

Five Fairly Short Talks on Anne Carson

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1. Short Talk on Faking It with Sappho

Anne Carson dissimulates. In “Irony is not Enough: Essay on my Life as Catherine Deneuve” (from *Men in the Off Hours*) she composes an extended prose-poem as a script improvised on *Les Voleurs*, André Téchiné’s 1996 film, and also as a fictionalized account of one of Carson’s seminars in Ancient Greek poetry, and as a re-reading of Sappho through a fantasized relationship with a student, named only “Girl.” In the film, Marie (played by Deneuve) is a philosophy professor having an affair with Juliette, one of her students; the omission in the poem of character names and the elision of the role of the professor into the actress who plays her—Carson calls her persona Deneuve, not Marie—suggests not only the instability of subject positions but also the palimpsestic erasures and reinscriptions occurring within the voice. We cannot tell actor from person, pretense from actuality. Subjects are partial fabrications, shivered continuities: simultaneously effects of metaphorical break and metonymic joint. The extensive blurring of scholarship and fancy, of biography and outright lying in a performance such as Carson’s Deneuve begins in the complex tangle of duplicities. “This is mental,” her speaker offers as chorus—a poem’s erudite irrationality. At one point in the text, she seems to redo her lecture notes: “For Sappho irony is a verb. It places her in a certain relation to her own life. [. . .] Latin rhetoricians translate the Greek word *eironia* as *dissimulatio* which means ‘mask.’ After all, why study the past? Because you may wish to repeat it. And in time (Sappho notes) one’s mask becomes one’s face” (121). The first sentence recalls a key statement near the opening of *Eros the Bittersweet*. “Desire moves.

Eros is a verb” (*Eros* 17). The erotic, for Carson, produces a dynamic indeterminacy, “tension of an acute and unresolvable kind” (*Eros* 73). That lyrical bittersweet suspense she now names irony.

2. Short Talk on Going Mental

But she knowingly makes a mistake here, I think. Hers is a mistranslation, or at least a bent one. The better sense of the Latin *dissimulatio* is pretense, fakery, make-believe: perhaps even, pushing a little, imagination. Mask in Latin is *persona*—character, put-on, ventriloquy. Her slippery academicism points up the complex glancing of meaning and resonance through which her poetry works. The Greek εἰρωνεία, irony or dissimulation, derives from the verb εἶπεῖν, to say or to talk. An εἶρων is a talker, but one who says less than he or she means: the term points to a disjunction between word and object, between intention and fact, that informs the practice of verbalization. Irony is a verb, then, in a fairly specific sense: because, as a performative, it speaks, just as this retooled film-script is fundamentally a performance, all talk, gesticulating through other voices toward autobiography. “There is too much self in my writing,” Carson begins her “Note on Method” for the lectures collected as *Economy of the Unlost* (vii). “This is mental,” she claims as she tries to abstract herself, to disengage into writing: “Meanwhile the body persists” (119). Bodies are only veiled in metaphor: “Deneuve sees her feet are naked. *Moi je comprends pas ça*, she whispers to them” (121). Carson may be a thief, stealing identities, but she also recognizes that she can’t get away with it, that the poetry consists in the fact of getting caught, often by mistake, emblemized in the everyday presence of human bodies that won’t, that can’t, be written off. Irony, as her title claims, is not enough, and cannot be. It marks a subjective insufficiency, an opening in language. What remains, as an outside of language that impinges onto words, is not so much incomprehensible as uncomprehended—that is, uncaught. Or, as Carson’s recent Sappho fractures: “[I want /]to hold /]said /]” (*If Not, Winter* 151).

3. Short Talk on Profession

Dissimulating is a contingently idealized critical idiom, in Carson, of the academic. It is doubly significant that Carson styles herself as Deneuve the professor in her cribbed film-script. Not only is she actually a professional scholar, teaching at McGill and elsewhere, but she also literally professes in writing. The Latin *professus*, the name for a public teacher, is the past

participle of *profiteri*, to avow or to confess. The poet, in Carson, is a species of public intellectual. Publishing poetry and essays is a means of opening oneself to readerly scrutiny even as it involves an attempt to produce a specific style, at least in Carson's case, of differential reading. In "Irony is not Enough," elliptical restraint balances against declarative candour: "In the hotel room it is dusk, a girl turns, *I have to confess something*" (*Men in the Off Hours* 120). The italicized dialogue marks not only a subjective try at beginning, at saying publicly on the page what is intimate and personal, but also an attempt to read and to interpret what occurs off-screen, off-stage, off-mike. Significantly, the confession is never heard, or at least never transcribed for Deneuve's readers. If this script is displaced autobiography—a compact *roman-à-clef*, for instance—what it manages to confess is always masked in metaphor, euphemism or ellipsis. In the film, Marie and Juliette are clearly lovers; in Carson's revision, their affair is implied only by the mention of hotel rooms and Sapphic verse. We can never read exactly what happened. "All the same," the text runs, "there are some small questions one would like to put to Sokrates. Or better still Sappho" (125). What questions? Ironist and poet, cloaked in dialogue and fragment, are unable to respond. But the question still needs for Carson to be put, in writing. The script closes in suspense, with a provisionally new beginning: "Comes a knock at the door" (126). We can only imagine what happens next. "Let us look more closely," she writes after "Canicula di Anna," "at this moment that gathers at the place called the end. [. . .] But there is a moment of uncovering, and of covering, which happens very fast and you seem to be losing track of something. It is almost as if you hear a key turn in the lock. Which side of the door are you on? You do not know. Which side am I on? It is up to me to tell you—" (*Plainwater* 89). But then, she never really does. Carson uncovers and covers up, professes and withdraws.

4. Short Talk on Leakage

To profess is etymologically Latinate; Carson's Greek for this activity, provisionally, emerges in the middle of another imaginary seminar, this time a gathering of "phenomenologists" in Perugia: "To categorize / means to name in public: / κατηγορία / as many a phenomenologist / points out, at the outset of the seminar. / To categorize / is to clarify, often" (*Plainwater* 77). Characteristically, we find ourselves in Carson's poems at the perpetual outset, beginning again. But her usually mixed method suspends itself, temporarily, in favour of a Husserlian reduction or *epochē*, bracketing off the

mess of the lived for the sake of categorical clarity, of clean lines: the clipped parallelism and choric repetition of Carson's verse here suggest exactly that—neat correspondences, identifications, word-for-word translations. But the conclusive circles of philosophical abstraction or neat poetic form are quickly contaminated by an unstable *Lebenswelt*: corporeal metaphors, “sacred filth,” “raws sounds” from outside the walls of La Rocca, trouble the categories, distressing scholars (77-78). Naming, especially as a public act, can never quite close itself off, but leaks.

5. Short Talk on Meaning What You Say

In “The Glove of Time by Edward Hopper”—a wholly fanciful description of a non-existent painting—Carson begins with unspeakable Platonic shadows, asserting a coherent subjectivity even as she withdraws from it: “True I am but a shadow of a passenger on this planet / but my soul likes to dress in formal attire / despite the stains” (59). Representation is a shadowing, and as the persona here recognizes its formal attire, its aesthetic distance—as a painted thing, an object, an it—from the lived person for whom it acts as stand-in, the voice shifts from first person to third, and then back. “She walks through the door,” the poem continues, insisting on beginnings and endings in the recurrent image of the entrance:

She takes off her glove.
Does she turn her head.
Does she cross her leg.
That is a question.
Who is speaking.
Also a question.
All I can say is
I see no evidence of another glove. (59)

Shadows institute and situate themselves in the clipped, blunt syntax of Carson's end-stopped lines. But this micrology of successive closures is broken, “stained” in the lexicon of the poem, by the blurring of declarative and interrogative. What we take for fixity, for self-evidence, is really only another way to frame a question. Who is speaking: the syntax destabilizes into a dependent fragment without a defined subject. All that this “I” can say, can profess for sure, is a negation or a lack, the want of presence, of sure sight—no evidence.

What matters, though, is that such mimetic dehiscence become not an excuse but an opening, that the interrogative also prove a creative spur. The essays gathered in this issue of *Canadian Literature* pursue, literally, these

lines of questioning. They open up and open on Carson's verbal forays. Ian Rae teases out the ironies of calling Carson's bluff. Andre Furlani investigates the cryptic ethics of Carson's reading of Paul Celan. Tanis MacDonald exhumes the absent father in "The Anthropology of Water." Robert Stanton examines Carson's resilient poetics of error. Jes Battis pursues the irresolute queerness of *Autobiography of Red*. Taken together, these readings create a network of deft tangents and keenly faceted fractals: the oblique, crystalline lattices of Anne Carson's genius.

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