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Anne Carson

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Brief orientation

Anne Carson is a Canadian poet, essayist, classicist, and translator from Ancient Greek. She was born in Toronto, Canada in 1950. Her childhood would be spent in numerous Canadian towns due to her father having to relocate often as a banker. She has taught Classical Studies, Comparative Literature, and other related subjects at several universities in Canada and the United States, including McGill University, the University of Michigan, and Cornell University. Since the early 2000s she has primarily lived in Ann Arbor, Michigan with her husband and professional partner Robert (Bob) Currie. However, they have also spent time living in Iceland – including during a residency at “Vatnasafn / The Library of Water” in 2008 – and in April 2022, both were granted Icelandic citizenship. *H of H Playbook* (2021), an idiosyncratic adaptation of the Greek tragedy *Herakles*, features drawings Carson produced in Iceland (Dean 2021).

Carson has been credited with displaying “one of the most idiosyncratic intelligences at work in contemporary literature” (Sampson 2006). She has published several poetry collections, long poems, verse novels, creative translations, and adaptations of myths. Although she is one of Canada’s most renowned poets, her critical reputation in Canada has been mixed, probably due to her work’s avant-garde character (McDowell 2015: 19-21, 38-39).

Her highly experimental, genre-defying writing has earned her numerous (international) prizes, fellowships, and honors, including the Lannan Literary Award for Poetry in 1996, a MacArthur Fellowship in 2000, two Griffin Poetry Prizes in 2001 and 2014, and the PEN/Nabokov Award for Achievement in International Literature in 2021. She was appointed a member of the Order of Canada in 2005.

Developments

Her first work, *Eros the Bittersweet: An Essay* (1986) is a combination of literary criticism, history, and philosophy. It evolved out of her PhD dissertation, originally titled *Odi et Amo Ergo Sum* (1981) and defended at the University of Toronto. The work is concerned with the relationship between lack and *eros* (or desire). In one of its defining passages, Carson writes that Eros “folds the beloved object out of sight into a mystery, into a blind point where it can float known and unknown, actual and possible, near and far, desired and drawing you on” (1986: 110). This has come to define her “stereoscopic” (Fisher 2015) or “erotic” (Jennings 2001) poetics, where two positions are simultaneously near to and far from one another, an approach which can be seen in Carson’s penchant for love triangles in her writings and more generally

through her characteristic blending of languages, contexts, and genres.

Carson's breakthrough came with the publication of *Autobiography of Red* (1998), a novel-in-verse about the coming of age of the red-winged Geryon and his tumultuous teenage romance with Herakles. It is a contemporary retelling of the myth of Geryon loosely based on Stesichoros' poem *Geryoneis* and is often considered to be her most accessible work. In 2013, Carson published a sequel to *Autobiography of Red* titled *Red Doc*, a hermetic combination of poetry, prose, and drama in which G (Geryon) and Sad (Herakles), this time in a new love triangle, wander around a no-man's land of ice, a psychiatric institution, and a hospital. *Men in the Off Hours* (2000), a combination of lyric essays, (prose) poems, and fictional (auto)biography, can be regarded as her foundational poetry collection. It was shortlisted for the T. S. Eliot Prize for Poetry, nominated for the National Book Critics Circle Award for Poetry as well as the Governor General's Literary Award for Poetry, and won the Griffin Poetry Prize. Other works that stand out are *The Beauty of the Husband: A Fictional Essay in 29 Tangos* (2001) – which is inspired by John Keats's adage that beauty is truth and for which Carson received the T.S. Eliot Prize for Poetry in 2001 – and her highly acclaimed *Nox* (2010), a replication of a collage-like notebook in memory of her deceased brother Michael, which resulted in a flurry of reviews and critical writings. Recurrent themes in these works include (unrequited) love, grief, spirituality, madness, and representation.

While Carson's work has always been genre-bending, her partner Currie has been credited with pushing her work to its creative and interdisciplinary limits. Being a versatile collaborator, Currie has earned the nickname of the *randomizer*: he has assisted Carson in the visual design of some of her works, most notably *Nox*, and has collaborated on experimental performances of Carson's work that blend her poetry with dance, video, and soundscapes, such as their collaboration with the Merce Cunningham Dance Company on *Possessives Used as Drink (Me): A Lecture on Pronouns in the Form of 15 Sonnets* in 2006 (Anderson 2013, Bokaer 2017: 86), which was later included in *Float* (2016). They also used to teach a seminar on collaboration called "EgoCircus" at New York University and other universities until 2020 (Elkamel 2021). From *Nox* onwards, Carson's work has become even more visually experimental: while *Nox* is formatted as an accordion book-in-a-box, *Antigonick* (2012) includes hand-inked texts by Carson and Currie as well as drawings by Bianca Stone on translucent pages. When we look at more recent works, *Float* (2016) consists of twenty-two individually bound chapbooks contained in a plastic slipcase, *The Trojan Women* (2021) is a comic book created in collaboration with Rosanna Bruno, and *H of H Playbook* (2021) is conceived as a facsimile of a personal scrapbook in the vein of *Nox*.

Carson has kept a low profile as a writer and has been called "an expert at the mock-scholarly interview as literary form" (Stanton 2003: 35) as she thematises the authorial interview in some of her works, such as the interview with Stesichoros at the end of *Autobiography of Red*. She prefers not to share much autobiographic information, although several of her works have been connected to elements of her personal life, including her father's dementia and her divorce from her first husband in works such as "The Glass Essay" (1995) and *The Beauty of the Husband* respectively. Carson is known to play with the boundaries of fiction and non-fiction in her writings and is adept in the genre of fictional (auto)biography.

Avant-garde strategies and contents

Carson is renowned for her use of juxtaposition to confront disparate elements: she does not only freely experiment with genres and (visual) forms, but also with myths, languages (including English, Ancient Greek, Latin, and occasionally French), and conventional thought. She is celebrated and criticised for her continuous interrogation of genre classifications: her genre-defying work often straddles (visual) poetry, essay, and translation. Due to the analytical yet lyric quality of her work, which is permeated by historical and intertextual references, she is credited with the invention of the genre of the "lyric essay", which was introduced as a critical term by John D'Agata and Deborah Tall in a special issue of *Seneca Review*

(1997). She has described her own literary practice as “[p]lainting with thoughts and facts” (D’Agata 1997: 13). Boundary crossing, hybridity, and playful wit are characteristic of Carson’s oeuvre.

By teasing out connections between various concepts and sources, her writings are characterised by polychronicity, which could be defined as “a metafictional way of ‘translating’ one [historical] context into another” (Sanchez 2016). This technique is most prominent in her startling adaptations of classical myths (see Jansen 2021), such as the conflation of Helen of Troy and Marilyn Monroe (born Norma Jeane Mortenson) in *Norma Jeane Baker of Troy* (2019), but is also present in her highly allusive work at large. Indeed, recurrent literary influences in her oeuvre include Homer, Sappho, Gertrude Stein, Virginia Woolf, Emily Brontë, and Samuel Beckett. Her work shares several characteristics with that of these authors: her playful use of language that sometimes borders on the nonsensical; her emphasis on mediation and representation; and detailed attention to strong female characters. Yet her work differs from that of her predecessors as Carson seems to take the game of intertextuality to the extreme in her writings, giving rise to what could be called a “networked” poetics (Van Praet 2022). She has consequently been accused of name-dropping, since her referencing of and engagement with sources is sometimes considered flippant. The most stringent criticism has come from the Montreal-based Jubilate Circle of poets and in particular from David Solway. The latter has accused Carson of intellectual and poetic ingenuity by writing, in a chapter condescendingly titled “The Trouble with Annie”, that when it comes to her work, “[i]t remains a moot question which is more precarious, the scholarship or the poetry it often vitiates” (2003: 41). Some have questioned Solway’s agenda and the sincerity of his attacks: Ian Rae (2003), for example, has wondered whether this attack is another literary hoax of Solway, who is known for mischief.

This interweaving of classical and contemporary references can be linked to Carson’s interest in the unknown or uncanny, as well as her juxtaposition of the academic and creative in her writings. Carson’s heavy reliance on other (textual) material in her poetry has especially sparked interest (and caused controversy) given her profession as a classics scholar. Indeed, many of Carson’s creative works include foot- or endnotes, quotations, and appendices and some are even titled “essays”. Carson’s refusal to let herself be pigeonholed has resulted in some of her works being published in creative and scientific outlets. As a case in point, Carson’s essay on the concept of decreation appeared in *Common Knowledge*, a peer-reviewed journal published by Duke University Press, in 2002, before the essay was published as part of her poetry collection titled *Decreation* in 2005. She has claimed to have multiple desks in her office for academic writing, creative writing, and drawing (Aitken 2004, Elkamel 2021), yet her position on whether there is a need to separate the academic from the artistic remains ambiguous, as she has also said not to consider her literary and academic writing to be fundamentally different (Streckfus 2015: 216).

More generally, Carson’s work is concerned with a poetic desire to explore what is less or not known. She often combines free-roaming explorations in which she moves from one idea to the next in a surprising network of references with sustained attention to affective themes like heartbreak or desire. This emphasis on both intellect and feeling is a recurrent element in praise of her work. Carson has commented in numerous interviews that intellectual stimulation is a guiding principle in her writings, as “it’s really important to get somehow into the mind and make it move somewhere it has never moved before” (Anderson 2013). This aim to avoid complacency on the reader’s part can be considered one of the more political implications of her work, alongside her project of showing arresting commonalities between the most unlikely of (historical) names, ideas, and things.

A final area of interest worth discussing is her liberal approach to translation and adaptation. While Carson has published translations in a conventional sense, including her translations of Sapphic verse in *If Not, Winter* (2002), some of her more reimaginative works, like *H of H Playbook* (quite literally a play- or scrapbook), are also labelled “translations”, probably for lack of a better term. This seems to be a misnomer as Carson often does not present so-called “faithful” translations of these predominantly Ancient Greek plays. She repeatedly appears to reinterpret works, usually from an intertextual angle, and, as Elizabeth Coles has shown (2023: 191-95), to comment self-reflexively on not only the ‘original’ work itself,

but also its critical reception and afterlife. Thus, the opening lines of *Antigonick*, a retelling of the tragedy by Sophocles, allude to Hegel's commentary of the *Antigone*: "Antigone: we begin in the dark and birth is the death of us Ismene: who said that Antigone: Hegel Ismene: sounds more like Beckett" (2012: n. pag.). Her approach to translation has been conceptualised as "hypertranslation" (Barrington 2017) and termed "rhizomatic" (Rose 2015) or "foreignizing" (Wiesenthal 2017) in the sense that Carson playfully and creatively questions the idea that it is possible to transport meaning completely from one language to another.

Carson's creative engagement with sources and collage work are of course reminiscent of avant-garde movements like Dada, but also allow us to situate her oeuvre in the tradition of conceptual art and, more specifically, Conceptual poets such as Susan Howe who uses found language in her archival collage poetics. However, Carson is not a Conceptual poet in the strict interpretation of the term as she does not refute individual expression or the authority of the writer (cf. Goldsmith 2011: 1-4). Her attention to language as matter and interest in deconstructionist lines of thought also align her work with that of the post-war American Language writers, while her playful language games, especially in *Float*, evoke echoes of the constrained-writing techniques of the French writers associated with OuLiPo. Her work moreover illustrates varied engagements with mystic writers and ancient prophets such as Simone Weil, Marguerite Porete, and Cassandra. Although she does not label herself a feminist, her constant questioning of categories, including the category of being a woman in works such as "Dirt and Desire: Essay on the Phenomenology of Female Pollution in Antiquity" included in *Men in the Off Hours*, does place her in that lineage. Carson herself is sceptical of labels and categories in general. She famously retorted, when asked in an interview if she considered the thought that her works need sections on their own to be a problem, that this is "not a problem but a question: What do 'shelves' accomplish, in stores or in the mind?" (qtd. in Rae 2008: 223).

Conclusion

Anne Carson has been hailed as the contemporary "acceptable face of the avant-garde" (Logan 2009: 149) thanks to her startling, shape-shifting reinventions that straddle experimentation and the classics. Her oeuvre tests the boundaries of what is acceptable in numerous ways: she freely combines poetry, prose, essay, and drama; plays with the possibilities of the book form; pits classical and modern authors against each other; and does not seem to differentiate creative from scholarly writing in works that are brimming with (esoteric) references and allusions. While found to be overly cryptic and somewhat artificial by many, the work of this "writer's writer" has become canonised and institutionalised in the twenty-first century, which is the fate of many avant-garde writers and movements. Whereas her oeuvre is generally considered to be relatively independent from any clear lineage (including from "Canadian" literature in a narrow sense), it is productive to study her work through the lens of the neo-avant-garde to trace how her oeuvre both breaks with and extends artistic (and epistemological) traditions and forms, not only those of the historical avant-garde but also of western literature, rooted in ancient Greece, at large.

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