

Φ (Flux)

WELLS LUCAS SANTO

If you open any work by Anne Carson, you will be greeted by a monolithic wall of ancient Greek or Latin. It's intimidating—scary, almost—how all these foreign words and symbols seem to just sit there, static on the page, and stare back at you with some great incomprehensible promise of meaning. But Carson is not afraid of these ancient languages. No, she revels in them—she loves them—and as *Eros: The Bittersweet* reveals, they are as important to her mind as the subject of love itself.

When you read a work by Carson such as *Eros*, you are not just reading the work of a translator who mechanically converts words from language to language; rather, you are witnessing a chase for new meaning in artifacts of the past. In the very first essay of her collection, Carson introduces a Greek passage from Sapphic poetry, where the word *glukupikron* appears. While the literal translation of this term would be “sweetbitter,” Carson notes that “‘Sweetbitter’ sounds wrong, and yet our standard English rendering ‘bittersweet’ inverts the actual terms . . . Should that concern us?” (“Bittersweet” 3). From here, she begins to worry about meanings that may be lost in translation. When Carson uses the word *glukupikron* to describe this seemingly foreign notion of *eros*, or desire, she points back to the Greek and notices that the combined feelings of sweetness and bitterness invoke both the emotions of love and hate, and it is this duplicity of emotion that lies at the heart of desire.

But why, and how, exactly does this duality exist? Later in her work, Carson admits that “*eros* is a lack,” which means that we desire what we do not have—in wanting it, we love it, but in not having it, we hate it (“Ruse” 12). For Carson, the existence of paradox is absolutely essential to the idea of *eros*, and this can be seen even in the growth of her short, simple, declarative sentences into complex, compound ones over the course of her writing. Over time, the use of more elongated structures that seem to pivot at the center reflects the growing presence of dualities in her mind and in the very subject

of desire itself. As blocks of texts go by, Carson is unable to revert back to her terse and very pinpoint style of syntax because her very understanding of desire has also expanded from something that involves two entities to one that involves three. Meghan O'Rourke notes in *The New Yorker* that "the geometry of desire, which we usually take to be a two-way street . . . is actually a triangular circuitry of lover, beloved, and that which comes between them" (2). It's an apt summary of Carson's dynamic translation of Sappho's fragment 31 ("Ruse" 12-13). And it is this unique translation of the classic Greek poem from which Carson builds the rest of her argument.

At first glance, any reader might be tempted to interpret "that which comes between them" as a second lover who acts to complete the stereotypical shape of the love triangle, but Carson complicates the issue by admitting that the third component in desire is not someone or something. In fact, this third component is opposite of any *thing*: it is the space that lies between lover and beloved. Perhaps, then, the property of *eros* is not found in the simple hate and love of an object, or even in the unobtainability of that which is desired: it exists in the hate and love of this third component, of the very "space [that] must be maintained, or desire ends" ("The Beach" 26). We desire only because we wish to fill up the space of what we lack. It is paradoxical because we need the feeling of lacking in order to contend with the lack itself. In fact, in a characteristic move, Carson returns to the very etymological roots of desire and wonders "who ever desires what is not gone? No one," she replies, explaining that the Greeks "invented *eros* to express it," a line of reasoning which captures the paradox embedded in the Greek word itself, which, like the word *glukupikron*, is a meaning lost to translation ("Gone" 11). This space, or lacking, characterizes the internally conflicting, paradoxical nature of *eros*.

Interestingly enough, near the end of *Eros: The Bittersweet*, Carson includes an essay titled, "What Is This Dialogue About?" which begins with a short haiku by Japanese poet Basho:

old pond
frog jumps in
plop (165)

This poem is a translation from a foreign language as well, but beyond that, it seems wholly unrelated to the rest of Carson's work. How does Basho's haiku relate to the need for space, or to the concept of love at all? To contend with this question, the context in which this poem is written must be understood—that is, it must be read through the lens of Zen Buddhism. In this

philosophy, it is believed that the moment of Zen, or enlightenment, is constantly in flux: enlightenment can only be obtained through the acknowledgment that each moment in life is ephemeral, fleeting, and impermanent (Suzuki 6). The old pond and the frog represent temporary silence, and the sudden “plop” at the end of the haiku is the breaking of that silence. For Carson, the fleeting moment of Zen is the same as the fleeting entity of love itself. Both must constantly be sought after. When one reaches for love, one can only grasp it for a moment before it crumples and changes and flees from one’s grip, only to leave behind the space of lacking once more. In Carson’s words, “Eros moves. You reach. Eros is gone” (“Dialogue” 166). The elusive explains much about why Carson’s terse style and declarative syntax which emphasize the abruptness of love. Her sentences are short. Quick. Momentary. Just as love can be.

All of this explains what Carson means when she states that “*eros* is a verb,” for desire is a game of temporal, not just physical, chase (“Ruse” 17). As William Smoot explains in his review of *Eros*, “the lover wants to freeze the beloved in time” so that the lover may skip to the moment when the object of his desire is obtained and possess it forever (202). But this is a problem. As Carson rebuts, “a real love affair . . . must be lived out in time . . . it cannot be entered . . . or frozen,” and for her, the “most erotic thing about *eros*” is the fact that it’s not solid or static; it’s elusive—evasive, even (“Dialogue” 165, 167). Perhaps, then, it can be said that Carson’s true obsession is not about love or *eros* itself, but about the thing that makes *eros* so interesting: its impermanence. In *Nox*, a more recent work of Carson’s, the poet Basho appears once more in section 8.2, followed by a very odd, abstract painting of the Biblical figure Lazarus, to whom she compares her recently deceased brother. What is immensely fascinating about this painting is that it is comprised of three images of *Enso*, a sacred symbol in Japanese calligraphy that represents enlightenment, space, and the fleeting moment. It is no coincidence that Carson places this painting after a Basho haiku, and it is definitely no coincidence that these symbols for impermanence rest at the heart of a work dealing with death.

Perhaps Carson puts together *Nox* because she has to deal with the absolute entity of death, which opposes the ephemeral and temporary entity of love. She mourns for her brother when she explains that “he’s dead. *Love* cannot alter it. . . . No matter how I try to evoke the starry lad he was, it remains a plain, odd history. So I began to think about history” (*Nox* 1.0). What makes Carson so unique as a writer curious about the topic of love is her level of scholarship in classical texts and her ability to breathe new life

into poems of the past through careful translation. But she cannot bring her brother back as she would the dead languages of Latin and Greek. No, she must do something different. For Carson, *Nox* is a collection of items from her and her brother's past that she desires to piece together and make sense of. Meghan O'Rourke explains this mindset in her review of *Nox*: "Because the dead person is absent and voiceless (the word *nox* both rhymes with the Latin word *vox*, or voice, and contains the English word 'no'), the bereaved is always experiencing the lost through other things: books, ideas, language, memory" (3). By making sense of these "historical" objects or memorabilia, Carson is essentially translating them into something comprehensible. Through translation, she is then able to *re-visit* and *re-vision* the past, and for a fleeting moment, to reconnect with what once existed—the love she felt for her brother. It seems, then, that translation is her *modus operandi* in continuing the eternal chase for what or whom she loves.

If the act of translation is what allows Carson to chase the memory of her brother by revisiting the past, perhaps the translation of ancient Greek poetry helps Carson to chase the fleeting entity of love in *Eros: The Bittersweet*, as well. By including blocks of ancient Greek or Latin text, Carson is not merely performing some etymological exercise to seize love from its historical roots. Rather, the act of translating these ancient languages is a necessity for Carson to keep the past—something that she loves fiercely—alive. Re-visiting and re-encountering the past is the only way she can keep reaching at the ungraspable entity of love. In this sense, the gap or space that exists for Carson in the "three-part structure" of *eros* is the space of time itself, and her act of translation is an attempt to transcend time and close the gap in order to reach for what she desires ("Ruse" 16). Indeed, what makes Carson's translation of ancient texts indispensable is that she does not simply convert words from one language to the other; rather, she breathes new life into the ancient and static by comparing them with things that exist later in time. In the essay "Gone," for example, Carson distills the messages of "various voices" throughout different ages of writing into a sort of "common perception" that acts to advance the meaning of ancient Sapphic poetry (11).

Instead of viewing objects of the past, such as ancient Greek poetry about love, as static and unchanging, Carson dares to see them in a constant state of flux. Just as she gives *eros* motion by describing it as the *action of lacking* rather than the object of lack itself, she gives motion to ancient Greek and Latin by showing that history isn't something that has already happened but something that is constantly happening and *re-happening*. What makes Anne Carson so important to us in the modern world is that she translates and

transforms what we see as static and unchanging into things that continue to move, grow, and evolve. As Guy Davenport points out about *Eros: The Bittersweet*, “this book is about kinesis and balance . . . spinning, moving, fluttering,” which Carson alludes to in the preface to her collection of essays (Davenport 185). There, she explains the mindset of the fictional philosopher from Kafka’s story, “The Top,” and how “catch[ing] a top still spinning makes him happy for a moment . . . [but] Disgust follows” (xi). Love is supposed to be active, not frozen in time, and for Carson, because the “suppression of impertinence is not the lover’s aim,” the viewing of history and Greek poetry as something frozen in time is not her aim either (xi).

What Carson sees that is of so much value is that “a meaning spins” and is not merely concrete or static (xi). The definition of love is not something that can be pinpointed and captured, and there is never a point in her essays when her chase for the meaning of love seems to stop or stall. But the meaning of love does not merely spin. In the field of physics, there are two types of motion: rotational and translational. Rotation describes things that pivot in place. Translation allows for such movement; it creates space through displacement, and this is what Anne Carson does with her own act of linguistic translation (Giancoli 249). She reminds us that the ephemeral moment of the chase is what matters, and that we must be forever concerned with the impertinence of existence and the transient nature of all things, especially history, life, and love. At the end of *Nox*, Carson includes the words of her brother’s wife at his funeral service: “Yesterday you cannot change / Today you might alter. Tomorrow does not give any promise” (10.2). Carson writes to inspire us to see the world in terms of constant change and flux, so that we may continue to re-translate the past as we move into the future. So that we do not become complacent with that which is static. So that we may continue to love.

WORKS CITED

- Carson, Anne. *Eros: The Bittersweet*. Champaign, IL: Dalkey, 2009. Print.
- “Preface.” xi-xii.
 - “Bittersweet.” 3-9.
 - “Gone.” 10-11.
 - “Ruse.” 12-17.
 - “Tactics.” 18-25.
 - “The Reach.” 26-29.
 - “What Is This Dialogue About?” 165-67.

- . *Nox*. New York: New Directions, 2010. Print.
- Davenport, Guy. "Eros the Bittersweet." Rev. of *Eros: the Bittersweet* by Anne Carson. *Grand Street*, Vol. 6.3 (1987): 184-191. *JSTOR*. Web. 6 Dec. 2012.
- Giancoli, Douglas C. *Physics for Scientists and Engineers with Modern Physics*. 4th ed. Vol. 1. Upper Saddle River: Addison-Wesley, 2008. Print.
- O'Rourke, Meghan. "The Unfolding." Rev. of *Nox* by Anne Carson. *The New Yorker* 12 July 2010. Web. 6 Dec. 2012.
- Smoot, William. Rev. of *Eros: the Bittersweet* by Anne Carson. *The Georgia Review*, 42.1 (1988): 201-203. *JSTOR*. Web. 6 Dec. 2012.
- Suzuki, Daisetz T. *Zen and Japanese Culture*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2010. Print.