“AN INTERESTING AND VALUABLE MENTAL EVENT”: ANNE CARSON’S ERROR POETICS

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Introduction

From the appearance of her first book-length collection Glass, Irony and God, Anne Carson has made ripples in the world of contemporary poets. In a review of Autobiography of Red for the Chicago Review Mark Halliday wrote “The first thing I read by Anne Carson blew me away,” and followed this with this with the statement that “The Glass Essay” “made me wonder if the best living poet in English could turn out to be a Canadian Professor of Classics” (121)—the fact of Carson’s background as a classicist has been the source of much fuss. Attention has tended to focus on her erudition in the field of classics, rather than how her scholarly training has impacted her work: yet while classical texts are an important point of return in Carson’s poetry, she doesn’t by any means confine her references to Ancient Greece and Rome. Her poems traipse across Romantic and Modernist texts, incorporate the writings of St Augustine and Freud, reference works of art and explore film. As a magpie of high culture, the classical world is only one source among many that informs Carson’s poetry, while her scholarly approach to her sources is a feature that permeates her body of work.

As a poet who has created a buzz, crossing over from the small readership poetry generally obtains to bestseller status, I have been struck by the paucity of scholarship available on her body of work. While her poetry has been in the public eye for just a little over a decade at this time, it has received so much attention in major venues, and found a
place in standard anthologies such as *The Norton Anthology of Poetry* so quickly, that some kind of stocktaking seems due. In fact, the most thorough attempts to chart Carson’s career so far have appeared in the pages of the *New York Review of Books*, with Bernard Knox addressing her renewal of classical sources in his review essay of *Autobiography of Red*, “Under the Volcano” and Charles Simic assessing the varying success of her original poetic work in his article “The Spirit of Play,” appearing upon the publication of *Decreation*. These review essays are among the most important resources for an attempted assessment of Carson’s *oeuvre*.

Among those who have addressed Carson’s work academically, two writers in particular have isolated Carson’s interest in error as the point of departure. Both Robert Stanton and Lee Upton, in addressing Carson’s “errors,” however, have sidestepped the role this errancy plays in the construction of her work. Both have leaned toward an examination of Carson’s work through the lens of Reader-Response. This is unsurprising: with Carson’s authorial interventions, her work seems to anticipate her reader, and therefore invites this investigation. Unfortunately, when addressing Carson’s work on the terms the author has set up, a question arises: *why* does Carson set up the playing field in this way? Similarly, other authors such as Stuart Murray in “The Autobiographical Self: Phenomenology and the Limits of Narrative Self-Possession in Anne Carson’s *Autobiography of Red*” have taken Carson’s poetic representations and discussions of phenomenology as the starting point for an examination of her work. The same inherent risk makes itself known, as the critic participates in the meta-narrative
Carson has produced, rather than standing outside it. In taking the stance of a reader-
response or a phenomenological approach to her work, these authors have also failed to
gauge the relative success of Carson’s major modes of writing. Most scholarship has
focussed on *Autobiography of Red*, which in particular provides fertile ground for gender
studies and queer studies, in evidence in Jes Battis’s essay ““Dangling inside the word
she”: Confusion and Gender Vertigo in Anne Carson’s *Autobiography of Red.*” While
Charles Simic in the pages of *The New York Review of Books* makes the critical
assessment that “Carson labours too much to make her work appear novel,” (“The Spirit
of Play”) following it with details of where, in his view, her poetry fails, the academy has
effectively flattened assessment of Carson’s work. A systematic attempt to understand
and assess the success of Carson’s project, especially within the terms she sets, seems to
be timely.

A further difficulty in addressing her work seems to arise from the fact that, due
to its comparative nature, scholars have tended to approach her work from a single
disciplinary perspective. While this is natural, there is a degree to which scholars
working on Carson’s original poetry, as opposed to her translation, have *taken her word
for it*. Most significantly, Robert Stanton and Lee Upton, who have both addressed her
poem “Essay On What I Think About Most” as Carson’s statement of the project of
poetry have not engaged with the poet’s use of Aristotle and Alkman, and, significantly,
have not returned to these original texts. Her choices among Classical texts and her
interpretation of other sources are a crucial part of Carson’s work, and as such this is a
shortcoming in work that has been done on Carson’s poetry. On the other side, classics scholars have also been involved with the assessment of Carson’s work, but have focussed on her translations of Sappho and Euripides, as well her scholarly interpretations of classical texts in her works *Eros the Bittersweet* and *Economy of the Unlost*. While I am not a classical scholar—and do not read Ancient Greek—I will compare Carson’s translations to those provided by others.

**Carson and the Tradition**

Carson’s work has many recognizable features; while defining these features of course leads to generalizations to which there are exceptions, it is nonetheless useful to catalogue the common gestures of her writing. Among the gestures that become familiar when reading her work, her poems are built on intertextuality, as she brings outside texts into her work, often combining work from different periods. These outside texts are not restricted to the literary: Carson draws on history (such as the work of Thucydides), philosophy (Aristotle; Heidegger), theology (St Augustine), art (Edward Hopper; Betty Goodwin), film (director Antonioni, and actresses Catherine Deneuve and Monica Vitti) and other referential materials in the creation of her works. In her academic work, Carson’s specialty is Classics, and, not surprisingly, the Ancient Greeks feature heavily in her work—most notably Homer, Aristotle, Thucydides the lyric poets. Her Classical work also emerges when Carson includes her own translations from the Greek in her work. At the same time, while her Classical training often informs the subject matter of
her work, the construction of her poems is most indebted to her academic career, as she finds way to bring the perspective of academia into the body of her poetry: the two fields bleed into each other. While dense fields of reference are not unusual in Modernist and contemporary texts, Carson brings her academic training to bear through the incorporation of bibliographic detail into the body of her poems. She uses not just the well-known writings of her subjects, but also brings in marginalia from her chosen authors’ works, and enters into conversation with other critics of those works. This approach to the construction of her poems implicitly sets up a claim of authority. At the same time, “authority” is something she questions through her return to error, and the ways she links error to an epistemological investigation.

Even though Carson addresses these epistemological questions through the deployment of texts in a way that strikes the reader as academic in tone, Carson produces not only meditative lyric works, but also narratives. Two of her works, *The Beauty of the Husband* and *Autobiography of Red* are book-length narratives: novels in verse. The shorter poem, “The Glass Essay,” is also an extended narrative. In *Plainwater*, “Canicula di Anne” and individual sections of “The Anthropology of Water” form narratives. Other works take place in sequences that hint at larger narratives behind the lyric instance of the poem.

“Poetry” is, in itself, a term that Carson problematizes. Through her titles and subtitles she undermines the label of “poem.” Her books mention essays and libretti. *The Beauty of the Husband* is subtitled “a fictional essay in 29 tangoes.” These labels hint at
both an uneasiness with the genre/form of poetry, as well as a desire to stretch the possibilities of that form. Frequently citing Gertrude Stein, who Carson thus claims as one of her poetic forebears, this pushing at the boundaries does not surprise the reader.

At the same time as these features of Carson’s work can be read as an expansion of the project of contemporary poetry, her intertextual collisions and hybrid claims for poetry fit into the Modernist tradition. However, though she returns in her work to Stein and Beckett, she doesn’t address other modernist writers—particularly Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot—whose examples most closely model the work she produces. Her incorporation of an academic perspective expands upon the intertextual gestures of the Modernists. While T. S. Eliot provides, in one version of “The Waste Land,” his own footnotes, Carson incorporates these suggestions into the body of her poems, or writes essays that, paired with her poems, provide that explanatory information; while Pound points the readers to his sources throughout The Cantos, Carson not only includes the references to specific editions and page numbers, but includes the scholarly conversation within the body of the poem, as when she cites differing editorial decisions on and interpretations of Emily Brontë’s oeuvre in “The Glass Essay”.

This academic pose, while following a lead suggested by the Modernists, is unique among contemporary poets. Symptomatic of this division from her contemporaries is how Carson makes use of Classical texts in her work. Many modern and contemporary poets make use of Graeco-Roman classics, particularly classical mythology in their work. Poets such as Louise Glück, Rita Dove and Eavan Boland take
the voices of mythological figures—especially common is the act of voicing the female characters of mythology—while poets such as W. B. Yeats in his “Leda” retell classical myths in narrative forms of varying length, producing metaphorical structures mirroring contemporary life. While Carson does both of these things (the main body of *Autobiography of Red* consists of the mythological monster Geryon’s voicing of his own history, and, within “Lots of Guns: An Oratorio” the segment “Tender Guns” takes a section of Homer’s *Iliad* to produce a metaphorical comparison of the Trojan War with the state of modern warfare) she more frequently analyses the classical text (as with Alkman’s fragment 20, appearing in totality within the body of “Essay on What I Think About Most” (*MH*, 30-36)) or allows the voices of the authors themselves to emerge, when she places Thucydides in conversation with Virginia Woolf. Carson’s makes frequent use of the interview in her works, and among the interviewees are Mimnermos, Stesichorus and Thucydides. Voicing these authors, rather than their historical or fictional heroes, speaks to Carson’s interest in the act of authorship, even as her narrative work makes overtures to a discussion of how narrative works are created. In contrast, taking the voice of, or retelling the story of classical figures such as Persephone, Demeter and Penelope draws a parallel to contemporary life, but omits the meta-narrative of authorial enquiry Carson creates.

These innovations have produced as much scepticism as interest among her readers. The majority of material available on Anne Carson comes from reviewers of her
work; even as they register interest in her work, they frequently express a degree of unease with her method. The release of Decreation produced mixed reception, such as William Logan’s reservation about this volume when he writes in the The New Critereon that Carson “seems to believe every idea brilliant because it is odd” (“Victoria’s Secret,” 76). In particular, the criticism that the work appeared to grow in didacticism, and her use of framing structures grows mannered—leading Simic to observe that “the impression she gives with her addendums is that she is unsure whether her poems can stand alone” (“The Spirit of Play”). Carson appears to anticipate her reader’s response, and in providing these framing devices, directs the readerly interaction with her poems.

In spite of these criticisms, Carson’s work has been widely praised, and—more unusually—taken up by the reading public to the degree Autobiography of Red reached the status of a “bestseller.” Her work has made appearances in pop culture—her first book, the scholarly essay Eros the Bittersweet became the basis of an erotic exchange on the television show The L Word. For an academic work published by a university press, this pop cultural outing is almost unprecedented. The oddity of the phenomenon led to Meghan O’Rourke’s article appearing on Slate, “Hermetic Hotties: What is Anne Carson Doing on The L Word?” In questioning why it was that a character would claim that Eros the Bittersweet “practically changed my life,” O’Rourke outlines the public reception of Carson’s work, as well as offering the astute observation in her discussion of “The Glass Essay” that “Carson is interested in her own erotic life primarily as a way of accessing the sibylline recesses of the mind.” Yet even as her work has cropped up in popular
culture and her books have won awards and accolades, the academy has by and large kept quiet.

**Error and the Moment of Knowing**

In her 2000 collection *Men in the Off Hours* Carson includes the poem “Essay on What I Think About Most,” which, as Robert Stanton has pointed out in his essay ““I am Writing This to Be As Wrong as Possible to You”: Anne Carson’s Errancy” is “the closest she has yet got to a poetic manifesto.” Using this poem as a starting point to explore Carson’s “Error Poetics,” what becomes clear is that Carson’s interest in error is linked to an interest in epistemology, and, in fact, her “error poetics” is part of a larger epistemological enquiry; in particular the poet’s interest lies in how we access our knowing in both rational and emotional forms. As I will discuss below, Carson proposes mistakenness as one possible method of accessing new instances of knowing.

In the collection *Decreation* Carson includes a response to a work of art, “*Seated Figure With Red Angle* (1988) by Betty Goodwin.” This poem consists entirely of incomplete conditional statements, in which the “if” proposed is never fulfilled. Among these conditional statements, Carson’s interest in knowing and its limitations are made clear when she writes

> If you want to know why you cannot reach your own beautiful ideas.

> If you reach instead the edge of the thinkable, which leaks. (*Decreation*, 99)
This “edge” in Carson’s view is a place of errancy and potential errancy, and the potential acquisition of knowledge that comes from recognition of that error. The “leakage” that takes place hints at Plato’s world of shadows, the human condition that dictates we can imagine a perfection that may never be attained. This edge of knowledge, too, is a place that promises access to beauty; it is no accident that The Beauty of the Husband, a tale of what she terms in The Autobiography of Red “wrong love” (AR, 74), is a response to Keats’s maxim: “Beauty is truth, truth beauty.” The unfolding story of wrong love is an attempt to get at knowing, a suspension in the unfolding of a mistake. In an interview with Kevin McNeilly Carson states “…the space of not knowing has always been seductive to humans” (“Gifts and Questions: An Interview with Anne Carson”). Error, epistemology and the seductive relationship between the two are the points of return in Carson’s body of work.

“The edge of the thinkable,” and how we get there is something Carson writes about over a decade earlier, in the introduction to the “Short Talks” of Plainwater:

It is the task of a lifetime. You can never know enough, never work enough, never use the infinitives and participles oddly enough, never impede the movement harshly enough, never leave the mind quickly enough. (Plainwater, 29)
This “leav[ing] the mind” is surely the step beyond the “edge of the thinkable.” Its relation to the thinkable, as it appears in “Seated Figure With Red Angle (1988) by Betty Goodwin” is made apparent with the opening of the sentence: “You can never know enough.” The mind—the intellect—is only part of how we know in Carson’s estimation, and escape from the mind is a desirable action.

Carson’s interest in how we know is not a new quest for poetry to make; once again Carson is linked to tradition. One notable exploration of error and its relation to learning/knowledge comes in Stanley Fish’s reading of Milton, appearing in his work “Surprised by Sin”: according to Fish, the reader re-enacts the fall as he is seduced by sophistry in one line, and, with the break of a single line, set straight on his path again. Here error and subsequent knowing have a moral dimension; but this moral inquiry is not a primary focus of Carson’s work. Wordsworth, in his rehearsals and re-tellings of his life in The Prelude allow multiple versions to stand side-by-side. The multiplicity of “errant” and “correct” versions opens a space where the two intermingle. The Romantic scholar Christoph Bode in his 2008 lecture “Discursive Constructions of Identity in British Romanticism” given at Georgetown University proposes that these alternate versions of his life demonstrate that the “corrective” to childhood memory made in the objective re-telling of an event in fact highlights the different knowing that the “errant” memory allows, in turn opening the possibility that the “errant” is the more “correct.” Through the interplay of mistakenness and correctness, Carson approaches the “leak” of knowledge, beyond which she may access her “own beautiful ideas.” This approach to
the leakage, like the possibility that Wordsworth’s errant memory may provide more knowing than the “correct” version, pre-supposes that knowledge is not purely a rational acquisition. The instances of learning that arise from Carson’s errors often represent what I term “extra-rational” knowledge—that which cannot be reached through logic alone.

In taking “Essay on What I Think About Most” as an opening statement of Carson’s poetic project, a close reading of that poem is necessary before its resources and suggestions about the nature of error and the nature of poetry can be applied to her other works. At the same time that she makes proposals about error and poetry, her attempts to bring them together in her various enquiries have varying degrees of success; evaluation of the degree of success will also be part of my writing, both in terms of the relation individual works bear to her statements on poetry, and as poems in and of themselves.

Carson’s poetic work can be broadly divided into the categories of extended narrative, and individual lyrics or lyric-sequences. Her critical essays, both those published independently and those appearing within her volumes of poetry, are of interest insofar as they offer an extension of her interests, but lie outside the scope of this essay. When discussing her narrative work, I will provide a close reading of “The Glass Essay,” read in light of her later rehearsals of extended narratives in The Autobiography of Red and The Beauty of the Husband. Of her lyric poems, selections from Plainwater, Men in the Off Hours and Decreation will inform my writing. In examining the place error has in her poetry, and how Carson uses error to explore the possibilities of
knowing, I have chosen to focus on a smaller number of texts closely; this has benefits insofar as I am able to demonstrate how Carson develops her poems in detail. This demonstration, however, comes at the expense of a consideration of a large body of work. While I focus primarily on a small number of poems, I will make reference to works in which Carson adheres to, or departs from, the “Error Poetics,” and her ultimate concern with epistemology. While I will be approaching only a limited number of texts in depth, I hope that these readings will illuminate a process of poetic construction that Carson has repeated throughout her career thus far.

Crucial to this discussion, too, is the definition of “error” as it manifests in Carson’s work. Broadly speaking, Carson’s errors can be placed in three different categories, which I term mathematical error, habitual error and implicit error. While Carson declares her specific interest in these instances, however, none are new to poetry.

“Mathematical error” occurs when a “wrong equation” takes place; in a sense, all poetry contains this error. Metaphor, one of the basic materials of poetry, relies on the equation of what is and what is not.

“Habitual error” occurs when there is a divergence from accepted practice: in particular, this occurs in Carson’s use of misspelling and the breaking of grammatical conventions. The breaking of grammatical conventions has, in particular, been the source of experimentation among Modern and contemporary poets. Among the most well-known of those poets toying with linguistic conventions are the Modernists Gertrude
Stein and e.e. cummings; linguistic play has, however, always been part of the project of poetry.

“Implicit error” occurs when the poet makes a statement and then provides a correction or amendment, thereby implying that the original statement was inadequate or wholly incorrect. This is a longstanding rhetorical device—the Latin name for this figure of immediate emendation is “correctio.” In classical rhetorical use this emendation often intensifies the previous sentiment; however the outright correction of a “wrong” statement is another version of this figure. Contradiction allows the poet to leave the original wrong present, even as it purports to replace that wrong with a “right.”

Through her poems Carson makes use of all three types of error; as mentioned above, this in itself is not unusual, as all are common figures through the history of poetry. Where Carson differs from other poets is that she explicitly declares her interest in these mistakes, alerting her reader to their occurrence both in the work of others that she embeds into her poems, and within her own writing. Carson effectively *trains* her reader to be alert to the possibilities of these moments of mistakenness, and thereby attempts to renew their effect. When she points to a misspelling, a mistranslation, an anachronism, a misinterpretation, she also draws attention to the readerly experience.

In introducing the theme of error in her work, Carson also introduces a vocabulary of error, which problematizes Robert Stanton’s etymological excursion into the linguistic roots of error, since her synonyms have different linguistic histories. She uses “mistake” synonymously with “error,” and also provides the reader with a further
constellation of language including: unexpectedness, contradiction, wrongness, the juxtaposition of what is and what is not, not knowing, complication, imperfection, jeopardy and messing up (“Essay on What I Think About Most”, MH, pp. 30-36). The “juxtaposition of what is and what is not” that she mentions is particularly important to Carson, as it represents the complete experience of the error which embeds both “wrongness” and its corrective in a single figure. This language of error forms another point of return throughout this essay.
Chapter 1: “Essay on What I Think About Most”: An Ars Poetica

Carson’s “Essay on What I Think About Most,” published in the volume *Men in the Off Hours* (which includes a number of essays in poetic forms, many of which are offered in multiple, almost unrelated “drafts), exemplifies many of the features of Carson’s poetry. Intertextuality is present in Carson’s examination of Aristotle, the Greek lyric poet Alkman, and the quotation of a Chinese proverb, all of which are examined and placed in conversation with the “I” of the poem. The poem itself proceeds with both a description of error and its effect, and the enactment of two types of error. Through the sections of Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* that Carson cites—all from the third part of that work, where Aristotle addresses *style*—Carson implicitly and explicitly links her examples and enactments of error to her interest in epistemology. As will be discussed below, this inquiry is both intellectual and emotional, or “extra-rational” in its manifestation.

“Essay on What I Think About Most” doesn’t represent Carson’s first proposal of the limits of “correctness”. Among other poems addressing this theme is her *Short Talks*, “The Rules of Perspective.” Appearing in *Plainwater*, this small text attempts to expose the limitations of perspective, which are often taken as allowing an accurate depiction of the three-dimensional world on a two-dimensional plane. When Braque breaks these rules in order to depict what is not at any given moment *not* immediately visible to the eye, but is nonetheless *true*, his work is attacked.
A bad trick. Mistake. Dishonesty. These are the views of Braque. Why? Braque rejected perspective. Why? Someone who spends his life drawing profiles will end up believing that man has one eye, Braque felt. Braque wanted to take full possession of objects. He said as much in published interviews. Watching the small shiny planes of the landscape recede out of his grasp filled Braque with loss so he smashed them.

_Nature morte_, said Braque. (Plainwater, 34)

Here the perspective that, following its introduction by the Renaissance masters, brought a new realism to art is revealed for its falsity. The reduction of the three-dimensional to a two-dimensional representation necessarily involves, at the strict level, a “mistake.” Yet, according to Carson, the accepted view of Braque as representative of the Cubist artists who attempted to break the limitations of a flat canvas with their ruptured perspective, is that in fact the “realism” introduced with the discovery of perspective is itself the errant position. Perspective mimics the way we encounter reality, and through its use the appearance of things encountered through the medium of the eye is transferred to the canvas, the vanishing point replacing depth perception. At the same time, however, this is merely visual information; the “rational” reduction of a single instant of seeing still
contains the mistake of flatness. Carson’s interest in the “mistake” of Braque’s canvases puts two paradoxical realities in conversation with each other.

Braque’s “mistake” is also juxtaposed with other language. In Carson’s poetry, a mistake is usually an epistemological event; here, however, she unusually places a moral judgement on the mistake exhibited on Braque’s canvases when she adds the language “a bad trick” and “dishonesty.” While “a bad trick” could be interpreted simply as a trick that is poorly executed, the addition of “dishonesty” to the charges against Braque’s approach amount to a reported accusation against the artist. However, this moral judgement—which is at variance with her usual deployment of error—is ultimately shown to be incorrect. The trick of perspective—which could allow the artist, and by extension the viewer, to believe that “man has one eye”—is shown to be flawed.

Carson’s approach in this short talk is to interrogate these purported attacks on Braque’s vision. When she writes, “these are the views of Braque” [my italics] the poet denies other views of Braque’s work. Her use of the definite article fixes these reactions as the only opinions that exist of Braque’s work. When she asks “Why?” her answers do not seek solely to give more information on this view of Braque’s mistakenness, but also to refute the critics with Braque’s own answers. “Braque felt.” “Braque wanted.” Carson relies not only on Braque’s canvases, but also his own statements about his artistic project, which reveal his vision of the limitations of the pre-20th century art that Modernist painters inherited. The “full possession” that Braque desires includes a fullness that goes beyond the “plane surface” that itself is the basis of a metaphor for the
mind in *Men in the Off Hours*’s “Essay on What I Think About Most,” beyond the limitation of immediate sight, and takes into account that which cannot be viewed in a single moment, but that the viewer nonetheless knows is there, just like the panoramic photograph allows the viewer to grasp an ungraspable instant in time. This “full possession” is akin to what Carson later proposes in “Essay on What I Think About Most” as the potential new knowledge errancy allows.

“**What We Engaged In When We Do Poetry**”

In “Essay on What I Think About Most” Carson puts forward a statement of her poetic project and a broader claim for the field of poetry when she writes

…what we are engaged in when we do poetry is error,

the willful creation of error,

the deliberate break and complication of mistakes

out of which may arise

unexpectedness. (*MH*, 35)

The aim of participation in poetic acts by writers and readers—she writes “when we *do* poetry [my italics],” not when we “write,” “create,” or “make” poetry, thereby involving the reader as part of the activity of poetry—is to arrive at a new understanding, new knowledge, an “unexpected” place. The mechanism she proposes that enables this arrival is error, which she defines as “an interesting and valuable mental event.” Backing this assertion first with the vague and casual “lots of people,” and then the specific authority
of Aristotle—a writer who was among the first to attempt to systematize the work poetry “does.” Even as she asserts her view on the engagement of poetry in a game of error, she has once again invoked Aristotle when she precedes the above statement of her poetic project with the words “Imitation (mimesis in Greek)/ is Aristotle’s collective term for the true mistakes of poetry” (MH, 35). Elsewhere Carson’s defines the act of imitation, and what it meant for the Classical world as “a mirroring of the activity of the thought that you had at the time that you had it, and an attempt to make that activity happen again in the mind of the listener” (McNeilly, “Gifts and Questions”). Her definition of mimesis, like her proposal regarding “what we are engaged in when we do poetry,” envisions a transaction that requires both writer and reader. When viewing Carson’s proposals regarding error through the lens of her definition of mimesis, the error she is proposing seems to be a deliberate re-creation for the reader of an error the author has already experienced. If this is the case, her definition excludes the possibilities for artificial error—constructed by the author solely for the reader’s experience, but not mirroring the author’s own. Similarly, if the author is unaware of an error taking place in the writing—genuinely mis-spelling, mis-translating, mis-calculating—the reader’s experience is likely to be different from the author’s. In the terms of Carson’s proposal, then, the latter two instances of errancy do not belong within the category of “the true mistakes” [my italics] (itself a seeming oxymoron) “of poetry.” In texts such as “The Glass Essay,” where Emily Brönte’s mis-spellings are mediated by Carson, the very construction of the poem is changed.
The poem proceeds by first isolating and defining two types of poetic error, and then enacting them in such a way that the reader is invited to be aware of their own readerly experience of these errors. In this way Carson attempts through her “Essay on What I think About Most” to provide an exemplum of the writerly and readerly engagement with error in both intellectual and emotional terms.

**Aristotle and the Mistake of Metaphor**

The first so-called error she labels is metaphor. At the level of pure logic, metaphor does by its nature involve the equating of two objects that are not, in fact, synonymous. Nevertheless, as a primary figure of language we are not used to think of the metaphor as a form of error: metaphors are deliberately unequal, and deliberation is antithetical to mistakenness. As such, by defining metaphor as an error, Carson is applying a purely mathematical understanding of error. At the same time, Carson’s labelling of metaphor as error is provocative: insofar as the inequality of two objects that have been pronounced the same may produce at the purely logical level a disconnection, metaphor is such a basic figure of language that her assertion of its inherent errancy makes the reader approach language at a new angle.

When she defines the error of metaphor, Carson once again brings Aristotle directly into the poem, quoting the *Rhetoric*. This is an interesting choice in itself: the style section of the *Rhetoric* is, like much of Aristotle’s writing, a systematization of elements of language. However, invoking Aristotle’s relationship to error, the natural
assumption a reader may make is that Carson would instead draw upon the *Poetics*, and in particular Aristotle’s isolation of *hamartia*, which the Oxford English dictionary defines as “the fault or error which entails the destruction of the tragic hero,” and is a fundamental feature of many of the texts Carson references and translates. *Hamartia*, however, steps too close to the moral content of errancy, where Carson’s interest is at its root epistemological. As such, she turns to Aristotle’s more technical manual on the possibilities of language, and she provides Aristotle’s explanation of the three types of words he asserts as the materials of language: “strange, ordinary and metaphorical” words. This explanation states:

Strange words simply puzzle us;
ordinary words convey what we know already;
it is from metaphor that we can get hold of something new & fresh. (*MH*, 30)

Having already told the reader that the “Essay on what I Think About Most” is engaging error as its topic, Carson bypasses the first two language materials, the strange and the ordinary, and paraphrases Aristotle’s further explanation of the source of metaphor’s so-called “freshness” when she writes “Aristotle says that metaphor causes the mind to experience itself / in the act of making a mistake” (*MH*, 30). This definition of error describes a cognitive—rather than a moral—event, where both the “wrong” equation and its correction are present, and experienced simultaneously. Moving beyond the explanation of this cognitive phenomenon, Carson instantiates the encounter with
metaphor, illustrating the nature of metaphor through Aristotle’s metaphor:

He pictures the mind moving along a plane surface

of ordinary language

when suddenly

that surface breaks or complicates. (MH, 30)

This surface of language, and its subsequent break or complication, removes the reader from the theoretical, systematized knowing that Aristotle provides and moves the reader into an actualization of metaphor by the physicalization of language into a plane surface, with surface imperfections. This break in the surface is, she proposes, a source of intellectual enjoyment, whereby the reader meets “the juxtaposition of what is and what is not the case.” This juxtaposition, not just of disparate materials, but of supposed error and its corrective is the “mental event” that Carson values: the mistake in itself is only valuable and interesting if the reader then recognizes the what is and what is not in simultaneity.

Carson’s interest in Aristotle’s discussion of metaphor lies in this juxtaposition of “what is” and “what is not”—this juxtaposition is an instance of having it both ways. Carson dramatizes the bridging effect of this juxtaposition elsewhere in Men in the Off Hours in her “Appendix to Ordinary Time,” a short prose piece written after the death of the poet’s mother. Quoting from Virginia Woolf’s notebooks, Carson uses a line that Woolf has in fact crossed out: “She did not not sufficiently. She had no grasp of.” Carson goes on to write:
Reading this, especially the crossed-out line, fills me with a sudden understanding. Crossouts are something you rarely see in published texts. They are like death: by a simple stroke—all is lost, yet still there. 

(MH, p. 166)

With that “all is lost, yet still there,” the crossout mimics the action of metaphor for Carson, and, as such, produces the same bridging experience all good mistakes must encapsulate.

In “Essay on What I Think About Most,” Carson’s metaphorical “mistake,” in keeping with the narrow definition of metaphor as mistake, is a mathemathical error: the paradox of equating two ideas that are not, in fact, equal. The “truth” that emerges— “how true, and yet I mistook it!”—arises from the “mental event” of accepting the contradiction, holding it in mind in right and wrong form. Aristotle’s definition here is reductive, even as he approaches the epistemological in considering the knowing that can arise from a mistake. In addressing the “freshness” present in error, leading to his categorization of the overall of effect the recognition of error as error, Aristotle writes

Most witticisms are also produced through metaphor and an additional illusion; for what the hearer hears becomes clearer to him through its being the opposite of what he thought, and the mind seems to say, ‘How true, and I was wrong.’ (239)

While wit is a subjective experiences of language, Aristotle’s interest here, beside the beauty of the language deployed, is that this wit arrives not from the aesthetic properties of the language itself, but from the same cognitive event that interests Carson. The sense
of learning—and Aristotle prizes metaphor as the rhetorical figure encapsulating such learning in the most compact way—is the primary source of pleasure in a text.

Illustrating the rapidity of learning with a comparison to the figure of the simile, as Aristotle writes, “the simile is...a metaphor differing in one addition only; hence it is less pleasant, as it is more drawn out, and it does not say that this is that, and so the mind does not think out the resemblance either” (235). This recognition of sameness and difference—knowledge in rational and irrational forms—shares is something I will return to.

**Arithmetic, logic and subjective response**

The second error Carson cites and then enacts is again a calculable error, though its arithmetic also relies on the “correctness” that arises out of habit/acceptance. Nonetheless, like metaphor is treated mathematically (as the juxtaposition—and implied equating—of “what is and what is not”) so too is Alkman’s “error” pre-empted in mathematical terms, when Carson (again introducing knowing) writes that “The poet does not seem to know/ that 2 + 2 = 4” (MH, 31). Though she prepares the reader for the fact that she will cite a specific poem and poet, Carson doesn’t introduce Alkman until after she has made this statement, allowing the reader the space to interpret her un-mathematical poet both in a specific and general sense: just as she makes a broad statement in which she proposes poetry’s project is the wilful creation of poetry, the figure of the poet, even as she has prepared a systematizable approach to error in
Aristotle’s treatment, exists outside of this calculable system. Furthermore, Carson hedges. “The poet does not *seem* to know” [my italics]. Even as Carson is reducing language to mathematics, the use of the word “seem” plants the suggestion of artifice. What the poet seems not to know and what the poet does know are very possibly different. If the poet *does* know that his arithmetic is wrong, then he is making a choice to bypass the rational knowledge that is captured by mathematics; the question then emerges: when reason in bypassed, what new knowing emerges? The fact that Carson brings these questions into play before she introduces the poet or poem means that her reader contemplates the nature of a basic sum before he is confronted with the language that is more slippery, not as easily reduced to mere numbers.

The quote Carson uses to exemplify arithmetical error, Alkman’s Fragment 20, is as follows:

[?] made three seasons, summer
and winter and autumn third
and fourth spring when
there is blooming but to eat enough
is not. (*MH*, 34)

Perhaps the most important thing to notice about this quotation is that while the poet has already framed her poem such that the reader is aware that error will be the subject of Carson’s interpretation, the actual error is not necessarily immediately apparent. The basic “2 + 2 = 4” equation doesn’t actually appear in Alkman’s fragment, and even
though the numbers three and four are included in the poem, these numbers don’t evoke a sum, just as the year is not a “sum” of seasons, but a progression.

Carson’s treatment of this fragment first fits the informational style of an essay, as, giving the background of what is known of the poet and his surroundings, Carson provides a context for the hunger she posits as central to the fragment. After defining the hunger as the central concern, Carson then makes a statement of the “feeling” experience of hunger: “it always feels like a mistake” [my italics]. With this feeling of mistakenness, Carson places the bodily experience of “to eat enough/ is not” into a realm of “mistake” in comparison to its “corrective,” satiety. The “error” is subjective—feeling—until Carson once again returns this incalculable experience to mathematical terms when she posits that the “computational” error is how Alkman actualizes the mistakenness of hunger. Feeling—or the “extra-rational”—is translated into rational terms. Alkman names three seasons before re-calculating, adding the fourth in his re-counting. The “afterthought” constitutes the corrective to miscalculation; at the same time as it corrects the calculation, without this afterthought, the error itself would not have existed. Despite the fact that Carson has mathematically “proven” an error, however, Alkman’s writing still doesn’t read as a botched sum. The series, rather than the sum, is where Carson is more convincing: spring appears “fourth in a series of three.” Having established a discrete group—summer, winter and autumn—Alkman introduces new information that doesn’t fit the scheme he has set up. The spillage that occurs, which Carson labels as mistake, is where the drama of Alkman’s poem naturally lies. Mathematical correctness,
however, is not enough—just as Alkman fails to explain where spring comes from (created the first three seasons of summer, winter and autumn, while spring simply arrives fully formed in Carson’s reading) Carson states that he also fails to address the fundamental concern of “why numbers don’t help us/ control reality better.” In Carson’s estimation, the logic underlying this mistake and others like it is not enough to provide understanding that moves beyond mere logic.

Beyond this movement of analysis, Carson then moves into an enactment of Alkman’s miscalculation. While the reader was unaware of Carson’s reading of afterthought as error prior to her analysis, now the reader is able to “correctly” experience the error. The errant enumeration of the poem’s subjectively “likeable” qualities makes the movement between quantifiable and unquantifiable claims. Carson first weighs the poem, before making completely subjective statements about the poem. Third, she moves to a metaphysical reading of Alkman’s line before introducing her own afterthought which, like Alkman’s afterthought, is the most important step in the enumeration.

When Carson claims Alkman’s poem is “small” and “light” she invites the comparison to her own poem: according to Carson, in the space of five lines Alkman has been able to translate the “mistake” of hunger into a knowable form via the mistake of miscalculation, while her poem’s length dwarfs Alkman’s fragment, and even her exegesis of the fragment points to Alkman’s “economy,” (an economy “more than
perfect,” in which is embedded another miscalculation, as Carson proposes a category
greater than the superlative of perfection) in isolating and enacting the mistake.

Carson’s second “reason,” it turns out, is unreasonable. She puts forward a
hedging, subjective reaction: the poem “seems to” (avoiding the definitive does)
“suggest” rather than directly invoke colours (“like pale green”) that Alkman’s poem
never names. In fact, Carson is herself “suggesting” the colours, and the reader cannot
help but associate the colours with Alkman’s fragment now that she has overtly
introduced them into the poems. By responding to the first thing she likes—presented in
objective, weighing language—with the subjective, “unreasonable” reason, Carson
invites the reader to hold two very different reactions in mind at once, echoing the dual
cognition of metaphor.

The third reason Carson gives introduces a further dual reading strategy, whereby
the reader again holds more than one understanding in mind. For the reader unfamiliar
with the Ancient Greek (which, as is her practice, Carson has translated literally,
retaining word order and placement) Carson analyses the linguistic elements of Alkman’s
text—as it has been received. While Carson explains the nature of the grammatical
mistake embedded in the extant Greek, she presents both the logical, rationalizing
explanations of scholars (“strict philologists”) give, and the refutation of that
rationalization. The philologists purportedly explain away the grammatical error by
posing that there has been an “accident in transmission” whereby part of the poem has
been lost; given this “accident of transmission,” this fragment is elsewhere smoothed
over in translation. Guy Davenport, in whose translation the fragment is numbered 38 in accordance with Antonio Garzya’s numbering of the surviving Alkman’s fragments, gives the following rendering:

There are three seasons:

Summer and winter,
And autumn is third,
And spring is fourth,
When everything flowers
And nobody has enough
To eat.

(Davenport, 155)

While hunger and the “fourth in a series of three” remain in Davenport’s translation, what is lost is the unknown maker of spring. In Carson’s view, this Carson advocates the benefits of interpreting what remains of the text, discovering what can be gained without recourse to the presumed absence. The advocating this approach, Carson implicitly argues that, making sense of the fragmented text as it stands, allows the mind another opportunity to “experience itself in the act of making a mistake.” While allowing the interpolated question mark to remain in place of the absent actor, Carson also receives “textual delight” in the absence of a subject governing Alkman’s verb “to make.” Allowing that the philologists explanation “may be so,” Carson still seeks to
glean knowledge from the amputated text. Again, Carson asks the reader to reside in the undecideable between what is and what isn’t.

**Willfulness**

Replicating Alkman’s mathematical error with “the fourth thing I like,” Carson also re-introduces “truth” to the poem, albeit in a “blurted impression,” appearing only “in spite of” itself. This “in spite of” is following by a claim of apparent inadvertency on Alkman’s behalf; yet the inadvertency is suspect, as Carson calls the simplicity of Alkman’s fragment “fake.” As a “contrivor,” Alkman exemplifies Carson’s statement on the nature of poetry: Alkman has engaged in wilful creation, translating the “mistake” that hunger feels like into a readerly error and its corrective. In doing so, Carson writes that Alkman

```
sidesteps fear, anxiety, shame, remorse

and all the other silly emotions associated with making mistakes

in order to engage

the fact of the matter.
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The fact of the matter for humans is imperfection. (*MH*, 35)

Carson’s mimicry of Alkman’s error, equally artificial as Alkman’s own contrivance, likewise saves the most important argument for last, when Carson uses this “fourth thing” to lead back to the very subject of mistakenness that under examination in her poetic essay. She claims to sidestep emotion, in order to engage with “the fact of the
matter.” Coming full circle, Carson shows that her engagement with error has implicitly been an epistemological investigation. This portion of Carson’s poem also leads the reader back to emotion, a crucial consideration in the opening lines of the poem, and arguably the key to reading Carson’s writing on errancy as an investigation into how we know things.

Carson replicates this “miscalculation” in *The Beauty of the Husband*, recording the wife’s reaction to a letter from the husband from whom she has separated. This letter arrives from Rio de Janeiro early in the text, before the reader is aware of the husband and wife’s history together. The epigraph to this “tango” comes from Keats’s *Otho the Great: A Tragedy in Five Acts*, 3.2.208-9, and reads “Here, Albert, this old phantom wants a proof!/ Give him his proof! A camel’s load of proofs!” (*BH* 17). The call for “proof” in Keats’s epigraph is met by the document of the husband’s letter. In the midst of his letter, he invokes the emotional habit of their relationship with the words

*We have this deep sadness between us and its spell so habitual I can’t tell it from love.*

*You want a clean life I live a dirty one old story. Well.* (*BH*, 20)

The husband’s words make clear the irreconcilable nature of emotional attachment and how it plays out in reality. The response that Carson records provides the following rendering of Alkman’s series:
There are three things to notice about this letter.

First
its symmetry:

*Make me cry… You make me cry.*

Second
its casuistry:

cosmological motifs, fire and water, placed right before talk of love
to ground it in associations of primordial eros and strife.

Third no return address.

I cannot answer. He wants no answer. What does he want.

Four things.

But from the fourth I flee
chaste and craftily. (*BH*, 20)

Here the mathematical error divides the intellectual and the emotional. The first thing she notices is a formal element of the letter. Like the weighing of Alkman’s poem as “small” and “light,” the wife here takes the measure of the husband’s words. In a different approach to the “unreasonable” conclusion she reaches regarding Alkman’s poem (that it “seems to suggest colors like pale green”) by an intellectual analysis of the husband’s “casuistry”—a term that is often used pejoratively. Carson updates her previous replication of Alkman by drawing attention to the images she has placed at the pen of her
male protagonist. The wife’s third object of note is framed logically—implicit to her train of thought are the “therefores:” if there is “no return address,” therefore she “cannot answer.” Therefore, presumably, he does not want an answer. If this is the case, the question arises “What does he want.” The fact that Carson punctuates her question with a period rather than a question mark arguably underlines the logical progression of these ideas. This punctuation also creates an emotional distance.

However, the appearance of emotional distance of the conclusion of the third object of the wife’s notice is blown apart by the fourth thing in this series of three. The fourth thing is something that she cannot approach even as she knows it; this time the error that moves the reader outside of the analysis of the letter into the (unspeakable) emotional space of the letter’s recipient. This unspeakable knowledge, again the errant fourth, is the emotional fact that Carson’s that underlies the drama of The Beauty of the Husband.

While “Essay on What I Think About Most” discusses error as the gap between unequal parts, placing the reader in the realm of rational thought, Carson is also interested in the emotional content of knowledge, and how we know things extra-rationally. To exemplify this, Carson’s title and first two lines embed error into this inquiry, placing the word in a pivotal position. The title—“Essay on What I Think About Most”—emphasizes error as an object of intellectual thought; but the object of thought
given in the opening line, “Error,” is modified in the following line when Carson adds “And its emotions.” In a construction of verbal addition, Carson moves through the emotions she associates with error (fear; a state of folly and defeat; shame and remorse); and while she punctures this mounting emotion with the intellectual deflation of her question “Or does it?” the residue of emotion nonetheless remains. Similarly, when she returns to mistakenness in her rendering of a “fourth thing,” she also reintroduces emotion to the poem, pitting it against “the fact of the matter.” Carson here “sidesteps” emotion—but the return to the subject belies her claim to circumvent “silly emotions.” While the combination of her sidestepping and her labelling of the emotions as “silly” lessens the focus on this element, she has “sidestepped” emotion only for the purpose of naming the emotions she lists. Fear, anxiety, shame and remorse linger in the reader’s mind as she follows Carson’s poem to its conclusion. When Carson asks the question “Or does it?,” this has the same effect as if she had crossed out the word emotion: the cancellation is not complete, because the word is both there, and not there. This state of both presence and absence at once is the essence of Carson’s interest in error and its epistemological possibilities.

Rewriting the Essay

As a kind of a coda to the “Essay on What I Think About Most,” Carson follows this poem with “Essay on Error (2nd Draft).” With “1st Draft” specified in Men in the Off Hours, the reader is left to presume that this re-drafting is related to the “Essay on What I
Think About Most,” which, in its opening lines, declares error as the subject of thought, and therefore the subject of that “Essay.” The relation of the two poems is reinforced by the fact that not only are they published side-by-side in *Men in the Off Hours*, but they also appeared together in their initial publication in the Winter 1999 edition of the journal *Raritan*. This second draft is not the only one of its kind in *Men in the Off Hours*. Carson includes both first and second “drafts” of “Freud” and “Lazarus,” three “drafts” of “Flatman,” as well as a second draft (without a preceding first draft) of “Irony is Not Enough: Essay on My Life as Catherine Deneuve.” Additionally, Lazarus appears in the sequence “TV Men” (a series of poems that in themselves had a previous life in *Glass, Irony and God*) and the opening essay “Ordinary Time: Virginia Woolf and Thucydides on War” is revisited in the “TV Men” segment “Thucydides in Conversation with Virginia Woolf on the Set of *The Peloponnesian War*” and the final essay “Appendix to Ordinary Time,” also returns to Virginia Woolf. The book circles back on itself. The links between each different version of these poems, however, are simply their named subjects: re-drafts are not recognizable as edited versions of the original drafts; instead in each case a radically different poem emerges. It is hardly surprising in a book that proposes error as central to poetic creation that Carson would continually re-“do” her poems, offering the “corrections” of second and third drafts.

Unlike “Essay on What I Think About Most,” however, the “Essay on Error (2nd Draft)” doesn’t appear to be a meditation upon error so much as a further enactment of its possibilities, particularly of the same type of extra-rational experience Carson invokes in
the previous poem. The “Essay on Error” is an elliptical poem, one which, I would argue, elicits an emotional response more than intellectual comprehension.

The poem begins in the space of dream (“It is also true I dream about soiled suede gloves” (MH 37)), and throws together Freud and Descartes alongside a suggestive series of statements. The “also” of the poem’s opening lines drops the reader into the speaker’s monologue in media res, as if hearing “on the other hand” without the first half of the construction. The speaker of the poem appears to be a former patient of Freud’s, but remains unnamed. Constructing a response to Freud’s letter of 7.4.1909 to the Hungarian psychiatrist Sándor Ferenczi, the “Essay on Error” is not a structured rebuttal, but instead reads like the thoughts floating through the speaker’s mind as he reads the letter. This letter refers to Freud’s patient Ernst Lanzer known as the “Rat-Man,” the subject of his case history Notes Upon A Case of Obsessional Neurosis of 1909. In his letter to Ferenczi, Freud’s mention of this patient consists solely of the sentence “I have completed the case of the Rat-Man and am preparing to send it to Jung, but I have reached the end of my capacity for work for now” (69). Though the identity of the speaker is traceable, presumably few readers would follow up Carson’s reference to learn the identity of the speaker.

The “error” hinted at in the title appears to be Freud’s assessment of his patient, yet its responses—such as “let me tell you/ that was no/ pollen stain” and “Smell of burnt pastilles./ I still remember the phrase every time I pass that spot” (MH 37)—place the reader in the speaker’s mind, correcting Freud’s impressions, yet without giving the
reader any tangible understanding of the “correct” interpretation. In this further enactment of error, the intellectual understanding of Freud is pitted against the emotional response of the unnamed respondent, again recording the divergence of different types of knowledge. If “Essay on What I Think About Most” forms, as I argue, an *ars poetica*, its re-draft in “Essay on Error (2nd draft)” is a further enactment on the possibilities of error. By naming error in the title while leaving it unnamed in the body of the poem, Carson shows the possibilities for mistakenness as an unnamed agent and figure of thought in poetry.
Chapter 2: Watching and Waiting: Error and Emotional Space in

“The Glass Essay”

You might say it is the poem that began it all: Carson’s “The Glass Essay,” the opening poem of her first full-length collection *Glass, Irony and God*, is the poem that Davenport singles out as “a poem richer than most novels nowadays” (ix) in his introduction to that volume, and, despite its hefty length, was very quickly anthologized, now appearing in the *Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry*. As an exemplar of Carson’s work, this poem instigates many of the features that become familiar in Carson’s work. The reader could approach the poem with a checklist: the intertextuality is there, with the quotation from Emily Brontë’s work. The intellectual element presides in Carson’s discussions of Brontë, incorporating not only interpretation of Brontë’s work, but also information emerging from biographies and the work of other critics. Yet the overriding concern of the poem is emotional, as the poet tells the story of the breakdown of a love affair. The poem develops the two threads, Brontë and the “I” of the poem, in parallel, allowing the two to mirror each other—to cross over. And Carson gives her reader the first of many initiations into error, with the discussion of such a benign mistake as Brontë’s habitual spelling mistakes—“whach” instead of “watch,” “kichin” instead of “kitchen.” The errant “whach” is a crucial pivot between the two
narratives, as well as the overriding action of the poem: the reader becomes the ultimate “whacher”/watcher as the poem unfurls.

Like many other Carson works, the poem is an extended narrative, and as mentioned above, like her two book-length narratives, the verse novels Autobiography of Red and The Beauty of the Husband, it tells the story of “wrong love.” While the later verse novels tell the story of the beginnings of the love affair, “The Glass Essay” picks up the tale only when the affair is already over. The protagonist makes a journey home to visit her frail mother, and recounts scenes with her ex-lover “Law,” her father’s decline into dementia, and elements of the narrator’s psychoanalysis. While Carson takes an intellectual stance in her use of Emily Brontë through the poem, Brontë is in fact first presented in subjective terms as the narrator’s “favourite author” (1). This fact is important, as Carson’s real interest is in the emotional aftermath of the affair, and the connection between the personal narrative and her analysis of Brontë likes in the emotional space of watching. Speaking of the poem in an interview for The Paris Review Carson says

I do think I have an ability to record sensual and emotional facts—to construct a convincing surface of what life feels like, both physical life and emotional life.

But when I wrote “The Glass Essay,” I also wanted to do something that I would call understanding what life feels like, and I don’t believe I did (194). Even though she expresses a belief that ultimately she failed in her attempt to understand—and record—“what life feels like,” this very aim for the poet echoes her
understanding of the mimesis of the Ancient Greeks—she is not merely imitating the surface of an object, but is trying to replicate the experience of an encounter. The “sensual and emotional fact” that she records are entangled, but not synonymous, with the objective facts of the situation. The sensual and emotional facts make little sense when divorced from their context; but the framing context also lacks without this mimetic understanding of “what life feels like” in Carson’s view. Guy Davenport supports Carson’s view that her strength is “emotional fact” when in the introduction to Glass, Irony and God he asserts that “she writes in a kind of mathematics of the emotions, with daring equations and recurring sets and subsets of images” (viii). Going further, Carson links this feeling of life to thought—later in the same Paris Review interview she states

...this capturing of the surface of emotional fact is useful for other people in that it jolts them into thinking, into doing their own act of understanding. But I still don’t think I finished the thinking. (194)

If the work inducts the reader into another’s experience, Emily Brontë has a didactic place in the poem. Quotation and analysis allow the poet to overtly inculcate the reader into an understanding of another person’s experience of the outside text. What Carson makes explicit by her use of Brontë, she also aims to do in the mirroring half of the poem, schooling the reader in the emotional life of her narrator.
Emotional Time

The opening of The Glass Essay immediately enters the personal narrative, as in “I” Carson sets the temporal and physical scene for what follows in the poem. She writes:

I can hear little clicks inside my dream.

Night drips its silver tap
down the back.

At 4 A.M. I wake. Thinking

of the man who

left in September.

His name was Law.

My face in the bathroom mirror

has white streaks down it

I rinse the face and return to bed.

Tomorrow I am going to visit my mother. (1)

The “I” that designates the section gains in meaning only at the outset of the second section of the poem. Initially the reader may assume that, as the opening of the poem, that “I” is a Roman numeral; when the next section of the poem—“SHE”—begins, the reader reevaluates the opening “I” to realize Carson is in fact using the personal pronoun,
and that within the juxtaposition of “I” and “SHE” Carson is identifying the dual narrative in those sub-titles at a miniature level.

These opening eleven lines establish the drama behind the personal narrative, identifies the major characters (narrator, ex-lover and mother) as well as constructing a sense of time, pitting the immediate (“At 4 A.M.”; “Tomorrow I am going to visit my mother”) against the past action (“Thinking// of the man who/ left in September”). The definition of the temporal parameters engages the reader through its sense of urgency. The ex-lover, Law, takes on a archetypal importance, named as he is for the system of judgment that regulates societal behaviour. The act of “thinking” is separated by the stanza break from the exit of Law, and what results is an emotional “lawlessness.”

What becomes significant in the ensuing action of the poem, as Carson enters the intellectual pose in a similar way that she does so in “Essay on What I Think About Most,” is that Carson starts the poem in the extra-rational space of a dream. This dream-space is the same space in which she later opens her “Essay on Error (2nd draft).” The outside world impinges on her internal dreamworld, breaching the space between rational and extra-rational. It is never clear what produces the “little clicks”—the image that follows (“Night drips its silver tap/ down the back”) suggests the dripping of a tap—but the “click,” despite its assonant chime with “drip,” is a very different sound, and the “silver tap of night” is a metaphor. While Carson has expressed her own disinterest in and lack of knowledge about music, claiming that the prosaic qualities of her poetry stem from this, her ability to manipulate the linguistic materials of the first stanza, with the
chiming of click/drip, tap/back and then back/wake belie those who criticize Carson’s lack of musicality. Given the skill displayed here, the reader can presume that the prosaic quality displayed elsewhere in Carson’s writing derives from the poet’s choice, rather than from the poet’s lack of ability.

In the third stanza the poet dramatizes another schism: this time that schism is internal. “My face,” which viewed “in the bathroom mirror/ has white streaks down it,” becomes “the face.” This detachment from—disclaiming of—her own face records another of Carson’s “emotional facts,” and echoes the rifts that exist both between the dual narratives, and within them. That this disclaiming of her face takes place immediately before she announces the forward movement of the narrative, with her report of the impending visit to her mother, has psychological resonance for the reader. The schism, too, suggests another juxtaposition—this time of the terms of what does and does not belong to the speaker.

Moving from “I” to “SHE,” Carson again delays information that allows the reader to glean the doubleness of her subject in this section title:

She lives on a moor in the north.

She lives alone.

Spring opens like a blade there.

I travel all day on trains and bring a lot of books— (1).
The “SHE” that is the subject of this section appears here is the narrator’s mother. After
the narrative exposition of “I,” which ends on the fact that tomorrow the narrator is
visiting her mother this is natural. These opening four lines do address the narrator’s
mother, with the anaphoric opening two lines providing factual information—about
location and living circumstances. That she “lives on a moor” prepares the ground for the
introduction of Emily Brontë, perhaps the literary figure most associated with the
landscape of moors.

With the introduction of Emily Brontë to the narrative, new possibilities opens for
the “SHE” of the section title—this is strengthened by the position that Brontë inhabits in
the subsequent text. As such, “SHE” is figure split between mother and Brontë —like the
narrator herself, who is split between the self experiencing transformation as she
“stump[s] over the mud flats” and the self that arrives at the kitchen door, the
transformative moment over. This split echoes that schism between “my face” and “the
face” in the opening section.

Brontë comes into the text through the presentation of the physical manifestation
of her work: the narrator carries The Collected Words of Emily Brontë. As when
Shakespeare brings the physical book onstage, such as Ovid’s Ars Amatoria in The
Taming of the Shrew, or his Metamorphoses in Titus Andronicus, bringing Brontë
“onstage” signals the parallel that her words draw to Carson’s narrative. Here Brontë is
presented as the narrator’s “favourite author,” allowed to hold a preferential, subjective
place in the narrative. The narrator’s love of Brontë is, however, tempered by her fear
regarding the author, which she “means to confront.” Carson writes, “Whenever I visit
my mother/ I feel I am turning into Emily Brontë” (1). This turning into another person
also echoes the schism she has previously described—if she is turning into Brontë, it is
not only her face that is disowned, but potentially her very self. Carson actualizes this
fear with the narrator’s avowal of her loneliness and ungainliness. The final stanza
mimics the form of the opening stanza:

my lonely life around me like a moor,

my ungainly body stumping over the mud flats with a look of

transformation

that dies when I come in the kitchen door.

What meat is it, Emily, we need? (2)

The narrator first gives two statements about her own state of being; the meat of
necessity can be seen in the return to the landscape (“I travel all days on trains and bring
a lot of books”) both physical and literary. Again Carson uses rhyme and assonance to
draw the physical and literary elements together the use of these literary devices to bring
together the landscape and necessity. Between the rhyming “moor” and “door” comes the
assonant “transformation,” while “meat” and “need” chime in sound and meaning.
Questioning what is needed, too, points to a lack of that “meat”—like Alkman’s hunger,
this lack feels like a mistake.
Whaching and Watching

The introduction of Brontë leads first in the third section “THREE” to quotation from *Wuthering Heights*, and then, more importantly, to the central position Brontë takes in the fourth section, “WHACHER,” and the introduction of error. The fourth section opens with the lines

> Whacher,

Emily’s habitual spelling of this word has caused confusion.

For example

in the first line of the poem printed *Tell me, whether, is it winter?*

in the Shakespeare Head edition.

But whacher is what she wrote. (*GIG*, 4)

In the error terminology I have proposed, I have taken Carson’s own word to define Brontë’s error: the mistake I term *habitual*. Unlike a mathematical error, misspelling requires deviation not from a provable equation, but from an agreed upon norm. With the event of Samuel Johnson’s dictionary, the English language became more or less fixed. As a result, Johnson’s fixing of the language has become the habit we adhere to, and Brontë’s misspelling is errant only because it breaks the agreed-upon rule. However, even as the language is fixed, we retain a historical record of alternatives. The *Oxford English Dictionary* doesn’t include Emily Brontë’s “whach” among the alternate
spellings a reader commonly comes across in the texts of previous centuries: Brontë’s mistake is idiosyncratic.

As a mistake, Brontë’s misspelling gains interest as a result of the resultant misinterpretation others have made: her the mistake is compounded by other mistakes. Yet while Carson is interested in the learning what takes place in the moment of a mistake, she makes the choice to sidestep the scholarly misinterpretation of “whether” as the point of potential epistemological interest, and concentrate wholly on Brontë’s action of “whaching.”

Carson unfolds Brontë’s “whaching” to define the scope of Brontë’s world; at the same time its repetition, like the Carson’s enactment of Alkman’s error in “Essay on What I Think About Most,” has a didactic place in the poem, making the reader aware of its central important to the action of the poem. This is how Brontë’s “whaching” unfolds:

Whacher is what she was.

She whached God and humans and moor wind and open night.

She whached eyes, stars, inside, outside, actual weather.

She whached the bars of time, which broke.

She whached the poor core of the world,

wide open. \( (GIG, 4) \)

The movements that interest Brontë, as well as the act of “whaching” are entangled with the concerns of the narrator watching, though the objects being whached are different.
The narrator, though, is fascinated by Brontë’s field of vision, and deliberately defines that world, which includes man and God, earth and sky, internal and external realities, and, finally, time and the world, both of which appear to be broken. This ultimate expansion to the inclusion of the entire world in Brontë’s vision is again underlined in the musicality of language. The “poor core” harmonizes with the “world” of which it is an integral part. The act of definition is, like Johnson’s dictionary, a gesture of fixity. This relation of the individual both to physical space and, especially, temporal space again contains echoes of Carson’s opening of the poem as she has defined both the fact of existing within an exact temporal landscape, as well as anticipating the physical movement of journey.

The anaphoric repetition of “She whached” also displaces the reader’s participation in the narrative. At this introduction of the act of “whaching” the reader “whaches” alongside the speaker; later the reader will be left in the position of the lone watcher, as the narrator enters her own story, leaving the reader on the “outside” watching the “inside,” aware of the gap between the two, just as Brontë and the narrator are aware of the separation. The way Carson sets up this definitional segment is interesting in itself, moving from a list connected by “ands” in line 98 to the pile of “whached” elements separated only by commas in line 99. In the following stanza, both time and the world each have a further explanatory phrase attached. This shifting way of defining the scope of “whaching” first accelerates as the “ands” are removed and the list
becomes more insistent, and then slows for the reader as he assimilates this information with what has come before.

As the poem schools the reader in the act of “whaching” it prepares the reader for the pivotal place watching will take in the narrative, just as, in “Essay on What I Think About Most” error was placed in a pivotal position between thought and emotion. Watching/“whaching” likewise emotional and non-emotional elements as the reader, through the narrator’s self-watch, watches facts and emotional facts unfold across the dual narrative.

**Choice and the Act of “Whaching”**

More important than the invitation to participate in Carson’s construction of watching, the poet reveals the limitations of agency in the act. She writes “To be a whacher is not a choice./ There is nowhere to get away from it” (ll. 103-104). Those compelled to “whach” can only whach; nor can the whachers determine the quality of its action—“To be a whacher is not in itself sad or happy” (108)—the “emotional facts” that Carson is interested in recording, in her estimation, are separate from the act of observation that allows her to record them. Just as in “Essay on What I Think About Most” Carson questions the relation of emotion to error, she here tries to separate the position of “whacher” from any inherent emotional stance. Emotion may be impressed upon the act from without, but in itself the action of whaching/watching is neutral. The potential moral appraisal of watching—the risk of voyeurism—is never addressed.

50
When the narrative turns to the story of the speaker’s own psychoanalysis, the lack of choice accorded the watcher is reinforced, and definitively applied to the narrator herself. Carson writes:

Why keep watching?
Some people watch, that’s all I can say.
There is nowhere else to go,

no ledge to climb up to. (GI\textit{G}, 19)

Addressing watching and its uses in the personal narrative, Carson “corrects” Brontë’s “habitual [mis-]spelling,” completing a crucial link between the two narratives. When asked the question, there is no rational answer: the answer, “Some people watch, that’s all I can say,” directly echoes the former statement that “to be a whacher is not a choice.” Cornered by reality, the only possible response is watching—for some people. The fact that not everyone is fated to watch underlines the importance of the connections between Carson’s narrator and Emily Brontë.

This spelling correction does not occur only in the personal narrative of “The Glass Essay.” “Whaching” becomes “watching” in Brontë’s narrative when Carson cites Brontë’s affection for the Psalm 130, quoting from the King James version,

My soul waiteth on Thou more than they that watch for the morning,

I say more than they that watch for the morning. (GI\textit{G}, 34)
Having discussed elsewhere in the poem the significance of the designation “Thou” to Emily Brontë, the relation of “watching” to “Thou” gains further importance; but what is most significant, and is the culmination of the entwining of the two narratives is the change to the “correct” spelling as Carson comments on her own interpretation of Brontë’s watching with the words “I like to believe that for her the act of watching provided a shelter,/ that her collusion with Thou gave ease to anger and desire” [my italics] (GIG, 34). The combined emotions of anger and desire mirror the emotions the reader has watched Carson’s narrator unfold as well. In addition to providing a space for new knowledge, as will be discussed below, Carson believes that watching has the potential to provide solace to the watcher.

**Watching, Waiting, Knowing**

Watching is important epistemologically as it opens a space for the arrival of knowledge. Carson illustrates not how such knowledge can arrive, but simply the fact that it does. Carson allows for unquantifiable events to exist in her poems. The fact that she cannot account for the suddenness of the knowledge that one moment is absent, the next moment has made itself present, is an unsolvable puzzle—the key “emotional fact” she returns to. Again, the moment of realization is presented as a mimetic event, such that the reader may, too, experience the realization of new knowledge as the poet has previously experienced that realization. For example Carson writes

> The frail fact drops on me from a great height
that my mother is afraid.

She will be eighty years old this summer. (\textit{GIG, 23})

Carson presents the moment of this “frail fact’s” arrival as though the knowledge is entirely new. In fact, logically, the speaker has likely been unconsciously aware of her mother’s fear for some time. What resonates for the reader is that suddenly the speaker recognizes a transformation that she has been taking in for years as she has watched her mother age. Though she marries the word “frail” to the fact of her mother’s fear, its proximity to the subject of her mother and her fear links that frailty to her mother’s state, while the alliteration of “frail fact” enhances the power of the word “afraid.” That she adds the prosaic detail that “she will be eighty years old this summer” reinforces the fact of \textit{human} frailty as well as factual frailty.

The arrival of new knowledge also implicitly provides a corrective to the preceding moment, when the narrator was still in an “unknowing” state—an example of “implicit error.” In recognizing what she had previously been oblivious of, Carson’s narrator now finds herself in another relationship of altered terms. Just as the poem takes place in the aftermath of her altered relationship to her ex-lover, the poem is similarly concerned with the shifting mother/daughter relationship. Furthermore, the corrective action of this new knowledge shows the “error” of the narrator’s previous (conscious) ignorance.

This moment of arrival appears, like metaphor, to be a moment of rapid learning—yet we cannot know how long the narrator spends “watching,” to enable this
knowledge to arrive. It also raises a question as to the efficacy of the obsessive search for understanding, as the narrator plays and replays the events of her love affair and its aftermath. Her new knowledge of her mother’s emotional state arises not out of a search for learning, but instead from a sudden consciousness of the state of her mother’s being, the sudden apprehension of accumulated changes. That moment of sudden consciousness is incalculable.

The watching that allows the entry of knowledge, and the self-correction of the state of prior unconsciousness is echoed later in Carson’s narrative work in the recasting of “wrong love” in *The Beauty of the Husband*. “Watching” becomes “waiting”—but the effect is the same. Here the female narrator is meeting her ex-husband in Athens, after a separation of three years. As she waits at the bar...

...She searches herself, waiting.

Waiting is searching.

And the odd thing is, waiting, searching, the wife suddenly knows a fact about her husband. (*BH* 98)

In place of “The Glass Essay’s” watching, waiting opens the same space for knowledge and self-knowledge to arise. The statement that “waiting is searching” makes explicit Carson’s awareness that knowledge does not always arise from direct action, but passivity can also have a place in learning; similarly, the mistake, an unintentional event, can also lead to correction, another form of learning. At the same time, the triplicate
linkage of “waiting” to “searching” also undermines the notion that waiting—or watching—is an entirely passive activity.

Like the “frail fact” that emerges in “The Glass Essay,” the wife’s waiting leads to emotional knowledge, and the alteration of personal relations with another person. Again, in an incalculable instant, the error of her prior state of being becomes apparent. In *The Beauty of the Husband*, however, what becomes clear is not that her ex-husband’s emotional life has changed, but that it hasn’t. This allows the wife to reassess her inability to leave her “wrong love” behind; the lesson entailed in the correction of her love-error does not necessarily lead the wife to new emotional action. The repetition of emotional “mistakes,” and the inability to truly learn from “correction,” forms the fundamental tension in Carson’s narrative poetry. The “emotional facts” that Carson records in her narratives exist in conflict—they are, like Aristotle’s explanation of the error of metaphor, extra-rational.

**Emotional Facts**

In keeping with her interest in actions and understanding that takes place outside of rationality, Carson provides another parallel between Brontë’s narrative and the speaker’s when she relays two instances of an illogical ordering of events or a disconnect between words and action. The first of these is a recollection that occurs in the personal story of “wrong love.” Carson writes, in the section “WHACHER,”

I don’t want to be sexual with you, he said. Everything gets crazy.
But now he was looking at me.

Yes, I said as I began to remove my clothes.

Everything gets crazy. When nude

I turned my back because he likes the back.

He moved onto me.

Everything I know about love and its necessities

I learned in that one moment

when I found myself

thrusting my little burning red backside like a baboon

at a man who no longer cherished me. (GIG, 11-12)

In these lines the essential drama of the breakdown of an erotic relationship crystallizes.

The divergence between word and deed—between demur and sexual act—dramatizes

Carson’s equations that indicate the essential “error” in attempting a rational approach to

an emotional problem. Carson puts the words “I don’t want” [my italics] into Law’s

mouth ironically—the passage is about sexual wanting, and its irrationality. When

“everything gets crazy,” the speaker leaves the rational space of rectitude, and gives into

the irrationalities of desire. Crucially, in this situation of wrong love, where what is said
does not equal what is done, the divergence of word and deed leads to new knowledge, as
the speaker learns the truth of “love and its necessities.”

In Brontë’s narrative, an implicit divergence between word and deed also
appears. In the section “KITCHEN,” in addition to reading Brontë’s words, Carson also
reads Brontë’s life. She includes the following biographical tidbit:

Reason with him and then whip him!

was her instruction (age six) to her father

regarding her brother Branwell. (*GIG*, 14)

The “error,” if one exists, lies in the “*then.*” Young Emily’s instruction appears to lead to
Branwell’s punishment whether or not the “reasoning” that occurs works: one follows on
the heels of the other. “Reason” and “instruction” are both present, words from Carson’s
satellite of error and epistemology. Between the “*then*” and “*whip him!*” the reader
expects to find the qualification “if that doesn’t work.” But instead, the instruction to
“reason with him,” that might have otherwise implied a desire to avert the whipping of
her brother, has no effect on the ultimate outcome for Branwell Brontë. As such, a
disconnect of logic exists, when Branwell has no chance of escape. While the instruction
is given to her father, Emily’s suggested order of actions can also be read as a lesson in
human nature. Saying one thing, and meaning, ultimately, another, Emily teaches her
brother that lesson.

This lesson—that no matter his action, Branwell will be punished—aligns with
the “emotional facts” that Carson records throughout her narratives. Ultimately, in her
explorations of mistakenness, whatever intellectual understanding Carson’s protagonists come to, they reach a divergent emotional understanding.
Chapter 3: “The Archaeology of Troy is an Archaeology of Guns”: error in the Lyric Voice

Alongside her extended narratives, Carson also works in shorter forms. These are often hybrids—prose poem “talks,” poems as “essays,” “oratorio.” Among these poems are poems that are suggested by Classical texts—her suite of poems, “Catullus: Carmina” uses a number of the poems of Roman poet Catullus as a point of departure. In his New York Review of Books review of Autobiography of Red, classical scholar Bernard Knox discusses Carson’s translations, describing them as ranging from “wildly free adaptions” to, in some cases, “outright inventions.” In this review Knox is referring to Carson’s use of the Greek lyric poet Stesichorus, but this description can equally be applied to the poems of “Catullus: Carmina.” Viewed purely as translations of Catullus’s originals, the poems would be judged mis-translations. These errant translations, however, provide insight into Catullus’s poems, and into Carson’s methods.

Translation is itself an interesting subject to Carson. This is not surprising as in both her scholarly words Eros the Bittersweet and Economy of the Unlost, the poet provides her own translations from the Ancient Greek. More recently she has translated Sappho’s work in If Not, Winter and has also rendered four plays by Euripides in the volume Grief Lessons and Aeschylus’s linked plays in An Oresteia. In “Gifts and Questions: An interview with Anne Carson” the poet tells Kevin McNeilly:
I like the space between languages because it’s a place of error or mistakenness, of saying things less well than you would like, or not being able to say them at all. And that’s useful I think for writing because it’s always good to put yourself off balance, to be dislodged from the complacency in which you normally go at perceiving the world and saying that you’ve perceived. And translation continually does that dislodging, so I respect the situation—although I don’t think I like it. It’s a useful edge to put yourself against.

The state of inbetweenness that Carson here describes could be seen as akin to the place of “watching” of “The Glass Essay”: from this place the poet can see the edges that she sits between. Like the space at the “edge of the thinkable” she describes in “Seated Figure with Red Angle (1988) by Betty Goodwin” the state of being off balance allows for a newness to enter the new language from the original, as the translator must find the possibility for the renewal of the original text as she makes it sing for a new group of readers. Alongside her own translations and mistranslations, Carson is also interested in the mistranslations of others—bad transmissions akin to the explanations she posits are offered by philologists for Alkman’s grammatical error in fragment 20, as discussed in the first chapter. In her “Short Talks” Carson tells the story of one such mistranslation in the mini-lecture “On Walking Backwards:”

My mother forbad us to walk backwards. That is how the dead walk, she would say. Where did she get this idea? Perhaps from a bad transla-
tion. 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. They are victims of love, many of them. 

(Plainwater, 36)

Recognition of mistranslation is, like recognition of error, a valuable mental event. Here the “bad translation” brings about not only a the correction of the mistranslated adage, but also further information. Having cleared up the matter of how/where the dead walk, Carson then elaborates on the way they walk behind us: the “correction” of the “error” here requires an explanation. This explanation she provides is suggestive, and the apparent final motivation—that many of them are “victims of love”—provides a final emotional insight. Without the need to correct the original mistranslation, however, the idea that the dead “walk behind us” would have less emotional currency; the poet would not have felt compelled to explore the reasons that the dead follow in the footsteps of the living. The mistake gains interest in interest because the correct version is known, which allows Carson another instructive juxtaposition.

In the case of “Catullus: Carmina” Carson names specific poems of Catullus through quotation of the opening Latin phrase, and, in parentheses, provides an accurate translation of the Latin. In the place of a subheading, Carson then summarizes the action of the poem. As a poet of emotion and eroticism, the reduction of the actions of
Catullus’s poems has a comedic effect: “Catullus observes his love and her pet at play” in “Passer Deliciae Meae Puellae (My Lady’s Pet); “Catullus sings a dirge” in “Lugete O Veneres Cupidinesque (Mourn O Venuses and Cupids).” What follows the Latin title, accurate translation and summary in each case is the free interpretation of Catullus’s original. Grammar may be ignored, anachronisms introduced. Fridges and ambulances enter the poems that originated in ancient Rome. Catullus’s urge toward invective is reduced to a thesaurus-like list of insults when, in “Non Quicquam Referre Putavi (I Thought It No Matter)” the poet announces “I’ve been looking up words for “anus” to describe Aemilianus’/ Mouth” (p. 44). The scatological catalogue that follows is true to the spirit of Catullus’s similar invectives.

Perhaps the most instructive poem in this suite is Carson’s interpretation of Catullus’s most famous text “Odi et Amo (I Hate and I Love Perhaps You Ask Why). In her parenthetical translation, Carson in fact provides half of Catullus’s original. The Latin for this poem 85 is as follows: “Odi et amo. Quare id faciam, fortasse requiris/ Nescio, sed fieri sentio et excrucior.” An accurate translation is “I hate and I love. Why I do this, perhaps you ask./ I don’t know, but I sense that it is happening and I am tortured.” Carson’s adaptation of this text is as follows:
Odi et Amo (I Hate and I Love Perhaps You Ask Why)

Catullus is in conflict

Hate hate hate hate hate hate hate hate hate
Hate hate hate hate hate hate love hate.
Love love love love love love love love love.
Love love love love love love love love love.

I I I I I I I I why I I I I I I I I I I I I.
I I I I I I I I I I I I I I why I I I I I I I I I I I I I.

(MH, 42)

What Carson does with this poem is not a word-for-word translation—and she is not interested in making syntactical sense out of the Latin original. Instead, she reduces Catullus’s text to merely four words, but in her deployment of these words, she created a text that is four times longer than Catullus’s two-line original. The result, initially seeming to be simplistic and juvenile, is actually quite a sophisticated text: Carson embeds love in hate, and hate in love; she follows this with the embedding of “I” in why (drawing attention to the rhyme of the two words that, in the absence of other words leading only to internal or end-rhyming, seems more fundamental) and vice versa. Rather
than translating the text whereby Catullus *tells* the reader of his torture, Carson dramatizes that conflict rather than stating it. Carson’s errant re-casting of the poem boils it down to the emotional essence of the conflict of any love-hate relationship. In its square-shape on the page, the poem seems to suggest the visual element as most important—yet voicing the poem is what allows the fundamental relationship of “I” and “why” to emerge, and these repetitions, when experienced aurally, replicate the obsessive anguish that is the poem’s subject.

The title and subtitle are also an integral part of the poem. In fact, in its provision of a partial (accurate) English translation, *Odi et Amo* is the only poem in the Catullus: *Carmina* suite that provides more of the English translation in parentheses than the segment of the Latin original it provides. The question—“perhaps you ask why”—is as important to the poem as the simultaneous love and hate, providing the poem an auditor, and the desire to explain a state of consciousness. The subheading “*Catullus is in conflict*” is important to the poem in providing a measure explanation of the passion that is then demonstrated in a seemingly uncontrolled outburst. With all of these factors included in Carson’s rendering, she is putting a substantially new spin on a poem that is so well-known. By “mistranslating” Carson prompts her reader to seek the resemblance between the original and her version, and this act of reading yields a new understanding of Catullus’s expression of self-division.
Poems that are built on translation/interpretation necessarily rely on an outside text; the original texts that these poems are built on provide a measure of control for Carson as they place limitations on her. Even as she very freely adapts these poems, her leaning towards intertextuality is curtailed. While the texts that she chooses to bring together create some of the most successful parallels narratives in her work, such as her use of Emily Brontë in “The Glass Essay,” or her Keatsian epigraphs in *The Beauty of the Husband*, on occasion Carson overplays this feature of her work. An example of this, where her intextual explorations have a scattergun effect and the writing begins to appear mannered, comes in 2005’s *Decreation*. Here Carson goes into hybrid-overdrive, adding an oratorio and a libretto to the range of forms she works in within her collections. At the same time, she separates her narratives from the analysis that elsewhere she provides in the body of the poem. Writing her own explanatory essays on her poems. In the *New York Review of Books* Charles Simic criticizes this tendency when he writes

> Many of her poems and narratives come annotated with serious scholarly commentaries, introductions, footnotes, appendices, postscripts, and even mini-interviews. The effect is annoyingly didactic and futile…Otherwise, the impression she gives with her addendums is that she is unsure whether her poems can stand alone.

Obviously Simic’s assessment is subjective, but a serious appraisal whether or not Carson succeeds in *all* her work has been missing in much academic discussion of her work, while the small space accorded reviews of individual volumes does not allow for
this assessment. Other than Adam Kirsch’s skeptical review of *Autobiography of Red* in *The New Republic*, Simic’s piece is one of the few review essays to give substantial, *reasoned* criticism of Carson’s poetry—though the extended essay ultimately places substantial value on Carson’s work.

In “Lots of Guns,” which is subtitled “An Oratorio for Five Voices” Carson’s intertextuality comes to seem a writerly tic. Acknowledging that she is a poet of connections, in her *Paris Review* interview “The Art of Poetry 88” with Will Aitken Carson states

> The things you think of to link are not in your control. It’s just who you are, bumping into the world. But how you link them is what shows the nature of your mind. Individuality resides in the way links are made. (207)

This linking—a process of cross-pollination—often yields interesting results: for example in *Men in the Off Hours*, the series of poems written in response to Edward Hopper’s paintings are paired with quotes from St Augustine’s *Confessions*. In this example, as with others previously cited, the links are between a limited number of texts. When Carson adds to many outside sources to the brew, the resulting text can lose its centre. The construction of “Lots of Guns” relies on a series of links, in which she places the object of gun into a “wrong” relation to the context she introduces. In the course of the poem gun is transformed variously into a tool of logic, a configuration of woundedness, an organic entity/body, the world, an object of faith, an object of life and death, an absence, a sword and state of war and an accident. Here the cognitive error of
metaphor that Carson discusses in “Essay on What I Think About Most” itself becomes the point of return. At the same time that Carson’s gun undergoes these transformations, its bumps into Linnaeus, Parmenides, Walter Benjamin, Homer, Chinese proverbs and Gertrude Stein. The last of these, Stein, is the reason for the poem’s being—the “oratorio” was performed at a tribute to Stein by speaking (as opposed to singing) voices. The section heading “Tender Guns,” too, speaks to Carson’s connection to Stein, recalling Stein’s Tender Buttons. However, Carson doesn’t create the type of language experiment that Stein enacts in Tender Buttons—at each stage her gun-transformation can clearly be read metaphorically. And, most importantly, all sections are linked by the presence of the errant gun. In Tender Buttons, Stein is interested in divorcing words from meaning—she later stated that she was unable to configuration language in a manner that would remove meaning. Structurally, Carson comes closer to Stein’s Tender Buttons in her “Short Talks,” the sequence that “Lots of Guns” most closely resembles. There, each talk is linked only by its form as a short prose-poem, or “talk.”

In the larger poem Carson invokes the musical with her inclusion of the chorus song “Lonesome Pine.” This quotation from “Lonesome Pine” (reportedly Gertrude Stein’s favourite song according to Carson’s own footnote) follows Carson’s own chorus: the repeated phrase “the mythic past/ the curious past” (Decreation 106). However, presented as a text on an otherwise blank page—empty of musical notation—“Lots of Guns” misrepresents the traditional understanding of an oratorio. The inclusion of the song-sections based on “Lonesome Pine” only reinforce the mistakenness of the
named form by highlighting the absence of music. As if to work against the possibly musicality of poetry, Carson largely employs the form of the prose poem in these segments, not explicitly framing a rhythmic (musical) structure for the reader by means of a line break.

It is the section “Tender Guns” that I will examine here: as one of the longest sections, it is also one of the most successful in the text. Here Carson recasts a narrative from *The Iliad*; elsewhere she gives brief glimpses into other scenes; while she makes a number of references, cited above, through the body of the poem, however, “Tender Guns” is the only section of “Lots of Guns” that provides an extended meditation upon a secondary text.

The section of the work entitled “Tender Guns” exemplifies Carson’s use of error, returning to the realm of Greek myth. She begins with archaeology, pairing a temporal location in the past with the anachronistic gun, when she writes “The archaeology of Troy is an archaeology of guns, for all the guns in the world/ have come to Troy, all the guns ever invented were invented for Troy” (111). She builds the effect through layering repetition with the cognitive dissonance the reader experiences when reading Troy in light of the modern warfare of guns. “The archaeology of Troy is an archaeology of…” lulls the reader into the rhythm of simile—until “guns” break into the familiar narrative of the Trojan War. After guns have been introduced—and the reader has experienced that moment of mistakenness—Carson reinforces the thought by further repetition, first telling the reader that “all the guns in the world/ have come to Troy,”
indicating a reversed chronology in which a relatively modern implement is sent, as though by time machine, to the ancient world (and recovered, once more in the contemporary moment, via the science of archaeology.) Once she has established this factual language she moves the reader once again into unstable territory with the words “Guns are the/ red and tender habit of Troy” (111). Once the reader accepts the chronological reversal of finding guns in Troy, the introductory sentence can be viewed as quantitative—while this following characterization as “red and tender” is qualitative. The guns themselves have replaced their use—human action is the habit, not the inanimate object—while the poet applies the adjectives “red” and “tender” to the habit. The combination of these words brings forth a bodily image: the (blood) red wound, the tender place. At the same time this tender habit carries the hint of intimacy that is unexpected in a (mistaken) narrative of the use of guns in ancient warfare. The overall metaphorical movement brings together the ancient site of a famous war with a modern tool of killing, representing another moment of rapid learning as the mind examines the links between the two.

Following the opening of “Tender Guns” which places the reader in the state of mistakenness, Carson moves to the matter-of-fact voice of statement, reminding the reader that this “movement” of the poem is a reading of another poem, The Iliad. She writes: “So Homer begins the sixth book of the Iliad with/ fourteen slaughtered Trojans. One after the other each is named and cut down” (111). By once again taking the reader directly to the text, Carson encourages the reader’s appraisal/reappraisal of Homer’s
work. The fourteen slaughtered Trojans are transformed from victims of the war with the Greeks into victims of the “red and tender habit”—a euphemism—of guns, even as she describes them as being “cut down.” Here Carson again begins to destabilize her reader, killing off the Trojan soldiers with language akin to the sword. While Carson starts “Tender Guns” with the archaeology of guns—and a sense of mistakenness about time—she begins to move the reader toward viewing the “guns” as swords, now mistaking the nature of the named object.

Having established this instability of the nature of the Trojan guns, Carson next moves into simply relaying the narrative. She demarcates this new mode of movement in the poem with the words “Then the pattern changes.” This phrase not only indicates the new Greek strategy she is outlining, but also prepares the reader for a new mode of address:

Menelaos decides to take Adrastos alive. Simple reason: rich father, big ransom. Adrastos promises bronze and iron and gold. Okay says Menelaos. (111)

The narrative is boiled down to its simplest elements: Menelaos’s planned action; the explanation of motive; the captive’s offer of a reward for his release; the agreement of Menelaos. At the same time this boiling down has a comic effect, as the magnitude of the decision of whether Adrastos lives or dies is reduced to a profitable equation, and his temporary stay of execution is provided by the casual assent of Menelaos’s “Okay.” With
the words “Momentarily things look good for Adrastos” the author re-enters the text. Having told the story, Carson assesses the outlook.

Carson’s moment of authorial re-entry prepares the reader for the turn in the poem, leading the reader into the narrative twist, at the same time as re-establishing the reader’s mistakenness about the nature of the “tender guns” of Troy. This narrative twist is marked by the arrival of a third party: “Then Agamemnon/ runs up screaming.” What follows, prior to the final action of the narrative, is Agamemnon’s speech:

*No, you weakling! Let none of them escape, let not one of them live, not even the infant thing in the womb of its mother! Let every last Trojan perish out of Troy into careless oblivion, unhoused, unfuneralled and blotted out!*

Agamemnon here sets out to dehumanize the Trojans—they start as infant “things” in the womb, and must end “unhoused, unfuneralled and blotted out.” The tone of this final plea for the erasure of the Trojan people is at odds with the chastisement of Agamemnon’s first words—“*No, you weakling!*” This outburst is comical when compared to the thoroughness of Agamemnon’s insistence of the systematic slaughter of all Trojans.

The section moves to its ending through a continuation of the narrative mode, but now images of the physical body predominate, and the guns of the title take on a metaphorical rather than literal status. Carson writes

*So noble*
Agamemnon spoke and drove his gun into Adrastos, into the soft part of the body that lies between the rib and the hip and then, turning him over, he put his heel on the chest of Adrastos and drew out the glorious gleaming great-hearted gun and Adrastos’ soul came with it. (111-112)

Rib and hip; heel and chest; heart and, finally, soul. The “soft part of the body” recalls the “tender habit” of the opening. The act of slaughter is portrayed as the thrust of a sword—only the word “gun” interrupts the reader’s recognition of that. Then Carson further mistakes the nature of the weapon itself, inviting her reader to view it as a “glorious gleaming great-hearted” object, taking on a life itself as it takes the life of another. This transformation of the gun—from gun, to sword, to a kind of organic life-form—is the culmination of the section. The reader experiences the “gun,” simultaneously and errantly, as metal and flesh. The exit of Adrastos’s soul from his body is simply the aftermath.
Coda: The Self-Enclosed Text

As with all rules, there are of course exceptions. If Carson is categorized a writer of hybrid texts, there are texts that are unambiguously poems to puncture that categorization. If Carson’s work is commented upon for its intertextuality, there are texts that belie this generalization too. One such text, “Father’s Old Blue Cardigan” from *Men in the Off Hours* is worth consideration.

As a collection, *Men in the Off Hours* is haunted by the death of the poet’s mother. Although this death is only acknowledged in the final essay, “Appendix to Ordinary Time” discussed in Chapter One, the book is full of epitaphs written for subjects that cannot die, and also includes a personal lyric poem on the poet’s relationship to her father. The poem doesn’t traverse literature and world history, but lingers in the personal history bound up an unassuming piece of clothing. Self-contained, the poet writes only in conversation with the memory of her father before the onset of his mental decline. The poem opens

Now it hangs on the back of the kitchen chair

where I always sit, as it did

on the back of the kitchen chair where he always sat.

I put it on whenever I come in,

as he did, stamping
the snow from his boots.

I put it on and sit in the dark.

He would not have done this. (*MH*, 47)

In these lines Carson sets up another example of the counterpoint, but instead of creating a dialogue with Aristotle, Brontë, Homer or any of the other figures that enter her poem, the gap Carson explores is that between her own usage of the cardigan and what her father would and would not have done with the same article of clothing. The familiarity of a loved one’s action, like the epic poems of Homer, becomes for Carson an object of interrogation.

First drawing two parallels with her father—she hangs the cardigan in the same place he had previously hung it; she puts it on whenever she arrives—Carson only separates herself from her father with her third action: Carson sits in the dark, passively. Informing the reader that her father would not have done this, we can infer that her father would instead have involved himself in further activity, while the poet lingers in the coldness and the darkness.

The poem, too, contains the familiar arrival of knowledge: recalling the moment when the “frail fact” of her mother’s fear descended on the speaker in “The Glass Essay,” Carson here finds the corrective moment when, in place of the vacuum that had existed before, knowing arrives. She writes: “His laws were a secret./ But I remember the moment at which I knew/ he was going mad inside his laws.” While Carson fails to
traverse the secret laws, she is able to penetrate the more essential secret of her father’s madness and, standing outside the laws she cannot understand, she is able to recognize that her father’s madness is a form of entrapment.

From the exposition of the story, Carson dramatizes the moment of knowing through the extended simile she uses to explain her father’s expression. In that simile, Carson returns to mimesis. She writes about that the look on his face makes him resemble

…a small child who has been dressed by some aunt early in the morning for a long trip on cold trains and windy platforms

will sit very straight at the edge of his seat

while the shadows like long fingers

over the haystacks that sweet past

keep shocking him

because he is riding backwards. (MH, 47)

The specific imagining of this scenario dramatizes the feeling of mistakenness where there is no overt mistake. Just as hunger always feel like a mistake to Alkman, wearing
the cardigan in high summer, or riding backwards on the train represent a reversal of the usual order of things.

This reversal—upheaval—of the usual order of things is the ultimate “emotional fact” that Carson records, and the moment of its recognition—arising from waiting, watching, and, in the mean time, slinking toward “the edge of the thinkable”—the ultimate knowledge that arises from the state of being human that “always feels like a mistake.”
Bibliography


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