybody’s Biography* (1937). Carson herself extends Reynold’s and duBois’s spatial metaphors of Sappho to include the sonic. As Carson writes, “Physical silence happens when you are looking at, say, a poem of Sappho’s inscribed on papyrus from two thousand years ago that has been torn in half. Half the poem is empty space. A translator can signify or even rectify this lack of text in various ways – with blankness or brackets or textual conjecture – and she is justified in doing so because Sappho did not intend that part of poem to fall silent” (*Nay* 4). See also Monique Wittig and Sande Zveig’s *Lesbian Peoples: Materials for a Dictionary* in which the entry for “Sappho” is simply a blank page.

importantly, we realize that when we read Sappho, she is already sharing borders, such as with Plato in the *Phaedrus*, or, as we shall see, Longinus in *On the Sublime*.

Carson's consideration of "pollution" among ancient women in the social realm draws attention to how she herself "plays havoc with boundaries" (*MOH* 152) and conventions in her own work. Seduced by "imperfect surfaces" and the impossibility of totality in the wreckage of ancient texts, we find in Carson numerous occasions of "rupture." More than just the social transgressions conducted by women, we also witness boundaries of other kinds – such as the boundaries of a text, the categories of genre, and the crossing of these lines. Boundaries mark an edge, separating the outside from the inside. They determine the beginning and the end of something – both spatially and temporally. But Carson appears to be more intrigued by the breakdown of borders, the straddling of one thing by another; overall, she resists categories, opting instead for a more ambiguous "middle."

With this in mind, we can take up Carson's extensive translation of Sappho's fragments in *If Not, Winter*.<sup>20</sup> In her translation, Carson makes deliberate use of negative space and line breaks in order to give the sense of something erupted. Square brackets, inserted to indicate missing pieces of papyrus or illegible letters, "give an impression of missing matter" (*INW* xi). Carson's translation keeps the fragments separate, dedicating a new page to each fragment. Thus, some pages have as few as two words. The reading experience departs from other canonical translations, such as *The Loeb Classical Library* (1982) translation by David Campbell, or even later translations, such as Jim Powell's *The Poetry of Sappho* (2007). Carson emphasizes the blankness of the page, doing away with footnotes and other extraneous

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<sup>20</sup> During the writing of this chapter, parts of two previously unknown poems by Sappho were discovered. See J. Romm (*The Daily Beast*): "Scholars Discover New Poems from Ancient Greek Poetess Sappho." See also Daniel Mendelsohn (*The New Yorker*): "Girl, Interrupted: Who was Sappho?" The new additions are now included in a new collection, translated by Diane Rayor: *Sappho: A New Translation of the Complete Works* (2014).

marks, thus highlighting the broken edges of the fragment. As Bruce Whiteman describes the translations, “To my ear her versions sound more like trots than fully achieved English poems” (685). The page is in constant tension between what remains and what is lost. Riffing through the pages, *If Not, Winter* appears as a plain stack of sheets, punctuating the eye now and then with ink.<sup>21</sup>

We better see the rupture in Carson’s translation when set against Sam Hamill’s translation. I’ve selected Hamill because he purposely takes a different route from Carson and arranges Sappho’s fragments as *complete* pieces. The following, for example, is Hamill’s translation of fragment 34:

All the stars turn away their faces  
when the pale moon grows full,  
who, in her splendour,  
turns the wide, shining world  
into silver. (4)

In his foreword, Hamill states that he chose to present each fragment “as an entire poem” in the belief that it “capture[s] a universal human experience in an infinite moment” (ix). Despite the separation from its original context, the fragment functions as a complete unit. However, this rendition is counter to what duBois believes Sappho’s fragments should be. As she states:

Her poetry epitomizes the *blanc*, the blank, the whiteness of the page marked only by scattered, shattered words. Her poetry can produce anxiety because it exemplifies lack, and Sappho herself sometimes becomes a fetish object, made whole, perfect, sealed on the page by translators who are made uncomfortable by the holes in her writing. (27)

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<sup>21</sup> My use of “punctuating” recalls Barthes’s definition of the “punctum” of a photograph. While the studium of a photo corresponds to its symbolic meaning, the punctum concerns an element, or number of elements, that punctuates the studium, or meaning of the photo, and in turn punctures the viewer: “A photograph’s *punctum* is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)” (CL 27).

In light of this, Carson is not a translator who is uncomfortable with the gaps in Sappho.<sup>22</sup> By contrast, Carson's translation arranges the fragment on the page so as to *capture* its disconnection rather than making it "whole." As Dimitrios Yatromanolakis notes: "[Carson] prefers poetic fragmentariness and transparency to scholarly reconstruction" (271). Sappho's words – to borrow duBois's terms – scatter, as much as they are scattered, and shatter as much as they are shattered. Carson's placement and typesetting of Sappho's words is an attempt to illustrate its rupture:

stars around the beautiful moon  
hide back their luminous form  
whenever all full she shines  
on the earth

silvery (*INW* 69)

We see at work in Hamill's interpretation a desire for totality, coherence, and self-containment, conventionally demarcating the fragment's beginning with a capital and its end with a full stop. Comparing diction and syntax, it is apparent that Hamill's version takes considerable creative liberties. For instance, the stars are personified and have "faces" while Carson makes only mention of a singular "form." While Hamill embellishes and beautifies the line about the full moon ("when the pale moon grows full"), Carson comes down with brute force: "whenever all full." The sparseness is deliberate on Carson's part as she states in the introduction: "I tried to put down all that can be read of each poem in the plainest language I could find, using where possible the same order of words and thoughts as Sappho did" (*INW* x).

Apart from these syntactical and rhetorical differences, I am interested in the way Carson presents her translation. The line breaks do not take the reader very far, as there is no

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<sup>22</sup> In an interview, Carson states: "making Sappho a complete text with sentences that go from right to left [is] kind of endearing to do but it's so hopelessly silly" (Fleming).

indication as to how much or how little exists between them.<sup>23</sup> Though it reads logically (“she shines / on the earth”), who is to say that this was Sappho’s intention? The mystery surrounding the fragments is foregrounded by the white space. There are as few black marks as possible on the page, no inserted punctuation, and fewer words than in Hamill’s version. The arrangement parallels the original ancient Greek on the facing page but it is still not as tightly woven as Hamill’s contained five-line stanza. The use of indentation on the fourth line of Carson’s version creates a longer pause, which invites readers to speculate. The final word, “silvery,” floats below, separated from the quatrain. What this adjective modifies remains unclear.

Carson recreates the challenges of her process, and of her poetics of translation, by using square brackets, which “will affect your reading experience, if you allow it” (*INW* xi). Though we are reading Sappho in English, Carson insists that there “is no reason you should miss the *drama* of trying to read a papyrus torn in half or riddled with holes” (xi; emphasis mine).<sup>24</sup> Indeed, maintaining the drama of reading torn papyrus is opposite to philology, which attempts to eliminate the processive drama in order to recreate an ideal exemplar. Carson’s use of white space, as Johanna Drucker would argue, is “integral to textuality” (“Graphical Readings” 271). Not only is it a field with “a set of elements in contingent relation” (275), it also embodies history and loss. Reading Carson’s translations provide the sense of genuine obscurity and incompleteness. This can be seen in Fragments 92 and 93 of *If Not, Winter*:

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<sup>23</sup> “On a papyrus roll the text is written in columns, without word division, punctuation or lineation. To read such a text is hard even when it comes to us in its entirety and most papyri don’t” (*INW* ix).

<sup>24</sup> Indeed, duBois also places importance on the “riddling of holes” and the presentation of the fragments: “A crucial question for the presentation of the Sapphic text has always been how to represent the absences, the holes, the gaps in the poetic object; how does a publisher, without sanitizing, rectifying, fetishizing, print these fragments, show the tears, frangible edges, erasures, abrasions? ... Her texts, as we receive them, insist on the impossibility of recapturing the lost body” (28-9).

Fragment 92:

]
]  
]  
]  
]
robe
and
colored with saffron
purple robe
cloaks
crowns
beautiful
]  
purple
rugs
]  
(181)

Fragment 93:

]
]  
]  
] I have
] of girls (183)

Despite the scantiness of fragment 92, which has been described as “virtual debris” (D’Agata, “Stripped-Down Sappho”), the Sapphic fragment has been translated and transformed by Willis Barnstone into an eight-stanza poem, complete with even the title, “Recalling a Letter Atthis Wrote Me.” While Barnstone, like Hamill, aims for completion and closes the gaps, Carson uses the space of the page to recreate the papyrus’s deterioration. The white space explodes the text and invites new possible connections. Readers of Greek, a highly inflected language, would be able to extract further details not available to English readers, but Carson translates the material “drama” of manuscript and papyrus. Consequently, readers of English are still able to engage with the ambiguous text as detotalized. Fragment 92, for instance, is



rich in colour, but we are not given a clear sense of place, speaker, or subject. Similarly, fragment 93 leaves the reader with more questions. The four words are the only coordinates on the page. What the speaker has and how it relates to the next line remains unknown and the possibilities are infinite. As Carson puts it, “Brackets are exciting ... brackets imply a free space of imaginal adventure” (*INW* xi). A text, as Barthes similarly asserts, has “an irreducible ... plurality” (*RL* 59). The multiplicity of meanings in Sappho’s poems is created by these fragments, but this crucial indeterminacy depends largely on the materiality of the surrounding white space. Negative space participates in the production of meaning. It signifies a presence of words that are eternally lost. Absence straddles presence, and vice versa, thus, blurring the borders between them. The text is ruptured and the remaining words, like shrapnel, are thrown out, free to pierce through other textual boundaries. While Carson has established in “Dirt and Desire” and “The Gender of Sound” the social pollution of women, here Sappho participates in pollution of a textual register that transgresses even the boundaries of Carson’s own works, resulting in formal, stylistic, and generic “contamination.”

### **Generic Boundaries: “Friskes, skips and jumps”**

The act of pollution by which boundaries are broken down coincides with Carson’s overall poetic practice. She is interested neither in fixed entities nor in the maintenance of their fixities; rather she is intrigued by their mixing and by the emergence of new forms. Indeed, the mixing of genres as a transgressive act is not unlike the “leakage” that Carson identifies in the social realm. If, according to trans-historical patriarchal edict, Woman needs laws and rituals to maintain her boundaries in order to prevent impurity, pollution, and monstrosity, such is the case with genre. As Derrida points out: “as soon as genre announces itself, one must respect a

norm, one must not cross a line of demarcation, one must not risk impurity, anomaly, or monstrosity” (“The Law of Genre” 57).

The “line of demarcation,” however, is not a boundary that simply exists between genres. It is not a line impervious to mixing; rather, and in keeping with Derridean deconstruction, the law of genre that aims to ensure purity is also at once a law of impurity:

What if there were, lodged within the heart of the law itself, a law of impurity or a principle of contamination? And suppose the condition for the possibility of the law were the *a priori* of a counter-law, an axiom of impossibility that would confound its sense, order, and reason? (“The Law of Genre” 57)

We may recall the law of marriage by which the union of a man and woman is legitimized. This social convention also follows what Derrida formulates: when the border dividing man and woman is broken down via the controlled ritual of marriage, they become immediately vulnerable to *illegitimate* transgressions – adultery. As Derrida writes, “The law and the counter-law serve each other citations summoning each other to appear, and each recites the other in this proceeding (*proces*)” (58). In the case of genre, Carson admits to the difficulty of distinguishing prose from poetry. In an interview, she speaks cryptically about the difference, stating that she identifies each by the “smell”: “The two modes fade in and out of one another and at a certain point the work congeals into a form” (di Michele 7). Echoing Derrida on how the law simultaneously summons its counter-law, Carson, too, does not pay heed to the authoritative or conventional rules of genre.<sup>25</sup> She recognizes that while such rules command

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<sup>25</sup> We also see this echo in Lacan: the law is obscene, commanding us to enjoy what it forbids.

order, they invite defiance by their very existence. As she states, “Genres are conventional. Conventions exist to be re-negotiated” (di Michele 8).<sup>26</sup>

This “renegotiation,” or movement across borders and genres, is best seen in *Decreation*, where “impurity,” “anomaly,” and “monstrosity” are at play. The cover blurb describes the book as a collection of “Poetry, Essays, Opera,” but such appellations do not contain all that Carson accomplishes within the pages.<sup>27</sup> Carson also plays with ekphrasis, the essay, tableau, rhapsody, oratorio, documentary, and screenplay. The opening epigraph of the book is fitting in that it applies to *Decreation’s* wide-ranging styles and forms, but also to Carson’s poetics as a whole: “I love a poetical kinde of a march, by friskes, skips and jumps.”<sup>28</sup> While Carson sources the line as coming from Montaigne’s “Essay on Some Verses of Virgil,” (a fictional essay), the line, in fact, is taken from Montaigne’s “Chapter IX: On Vanity,” as translated by Florio in 1603.<sup>29</sup> This misattribution is itself a “skip” in the sense that Carson “skips over” proper citation (and we will see this again when she misquotes Longinus in the “TV Men” series). More importantly, Montaigne’s line describes a playful movement in

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<sup>26</sup> Carson’s statement about genre echoes what is put forth in Derrida’s “The Law and Genre” (1980): “ ‘Genres are not to be mixed’ could strike you as a sharp order. You might have heard it resound the elliptical but all the more authoritarian summons to a law of a ‘do’ or ‘do not’ which, as everyone knows, occupies the concept or constitutes the value of genre. As soon as the word ‘genre’ is sounded, as soon as it is heard, as soon as one attempts to conceive it, a limit is drawn. And when a limit is established, norms and interdictions are not far behind: ‘Do,’ ‘Do not’ says ‘genre,’ the word ‘genre,’ the figure, the voice, or the law of genre” (56).

<sup>27</sup> Derrida also investigates subtitles in Maurice Blanchot’s *La Folie du jour*, which calls itself “an account” (*Un récit*). Carson often plays with her subtitles, calling *The Beauty of the Husband*, for example, “A Fictional Essay in 29 Tangos” (more on this in Chapter 4). See Derrida (“The Law of Genre” 73-4): “Could you tell whether these titles, written earlier and filed away in the archives, make up a single title, titles of the same text, titles of the account (which of course figures as an impracticable mode in the book), or the title of a genre? Even if the latter were to cause some confusion, it would be of the sort that releases questions already implemented and enacted by *La Folie du jour*. This enactment enables in turn the denaturalization and deconstitution of the oppositions nature/history and mode/genre.”

<sup>28</sup> Carson’s choice of Montaigne’s line (poetry as “a march,” “friskes,” “skips and jumps”) echoes her own claim that “words bounce” (*AR* 3).

<sup>29</sup> Ian Rae also notes this misattribution and states: “This misattribution seems to be a scholarly joke since the sentence preceding the Montaigne citation states, in the original, that ‘the titles of my chapters, embrace not always the matter’” (“Verglas” 165, fn. 2). We can speculate briefly on Carson’s reference to Virgil in her misattribution. Virgil is one of the chief representatives, along with Homer, of masculine, classical, epic poetry. Mentioning Virgil is mischievous in that Montaigne’s praise jibes more with the Sapphic/Carsonian-poetics.

language that is evidenced in Carson's work, that is, the "skips and jumps" that both cross borders of genre and also the linguistic and temporal gaps between the present and antiquity.

The epigraph is taken from a passage that describes a poetic platform consistent with Carson's own approach. Both Montaigne and Carson testify to an aesthetics that involves opportunity for accidents, play, and error:

I love a Poeticall kinde of march, by friskes, skips and jumps. It is an arte (saith Plato) light, nimble, fleeting and light-brain'd. There are some treatises in Plutarke, where he forgets his theame, where the drift of his argument is not found but by incidencie and chaunce, all stuffed with strange matter. Marke but the vagaries in his Daemon of Socrates. Oh God! what grace hath the variation, and what beautie these startings and nimble escapes; ... I am indiscreetly and tumultuously at a fault; my stile and wit are still gadding alike. A little folly is tolerable in him ... (Montaigne 138-9)

Montaigne cites the Greeks, Plato, and Plutarch, and describes a poetic art that is "light, nimble, fleeting" and that requires strangeness, forgetfulness, incidence, chance, variation, and folly. Indeed, these qualities are evident in Carson's own work, particularly the collection that houses this epigraph. A number of critics have noted the generic jumps and the variety of styles found in the book. William Logan, for example, describes *Decreation* as "a ragbag of strange ambition ... Carson delights in dizzy leaps of thought" ("Victoria's Secret"; emphasis mine). The poetry "appears to have been dashed off with the relaxed hand of an artist" (Guriel 46). Much of what is startling about *Decreation* is its openness to form, jumping from poetry to essay, from opera to documentary, and its inclusion of a range of figures rarely seen together, such as Longinus, Betty Goodwin, and Michelangelo Antonioni. To borrow Montaigne's words, Carson's "strange matter" in *Decreation* demonstrates her "nimble escape"

from conventional forms and expectations. The deliberate subtitle in *Decreation* – “Poetry, Essays, Opera” – enacts a law, but also encompasses the relations formed around it. What results is not a principle of order and organization, but a “ragbag.” As Derrida puts it: “The law is mad. The law is mad, is madness; but madness is not the predicate of law. There is no madness without the law; madness cannot be conceived before its relation to law (“The Law of Genre” 81).

Throughout the collection, Carson plays with the *madness* of genre, calling her poems in one section “Sublimes,” in another section “Gnosticisms.” Her piece, “Foam,” is an “essay with rhapsody.” Carson continually re-negotiates convention and genre. Sam Anderson whimsically describes her as “someone from another world, either extraterrestrial or ancient, for whom our modern earthly categories are too artificial and simplistic to *contain* anything like the real truth she is determined to communicate” (“Inscrutable”; emphasis mine). The transgression of borders and the experimental play in *Decreation* result in striking idiosyncrasies. When artificial and “earthly categories” cannot contain Carson, she moves into new forms more fitting. Her more recent works, such as *Nox* and *Antigonick*, pay special attention to medium and the physical attributes of the work.

Border transgressions and rupture are nothing new for Carson, as she herself participates in such “leakages.” In “Gender of Sound,” Carson writes, “Woman is that creature who puts the inside on the outside. By projections and leakages of all kinds – somatic, vocal, emotional, sexual – females expose or expend what should be kept in” (*GIG* 129). There is a striking parallel between the flow and spillage of the woman and the outpouring of the poet, pointed out by Montaigne. In the lines following the chosen epigraph, Montaigne describes the poet’s speech:

A Poet (saith Plato) seated on the Muses footestoole, doth in a furie powre-out whatsoever commeth in his mouth, as the pipe or cocke of a fountaine, without considering or ruminating the same: and many things escape him, diverse in colour, contrary in substance, and broken in course. (139)

The connection between Poet and Woman is reminiscent of Julia Kristeva's study of language and literature. Kristeva's definition of the maternal *chora* is evidenced by "*rupture* and articulations (rhythm)" (*Revolution* 26; emphasis mine). For Kristeva, language must consider both its "semiotic" (coded as feminine and maternal) and "symbolic" (coded as masculine and paternal) dimensions. The symbolic governs the expression of *ordered* meaning via grammatically and syntactically formulated utterances. The semiotic, however, is not rule-governed; it indicates a process by which libidinal energies, affects, and drives are unconsciously discharged into language. The semiotic injects language with libidinal energy, just as the female "projects" and "leaks," polluting the world around her. I would argue that we could also call the semiotic by another name: the sapphic. Both are characterized by rupture, chaos, spontaneity, improvisation, the feminine, as well as desire and affect. We have already mentioned Sappho's call upon Aphrodite as both goddess of love and Muse, thus, yoking together desire and discourse. Carson, too, sensualizes language, and notes: "the history of a text is like a long caress" (*AR* 6). Indeed, the history of Greek fragments, their transmissions, translations, and receptions, are all part of this "long caress" that shows itself by how they mingle with and leak into other texts.

While it may be said that *all* poets are to some degree agrammatical, I propose examining a selection of Carson's poems under the auspices of this metaphor of "leakage," which recurs and is taken up by her in varying ways. Though we can understand the sapphic as

Kristevan semiotic, I would argue that these two terms are not simply interchangeable. The sapphic also signals for Carson a larger issue at stake. The sapphic is not limited to intertextuality and linguistic intersections, but involves a creative praxis that encompasses error, the material, the fragmentary, and loss. “Foam,” an essay in which Carson discusses the sublime as “spillage,” is a useful text through which her poems may be examined, and partakes in a larger discussion of how “leakage” functions in material and textual rupture.

### **Foam: A Documentary Technique**

The danger of border transgression accompanying a text is familiar to Carson. In her essay, “Foam,” she writes on the sublime in Longinus and Antonioni. Carson describes Longinus’s use of intertextuality as follows:

Longinus skates from Homer to Demosthenes to Moses to Sappho on blades of pure bravado. What is a quote? A quote (cognate with *quota*) is a cut, a section, a slice of someone else’s orange. You suck the slice, toss the rind, skate away. Part of what you enjoy in a documentary technique is the sense of banditry. To loot someone else’s life or sentences and make off with a point of view ... (D 45)

What is this “sense of banditry” that Carson is referring to? According to Carson, Longinus’s treatise *On the Sublime*, is “an aggregation of quotes,” which, she claims, does not provide a clear, coherent argument: “You will come away from reading its (unfinished) forty chapters with no clear idea what the Sublime actually is” (D 45).<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Carson’s description of Longinus’s treatise as an “aggregation of quotes” has been noted by other classics scholars. See Longinus, Trans. W. Rhys Roberts (1899): “Reference is made to as many as fifty Greek writers, whose dates range over something like a thousand years” (26). See also the book’s “Appendix C. Literary With a List of Authors and Quotations” (211-246).

We can understand Carson's "documentary technique" through a Bakhtinian lens. According to Bakhtin's science of utterances, our words are never in isolation but are always part of a dialogue. Utterances reply to past utterances. We never reinvent the signification of our language when we speak; rather our words are connected with what preceded them. Every utterance we make is dialogical and thus, resonates with things previously said and written, and also anticipates utterances to come. As Bakhtin states:

language is not an abstract system of normative forms but rather a concrete heteroglot conception of the world. All words have the "taste" of a profession, a genre, a tendency, a party, a particular work, a particular person, a generation, an age group, the day and hour. ... Contextual overtones (generic, tendentious, individualistic) are inevitable in the word. (293)

Kristeva also claims that the literary word is no fixed point, but is "an intersection of words (texts) where another word (text) can be read" (*Desire* 66). For Kristeva, every text has to be understood as a "mosaic of quotations" (66), or, as Carson describes it, an "aggregation." Intertextuality is not a simple matter of texts intersecting each other and being analyzed together; rather, it is a transposition of one (or several) sign system(s) into another, resulting in a creative and revisionist interference between two sign systems. Every text, ultimately, is an open system. Indeed, Carson's own metaphor of "leakage" dovetails with Kristeva's formulation of the text as being open to other texts.

It is important to point out that Carson's argument is not actually a complaint against Longinus; rather, she states that the technique by which he quotes (or "loots"), analyzes, and "skates" from reference to reference, is itself a performance of the Sublime. The vibration that arises out of the "brutal juxtaposition" (*D* 46) and documentation in Longinus, and is felt by



the reader, is synonymous with being touched by the Sublime. This enjoyment, which Longinus cannot define but which he illustrates in his attempt to define it, is itself an experience of rupture and spilling, what Carson nicknames “foam”: “Longinus moves through the chapters of *On the Sublime* covered with foam himself” (48).

Witness and spillage are intrinsic to the Sublime. While the vulnerability of boundaries has been deemed feminine and threatening (the breaking of borders an indication of loss of control and order), in this case, the method of Longinus’s documentation is actually “exciting” (D 45), since textual control is constantly shifting, passed along, and possessed briefly by somebody else:

Watch this spillage, which moves from the man who hits, to the words of Demosthenes describing him, to the judges hearing these words, to Longinus analyzing the whole process, to me recalling Longinus’s discussion of it and finally to you reading my account. The passionate moment echoes from soul to soul. Each controls it temporarily.

Each enjoys it quote by quote. (D 46)

To experience the Sublime, according to Carson, is “to share a bit of electric life with the artist’s invention, to spill with him” (46). Banditry, or anarchy (literally as “being without a ruler”) is pleasurable.

Carson posits that Antonioni’s films also play with the “spilling” of contents and the “possibility of foam” (49). Antonioni, of course, does this differently from Longinus’s discussion of literature and rhetoric as the director demonstrates the Sublime by way of cinema:

Antonioni’s films involve different kinds of playing with the passionate moment, different ways of spilling its contents. He enjoys, for example, drawing attention to

offscreen space by placing a mirror in the middle of the scene so that you glimpse a stray piece of world there. Or he likes to give you two successive shots of the same portion of reality, first from close up, then a little further away, scarcely different yet noticeably the same. (D 49)

Both Antonioni and Longinus are interested in portraying “passionate moments,” “spilling,” and breaking of rules (a sense of wrong, or error). We have understood foam thus far to mean a sense of sublimity, but Carson also uses it to suggest a meaning that is closer to error.

In her comparison, Carson describes Antonioni’s unique method of filming, termed *temps mort* by French critics, in which he leaves the camera running after a scene is finished. Recording continues and “spills” from the moment of conscious performance to unconscious “real life.” *Temps mort* crosses the border between cinema and reality, thus, opening the possibility for capturing something worthwhile that is *outside* the script:

“When everything has been said, when the scene appears to be finished, there is what comes afterward ... the actors continue out of inertia into moments that seem ‘dead.’ The actor commits ‘errors.’ ...”

Antonioni likes to document these moments of errors, when the actors do unscheduled things, act “back to front” as he says. Possibility of foam. (D 49)

It is understandable that Carson would turn to Antonioni as his methods are in line with her own poetics of errancy. He, too, has a predilection for accidents, for the breaking of rules, the unpredictable movement, or “inertia,” of the moment. Like Carson, who negotiates conventions, Antonioni occupies the in-between space between deliberate and spontaneous recording. The quality of this leakage is, for Carson, identified as foam. Not only is

Antonioni's technique, "the *opening out* [of] the frame" (emphasis mine), associated with the sublime, but the artful contingency, or error, is a "possibility of foam" (*D* 49). Indeed, the "opening out" and breaking of received frames related to gender, form, translation, and genre is another useful analogy to describe the leakages, ruptures, and boundary-crossings with which Carson is concerned.

How does Carson place herself amongst Antonioni and Longinus as a participant of the sublime? More importantly, how does Sappho, an exemplary figure of the sublime for Longinus, fit into this strange realm that also includes Antonioni? The connection, as I will argue, is one of performance and sight.

Sappho's fragment 31, preserved for us by Longinus in his treatise, is an illustration of sublimity.<sup>31</sup> In the notes of *If Not, Winter*, Carson excerpts Longinus's passage on the fragment ("Are you not amazed at how she researches all at once the soul the body the ears the tongue the eyes the skin all as if they had departed from her and belong to someone else?" [364]), and emphasizes the complexity of bodily and affective "rupture" that take place in the fragment: "Sappho's body *falls apart*, Longinus's body comes together: drastic contract of the sublime" (364; emphasis mine). Indeed, fragment 31 demonstrates such a "documentary technique" as we move along the poem from body part to body part, one sense and sensation to another, as if "skating" from quote to quote ("a cut, a section, a slice"). Each passionate moment "spills" from the "he" to the "you" and to the speaker as evidenced by the sight of "he" who is "opposite you," his ear listening closely, the woman's "sweet speaking" and "lovely laughing," and finally the complex configuration of the speaker's bodily response to the

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<sup>31</sup> See Longinus (10.3) translated by Carson in *If Not, Winter*: "Are you not amazed at how she researches all at once the soul the body the ears the tongue the eyes the skin all as if they had departed from her and belong to someone else? And contradictorily in one instant she chills, she burns, is crazy and sensible, for she is in terror or almost dead. So that no single passion is apparent in her but a confluence of passions. And her selection (as I said) of the most important elements and her combination of these into a whole achieves excellence" (364).

unveiling of the bride: “no speaking is left in me ... tongue breaks ... fire is racing under skin ... cold sweat holds me ... greener than grass I am and dead – or almost” (*INW* 63).

The sublime, according to Carson, is experienced on multiple levels in Longinus’s treatise. There is, more broadly, the juxtaposition of various poets, as seen in Longinus as he “skates” (leaps, skips, bounces) from quotation to quotation, from Homer, to Sappho, and so on.<sup>32</sup> In addition to the interplay of various texts, we also have the juxtapositions within the excerpts themselves, as seen in the combination of affective elements documented in Sappho’s fragment 31. Understanding the sublime as Carson understands it is useful to keep in mind when we turn to the poems that follow.

Carson’s poetry also employs the documentary technique. With a “sense of banditry,” Carson loots and steals from a number of personal, cinematic, literary, and philosophical sources. Just as *On the Sublime* has been described as “a veritable storehouse of quotations” (Rhys Roberts 26), the twelve poems bring together a number of figures and quotes in an eclectic mix, such as Longinus, Michelangelo Antonioni, Monica Vitti, Kant, Sappho, and family members. The epigraph of the section begins: “Everything might spill” (*D* 60),<sup>33</sup> and, indeed, we don’t know how or where we will splash.<sup>34</sup> The poems spill from imagined or impossible worlds (as in “Longinus’s Dream of Antonioni” and “Kant’s Question about Monica Vitti”), to films by Antonioni (mentioned are *Red Desert*, *L’Avventura*, *L’Eclisse*), or to personal and familial memories such as in “Spring Break,” which details a family road trip

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<sup>32</sup> The “skating” or rapid movement and turning from writer to writer, text to text, generates a sense of vertigo, or textual dizziness. According to Barbara Claire Freeman (*The Feminine Sublime: Gender and Excess in Women’s Fiction*), “The absence of a fixed point of view or visual focus produces orientation ... Vertigo, of course, is a typically sublime feeling connected with the falling away of the ground or centre; it is what we feel when abyss opens up before us” (50). Indeed, this appears to be at the crux of Carson’s praxis: where is her centre?

<sup>33</sup> This line is repeated again later in the poem “Ode to the Sublime by Monica Vitti” (*D* 65-6).

<sup>34</sup> The metaphor of spillage draws a striking connection to Heidegger (*Poetry, Language, Thought*), who argues that an object exists in its functionality. He provides the example of a jug: “the gift of the outpouring is what makes the jug a jug” (170). Correspondingly, one might argue that the literary archive (or what remains) exists only in its “spilling,” when it is reactivated in the present.

from Canada to Carolina. Like much of Carson's work, there are many possible threads to tug. In the next section, I will focus primarily on Sappho's fragment 31 and trace its appearance in the "Sublimes" and the "TV Men" series. In both sections, Sappho is aligned with film and television and I will explore this metaphor in terms of poetic rupture and its larger resonances for Carson's poetics.

### **Fragment 31: Staging a Scenario**

As mentioned earlier, the connection between Sappho and Antonioni is dependent on performance and sight. Carson describes Sappho's fragment 31 explicitly in terms of performance: "Sappho is staging a scenario inside the little theatre of her mind" (*D* 160). This is an apt metaphor for the ceremonial ritual of the bride and groom. As we have seen in my discussion earlier on "Dirt and Desire," Sappho's fragment is dependent on gaze, particularly how the "contact of vision" (*MOH* 149) violates the social borders set up in the marriage ritual. The speaker's desire for the bride is especially transgressive given the heterosexual relationship that is being sanctified. Vision takes on a geometrical figure: the "he" gazes at the "you," and the "I," who first looks at the "he," shifts her gaze to the "you." But it is this shift that gives momentum to the fragment. The act of looking gives way to rupture and desire that violently affects the body of the speaker: "for when I look at you, a moment, then no speaking / is left in me." The speaker is rendered voiceless, blind, deafened, hot, as well as cold. The visual contact, as Carson argues, transgresses established borders. Similarly, Antonioni plays with the gaze by way of the camera. The camera continues to "look" and record even after the scene is finished. Like the state of Sappho's speaker who describes herself as "dead," the

“moments of error” (*D* 49) after the “cut!” is called *temps mort*, translating to “dead time.” Carson connects Sappho and Antonioni with this act of looking and re-looking.

If we are to understand Longinus’s technique of “skating” from quote to quote and Antonioni’s *temps mort* as aesthetic spillage, a “possibility of foam,” then Carson, too, demonstrates her own spillage via her use of Sappho’s fragments, and the continual reappearance of the ancient figure in her work. Departing from *Eros the Bittersweet*, Sappho continues to echo for Carson as she is used again and again in some form, spilling in new ways. For example, the triangular relationship of desire that Carson illustrates in *Eros the Bittersweet* (modelled after Sappho’s fragment 31) is one that Carson herself explores in her own work.<sup>35</sup> This depiction of desire is revisited and recontextualized in Carson’s poetry, such as *Beauty of the Husband* and *Plainwater* (which I shall discuss in the final chapter). Sappho also appears as a fictional character in the “TV Men” series (where she plays, fittingly, an actress), in “Irony is not Enough,” and in a study of women together with Marguerite Porete and Simone Weil. Sappho continually pops up in Carson’s work, making cameo appearances. Sappho, using Carson’s term, is “dirt.” She is “matter out of place” (*MOH* 143), or matter that has crossed boundaries. This is another way of understanding what Hugh Kenner means when he remarks: “Tiny though they are, these Sapphic details can rub off on other writings like bits of red dye” (59).

Carson’s reference to Antonioni is deliberate because he, too, sees in Monica Vitti new ways of spilling, new forms of artistic outcomes on screen. Vitti stars in a number of his films, her image repeating but styled in different characters each time, a striking resemblance to how

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<sup>35</sup> See Carson (*Eros* 77): “Writing about desire, the archaic poets made triangles with their words. Or, to put it less sharply, they represent situations that ought to involve two factors (lover, beloved) in terms of three (lover, beloved and the space between them, however realized?).”

Sappho “stars” in a number of Carson’s poems. Carson casts Sappho as an actress in her chapter “TV Men” (*MOH* 62, 118), which aptly echoes Antonioni’s (re)use of Monica Vitti in his films.

But the reuse and repetition of Vitti and Sappho is continuous and inexhaustible. Carson sheds light on how even movies cannot “contain” Vitti, or pin her down, in the same way that Sappho is elusive as a character. While “Ode to Monica Vitti” is read with Vitti in mind, I argue that the poem also offers a reading that is relevant to Carson’s approach to Sappho. When we read “she” – the speaker not only refers to Vitti, but also to the ancient poet.

The poem references Antonioni’s film, *L’Avventura*, which is set in a coastal villa, just outside of Rome. It opens with a classical setting:

caught  
in the time of the island, scraping themselves back and forth over  
the rocks, men slant against the wind and her golden  
hair going horizontal in whips on the ecstatic sea, boats roar  
up, roar off, men stand  
gazing (*D* 63)

Indeed, this scene brings to mind Sappho, inhabitant of her own island, Lesbos. The nature imagery and harsh diction (“caught,” “scraping,” “rocks,” “whips,” “ecstatic,” “roar”) are reminiscent of H.D.’s *Sea Garden* poems, which have been argued to depict the coastal Greek landscape and have been read as Sapphic in style and content. “Caught / in the time of the island,” can also be understood as being caught in the time of Lesbos. But “caught” is an interesting verb to use as the men here assume a position of stasis, containment, and capture.

What they gaze upon, however, escapes capture:

as  
for the scandal of our abandonment  
in a universe of “sudden trembling love,” blondes  
being  
always

fatally  
reinscribed on an old cloth  
faintly,  
interminably  
undone, why  
does Plato  
call Necessity  
a “wandering cause” isn’t it because  
you can  
‘t  
tell where  
she got in? (D 63-4)

The poem suggests that “blondes” (or Woman) have always been subordinated and pinned down permanently. As the speaker states, she is “always / fatally / reinscribed on an old cloth.” To inscribe is not only to write something down, but also to draw a figure within another so their boundaries do not touch. Woman, as we have discussed earlier, have always confounded borders and much has been done for their borders to be maintained. Here, “reinscribe” suggests that this task is done again and again, repeated throughout time. But, as the speaker points out, such dogma is problematic. Recalling the metaphor of the sieve, an image that embodies all that is problematic about women and their boundaries, it is uncertain “where / she got in” as well as how she gets out. The task of reinscribing or carving out a place for Woman is “faintly / interminably / undone.” Though it is deemed necessary – a “Necessity” as something that’s required according to logic or law – it is, as Plato describes it, a “wandering cause.” By the end of the poem, we see not an image of containment, but rupture, or “rip”:

men steady on the rock  
now they have put that gilded night  
down  
a little rip in their minds. (D 64)

Both “rip” and “rupture” are from the Proto-Indo-European root *reup-*, meaning “to snatch,” which is emblematic of the “banditry” or “looting” found in the sublime. The “little rip in their



minds” signals not only the escape of Woman, Vitti, and Sappho, but also the “rip,” or flaw, of a “gilded,” ideal, and impossible ideology. The final line suggests an elusion of masculine thought and capture.

Sappho appears again in Carson’s “TV Men” series, first published in *Glass, Irony and God*. An extended version was published in *Men in the Off Hours*, this time with an epigraph by Longinus: “TV makes things disappear. Oddly the word comes from Latin *videre* ‘to see’” (61). This, of course, is a fictional quote attributed to Longinus and even cited as coming from *de Sublimitate*, 5.3. Carson’s attribution is characteristic of her play with the archive as she undermines its veracity.

In the case of Antonioni, we have the spilling cinematic gaze, or *temps mort*, in relation to the sublime. This time, Carson introduces television, which, as she points out, “comes from Latin *videre* ‘to see.’” Similar to “Ode to Monica Vitti” where we have a poem about how it is “to see” Vitti inscribed and “reinscribed,” in “TV Men: Sappho,” we have an example of another actress who also experiences masculine expectations:

No one knows what the laws are. That there are laws  
we know, by the daily burnings if nothing else.  
On the second

day of shooting in the Place de la Concorde  
I notice the leaves in the Jardin have changed  
overnight,

but mention this to no one  
for fear of continuity problems. (*MOH* 62)

Reminiscent of the “blondes” who are “always / fatally / reinscribed on an old cloth,” here we have Sappho as an actress who is aware of the “fear of continuity problems.” In this case, the problems with continuity are in the context of film (“On the second / day of shooting”), as well as the replacement of the ancient Greek landscape associated with Sappho for a

contemporary landscape of Paris (“Place de la Concorde,” “Jardin”). But we can also understand “continuity” to refer to time and the linear trajectory of history according to “laws.” Indeed, the presence of Sappho is indicative of *discontinuity* and transgression and is disruptive to the scene:

I had already invalidated 16 (otherwise good)

takes this morning by changing an earring.  
You cannot erase.  
Is this a law?

No, a talent. To step obliquely  
where stones are sharp.  
Vice is also sharp.

There are laws against vice.  
But the shock stays with you. (*MOH 62*)

The first line of the poem, “No one knows what the laws are,” is self-aware and flippant. There are laws present, as the speaker knows, but what they are exactly remains a mystery (“That there are laws / we know, by the daily burnings if nothing else”). In fact, Sappho has already undermined these laws, or “invalidated” the filming, by her earring change. She continues to side with “vice” (from the Latin *vitium* meaning “defect, offense, blemish, imperfection”) by not mentioning the leaves that have “changed overnight.” While this can be considered a playful anachronistic poem where Carson recasts the ancient poet as a modern day actress, there are elements here that point to a larger commentary on Sappho and her reception. Indeed, the shooting, or recording, of the subject recalls another form of recording, one that is archival and historical. The desire to abide by the laws and repeat the shoot as to keep it synonymous to the first day is in line with a desire for order, coherence, and “presence.” However, Sappho, who “step[s] obliquely” into the scene, notes the impossibility of such a recording. Her changed earring has already “invalidated” sixteen takes, but, more importantly,

the changed leaves hint at a perpetual disturbance that lurks in the background. The disturbance already happened, and will continue to happen as the leaves continue to change, thus rendering a perfect take impossible. This detail, noticed by the speaker, is something she intentionally does not mention. As she puts it: “There are laws against vice.”

The conceit of film in these poems is useful in depicting the “staging” of Woman. Carson highlights the artificial and premeditated arrangement of traditional perceptions of females, as well as the desire to maintain consistency via the careful filming of Sappho. However, the “performance” and compliance of the women are undermined; there is a knowingness in the tone of both speakers: one calls Necessity a “wandering cause,” the other notes that though there are “laws against vice / ... the shock stays with you.” In both poems there is the dilemma of repeatability – that is, repeatability associated with *sameness*, as opposed to a repeating of a subject in new and different contexts. In “Ode to Monica Vitti” there is the “reinscribing” of “blondes,” and in “TV Men: Sappho,” we have the “16 takes.” But both instances are also followed by counter-actions, as suggested by the words “undone” in the first poem and “invalidated” in the second. The desire to control and repeat is accompanied by some rupture that prevents it from being done. We finish instead with “a little rip” or “shock” – ultimately, a *difference*.

Why is this important? A helpful entry into this is the fictional quote Carson provides at the beginning of the chapter: “TV makes things disappear. Oddly the word comes from Latin *videre* ‘to see’” (*MOH* 61). It is useful to read this in conjunction with the original passage of Longinus’s treatise on the sublime from which she claims this quote is culled: “All these undignified faults spring up in literature from a single cause, the craving for intellectual novelties, on which, above all else, our own generation goes wild” (Section 5, Trans. Prickard,

10). Here Longinus addresses the desire for novelty in writing, which may generate both vice and virtue in composition; he goes on to say: “It would almost be true to say that the sources of all the good in us are also the sources of all the bad.” Carson reinterprets this loosely via the image of the television. The contrary predicament of “good” and “bad” in novelty is embedded in the etymology of “Television.” “Tele,” meaning “far off, afar, at or to a distance,” and “videre” (“to see”) pulls the word in opposite directions, as the prefix strains the sense of sight. “Television” is “to see,” but to see *at a distance*. Carson makes the leap to say: “TV makes things disappear.” The “TV Men” poems are indeed a “disappearance” of known historical and literary figures. In place, Carson “replays” novelty in her depiction of not only Sappho, but also figures such as Artaud, Tolstoy, Lazarus, Antigone, and Akhmatova. What she continually seeks out is novelty. As she states in “TV Men: Lazarus”:

Each time I have to  
raise my slate and say  
“Take 12!” or “Take 13!” and then “Take 14!”  
I cannot restrain a shudder.  
Repetition is horrible.<sup>36</sup> (*MOH* 89-90)

How else can we understand television? In the same poem, Carson meditates on this word explicitly and at length:

if  
God’s gift is simply random, well  
for one thing  
it makes a  
more interesting TV show. God’s choice can be seen emerging  
from the dark of reason  
  
like a new planet. No use being historical

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<sup>36</sup> Carson discusses her own experience with acting. See Burt (“Poetry Without Borders”): “The process is just dehumanizing ... the thing with TV is that nothing happens right the first time, and you have to do it over and over and over. We did that 26 times, into traffic, saying the same things, and the worst part of it is not the death-defying scenario itself but having to repeat your own language. Nothing deadens language like repetition. So you write a sentence and you really like it and you have it in your mind and then you say it once, twice, three times. By the seventh time it’s just the worst sentence in the world and then you hate it and you have to go on to number 26” (56).

about this planet,  
it is just an imitation.

As Lazarus is an imitation of Christ. As TV is an imitation of  
Lazarus. As you and I are an imitation of

TV. Already you notice that  
although I am merely  
a director of photography,  
I have grasped certain fundamental notions first advanced by Plato,  
e.g. that our reality is just a TV set

inside a TV set inside a TV set, with nobody watching  
but Sokrates,  
who changed  
the channel in 399 B.C. (*MOH* 88-9)

TV takes on a Platonic dimension and we gain a different understanding as to the importance of “*videre*,” and the reality we see. The world as we sense it, according to Plato, is a moving image of the pure and eternal world of the Forms. Carson literalizes Plato’s allegory by transforming the cave to the televisual medium, which mediates images, or representations of “reality.” Prisoners (or TV viewers) mistake shadows on the wall for reality. This, too, is a seeing “at a distance,” as those in the cave are unable to turn their heads at the object, but can only view the object’s shadow as it passes in front of a fire.

Thus, through television, Carson works creatively within the parameters of novelty, as suggested by Longinus, and imitation, according to Plato. Sappho fits within this framework as an actress who undergoes multiple shoots (repeating her character, her lines) but because each take is imperfect, it is a repetition *with a difference*, thus, making each “take” new. In “Irony is Not Enough,” the narrator asks, “After all why study the past? Because you may wish to repeat it” (*MOH* 122). Indeed, Carson’s use of the classical past is both in part imitation, as well as innovation.

The final poem of the “TV Men” chapter also depicts Sappho, again assuming the role of an actress. Here Carson overlays the action of the filming with Sappho’s fragment 31. Similar to poems such as “Sumptuous Destitution,” where Carson plays with alternating voices and “braids” fragments from letters by Emily Dickinson with her own words, here Carson draws particular attention to Sappho’s protean quality alongside the incompleteness of her corpus:

Sappho is smearing on her makeup at 5 a.m. in the woods by the hotel.  
He She Me You Thou disappears

Now resembling a Beijing concubine Sappho makes her way onto the set.  
Laugh Breathe Look Speak Is disappears

The lighting men are setting up huge white paper moons here and there on the grass.  
Tongue Flesh Fire Eyes Sound disappears

Behind these, a lamp humming with a thousand broken wasps.  
Cold Shaking Green Little Death disappears

*Places everyone*, calls the director.  
Nearness When Down In I disappears

*Toes to the line please*, says the assistant cameraman.  
But All And Must To disappears

Action!  
Disappear disappears

Sappho stares into the camera and begins, *Since I am a poor man* –  
Cut (*MOH* 118)

Textual leakage spills onto the scene of action. The second line in each couplet echoes and corresponds to each stanza of Sappho’s fragment 31 as preserved for us by Longinus. Compare, for example, the lines “Tongue Flesh Fire Eyes Sound” and “Cold Shaking Green Little Death” with the third and fourth stanzas of the fragment:

no: *tongue* breaks and thin  
*fire* is racing under *skin*

and in *eyes* no sight and *drumming*  
fills ears

and *cold* sweat holds me and *shaking*  
grips me all, *greener* than grass

I am and *dead* – or almost

I seem to me (*INW* 63; emphasis mine)

The fragment is atomized into its recognizable elements. As the poem progresses, we also follow the fragment's progression, but while the action of the framing poem is one of *appearance* (Sappho "smear[s] on her make up" and "makes her way onto the set"), the incorporated fragment is one of *disappearance*, each atomized stanza punctuated with the word "disappears." This poem best exemplifies what Carson means when she says, "TV makes things disappear," as it strains in opposite directions. We "see" Sappho as she makes herself more present for the film, all the while her lines from fragment 31 recede. The poem becomes palimpsestic. The staging of the marriage ritual in the fragment withdraws, making room for the staging of a new scene: when the director calls out "Action!" the final remnant of the fragment goes ("disappear Disappears").

Longinus preserves this poem and quotes four complete Sapphic stanzas and what remains of the first line of the next stanza: "But all is to be dared, because even a person of poverty" (*INW* 63). As Carson notes in *If Not, Winter*: "the first verse of what looks like a fifth stanza ... breaks off, no one knows why" (364). What do we do with the residue? It too is incorporated into Carson's poem and echoed by the Sappho-actress in the penultimate line: "Since I am a poor man." Carson's Sappho, whose monologue begins with "a poor man," picks up where the speaker in the fragment left off, contemplating "a person of poverty." The director's call at the very end of the poem ("Cut") refers to the end of the filming as well as the end of the fragment. In "Dirt and Desire," the speaker states: "Sappho is one of those

people of whom the more you see the less you know” (*MOH* 152), and we finish the poem with a strong sense of incompleteness and abruptness. While Carson imaginatively brings the ancient poet closer, there is still the sense of omission. Sappho remains a space where, as Reynolds states, something can be made out of nothing (2).

Carson also incorporates part of Sappho’s fragment 31 in the poem, “Mia Moglie (Longinus’s Red Desert),” where she weaves three different texts together. As the title indicates, Carson incorrectly assigns Antonioni’s film, *Red Desert* (also starring Monica Vitti), to Longinus – a gesture similar to her attributing the fictional quote to Longinus in “TV Men.” Here, too, the Sapphic fragment “leaks” into the poem. Each word from the phrase “greener than grass and dead almost I seem to me” (which comes from the fourth stanza of fragment 31) appears consecutively in every third line. Every second line is clipped from section 10 of Longinus’s treatise, in which he discusses and praises the Sapphic fragment:

For instance, Sappho everywhere chooses the emotions that attend delirious passion from its accompaniments in actual life. Wherein does she demonstrate her supreme excellence? In the skill with which she selects and binds together the most striking and vehement circumstances of passion ... Are you not amazed at how at one instant she summons, as though they were all alien from herself and dispersed, soul, body, ears, tongue, eyes, colour? Uniting contradictions, she is, at one and the same time, hot and cold, in her senses and out of her mind, for she is either terrified or at the point of death. The effect desired is that not one passion only should be seen in her, but a concourse of passions. (Trans. Rhys Roberts 69-71)

Carson gives us a polyvocal arrangement, in which the reading of the poem is part puzzle, part mosaic. Longinus’s words are indicated in Carson’s poem by quotation marks. Sappho’s



words are italicized and in a different font. The remaining words belong, presumably, to Carson, or the “primary” speaker of the poem. Like Longinus, Carson also “skates” from quote to quote. The words, plucked from their original passages, are forced to work in new ways in the poem and take on new meanings:

A caught woman is something the movies want to believe in.  
“For instance, Sappho,” as Longinus says.

*greener*

Caught from within, she has somehow got the Sublime inside her.  
“As though these could combine and form one body.”

*than*

Her body vibrates, she is always cold, there is a certain  
cold industrial noise, she is also hot, has stuck a thermometer

*grass*

under her arm and forgotten it and at the wall she turns glistening,  
aghast: your prey. “Are you not amazed?” (D 67)

I have already combined Vitti and Sappho as one figure in my reading of “Ode to Monica Vitti.” “Mia Moglie” also brings the two women together. Sappho is another example of “a caught woman” (or the woman inscribed in cloth) that the movies would like to “believe in.” But what does it mean when we consider what movies depict and “believe in”? It is suggested that the movies, too, are nothing other than the “TV set” reality, where everything is an imitation of everything else, and reality is nothing more than a TV set inside another TV set viewed by no one. “A caught woman,” of course, is a woman who can be contained, captured, inscribed, and controlled. But, as the next stanza makes clear, the woman is not caught *without*, but “caught within.” The violent bodily sensations the woman in this poem experiences are indicative of the sublime, which is invested in “intensity” (Longinus, Trans. Prickard 27). Her

body, which “is always cold” and “also hot,” is reminiscent of Sappho’s speaker who notes the “fire racing under skin” and “cold sweat.” Later in the poem we see a more explicit connection between Sappho and Vitti:

In the clinic she met a girl whose problem was *she wanted everything*.  
Bolts of everything hit the table.

*seem*

Now *she is well* she says of this girl who has turned out to be herself.  
“Sublimity is the echo of a great soul.”

*to me (D 68)*

The girl who “want[s] everything” refers to the previous poem, “Ode to the Sublime by Monica Vitti,” in which the speaker (Vitti) states: “I want everything. / Everything is a naked thought that strikes” (D 63). Seeing its echo here further adjoins Sappho and Vitti – if not their persons, then their condition of *ekstasis*. The Sapphic line “greener than grass I am and dead almost I seem to me” has been what Carson describes as “*ekstasis*, literally ‘standing outside oneself’ ... a condition regarded by the Greeks as typical of mad persons, geniuses and lovers and ascribed to poets by Aristotle” (161). *Ekstasis*, or ecstasy, as Longinus asserts, is also the aim of the Sublime in language (Trans. Prickard 1).<sup>37</sup> The speaker of Sappho’s poem observes herself from outside her own body. She is, as Longinus describes her, “in her senses and out of her mind.” In “Mia Moglie,” Carson provides another instance of someone “standing outside oneself”: the “she” in this poem meets a girl (in a “clinic,” presumably a mental institution) who “turn[s] out to be herself.”

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<sup>37</sup> See Longinus (Trans. Prickard): “For it is not to persuasion but to ecstasy that passages of extraordinary genius carry the hearer: now the marvelous, with its power to amaze, is always and necessarily stronger than that which seeks to persuade and please” (2).

*Ekstasis*, or ecstasy, is to cross a border, to step outside of one's being. Carson points this out in her discussion of how women tamper with borders via their voices, putting outside what was once inside: "Female sound was judged to arise in craziness and to generate craziness" (*GIG* 128). To confound the borders of oneself is, in short, mad.<sup>38</sup> Carson also reiterates this state of ecstasy in her depiction of Akhmatova in the "TV Men" series:

Borders trembled all around her.  
She saw friends by now gone mad with wolvisish grins.  
"This is some terrible mistake." (*MOH* 108)

and Artaud in the same series:

Artaud is mad.  
He stayed close to the madness. Watching it breathe or not breathe.  
*There is a close-up of me driven to despair.* (*MOH* 73)

Borders, madness, and ecstasy find themselves again in this poem and its intricate composition finishes on, fittingly, a note of crazy: "*What is that antenna for?* she asks a man. *To listen to the noise / of stars –*" (*D* 68).

This poem is challenging and rich in its layers, which are philosophical, poetic, and cinematic. Sappho's fragment is an entry into sublimity defined by Longinus as "the echo of a great soul." The echoes are internal to the poem (the "echo" of souls between Vittori and Sappho) as well as external (Carson's own reference to her own work, and the reappearance of the ancient poet). Carson further ruptures Sappho's fragment and sets it in dialogue with her own poem, as well as with ancient literary criticism. We "spill" from Carson to Vittori to Sappho to Longinus, making off with someone else's point of view. Carson plunders multiple boundaries and, in doing so, illustrates the "madness" of the text and the "documentary

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<sup>38</sup> In the final chapter, I will bring up madness again, but this time in relation to the demented Father, eros, and the archive.

technique” of the sublime. To be touched by the sublime, or “caught within,” is to also undergo *ekstasis* as experienced by the speaker in fragment 31 and in “Mia Moglie.”

According to Carson, “You have to admire the mad. They know how to value a passionate moment. So does Longinus. ... [the end of] the manuscript of *On the Sublime* breaks off. The next page is too damaged to read and after that you cannot say how much is missing. Longinus skates away” (*D* 50). In the poems I have examined in which Sappho makes an appearance, however explicit or spectral, her presence indicates incompleteness, elusiveness, and madness. Extending “Sappho” to also mean “Woman” is certainly suggested by Carson, but more broadly, “Sappho” is an opportunity to demonstrate what Carson means when she says, “Consider incompleteness as a verb” (*PW* 16). Carson’s metaphor of television and cinema is an apt metaphor to play and replay Sappho, as well as to spotlight the ways in which poetry attempts to capture, record, and realize the ancient poet, her fragmented corpus, and history, which is, ultimately, inconclusive.

The final poem I want to turn to is from Carson’s chapter, “Sublimes.” “Blended Text,” as the title indicates, blends Carson and Sappho as she interprets Sappho’s line from fragment 31: “for when I look at you, a moment, then no speaking / is left in me”:

You have captured:	<i>pinned</i> upon
my heart:	the wall of <i>my heart</i> is your love
with one glance:	as <i>one</i>
with one bead:	as <i>an exile of the kings</i> of royalty
of your eyes:	<i>my heart</i>
you have something of mine:	a torn thing
again the moon:	<i>now</i>
the rule:	(who knows) ( <i>D</i> 79)

In this poem Carson takes the documentary technique of “sublime spillage” to the extreme. While “Mia Moglie” threads together three separate but unified and distinct texts (Carson, Sappho, Longinus), reading it linearly is also following and reconciling three different

temporal and poetic strands. In this case, words become material. Textual rupture leads to chaos and the poem offers a horizontal reading (jumping from column to column in a line) as well as a vertical reading. Sappho's line, recognizably rephrased in the left column, is "a torn thing." The final phrases in the poem ("the rule:" "(who knows)") suggest that there is no rule for the arrangement and reading of the text. The "rule," or "law," is unknown or tentative, and the poem finishes with uncertainty. Carson (and Sappho), once again, leaves us without an ending, just a parenthetical dismissal that basically tells us nothing at all. The lack of boundaries in this seemingly brief poem renders it incomplete and inexhaustible in its reading. Carson, I would say, puts it best when she describes the condition of *ekstasis* in fragment 31: "ecstasy is just a means to an end. Unfortunately we don't reach the end, the poem breaks off. But we do see Sappho begin to turn towards it, towards this unreachable end" (*D* 161).

## Conclusion

*"Experiments, seeing how much can be left out and still make sense."*

–Anne Carson (*di Michele* 12)

*"What holes, and made of what?"*

–Anne Carson (*MOH* 70, 73)

In "The Anthropology of Water," Carson writes: "I am not a person who feels easy talking about blood or desire. I rarely use the word *woman* myself" (*PW* 189). When asked about this passage and her relationship with the word "woman," Carson states: "A relationship of dis-ease" (*di Michele* 10). "Woman" marks a gendered relationship of "dis-ease" for Carson, but it is also a marker of poetic resistance (a negation of "ease"), as well as a condition of illness (what she has also called "madness"). Sappho is in many ways a suitable index for Carson's anxieties. Through "Sappho," Carson can – as many other women writers have done –

approach subjects of desire and Woman, but it is Sappho's absent corpus that persists and implicates a poetics of error and rupture. "Sappho" indicates a perpetual lack (she is a "space," "distant sightings," "rumour") that accounts and conditions much of the difficult layers, leaps, and "holes" in Carson's own poetry. As she asserts, "Sometimes you come to an edge that just breaks off" (*PW* 191).

In the next chapter, I shall discuss *Nox* and the thematics of absence in Carson's personal life: the death of her brother, Michael. This loss, however, is not intimately associated with Sappho, but another ancient poet: Catullus. Again, Carson's access to the classical past sets up a platform on which she resigns herself to the tasks of grief and translation – the agenda of a melancholy poetics.

## Chapter 3

### “Overtakelessness”: The Archive, Grief, and Translation in *Nox*

*“Archives do not record experience so much as its absence; they mark the point where an experience is missing from its proper place, and what is returned to us in an archive may well be something we never possessed in the first place.”*  
–Sven Spieker (*The Big Archive* 3)

Anne Carson's engagement with the classical past, figured by Sappho, can be understood in terms of "rupture," "leakage," "spillage," and "residue." For Carson, antiquity does not simply reside at a point of commencement; rather, it survives and "leaks" into new and future texts. Particular to Carson's treatment of the past is her predilection for the absent, the fragmentary, and the useable. The residue of the classical archive becomes an opportunity to make imaginative leaps and to dwell in speculation and error. Most crucial to Carsonian poetics is a resistance to available categories – primarily "the past" and "the present." The emptiness, or loss, surrounding an ancient fragment troubles notions of borders, boundaries, and frames. As discussed in the previous chapters, these formal ruptures present themselves in Carson's poetic treatment of history, translation, and genre.

In this chapter, I shall turn to *Nox* – a text that aptly illustrates the terms I have established. In *Nox*, we see "spillage" materialized as Carson adapts Catullus's elegy to her own fragmentary and familial history. The physical production of the book exemplifies Carson's straying from set categories of genre, as she collects, interweaves, and layers a miscellany of scraps from the past. This chapter will continue my study of the accidental "spills" and "leaks" in Carson's work, but will now focus on the archival and material dimensions of history.

### **Nocturnal Materiality**

Carson once said in an interview that she never thought of herself as a writer: "I don't know what I do yet. I know that I have to make things. And it's a convenient form we have in our culture, the book, in which you can make stuff, but it's becoming less and less satisfying" (Burt 56). It is unsurprising to discover that Carson's recent elegy to her brother, *Nox*, is



published not as a book, but produced in another form more to her satisfaction: a box which contains (or “coffins”) a long pleated page of fragments.

Like much of Carson’s work, *Nox* is a text that does not fit within available generic categories. Part literary text, part art object, *Nox* has been described as “a pastiche of numbered entries” (Stang), “a tactile and visual delight” (Martinuik), and a “diversion from our expectations” (Bradshaw). In accordance with the book’s many pleats, *Nox* is a layered text that implicates translation, history, and grief while entangling languages, time, and memories. Carson’s intentions, too, are many as she describes her processes of translating Catullus, memorializing her brother, and understanding history.

As Abigail Deutsch states, “Nothing could prepare you for *Nox*.” Deutsch’s statement suggests that *Nox*’s form is novel, but it is important to point out that it is not the first book of its kind. Like Carson’s other works that have a modernist bent, *Nox* finds a formal predecessor in the 1913 collaboration between poet Blaise Cendrars and painter Sonia Delaunay. The poetic experiment of *La Prose du Transsibérien et de la petite Jehanne de France* is described as

a unique book-object with its pages illustrated by Sonia Delaunay ... the Delaunays had been experimenting with “simultaneism” since 1912, and this beautiful art book was to be the “first simultaneous book.” It consists of a single sheet of paper folded up like an accordion in 22 panels that, when laid flat, total a length of 2 meters. Hence the entire run of 150 issues would reach the height of the Eiffel Tower, if one were to paste them together. The right-hand side of the pages contain the text of a free verse poem whose divisions are marked by coloured half-pages ... The left-hand side is painted, and looks like semi-abstract forms in bright primary colors. (Rabaté 60-1)

Robert and Sonia Delaunay adopted the term “simultanéisme” from *The Law of the Simultaneous Contrast of Colors* (1839), a scientific treatise by Michel Eugène Chevreul. Chevreul, a chemist, systemized colours according to the “laws of the harmony of contrasts” and the “laws of the harmony of analogy.” From his theories, Robert Delaunay discovered that opposing complementary colors, when beside each other, appear brighter and more vivid. Together, contrasting colours intensify the field. The two-way influences between opposing colours create a “vibration” in the viewer’s eye and Delaunay understood this phenomenon as “movement and rhythm ... appropriate to a modern society in motion” (Düchting 35). The collaboration between Cendrars and Delaunay was the “first simultaneous book” in the sense that the book is neither a poem, nor a painting, but is to be both read and viewed. The right hand side containing the text “vibrates” with the left hand side containing the abstract coloured forms. We engage with *Prose* “laterally and then as a whole” (Rabaté 61).

From Cendrars-Delaunay book, we acquire a concept of structural “simultanéisme.” Simultaneity implies time, or the occurrence of two events within the same *frame* of time. Carson, indeed, offers her own temporal vibration, but in her case, explores the resonance between two losses from two different periods: antiquity, as suggested by the presence of Catullus, and another more recent history belonging to Carson. Like the Cendrars-Delaunay book in which the left and right hand side of the fold are to be read and viewed together, *Nox* offers a similar method of reading. As Neil Corcoran notes, “The necessity that we read both texts more or less *simultaneously* means that our reading is constantly interrupted or disrupted by oscillations of attention” (376; emphasis mine). The interruptions, disruptions, and oscillations take place between the left hand side of *Nox*’s pages, which contains indexical entries for each Latin word in Catullus’s Elegy 101, and the right hand side, which contains

fragments pertaining to a personal and familial history. Together, the two distinct events find an intersection in grief.

Another important aspect of Chevreul's law of *simultanéisme* is the *spatial* adjacency of elements. In Chevreul's case, colours are not only viewed at the same *time*, but are placed side by side. Adjacency for Carson plays a critical role in the production of *Nox* as she positions, side by side, a variety of cultural products: translation, palimpsests, autobiography, memoir, letters, found art, and photography. The box form highlights the spatial and temporal miscellany of Carson's fragments. We may imagine how a box of fragments may be "read" (and "misread") according to the order by which each artefact is pulled out, or the way we piece them together. Carson, too, understands the poetics of adjacency found in a box of fragments. As she writes in *Autobiography of Red*, "The fragment numbers tell you roughly how the pieces fell out of the box" (6-7).

However, a box of fragments resists linearity and is rarely kept in order. It leads to arbitrary and surprising juxtapositions. Carson goes on to say in *Autobiography of Red*: "You can of course keep shaking the box ... Here. Shake" (6-7). Adjacency, then, is always at risk of losing its common side. As much as we may perceive the intersections of grief and memory among the fragments in *Nox*, we also make out the gaps and artful randomness that we would expect a box of fragments to contain. A perfect example of interstices that, in fact, structures *Nox*, is the appearance of Carson's fragments within the spaces between each Latin word of Catullus's elegy. This structure is as much a poetics of adjacency as it is a poetics of interstices. Indeed, as rich as *Nox* is, there is a plenitude of absence, evidenced by the white spaces of the page, the loss in translation, and the loss of a sibling.

The structure of adjacency that informs *Nox* allows Carson to collocate grief, history, and translation. These reciprocally related elements are coordinates in what Benjamin would call a “constellative” array.<sup>1</sup> For Benjamin, the poet, or “aesthetic engineer,” creates an object of art, or constellation, by “juxtapos[ing] disparate and despised artefacts, forms, and media, so as to generate an electrifying tension, an explosive illumination of elements in the present” (Gilloch 4). Similar to Chevreul’s contrasting colours that appear more vivid when next to each other, these juxtapositions also result in an “explosive illumination.”

Benjamin’s “constellation” suggests that artefacts, or “dusty, derelict things” (Gilloch 5), are not implanted in the past, but may be plucked out and rearticulated in the present, particularly as they relate to other objects. Carson, too, shares Benjamin’s concern with history in *Nox*, in which she uses materials of antiquity as part of the constellation of Michael. The simultaneous and adjacent qualities of Benjamin’s constellation exist in the “flash” through which it is perceived:

It is not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, an image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words: image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is purely temporal, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: not temporal in nature but figural [*bildlich*]. Only dialectical images are genuinely historical ... (Benjamin, *AP* 463)

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<sup>1</sup> Graeme Gilloch, in *Walter Benjamin: Critical Constellations* (2002), describes Benjamin’s concept of “constellation” as such: “It is the time in which the object is subject to transformations and interventions which recognize its significance and ‘actualize’ its potential: translation, transcription, imitation, criticism, appropriation, (re)construction, reproduction, remembrance, redemption. These are precisely the tasks of Benjamin’s ‘aesthetic engineer.’ Objects, edifices, texts and images are fragmented, broken and blasted from their usual contexts so that they may be painstakingly recomposed in critical contemporary constellations. The eclectic engineer juxtaposes disparate and despised artefacts, forms and media, so as to generate an electrifying tension, an explosive illumination of elements in the present” (4).

In order to elucidate the constellative array constituted by grief, history, and translation, I will point out the generic, visual, and linguistic dimensions of *Nox* and argue that the juxtapositions and tensions found within and between each other participate in not only expressing the loss of Michael, but also loss in language and history. The grief felt for Michael is, simultaneously, grief for what is lost in translation and what is lost in the process of archiving.

Fragopoulos states, “what Carson finally accedes to is the very darkness of it *all*” (emphasis mine). I end the chapter by arguing that what we understand about the “very darkness” of Michael’s death (what Carson terms “*nox*”) may be carried over, simultaneously, to her exploration of adjacent subjects. “*Nox*” extends from a private grief to encompass, more publicly and openly, loss in translation and the archive.

### **Dead Spaces: Epitaphs and Archives**

Both the epitaph and the archive are conceptual figurations that concern themselves with, broadly speaking, history, people, or events long passed. They are “haunted” by the dead, inhabited by absence, and created to memorialize the past. The paradoxical objective of both forms is revealed in the following observations, by Carson on the epitaph and Carolyn Steedman on the archive:

Carson:

“No genre of verse is more profoundly concerned with seeing what is not there, and not seeing what is, than that of the epitaph” (*Economy* 73).

Steedman:

“Historians read for what is not there: the silences and the absences of the documents always speak to us” (151).

In both forms, one may “read” and “see” what is absent, but what is actually made present is the *place* of absence, or the lacuna. As a historian, Steedman is responsive to how silence and absence “speak”; what is not there is given voice. Carson’s use of “not,” however, is less clear. Similar to Steedman’s observation, the epitaphic verse pertains to seeing what is “*not* there” but is also concerned with “*not* seeing what is.” What does it mean for Carson to not see what is there (and vice versa)?

In Chapter 1, I discussed the importance of negation (“no,” “not”) used by Sappho in her depiction of death in fragment 55. Correspondingly, “not” is a fitting paragram for a project such as *Nox*. The undoing of this “knot” between seeing and not seeing, presence and absence, life and death, as well as the impossible (“not”) possibility of unravelling these issues is at the crux of *Nox*. To begin, it would be useful to examine the physical formation of the book and how it fails as a self-described “epitaph,” and how I propose to approach it: as a representation of an archive.

Carson’s method of composition in *Nox* has frequently been referred to as “scrapbooking.”<sup>2</sup> Scrapbooking is no doubt the modern archival practice to which we can liken Carson’s conservation (or the *representation* of conservation), and little has been said on the text as forming an archive in itself. Indeed, scrapbooking is an activity determined by decisions on what gets in and what stays out. When discussing *Nox* as an archive, we can also consider Carson as an archivist who decides what is excluded and what is included in the text.

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<sup>2</sup> See Bradshaw, Stang, Hamilton, Fragopoulos, O’Rourke, Anderson (“Family Album”), Deutsch.

The box-container is an appropriate construction for defining the inside from the outside. A box is a coffer, or storage box, that can be locked and held secret from some, or unlocked and accessed by others. A box can also be a container that is closed once, never to be opened again, as in the case with a coffin, sarcophagus, or, what Carson calls a “deathbox” (“Now What” 45). When reading *Nox*, readers get the thrill of opening something that is at once valuable but not intended for them. They open a box – the “deathbox” of Michael – containing a private assemblage (the reproduction of Carson’s notebook).

On the outside of the box-container, *Nox* is labeled an epitaph. Carson describes the literary work as an “epitaph ... in the form of a book.”<sup>3</sup> We may say that the text *inside* ought to generate an epitaph, but such a thing is impossible. Indeed, the further Carson moves from pith and concision, the more it fails to serve as an epitaphic statement. Rather, *Nox* generously provides testimonials and fragments sourced from a variety of figures such as Carson, her mother, Michael, his widow, Catullus, and Hekataios. Despite the large size of the book, a lack of clarity in portraying Michael accompanies the abundance of fragments. *Nox* provides a rich, visual experience of sifting through textual and photographic evidence of a personal past and even seduces the reader with scraps of paper that are attractively tactile. Between the folds, we are situated in a space of varying tensions between the past and the present, the dead and the living, the spectral and the real. Just as in *Short Talks* where the speaker loses words and writes in order to make present what has gone, *Nox* endeavours to explore the nature of absence and presence.

Absence is represented in the visual assemblage of the book. Fragments of letters and photographs, impressions of a strongly pressed pen, the white page that surrounds and

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<sup>3</sup> There are other instances in Carson’s oeuvre in which she “plays” with the epitaph, such as the seven epitaphic poems in *Men in the Off Hours*. See also Erin Wunker (28-32).

overwhelms each scrap, and the charcoal rubbings that emphasize negative space, amplify Michael's absence. Yet it is not only Michael's death with which Carson must contend, but his long estrangement as well. His physical absence, felt by Carson for much of her life, is foregrounded; Michael is not merely a dead figure, but a fugitive figure whose presence (and, conversely, absence) is constantly felt. I use "fugitive" not only to refer to his running away from the police in 1978 (*N* 2.2), but to the quality of constant movement and Carson's (and thus our) resultant difficulty in bringing him into focus.<sup>4</sup> Michael is always in motion and out of grasp. He is someone who is continually leaving and whose return is anticipated. What we perceive of Michael are suggestions or metonymical traces of his presence: the cigarette butted "in a frying pan on the stove" (5.4); his dog who, following Michael's death, becomes overcome with anger (1.2); or his final disappearance in the stairway. We also catch hints of Michael's potential but thwarted return such as the laconic telephone conversations he has with Carson in which "all the years and time that had passed over him [come] streaming" (5.2), or the sound of a car for which his mother always listens hopefully.

To engage with the epitaph and the archive is to engage with traces of the dead. However, we must distinguish the epitaph from the archive, as they are distinct forms of cultural meaning. The former is an element of the latter. To understand this distinction in the most literal terms, the epitaph is limited to a tombstone, whereas the archive is an ongoing collection. One formalizes mourning's rituals; the other is much more amorphous and far less aware of its purpose. In Carson's consideration of Simonides, a composer of epitaphs, she states that the "epitaphic contract" (*Economy* 74) is a metaphor for exchange, involving a transaction between a death on a battlefield and a life on a monument. Death, too, lurks in the

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<sup>4</sup> Due to *Nox* not having page numbers, I will cite using the passage numbers Carson provides.



archive. As Steedman points out, “dust” not only refers to the bacteriological occupational hazards that arose in artisanal and scholarly professions in the early nineteenth century, but also the metaphorical dust of the dead that Michelet describes from his days in the archives.<sup>5</sup> Much like the epitaphic contract described by Carson, the archive also poses a transaction between life and death, the archivist and the documents.<sup>6</sup> Death resides in both the epitaph and the archive, but the epitaph is, more precisely, an archival *instance* that functions as a *memento mori*. Carson states, “A poet’s task is to carry the transaction forward, from those who can no longer speak to those who may yet read (and must yet die)” (*Economy* 75). I would argue that the archive, in its larger economy, also shares this call to remember, but the practice of reading and the practice of memory in the epitaph and archive differ in their relationship to time.

Like the epitaph, the archive is a “space of exchange between present and past by gaining a purchase on memory” (*Economy* 85). Just as the epitaph inscribes memory into stone, transforming it to become a substrate for commemoration, the archive is also a space that receives and organizes historical documents and shapes them into something *like* memory.<sup>7</sup> It is crucial to point out that though the epitaph and the archive are configurations of memory, the epitaph is a present inscription that refers to a *past* life, whereas the archive is a present collection intended for a *future* life. The epitaph is written to honour the dead; the monument’s purpose is “to insert a dead and vanished past into the present” (73). The archive

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<sup>5</sup> See Steedman (*Dust* 27): “We are forced to consider whether it was not life that [Michelet] breathed ... but death, that he took into himself with each lungful of dust.”

<sup>6</sup> Steedman goes on to say, “a symbiosis between the historian and History ... This ingested History was also Death” (27).

<sup>7</sup> Steedman clarifies the long use of the archive as a metaphor for human memory and states: “An archive may indeed take in stuff, heterogeneous undifferentiated stuff ... texts, documents, data ... and order them by the principles of unification and classification. This stuff, reordered, remade, then emerges some would say *like* a memory – when someone needs to find it, or just simply needs it, for new and current purposes” (68; emphasis mine).

is always created for the living, with the intention of providing a chronicle for future archivists and historians.<sup>8</sup>

Carson's description of Nox as an "epitaph" is obviously a metaphor. Indeed, this is not a *literal* epitaph that is traditionally written upon (*epi-*) the tomb (*taphos*). Such an inscription for Michael is not possible, as Carson makes clear, for lack of a) a body and b) a tomb. When her parents died, she was able to bury them. In the case of her estranged brother, this is not an option:

I buried [my parents'] ashes under a stone cut with their names. For my brother I had no choice, I was a thousand miles away. His widow says he wanted to be cast in the sea, so she did this. There is no stone and as I say he had changed his name. (*N* 5.6)

Carson describes the epitaph as a marker of a dead body; it is a "σῶμα that becomes a σημά, a body that is made into a sign" (*Economy* 73). Furthermore, even if there were a stone for the body, the name would be incorrect, marking another error. To add to this double bind of an absent corpse and a false identity, there is the temporal distance between Michael's disappearance and death, and the physical distance between his death and Carson: "I was a thousand miles away ... his death came wandering slowly towards me across the sea" (*N* 5.6-6.1). What I want to emphasize in this image is the irretrievability of the body. "[H]is death" that wanders in is a figure of a ghost, or the slow arrival of bad news. In her study of collage poetics, Vanderhart claims that Ian Rae's comparison of Carson to the ancient Egyptian goddess Isis, who gathered and assembled Osiris's body parts, is apt as "the recovered body in

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<sup>8</sup> The archive's investment in conserving history for futurity brings up some unanswerable questions. Given that this is a reproduction of Carson's notebook, for whom is this facsimile of an archive assembled? Who will be there to remember? Is the reader invoked as the supplement for a familial future – a Carson-to-come? Perhaps I am narrowing in on something that is irrelevant in the greater scope of the project, which is how Carson, like all artists, touches on a particular in order to move to the universal. "Michael" is not Carson's brother, but everyone's lost loved one. *Nox* does not present grief for Michael, but immense and terrible grief in general.

*Nox* is that of Carson's estranged brother Michael" (35). However, I would contest Vanderhart's neat suggestion of Michael's recovery as "a single body composed from a crowd of fragments" (35). Such a result would provide easy answers to Carson's many questions, to which I will return in more detail.

Carson recognizes that the  $\sigma\eta\mu\alpha$  is mentioned in literature as early as Homer and indicates the tomb of a dead warrior put there so "some passerby in later time will stop and remark on it" (*Economy* 73). An epitaph, as we all know, is written on a tomb and identifies the dead ("Here lies ..."). It does, in fact, provide an answer to the question, "Who were you?"<sup>9</sup> But an epitaph for Carson is always a "replica": a word derived from the Latin *replicare* meaning "to reply," but also "to copy" and, most importantly, "to refold."<sup>10</sup> Carson's "reply" can only be a copy, a simulacrum, something that always gives itself to more foldings and refoldings, in accordance with the material constitution of *Nox*. The work of the monument both falls short *and* is extended indefinitely.

In place of the stone that would traditionally confirm the identity of the dead is the reader who assumes the role of the archivist. We do not have, as Vanderhart claims, "a single body," or closed system, but more "bodies." As Derrida states, "The archivist produces more archive, and that is why the archive is never closed" (*AF* 68). Integrated into Carson's selection of fragments are materials collected by her mother and Michael's widow. Among the layers in *Nox* is the presence of other archives, collections, and scraps that participate in the attempted reconstitution of Michael. For instance, Carson's mother has "a box at home with all [their] letters in it" (*N* 2.1) that she bequeaths to Carson. Michael's widow is also in

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<sup>9</sup> "Who were you" is a rubbing, printed on the same page as 2.1 in *Nox*.

<sup>10</sup> Carson's use of the word "replica" on the box to describe the book is deliberate and highlights *Nox*'s position as a "copy" that falls short: "This is a replica of it, as close as we could get it."

possession of archival “stuff” now left to her after Michael’s death, such as “some old diaries she found ... filled with photographs” (3.2) and “his papers” (6.1). It is clear that what we have in *Nox* is not self-contained and complete, but reaches out to other deaths, other archives, and other clues regarding the identity of the lost brother. The archive intends to “order,” but recalling Carson’s “Short Talk on the Total Collection” in which Noah’s world of order “engulf[s] his life” (*ST* 43) and finally drowns him, we question the success of the ordering of these fragments. The reading and handling of *Nox* is not linear. The search for Michael, as Carson illustrates, is endless.

Carson writes, “an epitaph is a way of thinking about death and gives consolation” (*Economy* 95). Though *Nox* primarily commemorates Michael, we soon doubt its ability to console. *Nox* must first serve as an archive in order to take on the pressing question that haunts the book. Just as the epitaph marks the end of a life, the archive also functions as a space for endings, but is a space that is intended for the future. As Steedman states, “nothing starts in the Archive, nothing, ever at all, though things certainly end up there” (45). Carson offers readers an epitaph, but the reader continues her work of shuffling through and piecing together the contents of an archive.

### ***Who Are You? The Looming Question and The Likelihood of a Missing Piece***

*Nox* is introduced as an elegy for Carson’s brother, but is also, more importantly, a contemplation of history. In the first passage of *Nox*, Carson writes: “No matter how I try to evoke the starry lad he was, it remains a plain, odd history. So I began to think about history” (1.0). Carson is both a griever and a historian who asks the driving question, “Who were you?” The act of asking, as Carson explains, participates in the activities of mourning and

remembering: “History and elegy are akin. The word ‘history’ comes from an ancient Greek verb ἵστορεῖν meaning ‘to ask’” (N 1.1). Indeed, *Nox* is punctuated by questions such as “How do you know?” and “What is a voice?” As Carson admits after passage 5.2, “I love the old questions.” Folded in grief and situated toward the past, Carson searches for answers.

The looming question of Michael has preoccupied Carson, as seen in earlier works. The loss of a brother is anticipated in “The Wishing Jewel” (*PW* 245), an introduction to “Water Margins,” which is a series of texts about Carson’s brother. In fact, this chapter in *Plainwater* may be read as a prequel to *Nox*, as it provides a brief account of growing up with Michael prior to his disappearance. Their fraught sibling-relationship is marked by “hatred” leading up to “unexpected days of truce” (*PW* 246). Remembering her estranged brother, Carson writes: “a sadness began in me that I have never quite put down” (246). This response is an echo of another story of loss, “The Glass Essay” (*GIG* 1), in which the speaker’s mother tells her, “You remember too much ... Why hold onto all that?” The speaker in this case responds in much the same way and asks: “Where can I put it down?” (7).<sup>11</sup> In both cases, memory and its accompanying affects are made palpable and become objects carried in the hands of Carson’s speakers. *Nox*’s speaker, too, suffers loss and this elegy acts as a container, or a place for Carson to “put down” the grief.

According to Steedman, “the practice of history in its modern mode is just one long exercise of the deep satisfaction of *finding things*” (10). With that in mind, the archival disposition of *Nox* comes to light as Carson gathers together miscellaneous texts and fragments, arranges them on a long single sheet, and folds history into a box. Reminiscent of an archive, Carson presents the reader with a small, personal archive of carefully selected

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<sup>11</sup> Of course, to “put it down” also refers to writing, as in, “to put something down on paper.”

fragments.<sup>12</sup> *Nox* is a long exercise of finding things. History is set down and available for those who seek some resolution from grief.

I would go so far as to think of *Nox* as a scaled down version of an archive that houses classical material, and, indeed, the classical archive lurks in the background. As a classicist, Carson no doubt has engaged with archival material and handled the torn papyrus of ancient texts. *Nox*, as it happens, includes such fragments from Greek historians Hekataios and Herodotus. Furthermore, Carson's description of the classical archive as coming to us "in wreckage" (Aitken) also resembles Derek Walcott's comparison of ancient texts and civilizations to "shards of vocabulary" (69) that may be reworked into new patterns. "Shards," moreover, is reminiscent of an archaeological dig in which shards of pottery are sieved and recovered.<sup>13</sup> Carson borrows these terms used in discussing the classics in an interview on *Nox*:

I wrote the book because when my brother died I hadn't seen him for twenty-two years, and he was a mystery to me, and he died suddenly in another country, and I had a need to gather up the *shards* of his story and make it into something containable. (Aitken; emphasis mine)

Carson's notion of these shards being "containable" is striking. Shards of pottery are most often those of an urn, or vessel, that once contained water, oil, or wine. Shards, more importantly, are indexical: they point toward the whole "container" that once was. What is

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<sup>12</sup> I have borrowed the definition of "personal archive" from *Genres of Recollection* in which Penelope Papailias defines it as: "a textual, material, and theoretical construct that marks the borders between secrets and revelation as well as between private lives, state authority, and national imaginaries. The personal archive can be constructed to stand beside or even compete with state archives, but it can also be a hiding space in which subversive memories are stored and preserved for possible future disclosure (3).

<sup>13</sup> In *Archive Fever*, Derrida, too, draws a link between archiving and archeology. Speaking about Freud's writing, Derrida states: "These classical and extraordinary works move away from us at great speed, in a continually accelerated fashion. They burrow into the past at a distance more and more comparable to that which separates us from archaeological digs" (18).

containable for Carson moves from the object to the writing subject: Carson attempts to *contain* the shards of that object which no longer contains life.

While the box contains Michael's shards (or what Carson has curated for the public's viewing), the inherent nature of the fragment itself resists the neat suggestion of "containability." Rather, the fragments draw attention to their own lacunae and lack of a coherent narrative. In order to illustrate this underlying lack, I will turn to the image of the home as it figures in *Nox*, both as a site of memory and history, and as a figurative archival locus that houses the past.

### **Haunted House**

*"Haunting implies places, a habitation, and always a haunted house."*

–Jacques Derrida (*AF* 86)

*"Archives of grief I see falling upon this house."*

–Anne Carson (*Antigonick*)

We have already encountered the image of the house in Carson's discussion of ancient Greek, likening the classics to "a home in [her] mind" (Aitken). The home is also an important space for Derrida's conception of the archive.<sup>14</sup> The early *archons*, or "the document guardians" (*AF* 2), ensured the security and recognized the authority of archival documents by filing them in a specific locale. The archive, as Derrida points out, requires a residence: "It is thus, in this *domiciliation*, in this house arrest, that archives take place" (*AF* 2). The box-container of *Nox* functions as a place in which Carson gathers together fragments and is also where the archival scraps are *consigned*, not only as the place where they are deposited, but also where they form

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<sup>14</sup> As Derrida explains, "[T]he meaning of 'archive,' its only meaning, comes to it from the Greek *arkheion*: initially a house, a domicile, an address, the residence of the superior magistrates, the archons, those who commanded ... On account of their publicly recognized authority, it is at their home, in that place which is their house (private house, family house, or employee's house) that official documents are filed" (*AF* 2).

a system. Consignation, as Derrida explains, is also “the act of *consigning*, through *gathering together signs*” (3). These “signs,” consigned to the box-container as “archival domicile,” are available for the reader-cum-archivist to unify, identify, or classify.

It is fitting that the image of home informs Carson’s small, personal archive and is a sign of the memory of Michael. The home refers to both the haunted childhood home and the haunted space of the archive. Penelope Pepailias’s definition of “personal archive” neatly joins these two resonances: a personal archive

can refer to the home and its contents, which through calculation or circumstance take on the status of historical evidence. The word *personal* highlights the control and management of archives by individuals, families, or groups and the manner in which they knit their identities and histories into them. (3)

Indeed, the space of the home as a point of condensation of personal history participates in Carson’s memory of Michael; the emptiness of that home on account of his long-time absence is a void that Carson attempts to fill.

The cover of *Nox* depicts a young Michael in swimming trunks standing in front of a house. The image is cropped and we see only the corner of a sloping roof. The home in the background participates in a field of intensity, which Carson recognizes as she justifies the way in which she cropped the photos: “the backgrounds [of our family photos] were dreadful, terrifying, and full of content. So I cut out the backgrounds ... the backgrounds are full of truth” (Aitken). Nevertheless, the house peeks out from behind Michael and we continue to catch sight of it from various angles in the book. For instance, the first photograph of the series is a shadowy, backlit image of two young children sitting inside a home, a glare coming from the windows behind them. The next photograph is the frontal view of the home in winter



and what appears to be Carson, her brother, and mother standing in front of it. The photographer here appears only as a shadow stretching toward the group as the sun is behind him. Carson's decision to crop these family photos jibes with the nature of her poetics in general. Much like the encounter of the Greek fragment in Carson's works, the reader here is presented with a selection of fragments, and a sense of uncertainty and curiosity as to what was cut out. The photographer or viewer is ambiguous, as are the shadows surrounding the subjects.

The house, as suggested by Carson and Derrida, is an important locale in both its respective configurations as a literal home, and an archival domicile.<sup>15</sup> Perhaps because Carson never learned the whereabouts of her brother, this notion of place is relevant. In both "The Wishing Jewel" and *Nox*, the phrase, "No return address," recurs. Stamps on postcards and letters are the only clues to Michael's location and even a letter from Carson's mother asking him for an address ("I hope I have an address for you where I could mail a box for Christmas") results in none.<sup>16</sup> This homelessness in Michael's life, thus, gives his last known address a particular charge and poignancy. As Carson states:

Port Hope ... was a place we lived for six, seven years and my parents for about fifteen years and my brother intermittently, so the book, because it's about him, is connected to that place in some ways. But it's a place where everyone's life fell apart. That's too strong. It was a place where we all, my brother and I, met the end of our adolescence. So that's a serious order. (Aitken)

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<sup>15</sup> The house for Gaston Bachelard, too, participates in a similar formation of self and history. In *The Poetics of Space*, Bachelard explores the home as an important primary factor in shaping one's thoughts, memories and dreams. See Bachelard (xxxvi): "the house image would appear to have become the topography of our intimate being." Vanderhart uses Bachelard's text as an "analytic foil" to understanding *Nox* and the importance of the physical and metaphorical house of memory. See Vanderhart (*Under a New Law* 50).

<sup>16</sup> Carson clarifies: "She never got an address for him. Indeed during the last seven years of her life he wrote to her not a single word" (*N* 4.2).

Their home in Port Hope is a central location for Carson's remembrance of her brother. Congruent with Bachelard's description of the house one is born in as being "physically inscribed in us ... [where] the feel of the tiniest latch has remained in our hands" (14-15), Carson's childhood home retains this quality of nostalgia and familiarity. Furthermore, the home becomes a place of prolonged waiting, a place of hopeful homecoming. In passage 4.1, Carson writes, "I can see [my mother] standing at the kitchen sink scraping carrots. For years after he left she would glance up every time a car came spinning along the road." Like the faraway "oneiric house" that "sees, keeps vigil, vigilantly waits" (Bachelard 34), Carson's mother waits and anticipates Michael's return. His absence is made more pronounced when we learn in 4.2. that Carson's mother ultimately gives up hope ("Eventually she began to say he was dead ... she said When I pray for him nothing comes back"), and she dies without ever hearing from her son again.

Clearly, the home is closely entwined with Michael's memory and charged with anticipation and disappointment. It marks not only the last known residence of Michael, but also the end, or death, of adolescence. The home is a shared place for Carson and her brother and acts as both a catalyst for her mournful search, and an archival space in which to place her findings. Bachelard writes that "when we return to the old house, after an odyssey of many years, [we] find that the most delicate gestures, the earliest gestures suddenly come alive" (15). Indeed, the primal home with its accompanying dreams and memories ossifies and it is as if it is "physically inscribed" (as Bachelard puts it) when Carson states: "Places in our bones, strange brother" (after *N* 3.3).

A salient childhood memory of Michael is set in the stairwell of the home:

Stairwell smell (I remember) him huddling in the stairwell where we kept our coats and boots winter Sunday blood on his face he was about nine and my mother around him with all her hands crying What now oh What now? (*N* 5.3)

Absent of punctuation, the memory surfaces in a string of phrasal (fragmentary) units, each charged with trauma. The scene is recovered via the senses: the “stairway smell,” the chill of “winter,” the sight of Michael “huddling” with “blood on his face,” the frantic fluttering of a panicked mother and “all her hands,” and the sound of her cries. The memory is particularly disturbing, as the mother’s cries not only indicate uncertainty, but an implication that these traumatic experiences occur regularly. The mother, it appears, is always baffled by the “secret behind what torments [Michael]” (after 5.4) and, not unexpectedly, he continues to live a life of torment: drugs (8.2), homelessness, poverty, and hunger (5.3).

The memory itself is triggered by Michael’s widow’s memory of their time together (described earlier in *N* 5.3): “They lived for two years on the street, sleeping in stairwells, eating once a week.” Stairwells are associated with Michael and it is worth considering the topographical nature of the stairwell as an intermediate space, marking the passageway between floors. Bachelard mentions the stairways in his description of the “oneiric house,” particularly as a place of movement between cellar, ground floor, and attic: “We always *go down* the one that leads to the cellar ... we go both up and down the stairway that leads to the bed-chamber ... we always *go up* the attic stairs” (26-7). The architectural function of the stairs as accommodating movement fits the fugitive nature of Michael. In Carson’s memory, Michael is associated with the stairwell of their home, haunting this in-between space, not quite belonging in one room or another.

We deduce later in 8.2. that this memory is associated with the preceding photograph. In the black and white photo, a boy stands alone at the base of the tree while a group of boys congregate in the tree house above. Carson writes:

When we were children the family moved a lot and wherever we went my brother wanted to make friends with boys too old for him. He ran behind them, mistook the rules, came home with a bloody nose, it puzzled me from the beginning, it made my heart sink. I have a photograph of him (taken in the bush behind Bald Rock) about ten years old standing on the ground beneath a treehouse. Above him in the treehouse you can see three older boys gazing down. They have raised the ladder. (N 8.2)

In this scenario we have another example of a home, as seen by the tree house, and stairs, or, in this case, the ladder. The raising of the ladder prevents Michael from joining the boys, a gesture that keeps him excluded and isolated. Michael, as we see in *Nox*, is always at a distance, a point at which he occupies throughout his life with his family, his widow, and Carson. Both in death and life, he is regarded with an attitude of puzzlement (“it puzzled me from the beginning”) or, as seen in 5.3, with confusion and pity (“What now oh What now”).

The stairway as a state of indeterminacy and as a site of passage (between one “level” and another) fits the fugitive nature of Michael, and is emphasized by the images of stairs that Carson cuts and disperses in the pages following passage 9.1. The physical structure of the book and its accordion pleat also replicates the appearance of stairs as each fold imitates a step. Carson, thus, reproduces her memory of Michael in the stairs by pasting the fragments metonymically associated with him between the physical folds of the book and creates a literary work that also functions as an art object.

However, it is important to emphasize that Michael cannot be captured in the physical containment of art, nor in the incorporeity of Carson's memory. As Carson states, "Remembering draws attention to lostness ... Memory depends on void, as void depends on memory" (*Economy* 38). Even though this moment brings the absent (Michael) into the present moment of our reading, memory is transparent and all we are left with is the void that is the empty stairwell. The final words of *Nox* make up an italicized line that reads: "He refuses, he is in the stairwell, he disappears." Michael's memory and spectrality are intimately linked to the stairwell of the home. What he refuses (the "No" in *Nox*) remains unclear, but I would argue that Michael's refusal is not only a refusal to be comprehended and totalized by Carson and the reader, but also a resistance of the archive as a repository for his life's fragments. While we "reach" for comprehension, there is no firm grasp. The refusal is reminiscent of the negation in "Now What?":

You go quickly.  
[...]  
In two negations.  
*(No.*  
*No).*  
That reach like two arms.  
Toward memory and toward.  
Desire. (44)

Though we have arrived at the end of Carson's personal archive, what we have attempted to capture "disappears." In this moment we have an apt depiction of the hauntedness of both the home and the archive. As Derrida states, "the structure of the archive is spectral. It is spectral *a priori*: neither present nor absent 'in the flesh,' neither visible nor invisible, a trace always referring to another whose eyes can never be met" (*AF* 84).

Memory, too, becomes spectral, as seen by the vanishing figure of Michael in the stairwell. Between his appearance and his disappearance in the final italicized line, "we hover

between awareness of being and loss of being” (Bachelard 58). There is no engagement with Michael’s phantom, simply his *refusal* to engage. The instant we have located Michael in the home, he disappears, signalling the destructive principle in archivization that is already inherent in the process: “produc[ing] the very thing it reduces” (AF 94).”

### **The Archival “Aura”**

I would like to return to the “shards” collected by Carson and this time focus on their visual representation. I have discussed the fragments in terms of their constituting a “personal archive,” but a large part of the book’s pleasure is found in their graphic qualities and what I call the archival “aura.” Bradshaw echoes Benjamin in the title of her article, “The Work of Art in the Age of Technical Translation: The Materiality of Anne Carson’s *Nox*,” but given the attention she pays to its physicality and material production, it is surprising that she does not mention “aura.” Similarly, Vanderhart does not explore the concept of aura despite using Benjamin’s “literary montage” as a lens through which to view Carson’s “collage poetics.” Moreover, for the purpose of this chapter, it is worth pointing out that Benjamin himself was a steadfast archivist who collected, logged, and systemized fragments and scraps.<sup>17</sup> He has also compared the poet to a collector in his well-known dictum, “Ragpicker and poet: both are concerned with refuse” (*The Writer* 108).

In this section, I will focus on the visual make-up of *Nox* and how the aura lends itself to the archival experience. I will also compare Carson’s engagement with history to Michelet and poet Susan Howe’s experience. Vanderhart has already linked Howe and Carson in her study as they are both contemporary “collage artists and poets, invested in the pursuit of a

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<sup>17</sup> See Walter Benjamin’s *Walter Benjamin’s Archive: Images, Texts, Signs* (2007).

text's 'spirit' and the fragment's ghostliness" (36), but I will further this comparison by distinguishing their experiences within the archival space.

*Nox* opens with a wrinkled and stained copy of Catullus's Elegy 101. Like most of the fragments in the book that exhibit raw details of having just been ripped or handled, and lifelike tangibility, the poem is yellowed and smudged. Carson plays with the aesthetic of an ancient Roman text and gives the poem "a patina of age ... by soaking the pages in tea, which add[s] a mysterious sepia overtone" (Aitken). While this is not Carson's actual scrapbook but a facsimile (or "replica"), her decision to stain the page and give it "a historical attitude" (Aitken) lends an archival "aura" to the book. The archival aura, or traces of the past, accompanies the experience of working with archival material. Steedman describes the materiality of the archive as dust, and, in its most literal sense, is what Michelet breathes in while working in the "catacombs of manuscripts" (26). The close relationship between materiality and the dead is also echoed in Howe's description of working in the libraries in which she is "surrounded by raw material paper afterlife" (16). For both Michelet and Howe, working in close proximity to the dead and handling "original" documents is a stirring experience. The "amazement at perpetuity itself" (Steedman 161) experienced by Michelet as he worked, and the "raw material paper afterlife" that causes Howe to exclaim, "my spirits were shaken" (16), partake in the archival "aura" that Carson qualifies as "mysterious," "interesting," and "attractive."<sup>18</sup>

An incongruity arises in my use of the word "aura" to describe *Nox*, which, as mentioned, is a replica of Carson's notebook. As Benjamin explains, aura is what withers in the reproduction of a work of art (*I* 221). Nevertheless, Carson manages to retain a sense of an

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<sup>18</sup> See Aitken, *The Paris Review*, The Art of Poetry No. 88.

archival aura in the replication of her collection of scraps, and captures the coarseness of its assemblage, the wrinkles and shadows of the paper, and details such as ink and impressions that seep or imprint onto the successive fold. The point of the material production of Carson's notebook and its box is to "transmit" aura. While the replication conveys the feel of paper textures and the tone of time, it is not immediate. Carson foregrounds *mediation*, as every aspect of *Nox* invites us to consider the difference between original and copy. This "difference" is essential to Carson's project as what she offers in the reproduction of her notebook is the lost original, and, implicitly, the lost object.

Similar to Michelet and Howe, someone who picks up *Nox* experiences a thrill at perusing its "raw material paper afterlife." The experience of *Nox* extends, more importantly, to the accordion pleat. A haptic dimension exists in the reading of the text that forces a reader not only to encounter *Nox* as a literary text, but as an object. In turn, this also changes the space in which one reads and holds the book. As one critic writes:

Few things in this world have the power to make me clean my desk. One of them, it turns out, is Anne Carson's new book-in-a-box, *Nox*. Before I even opened it, I felt an irresistible urge to spend twenty minutes purging my worktable of notes, napkins, magazines, forks, check stubs, unpaid bills, and fingernail clippings. The urge struck me, I think, for a couple of reasons. For one, *Nox* is unwieldy. (Anderson, "Family Album")

Indeed the unwieldiness of the book is due to its unique pleating, which, depending on the number of folds unfolded at one time, dictates the amount of space it will take up. If one end of the book accidentally unravels over the edge of a table, it will, like a toppling row of dominoes, pull the rest of the book down with it. The pleated form allows the "book" itself to



spill. Being “un-centred” from the spine lets the pages *spill*, not just be turned. The pages of *Nox* are at risk of crumpling under their own weight, or even ripping. Deutsch notes that the book “resembles a house of cards” and since it has no binding, “its revolving ‘pages’ circle a column of air.” While I argue above that the book’s accordion pleat has a metaphorical and mnemonic association with Michael in the stairwell, I would also say that the pleat provides an archival experience where we become aware of our space and the materiality of the object before us.

Returning to Michelet and Howe, there are some overlaps particular to their time in the archives that Carson achieves in her presentation of *Nox*. The reading of *Nox* is a *deliberate* act in all senses of the word: we are conscious of the materiality of the object (particularly its lack of a secure spine) and careful with the pages and folds. We are also unhurried as we fold and unfold each pleat, often flipping back or forward as we follow Carson’s narrative. Finally, there is a silent asceticism that accompanies the reading, which is not only suggested by the white spaces in *Nox*, but also the urge to have a clean space in order to accommodate the object itself. As Anderson points out: “Processing it, as a reader, seems to require several acres of clear space—mental, physical, emotional, attentional—every inch of which Carson fills, immediately, with her own special brand of clutter” (“Family Album”). Carson’s “special brand of clutter” is what Steedman would call “heterogeneous undifferentiated stuff” (68) or, in other words, the clutter of the archive. Indeed the overwhelming clutter of the archive in which one works silently and in solitude is familiar to Michelet and Howe. For Michelet, the archives are “the quietly folded and bundled documents ... where he believes the past lives” (Steedman 70). Howe, too, is in awe of the “stacks of books” and “narrowly spaced overshadowing shelves” (14). The act of reading *Nox* participates in “the grubby trade” of an

archivist as the text itself is part of “the infinite heap of things ... the great, brown, slow-moving strandless river of Everything” (Steedman 18).

Surrounded by the clutter and heap of the archive, Michelet and Howe describe an identical relationship between the past and the production of their own work in the following:

Michelet:

“as I breathed their dust, I saw them rise up. They rose from the sepulchre ... as in the Last Judgement of Michelangelo or in the Dance of Death. This frenzied dance ... I have tried to reproduce in [my] work” (Steedman 27).<sup>19</sup>

Howe:

“These Lethean tributaries of lost sentiments and found philosophies had a life-giving effect on the *process* of my writing ... This may suggest vampirism because while I like to think I write for the dead, I also take my life as a poet from their lips, their vocalisms, their breath” (14-16).

Both Howe and Michelet provide similar accounts with the archive in which their “exchanges” with the dead affect their writing. This exchange echoes the “epitaphic contract” Carson describes in which there is an exchange between death on a battlefield and life on a monument. In the archives, there exists also an exchange with the dead represented by the inhalation of dust, vocalisms, and breath that, upon exhaling, has an effect on the act of writing. Though this transaction with history and writing is figurative, as Steedman clarifies (“[Michelet] inhaled the by-product of all the filthy trades that have, by circuitous routes, deposited their end-products in the archives” [27]), the descriptions of their intimate engagement with the

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<sup>19</sup> Steedman goes on to say: “In a quite extraordinary (and much scrutinized) passage, it is the historian’s act of inhalation that gives life” (27).

dead (or the Lethan and the lost) are a consequence of the archival aura. Their handling and reading “original” documents shape their compositions or new writing, a shift from the dead to new life.

Carson, too, comments on imperfect surfaces and how artefacts make their way through time by going through processes of discovery, investigation, classification, totalization – all of which are “layers” that “add up to more and more life” (Aitken).<sup>20</sup> What kind of exchange is taking place here? In this case, what is old doesn’t appear to “lose” aura, but *gains more* aura by each successive historical layer. The life that Carson perceives is reflexive and is *given back*, restored, to the past. Unlike Michelet and Howe who participate somatically with history, Carson, I would argue, is far more restrained. Unsurprisingly, when asked if *Nox* helped her understand her brother, she responds, “No. I don’t think it had any effect whatsoever on my understanding” (Aitken). While the aesthetic composition of *Nox* captures an archival aura and is suggestive of a reconstructive biography of a dead brother, the notion is fleeting. Carson does not experience any enduring regenerative exchange with the past. The life that is perceived in the fragments of *Nox* emphasizes a life that is *lost*. Michael remains fugitive, appearing and disappearing in the stairwell.

The matter of exchange is not limited to what is exchanged between us, or Carson, and the materiality of the archive. Even the exchange of languages (Latin for English) taken up by Carson suggests an impossible task that cannot be totally apprehended.

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<sup>20</sup> Carson’s notion of “more life” is reminiscent of Johanna Drucker’s (*Figuring the Word*) comment on writing and material: “But the authority of written documents, as I mentioned once before, does not depend upon their pristine and unaltered condition. Quite the contrary – it is the capacity of material documents to record change which makes them such believable witnesses. Their very substance is a testimonial since marks, means of writing, and material all change over time” (227).

## The Archival Shard: Translating Catullus

*“Repent means ‘the pain again.’”*  
–Anne Carson, *Nox*

The notion of “the fugitive” takes shape in the process of translation. Carson “prowls” for the right word in the same way she “prowls” for her brother. The attempts to grasp Michael’s figure in the stairway coincide with her endeavour to translate and master language and meaning in Catullus’s Elegy 101. The language of grief, thus, corresponds to the language of translation and both pose similar difficulties of capture and containment.

Catullus serves as the lens through which loss is comprehended, as well as a paradigm of mourning. I would like to stress that translation, which frames Carson’s grief, suggests something *beyond* a linguistic conversion from Latin to English. A classicist such as Carson is certainly *capable* of translating Latin, but here, translation is also a search, or prowl for the “universal” in ancient literature and the classics. Indeed, we sense two distinct historical timelines that Carson intentionally brings close together (deep history, or antiquity, as suggested by the presence of Catullus, and a more recent, familial history in Michael) along with their respective endeavours (translating and mourning). However, it becomes apparent that both experiences have no attainable end. Both are experiences of non-arrival. The figurative task of “translating” the archival fragments in *Nox* into something as coherent and seamless as Catullus’s elegy is, of course, a translation that is impossible.

The poem, as Carson explains in passage 7.1, was written by Catullus for his own brother who died in the Troad, signalling a similarity between the two poets as both brothers passed away while abroad. Carson takes this poem apart and provides a denotative and connotative “definition” of each Latin word of the text as it appears in the poem (63 words in

total). The word-by-word translation at first appears to display a translator's "fidelity to the word" (Benjamin, *I* 78). But Carson is ironic and aware of the misguided assumption that the translator's art is merely "a task that does not occur in the realms of thought but between the pages of a dictionary" (Maier 25). All translation is an approximation of a textual withdrawal that can never be exhausted. As Carson states: "[e]very translator knows the point where one language cannot be rendered into another ... you cannot match them item for item" (*Nay* 4). Translation entails loss – loss in the very process – and nothing can make up for that loss. Loss is both the enabling and disabling condition of all translation.

Benjamin provides a useful analogy of the translation and the original text as being recognizable fragments fitted to create the same vessel:

Fragments of a vessel which are to be glued together must match one another in the smallest details, although they need not be like one another. In the same way, a translation, instead of resembling the meaning of the original, must lovingly and in detail incorporate the original's mode of signification, thus making both the original and the translation recognizable as fragments of a greater language, just as fragments are part of a vessel. (*I* 78)

In *Nox*, these dictionary entries operate similarly when Carson places her own archival "shards" adjacent to the fragments of Catullus. The vessel of which both Catullus and Carson's fragments comprise is a sibling's grief for a dead brother, a shared affect that Carson cannot translate from Latin, and that she herself cannot translate to a reader.

We return, again, to a poetics of adjacency. Appearing on the *verso* pages, the entries are read together with various fragments pasted on the accompanying *recto* pages. Catullus's poem is atomized, and though our reading of his poem is "continuous" in the sense that one

Latin word follows another, *verso* page by *verso* page, this linearity is interrupted by what is drawn into the adjacent field. Carson fits her own narrative between Catullus's words, placing on the *recto* side more recent history of loss and the gathered fragments that bear witness to that loss.

Catullus's poem elegizing his own brother provides and points to an allusive space of lyric grief that Carson accesses for her own mourning. Her "definition" of each word begins as a traditional entry that identifies its part of speech, lists off the word's multiple meanings and uses, and defines its use in common phrases. As the entry continues, it digresses and becomes inflected by Carson's own personal story. For example, the first definition begins:

**multas**

*multus multa multum*            adjective

[cf. Gk μάλα, MELIOR] numerous, many, many of, many a; many people, many, many women, the ordinary people ... many words especially in elliptical phrases e.g. *quid multa? ne multa*: to cut a long story short; an abundance of, much, large, *multum est*: it is of value ...

By the end of the entry, however, Carson introduces another voice, one that is noticeably personalized: "*multa dies* or *multa lux*: broad daylight, *multa nox*: late in the night, perhaps too late." It is apparent that the neutral voice associated with the dictionary is overtaken by one that is subjective, humanized, and, in this example, uncertain ("*perhaps* too late"). Each word in Catullus's poem becomes a fulcrum upon which Carson balances her own grief. Each word is pried from Elegy 101, and no longer participates in the larger text, but is resituated into the neutral "genre" of the dictionary entry, and then re-integrated into Carson's narrative. The word becomes meaningful again but does so in a way that is particular to her loss.

By borrowing the words of Catullus, Carson gains entry into grief and the dark realm of death or oblivion (which she terms “Night”/*nox*), and establishes a lexicon for mourning. “Entry,” here, functions both as the item listed in a reference book, and as the place of entrance.<sup>21</sup> This glossary, however, will always be insufficient in conveying her loss. Carson’s inability to translate Catullus is due to the inadequacy of English. As she states in 7.1, “Nothing in English can capture the passionate slow surface of a Roman elegy” (and, indeed, we recall death “wandering slowly towards [Carson] across the sea”). The inadequacy of language and the impossible task of translating Catullus suggest other pursuits impossible to overtake, such as how to translate grief, how to convey grief, how to reconstruct an individual, and how to bring back the dead.

Carson explicitly links the metaphor of the home with translation: “I came to think of translating as a room, not exactly an unknown room, where one gropes for the light switch” (7.1). Carson’s comparison of translation to a room or abode is also echoed in her foreword of *Electra*, a Greek tragedy that centres on grief and the brother-sister relationship between Electra and Orestes. In the passage below, she describes the difficulty of pinning down the precise English word for the Greek verb, *λυπειν* [*lupein*]:

During the days and weeks when I was working on this play I used to dream about translating. One night I dreamed that the text of the play was a big solid glass house. I floated above the house trying to zero in on v. 363. I was carrying in my hands wrapped in a piece of black cloth the perfect English equivalent for *lupein* and I kept

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<sup>21</sup> Charles M. Stang writes in “‘Nox,’ or the Muteness of Things” (*Harvard Divinity Bulletin*, Winter/Spring 2012, Vol. 40): “Each of the left-hand pages, after all, is an *entry*, a point of opening in which the translator is not so much looking for *le mot juste* as *le mot muet*.” Furthermore, Carson states in an interview, “[E]tymology is the place where I begin any research. The story of how a word began to mean what it means is a point of entry to everything else about it” (Constantine 37). Indeed, we also see this interest in etymology earlier in *Eros the Bittersweet* in which she explores the meaning of the word “glukupikron” (“sweetbitter”).

trying to force myself down through the glass atmosphere of the house to position this word in its right place. But there was an upward pressure as heavy as water. I couldn't move down, I swam helplessly back and forth on the surface of the transparency, waving my black object and staring down at the text through fathoms of glass. And I was just about to take the black cloth off and look at the word so as to memorize it for later when I awoke, when I awoke.

I never did discover, asleep or awake, what was under that black cloth. I never did hit upon the right translation for *lupein*.<sup>22</sup> (*Electra* 45)

There is a similar sense of frustration in *Nox* due to Carson's inability to translate Catullus – an inability that refers *not* to the task of converting Latin to English (as mentioned earlier, Carson is capable of that and indeed provides a translation in *Nox*) – but an inability to achieve the *ideal* translation. Just as one prowls for the universal in classical literature, or, as Woolf describes it, the “original” and “pure,” the translation Carson seeks is a literary imaginary. The ideal translation is always on the horizon, “just on the far side of language” (Woolf 14). To return to Carson's experience of translating *Electra*, the “right translation” is the stuff of dreams, unrecoverable by morning, thus, leaving it beyond grasp and always desired. Carson's comparison of the right word to an impenetrable, uninhabited house is reminiscent of what Bachelard says of the desired dream home: “Maybe it is a good thing for us to keep a few dreams of a house that we shall live in later, always later, so much later, in fact, that we shall not have time to achieve it” (61).

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<sup>22</sup> Fittingly, the Greek verb that posed some difficulty for Carson as she was translating *Electra* means, in short, to grieve. But, as Carson points out, *lupein* is multifaceted in its meaning: “The Greek lexicon defines *lupein* in the active as ‘to grieve, vex, cause pain, do harm, harass, distress, damage, violate’ and in the passive as ‘to be vexed, violated, harassed,’ etc. or ‘to grieve, feel pain.’ The cognate noun *lupê* means ‘pain of body’ or ‘pain of mind’ or ‘sad plight’” (44). One could say that *Nox* embodies all these meanings of *lupein*. *Nox* is an elegy bound up in elegies. In addition to Carson's grief for Michael, other episodes of distress and pain are presented in the book such as the death of Anna, the death of Carson's mother and father, and the subsequent grief felt by all.



Catullus's poem is one that Carson "ha[s] loved ... since the first time [she] read it in high school" (N 7.1) and, since then, has tried to translate it adequately. One of these attempts is included in *Men in the Off Hours*, wherein Carson translates a selection of Catullus's poems. Recalling Benjamin's comparison of a translation and its original fitting like fragments of the same recognizable vessel, I would like briefly to compare Carson's earlier translation to her later one. Though quite different, the earlier translation plots a set of coordinates that are later represented in *Nox*.

Unlike the translation she offers in *Nox*, Carson's version in *Men in the Off Hours* demonstrates a play, or *infidelity* to the word:

Multitudes brushed past me oceans I don't know.  
Brother wine milk honey flowers.  
Flowers milk honey brother wine.  
How long does it take the sound to die away?  
I a brother.  
Cut out carefully the words for wine milk honey flowers.  
Drop them into a bag.  
Mix carefully.  
Pour onto your dirty skeleton.  
What sound? (45)

It would be useful to read this earlier "shard" alongside the one in *Nox*:

Many the peoples many the oceans I crossed  
I arrive at these poor, brother burials  
so I could give you the last gift owed to death  
and talk (why?) with mute ash.  
Now that Fortune tore you from me, you  
oh poor (wrongly) brother (wrongly) taken from me,  
now still anyway this – what a distant mood of parents  
handed down as the sad gift for burials –  
accept! soaked with tears of a brother  
and into forever, brother, farewell and farewell.

Though both translations maintain the 10-line structure of the original elegy, the former includes, most notably, two ambiguous questions found in the fourth and final lines: "How

long does it take the sound to die away?” and “What sound?” respectively. Their apparent anomaly sets the coordinates by which we may compare Carson’s later version.

In the fourth line, Catullus suggests a desire on the speaker’s part to communicate with the dead, despite the emptiness of communication (*et mutam nequiquam adloquerer cinerem*).<sup>23</sup> An earlier translation by Sir Richard Francis Burton clarifies the “answerlessness” of conversing with the dead: “And I may vainly address ashes that answer have none.”<sup>24</sup> In *Nox*, Carson translates this as: “and talk (why?) with mute ash.” The parenthesized “why” also suggests the speaker’s vain address to the ashes and functions as a subconscious interjection – why talk with “mute ash” if it will only lead to a one-sided conversation? In her earlier translation, Carson decides to translate this futile endeavour of the still-living into a question that, similarly, has no answer. At best, its answer is yet another question (“What sound?”).

Furthermore, “How long does it take the sound to die away?” is addressed to an ambiguous listener. Is this a question posed for the “you,” the dead brother, as suggested by “*your* dirty skeleton”? Is it a rhetorical question for us, the readers? What does the sound refer to, exactly? Does it stand for grief and inquire into the end of mourning? Elena Theodorakopoulos suggests that the final question (“What sound?”) is Carson’s way of “ask[ing] the knowing reader to supply the sound of the omitted *ave atque vale*, but also ... for

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<sup>23</sup> See Peter Green’s translation (2005, 203): “A journey ... has brought me here, brother ... *to let me address, all in vain, your silent ashes...*”

<sup>24</sup> The full translation by Sir Richard Francis Burton (1894):

Faring thro' many a folk and plowing many a sea-plain  
These sad funeral-rites (Brother!) to deal thee I come,  
So wi' the latest boons to the dead bestowed I may gift thee,  
And I may vainly address ashes that answer have none,  
Sithence of thee, very thee, to deprive me Fortune behested,  
Woe for thee, Brother forlore! Cruelly severed fro' me.

...

Yet in the meanwhile now what olden usage of forbears  
Brings as the boons that befit mournfullest funeral rites,  
Thine be these gifts which flow with tear-flood shed by thy brother,  
And, for ever and aye (Brother!) all hail and farewell.

a sound perhaps from the lost brother” (157). Indeed, the (lost) sound of the lost brother is confirmed in *Nox* when Carson speaks about the “muteness” (1.3) of Michael, borrowing Catullus’s “*mutam*” from his elegy. The sound of the lost brother is also echoed in 5.2 where Carson describes a taciturn conversation she has with Michael and notes that “[h]is voice was like his voice with something else crusted on it ... What is a voice?”

Another striking decision that Carson makes in her earlier translation is her repetition of “wine,” “milk,” “honey,” and “flowers.” While Catullus repeats “*frater*” three times in his elegy, Carson chooses, instead, to emphasize the libations. The unnamed “gifts” bestowed upon the dead is specified by Carson and harks back to antiquity as the usual offerings given to the dead (befitting, given that this is a translation of a Roman elegy).<sup>25</sup> According to Theodorakopoulos,

The imagery of collage (‘Cut out carefully the words for wine milk honey flowers. / Drop them into a bag. / Mix carefully’) is picked up again in *Nox*, where it becomes a guiding principle. This is in many ways a very simple approach to the process of translation as interpretation. (157)

The rearrangement of “wine milk honey flowers” and the instructions to “cut out the words” certainly anticipate the cut-and-paste organization in *Nox*. Perhaps, though, it does not simply demonstrate Carson’s process of translation as *interpretation*, but, rather, translation as an infinite number of ways to “cut out,” and “mix” the elegizing of a brother. Despite the

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<sup>25</sup> See Aeschylus’s *Persians*: “It is for this reason that I have come here from the palace once again, without my chariot and my former pomp, and bring, as propitiatory libations for the father of my son, offerings that soothe the dead, both white milk, pleasant to drink, from an unblemished cow, and bright honey, distillation wrought from blossoms by the bee, together with lustral water from a virgin spring; and from a rustic source, this unmixed draught, the quickening juice of an ancient vine. Here too is the fragrant fruit of the pale-green olive that lives the entirety of its life in luxuriant foliage; and garlanded flowers, produce of the bounteous earth” (lines 607-618).

See also Euripides’s *Iphigenia in Taurus*: “O fate, I had one brother only and you carry him off and send him to Hades. For him, I am about to pour over the back of the earth these libations and the bowl of the dead: streams of milk from mountain cows, and offerings of wine from Bacchus, and the labour of the tawny bees; these sacrifices are soothing to the dead” (lines 156-166).

grammatical and syntactical discrepancies between Carson's two versions of Elegy 101, and disregarding which of the two is better, or more "faithful," it is apparent that they fit with the original as part of the same, recognizable vessel. The cut-and-paste images of offering and the inquiry into "dead" sounds find their resonances in *Nox*. The mystery of the final question ("What sound?") resembles the mystery of the initial question that drives *Nox* ("Who were you?"). There is no single way to capture the elusiveness of Catullus's poem, nor understand the death of a brother that Fortune has "(wrongly) taken."

We may also understand the differences between Carson's translations more broadly as illustrating the non-fixity of classical reception. As Julia Gaisser puts it in her work on the reception of Catullus:

Classical texts are not only moving but changing targets ... [They] are not teflon-coated baseballs hurtling through time ... rather, they are pliable and sticky artifacts gripped, molded, and stamped with new meanings by every generation of readers and they come to us irreversibly altered by their experience. (387)

This notion of the classical text as a "moving" and "changing" target is analogous, I would argue, to the fugitive quality of Michael. The capture of Michael is as impossible as a "teflon-coated" translation. Whether sticking close to the meaning of the original, or creatively straying, translation falls short. This is further illuminated when we consider how Carson's later version is still, despite her gesture toward the dictionary, far from her ideal.

Carson admits in *Nox*, in much the same words as she did in her admission of not finding the precise word for *lupein*, "I never arrived at the translation I would have liked to do of poem 101." Like trying to pierce an impenetrable glass house, Carson "gropes for the light switch" but there is "no use expecting a flood of light." This impossibility is made more

acutely following the death of Michael. Her inability to translate Catullus's grief for his brother is the same inability to convey her own. A translation that can span from the ancient to the present, from Latin to English, and from Catullus's brother to Michael is one that is imaginary, abstract, and beyond reach.

Carson's use of the dictionary entry in her translation is worth exploring. If the reconstruction of Michael via archival fragments is analogous to the translation of Catullus, then Carson's experience of "archive fever" (seeking out an "origin," that is, Michael) is also a febrile endeavour of uncovering the "original" meaning or poetic intention of Catullus. The dictionary is relevant in that it provides a *definition* for a word. To define is to bind, or limit, completely; a definition is a statement of the meaning of a word, limited to its indexical entry. The reference text may be considered the "etymological bedrock" which we consult. There is a desire for clarity when we look up a word in the dictionary; we seek out something categorical and absolute.<sup>26</sup> Carson, too, desires clarity when "defining" Michael: "We want other people to have a centre, a history, an account that makes sense. We want to be able to say This is what he did and Here's why. It forms a lock against oblivion" (*N* 3.3).

The desire for a "lock against oblivion" echoes Noah (in "Short Talk on the Total Collection") who denies "lack, oblivion or even the likelihood of a missing piece" (*ST* 43). One can even say that the desire to possess a cohesive history or "an account that makes sense" is what spurs Carson on to find the basic sense of Catullus's words. However, the notion of literal meaning, or *sens propre*, is problematic, as Derrida points out.<sup>27</sup> No word defined by Carson is restricted to a single meaning, in a perfect one-to-one correspondence. The above example of "multas" makes that apparent.

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<sup>26</sup> As Carson herself states: "To categorize / means to name in public / ... / To categorize / is to clarify, often" (*PW* 77).

<sup>27</sup> See "Signature Event Context" in *Margins of Philosophy*.

But why does Carson provide an exhaustive translation of each word? In *Nay Rather*, Carson describes the silence a translator encounters when a word does not translate: “In the presence of a word that stops itself, in that silence, one has the feeling that something has passed and kept going, that some possibility has got free” (26). In her indexical entries, Carson continues to chase after the “possibility” that has gotten free. It is not only an attempt to meet the silence, to reach the limit of the word where it “stops itself,” but also a way to surpass the silence. Carson takes each word to the farthest point where it is quiet, and then makes it sound again.<sup>28</sup> As the entry continues, each of Catullus’s words is re-integrated into Carson’s own context and gains new meaning or inflection.<sup>29</sup> Though she may desire a “centre” in Michael, this desire will never be satisfied. Both the archive and the dictionary promise to offer something it cannot: an origin, or source, a fundamental meaning and, as Derrida would call it, “pure presence.” There is, as Carson shows us, no “lock against oblivion.” A centre lacks in subjects in the same way that a centre lacks in words: “there are only contexts without any centre or absolute anchorage” (Derrida, *Margins* 12). We may also recognize this lack of centre represented in Deutsch’s description of *Nox*’s physical construction: the absence of a binding means that the pages “circle a column of air.”

Nevertheless, this desire for cohesion and knowledge arises from the utter ambiguity and mystery that has surrounded Michael all his life. Between cut-out fragments of postage stamps, Carson pastes passage 2.2. four times in a row to emphasize the obscurity shrouding Michael:

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<sup>28</sup> In Chapter 1, I discussed the “emptiness” (*PW* 94) and silence that Carson discovers between ideas (“towns”) in “The Life of Towns.” Here, Carson brings up silence, but this time refers to translation and the empty space between languages.

<sup>29</sup> See Derrida, “Signature Event Context,” (*Margins of Philosophy* 12): “Every sign, linguistic or nonlinguistic, spoke or written . . . in a small or large unit can be *cited*, put between quotation marks; in so doing it can break with every given context, engendering an infinity of new contexts in a manner which is absolutely illimitable.”

My brother ran away in 1978, rather than go to jail. He wandered in Europe and India, seeking something, and sent us postcards or a Christmas gift, no return address. He was travelling on a false passport and living under other people's names. This isn't hard to arrange. It is irremediable. I don't know how he made his decisions in those days. The postcards were laconic. He wrote only one letter, to my mother, that winter the girl died.

It is evident in this passage that Carson could never grasp a centre, a history, or an account of Michael. His disappearance and time away are unknown, as are his whereabouts, decisions, and identity. The fugitive quality of Michael highlighted in this passage (his running away, wandering, seeking, and travelling) can be seen in the "movement" of this repeated fragment as it shifts on the pages, eventually cutting off in its final repetition and leaving only half of the fragment legible. Michael's life is one large error that is doomed to stand uncorrected, or, as she puts it, "It is irremediable."

In an attempt for transparency, it is not difficult to associate Michael with reference books that are typically used to consult for information and confirmed facts on specific matters – in short, the indexical, or "that which points." I would argue that the archival fragments as a whole are indexical, each piece "pointing" to a larger narrative that is, ultimately, void of coherence, or a "centre."

The dictionary in *Nox* conjures up the thesaurus in "The Wishing Jewel," which was a gift from Michael:

He called me Professor and gave me Roget's *Thesaurus* in the deluxe two-volume edition for Christmas. It is here beside me, volume one at least. He never got around to giving me volume two.<sup>30</sup> (*PW* 246)

Like waiting for the other shoe to drop, Carson reveals that she never received the second volume – ironically, the inevitable, undesired event is the fact that the second shoe did not drop at all. Like the non-arrival of the ideal translation, this, too, is an experience that does not see to an end. Even in this act of gift giving, Michael is only partially present, eventually vanishing as he did in 1978. Similar to Carson's mother who vigilantly waits in the house for Michael, we see an echo of this anticipation and discontinuity, a sense of unfinished business.

The pressing question is how to define "brother" in his absence. In his elegy, Catullus repeats the word "frater" three times and the cognate adjective, "fraterno," once. Carson defines these words as follows:

**frater**

*frater fratris* masculine noun

[cf. Skt *bhratar*, Gk *φράτηρ*] a son of the same father or mother, brother; *frater germanus*: a full brother; (plural) brother and sister; (plural, transferred) of a kindred race; (especially vocative, as an affectionate way of referring to a person of one's own age); (as a euphemism for a partner in an irregular sexual union); (as an honourific title for allies); (referring to a member of a religious club); *cum fratre Lycisce*: with dear old Lycis (of a dog).<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> See Passage 5.1. in *Nox* where this nickname is echoed: "He called me **professor** or **pinhead**, epithets implying intellectual respect but we never had a conversation about ideas in our life."

<sup>31</sup> Defined before Passage 3.3. Subsequent definitions of "frater" read: "**frater**, see above *frater fratris*."



## **fraterno**

fraternus fraternal fraternum adjective

[FRATER+NUS] of or belong to a brother; proper to a brother, brotherly, fraternal; honourific term applied to allies.<sup>32</sup>

Defining “brother” is a task that has long preoccupied Carson. “The Wishing Jewel” opens with the Roget thesaurus entry for “brother”:

*Brother (noun) associate, blood brother, cadet, colleague, fellow, frater, frère, friar, kinsman, sibling, soul brother, twin brother. See CLERGY, FRIEND, KINSHIP. (PW 245)*

There are some obvious overlaps between these entries, such as kinship and alliance, but there is a stark contrast between these definitions and the reality of Carson’s relationship with Michael. The rhetorical phrase Michael uses to emphasize the incomparability of his relationship with his dead lover, Anna, “I have never known a closeness like that” (after *N* 3.3), may also be applied accurately to Carson’s relationship with Michael. Despite having a brother, he does not fit the dictionary definition of this sibling: Carson has “never known a closeness like that.”

Like Catullus, Carson repeats “brother” in *Nox* and refrains from using Michael’s name. He is referred to as “he,” “my brother,” “your brother,” or “strange brother.” But “brother” is clearly a word that is problematic for Carson. It is a word that is difficult to translate and possesses a meaning that is beyond her. A good place, appropriately, to begin searching for meaning is in a reference text.

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<sup>32</sup> Defined before passage 9.1.

The dictionary and thesaurus intend to provide facts. Facts are important for Carson. Like her character Geryon, Carson “[has] a respect for facts” (*AR* 27). On the subject of her mother’s death, Carson writes, “Death is a fact” (*MOH* 166). The mother’s death precedes Michael’s death, but it is clear that in both cases, death and facts are slippery things, both within and out of reach for Carson. She writes in *Nox*:

I am looking a long time into the muteness of my brother. It resists me ... To put this another way, there is something that facts lack. ‘Overtakelessness’ is a word told me by a philosopher once: *das Unumgängliche* – that which cannot be got round. Cannot be avoided or seen to the back of. And about which one collects facts – it remains beyond them. (1.3)

This may be one way to understand Carson’s dictionary entries. By attempting to define each word, Carson comes up against something that “cannot be got round.”<sup>33</sup> Something “remains beyond.” Borrowing Heidegger’s term, *das Unumgängliche*, this “something” is what Carson translates to “overtakelessness.”

### **Overtakelessness/*das Unumgängliche***

In order to demonstrate how the failure to “overtake” presents itself in *Nox*, I will first consider its original use by Heidegger. Heidegger first uses the term “*das Unumgängliche*” in his discussion of modern science and its relation to Being.<sup>34</sup> According to Heidegger, science cannot access the Being of its objects of study, and sets upon the real by “order[ing] it into place to the end that at any given time, the real will exhibit itself as an interacting network, i.e.,

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<sup>33</sup> As I mentioned earlier, this inability for complete grasp may be understood as the Derridean impossibility for pure presence.

<sup>34</sup> See “Science and Reflection” in Heidegger’s *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays* (1997).

in surveyable series of related causes” (*The Question* 167-8).<sup>35</sup> In order for modern science to be theoretical and remain disinterested, it must observe and correspond to a fundamental characteristic of the real itself. That is to say, science must consider that which presences as object, otherwise known as “objectness” (“*Gegenständigkeit*”).

“Objectness” is a term Heidegger uses to characterize the mode of presencing that rules in the modern age.<sup>36</sup> However, objectness does not take into account the *whole* of Being, but is “only *one* way in which what presences ... reveals itself and sets itself in position for the refining characteristic of science” (*The Question* 174). An example Heidegger provides that is relevant to *Nox* is the science of psychiatry. While psychiatry may study the “objectness of the bodily-psychical-spiritual unity of the whole man” at a given time, the “openness-for-Being [*Da-sein*] in which man as man ek-sists, remains that which for psychiatry is not to be gotten around” (174, 174-5). Similarly, in 1.3 in which Carson uses “*das Unumgängliche*,” or “overtakelessness,” Michael is a subject of study that she cannot get around. All she has access to of Michael is his “objectness,” which differs from the objectness accessed by her mother, Michael’s widow, and Anna.

Heidegger and, I would argue, Derrida and Carson, suggest something further, and that is that Michael himself cannot be fully encompassed. Even if we were to add up the multiple modes of presencing, his various “objectnesses” perceived by everyone connected to him, there would always be a reserve of Being. To put it simply, there will always be something *more* that cannot be grasped. We may recall the episodes of “non-arrival” related to Michael

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<sup>35</sup> Modern science is characterized by “*das Unumgängliche*,” as science itself is incapable of questioning its own essence. See Trish Glazebrook (*Heidegger’s Philosophy of Science* 141) in which she writes: “For example, no experiment in physics can show what physics is; nor can what mathematics is itself be calculated. The essence of a science is inaccessible from within that science. To regain the Greek sense of the impotence of knowledge would be to recognize that knowledge needs a purposive guidance that no science can give itself.”

<sup>36</sup> See the footnote on page 163 of Heidegger’s “Science and Reflection” in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*.

discussed thus far that illustrate a reserve or “something *more*” that is never secured by those around him, such as Carson never receiving the second volume of the thesaurus, her mother never receiving a return address, and the widow who understood that Anna – not she – was the “love of his life” (N 3.2). Michael remains at a point beyond Carson’s answerless questions such as “Who were you?” and “What is a voice?” (5.2). He eludes letters, phone conversations, and photographs: “He is giving the camera a sideways invisible look ... that look. No one knew him” (8.2).

Derrida would call this reserve *différance*, and, consequently, it denotes impossibility of pure presence, or, as mentioned above, Carson’s notion of “a centre, a history, an account that makes sense” (3.3). But this “lock against oblivion” is unthinkable on account of *différance*, or overtakelessness. As stated in 1.3, there exists that which Carson cannot avoid, which remains beyond her. We may understand overtakelessness in these spatial terms as Heidegger does in the context of modern science. Heidegger uses the term “one-sidedness” to describe the “blindness on the part of the sciences” (Glazebrook 15-6) to Being.<sup>37</sup> Carson, too, experiences blindness and “cannot see to the back of” Michael.

Objectness refers to only *one* kind of presencing. While we entrap and secure the real in its objectness, our experiences do not contain *all* of Being.<sup>38</sup> “History” and “Language” as such can never be represented in their respective fields. As Heidegger states:

Nature, man, history, language, all remain for the aforementioned sciences that which is not to be gotten around, already holding sway from within the objectness belonging

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<sup>37</sup> See Trish Glazebrook (*Heidegger's Philosophy of Science* 217): “Heidegger's claim is that when the one-sidedness of the sciences is lost to sight, then the other side is also lost. On the other side is being. The one-sidedness of the sciences is a preoccupation with but a single side of the ontological difference: beings.”

<sup>38</sup> The impossibility to contain (or, as Heidegger states, “encompass”) is also the impossibility to totalize. Returning to the distinction between epitaph and archive, we can understand the elegy as a pithy totalizing essence of a person. The archive is the ground of *potential* totalization. This is what comes apart, necessarily, in *Nox*.

to them, remain that toward which at any given time those sciences are directed, but that which, in the fullness of its coming to presence, they can never *encompass* by means of their representing. (*The Question* 175-6)

### **Prowling History & Language**

*“Prowling the meanings of a word, prowling the history of a person, no use expecting a flood of light.”*  
–Anne Carson (*Nox* 7.1)

We may now begin to see how overtakelessness in history and language is important for Carson as she inquires into the biography of Michael and translates Catullus. Indeed, grief is framed by Carson’s own contemplation of history and translation of Elegy 101, both of which demonstrate a Heideggerian overtakelessness that is also, ultimately, transposed to Michael himself.

In the case of the past, Carson shows us the impotence, or “non-encompassing” quality of History. She states: “Now by far the strangest thing that humans do ... is history. This asking. For often it produces no clear or helpful account” (*N* 1.3). This lack of clarity, centre, and habitual overtakelessness may be seen in the example she offers of Hekataios’s fragment:

He makes out of myrrh an egg as big as he can carry. Then he tests it out to see if he can carry it. After that he hollows out the egg and lays his father inside and plugs up the hollow. With father inside the egg weighs the same as before. Having plugged it up he carries the egg to Egypt to the temple of the sun. (Hekataios fr. 324 *Fragmente der griechischen Historiker* ed. Jacoby [Berlin 1923] cf. Herodotos 2.73)

Hekataios is describing the sacred phoenix which lived in Arabia but came to Heliopolis in Egypt once every five hundred years to bury a father there. The phoenix mourns by shaping, weighing, testing, hollowing, plugging and carrying towards the

light. He seems to take a clear view of necessity. And in the shadows that flash over him as he makes his way from Arabia to Egypt maybe he comes to see the immensity of the mechanism in which he is caught, the immense fragility of his own flying – composed as it is of these ceaselessly passing shadows carried backward by the very motion that devours them, his motion, his asking. (1.1)

By including this ancient description of the phoenix’s activity of mourning, Carson at once brings together the habitual overtakeness of grief and history. Furthermore, this “motion,” or “asking,” is cyclic and never-ending. The phoenix’s flight is “immense,” “fragile,” and composed of “ceaselessly passing shadows carried backward by the very motion that devours them.” The fragment is marked by continuity and repetition. The phoenix itself is a mythical creature that is known to die and revive from its own ashes. Death and the mourning ritual is also a regular occurrence, taking place “once every five hundred years.” But this flight from Arabia to Egypt is itself unending. Grief does not finish at the temple of the sun, but will repeat again in five hundred years, and so on. It is only in flight, in mourning, that the phoenix realizes “the immensity of the mechanism in which he is caught.”

More striking is the image of the egg, now hollowed out and containing a dead parent. The egg is a common image of birth, a point of beginning in the life cycle. The phoenix’s mourning ritual, however, troubles this notion of beginnings, as the egg becomes a vessel for the dead. The parent no longer carries the egg in preparation for life, but it is the phoenix/child that holds the egg in death.<sup>39</sup> While Hekataios’s fragment above sheds light on the cyclic *return* of death, I would argue that the more important movement is *unbroken continuation*. Death’s envelopment in life, as seen in the image of the egg, blurs the clear point of origin, or

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<sup>39</sup> A similar image of eternal return is found in Williams’s *Paterson*: “the snake with its tail in / its mouth / rolls backward into the past” (212).

beginning. Like the phoenix rising out of the ashes, or the egg posing as a coffin, there remains a trace of death. As Carson writes, “Death lines every moment of ordinary time” (*MOH* 166).

Paralleling the physical and metaphorical shape of the egg in Hekataios’s fragment, Carson’s own grief is characterized by ellipses. During her visit with Michael’s widow in Copenhagen, Carson alludes to the phoenix’s mourning ritual. For instance, the church in which Michael’s funeral takes place is described as “white and clean as an eggshell inside” (*N* 5.4). Furthermore, the regenerative quality of the phoenix is suggested in 8.3 when Carson writes: “More than one person has pointed out to me a likeness between my brother and Lazarus.”

A more explicit echo to the phoenix is made when, in the church, Carson lets “the sheets of memory blow on the line” (*N* 5.5) and recalls the funerals of her parents. She writes: “both my parents were laid out in their coffins (years apart, accidentally) in bright yellow sweaters. They looked like beautiful peaceful egg yolks. I have always admired the design of the egg – yellow circle within a white oval” (5.5). A small painting of two yellow ellipses precedes this fragment. A cut-up negative of an egg in a nest follows it. By invoking the phoenix described by Hekataios, Carson participates in this ritualistic mourning, aligning, once again, an egg with death. Like the phoenix who adheres to this custom once every five hundred years, Carson, too, repeats (“years apart”) the dressing of her parents in yellow sweaters. Here the coffin and the church, like the egg, harbours death. From antiquity to the present, Carson engages in the same immense “mechanism” that repeats, is continuous, and sees no end. The immensity of this timeless, endless mechanism opens out to the processes found in elegy and translation, but also the figure in perpetual motion, which cannot be

apprehended in Michael. Herodotos quotes Pindar in 5.5, “Custom is king of all” (3.38.1-3), and it is the custom of mourning that reigns. It is a continuous circling, like the sunflowers that Michael’s widow throws into the sea after she puts in his ashes; the sunflowers continue to “turn around on the water” (7.2).

This notion of the elliptical that participates in activities of mourning (and, in a larger context, history) is also seen in language. The elliptical refers not only to the ellipse, but also to *ellipsis*. There are, for instance, the ellipses that punctuate much of Michael’s discourse. Part of what makes Michael so elusive is his silence. His letters are few and far between and are described as “laconic” (N 2.2). When he phones, there exists impenetrable silences: “when he telephoned me ... about half a year after our mother died he had nothing to say” (5.1). And it goes further than mere silence; even when Michael speaks or writes, his discourse is elliptical, in the sense that it is cryptic. Indeed the fragments themselves are visually presented to emphasize their fragmentary states by being smudged, ripped, folded, and unreadable, but the fragments of Michael’s dialogue also suggest something more that is not being shown. The transcribed conversation after 5.1 illustrates Michael’s clipped responses to Carson and provides no clue as to what he is thinking, feeling, and experiencing:

Mother is dead.  
Yes I guess she is.  
She had a lot of pain because of you.  
Yes I guess she did.  
Why didn’t you write.  
Well it was for hard for me.  
Are you sick.  
No.  
Do you work.  
Yes.  
Are you happy.  
No. Oh no.



Michael's recycled and curt responses give us a strong sense that there is much left unsaid. Meaning, or the overtakelessness of meaning, troubles Carson and she aligns their dialogues with her "dialogue" with Catullus. Listening to Michael is itself an encounter with *différance*, and is a language that requires the supplement of translation: "Because our conversations were few (he phoned me maybe 5 times in 22 years) I study his sentences the ones I remember as if I'd been asked to translate them" (8.1). Following this fragment is a list of phrases Carson has transcribed, all of which are opaque and assembled together at random, reminiscent of a found poem:

Lots of crime in Copenhagen.  
Danes are hardworking.  
I am painting the flat.  
We have a dog that's him barking.  
Yes he barks in Danish.  
Don't go back to the farm don't go alone.  
What will you do sit on Bald Rock and look  
down at the graves.  
Put the past away you have to.

Needless to say, the affect and tone captured in these lines are ambiguous. Succinct and withheld, we cannot help but recall Carson's question that haunts her: "What is a voice?" At this point in *Nox*, Carson illuminates the "overtakelessness" of language. While temporal and linguistic distances may be more obvious in the translation of an ancient Roman poem, similar distances are inherent in *all* iterations, despite the common language shared between speakers, and despite, more unfortunately, kinship. To traverse these distances and reach a precise and "pure" meaning of Michael's utterances would be like finding the ideal, adequate translation. As Carson discovers: "I never arrived at the translation I would have liked ... I came to think of translating as a room ... I guess it never ends" (7.1). She continues to prowl in a dark room. Though Michael's voice may "light up for a moment" (5.2) when he calls her by a familiar,

childhood epithet (“pinhead”), it goes “dark again” and his voice remains “crusted ... black, dense” (5.2).<sup>40</sup> One may grope for a light but, as Carson states, “Human words have no main switch” (7.1). Comparable with Heidegger’s assertion that the whole of being cannot be encompassed but may only be understood via objectness, for Carson there exists only moments of light that go dark again. There is “no use expecting a flood of light” (7.1) to brighten every corner of the room.

In addition to mourning and understanding Michael, the “elliptical” is also played out in Carson’s translation of Catullus. She introduces the ellipse in the first indexical entry, “multas:” “many thing, much, to a great extent, many words especially in elliptical phrases ...” Again, “elliptical” may denote a) a cyclic motion, or b) phraseological ambiguity. The recurrence of “*nox*,” or “night,” in her indexical entries contains both meanings as it is phrased and rephrased in various ways throughout the text. Stang notes: “It is odd that nearly all [of] Carson’s entries on Catullus’s poem 101 are bent toward *nox*, since it is not one of the elegy’s sixty-three finely chosen words.” Indeed *nox* creeps into the creative “definitions” provided by Carson, and its regular appearance marks a linguistic and spatial ellipse. So, how can we understand *nox* as it functions in Carson’s work of mourning and translating?

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<sup>40</sup> Carson describes a similar experience communicating with her brother in *Plainwater*: “Then very early one morning, about three years after he left, he called from Copenhagen (collect). I stood on the cold linoleum, listening to a voice that sounded like him in a padded costume. Layers and layers of hard times and resentment crusted on it” (246-7).

## The Recurring *Nox*

*“The world’s darkening never reaches  
to the light of Being.”*

–Heidegger (*Poetry, Language, Thought* 4)

In order to answer this, I would like to return to Heidegger’s concept of overtakelessness and its use in Carson’s poem “Longing, A Documentary” (*D* 241). The poem, which plays with the form of a cinematic shot list, describes a woman who drives out into the night and lays out photographic papers at the bank of a river in attempt to capture something. What this “something” is remains ambiguous. The photographic paper may be used to catch moonlight through the water, or, perhaps, night itself.

The subtitles of shots 9, 10, and 15 are striking in that they reiterate a similar struggle in *Nox* and draw an intimate link between night and overtakelessness:

“Night is not a fact.”

“Facts lack something, she thought.”

“‘Overtakelessness’ (what facts lack).” (*D* 244-45)

Overtakelessness, defined by Carson is “what facts lack.” As we’ve seen earlier, overtakelessness is indeed a kind of lack, in the sense that what we perceive fixes an object in time, allowing us access to only *one* instance of presencing. However, an object as we conceive of it is a donation of Being. Being gives as it withdraws. We cannot encounter *all* of Being; there is something *more* inaccessible to us – we encounter overtakelessness, a lack. How, then, can we read “night” (which is “*not* a fact”) in this poem?

The poem details the speaker’s wait (“she sits awhile in the reeds, arm on knees” [*D* 245]) and it remains uncertain if she has captured what she wanted on the photographic paper. Despite this uncertainty, the final subtitle of the speaker driving off suggests that this task is

cyclic: “As usual she enjoyed the sense of work, of having worked. Other fears would soon return” (245). Indeed, the beginning of this poem already suggests the repetitive nature of this art: “It was for such a night she had waited” (243).

Night returns for Carson. Night, or *nox*, marks a similar overtakelessness in “Longing” as it does in the elegy for her brother. While “*nox*” does not appear in Catullus’s poem, Carson still encounters it in her indexical entries. It is not simply a metaphor for death, but as the word appears and reappears throughout the book, it points to something more difficult to grasp.<sup>41</sup> “*Nox*” diverts Carson away from the neutral genre of the dictionary entry and its intimation as denotative “bedrock.” It deflects her from the fidelity of meaning so she cannot “see to the back of” the word.<sup>42</sup> “*Nox*” is an obstacle that counters fact and keeps facts lacking. As Carson puts it in “Longing,” “Night plucks her, she stumbles, stops” (*D* 243).

I would argue that Heidegger provides a way to access *nox*. As Carson suggests in “Longing,” *nox* is not a fact that can be overtaken; *nox*, then, can be thought of *as* Being, in the sense that it is a “fullness” which cannot be “encompassed.” As Heidegger states, “Nature, man, history, language” (*The Question* 175) are all that cannot be gotten around, and indeed, these are all subjects that Carson associates intimately with night. The overtakelessness of language, for instance, is made apparent by the indexical entry. There is no *one single meaning* of a word, in the same way that there is more than just *one instance of presencing* or “objectness.” A word’s Being is something that cannot be seen to the back of, and though we may reach the end of the entry, the very appearance of “*nox*” suggests that we did not reach

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<sup>41</sup> Deutsch also contemplates the relevance of “*nox*,” but does not settle on one thing. See Deutsch (“Tribute and Farewell”): “Nothing could prepare you for *Nox*, but the title tries: It sounds like ‘book’ and ‘box,’ and ‘nix’ and ‘knocks,’ maybe even ‘knick-knack.’ To elegize her brother, Anne Carson has packed a study of night and nothingness in a cardboard container.”

<sup>42</sup> In a discussion on Celan and Hölderlin, Carson writes: “Now a private language is a kind of riddle. It raises the same problem of pure origin: you cannot get behind the back of it” (*Economy* 132). The inability to “see” or “get to the back of” something is the same in the case of “pure origin,” or “pure presence” in language and Michael. Carson describes this inability as “overtakelessness.”

the end of the word at all. “*Nox*” signals a reservoir of Being that offers further exploration. We may think of these indexical entries as a line, defined in mathematics as a continuous entity, or, as Euclid put it, a “breadthless length.” While each meaning offered by Carson may be plotted on a line, there is no end point. The word is never present.

It would be tedious to examine every single occurrence of “*nox*” in the text, so I would like to point out a few selections from the indexical entries. These examples also participate in the conceit of night as Being. I have ordered these entries in such a way to illustrate the “breadthless length” of night/Being and its “uncontainability”:

**multas:** occurring in a high degree, full, intense, *multa dies* or *multa lox*: broad daylight, *multa nox*: late in the night, perhaps too late.

**et:** and after all that? (adding an enlargement of the thought) and indeed, and moreover; ... (*et nocte*) (you know it was night)

**aequora:** a level stretch of ground, plain; *imensumne noctis aequor confecimus?* have we made it across the vast plain of night?

**advenio:** *advenientes ad angulos noctis* reaching to the very corners of the night.

**ad:** on the side next to, *ad dextram, laevam, noctem* on the right, left, night side etc.

Though fragmentary and allusive, Carson’s mentions of “*nox*” contain Heideggerian resonances. Described as “full,” and “intense” (*multas*), night is appended with a “moreover” (*et*), a suggestion that there is something further. Night has an unfathomable depth (“reaching

into the corners of the night”) and a mystifying vastness (“have we made it across the vast plain of night?”), which is, respectively, unreachable and uncrossable. “Night side” echoes Heidegger’s calling science “one-sided.” Science is only equipped to deal with “objectness” (beings), but not the “other side” of ontology (the “Night side”), which pertains to Being.

It is important to point out that Carson’s encounter with *nox* is not neutral, but is wrought by grief and frustration. This is made apparent when we consider the genre of the indexical entry, and the addition of a subjective voice to the otherwise “neutral” genre. Carson is aware of the ubiquitous night and the overtakelessness that exists, but, like anyone who partakes in translation or history, is frustrated by the inherent shortcomings:

**atque:** *similiter atque ipse eram noctuabunda* just like him I was a negotiator with night.

**miseras:** *nocte fratris quam ipso frater miserior:* made sadder by the brother’s night than by the brother himself

**quae:** an unspecified, any, anyone called - ; anyone, anything; *quod homo est non est hoc nox* a man is not a night!

**vale:** to mean, signify, *parum valent graeci verbo* the Greeks have no precise word for this (but we call it ‘night’).

While I propose to think about the salience of *nox* in terms of Being, a more sombre reading lurks in the background. I would posit that, beyond death, what Carson mourns is not the loss of the “brother himself” but the “brother’s night” or Being, the realization that she is unable to

fully *know* Michael. She may protest that “a man is not a night!” but, dismayingly, Michael’s meaning and signification is ungraspable: “we call it ‘night.’”

Carson touches on the nonsensical nature of Being (and grief) and, ultimately, the “blindness” of language. As Derrida puts it, “Being itself is *alone* in its absolute resistance to *every metaphor*” (*Writing* 73). Thus, while Carson may understand that she is prowling a dark room with no end in sight, the poetic configuration of darkness, night, or *nox* that she sets up breaks down and is itself also an inadequate frame for dealing with Carson’s study:

**donarem:** *ego te quid donem?* what would I give you? *nox nihil donat* nothing is night’s gift.

**manantia:** *omne supervacuum pleno de pectore manat* the whole pointless night seeps out of the heart.

“There is no possibility I can think my way into his muteness. God wanted to make nonsense of “overtakelessness” itself. To rob its juice, and I believe God has succeeded.” (*N* 8.5)

How perfectly the metaphor of night maps onto Being is perhaps beside the point. I would argue that what Carson stresses in *Nox* is that language itself is no match for grief, and, by extension, Being. Language is a vehicle that cannot convey the meaning behind Michael’s utterances, or the ideal translation of Catullus. There is no light, and no main switch. Night, thus, is a befitting representation in line with Heidegger’s notion of Being. As he states:

...what is inaccessible and not to be gotten around remains inconspicuousness ... The inconspicuousness of the state of affairs, its failure to *shine forth*, is grounded rather in

the fact that it, of itself, does not come to appearance. (*The Question* 178-9; emphasis mine)

In the footnote we learn that “inconspicuous,” or “*unscheinbar*,” means literally, “not shining,” “not bright” (Heidegger, *The Question* 177). The inaccessible (“overtakelessness”) is associated with the inconspicuous (“not shining,” or, I would say, “*nox*”). Carson makes an exception to the inconspicuous and offers moments of illumination and appearance, but all, in the end, return to the dark. Michael’s voice lighting up over the phone is a mere flicker. A more striking image Carson offers is the ideal translation that is perceived but then forgotten, much like in her dream of translating *Electra*:

But all those little kidnaps in the dark. And then the luminous, big, shivering, discandied, unrepentant, barking web of them that hangs in your mind when you turn back to the page you were trying to translate. (*N* 7.1)

How then, does Carson’s engagement with Heidegger affect her process of translation, and, more pressingly, redeem her despairing stance toward her grief? At the end of “Science and Reflection,” Heidegger writes:

What have we achieved? We have become attentive to that which is inaccessible and not to be gotten around, which is constantly passed over. ... We shall be satisfied with having *pointed* to the inconspicuous state of affairs. ... Through this *pointing* to the inconspicuous state of affairs we are, however, directed onto a way that brings us before that which is worthy of questioning. (*The Question* 179; emphasis mine)

Carson, too, has become attentive to the “overtakelessness” of her tasks posed in *Nox*. Though unable to look or think her way into Michael’s “muteness” she can, at least, contemplate “that which cannot be got round” (*N* 1.3): her encounter with *nox*, the prowling of a dark room. We



return, once again, to the indexical entries, always *pointing* toward Being, or *nox*: “In one sense it is a room I can never leave, perhaps dreadful for that. At the same time, a place composed entirely of entries” (7.1).

## **Conclusion**

The layered and entangled abundance that Carson provides in *Nox* illustrates her primary concerns laid out in her earlier works: the reception of the past, its reactivation in the present, and the accompanying error, loss, and novelty. The material and visual features of *Nox* emerge out of Carson’s scholarly and creative interest in ancient Greek fragments, the wreckage of the classical past, and the space of loss, absence, and imaginative possibilities. In this chapter, I continue my discussion on “rupture,” but this time broaden the scope to address the material aspects of the archive (both classical and personal), and the importance of adjacency with which we read the generic, visual, and linguistic dimensions of the book.

At the beginning of this chapter, I set out to elucidate the constellative array in *Nox* and argue that Carson’s grief for Michael is also at once grief for archival and linguistic loss. I also set out to investigate the implications in Fragopoulos’s statement, “what Carson finally accedes to is the very darkness of it all.” The “darkness” of it all, which may be conveniently rephrased to “the *nox* of it all,” does not only pertain to Michael’s death, but, simultaneously, history, language, and the archive. The treatment of personal loss is also the treatment of these adjacent subjects, in which “overtakelessness” and endless “prowling” exist. To be a “negotiator of night” does not imply that a deal will be reached, but that one is always negotiating.

Steedman states: “Historians, writing the narrative that has no end, certainly make endings, but as we are still in it, the great, slow moving Everything, in which nothing has gone away and never shall, you can produce only an Ending, which is a different thing indeed from an End” (167). As in translation, there may be “an ending” – Carson eventually produces a translation – but “an End” (the imaginary translation) does not exist.

So to return to what Stang notes, I would argue that the absence of the word “*nox*” in Catullus’s poem does not indicate the absence of *nox* in the Carsonion-Heideggerian sense. Catullus, too, stares into the “muteness” of his brother, and speaks “with mute ash.” Elegy 101 is itself a “little kidnap in the dark,” a “luminous ... web” (*N* 7.1), or template that Carson employs to chart out her own grief. Though “*nox*” does not appear as one of Catullus’s 63 words, the fathomless depths and distances of his brother imply a sense of “overtakelessness”: “into forever, brother, farewell and farewell.” Just like death, *nox* “hides right inside every shining sentence we grasped and had no grasp of” (*MOH* 166).

A possible answer, finally, that responds to the overarching question of Carson’s fugitive brother may be found quite neatly in “The Wishing Jewel” wherein the swimmer plunges into the “black glass of the lake”:

The swimmer is grateful to escape underneath to where his dim water kingdom receives him. Silently. ... Who else ever knew me? the swimmer thinks. The hand with the wedding ring floats down past his face and disappears. No one. (*PW* 249)

In the next chapter, I will return to error, but shift my focus to error in Eros. Through Carson’s love-narratives, I want to develop the concept of eros (commonly understood as love or sexual desire) to also encompass errancy in the re-membling of erotic experience, and, by extension, desire for totality within the archive. Carson’s assertion that “Eros is in between” (*Eros* 109)

engenders the liminal spaces that I have hitherto discussed. Eros is not only between lovers, but also occupies the gaps, leaps, and distances in language and time.

Crucial to my argument is the demented father, a recurring figure in Carson's work. If the desire for an origin and totality is intrinsic to the "law" of the *patri*-archive, then the presence of the demented father suggests a resistance to such a desire and, consequently, an alternative conceptual model of the archive. In addition, the father has a bearing on established and traditional notions of eros as a "totalizing" affect, what Lacan calls the "becoming a One." The terms I have used thus far – "error," "accident," "spillage," and "non-arrival" – can be adapted to Carson's depictions of eros and the disordered state of the Father. Recalling Derrida's assertion that "there is no madness without the law" ("The Law of Genre" 81), I want to conceptualize the archive (or the "madness" of the text) in terms of the father's madness, as well as erotic madness.

## Chapter 4

### “Eros is in Between”: Desire and the Archive

*“The history of a text is like a long caress.”*  
–Anne Carson (AR 6)

Thus far, I have argued that Anne Carson's response to the classical archive is framed within the parameters of error and accident. Carson does not work to preserve or to find coherence in the past; rather, she embraces and incorporates the temporal, linguistic, and even physical gaps inherent in ancient texts. The inclusion of mistakes in transmission as well as contingencies that arise in the poetic process itself all contribute to what I call Carson's poetics of error.

Sappho – her fragments, as well as her ambiguous biography – is emblematic of Carsonian poetics. The “rupture” that fragments the material remains of Sappho's work is crucial to Carson's own work; when we hear or detect the ancient poet in Carson (in the form of a line of poetry, or as a fictional character), we are alerted to a poetics that is non-linear and experimental. The “Sapphic” connotes not only transgressive female or lesbian desires (which Phaedrus describes as “a *mistake* in nature” [qtd in. Williamson 30; emphasis mine]), but also ruptures in the textual and archival registers. In opposition to the contained, determined, and stable qualities supposedly intrinsic to the archive (as well as history), “Sappho” indexes incompleteness, omission, and chaos.

In the previous chapter, I continued to investigate absence, but shifted my focus from Sappho to the figure of Carson's late brother, Michael. In her attempts to discover Michael's history and personage, she turns to Catullus's poem 101, an elegy written by the ancient poet for his own brother. Bringing together the classical genre of the elegy with the familial, Carson examines translation, the archive, and mourning. Keeping in mind that Carson's poetics challenges the stable and the accurate, here she focuses on the overwhelming impossibility of an error-less, ordered, and complete mastery of language, history, and grief. The genre of the elegy is a summation: it totalizes both the deceased's life and the speaker's grief, giving formal expression to grief and a sense of resolution to a life. Carson, however,

troubles the genre and its desire for totalization and offers, instead, an archive composed of scraps and traces.

Both Sappho and Michael are bodies constituted by perpetual absence. We receive them as arbitrary fragments and scraps. In *If Not, Winter* and *Nox*, their remnants are presented on the pages as surrounded by white space, indicative of what Carson calls “physical silence,” or the part of the text that has fallen quiet. In *Nox*, for example, Carson intentionally cuts up old photographs. This was done, on the one hand, because the backgrounds were too “full of truth” (Aitken). On the other hand, she notes that “the more you cut, the more story they gather” (King). Empty space gives way to speculation – and if Michael (as a recovered or reconstructed object of poetic practice) is reminiscent of Sappho, then we know that this speculation is ongoing and endless. There is no clear route to the “truth” of Michael; rather, there is simply a reconstruction, or a “re-membering” of parts. The past, as Carson demonstrates, is open. It is open to our interpretations and fictions, and remains open to future retellings and revisions.

While I have discussed the archive in the context of translation, grief, and history, in this chapter I want to turn to the erotic dimension of the archive. In this regard, Carson tells us, “the history of a text is like a long caress” (*AR* 6). This line intimately combines the historical, textual, and amatory registers. We can theorize a textual erotics by means of Roland Barthes’s *The Pleasure of the Text*, wherein he explicates an erotics of reading: the text generates either pleasure *or* jouissance.<sup>1</sup> For Barthes, the pleasurable text is associated with “a *comfortable* practice of reading” (*PT* 14) in which the reader’s relationship to language is confirmed as something “stable and limited” (Makaryk 607). The pleasurable text does not challenge the

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<sup>1</sup> According to Barthes, pleasure is associated with the readerly text, whereas bliss, or jouissance, is associated with the writerly text. See Barthes (*PT* 14) in which he defines the “Text of Pleasure” and “Text of Bliss.”

reader; rather, the reader's knowledge, beliefs, and expectations are confirmed. The text of *jouissance* (translated most closely to *bliss* or *enjoyment*), on the other hand, is one that produces discomfort, bringing loss, rupture, and crisis to the reader's relation with language. Following Barthes, I want to argue that Carson's attitude toward the archive is not one of pleasure (as found in the readerly text), but one of *jouissance*, by means of which her poetry "unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions" (Barthes, *PT* 14).

History, textuality, and love are all at risk of fragmentation, rupture, and error. Carson's deliberate intertextuality in her love narratives draws attention to the fissures of language, as well as to the shortcomings of love, and offers an affective orientation toward the archive. Love, as presented by Carson, does not simply refer to a sexual desire for the beloved, but rather to a broader desire for a totality that extends to the past. In fact, I propose to approach eros not as "love" or "feelings," but as a site or situation of in-between-ness. According to Carson:

Eros is an issue of boundaries ... in the interval between reach and grasp, between glance and counter glance, between "I love you" and "I love you too," the absent presence of desire comes alive. But the boundaries of time and glance and I love you are only aftershocks of the main, inevitable boundary that creates Eros: the boundary of flesh and self between you and me. And it is only, suddenly, at the moment when I would dissolve that boundary, I realize I never can. (*Eros* 30)

The liminal space of the erotic is also the poetic, affective, conceptual, and linguistic "between" space of error that I have already outlined in Carson's work. Eros is between "reach and grasp," "glance and counter glance," "you and me," but also between antiquity and the present, Greek and English, the critical and the creative, the fragment and the whole, and one

literary genre and another.<sup>2</sup> Time and distance are obstacles to continuity, coherence, and totalization, yet the desire persists. The impossible moment in which the boundary “dissolves” is the impossible moment of reciprocity and fulfillment. Eros, as a historical and traditional theme of poetry, sets up Carson’s procedures of error and errancy in the archive, whether classical, modern, literary, or familial.

Given the “between-ness” of eros, I want to return briefly to Derrida’s model of the archive. At the outset of *Archive Fever*, Derrida argues that the archive is to be understood *not* as a collection of documents, but rather as any “founding” and sustaining myth of commencement (absolute origin) and commandment (the law of the father). As mentioned in Chapter 1, the Greek ἀρχή [*arkhē*] “names at once the *commencement* and the *commandment*” (Derrida, *AF* 1). Ideologically, the archive is configured as ordered, self-enclosed, and total: the ontological principle of the archive, or its guarantee of the coherence of the subject within a nation or a tradition, inheres in the trans-historical phenomena of repetition, citation, and ritual. For Derrida, the function of the archive is to laminate the present to the past, and thus to guarantee a certain futurity. Essentially a theory of the temporality of the subject, the archive inheres in the archival *event* – in that moment when the tradition is invoked. How then does eros suggest a destabilizing of the regulatory logics of the archive? How do we conceive of a law-less archive – one without a stable point of origin? To respond to this problem, we must turn to the figure of the father.

The demented father, who appears in a number of Carson’s works, gives us a way to understand her fragmentary poetics. While much of Carson’s writing is autobiographical (and her father did, indeed, suffer from dementia), I suggest that we read the father figure in her

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<sup>2</sup> This “between space” is very important to Carson. As she once stated in a lecture, “Nothing to me is more interesting than the spaces between languages” (qtd. in D’Agata, “Review: Men in the Off Hours”).



oeuvre *structurally*, as the Lacanian *nom/non du père*, signalling both authority (or the Law) and prohibition.<sup>3</sup> Tanis MacDonald, in her reading of “The Anthropology of Water,” argues that the father-daughter relationship parallels that of the relationship between pilgrim and saint, and that his “indecipherable speech suggests paternal knowledge codified by divinity as well as disease” (68). In this chapter, I will provide an alternative reading of the father-daughter relationship as one that focuses on both archival and erotic desires as error. The father’s dementia (which emerges as “indecipherable speech”) encodes the impossibility of these desires. If the father is sick and his ordering function compromised, what does that mean for the archive? More to the point, it raises the question of the situation of the daughter, of the daughter who writes, in relation to that archive.

The demented father indexes a fractured, inconsistent archive, no longer superintended by a phallogocentric authority. Thus, the archive is not a *patri*-archive; rather, it becomes something alternative, or Sapphic. My use of “Sapphic” does not simply refer to a binary opposition, but a resistance to the commandment and commencement of the archive. The freedom to err means a movement toward the inconclusive, as perceived in the fragment. The Sapphic rupture disturbs and destabilizes the notion of a fixed origin, or order. A Sapphic archive, thus, is one that refrains from stability, containment, and continuity. There are, as Carson carefully shows us in her explorations of history, grief, and love, things that manage to escape (what I have already termed “leakage”): “Water is something you cannot hold. Like men. I have tried. Father, brother, lover, true friends, hungry ghosts and God, one by one all

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<sup>3</sup> Lacan plays with homonyms “nom” and “non” to emphasize the symbolic element that is operative in the paternal (or authority) figure: “the Father’s name (*le nom du père*) and the father’s no-saying (*le non du père*)” (Fink, *The Lacanian Subject* 57). For more, see Fink (*The Lacanian Subject* 106): “Despite the infinite permutations allowed by language in the constitution of desire, man can be seen as bounded or finite with respect to the symbolic register. Translated in terms of desire, the boundary is the father and his incest taboo: man’s desire never goes beyond the incestuous wish, impossible to realize, as that would involve overstepping the father’s boundaries, and thus uprooting the very ‘anchoring point’ of neurosis: *le nom du père*, the father’s name, but also *le non du père*, the father’s ‘No!’”

took themselves out of my hands” (*PW* 117). The demented father also signals a rupture of concepts traditionally regarded as phallogentric. The weakened father is thus a useful model when considering alternative models of both the archive and its amatory dimension.

I will begin by linking love, as conceptualized by Lacan in Seminar XX, with the archive, both of which are informed by the desire for wholeness and totality. I will then demonstrate that the demented father, a recurring figure in Carson’s work, is an apposite trope for both the “demented” archive – one that is not stable or closed – and erroneous love – one that does not fulfill the fantasy of “oneness.” Carson’s use of intertextuality is indicative of both the fractured mind of the father and the openness of an archive no longer governed by the patriarchal order. I will turn finally to *The Beauty of the Husband*, a long poem which makes use of Keats and the classical archive in its telling of a failed marriage. The temporal difference in this text is the very matrix of Carson’s re-membering of a history of erotic intimacy. If the erotic discourse in the individual text or line is an expression of that desire across distance, then the erotic, as a history of an error, is the “errant” in engagement with the archive and its literary allusions. By bringing together erotic desire and Derrida’s archive fever, I want to demonstrate that if desire is always the desire to make whole, then the experience of the archive is erotic. To lose oneself in love is to lose oneself in the archive.

## **Eros: The One is Not**

“*Eros is a verb.*”

–Anne Carson (*Eros* 17)

“*Consider incompleteness as a verb.*”

–Anne Carson (*PW* 16)

According to Sharon Wahl, what makes Carson’s melding of classical scholarship and poetry so compelling is “a third obsession, her study of the longing for, and loss of, romantic love” (180). Chris Jennings, too, notes the importance of this “obsession” and suggests that *Eros the Bittersweet* constitutes the groundwork for Carson’s writing. The triangular structure that Carson explores in Sappho’s fragment 31 “provides a figure for eros that illuminates a recurring pattern in [Carson’s] own poetics” (Jennings 923). The relationship of love to the archive is, I argue, one that finds its commonality in desire. While I have discussed desire in its many manifestations, such as the desire for a fixed point of origin, the desire for textual wholeness, and the desire for a “lock against oblivion” (*N* 3.3), here I want to turn to desire in its most quintessentially Sapphic form: desire as *eros*.

Carson, whose doctoral research focused on what the ancient Greek poets mean by eros, continues to explore erotic experience in her poetic work. In line with my earlier discussion of the desire for totality, there is, perhaps, no other experience more preoccupied with wholeness or “consummation” in its etymological sense: to be “together” (*con-*) as a “sum” (*summa*) or “total.” Inherent in love is an expectation of “oneness.” As Alistair Blanshard puts it, “When love is reciprocated it means that one has found one’s other half ... Love helps make us whole” (106).

And yet the wholeness we think we can find through love, according to the Lacanian critique, is just a delusive fantasy, an imaginary reconstruction of a mythical “pre-symbolic”

state, prior to the fall into division, language, and lack. Love is an imaginary means to fill the hole that is created when we are amputated from the Parent by the scalpel of the signifier.<sup>4</sup> To be a subject is to be a fragment, but the most primal insistence of fantasy is that love can make up for what was lost. Bruce Fink makes clear that this fantasy has long presided over popular conceptions of love, and harks back to antiquity:

The fantasy of harmony between the sexes has a long and distinguished lineage, insofar as we can trace it back to at least Plato's *Symposium*, where we see Aristophanes put forward the view that once we were all spherical beings lacking in nothing, but Zeus split us in two, and now we are all in search of our other half. We divided beings yearn to be grafted back together, finding which we at least find relief in each other's arms (thanks to Zeus having taken pity on us, turning our private parts around to the inside). As Aristophanes says, "Love thus seeks to refind our early estate, endeavouring to combine two into one and heal the human sore" (Loeb edition, 1967, 141). Love is what can make good the primordial split, and harmony can be achieved thereby.<sup>5</sup> ("Knowledge and Jouissance" 29)

Here Aristophanes illustrates what Lacan describes as "fantasy" – that love will "heal" the split we experienced when separated from the mother and will thus return us to a state of primordial completion.<sup>6</sup> However, Lacan argues that there is no putting together two

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<sup>4</sup> There are innumerable references of this fantasy found in our culture. The lyrics in a Cyndi Lauper song ("This hole in my heart that goes all the way to China / You gotta fill it up with love before I fall inside") suggest just that. Take, as another example, the line uttered by Tom Cruise's character to his beloved in *Jerry Maguire* (1996): "You complete me."

<sup>5</sup> See Sigmund Freud (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 51) in which he discusses Aristophanes: "...science has so little to tell us about the origin of sexuality that we can liken the problem to a darkness into which not so much as a ray of a hypothesis has penetrated. In quite a different region, it is true, we *do* meet with such a hypothesis; but it is of so fantastic a kind – a myth rather than a scientific explanation – that I should not venture to produce it here, were it not that it fulfills precisely the one condition whose fulfillment we desire. For it traces the origin of an instinct to *a need to restore an earlier state of things*. What I have in mind is, of course, the theory which Plato put into the mouth of Aristophanes in the *Symposium*."

<sup>6</sup> As Lacan states, "'We are but one.' Everyone knows, of course, that two have never become but one, but nevertheless, 'we are but one.' The idea of love begins with that" (Lacan, *XX* 47).

fragments to become a “one.” Our entrance into the symbolic order, whereby we become subjects of language (an “I”), results in a loss. We are thus *necessarily* and *irremediably* fragmented. This process, termed “castration,” leaves a phantom object behind, called the *objet petit autre*, the object-cause of desire. The object functions like a hole that can never be filled and its unique shape *causes* our singular desires, dictating the means by which we attempt to make up for what is forever lost.<sup>7</sup> Love is the fantasy that urges us to believe that we can return to a primordial state of oneness by means of an erotic reconciliation.

Love, however, is an *ongoing* search for the soulmate, or “the one.”<sup>8</sup> Fulfillment remains always in the future. As Carson understands it, “Eros is a verb” (*Eros* 17). The opening quotations of this section, which I’ve placed together to highlight their similar syntax, work together to demonstrate that we desire and move from lover to lover in an attempt to fuse into one, but our unfruitful pursuits are perpetuated by our being irrevocably incomplete. Thus, the line, “Consider incompleteness as a verb” (*PW* 16), gains another layer of meaning: “incompleteness” not only refers to the papyrus fragments that comprise the classical archive, as I have used earlier, but also the fragmentary (or castrated) state of the Lacanian subject. We desire, but we desire because we lack. Eros and incompleteness work mutually as verbs in an ongoing search for fulfillment and wholeness.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Carson makes a similar observation in *Eros the Bittersweet*: “If we follow the trajectory of eros we consistently find it tracing out this same route: it moves out from the lover toward the beloved, then ricochets back to the lover himself and the hole in him, unnoticed before. Who is the real subject of most love poems? Not the beloved. It is that hole” (30).

<sup>8</sup> The “ongoing” search I mention here is associated with Lacan’s model of the drive. To put something very complex very simply, we could say that drive is the *objet petit a* in its naked form – the traumatic Thing that insists beneath the fantasy and that is initially produced by the signifier. We reach the level of drive, as opposed to desire, when we confront directly the remainder of the lost, mythical unity. Drive is what “aims” at the lost object but never reaches it, just pulsating around a hole endlessly and meaninglessly. This pulsation is the utterly meaningless consequence of our castration by the signifier.

<sup>9</sup> The search is ongoing because, unfortunately, once that which is desirable is attained, it is no longer desirable because it is no longer prohibited. Carson, also, touches on this dilemma in her description of eros:

The Greek word eros denotes ‘want,’ ‘lack,’ ‘desire for that which is missing.’ The lover wants what he does not have. It is by definition impossible for him to have what he wants if, as soon as it is had, it is no longer wanting. (*Eros* 10)

Carson draws our attention to the impossible pursuits found in language and history, as I pointed out, via her use of Sappho, her penchant for philological mistakes, as well as her archival documentation in *Nox*. Love is also an impossible pursuit of totality, or oneness. As Lacan asserts, “Eros is defined as the fusion that makes one from two, as what is supposed to gradually tend in the direction of making but one from an immense multitude – not only do not make one, but have no chance of pulling that off” (*XX* 66). This “fusion” or “making a One” is never achieved. Rather, the love event is, to borrow the term used by Carson in *Nox*, an ongoing “prowl” in which a lover *expects* to achieve a sense of wholeness when joined with the beloved. Carson’s prowl for her brother is echoed in the Lacanian search for the beloved who will complete us. I want to be cautious and not simply superimpose the Heideggerian concept of “overtakelessness” onto Lacanian psychoanalysis, but there are commonalities worth pointing out. Both are processes of pursuit with no end point. Indeed, Carson’s definition of “overtakelessness,” as “that which cannot be got round. Cannot be avoided or seen to the back of” (*N* 1.3), lends itself as an apt description of the unfillable hole that we, as Lacanian subjects, possess.<sup>10</sup> Carson’s prowl, which “does not end,” is also exhibited in her narratives of unsuccessful love. Presumably, if there is, in fact, unification with the One, if something can be gotten around or seen to the back of, we would reach an end point and these narratives would cease. Carson, however, is highly self-referential and reflexive, often quoting herself and recycling phrases.<sup>11</sup> The repetition and ongoing return to amorous unhappiness is a

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Our desire is *dependent* on our not getting what we want. As Carson states, “What does the desirer want from desire? Candidly, he wants to keep on desiring” (*Eros* 136).

<sup>10</sup> In French, “to fulfill,” is *comblé*. The verb means also, literally, “to fill a hole.”

<sup>11</sup> There are a number of instances in Carson’s oeuvre in which she reuses her own lines. A relevant example is the line, “Not enough spin on it,” which is uttered by the lover in “The Glass Essay” (*GIG* 1) and picked up again in another poem, “New Rule” (*MOH* 12).

poetic prowl for a closure that does not come.<sup>12</sup> In fact, I would argue that Carson's continual return to tales about unfulfilling relationships is indicative of poetry's own necessary failure when it engages with what Carson describes as "the human custom / of wrong love" (*AR* 75). There can't be poetry about achieving "oneness," due to language's own condition of failure, error, and contingency. It is language, after all, that generates the primal lack. We write poetry to make up for, to provide a supplement for, the very impossible desire that poetry engenders. That is why the Ovidian Apollo, remarkably unsuccessful where love is concerned, takes the laurel in the place of Daphne. The dilemma of eros is the dilemma of poetry – something both Carson and Sappho understand well.

"The human custom / of *wrong* love" (*AR* 75; emphasis mine) is reminiscent of the sense of "wrongness" that exists in Carson's approach to history and translation, as she works against traditional conceptions and clichéd expectations. Her poetics of error is characterized by play, omission, obscurity, and, more importantly, contingency. Contingency is also important in Lacan's conception of love and desire. There are two kinds of love, as Lacan makes clear. One is based on necessity, in which the lover seeks out the other (his or her "destiny") in order to be made whole. This is the endlessly popular conception of love functioning as a delusive fantasy. The other love, however, is not love as necessity, but as contingency. In this case, the lover loves all the while knowing that the beloved *does not* complete him or her. The other, in fact, has nothing to do with the lover. There is no "other half," "right" person, or "soulmate" in which we may find meaning in ourselves. Love is not *meaningful*; rather, love is meaningless.

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<sup>12</sup> The recurrence of love in Carson's oeuvre has not gone unnoticed amongst critics. Wahl lists *Plainwater* and *Glass, Irony and God* as a continued "erotic investigation" (181) following *Eros the Bittersweet*. Subsequently, *The Beauty of the Husband*, a long poem documenting a failed marriage, more overtly takes on the "ever more insistent discernment of Carson's prior writing – the 'dilemma of desire'" (Merkin).

The desire for meaning and fulfillment puts pressure on “the end,” an imaginary culmination in which we are finally satisfied. Barthes, too, asks (and answers) a relevant question: “How does a love end? ... To tell the truth, no one – except for the others – ever knows anything about it” (*LD* 101). His term “amorous errancy” aptly encapsulates the ongoing nature of the Lacanian phenomenon as described above:

Though each love is experienced as unique and though the subject rejects the notion of repeating it elsewhere later on, he sometimes discovers in himself a kind of diffusion of amorous desire; he then realizes he is doomed to wander until he dies, from love to love. (*LD* 101)

Barthes’s metaphor for such errancy is in his chapter title, “The Ghost Ship.” The continual search for the “end” of love and fulfillment is likened to the Flying Dutchman, which, as the myth goes, is doomed to sail the oceans forever. We, too, are “doomed to wander ... from love to love.” According to Barthes, desire

leads me to say ‘I love you’ in one port of call after another, until some other receives this phrase and gives it back to me; but no one can assume the impossible reply (of an insupportable fulfillment), and my wandering, my errantry continues. (*LD* 102)

Barthes’s metaphor is echoed neatly in *The Beauty of the Husband* when the wife spies her husband with another woman:

The wife positions herself in an enclosed veranda across the street.  
Watches the dark woman  
reach out to touch his temple as if filtering something onto it.  
Watches him bend slightly toward the woman then back. They are both serious.  
Their seriousness wracks her.

...

A cold ship

moves out of harbor somewhere way inside the wife  
and slides off toward the flat gray horizon,



not a bird not a breath in sight (111)

The husband, dissatisfied with his wife, discovers another “port” in the other woman. Reminiscent of the Flying Dutchman, he wanders and vacillates between his wife and his lovers. In this moment described by Carson, the shift in the husband’s desires is felt by the wife as “a cold ship / mov[ing] out of harbor.” The husband (and wife) recognizes the error in his desire as he leaves her for another woman. What Barthes terms as “amorous errantry” is not only an endless wandering, but also an erring.<sup>13</sup>

Lacan, Barthes, and Carson continually come up against notions of totality and fulfilment in their conceptions of love. Wholeness, or totality, is also at the crux of what Derrida calls “archive fever.” Archive fever is a desire for the neat and contained packaging of the past as it seeks out a fixed point of origin. The archive attempts to master history. Carson’s struggle in *Nox* for “an account that makes sense” (*N* 3.3) is a desire that history, and the archive, cannot satisfy. Such clarity and cohesion is impossible. “We want other people to have a centre” (3.3), she writes of her brother, Michael. Indeed, her desire for an imaginary, central, and fundamental core that functions as a “key” against the “lock of oblivion” (3.3) is a desire for mastery over someone else. A similar desire is also found in *The Beauty of the Husband* when the husband wonders, “How do people get power over one another?” (38).

Both the archive and love share similar configurations and attempt to satisfy the same longing: totality, cohesion, and mastery. Strikingly, Carson’s narratives of erotic experience often describe love that is ending or has ended. Love, as presented by Carson, is neither fulfilling nor satisfactory. For example, “The Glass Essay” (*GIG* 1) is a long poem

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<sup>13</sup> In French, *errer* means “to wander.” The secondary meaning (“to err”) is seldom used in French, which uses *se tromper* instead. Yet the dual meanings of wandering and mistake are laminated to the word.

documenting the aftermath of a relationship. *The Beauty of the Husband*, too, is a series of twenty-nine poems (which Carson calls “tangos”) that tell the story of a failed marriage. “Just for the Thrill” and “Kinds of Water” are a series of prose poems that record, respectively, a pilgrimage and a camping trip with a lover.<sup>14</sup> Both accounts, of course, end with the speaker alone. In these narratives, Carson highlights the impossibility of becoming a One with the beloved. Instead, what we encounter is a kind of error, that is, love *as* error, mistake, or contingency (Lacan *XX*). How then, does Carson account for this rupture, that is, the break from love’s satisfaction? Furthermore, how does this relate to her inability to tell a (successful) love story?

The experience of love and, consequently, the telling and re-telling of love, orients the lover toward the past. There is not only a desire to be joined with the beloved (inherent in the experience of love itself), but also a desire to find meaning in the event that has passed. The aims of totalization are both erotic as well as archival. Furthermore, the historicizing (and fictionalizing) of love puts pressure on language. Carson makes this connection explicit in “Just for the Thrill” when the speaker states: “What is love like for you? is a question that concerns also language” (*PW* 204). The speaker is also an avid archivist and record-keeper: “I don’t like romance and have no talent for lyrical outpourings – yet I found myself during the days of my love affair filling many notebooks with data” (190).

But language is as slippery as love. According to Carson, the writer and the lover occupy analogous positions and serve similar functions: both reach out to ideal and imaginative spaces that are, in the end, unreachable. We may recall my earlier discussion about Carson’s use of the indexical entry in which one may search for a precise and final

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<sup>14</sup> These two narratives are found in the section “The Anthropology of Water” in *Plainwater*.

“bedrock” of meaning; however, such a meaning can never be found. Indeed, the perfect union between writer and reader, and lover and beloved is a fantasy and an impossible ideal:

As the vowels and consonants of an alphabet interact symbolically to make a certain written word, so writer and reader bring together two halves of one meaning, so lover and beloved are matched together like two sides of one knucklebone.<sup>15</sup> An intimate collusion occurs. The meaning composed is private and true and makes permanent, perfect sense. Ideally speaking, at least, that is the case. In fact, neither reader nor writer nor lover achieves such consummation. The words we read and the words we write never say exactly what we mean. The people we love are never just as we desire them. The two *symbola* never perfectly match. Eros is in between. (*Eros* 108-9)

Language, like love, is an ongoing prowl in which no end is attained. In the same way that there is no perfect other half for each person, as Aristophanes proposes, there is no meaning that is “private,” “true,” “permanent,” or “perfect.”<sup>16</sup> “Symbola,” or “symbol,” is also used by Aristophanes in his myth of “the broken original whole of primal selves” (Desmond 217). Symbols refer to “broken wholes that image the original whole; they partake of the original whole, for they are broken from it” (217). The “broken” and “original whole” is important to keep in mind as they come up again for Carson.

A critical subplot in Carson’s narratives of amorous unhappiness that illustrates the “broken” and the lost “original whole” is the declining mental state of the father. Afflicted with dementia, the father’s diminishing grasp on language touches on the dilemma put forth by Carson – that is, the question of love as being at once a question of language. Eros – as a

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<sup>15</sup> Carson reiterates this image in “Just for the Thrill” when she describes the lovers: “We lie side by side in the dark, two halves of a knucklebone – the same knucklebone?” (*PW* 199).

<sup>16</sup> As the speaker in Prufrock puts it: “It is impossible to say just what I mean!” (Eliot 485).

site of rupture, error, and inconsistency – effectively adjoins the broken state of the relationship with the father’s broken speech. The weakened father participates in the errancy of eros as well as provides a useful model for the archive and is representative of Carson’s work: the instability and disruption of the self-contained text.

### **The Law of the Father**

The Lacanian father is either powerful or impotent. The strong father anchors the desires of the speaker and enforces prohibitions and installs fantasmatic desires, ensuring that the (neurotic) subject always knows *what* and *how* to want; the impotent father can no longer anchor desire, leading to the subject’s anxious confrontation with the Real, the meaningless object that language can never master. Recalling Carson’s statement that “eros is an issue of boundaries” (*Eros* 30), in this section, I want to explore Carson’s traumatic shift from the strong coherent father to the weak incoherent father. As we soon see, the division between these two roles is not distinct because the symbolic order is always at risk of breaking down. In Carson’s words: “[dementia] is continuous with sanity” (*PW* 121).

Both the mother and father play peripheral but important roles in Carson’s narratives and can be understood as representatives of the law by which the speaker’s desires abide. In *The Beauty of the Husband*, for example, her mother warns the speaker very early on about the husband:

Glancing

at a book I’d brought home from school with his name inscribed on the flyleaf  
she said  
I wouldn’t trust anyone who calls himself X – and  
something exposed itself in her voice,  
a Babel

thrust between us at that instant which we would never  
learn to construe (*BH* 23)

Her parents try to convince her to “change high schools” (*BH* 37) but when she refuses, they move to another town. The distance they try desperately to force between the wife and the husband is critical in solidifying her desire for him. As the speaker points out: “My mother ran counter to him as production to seduction” (37). What is prohibited becomes desirable, and what is vigorously prohibited, becomes even more so: “Opposition of friends or family merely toughens it” (23). In the above passage, what the speaker detects in her mother’s voice, “a Babel / thrust between [them],” can be understood as the law that is “arbitrarily and absolutely imposed, thereby instituting the reign of patriarchal law” (Gallop 39). In the instance that the mother voices her doubt (“I wouldn’t trust anyone who calls himself X”) and, by extension, disapproval, she has instructed her daughter *not* to enjoy (*le non/nom du père*), thereby setting her up to do the exact opposite.

The father in “Just for the Thrill,” also imposes a law on the speaker. The love relationship between the speaker and her lover (“the emperor”) is prefaced with a meditation on language, particularly the language used by the father. In the text’s introduction, Carson opens:

Surely the world is full of simple truths that can be obtained by asking clear questions and noting the answers. “Who is that woman?” I overheard my father ask my mother one night when I was coming down the stairs to the kitchen. It took me a moment to realize he was asking about me – not because I did not know by then that he was losing his mind, which was obvious in other ways, but because he used the word *woman*.

I was not “woman” to him. I stopped halfway down the stairs. It reminded me of a night when I was twelve or thirteen. Coming down the same stairs, I heard him in

the kitchen talking to my mother. “Oh, she won’t be like them,” he was saying with a sort of glow in his voice. (*PW* 188)

Here is an example where, as Carson puts it, words “never say exactly what we mean” (*Eros* 108). In this passage, it is not so much that her father no longer recognizes her that is startling, but that suddenly she is signified by the word “woman.” The moment of overhearing him superimposes itself on an earlier moment of overhearing her father speak while “coming down the same stairs.”<sup>17</sup> Location and language adjoin these two instances in which the father speaks about and signifies his daughter. “Oh, she won’t be like them,” he states, thus pitching her against an anonymous “them” – a collective term for the desiring (and liberated) “woman.” While there are no typographic markers, the reader can detect a tone of disgust tainting the final word “them.” A similar scenario is echoed later:

I remember on the eve of my thirteenth birthday, I overheard my aunts talking to Father about young girls and the dangerous age. “But she isn’t going to be one of them,”

I heard Father say firmly. I was filled with pride, which smells like rubies. (*PW* 235)

In both nearly identical scenes, the adolescent speaker unintentionally overhears her father speaking about her. The father’s words have significant effects on the speakers, and it is no surprise that these two texts, which focus primarily on broken relationships, recall these memories. The father, representative of the symbolic order and arbiter of the law, projects and enforces an idea of femininity for the daughter. The synesthetic response of the speaker’s pride as “smell[ing] like rubies” fittingly alludes to the biblical measure of a righteous woman (“Who can find a virtuous woman? for her price is far above rubies” [Proverbs 31:10]).

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<sup>17</sup> The placement of these two separate but similar scenes recalls Carson’s description of time after losing Law in “The Glass Essay”: “I can feel that other day running underneath this one / like an old videotape (*GIG* 8).

The father's disapproval of "them" necessarily shapes the daughter's desires and her anticipation of gender identity. Lacan tells us, "the function of the Father ... is fundamentally to unite (and not to oppose) a desire to the Law" (*Écrits* 698). The main issue revolves around an identity that will meet the father's approval: "Who will I be instead? is a question I never got around to asking Father" (*PW* 236). Such a question is not merely self-reflexive and internalized, but is at once a question posed to the Big Other: *Che Vuoi?*<sup>18</sup> What does the other want? What is it that Father wants me to be? This question of identity haunts the speaker in "Just for the Thrill." The father's words become a marker for her sexual development. As she states:

I am not a person who feels easy talking about blood or desire. I rarely use the word *woman* myself. But such things are the natural facts of what we are, I suppose we have to follow out these signs in the endless struggle against forgetting. The truth is, I lived out my adolescence mainly in default of my father's favour. But I perceived that I could trouble him less if I had no gender. Anger tired him so. I made my body as hard and flat as the armour of Athena. No secrets under my skin, no telltale drops on the threshold. And eventually I found – a discovery due, in fact, to the austerities of pilgrimage – that I could suppress the natural facts of "woman" altogether. (*PW* 189)

The speaker conducts herself according to her father's law, or "favour," that is, as an individual with "no gender." (Carson's speaker in the introduction of "Kinds of Water" repeats this sentiment when she states: "I was a young, strong, stingy person of no particular gender" [*PW* 123].) In this passage she compares herself to the warrior Greek goddess, Athena, whose

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<sup>18</sup> According to Lacan, the infant poses this question – *Che Vuoi?*, or *What do you want?* – to the (m)Other as a means to determining his own position in the signifying chain. The question of desire, or what the Other wants, is echoed in Carson. Later in "Just for the Thrill," Carson repeats the question again, this time in relation to the lover: "What is it men want? They talk of pleasure, they go wild, then limp, then fall asleep. Is there something I'm not getting?" (*PW* 200).

one of many epithets include *parthenos*, or “virgin.” She makes her body “hard and flat” as Athena’s armour, resisting the sensuality and voluptuousness that is more befitting of Aphrodite. She grows only to suppress her womanhood altogether. The daughter wants to conform to her father’s desire by embodying a form that will repel his desire. As Jane Gallop states: “the law of the father protects him and patriarchy from the potential havoc of the daughter’s desirability” (76). However, the denial and repression of her gender and sexuality is eventually met with rupture. The speaker in “Just for the Thrill” experiences this in the form of love, as is the case with the female speakers in “The Glass Essay,” “Kinds of Water,” and *The Beauty of the Husband*:

I lived alone for a long time.

What happened to me after that takes the form of a love story, not so different from other love stories, except better documented. Love is, as you know, a harrowing event. I believed in taking an anthropological approach to that.

Even now it is hard to admit how love knocked me over. I had lived a life protected from all surprise, now suddenly I was a wheel running downhill, a light thrown against a wall, paper blown flat in the ditch. I was outside my own language and customs.<sup>19</sup> (*PW* 189)

Love, which Carson describes as a “harrowing event,” is the moment of rupture that severs the speaker from her original desexualized and virginal position, provided by the father. Her life, which was once “protected from all surprise,” bursts open. Carson further describes the harrowing experience of love in metaphors marked by uncontrolled acceleration (“a wheel running downhill”), chance and transformation (“paper blown flat in the ditch”), and exquisite

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<sup>19</sup> As usual, Carson recycles words, phrases, and scenes within her oeuvre. The speaker in “The Glass Essay” also uses an identical comparison when discussing love: “I had not been in love before. / It was like a wheel rolling downhill” (*GIG* 3).



force (“a light *thrown* against a wall”). Wrenched (or “knocked ... over”) from her secure position prescribed by the Father, the speaker finds herself suddenly “outside [her] own language and customs.” The language of love, she discovers, is not the language of her father, which had set up her desires in relation to him. The event of love allows the speaker to formulate her own language and customs in relation to the beloved. As the speaker in “The Glass Essay” describes a night with Law: “we lay on top of the covers ... / caressing and singing to one another in our made-up language / like the children we used to be” (*GIG* 12).

However, once the beloved is gone, the speaker, now changed, has to form a new relationship to language. The language of the father and the language of the beloved have failed her in that they no longer function as a strong or effective symbolic register. Desires framed by both men are suddenly freed up and confronted by the speaker. In “The Glass Essay,” for instance, the mother and the speaker engage in a heated debate about women, which echoes the father’s overheard speech from “Just for the Thrill”:

Those women! says my mother with an exasperated rasp.  
Mother has chosen random channel.  
Women?

Complaining about rape all the time –  
I see she is tapping one furious finger on yesterday’s newspaper  
lying beside the grape jam.

The front page has a small feature  
about a rally for International Women’s Day –  
have you had a look at the Sears Summer catalogue?

Nope.  
Why, it’s a disgrace! Those bathing suits –  
cut way up to here! (she points) No wonder!

You’re saying women deserve to get raped  
because Sears bathing suit ads  
have high-cut legs? Ma, are you serious?

Well someone has to be responsible.  
Why should women be responsible for male desire? My voice is high.  
Oh I see you're one of Them.

One of Whom? My voice is very high. (*GIG* 23)

In this passage, we don't have the father voicing disdain for "them"; rather, we have the mother. A primary difference in this scene from the previous two is that this time, the speaker is older. She is an active participant in the discourse, and not simply an adolescent eavesdropper. More importantly, she is someone who has experienced the "harrowing event" of love. Desire and the question of desire between men and women are suddenly lived experience.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, "women"/"them" are implicated in a complex sociocultural network (attire, International Women's Day) to which the now older speaker is privy, as evidenced by her rebuttal. The father's language, which had its influence prior to the love event, is now problematic and complicated: "One of Whom?" she asks.

The father at this point does not occupy the same position as he did prior to the love event. The breakups experienced by Carson's speakers signal a removal from language, or the symbolic order, as the fantasy of love breaks down. The trauma of the failed fantasy coincides, fittingly, with the father's dementia and his own slackening grasp on language.

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<sup>20</sup> In contrast to the inexperienced, passive adolescent, Carson's speaker is now an experienced lover, aware of this ancient question about gender differences and desire: "Man is this and woman is that, men do this and women do different things, woman wants one thing and man wants something else and nobody down the centuries appears to understand how this should work" (*PW* 191).

## The Demented Father

*“Desire doubled is love and love doubled is madness.”*

–Anne Carson (*BH* 38)

We can understand the disintegration of the love fantasy as the weakening of Lacan’s “Big Other” (*qua* symbolic order) by which the fantasy is installed. The “Big Other” refers to overarching, anonymous, and socio-linguistic entities of power or knowledge such as “God,” “History,” “Government,” and “Nature.” (We can already sense an echo of my earlier discussion about how Western tradition has regarded the archive and defined the “Classical.”)

Carson’s typical approach is to undermine concepts that fall under the rubric of what is commonly understood as the patriarchy. It is worth noting that Carson’s speakers are involved with men who are deliberately and explicitly denominated to reflect patriarchal order. For example, the lover in “The Glass Essay” is named Law, which, as Ian Rae notes, “aligns the lover with the rule of the father” (“Verglas” 174). In addition, the love interest in “Just for the Thrill” is referred to as “the emperor of China” (*PW* 193). Indeed, these men occupy the realm of the symbolic and anchor the speakers’ desires. Once they are gone romantically, as is always the case, we see what I wish to argue is a “rupture” in the symbolic order, a weakening of the closure of fantasy.

In line with the patriarchal titles taken up by the lovers, the father is also positioned in the realm of masculine authority and was once an airman during World War II. He, in addition to being “Father,” takes on a role of power and machismo. The speaker even praises his position: “my tall proud father, former World War II navigator!” (*GIG* 24).<sup>21</sup> The speaker describes him as, at one time, “a big man, over six feet tall and strong” (26). In a photograph,

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<sup>21</sup> See also “Just for the Thrill”: “during the war my father was a navigator and flew low over France dropping parcels for spies” (*PW* 209).

“the shadowless light makes him look immortal” (27). The powerful and god-like stature of the father attests to his ability to enforce laws and rules, which, as Carson details, are abided by the daughter. In this regard, Gallop notes: “Patriarchy is grounded in the uprightness of the father. If he were devious and unreliable, he could not have the power to legislate” (75). The father provides an anchor for the neurotic subject’s desires. If the father is unreliable or inconsistent, the subject becomes anxious. It is appropriate that in Carson’s narratives of love, the trauma of breakup coincides with the subplot of the father’s dementia, when he no longer has legislative ability. Desires, as a result, are disordered, a situation fraught with anxiety, but also opportunity.

The association between the father and the lover no doubt possesses Freudian undertones, but it is the weakened father that strikes me as germane in Carson’s poetics. The father’s dementia, which lurks in the background of so many of her texts, marks Carson’s attempt to seek out an alternative conceptual mode that is not governed by the stability of the patriarchal *logos*. In lieu of order, Carson presents madness. Madness extends to both love and textuality, or the open and “ruptured” text.

Madness, or mania, takes on a significant role in Carson’s study of love. In *Eros the Bittersweet*, Carson states: “The facts are that eros changes you so drastically you seem to become a different person. In conventional thinking, such changes are best categorized as madness” (154). Recalling Sappho’s fragment 31, the lover experiences a “mad” disorder within her body. Two Greek fragments offered by Carson also illustrate something similar:

I don’t know what I should do: two states of mind in me ...  
–Sappho, fragment 51

I'm in love! I'm not in love!  
I'm crazy! I'm not crazy!  
—Anakreon (qtd. in Carson, *Eros* 8)

The overlap between eros and mania in *Eros the Bittersweet* is reproduced in Carson's own narratives, which are intimately constructed around the father. The symbolic breakdown in her narratives is manifested in both the lovers' abandonment, as well as the weakened father. The role of dementia, I argue, is two-fold. In psychoanalytic terms, the father's state alludes to the fragile fabric of fantasy; that is, he no longer occupies the role of the consistent father who orients the speaker's desires. More broadly, dementia is also an effective illustration of the past and the archive. The nonsense uttered by the father signals the nonsense of history. The "sens" in the French "nonsens" refers to both "meaning" and "direction." The archive, operating as a master signifier, is essentially nonsense, and thus provides neither meaning nor direction.

The dwindling physical and mental health of the father signals a shift from patriarchal order to disorder, or madness.<sup>22</sup> The father is no longer described in terms of masculine strength, but child-like vulnerability. His face is compared to that "of a fledgling bird," and "clear as a child's" (*PW* 191, 120). This simile is echoed again in "Father's Old Blue Cardigan," which can be read as an elegy to Carson's father:

His laws were a secret.  
But I remember the moment at which I knew  
he was going mad inside his laws.

He was standing at the turn of the driveway when I arrived.  
He had on the blue cardigan with the buttons done up all the way to the top.  
Not only because it was a hot July afternoon

but the look on his face –

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<sup>22</sup> As the speaker in "Just for the Thrill" explicitly notes: "Father had always disliked disorder. Now he spent all day bent over scraps of paper, writing notes to himself which he hid in books or his clothing and at once forgot" (*PW* 121).

as a small child who had been dressed by some aunt early in the morning  
for a long trip (*MOH* 47)

Madness in this excerpt is aligned with infancy, as if the patriarchal model could be regenerated, and an alternative configuration of the archive invented. Whatever “laws” the father had once enforced are unable to contain even himself: “he was going mad inside his laws.”<sup>23</sup> Beneath the semblance of order the reader senses rupture. The sturdy father is no longer capable of keeping himself upright. As “The Glass Essay” illustrates: “Father sits strapped in a chair which is tied to the wall” (*GIG* 25). The “uprightness of the father” (*Gallop* 75) is literally compromised. The weakened body of the father, which “has shrunk to the merest bone house,” recalls the Nudes in “The Glass Essay,” in particular the final nude of a body “trying to stand against winds so terrible that the flesh was blowing off / the bones” (*GIG* 26, 38). The abject body in both poems is indicative of a move away from order, language, and the symbolic to madness, body, and the semiotic.

While the father’s physical deterioration is illustrated in detail, it is his loss of language that is especially pertinent for Carson. I want to return to the question Carson poses: “What is love like for you? is a question that concerns also language” (*PW* 204). One way by which Carson elucidates what love is like is via her father’s relationship to language. Logos, as I mentioned earlier, is consonant with eros. Indeed, the father’s decline, which accompanies these love narratives, provides a vehicle to explore eros, language, and narrative. What is it about dementia that reveals Carson’s discoveries about love?

Love is, as I pointed out, the most nostalgic of experiences. To write about love is, ultimately, to establish meaning as we attempt to make sense of the past. What does it mean

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<sup>23</sup> This line uttered by the speaker echoes Derrida’s point of law and madness (discussed in Chapter 2): “The law is mad. The law is mad, is madness; but madness is not the predicate of law. There is no madness without the law; madness cannot be conceived before its relation to law (“The Law of Genre” 81).

then to go back and construct the perfect memory of love with remembered and archived exchanges between lovers? A strong father attests to the ideal situation (for the neurotic) in which there are directions, instructions, coordinates, and a code. A demented father, on the other hand, reveals the flaws in the system. There is no true fixed meaning; rather, the past is nonsensical. Carson's explorations of love are, fittingly, written retrospectively. While the speakers recall and revisit the language of their lovers, their words remain ambiguous, cryptic, and inconclusive. As Barthes argues:

To try to write love is to confront the *muck* of language: that region of hysteria where language is both *too much* and *too little*, excessive (by the limitless expansion of the *ego*, by emotive submersion) and impoverished (by the codes on which love diminishes and levels it). (*LD* 99)

The father's mad ramblings ("excessive" in its content, but "impoverished" in its sense), thus, becomes a suitable analogy for the lover's discourse – the "muck" or Babel/babble of the Other's desire that can never be figured out or known. When the speaker recalls love, its meaning, its history, there is a "wall of language" (Lacan, *Écrits* 316) that resists sense, much like the incoherent sounds of the demented father. The speaker in "Just for the Thrill" describes her attempt to make sense of her father's babble, which proves to be a deadlock:

When he speaks the words are not for me. "Death is a fifty-fifty thing, maybe forty-forty," he says in a flat voice.

...

I watch the sentence come clawing into me like a lost tribe. That's the way it is with dementia. There are a number of simple questions I could ask. Like, Father what do you mean? Or, Father what about the other twenty percent? (*PW* 120)

In his babble, the father corrects himself with a computational error: “maybe forty-forty.” The error does not go unnoticed by the speaker who notes that this is not a perfect total and wonders about “the other twenty percent.” The error here is reminiscent of the computational error in Alkman’s fragment (qtd. in Carson, *MOH* 32) when counting the seasons. In that case, Carson expresses pleasure in the error and loss found in classical transmission. The father, too, represents something similar: language as a vehicle for transmitting the past is also imperfect. There is lack and deficit within the system. The sentence, as Carson describes, is not a neutral linguistic structure; rather, it takes on animal quality as it “claws” toward the speaker. The words are dangerous and threatening.

Carson’s description of the relationship between language and love can also deepen our understanding of her use of intertexts. Consider, for example, the following passage in which Carson deliberately adjoins the father with the experience of love by way of language:

I found the kinship between a man and a woman can be a steep, whole, excellent thing and full of languages. Yet it may have no speech. Does that make sense?

One night – it was the first winter my father began to have trouble with his mind – I was sitting at the kitchen table wrapping Christmas presents. I saw him coming down the stairs very slowly, holding his hands in front of him. In his hands were language and speech, decoupled, and when he started to talk, they dropped and ran all over the floor like a bag of bell clappers. “What happened to you to I who to? There was a deer. That’s not what I. How many were? No. How? What did you do with the things you dripped no not dripped how? You had an account and one flew off. That’s not. No? I. No. How? How?” (*PW* 191)



In this passage, written after the love affair, Carson aligns the experience of love to that of her demented father. According to Carson, the kinship between lovers is “full of languages” but “no speech.” That is, we have language, but no grammatical structures in place to shape the sounds. The father’s condition aptly illustrates this scenario: language and speech are decoupled in his hands. The father’s utterances are unformed, nonsensical sentences. He speaks in non-sequiturs and interrupts himself with disparate and unconnected thoughts. How does this illustration compare with the experience of the text?

A productive entry into Carson’s description of the “decoupling” of language is through Kristevan concepts of the symbolic and the semiotic. I return to these concepts (from Chapter 2) as here we witness not only the weakened father, but also the weakened paternal and masculine dimension of language. What Carson means by “speech” can be understood as Kristeva’s symbolic, which governs the grammar, syntax, and order of expression. We are thus left with the semiotic (the counterpart that Carson terms “language”), evidenced by the disordered drives and affects released by the father. Indeed, his utterances are never likened to “real” speech. In “The Glass Essay,” for example, the father doesn’t form sentences; rather, “he issues a stream of vehemence at the air” (*GIG* 25). The father does not effectively communicate; he “uses a language known only to himself, / made of snarls and syllables and sudden wild appeals” (26). His mad murmurings resist sense, order, rule, and containment. Carson’s metaphor of leakage for textual rupture and border transgression is also echoed in the following description of the father’s speech:

From his lips comes a stream of syllables. He was all his life a silent man. But dementia has released some spring inside him, he babbles constantly in a language neurologists call “word salad.” (*PW* 120)

There is fluidity in the father's utterances, as suggested by "stream," "spring," and "babble" (this time not as "Babel" but as in a "babbling brook"). The father no longer has control to remain "a silent man"; instead, words erupt, flow, and spill in a constant and uncontrollable stream.

How can we link the father's madness and erotic mania to what I call the text's "madness"? The text, too, resists containment. Barthes makes a distinction between the work and the text, stating that while "the work is held in the hand, the text is held in language" (*RL* 57). The literary text is not a stable, self-contained, unique, and autonomous entity; rather, it is plural, open to and traversed by meaning, and "entirely woven of quotations, references, echoes" (60). The text, we could say, is mad. My description of the mad text is in line with my earlier uses of the word. In Chapter 2, I used madness to describe the "documentary technique" that Carson detects in Longinus. I have also used madness in relation to *Nox* and what Derrida sees as the madness that is intrinsic to the law of genre. Echoing Carson's conception of eros, madness, too, is an issue of boundaries. Madness describes that which cannot be contained and which troubles or ruptures "set" borders and categories.

For the purpose of this chapter, I want to highlight and expand on what I call madness to also include that which does not have a centre, or a stable origin – in short, that which lacks a fixed and overarching governing principle. The disordered state of the father is an apposite analogy of Barthes's conception of "the text" (versus "the work") and the "text of jouissance" (versus "the pleasurable text"). The father's failure to act in accordance with grammar suggests that there is no governing principle. Moreover, there is no kernel of meaning to the father's utterances (what Barthes has described as the pit of the fruit); rather, his discourse is diffuse and uncontained. Comparably, psychosis for Lacan refers to that which does not have a

master signifier, or a *point de capiton*, to anchor it to the symbolic order.<sup>24</sup> Reminiscent of the demented father, the text also lacks a “centre” to anchor or fix it in place. There is “no ‘grammar’ of the text,” as every text is itself “an intertext of another text” (Barthes, *RL* 60).

We can unite Barthes conception of the work with Derrida’s critique of the archive via filiation and inheritance. “The work is caught up in a process of filiation (*RL* 61),” Barthes states. Indeed, the tracing back of a work to its author (or father) vis-à-vis a lineage is comparable to the desire we have of the archive to have an origin that is accessible, traceable, and delineated.<sup>25</sup> The text, on the other hand, does not function like the work or the patri-archive. There is no order or clear genealogy. While the author is considered the father of his work, the text “is read without the Father’s inscription” (Barthes, *RL* 61). The father/author is no longer privileged; instead, the text “can be read without its father’s guarantee” (61). Barthes, as we can see, provides a literary conception in which the father no longer occupies a strong, upright, and governing position.

Bearing in mind the demented father as a trope for textual and archival madness, in the following section, I will turn to *The Beauty of the Husband*, a text about a failed marriage, and argue that Carson’s use of intertextuality demonstrates the fissures of love, as well as the fractured lines of the text. Eros is not only significant in terms of the book’s subject, but presents a site and opportunity for explorations of history (specifically the re-membling of a love affair) and literary and archival ruptures.

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<sup>24</sup> See Lacan, *Seminar III*. See also Fink (*The Lacanian Subject* 55): “Psychosis, according to Lacan, results from a child’s failure to assimilate a “primordial” signifier which could otherwise structure the child’s symbolic universe, the failure leaving the child unanchored in language, without a compass reading on the basis of which to adopt an orientation.”

<sup>25</sup> The example Derrida opens with in *Archive Fever* is Freud’s father’s father.

## Misstepping the Tango

*“I’d like to add a piece of wisdom from Gertrude Stein: ‘act so there is no use in a center.’”*  
–Anne Carson (Aitken)

Following Carson’s other works, particularly love narratives such as “The Glass Essay” (which interweaves *Wuthering Heights*) and “The Anthropology of Water” (which makes use of Chinese scholarship and *Cantar de Mio Cid*), *The Beauty of the Husband* is a text complicated by a number of literary and cultural intertexts. Daphne Merkin asserts that Carson’s diverse influences in *The Beauty of Husband* make her “one of the great pasticheurs.” Priscilla Long also notes that Carson “moves easily from Duchamp to Degas to Demeter” and that her “intense and synthesizing erudition, here brought to bear on the subject of desire, is partly what makes her such a thrilling read” (14). However, after the book was awarded the T. S. Eliot Prize, Robert Potts criticized it as being a “self-pitying account of marital unhappiness.” Potts finds fault with Carson’s poetic execution and reads her intertextuality as “an almost artless grafting-on of academic materials.”

Focusing on *The Beauty of the Husband*, I argue that what Potts calls “artless grafting” encapsulates the fragmentation of fantasy, history, and poetry. Indeed, the Barthesian jouissance, or “thrill,” that Long experiences is due to Carson’s “artlessness,” or errant poetics. Eros lends itself as both a subject and a creative approach – an artlessness that resists generic and narrative boundaries, or order. The textual madness that Carson presents is integral to the erotic madness of the marriage.

Merkin’s labelling Carson a “pasticheur” calls to mind similar praise she received for *Nox* in regards to her collage-like approach. While the visual and tactile presentation is not foregrounded in *The Beauty of the Husband*, the text is no less fragmented and diverse. The

cover, or “packaging,” anticipates the varied content within. The book is described on the back cover as “an essay on Keats’s idea that beauty is truth, and is also the story of a marriage. It is told in twenty-nine tangos.” Immediately, we encounter a generic dilemma, reminiscent of the one in *Nox*, a self-described epitaph. This book, too, folds in many genres and forms, not all of which are literary: it is a “fictional essay” (as the front cover reiterates) and a tango, but also a long poem containing snippets of letters, telegrams, phone conversations, overheard dialogue, and lyrics. Interspersed among the poems are quotations from Keats, and within the poems themselves are references to Kafka, Duchamp, Aristotle, Plato, and Parmenides among others. A “Notes” section is also included in the back, listing these references. Generically and textually, the book spills and overflows its own description.<sup>26</sup>

Furthermore, the book is “wrapped” in images not produced by Carson nor created with the intention for the book’s publication. The back of the book is designed with a detailed reproduction of a letter written by Keats. The front cover is designed with a cropped image from “Portrait of Jean-Baptiste Desdeban” (1810), painted by Ingres. Carson immediately embeds her text within other intertexts as she reaches out to nineteenth-century artefacts.

In addition, Carson plays with paratext, specifically, the poems’ titles. The titles are varied, sometimes taking up one line, but are more often long and run-on. The type, written in capital letters, is larger in size and is often void of punctuation. Carson does not use titles conventionally; rather, she uses the space to draw attention to the book object itself (for example, the title of Poem I begins, “I DEDICATE THIS BOOK TO KEATS...”), to mark time and place in the narrative (“XX. SO THE HALL DOOR SHUTS AGAIN AND ALL THE NOISE IS GONE”), or to introduce yet another reference (Socrates, Degas, Plato). At

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<sup>26</sup> I discuss a similar phenomenon in Chapter 2 when I talk about *Decreation* and its description on the front cover: “Poetry, Essays, Opera.”

times, a title is rich enough to be read on its own as if it were its own poem, such as the title to Poem XVIII: “DO YOU SEE IT AS A ROOM OR A SPONGE OR A CARELESS SLEEVE WIPING OUT HALF THE BLACKBOARD BY MISTAKE OR A BURGUNDY MARK STAMPED ON THE BOTTLES OF OUR MINDS WHAT IS THE NATURE OF THE DANCE CALLED MEMORY” (79).<sup>27</sup> Carson’s titles are startling, cryptic, and loosely fitted to the primary narrative. Indeed, their arcane tone recalls the ramblings of the demented father. The shifts in tone and typographical presentation add to the fragmented reading of the book. Carson’s point is clear: her story cannot be read alone nor effortlessly, as if the book were linear, self-contained, and autonomous; rather, it must be read in relation to innumerable intertexts, including her own inscriptions.

Carson labels *The Beauty of the Husband* a “tango,” which many critics have remarked upon. As per Carson’s creative process, her decision to bring together tango music and poetry came about by accident. Carson recounts:

Before I left here for Berkeley [where Carson wrote *The Beauty of the Husband* while teaching at the University of California] a guy broke in the back door and took all my CDs, so when I went to Berkeley I just had one that somebody had given me for Christmas, and it was a tango. I played it every day and I got tango in my head, as one will. I started to think how tangos work and what they are, and I just got fascinated with them, and so I thought, “I’ll try to write some and see how that would be.”  
(Gannon)

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<sup>27</sup> This title, seemingly self-contained, in fact makes reference to a letter John Keats had written to Benjamin Bailey, March 13, 1819. See pg. 291 in *The Complete Poetical Works and Letters of John Keats* (1899).

The event of the burglary recalls the thieving husband who, as detailed in Poem XXVI, steals “53 wirebound notebooks” (*BH* 125) containing 5820 elegiacs that the wife had written.<sup>28</sup> In this case, the burglary also makes an impact on Carson’s poetics as she is stuck with repeating the CD. Despite the accidental event that brings the two together, tango, music, and poetry are not so disparate as narrative forms. In short, both the song and the serial poem rely on time for the unfolding of events. The tango has been likened to the telling of a story: “There is the introduction of the characters, the connection, the pressure, the playing out, a tense moment and then the release near the end ... The old tangueros describe the dance as telling a story” (Lechtenberg). Furthermore, the tango, a piece of music written intended for tango dance, is an appropriate model for a love story.

However, the predetermined form of the tango is particularly relevant to Carson and her exploration of love and marriage. To learn the dance is to learn a set of *prescribed steps*. Indeed, the idea of this “fixed” template anticipates the idea of the love fantasy, which Carson notes:

I don’t really think much about rhythm, and I don’t know much about music. But I did like the idea of the tango as I was using it, the idea of how it works as an emotional history, and it seems like it’s a form—just like marriage—where there’s a prescription to the steps, and once you get into the dance you have to dance it to the end. There’s no way out. There’s no way to change the steps. It’s set. I shouldn’t say that every marriage is like that, but romantic expectations are like that. (Gannon)

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<sup>28</sup> Poem XXVI (*BH* 123) reveals that the wife had written a short talk (“On Defloration”), which was stolen and published by the husband. In typical Carsonian flair, she references her first book, *Short Talks*, in which one of the pieces is entitled “Short Talk On Defloration.” The wife’s stolen notebooks also recall the stolen fascicles belonging to the speaker in *Short Talks*, of which there are also 53: “In 53 fascicles I copied out everything that was said, things vast distances apart. I read the fascicles each day at the same time, until yesterday men came and took up the fascicles. Put them in a crate. Locked it” (11).

Romantic expectations, or fantasy, and history seemingly follow the steps of the dance in that they are, in Carson's words, "set" and "unchangeable." A perfect marriage, similarly, would be like a tango. However, the marriage between the husband and the wife does not conform to this model. The cycles of their relationship are tumultuous. The husband's inability to remain faithful (his cheating as a sign of dissatisfaction in his marriage), and the wife's distress as she cannot fulfill his desire, ensure that eros continues to move. (I would even argue that eros is not limited to the erotic, but moves in the between-spaces set up by Carson, be they temporal or generic.) Together, the husband and wife deviate from the prescribed steps until their marriage leads to divorce. So, too, does the book as it evades its given labels ("fictional essay," "tango," or, more perceptibly, verse).

Carson's description of the book as "twenty-nine tangos" is problematic in that she pretends to have achieved perfection when the marriage is clearly less than perfect.<sup>29</sup> Carson's assertion that "once you get into the dance you have to dance it to the end," evokes my earlier discussions of "endings," or the definitive culmination that resides at the point we call "the end." The perfect translation, the end of grief, the piecing together a whole, and the writing of history are examples of what Steedman calls "an Ending" but not "an End" (167). Carson continues to play with this point of conclusion.<sup>30</sup> The book, in fact, subverts the prescribed steps of the tango, in that there exists one extra "step" in the collection. There are, as it happens, not twenty-nine but thirty poems in total. Carson's failure to mention this extra poem

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<sup>29</sup> Only divisible by one and itself, twenty-nine is, of course, a prime number, refusing division into complementary parts.

<sup>30</sup> What Carson thinks about endings can be summed up in the afterword to her long poem, "Canicula di Anna." The afterword is a contemplation of the story, its end, and its telling:

After a story is told there are some moments of silence. Then words begin again. Because you would always like to know a little more. Not exactly more story. Not necessarily, on the other hand, an exegesis. Just something to go on with ... Perhaps it is something about me you would like to know – not that you have any specific questions, but still, that would be better than nothing. (*PW* 88)

Carson's argument that "eros is a verb" can also be applied to narrative. Even when the reader reaches the "end" of the story, she desires more, "just something to go on with."



is deliberate. The husband, who interrupts his wife's voice now and then, provides the last word in the final, unnumbered poem. The extra poem signals an excess, or a remainder which the tango cannot account for or contain. The story of their marriage not only breaks from the tango form, but engages and contends with another detail: beauty, more particularly, Keats's idea that "beauty is truth."

The well-known line in Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn," "Beauty is truth, truth beauty," is pivotal to Carson's own study of beauty and its significance in the story of the marriage. Carson admits to not knowing anything about beauty and when writing the book, thought of Keats:

I've never understood that sentence, "Truth is beauty, beauty truth." And I thought, "Maybe I should just put that in and see if I can get inside it by having it in there." So I put it in mentally; I thought of it as being the centre of the concept of the work. As I was working through it again it seemed that it needed more Keats, so I read all the strange, lost, bad Keats from when he was nine years old or whenever he started writing that stuff.<sup>31</sup> It is pretty bad, a lot of it, but nice in excerpt. I just took some bits here and there, and I think it helped me work that concept through. (Gannon)

As with the tango, beauty and truth are a couplet intimately and chiasmically related. Yet Carson admits to never understanding the sentence. Indeed, the line proves to be suspiciously pat. Keats's line has a totalizing effect; it inserts a tolerable distance between his speaker and the "unravish'd bride of quietness," as if to isolate the speaker from the impossible paradoxes of erotic love, "Silence and slow Time."

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<sup>31</sup> The cover design, similarly, is also one of Ingres's obscure and less well-known portraits. While it is still puzzling to me as to why this specific image was chosen, Carson's choosing an uncommon piece by Ingres is in line with her use of Keats's own obscure texts.

But Carson, as I have suggested, is likely not as interested in the totalizing and isolating effect of Keats's line as she is in what Barthes's calls "the muck of language." When asked how beauty speaks of truth, Carson responds: "I don't think it does. I think that's all a big mistake, but there's so much power in believing it" (Wachtel). The power of believing that "who's beautiful is also true and the feelings that come from beauty leads you to truth" (Wachtel) is a fantasy of a perfect and ideal love. Furthermore, to be "led to" truth implies that there is some culminating end point.<sup>32</sup>

Another understanding of Carson's confusion over Keats's "truth" is through Lacan, who characterizes truth as he characterizes love: that is, truth is the ultimate jouissance.<sup>33</sup> Truth is the fulfillment of the One, or communion with the divine. It indicates completion, or "the all." The alternative conception of love and truth (which jibes with Carson's poetics) is that rather than "all," they are irremediably "not all." Given her renewed narratives of "the human custom / of wrong love" (*AR* 75), it is unsurprising that Carson admits to never understanding Keats's line.

What about the counterpart of Keats's chiasmic line: beauty? The reader quickly learns in Poem VII that the husband, praised for his beauty, is far from truthful. As the wife puts it, he "uses[s] language / in the way that Homer says the gods do / ... They flip the switch at will" (*BH* 33). Carson, similarly, flips the switch on Keats's line. How, then, can we read "beauty" in *The Beauty of the Husband*? The title itself is slippery as the genitive case is always ambiguous: does beauty refer to the husband's beauty? Or is beauty a reference to the wife? Is beauty simply sensual pleasure? Does Carson's "beauty" defy Keats's "beauty," in that it is

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<sup>32</sup> Where is the end point in Keats's own poem? Many would argue that despite the famous chiasmic line, "Ode on a Grecian Urn" ends vaguely and inconclusively: "that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know."

<sup>33</sup> See Lacan, *Seminar XX*.

resists Truth? Indeed, beauty, for Carson, is a complex term. More appropriately, I would argue that *The Beauty of the Husband* is better identified as Carson's story of beauty (or desire) as likened to "a big mistake." As she writes in Poem XXIX:

To say Beauty is Truth and stop.  
Rather than to eat it.  
Rather than to want to eat it. This was my pure early thought. (*BH* 139)

Carson is not satisfied at stopping at "Truth." Instead, she deviates, errs, "eats" Keats's words, and explodes the "truth" of love, history, and the text.

### **Intertextuality in *The Beauty of the Husband***

Carson interweaves Keats throughout her book in such a way that a brief excerpt appears before each poem. While the back cover of the book makes reference to Keats's most well known lines of poetry, Carson draws directly from his less well known poetry and drama, such as "I had a dove and the sweet dove died," "To the Ladies Who Saw me Crown'd," "Ode on Indolence," *Otho the Great*, and *The Jealousies* (which was to be published under the name Lucy Vaughan Lloyd). She also cites secondary texts such as Keats's letters, his editorial notes on his own work, and scribbled marginalia in his copy of *Paradise Lost*. The textual web, evidently, is complex as Carson provides direct references, but also double references, accessing Milton through Keats, and masked references, using the feigned authorship of Lucy Vaughan Lloyd. These obscure fragments Carson plays with no doubt derives from the Greek fragments that she has also, on occasion, manipulated.

Keats mediates Carson's relationship to the literary past, as well as to the classical archive ("Ode on a Grecian Urn" is a prime example) in *The Beauty of the Husband*. What Carson demonstrates in composing a history of a marriage is that there is no direct, seamless,

or resistance-less access to the past. The textual insertion of Keats illustrates just that: Carson cannot write a new narrative without somehow writing alongside other narratives. Keats (among others) regularly interrupts Carson's text so the story becomes "mad." The text is not one of Barthesian pleasure, but of *jouissance*, or bliss. The earlier mention of "Babel" in *The Beauty of the Husband*, can also be understood in the context of Barthes who compares Babel to bliss: "the confusion of tongues is no longer a punishment, the subject gains access to bliss by the cohabitation of languages *working side by side*" (PT 4). The "babelian" cohabitation of languages in Carson's use of Keats is reminiscent of her use of Catullus in *Nox*. Both Keats and Catullus provide a necessary poetic and allusive distance from which Carson works. Rather than confront her subjects directly, Carson uses this allusive distance, which is necessary for setting up the process of poetic errancy, or wandering, within the literary and classical archive. In this section, I will analyze select examples from *The Beauty of the Husband* in order to demonstrate how Carson plays off Keats and how he, in turn, augments and shapes Carson's narrative of desire.

A useful quotation that gives insight into Carson's process is borrowed from Keats's notes on his copy of *Paradise Lost*: "[O]ne of the most mysterious of semi-speculations is, one would suppose, that of one Mind's imagining into another" (BH 21). Keats makes reference to Book I, lines 59-94, which detail Satan's banishment to Hell. The passage ends with Satan's admission to Beelzebub that God was indeed stronger than he expected: "so much the stronger prov'd / He with his Thunder: and till then who knew / The force of those dire Arms?" (lines 92-94).

The reader accesses *Paradise Lost* and Milton through Keats, who is himself framed by Carson. Indeed, we are distanced from the "original" text – what we receive is merely

Keats's commentary. But his comment is manifold and is applicable to all these frames of reference. Speculation as "one Mind's imagining into another" suggests that there is no thinking within a vacuum; rather, one thinks *into* and *through* another. In the case of *Paradise Lost*, the dangerous thought of Satan "infects" others, such as Beelzebub, who becomes his follower and is allotted the same fate of eternity in Hell. Carson thinks through Keats, who thinks through Milton. I would argue that Carson's entire poetic process involves "one Mind's imagining into another." Minds are always already infiltrated by other minds; texts are always already infiltrated by other texts in a babelian superposition.

More interesting are the traces of Milton in Carson's Poem V, which follows Keats's quotation. Milton's passage is one of sin, betrayal, power, and disillusionment. Indeed, *Paradise Lost* summons God, Satan, and the fall. A possible reading of the marriage in Carson's text is via the terms set up by Milton. Does the husband, for example, play the role of God? As Carson begins Poem V: "Like many a wife I boosted the husband up to Godhood and held him there" (BH 23). Or is the husband, who is exposed as someone who "lied about everything" (33), more suitably the deceptive demon? The complexity of truth and beauty implies, of course, a less decisive reading.

We have a sense of Carson's poem functioning as a hall of mirrors, in which Milton is reflected, enlarged, or distorted. "What is strength?" (BH 23) the wife asks in the second line, echoing Milton's Satan who comments on the strength of God in the cited passage. There is even a play between Keats's marginalia in his copy of *Paradise Lost* and the mother who finds the husband's name "inscribed on the flyleaf" (23) of her daughter's book. The husband's marginal scribbles forces the mother to speculate and prophesize:

I wouldn't trust anyone who calls himself X – and  
something exposed itself in her voice

...

taste of iron.

Prophetic. Her prophecies all came true although she didn't mean them to. (*BH* 23)

I referenced this passage earlier in terms of the mother as prohibiting her daughter's desires and thereby fostering them. Indeed, we may recall God's instructions to Adam and Eve not to eat the fruit from the tree of knowledge. The daughter, similarly, does not pay heed to her mother (who, at this point in the poem, occupies the position of God), resulting in what can be interpreted as a "fall," or the doomed state of love. The mother's wariness is "prophetic" – we learn later in Poem X that she is "unsurprised / when [the husband does] not appear for the wedding" (*BH* 45). The wife's "fall" is unavoidable and inevitable. Despite all protest and "opposition of friends or family" (23), she begins the dangerous pursuit of the lover, leading to a long and passionate but equally tumultuous marriage.

Hindsight plays an important role for the wife, as it does for Satan. If the strength of God is "so much the stronger prov'd," why not repent? If the husband is "loyal to nothing" (*BH* 9), why return to him? The wife, in Poem II, reveals explicitly to the reader the reason for her desire:

So why did I love him from early girlhood to late middle age  
and the divorce decree came in the mail?  
Beauty. No great secret. Not ashamed to say I loved him for his beauty.  
As I would again  
if he came near. Beauty convinces. (*BH* 9)

Beauty drives her to the husband. His effect, even afterward as she recounts their relationship, is inescapably seductive: "I would again / if he came near." Despite everything, the wife knows that she would succumb to the husband's beauty. Interestingly, we find a similar sentiment in Milton's Satan, who, despite God's strength, refuses to repent or change. Though Carson only makes reference to Book 1, lines 59 to 94, it is what Satan continues to say after

acknowledging God's strength that finds its echo in the wife: "yet not for those, / Nor what the Potent Victor in his rage / Can else inflict, do I repent or change" (lines 94-96).

At the end of Poem V, Carson illustrates the infidelity of the husband. This time, the husband assumes the role of the fallen angel who betrays God:

Less than a year after our marriage  
my husband began to receive calls from [a woman] late at night.  
If I answered [she]  
hung up. My ears grew hoarse.

How are you.

-

No.

-

Maybe. Eight. Can you.

-

The white oh yes.

-

Yes.

What is so ecstatic unknowable cutthroat glad as the walls  
of the flesh  
of the voice of betrayal – yet all the while lapped in talk more dull  
than the tick of a clock (*BH* 24-5)

This excerpt reveals the husband's infidelity to his wife and his betrayal of the sanctity of his marriage. While the wife's surrender to her husband's seduction can be considered "a fall," this, too, is a fall as he succumbs to the seduction of the other woman. He secures his place as "the king of hell" (*BH* 62), as the wife later calls him. The wife, on the other hand, learns to become cautious and compares herself to an innocent animal: "A puppy / learns to listen this way" (25).

In this passage, we eavesdrop alongside the wife and are forced to hear the conversation from her perspective. We, too, have to extrapolate, speculate, and fill in the gaps. Furthermore, and more importantly, we have to confront the mystery of what it is that the

other desires. What does the other want? What is it that this mistress can satisfy that the wife cannot? His response, “The white oh yes,” hints at something, but remains ambiguous and unexplained. Four simple words (“talk more dull / than the tick of a clock”) become a possible opening, or answer, to the big question of the husband’s desires. The wife, who agonizes over the “ecstatic unknowable,” would no doubt wish to have her mind “imagine into” the mind of her husband.

Keats’s marginalia, in his copy of *Paradise Lost*, expresses a fascination with how a mind “imagine[s] into another.” His commentary on Milton’s process engenders Carson’s own imagining. Milton animates Poem V as the wife, husband, and mother trade the roles of God and Satan. Carson approaches their relationship with the aid of the terms set up by Milton and borrows from his verse, thus opening her narrative to other narratives. Carson’s excerpt highlights the borders between herself, Keats, and Milton. As Barthes describes it, “the seam of the two edges, the interstice of bliss, occurs in the volume of the languages” (*PT* 13). While I have read Carson’s poem through Milton, by way of Keats, the adjacency of the texts is at times more direct. Consider, for example, the poem that follows.

Poem VI begins with a quotation from Keats’s drama, *Otho the Great*. The play, which has been considered “undervalued” (Roe xix) and was never performed, was written in collaboration with his friend, Charles Armitage Brown. Set in tenth-century Germany, the play tells the story of an arranged marriage between Otho’s son, Ludolph, and the duke’s daughter, Auranthe. After the wedding, it is revealed that Auranthe has a lover, which drives Ludolph mad. Already, we can detect the parallel themes between *Otho the Great* and *The Beauty of the Husband*: marriage, infidelity, and tragedy.



The excerpt Carson provides is from the final scene of the play when Ludolph, bedridden and deranged, contemplates which wine to drink to his deceitful wife: “purple slaughter-house where Bacchus’ self / Pricked his own swollen veins!” (5. 5. 123-125). Keats’s fictional Otho is a tenth-century Roman emperor and conjures up the medieval past. (Carson, later in Poem XI, makes reference to the actual Roman emperor Marcus Salvius Otho Caesar Augustus.) The mention of Bacchus solidifies the connection of Carson’s poem to antiquity. The full passage from Keats is as follows:

I thirst to pledge my lovely bride  
In a deep goblet: let me see – what wine?  
The strong Iberian juice, or mellow Greek?  
Or pale Calabrian? Or the Tuscan grape?  
Or of old Ætna’s pulpy wine-presses,  
Black stain’d with the fat vintage, as it were  
The purple slaughter-house, where Bacchus’ self  
Prick’d his own swollen veins? (5.5.118-25)

The reference to Bacchus immediately brings up wine, madness, and ecstasy.<sup>34</sup> In the longer passage above, we can see how Bacchus is embedded in Ludolph’s ramblings about wine. The image of the grape is continued in Carson’s poem following the quotation. The title of Poem VI is: TO CLEAN YOUR HOOVES HERE IS A DANCE IN HONOR OF THE GRAPE WHICH THROUGHOUT HISTORY HAS BEEN A SYMBOL OF REVELRY AND JOY NOT TO SAY ANALOGY FOR THE BRIDE AS UNCUT BLOSSOM (*BH* 29). Carson’s title brings together many things at once: metonymically, we have the satyrs (“hooves”), who are the traditional companions of Bacchus, Bacchanalia (“dance,” “revelry and joy”), wine (“grape”), and virginity (“the bride as uncut blossom”). Poem VI takes the coordinates provided by Keats and re-imagined by Carson to relay an early sexual experience between the wife and husband during their adolescence:

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<sup>34</sup> The passage also alludes to the more familiar reference to Bacchus in the “Ode to a Nightingale.”

Smell  
 I will never forget.  
 Out behind the vineyard.  
 Stone place maybe a shed or an icehouse no longer in use.  
 October, a little cold. Hay on the floor. We had gone to his grandfather's farm to help  
  
 crush  
 the grapes for wine.  
 ...  
 Naked in the stone place it was true, sticky stains, skin, I lay on the hay  
  
 and he licked.  
 Licked it off.  
 Ran out and got more dregs in his hands and smeared  
 it on my knees belly licking. Plucking. Diving.  
 Tongue is the smell of October to me. (BH 30)

In this vivid, primal, and erotic scene, eros locates itself in the temporality of memory, its distance, separation, and reconstruction. This memory, written "in honour of the grape," overwhelms the senses, particularly smell, which the first line emphasizes. The wife remembers the smell of the cold October, hay, crushed grapes, tongue. Later in the poem, she mentions the "smell / of turned earth and cold plants and night coming on" (30). "Lick," repeated three times, brings together the erotic act, as well as the *liquidity* and sensuality of squeezed grapes. The grapes, setting the scene for their sexual encounter, is indeed a symbol of "revelry and joy," and the "crushed" grape suggests the loss of virginity, or the now cut blossom of the bride.

The sensuality of the memory, however, takes a turn in the next stanza. The wife, mirroring Ludolph in his state of derangement, contemplates different varieties of grapes in the final stanzas of the poem:

Stamens on him  
 and as Kafka said in the end  
 my swimming was of no use to me you know I cannot swim after all.  
 Well it so happens more than 90% of all cultivated grapes are varieties of

*Vitis vinifera*  
the Old World or European grape,  
while native American grapes derive  
from certain wild species of *Vitis* and differ in their “foxy” odor  
as well as the fact that their skins slip so liquidly from the pulp.

An ideal wine grape  
is one that is easily crushed.  
Such things I learned from the grandfather (*BH* 30)

The sudden segue to Kafka is surprising. Kafka suffered conflict over being Jewish: “[h]is biographers record how Kafka attempted to alter his body through sports of all types, including swimming. But he could not avert his destiny, which was to become – his father and all that his father represented – the ill Dreyfus, the diseased Jew” (Gilman 91). This allusion signals the inevitability of the wife’s “destiny,” that is, her tangled marriage with the husband. Beauty, as she said already, “convinces.” Carson repeats the word “crush,” but this time, the word takes on a more ominous meaning. The word “crush” has a ring of dramatic irony when read in hindsight. Is it suggested by the grandfather that the wife, too, is “easily crushed?” Keats’s quotation compares the winepress to “the purple slaughter-house,” and there is a sense that, by losing her virginity to the husband, the wife is like a lamb led to the slaughterhouse. The shed behind the vineyard where they crush grapes is called the “stone place,” which the wife repeats twice in the poem. Later in Poem XXVII, the husband recounts skinning rabbits with his grandfather behind the shed: “Satiny red entrails. Clear splash of blood on white porcelain” (*BH* 129). The space, used for crushing grapes, is also a place of gutting. The loss of virginity is a “death.” When read against Keats’s lines, Carson effectively foreshadows the tragic finale. As Roger Gilbert describes *The Beauty of The Husband*, “The book traces the course of their marriage from its first Dionysian consummation while crushing grapes ... to its

last gasp in an Athenian hotel room, blood streaming from the husband's nose like a parody of the grape juice that first seduced them."

The grape brings up a number of striking dyads in the above passage: European and American, old and new, ideal and imperfect. By extension, we also have the wife and Ludolph, and Carson and Keats – both of whom write of failed love. Both the wife and Ludolph have been deceived very early on in their marriages (Ludolph cries, "I was the fool, / She was the cheater!" [5.5.104-5]). Keats's passage and Carson's poem find their commonality in the metonymic overlap of grape, wine, and Bacchus, who also represents chaos and disorder. While Ludolph turns to Bacchus at the end of his (short-lived) relationship with Auranthe, wine for Carson marks the beginning of a long and tumultuous relationship with the husband. The husband, a young man in this memory, is even described by the grandfather as "*tragikos*," a Greek word which Carson defines as "a country word meaning either tragic or goat" (*BH* 30). Indeed, "goat" alludes to the satyr, thus likening the husband to the lustful and drunken hybrid, which, in the course of his marriage, he proves to be. But "*tragikos*" also contains other resonances such as Keats's tragic play, the tragic story of marriage, and the current tragedy that Carson is sharing with the reader. As the husband writes in his letter to the wife after their divorce: "This is a tragedy" (133).

Carson continually tampers with narrative frames within her poetry and in conjunction with Keats. At times, she uses Keats indirectly, borrowing an affect or sense that then "spills" and colours her poetry. Allusions, like the stain of crushed grapes, dye and blend with the new text. Barthes also provides an analogy of such "leakage": "The *brio* of the text ... is its *will to bliss*: just where it exceeds the demand, transcends prattle, and whereby it attempts to

overflow, to break through” (PT 13-14). In Poem IX, Carson demonstrates such an “overflow” with both Keats and Homer.

Poem IX is coloured by Keats and *The Homeric Hymn to Demeter*. Carson’s poem is preceded by an excerpt from Keats’s 10-line poem, “I had a dove and the sweet dove died”: “its feet were tied / With a silken thread of my own hand’s weaving” (BH 39). Keats’s speaker mourns for a dove that has died while in his care.

Its feet were tied  
With a silken thread of my own hand’s weaving:  
Sweet little red feet! Why would you die?  
Why would you leave me, sweet bird, why?  
You liv’d alone on the forest tree,  
Why, pretty thing, could you not live with me?  
I kiss’d you oft, and gave you white pease;  
Why not live sweetly as in the green trees? (lines 3-10)

Grief is at the centre of this poem, but, more curiously, the speaker is baffled by *why* the bird dies. If the bird could live alone in the forest, why could it not live together with the speaker? The speaker mourns the bird, but also mourns that which entirely escapes him. Despite his aims to detain the bird (“Its feet were tied”), the bird, in death, still manages to get away.

Although Keats’s poem does not make direct reference to the Homeric hymn, the speaker’s loss identifies with the loss felt by Demeter. Hades’s abduction of Persephone is also the cause of Demeter’s anguish. While Poem V provides a Christian model of heaven and hell, Poem IX offers a classical interpretation of the underworld.

Carson yokes the wife’s story with that of Persephone when one day, unexplainably, the husband (then young man) shows up at her new school:

Word that overnight  
showed up on all the walls of my life inscribed *simpliciter* no explanation.  
What is the power of the unexplained.  
There he was one day (new town) in a hayfield outside my school standing  
under a black umbrella

in a raw picking wind.  
I never asked  
how he got there a distance maybe 300 miles.  
To ask

would break some rule.  
Have you ever read *The Homeric Hymn to Demeter?* (BH 41)

Carson inserts the Latin word “simpliciter,” an adverb meaning “simply,” or “plainly.” (Latin, as we learn in Poem XI, is particularly charged as the wife and husband had first met in Latin class when they were fifteen.) To explain her story simply is, in fact, to recall the Greek myth. The struggle, as Carson makes clear, is providing an explanation to the mother (and to Demeter). The wife-speaker cuts to the story of Demeter:

Remember how Hades rides out of the daylight  
on his immortal horses swathed in pandemonium.  
Takes the girl down to a cold room below  
while her mother walks the world and damages every living thing.  
Homer tells it  
as a story of the crime against the mother.  
For a daughter’s crime is to accept Hades’ rules

which she knows she can never explain  
and so breezing in she says  
to Demeter:  
“Mother here is the whole story.  
Slyly he placed  
in my hands a pomegranate seed sweet as honey.  
Then by force and against my will he made me eat.  
I tell you this truth though it grieves me.”  
*Made her eat how?* (BH 41)

Despite her changing schools, the husband shows up unexpectedly and unannounced, much like Hades who rides out of the earth in his chariot. Their romance, once again, comes up against the mother, this time aligned with Demeter who “walks the world and damages every living thing.” The striking part about the story of Persephone is her explanation to her mother: “Then by force and against my will he made me eat.” The ambiguity as to *how* Persephone

consumed the seed (by force, or with consent) has been attached to this Homeric hymn.<sup>35</sup> The wife, in her italicized question, suggests that she doubts this version of Persephone's story. Perhaps Persephone, too, was swayed by Hades's beauty? An explanation for Persephone's betrayal, or "the crime against the mother," thus proves difficult. The mother's goal, as Carson states, is "to abolish seduction" (*BH* 42). Reminiscent of the speaker in Keats's poem, both the mother and Demeter try to keep their daughters innocent and contained. Just as the dove does not provide an answer to Keats's speaker, Persephone cannot offer an explanation. Carson's line, "she knows she can never explain," laminates the situation of Persephone to that of the wife. The inability to explain is not simply narrative, but formal: eros occupies the liminal space where there is no language for desire.

Carson adapts the story of Demeter and Persephone as an aid for the wife to explain that which has "[simply] no explanation." More problematic than the seduction and beauty of the husband is the "crime against the mother." Indeed the mother in *The Beauty of the Husband* senses trouble:

From my mother  
emanated a fragrance, fear.  
And from me  
(I knew by her face at the table)  
smell of sweet seed. (42)

The "smell of sweet seed" recalls the split fruit of both the crushed grapes as well as the infamous pomegranate seed that Hades gives Persephone to eat. As a result, Persephone is doomed to return to Hades for a part of each year because she has consumed food from the underworld; her return signals the coming of winter. Accordingly, the wife's loss of virginity in Poem VI is set in October. The pomegranate seed is steeped in symbolism, and has been

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<sup>35</sup> See Faraone: "Finally it is interesting to note that two versions of the pomegranate seed in the Hymn to Demeter diverge on this very question, i.e., to what degree did Persephone offer her consent?" (238).

interpreted as blood and death, or marriage and fertility (Penglase 121). The seed has also been considered a “love-charm” and that its purpose is “to induce the loved one to reciprocate ... Hades gives [Persephone] the seed as a charm to induce her to love him, to reciprocate his love and desire for her” (Penglase 132). The wife, too, receives a love-charm and is interrogated by her mother:

Roses in your room’d he send you those?

Yes.

What’s the occasion?

No occasion.

What’s going on with the color.

Color.

Ten white one red what’s that mean.

Guess they ran out of white. (*BH* 42)

The wife, by accepting the roses, anticipates the same retribution as Persephone, much to the mother’s dismay. Both daughters descend to their respective underworlds. Just as the pomegranate seed determines the fate of Persephone, the red rose (which the wife admits to keeping, “dried to a powder now” [*BH* 42]) is also mixed in its meaning. On the one hand, it functions as the love-charm that unites the lovers. On the other hand, it also signals the mother’s loss. To explain the pomegranate seed and its consequences, thus, proves difficult when confronted by the mother.

Furthermore, the red rose in the bouquet crystallizes and affirms the erotic. Its colour taints the purity of the white flowers – in much the same way that the stain of crushed grapes colours the wife’s early erotic memory, and the classical allusion of Persephone and Hades pigments the wife’s recount to her mother. Purity of memories, texts, and history is, as the image of the bouquet suggests, impossible. Eros “flout[s] the edges of things” (*Eros* 35),



colouring, staining, and blending with what is at the “centre.” Eros resides in the liminal space separating the wife from the memory, as well as the reader from the text.

How does Persephone attempt to explain things to her mother? When faced with Demeter, she shifts the onus and tells a story that lays blame on Hades. In Poem XI, we can read Carson’s description of her own “descent” in the same light:

I turned in my seat  
and there he was.  
You know how they say a Zen butcher makes one correct cut and the whole ox  
falls apart  
like a puzzle. Yes a cliché

and I do not apologize because as I say I was not to blame, I was unshielded  
in the face of existence  
and existence *depends on beauty*.  
In the end.  
Existence *will not stop*  
until it gets to beauty and then there follow all the consequences that lead to the end.  
(BH 49)

The wife in this passage, like Persephone, is “unshielded” and vulnerable. Both Hades and the husband are overpowering in their beauty. But, as Gilbert observes, “For Carson of course beauty is not merely aesthetic but erotic, and therefore prone to catastrophe.” Indeed, “the end” that Carson alludes to is not the fulfillment that seemingly satisfies the lover’s desire; rather, an erotic fulfillment of fantasy is ultimately *catastrophic*, or the “down turning” of what is expected. The marriage, as Carson demonstrates, is not a happy one. In their final encounter in Athens, “joys and leaves of earlier times flowed through the husband and disappeared” (BH 100).

The final example I want to look at is Poem XXIX, the last tango. Unlike the previous excerpts, which draw on Keats’s primary texts, the poem opens with his notes on his long unfinished poem, “The Jealousies: A Faery Tale.” Like *Otho the Great*, “The Jealousies”

revolves around the arranged marriage between Emperor Elfinan and Princess Bellanaine. The marriage, as expected, does not work out: it is revealed that both Elfinan and Bellanaine are, in fact, in love with other people. Keats's notes, excerpted by Carson, are as follows:

{Not for the glance itse}  
{Not for the fiery glance itself perhaps}  
{Nor at the glance itsef} (*BH* 137)

Keats's edits are written above lines 68-69 of his poem in which Bellanaine's nurse, Coralline, is silenced by her mistress. Coralline warns Bellanaine not to whisper too loudly about her lover for fear that Crafticant (Elfinan's "great state-spy militant" [line 61]) would overhear:

"Ah, beauteous mortal!" "Hush!" quoth Coralline,  
"Really you must not talk of him, indeed."  
"You hush!" replied the mistress, with a shine  
Of anger in her eyes, enough to breed  
In stouter hearts than nurse's fear and dread:  
'Twas not the glance itself made nurseey flinch,  
But of its threat she took the utmost heed;  
Not liking in her heart an hour-long pinch,  
Or a sharp needle run into her back an inch. (lines 64-72)

Keats's edits play with the phrasing in line 69, "'Twas not the glance itself," and offer other variations. While the glance of Bellanaine is one of anger, taken on its own, Keats's edits befit the "fiery glance" of lovers. Indeed, it is the wife's sighting of the husband in their high school Latin class that sets their relationship in motion. (The importance of the gaze is also evoked in Sappho's fragment 31: "when I look at you, a moment, then no speaking / is left in me.")

More importantly, the list of possible phrasings provided by Keats draws attention to the act of writing and re-writing. The wife in the preceding poem in the book states: "So you see / I work at correcting the past" (*BH* 135). This excerpt from Keats, thus, is not necessarily relevant for the primary text which he edits, but for the act of editing itself. Consider also the quotations preceding Poem X and Poem XXIII, respectively:

19 thine own *altered in pencil possibly by Keats to* some small (BH 43)

a sort of Delphic Abstraction a beautiful thing made more  
beautiful by being reflected and put in a Mist  
[there is a faint mark after *beautiful* read by one editor as a dash, by another as a slip of  
the pen, while a third does not print it] (BH 103)

Carson highlights the creative and editorial “mistakes” of the past. They are not only Keats’s own corrections for himself, but also the various readings that occur in the transmission of a text. A “faint mark” becomes “a dash,” “a slip of the pen,” and, in the last case, negligible. While I have elucidated a few examples in which Carson’s poems can be read alongside other intertexts, what Carson is emphasizing, by using Keats’s secondary texts, is the plurality of reading, writing, and transmission. Even Keats’s unfinished poem errs, strays, and finds itself under various editorial eyes, and rejuvenated alongside new texts. His scribbles, repeated and slightly different each time, signal an excess, or leakage. It is part of the text, and yet remains outside of it.

Poem XXIX also opens with excess, or a remainder of words. The wife contemplates all the things she was never able to utter to the husband during their marriage:

To get them out of her the wife tries making a list of words she never got to say.  
How have you been.  
Fancy seeing you here.  
I had given up hope I grew desperate why did you take so long.  
Bloodless monster! had I never  
seen or known your  
kindness what  
might I  
have been. (BH 139)

These words take on a toxic quality that must be expelled from the body (“To get them out of her”). Divorced, there is no longer an opportune time to say these things to her husband. However, Carson suggests that the exercise of “making a list of words she never got to say” is

not a solution. In the next line, Carson states: “words are a strange docile wheat” (*BH* 139). They “bend to the ground” (139) and have a quality of malleability to them. Words do not simply disappear from the wife when written down, but remain and survive.<sup>36</sup> Her words participate in their own kind of archive, or collection.

In an attempt to finish the story, Carson summarizes:

let’s just finish it.  
Not because, like Persephone, I needed to cool my cheek on death.  
Not, with Keats, to buy time.  
Not, as the tango, out of sheer wantonness.  
But oh it seemed sweet.

To say Beauty is Truth and stop.  
Rather than to eat it.  
Rather than to want to eat it. This was my pure early thought.  
I overlooked one thing.  
That the beautiful when I encountered it would turn out to be  
prior – inside my own heart,  
already eaten.  
Not out there with purposiveness, with temples, with God.  
Inside. He was already me.  
Condition of me. (*BH* 139-40)

The wife in the passage addresses the reader, drawing awareness to her own intertextuality. Borrowing the form of Keats’s notes, she edits herself and tells the reader that she will finish her story – not with Persephone, Keats, or the tango, which she had carefully woven into her narrative – but with her own admission: that the beautiful was not “out there” but already inside her – “eaten.”

Most striking in this passage is the temporal difference of the verbs “to eat” and “already eaten.” In the former case, the wife’s “pure early thought” (that is, “to eat [beauty]”)

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<sup>36</sup> The survival of this “residue” conforms to what Derrida calls the “trace.” The wife’s expulsion of her words does not result in a complete purge, as if the “list of words” (*BH* 139) is a neatly packaged body text. On the contrary, Derrida defines the text as “no longer a finished corpus of writing, some content enclosed in a book or its margins, but a differential network, a fabric of traces referring endlessly to something other than itself, to other differential traces” (“Living On” 84). The intertextual poetics of Carson is above all a play with the trace and the trace of the archive.

suggests a hypothetical future that has already past. The latter, upon her discovery when writing and remembering, is the pluperfect (“[I had] already eaten”). The difference between the verb forms is the site of eros: the erotic, the experiential, the archival, and the textual. Eros enfolds the husband (from boyhood to the present), the process of re-remembering their marriage, and the words of Keats, Milton, Homer, and others. What has been eaten? The answer is “beauty,” that is, language, memory, experience, and that which leaves traces or residue and which stains the future present.

Carson’s beauty does not follow Keats’s romantic idea of beauty, in which there is something “out there” like a Grecian urn. Beauty is not spiritual and divine, residing in temples and God. Furthermore, beauty is not universal or whole. The beauty Carson proposes is one that is flawed, “eaten,” internalized, recognized, and reflected in the husband: “He was already me” (*BH* 140). While Keats’s “beauty” is found in the subject-object nexus, Carson’s “beauty” is in the subject, in the subject’s desire for beauty, and in the traces of her readings leading up to her vague idea, or expression, of beauty. I return to the title, once again, which aptly reflects the wife’s realization. While the reader is led to believe that “The Beauty” in the title indicates beauty possessed by the husband, beauty, in fact, belongs foremost to the wife. The story is as much about the wife as it is about the husband:

Words, wheat, conditions, gold, more than thirty years of it fizzing around in me –  
there  
I lay it to rest. (*BH* 140)

These lines signal an “end,” or a neat conclusion. Despite these lines, it is suggested that the speaker here is also uncertain of her ability to “lay it to rest.” The wife addresses the doubting reader:

You smile. I think  
you are going to mention again

those illuminated manuscripts from medieval times where the scribe  
has made an error in copying  
so the illuminator encloses the error  
in a circlet of roses and flames

which a saucy little devil is trying to tug off the side of the page.  
After all the heart is not a small stone  
to be rolled this way and that.  
The mind is not a box to be shut fast.  
And yet it is!  
It is! (*BH* 140-1)

The poem takes a noteworthy turn here. We return, once again, to error – but this time, the illuminator attempts to *enclose* error, which seemingly goes against Carson’s overall poetic processes of rupture and spillage. Despite the circlet and the attempt to “tug [it] off the side of the page,” the error remains visible, occupying the spaces of the margins. We can liken this act of enclosure to the archival process, which attempts to enclose, or “shut fast,” that which cannot be confined (like Keats’s dove). Here, too, is a suggestion of the impossibility of bounded containment.

This passage is not the first instance in which the wife addresses an anonymous “you.” Carson explains that it is not a particular “You”:

It’s the generalized You of lyric poetry. Catullus invented this, I think, for the Romans, and the You is sometimes unnamed, a persona who forms as the poem forms, a sort of ideal listener. ... He used it extensively. Probably took it from Sappho. (Wachtel)

However, this use of “you” is striking due to the fact that the wife appears to engage with a particular “you” about her own story. Somewhere, the wife, in telling her story, has erred and she anticipates the “you”/reader to point out her mistake. I would argue that the reader could likely be Carson herself who, eruditely, would mention how medieval scribes make mistakes only to transform them creatively into something new. Indeed, Carson can even be aligned

with the scribe who makes mistakes in copying, or transmitting, and who transforms the errors of the process into something novel. The lines here offer a striking two-way mirror prefigured in the wife's earlier admission. It is as if Carson, who writes the wife, has the wife break out of the literary frame to address Carson. Carson would agree that the heart is not like a "small stone," and the mind not a shut "box" – metaphors that exemplify self-containment and enclosure. The wife, in this passage, however, protests: "And yet it is!"

A problem set up by the wife and the "you" is how the story ends. The wife, who wants to "lay it to rest," appears to come up against the "you's" acknowledgement of a mistake. Her final lines advise the reader to "hold. / Hold beauty" (*BH* 141). The wife's ending seemingly contradicts her notion of beauty as something that is containable. Can beauty be "held" or contained in the mind, described as "a box to be shut fast"?

The wife, as we soon see, cannot get away with a neat ending. Recalling Barthes who states, "How does a love end? ... To tell the truth, no one – except for the others – ever knows anything about it" (*LD* 101), Carson does not give the last word to the wife, but to the husband. Carson includes one last, unnumbered poem, which participates as part of the collection, but is not included as one of the twenty-nine tangos. The poem represents excess, or a remainder, that resists containment and conclusiveness.

Hurts to be here.  
"You are the one who has escaped."  
To tell a story by not telling it –  
dear shadow, I wrote this slowly.  
Her starts!  
My ends.  
But it all comes round to a blue June moon  
and a sullied night as poets say.  
Some tangos pretend to be about women but look at this.  
Who is it you see reflected small  
in each of her tears.

Watch me fold this page now so you think it is you. (*BH* 145)

The last poem throws ambiguity on the book as a whole: who is the writer of the story? The husband claims that he “wrote this slowly.” Who can we trust? His lines, “Her starts! / My ends,” echoes the wife’s words from Poem II:

You know I was married years ago and when he left my husband took my notebooks.  
Wirebound notebooks.  
You know that cool sly verb *write*. He liked writing, disliked having to start each thought himself.  
Used my starts to various ends (*BH* 9)

The wife hints to the reader very early on that writing is a “cool sly verb.” Both the wife and the husband collaborate in much the same way that Carson borrows, or steals, from other texts. Writing is “sly,” “sullied,” and full of pretence (“tangos pretend” [*BH* 145]). Desire itself remains up in the air between the husband and wife; the line, “You are the one who escaped,” is not designated to a speaker and remains ambiguous as to whether the husband or the wife accuses the other of this.

Indeed, the final poem denies *The Beauty of the Husband* an author, or *auctoritas* and problematizes the archival “commencement.” There is no single origin; rather, the marriage is refracted through the intertexts, which disperses the “origin” among Keats, Milton, and the classical corpus. There is no single authorial voice, but a confluence of voices. The last line, “Watch me fold this page now so you think it is you,” breaks the literary frame one last time as the husband commands the reader to “watch.” The story “leaks” from the book, so even the final gesture of the reader (folding the page over) is questioned and uncertain.



## Conclusion

*"[E]nlightenment is useless."*

—Anne Carson (*PW* 240)

In this chapter, I have argued that Carson's narratives of erotic experience lend themselves to a broader understanding of her poetics of error. I argue that the desire for "oneness" in love is akin to desires previously discussed, such as the desire for origin, and the desire for totality. Carson's depiction of Love follows the same paradigm as History and the Archive in that they all purport to provide the "total sum" with a defined and fixed origin. At the crux of Carson's work, however, is error. The person we think who will complete us proves inadequate. The history we turn to for meaning turns out to be meaningless. The archive, which aims to command the past, is in constant flux. Language, too, is flawed in that it can never quite express what we mean to say.

Crucial to this chapter is Carson's assertion that eros is that which is "in between" the lover and the beloved. The erotic liminal space that prevents the complete unification between lovers is also, by extension, what divides us from the "perfect" translation, the "complete" transmission, and the "accurate" account of history. The overarching belief that we can achieve oneness, or "pure presence," is a fantasmatic desire. Eros, thus, is a necessary form of error: to love is to err – both to wander (from lover to lover) and to make mistakes. Moreover, eros is that intervening space born of various distances in relation to error: temporal, translational, archival, and generic.

Carson confronts the fantasmatic desire for oneness by way of the sick father, a recurring figure in her work, who demonstrates what happens when the symbolic, or fantasy, breaks down. His madness is a useful trope in representing a number of things, such as the

ineffable trauma of loss, the babble between subjects, and the lack of meaning when it comes to the beloved. More importantly, the demented father is a productive way of conceptualizing the mad text, that is, the text that is open and traversed by other words, meanings, and systems. Poetry is not self-enclosed; rather, it is plural, various, surprising, and deviant. My analysis of *The Beauty of the Husband* demonstrates how Carson, in narrating the history of erotic experience, illustrates the fractured lines of love by way of the fragmented text. Keats continually mediates, interrupts, and rejuvenates her poetry. His fragments become nodes at which Carson intersects with the literary/Keatsian archive, as well as the classical archive. Erotic desire, thus, is tethered to an archival and textual desire for wholeness. These desires, however, are resisted. Much like *Nox*, *The Beauty of the Husband* uses fragmentation and adjacency to complicate the acts of loving, reading, narrating, and historicizing. Eros is not limited to its subject, or poetic theme, but becomes a vital site for Carson's procedures of error.

## Conclusion

“Use a distant brush”

*“Because when you write an essay you’re giving a gift,  
it seems to me. You’re giving this grace, as the ancients would say.  
A gift shouldn’t turn back into the self and stop there.”*

–Anne Carson (D’Agata, “A \_\_\_” 17)

*“To sum up. Honestly, I am not very good at summing up.  
The best I can do is offer a final splatter of white paint.”*

–Anne Carson (Nay 32)

Two years after the publication of *Nox*, Carson published a poem entitled “Powerless Structures Fig. 11” in *New Republic*. The poem concerns the death of a nameless “she,” who turns out to be Michael’s wife. It opens:

HER FUNERAL

is in Sankt Johannes nine years after his.

THAT GOLDSMUGGLER

she fell in love with in Amsterdam is how he appears in her eulogy.

...

I FIRST

met her on the telephone you don’t know me she said but your brother has just died in my bathroom.

APPARENTLY THEY’D

been married 17 years.

The wife’s death evokes Michael’s death and what little was known of Carson’s brother. The poem borrows and recycles phrases from *Nox*, such as “what’s that / sound,” and “most people / blush before death.” New details of their marriage, as well as further details of Michael not revealed in *Nox* (such as his dying in the bathroom), also emerge. “Powerless Structures” can be read as an addendum to *Nox*; the wife’s death follows the death of Michael, which follows the death of the mother, and so on. In a typical Carsonian manoeuvre, Carson draws from her own poetic archive, as she repeats and renews her words. The poem is published in a magazine (it should be noted that *New Republic* is not strictly a literary journal), thus giving the poem limited exposure, as well as an understated – and even overlooked – position.

The following year, *New Republic* published another poem by Carson, “Short Talk on the Witness of the Body.” Much like “Powerless Structures,” this poem is self-consciously and reflexively allusive. The title immediately aligns the text with Carson’s first collection, *Short Talks*. The format echoes the “racing stripe” text in *Red Doc*> (published earlier that

year). Finally, the third part of the poem derives directly from “Town of My Farewell to You” (PW 111) in *Plainwater*.

These two recent poems by Carson are not necessarily novel in their technique of self-reference; indeed, self-referentiality occurs throughout her oeuvre.<sup>1</sup> Carson returns to, continues, and adds to her work in an ongoing process of “friskes, skips and jumps.” What does her technique of self-reference imply in terms of time? I would argue that, for Carson, her works are not simply finished and fixed in the past, but can be resurrected, brought forth into the present, renewed, and rejuvenated in new works. Just as she produces from within the gulf between present and antiquity, she also finds the gaps within her own chronology to be opportune for her creative production. The second part of “Short Talk on the Witness of the Body” illustrates the fertile gaps, ebbs, and flows, in history as it relates to art:

What departs at death is 19 grams (= 7/8 ounce) of you shedding a soft blue light. What remains behind is various. Within a year of the passing of Emily Dickinson’s dog Carlo (1848-1866) there were 5 other Carlos in Amherst and 2 in novels. Some centuries later workers digging the Athens metro unearthed the grave of a dog, small paws still folded, collar studded with a row of blue beads. Use a *distant brush* to paint these things. Do not redip.<sup>2</sup>

Carson’s premise that “what remains behind is various” is represented by the recurrence of the dog throughout time in varying literary, temporal, and archeological situations. She begins

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<sup>1</sup> I have drawn attention to Carson’s self-references in my thesis. Ward, too, notes: “[Carson] also publishes purportedly successive drafts of poems, creating her own archive of palimpsests and reifying her instabilities” (14).

<sup>2</sup> The typos in this passage are also in the original publication.

with Emily Dickinson's dog, Carlo, who, after his death, left behind traces (specifically, "5 other Carlos in Amherst and 2 in novels"). The death also anticipates the excavation of a dog grave "centuries later" – an event that, in fact, reaches *back* to antiquity. What "remains behind" (which Carson describes curiously as "19 grams" of "a soft blue light") is not only various, but is refracted through time. What do we do with these remnants?

The speaker in the poem instructs: "Use a *distant brush* to paint thesethings [sic]. Do not redip." But what is a "distant brush"? The emphasis given to the brush intimately adjoins distance and art. Indeed, a series of temporal relations is established with each appearance of the dog, but also a physical distance, such as that between Amherst and Athens. Perhaps a better question to pose is: from where does the distant brush come? Is it the past bearing on the future? Or vice versa? The final instruction, "Do not redip," recalls the speaker in "Introduction to Kinds of Water," who concludes with: "the only rule of travel is, Don't come back the way you went. Come a new way" (*PW* 123).

What is most important for Carson is that there *is* distance – whether temporal, spatial, linguistic, or affective. This distance, as I have discussed in my dissertation, is imperative for her poetics of error and entails the mistakes, misreadings, mistranslations, and loss that are inherent and inevitable in classical transmission. Furthermore, Carson discourages "redip[ping]." Reminiscent of her use of Sappho, Carson here is not interested in repeatability associated with *sameness*; rather, she seeks out "a new way." The (careless?) typos included in this section ("witha" and "thesethings") are also striking as they draw attention to error. Perhaps the title, too, is a deliberate oversight. The "withness" of the body is to be prepositionally in proximity to the body. The more-correct "witness" of the body, on the other

hand, requires some necessary distance.<sup>3</sup> The error in this typo resides in the tensile opposition between words. In Carson's words, "my pear, your winter" (*PW* 93).

*The Erring Archive in Anne Carson* investigates Carson's use of "a distant brush" with antiquity. I discussed Carson's responsiveness to the classical archive in terms of the critical, the sapphic, the elegiac, and the erotic. Each of these aspects demonstrates the impossibility of totality, or wholeness; a resistance to categorical entrapments; and the linguistic, affective, and temporal interstices from which Carson writes.

By opening with Carson's reception, I wanted to establish a Carsonian poetics that both addresses and emerges from the ambivalent reactions from readers and critics. One response to this mixed readership is Helen Guri's playful essay, "Latches of Being: A User's Guide to Anne Carson." The "handy Carson how-to guide" includes book recommendations, as well as a three-step program to engaging with the poet's work. Strikingly, Guri appears to address not the fans of Carson, but those who are put off by Carson's erudition, genre-breaking tendencies, and absurdity. Guri notes:

In all likelihood, they put the book straight down ... They did not become fans of Anne Carson. Today, these people constitute the majority of the population. Maybe you are among them. This isn't necessarily shameful.

Guri is likely being tongue-in-cheek. Indeed, the richness of Carson's work cannot be contained in a brief guide, but the attempt to win over the non-enthusiasts is pointed. As Guri writes, "Carson, more than high modernism, cafeteria food, or even tumultuous relationships, is a lifelong pursuit."

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<sup>3</sup> Of course, other corrections for "witness" may include "wetness" and "wittiness." Indeed, this error falls neatly within my discussion of "leakage" (see Chapter 2), as well as the playful "wittiness" characteristic of Carson, respectively.

My dissertation is limited to Carson's engagement with the classical archive. But, as Derrida remarks, "The archivist produces more archive, and that is why the archive is never closed" (*AF* 68). Carson is a readerly writer – she never works alone. Beyond the scope of my project were the other archives and fields of study that are undoubtedly important for Carson. These include visual art (Edward Hopper, Hokusai, Betty Goodwin, her own art – Carson often talks about her beginnings in drawing); modern literature (Samuel Beckett, Gertrude Stein, Virginia Woolf); cinema (Artaud, Antonioni, Monica Vitti, Catherine Deneuve); music (Guillermo), philosophy (Kant, Hegel, Heidegger, Simone Weil); and biblical scripture. The terms that I have put forth in relation to Carson's encounter with the classical archive can, I hope, be useful for future Carsonian scholarship.

In addition, Carson's relationship with Robert Currie has produced a number of experimental collaborations (including *Nox* and *Antigonick*). It is apparent that Carson's work is moving off the page and into the realms of visual art, theatre, and performance art.<sup>4</sup> No doubt, this shift in media will enrich her growing body of work. The issue, as I foresee, may no longer be limited to the division between scholar and poet, but also include the overlaps with Carson-as-visual-artist, Carson-as-performance-artist, and so on. Reminiscent of the speaker in *Short Talks*, Carson works hard at keeping us surprised – and she is never boring.

I emphasize this. I will do anything to avoid boredom. It is the task of a lifetime. You can never know enough, never work enough, never use the infinitives and participles oddly enough, never impede the movement harshly enough, never leave the mind quickly enough. (*ST* 9)

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<sup>4</sup> See Andrew David King ("Unwriting the Books of the Dead: Anne Carson and Robert Currie on Translation, Collaboration, and History") and Megan Berkobien ("An Interview with Anne Carson and Robert Currie").



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