

# Writer's Writer Revisits Authorship

## Iteration in Anne Carson's *Decreation*

The poet stalks her subjects from oblique angles . . .  
—William Logan, *Our Savage Art*

### 1. Dialogism and Rewriting

As a writer's writer and "one of the great pasticheurs" (Merkin), literary virtuoso Anne Carson has been both praised and criticized for her extensive use of intertextual references.<sup>1</sup> Carson's practice of writing as rewriting by reassembling existing texts and voices, which Jennifer Thorp has termed "name-dropping" (15) in response to David Solway's critique of Carson, has accordingly been established as a hallmark of her work. In her experimental collection titled *Decreation: Poetry, Essays, Opera* (2005),<sup>2</sup> Carson probes the works of numerous authors in four lyric essays, who then resurface as voices among other prominent names in the literary experiments that make up the rest of the collection. As a case in point, the collection's central essay on decreation is concerned with the heretical lives of the archaic Greek poet Sappho, the medieval mystic Marguerite Porete, and the French philosopher Simone Weil, whose life stories are then transformed into an accompanying opera libretto.

While much cogent criticism has been devoted to this spiritual dimension of the collection, including to sublime decreation (e.g., Disney; Skibsrud), and in particular to Carson's engagement with Weil (e.g., Fan; Coles), few scholars have effectively drawn on systematic research into the role of the reader as a text-constructing agent in Carson's work, with the exceptions of Liedeke Plate's multimodal approach to *Nox* (2010), and Solway's polemical attacks, wherein he argues that Carson is riding the zeitgeist of superficial erudition and that her readers see themselves reflected in

her gratuitous showmanship (49-50). Whereas Thorp regards the inter-authorial aspect of Carson's work as a poststructuralist technique to confuse notions of authenticity in contemporary poetry (15), I take Carson's alleged name-dropping as a starting point to argue that *Decreation* should be conceptualized as a project of re-engagement that is underpinned by synthetic disjunctions of competing viewpoints. In my reading of Carson's collection, the notion of decreation moves beyond a spiritual undoing of self to an undoing of entrenched patterns of thinking. To this end, Carson relies on the principle of intratextuality, which instills in the reader a blurring of the speaker's identity that complicates Carson's authorial presence in the collection, while her use of echoes ingrains the notion of decreation in the reader's mind. By pitting numerous literary voices and elements against one another, Carson coaxes the reader to assess *Decreation* from a syncretic viewpoint that can encompass these distinct perspectives. My essay therefore presents the following proposition: while conspicuously self-conscious and permeated by an authorial presence, Carson's *Decreation* instigates a critical re-evaluation of the notion of authorship by requiring the reader to pick up on its patterns of synthetic disjunction.

Focusing mainly on the reader in the context of literary semiology, my analysis sets out from the concept of intertextuality as theorized by Julia Kristeva in her 1966 essay "Word, Dialogue and Novel." Kristeva's central idea, derived from the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, that "any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another" (37) has already been discussed at length in a great many other works.<sup>3</sup> I build on these studies by incorporating Kristeva's notion of dialogism into critical discussions of Carson's work within the context of her disjunctive collection *Decreation*. This approach is warranted by the collection's reliance on a stereoscopic third angle of vision as its organizing principle. In this respect, Carson has argued that

we think by *projecting sameness upon difference*, by drawing things together in a relation or idea *while at the same time maintaining the distinctions between them*. . . . In any act of thinking, the mind must reach across this space between known and unknown, linking one to the other but also keeping visible their difference. It is an erotic space. To reach across it is tricky; a kind of stereoscopy seems to be required. (*Eros* 171, emphases mine)

Stereoscopy or depth perception, which stems from viewing a single object with both eyes through binocular vision, should be interpreted here as a visual process of reconciliation. This dialectic of reconciling two or more

apparently incongruous entities—in this case, either the numerous voices or the variations on the central trope of decreation—gives rise to what I will term a *synthetic disjunction*, in contrast to Gilles Deleuze’s term *disjunctive synthesis* that implies an ultimate union, as a way of perceiving that recognizes both dissimilarity and discovered similarity. As a triadic structure that projects sameness across difference, it is akin to Barbara Maria Stafford’s notion of analogy as “the vision of ordered relationships articulated as similarity-in-difference” (9). In the words of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, this disjunction can be described more precisely as one “that remains disjunctive, and that still affirms the disjoined terms, that affirms them throughout their entire distance, *without restricting one by the other or excluding the other from the one*” (76, emphasis original). Extending these critics’ reasoning, I will argue that *Decreation* rests on a system of partial concordances or analogies, as Carson ushers the reader’s perspective toward a relational angle.

Kristeva’s interpretation of dialogism is instructive for this discussion since it helps me to conceptualize how Carson produces synthetic disjunctions of different perspectives throughout her collection. Key to my reasoning is Kristeva’s emphasis on congruence, since it encapsulates the analogical quality of Carson’s *modus operandi*:

The notion of dialogism, which owed much to Hegel, must not be confused with Hegelian dialectics, based on a triad and thus on struggle and projection (a movement of transcendence). . . . Dialogism replaces these concepts by absorbing them within the concept of relation. *It does not strive towards transcendence but rather toward harmony*, all the while implying an idea of rupture (of opposition and analogy) as a modality of transformation. (Kristeva 58, emphasis mine)

Kristeva’s interpretation of dialogism thus allows for a more precise definition of this dialectic of reconciliation as a *dialogism* of reconciliation. The dialogue that is established between the different texts, then, results in an amalgam of different voices and intertextual traces that indirectly convey the (perceived) intention of the author. At the same time, these relations of synthetic disjunction are not only established between the speaker and other literary figures (and texts), but also between Carson herself as an author and the reader—thus necessitating an analogical third angle of vision involving the reader. The novel speaker of the collection that emerges thus remains a profoundly individual construct on the part of the reader, since the analogical activity of linking always entails an emotional, personal dimension crucial to understanding selfhood (see Stafford 141).

## 2. From Intertextuality to Intratextuality: Meditations on I

My argument that Carson's fragmented speaker in *Decreation* originates as a synthetic disjunction of competing voices that are intratextually reprised requires a close examination of the notion of voice in the collection. In Ian Rae's article on narrative technique in Carson's "The Glass Essay" (1995), a rewriting of Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847), he puts forward a cogent argument concerning Carson's use of intertextual echoes:

As the text progresses in this fashion, the intertextual allusions (between distinct authors and texts) transform into intratextual echoes (within Carson's poem), and Carson thereby achieves the effect of blurred identity between Brontë and her speaker. . . . [T]he author makes the reader feel this transformation taking place by showing how language draws the reader into a vortex of thought and emotion by establishing systems of association that become part of the speaker's subconscious response to phenomena. (174)

What I take from Rae's work in my reading of *Decreation* is the central idea that when intertextual references evolve into intratextual repetitions, a blurring of identity takes place as these mental associations become part of the speaker's subconscious. However, while "The Glass Essay" revolves around the figure of Brontë, *Decreation* features a plethora of authors and other names. Yet crucially, the collection opens with an unnamed speaker who addresses their mother. Since the mother figure plays a prominent role in many of Carson's works—from the mother as a modern Demeter in the autobiographically inspired *The Beauty of the Husband* (2001), to G's mother's death in *Red Doc* (2013) and Carson's reflection on her own mother's death in *Men in the Off Hours* (2000)—this evocation of the mother-child relationship leads me to argue that *Decreation* is organized in such a way to make the reader wrongly believe that the speaker is Carson herself, or at least a persona that is close to her. Toward the end of the first series of poems, called "Stops," however, a name is introduced when the speaker proclaims that "going to visit my mother is like starting in on a piece by Beckett" (14). Beckett's work then takes centre stage in the following two poems as well as in "Quad," Carson's enigmatic discussion of his *Quadrat I* and *Quadrat II* in the form of a pseudo-interview. In this way, a first transformation from intertextual reference to intratextual echo takes place. Moreover, this introduction of Beckett is strongly reminiscent of a sentence in "The Glass Essay" that reads: "Whenever I visit my mother / I feel I am turning into Emily Brontë" (*Glass* 3). In *Decreation*, Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* is referenced as well, not incidentally in "Quad": "But Beckett people

[sic] pounce on such remarks as if they were Catherine pulling feathers out of a pillow in *Wuthering Heights*” (123). These allusions conspicuously cloud the speaker’s assumed identity (as Carson herself) as the “I” in both works identifies with established literary names.

Such allusions are manifold in *Decreation*, but the poems in the collection’s “Gnosticisms” series are especially metafictional, since they frequently offer a self-conscious reflection on intertextuality and notions of originality. The first of these poems, entitled “Gnosticism I,” makes a tentative start by evoking Gerard Manley Hopkins’ use of Duns Scotus’ concept of *haecceitas* (or “thisness”) through an allusion to “The Windhover” (see Birch 497):

. . . Astonishment

inside me like a separate person,  
sweat-soaked. How to grip.  
For some people a bird sings, feathers shine. I just get this *this*.  
(87, emphasis original)

In “Gnosticism III,” however, Carson’s reliance on intertextuality is far more explicit: the “first line has to make your brain race that’s how Homer does it” (89). Subsequently, “Gnosticism V” gives up any pretence of originality in literature when the speaker asserts that “to inspire me is why / I put in a bit of Wordsworth but then the page is over, he weighs it to the / ground” (92). Thus, Carson seems to evoke Harold Bloom’s concept of the anxiety of influence as she alludes to the brittle balance between inspiration and appropriation in literature, which T. S. Eliot phrased earlier as “immature poets imitate; mature poets steal” (206). This preoccupation with literary names remains a constant throughout Carson’s work. However, it is not always clear who is being addressed or to whom the poem refers. For example, the second half of “Ode to Sleep,” Carson’s unorthodox conclusion to her essay in *Decreation* on sleep, moves in rapid succession from a second-person “your” to a third-person “her” and “she,” a first-person “me,” and a third-person “they”:

later! Later,  
not much left but a pale green *upsilon* embalmed between *butter* and *fly*—  
but what’s that stuff he’s dabbing in your eye?  
It is the moment when the shiver stops.  
A shiver is a perfect servant.  
Her amen sootheth.  
“As a matter of fact,” she confides in a footnote, “it was  
a misprint for *mammoth*.”  
It hurts me to know this.  
Exit wound, as they say. (41, emphasis original)

Carson stages an almost dramatic dialogue of competing voices, but the different characters are not named or introduced—they rather belong to the speaker's subconscious. Carson thus deliberately obfuscates the distinction between enunciation (the utterances of the speaker), enounced (the statements made by the unnamed characters), and the announced or the agency of Carson as a writer, to borrow Rachel Blau DuPlessis' terminology (27), thereby spurring the reader to reconcile these various mental associations making up the speaker's subconscious.

A similar questioning of voice takes place in "Quad" when the speaker relates how most of Beckett's students to whom he lectured in Paris in 1931 "were doing their nails but one of them (Rosie) wrote down everything he said in a small notebook which she was courteous enough to show me" (121). This statement is troubling for a number of reasons. Firstly, the reader is confronted with the veracity of the account as Carson appears to blur fact and fiction. It seems probable enough that a reader would take the first part of the statement on Beckett's teaching position at face value, but the (fictional) character of Rosie might cast doubt on the whole account. Secondly, Carson again appears to blur the distinction between enunciation, enounced, and her agency as an author, since it is unclear to whom Rosie showed her notebook. However autobiographically inspired Carson's lyric essays may (appear to) be, the speaker in the collection is clearly *not* the author. Instead, Carson self-consciously complicates notions of authenticity and veracity in a genre that could be called autobiographical fiction by directing the reader's attention to the fact that her collection remains fictional. Carson's *Autobiography of Red* (1998), a rewriting of an ancient Greek myth concerning the red monster Geryon, can be placed within this same troubling paradigm. Yet this fictional aura is nevertheless convoluted by the numerous intertextual references that stem from a very human author who "wears her brain on her sleeve" (Merkin). In *Decreation*, Carson reflects on notions of authorship and presence in writing while stating, in her essay in the collection on the concept of decreation, that

to be a writer is to construct a big, loud, shiny centre of self from which the writing is given voice and any claim to be intent on annihilating this self while still continuing to write . . . must involve the writer in some important acts of subterfuge or contradiction. (171)

Carson thus draws attention to the ontological relationship between writing and being, and thereby appears to reformulate Descartes' adage as "I write, therefore I am."

The issue of who is speaking becomes even more complex when considering that Carson does not seem to make a fundamental distinction between her academic and fictional writing. When asked about this distinction by Peter Streckfus in an interview about *Decreation*, Carson states:

When I started to write the libretto, I had already worked on an academic lecture about Simone Weil, Marguerite Porete, and Sappho. The analytic level was there. The libretto was the fumes coming off that analytic effort, the sort of intoxicating fumes left in the room by mashing up all the grapes of the academic part. So, not that different but more pleasant. Not a different part of my mind. (Streckfus 216)

In this respect, it is telling that Carson's essay on decreation first appeared in the academic journal *Common Knowledge* in 2002, before *Decreation* was published as a collection, while two of the three opera instalments on decreation, *The Mirror of Simple Souls* and *Fight Cherries*,<sup>4</sup> were performed in 1999 and 2001, respectively (Streckfus 214; Carson, "Mirror"). Thus, according to Carson, there is no clear opposition between these two realms of her writing, which has enduring implications for the notion of voice in her collection: not only does it allow her to amalgamate fact and fiction, it also gives her the freedom to infuse her authority as a scholar into her fictional voices. As a literal case in point, "Lots of Guns: An Oratorio for Five Voices," included in *Decreation*, was originally recited by Carson herself, who was one of the performers during its debut in 2003 (115), but here again, the text of the oratorio does not indicate who these five voices represent or which parts of the text they each take on.

Beckett, a primary intratextual figure in Carson's collection, proclaimed earlier in his *Stories and Texts for Nothing* (1958): "What matter who's speaking" (85). A second major literary name in *Decreation* is Homer, whose *Odyssey* and *Iliad* are discussed at length in the essay on sleep and in the oratorio, and who also makes an appearance in the essay on the sublime, in "Gnosticism III," in "Quad," and in the third part of the opera. Furthermore, Virginia Woolf plays a prominent role in the collection as well, since her story "A Haunted House," her essay entitled "The Sun and the Fish," and her novels *To the Lighthouse*, *The Waves*, and *The Voyage Out* are discussed extensively in the essays on sleep and the solar eclipse. Philosophers, too, are rewarding objects of study in *Decreation*. Immanuel Kant, for one, is mentioned in the essay on sleep and in several of the collection's series of "Sublimes." Plato's *Krito* is referenced in the essay on sleep and he later reappears in the sublime titled "L (Ode to Monica Vitti)" as well as in the third part of the opera. Moreover, the treatise *On the Sublime* by the

ancient literary critic Longinus provides a conceptual basis for Carson's essay on the sublime, and Longinus subsequently makes an appearance in the "Sublimes" and in the first part of the essay on decreation, where he is credited with the preservation of Sappho's Fragment 31. Finally, the director Michelangelo Antonioni plays an equally important role in the essay on the sublime, the accompanying rhapsody, and the "Sublimes" as a whole, of which the opening poem bears the telling title "Longinus' Dream of Antonioni." Other prominent literary figures that are mentioned in the collection include Byron, Artaud, Keats, Milton, Tolstoy, Hegel, Nabokov, Dickinson, and Dillard, to name but some. Carson too makes reference to Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* and thereby indirectly offers an insight, so I argue, into the effect of these intratextual figures in her collection. According to Carson, "Stoppard uses the familiarity of Shakespeare's play to lock us into the badness of the bad dream" (35), and it is precisely this "sense of being governed by laws outside us" (35) that facilitates the coalescence of these intratextual figures that inhabit the speaker's subconscious.

Yet it is not always clear whether the information that is attributed to these historical figures is accurate or fictional, as Carson does not always provide a source, for example when she writes that "'Lovers all show such symptoms as these,' Longinus says" (160) without providing a reference. Furthermore, the sublime "Mia Moglie (Longinus' Red Desert)" starts off with a presumed quotation by Longinus that reads "'For instance, Sappho,' as Longinus says" (67) and then continues with a series of sentences between quotation marks of which both the source and the speaker are unclear, thereby evoking a lingering monologue that does not seem to be addressed to or spoken by anyone in particular. Yet crucially, the poem ends with another citation that is supposedly written by Longinus: "'[A]s I believe I said,' Longinus adds" (68). The poem thus blurs the distinction between quotations and chunks of conversation, and by extension, fact and fiction, as Carson uses quotation marks for both purposes. In this regard, the formal organization of the collection plays a pivotal role as well, given that *Decreation* opens with a series of poems entitled "Stops," followed immediately by the essays on sleep and on the sublime. In these essays, quotation marks do represent actual quotations, accompanied by endnotes, but this is not the case for the "Sublimes" that follow. What is more, Carson heightens the sense of (false) factual representation in "Mia Moglie" by printing the speech (and thought) representation of other unnamed characters in italics: "On the street she



pulls herself along, *to get there will be worse*,” for example, and “*What is that antenna for?* she asks a man. *To listen to the noise / of stars—*” (68). In this way, Carson is able to riff on historical figures in intricate, fictional patterns that interweave around the collection’s speaker.

*Decreation* is suffused not only with fictionalized accounts of historical figures, but also with narratives of actual fictional figures. By way of illustration, the “H & A Screenplay” revolves around the affair between the theologian Abelard and his student Heloise, one of the most famous couples of the Middle Ages (Bulman 2, 15), whereas the first part of the opera, “Love’s Forgery,” is based on an ancient Greek myth concerning the love triangle between Aphrodite, Hephaistos, and Ares. Furthermore, some passages in the collection hinge on mere speculation rather than textual documentation, such as the conversations between Simone Weil and her parents in the third part of the opera. In general, Carson often provides an additional, fictionalized account of the topics and figures she introduces in her essays—although their lyric quality already imbues these expositions with a fictional strain. In this regard, the “Sublimes,” the “Gnosticisms,” and the rhapsody titled “The Day Antonioni Came to the Asylum” all revisit the essay on the sublime, the opera in three parts complements the essay on decreation, and the “Ode to Sleep” supplements the essay on sleep by evoking a dream logic. Yet different media and genres call for different content, and such transfers of meaning operate by the principle of *transduction*. In more concrete terms, the material is transposed from one medium to another whereby the mediating role of the transfer results in a conceptual fitting together or negotiation (Collard 23). I therefore do not consider the process of transduction to be merely an act of translation, as Gunther Kress does (125). In the case of *Decreation*, this phenomenon can be illustrated by the fact that the opera on decreation, which revisits the preceding essay, does not comprise a fourth part, in contrast to the four parts of the supposedly three-part essay. More importantly, the first part of the opera is not simply centred on Sappho, the woman writer under scrutiny in the first part of the essay, but rather on her object of worship, namely the goddess Aphrodite. Thus, Carson’s intratextual rewritings confirm adaptation’s potential as a syncretic structuring process rooted in analogical thought (see Collard 23-24), as she produces a synthetic disjunction of analogical counterparts straddling fictional historiography, rewritten mythology, and lyrical criticism. I therefore contend that Carson is able to instill a blurring of the speaker’s identity in the reader by means of intratextual echoes of names, whose lives

she rewrites in different genres that obfuscate the distinction between fact and fiction, and whose speech and thought representation she complicates through her deft use of quotation marks and italics. As a work of re-engagement whose speaker emerges as a synthetic disjunction of intratextual voices, *Decreation* is thus able to bypass discussions of authenticity in literature by highlighting the importance of productive intervention on the reader's part.

### 3. Echoes and Iteration

In his article on sublime disembodiment in *Decreation*, Dan Disney states that “the poems in ‘Stops’ speak less of integration by assembling parts of a life into an imaginative order, and more of a rhapsodic swerve towards disintegration” (35). Yet this sense of disintegration is countered by the numerous echoes, which can rightfully be described as the kernel of Carson's literary project (Thorp 23). To forestall ambiguity, I want to clarify that such echoes do not refer to literal repetitions, such as the figure of the wind or the swallow that do recur as motifs in the collection, but rather to the reassessment of central ideas. This specific understanding of an echo as a variation on a leitmotif yields a sense of repetition-with-difference while engendering continued creation in an analogical whirlwind of personal associations. I now turn to explore how Carson's use of echoes instills a sense of continuity that counterbalances the fragmented quality of the collection through an eternal, mythical time. After all, *Decreation* can be seen as a concerted work of literature, in the sense that “any idea must be perpetually rewritten, re-understood, re-transformed” (Thorp 23). Whereas Thorp suggests that rewriting—in the sense of exploring the notion of a bounded text—constitutes the crux of Carson's praxis (24), I will treat her narrative technique as a signification strategy that illustrates how a concept, in this case the notion of decreation, is established. As Douglas Hofstadter and Emmanuel Sander expound in their work on analogy, every concept in our mind is continually enriched by a succession of analogies in a constant oscillation between the known and unknown (3).

In his incisive account of Carson's narrative technique in “The Glass Essay,” Ian Rae reads the poem as a bilingual pun on the Canadian compound term *verglas*, which stands for a fine, glass-like layer of limpid ice caused by April thaws or freezing rain (164, 182). He furthermore claims that “‘The Glass Essay’ has come to define Carson's narrative technique” (163). The similarity between “The Glass Essay” and “Gnosticism II” in *Decreation*

may be simply fortuitous, but the latter too draws on the concepts of ice and glass through the image of windows at night. The following excerpt from “Gnosticism II” provides a stepping stone to my own investigation of narrative technique in *Decreation*:

Forgot? how the mind goes at it, you open  
the window (late) there is a siffling sound,  
that cold smell before sleep, roofs,  
frozen staircase, frozen stair,  
a piece of it comes in.

Comes in, stands in the room a bit of a column of it alive.  
At first no difference then palely, a dust,  
an indentation, stain  
of some guest  
centuries ago.

Some guest *at this very hour* . . . (88, emphasis original)

On the face of it, the poem seems to be made up of repeated phrases such as “frozen stair,” “comes in,” and “guest.” Yet it also offers a critical reflection on analogy’s key role in cognition. The poem starts with a reference to memory and then proceeds by progressively ushering the reader into a vortex of associations that gradually give rise to the speaker’s object of memory, namely the ghostly guest. The poem thus revolves around a tightly interwoven associative cluster consisting of a speaker, the half-forgotten memory, and the nightly cold.

This triadic configuration is characteristic of Carson’s narrative technique in general. According to Rae, “Carson’s triads grow through symmetrical accretions around innocuous details until they take on a unique shape” (168). In “The Glass Essay,” this triangular structure is formed by the speaker, her mother, and Emily Brontë (Rae, 168), whereas in *Decreation*, the three women under scrutiny in the title essay each provide a distinct perspective on the notion of spiritual annihilation. Yet these triadic configurations do not account for the echoes that pervade *Decreation* and thereby evoke a sense of repetition-through-difference. Rae’s observation about Carson’s use of conceits proves helpful in this regard:

Whereas Donne’s conceits draw unlike entities into a convergent state of synonymy through brilliant but outrageous comparisons, Carson *clusters related entities together and explores their similarities without ever finally unifying or arresting them*. Instead, these affinities serve as means for the author to change narrative foci, defer conclusions, explore ideas from different angles, negate initial hypotheses, and develop new ones. (167-68, emphasis mine)

Rae thus argues that Carson draws on the affinities between *related* elements to advance her poem. However, building on and extending Rae's analysis, I am arguing that by juxtaposing seemingly *disparate* elements in *Decreation*, Carson's narrative technique encourages distinct entities to be viewed through the prism of analogy, which captures a synthetic disjunction. So whereas Rae states that the aim of this method is to "clarif[y] their subtle but important differences" (168), my reading shifts the focus by letting Carson's juxtapositional method take centre stage: the purpose is not to foreground similarity and to elucidate minor differences, but rather to inspire a new understanding of distinct elements that allows for similarity despite difference, i.e., a synthetic disjunction. In this way, the overarching conceit of decreation is evoked by juxtaposing dissimilar entities that together offer a variation on this key motif.

As a first example of Carson's juxtapositional technique, I would like to consider the following excerpt from "Gnosticism IV":

at the moment in the interminable dinner when Coetzee basking  
icily across from you at the faculty table is all at once  
there like a fox in a glare, asking  
*And what are your interests?*  
his face a glass that has shattered but not yet fallen. (90)

In this excerpt, Carson connects—seemingly—unrelated elements, including the figure of author J. M. Coetzee, an unnamed "you," and shattered glass. However, considering that Coetzee is also an academic, I argue that Carson's juxtapositional method allows us to reflect on the dangers of the competitive streak in academic life. Crucially, here, too, ice and glass play a prominent role, and both contribute to the sense of insecurity (the breakability of glass) and confrontation (the slipperiness of ice) that characterizes academia. In particular, the phrase "his face a glass that has shattered but not yet fallen" may point to a potential burnout or the uneasy feeling that arises when you give in to the pressure of social networking, which can both be regarded as a particular instance of the overarching metaphor of decreation. This passage thus exemplifies how Carson crafts a synthetic disjunction of perspectives and how this "process of congealing wherein things are connected by a medium of *glace* yet do not abandon their distinct identities" (Rae, 171) is instrumental in evoking an atmosphere of pushing past one's boundaries.

Another example of Carson's method of juxtaposition that generates echoes of decreation throughout the collection can be found in "Our Fortune":

In a house at dusk a mother's final lesson  
ruins the west and seals up all that trade.  
Look in the windows at night you will see people standing.  
That's us, we had an excuse to be inside.  
Day came, we cut the fruit (we cut  
the tree). Now we're out.  
Here is a debt  
paid. (6)

Again, the speaker's mother, the downfall of the west, people standing, and debt seem unrelated to one another, but Carson manages to tie these elements in with a sense of sublime transcendence. As the mother's "final lesson" on her deathbed amounts to a rejection of Western capitalism and materialism, the speaker and their mother are ultimately able to perceive reality in a fashion reminiscent of Plato's cave: they have escaped the cave ("Now we're out") and can see reality for what it really is in an act of sublime decreation. Rae thus rightly notes that "the clarity of Carson's work is enhanced, not obscured, by this circuitousness because each variation of the . . . motif is like a lens magnifying the significance of the preceding and succeeding variations" (165). Put differently, Carson's narrative technique in *Decreation* operates on the basis of analogy at two levels simultaneously: both within the juxtaposed entities that together evoke a sense of decreation on a micro level and between the resulting variations on decreation throughout the collection on a macro level.

As Carson's readers thus forge links within and between dissonant chains of elements, reverberating echoes are created and recuperated within a paradigm that rejects referential thinking. Within the context of such [an] intricate network of relations, Rae postulates that "The Glass Essay" fuses "the paratactic qualities of the modernist lyric (in which the poem leaps from one topic to another without transitional matter) with the hypotactic logic of the essay (in which the essay develops an argument using classical techniques of rhetorical persuasion)" (164). In relation to *Decreation*, I am thus arguing that, by favouring an analogical over a referential logic, Carson's collection "camouflage[s] hypotaxis as parataxis, such that her seemingly fragmented poetry retains an element of rhetorical coherence and force, while at the same time undermining the element of subordination in the hypotactic logic" (Rae, 183). In other words, by relying on relationships of similarity-in-difference between the juxtaposed elements, *Decreation* is able to offer an alternative to hypotaxis, without, however, compromising coherence.

Clearly, Carson's hallmark juxtapositional technique mirrors the thematic concerns of the collection. As content and medium thus reflect and reinforce each other, a recursive loop is generated at the heart of which lies a "revisiting effect" (Delville 223), not least since the variations on the central metaphor of decreation reverberate throughout the collection. This kind of repetition with a difference, also known as iteration (Callens 77), is characteristic of the loop as "a structuring device which, unlike mere repetition, intentionally 'returns upon itself' by 'revisiting' previous compositional units or segments of a given artwork" (Delville 222). By way of illustration, the poem "Stanzas, Sexes, Seductions" is suffused with variations on key themes, which include the colour green, love, the intolerability of existence, and by extension, death, through phrases such as "green room," "the greenness of love," "things unbearable," "to be unbearable," "this little size of dying," "still die," and "legs die" (*Decreation* 72-73). Key to my argument is the coupling of these apparently unrelated variations on major themes—already reverberations in themselves—which together echo the overarching conceit of decreation, as the poem reflects on the ambiguities of love:

The oceans remind me  
                                   of your green room.  
   There are things unbearable.  
   Scorn, princes, this little size  
of dying.  
.....  
I tempt you.  
                                  I blush.  
  There are things unbearable.  
  Legs alas.  
Legs die. (72-73)

The associative cluster that Carson presents in this passage homes in on romantic heartbreak, which is in turn buttressed by visually foregrounding the notion of death.

#### **4. The Mythic Past**

The central theme of personal annihilation is thus formally echoed in Carson's paratactic narrative technique of juxtaposing seemingly disconnected elements, as visually reinforced in the visual-textual dynamics. Crucially, this recursive loop is closely related to the workings of myth. In this respect, Rae references Michael Ondaatje, who states that myth is produced through "a very careful use of echoes—of phrases and images.

There may be no logical connection when these are placed side by side, but the *variations* are always there setting up parallels” (qtd. in Rae, 174, emphasis mine). Furthermore, Rae draws attention to a particular understanding of myth Carson advances in *The Beauty of the Husband* (2001): “All myth is an enriched pattern, / a two-faced proposition, / allowing its operator to say one thing and mean another, to lead a double life” (qtd. in Rae, 176). It is clear that the deliberate use of variations on a key idea often results in the text’s potential meaning being Janus-faced or even multifarious—which is exactly where the importance of analogical thinking manifests itself.

Yet such an “enriched pattern” has implications more far-reaching than mere polysemy. Rather, Carson’s literary project of perennially re-engaging with her material plays a pivotal role in evoking a mythical time—a quality so very characteristic of Carson’s writings. Paratactic shifts therefore not only result in what John D’Agata calls a “parallel present tense” of juxtaposed elements (qtd. in Rae, 183), but also in a wholesale reconceptualization of time—and, by extension, literature—as not merely layered, as Rae states (173), but as representing a continuity between past and present. Meanings become transitory as “each variation of the key motif in Carson’s . . . [collection] cycles through moments of dominance, subordination, blurred identity, and complementarity before congealing in a surprising state of suspension” (Rae, 183). Yet crucially, these variations encourage analogical reasoning and imbue the collection with a sense of coherence and continuity. This cyclic rather than linear progression is therefore instrumental in instilling a mythical quality in the core of *Decreation*, which warrants a reassessment of Carson’s praxis as aporetically probing the meanings of not only concepts, but entrenched patterns of thinking in general. Heloise rightly notes that “[still] the absence of time divides itself perpetually / into the one same moment / (repeat)—” (*Decreation* 131) as Carson revisits the past and thus reevaluates the present in a recursive loop.

Carson’s *Decreation* makes clear that any work of re-engagement, whether with central ideas or with the (literary) past, relies on a synthetic disjunction that re-evaluates apparently dissimilar entities in a process of reconciliation. While the reader of this dialogical collection is coaxed into toggling between fictional and fictionalized accounts of mythical and historical figures, these intertextual references in many instances develop into intratextual echoes, which together evoke a system of association that results in a blurring of identity between the polyphony of voices and the speaker, who has affinities

with Carson herself. Since this analogical reasoning is largely reliant on the reader's own idiosyncratic associations, the syncretic speaker of *Decreation* ultimately becomes the sum of the readers' partial recognitions of themselves in the plethora of voices. Equally, the continual rewriting of the central trope of decreation inspires a mythical sense of perpetuity that is capable of counterbalancing the paratactic quality of the collection. In this way, Carson's play with personae and distinct use of echoes trigger the reader to reconcile seemingly incongruous perspectives within an aesthetic of stereoscopy.

Rather than offering us brittle failures possessing "neither substance nor technique" (Solway 50), *Decreation* hinges on a network of relations connecting the author, her personae, and the overarching trope of decreation approached from multiple angles. Carson's revisioning of the authorial voice requires critical intervention on the reader's part and thus points toward the pitfalls and limitations of a belief in overt authorial control. Fully comprehending the critical nexus between authorship and scholarship therefore requires a recognition of the synthetic disjunction that allows for a sustained engagement with the principle of iteration as repetition-through-difference. As a metamodernist poet, Carson ceaselessly interrogates the leaking boundaries that define distinct voices and concepts. The significance of her work therefore lies precisely in its potential to give us a deeper appreciation for the fluctuating relationship between similarity and difference.

#### NOTES

- 1 By way of illustration, in the chapter with the loaded title "The Trouble with Annie," Canadian poet and literary critic David Solway excoriates Carson's work while claiming, *inter alia*, that "the scholarship for which she is celebrated merely exacerbates her overall performance" (41).
- 2 All further references are to the 2006 Jonathan Cape edition of *Decreation*.
- 3 See, e.g., Bloom (1997), Orr (2003), or Allen (2011).
- 4 In *Decreation*, the second part of the opera is called "Her Mirror of Simple Souls."

#### WORKS CITED

- Allen, Graham. *Intertextuality*. 2nd ed., Routledge, 2011.
- Beckett, Samuel. *Stories and Texts for Nothing*. Grove, 1967.
- Birch, Dinah, editor. *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*. 7th ed., Oxford UP, 2009.
- Bloom, Harold. *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*. 2nd ed., Oxford UP, 1997.



- Bulman, Jan. "Abelard and Heloise." *Icons of the Middle Ages: Rulers, Writers, Rebels, and Saints*, edited by Lister M. Matheson, vol. 1, Greenwood, 2012, pp. 1-41.
- Callens, Johan. "Recursion, Iteration, Difference." *Performance Studies: Key Words, Concepts and Theories*, edited by Bryan Reynolds, Palgrave, 2014, pp. 76-83.
- Carson, Anne. "Decreation: How Women Like Sappho, Marguerite Porete, and Simone Weil Tell God." *Common Knowledge*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2002, pp. 188-203.
- . *Decreation: Poetry, Essays, Opera*. 2005. Jonathan Cape, 2006.
- . *Eros the Bittersweet: An Essay*. 1986. Princeton UP, 1988.
- . *Glass and God*. Jonathan Cape, 1998.
- . "The Mirror of Simple Souls: An Opera Installation Libretto." *Kenyon Review*, vol. 24, no. 1, 2002, pp. 58-69.
- Coles, Elizabeth. "The Sacred Object: Anne Carson and Simone Weil." *Acta Poética*, vol. 34, no. 1, 2013, pp. 127-54.
- Collard, Christophe. "Adaptation in Transition: A Semiology-Based Reassessment of the 'Fidelity' Debate." *English Text Construction*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2011, pp. 18-28.
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. 1972. Translated by Robert Hurley et al., U of Minnesota P, 2000.
- Delville, Michel. *Crossroads Poetics: Text, Image, Music, Film & Beyond*. Litteraria Pragensia, 2013.
- Disney, Dan. "Sublime Disembodiment? Self-as-Other in Anne Carson's *Decreation*." *Orbis Litterarum*, vol. 67, no. 1, 2012, pp. 25-38.
- DuPlessis, Rachel Blau. "Lyric and Experimental Long Poems: Intersections." *Time in Time: Short Poems, Long Poems, and the Rhetoric of North American Avant-Gardism, 1963-2008*, edited by J. Mark Smith, McGill-Queens's UP, 2013, pp. 22-50.
- Eliot, T. S. *Selected Essays*. 2nd ed., Faber and Faber, 1934.
- Fan, Kit. "'Between the Blank Page and the Poem': Reading Simone Weil in Contemporary American Poets." *The Cambridge Quarterly*, vol. 36, no. 2, 2007, pp. 129-54.
- Hofstadter, Douglas, and Emmanuel Sander. *Surfaces and Essences: Analogy as the Fuel and Fire of Thinking*. Basic, 2013.
- Kress, Gunther. *Multimodality: A Social Semiotic Approach to Contemporary Communication*. Routledge, 2010.
- Kristeva, Julia. "Word, Dialogue and Novel." *The Kristeva Reader*, edited by Toril Moi, Columbia UP, 1986, pp. 34-61.
- Logan, William. *Our Savage Art: Poetry and the Civil Tongue*. 2009. Columbia UP, 2012.
- Merkin, Daphne. "Last Tango." *New York Times*, 30 Sept. 2001, [www.nytimes.com/2001/09/30/books/last-tango.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2001/09/30/books/last-tango.html). Accessed 14 Apr. 2019.
- Orr, Mary. *Intertextuality: Debates and Contexts*. Polity, 2003.
- Plate, Liedeke. "How to Do Things with Literature in the Digital Age: Anne Carson's *Nox*, Multimodality, and the Ethics of Bookishness." *Contemporary Women's Writing*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2015, pp. 93-111.
- Rae, Ian. "Verglas: Narrative Technique in Anne Carson's 'The Glass Essay.'" *ESC: English Studies in Canada*, vol. 37, nos. 3-4, 2011, pp. 163-86.
- Skibsrud, Johanna. "'To Undo the Creature': The Paradox of Writing in Anne Carson's *Decreation*." *Anne Carson: Ecstatic Lyre*, edited by Joshua Marie Wilkinson, U of Michigan P, 2015, pp. 132-37.
- Solway, David. *Director's Cut*. Porcupine's Quill, 2003.

Stafford, Barbara Maria. *Visual Analogy: Consciousness as the Art of Connecting*. 1999. MIT P, 2001.

Streckfus, Peter. "Collaborating on *Decreation*: An Interview with Anne Carson." *Anne Carson: Ecstatic Lyre*, edited by Joshua Marie Wilkinson, U of Michigan P, 2015, pp. 214-21.

Thorp, Jennifer R. *Prowling the Meanings: Anne Carson's Doubtful Forms and The Traitor's Symphony*. 2015. University of Manchester, PhD dissertation.

