

“I am writing this to be as wrong as possible to you”: Anne Carson’s *Errancy*

Anne Carson’s first book, *Eros the Bittersweet*, opens with a prose celebration of poetic impertinence:

The story is about the delight we take in metaphor. A meaning spins, remaining upright on an axis of normalcy aligned with the conventions of connotation and denotation, and yet: to spin is not normal, and to dissemble normal uprightness by means of this fantastic motion is impertinent. What is the relation of impertinence to the hope of understanding? To delight? (*Eros xi*)

The story mentioned is Kafka’s “The Top.” In it, a philosopher delights in chasing spinning tops because he believes “that the understanding of any detail, that of a spinning top for instance, [is] sufficient for an understanding of all things” (*Eros xi*). Delight, however, is soon followed by disgust, as the disappointed—and unenlightened—philosopher throws down his caught top in dismay. But this doesn’t prevent him getting excited again every time he sees children preparing to spin their tops. At this moment, his desire for understanding is always rekindled.

Equating this little narrative to “our” desire—the “we” in question relating to some kind of collective readership—for metaphor might seem to set up a rather gloomy cycle: hope, desire and excitement leading to delight; delight leading to impatience and frustration; frustration leading back again to hope and desire. And yet Carson depicts metaphor itself as something “fantastic”: a source of “delight.” Under observation, its seeming “uprightness” is seen to be spinning against both normal language usage and normal perception. The delight it offers is real, if fleeting. This apparent contradiction might leave us wondering, if we accept Carson’s model

(and to divert her own questions slightly), which is the more impertinent: the nature of metaphor itself; our imposing—as readers—of our desire for understanding onto metaphor; or the poet’s offering of metaphor as the salve for such desires.

Many would argue that it is the poet’s role—or responsibility—to *be* impertinent, an irritant even. The ancient Greek poet Simonides of Keos, as he is depicted in Carson’s critical study *Economy of the Unlost*, certainly cuts such a figure, half in and half out of the culture that surrounded him. But then, as Carson shows, the culture in which Simonides lived and wrote was itself half in and half out of a new economic system—moving from a tradition of reciprocal gift-exchange to a more abstracted, but (to us) more familiar, coin-based economy—and he suffered from the change. In the traditional set-up the poet, as *xenos* (or “guest”), would be welcomed into the household of his aristocratic patron, or *xenos* (or “host”). The reversible nature of the word *xenos* suggests the transaction that underlies the gesture: the patron provides the food and shelter that the poet, as “guest,” needs to survive; the poet then grants his “host” immortality by praising his name in memorable verse. On its flipside, however, *xenos* can also mean “stranger,” “outsider” or “alien,” and, in a sense, it is this ambiguity that was the root of Simonides’ problem (*Economy* 22). The multifaceted nature of the word hints at the cultural paranoia that underpinned the tradition it embodies, the essentially conservative nature of “guest-friendship,” or *xenia*. The process by which an individual could pass from the role of “stranger” to that of “guest” to, eventually, that of reciprocal “host” was a fraught one, aimed ultimately at maintaining the social status quo. As Carson writes elsewhere, “[c]ontact is crisis” (*Men* 130). It is unsurprising, then, that she should take as her example of ideal poet/patron *xenia* a passage from *The Odyssey*: Odysseus offers the singer Demodokos “a hot chunk of pig meat” from his own meal in gratitude for his performance, “so that he may eat and so I may fold him close to me” (*Economy* 14). Odysseus, of course, is a man who periodically moves from “stranger” to “guest”—and back again—over the course of his voyage home.

In a Greek world gradually shifting toward a new economy, Simonides was unsure which sort of *xenos* the poet now represented, stranger or guest. Still adopted by aristocratic patrons, the poet was now more likely to be paid in cash—or home-delivered food—than to be welcomed to his employer’s home or table. Carson recounts several anecdotes concerning Simonides’ social awkwardness, including this one from Athenaios:

Chamailion (speaking of hares) says that one day Simonides was feasting with Hieron when hare was served to the other guests. But none to Simonides. Later Hieron gave him a portion and he improvised this verse: "Wide it was but not wide enough to reach this far." (*Economy* 21)

Carson continues: "Simonides' improvisation is a parody of a verse in Homer: 'Wide it was but not a wide enough shore to contain all the ships'" (*Economy* 21). As Carson explains, this witticism, aimed at defusing an embarrassing social situation, may also contain a wistful reference to an older, Homeric orthodoxy, exemplified in the story of Odysseus and Demondokos. It's not that Simonides didn't thrive under the new financial system—in fact, he was so successful that he became a stock figure of miserliness for subsequent generations.¹ He does seem, however, to have had a unique awareness of how his own personal alienation mirrored the more widespread alienation caused, in Marx's terms, by the nature of money itself.

Simonides' fiscal ambivalence, and the conditions that led to it, may seem somewhat alien to our current cultural concerns, but, throughout *Economy of the Unlost*, Carson juxtaposes his life and work with that of a more contemporary representative of poetic alienation: Paul Celan. Celan was born in Bukovina in 1920, lost both parents in the Holocaust (his mother was shot, his father died of typhus), and eventually settled in Paris after the war. Despite this—because of this—he continued writing his poetry in German, "the language of his mother but also the language of those who murdered his mother" as Carson points out, until his suicide by drowning in 1970 (*Economy* 28). In *Economy of the Unlost*, Carson quotes from one of Celan's few extended commentaries on poetry, the "Meridian" speech, delivered in Darmstadt in 1960, on the occasion of his being awarded the Georg Büchner Prize:

The poem intends another, needs this other, needs an opposite. It goes toward it, bespeaks it.

For the poem, everything and everybody is a figure for this other toward which it is heading. (Celan 49)

Despite the great difficulty of Celan's work—a difficulty that stems, in part, from his profound ambivalence toward the *Muttersprache* in which he felt compelled to write—he stood by this notion of poetry's essential outwardness: in a copy of one of his books owned by Michael Hamburger, one of his earliest English translators, Celan once wrote angrily the dedication "[g]anz und gar nicht hermetisch"—"absolutely not hermetic"—countering an accusation that had, and has, often been leveled at his work (*Poems* 29).

In another award speech, given this time in Bremen, in 1958, Celan borrows an image from his favoured Russian poet, Osip Mandelstam:²

A poem, being an instance of language, hence essentially dialogue, may be a letter in a bottle thrown out to sea with the—surely not always strong—hope that it may somehow wash up somewhere, perhaps on a shoreline of the heart. In this way too poems are *en route*: they are headed toward. (Celan 34)

It is perhaps surprising that Carson doesn't mention this image in her own essay, as it draws together the complementary doubts of her two poets—Simonides' worries about the social position of the poet; Celan's worries about the social position of the poem—into a literal symbol: a letter in a bottle. The English word "symbol" comes from the Greek *symbolon*. A *symbolon* was itself a symbol of *xenia*, Carson explains, quoting from Gabriel Herman:

People who entered into relationships of *xenia* used to cut a piece of bone in two and keep one half themselves and leave the other with their partners, so that if they or their friends or relatives should have occasion to visit them or *vice versa*, they might bring the half with them and renew the *xenia*. (*Economy* 18, Herman 63)

Carson, via Celan, depicts the poet as someone desperate for outside contact, desperate for his work to reach a readership, desperate for the role of poet to mean something within society, and the English word "symbol"—the primary tool of the poet—even contains an echo of this idealized relationship between writer and reader: writer as host, reader as guest (or *vice versa*). She writes that the poet

has to construct fast, in the cause of each song, this community that will receive the song. He does so by presuming it already exists and by sustaining a mood of witness that claims to be shared primordially between poet and community but in fact occurs within his words. [. . .] He is prior to the community that will acclaim him its poet and so invent itself. (*Economy* 133)

This idea of a self-constructed reading community returns us to our initial question. If the poet himself (or herself)—alienated perhaps from society, perhaps alienated also from his or her own language—is constantly addressing a potential readership, ideal or imagined, and if the nature of poetry itself relies on such a drive, then what is it that strikes us, as readers, as impertinent about poetry? Perhaps it is then inappropriate to look—if the poet is constantly writing toward such a community—for the source of this impertinence in the figure of the poet him- or herself. Are we not, in that case, returned to the question of the poet's main tool, metaphor? Does metaphor—a "species of symbol"—offers us half of a *symbolon*, or does it withhold it (*Eros* 175)?

Metaphor, as Carson depicts it, can just as easily be a frustrating novelty as an unsettling delight, and “[n]ovelty, by definition, are short-lived” (*Eros* 114). Does the impertinence of metaphor lie, then, not in a poet’s specific uses of it, but in its very essence? This question may not be as misguided as it seems. In a poem entitled “Essay on What I Think About Most,” collected in *Men in the Off Hours* (2000), Carson has written the closest she has yet got to a poetic manifesto. And it is all about the supposed impertinence of metaphor, which she here calls “error” or “mistake”:

In what does the freshness of metaphor consist?
Aristotle says that metaphor causes the mind to experience itself

in the act of making a mistake.
He pictures the mind moving along a plane surface
of ordinary language
when suddenly
that surface breaks or complicates.
Unexpectedness emerges.

At first it looks odd, contradictory or wrong.
Then it makes sense.

And at this moment, according to Aristotle,
the mind turns to itself and says:
“How true, and yet I mistook it!”

From the true mistakes of metaphor a lesson can be learned. (*Men* 30-31)

So metaphor does not, in this model, frustrate our readerly desire for understanding in any direct or essential way. Instead it causes a “true mistake” that can lead the mind—like a spinning top—via “unexpectedness,” to a new perception of the world, via what Carson quotes Aristotle as calling “the juxtaposition of *what is* and *what is not* the case” (*Men* 31). Carson takes as her example a fragment by the ancient Greek poet Alkman, a fragment containing a simple “error of arithmetic” (*Men* 31):

[?] made three seasons, summer
and winter and autumn third
and fourth spring when
there is blooming but to eat enough
is not. (*Men* 32)

The “juxtaposition of *what is* and *what is not* the case” is acute here: spring arrives surprisingly, but the possibility of eating enough does not. “Hunger,” Carson writes, “always feels / like a mistake,” and for Alkman, a poor poet living in the 7th century B.C.E., in the poor country of Sparta, fear of hunger was probably a constant presence (*Men* 32). As Carson suggests, his deliberate

computational “mistake” allows us to see the sheer impertinence of that presence in the context of an otherwise blooming spring. She claims that there are three things she particularly likes about the poem: first, that it is “small, / light / and more than perfectly economical”; second, that it “seems to suggest colors like pale green / without ever naming them;” and third, that it addresses “major metaphysical questions / (like Who made the world) / without overt analysis” (*Men* 33). (“Strict philologists,” we are told, would rather assign the subject-less verb at the start of the fragment to an “accident of history,” by claiming that the complete poem would doubtless have revealed the identity of whoever made the seasons [*Men* 33-34]. Carson prefers to leave the fragment as it stands.) The fourth thing that she likes about the poem (unable to resist replicating Alkman’s “mistake”) is “the impression it gives // of blurting out the truth in spite of itself,” of “inadvertent lucidity” (*Men* 34). This impression is, of course, a contrivance: Alkman is a “master contriver— / or what Aristotle would call an ‘imitator’ / of reality” (*Men* 35). Carson goes on: “[i]mitation (*mimesis* in Greek) / is Aristotle’s collective term for the true mistakes of poetry” (*Men* 35). Alkman, through his deliberate error, has made us, as readers, party to the reality of a hunger that we can’t actually share. But he has made us party.

What about Carson’s own poetic practice, her own “true mistakes”? Here is an example taken from *The Beauty of the Husband* (2001). The speaker has just overheard her husband speaking to his mistress on the phone:

What is so ecstatic unknowable cutthroat glad as the walls
of the flesh
of the voice of betrayal—yet all the while lapped in talk more dull
than the tick of a clock. (*Husband* 25)

This image falls into two halves. The first is a complex composite, inviting us to try to imagine something increasingly intangible (“the walls / of the flesh / of the voice of betrayal”—can flesh have walls?—can a voice have walls of flesh? etc.), while simultaneously providing a surfeit of adjectives (“ecstatic unknowable cutthroat glad”) to “help” us place it in reality.³ The second half of the images counters the first. Two different experiential tempos are contrasted: the frenetic moment of betrayal—with its unpunctuated adjective pile-up (“ecstatic unknowable cutthroat glad”) and its rapid line-breaks and repetitions (“the walls / of the flesh / of the voice”)—and the rather more prosaic comparison of everyday “talk” to the “dull” ticking of a clock, which slows everything down to a regular pace. The initial question (“What is so”) is derailed, along with its implicit involvement of us, the

readers, as addressees, and the seemingly unstoppable, destructive (or self-destructive: “cutthroat glad”) train of thought is “lapped” up—consumed—by the sentence’s deadening second clause.

The nature of this passage’s “true mistake” is, I think, threefold. First, and most obviously, there is the revelation of betrayal, and its immediate, overwhelming effect. Second, there is the revelation that the ordinary talk, which “laps” the voice of betrayal, is duller than a ticking clock. And third—and most importantly—there is the comparison between the two. This comparison opens the mistake up, both for us readers and for the speaker herself. Without the sudden moment of realization, the dull routine surrounding the betrayal would not be recognized as such; without the routine, the overwhelming moment would not stand out so much. In each other’s light, the two metaphors reveal a larger “mistake”: the ongoing relationship between the speaker and her husband: a definite case of two wrongs not making a right. This realization does not help the speaker—caught, as she is, in one of Carson’s recurring narratives of “wrong love”—but it does help us to understand her and her relationship (*Red* 75).

For Carson *mimesis* is no simple matter of documentary “realism.” Indeed, the drive of this brief passage could be usefully described as something akin to “emotion *vérité*”—wilfully following the speaker’s subjective response, but in an honest and conscious fashion. The poet’s *mimesis* stems not from an unquestioning fidelity to the objective reality of the world, but from the making of individualistic “true mistakes”—mistakes that do not contravene reality, but that the reader can position at an angle to it, a “*what is not*” to contrast with “*what is*”:

The poet’s metaphysical activity puts him in a contrafactual relation to the world of other people and ordinary speech. He does not seek to refute or replace that world but merely to indicate its lacunae, by positioning alongside the world of things that we see an uncanny protasis of things invisible, although no less real. Without poetry these two worlds would remain unconscious of one another. (*Economy* 58-59)

Alkman’s hunger is “invisible” but “real,” thanks to his fragment; Carson lends tangible reality to the abstract idea of “the voice of betrayal” in the above extract; and anyone who has read Celan’s poetry will attest to his uncanny ability to render psychic landscape visible—a “spectral analysis of things” as he called it (Felstiner 232):

Gorselight, yellow, the slopes
suppurate to heaven, the thorn

pays court to the wound, there is ringing
inside, it is evening, the nothing
rolls its seas toward devotion,
the bloodsail is heading for you. (*Economy* 5)

Metaphor, in these examples, works primarily through paradox and incongruence, but in a pertinent rather than impertinent manner: “[a] virtuoso act of imagination brings the two things together, sees their incongruence, then sees also a new congruence, meanwhile continuing to recognize the previous incongruence through the new congruence” (*Eros* 73).

Can Carson bring the two sides of her own work—her scholarly accuracy, her poetic “mistakes”—into a similar congruence? She claims not: in a 1997 interview, she speaks of her first book, *Eros the Bittersweet*, as the one-off never-to-be-repeated result of bringing her “two impulses” into “the same stream” (D’Agata 9). Of her more recent work she says that, while it displays a “more mature method” (D’Agata 9), “[y]ou can’t do clean things when you’re old” (D’Agata 11). She even talks of having two desks in her office, one for academic and one for artistic work. And yet, the seeming confusions of the academic and the aesthetic that lead Carson’s interviewer, John D’Agata, to keep insisting that for “[s]ome people” she is “still working with both in the same stream” are everywhere apparent in her work: poems and sequences entitled “The Glass Essay,” “Essay on What I Think About Most,” *Short Talks*; a “romance” like *Autobiography of Red*, containing a full scholarly array of introductory essay, translations, appendices and authorial interview; a “fictional essay” like *The Beauty of the Husband*, interspersed with opaque quotations from a variorum edition of Keats’ works; lyrical critical books with titles like *Eros the Bittersweet* and *Economy of the Unlost*. In fact, it is somewhat ironic that it is within the space of an interview that Carson—an expert at the mock-scholarly interview as literary form—should make a point of separating her academic and poetic selves.⁴

I would like to make another brief detour into etymology here. (But then, after all, as Celan said in his Bremen acceptance speech, in German, on the occasion of being awarded a major literary prize in Germany, “is there such a thing as a detour?” [Celan 33]) The word “error”—so important to Carson—meant originally, taken back through French to Latin, “to wander.” So, as Carson herself suggests with her image of a mind “moving along a plane surface” until it encounters the “unexpectedness” of metaphor, the idea of “error” has a spatial dimension. The poem in which she discusses, and justifies, such wanderings is entitled “*Essay on What I Think About*

Most" (my emphasis). Carson is keen on the essay form: her book *Plainwater* is subtitled *Essays and Poetry*, despite the fact that all its contents could be described uncontroversially as poetry; *The Beauty of the Husband* is a "fictional essay"; *Glass, Irony and God* and *Men in the Off Hours*, theoretically poetry collections, both contain essays; and *Eros the Bittersweet*, her first book, the one that she can't "replicate," is subtitled *An Essay* (D'Agata 11). An essay, etymologically, is an "attempt," a "test" or "trial." Further back is its Latin origin as *exagium*, a "weighing," which has an ancient Greek equivalent in ἐξάγειν. That, in turn, comes from ἐξάγειν, to "export goods," or, more literally to "lead out." So, at root, "essay" has its spatial dimension too, an organized "exporting" of information on any given topic, "led out" into the light, where it can be read by others. This returns us again to the question of the apparent division of Carson's work: how can she align poetic "wandering"—"mistakes"—with the scholarly desire to "lead out" essential truths?

The simple answer would be, of course, that she can't: that her protestations of division are entirely accurate. On the subject of essays, for example, she rejects the idea of the essay as a psychological experiment—a tradition that can be traced back to Montaigne (which she describes acerbically as "autobiography dressed up as community")—in favour of a more classical approach, the essay as written by Plutarch and Cicero: "to have something to say and to do so" (D'Agata 16). There is little chance of "error" there. And yet, D'Agata is right to keep pressing the issue in his interview. If poetry and essay are essentially separate, why publish essays in collections of poetry? Why entitle a poem "The Glass Essay"? And why—and this is the most telling example—write a poem about the function of metaphor and then call it "*Essay on What I Think About Most*" (my emphasis again)? The double irony, of course, is that the poem *does* read like a essay, not just in terms of its argument, but formally as well: "(*Rhetoric*, 1410b10-13)," for example, has got to be one of the more prosaic (or numeric?) lines in English verse (*Men* 30). The only extended metaphor in the poem—other than those "buried" in the language, such as the mind "turning to itself," or the idea that we can "look into" something that is puzzling (it may well be that Carson wants to draw our attention, as readers, in a poem about metaphor, to how easy it is for old metaphors to become fossilized in everyday usage)—is the description of the mind "moving along a plane surface / of language" until it encounters the "breaks or complicat[i]ons" of metaphor. Carson offers metaphor defining metaphor. Contrast this "poem" with a

passage from the “Note on Method” that opens *Economy of the Unlost*, a book of (supposedly) critical prose:

I am writing this on the train to Milan. We flash past towers and factories, stations, yards, then a field where a herd of black horses is just turning to race uphill. “Attempts at description are stupid,” George Eliot says, yet one may encounter a fragment of unexhausted time. Who can name its transactions, the sense that fell through us of untouchable wind, unknown effort—one black mane? (*Economy* viii)

It would be hard to imagine a more poetic critical “method.” And yet Carson goes out of her way—in the D’Agata interview at least—to deny any connection between the two strands of her work.

In a sense, the interview format gives a good index to the paradox of Carson’s position, and of her positioning of us as readers. In another interview she expresses her disdain for the manifestations of the media role of “poet,” as they affect the appearance of her work:

At her insistence, none of her books show her readers what she looks like. She even hates “the blurb thing. I just loathe it. They want to cover the whole back of the book with junk from other’s people’s bad language about what I wrote, and it just drives me crazy [. . .] with the next one I want to have a blank book. This is my aim. Nothing. No biography, no author’s photos, no quotes from whoever, just the book.” (Burt 57)

Again, the irony is that this desire for authorial withdrawal is voiced during an interview. If Carson is so allergic to the “process of manufacturing a persona,” then why give interviews at all (Burt 57)? Perhaps because the interview format reveals that the true relationship between author and reader (or reader-as-interviewer) is not that of an ideal reciprocal exchange, but something richer, more anarchic and more strange.

As Carson’s argument in *Economy of the Unlost* suggests, the basis of *xenia* in ancient Greek culture was respect for social tradition and continuity, rather than the mutual trust and respect of what we might regard as friendship. Even the nostalgia of a Simonides cannot counter this suggestion: the reader comes to feel that he would have been as awkward—as impertinent—in any setting. Is the ideal of some kind of reciprocal relationship between poet and reader, as symbolized in the etymology of the word “symbol,” automatically an untenable one? As symbolized—dramatized—in the form of an interview, Carson would seem to think so. In her fictionalized interviews with the ancient Greek poets Stesichoros and Mimnermos and with the Japanese author Hara Tamiki, the interviewers are invariably earnest, opinionated, sympathetic and blunt (“I am not angry,” one announces at

one point, “I am conscientious”); the interviewee is invariably reticent, oblique, irritable and insular (*Plainwater* 19). The interviewers never get the answers they are looking for; it is unclear why the interviewees have submitted themselves to this ordeal. In the end, we learn more (about the interviewers, about the interviewees) from disjunction and misdirection—from the lacunae, mishearings, conversational circlings and awkwardness that a more professional “interviewer” might edit out—than in any direct fashion. For example, in one of the interviews with Mimnermos, the interviewer, for some reason, brings up his (female) psychoanalyst. Mimnermos replies, “Ah the perfect listener yes I dreamed I would one day find her,” slighting both the interviewer and the idea of interview-as-therapy (*Plainwater* 20). (But, then again, it all depends on how you read his tone: perhaps he is being completely sincere, in which case it is the idea of the interview as a source of unambiguous facts about the interviewee that is being mocked [*Plainwater* 20].) Even identity is not a given in the interview as Carson directs it: at the close of *Autobiography of Red*, the “S” being questioned seems to have transmogrified from Stesichoros into Gertrude Stein (with whom Carson compared him at the start of the book: “[h]e came after Homer and before Gertrude Stein, a difficult interval for a poet”) (*Red* 3). S/he, incidentally, has no doubts about the true role of the poet, of his or her “error”:

S: I was (very simply) in charge of seeing for the world after all seeing is just a substance

I: How do you know that

S: I saw it

I: Where

S: Wherever I looked it poured out my eyes I was responsible for everyone’s visibility it was a great pleasure it increased daily

I: A pleasure you say

S: Of course it had its disagreeable side I could not blink or the world went blind

I: So no blinking

S: No blinking from 1907 on (*Red* 148)

Similarly, at one point the “M” of “Mimnermos” seems to have become “Mallarmé” (almost quoting from “Un Coup de Dés”): “Nothing takes place but the place” (*Plainwater* 22). The discrepancy between what an interview promises and what it provides is summed up at the end of these Mimnermos interviews:

I: I wanted to know you

M: I wanted far more (*Plainwater* 26)

Despite this cynicism, Mimnermos, like his “author,” understands the desire underlying the interview format. For him, though, this knowledge comes forward in crisis, in his astonishing Beckettian rant during the third interview:

I: Now it is you who is angry

M: I'm not angry I am a liar only now I begin to understand what my dishonesty is what abhorrence is the closer I get there is no hope for a person of my sort I can't give you facts I can't distill my history into this or that home truth and go plunging ahead composing miniature versions of the cosmos to fill the slots in your question and answer period it's not that I don't pity you it's not that I don't understand your human face is smiling at me for some reason it's not that I don't know there is an act of interpretation demanded now by which we could all move to the limits of the logic inherent in this activity and peer over the edge but everytime I start in everytime I everytime you see I would have to tell the whole story all over again or else lie so I lie I just lie who are they who are the story-tellers who can put an end to stories (*Plainwater* 25-26)

The interviewer provokes this reaction by asking probing—but increasingly abstract—questions about the influence of a shadowy female figure, Nanno, on Mimnermos' life and work. He initially replies in stereotypical fashion, with the standard response of an insulted interviewee who thinks his privacy is being invaded: “[w]hat are you digging for” (*Plainwater* 24). He then reacts with a series of deeply ambiguous silences, before embarking on his outburst. And yet we believe, as readers, that he is “not angry,” that he has seen some internal logic to this “question and answer period” that might be transcended to get to somewhere useful, and that, above all, despite his inquisitive rudeness, the interviewer's “human face” is “smiling” through his (or her) questions. To desire knowledge about another human is a very human thing, and the very existence of these fictional interviews demonstrates that Carson recognizes, and is intrigued by, the reader's desire for extra-curricular knowledge of writers about whose work they care. Despite her distaste for blurb-speak, she can understand the attraction—in *Economy of the Unlost*, she announces that “a poet's life is a kind of icon” and throughout her work poets, artists, philosophers and actors are presented as exemplary figures: Simonides and Celan in that book, Mimnermos, Stesichoros and Gertrude Stein, Kafka, Rembrandt, Emily Dickinson, Emily Brontë, Sappho, Virginia Woolf and Thucydides, Hokusai and Audubon, Catullus, Edward Hopper, Antonin Artaud, Tolstoy, Anna Akhmatova, Catherine Deneuve and John Keats, to name only the most obvious (*Economy* 60). They all stand for something, in their work and in themselves. What, then, does Anne Carson stand for?

Well, if she's anything like her "creation" Mimnermos, she lies. And yet, what is a willful verbal error *but* a lie? In his despair, Mimnermos is simply casting his only calling as a crafter-of-metaphors in an overly negative light: the very thing that causes him to fail in the "honest" arena of the interview makes him a true poet. And a poet is *not* a "storyteller" (in either sense): as Carson makes clear in her essay "Mimnermos and the Motions of Hedonism," he was too intensely, "hedonistically" involved in capturing the lyric present to be interested in any death-inviting "epic" narrative (*Plainwater* 12-17). Carson *is* interested in narrative, just as she is interested in scholarly accuracy. If a poet's life is an "icon"—a kind of poem—then perhaps Carson's juxtapositioning of the aesthetic and the academic within her work is the very "error" that makes that work "new & fresh," as her Aristotle would say. In the preface to her sequence "The Life of Towns," Carson, as poet, talks about being a scholar:

A scholar is someone who takes a position. From which position, certain lines become visible. You will at first think I am painting the lines myself; it's not so. I merely know where to stand to see the lines that are there. And the mysterious thing, it is a very mysterious thing, is how these lines do paint themselves. (*Plainwater* 93)

It is as though the scholar Carson observes the "plane surface / of ordinary language," so that the poet Carson can appear all the more "mysterious" when she arrives. Hence all the poems about poets: once Carson takes a particular "scholarly" position on the life of a writer, then that life—as well as the writer's works—begin to adopt "poetic" lines. And the nature of poetic "error" within a poet's life, as is borne out in *Economy of the Unlost*, can be summed up as "alienation." Simonides is alienated by the shifting economic system of his culture, and his own impertinent—as much to him as to others—financial success within it. Celan is alienated by the terrible events of his youth, and from the very language in which he tries to engage with those events. These may be external causes of alienation, but many of the figures Carson writes about—Dickinson, Emily Brontë and Tolstoy, for example—might be regarded (uncharitably) as wilfully self-alienated. Such self-distancing would seem unacceptable—impertinent—if poetry were not, as Carson has shown (with the help of Celan), essentially outgoing, "*en route*," a letter in a bottle "headed toward": "everything and everybody is a figure for this other toward which it is heading" (Celan 49). As Carson remarks, citing Georg Lukács at the beginning of *Economy of the Unlost*, "I do not want to be a windowless monad," as though it were the

first temptation that must be overcome in order for useful work to follow (*Economy* viii).

The outward nature of poetry must, Carson suggests, be taken as read:

a poet's despair is not just personal; he despairs of the word and that implicates all our hopes. Every time a poet writes a poem he is asking the question, Do words hold good? And the answer *has to be yes*: it is the contrafactual condition upon which a poet's life depends. (*Economy* 121)

Carson is writing of Celan: "despair," in his case, seems altogether too light a word. Does the poet's alienation always require, or precipitate, despair? Perhaps it does, but Carson seems adamant that it is *the* vital ingredient needed for a poet to be a poet: in an aside in "The Anthropology of Water," she mentions anthropology, and the distinction anthropologists make between an *emic* and an *etic* point of view. Emic has to do with the perspectives of a member of the society itself and etic is the point of view of an outsider seeing the society in his own terms (*Plainwater* 223).

In Carson's view, the poet's view must be an *etic* one: the poet must stand at a distance from society, and the language that it uses. Put more positively, the poet errant (a word with the same root as "error"), like the knight errant, must travel and operate at a distance from society, though always performing acts for the eventual benefit of that society. That distance, when Carson writes of her exemplary figures, becomes apparent. And that, in turn, highlights her own alienation: as she writes at one point in *Short Talks*, almost as an aside, "I am writing this to be as wrong as possible to you" (*Plainwater* 45).

Despite this "wrongness," Carson seems sure of the fundamental social benefits of the poet's "errors." When D'Agata asks her the "hard question" of why she thinks her work has suddenly become so popular, she initially brushes the question off in embarrassment, before replying:

I think people like to be told something that they can get, you know? I mean otherwise it's like giving a person a gift they can't unwrap. That's cruel. [. . .] I think it arises out of compassion, you know? People are just out there struggling to make sense of life. You have to give them something they can use. It's only polite to do that. (D'Agata 21-22)

In Plato's *Euthyphro*, as Carson shows in her essay "'Echo with No Door on Her Mouth': A Notional Refraction through Sophokles, Plato, and Defoe," a debate on the true nature of piety breaks down repeatedly over the word *charis*. This word, like *xenos*, is multifaceted. It can mean, as Carson translates it, either "return favor" or "free gift." Euthyphro cannot accept that an

individual's relationship with the gods could be anything other than reciprocal, a kind of *xenia*: "[m]en offer sacrifices to gods, gods fulfill men's prayers: a tidy exchange" ("Echo" 252). For him, *charis* is thus a returned favour: "[e]very gift is a debt, the sociologists tell us, insofar as a gift sets up the idea of a counter-gift: every gift contains the obligation to repay" ("Fragrance" 10). For Sokrates—who believes that the gods do not require anything from man: faith, products or sacrifice—*charis* is a kind of free dispensation, or grace. Without wishing to grant it a similar kind of divine aura, the same quality could be assigned to metaphor, or to poetry as a whole: "by thrifty management of its own measures—measures of rhythm, diction, syntax, image and allusion—the poem secretes a residue, the poem generates a profit, the poem yields surplus value" ("Fragrance" 10). And this too is one of the meanings of *charis*:

The Greeks used the word for the grace of a poem, the charm that makes it a poem and makes you want to remember it. So for them to make a poem is to make something that will be so charming that it will be a gift that the world wants to receive. (D'Agata 17)

Instead of a reciprocal return on our attention as readers, poetry offers an excess of meaning. Perhaps this is what infuriated Simonides so: an awareness that his "gifts" were of a type different from any that might be repaid through financial channels. And metaphor might seem impertinent to us if, like Celan's poetry, it demands more attention than we—the social readers—are perhaps willing to spare. But then, as Celan says in his Meridian speech, in words borrowed from Malebranche "via Walter Benjamin's essay on Kafka, 'attention is the natural prayer of the soul'" (Celan 50). Or, as Carson, puts it, "[a]ttention is a task we share, you and I" (*Economy* viii).

In her poem "Canicula di Anna," Carson reminds us that "to categorize," means, originally, "to name in public" (*Plainwater* 77). This explanation, however, only hints at the full connotations of the ancient usage: taken back, "to categorize" can also mean "to accuse," in the sense of bringing a legal case to bear. Personally, I believe Anne Carson's work—inward and yet outgoing, playful and yet profound—sidesteps "category" nicely. It is, of course, and as you are all surely aware, easy for an "essay" to descend into "categorization." If this essay has done so, if it has seemed too eager to categorize—in our more current usage—Carson's work, then I hope the reader can accept it in the spirit of "error" in which it was intended.

NOTES

- 1 Whether Simonides deserved this reputation, or whether he earned it due to the envy of others, or because of the sheer impertinence of his economic ambivalence remains unclear. Carson just calls him “smart” (*Economy* 10).
- 2 This image is taken from Mandelstam’s essay “About an Interlocutor.” The argument of this essay clearly had a profound influence on Celan, and on his speech:

The shipwrecked sailor throws a sealed bottle into the sea at a critical moment, and it has his name in it and what happened to him. Many years later, walking along the dunes, I find it in the sand, I read the letter, I learn when it happened, the testament of the deceased. I had a right to do this. I did not unseal someone’s else’s letter. The letter sealed in the bottle was addressed to its finder, I found it. That means, then, that I am its secret addressee. [. . .] Poetry as a whole is always directed at a more or less distant, unknown addressee, in whose existence the poet may not doubt, without doubting himself. (Mandelstam 59-64)

- 3 In the “introduction” to her book *Autobiography of Red*, Carson calls adjectives “the latches of being,” and argues that the ancient Greek poet Stesichoros’ adjectival originality stemmed from his ability to “undo the latches” (*Red* 4-5).
- 4 D’Agata seems well aware of the irony: the interview is pointedly entitled “A ___ with Anne Carson,” and he makes a point of including all the lacunae, mishearings, conversational circlings and awkwardness that a more “professional” interviewer might edit out. The piece ends with Carson’s directive “[n]ow turn that off” (D’Agata 22).

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