

# Sublime Transactions

The Gestures of Poetry and Criticism with Anne Carson,  
the Scholar-Poet

Edda Ahrent

Thesis submitted in partial fulfilment for the requirements  
of the degree of Master of Literature  
Lund University

Literature - Culture - Media: General Literature  
Centre for Languages and Literature  
Master's Thesis: LIVR07  
Advisor: Daniel Möller  
2021-06-02

Part I: Context	1
1. Introduction	1
2. Selection, method, and disposition	4
3. Background	7
3.1 The scholar-poet	7
3.1.1 Anne Carson as intepreter/interpreted	7
3.1.2 The hermeneutic problem	10
3.2 Key theoretical concepts	16
3.2.1 A transactive system of art	16
3.2.2 Intertextuality	18
3.2.3 Play	20
Part II: Analysis	23
4. Survival	23
4.1 Poetic affect	23
4.1.1 Inherent value of the literary object	23
4.1.2 The production of affect in literary texts	25
4.2 Productive affect	32
4.2.1 The desert of after-Proust	32
4.2.2 The ludic gestures of criticism	35
5. Resurrection	39
5.1 Speaking the dead	39
5.1.1 Keats: "if a book is to remain free"	39
5.1.2 Mimnermos: "Consider incompleteness a verb"	49
5.2 Between sleep-state and statement	57
5.2.1 The intrusion of self in the interpretive moment	57
5.2.2 Demands of the past	60
6. Vitality	67
6.1 The exchange rates of poetry and criticism	67
6.2 A gift economy	76
7. Conclusion	86
Bibliography	89

## PART I

### 1. Introduction

Anne Carson begins her collection of poetry titled *Short Talks* with an introduction, in which she writes: “I will do anything to avoid boredom. It is the task of a lifetime.”<sup>1</sup> *Short Talks* is a collection of prose-poetry that is in many ways indicative of what makes her interesting to this thesis. Carson is a writer known for disregarding conventions. A “short talk” is what one might expect to be delivered at an academic conference. Poetry, one might expect to be delivered in verse. “Short talk on Ovid” is perhaps likely to be found in a different book from “Short talk on Why Some People Find Trains Exciting” or “Short talk on Chromoluminarism”. Carson is a scholar-poet, or poet-scholar, who is an increasingly centralised figure in academic life. As such, Carson is positioned somewhere between the rigour of academic literary research – her day job is as a lecturer and teacher of Ancient Greek – and the creative output of the poet. This is a lucrative position from which this thesis will attempt to glean out answers to its central objective: investigating the space between poetry and literary criticism.

This thesis will use the terms “critic” and “criticism” extensively to refer to the interpretive work of the literary scholar. I choose not to use the word “scholar”, despite it being one of the poles of “scholar-poet”, based on a distinction offered by Northrop Frye. In *The Well-Tempered Critic*, a collection of lectures on the topic of literary scholarship, Frye makes a distinction between the scholar and the critic, as follows. The scholar, he argues, is the expert – he “tunes his own scale as accurately as possible”. The critic, on the other hand, is someone who must cultivate, often on his own, a wide understanding of literature and its cultural applications.<sup>2</sup> Frye further suggests that in order to be well-tempered, the scholar and the critic must be one person – must be limber, able to both become expert and to apply their expertise in a way that interacts with the world outside of academia. I use the word critic because I am referring to this aspect of the thinker, the one who moves outside of the University, with the understanding that they are, in fact, the same person.

---

<sup>1</sup> Carson, Anne. *Short Talks, with a new introduction from Margaret Christakos*, Brick Books classics, London, Ontario, ebook, 2015 (1992), 24

<sup>2</sup> Frye, Northrop. *The Well-tempered Critic*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and London, 1963, 14-16

Further, literary criticism in this thesis refers specifically to hermeneutics: the event of interpretation and how interpretation expresses itself on the page. Previous research on the scholar-poet, and on Carson in particular, is preoccupied by the problem of interpretation, and it is indeed a problem. The twentieth century in particular, though not exclusively, is concerned with how to do hermeneutics in a way that is fair to the object of interpretation. In the 1960s, Gadamer published *Truth and Method* and Susan Sontag disparaged the very act of interpretation as a death-sentence to the poem. This history is well-established in a doctoral dissertation this thesis is in direct dialogue with, Elizabeth Coles' *Anne Carson: the Ethics and Erotics of Interpretation*. Coles traces a lineage of anxiety in literary criticism with the help of psychoanalysis, which I will counteract with another anxiety: that of historical interpretation through the emergence of new historicism, a tradition which is equally dedicated to the survival of the object of interpretation.

This thesis investigates the space between poetry and criticism from the suspicion that literary criticism, through being so intimately in collusion with what it is studying, is an aesthetic act in itself. I will argue that it responds to and engages within the same network of cultural exchanges in which poetry is traded, and that vice versa poetry exists in active engagement with criticism. The chronology of poetry, I argue, moves from its conditions for survival, its life, to its continued emergence within a network of exchanges which includes literary criticism, its after-life. I suggest this chronology as a continuum, rather than a temporally bound trajectory. By studying an author known for transgressing boundaries of criticism and poeticism, the convergences and divergences of the two can be teased out in a lucrative manner, as Carson's text can function simultaneously on several locations of the continuum. Carson is also translator of ancient Greek poets, which allows for an enhanced view of ideas of survival and cultural transactions, as well as of the anxiety of hermeneutics since it concerns texts far removed from a contemporary context and as such throws differing patterns of understanding into sharp relief.

While I read primarily Carson as an avenue of understanding, I attempt to make more general suggestions on the nature of the differences and similarities of poetry and criticism. In order to do so I have chosen to place the North American context within which Carson is active in connection with strikingly similar European tendencies. As such, I focalise Swedish scholar and poet Gunnar D. Hansson, a writer whose critical inquiries and poetic tendencies will be shown to have striking similarities to Carson's, specifically a communal anxiety of

what it is, precisely, that we are doing with literature. Hansson is one of Sweden's several scholar-poets, and my thesis suggests that those places where literary production and literary research begin to converge – as it does in both North America and Scandinavia – produce such a writing subject. Further, I intend with this comparative aspect of the thesis to show the intense contemporariness of the topic and its international implications, as well as suggest that there is trans-national and trans-institutional knowledge the transference of which could vitalise international study of literature.

## 2. Selection, method, and disposition

This is a study into the space between poetry and criticism, and whether it is a space at all and not a liminal blending, a continuum. I have chosen to study the scholar-poet Anne Carson not least because it appears to me that the only constant to her style of writing is the resistance of categories for the sake of indulgences in the malleability of forms, styles, and genres. I do not study her entire bibliography, for two reasons. First, I have excluded those works which veer towards the novelistic. My focus is not on narrative structures but poetic ones, however complicated that divide may be, wherefore Carson's much-read *Autobiography of Red* and its sequel *Red Doc* are not discussed here. Second, my interest in criticism lends attention to those of Carson's works which include analytical work of some sort, typically essays but also poetic writing which lead out of an interpretive act or invite it directly, such as the prose-poetry collection *The Beauty of the Husband* in which an excerpt of Keats precedes each section. I mostly exclude as well Carson's translations of Ancient Greek. Translation is an event in which poet and critic necessarily must coexist, which is neither my specialty nor the most fruitful avenue for studying where and how criticism and poetry coincide and diverge. There is, however, cause to study Carson's interactions with those ancient poets where she takes the role of interpreter, which she does in several essays and poetic utterances.

What follows is an experiment in hermeneutics. Those theoretical and technical texts which are foundational here and detailed in the next section are ones which I believe provide significant insight into the motions of Carson's poetics. Notably, these are disparate and in some cases specialised. Carson presents across her works a system of understanding, a pattern of thinking, or a poetics, to which these secondary texts function in support. Greenblatt's economics, Kristeva's intertextuality, and Massumi's play prepares for and highlights what I believe are the primary gestures of Carsonian writing. Gadamer, while utterly central to the vocabulary of this work and the history of hermeneutics is it responding to, rarely appears in the flesh. His position in this thesis is similar to Johan Huizinga's, Dutch philosopher and author of *Homo Ludens*, or the playing/playful human. Their foundational work appears through their readers and the impact they have had on their fields of expertise. Such is the effect of the highly specialised work that occurs within this thesis, and the impressively detailed work of previous scholars.

Where many recent studies of Anne Carson have been published in the last decade, she is intended in this case not so much the object of study as the method of study. The scholar-

poet provides textual events where the interrelationship between critic and poet, criticism and poetry, is thrown into sharp relief. Close reading of those texts become in this study the foundation for an understanding of literary criticism. Further, Anne Carson's texts have – as I will argue in my analysis – an interwoven hermeneutic anxiety which is central to understanding how criticism has become what it is today. Rather than studying, as many scholars have, the chronology of Carson's creative project, I aim to study the chronology of the poem: its manifestation as an object, its autonomy, and the role criticism plays in its life and after-life. This chronology structures the analysis into its three parts, titled *Survival*, *Resurrection*, and *Vitality*. The analysis moves from the conditions of life of poetry, to its after-life of transformation and translations between forms and modes not least through criticism, and finally to the idea of *Vitality*: what I argue is key to understanding the poem/criticism relationship.

In section one, “*Survival*”, I present my theory of what the life of the poem consists of – why it can be considered a life – based on recurring ideas and structures in Carson's work and supported by a new historicist conceptualisation of poetic objects as part of a cultural transactive system of arts. This takes the form of a theory of affect in poetic language that I base on philosopher Brian Massumi's study of play – the ludic gesture – and Julia Kristeva's poetic logic. It is this theory of affect which forms the foundation of the rest of my analysis, not least for understanding the why of criticism, and how criticism is an aesthetically charged activity.

Section two, “*Resurrection*”, studies several of Carson's critical, intertextual relationships with specific focus on the collapsing of past and present, the literary and non-literary text, and how Carson as an interpreter approaches the ideas of truth and art. I delve here into what I call the after-life of the poem, its continual affective gestures without its original manifestation. This section handles the largest assortment of discrete texts and consists of the bulk of my literary analysis, all of which contain an interpretive act defined by anxiety. I argue here for what the critic as writer can and cannot do, especially as she deals with the unknown and unknowable.

The third section concludes the thesis by placing poet and critic in direct confrontation in order to investigate the consequences of placing poetry and criticism on a continuum, not least the effects it has on the scientificity of hermeneutics. Further, this section proposes a system for understanding both the interactions and exchanges of poetry and criticism and what separates them that is based on Carson's own exploration of an ancient gift-economy. It

posits the literary interpretive text as functioning on a philosophical arena, and responds to several critiques of the abilities of literary criticism to posit truth and knowledge.

Throughout the analysis, I am responding to both a broader historical context and an intensely contemporary one. There are two consequences to this. First: I have had to make decisions on how extensively this thesis can make claims on a historical tradition. As such, I have chosen to respond to several dissertations which make historical claims based of thorough readings, and otherwise include only limited aspects of larger historical systems. For instance, I make a comparison between the writing of the scholar-poet and the didactic poetry of Romanticism, but am unable to fully excavate the implications of such a comparison. Instead, it functions more as a system of focalising certain aspects of the Carson's writing. Second, the intense contemporariness of the topic means that the conversation is active and it is impossible to provide a survey of all its movements. Texts which lack published translations to English, such as the 2020 article "Poetik der Kritik" ["The Poetics of Criticism"] by Rüdiger Görner are presented in my own translation alongside the original German, and the same system has been applied to my translation of Hansson's poetry from Swedish. Hansson's position here is one of shadow and mirror, a Scandinavian equivalent to Carson who I have chosen – in the place of others like him – as an under-analysed triple threat (translator, critic, poet). When translating his poetry, I have made very limited attempts to preserve the poetic quality of his writing, prioritising instead the transparentness of its content. This is because I do not in this thesis study his poetry as poetry, but as a presentation of a pattern of thinking.



### 3. Background

#### 3.1 The scholar-poet

##### 3.1.1 Anne Carson as interpreter/interpreted

Scholarship on Anne Carson is substantial and ongoing, and not least interested in teasing out the intricacies of what is sometimes a fine tightrope walk and sometimes a gratuitous smashing of conventions of genre and form. In the last twenty years many dissertations and theses have been published on Anne Carson in the pursuit of titles and degrees in Art, Classics, and Philosophy. A recurring theme in several of these studies is, more or less explicitly, the unique position of the scholar-poet as reader and writer. Smaller studies of her work tend towards treating one text or collection as if complete onto its own, while dissertations grapple with the complexity of Carson's oeuvre, often attempting to establish a centrality in theme or function. This proves difficult, as Carson is a "poet of the moment".<sup>3</sup> The scholar-poet, with one foot in the institutions of literary criticism and their desire for scientificity of the humanities, and one in the creativity of the poetic project, has the technical knowledge of conventions required to knowledgeably break and experiment with them, and the poetic inclination to push what criticism is and can be. Carson blends time, form, and style in ways which both frustrate and intrigue – a combination which asks for scholarly attention – and moves freely between textual genres.

Craig Brian Hannaway, in his 2013 dissertation *Translations of the Self: A.E. Housman and Anne Carson, Between Scholarship and Creativity*, studies the scholar-poet as an institutionalised persona. He suggests that the popularity of the scholar-poet as a creative is partly indebted to the inclinations of those institutions of writing that offer awards, grants, fellowships and positions. That is: her success lies partly in that she writes poetry for academics. Further, her freedom of creativity in both aspects of her writing career is the result of a "grand assertion of personality"<sup>4</sup> which relies on obscurity and inaccessibility, independence of mind which, paradoxically, relies on her being the closest thing academia gets to a superstar. In the North American literary field, partly in credit to the rise of creative writing programs, aesthetic valuation lies in the hand of the institution of academia and is intimately

---

<sup>3</sup> Thorp, Jennifer R. "Prowling The Meanings: Anne Carson's *Doubtful Forms*" and "The Traitor's Symphony", University of Manchester, 2014, 7

<sup>4</sup> Hannaway, Craig Brian. *Translations of the Self: A.E. Housman and Anne Carson, Between Scholarship and Creativity*, Durham University, 2013, 77

tioned to literary production. “Originality,” Hannaway suggests, has paradoxically “become institutionalised, and the avant-garde is simultaneously the literary establishment.”<sup>5</sup>

While Hannaway’s interest very much lies in Carson as persona, and attempts to establish the nature of her “creative project”,<sup>6</sup> and my study begins and leads elsewhere, his argument that “the matrix of ideas she develops in this work of scholarship is a significant influence upon her subsequent creative work”<sup>7</sup> is central to my understanding of the scholar poet as not scholar and poet but precisely scholar-poet. Carson’s academic work being consistently interrelated with her creative work in a cyclical feedback-loop is at the basis of my treatment of Carson’s texts not chronologically but as textual events part of a greater schematics – forming the basis of poetics. Hannaway performs close readings of several of the texts that I will handle in my own study, and while his questions and conclusion reside in a place not very distant but certainly separate from my own, his analysis of those texts and of Carson’s “poetic obsessions” aligns at several points with mine. Particularly, his assertion that Carson is inclined to stress “the inadequacy of words and consequent dismantling of language [as well as] the meaning of empty space on the page”.<sup>8</sup>

In 2014, a year after Hannaway’s study of Carson’s place in the institutionalised modernity of the North American literary world, Jennifer R Thorp published her unique dissertation *Prowling The Meanings: “Anne Carson’s Doubtful Forms” and “The Traitor’s Symphony”*, the first half of which is an insightful tracing of Carson’s resistance to form as an example of modern poetry, and the second half of which is an experimental novel. She, like Hannaway, aims to produce a “definition of Carson’s characteristics as a poet”.<sup>9</sup> She suggests and deconstructs categorisations of Carson as modernist or postmodern poet, suggesting a fitting term for her is “self-conscious”<sup>10</sup> and further that “all aspects of Carson’s work are heavily interrelated, part of the same poetic, experimental mission”<sup>11</sup> which is defined by uneasiness. Where her study lies is in Carson as particularly suited for discussing the limits of poetry, a conclusion that supports my study, and how these may be the future of poetry.<sup>12</sup> A poet with such disregard for convention as to endlessly frustrate critics, who are then led to

---

<sup>5</sup> Hannaway, 84

<sup>6</sup> Hannaway, 126

<sup>7</sup> Hannaway, 117

<sup>8</sup> Hannaway, 168

<sup>9</sup> Thorp, 8

<sup>10</sup> Thorp, 15

<sup>11</sup> Thorp 19

<sup>12</sup> Thorp, 25

claim that her fragmentary form is the result of an inability to produce good conventional poetry,<sup>13</sup> intensifies places where lines have been drawn in the sand – and perhaps points out that those lines are drawn in malleable sand, not concrete.

Thorp also performs close readings of several of Carson's texts. Primarily her interest lies in *Nox* and *The Glass Essay*, two texts which I do not study. The first half of her analysis studies *Nox* – an elegy to dead brothers – in which she argues Carson destabilises the elegy by denying it its conventionalised form. Carson returns to the origin of elegy, historically and linguistically, and thus returns to and casts light on the possibility of *poiesis* – which Thorp defines as “the emergence of form and light from darkness”.<sup>14</sup> The second half of the analysis argues that *The Glass Essay* along with two shorter texts interrogate “the capacities of language, its facility for genuine representation”,<sup>15</sup> an interrogation which lands in deep scepticism and doubt. This doubt of language, as Thorp points out, however characteristic of the modernist movement and entrenched in the theories of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century it is, is an ancient problem.<sup>16</sup>

In Carson this doubt is not a pessimistic one. Thorp carefully negotiates Carson's texts to show an incorporation of hope for the future of language, which she illuminates through Austro-Hungarian theorist Fritz Mauthner, a pre-Beckett and pre-Wittgenstein writer who shares with Carson an insistence on process despite apparent futility.<sup>17</sup> Thorp identifies several manifestations of Mauthnerian scepticism in Carson's investigation of the limits of language. The first is Carson's juxtaposition of “self-consciously authoritative language” with “decidedly non-authoritative language”<sup>18</sup> as “not just a communication failure but a revision of all modes that hope to codify [language].”<sup>19</sup> The second is the impossibility of communication between speakers, the failure of bonds across linguistic barriers, which simultaneously empowers and disempowers the reader as the outside-figure, the anthropologist, who has both insight into where communicative errors occur and an utter powerlessness to interfere. Thorp frames this as a productive space, which invites the reader to work. Here Thorp is approaching the gap this thesis is attempting to fill: interrogation of the reader as writer, the active

---

<sup>13</sup> Hannaway, 149

<sup>14</sup> Thorp, 47

<sup>15</sup> Thorp, 66

<sup>16</sup> Thorp, 67

<sup>17</sup> Thorp, 72

<sup>18</sup> Thorp, 75

<sup>19</sup> Thorp, 77

participation and production of the critic. The third and final “rupturing of code [...] the one that creates the most possibilities for Mauthnerian ‘redemption’, is that of the pairing between the author and the reader.”<sup>20</sup> Thorp centers the unsaid as a space of productivity – precisely what my first analytical section tends to – but does not move away from interpreting Carson to the act of interpretation as I will do.

A final point on Thorp’s dissertation is that she begins to approach a poetics of Anne Carson. In the texts she has studied, Carson manifests scepticism so utterly as to place language in direct danger of failure, only to then “enact a complex ‘rescue’”.<sup>21</sup> Her work pursues Mauthnerian redemption of language as capable of constructing meaning by enacting “a form-model that will somehow sustain the ‘pulling pulling pulling’ of communicative desire through language”. Reading Carson in this way, as active interrogation of language, a theoretical experiment, a *poetics* – defined as active theory<sup>22</sup> – is what my thesis does, and what is common in Carson-scholarship: studying Carson as interpreter and critic in order to investigate the nature of criticism and hermeneutics. For Thorp, “the instability inherent in contemporaneous criticism may be the best fit to grapple with” Carson,<sup>23</sup> a statement I fully agree with. Further, Carson – as a scholar-poet – may be the best fit to grapple with the instability inherent in 20<sup>th</sup> century and contemporaneous criticism: the hermeneutic problem.

### 3.1.2 The hermeneutic problem

Thorp references doubt as characteristic of the modernist movement and central to theorists working in the late 20th century. A thorough insight into this understanding of the literary discourse of the time is presented in Elizabeth Coles’ 2013 dissertation *Anne Carson: the Ethics and Erotics of Interpretation*. Coles details the history and implications of literary hermeneutics through its close sister: the hermeneutics of the Independent tradition of psychoanalysis, which broke with Freud’s school in the early half of the century. The tradition – both psychoanalytical and literary – that grew throughout the 20th century and continues to grow is resistance to hermeneutic sovereignty, in order that the object of interpretation retains its autonomy. Coles consistently proffers examples of literary theorists

---

<sup>20</sup> Thorp, 81

<sup>21</sup> Thorp, 101

<sup>22</sup> Such is the understanding of “poetics” as this thesis understands it: the implications of certain structures within poetic language

<sup>23</sup> Thorp, 103

who share with the Independent tradition “an academised doubt”<sup>24</sup> and a preoccupation with the survival of the object of interpretation, naming Theodor Adorno as a crucial bridge in the importation of hermeneutic anxiety into the humanities in attacking “the critic’s sovereign gesture”<sup>25</sup> and monumentalising incomprehensibility as inherent to art. This 55 years after Friedrich Schlegel’s “On Incomprehensibility” in which he – in a suggestively structuralist way – writes that “words often understand themselves better than do those who use them”.<sup>26</sup>

In tracing the hermeneutic problem in the Independent tradition, Coles exposes the power of the interpreter over the object of study. This position of hermeneutic sovereignty relies on a posture of objectivity. The Independent tradition’s split from Freud’s inner circle was in part due to critique towards objectivity for the sake of engaging the interpretive encounter as a space of open discussion, where the subconscious is affirmed in its unreadability. An object’s resistance to interpretation, Coles writes, affirms its existence, the reality of experience, as separate from the interpreter.<sup>27</sup> Herein lies creative potential that is unlike the brute force of imposing oneself on the object of interpretation, it is a *poesis*, – in Thorp spelled *poiesis* – understood from the Greek as “creation of a work and/or the arising of creative forms of thinking and knowing”,<sup>28</sup> rather than a one-directional naming. In literary studies, naming takes the form of claims on or imposing of meanings onto the literary text, rather than allowing it to survive as an object in itself, incomprehensible and luminous.

Coles central claim is that Carson has made the exchange from the violent sovereignty of interpretation to the erotics of interpretation.<sup>29</sup> The erotics of interpretation is a recurring idea which recalls Plato’s idea of the beautiful, and the response of passionate longing to it. Daniel L. Tate helpfully traces Plato in Nehamas and Gadamer in a 2015 article published in the *Journal of Aesthetics and Phenomenology*. Beauty, he argues, as well as a response of desire and passion that drives us to know and understand the object, is what connects the hermeneutic inclinations of these two thinkers. Reading Nehamas’ *eros* in Gadamer, he writes: “Addressed by the work, we respond to its claim upon us as a call that issues from the

---

<sup>24</sup> Coles, Elizabeth. *Anne Carson – the Ethics and Erotics of Interpretation*, Queen Mary, University of London, 2013, pg. 7

<sup>25</sup> Coles, 21 and Theodor Adorno quoted in Coles, 22

<sup>26</sup> Schlegel, Friedrich and Firchow, Peter (trans.) “On Incomprehensibility” in *Friedrich Schlegel’s Lucinde and the Fragments*, University of Minnesota Press, Minnesota, 1971, 260

<sup>27</sup> See Coles, 36 and 47

<sup>28</sup> Coles, 33

<sup>29</sup> Coles, 4

work itself and that calls us to understand what it says.”<sup>30</sup> It is implicitly Gadamer, whose magnum opus *Truth and Method* [Wahrheit und Methode] was published in 1960, or at least the tradition he writes within that Sontag’s 1966 essay “Against Interpretation” is referencing. She urges that we discontinue hermeneutics as an act of violence upon the text and replace it with erotics which allows for continued appreciation of the “highest, most liberating value in art – and in criticism – today. [...] Experiencing the luminousness of the thing itself, of things being what they are.”<sup>31</sup> A similar insistence is made by Tom Mullins in a 1985 issue of *Irish Educational Studies* in which he writes that modern literature students are not being taught to read properly. The simile he chooses is that when Apollo, the god of Intellect, chased the nymph Daphne she turned from live flesh to hardened wood, but when Dionysus engaged in a relationship with Eros based on promise of joy and fulfilment, he “suffered few disappointments”.<sup>32</sup> However, as is clear from Mullins examples, both the ruinous and the productive come from the same base movement: a desire towards an other.

A substantial part of Coles’ dissertation consist of her reading of Roland Barthes, which is under-examined in her Anglo-American context.<sup>33</sup> In 1966, the same year as Gadamer published *Truth and Method*, Barthes published *Criticism and Truth*. Where Gadamer certainly leaves room for an erotics in his method of hermeneutics, as argued by both Tate and, in the Polish Journal of Aesthetics article “Is the Hermeneutic Interpretation of Art Erotic? A Reader of Gadamer Responds to Sontag’s Challenge” by Dominika Czakon, Barthes explicitly phrases reading as desire.<sup>34</sup> The over-representation of the reader in a neutral position is due to the over-representation of “The Death of the Author” (1967) in which those arguments are put forth. Coles argues that eros is not merely present in Barthes understanding of the reader, but fully depended upon.<sup>35</sup> Barthes writes that criticism must use the language of the text it is interpreting, it must “echo the work”, or else it falls into self-involved delusion. Schlegel similarly claimed, in the Lyceum fragments, that critique of

---

<sup>30</sup> Tate, Daniel L. “Erotics or Hermeneutics? Nehamas and Gadamer on Beauty and Art”, *Journal of Aesthetics and Phenomenology*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2015, 7-29, 21

<sup>31</sup> Sontag, Susan. *Against Interpretation*. [New ed.]. Vintage, 1994, 9

<sup>32</sup> Mullins, Tom. “Erotics not Hermeneutics”, *Irish Educational Studies*, vol. 5, no. 1, 1985, 58

<sup>33</sup> Coles, 24

<sup>34</sup> As argued and quoted by Coles, 146

<sup>35</sup> Coles, 149

poetry must occur in the language of poetry.<sup>36</sup> Coles contextualises this as such: “Criticism is, rather, an intertext of the work of art”<sup>37</sup> and the scholar-poet is the culmination of this notion.

“What joins erotic and literary relations in the realm of ethics,” Coles argues, “is the question of possession, the shifting parameters of difference, separateness, desire, and union.” Where Carson is successful in her surrender of hermeneutic sovereignty is in the acknowledgement that eros – desire for the other – is invariably accompanied by *aidos*: “the mutual intuitive sensing felt by each for the status of the other, a sensitivity with regard to where the boundary lies between them.”<sup>38</sup> Understanding eros as integral to a reader’s engagement with a work of art, we can see that the hermeneutic problem lies in failure to acknowledge *aidos*. Carson names this failure *hubris*, the indignity of interpretation that assumes the position of objectivity and rather than engaging the encounter, imposes on the object. Coles reads Carson as offering a vocabulary – and practical examples – for understanding the limitations of interpretation which resides in the dichotomy of *hubris* on the one hand and eros/*aidos* on the other.

Reading eros is understanding reading as relationships, defined by difference and connection which I will expand on in my own thesis. Coles frames eros in Carson’s work in two interesting ways. On the one hand in her intertextual relationships, her writing about and with other writers. Carson’s texts are, according to Coles, “exercises in the undoing of criticism as hermeneutic sovereignty, reimagining it as ethico-erotic relationship.”<sup>39</sup> Coles studies these intertextual relationships both outside Carson’s texts and within them. On the one hand, she studies Carson in relation to an American scholar-poet who is her contemporary: Susan Howe. This allows Coles to consider the scholar-poet’s place in the lineage of the hermeneutic problem in a persuasive way. On the other hand Coles reads eros in Carson’s auto-poesis or auto-poetics. She borrows the term auto-poetics from Mark McGurl, who studies the relationship between the Creative Writing Programme and its academic perception, claiming that it is a useful way of understanding the kind of writing Carson does, one which “has absorbed (and, in its language, performs) its own criticism, theorising its own workings and forcing us to rethink the relationship between academic criticism and its

---

<sup>36</sup> Görner, Rüdiger. “Poetik der Kritik – Ästhetik des Deutens”, *Journal of Literary Theory*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2020, 33

<sup>37</sup> Coles, 162

<sup>38</sup> Carson quoted by Coles, 6

<sup>39</sup> Coles, 15-16

object.”<sup>40</sup> Coles claims that autopoiesis, Carson’s relationality, her self-theorisation, is “her most radical gesture”<sup>41</sup> in which she subverts hierarchies of hermeneutics and suggests criticism as the extension of the poetic object.<sup>42</sup> Where Coles leaves off, and where I wish to pick up, is in this focus on the critical as an extension of the poetic.

The line between scholarship and creativity is continually coming into focus in this new century. Stephen Benson and Clare Connors anthology *Creative Criticism* from 2014 features Barthes and Derrida alongside Carson in an attempt to reframe criticism around the encounter. “Creative criticism” they suggest, “is a response in writing to the encounter”.<sup>43</sup> Criticism must, they suggest, “do justice to what can happen – does happen, when we are with an artwork” and write out that encounter. We arrive here at *withness*,<sup>44</sup> a phenomenon which is central to Carson’s intertextualities, and which she names as such in her critical work *The Economy of the Unlost*. *Withness* is a gesture of *aidos*, Coles writes, in which the “language and versification of criticism are led by its object, pulsing out of the original.”<sup>45</sup> *Withness* as creative criticism is perhaps a fair description of what this thesis aims to do: write out the encounters, the in-between motions and gestures of texts and their readers.

Much debt is to be paid in this thesis to the work outlined above, and to studies on smaller scale which will occur throughout my analysis. Hannaway and Thorp, but most thoroughly Coles, provide theses which push Carson-scholarship forward, into the deeply theoretical and institutional territory of questioning the future of poetry and of academic relation to and engagement with poetry. Coles also teases out the idea of play that you will see sketched below, though I will resist her psychoanalytical roots for the sake of following Bakhtinian and Deleuzian legacies in Julia Kristeva and the Canadian Brian Massumi to navigate textual relationships. Coles further begins a broader scholar-poet study by framing Susan Howe, and I wish to perform a further broadening – which is why the phenomenon of the scholar-poet and the future of critique in the context of academia in Sweden, Denmark,

---

<sup>40</sup> Coles, 33

<sup>41</sup> Coles, 19

<sup>42</sup> Coles, 128

<sup>43</sup> Benson, Stephen (ed.); Connors, Clare (ed.) *Creative Criticism: An Anthology and Guide*, Edinburgh University Press, 2014, 6

<sup>44</sup> “withness” or “with-ness” is used by Carson in *Economy of the Unlost* and *Decreation* as well as extrapolated by Coles to describe Carson’s interpretive gestures. Coles defines it as such: “‘withness’ means writing ‘with’ the idiom of the critical object to ensure that object endures, so that the relation it sets up is one of *aidos* and not *hubris*.”, 83-84

<sup>45</sup> Coles, 86



and Germany will be acknowledged. The life and after-life of the poem is of great interest to scholars active there.

## 3.2 Key theoretical concepts

### 3.2.1 A transactive system of art

This thesis argues for the aesthetic and poetic qualities of criticism, which place it within the same transactive system of art in which poetic texts are transferred. This transactive system is borrowed from the basis of new historicism, particularly as presented by Stephen Greenblatt in *Shakespearean Negotiations: the Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England*. While this thesis is not a new historicist study, the assumptions and articulations of historical interpretation as suggested by Greenblatt function in place of Coles' use of psychoanalysis. New historicism, which Greenblatt continuously attempts to rename a poetics of culture, studies how literary works survive their circumstances. In "The Circulation of Social Energy", he writes that: "The 'life' that literary works seem to possess long after both the death of the author and the death of the culture for which the author wrote is the historical consequence, however transformed and refashioned, of the social energy initially encoded in those works."<sup>46</sup> We can thus see a parallel preoccupation with the survival of the object, not in the moment of immediate interpretation but when that interpretation occurs across temporal distance.

Like other theorists of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, Greenblatt ponders the gaps, the unknown and unknowable. His solution to the problem of hermeneutics is embracing the impossibility of structurally recapturing the past, the inconclusiveness of the project, and he offers in compensation another sort of satisfaction: "insight into the half-hidden cultural transactions through which great works of art are empowered."<sup>47</sup> The power he refers to is not authorial genius, any originary moment, or blazing genesis of a work of art. Instead, the aesthetic power of the poetic object is generated through cultural transactions and over time. He names this power *energeia*, from the Greek word which has become our "energy", and which accumulates as a text is traded, transformed, and translated. "We identify *energeia* only indirectly," he writes, "by its effects".<sup>48</sup> In the introduction to *The New Historicism*, H. Aram Veeser writes: "Circulations, negotiation, exchange – these and other marketplace metaphors characterise New Historicists' working vocabulary, as if to suggest the ways capitalism

---

<sup>46</sup> Greenblatt, Stephen. *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England*, University of California Press, Los Angeles, 1988, 6

<sup>47</sup> Greenblatt, 4

<sup>48</sup> Greenblatt, 6

envelops not just the text but also the critic.”<sup>49</sup> The suggestion of an economy of art in which texts gain capital in transactive events is crucial to my understanding of poetic criticism. Poetry and politics, new historicism argues, as well as poetry and criticism, I argue, are part of the same network: they transpire within the same system.

Greenblatt writes that tracing these systems of exchange in the margins of the artwork and in the surrounding capitalist system in which art takes its shape offers a satisfactory way to engage with history and interpret the object of art while allowing it its unknowable quality. Bann, who claims to perform new historicism in his chapter of Veeseer’s collection, analyses the materialisation of the past through interpretive work. He calls this a “rhetoric of evocation, in which objects, texts and images all contribute...”<sup>50</sup> New historicism works to engage those liminal and peripheral objects of interpretation, which can then provide insight into a past which is impossible to reconstruct. These peripheral objects signal the lived presence of the object of interpretation. This is not to say that new historicism is exempt from the anxiety of interpretation. This anxiety is layered within Greenblatt’s originary text, and obvious to his critics. In *The New Historicism* H. Aram Veeseer collects works of new historicist analysis with critiques of it, providing as broad of a perspective on this new way of “doing history” as he can. Frank Lentricchia and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese criticise new historicism as containing foundational fallacies as a method of history, working off of flawed marxist interpretation, as well as resulting in an uncomfortable amount of unknowability. Lentricchia writes that “...from this point epistemological mayhem would appear to follow. Accordingly, the question, in what sense, if any, can a historian know his or her object of study?”<sup>51</sup> Fox-Genovese puts it in this way:

The problems of “knowing” history persists. We remain hostage not merely to the imperfection but to the impossibility of precisely recapturing the past and, in this sense, remain bound on one flank by the hermeneutic conundrum. But those constraints neither justify our abandoning the struggle nor our blindly adhering to the denial of history.<sup>52</sup>

---

<sup>49</sup> Veeseer, H. Aram (ed.). *The New Historicism*, Routledge, New York, 1989, xiv

<sup>50</sup> Bann, Stephen. “The Sense of the Past: Image, Text, and Object in the Formation of Historical Consciousness in Nineteenth-Century Britain” in *The New Historicism*, Veeseer, H. Aram (ed.). Routledge, New York, 1989, (102-115), 104

<sup>51</sup> Lentricchia, Frank. “Foucault’s Legacy: A New Historicism?” in Veeseer (ed.), (231-242), 232

<sup>52</sup> Fox-Genovese, Elizabeth. “Literary Criticism and the Politics of the New Historicism” in Veeseer (ed.), (213-224), 219-220

This criticism of new historicism as constrained or erroneous is addressed throughout my reading of Carson, in which error is reframed. The vocabulary of new historicism, wherein a poetic object is encoded with energy in its ability to transfer between modes of exchange, of which “there are many [...] their character is determined historically, and they are continually renegotiated”<sup>53</sup> allows, I will show, a new way of understanding the sort of poetics of criticism she is suggesting. The idea of a poetic object moving within and accumulating value because of a system determined by profit will be central to my study. Profit, excess value, becomes complex in Carson’s writing, especially as we begin to study it in accordance to play. The profit, we will see, needs not be economical, it can be affective.

### 3.2.2 Intertextuality

Not only is Carson’s writing consistently and explicitly intertextual, this thesis’ central question is an intertextual one, concerning the intersections and liminal space between poetry and criticism. The definition of intertextuality which will be put to use in this study is Julia Kristeva’s, who coined the phrase in the 1960s.<sup>54</sup> As a scholar placed in the interim between structuralism and poststructuralism, she provides an understanding of texts as intertextual events which is rooted in the search for scientific objectivity of high structuralism but embraces the post-structuralist idea that “pristine structuralist categories always break down under the pressure of the *other* side of language...”<sup>55</sup> Kristeva’s famous text “Word, Dialogue and Novel” can be considered a reading of formalist thinker Bakhtin, and Kristeva is credited with bringing a Bakhtinian dialogism into the West. “What allows a dynamic dimension to structuralism,” Kristeva writes, “is his conception of the ‘literary word’ as an *intersection of textual surfaces* rather than a *point* (a fixed meaning)”<sup>56</sup> Kabthiyal and Dangwal, in their contextualised presentation of Kristeva’s intertextuality, describe her work as the antithesis of the closed systems of structuralism, insistently breaking them open.<sup>57</sup> Kristeva herself lingers on the term “ambivalence”.

There is overlap between some fundamental points of Kristeva’s text and Greenblatt’s new historicism. Both agree that texts are emotionally, politically, and culturally charged:

---

<sup>53</sup> Greenblatt, 8

<sup>54</sup> Kabthiyali, Niyakati; Dangwal, Surekha. “On Kristevan Concept of Intertextuality”, *International Journal of English Language, Literature and Translation Studies*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2016, 298-303, 298

<sup>55</sup> Kristeva, Julia and Moi, Toril (ed.). *The Kristeva Reader*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1986, 34

<sup>56</sup> Kristeva, Julia. “Word, Dialogue and Novel”, in *The Kristeva Reader*, Moi, Toril (ed.), 36

<sup>57</sup> Kabthiyali and Dangwal, 299

they are aspects of a larger system which includes both the human subject and overarching political and economic systems. Kristeva writes that “[e]verything written today unveils either the possibility or impossibility of reading and rewriting history.”<sup>58</sup> Linear history is an abstraction, she claims, from which one can infer that it cannot be grasped but must be interpreted. According to Kristeva this interpretation should be performed as a transgression of linear history “through a process of reading-writing”.<sup>59</sup> Writing is communication, according to the Bakhtinian dialogism Kristeva indulges, and writing is intertextuality. The hermeneutic anxiety of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is combated by Kristeva through systematic thought combined with radical inclusion of the ineffable.

Intertextuality, according to Kristeva, is not reducible to intersections of texts through allusion, parody or quotation, nor to the analysis of two texts against and with each other. Intertextuality is the transposition of signifying systems onto another or other signifying systems. Every signifying practise, she claims, “is a field of transpositions of various signifying systems (an inter-textuality).”<sup>60</sup> Put differently: “any text is the absorption and transformation of another ... poetic language is read as at least double.”<sup>61</sup> Kabthiyali and Dangwal mean that no one signifying practise (here, text) can produce a single and uniform meaning, a claim which is indicative of the time in which Kristeva was writing. This insistence against reducing language to a simple inference of meaning becomes Kristeva’s poetic logic. She argues that any logic which relies on a zero-one sequence, “(true-false, nothingness-notation)”<sup>62</sup> is inapplicable to poetic language. It cannot account for its operation because “1 is not a limit.”<sup>63</sup> She writes that:

It is therefore impossible to formalise poetic language according to existing logical (scientific) procedures without distorting it. A literary semiotics must be developed on the basis of a poetic logic where the concept of the *power of the continuum* would embody the 0-2 interval, a continuity where 0 denotes and 1 is implicitly transgressed.<sup>64</sup> (Emphasis added)

---

<sup>58</sup> Kristeva, in Moi (ed.), 56

<sup>59</sup> Kristeva, in Moi (ed.), 36

<sup>60</sup> Kristeva quoted in Kabthiyali and Dangwal, 299

<sup>61</sup> Kristeva, in Moi (ed.), 37

<sup>62</sup> Kristeva, in Moi (ed.), pg. 40

<sup>63</sup> Kristeva, in Moi (ed.), 41

<sup>64</sup> Kristeva, in Moi (ed.), pg 41

Kristeva's rejection of "notions of definition, determination, the sign "=" and the very concept of sign, which presuppose a vertical (hierarchical) division between signifier and signified"<sup>65</sup> is absolutely central to understanding language as transgression, as accumulation of meaning, which will be considered in depth in the first part of my analysis and thus forms the foundation of this thesis.

### 3.2.3 Play

Kristeva ascribes to the Lacanian idea of the human being entering language as an entering into subjectivity, that is: human being becomes the human subject embedded in and dominated by language, which precedes her existence.<sup>66</sup> This idea of language as pre-human and extra-human, is central to understanding the way in which I wish to encircle the concept of *play* in my analysis. As a phrase, play reoccurs in many of above mentioned texts. Kristeva's intertextuality comes out of Bakhtinian 'dialogism', which Toril Moi in her introduction to "Word, Dialogue and Novel" describes "as an open-ended play between the text of the subject and the text of the addressee";<sup>67</sup> Benson and Connors write that the essay as engaged by Adorno "keeps in play, keeps mobile and vivid, something that has been shut down by objectification and commodity culture";<sup>68</sup> Coles builds her dissertation on the interplay between eros and aidos in Carson's poetry, and discusses the betweenness of interpreter and object of study as a form of play: "What play plays with is betweenness: with what is neither totally inside nor outside, self nor other, subject nor object."<sup>69</sup>

Play as it takes shape in this thesis has its roots in Dutch historian and cultural theorist Johan Huizinga, but is developed out of Brian Massumi's book *What Animals Teach us About Politics*. Massumi develops Huizinga's theory in collaboration with other thinkers in a way which rigorously excavates the functions of play. Massumi, like so many late 20<sup>th</sup> century thinkers, argues against ideas of hierarchy and sovereignty. His text presents an idea of continuum that is similar to Kristeva's – suggesting transgression – and indicative of the Deleuzian legacy he is working off of. Indeed, it is from Deleuze and Guattari that he borrows the phrase *zone of indiscernibility* which is central to his continuum. He argues that

---

<sup>65</sup> Kristeva, in Moi (ed.), pg. 40

<sup>66</sup> Kabthiyali and Dangwal, 298

<sup>67</sup> Moi (ed.) Introduction to "Word, Dialogue and Novel", 34

<sup>68</sup> Benson and Connors. "Introduction" in *Creative Criticism: An Anthology and Guide*, 9

<sup>69</sup> Coles, 56

this zone is exemplified in the act of play. The play between two animals is not real combat, but also not not-combat, as it includes all the gestures of combat. It complicates the logic of categories and takes place in a zone defined by indiscernibility. He writes that

Its logic is that of mutual inclusion. Two different logics are packed into the situation. Both remain present in their difference *and* cross-participate in their performative zone of indiscernibility. Combat and play come together – and their coming-together makes three. There is one, and the other – and the *included middle* of their mutual influence. The zone of indiscernibility that is the included middle does not observe the sanctity of the separation of categories, nor respect the rigid segregation of arenas of activity.<sup>70</sup>

This included middle can, I argue, be compared to Kristeva’s poetic logic of the transgressed 1 and rejection of “=” and is an apt way to approach intertextual relationships, and indeed to approach Carson’s play with form. Combat and play “overlap in the unicity of the performance, without the distinction between them being lost. The zone of indiscernibility is not a making indifferent. On the contrary, it is where differences come actively together.”<sup>71</sup> In such a way, Carson’s writing can be both poetry and criticism without each negating the other.

Where Kristeva invited Bakhtinian dialogism to understand what happens when two things come together, Massumi approaches it with Bergsonian sympathy. Kristeva reads dialogism “as a *writing* where one reads the *other* (with no allusion to Freud) [...] Both subjectivity and communication”.<sup>72</sup> Similarly, Massumi quotes Bergson as describing sympathy as that “‘by which one is transported into the interior of an object in order to coincide with what there is unique and consequently inexpressible in it’ (2007, 135)” but adds a corrective and an extension which reads, slightly shortened, sympathy as that which “‘transports us, with a gesture effecting a transformation-in-place, into the heart of a unique event that is just beginning, with which our life will now coincide, but whose outcome is as yet unknowable, and consequently inexpressible’”.<sup>73</sup> He may as well be writing, here, about the moment of reading understood as a witness: the encounter must be approached on its own terms, and lived as it occurs. Reading literary texts as events of intertextuality, and the

---

<sup>70</sup> Massumi, Brian. *What Animals Teach Us About Politics*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2014, 6

<sup>71</sup> Massumi, 6

<sup>72</sup> Kristeva, in Moi (ed.), pg. 39

<sup>73</sup> Massumi, 32

critics engagement with them as a further transcommunicative and transformative event will allow us to understand the aesthetic qualities of criticism.

Beyond his articulation of the continuum, it is Massumi's gestures which will be key to analysing Carson's intertextual writing, not least gestures reaching across temporal distance. The most important gesture is the *ludic gesture* which is the key to play and which transforms use-value to ludic value. Rather than gesturing towards a signified, the ludic gesture is signifier that leaves the signified untouched.<sup>74</sup> It begets an aesthetic yield or excessive energy beyond instrumentality which Massumi calls active potential.<sup>75</sup> Huizinga claims at one point that play is antithetical to profit,<sup>76</sup> which Massumi disproves in this way: play is defined by profit, an accumulation and release of excess. Massumi, Kristeva, and Greenblatt's varying but compatible theories and vocabularies will come together in this thesis in order to construct an understanding the life and the after-life of the poem, as well as its potential.

---

<sup>74</sup> Description borrowed from Greenblatt in *Shakespearean Negotiations*, as he describes the gestures of theatre, 7

<sup>75</sup> Massumi, 35

<sup>76</sup> Huizinga, Johan. *Homo Ludens*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, Boston and Henley, 1949 (1944), 10



## PART II

### 4. Survival

Foam is the sign of an artist who has sunk his hands into his own story,  
and also of a critic storming and raging in folds of his own deep theory.<sup>77</sup>

In this section, the poetic and extra-poetic works of Anne Carson constructs a theory of affect which accounts for the life of the poem. Further, it reads the literary critical text as part of the same transactive system of art as the literary text, and in part accounting for what I will refer to as the after-life of the poem through being effaced with the same poetic affect.

#### 4.1 Poetic affect

##### 4.1.1 Inherent value of the literary object

Part I has shown that the 20th century is ripe with hermeneutic anxiety, one which revolves around the survival of the object, and suggests the continuation of such a tradition in the 21st century. Elizabeth Coles suggests in her dissertation that the scholar-poet is a culmination of a tradition of anxiety through performing ethical interpretive work which engage with the textual object without sovereignty. In Carson, eros – desire for the object – is tempered by *aidos* – the admittance of the otherness of the object. Her critical gesture is different than the sovereign one Adorno warns of. Coles writes that “the privacy of the other, and the *aidos* of its acknowledgement, is one of the most basic commitments of Carson's work as a critic.”<sup>78</sup> Thus she is an ethical interpreter: she cedes to the autonomy of the text as an object, and thus does not commit the murderous error of hermeneutics that Schlegel and Sontag rage against.

What Coles does not unpack, however, is where the autonomy of the object resides. This un-scavenged ground is toed by Stephen Greenblatt in *Shakespearean Negotiations*, the originary text of new historicism, or poetics of culture, which fittingly enough begins with desire. “I began,” the first chapter opens, “with a desire to speak with the dead.” His curiosity lies in where the “compelling force” of the poetic object comes from, that which I would like to call its autonomy, but it is not where his study lies. Instead, the study is concerned with the transactive system of art which is built of a network of exchanges, monetary and otherwise.

---

<sup>77</sup> Carson, *Decreation*, 47

<sup>78</sup> Coles, pg. 80

The closest he comes to his originary question is through discrediting an aesthetic object's entrance into this network as a result of essential value, claiming it is not through any claim to genius or blazing genesis, "in which the master hand shapes the concentrated social energy into the sublime aesthetic object"<sup>79</sup> that trading begins. The only way to trace the "compelling force" of the poetic object is "indirectly, by its effects".

While his rejection of genius is appropriate, I find his evasion unsatisfactory. By tracing the effects of the aesthetic object on the reader, he fails to question the nature of the aesthetic object itself. The closest he comes to such claims is in encircling the value of the aesthetic object as its ability to cause "a stir to the mind" whether that be "disquiet, pain, fear, the beating of the heart, pity, laughter, tension, relief, wonder".<sup>80</sup> If in its initial encounter with a reader the cultural text (in this case the literary text) comes with a surge of what he calls *energeia*, if it produces pleasure, anxiety or interest, it has value within the transactive system of art. Or, as Carson puts it in her poem "Gnosticism III" in *Decreation*: "The first line has to make your brain race that's how Homer does it".<sup>81</sup> Framing *energeia* as he does, he infers that the aesthetic nature of the object is its ability to produce an effect in the reader. Through this logic, the object is aesthetic because it is not only a product, but something which produces. This, I argue, is its autonomy, its existence as not a passive object but a productive entity.

What it produces is *affect*. I refer to affect here as it is presented by Ruth Leys in the 2011 article "The Turn to Affect: A Critique": separate from emotion, a non-conscious, non-signifying intensity.<sup>82</sup> The release of affect from the poetic object often results in emotion – Greenblatt lists many of them as effects of reading – but emotions are inherent to the reader, not the object. The non-signifying aspect of affect is key: affect consists of signification which leaves the signified untouched, it is a movement outwards which has no goal beyond "a stir to the mind", an intensification. Gunnar D. Hansson writes in a conceptual letter to David Hume that Hume shares with Edmund Burke a judgement of art which denies mystification. "Experiences of fright, of agitation and uneasiness or of sorrow are as important as pleasure in art." ["Upplevelser av fast, av olust och oro eller av sorg är lika

---

<sup>79</sup> Greenblatt, 7

<sup>80</sup> Greenblatt, 7

<sup>81</sup> Carson, Anne. *Decreation*, Vintage Contemporaries, New York, 2006 (2005), 89

<sup>82</sup> Leys, Ruth. "The Turn to Affect: A Critique", *Critical Inquiry*, University of Chicago Press, vol. 37, no. 3, 2011, 434-472, 441

viktiga som skönhet i konsten.”]<sup>83</sup> How a poetic object produces affect is not further investigated by these writers, but the answer lies in its interior gestures and its logic, the nature of which are a negation of the “=”-sign.

#### 4.1.2 The production of affect in literary texts

The ability of an poetic object to produce affect accounts for its transactive value, and defines it as aesthetic. In “Economy: Its Fragrance” which was published in *The Threepenny Review* in 1997, in many ways a precursor to her larger economic study *Economy of the Unlost*, Carson provides an understanding of the definition of poetry which analyses its economic value through its interior gestures. In it, she suggests that while she cannot define the poetry/prose distinction, she can smell it. She says that “by thrifty management of its own measures—measures of rhythm, diction, syntax, image, and allusion—the poem secretes a residue, the poem generates a profit, the poem yields surplus value.”<sup>84</sup> There is an economic pleasure in poetry which is its defining feature: its gestures result in an overflowing beyond its measures which she means, using a simile based in the gospel of John, fills the house with the odour of ointment.<sup>85</sup> This way of forming a distinction between poetry and prose is, I believe, limiting to the poetic qualities of prose which – as we shall hopefully see throughout this analysis – also has the ability to produce surplus value. It is, however, very apt for understanding the functions of poetic language.

Residue, profit, surplus value – these are all terms which infer production and spillage, and which Carson further develops in her much lauded work *Decreation*, which in particular Carsonian fashion is subtitled “Poetry – Essays – Opera” in insistent rejection of conventions of genre. *Decreation* is the study of the unmaking of the subject, not least the interpretive subject, built on and borrowing its title from the philosophies of Simone Weil, who wished to get “the self out of the way”.<sup>86</sup> Helena von Praet in a 2020 article in *Canadian Literature* writes that the book “moves beyond a spiritual undoing of the self to an undoing of entrenched patterns of thinking.”<sup>87</sup> She, similarly to me, bases her analysis on Kristevan (Bakhtini-

---

<sup>83</sup> Hansson, Gunnar D. *Var Slutar Texten? : Tre Essäer, Ett Brev, Sex Nedslag i 1800-Talet*, Litterär Gestaltningsskriftserie: 10. Autor, 2011, 93

<sup>84</sup> Carson, Anne. “Economy, Its Fragrance”, *The Threepenny Review*, no. 69 (Spring 1997), 14-16, 15

<sup>85</sup> Carson, Economy, “Its Fragrance”, pg. 14

<sup>86</sup> Carson, *Decreation*, 167

<sup>87</sup> von Praet, Helena. “Writer’s Writer Revisits Authorship: Iteration in Anne Carson’s *Decreation*”, *Canadian Literature*, no. 241, 2020, 18-35, 19

an) dialogism. Throughout the collection the thinking figure is dismantled, from intimate poetry, to essay writing, to dialogue based opera through which there is no insight into interiority of Being, and finally ending up as a distant subject described from afar in documentary “shot list” fashion. Early in the book Carson presents what I argue is her understanding of the inherent value of the aesthetic object, and the key to understanding how the interior gestures of poetry produce affect: an essay on the Sublime.

In “FOAM (Essay with rhapsody) On the sublime in Longinus and Antonioni”<sup>88</sup> Carson splits her work in two parts: Spill and Stop. Under “Spill” she presents the sublime – in the incredibly early work of literary criticism by the Greek author Longinus – as a result of intertextuality, though she does not use that term.

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.<sup>89</sup>

The sublime occurs in the skating away. Longinus touches on Homer and Moses, reaches for them, but does not pin them down to perform a full excavation of meaning. Skating away, a leaving-things-unsaid, is the core of poetry. The beginning of the book is a collection of poems titled “Stops”.<sup>90</sup> In one of these poems, “Our Fortune,” Carson writes “In a house at dusk a mother’s final lesson / ruins the west and seals up all that trade”. In the poem “Some afternoons she does not pick up the phone” she writes “Some ice has core bits of gravel or shadows inside. / Some is smooth as flank, you cannot stand on it. / [...] / The little ones cannot stand on it. / Not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, can stand.” The poet skates from the formulation of one image to another with no warning – she rejects the idea of bridges and steps in favour of placing two things (a mother and western trade, children and letters) so close together that one might skate from one to another without thought.

This is a form of symbolic acquisition, defined by Greenblatt as social energy (energeia) transferred by means of representation. “The transferring agency has its purposes, which may be more or less overt” he writes. His examples of types of symbolic acquisition are tied to theatre, but the three forms he specifies: Acquisition through Simulation, Metaphorical Acquisition, and Acquisition through Synecdoche or Metonymy share a fairly uncompli-

<sup>88</sup> Hereafter referred to as Carson’s essay on the Sublime

<sup>89</sup> Carson, *Decreation*, 45

<sup>90</sup> Not to be confused with the section of the article on the sublime titled “Stop”.

cated transferability to the literary text, partly as theatric performance is a cultural text itself and partly as they revolve around the sign, the signifier, standing in for something. A gesture is made, either verbal or physical, towards an other in such a way that the gesture – by gesturing – denotes either part or the entirety of the other.<sup>91</sup> Such thrift of resources, a saving of time by saying little and meaning much, “yields surplus value”.

Symbolic acquisition is specified by Greenblatt in contrast to appropriation and purchase as modes of exchange. In appropriation, objects are there for the taking. In purchase, “something, often money” is paid in return for acquisition. Symbolic acquisition, however, works on the basis of representation, and something is always given in return for what is acquired, whether “implicitly or explicitly”. On the stage, the theatrical gesture – whether word or action – opens a mutual exchange: it is a gesture back and forth. If we consider this theatrical gesture a sign, which is linguistically plausible, it opens up this mutual exchange to the intertextuality of Kristeva, in which the word within the space of the text is an intersection or a mediator of meanings, not a point. Unlike monetary exchange, symbolic acquisition – I argue – does not follow the 1=1 logic of signifier to signified. Instead, it follows the poetic logic which is a dyad of “*one and other*”.<sup>92</sup>

Rejecting the “scientific abstraction” which has led to understanding a “logical system based on a zero-one sequence (true-false, nothingness-notation)” leads instead to a literary semiotics that is not a 0-1 sequence but a 0-2 interval. In it, zero denotes and 1 is implicitly transgressed on the basis of an infinity of pairings and combinations.<sup>93</sup> Pressing two images together in poetry does not denote that one is the other, stands in for the other, or can be equated to the other. It simply places them together on a continuum. The consequences of the continuum is a spillage, an overflow, or as Carson suggests: foam. To understand the spillage, we must look more closely at the transgressed 1, which we will do through the concept of play.

In *Homo Ludens*, a text which, like most of the thought that shapes the writers addressed here, was published in the twentieth century, Johan Huizinga argues that human society is not determined by reason but by play. He writes: “Animals play, so they must be more than merely mechanised things. We play and know that we play, so we must be more than merely

---

<sup>91</sup> Greenblatt, 11

<sup>92</sup> Kristeva, in Moi (ed.), 40

<sup>93</sup> Kristeva, in Moi (ed.), 40-41

rational beings, for play is irrational.”<sup>94</sup> Culture itself, he says, bears the character of play. On poetry, he writes: ”Like everything else that transcends the bounds of logical and deliberative judgement, myth and poetry both move in the play-sphere. This is not to say a lower sphere, for it may well be that myth, so playing, can soar to heights of insight beyond the realm of reason.”<sup>95</sup> This thought is central to what this thesis will come to present, but to further understand the nature of the play-sphere we turn to Brian Massumi’s study of animal play, in which he dissects the function of the moment of play in a way Huizinga’s account of human culture does not.

Massumi, like Kristeva and Carson, wishes to resist ideas of sovereignty. The hierarchy he wishes to dismantle is the one between human and animal, which he wants to replace with a continuum that relies on the idea of an included middle.<sup>96</sup> He begins with an idea of language that is similar to Kristeva, the Lacanian idea of the human being entering language as an entering into subjectivity.<sup>97</sup> Massumi writes that animal play proves animal capability of abstraction that is comparable to language, and follows its own logic. This logic is one which, like poetic logic, rejects  $1=1$ . Animal play, he says, is not real combat, but it is also not not-combat. It includes all the gestures of combat, but those gestures are performed as “combat-esque.”<sup>98</sup> The -esqueness of the gesture has negation as its key: “these actions [this gesture] does not denote what those actions [those gestures] for which they stand *would* denote”.<sup>99</sup> They transgress immediately beyond the 1 of the logic, and defer to a poetic logic in which  $1+1$  is 3.

Its logic is that of mutual inclusion. Two different logics are packed into the situation. Both remain present in their difference *and* cross-participate in their performative zone of indiscernibility. Combat and play come together – and their coming-together makes three. There is one, and the other – and the *included middle* of their mutual influence. The zone of indiscernibility that is the included middle does not observe the sanctity of the separation of categories, nor respect the rigid segregation of arenas of activity.<sup>100</sup>

---

<sup>94</sup> Huizinga, 4

<sup>95</sup> Huizinga, 129

<sup>96</sup> Massumi, 6

<sup>97</sup> Kabthiyali and Dangwal, 298

<sup>98</sup> Massumi, 9

<sup>99</sup> Bateson quoted in Massumi, 5

<sup>100</sup> Massumi, 34

Combat and play “overlap in the unicity of the performance, without the distinction between them being lost. The zone of indiscernibility is not a making indifferent. On the contrary, it is where differences come actively together.”<sup>101</sup> Here is the transgressed 1, become included. When differences come actively together, they do not blend. Like waves rushing together, they produce foam. Foam as a symbol, like the smell of ointment, has the attribute of expansion. It bubbles up, it takes up room that is not equal to the sum of the parts.

The zone of indiscernibility allows for the autonomy of the object, as an inherent aspect of Schegelian incomprehensibility. Like the eros/aidos divide, Massumi approaches the object not with hierarchical intent, but with the concept of sympathy, borrowed from Bergson. Massumi writes:

Bergson proposes a concept designed to replace the notion of cognition, so woefully misplaced with respect to instinct as lived intuition. Instinct, Bergson says, is not cognitive. It is sympathetic. And he couldn't say it any more clearly: “*instinct is sympathy*” (Bergson 1998, 176; emphasis added). “We call intuition here the sympathy by which one is transported into the interior of an object in order to coincide with what there is unique and consequently inexpressible in it”<sup>102</sup>

On sympathy, Carson writes that: “the term implies some shared movement of soul between writer and reader, as if words could have a power to enter the reader and design an emotion from inside his own voice.”<sup>103</sup> This consideration of a complex, inter-personal encounter between text and reader allows for the unique inexpressible, and leaves room for the survival of the autonomy of the object. It does not impose on Sontag's “luminousness of the thing itself” or Schlegel's fascination with the inexpressible<sup>104</sup> – it celebrates it.

If we consider the intertextual event of the literary text as a space of mutual inclusion, in which there is slippage between unlimited signifieds, and there is no fixed point to be isolated – if we consider the literary text as an arena of play, it becomes clear how its gestures produces a spillage of affect. The gestures within literary texts are, as Greenblatt voiced, not directed in one way. In Massumi's vocabulary, they are ludic gestures. A ludic gesture is one which transforms use-value to ludic value, and by doing so begets an excessive energy

---

<sup>101</sup> Massumi, 6

<sup>102</sup> Massumi, 32

<sup>103</sup> Carson, Anne. *Economy of the Unlost: reading Simonides of Keos with Paul Celan*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1999, ebook provided by The Internet Archive, archive.org, 84

<sup>104</sup> Schlegel, 259

beyond instrumentality which he also calls an “aesthetic yield”. Following poetic logic, it transgresses, and thus produces a surplus value, “irreducibly qualitative, actively flush with the living”<sup>105</sup> which Massumi, quoting Deleuze, calls “reciprocal potentialization” or “a power of the false in that it ‘posits the simultaneity of impossible presents’ in its instantaneous back-and-forthing”.<sup>106</sup> A ludic gesture is thus defined through negation, and reaches simultaneously towards many potential and possible signifieds, and becomes a producer of affect.

Greenblatt’s original question was how an object is initially encoded with *energeia*, and I have provided a possible answer: through following a poetic logic that relies on an included middle, expressed through ludic gestures that produce affect. It is that affect that is felt in the reader as *energeia*, and which Carson identifies in *Economy, Its Fragrance* as the smell of ointment, the economic quality of the poem residing in its thrifty gestures which raise the poem “beyond its paraphrasable content”. Greenblatt identifies that it is this affect which initiates a poetic object into a transactive system of arts, and engagement in that system is what ensures its survival, propels it through time.

I have accounted above for the life of the poem, and next its after-life must be discussed. In *Economy, Its Fragrance* Carson begins this discussion, and she continues it in *Economy of the Unlost*. A literary object produces affect, but it also generates interest, a phenomena for which Carson centers the notion of debt. A idea of life as debt originated with Simonides, who wrote the famous epitaph: “We are all debts owed to Death”.<sup>107</sup> When the poet Theodoros, who Carson discusses at length in *Economy, Its Fragrance* died, he paid his debt. However, “[h]is debt may be paid but his interest is rising. The poem that maintains his interest does so by a subversive economic action.”<sup>108</sup> This interest, like the poetic word, must be read at least double. The poem accumulates interest in the form of increased value over time, and as it does it catches the interest of the reader. Theodoros poem continues to be read not only as poetry but as an insight into a history which is hard to read, and every time it is read, “we can feel a residue of Theodoros loose in this room like a perfume.”<sup>109</sup> The spilling of affect that the play of the poem produces generates emotional response in a reader who

---

<sup>105</sup> Massumi, 10

<sup>106</sup> Massumi, 25

<sup>107</sup> Quoted in Carson, *Economy of the Unlost*, 80

<sup>108</sup> Carson, “Economy, Its Fragrance”, 15

<sup>109</sup> Carson, “Economy, Its Fragrance”, 15



then reaches back towards the object. Carson calls it desire for the object, and it is what comes out of that desire – what continues the rising of interest – that I will consider next.

## 4.2 Productive affect

### 4.2.1 The desert of after-Proust

One of the foundational conditions for a poetic object's survival through time is, Greenblatt writes, a minimal range. That is, its ability to produce affect in a minimal amount of people to begin to be traded amongst them. It must also have minimal adaptability, so as to continue to be productive beyond its initial context.<sup>110</sup> By generating affective profit, the poetic text makes sure the initial transaction, that between poet and text, is not the final transaction. Carson, as quoted above, frames this in direct relation to the survival not only of the text but of the poet. She further writes: “the poem yields surplus value: lifting Theodoros past the termination of his debt into an endless extra space and time on the far side of restitution”<sup>111</sup> and “Poetry is an act of memory [...] transforming what is innumerable and headed for oblivion into a timeless notation.”<sup>112</sup> Whenever we, once again, read Theodoros, we pull him from the grave and into our reading moment, “beyond the terms set by Death” thus “[d]is-mantling the axiom of exchange that says there is no such thing as grace in economics.”<sup>113</sup>

It is in this rising to life that we must begin if we are to understand how critical writing is part of a poetic logic, and thus of a poetic system of transaction. To begin, I shall provide a metaphor by Carson, given in an introductory talk before a live reading of her book *The Albertine Workout*, a collection of 59 paragraphs on the character of Albertine in Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* which is beautifully poised between criticism and poetry. She tells the audience that the reason she wrote this book is because after she finished reading Proust, she encountered the desolate landscape of having no more Proust to read. She names this landscape ‘the desert of after-Proust’.<sup>114</sup> The picture of the desert is poignant: a reader, bereft. It is a geographical manifestation of the “absent presence of eros”, the lesson a reader must learn that a relationship with a text is also a rift: the lesson of *aidos*. She is describing an experience of lack as the perception of absence.

“To feel the joy of the Sublime,” Carson writes in her essay on the Sublime in *Decreation*, “is to be inside creative power for a moment, to share a bit of electric extra life with the

---

<sup>110</sup> Massumi, 6

<sup>111</sup> Carson, “Economy, Its Fragrance”, 15

<sup>112</sup> Carson, “Economy, Its Fragrance”, 16

<sup>113</sup> Carson, “Economy, Its Fragrance”, 15

<sup>114</sup> Watt, Adam. “Poetry as Creative Critique”, *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies*, vol. 20, no. 4-5, 2016, 648-656, 648

artist's invention, to spill with him."<sup>115</sup> While reading Proust leaves one flooded with affect, covered in foam, there comes a moment when it fades away, and it becomes clear that the poem is not flush against you. In *Economy of the Unlost*, she touches on this lack as a uniquely poetic experience. She writes:

The poet is someone who feasts at the same table as other people. But at a certain point he feels a lack. He is provoked by a perception of absence within what others regard as a full and satisfactory present. His response to this discrepancy is an act of poetic creation. [...] You might see this as a transcendent example of what Marx calls "surplus value," when a poet decides to double the negative of death and say 'No' to oblivion.<sup>116</sup>

She extends this claim when she notes that the desert is not empty. It is inhabited, Carson writes, by biographies, word-indexes, and literary studies on Proust.<sup>117</sup> It is for this reason I refer to the continued survival of the literary object not as its life, but as its after-life. Like the desert, it bears the lesson of *aidos*. As temporal distance from the originary moment of inscription grows, so does the illusion of death. The negation of this illusion, the gentle spillage of continued life, is not the poems' afterlife, as in ghostly half-presence, but its after-life: the moment in which its absent presence turns productive. The hand that writes in the desert of after-Proust, does so with foam on her fingers.

In "Poetik der Kritik" [The Poetics of Criticism], Rüdiger Görner suggests that the critic does the work of giving the poet durability through reflection. He quotes Kames, author of *Elements of Criticism*:

The science of rational criticism tends to improve the heart no less than the understanding. It tends, in the first place, to moderate the selfish affections: by sweetening and harmonizing the temper, it is a strong antidote to the turbulence of passion, and violence of pursuit [...] (ebd., 9).<sup>118</sup>

Critical texts, like autobiographies and word-indexes, are those cultural texts through which Greenblatt can feel the effects of *energeia*, they are signs of overflowing affect,

---

<sup>115</sup> Carson, *Decreation*, 46

<sup>116</sup> Carson, *Economy of the Unlost*, 108

<sup>117</sup> Carson, Anne. "Reading of '59 Paragraphs About Albertine' at the Mercantile Library Center for Fiction." *YouTube*. YouTube, 10 September 2013. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?vDofR3Qd2E\\_A0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?vDofR3Qd2E_A0)

<sup>118</sup> Görner, Rüdiger. "Poetik der Kritik – Ästhetik des Deutens", *Journal of Literary Theory*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2020, 44

become productive. It is the double-read interest – also desire for the object – which, as interest is wont to do, rises and accumulates exponentially. The reader, in the desert, becomes writer and when she does the accumulated interest, the profit of the poem, re-enters the economy. Hansson agrees that

There is, in the call and response world of literature and art, a potential for survival which through its existential power and transgressive ability defies most predictions of dilution and withering.

[I litteraturens och konstens värld av tilltal och svar finns en överlevnads-potential som genom sin existensiella kraft och överskridande förmåga trotsar de flesta förutsägelser om uttunning och försvagning.]<sup>119</sup>

Through analysing a piece of literary text, a critic is attempting to trace its ludic gestures, which cannot be done without representing them. Thus, in the simplest manner, we can see that critics play a direct role in the transactive system which keeps an object of art alive. It does so by symbolic acquisition: by quoting and referencing, establishing an intertextual relationship by isolating one part or attribute “which then stands for the whole (often a whole that cannot be represented).”<sup>120</sup> Critical texts are one economic force which enters a poetic object into a system of transaction by flushing against poetic objects, transferring the affective power of poetry. Whether the mode of transference is word-indexes, biographies, or literary analysis, Proust is gently spilled again by being gestured towards. Either through descriptive prose or quotes, a piece of criticism brings the poem to the textual event of the criticism, keeping it alive.

Greenblatt, in Veenser’s *The New Historicism*, which wishes to “establish the range and urgency of the New Historicist inquiry”,<sup>121</sup> writes that

We need to develop these terms [allusion, symbolisation, allegorisation, representation, and above all mimesis; terms for the relationship between a work of art and the historical events to which it refers] to describe the ways in which material – here official documents, private papers, newspaper clippings, and so forth – is transferred from one discursive sphere to another and becomes aesthetic property.<sup>122</sup>

---

<sup>119</sup> Hansson, 76-77

<sup>120</sup> Greenblatt, 11

<sup>121</sup> Veenser, “Introduction”, xi

<sup>122</sup> Greenblatt, 11

He means to study the anecdotal evidence of history to capture the stray motions of affective energy that resides there, or frame them as vehicles for poetic affect. By doing so, he simultaneously claims the aesthetic value of the non-poetic text. Here we arrive at a central claim of this thesis: literary criticism has poetic value.

#### 4.2.2 The ludic gestures of criticism

Reconsidering the desert not as empty but populated by post-Proust writings transforms the desolate empty space into space of potentiality. Critical texts employ symbolic acquisition the result of which is a ludic gesture. To understand how these gestures can look, I will look at *The Albertine Workout* as critical and poetic, ciphering the places in which those things converge, as well as look at the critic as writer presented in Carson's self-reflexive essays and critical works. *The Albertine Workout* consists of 59 paragraphs which are described by Adam Watt in "Poetry as Creative Critique: Notes from the Desert of After-Proust (on Anne Carson's *The Albertine Workout*)" as "a contribution to critical commentary on Proust's work," which "interacts with the existing literature, suggests connections and paths one might pursue, whilst also being a creative work, a carefully crafted meta-literary construct."<sup>123</sup> Here he has framed what I argue is the key to understanding criticism as having poetic, aesthetic value. That is: its interactive qualities, which employ the potentialities of the poetic gestures of Proust by walking the gestures out, suggesting them as paths.

In writing about Albertine, Carson reaches through Proust plucking facts about a difficult to grasp character in order to "work out" what she is about. The functions of this engagement with the text is given context in another one of Carson's books: *Plainwater*, subtitled "Essays and Poetry". *Plainwater* is split into five parts. In "Part IV, The Lives of Towns" she precedes a collection of poems with an introduction that deconstructs and re-legitimises the concept of towns. "Towns are the illusion that things hang together somehow, my pear, your winter"<sup>124</sup> she begins. This hanging together, or witness, is more complicated than sameness. Sameness has no place in towns, which is "matter which has painted itself within lines". Consider a poem a town, framed by the emptiness of the surrounding page,

---

<sup>123</sup> Watt, 649

<sup>124</sup> Carson, Anne. *Plainwater*, Vintage Contemporaries, New York, 2000 (1995), 93

maintained by constructed relationships. This is what Carson suggests when she insists that she is “not being trivial.”

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.

Pear and winter cannot be understood in a 1=1 logic of one is other, they must be considered as one *and* other. The one who stands where they are pressed close together is the scholar, the critic. Carson claims:

I am a scholar of towns, let God commend that. To explain what I do is simple enough. A scholar is someone who takes a position. From which position, certain lines become visible. You will think at first I am painting the lines myself; it is 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?<sup>125</sup>

The lines paint themselves: they are traceable in the interior gestures of the poem which, for the critic (scholar) take the form of paths one may choose to follow.

In his essay on *The Albertine Workout*, Watt says Carson is “stripping literary criticism back to numbered propositions in Wittgensteinian fashion”.<sup>126</sup> The tone of the book is “instructive, approachable, unfussy” and that not until paragraph six, in which Carson misattributes the number of volumes that exist in the Pleiade-edition as seven rather than four, does she introduce “the first note of playfulness.”<sup>127</sup> This is indeed playful, read by Watt as an homage to the critical tradition in the way of name-dropping while simultaneously brandishing an obvious error. This is playful in the sense of being a form of inside-joke between avid Proust-readers and critics. It is also playful in my own introduction of the term: as an intertextual gesture which negates the “=” sign, it misattributes and thus transforms the use-value of such a critical name-dropping into the ludic-value of a giggle.

However, I would like to resist the idea that this is the moment that play enters the text. The moment Carson begins to “work out” Albertine, what she writes negates the “=” sign, and thus follows Kristeva’s poetic logic. Part of this is her construction of the numbered

---

<sup>125</sup> Carson, *Plainwater*, 93

<sup>126</sup> Watt, 650

<sup>127</sup> Watt, 651

paragraphs which make a play at being orderly but immediately refuse it by skating to and from, and away. Some of the paragraphs are as follows:

3. Albertine herself is present or mentioned on 807 pages of Proust's novel.
4. On a good 19 per cent of these pages she is asleep.  
[...]
24. The state of Albertine that most pleases Marcel is Albertine asleep.
25. By falling asleep she becomes a plant, he says.

The first of these two are indexable facts, the second of which does not stand well as an isolated sentence, despite the numbering insisting it should. The second couple are less indexable facts and more literary analysis, in which Carson not only suggests a reading of Marcel but slides into a second paragraph which has the rhythm and cadence of a quote, if not the proper markings. These gestures function like the interior gestures of poetry, in which syntax, rhythm or image are first isolated as separate, then having their difference negated, their middle included as a zone of indiscernibility – where something is unsaid. They have the economic quality of thrift, which Carson has taught us spill into the room.

Towards the end of Watt's analysis of *The Albertine Workout* he quotes Harold Bloom as saying "to practice criticism, properly so-called, is to think poetically about poetic thinking".<sup>128</sup> To write literary criticism is not merely identifying the lines of the town, naming the streets, because, as Carson notes in her introduction to "The Lives of Towns": "what about variant readings?".<sup>129</sup> In poetry, there is no "=" and the same is true for criticism. The critic, as one who does hermeneutic work, does not simply amble across the page, she rages within the folds of her own theory, skates from potentiality to potentiality, foam at her mouth. Carson in her essays plays like Longinus: skates from Keats to Kafka, or flushes Homer and Virginia Woolf against each other to see what foam occurs. Görner writes that hermeneutics means, first and foremost, engaging the vague and undetermined in texts. German helpfully has two words for interpretation: "Deuten" and "Auslegen". As far as my understanding of their difference, "Deuten", coming from the word "deutlich" which means clear, regards clarification while "Auslegen", consisting of the two words "aus" and "legen", respectively "out" and "lay" and is used when referring to configuration, regards structural qualities. In our metaphor of towns, I would suggest the view comes together here. The critic must see the

---

<sup>128</sup> Bloom quoted in Watt, 655

<sup>129</sup> Carson, *Plainwater*, 93

lines, the paths, and how they converge and diverge on two scales, and must move between these, well-tempered. Interpretation, “Deuten und Auslegen” always means “diesen Zustand erleben können”<sup>130</sup> – Being able to *live/experience* this condition/state of things.<sup>131</sup>

Interpretation, the act of the critic, is precisely an act – a process. It represents a process which is creative in its essence and which is forced to productively and creatively construct its own object.<sup>132</sup> Gestures towards the poetic become ludic gestures, become part of the logic of literary texts, because by standing, the critic sees roads. The act of interpretation, the act of the critic, becomes a creative, productive event in itself, because it performs its own gestures. Thus, criticism consists of the after-life of the poem, and is wreathed in its affects. We return here to that initial reference to *Economy, Its Fragrance*. Carson claims she can smell the difference between poetry and prose, but her definition of prose never makes an appearance. Instead, she suggests the biblical section describing the spilled ointment is a “poetic moment.” A poetic moment does not exclude nor negate prose as having the qualities of poetry. Indeed, it only tells us that poetry is the unwritten; not words but what spill into the spaces in between. In the prose text of the critic, the poetic text is lifted beyond its initial context and engaged in an encounter with the thinking critic, an encounter which has all the properties of play.

---

<sup>130</sup> Görner, 41

<sup>131</sup> My own translation from German

<sup>132</sup> Görner, 45, referencing Bollnow (1949), 56



## 5. Resurrection

I'm not angry I am a liar only now I begin to understand what my dishonesty is what abhorrence is the closer I get there is no hope for a person of my sort I can't give you facts I can't distill my history into this or that home truth and go plunging ahead...<sup>133</sup>

All the greatest truths of every sort are completely trivial and hence nothing is more important than to express them forever in a new way and, whenever possible, forever more paradoxically, so that we won't forget they still exist and that they can never be expressed in their entirety.<sup>134</sup>

Previously, I suggested a theory of affect to account for the entrance of a poetic object into a transactive system of art, and argued for the critical text as part of that same system, effaced with the same affect. Below, I will begin from this standpoint to do a reading of a selection of Carson's writings as critical events which collapses temporal difference and result in hermeneutic anxiety. By doing this, I can investigate the critical gestures of Carson and their implications. I title this section "Resurrection". Resurrection is the bringing forth of something lost or distant, into a lived moment.

### 5.1 Speaking the dead

#### 5.1.1 Keats: "If a book is to remain free"

I. I DEDICATE THIS BOOK TO KEATS [...] ON GROUNDS THAT A DEDICATION HAS TO BE FLAWED IF A BOOK IS TO REMAIN FREE AND FOR HIS GENERAL SURRENDER TO BEAUTY<sup>135</sup>

This is, shortened, the title of the first poem in Carson's book *The Beauty of the Husband*. It is described as "a fictional essay is 29 tangos" and tells the story of a marriage in 29 poems (called tangos), 29 epigraphs of Keats, and 29 rambling titles. In my reading of this book, fragile patterns of time, memory, and truth collapse under errancy, and are replaced. This is a book of three's. Every section has an epigraph, a title, and a poem. We are encouraged to read this book with Keats at every turn, presented with a quote of his before every new insight into the marriage. We are also, however, discouraged – for "a dedication has to be flawed". We

---

<sup>133</sup> Carson, *Plainwater*, 25

<sup>134</sup> Schlegel, 263

<sup>135</sup> Carson, Anne. *The Beauty of the Husband*, Vintage Contemporaries, New York, 2002, 5

enter with suspicion. In *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, which is not mentioned in any of the epigraphs, we read: “Beauty is truth, truth beauty, – that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.” The book is dedicated to Keats for his surrender to beauty, which the wife of the book knows much about: “No great secret. Not ashamed to say I loved him for his beauty. / As I would again / if he came near. Beauty convinces.<sup>136</sup> ...” Simultaneously, we are invited to be sceptical with the book. Were it true that beauty is truth and truth beauty, this dedication would not be flawed. This is not a story about a successful marriage. “Rotate the husband” she writes in the fourth tango, “and expose a hidden side. [...] When I say hidden / I mean funny.”<sup>137</sup>

An epigraph performs an acquisitional action, one which moves in several directions at once, and in this case functions much like an epitaph. Carson teaches us about the nature of the epitaph in *Economy of the Unlost*, which reads Simonides with Paul Celan – a witness that is not one-directional – not least through the lens of economy and change. “Simonides” Carson writes, “is Western culture’s original literary critic, for he is the first person in our extant tradition to theorise about the nature and function of poetry.”<sup>138</sup> He lived in the transitory time in which coinage was introduced as representative of value, and was likely the first to charge for his poetry. He is famous for his epitaphs, written on graves and memorials and paid for by the mourning. Carson writes that the epitaph that it is an economic act, which “create a space of exchange between present and past by gaining a purchase on memory.”<sup>139</sup> The epitaph ensures survival, lifts the buried into the present moment of reading. *The Beauty of the Husband* is the story of the death of a marriage, which refuses the moment of death. Its epigraphs lift Keats into the moment of reading, lets him spill into the room. Such a resurrection is allowed, Carson writes, through the power of Grace (χαρις), which is “a coin with more than two sides. In which we trust.”<sup>140</sup> It resurrects him in order to study him: truth as beauty is continually dismantled in this story not only through the presence of the lying husband, but by contemplating the concept of poetry as beauty.

“My husband lied about everything,” the speaker tells us in the seventh tango. In this section, Carson begins to unravel truth from beauty and does so, as she is wont to do, through

---

<sup>136</sup> Tango II. Carson, *The Beauty of the Husband*, 9

<sup>137</sup> Carson, *The Beauty of the Husband*, 19

<sup>138</sup> Carson, *Economy of the Unlost*, 46

<sup>139</sup> Carson, *Economy of the Unlost*, 85

<sup>140</sup> Carson, *Economy of the Unlost*, 27

mythology and philosophy. First presenting, in the title, the Platonic idea of truth residing in the smooth divine and lying as living “down below amid the mass of men both tragic and rough”. Then, in the first half of the poem, writing that:

All myth is an enriched pattern,  
 a two-faced proposition,  
 allowing its operator to say one thing and mean another, to lead a  
 double life.  
 Hence the notion found early in ancient thought that all poets are liars.  
 And from the true lies of poetry  
 trickled out a question.

What really connects words and things?

Not much, decided my husband  
 and proceeded to use language  
 in the way that Homer says the gods do.<sup>141</sup>

If we are to consider poetry as beauty, then beauty is a two-faced proposition in which lies are true. Such is the use of words by poets, and by gods, for whom words have “entirely other meanings / alongside our meanings. / They flip the switch at will.” The double-meaning of the poetic is inherent to the poetic logic. It turns deceitful, I argue, in the fallacy of the husband’s response to the question that “trickled out” of poetry: that of the connection between words and things. Words and things being disconnected assumes the gap, the excluded middle, of unpoetic logic in which a zero-one sequence, a scale of nothingness to notation, is ruler. Instead, the true lies of poetry are in the included middle, as Carson writes in the eight tango: “this is the look of the truth: layered and elusive.”<sup>142</sup>

Carson often returns to the connectedness of words and things. In *Decreation* under “Gnosticisms” the first poem begins and ends thus:

Heaven’s lips! I dreamed  
 of a page in a book containing the word *bird* and I  
 Entered *bird*.  
 [...]  
 For some people a bird sings, feathers shine. I just get this *this*.<sup>143</sup>

---

<sup>141</sup> Tango VII, Carson, *The Beauty of the Husband*, 33

<sup>142</sup> Tango VIII, Carson, *The Beauty of the Husband*, 37

<sup>143</sup> Carson, *Decreation*, 87

There is a difference, here, between bird and *bird*, this and *this*. The emphasis, italicisation, is an intensification and a signifier. What connects words with things? What connects bird with *bird*? Carson often makes suggestive changes to words in order to release new meanings from them. Fleming, in *Errant Versions and Textual Motions*, excavates one of Carson's purposeful misspellings, "Rapt away" in her poem "Freud (2nd draft)", in a way that insists on errant versioning both within the text and within interpretation.<sup>144</sup> Keegan Cook Finberg's article "Figuring an Ethical Reading Practice: Anne Carson's 'Whaching'" discusses the choice to write "Whaching" instead of "watching" in *The Glass Essay* as a form of watching which is "without a choice [...] and always carried out in uncertainty".<sup>145</sup> In the Gnosticism-poem quoted above, titled simply "Gnosticism I", the *bird* is not the bird which sings and whose feather shines, *bird* thrashes against black, nothing guiding it, while a lion below looks up at it, astonished. In fact, the poem suggests *bird* can never be bird, and presents it as an anxious fact. In another *Decreation*-poem, Carson negates such a claim: "Kant's question about Monica Vitti" under the collection "Sublimes".<sup>146</sup>

In this poem, Kant's thing-in-itself, separate from observation, is pressed against images from the 1962 film *L'Eclisse* with Monica Vitti. On the left hand page, a note on Kant is followed by a description of a moment from the film, written in italics. While Monica Vitti wanders around in her filmic universe, something "hidden within her", Kant is pleased with a non-representative existence. "Kant's was partly a negative pleasure" the poem says, "Kant took pleasure in what he called the Thing in Itself" while Monica Vitti is "*observed deeply by a man in an armchair.*" These things are claimed by the left hand side of the poem: "The Thing in Itself was unattainable, insurmountable. / [...] / Nor could the Thing in Itself be represented. / [...] / Yet through the very failure of representation, Thing in Itself might be inscribed with phenomena." As the poem continues on the right hand side, however, the order of the verses switch place, Monica Vitti preceding Kant instead of the other way around. This change occurs immediately following the stanza: "Kant noted a rustling aside of sensible barriers. / *Her unquiet drifts in her, spills, drifts on.*" Suddenly, spillage is not only spillage of affect, but the spill between rigid ideas of separation between representation and thing-in-itself, between internal and external. On the right hand page, Kant and Monica Vitti both step into

---

<sup>144</sup> Fleming, Joan. *Errant Versions and Textual Motions*, University of Otago, 2013, 23-24

<sup>145</sup> Finberg, Keegan Cook. "Figuring an Ethical Reading Practice: Anne Carson's 'Whaching.'" *Canada and Beyond*, vol. 3, no. 1-2, 2013, 103-122, 106

<sup>146</sup> Carson, *Decreation*, 70

daylight. Kant, “weak as a wave” but Monica Vitti invigorated: “*Now she can leave. The surface of the movie relaxes.*” She walks out into “filthy daylight” he into “this more difficult dawn”. Such a turning on its head of filmic representation against transcendental idealism, a destabilising action, gives context to the bird vs. *bird* of the Gnosticism-poem and suggests they are not as disparate as they seem.

On the Greek language, Carson has said that she experiences herself as at the roots of meaning, while with English she is up in the branches.<sup>147</sup> In Gnosticism I the animals below (including the lion looking up), are uncomplicated, following instinct, in the infancy of meaning, while the distressed, flighty *bird* is somewhere high up, lost and confused. “How to grip.” The poem asks, while not asking. The question Kant has about Monica Vitti is similarly never a question – it is a poem of statements which utterly distress the idea of statements. The narrator of “Gnosticism I” enters *bird* in a dream, which is connected in the introductory verse with the mouth of heaven – where the switch between true and false can be flipped in a moment. Through the course of the poem, she does not reach any truth, she just gets this *this*, the intensification, a signifier with no signified and yet inscribed within phenomena. A signifier with no signified is a distressing thing, a more difficult dawn, when one is looking for truth. In a manner structured like this, throughout *The Beauty of the Husband*, Carson destabilises truth.

Fleming touches on the epigraphs of *The Beauty of the Husband* in her thesis, writing that Carson is “emphasising the epigraph as a site of revision and correction”.<sup>148</sup> Indeed, Carson’s epigraphs are sometimes quotes, sometimes marginal notes, sometimes corrections. Doing this, Carson is destabilising the iterative distance between official and non-official, between literary and non-literary words. Simultaneously, her resurrection of Keats is something of a new historicist one, interested in the marginal. In this book, Keats has been fragmented in two ways, partly in the very act of symbolic acquisition in which a part (a single epigraph) references a whole, and partly through this rejection of intentions. Keats is broken open, which allows for spillage beyond the interiority of his texts. He enters the room in a new historicist way, through peripheral, accidental spillage. While there are transactions here, a borrowing and appropriating, it is sublime in nature. The most interesting, I would argue, use of epigraphs in *The Beauty of the Husband* is the epigraph preceding tango XXIII:

---

<sup>147</sup> Fleming, 51

<sup>148</sup> Fleming, 13

a sort of delphic Abstraction a beautiful thing made more  
 beautiful by being reflected and put in Mist

JOHN KEATS,  
 a note on his copy of *Paradise Lost*, 1.321

[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]

This errant dash, displaced after the word beautiful, invokes the errancy of iteration which Fleming proposes in her discussion of the holes in papyrus which complicate our – and Carson’s – relationship with Sappho. She writes: “All iterations of these texts, therefore, whether in transcription or translation, are necessarily errant. This sense of the fundamental errancy of the source text, or source idea, connects to an understanding of language itself as processual and undergoing continuous versioning and revision.”<sup>149</sup> What Carson does, by adding her note at the end of the epigraph, is utterly center the absent presence of the dash, and therefore our reading of the word “beautiful”. She suggests further attention be added, for it is possible there was more Keats intended to infer. The placement of this errant dash in a note regarding representation through reflection, a double-imaging and abstraction, is poignant within my discussion of the complex relationship between truth and beauty. It is “more beautiful” not only through abstraction but through muddling, as is implied in seeing something in/through mist.

Hansson writes in the essay “Where does the text end? Does one need to speak?” [“Var slutar texten? Behöver man tala?”], under the segment “(unmemorable speech)” that the last century has seen a turn to a-literary forms of storing and transferring cultural information. He writes, quoting Charles Bernstein, that this is the reason seemingly non-literary texts such as catalogs, indexes, records, as well as misprints and textual variations, have become so important to poetry.<sup>150</sup> This shares a quality of centering the peripheral that is equally found in new historicism. New historicism traces the compelling force of the literary in the a-literary and in *The Beauty of the Husband*, it seems, the literary is drawing upon the a-literary for its compelling force.

---

<sup>149</sup> Fleming, 23

<sup>150</sup> Hansson, 79

*The Beauty of the Husband* is a story about desire as much as it is about truth and beauty, and they come together in varying ways. The husband is framed by his beauty, and his beauty an irresistible temptation. “Don’t call it my choice,” Carson writes, “I *was ventured*: / [...] / and I do not apologise because as I say I was not to blame, I was unshielded / in the face of existence / and existence *depends on beauty*.” Desire for the beautiful is, in part, desire to possess, but also desire to understand. In Anne Carson, the figure of desire is a triangle. She presents it as such in the opening of her debut *Eros the Bittersweet*, which concerns Sappho’s 31<sup>st</sup> fragment, in which the speaker views her lover and the attentive man, aching. In desire, the radical constitution of the triangle becomes visible.<sup>151</sup> In *The Erotic Poetics of Anne Carson*, Chris Jennings build on the idea of the triangle as central to Carson’s poetics, writing that

Carson gives her writing a triangular structure by binding the terms juxtaposed not only to each other but to a liminal position between them. This perspective conceives connection from contiguity and serves as the ‘third component’ that ‘both connects and separates’ the terms in order to reveal ‘the lines that are there.’<sup>152</sup>

Jennings has identified what I have chosen to refer to as the included middle as a third component. I would argue, however, that his argument is incompatible with the figure of the triangle, and that Carson disrupts the triangle throughout this book. *The Beauty of the Husband* performs triangular play between “the husband”, “the wife”, and the pressure of a third which is sometimes the husband’s lover, sometimes his friend Ray with whom the wife forms a friendship, sometimes space, time, or lack of understanding. In the poems, the triangle is also the figure of war. The husband plays war games, recreating ancient battles, in which he places “Rectangles for the Syracuse outbuildings, / broken lines for the brave Athenian assault, / triangles for likely places of confrontation”.<sup>153</sup> This is mind, we can consider that the third point of the triangle is not a “*point* (a fixed meaning)”<sup>154</sup> because it gestures in multiple directions at once – it is an intersection, and a place for confrontation, where wife and husband experience friction. The third point in the triangle is *aidos*, the utter unknowability of, lack of sovereignty over, the other.

---

<sup>151</sup> Carson, quoted in Jennings, Chris. *The Erotic Poetics of Anne Carson*, University of Toronto Quarterly, vol. 70, no. 4, 2001, 923-936, 923

<sup>152</sup> Jennings, 923

<sup>153</sup> Carson, *The Beauty of the Husband*, 119

<sup>154</sup> Kristeva, in Moi (ed.), 36

The wife's mother, since she was fifteen, has attempted to replace seduction – the triangle of desire – with production. “My mother ran counter to him as production to seduction.” Tango VIII reads.<sup>155</sup> In IX. WHAT WORD WAS IT the speaker compares her marriage with that of Hades and Persephone, in which the mother Demeter walks the earth “damaging every living thing” until the daughter is given back.

To abolish seduction is a mother's goal.  
 She will replace it with what is real: products.  
 Demeter's victory  
 over Hades  
 does not consist in her daughter's arrival from down below  
 It's the world in bloom—  
 cabbages lures lambs broom sex milk money!  
 These kill death.<sup>156</sup>

Seduction is a failing economy. As the daughter goes below, the harvest which would form the basis of a thriving economic system dies – the daughter *not* below is the world in bloom. Production placed opposite seduction, one resulting in wealth and the other in loss, aligns with our previous consideration of the living poem as a productive entity, and the unchecked desire for the object – seduction – as the death of the poem. This death, we have learned, occurs when the gesture of the critic is sovereign, when the autonomy of the poem is not respected thought the sensing of *aidos*. Much as the husband's beauty is the inducer of desire, the wife is disappeared in relation to him as she “Like many a wife I boosted the husband up to Godhood and held him there.”<sup>157</sup> It is not a lateral relationship but an explicitly sovereign one, where she is placed below his rule, and the triangle cannot hold. His gesture is a devil's cut.

The devil's cut is explained in tango X, directly following the Hades/Persephone simile, as “the portion of one's goods that cannot be usefully spent”,<sup>158</sup> an economic failure. Further, it is placed along with the rising worry of a devil used to receiving sacrifice, wanting more: an unstable, one-directional gesture. Immediately following the description of the devil, “he” refers to the husband, who did not show up for their wedding. Then, in XI, the poem tells us that a zen butcher can make one well executed cut, and the whole ox falls apart. The title of

---

<sup>155</sup> Carson, *Beauty of the Husband*, 37

<sup>156</sup> Carson, *Beauty of the Husband*, 40

<sup>157</sup> Carson, *Beauty of the Husband*, 23

<sup>158</sup> Carson, *Beauty of the Husband*, 45



the tango reads thus: “XI. MAKE YOUR CUTS IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE LIVING JOINTS OF THE FORM SAID SOCRATES TO PHAEDRUS WHEN THEY WERE DISSECTING A SPEECH ABOUT LOVE”<sup>159</sup> and it describes the early love in which the wife is not to blame. She is the ox that fell apart, he the one that performed the cut. When the husband does not show up for their wedding, he sends a telegram: “But please don’t cry– / That’s all. / Five words for a dollar.” Five words, the poem tells us, and the implication is that the dash of his telegram counts fully as a word. The stoke of the pen in the Keats epigraph discussed above, whether purposeful or a slip, reappears here. It is the cost of a sovereign gesture, implied in the economy of seduction, which is volatile like the stroke of a knife.

It seems, then, that the third point of the triangle fails to hold it in place through failing to be *aidos* and instead succumbing to a sort of desire that results in sovereignty. This becomes clearest in the longest poem of the book, “XXII. HOMO LUDENS”. In it, I argue, the triangle dissipates and is replaced by a continuum that follows the rules of play. Seduction becomes production. The husband and wife are arguing in a hotel room, but there comes a point where they stop: “... They stood aligned, / [...] / in that posture which experts of conflict resolution tells us ensures impasse”.<sup>160</sup> In the dissipation of the triangle of desire and war, defined by tension and blockage, something in the room releases. “Husband and wife may erase a boundary. / Creating a white page” Rather than desire, what fills the room is blood trickling from the husbands nose, an unexpected nosebleed which stains his face and her robe. As the triangle bursts, so does a blood vessel, but their coming together is not a white page – it’s stained, just as “blood appears on the whiteness of his shirt.” What follows is a bittersweet moment, in which the “husband and wife rested, / as players may rest against the rule of the game”.

This moment is described as a final surrender to beauty, expressed in a moment of tenderness where the wife dries the blood with her own robe in a moment of touch, a gesture, that has visual evidence of its own occurrence. The marriage has been a war-game, the metaphor held up by the husband’s pastime of recreating old battles, and a betting game in which the husband “throws the dice of his beauty”. No one, it seems, wins anything. In this moment where the marriage draws first blood, the economical failure of the triangle is replaced by an impasse which moves according to an included middle instead of a point.

---

<sup>159</sup> Carson, *Beauty of the Husband*, 49

<sup>160</sup> Carson, *Beauty of the Husband*, 100

Simultaneously, it is explicitly aligned with play: The poem is HOMO LUDENS, referencing Huizinga directly. Huizinga writes, and Massumi quotes him directly on this, that:

[P]lay only becomes possible, thinkable and understandable when an influx of *mind* breaks down the absolute determinism of the cosmos<sup>161</sup>

The poem continues “Wasn’t it you who told me civilisation is impossible in the absence of a spirit of play. / Husband and wife did not therefore engage in murder”.<sup>162</sup> Rather than a triangle, the geometry of this marriage is an arena of play in which errancy both ensures the safety of the play – by consisting of gestures which do not denote what they would denote – and can result in precisely what it is attempting to avoid: blood spill. Play, according to Huizinga “may be deadly yet still remain play”.<sup>163</sup> This is an equation which does not solve, but this does not bother Carson. In *Short Talks*, specifically “On Hedonism”, desire becomes round: “Desire as round as peaches bloom in me all night, I no longer gather what falls.”<sup>164</sup> The moral of humanity, she makes clear, is as rigid as a mathematical equation, if that mathematical equation is written on water: “so ingenious are the arrangements of the state of flux we call / our moral history are they not almost as neat as mathematical / propositions except written on water–“<sup>165</sup> Water is, as ever, temporal. The moment in which one draws a line into water it is already dissipating – a temporal complexity which will be investigated in the next section.

*The Beauty of the Husband* suggests the geometry of time, memory and truth as intrinsically linked, but not as a triangle. Each point is a fallacy in the other. Instead, consider the continuum, or what Carson presents in tango XV: *antilogic*. Tango XV is titled “ANTI-LOGIC IS THE DANCE OF THE DOG IN HELL HAPPY TO EAT ANY FOOD THAT GROWS BUT DO THEY NOT SAY THE SAME OF A DOG IN HEAVEN”. Antilogic is assigned by Plato to Protagoras and other Sophists as proof that they do not care for truth. After all “antilogic involves the assignment to any argument of a counterargument that negates it, with the implication that both argument and counterargument are equally true”.<sup>166</sup> Just the same, Plato cedes that the phenomenal world is essentially antilogical. “Was it not

---

<sup>161</sup> Huizinga, 4 and Massumi, 103

<sup>162</sup> Carson, *Beauty of the Husband*, 103

<sup>163</sup> Huizinga, 41

<sup>164</sup> Carson, *Short Talks*, 68

<sup>165</sup> Carson, *Beauty of the Husband*, 89

<sup>166</sup> Kerferd, George Briscoe. “Sophist Philosophy”, *Britannica*, 1999, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Sophist-philosophy>

Aristotle who said,” Carson writes in *Economy of the Unlost*, ““A mistake enriches the mere truth once you see it as that.””<sup>167</sup> Errancy, inherent as it is to the ludic gesture, adds value – though it sometimes takes the form of a loss.

Hansson, in his study of Sanskrit poetics, writes that “John Keat’s words ‘truth is beauty’ – could have been written in an early Sanskrit poetics – or rather ‘language is beauty’. Or should be.” [“John Keats ord ‘truth is beauty’ – skulle ha kunnat stått i en tidig sanskritpoetik – eller rättare: ‘language is beauty’. Eller borde vara.”<sup>168</sup>] The book *The Beauty of the Husband* is a study of truth and beauty which results in errancy. The second to last poem contains the verses: “But oh it seemed sweet. // To say Beauty is Truth and stop.”<sup>169</sup> But this is not the logic of truth and beauty. The logic of truth (and language) is an internal, productive, excessive one which is simultaneously fragmented – riddled with holes. One tango asks in its title: “Do you ever dream [...] of terrible little holes all over everything what do those dreams mean?”<sup>170</sup> In that poem, the wife stands looking at water fall, watching “Little holes that show where the rain hits.” As letters from the husband arrives the holes widen, break, multiply or simplify along with his fraudulent statements.

“A dedication must be flawed,” Carson told us, “if a book is to remain free.” The flaw of the triangle collapses it and offers in its stead a productive, playful space. Context to this quote can be found in her poem “Essay on What I Think About Most”, in which she ponders the possibilities of errancy. The metaphorical word is a moment when the “surface breaks or complicates. / Unexpectedness emerges. [...] From the true mistakes of metaphor a lesson can be learned.”<sup>171</sup> The “true mistake”, the error, of the poetic word is a single brushstroke saying more than one thing. The speaker of the poem gives an example, fragment 30 of the Spartan poet Alkman whose poem is “more than perfectly economical” not least because it “contains an error of arithmetic. / The poet does not seem to know / that  $2 + 2 = 4$ .” Nor does the poet know that  $1=1$ , because through flawed, negating gestures language remains free.

### 5.1.2 Mimnermos: “Consider incompleteness as a verb”

---

<sup>167</sup> Carson, *Economy of the Unlost*, 9

<sup>168</sup> Hansson, 34

<sup>169</sup> Carson, *The Beauty of the Husband*, 139

<sup>170</sup> Carson, *The Beauty of the Husband*, 93

<sup>171</sup> Carson, Anne. *Men in the Off Hours*, Vintage Contemporaries, New York, 2001 (2000), 30-31

In those interpretive and poetic works in which Carson considers the ancient poet, Carson uses errancy and fragmentism to trouble ideas of time and the limitations of resurrection. In *Economy of the Unlost*, Carson asks:

What is remembering? Remembering brings the absent into the present, connects what is lost to what is here. Remembering draws attention to lostness and is made possible by emotions of space that open backward into a void. Memory depends on void, as void depends on memory, to think it. Once void is thought, it can be cancelled. Once memory is thought, it can be commodified.<sup>172</sup>

The first part of *Plainwater* is titled “Mimnermos: The Brainsex Paintings” and deals with the Greek elegiac poet Mimnermos. Carson studies him as a literary figure and translates his fragments, though her translation has been called unorthodox.<sup>173</sup> Laubhan, in *Studies in Prose Poetry: Tate, Carson, and Wenderoth* claims that “[t]his section isn’t dealing in translation; it’s dealing in intertextuality.”<sup>174</sup> This reflects a general understanding of Carson’s translating activities as tensed between wishing to “step out of the way” of language and of inserting herself in her translations. Her translation of the fragments of Sappho have become famous for their radical inclusion of gaps, where she does not attempt to complete the fragment but places brackets to draw attention to the gaps where the papyrus is damaged or impossible to read. On these, Hannaway writes: “Carson has to some extent released the brackets from their technical function and replaced it with a poetic one.”<sup>175</sup>

Jennings writes that:

Carson situates her translation between the complete text suggested by the fragment that survived and the contemporary experience of fragmentary insufficiency. Insufficiency becomes part of a new whole, implying its lost completion in ‘that enchanting white space ... in which we can imagine all of the experience of antiquity floating but which we cant quite reach (‘A Talk’). Supplying this imagining, Carson mediates between text and white space.

[...]

---

<sup>172</sup> Carson, *Economy of the Unlost*, 38

<sup>173</sup> Rae, Ian. *Unframing the Novel: From Odaatje to Carson*, University of British Columbia, 2002, 229

<sup>174</sup> Laubhan, Jonathan “Luke”. *Studies in Prose: Tate, Carson, and Wenderoth*, University of Washington, 2013, 16

<sup>175</sup> Hannaway, 146

Carson, like desire, bridges the gap between fragment and restoration, between Greek and English. She projects the possibility of fulfilment on its lack.<sup>176</sup>

The desire expressed here is not the one in *The Beauty of the Husband*, in which devotion lifted the husband to Godhood and held him there in an inversion of interpretive sovereignty.<sup>177</sup> With Mimnermos, Carson turns to the motions of hedonism, referenced above as circular, in which Mimnermos is an expert. His hedonism is not about pleasures, Carson writes, it's "a kind of hunger for the motions of the self that we are mining still, though freshness is going out of the work. It is haunted from two directions at once" and it can be referred to as "knowledge".<sup>178</sup> Further than collapsing then and now, Carson thus collapses a hunger for understanding how the self functions with the much broader idea of knowledge.

Mimnermos, Carson writes, likes to put the sun in every poem. What "streams out of Mimnermos' suns are the laws that attach us to all luminous things. Of which the first is time." She understands Mimnermos to be preoccupied with the end of things, but in his poetry the end takes up a complicated temporal position. In one of his fragments, he tells the story of Tithonos, who wished for and was granted eternal life, but failed to wish for eternal youth. Mimnermos syntax, Carson explains, in the description of Tithonos fate, implies that there is a second half to Tithonos story, which might be "about to be set in motion and carry him on past petrification."<sup>179</sup> That second part never comes, but, she adds, the fragment could be incomplete. Therefore, his continued life hangs above the poem in an incomplete gesture, flush with possibilities. When Carson translates Mimnermos, she resurrects him into a new moment in time wherein encounters with new readers is possible. She lifts him beyond the terms set by death, and thus gives his poetry eternal life – but not eternal youth. "Freshness is going out of the work" she notes, and the fragment remains incomplete – as does Tithonos, as does Mimnermos himself. While Tithonos is stranded in a technicality of "syntax, not metrics", Mimnermos is stranded in an incomplete fragment.

"Consider incompleteness a verb" Carson writes. In English, "every verb has a tense, it must take place in time" but ancient Greek avoids such laws through the aorist, the unbounded tense. This is the tense that embodies the actively occurring, explained in the motion of a

---

<sup>176</sup> Jennings, Chris. *The Erotic Poetics of Anne Carson*, University of Toronto Quarterly, vol. 70, no. 4, 2001, 923-936, 926; 927

<sup>177</sup> See Tango V, Carson, *The Beauty of the Husband*, 23

<sup>178</sup> Carson, *Plainwater*, 14

<sup>179</sup> Carson, *Plainwater*, 16

man who runs at noon running on top of his own shadow. It is with this tense that Mimnermos describes men moving in war, “they are the receptacle of a charge that shoots itself toward the night side, spoor of its own explanations.”<sup>180</sup> This motion, this verb tense, is both incompleteness and culmination – both a never and an always: never arriving, always moving. Time expresses itself not as a line, but as a circle. If incompleteness is a verb, its tense is aorist. The translator’s job, as the interpreter’s job, is attempting to dig through that incompleteness for truth. When Hansson talks about translation, he references Walter Benjamin as having said that poetic words, more than any other, long to be translated. Because, somewhere in it true poetic language resides. This somewhere, I will suggest, is the night side. Translation is attempting a dig, a resurrection, and as it does it necessarily collapses past and present.

Such endeavours are portrayed in a story in verse, also in *Plainwater*. The section is titled “Part III: Canicula di Anna” and consists of a poem and an afterword. The poem, titled “What Do We Have Here?” is split into 53 sections. It begins:

1

What we have here  
is the story of a painter

In the Mimnermos essay the model for the form of translation is precisely painting<sup>181</sup> and here, I argue, it becomes the model for historical interpretation. The speaker of the poem is attempting to excavate “Anna”, and does so through the motions of painting. The setting of the story is such: it is set “upon the ancient rock of Perugia” as philosophers of the present day gather for a conference. “They seem to have commissioned,” the poem states, “for purposes of public relations / a painter to record them / in pigments of the fifteenth century” but the painter they have commissioned is troubled by a woman with “a face / and a past / worth painting”. As the story continues, the actions of the philosophers (and phenomenologists) are depicted with deep irony and a near-mocking tone, juxtaposed by the speaker’s search for the woman. The second section of the poem begins like this:

2

---

<sup>180</sup> Carson, plain water, 16

<sup>181</sup> Rae, 231

I think that I would like to call her Anna.  
 When I arrived it was raining. Everyone  
 seemed to be annoyed with me.  
 I could not find  
 Anna's name on the list, they  
 produced another list, no, they drew  
 together in a circle, gesturing,  
 hopeless. I went out quietly.

“Gesturing / hopeless” they are unable to locate Anna. The entire conference they are speaking over each other, misunderstanding each other. “The phenomenologists are in each other's way today. / They cough, drop pencils” one section begins. In another place, one of them “confronts the circle in Heidegger / with the circle in Hegel” and a second points out that “what is at issue / / is a surplus. The other / phenomenologists are growing restless.” Quite mockingly, one stanza reads: “One of the phenomenologists / appears to have brought his mother / to the seminar.” They insistently argue in attempts to establish truths, to establish their points. The painter (the speaker) functions completely differently.

The second stanza as quoted above continues:

hopeless. I went out quietly.

Outside still raining.  
 Two things happened  
 (in the painting, a superposition of colors)  
 at once, both impossible.  
 I heard someone call Anna's name. I saw the sea.

Anna appears here in the moment of turning away from the phenomenologists, and in a superposition of colours which evoke the transgressed one. She appears peripherally, at the moment of turning, and through sound, which the poem troubles continuously as something that cannot be expressed in painting. There can be colour, there can be texture, but there are no similes to sound. Another thing which exists somewhere off, somewhere out-of-frame, are Anna's dogs: “Wild dogs, mouths dripping with such bloody / syllables, ebb and run over the ocean / floor down there.” The bloody syllables of the dogs cannot be heard, and when the speaker gets Anna on the phone later in the poem, Anna “pitches her voice / just lower than the / barking”.

“I hunger for Anna” the poem reads. The speaker aches to know her, but she cannot be approached directly. Continuously, she is peripheral, “Standing / just outside their line of

vision, / I slide my eye to the left.” In this stanza, it reads: “In Renaissance painting / every point is accounted for. / Here is a point, / Anna,” which locates Anna somewhat directly, but suggests her as an intersection of meaning – perhaps a true life in the peripheries of history, which cannot be represented without losing something. In one stanza, early in the story, the speaker finds her in a painting they are walking past. It turns out to “be a still life / of apricots and aqua minerale. / The glass has a crack” and it is that crack which contains Anna. She can be approached only the way *energeia* can be traced – effaced on the incidental, anecdotal, and peripheral proofs of her existence. That is: in a new historicist fashion. Fox-Genovese in her critique of new historicism in Veese’s anthology calls it “[a] bastard child of a history that resembles anthropological ‘thick description’ and of a literary theory in search of its own possible significance.”<sup>182</sup> The speaker of the poem tells us this: “her answers on the telephone are notable / for what phenomenologists call ‘thickness.’”

There is no pinning down Anna, nor any facts about her. In one stanza, she has a birth defect which appears as marks on her arms. In another the “knots of blue / on the arms of Anna / are an illusion produced by the painter.” She is “hesitating somewhere”, and searching for her seems to inevitably result in loss.

10

The fact that Anna is somewhere  
 having coffee or a dream  
 is an assault on me.  
 I hate these moments of poverty.  
 What does the man eat? Ask the phenomenologists.  
 Like the dogs, names  
 down there,  
 starving.

Lying below the poem, “down there” is a constant threat of death, and not only death but murder: the sovereign gesture of naming one of them. Eradication is introduced early through the story of the painter called Perugino: “a contemporary of Michelangelo / and a teacher of Raphael”, who “spent the years 1483 to 1486 / covering with frescoes / that part of the Sistine Chapel / now immortalized by Michelangelo’s *Last Judgement*, / which efforts were ruthlessly effaced / to make space for / his successor’s more colossal genius”. When the

---

<sup>182</sup> Fox-Genovese, in Veese (ed.), 213



end of the story approaches, the dogs – “Anna’s dogs” – kill a cock which crowed “far too early in the night.” Immediately following the killing “they turned. / You could hear them turn. // [...] // As you could hear heads turn / when Perugino moved toward / Michelangelo”. Perugino’s movement toward Michelangelo is a movement forward in time and towards eradication of self, of proof of life. It is the movement of painting-over, which is a deadly stroke. At the end of the story, Anna herself perishes. “Anna did not hear / the dogs turn”, but the painter: “Postmetaphysical myself, / I will be / unaccountable for the murder.”

In the *Mimnermos* essay, painting is “the model for the form of translation”. In *Canicula di Anna*:

43

A curious system of exchanges  
 occurs within the painter’s body  
 as he works. Touch  
 for touch, grace  
 for grace.  
 Murder thinks itself.  
 Pure lines of fever think themselves.  
 The painter chooses  
 where to stand  
 and the ritual  
 totters forward.

The painter chooses where to stand like the scholar of towns knows where to stand in order for things invisible to become visible. They are capable of both grace and murder and their work is a ritual either way. Some things, however, remain out of reach. Anna is never fully grasped. The moment where she comes closest, “an event which threw me into a bad temper”, the speaker retreats immediately to go for a walk. Desiring Anna is a hopeless gesture which does not result in finding truth. Compare this poem to another: under “Short Talks”, “On the Total Collection”, Carson tells the biblical story of Noah. “He denied lack, oblivion or even the likelihood of a missing piece. Order streamed from Noah in blue triangles and as the pure fury of his classifications rose around him, engulfing his life, they came to be called waves by others, who drowned, a world of them.”<sup>183</sup> Noah causes the flood through the murderous force of his triangular classifications, the sharpness of which we have

---

<sup>183</sup> Carson, *Plainwater*, 40

considered already. In order not to murder Anna, she must be allowed to reside in the somewhere else where she is, hesitating.

In *Economy of the Unlost* Carson presents the vacant place “Leerstelle” which is “where art lives”. It is a place with “syllables standing all around”, a place of “Geschwätz” – babble – that is post-Adamic. That is to say: it is language without the Adamic power of naming.<sup>184</sup> This is, I argue, the night side where Anna is: Anna and her dogs with their “mouths dripping with such bloody / syllables”. Mimnermos, Carson says, approaches the world from his own, separate existence, “down behind the world” where “nothing takes place but the place.”<sup>185</sup> In *Economy of the Unlost*, Carson writes that:

The properly invisible nature of otherness guarantees the mystery of our encounters with it, pulls out of us the act of attention that may bring ‘some difference’ to light here. [...] When our grief deserts us, where does it go and who will we be without it? These are the questions that remain in the empty place where ἀλήθεια (truth) and τὸ δοκεῖν (appearances) lie side by side, strangeness by strangeness, exerting on one another a terrible and sleepless press that only the poet attends.<sup>186</sup>

The empty place Carson refers to here, where truth and appearances push against each other, sounds like that place down behind that M references in the interviews, and which Canicula di Anna gestures towards: “Like the dogs, names / down there, / starving.” There, words and things lie side by side, connected. It is the place the husband could not see and the place the painter looks for. It is this space we will consider next and, beyond the poet’s attempts to attend to the friction occurring there between truth and appearances, the ways in which the Carsonian critic reaches for it.

---

<sup>184</sup> Carson, *Economy of the Unlost*, 66-68

<sup>185</sup> Carson, *Plainwater*, 22

<sup>186</sup> Carson, *Economy of the Unlost*, 72

## 5.2 Between sleep-state and statement

### 5.2.1 The intrusion of self in the interpretive moment

Having considered the effect of interpretive gestures on objects of interpretation, I will now consider the interpreter herself. In the second Mimnermos fragment, we are suddenly transposed into a hotel room in Chicago. This is a destabilising practise which, in Laubhan's words, scrambles the reader's experience,<sup>187</sup> and brings the translator into the room herself. Perhaps Carson in her translation is attempting to, as closely as possible, mimic the collapsing of Then and Now she argues is consistent in Mimnermos writing, which brings as a result an explicit intentionality, a making-visible of the translator in the interpretation of the Greek fragment. It is an extreme example of the blockage of the writer in the interpretive moment, which will be further investigated below. We as readers stumble over Carson in reading Mimnermos, because the translation of fragmentary texts (as seen in the Sappho example) rips open the arena of meanings. The bird is here, thrusting its wings in the gaping black, white page. Literary writing is an activity, a "bundle of affective capacity" that is unique to the human animal, Deleuze and Guattari note.<sup>188</sup> It makes "for a movement in place that understatedly outdoes itself, overflowing into an expressive becoming..."<sup>189</sup> It shares the quality of overflow, as well as the function of deterritorialisation, with the act of play.

What the gesture of absolute deterritorialization does is suspend the extensive unfolding. It doesn't act the potential actions out. It holds them together, purely in their relation to each other, in tightest, most intimate embrace, in a written zone of indiscernibility. It in-acts them. [...] The potential actions are purely played, unframed and thus without assignable limits.<sup>190</sup>

The minimalist excessiveness of the poetic gesture becomes an *absolute* deterritorialisation which in turn is "the autonomizing gesture of pure expression". This wording of Massumi's bears much resemblance to Gadamer's "aesthetic differentiation", which rises out of the abstract nature of the quality of a work of art. "It proves its productivity by giving to simultaneity of its shades" and in turn creates an "external existence of its own".<sup>191</sup> We have

---

<sup>187</sup> Laubhan, 16

<sup>188</sup> Deleuze and Guattari quoted in Massumi, 58

<sup>189</sup> Massumi, 57

<sup>190</sup> Massumi, 58

<sup>191</sup> Gadamer, Hans Georg. *Truth and Method*, Crossroad Publishing Company, New York, 1982 (1975), 78

encountered this already while discussing the autonomy of the poetic object under “Survival” where autonomy is equated to the productive capabilities of the gestures. Productive capabilities which are the gestures of “pure expression”: signifying intensity without a marked signifier. This is, Massumi explains, “all about strategic subtraction.” Through the economically thrifty gestures of poetry, Carson wishes to “leave the given framing of the scene, extract [herself] from the imperatives of the context, suspend the terms structured into place and go elsewhere, shake loose and plunge headlong into an absolute deterritorialization without knowing in advance where it might lead...”<sup>192</sup> Through minimised gestures, overstepping the boundaries of translation to release meaning into the room, she means to subtract herself.

In writing about Carson’s iterative poetic tendencies, Fleming centers the phrase “shaking the box”, concluding that “Carson’s iterative poetics ‘keep shaking the box’”.<sup>193</sup> What she is referring to is Carson’s introduction to *Autobiography of Red*, in which Carson suggests that the fragmentary knowledge of her main character is approachable as bits of verse falling out of a box, and one can of course always keep shaking the box. This is applicable to our understanding of the contents of a poetic object, continually spilling. The problem comes with shaking oneself loose, which is a form of negation of self. The book *Decreation*, which is intimately concerned with such an act, begins with an essay on sleep. This is the essay which is featured in Benson and Connor’s *Creative Criticism*, on which they note that “Anne Carson’s deep knowledge of the literature of sleep fosters a kind of writing that – like the dreaming mind, for Freud – makes sidelong connections across great distances, all from the intimate space of a bed”. We have considered the skating of Carson under “Survival” as what yields surplus value through being ludic – it a form of negation. In skating, Carson wishes to “go somewhere else”, a somewhere else that is suggested above, and which begins to take shape in this essay on sleep.

The going-somewhere is present in the title of the essay, which is: “Every exit is an entrance (A praise of sleep)”. She begins explaining how she once encountered her childhood living room from within a dream: “It was the same old living room as ever, I knew it well, nothing was out of place. And yet it was utterly, certainly, different. Inside its usual appearance the living room was as changed as if it had gone mad.”<sup>194</sup> The way she made sense of the

---

<sup>192</sup> Massumi, 57-58

<sup>193</sup> Fleming, 111

<sup>194</sup> Carson, *Decreation*, 20

madness, later in life, was that she had happened upon the room from the other side, the “sleep side”. “Rotate the husband,” she wrote about truth, “and expose a hidden side.” The room’s hidden side is a consolation, because no matter what, it lies there:

... Sunk in its greenness, breathing its own order, answerable to no one, apparently penetrable everywhere and yet so perfectly disguised in all the propaganda of its waking life as to become in a true sense something *incognito* at the heart of our sleeping home.<sup>195</sup>

In this essay, sleep is both something *incognito*, something that hides because it has something to hide, as well as “the emptiness of things before we make use of them, a glimpse of reality prior to its efficacy.”<sup>196</sup> This image of green returns in “Stanzas, sexes, seductions”, a poem under the section titled “Sublimes” in *Decreation* which, as we have discussed, constitutes a spillage. This poem is read by Coles as a plea for the end of meaning.<sup>197</sup> “I want to have meaningless legs,” it reads, and “I do not want to be a person. / I want to be unbearable.” What is unbearable is the “green room. / There things are unbearable.” We approach the double-bind of interpretation, where desire to understand language is desire to gain access to the place where appearance and truth lie pressed together, where “nothing takes place but the place”. It is a desire to approach “from beneath the world” in Mimnermos words, or “from the sleep side” of language.

The goal of *Decreation* is a subtraction of self, not least the interpretive self. In her essay about Simone Weil, Carson lingers on witness, explaining that “I cannot go towards God without bringing myself along.” Understanding this “brings a wrench in perception”, it “forces the perceiver [the interpreter] to a point where she has to disappear from herself in order to look.”<sup>198</sup> This is an anxiety of interpretation. Denial of self-hood is impossible.

If only I could see a lands alone as it is when I am not there. But when I am in any place I disturb the silence of heaven by the beating of my heart.

Carson quotes Simone Weil.<sup>199</sup> It is Simone Weil who lies at the heart of *decreation*, and here shows it to be impossible. You can shake the box, and meanings will fall out, but you cannot shake yourself loose. You are the one performing the shaking. The intrusion of self

---

<sup>195</sup> Carson, *Decreation*, 20

<sup>196</sup> Carson, *Decreation*, 24

<sup>197</sup> Coles, 122

<sup>198</sup> Carson, *Decreation*, 169

<sup>199</sup> Carson, *Decreation*, 169

appears to me the core of Carson's poetics. In "The Lives of Towns", which discussed the critic as one who stands in a position from where lines appear, Carson asks the vital question: "Can you punctuate yourself with silence?"<sup>200</sup> The answer is that you cannot, for the sound of your heartbeat troubles the landscape. In "Stanzas, sexes, seductions", Carson says she wants to be Neuter. Coles writes on this that: "The trouble with the Neuter is it proposes to be at once everything and nothing, its plurality opens it to a boundarilessness that renders its category defunct."<sup>201</sup> Boundarilessness is the determining factor of the zone of indiscernibility and is, in fact, everything and nothing. However, critical writing relies on writing out an encounter – it requires interaction, which is antithetical to Neuter, to the room in its sleep-state, and to the field without the heartbeat. The heartbeat of the critic is present in the room, for she is orchestrating the encounter. In "Short Talk on Homo Sapiens", Carson admits it: "Face in a pan of water. In every story I tell comes a point where I can see no further. I hate that point. It is why they call storytellers blind – a taunt."<sup>202</sup>

Reading the poet Paul Celan, Carson muses that "her [the poet's] sense of the relation between visible and invisibles" – remember here the push between truth and appearances on the sleep side of the world – "her staying power", is her poetic situation.<sup>203</sup> Further, she writes that "to understand and to keep, in however diminished a form, some picture of the inside crystal of things [...] is a poet's obligation". This obligation places the poet within the encounter, enclosed in the middle. The same position is occupied, I argue, by the critic who writes out the encounter between text and world, which is what she does when she is digging in it. The anxiety of hermeneutics led into the formulation of the concept of *aidos*, but it appears that maintaining *aidos* is impossible. Such is the paradox of Carson's hermeneutics: it is straining continuously between the privacy of the other and the impossibility of sustaining it.

### 5.2.2 Demands of the past

This title refers both to demands the interpreter of fragmented knowledge makes of the past – to speak – and the demands of diligence the past insists on. We have touched already on this, studying *Canicula di Anna*. In that text, however, it was the sliding of the eye to the left that

---

<sup>200</sup> Carson, *Plainwater*, 94

<sup>201</sup> Coles, 179

<sup>202</sup> Carson, *Short Talks*, 27

<sup>203</sup> Carson, *Economy of the Unlost*, 69

was the key, much like coming up on a room from a new angle, turning the husband to reveal a new side. When Anna appears to the speaker, it is explicitly an event. “An event that threw me into a bad temper.” All that event accomplishes is exposing the interpreter in the event. She is not meant to look at you, as the interpreter, as soon as she does it must be tempered by the statement: “ich bin ich” which is “too easy to say. / *Ich bin ich*. It is too easy / to let these hot feet presuppose / the cool feet of Christ.” In the moment of the encounter there is an eradication, a murder, which the speaker warns Anna of when telling her to sleep with one eye open. In that moment the hot feet of the interpreter can be mistaken for the feet of Christ, which suggests sovereignty, purity.

Concerning Mimnermos, Carson makes an attempt to encounter him. She does so in three mock-interviews which fully collapse Then and Now. In them, Mimnermos moves towards the present like Perugino approaches Michelangelo, for his own eradication. Laubhan interprets this moment as one in which “Carson’s interviewing a classic Greek version of herself, addressing, among other things, the liberty she takes with original material”.<sup>204</sup> However, Rae comments that the interviews are based on those peripheral, anecdotal historical artefacts which new historicist claim are effaced with value, but are not regarded as “credible history”<sup>205</sup> suggesting, to me, that Carson is not draping herself in Mimnermos but truly attempting to grasp him. Hannaway, in his study, suggests that the interview is with Mimnermos in this, much more direct, way. Concerning the section of the interviews which discusses the value of dreams, and of the unconscious, Hannaway posits: “Here we arrive at the core of what Carson sees as Mimnermos’ vision of reality. There is no such thing as a solid self in Mimnermos’ vision, there is only eternity, or the timeless unconscious.”<sup>206</sup> Hannaway further chooses to suggest the “I” interviewing the suggestive M is “I[n]terviewer]” rather than the first person pronoun. In my reading, “I” is the self brought into the encounter, who starts all the trouble. M is Mimnermos, but simultaneously isn’t. He is the peripheral of M.

What becomes clear quickly in these interviews is that one the one hand, M is slippery:

I: Can you tell us a little about [your grandfather]

M: He loved thunderstorms olives and the wilder aspects of life here  
he loved war

---

<sup>204</sup> Laubhan, 17

<sup>205</sup> Carson quoted in Rae, 230

<sup>206</sup> Hannaway, 121

I: *None Such* is about him

M: I would have to say yes but you know a lot of it is invented fighting naked and things like that

I: I understand the text as we have it is merely the proemium to a much longer work

M: Well I don't know what you're reading over there nowadays those American distributors get some crazy ideas<sup>207</sup>

M does not provide facts, his movements are evasive, “layered and elusive” like the look of truth. The grandfather appears in sound, taste and those complicated categories of “the wilder things in life” and “war”. M cannot say that *None Such* is about him, when pressed he “would have to say yes...” perhaps because the insistence of historians on the intention of topic have, in this case, painted over any truth. The last couplet certainly fits with Laubhan's reading: an ironic, self-deprecating acknowledgement of the liberty taken with ancient materials in order to fill gaps. But it does not take long for gaps to appear in these interviews, their value converted from use-value, or “technical function”, to a poetic, ludic one. When “I” begins to dig, M falls into silence – a silence expressed not by emptiness on the page but by a black line, as if his answer is not so much missing as hidden.

M: What are you digging for?

I: Nanno

M: ———

I: Who is this person this chasm this lost event

M: ———

I: Considerable ambiguity surrounds Athenaios's assertion that in old age you became enamored of a flute girl by this name

M: ———

[...]

I: Foucault speaks of the Unthought as a limit within which all actual knowledge is produced I'm groping here can we regard Nanno as some sort of epistemological strategy are we to look for a logic of Nanno

M: ———

This is a desperate searching for sense within an historic anecdote which, no matter the digging, will likely never exceed its anecdotal status – this is the limit of knowledge which Foucault calls the Unthought. The limit of knowledge is presented in this interview as a

---

<sup>207</sup> Carson, *Plainwater*, 18



visual limit, a line drawn on the page – here but no further. The only information we are offered about Nanno is: “M: I wrote her epitaph / I: I don’t believe I know this piece”. This information is, however, plentiful. We learn that Nanno is dead and that Mimnermos connection with her is what lifts her beyond “the terms set by Death”: he is the condition for her survival, but her survival exists only as a rising interest.

M’s silence riles “I” up until she shows her hand: she is looking for an epistemological strategy, she is looking for logic, sequence and statements. The interpretive anxiety spills and becomes, in this interview, M’s anxiety. It is the anxiety of the demands of the past, stretching as it does towards two poles, haunted as it is from two directions at once:

I’m not angry I am a liar only now I begin to understand what my dishonesty is what abhorrence is the closer I get there is no hope for a person of my sort I can’t give you facts I can’t distill my history into this or that home truth and go plunging ahead composing miniature versions of the cosmos to fill the slots in your question and answer period it’s not that I don’t pity you it’s not that I don’t understand your human face is smiling at me for some reason it’s not that I don’t know there is an act of interpretation demanded now by which we could all move to the limits of the logic inherent in this activity and peer over the edge but everytime I start in everytime I everytime you see I would have to tell the whole story all over again or else lie so I lie I just lie who are they who are the storytellers who can put an end to stories<sup>208</sup>

Consider incompleteness a verb. All the greatest truths, Schlegel says, are truths which can never be expressed in their entirety. As such, we must express them continuously, erroneously, paradoxically. “[T]here is an act of interpretation demanded now by which we could all move to the limits of the logic inherent in this activity and peer over the edge but [...] who are they who are the storytellers who can put an end to stories”. As such the peripheral, ungraspable M summarises my argument as clearly as it can be expressed.

We return now to the presence of threat in the sublime. Threat holds the same function in the sublime as categorical affect in play, it “furnishes the Sublime with its necessary content—dire things [...] and dire reactions [...] within which the sublime soul is *all but lost*.”<sup>209</sup> The interview-encounters, “this activity”, has the gestures of play, which as we have learned is categorical affect becoming simultaneous with vitality affect. For play to be play, it

---

<sup>208</sup> Carson, *Plainwater*, 25-26

<sup>209</sup> Carson, *Decreation*, 48

necessitates the presence of the real, the threat. While vitality affect is the *how*, the -esqueness of the encounter, categorical affect is the *what*. Categorical affect is, however, not homogeneous, it is asymmetrically apportioned in the encounter, “distributed differentially, in the affectation of *roles*: scarer/scared, hunter/hunted, quarry/pursuer”<sup>210</sup> and in this case interviewer/interviewee.

We saw earlier how the vitality affect signed by the -esqueness of the ludic dramatization carried transsituational potentials straddling distant existential territories. It was a *sign of potential*. Categorical affect, for its part, is a *sign of power*. The two are inseparable, like two sides of the same gestural coin.<sup>211</sup>

We can see when “I” exerts the role of interviewer, turns towards demands, that the encounter of the interview falls apart. It blocks M from appearing in the encounter, from being bodied, strikes his presence out with a sharp line. Corporeality, Massumi explains, is not separable from the vitality affect of the event. It “is the immediately felt ‘aboutness’ of that expression of vitality”<sup>212</sup> which means that when the “I” swipes too hard, draws blood, the encounter falls flat. In the first interview, the “I” rears up at the mystery and wants to know if M has even been psychoanalysed. This disturbs M, in whose day “we valued blindness rather more”. “I” desires fact of history, the objectively statable. Only when “I” retreats and offers a simple “Mystical” in response, a far more open gesture, is the play of the activity resurrected. M responds in an outpouring of words. However, “I” immediately asks “may I quote you” and then comes the final line of the first interview: “Ah the perfect listener yes I dreamed I would one day find her” which is a deeply ironic comment, vicious in its derision for the overtaking of categorical affect, of use-value. The “I” is not treating the interview as an encounter here, but mining it, trying to transform ludic value back to use-value, which can then be acquisitioned for cultural profit. Carson let us know that feeling the joy of the sublime is to be inside creative power, and spill with the writer. This “I” (Interviewer/interpreter) does not want to spill with, it wants to mine, in both meanings of that word.

A more successful interview takes place in *Men in the Off Hours*, titled “Interview with Hara Tamiki (1950)”. In this, the “I” gestures broadly and engagingly, and continues with the pattern originally set up instead of falling into the trap of desire. The pattern is as such: “I”

---

<sup>210</sup> Massumi, 26-27

<sup>211</sup> Massumi, 27

<sup>212</sup> Massumi, 29

offers a word for Tamaki to respond to, to his abilities, and accepts the response that is offered. In the last exchange, there is a first, genuine question: “I: Why not take the shorter way home?” Marked genuine and unlike the questions of the Mimnermos Interviews simply and decidedly by the presence of the question mark, something which is never offered to M. The response, and final line of the interview is: “HT: There was no shorter way home.” Nor are there shortcuts in the interpretative encounter.

*Men in the Off Hours* is that of Carson’s work most explicitly obsessed with errancy, iteration, variation, and correction. It contains both first and second drafts of a multitude of poems, titled clearly “... (1<sup>st</sup> draft)” or “... (2<sup>nd</sup> draft), the most interesting of which for this thesis are: “Essay on What I Think About Most” and “Essay on Error (2<sup>nd</sup> draft)”. We have considered the first above, in which “Error. / And its emotions.” is construed as the key to poetry. In it she allows the grammatical and arithmetical mistakes of Alkman to stand as “the deliberate break and complication of mistakes / out of which may arise / unexpectedness. / / So a poet like Alkman / sidesteps fear, anxiety, shame, remorse / and all the other silly emotions associated with making mistakes”.<sup>213</sup> Immediately following this optimistic poem comes its sequel, “Essay on Error (2<sup>nd</sup> draft)” which begins, effectively: “It is also true I dream about soiled suede gloves.”<sup>214</sup> There is nothing unexpected about soiled suede gloves: they are just ruined.

We have seen in this section that a critic working from a sleep-state is impossible, and that statements made induce the risk of flattening the encounter. Errors are simultaneously the key to poetic language and something which the poet, and the critic, must take care with so that the ludic gesture does not evaporate under its own categorical affect. The ludic gesture, at its nature, is not demanding, it’s flush with potentialities. In the Hara Tamiki interview, “I” (pronoun, interviewer, interpreter) does not make demands, but offers arena’s of play – like “Beauty” or “War” on which the poet is free to gesture. In the Mimnermos interviews, “I” makes demands and when chastised by the fragmentary poet, says: “I wanted to know you.” Here is the crux of the problem, the problem of knowledge which is intensely tied up with finality, with statements. M asks “who is the storyteller who can put an end to stories” and Carson, in her afterword to *Canicula di Anna*, muses on debt as inherent to the death of Socrates, as written by Plato, where his final words were an acknowledgment of owing.

---

<sup>213</sup> Carson, *Men in the Off Hours*, 35

<sup>214</sup> Carson, *Men in the Off Hours*, 37

“What a courtly gesture it is” she writes, the promise of a cock for Asklepios. This section is one of several where Carson (the implicit Carson) speaks directly to a reader. She acknowledges the moment of loss at the end of a story, and finds that the only thing she, as writer, can offer is “simply the fact of my eyes at your back.”<sup>215</sup> The story trails after you, but this is not a restful fact – laid to rest, buried –, it’s a prickling at the back of your neck; the heat of the desert of after-Proust.

---

<sup>215</sup> Carson, *Plainwater*, 90

## 6. Vitality

The word-bound concept is always inadequate to the torrent of life.<sup>216</sup>

When I think of you reading this I do not want you to be taken captive,  
separated by a wire mesh lined with glass from your life itself like some  
Electra.<sup>217</sup>

The idea of mesh requires thought. I have mentioned already one place where the implicit Carson speaks directly to an implicit reader, and this quote reiterated above in particular I would like to suggest is indicative of a poetic plea that can be found throughout Carson's oeuvre, her hope for her reader. Mesh, she argues in *Economy of the Unlost*, is multipurpose. It is "an action of estrangement" and "an ordering action" both.<sup>218</sup> "Blockages or salvages of speech?" She asks, "Mesh can do all of these."<sup>219</sup> I will return to mesh soon.

This section returns to the central question of poetry and criticism, poet and critic. We have placed criticism within the transactive network of poetry – as in play on its continuum – but before I present my final reading of the scholar-poet as a basis for a poetics of criticism that centers vitality affect, we must place poet and critic face to face, so as to inquire further on the nature of their continuum.

### 6.1 The exchange rates of poetry and criticism

This thesis has placed poetry and criticism together on a continuum, the nature of which is a poetic logic. This argument has consequences for criticism and poetry both. First, on the nature of criticism. Functioning through poetic logic, the gestures of criticism produce knowledge and affect both. Subsequently, the knowledge it produces also functions by poetic logic and is, as Carson writes in *Plainwater*, a hunger for the motions of the self, haunted from two directions at once. In her article "Is the Hermeneutic Interpretation of Art Erotic? A Reader of Gadamer Responds to Sontag's Challenge" Czakon writes that the "purpose of the interpretation of art is to reach the truth of a given artwork"<sup>220</sup> but this truth can be trusted to

---

<sup>216</sup> Huizinga, 131

<sup>217</sup> Carson, *Small Talk*, 42

<sup>218</sup> Carson, *Economy of the Unlost*, 33

<sup>219</sup> Carson, *Economy of the Unlost*, 30-31

<sup>220</sup> Czakon, Dominika. "Is the Hermeneutic Interpretation of Art Erotic? A Reader of Gadamer Responds to Sontag's Challenge", *The Polish Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 43, iss. 4, 2016, 45-63, 58

hold only within the logic of the poem, for it is written in its language. Is the epistemological quality of literary criticism, because of its inherent poetic qualities, trapped within the logic of the poem with no bearing beyond its own existence? When poetry becomes knowledge, knowledge becomes poetry and thoughts of debt, rising interest, and profit become nullified in a closed economic system. If it is so, the futility of criticism threatens to suffocate it.

Czaron, while defending the erotic possibilities of hermeneutics, suggests this is the case by stating most firmly:

Let us reiterate that hermeneutic interpretation understood in the spirit of Gadamer must differ from interpretations and descriptions of works defined as expert, academic, or aspiring to objectivity, precision, or full compliance with the material accumulated on a given theme.<sup>221</sup>

I agree that no literary critical text can hope to aspire to full compliance with the material, as the meaning-producing gestures of poetry occur not least in its meeting with a reader. Nor can any such text aspire to full objectivity, as we have established the relentless presence of the critic in the interpretive moment. I would like to linger, just the same, on Czaron's dismissal of criticism's capabilities to be expert or academic.

Hansson considers a lengthy quote by Swedish poet (and scholar) Carl Jonas Love Almqvist as one of the six quotes from 19th century writers that are found in his book *Where Does the Text End?* [Var slutar texten?]. Hansson considers Almqvist as linguistically strict as any writer is likely to be. Hansson quotes Almqvist:

In scientific language the purpose is not to paint one's subject, but to murder it. As such, in art words should be used as brushes, in science as daggers. This distinction is important in order to understand the proper use of language.

[I det vetenskapliga språket består saken icke i all måla sitt ämne, men mörda det. Orden skola således i konst nyttjas som penslar, men i vetenskapen som dolkar. Denna urskillnad är af vikt, för att rätt begripa språkbegagnandet.]<sup>222</sup>

Arguing for hermeneutics as scientific would, according to Almqvist's logic, undeniably lead to the murder of the poetic word – the poem sliced to bits with the dagger of scientific

---

<sup>221</sup> Czaron, 59

<sup>222</sup> Almqvist quoted in Hansson, 40

discourse much like the wife is sliced and falls apart by the beauty of the husband. The hermeneutics at play in the writing of the modern scholar-poet understood as it has been in this study, is quite the opposite – a paintbrush, dripping with a determination to avoid the murder of the object. This would suggest that there is no hope for literary criticism, that art and science are separated from each other, perhaps “by wire mesh lined with glass.” Recent research would suggest otherwise, however, as we have seen in the position taken by Rüdiger Göring in Germany and as we can see acutely present in a Scandinavian context.

Mia Quirin’s 2020 article “modern poetics and literary artistic research from a Danish-Swedish perspective” [“Modern poetik och litterär konstnärlig forskning ur ett Dansk-Svenskt perspektiv”] conducts a critical comparison between two fields of research in which a central question is: “are science and art ontologically separate phenomena, or are they in fact two sides of the same historic coin?” [“Är vetenskap och konst ontologiskt skilda fenomen eller utgör de två sidor av samma historiska mynt?”]<sup>223</sup> Her study suggests that there are lucrative avenues of exchange to be approached reading the well-established Danish study of poetics with those recent dissertations published through Gothenburg University in Sweden under the Faculty of Fine, Applied and Performing Arts which complicate the border between “reflection and literary composition” [“reflektion och gestaltning”] or “theory and fiction” [“teori och skönlitteratur”]. Quirin notes that Sweden has taken up a position of literary scholarship that does not yet exist in Denmark, one which “has made the bordered position of self-reflective poetics between science and art still more acute” [“har gjort den självreflexiva poetikens gränssituation mellan vetenskap och konst än mer akut”]<sup>224</sup> since the dissertations, unlike the self-reflexive autopoiesis of singular authors pondering their own work, are produced within and thus consecrated by an academic milieu.<sup>225</sup>

Quirin begins a conversation which she hopes will gain ground in Swedish-Danish academic circles, and is as pressing in North America as in Europe. In an endnote, Quirin explains that just before the publishing of her article, the four dissertations she studies were joined by a fifth. Imri Sandström’s dissertation studies the histories and languages of New England and Västerbotten County with texts by Susan Howe. Not only does this directly engage the witness of recent Carson scholarship, Sandström’s key author – Howe – is the

---

<sup>223</sup> Quirin, Mia. “Modern poetik och litterär konstnärlig forskning ur ett Dansk-Svenskt perspektiv”, *Tidskrift för Litteraturvetenskap*, vol. 49, no. 4, 2019, 19

<sup>224</sup> Quirin, 19

<sup>225</sup> Quirin, 19

American contemporary of Carson who a substantial portion of Coles' dissertation concerns. This in mind, along with Hannaway's study of the rise of creative writing programs in North America (present also in Nordic Universities) putting aesthetic valuation and literary production within the institution of academia, it is clear that Quirin's question: "How should the border position between self-reflective poetics and academic dissertation be understood?" [hur bör gränspositionen mellan självreflexiv poetik och akademisk avhandling förstås?] is of international concern, a question which is hand in hand with my, more specific: can literary criticism be trusted to produce knowledge beyond the poetic?

For the purposes of this thesis, I will center one avenue of understanding that is especially suited to the reading of Carson's form of auto-poesis. Quirin writes that "[a]ccording to the Danish poetics-scholar Michael Kallesøe Schmidt, modern poetics has developed in line with the integration of art and philosophy that is found in romantic fragments." ["Enligt den danska poetikforskaren Michael Kallesøe Schmidt är det i linje med de romantiska fragmentens förening av konst och filosofi som den moderna poetiken har utvecklats."]<sup>226</sup> Coles, in *Anne Carson: the Ethics and Erotics of Interpretation*, makes several gestures towards Romanticism as a way of reading Carson. While choosing to perform a reading of Carson and Howe through Barthes' "insight that the language of criticism and its object are finally the same language with the same fallibility" she adds in a footnote that "links could also be made" to theories of literature concerning German Romanticism and Metaromanticism with Walter Benjamin.<sup>227</sup> Indeed I note a similar emerging link attached on one end to romanticism being, according to Huizinga, "born in play".<sup>228</sup> Later in her dissertation, Coles invites Daniel Tiffany into her reading for his use of the term "materiality" in *Toy Medium: Materialism and Modern Lyric*, writing that:

His book opens out the term in detours through science and natural philosophy, arguing that Romantic notions of what poetry does and *is* have a surprising amount in common with contemporary scientific understandings of material substance. Carson, I have argued, brings to bear on poetic (as well as critical) projects something Tiffany considers "proper to the devices of Lyric poetry." Tiffany calls this property a "doctrine of corporeality" or "Lyric substance", through which, he

---

<sup>226</sup> Quirin, 17

<sup>227</sup> Coles, 12

<sup>228</sup> Huizinga, 189



argues, poetry – in collusion with rather than antithesis to science – gives form to the unseen and the “imponderable.”<sup>229</sup>

Thus, in two very separate studies on auto-poesis (understood as the self-reflective gesture of the scholar-poet), a connection has been distinctly drawn from the literary production of the writer straddling the border between poetry and academia, to certain tendencies of the Romantic era.<sup>230</sup> Reading Carson through a lens of Romanticism will, I argue, allow me to consider closely the epistemological possibilities of her poetry and through that, her criticism. A continuum, after all, is not one-directional – a result of a poetisation of criticism is a feedback in which poetry has critical value. Carson fully embraces this. Following her essay on sleep comes the poem “Ode to Sleep”, following her essay on the Sublime comes a collection of poems titled “Sublimes”. By doing this, she is encouraging the reader to engage with both types of text with the same sort of scrutiny.

Coles suggests “poetry as a form of truth-telling”,<sup>231</sup> and though she investigates it in the context of psychoanalysis, the idea of poetry as truth-telling is tightly wrapped up in the Romantic Era. The didactic poem, David Duff writes in *Romanticism and the Uses of Genre*, holds a complex position within Romanticism, both viciously rejected in pursuit of “a full-blown theory of ‘art for art’s sake’”<sup>232</sup> and surreptitiously appearing throughout the Lyric poetry that in many ways attempted to replace it. Schlegel himself was inconsistent with his views on the didactic, dismissing it and encouraging it in turn. However, the definition of didacticism which Duff navigates his way to in this book is one which “becomes inseparable from the cultural project of *Bildung* – [...] – making this yet another expression of Schlegel’s ideal of ‘progressive universal poetry’, the genre of genres that would fuse poetry, philosophy, and rhetoric, and mix ‘solid matter for instruction’ with irony and inspiration.”<sup>233</sup> Carson’s poetry fits painlessly into such a definition, as has been shown throughout this thesis and as is consistently addressed by her critics.

One major reason behind the Romanticist’s rejection of the genre is presented by Duff as such: “The idea that form and content were separable, that poetic language was merely an

---

<sup>229</sup> Tiffany quoted in Coles, 109

<sup>230</sup> Further arguments could be made, based on Thorp’s identification of the writing of Carson as indicative of the route modern poetry is taking, that the contemporary poetry of Scandinavia and North America are a form of neo-Romanticism. Such an argument would, however, be beyond the constraints of this thesis.

<sup>231</sup> Coles, 41

<sup>232</sup> Duff, David. *Romanticism and the Uses of Genre*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2009, 96

<sup>233</sup> Duff, 116

outer covering, or ‘dress’, which concealed the naked thought beneath, was, for the Romantics, the most grievous of all errors in the neoclassical system.”<sup>234</sup> Jason Guriel’s review of Carson’s *Autobiography of Red* carries the same tendencies, wherein he suggests that Carson’s diffusion of form and content is simply “grad school made cool.”<sup>235</sup> Carson’s didacticism is not one, I argue, which uses poetry simply as dressing. Instead, it shares tendencies with the philosophical poem. Duff writes, on Wordsworth preface to *The Excursion*, the first true philosophical poem, by his own claim: “The aim of his ‘philosophical poem’, he explains, is not ‘formally to announce a system’, but to present ‘clear thoughts, lively images, and strong feelings’ in such a way that ‘the Reader will have no difficulty in extracting the system for himself’.”<sup>236</sup> The knowledge-transferring of didactic poetry, Duff makes it clear, has consistently included poetry that related to “philosophical speculation [...] or, lastly, to Poetry itself.”<sup>237</sup> By this definition, supported by the claim Duff makes that Lyrical tradition in no way eradicated didacticism’s presence in poetry, the capacity of poetry to transfer knowledge is clear.

In the introduction to *Glass, Irony and God*, Guy Davenport notes that

[Carson] writes philosophy and critical essays that are as beautiful and charming as good poetry; it is not surprising that her poems are philosophical – in the old sense, when from Herakleitos (if his fragments are from a poem) to Lucretius, and even longer (Bernardus, Dante, Cavalcanti), poetry was a way to write philosophy.<sup>238</sup>

Section two of this thesis, “Resurrection”, treats Carson’s poetry as didactic in a philosophical manner: as presenting and complicating, often negating, ideas of epistemology and ontology and – not least – ideas of the self. Hansson comments in his conceptual letter to Hume on the arrival of the self into Lyric poetry being preceded by, and perhaps in due course of, Hume’s (and Kant’s) questioning of the concept of self. It seems that once the self has been deconstructed, it was free to emerge in poetry.<sup>239</sup> What is happening in Carson’s poetry is perhaps the next step, the insistent Deconstruction of the self, attempts to shake it loose,

---

<sup>234</sup> Duff, 105

<sup>235</sup> Guriel, Jason. “Autobiography of Reader”, *Poetry*, vol. 201, no. 6, 2013, 569-578, 572

<sup>236</sup> Duff, 114

<sup>237</sup> Duff, 96

<sup>238</sup> “Introduction”, in Carson, Anne. *Glass, Irony and God*, New Directions Publishing, New York, 1995, x

<sup>239</sup> Hansson, 99

go somewhere else and let language be. By doing so, she hopes that language will be able to speak freely, that truths will trickle through un-polluted by subjectivity.

If one considers poetry as a knowledge-producing entity, where the nature of the knowledge is philosophical rather than scientific, it follows that the truths established through literary criticism are the same. As such that knowledge is not disqualified from its status as expert or academic. On the other hand, avenues for potential open wide. In *Canicula di Anna*, we can read: “‘Painting is a science,’ calls Perugino / delirious”.<sup>240</sup> Quirin describes Helga Krook’s dissertation as “a kind of negative gesture which hides the autonomous creative text, and she uses the fragment form to gesture towards that which the dissertation fails to speak on.” [“en sorts negativ gest som döljer den autonoma konstnärliga texten, och hon använder sig av fragmentformen för att gestikulera mot det som avhandlingen inte lyckas tala om.”]<sup>241</sup> This suggests that poetry can provide insight which cannot otherwise be expressed.

Thorp’s reading of Carson addresses an apparent futility and irony of discussing the limitations of language with language, a discussion which concludes in the “redemption” of the potentiality of language succeeded in Carson through rupturing of codes, most notably in the author/reader-pairing.<sup>242</sup> This avenue from futility to redemption is mirrored in the transformation of negation to excessiveness that takes place within the continuum of play. Negation is, as has been established, inherent to the ludic gesture. Play and its gestures functions within a negative space in which it does not denote what it would denote, a space which becomes potential as soon as the question is asked: what is, then, being denoted? Carson writes in *Economy of the Unlost*: “The interesting thing about a negative, then, is that it posits a fuller picture of reality than does a positive statement.”<sup>243</sup> Through its thrifty, negating gestures, poetry can produce a “fuller picture of reality”, one which provides understanding that scientific language cannot. Or, in Huizinga’s terms soars to “heights of insight beyond the reach of reason.”<sup>244</sup>

Hansson tells Hume:

Research about art and in art are therefore of a fraudulent sort. Intentions in the deviating and the occasional are difficult to map. There is therefore need of a kind of deepened understanding that does not fear casual

---

<sup>240</sup> Carson, *Plainwater*, 79

<sup>241</sup> Quirin, 22

<sup>242</sup> Thorp, 81

<sup>243</sup> Carson, *Economy of the Unlost*, 102

<sup>244</sup> Huizinga, 129

(unforced) fluctuations in the inventiveness of art and critique. To scientificize such things can be demanding, perhaps not even desirable.

[Forskning om konst och i konst är därför av ett bedrägligt slag. Avsikter i det avvikande och i det tillfälliga är svåra att kartlägga. Därför krävs ett slags fördjupad förståelse som inte räds otvungna växlingar i konstens och kritikens uppfinningsförmåga. Att vetenskapliggöra sådant kan vara påfrestande, kanske inte ens önskvärt.]<sup>245</sup>

It is a mistake, he suggests, to enforce scientific logic on the artistic, to commit hermeneutics to the rigour of the hard sciences. Indeed, the murderous dagger should – I believe – be let nowhere near poetry. Czakon writes that an exceptionally important aspect of Gadamer’s hermeneutics is “good will” – necessary “whenever understanding it sought, and thus wherever an attempt is made at interpretation.”<sup>246</sup> The same is certainly true for the ethical approach of an erotics of interpretation which has, in my reading, depended on sympathy: being transported into the heart of an event. Rather than scientific, approaching the poetry–criticism continuum as a philosophical arena allows for those considerations of truth, expertise and precision which Czakon refers to, while maintaining concerns of ethics.

What is, then, the exchange rate between poetry and criticism? It is a form of abstraction of content, but it does not function through monetary or appropriative acquisition. Nor, I argue, is it satisfactorily described by symbolic acquisition, which cannot account for the anxiety of interpretation nor the desert of after-Proust. We have spoken of both loss and profit in the ludic arena, of rising interest and excess value. This, along with the necessity of “good will” insisted on by Czakon, leads us to another analogy: one which is an abstraction of content, but not an abstraction of value. Carson, in *Economy of the Unlost*, studies the poet Simonides life as one of change, in both senses of the word. There, she provides an exceptional system with which to consider the economy of the scholar-poet, that of *xenia* (χενία), translated most often to hospitality or guest-friendship, and for the ancient Greeks something holy, protected under Zeus. During Simonides lifetime, a gift-based economy was slowly exchanged by the commerce and commodity exchange in which coin was used as abstraction of value. In a gift economy, the goal is not wealth but debt,<sup>247</sup> which occupies a complicated position between loss and gain but is consistently a rising value. The exchange rate between

---

<sup>245</sup> Hansson, 95

<sup>246</sup> Czakon, 59

<sup>247</sup> Carson, *Economy of the Unlost*, 13

poetry and criticism is, I argue, that of *xenia*, perhaps the only surviving gift economy since Simonides time.

## 6.2 A gift economy

A gift has both economic and spiritual content, is personal and reciprocal, and depends on a relationship that endures over time. Money is an abstraction that passes one way and impersonally between people whose relationship stops with the transfer of cash.<sup>248</sup>

In *Glass, Irony and God*, Carson has a narrative poem titled “The Fall of Rome: A Traveller’s Guide”<sup>249</sup> a reading of which I would like to present here: as a sublime engagement with the past following the rules of *xenia* and warning of the wrong ways to go about the encounter. The speaker of the poem, simply “I” is a traveller and a stranger who can (they claim) take “you”, the reader, to Anna Xenia: “a citizen of the ancient republic. / historian of its wars”. The journey to Rome and to Anna begins as such:

A journey, for example,  
begins with a voice  
  
calling your name out  
behind you.  
[...]  
  
[...]  
On the other hand,  
who is it?  
  
And what do they want?  
So too a friendship  
begins before the first meeting

This section does two things I would like to highlight. First, it creates a witness to the afterword of *Canicula di Anna* in which the story that has been told resides behind you, trailing after. In “Short Talk on Walking Backwards”, we learn that “the dead, after all, do not walk backwards but they do walk behind us. They have no lungs and cannot call out but would love for us to turn around.”<sup>250</sup> In this instance, it calls your name. A little later in the poem, just before the speaker’s first meeting with Anna Xenia, they are anxious and pacing and the poem reads: “do I look // different? what if I don’t recognise — perhaps / she is here already! — I wheel: / there.” Anna is, it seems, located always behind. Once you acknowl-

---

<sup>248</sup> Carson, *Economy of the Unlost*, 12

<sup>249</sup> Carson, *Glass, Irony and God*, 73-105

<sup>250</sup> Carson, *Short Talks*, 49

ge her presence, even with the good will of a “perhaps”, it becomes possible to turn the right way and perceive her. Second, the description of the journey above centers the beginning of a friendship, which is the heart of the gift economy. In their first meeting Anna is holding flowers, “[...] at which / I clutch,” a moment which Jennings describes thus: “Anna seems to be the implied holder, but the speaker’s clutch seeps into the implication as they are linked in a Carsonian moment of exchange.”<sup>251</sup> Section I to XV continue this hopeful immersive exchange. It is, however, not true immersion, for the speaker who moves through Rome does so in a “zigzag, // parting it like a comb. / hearing it coil / together // behind me.” because “A stranger makes no fissure.” Section XI reads, entire:

XI.  
 What is the holiness of the citizen?  
 It is to open  
 to a stranger,  
 who has no day  
 of his own

The stranger in this section is the stranger under the rule of *xenia*, which has no strangers. Carson quotes Solon as saying: “Perfectly happy is the man who has [...] *xenos* in a foreign place”<sup>252</sup> something the citizen grants as part of its holy nature. The stranger of the poem has a wonderful first day in Rome, listening “From deep within / my traveller’s clothes” to all the talk and conversations, noting: “Italian is a beautiful language, / also very difficult. / So long.” Conversation is the key to this poem. Section LIII claims that the holiness of conversation is “to master death”, something which this thesis has engaged with extensively: conversation with the past, with poetry, as a way to lift it beyond the terms of endings – the key to which is debt and thus, gifts.

When the first day ends, and the verse reads “So long.” – which is to be mirrored in the very final words of the poem – the faultiness of the visit begins to sink in. The “nightmare” appears, taking the form of dread. “I think I will call my nightmare The Fall of Rome.” the speaker says, and reminds the reader of a history of strangers which are not part of the guest-host relationship, but invaders: “Alaric invaded Rome in 410 AD”, is the first example, and “Romans hate a stranger” because unlike the holiness of the Roman citizen, the stranger has no holiness. The poem teaches us why in many variations of “A stranger is...” including

---

<sup>251</sup> Jennings, 930

<sup>252</sup> Carson, *Economy of the Unlost*, 14

“poor, voracious and turbulent”, “evil”, “master of nothing”, “desperate for conversation”, and “someone who comes on the wrong day”. The description of the stranger which I would like to draw most attention to in my reading, however, is this:

He comes  
 from nowhere in particular  
 and pushes prices up.  
 His method of knowing something  
 is to eat it.

And several sections later:

XXVIII.  
 Now,  
 I have a tendency to dread.  
 I have to watch it.

XXIX.  
 I grin.  
 I eat.

Thousand of cuts morning and night,  
 [...]

The speaker has become the invading stranger, and the stranger is someone who Romans hate, “And / their reasoning / is empirically // sound.” The method of searching for knowledge is for the stranger both cutting and eating: it is the sovereign gesture of interpretation, as volatile as a knife and without regard for the autonomy of the object. The speaker, unlike Alaric, never causes the fall of Rome, however. The reason is Anna Xenia. “I lunge for words.” one section reads, and “She knocks them away.” When the stranger “is one who” opens the door and lets the dog escape, Anna Xenia chases after it down five flights of stairs and brings it back “to find me still in the doorway” not quite entering the encounter, but lingering along the peripheries of it, filled with dread. When read in witness to “Canicula di Anna”, the dog accumulates meaning. Anna’s dog, mouth dripping with bloody syllables, running rampant and threatening in “Canicula di Anna”, should not be let out. It is because of Xenia that the poem does not end in tragedy.



Instead, the poem ends in a kiss which is not a goodbye but a “so long”. Anna Xenia walks away “stuffing her shadow into her mouth as she goes.” and with that act tells the reader that within this poem she has been alive – resurrected – and now she returns to rest until the next time someone wishes to speak with her. We know what the shadow means because the poem has told us through playfully offering the reader a chance for interpretation, “I know you will be pleased / if I leave with you / [...] / a small question of interpretation.” The poem explains that in Orvieto, in the cathedral, the painter Luca Signorelli has depicted scenes from Dante’s *Comedia*. In purgatory Dante makes it clear that “Only Dante, / as a living man, / / casts a shadow.” But Signorelli, “governed by his naturalistic training” has given shadows to all the figures. Anna gains a shadow, a life, with the visitor, and retires it when the visit is over, sinking back into the vacant place “Leerstelle”. Another lesson from Anna Xenia is one she teaches on the way home from a visit to Signorelli’s chapel: one of the three ways in which to master death. She tells us they carried Signorelli’s son, dead, into his studio. There he sat all night with the body, and “From that time / all his angels / / have the one / same / face.”

This is a poem about mastery. Mastery of death, mastery of dread. It is made clear that dread, the nightmare called the Fall of Rome, is the trap of the interpreter and were they to fall into it the result would be not only the flattening of the interpretive encounter, but the ruin of an empire. Dread is not the way to enter a city, or a town, or a poem. “Dread masters me.” the speaker says, “I do not master dread.” Immediately followed by: “A stranger is master of nothing. / / Who in a nightmare / can help himself?” Anna Xenia has no strangers, only friends and honoured guests, and thus the stranger/interpreter does not need to help himself. Together, the speaker and Anna Xenia, “driving home” are masters of entrata (entrance) and uscita (exit). Alaric’s invasion ended like this: “Rome collapsed when Alaric ran out the dawn side”. But this speaker masters entrance and exit by travelling alongside Anna Xenia. This poem has shown the dangers of a sovereign stance in regards to poetry: instead of lingering in the doorway or wrecking havoc, this speaker enters, learns, exits – letting no dogs loose.

But the interpretive moment is not without cuts, even under Xenia. The poem asks:

LIX.

What is the holiness of mastery?

Let us help ourselves

to a theory of the martial arts.

LX.

It is to cut your opponent  
just at the moment he cuts you.

This is the ultimate timing.

It is the lack of anger.  
It means to treat your enemy  
as an honoured guest.

This suggestion of the encounter with a poetic object, when not sovereign, as mutually harmful is interesting in the arena of play, where blood spill is always close. The swipe of the dagger has been ruinous, above, but here it becomes something else. In Carson's long essay "Dirt and Desire: Essay on the Phenomenology of Female Pollution in Antiquity"<sup>253</sup> Fleming reads an anxiety about boundaries. Fleming's reading of this text highlights a very fruitful line of thinking. He writes that: "[p]ollution arises as a result of certain boundaries not being sufficiently maintained."<sup>254</sup> It seems reasonable, then, to dread pollution, blood staining, in the interpretive moment. This is not the case in Carson. Fleming writes.

Translation is reframed as inevitably dirty work. In Carson's approach to translation, we see an anxiety about boundaries, like the ancient Greeks. However, Carson's anxiety is inverted. It stems from the authorial work of enforcing boundaries—an anxiety that can never be fully abated, so long as books are bound, and translation choices are bound to be made.<sup>255</sup>

A lesson learned throughout "A Traveller's Guide" is the lesson of leaving, *uscita*. If the gift of life (of grace, or *charis*, as Carson refers to it in "Economy, Its Fragrance") has been given and the gift of knowledge or understanding has been received – a mutual cut has been delivered – what happens to the blood in the moment of leaving? Certainly the poem has stained the reader, for (if it is good) it continues at the back of your head, but has the reader stained the poem? This question is aligned with Quirin's question on the bordered position of the scholar-poet's writing, and through the rules of the continuum, the answer is no. The excessive included middle is one in which differences come actively together without mixing. The blood is, then something other than pollution.

---

<sup>253</sup> Carson, *Men in the Off Hours*, 130

<sup>254</sup> Fleming, 75-76

<sup>255</sup> Fleming, 76

Where there is no anger, for there cannot be in the gestures of play, the cut and being cut of mastery can perhaps be understood in accordance with the husband's nose bleed in HOMO LUDENS: the release of the triangle bursting, to be replaced by something less rigorous. Consider these two quotes from *Economy of the Unlost*: "Within a gift economy [...] objects in exchange form a kind of connective tissue between giver and receiver" and "A gift is not a piece broken off from the interior life of the giver and lost in the exchange, but rather an extension of the interior of the giver, within space and in time, into the interior of the receiver." In the interpretive encounter as a gift economy, I would like to suggest blood as the gift. Blood is an image of life – blood, spilled, an image of life with an undercurrent of urgency. In the end of *Canicula di Anna*, the dead are described as black and "bloodless"<sup>256</sup> and it is from the blood soaking the earth that the painters of that poem get their pigment.<sup>257</sup> If blood is the gift it constitutes the creation of debt, and – as Simonides and Carson has taught us – debt is the relentlessness of life. The bursting of a blood-vessel, the mutual cut, is the spilling of vitality affect from the encounter.

While "Resurrection" showed clearly an anxiety of pollution in the arrival into the interpretive encounter on behalf of the interpreter, the inverted anxiety of borders has similar pull. Following his own discussion on the didactic poem, Hansson writes one, titled: "(post-faust; didactic poem)" ["(post-faust; lärodikt)"]<sup>258</sup> I would like to highlight three verses of this poem in order to embolden my reading of Carson as offering a poetics of criticism which can circumvent both aspects of hermeneutic anxiety. They are as follows:

‘The art of reading well’  
 – is how Nietzsche defined philology.  
 Language does not float free between countries and eras.  
 There are boundaries, as among others Göran Holmberg once noted,  
 whoever he is. There are strong forces, bias  
 and un-transparentnesses we don't know of.  
 Where you stand no one else stands. Ex. When you read  
 and when the text speaks to you. The words, the dictums, the signs  
 carry forth something else. Anonymously at best.

[...]

And the poems knew quite a bit, more than the poets.

---

<sup>256</sup> Carson, *Plainwater*, 87

<sup>257</sup> Carson, *Plainwater*, 87

<sup>258</sup> Hansson, 82-84

It's us who have been plugged in equalised.  
 To such a degree that we must invent literature  
 so as to not every day perish. The context is another.  
 We are always stuck in something that can't be read.  
 From the start. There is no help to be gotten.  
 It's as simple as persisting in attempted readings.  
 And we'll see how it ends.

[...]

There are boundaries also for genius,  
 as Göran Holmberg said, whoever he is.  
 Is Gregor Mendel dead in the same moment  
 he appears<sup>259</sup> in front of the wrong readership?  
 Plato both recommended and warned of  
 his and others' cultivation of Socrates.  
 It should be possible to break free from the system,  
 it should be possible to be quotable, nameless and readable  
 all at the same time – but how?

['Konsten att läsa bra'  
 – så definierade Nietzsche filologin.  
 Språket flyter inte fritt mellan länder och epoker.  
 Det finns gränser, som bl.a. Göran Holmberg en gång påpekade,  
 vem han nu var. Det finns starka krafter, partiskhet  
 och ogenomskinligheter som vi inte känner till.  
 Där du står där står ingen annan. T.ex. När du läser  
 och när texten talar till dig. Orden, utsagorna, tecknen  
 bär fram något annat. Anonymt i bästa fall.

[...]

Och dikterna visste rätt mycket, mer än diktarna.  
 Det är vi som blivit uppkopplat nivellerade.  
 Till den grad att vi måste uppfinna litteraturen  
 för att inte varje dag gå under. Kontexten är en annan.  
 Vi sitter alltid fast i något som inte går att läsa.  
 Från början. Det står ingen hjälp att få.  
 Det är bara att framhärda i läsförsöken.  
 Så får vi se hur det slutar.

[...]

Det finns gränser också för geniet,

---

<sup>259</sup> The Swedish word "uppträder" can also be translated to "performs"

som Göran Holmberg sa, vem han nu var.  
 Är Gregor Mendel död i samma stund  
 han uppträder inför fel läsarkrets?  
 Platon både anbefalld och varnade  
 för sitt och andras bruk av Sokrates.  
 Det borde gå att frigöra sig från systemet,  
 det borde gå att bli citerbar, namnlös och läsbar  
 på en och samma gång – men hur?]

The art of philology involves, for Hansson, an acknowledgement of borders, of untranslatability and temporal distance, the lesson of *aidos*. This reminds me of Carson's simile of the face in the pan of water: the point where you can see nothing but your own face looking back at you. When the Mimnermos interview begins, M says: "It surprised me you came all this way" and "I" responds: "What a mud pond."<sup>260</sup> Temporal distance obstructs, as such it is difficult to make out anything, even your own face. It is simple, in fact, in a mud pond to confuse one's own face for another's. "...strong forces, bias / and un-transparentnesses" Hansson calls it, and where you stand no one else stands. We know that the scholar is a person who knows where to stand in order for the "words, the dictums, the signs" to appear. What Hansson does is phrase it as a gift, carried from the text to the hands of the scholar. They have the ability to know this, because "the poems knew quite a bit, more than the poets."

The second stanza frames beautifully the situation of the interpreter. There are no flaws or faults in the texts, not even the fragmented ones, but the reader – certainly the scholar – has been equalised to the point where we, like the phenomenologists in "Cunicula di Anna" stand in each other's way as literature stretches across temporal space, changing as it goes, forcing new definitions of literature to take shape. Carson's oeuvre troubles and frustrates critics, who claim that her writing is simply a failure to successfully perform within conventions. This is not new: "We are always stuck in something that can't be read." Hansson's solution to this trouble is simple: "It's a simple as persisting in attempted readings. / And we'll see how it ends." The final stanza I've presented above is the ending of the poem. The anxiety of the survival of the object rears its head in worry that Kafka's Gregor will perish if he is not carefully tended to by the right sort of readers. The anxiety of interpretation, of the sort of insistent incorporation of other material that Carson relies on, takes Plato's voice. The

---

<sup>260</sup> Carson, *Plainwater*, 18

scholar-poet, as he manifests in Hansson, is concerned about the transactional quality of text, about what can be gleaned and gained in the intertextuality of the encounter.

The first poem under “Sublimes” in *Decreation* is titled “And Reason Remains Undaunted”.<sup>261</sup> It begins:

Searching for things sublime I walked up into the muddy windy big  
hills behind the town where trees riot according to their own laws and

one may

observe so many methods of moving green –

Keep in mind the role of green as it has been read in Carson’s writing, not least with the greenness of the sleeping room, and it stands to reason the trees have their own laws, of which we have limited understanding. These motions (consider: gestures) of green are “flat in the eyes, as if // pacing a // cell,…” and “with blazing nostrils, not a / servant, not rapid, rapid.” The cell in this poem does not contain the green, which moves freely, rioting; The bars are not between interpreter and the sublime. Instead, somewhere between the “own laws” of the sublime and the speaker’s attempt to describe it, the cell appears. It is the trap of language. “It should be possible” Hansson insists, to break free, to be “quotable, nameless and readable / all at the same time”. In her essay on the Sublime, Carson asks “what is a quote?” It is “a cut, a section, a slice of someone else’s orange”. The cut is unavoidable, as long as books are bound, but the cut does not have to be debilitating. Carson does not want the reader to be taken captive, does not want to impose a border lined with glass from the act of reading and life itself.

Texts, Görner suggests, consist of mesh: permeable structures.<sup>262</sup> Mesh constructs a border but, as long as it is not lined with glass, it is un-obstructive. You can find an entrance and an exit, or you can view the luminousness of the thing shining through, unstopped. What mesh does is provide the same function as an included middle: “The zone of indiscernibility that is the included middle does not observe the sanctity of the separation of categories, nor respect the rigid segregation of arenas of activity.” It allows for a remaining present in difference, cross-participating without merging. Such an approach to poetry and criticism as I argue is suggested in Carson’s oeuvre, in the gestures of the scholar poet, relies on vitality

---

<sup>261</sup> Carson, *Decreation*, 62

<sup>262</sup> Görner, 36

affect. I have accounted for the life and the after-life of the poem by showing how poetry and criticism co-occur together on a continuum which functions by poetic logic, wherein all activities are necessarily playful and therefore flushed with life. Categorical affect, the use-value of gestures, are inherent to activities, it is the “lived importance” of it. But it is the “lived abstraction” of vitality affect which transposes an activity into a trans-individual event, which makes the transactions sublime, defined by spillage: spillage of affect, excess, enthusiasm, of knowledge, of truth, of vitality.

## 7. Conclusion

This thesis has read Carson's oeuvre as containing all the building blocks for a poetics of criticism which ensures the survival of the object of interpretation through centering vitality affect. Such a poetics is defined by sublime transactions: they are not reducible to the sum of their parts. At the heart of literary criticism lies the ever present talk of filling in gaps in research, on arguing a position, on making statements where others have not made statements. These are all transactions, between systems and between currencies, and they flood poetry and academia alike. Görner writes:

In the context of an aesthetics of understanding, the circular hermeneutic process is per se an aesthetic phenomenon; It must also be taken into account that an understanding is conceivable which is based exclusively on intuition and thus sensual experience.

[Im Zusammenhang einer Ästhetik des Verstehens gilt der zirkuläre hermeneutische Prozess an sich als ein ästhetisches Phänomen; dabei ist gleichfalls zu berücksichtigen, dass ein Verstehen denkbar ist, welches ausschließlich auf Anschauung und damit sinnlicher Erfahrung beruht.]<sup>263</sup>

Intuition is, as we have seen, the key to Massumi's philosophy: a cooperation of cognitive and non-cognitive understanding, a double dosing of recognition of the given and enactive thinking of the new.<sup>264</sup> The key is the ambivalence, and the ambivalence is of a Bakhtinian sort, one which yields and allows. Kristeva writes:

The term 'ambivalence' lends itself perfectly to the current transitory state of European literature – [...] – a literature that will perhaps arrive at a form of thought similar to that of painting: the transmission of essence through form, and the configuration of (literary) space as revealing (literary) thought without 'realist' pretensions.<sup>265</sup>

She wrote this in 1986 and not much has changed. The massive influence of the Russian and French traditions on the North American Carson perhaps accounts for some of the similarities I have drawn between Europe/Scandinavia and North America. Indeed, I believe there is an avenue of research to be walked along in a reading of the scholar-poet as writing with a didactic quality, a similar notion being expressed by Quirin who identifies areas

---

<sup>263</sup> Görner, 37

<sup>264</sup> Massimi, 30-31

<sup>265</sup> Kristeva, in Moi (ed.), 59



Swedish literary research has shown “remarkably limited attention.” [“anmärkningsvärt lite intresse.”]<sup>266</sup>

I began with a desire to understand the liminal space between poetry and literary criticism: when one becomes the other, and what qualitative differences keep them discrete. My hypothesis was that these were intrinsically linked: that criticism had poetic qualities. As such I chose the scholar-poet, through whom I could tease out the moments where poetry becomes critical response, and where literary criticism is poetic. The inclusion of Hansson, and as such the broadened European perspective, could not be kept at bay: such was the abundance of similarities of approach, professional background, and attitude. Hansson stands, in this thesis, as an example of a Swedish tradition he is not alone in, much the same as Carson is not alone. The result of this is, I believe, an acute contemporariness of my line of questioning, but at the expense of other avenues of exploration.

This approach has been, I believe, successful with a caveat: what was found, beyond my initial concern, was the traces of a poetics of criticism out of the work of Anne Carson that was not fully accounted for by previous studies. In my study, Carson’s oeuvre was narrowed down in accordance with my reasoning under “Selection, method, and disposition” thought necessarily strayed sometimes beyond: note my inclusion of studies of Carson’s novelistic writing, as well as translation work. My reading of Carson is in no way exhaustive (though this thesis has suggested such a thing is impossible no matter the scope of the study) but I have attempted to provide as broad of an understanding of relevant lines of inquiry as they appear across her work. This thesis has presented, without accounting for her full body of work, a general consistency of, if not topic, trouble.

Poetry and criticism understood within a shared continuum of sublime quality has been the conclusion of their similarities. Their differences remain largely un-determined by this thesis, complicated by the increasingly homogeneous world of literature that is exhibited by the growing institutions of University sanctioned creative writing programs, the academised sphere of determination of literary valuation through grants and awards, and the exciting resistance to scientific constraints exhibited by the five new Swedish dissertations. I have offered an answer to Mia Quirin’s question of how the bordered position between dissertation and creative writing should be understood: as mesh. This does not, however, give a truly satisfying answer to the changing shape of literary research. My reading is, after all,

---

<sup>266</sup> Quirin, 17

contained by the focus on Carson. The continuum of poetry and literary criticism remains mysterious, in a most thrilling way.

It remains that the scope of this work has been wide, and each of the three sections – while deeply connected – produce their own lines of questioning. Regarding “Survival” there is certainly more to be said about the function of poetry, such as the question of if poetry and prose are separable in a meaningful way – this thesis suggests perhaps not – and the reality of the poetic moment arising out of some texts but not others. “Resurrection” provided a reading of *The Beauty of the Husband*, a book which is woefully unscavenged for meaning, that included less than half of the 29 tangoes, and an even smaller amount of the poetry of *Men in the Off Hours*. I can only hope – and assume – I and others have the chance to keep shaking the box. “Vitality” merely begins to trace the shared motions of poetry and philosophy, and suggests a didacticism with implications far beyond this thesis. As such, while I argue this thesis has answered some questions, it has posed many more. Such is the nature of the practice, however. If we wish to ensure its survival, we must gesture with affect.

## Bibliography

### Primary literature

- Carson, Anne. *Short Talks, with a new introduction from Margaret Christakos*, Brick Books classics, London, Ontario, ebook, 2015 (1992)
- . *Glass, Irony and God*, New Directions Publishing, New York, 1995
- . *Plainwater*, Vintage Contemporaries, New York, 2000 (1995)
- . *Men in the Off Hours*, Vintage Contemporaries, New York, 2001 (2000)
- . *The Beauty of the Husband*, Vintage Contemporaries, New York, 2002
- . *Decreation*, Vintage Contemporaries, New York, 2006 (2005)

### Secondary literature

- Benson, Stephen (ed.); Connors, Clare (ed.) *Creative Criticism: An Anthology and Guide*, Edinburgh University Press, 2014
- Carson, Anne. "Economy, Its Fragrance", *The Threepenny Review*, no. 69 (Spring 1997), 14-16
- . *Economy of the Unlost: reading Simonides of Keos with Paul Celan*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1999, ebook provided by The Internet Archive, [archive.org](http://archive.org)
- . "Reading of '59 Paragraphs About Albertine' at the Mercantile Library Center for Fiction." *YouTube*. YouTube, 10 September 2013. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?vDofR3Qd2E\\_A0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?vDofR3Qd2E_A0)
- Coles, Elizabeth. *Anne Carson – the Ethics and Erotics of Interpretation*, Queen Mary, University of London, 2013
- Czakon, Dominika. "Is the Hermeneutic Interpretation of Art Erotic? A Reader of Gadamer Responds to Sontag's Challenge", *The Polish Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 43, iss. 4, 2016, 45-63
- Duff, David. *Romanticism and the Uses of Genre*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2009
- Finberg, Keegan Cook. "Figuring an Ethical Reading Practice: Anne Carson's 'Whaching.'" *Canada and Beyond*, vol. 3, no. 1–2, 2013, 103-122
- Fleming, Joan. *Errant Versions and Textual Motions*, University of Otago, 2013
- Frye, Northrop. *The Well-tempered Critic*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and London, 1963

- Gadamer, Hans Georg. *Truth and Method*, Crossroad Publishing Company, New York, 1982 (1975)
- Guriel, Jason. "Autobiography of Reader", *Poetry*, vol. 201, no. 6, 2013, 569-578
- Greenblatt, Stephen. *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England*, University of California Press, Los Angeles, 1988
- Görner, Rüdiger. "Poetik der Kritik – Ästhetik des Deutens", *Journal of Literary Theory*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2020
- Hannaway, Craig Brian. *Translations of the Self: A.E Housman and Anne Carson, Between Scholarship and Creativity*, Durham University, 2013
- Hansson, Gunnar D. *Var Slutar Texten? : Tre Essäer, Ett Brev, Sex Nedslag i 1800-Talet*. Litterär Gestaltnings Skriftserie: 10. Autor, 2011
- Huizinga, Johan. *Homo Ludens*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, Boston and Henley, 1949 (1944)
- Jennings, Chris. *The Erotic Poetics of Anne Carson*, University of Toronto Quarterly, vol. 70, no. 4, 2001, 923-936
- Kabthiyali, Niyakati; Dangwal, Surekha. "On Kristevan Concept of Intertextuality", *International Journal of English Language, Literature and Translation Studies*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2016, 298-303
- Kaushall, Justin Neville. "The Echoic Imagination: Beckett and Adorno on Aesthetic Experience", *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd'hui*, vol. 28, no. 2, 2016, 341-355
- Kerferd, George Briscoe. "Sophist Philosophy", *Britannica*, 1999, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Sophist-philosophy>
- Kristeva, Julia and Moi, Toril (ed.). *The Kristeva Reader*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1986
- Laubhan, Jonathan "Luke". *Studies in Prose: Tate, Carson, and Wenderoth*, University of Washington, 2013
- Leys, Ruth. "The Turn to Affect: A Critique", *Critical Inquiry*, University of Chicago Press, vol. 37, no. 3, 2011, 434-472
- Massumi, Brian. *What Animals Teach Us About Politics*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2014
- Mullins, Tom. "Erotics not Hermeneutics", *Irish Educational Studies*, vol. 5, no. 1, 1985

- Quirin, Mia. "Modern poetik och litterär konstnärlig forskning ut ett Dansk-Svenskt perspektiv", *Tidskrift för Litteraturvetenskap*, vol. 49, no. 4, 2019
- Rae, Ian. *Unframing the Novel: From Odaatje to Carson*, University of British Columbia, 2002
- Schlegel, Friedrich; Firchow, Peter (trans.) "On Incomprehensibility" in *Friedrich Schlegel's Lucinde and the Fragments*, University of Minnesota Press, Minnesota, 1971
- Sontag, Susan. *Against Interpretation*. [New ed.]. Vintage, 1994.
- Tate, Daniel L. "Erotics or Hermeneutics? Nehamas and Gadamer on Beauty and Art", *Journal of Aesthetics and Phenomenology*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2015, 7-29
- Thorp, Jennifer R. "*Prowling The Meanings: Anne Carson's Doubtful Forms*" and "*The Traitor's Symphony*", University of Manchester, 2014
- Veeser, H. Aram (ed.). *The New Historicism*, Routledge, New York, 1989
- von Praet, Helena. "Writer's Writer Revisits Authorship: Iteration in Anne Carson's *Deceatation*", *Canadian Literature*, no. 241, 2020, 18-35
- Watt, Adam. "Poetry as Creative Critique", *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies*, vol. 20, no. 4-5, 2016, 648-656