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# Spillage and Banditry: Anne Carson's Derivatives

Oran McKenzie

This essay argues that traditional notions of literary value cannot account for the work of the contemporary Canadian poet Anne Carson because her poetry needs to be situated in the context of the emergence of a new form of economic value in the age of financial derivatives. This stems not from the poet's superficial wish to keep up with the times, but from a deep engagement, born out of Carson's training as a classical philologist, with how the introduction of coinage in Lydia in the 7th century BC changed – or even created – subsequent ways of thinking in philosophy and poetry: the perception of reality and value, the notions of self, subject and object, the separation of form and matter. In the collection *Decreation* (2005) Carson takes derivation (in both the literary and economic sense) beyond traditional forms of intertextuality, encouraging a “spillage” of sources within the text which she observes already in Longinus' essay *On the Sublime*. Through her own practice of a form of “banditry” trading on this spillage, which makes the relationship between the original and the derivative ever more obscure, Carson explores the possibilities of a poetical order grounded in a different kind of visibility. Such a new poetics, which Carson the classicist in effect traces back to Simonides of Keos at the very beginning of the Greek canon, does not deal in the representations, illusionism and exchange between an estranged self and other, all features of a coinage based culture, but strives for the “*withness*” of a new form of gift economy.

The invention of coinage between 700 and 600 BC in the kingdom of Lydia changed the way humans think about and perceive reality. It also transformed poetry. Bruno Snell argued that ancient Greek lyrics bear the traces of a revolution in human self-awareness that he calls “the discovery of the mind,” a consolidation of the self which accounts for “the

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rise of individualism" (235, 42). Hans Jonas discussed how at the same time sight came to be privileged over the other senses, giving rise to "the concept of objectivity, of the thing as it is in itself as distinct from the thing as it affects me," a distinction from which arises "the whole idea of *theoria* and theoretical truth" (147). Marc Shell introduced the idea that the emergence of this "new logic" is linked to the "development of money," the spread of coinage which transformed both philosophy and literature (11). Richard Seaford built on this insight to argue that the origins of philosophy lie in "the counter-intuitive idea of a single substance underlying the plurality of things manifest to the senses," an idea which, he contends, springs from the nature of coins (175). Contemporary to these transformations, the development of a new alphabetic literacy provoked a shift from the oral to the written and a revolution in the "techniques of literary composition" (Carson, *Eros* 43).

A new measure of value, a new sense of self, a new way of perceiving and relating to objects, a new technology to write poetry: "It is not always easy . . . to trace the subtle map of cause and effect that links such changes," writes the Canadian poet and classicist Anne Carson in her first book, *Eros the Bittersweet* (1986), "[b]ut we should make an effort to do so. There is an important, unanswerable question here" (41). She sustained the effort, discussing how the transition from a traditional gift economy to an economy based on money transformed poetry in *Economy of the Unlost (Reading Simonides of Keos with Paul Celan)* (1999). Building her argument on the juxtaposition of early fragments of Greek poetry with the poems of someone who famously despaired at the possibility of continuing to write verse in the second part of the twentieth century, her discussion seems to imply another, unformulated question: if written poetry is linked to the introduction of coinage, what might it become in the age of financial derivatives?

The American poet Kenneth Goldsmith recently claimed that "poetry as we know it – sonnets or free verse on a printed page – feels akin to throwing pottery or weaving quilts, activities that continue in spite of their cultural marginality" (Goldsmith). His argument is that the information overload brought about by new technologies puts verbal arts in a position similar to that of visual arts after the invention of photography. Beyond the rise of the Internet, though, there is an intrinsic connection between money and the notion of value, including in discourses about literature, so could it be that the marginalisation of coinage in the economy also disqualifies traditional notions of literary value? Goldsmith's own solution for literature in this new age is what he calls *uncreative writing*, a writing of "language hoarders" rather than creative geniuses which

abandons traditional poetic practices in favour of activities such as databasing, recycling, appropriation and intentional plagiarism. Inspired by Marcel Duchamp, this is a writing which consists in reframing existing texts rather than creating new, original content; in other words, a writing of derivatives.

Anne Carson is not an uncreative writer, far from it, but she is known for a “heretic form of poetry” (Aitken) which is also highly derivative, blending poetry, essay, criticism and translation in multi-layered and complex juxtapositions of quotes, allusions, echoes and ekphrastic descriptions. In *Decreation* (2005), her seventh collection, she pushes the derivative nature of her poetry even further, confounding most of its reviewers. If the essays in the collection are generally praised, much of its poetry is often ignored or, when discussed, dismissed as “bad poetry,” a “cliché-ridden jumble” which “overpowers the limits of the lyric in the name of formal or rhetorical experimentation” (Pollock). But is this simply bad poetry or, as with the texts of uncreative writers, is it poetry for which the traditional notion of literary *value* has been rendered inoperative?

In the same way that Carson argues that the poetry of Simonides of Keos emerges from and illuminates the social changes brought about by the invention of coinage, could her own poems – often described as opaque and experimental – depend on and engage with the rise of a new phase in the history of capitalism? “Every time a poet writes a poem,” Carson notes on Paul Celan, “he is asking the question, Do words hold good?” (*Economy* 112). Extending Celan’s question from the post-Holocaust era to the beginning of the twenty-first century, this paper intends to question the possibility for poetry to still “hold good” in the age of globalised financial capitalism.

My aim is not to argue that Carson’s poems “hold good” by being literary equivalents of financial derivatives, but I am interested in attempting to go beyond the idea that their opacity is the result of gratuitous formal experimentation by reflecting on how it relates to the emergence of a new form of economic value. I will begin by sketching the mental horizon which emerges with the invention of coinage in order to set a background on which to then contrast the dynamics at play in Carson’s derivations in *Decreation*. Suggesting that these texts echo the logic of derivatives, I will end by marking their difference. If the development of financial capitalism puts large portions of the world population at risk, there might be another side to the disappearing coin: an opportunity to capture some of the energy unleashed by the collapse of the

older order in poems which may help to reinvent a different kind of vision, and a more open future.

### *Of coins and dualisms*

One of the main characteristics of a literate culture, according to Carson, is its emphasis on separation. The argument of *Eros the Bittersweet* is based on the idea that the advent of alphabetic literacy is linked to a “reorientation of perceptual abilities,” a shift towards the visual sense which informs the literature of the time (43). “[T]o know words,” she writes, is “a matter of perceiving the edges between one entity and another,” a fact which has profound consequences: “As separable, controllable units of meaning, each with its own visible boundary, each with its own fixed and independent use, written words project their user into isolation” (*Eros* 51, 50). The development of coinage has a similar effect, she continues in *Economy of the Unlost*, severing social relations that previously remained continuous. If a gift is “personal and reciprocal, and depends on a relationship that endures over time,” money, on the opposite, “is an abstraction that passes one way and impersonally between two people whose relationship stops with the transfer of cash” (*Economy* 12). The “moral life of a user of money” thus differs from that of someone enmeshed in a traditional gift economy (*Economy* 10), opening up the age of the “spectacle of *grammata*,” an age of separation and edges (*Eros* 58).

There is a connection between money and thought, and it implies visibility. In *The Economy of Literature* (1978), Marc Shell argues that there is a “‘constitutional’ relationship between the origin of money and the origin of philosophy itself,” noting that “[i]t is not easy for us, who have used coinage for some twenty-five hundred years, to imagine the impression it made on the minds of those who first used it” (11, 13). Carson alludes to the same idea through a visual metaphor and a Chinese proverb: “No one who uses money can easily get a look at their own practice. *Ask eye to see its own eyelashes*” (*Economy* 10). For Shell, the most striking characteristic of money is its capacity to “transform visibles into invisibles and invisibles into visibles” (Shell 13), while Carson uses Marx to also note that “[m]oney is something visible and invisible at the same time. A ‘real abstraction,’ in Marx’s terms. You can hold a coin in your hand and yet not touch its value” (*Economy* 45).

This double nature of money is precisely what constitutes its relationship with philosophy, according to Shell, noting that “[i]n the

thought of Plato, the Idea (especially that of the Good) [also] plays a role at once visible and invisible, unreal and real" (41). Confronted with a profoundly new type of object, both visible and invisible, Greek thinkers used this new form of visibility to further their investigations. "The Ideas cannot be separated from problems of visibility," Shell adds, since "*Eidē*, in fact, is cognate with *idein* (to see)" (42). Socrates follows the rift which appears between material objects and abstract value and devises a similar separation between things and Ideas: "we say that things are seen (*horasthai*) but not intellected (*noeisthai*), while the Ideas (*eide*) are intellected but not seen" (*Rep.* 507b, qtd in Shell 42). In the *Timaeus*, Ideas are associated to the notion of *form*:

we must acknowledge that one kind of being is the form which is always the same, uncreated and indestructible, never receiving anything into itself from without, nor itself going out into any other, but invisible and imperceptible by any sense, and which contemplation is granted to intelligence only. (qtd in Shell 43n)

The visible, material things of the world are separated from the forms from which they emerge and in relation to which they remain secondary: "The reality after which an image is *moulded* does not belong to it," Plato affirms, and Shell adds "any more than the die from which a coin is cast belongs to it" (43n).

The logic of money is thus also at the root of the dualism between matter and form. The anthropologist David Graeber extends Shell's argument and suggests that the advent of coinage is also responsible for the birth of what he calls "Axial Age spirituality" (244):<sup>1</sup>

The war between Spirit and Flesh, then, between the noble Idea and ugly Reality, the rational intellect versus stubborn corporeal drives and desires that resist it, even the idea that peace and community are not things that emerge spontaneously but that need to be stamped onto our baser material natures like a divine insignia stamped into base metal – all those ideas that came to haunt the religious and philosophical traditions of the Axial Age . . .

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<sup>1</sup> Graeber borrows the phrase "Axial Age" from Karl Jaspers, who "became fascinated by the fact that figures like Pythagoras (570-495 BC), the Buddha (563-483 BC), and Confucius (551-479) were all alive at exactly the same time, and that Greece, India, and China, in that period, all saw a sudden efflorescence of debate between contending intellectual schools" (223). He extends Jaspers' notion to include the period going from 800 BC to 600 AD, noting that "[t]his makes the Axial Age the period that saw the birth not only of all the world's major philosophical tendencies, but also all of today's major world religions: Zoroastrianism, Prophetic Judaism, Buddhism, Jainism, Hinduism, Confucianism, Taoism, Christianity, and Islam" (224).

can already be seen as inscribed in the nature of this new form of money. (247)

Building on Richard Seaford's argument concerning the origins of philosophy, Graeber proposes that all the major religions and philosophies are "built on a bedrock of materialism," that is to say that they spring from the question inherited from the problems of visibility intrinsic to the use of money: "What substance is the world made of?" (244). The search for some "underlying material behind the physical forms of objects in the world" quickly leads to "some notion of God, Mind, Spirit" as an "active organizing principle that gave form to [but] was not itself substance," he writes, noting the proximity between a notion such as Anaximander's *apeiron* – a "pure abstract substance that could not itself be perceived but was the material basis of everything that could be" – and the properties of gold when it is stamped into a coin (244, 245).<sup>2</sup> As Shell writes, "[g]old has a universal nature that, like the sculptor's metal or the stamper's wax, can become something else and yet still remain itself. Gold minted into a coin . . . is both homogeneous with itself (as gold) and heterogeneous with itself (as numismatic sculpture or as money)" (53-4). Graeber extends this "double-sidedness" of money to the notion of material itself (245):

What is "material," anyway? Normally, we speak of "materials" when we refer to objects that we wish to make into something else. A tree is a living thing. It only becomes "wood" when we begin to think about all the other things you could carve out of it. And of course you can carve a piece of wood into almost anything. The same is true of clay, or glass, or metal. They're solid and real and tangible, but also abstractions, because they have the potential to turn into almost anything else – or, not precisely that; one can't turn a piece of wood into a lion or an owl, but one can turn it into an image of a lion or an owl – it can take on almost any conceivable form. So already in any materialist philosophy, we are dealing with an opposition between form and content, substance and shape; a clash between the idea, sign, emblem, or model in the creator's mind, and the physical qualities of the materials on which it is to be stamped, built, or imposed, from which it is to be brought into reality. (246)

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<sup>2</sup> Graeber notes that "the historical connections [between the invention of coinage and the birth of philosophy] are so uncannily close that they are very hard to explain any other way," pointing to the fact that the first coins were minted in Lydia around 600 BC, precisely in the city in which and at the time when Greek philosophy begins with the speculations of Thales, Anaximander and Anaximenes of Miletus "on the nature of the physical substance from which the world ultimately sprang" (244-5).

A material is thus also something both “homogeneous with itself” *and* the potentiality for being something “heterogeneous with itself”: a form (54). Confronted with the novelty of an object “whose nature was a profound enigma,” Greek thinkers devised a dualistic way to think about reality which implies, at its heart, “a clash” between substance and abstraction, a tension in which the latter is given precedence and thought to have to be “stamped, built, or imposed” on the former (Graeber 246). Money “transform[s] visibles into invisibles and invisibles into visibles” (Shell 13), and the birth of materialism is also the moment when materiality disappears under the forms devised to understand and master it.

As a classicist, though, Carson notes that “[w]hen the ancient Greeks talk of money, adjectives for ‘visible’ and ‘invisible’ occur inconsistently,” a fact which explains why “[m]odern scholars have been unsuccessful in efforts to abstract a stable definition for these terms from ancient usage” (*Economy* 45). As a poet, inconsistency and instability is precisely where she finds her value, and an entry into Simonides’ poetry: “He lived at an interface between two economic systems” and his writing “makes clear that he gave thought to the concept of visible and invisible, was aware of a turmoil in their categorization and had an interest (conditioned perhaps by economic experience) in their valuing” (*Economy* 45). The invention of coinage changed the way humans conceive and thus perceive reality, generating centuries of confusion caught in the unbridgeable separations and edges between appearances and reality, form and matter, subject and object, self and other. But Simonides’ interest, like that of Carson, lies not in the birth of stable categories, but on having the “occasion to observe [the movements of thought and money] and to meditate on their relation to the phenomena of perception” (*Economy* 45).

#### *Of derivation and decreation*

If the transition from gifts to coins generates turmoil in the categorisation of the visual, does the transition from coins to financial derivatives produce a similar necessity for poets to meditate afresh on the phenomena of perception? The distinctions between different types of derivatives can be complex, but, for the purpose of this essay, I am merely interested in two basic features: first, the idea that value results from a process of derivation between entities rather than from their intrinsic nature or qualities and, second, that this process of derivation is not a

*one-off transfer* of value but, rather, the establishment of a relationship that endures over time and space between what is called an *underlying entity* and the *derivative*.

Derivatives are closer to the logic of gifts than to that of coins. If money “ruptures continuity and stalls objects at the borders of themselves,” abstracting them “as bits of sealable value” which “become commodities,” writes Carson, a gift, on the other hand, “is not a piece broken off from the interior life of the giver and lost into the exchange, but rather an extension of the interior of the giver, both in space and in time, into the interior of the receiver” (*Economy* 18). Extension and continuity instead of separation and edges: the shift towards an economy in which the notion of value becomes a function of financial products such as derivatives seems to reinstate, within the formation of value itself, some of the logic of the sociocultural system which predates the invention of coinage.<sup>3</sup> Transferred to literature, the logic of derivatives thus forces us to go beyond traditional notions of intertextuality, looking for writings which derive their value not only from the incorporation of various sources but from establishing a form of bidirectional relationship which endures over time and space between themselves and their sources.

The highly derivative nature of Carson’s poetry in *Decreation*, confounding even some of her most eager critics, makes it a good place to start probing the kind of visibility associated with such relationships. The title of the collection is a neologism coined by the French philosopher and mystic Simone Weil, “a person who,” proposes Carson in lieu of a definition, “wanted to get herself out of the way so as to arrive at God” (*Decreation* 167). Decreation stands for Weil’s project of “undoing the subject because her presence to the object – God – is too substantial” (Coles 134). The separation between the subject and the object does not, for Weil, grant access to theoretical truth, but, on the contrary, is something that needs to be bridged. Carson’s choice of Weil’s notion as the title of the collection is already an indication of the kind of dynamics she is interested in establishing between her texts and the various sources they derive from.

Carson addresses this dynamic in one of the essays of the collection by associating it with the notion of the sublime. In “Foam (Essay with Rhapsody): On the Sublime in Longinus and Antonioni,” she starts by defining the sublime as a “documentary technique,” by which she means

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<sup>3</sup> Graeber’s argument is precisely that virtual money is “the original form of money,” existing long before the invention of coinage (18).

the derivation of quotations as the main building blocks of one's own text:

A quote (cognate with *quota*) is a cut, a section, a slice of someone else's orange. You suck the slice, toss the rind, skate away. Part of what you enjoy in a documentary technique is the sense of banditry. To loot someone else's life or sentences and make off with a point of view, which is called "objective" because you can make anything into an object by treating it this way, is exciting and dangerous. (45)

She introduces the notion of the sublime as a relationship between the writer and her sources by associating it with a form of looting, a "banditry" which suggests that critical distance is achieved at the expense of "someone else's life or sentences" treated as mere objects so as to "make off with a point of view." Typical of her essays, Carson sketches this definition of the sublime as a form of derivation in a few, very condensed sentences, leaving the implications of such a move buried in her text and letting them unfold in the rest of the essay as effects rather than as an overt argument. The point of departure itself, the association of the sublime to the use of quotations, seems to surface only as an off-hand comment on Longinus' treatise *On the Sublime*: "It has muddled arguments, little organization, no paraphrasable conclusion. Its attempts at definition are incoherent or tautological . . . You will come away from reading its (unfinished) forty chapters with no clear idea what the Sublime actually is," she affirms, but "will have been thrilled by its documentation" (45). The slippage from a lack of paraphrasable definition to the quality of the documentation, however, is far from innocent.

The focus of the essay is on the kind of relations Longinus' "aggregation of quotes" establishes with its sources, but the point is made only obliquely through its thematic content (45). It begins with Longinus' quotation of a sentence of the Greek orator Demosthenes uttered in a lawsuit opposing him to another Athenian who had slapped him in public: "By attitude! by look! by voice! the man who hits can do things to the other which the other can't even describe" (45). Carson then moves to Longinus' analysis on that sentence: "With words like these . . . the orator produces the same effect as the man who hits — striking the judges' minds with blow after blow" (45). She then sucks the slice of orange herself, noting that "Longinus' point is that, by brutal juxtaposition of coordinate nouns or noun clauses, Demosthenes transposes violence of fists into violence of syntax" (46). From quotation to quotation, she continues, "[h]is facts spill over the frame of their original context," and she makes them spill some more:

Watch this spillage, which moves from the man who hits, to the words of Demosthenes describing him, to the judges hearing these words, to Longinus analyzing the whole process, to me recalling Longinus' discussion of it and finally to you reading my account. The passionate moment echoes from soul to soul. (46)

From the brutality of the slap to the violence of syntax, Carson then proceeds with the kind of juxtapositions she enjoys in both her prose and poetry and quotes the Italian director Michelangelo Antonioni to reach back to a more literal slapping, this time of the filmmaker's own actress Lucia Bosé:

How many blows Lucia took for the final scene! The film ended with her beaten and sobbing, in a doorway. But she was always happy and it was hard for her to pretend to be desperate. She was not an actress. To obtain the result I wanted I had to use insults, abuse, hard slaps. In the end she broke down and wept like a child. She played her part wonderfully. (46-7)

Carson's own banditry adds up to a handsome little sum in which "the passionate moment" spills first from her sources to her own text, but then also, within her text, between the sources themselves as one occurrence of violence echoes the other.

Both the banditry and the spillage continue in the series of poems "Sublimes" which follows the essay. Akin to the juxtaposition of Longinus and Antonioni, the poem "Kant's Question About Monica Vitti" juxtaposes Kant's musing on the "Thing in Itself" with a description of the opening scene of Antonioni's *l'Eclisse* (1962), alternating one underlying entity with the other in eleven short stanzas. The relation between the two entities remains obscure, the only direct link being established in the title through the theme of questioning and then alluded to by the pronouns of the first line: "It was hidden in her and it gave Kant pleasure" (70). The line injects a degree of ambiguity as to the object being questioned, twice removed as an "it" hidden in a "her," and frames the relation between the act of questioning and its object in a correlation between hiddenness and pleasure. The neuter pronoun may refer to the question mentioned in the title, but it could also refer to the "Thing in Itself" mentioned at the end of line 5, qualified as "unattainable" and "insurmountable," or maybe to the concept of the sublime through an echo with a line from a previous poem of the series which proposes that "she has somehow got the Sublime inside her" (70, 67). After the first line, in any case, the overt relation between the two entities dissolves

and the poem itself becomes an opaque derivative which resists efforts to answer the question raised by its title.

Both entities mirror each other as different forms of questioning of an unattainable object. Kant's "Thing in Itself" is doubled, in the lines which describe *l'Eclisse*, by the character played by Monica Vitti who is also, as line 6 puts it, "observed deeply / by a man in an armchair" (70). A connection is thus suggested between the work of the philosopher and the relation between the two characters, but to grasp the effects of Carson's derivation it is necessary to actually watch *l'Eclisse*. The movie opens with a long silent scene in which Monica Vitti is moving in a room, "with her eyes down," as the poem describes, under the gaze of a man sitting in a chair (70). When the dialogues begin, it becomes a scene of separation and questioning. Vittoria, Monica Vitti's character, is breaking up with Riccardo, and the latter wants to know why. The dialogues are sparse and clichéd: "Be good and tell me one last thing," he tells her, "[w]hen did you stop loving me?" (0:11:47-0:12:21). He wants to *understand*: "Is there someone else?", "Are you really sure?", "But there has to be a reason!" The man demands reason while the woman remains unable or unwilling to provide one: "I don't know," she repeats.

Watching this scene with Carson's poem in mind, the effect of her derivation gradually comes into focus as a bidirectional relation is established between the two underlying entities, producing a kind of stereoscopic vision in which the lover's romantic despair aligns itself with the sternness of the philosopher's theorising. Kant merges with Riccardo, and this composite subject, in turn, merges with the Longinus/Antonioni juxtaposition of the essay, associating the separation between subject and object with both the banditry of the literary critic attempting to "make off" with an objective point of view and the filmmaker's aggression of his lead actress to produce the sublime effect he is looking for.

At the heart of both the discourses of the sublime and Weil's notion of decreation is the question of the relation to otherness. In an interview, Carson summarises the "conventional descriptions of the sublime" as "an ambivalent motion" in which "[d]read [is] followed by a recovery of the feeling of mastery," that is to say a confrontation between self and otherness which results in the reinforcement of the edges separating the two in order to maintain or restore the feeling of mastery of the self (Aitken). The theory of the sublime is thus also a form of banditry, and Carson obliquely builds an argument on how relations built on separation and critical distance imply violence rather than open a path towards truth.

As the title of the series of poems suggests, however, there is a plurality of sublimes. In ‘Mia Moglie (Longinus’ Red Desert),’ three distinct variations are derived and become underlying entities which extend, confront and complicate each other. The poem’s first two lines, “A caught woman is something the movies want to believe in / ‘For instance, Sappho,’ as Longinus says” (67), weave Antonioni’s belief that “women are a finer filter of reality” (qtd in Ricciardi 10) with Longinus’ discussion of Sappho’s poetry. As the film critic Alessia Ricciardi shows, Longinus’ comments quoted in the poem – “For she is terrified,” “For she is all but dying” – align themselves with the “misappropriation of Giuliana’s story” by both the husband and the lover in the movie (19). But a third entity then disrupts the poem, and the voice of Sappho herself creeps into the cracks of this juxtaposition of potential misappropriations.

Broken down into single words distributed between each stanza, a line from Sappho’s fragment 31 gradually appears, precisely the line with which Carson launches her essay on *decreation*. Sappho’s poem is usually read as a disquisition on jealousy in a love triangle between a girl who laughs, a man who listens and the speaker who witnesses the scene. But Carson underlines how from the second stanza onwards, the girl and the man disappear and the poem focuses solely on the speaker’s own mind and body, describing the way in which her “perceptual abilities . . . [are] reduced to dysfunction one after the other” (160). The sentence included in Carson’s poem, “[g]reener than grass and dead almost I seem to me,” is a variation of the end of Sappho’s fragment, just before it breaks into silence, a line that Carson reads as “a spiritual event”: “predicating of her own Being an attribute observable only from outside her own body,” Sappho stands outside herself and achieves a form of “*ekstasi*” (161). Confronted with otherness, Sappho seems to welcome the reduction of “perceptual abilities” and the dysfunction of the self that ensues, rather than attempting to theorise or systematise the encounter in an effort to recover her feeling of mastery.

It has been argued that Carson’s engagement with the sublime in *Decreation* inscribes her poetry in the “Romantic tradition . . . stretching back through Longinus to Sappho, Homer, and the Bible” (Pollock), or, on the contrary, that it represents her efforts to break with the tradition and participate in founding a “feminine” and contemporary alternative to it (Disney 26). But to try to establish whether Carson stands within or breaks with and opposes the tradition both imply reducing the strangeness and opacity of the poem’s derivations, and thus run the risk of simply reproducing the very kind of misappropriations they stage. In

“L’(Ode to Monica Vitti)”, another poem in the series, after a description of Antonioni’s *L’Avventura* (1960) in which Monica Vitti’s character is again juxtaposed with men who “stand / gazing,” the sentence suddenly breaks down:

– and as  
 for the scandal of our abandonment  
 in a universe of “sudden trembling love,” blondes  
 being  
 always  
 fatally  
 reinscribed  
 on an old cloth  
 faintly,  
 interminably  
 undone . . . (63)

The notion of *reinscription* provides a clue. This sentence is a derivation of a quote from Jacques Derrida commenting the notion of “epistemological breaks” in an interview: “I do not believe in decisive ruptures,” he says, since “[b]reaks are always, and fatally, reinscribed in an old cloth that must continually, interminably be undone” (Positions 24). Resisting his ambition to somehow *access the real* through the finer grain of his female actresses, Antonioni’s “blondes” are always, fatally, re-inscribed on the cloth of older theories of the sublime that maintain a distance with the real. Carson’s poetry gains its energy not by trying to break with traditional notions, but by deriving and juxtaposing them, establishing complex relations which endure over time and space and cannot be reduced to a dualistic pair of *for* or *against*.

While in her poems she stages the potential for misappropriation implicit in Antonioni’s approach, at the same time she also draws on it to build her own poetics. His “obsessive framing and reframing of multiple iterations of the same image,” for example, his aesthetics of formal error and his “systematic efforts to violate the rules of commercial cinematic storytelling . . . clearly welcoming the risk of alienating the film’s viewers” indeed all resonate deeply with Carson’s poetic practice (Ricciardi 15, 6). The relations she establishes with her sources are better described by what she calls *witness*, a notion she derives from “the preposition chosen by John the Evangelist to describe the relationship between God and The Word” which, in Greek, “[w]hen used with the accusative” means “toward, upon, against, with, ready for, face to face, engaging, concerning, touching, in reply to, in respect of, compared

with, according to, as accompaniment for" (*Economy* viii). Witness entails a different kind of turmoil of the visual.

### *A different kind of vision*

"If you want to know why you cannot reach your own beautiful ideas," says the speaker of another long ekphrastic poem in *Decreation*, but "reach instead the edge of the thinkable," you may see that it "leaks" (99). When Carson reaches an edge, or when she uses them to build the triangulations of her poems, she is more interested in what happens after and between them than in what stops at them. Her poetry can be said to echo the logic of financial derivatives in the sense that it derives value from juxtaposition and continuity rather than from separation and breaks, but a central difference remains, and it concerns the question of visibility. Problems of money and visibility are as much at stake today as they were in Simonides' time, and it is by working through how his poetics emerged out of these problems that Carson develops her own for this new age of globalised financial capitalism.

The turmoil in the categorisation between the visible and the invisible brought about by the invention of coinage changed the way reality is represented and, through this representation, controlled. Carson argues that Simonides developed his poetics partly by reflecting on a contemporary revolution in painting, the development of illusionism by Polygnotos and other painters who transformed "the two-dimensional picture plane of archaic style and developed a new technology for the representation of three-dimensional reality" (*Economy* 47). The impact of this "new science" of representation on "the Greek popular imagination" was profound, as the vehemence with which Plato denounces painting as a form of sophistry attests (48, 49). Quoting Gorgias' famous opinion that poetry is simply "prose dressed up in meter," that is to say that it is "distinctive by virtue of its surface, not its content," Carson associates the "art of persuasion" of the sophists with illusionism in painting as the two sides of the same coin: "Illusionism, in paint as in words, . . . entails a total investment in the visible surface of the world as reality and a tendency to disavow the reality of anything not visible. Facts are what matters and facts are what you see" (50). "Like the sophist," she concludes, "the illusionist painter defines the world as data and undertakes to enhance our experience of it by perfecting our control of it" (62).

The historical development of financial derivatives also depends on the invention of a new technology of representation to perfect our control of the world. Bundling together and deriving various financial products entails a certain risk, but since the development of the Black-Scholes formula in 1973, the very notion of risk has been transformed. It is now thought to be calculable and can thus be priced appropriately. In other words, the risk inherent in derivatives is considered manageable by being “brought under the regime of value” through what is presented as an “advance . . . in the technological forces of representation” (Heidenreich). Applying this new advance in the science of representation, financiers use various *materials* (underlying entities) to create new *forms* (derivatives), which can be described as opaque since their complexity makes it impossible to perceive what they are constituted of. As the US subprime crisis and the credit crunch of 2007/8 brutally revealed, even financial institutions did not really grasp what they were investing in with these derivatives. This reincorporation of risk within the manageable through “new forms of securitization” (Graeber 15) – i.e. another version of the theorising of the recovery of the feeling of mastery – thus appears akin to a form of illusionism. Like the illusionist painter or writer, the banker indeed also “claims to make his audience see, as it were, what is not there” (*Economy* 62). Carson’s poems embrace a different kind of opacity.

Opposed to illusionism in paint as in words, Simonides’ “commitment is to a reality beyond ‘what is visible to each person’,” Carson proposes, aligning him with her own interest in the leakage of edges: “His medium is words positioned so as to lead you to the edge where words stop, pointing beyond themselves toward something no eye can see” (51). For him as for her, the edge of words does not mark an end but the point from which one needs to start looking: “His poems are paintings of a counterworld that lie behind the facts and inside perceived appearances,” she writes, merging the visible and the invisible in her own metaphor (60). What matters is not the dichotomy, but the effort to “paint a picture of things that bring visible and invisible together in the mind’s eye as one coherent fact,” she explains, “a single fact seen from two vanishing points at once, in defiance of the laws of painterly perspective,” she adds, echoing her own poetics of juxtaposition (55, 54).

A “different kind of visibility has to be created by the watchful poet,” Carson concludes, a visibility that may breach separations and dualisms and in which we may “see matter stumble out of its forms,” as she already proposes in one of her early poems (*Economy* 58; *Short Talks* 52). Carson obliquely addresses the duality of matter and form in an

essay in which she aligns it with other dualisms such “as the unbounded from the bounded, as content from form, as polluted from pure,” oppositions which, she argues, are based on a “mythological groundwork of assumption” which “can be traced to the earliest legends of the Greeks” and also inform the distinction between the female and the male in the texts of the philosophers (“Dirt and Desire” 132, 135, 133). The gender difference in Greek philosophy is linked to the opposition between the wet and the dry, and from Aristotle’s characterisation of wetness as “that which is not bounded by any boundary of its own but can readily be bounded,” Carson shows that, explicit in the philosophers’ texts, is “[t]he image of woman as formless content” (132). Plato, for example, “compares [the] matter of creation to a mother, describing it as a ‘receptacle’ or ‘reservoir’ which is ‘shapeless, viewless, all-receiving’ and which ‘takes its form and activation from whatever shapes enter it’,” while Aristotle characterises the female as “raw material”: “as when a bed (the child) is made by a carpenter (the father) out of wood (the mother). Man determines the form, woman contributes the matter” (132-3, 133).

“Contact is crisis,” writes Carson who enrolls social anthropology in her discussion, showing how the presence of the unbounded is a constant threat of “violating a fixed boundary, transgressing a closed category” (130). Because of the “pregnability” of their boundaries, porous to both “incursion from without” and “leakage from within,” the logic of myth presents women as “awfully adept at confounding the boundaries of others,” she writes, and “since woman does not bound herself, she must *be bounded*” (135, 142). This insight is worth keeping in mind when trying to evaluate the *value* of Carson’s own blending of genres and derivative poetry. At the heart of the etiology of that conception, she argues, is a “deep and abiding mistrust of ‘the wet’ in virtue of its ability to transform and deform” (135). This is a dangerous ability, one that prevents the establishment of critical distance between a subject and the otherness of her object of inquiry, producing the risk to reduce perceptual abilities and lead to a dysfunction of the self rather than to help recover its feeling of mastery.

But this ability is also what opens a path for the decreation of the self through the writing and reading of poetry. Poetic language “reenacts the reality of which it speaks,” writes Carson, naming this reenactment “radical mimesis” (*Economy* 52). Mimesis is not, for her, the imitation of nature recorded in a work of art, but “an action of the mind captured on a page,” “the action that the poem has . . . on the reader” (Aitken). Reading repeats the action, she says, “it is a movement of yourself through a thought, through an activity of thinking, so by the time you

get to the end you're different than you were at the beginning." (Aitken). With its "clean machinery of appositions, vanishing points and conceptual shocks," Carson's poetry as much as Simonides' is composed "as a painter may set daubs of pure color next to each other on his canvas in the knowledge that they will mix on the retina of your eye" (*Economy* 55, 54). Words, like daubs of paint, "interdepend," she explains, "the meaning of the sentence happens not outside, not inside the daubs of paint, but *between* them . . . Visible and invisible lock together in a fact composed of their difference" (*Economy* 54). Her derivations work the same way.

While the illusionist painter or writer or banker claims to make his audience see what is *not* there, Carson summarises, Simonides' claim, just like hers, "is more radical, for it comprehends the profoundest of poetic experiences: that of *not* seeing what *is* there" (*Economy* 62). "The properly invisible nature of otherness guarantees the mystery of our encounter with it," she adds, it "pulls out of us the act of attention that may bring 'some difference' to light" (71-2). Blindness is a more radical and profound artistic experience than the clairvoyance of beliefs and ideas, but it is also more threatening. Rather than restoring mastery and allowing control, it implies a crisis of contact, the violation of fixed boundaries and the transgressing of closed categories to make us wake up "just in time to see matter stumble out of its forms" (*Short Talks* 52). It requires us to encourage, rather than restrict, the leakage of matter and its ability to *transform* and *deform*. It demands a mode of attention to the poet's "syntax of defiance" (*Economy* 54) in which we confront ourselves with what usually remains invisible, but *is* nonetheless there, an experience of *withness* in which our very selves may come undone.

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