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**FROM FLOOR TO CEILING CROWDED SHELVES:
WRITING ABOUT READING**

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Submitted for the PhD in Creative Writing, January 2018

Declaration of Authorship

I declare that the work presented in this thesis is entirely my own.

Signed:

Date:

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I have inherited my hunger for the written word from both my parents, who filled our home with books and encouraged me to read and enjoy all kinds of literature. Without their influence, these poems and essays would probably not have been written. Many of my teachers have unwittingly contributed to this project. I would particularly like to thank Mr Hague; Miss Shore (who taught *Sons and Lovers* at A Level); Professor Dame Gillian Beer (with whom I first studied George Eliot and Virginia Woolf); Professor Jill Mann (with whom I studied Malory); and Professor Sylvia Adamson. I would also like to thank my husband, Mark Green, for his support and encouragement over the past seven years.

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ABSTRACT

All writers should begin by reading. In this thesis I have explored ways of writing about reading through the process of writing my own poems and short prose pieces and through my readings of the work of the Canadian poet and academic Anne Carson.

The poems and prose pieces conduct a conversation with the work of writers who have been significant figures in my own history as a reader. These writers include D.H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf, George Eliot and Sir Thomas Malory. Many of the pieces reflect on the experience of reading itself: the intellectual, analytical, and critical readings occurring alongside the more instinctive and personal responses.

My critical thesis focuses on the conversations that Anne Carson has entered into with other writers. The close reading and re-reading necessitated by scholarly translation has engaged Carson in creative collaborations with classical writers such as Sappho and Stesichoros. It has also resulted in formal experiments that cross traditional genre boundaries. Carson's long narrative poem 'The Glass Essay' examines the work of close reading and demonstrates the process of reading both as recuperation and inspiration.

There is considerable risk involved in producing work of this kind. It may baffle or alienate the reader, or it may give the impression that the writer is merely showing off their erudition. But where creative writing about reading succeeds, it can engage the reader deeply. Through my own close reading of Carson's poems and lyric essays I demonstrate the different strategies by which she illuminates the full complexity and subtlety and redemptive power of literature and the reading process.

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FROM FLOOR TO CEILING CROWDED SHELVES

Spines in Shining Orange

Litany of new names:

Spark, Colette and Reid Banks and Rhys, Murdoch, Drabble,
from floor to ceiling crowded shelves in Sisson and Parker,

this cover: blown rose with a fringed eye gazing from centre;
that one: a woman's body, half-sculpted by shadow;
and that one: a red typewritten sentence: *I loathe my childhood.*

These spines in shining orange the colour of lipstick wands,
they are spiralling up pearl shimmers in shocking pink,
they are singing like silver varnish.

Complications

Then we had all just come walking out of the sixties,
but no-one had really noticed it yet, not much.
Skirts were still brief, colours still psychedelic,
fuel crisis and the three day week were in the future.

But now I stayed up later, snatched plays on television,
glimpsed the actress last seen as Beth in *Little Women*
not dying of scarlet fever, but telephoning, talking,
talking about love, head at a slant and shining.

Lives filled with embraces and tangling problems
in flats in London. Emotional clusters dangling
just out of my range. A bundle of mistletoe complicates,
perhaps creates, the branching wholeness of a winter tree.

Until that time, stories had walked on well swept paths,
were all about getting from A to B, from lunch to dinner,
about what happened. Not about the chattering in our heads.
Not about that shiver in the air between us.

What it Was All About

Five in the morning. Blank rubbery walls
closing in on this middle-aged subject
whose name was like bleakness, bleeding,
pale moles with hairs in them,

and bleating. Echoing mean things.
So he was trapped in that life and
all his possible futures had been crossed out.
What it was all about

was the sag of a narrow divan,
a slippery counterpane the shade of a barley sugar,
the smell of exhausted Players. Outside,
nothing but battered wire fences

and allotments of ravelled cabbage.
Poverty of spirit, and (I thought then)
the poet gloating, setting his teeth against
joy and luxurious language, determined

to hold us all down by the neck in it,
grievance and failure and factories.
A poem must *mean*, not just extol
the foxgloves. The bell rang.

We were free to close our books
and return to our lives. *You've got to learn
what it's all about*, my form teacher said.
(He roared that *many are called*

but few are chosen, the time I said
I wanted to be a writer.) I could not bear
the grim attention pacing those lines and
all that they denied. I did not understand

what was required. In fear, I kept on
exercising my choices, turning away from
the unshaded forty-watt bulb, thin curtains
falling short, plain words like glass.

Modern Verse

One book had royal blue covers with a title embossed in gold:
Palgrave's Golden Treasury of English Songs and Lyrics, and the other one,
the thin one, bound in deep blue-green, had a tall black typeface
that quickened and pleased the eye and sent an inward spark jumping.

In that thinner book, *Modern Verse*, was the lighthouse on Flannan Isle,
with its blinded lantern; a void round room; the bread and the meat untouched;
the chair kicked over. Outside, three odd ghastly birds sat up stark on the rocks
like haunting and haunted seamen. More frightening now than then,
in those early mornings when my father read it aloud at our G-plan table.

I was swept by the tale rolling onwards. Palgrave had lines that made me
keep on singing them over and over out loud, words like hooves paddling,
Great God Pan, half-man-half-beast fluting down in the reeds by the river,
splashing and stirring and scattering bran. I still have it almost by heart.

That was what poetry meant, when my father was young:
a musical instrument, rhythms and chime and scholarly heartfelt words. But then
came the fractures, the discords, barbed wire on park railings, cheap curtains,
a fraying shirt collar, a disembowelled frog in a ditch. The real and visceral
teeming mid-twentieth-century world.

The Country of My Heart

Look across at Crich on the left, Underwood in front – High Park Woods and Annesley on the right: I lived in that house from the age of 6 to 18, and I know that view better than any in the world.

D.H. Lawrence: Letter to Rolf Gardiner, 3 December 1926

From the age of six to eighteen I too lived in Eastwood, in a house that faced north-west. His view was my view too, five minutes' walk away and seventy years updated.

Through our huge living room window: a forsythia bush, a beech sapling still buckled to a post, an expanse of mud evolving into a lawn, television aerials, new brick walls, the shine of other windows. He would have known none of this; our bungalow was built over the track of the engine that had travelled to and from the pit, across the fields, in his time.

Framed in the centre: the pit hill, a mountain of volcanic black, compelling the eye. Metal structures pinned parts of it along the horizon slope; there were shapes that might have been small corrugated huts; sometimes you could just make out lorries slowly grinding up and down to deposit more grit and ashes. I didn't judge it ugly, not at first. It intrigued me. Later, parts were grassed over, first, one small section low down on the left, then the whole of the right hand side. Half patched, reclaimed. I imagined toiling up it. The pit itself was outside the frame, across the main road and then three fields away, off to the right.

Like the Morel family in *Sons and Lovers*, we looked at distant hills and flaring sunsets. I had an old diary for children, with weather sayings: 'When the distant hills look near, rain is coming.' Over the pit hill's black shoulder was another, smaller, pale green shoulder, sloping in the opposite direction: Crich Stand. And beyond that was Derbyshire and gritstone and limestone and gritstone again.

At night, the wind screamed and caught in its breath hard through metal, just as it had gasped through Lawrence's ash tree seventy years before and three streets away. *All the cords of the great harp hummed, whistled, and shrieked.* But on clear evenings there was Crich light, calling across the distance regularly and faintly, like the beam from a lighthouse. After his time.

Reading *The Rainbow*

Fourteen, and my mother's old Penguin edition
plucked from the crammed shelf like an apple,
not *Sons and Lovers* because I needed a heroine,
and the narrative surge drew me onwards and in,
and the hunger of needing to know.

*what they lived through and what they lived by
aspiring grappling beyond unslaked
through the cramping repeating design of lace
and the shouting drilling the rigid lines of desks
yearning after the substance of churches and cathedrals
and emotional weather*

It was not a dirty book.

Those wonderful stretches of time in the barn
while the cattle browsed hay and the crying stilled;
the harvest field in the moonlight,
binding the sheaves,
the lovers racing to meet one another.

Later on, it was different.
Floating more slowly through paragraphs of declamation,
struggling with the tensions in their heads.
It was like dipping a knotted thread
into a hot drench of copper sulphate
causing irritations and disruptions in the blue liquid
so that structures formed.

Practical Criticism

Someone called Louis sits in an eating house.

(A first person narrator in the present tense.)

We are threaded along in the uneasy music

of his interior monologue. He has propped up a book
against a bottle of Worcester sauce. He pretends to read.
He observes the behaviour of clerks and the conduct of waitresses,

not for their own sake, but because he wants to absorb
the protective tint of all their circlings,
to be submerged in the tide.

But the author, who does not appear to be Louis,
presents the bottle of Worcester sauce for its own sake,
because it is there, also the prose calls up the dampness of ham,

and the watery reek of greens and the feel of soaked apricots.
We begin to unplat the words. We do this every week
and it is compulsory. We never find out who wrote it

until the end. (Sue says something expansive
but also pointed, detached and confident
in the right critical register, about building up structures.)

We all call it *sea imagery*. I visualise random and rotting
fragments of debris, bobbing down, and up, and down.
(We analyse prose rhythm and repetition.)

Meanwhile the door of the eating house opens
and shuts and opens like the valves of the heart.
Louis describes the eating house precisely in slices,

working from background to foreground and sliding in
words like *somewhat* and *therefore* (we note the clerkish register),
despite this, his sentences pulse and curve beautifully,

suggesting the buoyancy he envies, plunging and sweep
and noisome oil. All those long viscous sounds
for slimy bills.

I will reduce you to order, he says. In one sense,
this is what we do, constructing something quite separate
out of this slab of packed words on the page,

in little sharp rushes and angles and special vocabulary,
but all the time there is Louis cataloguing the tedious
conversation about the piano, the steam net over everything,

the vehicles and people that pass perpetually. There in the centre,
he gives us something to settle on, making the rhythms surround him.
Or have *I* done that?

(Fiona says *lack of community* and Sarah says *histrionic*
and Sue says: *Do we long for a break*
in that incessant rhythm?)

I think, but never quite manage to
cleave through the surge of discussion, that
Louis himself is the break.

I imagine a spire of stark rock ramping out of the sea,
hard and absolute, and the spray resisting. I could say, aloud,
that *this is about disaffection*. But I don't say that.

Virginia Woolf: The Waves

Embracing the Prune

And if anyone complains that prunes, even when mitigated by custard, are an uncharitable vegetable (fruit they are not), stringy as a miser's heart and exuding a fluid such as might run in misers' veins who have denied themselves wine and warmth for eighty years and yet not given to the poor, he should reflect that there are people whose charity embraces even the prune.

Virginia Woolf: *A Room of One's Own*

Shoplifters will be forced to eat a bag of prunes.
So read the warning notice in the wholefood store.
Then came the days of fruit in silver sachets,
from Lexia, from Elvas, and from Agen.

*

Within Virago dark green covers
Olivia wandered the nauseous London streets
craving for *prune juice, prune juice, prune juice*,
dreaming of raiding her mother's larder in secret,
siphoning off the bowl.

*

Prune was what Ursula Brangwen
called her sister Gudrun.
It is not clear why.
It was affectionate.

*

Consider the noun: *prune*.
How it sounds like a rising slope,
like an upward path,
how its length leads somewhere.

Contrast it
with the noun: *plum*.
An ovoid dropping.

*

Soak prunes overnight
in a mixture of Earl Grey tea,
Armagnac,
and fresh orange juice.

The next day,
arrange them in a shell of sweet shortcrust pastry.

Pour over a custard made with cream
in which a split vanilla pod has been
allowed to steep.

Bake in a moderate oven
until the custard is lightly set.

*

If you are a prune,
you will never
be stolen from the icebox,
so you will never
be bitten alive
by some rapacious young male poet,
who'll then wipe his chin
free of your juices,
and walk from the room.

The Sense of Things Coming Over and Over Again and Yet Changing: Reading and Re-Reading *The Waves*

‘So, for next time, write something for me on history and continuity in Woolf’, said my tutor. I remember my tutor’s room, which had bay windows and high ceilings and yards of bookshelves and a long sofa draped with a patchwork quilt in strong blues and whites. The other colours were earthy, sandy, ochre. On the coffee table there was a precious object: a huge shallow bowl, with a pink lustre glaze.

And it all began well. I spent a fortnight reading and re-reading Virginia Woolf’s novels voraciously, mostly in my own room and surrounded by my own objects: Indian rugs, cushions, posters, vases of autumn dahlias. I too had a sofa, it had a broken spring, but it was somewhere to sit and read. I too had high Victorian ceilings, and there were scarlet curtains at the windows, and a white painted mantelpiece. And, of course, books. I had bought a cassette of Debussy Preludes and I played their staccato chiming and rippling over and over while I read.

But when I finally sat down at my desk, with paper in front of me, it was no use. That title: ‘History and Continuity in the Novels of Virginia Woolf’ was authoritative and professional and I more or less knew what my tutor had meant, but it was those words *history* and *continuity*, the register of them, the certainty of them. They did not have anything to say to the novels that I had just been reading in the way that I had been reading them.

It was a sentence in *A Writer’s Diary* that eventually gave me a way in. ‘I want to keep the individual and the sense of things coming over and over again and yet changing.’ This was an essential idea: rhythm and repetition. I wrote through that evening and most of the next day, about all the ways in which Woolf used repetition and rhythm. When I got to the end I realised that I had, after all, managed to write about history and continuity, in my own way. The sense of things coming over and over and yet changing.

My old battered paperback copy of *The Waves*, the one I used as an undergraduate, has a portrait on the front cover. It shows a young woman sitting beside a stretch of water, with her back to it, immersed in thought. The swirl of the brush strokes, dark brown and white, suggests movement, ripples, concentric circles, perhaps onward flow, farther out. I wonder, who did the book designer see in that figure? One of the female voices? Virginia Woolf

herself? Someone solitary, passive and pensive, being gazed upon, perhaps resisting or resenting this gaze. Just as *The Waves* resists that way of reading.

This is how *The Waves* begins:

The sun had not yet risen. The sea was indistinguishable from the sky, except that the sea was slightly creased as if a cloth had wrinkles in it. Gradually as the sky whitened a dark line lay on the horizon dividing the sea from the sky and the grey cloth became barred with thick strokes moving, one after another, beneath the surface, following each other, pursuing each other perpetually.

Each wave is a single natural occurrence, like a heart beat or a breath; it is also part of an amorphous mass of water, the sea, and also part of a sequence, a succession. The description of the waves changes as the novel progresses, as the tide comes in towards noon and then draws out towards night. Near the beginning they were 'blue waves, green waves'; then 'like turbaned men with poisoned assegais who, whirling their arms on high, advance upon the feeding flocks, the white sheep'; later they 'swept the beach with steel blue and diamond-tipped water' and 'they drew in and out with the energy, the muscularity, of an engine'. At midday their backs 'rippled as the backs of great horses ripple with muscles as they move', while in the afternoon they were 'arrow-struck with fiery feathered darts that shot erratically across the quivering blue'.

It is always essentially the same thing: water moving. Yet the appearance of moving water changes according to the way the light strikes it, according to the weather, the time of day, who or what is in it, or on it – and according to the mood and preoccupations of the person observing it. Woolf decorates it with images and figurative language, the warriors advancing, the muscular horses, and late on in the novel, as the darkness gathers, the waves become 'a wall of grey stone, unpierced by any chink of light'. But she also gives us the constancy of an underlying idea, wave succeeding wave, the concussion of falling water, a great chained beast stamping and stamping. These words are used over and over again, at different times, sometimes by individual voices, as well as within the interchapters. The same essential sequential movement and the same sound, undertowing all those different ideas and recollections of the sense and colour of water in rhythm.

Things coming over and over and yet changing. Memories of moving water seep into the interior monologues of all six voices all through their imagined lives. 'Like a long wave, like a roll of heavy waters, he went over me', says Bernard, describing an intense conversation with a friend at college. At a dance, Rhoda observes that Jinny 'rides like a gull on the

wave', while she recollects a game she played in childhood, rocking white petals in a basin and pretending that they are a fleet of ships at sea. In the same chapter, Louis sits in an eating house and describes its various rhythms, the waitresses dealing out plates of apricots and custard, the repetitious conversations of the clerks at neighbouring tables, in words that suggest objects and creatures in a seascape. 'They dive and plunge like guillemots whose feathers are slippery with oil....Meanwhile the hats bob up and down; the door perpetually shuts and opens. I am conscious of flux, of disorder; of annihilation and despair.'

The remembered rhythm of the waves coming over and over is echoed in other rhythms. People go on passing. The door keeps on opening... 'doors will open and shut, will keep opening and shutting', into eating-houses and restaurants, into the rooms where people meet and hold conversations. 'One two, one two, the heart beats in serenity', says Rhoda. 'Lifts rise and fall; trains stop; trains start', says Jinny. A needle passes back and forth through white cambric as Susan sews. 'I do this, I do that and again do this and then that. The seasons pass', she says. 'The clouds change perpetually over our houses', says Louis.

And the images that recur: knives; nets; being nailed to a door; screwing up a handkerchief; globes and bubbles. They function as part of a language that seems to be at once private to each speaker, part of their inner landscape, and at the same time a common currency, perhaps a collective memory, among the group. I think that one of the reasons I have always had so much difficulty in writing coherently about this novel is that it can seem like a cloth made from transparent taffeta or net, a tissue, fantastically patterned; I fear that if I pull out one thread to describe it then I will unravel and destroy the whole, the intricate pattern will melt into a chaos, into the ocean. Reading and re-reading, I mark each reference to nets. Nets of light thrown over, quivering, capturing, but also the arching energy of the act of throwing. The damp net composed of the 'meaty, vapourish smell of beef and mutton, sausages and mash' that hangs over Louis in the eating house, dismal, confining, isolating. Nets then become almost a work of art, safeguarding the strawberry and lettuce beds, 'all spun to a fine thread round the cradle', a cocoon. Later the image widens and becomes figurative, spreads out its associations. 'Membranes, webs of nerve that lay white and limp, have filled and spread themselves and float round us like filaments, making the air tangible and catching in them far-away sounds unheard before.' Later still the image is transformed again and made miraculous: 'To myself I am immeasurable; a net whose fibres pass imperceptibly beneath

the world. My net is almost indistinguishable from that which it surrounds. It lifts whales – huge leviathans and white jellies, what is amorphous and wandering.’

These days, as I read and re-read *The Waves*, it seems that there are more and more resemblances, echoes, not-quite-mirrorings, half-memories, associations, connections, conversations, things that will not be nailed firmly to the door or netted. I cannot say for certain that they are this, or they are that. In a letter, Woolf once said, ‘Whether it’s right or wrong I don’t know, but directly I’m told what a thing means, it becomes hateful to me.’

This week I have been walking by the sea, two and three times a day, observing it even when everything is roaring and damp and dark grey, even when the wind is so steely I can scarcely bear it. There are so many reasons why this book should have come up out of the sea, including all the poignant ones (Woolf’s family holidays at St Ives and her own first memories of waking at Little Talland House), but in the beginning the sea would always have been there, behind everything. She would have spent hours and hours just contemplating it, or noticing it incidentally as a backdrop to the adult conversations overheard, cricket, walks, reading. The sound of the great beast stamping, that echoing concussion, would have been there in her ears, perpetually.

Here, where I am staying, the sea is basically always the same colour, the same base note, a kind of murky brown grey green blend, like exhausted paint water. But at different times I have seen it soft grey, mid blue-green, covered with a milky film, and with silver fragments shimmering concentrated in one corner, because it has a glaze, a sheen, that corresponds with the pattern of the clouds and the force of the wind and the position of the sun – if there is any sun.

And it occurs to me: perhaps those passages in italics, the ones that describe the sea, birds in a garden, and a room in a house at different times as the day progresses, have another function, quite apart from signalling and introducing the different stages in the lives of the six characters. Perhaps they are actually *about* the process of close observation, the problems of description.

The sun laid broader blades upon the house. The light touched something green in the window corner and made it a lump of emerald, a cave of pure green like stoneless fruit. It sharpened the edges of chairs and tables and stitched white table-cloths with fine gold wires. As the light increased a bud here and there split asunder and shook out flowers, green veined and quivering, as if the effort of opening had set them rocking, and pealing a faint carillon as they beat their frail clappers against their white walls. Everything became softly amorphous,

as if the china of the plate flowed and the steel of the knife were liquid. Meanwhile the concussion of the waves breaking fell with muffled thuds, like logs falling, on the shore.

The descriptions are detailed and careful and in some ways self-conscious, like an exercise. They are not particularly naturalistic.

(Those words *like* and *as if* are frequently recurring: 'like stoneless fruit'; 'as if the effort of opening had set them rocking'; 'as if the china of the plate flowed'; 'like logs falling, on the shore.' One thing is called up by naming another and the words draw attention to this.)

Years ago, I wrote, in my notebook: 'about the sections with the sea, who is narrating them?' This is a question that I still can't properly answer. Woolf herself? Possibly. Woolf herself deliberately adopting a voice, a persona, (as she sometimes does in her essays and her juvenilia, for example) consciously describing in a writerly way. ('Like turbaned men with poisoned assegais who, whirling their arms on high, advance upon the feeding flocks, the white sheep.') There is never any overt or even implicit suggestion that the italic passages are meant to be in the voice of any of the six narrators. But if they are in anyone's voice, that voice surely belongs to Bernard. It is a fanciful idea, I want to resist it, but the possibility is there, in those carefully studied elaborate comparisons in Bernard's notebooks:

He has minced the dance of the white butterflies at the door to powder. His rough and hairy voice is like an unshaven chin. Now he lurches back to his seat like a drunken sailor....I note the fact for future reference with many others in my notebook. When I am grown up I shall carry a notebook – a fat book with many pages, methodically lettered. I shall enter my phrases. Under B shall come 'Butterfly powder.' If, in my novel, I describe the sun on the window-sill, I shall look under B and find butterfly powder. That will be useful. The tree 'shades the window with green fingers.' That will be useful.... 'The lake of my mind, unbroken by oars, heaves placidly and soon sinks into an oily somnolence.' That will be useful.

Although Woolf herself certainly kept a great many notebooks, as most writers do, as far as I know, she never kept a notebook remotely like this one. But towards the end of his life Bernard talks of filling 'innumerable notebooks with phrases to be used when I have found the true story, the one story to which all these phrases refer.'

And the images come over again and keep on changing. Waves, nets, knives, globes and bubbles, bubbles and the globe. In the opening chapter: 'Bubbles form on the floor of the saucepan. Then they rise, quicker and quicker, in a silver chain to the top.' Then: 'Up they bubble – images...One floats too, as if one were that bubble; one is freed; I have escaped, one feels...The sentence tails off feebly.' Bubbles represent an attempt at a narrative sequence, a

chain of lively images and phrases, but they are insubstantial and evasive, the chain breaks. ‘Who is to foretell the flight of a word? It is a balloon that sails over tree-tops’. Yet Bernard says he was born ‘knowing that one word follows another’ and ‘When I cannot see words curling like rings of smoke round me I am in darkness – I am nothing.’

I used to, and still do, read *The Waves* as an experiment in life writing. My thesis was that Woolf’s later novels – from *Orlando* onwards – had all been influenced in some way by contemporary experiments in biography, the most obvious examples being Lytton Strachey’s *Eminent Victorians* and *Queen Victoria*. Woolf had also read – and reviewed – Harold Nicolson’s book *Some People*, in which he writes his own life, obliquely, by means of sketches of people he knew at various stages of his life. My old notebook contains this quotation from Woolf’s *Granite and Rainbow*: ‘It is thus, he would seem to say, in the mirrors of our friends, that we chiefly live.’

Whether Woolf actually intended it or not, this novel seems to be at least partly about the impossibility of telling a life, of telling anything, of nailing it down to the barn door, netting it over, roofing it in, cutting it clearer and clearer with a knife, transforming the bubble of air and the drop of water into a shapely, shining globe. ‘Ideas break a thousand times for once that they globe themselves entire’, says Bernard. ‘They break; they fall over me.’

But in the very final chapter, which is entirely in Bernard’s voice, the image of the globe recurs. This final chapter is Bernard’s own life story, his summing-up, told, not in the present tense, like the rest of the novel, but in retrospect. At the very beginning: ‘The illusion is upon me that something adheres for a moment, has roundness, weight, depth, is completed’. A few lines later, he refers to a globe full of figures and later still: ‘Let us again pretend that life is a solid substance, shaped like a globe.’ Yet he is still grappling with the problems of description: ‘Blue, red – even they distract, even they hide with thickness instead of letting the light through.’ And with the problems of narrative coherence: ‘How tired I am of stories, how tired I am of phrases that come down beautifully with all their feet on the ground! Also, how I distrust neat designs of life that are drawn upon half-sheets of note-paper.’

And still the phrase comes down beautifully with all its feet on the ground. A few lines later, comes the following paragraph:

Lying in a ditch on a stormy day, when it has been raining, then enormous clouds come marching over the sky, tattered cloud, wisps of cloud. What delights me then is the confusion, the height, the indifference and the fury. Great clouds always changing, and movement; something sulphurous and sinister, bowled up, helter-skelter; towering, trailing, broken off, lost, and I forgotten, minute, in a ditch. Of story, of design, I do not see a trace then.

Things coming over and over and yet changing, amorphous, constantly in flux.

At the very end of the novel, it is as if the struggle has ended in defeat. The final sentence, one single sentence in italics, is not a description, but simply a statement of fact: ‘The waves broke on the shore.’

And yet. And yet. Bernard is not the only narrator. All six voices tell stories, the stories of their lives, and are their own interpretations of those stories. And sometimes one voice can, for a moment, speak in a different voice, something a little like one of the other five. ‘Different people draw different words from me’, says Bernard. Jinny, speaking excitedly to an unnamed other, begins: ‘Now let us talk, let us tell stories’. And so on, for more than a page, a string of conjectures and hypotheses:

One must be quick and add facts deftly, like toys to a tree, fixing them with a twist of the fingers....And that man is a judge; and that man a millionaire, and that man, with the eyeglass, shot his governess through the heart with an arrow when he was ten years old. Afterwards he rode through deserts with despatches, took part in revolutions and now collects material for a history of his mother’s family, long settled in Norfolk.

The toys and the twisting fingers are reminiscent of Bernard, they are the terms that he habitually uses when he talks about telling stories, but the pace is far more rapid and staccato than his, like the chain of bubbles rising up in the saucepan. Towards the end of the novel Neville, too, speaking to Susan, launches into a flight of fancy, starting from the embroidered fruit swelling on his curtains and moving into an account of the pipes bursting hilariously in a snowfall, to illustrate the ‘hazard and marvel of intimacy’.

In her lyric essay, ‘Appendix to Ordinary Time’, the poet Anne Carson reflects on Woolf’s diaries, which she has just been reading. Despite her knowledge that they led Woolf to her death in the Ouse, she has the impression that ‘strong pleasure’ rises from every sentence. I sense this too. Glee is the word that comes to mind. I sense her glee.

Reading, simply reading, not trying to nail anything to the barn door, or to know what it means, I keep coming across passages and paragraphs I never really noticed or properly appreciated before. Here is Neville, reading:

The page is often corrupt and mud-stained, and torn and stuck together with faded leaves, with scraps of verbena or geranium. To read this poem one must have myriad eyes, like one of those lamps that turn on slabs of racing water at midnight in the Atlantic, when perhaps only a spray of seaweed pricks the surface, or suddenly the waves gape and up shoulders a monster. One must put aside antipathies and jealousies and not interrupt. One must have patience and infinite care and let the light sound, whether of spiders' delicate feet on a leaf or the chuckle of water in some irrelevant drain-pipe, unfold too.... One must be sceptical, but throw caution to the winds and when the door opens accept absolutely. Also sometimes weep; also cut away ruthlessly with a slice of the blade soot, bark, hard accretions of all sorts. And so (while they talk) let down one's net deeper and deeper and gently draw in and bring to the surface what he said and she said and make poetry.

The Waves

This is the place:

waves churning a base note of grey-brown murk
like paintwater over-used,

frayed edge, holes in spume. No oncoming roar,
only single drained words, long hollow note;
bleak has been ground small like pebbles.

Each wave is a story of gravities, tow, tug,
in the distance. I choose one and follow it in,
then search for another:

pattern of heart, breath,
more wearing away. Dark tendrils of vapour trail out
from low stratus and smudge the horizon.

After a long time, slide, change of light,
glossing the swell with blue milk, something is evened out,
the water is spangled with fragments of silver

off in one corner, as if they were poured there,
as if they had sunk there; the sky is responding to sea,
the sea corresponds with blue-white,

the mirror gives back. In that Truffaut film, the hero
escapes from reform school and makes for the sea, a respite,
small space, a solution. Turn, face the camera. Freeze.

A Line There, in the Centre

I meant *nothing* by The Lighthouse. One has to have a central line down the middle of the book to hold the design together.

Virginia Woolf: Letter to Roger Fry, 25 May 1927

The only fixed point
in the turning blue plateful,
is somewhere to get to,

something to hold to.
Far off silver needle
opens an evening eye

and two short bright strokes,
one long circling beam
pierce straight through the rooms

startle a different shape
into all that they stare at,
insisting on truth:

a scrubbed kitchen table,
when you're not there,
a solitary journey

down a dark passage,
or the courage
to own what you see.

But What After All is One Night?

We have to hold at least two versions of the moon in our heads. The silver sphere decorated with rays and dark patches, widening smile, thinning slice, shaded on one side, then the other. And the military spoil: the place where shadowy figures bounced around, and sang songs; the place they colonised with flags and sampled with geological drills. They said it looked like dirty sand that children had played in. That was a loss. But *nothing is simply one thing*.

Virginia Woolf said that she meant nothing by the Lighthouse. I wrote some short still lines set in isinglass; the stillness might suggest a sea becalmed, absence, regret, all of which are in the novel.

And you could say: 'they keep the flame there'. The Lighthouse illuminates, protects, preserves, commemorates. The circle closes too neatly, with a click. James Ramsay, in the novel, sees *a silvery, misty-looking tower with a yellow eye that opened suddenly* and then, years later, from a different angle, something *stark and straight;...barred with black and white*.

For nothing was simply one thing. Woolf's lines are not short and still and set in isinglass, but long and rocking, like being swept along in an express train. Like a river; with one strong central current and many cross currents and whirlpools underneath. You can skate over the surface like one of those insects that relies on surface tension. Or you can stop and look intently down through the layers of water, observing each strand of weed, each stippled pebble, each singular detail.

For a few hours today the moon will be yet another thing: a black disc of shadow sliding gradually across the sun. Darkness and obscurity and the streaming hair of the corona. She observed those things, too.

I meant to write

that last novel. I soon gave it up. The dawn of the new millennium,
a place in my head where someone, not me, was pedalling hard,
forcing the world along with her muscles and insteps,
South London, a little like Streatham, somewhere between
my old home and my new. Her destination: a bookshop, a café,
ginger tea in a hand thrown mug and an almost-friend.
She had turned a sharp corner into her thirties,
these two women were careful together, they exchanged
cordial attentive words about Francois Truffaut: how narrative plots close
other stories nesting inside them, how in one film
he gives all his peripheral characters time to tell stories
and how, when the girl in the belted coat walks with her violin,
right into the focus, from the audition, her story is being withheld.
It must have ended in darkness. It ended there.

It ended there, in darkness. I knew something about this person,
I'd conjured her up, I knew she was better than I am, I knew
she'd abandoned it all: brilliance, the certainties of the library,
winding the cable of words, to teach language in Zambia.
Now she attends to the others, the unheard, the angry,
abandoned, stopped ends. She only knows this:
to tell her own life is an act of aggression. All I could imagine
was her on the dutiful bicycle, gritting it out on the pedals.
I had little ideas of her life, tiny fragments of dirty white gravel but
I could not move her on; it was only an image vouchsafed,
not a narrative plot and nowhere to go to, other than
ginger tea and an almond cake at a table of reclaimed wood,
and a talk with the woman she wanted to like
but could not, the woman like me.

This Particular Web¹

I think of *intertext*, as if it were fibrous and porous tissue lining a folded seam, stiffening a hem, stopping the cloth wearing out.

I once had a favourite novel, in which the protagonist said *I try to resist the temptation to talk in quotations. Sometimes it seems*

*the only accomplishment bestowed by my education: the ability to think in quotations.*² And this narrator's dry, wry style

upheld me while she misquoted a Shakespeare sonnet and filled the pentameter up with her own *something something*

every time she forgot a word. At fifteen, I patterned my phrases like Drabble's, copied her sentence,

let all the colours of her register dye my precocious first novels. The hectic web hangs there, infinite, chattering;

George Eliot wrote of the weavings and interweavings, that *tempting range of relevancies called the universe.*³

A net diverting the soul and holding it back from flight?⁴ (An echo of James Joyce's *Dedalus*). Shall we try to

fly past that net, dart like a blackbird between the spaces, defiant, stealing cherries? Or does it suspend horizontal,

gathering each reckless Icarus, after their wings have matted, after their nerve has failed?

*The goose flies too fast...I fling after it words like nets... and sometimes there's an inch of silver – six words – in the bottom...*⁵

¹ George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (1871-2).

² Margaret Drabble, *A Summer Bird-Cage* (1963). This is actually a slight mis-quotation. Drabble herself, in her early novels, frequently refers to other works of literature that her characters have read or studied. The title of this novel is taken from John Webster's play *The White Devil* (1612).

³ George Eliot, *Middlemarch*.

⁴ James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1904).

⁵ Virginia Woolf, *Orlando* (1928). Woolf was another writer who readily acknowledged her literary precursors; it is possible to read *Orlando* as an unconventional history of English Literature.

Fragments After Sappho

like the sweet apple ripe
on the highest high bough

like the sweet apple reddening
at that uppermost point

the gatherers forgot
no not truly forgot
not completely

but were not strong enough
not quite

torn edges
in the mouths of ancient crocodiles wadded

fracture pasted together
fingernails meeting
on nothing

the harvesters forgot utterly

descending the staircase
thinking elsewhere

somehow
missing

an impact
should have been

like the hyacinth
tramping into purple
under passing/treading feet
of shepherds/herdsmen/men

interpreted changed burned

the purple flower

From: *Ce Que Dit la Bouche d'Ombre*

Donc, une bête va, vient, rugit, hurle, mord;
Un arbre est là, dressant ses branches hérissées,
Une dalle s'effondre au milieu des chaussées
Que la charrette écrase et que l'hiver détruit,
Et, sous ces épaisseurs de matière et de nuit,
Arbre, bête, pavé, poids que rien ne soulève,
Dans cette profondeur terrible, une âme rêve!

Que fait-elle? Elle songe à Dieu!

*

So, a beast prowls, pads, howls, bawls, bites;
A tree is there, tensing its bristling branches,
A slab of stone subsides into the pathway
That the cart breaks down and that the winter erodes,
And, beneath the thicknesses of matter and of night
Tree, beast, stone, dead weight that nothing uplifts,
In that terrible deep darkness, a soul dreams!

What is it doing? It dreams of God!

Victor Hugo: *Les Contemplations*

By Heart

In memory of Eric Rohmer (1920-2010)

Your room is full of books I haven't read,
and here are unexpected guests who won't stop talking,
talking, of superstitions, reincarnation, the Catholic faith
and miracles. I want a miracle.

If I say I love you,
you'll curve over your shelves, leafing and leafing
through Shakespeare, Pascal, some marble figure,
to see if it's written there. I blurt out something,
say I'm ignorant, the words uncultured and uncouth
crouch, coiled, inside that other one.
I want a miracle.

I know my tongue is raw.
Wanting is not enough. I need another word,
not need. The word I'm scrambling after
enfolds a dream within it, but overflows those banks,
my longing for and yearning never get there.

*

I came to say it's over, with you and me
and then among the dregs of wine,
the plates I stack, you make a music
or a magic, tell out (not read)
some lines you've learned.

A distant place.
A padding pelted thing,
stones that abrade and shrug, hunger, despair.
Darkness so thick, you could not breathe.
And then. A tree asserts itself, a giant beech,
it bristles and arranges like a cat,
cracking the caul of iron frost along each twig.
The sky is clear, jet black.
High up, one star.

I change my mind. Almost.

OF TIME, SNAKES, AND THE FALLING SNOW

Author's Note

The *Morte D'Arthur* (described as 'the whole book of King Arthur and of his noble knights of the Round Table') was written by Sir Thomas Malory (d.1471) and originally published by William Caxton in 1485. Malory drew his tales from a number of different sources, including French prose romances and English alliterative poems. The writer and scholar C.S. Lewis compared Malory's work to a great cathedral, where different elements grow together into something strange and admirable.

The winter of 1979 ('the winter of discontent') was marked by unusually cold and severe weather and also by a series of prolonged strikes by workers in the public sector. The phrase 'Crisis, what crisis?' was attributed to James Callaghan, the then Prime Minister, commenting on this situation.

On 3 May 1979 a General Election took place. A Conservative government was elected and Margaret Thatcher became Prime Minister.

In a Cathedral in Bologna, a Long Time Afterwards

And then
she stands beside a line drawn out in gold,
slicing diagonally across the nave
and edged with carved out words.
A Solstice stops each end.

From Crab to Capricorn,
the signs in pairs confront each other
along the ruler's length. At the exact mid-point,
the Equinoxes match, even the names rhyme,
Vernal with Autumnal. Her own sign of the Ram
faces the Scales that weigh all souls in balance
and that judge. And now the sun comes out.
Observe the disc of light move slowly to the line
and touch the line, at noon, and cross.
A year is not a circle but a line, the sun
tracks slowly back and forth and back,
end-stopped. For these few moments,
she is high above it.

Now
like God and angels she can see the whole.

How it Began

A version abridged for children, found
on a shelf in the classroom, pored over wet lunchtimes.
An idea of the Middle Ages crayoned in.
A sword pulled out of a stone. A sadness
she couldn't quite reach for.

Ten years later, the real thing, Oxford Edition.
Red paperback weight in her bag. Then
she discovered again those ordeals and forking paths,
prophecies carved in gold, old wounds, the quest.
Loss soaking backwards through the pages like a tide receding.

Teeth closing softly on her trailing sleeve.

Why it Began

Because of the narrative voice,
a plain voice, threading beads.
And so.... And than.... And whan....
And thus.... Anone.... Ryght so....
And ringing cadences of speech
that Middle English could not muffle:
That blast, said Balyn, is blowen for me,
for I am the pryse, and yet am I not dede.
He knew how to paragraph, when to pause.

Because of the prophecies:
like setting down books hard on a table.
Those things must happen. *All thys*
he lette wryte in the pomell of the swerde.

Because of words.
The way that certain words recurred,
hole, holé, holy, all hole togydirs,
imprinted, stamped, accruing
power and meaning on each repetition
as snowballs rolling draw more snow, no,
perhaps not quite, perhaps not only that?

Three sacs of gold that float within one shell?

An image that will not be turned away
(not out of Malory):
a pale egg with a black worm
coiled inside.

(Then,
she had yet to learn that
words could sound clean yet
nudge old wounds,
snake rippling marks in mind.)

Most of all
because of that long corridor of time,
knowing it ended badly but still
flickering backwards and forwards and backwards
pretending one deed did not follow another
as one word follows another.

Naming

What should I call her,
this twenty year-old scholar?
After some character
in medieval writings:
Guinevere, Alisoun,
possibly Criseyde,
slydyng of corage and
faithless, fallen,
drawing others down?

Remember Milton's Satan,
sliding down to hell,
from morn to dewy eve.
I could name her Eve,
hungry for knowledge.
The cause of all the trouble.
But she wasn't causing trouble,
though she used up public money,
this twentieth-century student.

Saint Margaret survived
being swallowed by a dragon.
I'll not name her Margaret,
like the grocer's daughter,
waiting, growing stronger,
through that discontented winter,
while that girl studied Malory
safe in the library,
and all unknowing.

And so perhaps *the damsel*
or Griselda who was patient,
or Elayne who died for love?
Although she didn't die,
she painfully shifted
to a different shape.
I could call her Everywoman,
but she wasn't every woman.
She was no one but herself.

Taking the Adventure

She cast the routine covert look at his bookshelves,
while he was filling the kettle. Hemingway, Conrad.
Mandeville's Travels. Men who go down to the depths,
mend cables in tearing storms, eat biscuits riddled with weevils.
They speak a different language, mouth full of sinews.

At the party, she'd been expounding all her ideas
for a dissertation on Malory to one of her female friends:
chances, choices, prophecies, destinies, past and future time
and the way that he made you know and
still not know what would happen, when abruptly

she felt herself pinned in that static appraising stare,
from the other side of the room, her careful precarious hair,
her chain of little gold stars and her chosen words.
And he selected some words that were freighted precisely,
his sentences full of clauses and cadences, coiling.

Why had she come here? He wasn't her kind of person.
Dark, tweedy, heavily spectacled, austere, judging.
She couldn't be his kind. She'd always avoided
grim fights through the blackthorn of English Morals,
dry Hobbes, Locke and Hume. Quick, without thinking,

she had marched down here, rung the doorbell,
oh let him be in the library, playing cricket,
or drinking Earl Grey elsewhere. Please God.
He wasn't her kind of person and she wasn't his.
But she would have tried, then. There would have been an end.

Of course, he was in. That afternoon he made tea for her
and a conversation. And just as she'd feared, it was hard,
not as a trial in the wasteland, more as an effort required of her
because he was paying attention, because he was listening,
because in all ways he was present.

New Year, 1979

She'd just carefully pulled her door
closed, on the latch, behind her,
and ahead was the corridor.

All brown and white. Floorboards,
linoleum runners streamed forwards,
gothic arch framed gothic arch,
swing door after swing door opening,
then stealthily drifting back.

The lines all converged to a point,
a tutorial on perspective,
still with the door behind her,
almost but not quite, yet, shut.

A(d)venture

According to the glossary at the back of the Oxford Malory Works: chance; risk; danger; enterprise. Or the verb: to risk.

Not yet worn down to Enid Blyton plot (*The Castle of Adventure*) or ill-advised transactions between bodies (scheming adventuress).

It could also mean chance occurrence, something that happens, experience, a test, a trial or a marvel, but most of all

a thing that can only be achieved by one person, something that reveals that person's true nature, as when a character says:

I shall take the aventure that God woll ordayne for me.

Something that once chosen must be followed to the inevitable end. A thing with consequences.

Extending the Moment

*The combat, she wrote,
is the means of completely encountering
another knight as knight.*

After a while, reading,
every battle pressed in one battle,
fought over and over.

They rush together like thunder,
they give each other great strokes with their lances,
their horses fall down under them, dead,

they avoid their horses,
they lash together on foot, like wild boars or wild bulls,
they strike blows

and finally one of them falls back grovelling under the blows of the other.
Each knightly encounter
follows these customary moves

like a courtly love dance:
rushing together, striking each other and falling,
rushing and striking and falling,

a literary device for extending the moment
and creating a timeless space
or the idea of it.

She'd already explained all the things
that *blood* meant, and means,
in those customary terms that she'd borrowed

which felt like a great sheet of iron
preventing things she really thought and meant,
but when she came to the final battle

and at last Mordred *threste hymselff*
to the burre of kynge Arthurs spere,
that the swerde perced the helmet and the tay of the brayne,

she noted that rushing and reciprocal strokes and falling
had been built into different sentences.
The blood was real.

The Time of the Angels

Read this if you want to find out how a book can be wrong and still wonderful.

Comment on a reading list for undergraduates

She had snared something, high up in the bookstacks,
or it had caught her, a narrow shelf of idea
on which she could rest all the fragments
she'd dredged from the tide of atoms and words
to see where they pointed and fit them together,
solve how to arrange them and tell them.

This commonplace morning, a footnote,
she'd gone where it led, to a book about God
and the politic body – and it made sense.
There were two kinds of time:
tempus, where mortals lived, in the fifteenth century
(and of course now), end-stopped and finite and mortal;

aeternitas in which God lived, past present and future
in one coherent whole, all happenings seen and known
and understood and all at once and under His control,
and then this third, this cross between the two, this bridge,
called *aevum*, the stretch of time in which the angels lived:
duration and motion continuing on forever

but having a past and a future. Mopped in the head,
in a good way, she sat by herself in the tearoom,
buttered a scone, swallowed sweet tea and looked out
past the fretted high window to where puffed irregular flakes
still spiralled and fell, and had fallen, would carry on falling.
She knew that *the king never dies*, and she thought

of the mass of the book and of how it had made
an imperfect tense, created a place where time froze.
She savoured the taste of the cheddar and butter
and the warm melting crumb, and imagined the angels
all dancing and golden and fragile and wonderful,
each on the head of a pin.

Writing it Up

Some days

each sentence travels hopefully
and a million atoms glitter as they shower the air

the words slide out of themselves like a spyglass

Corridors

The corridors of Girton are like the vaults in some horrid high church cathedral – on and on they go, cold and shiny, with a light burning.

Virginia Woolf: *A Writer's Diary*

But then they'd have been newer, darker, serviceable, and students meeker but more earnest. Perhaps. Now corridors were clearways, thoroughways, straight lines of energy contained, somewhere to pace it off, that agitation, that nervy restlessness, all the way to the library. Striding past rows of doors the hue and shininess of fresh horse chestnuts, numbers in elegant white, but wipe-clean message pads (her own had a butterfly in pink and lemon and lime), and felt-tips dangling. This was the antidote to the knock on the door that never arrived, her thoughts in snarls that would not spin out straight and neatly, her pigeonhole always empty, ideas that would not thicken and gather into a mass. On and on the corridor stretched, heel taps on herringbone parquet floors, steam pushed from electric kettles, a piano line of Mozart pouncing up flights of stairs.

Writing it Down

Some days

a black stone squats in her chest
cleaves to her fist
so she can't set it down

a million grains of sand
contracted to a pebble
so impacted
compacted
it can't be unpacked

Maying

The moneth of May was com, whan every lusty harte begynnyth to blossom and to burgyne. For, lyke as trees and erbys burgenyth and florysshyth in May, in lyke wise every lusty harte that ys ony maner of lover spryngith, burgenyth, buddyth, and florysshyth in lusty dedis.

Thomas Malory: 'The Knight of the Cart'

Beginning a tale:

here is a little unexpected essay of forty lines, on the month of May, flowering and flourishing, summer and winter, and the nature of love.

It comes just before

Lancelot *toke hys plesaunce and hys lykinge untyll hit was the dawnyng of the day*, and Guinevere's sheets became all dabbled with his blood. Just before the beginning of the end.

(Background hiss of gas fire,
cushions and broken spring, safe circle of reading light.)

She likes this digression.

It conjures garlands and broad swags and whole orchards in wind and in flurries, shrill sharp, fluttering, downpointed umbrellas of horse-chestnut, olive and grey-green powdering and crumpled tufts still not quite yet unfurled from the branch and everything still to come. Thousands of oval petals blown down pink and white, forsythia in little golden stars...*all erbys and treys renewyth a man and woman...*

She likes the way that it reaches a long arm back towards Chaucer (*Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote*) and forward to Thomas Nashe (*The fields breathe sweet, the daisies kiss our feet*) and to Shakespeare.

(Behind scarlet curtains
snow lies still in the court and crusts over the top of the box hedge.)

And also she likes

the sudden subtle taste of cinnamon in the raisin cake, this voice, this brief scenting of a voice: Sir Thomas Malory, knight.

Her idea of essayists:

men sitting in towers, looking down, judging, but not like this. What had happened, what made those lines flow out just then?

And in what spirit should she read them?

...for a lytylle blaste of wyntres rasure, anone we shall deface and lay aparte trew love, for lytylle or nowght, that coste muchoe thyng. Thys ys no wysedome nother no stabylité... Contrition and sorrow lie lightly under the surface of these words.

(Out in the apple orchard,
a white rime on the edge of each blade of grass, as Orion aims upwards into the dark.)

Better to sit quietly in stability,

with books, better *endure by reson, forego desyres for love, trouthe, and faythefulnes*.

But then he says of Guinevere:
that while she lived she was a true lover, and that therefore she had a good end.

So he had forgiven her, then.

Disserting

with two fingers
nails ragged
at the typewriter she'd had for her eighteenth birthday

concussion of metal on paper on roller
hard unpractised scuffle almost in rhythm
sighing drawn zip

as the carriage returns

a gear change
a breath

any random stutter
uncertain rap and tap-tap
tap
and

a drained quiet

dark distant piano waltz from the radio
and the announcer says
the pianist gives a colour and sonority to every note
a waltz is a circle completed and repeated
the time is something paced out and rounded
old perfume

long heavy rip

as the carriage returns

The Day of Destiny

She will not go
on-maynge into woodis and fyldis
this year.

Behind the fragile screen
she will take the blunt pencil.
She will mark her first cross.

A fortnight afterwards,
black-gowned officials,
frail folding desks in rows.

Ryght so Cam Oute an Addir of a Lytyll Hethe-buysse

Imagine the great black mark on the slithy head,
the withered furse, concealing Sin and Death
and oily scales, forked tongue and fangs, while
garnering its mean twigs in to last another season.

But this was crayoning in, it was not what happened.
It was a little bush, not worth description,
bleached earth, dull straw to camouflage a worm.
The knight pulled out his sword and *thought none othir harme*.

At Thys Time, said Merlion, I Woll Nat Tell Thee

And then, the third of May
and the long walk to the polling station,
still cogitating.

Safe Tory seat,
no chance to amend
the nation's iron destiny, but

still trying to order her mind
for this very first time,
rather, trying to digest,

believe,
in this sudden capering wish
to cross out cynicism

and vote *for* something.
Was Merlin there in the polling booth?
He'd never have told her

she'd taken the aventure,
set out on a quest without knowing,
chosen the man she'd marry.

Not Consoled

For example, if someone began to dig the ground in order to cultivate a field and found a cache of buried gold. This is believed to have happened fortuitously, but it does not happen as a result of nothing; it has its own causes, the unforeseen and unexpected conjunction of which have clearly effected the chance event. If the cultivator of the field had not been digging, and if the depositor had not buried his money at that point, the gold would not have been found.

Boethius: *The Consolation of Philosophy*

Often she used Boethius in essays.

It was relevant: nobody made the prophecy, setting it down hard like books on a table; nobody had engraved a warning in letters of gold on a sword. But a snake came out suddenly and stung a knight on the foot; and when both sides saw the flash of his sword *they blewe beamys, trumpettis and hornys, and shouted grymly, and so both ostis dressed hem togydirs.*

Allusions are quietly scattered throughout: Lancelot tethers his horse under an apple tree; Sir Patryse dies from the poisoned apple meant for Gawain; someone dreams of a beautiful woman who rides on a serpent. And then a bite from a snake and it is finished. *It shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel.*

If only.

One possible view: she'd been seduced by Malory and medievalism when all the time she could have, should have, kept firmly to the safe path, where she was strong: the nineteenth and twentieth-century novel.

Another view: she should have stayed ploughing a scholarly determined furrow through the sources, the Huth Merlin, the Middle French, she should have bridled her mind down, dutifully, on the earth and not have gone swerving and looping up carelessly like a badly blown balloon, into her own dreaming interpretations.

The Epstein-Barr virus looks like chain mail, under a microscope. Late in the Lent term it struck down a certain person and she found this out by chance, in the street, from a mutual friend who speculated on who he might have kissed, at the precise moment when she herself was falling prey to a scorched bright ring in her throat, a cough that illuminated every branch and twig of her lungs, and shivering waves of lightness.

So she wandered round the town in the dusk in the melting snow, hallucinating like Lucy Snowe in *Villette*. (*Acetylene lady, acetylene lady*, she kept thinking, but couldn't remember which poem it came from.) She'd kissed nobody, but thought of their coffee cups, that evening last week when he'd knocked at her door, unexpectedly. (They'd talked until almost midnight.)

She found his response to her get well soon note, (written from her own sick bed) in her pigeonhole on the Monday after the Saturday on which he'd invited her to tea because he thought that they might have matters to discuss.

Suppose that any of these chances had fallen differently?

Nothing, and so no shame.

What of those other adventures, that spring, that had so many and such various consequences? If Callaghan had called the General Election a few months earlier, the previous autumn? If there had been no discontent, no rubbish decaying in the streets, no dead unburied, no crisis what crisis, if the snow had not fallen and fallen, that winter?

But the adder came sliding out ... *it does not happen as a result of nothing; it has its own causes.*

These Are the Things that Should Remain Unsaid

I saw her pale, cold form glide silent by me, dead to shame as to pity.

William Hazlitt : *Liber Amoris*

I read his Life, and too much light spills over and echoes off buildings
and here she comes gliding like a snake across High Holborn
past all the lawyers and accountants and hard edges.
The ghost of Hazlitt's Sarah. She doesn't know he watched her,
his lost thing. She never saw him. Male anger gorges and stings.
They say she wasn't beautiful.

Then Nina Simone's voice slides in from the next room.
It's late at night. She sings out from a place that's high above a city,
notes like old rags and kitchen scourers soaked in bourbon.
Deep winter and dead cigarettes suffuse the air.
The words are shivering and flayed wide open.
Far too much light.

I put the book down. But still the ghost is gliding like a snake
through that contemporary crowd, past all the black and tailored sharpness,
a vague pale object with blurred edges. The only possible road
is this one that he's heavily retracing. I've read the ongoing bruise,
the way that life carries on, past the end of the story. She died young.
This hurt will last for over two hundred years.
It will never wear down.

A Subjective Impression: Lawrence and Me

You could see it otherwise

When I was eight I wrote some poems, and they showed me a small photograph up on the wall in a corner of the assembly hall. ‘Do you know who this is?’ said Mrs Taylor. ‘He was at this school, years ago. He was a famous poet.’ So that evening my mother read me his poem about the snake, and that night I dreamed about a snake, and in the dream it whipped back and struck, like a cobra. That was the end I had been fearfully expecting, while the poem proceeded and while Lawrence observed his snake so attentively. For a while the poem set dread aside and considered the snake as itself, although dread won, in the end, a reflex and a whiplash and an object thrown.

A snake can shed a thousand skins.

This is my own memory, for certain, but I have counted my Lawrence memories over so often that they feel like a story that an older person has told me about myself as a child. A set of little flashed anecdotes, but no narrative path that I can follow to a conclusion.

(I know that I stood where he stood, in the assembly hall at Beauvale Junior School, I sang the same hymns, I walked the footpaths he walked, with my dog, and later on I passed his birthplace every weekday on my way to Eastwood Comprehensive. In those days Lawrence’s birthplace, 8 Victoria Street, was only marked by a discreet brass plaque above the front door; you could easily miss it. On the school registers were many of the same names that occur in biographies of Lawrence and in his novels: Barber, Chambers, Hopkin, Birkin, Annable, Limb. Not Morel or Leivers or Brangwen.)

So I return to a later, more specific memory.

I walked the footpaths he walked

Sunday morning, early. Grey, still, moist weather and I was walking. He would have known the place. Dark water ruffling in the wind, intense pine trees crowding on either side. He called it Nethermere (in *The White Peacock* and in *Sons and Lovers*), and then Willey Water (in *The Rainbow* and in *Women in Love*). Neither of these are its real name, which is practical and factual.

I always turned right, into High Park Woods, following a bridle path that eventually eked out into a muddy track, prints of shoes and boots and paws and hooves and ruts and pools of standing water.

One composite memory of walks on many different Sundays, accumulated layers, one sheet of tracing paper over another. The February muddied misery, but at the same time, the rhododendrons, and they could not have been in February, but much later that year, in April, or May?

On those Sunday mornings I was deliberately avoiding something: a pack of shapeless, half articulated dreads and lacks. And one specific thing: my Art homework. The art lesson was the following morning, Monday morning, all morning. I was working for O level. Art was not a soft option. I had an artistic temperament and no talent.

One Sunday morning, suddenly, rhododendrons, deep crimson, purple, lilac, yellow, every possible singing shade. I half-remember having the sense that they were an unexpected answer to a problem although that was not exactly how it felt at the time. I had a desire to keep hold of them, to capture them, somehow. To make them a subject. I have a half-memory of gathering one of each colour and carrying them home to press, but doubt that this is accurate.

For certain that would be illegal now, and perhaps it already was then. Sylvia Plath, a jealous Fury with her avenging shears, castigating those schoolgirls who tore armfuls from rhododendron bushes in the park – but that was in another country and Plath was still only a name to me, then.

I was less than a mile from Hags Farm, the place that he must have been mentally recreating, reliving, as he wrote his novel *Sons and Lovers*. In one scene, Paul Morel, the central protagonist, is at the very beginning of his friendship with Miriam Leivers, who lives at the Hags with her parents. They are fifteen and fourteen, about the age I was at this time I am remembering. Paul remarks that the flowers grow over large and tender because Miriam's garden is too sheltered, whereas the flowers in his mother's garden grow small, wiry and hardy. The implication is that Miriam herself is a sheltered plant, while his mother has been exposed to everything. At this early stage, this seems to be only an observation, rather than a criticism. But already he is comparing Miriam with his mother and placing them in opposition.

Later in *Sons and Lovers* Paul gathers some sweet peas from his mother's garden and pins them into Miriam's dress. 'Don't let mater know', he says.

Later still in the novel, he condemns Miriam for fawning over daffodils and picking wild cowslips in an over-reverent but acquisitive way, although he is just about to pick some cowslips himself, and to scatter them over the head and shoulders of another woman, a woman he desires, by that time, far more than Miriam. He eats the 'little yellow trumpets' as he gathers them.

A sheltered plant

I never drew the rhododendrons. I know that for certain. I am not sure why I could not, so to speak, gather them. Cowardice often ruled a line under my artistic endeavours. That and various kinds of noise. The atmosphere in the Art Room at my school was often volatile. Figure drawing was the most important thing and I was no good at it.

There were also exercises in perspective, and sketches of leaves, and still life, and chimney pots and windows, which I enjoyed. But these things had no real life force in them, not as my pencil understood them. Outwardness and energy were fundamental, something assertive that surged boldly and filled the whole sheet of paper. On my report, the term before, the teacher had written, 'Continues to work well, but there are problems in communication.'

Not as my pencil understood them

That lino print. Did that happen at about this time, or a little later? Certainly it is part of the problem, something trapped deep down in the pages like an ancient stain.

The subject was the sea. We were shown a reproduction of the famous Hokusai rendition of waves, with the spray as grasping claws. We were shown other pictures, but I particularly remember the Hokusai.

Eastwood is a very long way from the sea, in every direction, but it just happened that I had been there quite recently, at half term. Not brash and sandy Skegness as usual, but somewhere along the South Coast. It was an austere pebble beach, and the sea was very quiet, early in the morning. It was the ebb that had fascinated, not the surge. I had watched the water simply flowing back, and heard the sigh of the pebbles shifting and abrading.

So I drew, then tried to carve this into the lino, as a series of lines flowing around gravid circles. It was very therapeutic work, like meditation. It took me out of myself.

I'd seen what I'd seen, but we were lazy, he was disgusted with us, we'd none of us been to look at the sea, nothing that we had made communicated the sea.

Something trapped deep down like an ancient stain

Those rhododendrons in the wood. I could have given them the quality of dancers, emphasised their heat, or their frilled and layered intricacy, their affinity with fabric. I'd seen what I'd seen.

But my temperament would have interposed itself. I was too anxious to please. The translation from the shaded air to the sketch book would have made them pale, studied, static, timid. The pictorial equivalent of greeting card verse.

In *Sons and Lovers*, Paul Morel walks in his mother's garden at night, thinking about Clara, the sensual, physical, real woman obsessing him, the woman who he now prefers to Miriam and the ostensible reason why he will forsake her.

He breaks off a pink, goes indoors and announces to his mother that he will break off with Miriam decisively and for good. Then he bares his teeth, bites off a mouthful of petals and spits them out into the fire.

It took me out of myself

It was difficult to read at school, I mean to do my own reading, between lessons, but it was possible. In those miserable few months when I could do no right, I read as a form of resistance, as a defence and possibly as a means of survival.

I read *Women in Love* for the first time, that summer. In truth, I don't remember much about that first reading, beyond the fact that it happened. I did not dare engross myself completely. I had to read in snatches.

It was like travelling on the London Underground, which then I had hardly ever done, staring at sooted bricks and thick cabling and then quick electric intervals of tiles and posters and jostling people in bright clothes.

But I remember scribbling down quotations dutifully and illegibly in my rough book. ‘Every true artist is the salvation of every other’, and ‘...only artists produce for each other the world that is fit to live in’.

There is a lot of art in *Women in Love*. Primitive figures. Dalcroze dancing. Gudrun’s two water-wagtails, carved in wood and painted, her little things, ‘seen through the wrong end of the opera glasses’. Especially the green bronze statue of the very young girl, Annette Von Weck, an art student, naked on a huge, stiff, block-like horse.

And there are many combative discussions about art, and love. I was fascinated by the discussion about the art student who had become an art object, instead, evidently at some cost to herself. I felt that the horse and the relation between the horse and the girl and indeed the whole discussion was in some way very significant, that it carried a meaning far beyond itself, yet I did not know whether to accept the most persuasive interpretation or not. ‘It isn’t a word of it true, of all this harangue you have made me,’ she replied flatly. ‘The horse is a picture of your own stock, stupid brutality, and the girl was a girl you loved and tortured and then ignored.’

All this harangue you have made me

Early in *Women in Love*, Birkin, an Inspector of Schools, enters and takes over a botany lesson. The children have been sketching some hazel catkins so that they can learn to understand their structure and meaning. An interesting phrase, this, structure and meaning, suggesting that their drawings should have some of the characteristics of art, not botany. The drawings must not only accurately reproduce what the children see, but must articulate a truth that goes beyond the form.

And Birkin, a character generally understood to be a version of Lawrence himself, is clear and certain what that truth must be. Outline scarcely matters in this case, he says. There is just the one fact to emphasise. He wants the children to colour in the catkins in yellow and red chalks to show the distinction between the gynaecious flowers and the androgynous flowers. It will make the books untidy. Nevertheless: ‘It’s the fact you want to emphasise, not the subjective impression to record. What’s the fact?—red little spiky stigmas of the female flower, dangling yellow male catkin, yellow pollen flying from one to the other.’

At that time, my favourite drawing tools were essentially chalks for adults: artists' pastels bought from Sisson and Parker in Nottingham. I still have them, or what remains of them, in the bottom drawer of my desk. I liked to use them, not only because of the colours, but because they gave me what I thought I needed: light and shade and at the same time a certain amount of control. Paint or ink might run away and ruin whatever I was trying to achieve, it might stream or saturate everywhere. How the light fell was what brought an object to life. I had learned that light could be a space, an absence of pencil or colour.

Shading, blurring, instability. It seems to me that the red and yellow flowers – the relation of the female to the male – are certain facts, but slanted, emphasised. One could argue that they are over-weighted to the extent that they have become a subjective impression.

There are problems in communication

Something that I have been circling: the reasons why my difficulties with making art were also about Lawrence, or my developing ideas of him. Something to do with being harangued. Lawrence was a schoolteacher.

Anyone who is at school has to endure harangues and sermons. Sometimes these pass over like a heavy rain shower.

But when it becomes complicated, personal, it is then grievously difficult to bear. Noise, perpetual noise, distracting noise, comes between you and whatever you are trying to take in and do or learn and you seem to be the cause. And you are helpless. You are terribly, terribly, in the wrong. You want to do right. But you cannot understand what is needed, because all that they really ever communicate to you is that they are irritated, that they are annoyed, that they are terribly, terribly upset. What they want, the thing they need from you, the magic thing, is always what they never have and never fully articulate.

Nothing can ever be enough.

This is a subjective impression, of course, not a fact.

All the space of light

On those Sunday mornings. At the end of the wood, the path continued, forked, acres of soaked unremarkable grass, tenacious brambles. There was a signpost pointing, not to the Hags, but to Felley Mill Farm. If I wanted to I could keep walking, somewhere.

In *Sons and Lovers* a character asks: 'I wonder which was more frightened among old tribes – those bursting out of their darkness of woods upon all the space of light, or those from the open tiptoeing into the forests.' As usual, the conversation is freighted with significance below the surface. There is sexual tension between the man asking the question and the woman responding.

In most literature the forest is unknowable and perilous, the place of whistling wild beasts, and worse, unnameable terrors, outside the law. The place for ordeals and quests.

But you could see it otherwise.

Paul and Clara Walk Beside the Trent

How busy the mind can be, struggling to forge significance,
making this mean that exact thing, hammering it down.
No detail is left alone to dart quickly along like a gleam of light on water,
to drift in the atmosphere like the scent of wild thyme on the wind.
There are real rivers that flow unnaturally fast and silent,
a film speeded up, but suppose an inflamed young man
walks out with a married woman, gets stuck in red mud.
The river is swirling from heavy rain. There is a footprint
left by a man's nailed boot. This can be read
as a reminder of the woman's discarded husband.
His possible vengeance. Her sexual experience.
I know that red mud. I know that it gathers under the instep,
upsetting the balance, builds itself into a wedge right under the heel,
soaks the shoe through.

This river moves like a subtle and complex animal.
We don't quite say a snake. There are currents like trailing hair.
And the couple appear to be trapped with no way forward.
Then the footprint. A tentative path can be trodden by one pair of feet.
An escape, or a possible way. A reminder
that this particular couple were never alone in the world.
I have walked like that on my own,
catching at twigs and brambles and I know
that each tread is important and must be tested
before the ground can be trusted to bear the weight.
Each handhold is vital, each thorn is important, each streak of damp green.
Red mud goes everywhere.

He must have known this. It was a real place.

she was only
one white speck bobbing
a single
clot of foam a single
grain of salt
dissolving

Miriam Leivers Reads *Middlemarch* and Thinks About Paul Morel

I've often thought that the best way to write a novel would be to invent the story and then to remove the hero and the heroine and write about the peripheral people – because one wants to extend one's sympathy and divide one's interests.

Iris Murdoch: Interview with Jean-Louis Chevalier

'You really do blossom out sometimes,' he said. 'You ought to write poetry'.
She lifted her head with joy, then she shook it mistrustfully.

D.H. Lawrence: *Sons and Lovers*

I

The novel is the one bright book of life,
he said, but she should write *poetry*.
She saw herself at fourteen, when she first knew him,
strictly exterior view. Someone bowing her head,
browsing, glancing away, blurring edges,
not really properly there. Not in the world.
He dismissed her with trite imprecision: *blossoming out*,
she sees apple blossom in rain, blown, strewn,
hears Edgar her brother warning him not to get blossom,
or there will be no apples.

Ten years ago.
Now he is avid for the sparks from Clara's heels,
grinding on grimy pavements.

And poetry (rather than poems),
was maidens in aprons, solitary, even steps pattering,
plain, purl and backstitch, run-and-fell,
draper's shop, hedged-in canter.
Enervation and chime. Whereas a novel
packs in the whole world, even a black tom cat,
even a rain-soaked cabbage, layered hemisphere,
muscular, shining. *A cabbage alive*.
Even the unploughable field that they stood in,
while he expounded all this,
dip and then slope up into the woods,
snapped dandelions oozing sour milk,
cuckoo spit gobbets on stalks,
mauve nacreous worms encircled by saddles of eggs.

Those early mornings. Alone
in her grandmother's house, reading *Middlemarch*
on the sofa. Too many long white nights
after he'd cycled away. Sodden with waking dreams,
she'd study the faded cushions, soft red, powder blue.
The heavy grey absence of light in the living room window.
That stuffed owl up in the corner. She had the fantasy –
behind those feathery eye-rings, blank black spaces
was the spirit of his mother, watching.
It was this time last year.
What did he tell his mother?

Thinking about his mother
is like trying to imagine the bedroom in a house
where you have distant cousins.
She can envision the double bed of brass,
the counterpane of hoarded scraps of colour,
from memories of other rooms she's known.
But can't go up those stairs. She's not invited.

II

She is kneading bread dough
with the heel of her hand,
digging her knuckles in, her left foot
a little behind her right. The dough grows cool
as she works it, springing and self contained,
smooth mass that pulls damply away
leaving nothing behind. She's remembering
that time in the Morel kitchen, him shearing off
their thread of words about books, belief,
his new design of roses and angry thorns,
to snap the loaves from their tins, to turn them,
rap on the base to hear the hollow knock,
prove them well done.

But in the beginning.
When he first entered a room, shimmer and dart
like the curl of a fish through clean water
and all the light lifted. His bicycle chain
had broken, leaving him handed in oil
which he said it did 'frequently', and there was deftness
in the way the mild inflection fell, a deprecation, a wryness,
that did it. Then he said that her rose trees
shuddered the flowers from themselves as a dog
shakes off drops of water. She saw, not a tree,
but a dog, shaggy cur, rippling
around a rod running vital from nose to tail,
a mongrel alive.

III

And it was *Middlemarch*
she read, again, after that hybrid struggling thing
their friendship had turned into, stopped.
Dreading he'd be there by accident in the Free Library
each time the two blue volumes were renewed.
She read it over and over. I gave you books,
he'd said, not pages and printed words,
something they'd owned and mirrored in each other,
a language that bound them, hunger.
A fire fed on books, his mother called it.

In *Middlemarch* a fire can be itself,
can be *a wondrous mass of glowing dice*,
a thing to sit by, source of light,
the words draw what is there,
make it no more. No less.
And not a pent-up euphemism
for what would make Paul whole
(or so he said), the spark his mother achieved,
(if only once), for what,
presumably, he has now won with Clara.
Paul as Prometheus, stealing fire.

Why always Dorothea?
says George Eliot, firmly taking the reader
away to the arid husband, Casaubon,
and the other impeded couples.
Mainly she read *Middlemarch* over and over
for Dorothea. Paul would have judged her for it.
He would have chewed the thread of her thought
into a chaos. He would have argued the web,
that was the point, the tangled web, the market place,
where people bargained for turnips and china dishes
and told tales about each other,
that was the point.

Not even,
we are all members one of another,
teeming and wonderful and a necessary thing,
but types and masses and the wadding of
strictly exterior detail, purple scar on father's cheek,
coal grit ingrained, blonde tendrils on bent necks
of machinists in heavy aprons, weaving stockings.
He always set her up as opposition,
dissolving limestone to his impervious gritstone,
a leaping Gothic arch to his relentless Norman.
His horizontal bearing down her vertical.
His threshing floor.

IV

He'd said: *If people marry,*
they must be commonplace with each other,
they must live as affectionate humans.
Not as two souls. But she didn't want marriage.
She dreaded its dailiness,
she feared it would be like swabbing the filth
from the red earth tiles of their kitchen floor,
over and over. Her mother's marriage is.
His mother's is.

She used to imagine her rival,
lurking mean in the parlour, drawing her white web of lace,
Clara the spider, luring him in. Lately she thinks:
what does Clara have? Her Suffragette banner
of green, purple, white (which he never respected),
stale chocolates thrown on her workbench,
and her marriage to Baxter Dawes, his dirtiness,
hammers, steel, simmering fury.
Whatever could it have been,
to live as an affectionate human with Baxter Dawes?

That evening,
she'd hung the bunches of cherries over her ears.
Because he'd said,
red berries in her hair would make her some witch or priestess,
not a reveller. She'd hoped the cherries were not priestly.
She'd wanted their jewelled globes, all shades:
vermillion, crimson. She'd wanted
to be like women who danced to castanets at sunset.
To offer him nothing but outwardness. She'd wanted.
To be like Clara, leaping the haycock,
her mass of blonde hair tumbling down,
all the hay scattered, her honey skin and her passion.
That astringency in her.
The swing of her arm.

And her mother had said
*There is one thing in love that is always terrible
but you have to bear it.* Afterwards, home, drying up,
she wiped the fluted china cup with its pattern
of overblown poppies. She clenched her hands too tight.
Wrenched off the handle. What had happened that night
in the pinewood was nothing to do with love,
but a double line drawn brutally under a final total.
Lying there helplessly pinned, thinking,
everything going too fast, this is what I have deserved,
slurred darkness is what I have made him.

Middlemarch:

felicitous clusters of words slipped in,
 sharp pictures, small mental joys
 that her attention hooks on, prowls through, and examines,
 not quite like all those metaphors for marriage,
 dim ante rooms and winding passages,
 cramping and leading nowhere,
 nor quite like Dorothea, newly widowed
 walking through all the rooms at Lowick,
 framing speeches to her dead husband,
 but more like gazing out at a landscape
 through a large bow window.

What catches her attention:

not unmixed joy. *A perpetual struggle
 of energy with fear*, about the marriage,
the way that trouble comes and ties our hands.
 Sometimes it feels like a glancing blow. *A girl
 who would require you to see the stars
 by daylight*, reminds her Clara's mother
 said something similar about her,
 once. (Someone made sure she heard.)
 Something about her wanting wings,
 superior wings, so she could fly away,
 soar over all their heads.

As she reads

she grafts on her own connections,
 inner herringbone, chain stitching,
 over and under the words, *care of her soul
 over embroidery in her own boudoir.* Wings.
 The husband's soul *went on fluttering
 in the swampy ground where it was hatched,
 thinking of its wings and never flying,*
 making her think of scales, stretched leather,
 something with tepid blood.

Paul had once said, *I can't,
 any more than I can fly up like a skylark,
 love you.* Walking the fields, they'd often heard skylarks
 rippling and running, one long floating passage
 opening out of another, endlessly,
 and talked about Shelley. Larks also
 fall down in an instant
 straight down like a stone.

VI

That day at Wingfield Manor
she 'd begun to think about windows,
and women at windows. Crumbled spiral stair
and racing wind. At first, she'd looked out
at the hills whence no help came to Mary Queen of Scots.
She was only lively, he'd said. As she was meant to,
she strained to imagine how a woman condemned to death
might see those grey-green slopes,
bleached dislocated gritstone shearing through.
But what unsettled her were broken rooms,
strange random openings.

Her own bedroom window,
too small to sit in and covered in ivy,
and that Veronese print on her wall,
St Catherine looking up at a dungeon lunette
apparently thinking high thoughts,
chains tactfully placed. If Paul had known,
he would have added another layer to the long accretion
of little daubs and spots splashed wrong
in the way he'd paint her.

Dorothea alone
in a room. Having longed for vast libraries,
she found herself bound by grey stone, echoing,
all draped in red, *like a disease of the retina*.
Then her room in Casaubon's house.
Blue draperies, faded, portraits in miniature
of powdered and wigged long dead people
not known or chosen.
A tapestry stag looking down through a ghostly mist.
A light shelf of volumes unread.
Polite literature.
The bow-window.

She particularly likes the passages
describing Dorothea's indoor life:
Dorothea, the room, the landscape outside the room,
long avenue of limes leading away,
the room, Dorothea, concentric circles,
like ripples from a raindrop in a pond.
She likes the way the furniture became fragile
and seemed to shrink when Dorothea returned
from Italy to the snow and the disillusion,
the ghostly fantastical stag,
immovable imitations of books,
and then, how the chairs and tables and the hangings
gradually became seasoned with her own endurance,
a kind of consolation.

VII

She walks the lane with a basin,
looking for blackberries.
The path rises steeply beside burned stubble.
On her left, the hedge, part hawthorn, part bramble.
Not for the first time, she thinks
what an unremarkable plant the bramble is,
in the way that girls like herself are unmemorable,
yet too tenacious. She can't stop thinking
of the Devil being in them after Michaelmas,
all those unpleasant seeds,
though it isn't yet Michaelmas.

Out of habit
she tries to see the berries as he'd describe them,
fat clenched baby fists, but all she sees at first
is something difficult to reach.
The over-ripe ones burst and smear over her fingers.
Hard unripe green, streaked red,
and engorged purple black.
Clusters of droplets.
A frail bristle between each one.

VIII

At almost the end of *Middlemarch*,
after a long night bleached in anguish
Dorothea looks out of her window.
She sees a man with a bundle on his back
and a woman with a baby.
Far off in the bending sky was the pearly light.
There is the usual imagery of hymns:
light, dawn, shepherds, pearl,
washed clean of moralising,
by a sense of expanding space.
A lifted burden.

She felt the largeness of the world.
And changed her life.

Experience

On the other side of the pane
a portion of the tremendous ash
billows back under hard wind.

The long leaves have the quality
of leaked out light.
There have been so many mornings.

New growth has repaired an old scar
made by tree surgeons.
The gnarled bark resembles a staring eye.

It was a broad corridor
that the old man Casaubon
and his young wife Dorothea
walked up together.

In the House of the Architect: Thoughts on Sir John Soane and the Art of Biography

What should I make of this? I mean ‘make’ in the sense of ‘make sense’, rather than ‘make up’ or ‘construct’; those words that bring fabrication and invention trailing in behind them. This is the house of someone who designed and constructed. He purchased these three houses one by one, combined them, and made something of them.

What *could* I make of this? ‘Orts, scraps and fragments’.¹ The echo hangs in the air.

The breakfast parlour: a space of movement and transit, like a dining room in a smart station hotel. A round table covered with a starched white cloth, wicker chairs. Pale yellow walls and transparent veilings that flicker in the faint breeze from a half open window. And the ceiling decorated with a trellis pattern on a pale green ground, painted garlands of leaves, designed to provide the illusion of shelter and careful flowering. A brick wall outside.

A library. Walls in red with bands of dark green, leather armchairs of the kind that one imagines in clubs that women are not allowed to enter, panels of lighter green brocade. Volumes in pale brown calf. An army of upright chairs ranged formally around a long table, chairs with important wooden backs, chairs in which one sits up alert and straight to deliver significant pronouncements or to declare war.

In Virginia Woolf’s novel *To the Lighthouse*, Cam Ramsay remembers her father’s library:

In a kind of trance she would take a book from the shelf and stand there, watching her father write, so equally, so neatly from one side of the page to another, with a little cough now and then, or something said briefly to the other old gentleman opposite. And she thought, standing there with her book open, here one could let whatever one thought expand like a leaf in water; and if it did well here, among the old gentlemen smoking and *The Times* crackling, then it was right.²

But a pale brown gigantic thistle has been placed deliberately and precisely on the seat of each of the chairs and these books are shut away behind glass doors.

A courtyard full of statues, busts and monuments and at the heart of it, below stairs, the sarcophagus, the tomb. A house as mausoleum. Woolf’s father, Leslie Stephen, wrote a family history that he called a Mausoleum Book. He tells his story from a place of extreme

¹ Virginia Woolf, *Between the Acts* (London: Hogarth Press, 1941), p. 251

² Virginia Woolf, *To The Lighthouse* (London: Hogarth Press, 1927,) p. 291.

grief, but at a crucial moment (the death of his second wife Julia), he retreats behind words that muffle: 'my beloved angel sinking quietly into the arms of death'.³

There are other ways of telling this death (this very same death):

My father staggered from the bedroom as we came. I stretched out my arms to stop him, but he brushed past me, crying out something I could not catch; distraught. And George led me in to kiss my mother, who had just died.⁴

[Mr Ramsay stumbling along a passage stretched his arms out one dark morning, but, Mrs Ramsay having died rather suddenly the night before, he stretched his arms out. They remained empty.]⁵

In a courtyard, near the sarcophagus, there is a tombstone engraved with the words: 'Alas! Poor Fanny.' This may be a deliberate echo of 'Alas! Poor Yorick', not only in *Hamlet* but in *Tristram Shandy*, that essay in the telling of a life that begins with forgetting to wind up the clock, digresses, digresses, then ends with an admission that the whole narrative is nothing but a wild goose chase. But Fanny was a real dog and her portrait is on the wall in the circular parlour, not the place of transit described above, but a different and more interesting room entirely, an interior room lit mainly by mirrors and a skylight of complicated and intricate stained glass, meaning that the light does not strike anything directly, but seeps in at second hand. The little black and tan terrier bitch is lying couchant. She has soft eyes and a rounded jaw, and is posed beside Greek columns, as if she were still alive. And the room is full of mirrors and Fanny is unmistakably the ancestor of the two Manchester Terriers who live, and lie, curled into black ovals, on the rug beside me as I write. And of another small black and tan dog, the dog of my childhood, now more than thirty years dead.

Woolf's second novel, *Night and Day*, shows Katherine Hilbery and her mother engaged in writing the official biography of Katherine's grandfather, an eminent Victorian poet. Each morning at ten, Katherine sits down opposite her mother 'at a table heaped with bundles of old letters and well supplied with pencils, scissors, bottles of gum, india-rubber bands, large envelopes, and other appliances for the manufacture of books'. She is depressed by their lack of progress.

They found, to begin with, a great variety of very imposing paragraphs with which the biography was to open; many of these, it is true, were unfinished, and resembled triumphal

³ Leslie Stephen, *Sir Leslie Stephen's Mausoleum Book* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), pp. 96-97.

⁴ Virginia Woolf, 'A Sketch of the Past' in *Moments of Being* ed. by Jeanne Schulkind, 2nd edn (London: Hogarth Press, 1978), p. 91.

⁵ Woolf, *To The Lighthouse*, pp. 199-200.

arches standing upon one leg, but, as Mrs. Hilbery observed, they could be patched up in ten minutes, if she gave her mind to it. Next, there was an account of the ancient home of the Alardyces, or rather, of spring in Suffolk, which was very beautifully written, although not essential to the story....Here were twenty pages upon her grandfather's taste in hats, an essay upon contemporary china, a long account of a summer day's expedition into the country, when they had missed their train, together with fragmentary visions of all sorts of famous men and women, which seemed to be partly imaginary and partly authentic. There were, moreover, thousands of letters, and a mass of faithful recollections contributed by old friends, which had grown yellow now in their envelopes, but must be placed somewhere, or their feelings would be hurt.⁶

There is a tyranny in ordinary narrative, a straight line moving from birth to death: 'She did this; and then she did that'; Monday follows Tuesday. Getting from lunch to dinner. The overwhelming urge to catalogue everything, to miss nothing, to pile detail upon detail. The cabinets and drawers throughout the house are numbered and lettered: an attempt at an index.

Shall I simply list each room, with its contents? What shall I leave out? Should there be no attempt at shaping? Woolf and her circle wanted to move away from the 'Life and Letters' in three large volumes, an exhausting monumental memoir in which nothing could be said that might possibly offend the widow or cast a bad light on the subject. Everywhere here one is conscious of the light coming in.

In the sarcophagus room and the enclosed courtyard next to it the sunlight is concentrated by the placing of the skylights to pick out and heighten the bleached tones of the statues and busts, so that it seems unnaturally strong, perhaps to reproduce the midday light in Greece or in some other very southern classical country. Or an impression of it.

Natural light is always coming in, from somewhere, but it is managed light, framed by tall windows, carefully strained through skylights or stained glass, reflected by the numerous mirrors, which all the time give me back, not a sense of Sir John Soane, or even of his house, but unwelcome glimpses of myself.

Biography will enlarge its scope by hanging up looking glasses at odd corners. And yet from all this diversity it will bring out, not a riot of confusion, but a richer unity.⁷

The blanched sarcophagus room reminds me of walking through the nave of Chester Cathedral in winter, under the tattered flags, that year when I was reading Woolf and having ideas about the influence of the 'new biography' on her later novels. Chester Cathedral smelled of attics in the rain. That was the year I discovered Lytton Strachey, almost stumbled

⁶ Virginia Woolf, *Night and Day* (1919), (London: Hogarth Press, 1930), pp. 36-38.

⁷ Virginia Woolf, 'The Art of Biography', in *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays* (London: Hogarth Press, 1942), p.125.

and fell right over him, *Eminent Victorians*, *Queen Victoria*, a complete reaction, the traditional ingredients sweated down so that crystals formed in the pan. Those serpentine sentences with their clauses and sub-clauses and their rhythms. The broth has been salted and spiced, it has been gelled in aspic in a mould shaped like a stylised salmon with all its scales exaggerated.

Here, Woolf is writing about E.M. Forster, but what she has written might equally apply to Strachey:

If there is one gift more essential to a novelist than another it is the power of combination – the single vision. The success of the masterpieces seems to lie not so much in their freedom from faults – indeed we tolerate the grossest errors in them all – but in the immense persuasiveness of a mind which has completely mastered its perspective.⁸

Soane placed a ‘pasticcio’⁹ in the courtyard: a central column, a gracefully proportioned object, something like a fountain. It seems to have been deliberately positioned in such a way that it is exactly framed by the window, and the window has another frame in the form of a stained glass border. Landscape artists of the Romantic period (approximately Soane’s period) often used a claude glass.¹⁰ A claude glass frames a scene and is also a kind of mirror; it distorts the characteristics of the landscape, making them smaller, mellowing the light and the tonal quality of lakes and mountains. It exaggerates the salient features and it blurs the fine detail. To draw from a claude glass, the artist has to stand with his or her back to whatever is being sketched.

Yet, in spite of a frame, the perspective can still change. There is nothing to prevent an observer from moving around the room, even from going upstairs, and looking down on the pasticcio in the centre of the courtyard. A different way of framing. To take a more contemporary issue in biography: would I be pro-Sylvia, would I be pro-Ted, or might I see that marriage and its breakdown as something like two combustible substances combined in a mortar and pestle; the creation of a compound with magical properties far beyond the sum of its parts, but which, after a while, becomes unstable and gives off a terrible gas?¹¹ Alternatively, what might I make of Woolf’s own marriage? Would I subscribe to the

⁸ Virginia Woolf, ‘The Novels of E.M. Forster’, in *The Death of the Moth*, pp. 106-107.

⁹ A pasticcio (or pastiche) can also refer to an opera or any work (including a literary work) made up of fragments or portions of other artists’ works, often adapted by the composer or artist.

¹⁰ Sir John Soane was born in 1753 and died in 1837, the year of Queen Victoria’s accession to the throne. See also Michael Donaghy, ‘Upon a Claude Glass’, in his *Collected Poems* (London: Picador, 2009).

¹¹ Most of the early biographies of Plath were ‘pro-Sylvia’; a notable exception was Anne Stevenson’s controversial *Bitter Fame: A Life of Sylvia Plath* (London: Viking, 1989).

generally accepted version in which, without Leonard's calming and nurturing, if occasionally restrictive influence, we would not have had *Mrs Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, *Orlando* or *The Waves*? Or could I hold a more subversive view? For example, that Leonard subtly undermined her, stifled and muffled her with milk, obstructed her writing on the pretext that she had a headache and might otherwise go mad, again.¹² Or would I even want to construct a counterfactual story, an alternative life in which she married Lytton Strachey, or Clive Bell or Vita Sackville-West, or never married at all, like Lily Briscoe?

Woolf liked to ask 'what if?' What if her father had lived to be ninety-six, as people do? What if Mrs Dalloway had married Peter? What if Shakespeare had had a sister?

She would not say of any one in the world now that they were this or were that...she scarcely read a book now, except memoirs in bed; and yet to her it was absolutely absorbing; all this; the cabs passing; and she would not say of Peter, she would not say of herself, I am this, I am that.¹³

In attempting to shape a collection of random facts and objects, the greatest enemy seems to be a hunger to make *any* shape and to force as much significance as possible into it. I am on the first floor now. The drawing room is all bright yellow, heightened banana yellow, a not unpleasant shade, especially after the heavy inwardness of many of the downstairs rooms. Yellow, the colour of scandalous novels, Van Gogh, madmen and the midday sun. Apparently there were theories of colour in the eighteenth century. Should I read Goethe, Newton? Or is it more significant that this was Mrs Soane's room, and that yellow was a fashionable shade at the time this room was originally decorated and furnished?

Suddenly there is a window out into the world, a window in a loggia. I am in Lincoln's Inn, in June, in the first decade of the twenty-first century. It is drizzling. A family walk their two bull terriers along the street.

A house is composed of rooms. A room is a container, like a stanza in a poem, it is a space or a place in its own right, but it leads to somewhere else, or so it should. There are many imposing archways between rooms that appear to lead somewhere. There are compass points in every room, but I have been told that these were deliberately set in the wrong direction. And the house seems to be larger than I think it really is. If this is a labyrinth, where is the devouring monster? And what form will it take?

¹² For example, Roger Poole, *The Unknown Virginia Woolf* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1982).

¹³ Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* (London: Hogarth Press, 1925), p 15.

In the basement, beside the yard that holds the little dog's grave, is the room known as the Monk's Parlour. Soane invented a monk named Padre Giovanni as a kind of imaginary alter ego. This room was furnished in a Gothic style as if for the fictional monk. As you descend the stairs to reach the parlour (the word derived from 'parler', a place for conversation, or perhaps confession) you get a glimpse of mortality: at the turn of the stairs behind a window you start at the sight of a skeleton, literally a skeleton in a cupboard, standing, grinning out, the cupboard door ajar. The tomb has been called the everlasting dwelling. A house for the dead.

The Monk's Parlour itself is furnished with stuffed armchairs covered in red brocade arranged around a circular table covered in a red cloth, like a Victorian tea table. It gives the impression of community where there was probably none, calling to mind those tables at which the young Virginia Stephen, with her sister Vanessa, was trained in the Victorian game of manners: 'I see myself, not reviewing a book, but handing plates of buns to shy young men and asking them: do they take cream and sugar?'¹⁴

But on the table, in the centre, is a skull. (Is this another reference to *Hamlet*? Or perhaps to *Tristram Shandy*?)

The ceiling presses down and it is ornamented with the heavy coils of serpents. Inevitably, the parlour has an aperture for a skylight, but it would be a very long climb up, to reach the light.

The house is filled with objects that commemorate the people and the things that Soane loved (or might have loved, or would have loved): his dog, his difficult sons, his wife, his work, the art of Hogarth and of Canaletto, the idea of Padre Giovanni, the plays and poems of William Shakespeare.

To commemorate is to keep in memory by celebration. When she attempted to write her own memoirs, Virginia Woolf described what she called 'moments of being': when 'something happened so violently that I have remembered it all my life'. There was a puddle in her path; she could not step across the puddle and the whole world became unreal. Many of these moments are shocks of some kind, but one of them is different:

¹⁴ Woolf, 'A Sketch of the Past', p. 150. Woolf continues: 'On the other hand, the surface manner allows one, as I have found, to slip in things that would be inaudible if one marched straight up and spoke out loud.'

I was looking at a plant with a spread of leaves; and it seemed suddenly plain that the flower itself was a part of the earth; that a ring enclosed what was the flower; and that was the real flower; part earth; part flower. It was a thought I put away as being likely to be very useful to me later.¹⁵

There are two places in the Soane house that seem to represent some kind of positive moment of being. Thinking of Woolf and the modernist novel, I reach automatically for the word *epiphany* although perhaps they do not quite deserve that description. Yet these places in the house could be seen to stand for the sometimes edifying and uplifting moments that happen in most people's lives. Soane probably knew such moments, although, if so, they have almost certainly never been recorded.

A yellow study and dressing room. The relief of coming into the light. Suddenly there is clarity and normality, tigerish red tulips in a vase¹⁶ and dark wood, but also an elegant small sink; here is furniture for doing real things and this is natural daylight, a simple large Georgian window. Here is his desk. He sat at this desk to make his architectural sketches. The drawers and cupboards are harmoniously proportioned, economically fitted in to the available space, polished, shining, numbered, ornamented with brass handles. The wood has warmth and complexity in its grain. It was once alive.

Towards the end of her life Woolf herself embarked on some attempts to give a shape to collections of facts and objects, in particular, when, at the request of her friends, she wrote the first biography of Roger Fry, the Bloomsbury painter and art critic. It was drudgery and at times despair; as with the Victorian memoirs, there were crucial episodes in Fry's private life that she had to skirt around and shade, from delicacy and consideration. Perhaps she did succeed in commemorating the essential essence of Fry the man: his character; the reasons why others were drawn to him. Here she writes an appreciation of his book on Cezanne:

But though the analysis is minute, it is not a dissection. Rather it is the bringing together from chaos and disorder of the parts that are necessary to the whole. When at last the apple, the kitchen table, and the bread-knife have come together, it is felt to be a victory for the human spirit over matter. The milk-jug and the ginger-jar are transformed.¹⁷

Half way up a flight of stairs from the ground floor to the first floor: a small alcove holding a very recognisable bust of Shakespeare, the domed bald forehead, the slashed doublet, the

¹⁵ Woolf, 'A Sketch of the Past', p. 71.

¹⁶ See also Sylvia Plath, 'Tulips', in her *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1981). Plath likens the red tulips beside her hospital bed to dangerous and exotic animals. In contrast, the striped tulips in Soane's study seemed to be something lively and beautiful existing in the present moment.

¹⁷ Virginia Woolf, *Roger Fry* (London: Peregrine Books, 1979), p. 248.

image caricatured on a thousand school textbook editions and on the covers of popular literary criticism. But also a pale powder blue ceiling above Shakespeare's head: the sky; stone cherub heads appear to float there, as if they were on the ceiling of a cathedral in Venice or in Florence. And a sunflower in the centre, representing the sun itself, blue rosy fingers and an image with petals like a dahlia, the sun breaking through.

Lawrence, D.H., *The Rainbow* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1949)

Green was the colour of crime and blue was the colour of essays, the forerunners of Pelicans. Orange was – is – the colour of fiction. A matt paper cover, not like the bright shining covers of my teens. At the top, a softened lozenge. At the foot, two penguins dance as mirror images, as an heraldic device, a wing crossing a wing. Joined but moving outwards. Complete and Unabridged.

A comfortable white stripe across the middle, girdling, brown now, at the edges, smoked, seasoned, like an old pan. A title in black square capitals, properly centred. Each letter precisely balanced within a perfect square, filling a space exactly, like a weight in the hand.

On the back cover, the black and white photo, familiar long bearded face, middle-aged. (So, taken near the end. A good photo, actually, with some softening in the eyes.) Several long paragraphs of biography in quite small print, stressing his social origins, the fact that his father worked as a miner in Brinsley colliery since he was seven years of age. A scholarship, the High School, then a job as a clerk with a surgical goods manufacturer at a wage of thirteen shillings a week. Such people were – are – not normally expected to become what he became, to have a *vivid and dynamic pen*, to have *lived entirely by his writing*, to have made extensive travels, to have produced *many novels, hundreds of poems, letters and several books of travel*.

The message of this paperback edition and the others like it: this is possible. There is – anyway, in the nineteen-fifties there was – a way out, a way up.

Little tears and creases, little faults and folds and erosions in the cover.

The spine. Part of it broken now, torn away. The glue has whitened and cracked, with a blue black stain, like watered ink from a leaking fountain pen, edging through it in line steps. At the foot of the spine, the glue has dried completely and fallen off, to show a corduroy of paper, many pamphlets and folds glued together, a careful pleating and drawing together of thousands of individual words. A reminder that a novel, even such a substantial one as this, (a narrative of three generations and five hundred pages) is a slow accumulation, chapters and paragraphs and sentences.

This book was originally my mother's. I first read it when I was fourteen; it was the first adult novel I read, properly. I appropriated it (calling it borrowing), I took it with me when I

went away to university. Second-hand books are affecting. Not only the general nostalgia of those dusty haphazard rooms and the personal rediscoveries, Book Society Choices, Pan Pipers and Penguin paperbacks like this one, or like a Collins Seagull Library book without its jacket, the one that I read and read but let my parents give away, because we all thought I'd outgrown it.

What the books contain besides the ostensible narrative. The inscriptions on the flyleaves: 'To Phoebe with love, Christmas 1954.' (This is in our copy of *The Towers of Trebizond*; she was my husband's grandmother; I never knew her.) The past is not simply or only turned pages. To almost quote Virginia Woolf, there were people like ourselves, only dressed slightly differently, in that time just before the time I started from.

And here in this 1949 Penguin paperback are announcements and descriptions of other current and forthcoming editions in orange striped with white, for anyone to buy, to give, to read. Some of these are familiar, still read, still discussed and written about: T.S. Eliot *Selected Poems*; Edward Gosse *Father and Son*; Lytton Strachey *Eminent Victorians*.

And some have been forgotten, or almost forgotten: Mary Lavin *The House in Clewe Street*; J.B. Priestley *Angel Pavement*; Kay Boyle *The White Horses of Vienna*. Lost books, once passed from hand to hand, given away, the ones that might just have been rediscovered in green Virago covers, or reissued as grey Persephone volumes, but were not.

Before my mother became my mother she worked in a public library, she passed books like those books over the counter swaddled in their thick protecting plastic, date stamped them with a satisfying report of metal, received them back, moved pink and green and fawn typed tickets from card index to inside folder, reshelved them once again.

I imagine her issuing books in the first library that I knew, when I was a small child – but that was not the building in which it happened. The new building, the one that held the first books of my life, opened the year after I was born; it was opposite the park and it had large slices of window framed by walls clad in wood stained the colour of chestnuts.

But anyway this is where I imagine it all, all the things my mother told me. My father walking through the polished entrance hall with its staircase with metal zigzag bannisters and open treads, under the white pendant beehive lights, fresh from his game of badminton. As a small child I sometimes found the library intimidating; Mr Goodman, who had succeeded Mr

Germany, was not good with children. There was a proper emphasis on clean hands and silence. Now I remember it as an ark with windows lit against the tea-time twilight, symbolic of all the small possibilities that were unfurling in the 1950s and the early 1960s, for people like my parents, possibilities that should have remained light and bouncing and unbreakable like red and yellow melamine bowls.

My mother was a collier's daughter. She won a scholarship to Ilkeston Grammar School, where they threw new girls into the holly bush, as an initiation rite. But then she was forced to leave school at fourteen. So in Heanor Branch Library she stamped books, she reshelved books, she talked to borrowers about Mazo de la Roche, C.S. Forester, Elizabeth Goudge, Georgette Heyer, John Masters and Dorothy Whipple.

In the library there was a certain cupboard, known as the 'blue cupboard'. It contained all the books that were considered too controversial to be placed on the open shelves. These books could be borrowed, but readers had to apply to Mr Germany, the Librarian, who kept the key.

This was in the old Heanor Library that I never knew. And ten years or so before the famous court case in which they asked: 'Is this a book that you would want your wife or your servants to read?'

I imagine that it must have taken courage and determination to borrow and read *Ulysses*, or *Jude the Obscure*, or *Women in Love*, in 1952 or thereabouts, if you were an ordinary person, a clerk perhaps, or a shop assistant, or a machine operator at the stocking factory, living in a small market town less than five miles from where D.H. Lawrence was born.

For years I thought that Mr Germany's blue cupboard was called that because it protected the respectable citizens of Heanor from pornography. But recently I learned that it was because the actual cupboard was blue; it was painted that colour. I imagine it dark navy, serviceable, gloss paint, the kind used in institutions, tall and high, like the cupboards in my first infant school. And firmly closed and locked.

Like D.H. Lawrence, my father was a collier's son who won a scholarship. The Latin master in his black gown: 'I kick Watson. I punch Watson. I slap Watson. Watson: dative of disadvantage.'

But then there was sport, the great leveller. He grinned in cricket whites, in the middle of the front row, the demon fast bowler, the youngest boy ever to get into the Heanor Grammar First Eleven.

And books became a part of him: Milton's *Lycidas*; certain parts of *Paradise Lost*; Hazlitt's essays; *Hamlet*. An anthology of Modern Verse first published in 1919. No chance of university for him either, of course. After Higher School Certificate it was National Service, the RAF, India and back in the freezing winter of 1947 to become an accounts clerk at the local building firm, the same firm that would eventually construct the new Heanor Library and the brand new technical grammar school a few miles away in Eastwood, urgently needed to implement the provisions of the 1944 Education Act. ('This school is the same age as you are', said the headmaster, welcoming my intake in 1969.)

Naturally he was a member of the library. One day he asked the young woman behind the counter to recommend a good novel. She thought he might like *No Highway*, by Nevil Shute. It was about a scientist, a shy but determined underdog who turns out to be right in the end.

James Stewart played the scientist in the film. My father took her to see the film when it came to the Heanor Empire, and then to a milk bar.

Reader, I owe my life to books, and a public library.

NOTES

In 'Spines in Shining Orange' the phrase in italics is taken from the front cover of the Penguin edition of Jean-Paul Sartre's autobiographical work *Words*: 'I loathe my childhood and all that remains of it'.

The poem being read in a classroom in 'What it Was All About' is loosely based on Philip Larkin's poem 'Mr Bleaney'.

'Modern Verse' refers to two poems: 'Flannan Isle' by Wilfrid Wilson Gibson; and 'A Musical Instrument', by Elizabeth Barrett Browning.

In 'The Country of My Heart', the sentence in italics is quoted from D.H. Lawrence's novel *Sons and Lovers*.

In his seminal work *Practical Criticism*, I.A. Richards presents and discusses the results of an experiment in which readers were invited to comment on poems without knowing who had written them. The paperback edition of the book supplies the titles of the poems and their authors at the very end and prints these backwards, to prevent accidental reading. I have borrowed this device.

The Virago novel mentioned in 'Embracing the Prune' is *The Weather in the Streets*, by Rosamond Lehmann. Ursula Brangwen and her sister Gudrun are the two principal female characters in D.H. Lawrence's novel *Women in Love*. The final stanza of the poem contains an echo of a poem by William Carlos Williams, 'This is just to say'. The form of the poem owes something to 'Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird', by Wallace Stevens.

In '*But What After All is One Night?*', the phrases in italics are quoted from Virginia Woolf's novel *To the Lighthouse*. The title of the poem is also a quotation from that novel.

'Fragments After Sappho' is a very 'free' translation of Sappho's 'Fragment 105A' and 'Fragment 105B'; it was inspired by comparing several versions by different translators, including Anne Carson.

The extract from a much longer poem by Victor Hugo, ‘Ce Que Dit la Bouche d’Ombre’ is recited by one of the characters in the Eric Rohmer film *Conte D’Hiver*. The English translation is my own. The following poem, ‘By Heart’, is in the voice of another character, the film’s main protagonist, as she listens to this recitation.

In the sequence ‘Of Time, Snakes and the Falling Snow’ almost all quotations in the body of the poems are from the works of Sir Thomas Malory (the *Morte D’Arthur*). There are a few exceptions: the italicised words in ‘Naming’ are taken from Sir Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde*; in ‘Maying’ I quote the first line from the Prologue to Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* and one line from ‘Spring, the Sweet Spring’ by Thomas Nashe (the very first poem in *Palgrave’s Golden Treasury*). In ‘Not Consoled’ the final sentence of the third paragraph is from the Book of Genesis; the reference to the acetylene lady is actually a mis-remembered line from a poem by Sylvia Plath: ‘Fever 103°’; the final line repeats the epigram taken from Boethius.

‘These Are the Things That Should Remain Unsaid’ was inspired by reading a book about the essayist William Hazlitt (1778–1830). Jon Cook’s 2007 biographical study *Hazlitt in Love: A Fatal Attachment* is an account of Hazlitt’s obsessive and unrequited love for a much younger woman. Hazlitt’s controversial work *Liber Amoris* is his own version of this traumatic episode.

In ‘Miriam Leivers Reads *Middlemarch* and Thinks About Paul Morel’ almost all the quotations in italics are taken either from *Sons and Lovers* or from George Eliot’s novel *Middlemarch*. The first line of the poem, and the subsequent reference to ‘a cabbage alive’ are taken from Lawrence’s essay ‘Why the Novel Matters’. The first epigram is taken from an interview reprinted in *From a Tiny Corner in the House of Fiction: Conversations with Iris Murdoch*, edited by Gillian Dooley.

In ‘Lawrence, D.H., *The Rainbow* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1949)’ the quotations in the third paragraph are from the biographical material on the back cover of the Penguin paperback.

**ANCESTORS ASSERT THEIR IMMORTALITY:
ANNE CARSON WRITES ABOUT READING**

CHAPTER 1: LIKE STONES OF FIRE, LIKE POINTS OF STARS IN THE DARK: WRITING ABOUT READING

We shall often find that not only the best, but the most individual parts of [the poet's] work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously.

T.S. Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent'¹

Any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another.

Julia Kristeva, 'Word, Dialogue and Novel'²

I first discovered Anne Carson's work by accident, almost fifteen years ago. While I was browsing in a second-hand bookshop I picked up a copy of a collection called *Wild Workshop*, which includes her long narrative poem 'The Glass Essay'.³

Each of the three poems in *Wild Workshop* describes the aftermath of a failed love-affair. Carson's poem, like the others, is written in the first person and reads rather like a journal. The first short section sets the scene and describes the narrator's grief. But then almost immediately something more unexpected comes in: the narrator is reading the *Collected Works of Emily Brontë*. She begins by relating a rather conventional image of Emily Brontë to her own situation, but she carries on reading and, as the poem progresses, her reading becomes closer and her observations on Brontë's life and work become more complicated and insightful. It would be possible to sum up the poem by saying that reading Brontë helps the narrator to recuperate, but it does much more than that. Something more intriguing and compelling is happening.

As A.S. Byatt has pointed out, writers do not very often describe the experience of reading in the same way that they might describe 'the primary pleasures of eating, or drinking, or looking on or sex.'⁴ Yet all writers begin as readers, or should do. When I first read 'The Glass Essay' I had already discovered and greatly appreciated Byatt's descriptions of her protagonists' reading in her novels *Still Life* (1985) and *Possession* (1990): what they read, when and how they read it, the thoughts and feelings and insights and even epiphanies that come from reading. I recognised and remembered those 'readings which make the hairs on the neck, the non-existent pelt, stand on end and tremble, when every word burns and

¹ T.S. Eliot, *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (London: Faber and Faber, 1997), p.40.

² Julia Kristeva, *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. by Toril Moi (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), p.37.

³ Anne Carson, Kay Adshead and Bridget Meeds, *Wild Workshop* (London: Faber and Faber, 1997).

⁴ A.S. Byatt, *Possession: A Romance* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1990), p.470.

shines hard and clear and infinite and exact, like stones of fire, like points of stars in the dark.’⁵

At that time I had written several unpublished novels, but it had become clear that the novel was no longer the right form for what I wanted to say. I had been wondering whether I might try non-fiction, perhaps revisit the work that I had done on Virginia Woolf as a research student in the early 1980s, but I would not necessarily write about Woolf in a conventionally academic way. In the meantime I had also begun to read some contemporary poetry and to be excited by it, although I was not yet writing poems of my own.

Over the next few years I read more of Carson’s work. I noticed that all her collections of poetry to date have included at least one major piece that refers to one or more texts by another writer. These were the pieces that particularly intrigued me, even though I did not always like them immediately.

When I began to write my own poems it was noticeable that many of them (including one very early poem that was accepted for publication)⁶ were very interested in narratives and the act of reading. I knew that I wanted to find a way of writing about reading that acknowledged the importance of detached and analytical study but also included instinctive and emotional responses to literature in a way that might allow the different kinds of reading to enrich each other. Reading Carson’s poems and prose pieces persuaded me that that my own response to the work of another writer *could* be a legitimate subject for creative writing as well as critical writing and that it was possible to use poetic form (including the ‘lyric essay’) as a vehicle for responding to, appreciating, holding dialogues with and even arguing with literary texts and the other writers that have produced them. In addition, studying Carson’s work seemed to provide an opportunity to explore a number of different methods of responding to other texts: long narrative poems, lyric essays, alternative versions of existing narratives, novels in verse, poems in prose, poem sequences, and translations of various kinds from scholarly to ‘free’.

Another reason why it seemed appropriate to study Carson was that there are certain similarities in the paths that we have taken. Both of us have academic backgrounds: Carson is a scholarly classicist; I read English at Cambridge and, if circumstances had been different, I might have had an academic career myself. Both of us began as prose writers before making the transition to writing poems. Carson was a literary translator and a critic (her first

⁵ Byatt, *Possession*, p.471.

⁶ This poem is ‘Complications’, which is included on p.10 of this thesis in a slightly edited form.

published book, *Eros the Bittersweet* (1986) was based on her PhD thesis); I wrote a series of novellas during my teens and twenties. However there are some important differences: Carson's range of literary interests is much broader than my own, encompassing the classics and continental European writers and philosophers as well as English literature; she has also worked in a much wider range of genres than I have. Many of the pieces in her 2006 collection *Decreation* and in her latest collection, *Float* (2016), were originally written for live performance. In addition, Carson has illustrated some of her poems with her own drawings and with photographs, and she has also taken part in a number of collaborative projects.

Collaboration and conversation

All poets learn through imitation. Seamus Heaney describes the process by which, in his experience, a writer finds an individual voice:

In practice, you hear it coming from somebody else, you hear something in another writer's sounds that flows in through your ear and enters the echo-chamber of your head and delights your whole nervous system in such a way that your reaction will be, 'Ah, I wish I had said that, in that particular way.' This other writer, in fact, has spoken something essential to you, something you recognise instinctively as a true sounding of aspects of yourself and your experience. And your first steps as a writer will be to imitate, consciously or unconsciously, those sounds that flowed in, that in-fluence.⁷

Anne Carson was an academic classicist before she became an established poet. Classical attitudes to individual authorship were very different from contemporary attitudes. Originality was not highly valued; authors were expected to re-work established themes and ideas. Roman writers were encouraged to learn their craft by consciously imitating the great poets of the past, particularly the Greeks. As Susan Bassnett-McGuire has pointed out, Greek was the language of culture in Ancient Rome and therefore translation was an obvious method of imitation as educated Romans were able to read the source texts in the original.⁸ To be the Roman equivalent of Homer or Hesiod was something that a writer would aspire to.

Harold Bloom's important 1973 work, *The Anxiety of Influence*, develops a theory of poetry in which poetic history is indistinguishable from poetic influence. Bloom presents poetic influence as a 'battle between strong equals, father and son as mighty opposites, Laius

⁷ Seamus Heaney, 'Feeling into Words', in *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978* (London: Faber and Faber, 1980), p.44.

⁸ Susan Bassnett-McGuire, *Translation Studies*, Rev. edn (London; New York: Routledge, 1991), pp.44-45 and p.53.

and Oedipus at the crossroads'.⁹ Strong poets make that history by misreading one another, so as to clear imaginative space for themselves.¹⁰ They overthrow their precursors by various kinds of creative misreadings and swervings, including completion and mistranslation: 'a poet antithetically "completes" his precursor, by so reading the parent-poem as to retain its terms but to mean them in another sense, as though the precursor had failed to go far enough.'¹¹

In their ground-breaking 1979 work *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar develop and explore a feminist version of Bloom's theory of influence:

The 'anxiety of influence' that a male poet experiences is felt by a female poet as an even more primary 'anxiety of authorship', a radical fear that she cannot create, that because she can never become a 'precursor' the act of writing will isolate or destroy her [...]. And just as the male artist's struggle against his precursor takes the form of what Bloom calls revisionary swerves, flights, misreadings, so the female writer's battle for self-creation involves her in a revisionary process.[...] Frequently, however, she can begin such a struggle only by actively seeking a *female* precursor, who, far from representing a threatening force to be denied or killed, proves by example that a revolt against patriarchal literary authority is possible.¹²

Carson's 'precursors' – the other writers she explicitly refers to – are both male and female. In her 1998 collection *Autobiography of Red* Carson has done what Adrienne Rich suggested was necessary – seen an old text with fresh eyes and entered it from a different direction.¹³ She has both misread and completed the work of a male precursor: the *Geryoneis* of Stesichoros. (The original exists as incomplete jumbled fragments).

Carson is not known primarily as a feminist poet, but some of her work does engage with gender issues, for example 'Dirt and Desire: Essay on the Phenomenology of Female Pollution in Antiquity'.¹⁴ In 'The Glass Essay', the narrator reads and studies the work of Emily Brontë first as a means of support during a personal crisis, but then as a starting point, an image or an attitude that she can progress beyond and to some extent repudiate. In 'Ordinary Time: Virginia Woolf and Thucydides on War', the 'lyric essay' that begins her 2000 collection *Men in the Off Hours*, Carson implicitly acknowledges that reading both

⁹ Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (London; Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), p.11.

¹⁰ Bloom, *Anxiety of Influence*, p.5.

¹¹ Bloom, *Anxiety of Influence*, p.14.

¹² Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, 2nd edn (New Haven; London: Yale Nota Bene, 2000), pp.48-49.

¹³ Adrienne Rich, 'When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision', in *Adrienne Rich's Poetry and Prose: Poems, Prose, Reviews and Criticism*, ed. by Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi and Albert Gelpi (New York; London: Norton, 1993), p.167, cited in Gilbert and Gubar, p.49.

¹⁴ Anne Carson, *Men in the Off Hours*, (London: Cape Poetry, 2000), pp.130-157.

these precursors, but especially Woolf, has encouraged her to develop appropriate forms for her own writing.¹⁵

But when Carson references male writers such as Thucydides and Aristotle, she does not appear to be engaged in a struggle to overcome their influence. Instead, she acknowledges their presence and even includes their voices, often in the form of extended quotations, in her own work.

There have been several studies of the relationships between groups of writers and the reciprocal influences of these relationships on their writing. In *Becoming a Poet*, David Kalstone examines the relationship of Elizabeth Bishop with an important mentor, Marianne Moore, and then with a close friend and contemporary, Robert Lowell.¹⁶ Kalstone demonstrates that through her dialogue with Moore, Bishop learned how to craft the descriptive poetry that became her strength, while the correspondence between Bishop and Lowell had a fruitful influence on the work of both of them. In *The Grief of Influence*, Heather Clark describes the way in which Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath engaged in a dialogue through their work, as homage to each other, as a way of expressing their rivalry, and finally as a way of mourning their failed marriage. The dialogue continued even after Plath's suicide, in their final collections *Ariel* (which Hughes edited) and *Birthday Letters*.¹⁷

There are some similarities between what has happened in these relationships and what appears to be happening when Carson makes use of the work of other writers. Certainly she learns from them and there are many occasions when she pays explicit homage to her precursors, both male and female. But there is no suggestion, anywhere in her published work, that she regards any of the other writers she references as enemies or rivals. Another important difference is that the dialogue is one-sided. She responds to them, but being dead, they cannot respond to her.

There are other ways of thinking about Carson's relationships with other writers. Carson has produced several translations of works by classical poets and dramatists, including Sappho, Sophocles and Euripides.¹⁸ In addition, she often incorporates translations from classical authors into her own poems and lyric essays. For example, she uses her own

¹⁵ Carson, *Men in the Off Hours*, pp.3-8.

¹⁶ David Kalstone, *Becoming a Poet: Elizabeth Bishop with Marianne Moore and Robert Lowell*, ed. by Robert Hemenway (London: Hogarth Press, 1989).

¹⁷ Heather Clark, *The Grief of Influence: Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

¹⁸ Sappho, *If Not, Winter: Fragments of Sappho*, trans. by Anne Carson (London: Virago, 2003), Sophocles, *Electra*, trans. by Anne Carson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), and Euripides, *Grief Lessons: Four Plays by Euripides*, trans. by Anne Carson (New York: New York Review Books, 2006).

‘free’ translation of the *Geryoneis* of Stesichoros as part of the introductory material to *Autobiography of Red* and incorporates the process of translating a poem by Catullus into her elegy for her dead brother, *Nox* (2010).¹⁹ Translation involves a continuous process of extremely close reading and re-reading, of thinking on the meaning or even the multiple meanings of individual words and completed phrases. The translator must not only reach towards literal meaning. She must also attempt to express the sense and the spirit contained in words and phrases, which may be problematic or ambivalent. Carson herself has described it as ‘a room, not exactly an unknown room, where one gropes for the light switch. I guess it never ends.’²⁰ As I shall explain in a later chapter, Carson’s method of translating Sappho’s poems in *If Not, Winter* suggests that the act of translation engaged her in a kind of collaboration with the original text of Sappho’s poems. Many of her more ‘creative’ works seem to be the result of a similarly long process of reading and re-reading other texts. It is worth noting that Carson’s serious studies of literature would have begun during the late 1960s and early 1970s: at a time when New Critical methods of close reading, as demonstrated in works such as William Empson’s *Seven Types of Ambiguity* and Cleanth Brooks’ *The Well Wrought Urn*, were widely taught and practised.²¹

As well as overt and explicit references to other writers and to specific other texts, certain of Carson’s works contain echoes of other texts that are implicitly present within them. For example, one of the narrator’s visions in ‘The Glass Essay’ is strongly reminiscent of Sylvia Plath’s poem ‘Wuthering Heights’. *Autobiography of Red* shares many of the characteristics of magical realist works such as Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.²² It narrates fantastical and sometimes absurd events in a conventionally realistic way; the story is set in the late twentieth century, but its main protagonist is a winged red monster. It is not a coincidence that much of the action takes place in South America. Edith Hall has identified the *Inferno* of Dante Alighieri as another highly probable source for *Autobiography of Red*, even though Carson never openly refers to it.²³

¹⁹ Anne Carson, *Autobiography of Red: A Novel in Verse* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998).

²⁰ Anne Carson, *Nox* (New York: New Directions, 2010), Section 7.1 (Note: *Nox* has no page numbers.)

²¹ William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1930) and Cleanth Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry*, Rev. edn (London: Dennis Dobson, 1968).

²² Gabriel Garcia Marquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, trans. by Gregory Rabassa (London: Picador, 1978).

²³ Edith Hall, ‘The Autobiography of the Western Subject: Carson’s Geryon’ in *Living Classics: Greece and Rome in Contemporary Poetry in English* ed. by S.J. Harrison (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 218-237.

Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal

Borrowing from other writers carries particular risks and disadvantages. The writer may deface what she borrows or she may end by producing something that has no cohesion, something chaotic and meaningless.

One of the surest of tests is the way in which a poet borrows. Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different. The good poet welds his theft into a whole of feeling which is unique, utterly different from that from which it was torn; the bad poet throws it into something which has no cohesion.²⁴

By borrowing, T.S. Eliot means deliberately or unconsciously using and adapting another poet's lines without acknowledging the other poet; his essay goes on to illustrate the instances of lines that Philip Massinger has borrowed and adapted from Shakespeare, not always successfully. Carson's work does contain unacknowledged 'borrowings' from and allusions to other writers, and it is difficult to tell whether any particular instance is conscious or unconscious. Interestingly, 'The Glass Essay' contains at least one apparent echo of T.S. Eliot himself: the narrator says that, 'April snow folded its huge white paws over doors and porches'²⁵: a possible echo of Eliot's description of the yellow fog in 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock'.²⁶

But when she includes the other writer in the work, by naming and acknowledging them, Carson is doing something rather different from the stealing and borrowing that Eliot goes on to describe. Stealing would imply not acknowledging her use of or her debt to the other.

Carson's practice of referring to scholarly and literary texts in her poetry is discussed by most of the critics that have written on her work to date. Like Eliot, David C. Ward observes that poets have always appropriated the work of other writers for source material and inspiration.²⁷ But he is critical of Carson's approach, in particular the incorporation of direct quotations from other texts into her own poems, arguing that this is merely 'the repackaging of established artistic brands', rather than creating something new.²⁸ 'Classicists work from texts, post-modern poets from within their heads and Carson's unstable attempt at

²⁴ T.S. Eliot, 'Philip Massinger', in *The Sacred Wood*, pp.105-106.

²⁵ Anne Carson, 'The Glass Essay', in *Glass and God* (London: Cape Poetry, 1998), p.45.

²⁶ T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land and Other Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1940), pp.9-10.

²⁷ David C. Ward, 'Anne Carson: Addressing the Wound', *PN Review* 139 (May/June 2001), 13-16. This article mainly focuses on Carson's collection *Men in the Off Hours*.

²⁸ Ward, 'Addressing the Wound', p.13.

marrying the two disciplines continually jars.’²⁹ In an essay on Carson’s collection *Decreation*, James Pollock observes that when Carson’s work is not successful it is because her experiments with form and rhetoric, including quotations from other writers, ‘overpower the limits of the lyric’.³⁰

Ward also argues that the frequent quotations overshadow the works that they form a part of or introduce. For example, a series of poems about the realist painter Edward Hopper, in which Ward recognises the ‘borrowed’ styles of William Carlos Williams and e.e. cummings, are given epigraphs from St Augustine’s *Confessions*. He also comments on the ‘gulf in emotion and technique’ between Carson’s poems on Anna Akhmatova and Akhmatova’s own poems (which Carson does not quote). *Men in the Off Hours* includes the poem, ‘TV Men: Sappho’, which is loosely based upon Sappho’s ‘Fragment 31’; later in the collection, Carson’s actual translation of ‘Fragment 31’ is incorporated into a lyric essay, ‘Dirt and Desire: Essay on the Phenomenology of Female Pollution in Antiquity’.³¹ In order to grasp the significance of the ‘T.V. Men’ version, the reader has to be familiar with the original, but there is a danger that a reader who *is* familiar with the original will simply regret its absence and experience the alternative version as disappointing in comparison.

This highlights a further difficulty. To what extent can a long poem, or a sequence, or a prose poem or ‘lyric essay’ allude to, or be ‘about’ another work of literature, or another writer and still stand alone? In order to understand or appreciate or be moved by a work that references other writings, how familiar does the reader have to be with those other writings? Carson has likened the process of translation to ‘doing an endless crossword puzzle but with a valuable product’; readers who study her creative work may not necessarily agree that ‘that puzzle mode of mind is simply the best thing’.³² What strategies can a writer use to make it more likely that she can, as Eliot said, weld her borrowing or theft into something better, ‘a whole of feeling which is unique, utterly different from that from which it was torn’? Must she always run the risk of irritating and alienating those readers who might be inclined to view her work as nothing more than showing off her erudition?

Given the very serious potential problems associated with using other texts, what does Carson’s strategy of referencing other writers and other works achieve? Lee Upton argues

²⁹ Ward, ‘Addressing the Wound’, p.14.

³⁰ James Pollock, *You Are Here: Essays on the Art of Poetry in Canada* (Ontario: Porcupine’s Quill, 2012), p.54.

³¹ Carson, *Men in the Off Hours*, p.118 and pp.130-157.

³² Eleanor Wachtel, ‘An Interview with Anne Carson’, *Brick Magazine*, No 89, Summer 2012, p.30.

that Carson's deliberate blurring of the boundaries between poetry and scholarship functions as a means of 'defending' her more personal subject matter, often a narrative of unrequited or uncompleted love, or of betrayal, for example in the long narrative poems 'The Glass Essay' and *The Beauty of the Husband*.³³ Carson's strategies can function as a means of establishing distance between the poem and the reader and between the poem and its ostensible subject. For Upton, Carson's use of other texts illustrates her general thesis concerning mechanisms of shielding, 're-treating' and resistance in women's poetry. I hope to show that, for Carson, the work of other writers has not only this function, but several other vital functions within her own creative work; not least that it provides her with inspiration.

This study will necessarily focus on a very small number of Carson's poems, but it will also attempt to address some of the general questions that are raised when a poem makes explicit and extended reference to the life and work of another writer.

Chapter 2 will consider Carson as a translator. Not only does literary translation offer considerable scope to refresh and re-invent the work of another writer, but for Carson the translation process has provided an important way of reading and responding to other writers. An extended consideration of her translations is beyond the scope of this study and therefore this chapter will focus on Carson's translation of 'Fragment 31' ('He seems to me equal to Gods that man...') as it appears in her 2002 edition of the works of Sappho, *If Not, Winter* and elsewhere in her work. I will also consider some of the different ways in which Carson has incorporated 'Fragment 31', into her own prose poems and lyric essays. Finally I will attempt to evaluate the impact of Carson's translation practice upon her own writing.

Chapter 3 will examine another way of collaborating with a prior text: close reading. It will focus on Carson's long narrative poem 'The Glass Essay' (included in her 1998 collection *Glass and God*). It will analyse the various ways in which Carson, through a narrator's voice, uses numerous references to the life and work of Emily Brontë: to complicate and enrich her own narrative; to help her to confront distressing issues in her personal life; to draw attention to the process of editing one's own and others' personal narratives; to help her reflect on her own situation through comparison and juxtaposition; and to provide an impetus for her own meditations on love, confinement, the natural world and the divine.

³³ Lee Upton, *Defensive Measures: The Poetry of Neidecker, Bishop, Gluck, and Carson* (Lewisberg: Bucknell University Press, 2005), pp.109-119. See Anne Carson, *The Beauty of the Husband: A Fictional Essay in 29 Tangos* (London: Cape Poetry, 2001).

Chapter 4 will connect my critical thesis with my creative writing and will describe and evaluate the contribution that my reading of Carson's work has made to my own poems and essays. In particular I will consider the issue of whether a work such as 'The Glass Essay' or *Autobiography of Red* can stand alone and exist as a separate entity for a reader who may not be familiar with the original works that have inspired it.

CHAPTER 2: TRANSLATION OR RECREATION: WHAT HAS ANNE CARSON MADE OF THE GREEKS?

Anne Carson decided to learn Greek after she accidentally found a bilingual edition of Sappho's poems in a bookshop. When asked what attracted her to Greek and why it became her subject, Carson replied that 'the mental activity of being inside a translation is something I simply love. It's like doing an endless crossword puzzle but with a valuable product. And that puzzle mode of mind is simply the best thing.'³⁴

Sappho, Stesichoros and other classical poets have clearly been a crucial source of inspiration for Carson. This chapter will consider to what extent, and in what way, the actual process of translation has influenced the development of her other writing. Because a comprehensive study of Anne Carson's translations is well beyond the scope of this chapter, I shall focus on her translations of Sappho and particularly on the poem that is generally known as 'Fragment 31'.

There are a number of different reasons why one poet may wish to translate the work of another. She may be tired of her own voice and need refreshment, or, like Carson, her imagination may have been fired by the work of someone else writing in another language. She may be a classical scholar (again like Carson) or a modern linguist. Poets who translate other poets generally agree that, as David Constantine has asserted, 'Translation is good for you.'³⁵ It provides access to valuable new reading and, for a writer, it offers a salutary shock of foreignness. By opening oneself up to foreign influences one can become a better poet.

The process of translation can be, and often is, described as 'carrying across', but this description over-simplifies what most literary translators experience as a much more complicated and challenging process. The poet Fiona Sampson likens translation to active listening and also observes that translation is an individual act of meaning-making.³⁶ Matthew Reynolds has traced the metaphors used to describe the process of translating poetry: "translation as interpretation" and as "opening"; as "friendship", "desire", and "passion"; as "adhesion"; as "taking a view", as "moving across a landscape", and as

³⁴ Eleanor Wachtel, 'An Interview with Anne Carson', p.30.

³⁵ David Constantine, *A Living Language* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 2004). 'Translation is good for you' is the title of the first essay.

³⁶ Fiona Sampson, 'Mind the Gap: Translation as a Form of Listening', in *On Listening* (Cambridge: Salt, 2007), p.24.

“zoom”; as “loss”, “death”, “resurrection” and “metamorphosis”³⁷. He believes that translation is an act of collaboration between the poet and the translator. ‘What literary translation captures is not simply in the source text but is brought into being by the continuous process of reading-and-making-sense-and-translating.’ This is why Walter Benjamin, in the 1923 essay ‘Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers’ (‘The Task of the Translator’) said that literary translations should not aim for ‘alikehood’ or ‘similarity’ with their sources, but rather for a deeper connection which allows ‘kinship’.³⁸

Listens close to your sweet speaking

Throughout her career as a poet and as an academic, Carson has repeatedly returned to Sappho and particularly to ‘Fragment 31’. The title of her first published work, *Eros the Bittersweet*, is taken from Sappho’s ‘Fragment 130’ and passages from Sappho’s poems are quoted and discussed throughout. ‘Fragment 31’ is included (in both Greek and English) in its entirety in one of the early chapters.³⁹ As well as producing a comprehensive translation of Sappho’s poetic fragments in *If Not, Winter*, Carson has twice incorporated her translation of ‘Fragment 31’ into a larger work within a collection: as part of a prose poem, or ‘lyric essay’ in *Men in the Off Hours* in 2000; and again within a ‘lyric essay’ in *Decreation* in 2006.⁴⁰ *Men in the Off Hours* and *Decreation* each contain one other poem that references ‘Fragment 31’.⁴¹

Sappho lived on the island of Lesbos from about 630 B.C.⁴² Not a great deal is known about her life. As Josephine Balmer comments, ‘Evidence is slight and, as is so often the case with classical history, most of the details are tentative.’⁴³ It is believed that the greater part of her work has been lost or destroyed, perhaps deliberately.⁴⁴ That which

³⁷ Matthew Reynolds, *The Poetry of Translation: From Chaucer and Petrarch to Homer and Logue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p.6

³⁸ Reynolds, *The Poetry of Translation*, pp. 29-30. See also the following discussion of Paul Muldoon’s translation of Montale’s ‘The Eel’, which shows how ‘the eel’s journey and return bear a glancing resemblance to the to-ing and fro-ing of the translating imagination between English words and the ‘ur-poem.’ (p.47).

³⁹ Anne Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet* (Champaign: London: Dalkey Archive Press, 1998), pp.12-13.

⁴⁰ Carson, *Men in the Off Hours*, pp.130-157 and *Decreation: Poetry, Essays, Opera* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2006), pp.155-183.

⁴¹ Carson, ‘TV Men: Sappho’, in *Men in the Off Hours*, p.118 and ‘Ma Moglie (Longinus’ Red Desert)’, in *Decreation*, pp.67-68.

⁴² Carson, *If Not, Winter*, p.ix. All future references to *If Not, Winter* will be given in the body of the text.

⁴³ *Sappho: Poems and Fragments*, trans. by Josephine Balmer (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1992), p.8. Balmer’s Introduction to the poems (pp.7-23) provides a summary of the known and agreed facts and sets Sappho’s poems in their historical context. See also C. M. Bowra, *Greek Lyric Poetry: From Alcman to Simonides*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961), pp.176-177 and *The Sappho Companion*, ed. by Margaret Reynolds (London: Chatto and Windus, 2000), pp.2-5.

⁴⁴ *The Sappho Companion*, p.18.

survives consists almost entirely of fragments; there is only one complete poem. The fragments are of two kinds: those preserved on papyrus; and those quoted by other classical authors. While there are some poems that are almost complete, many of the papyrus rolls were torn into strips lengthwise, so that only fragments of the poems – the middles of some lines, the ends of others and some half-lines – have survived. Even where a poem is reasonably complete, damage to the papyri means that some words are difficult to decipher.⁴⁵ The poems quoted by other classical authors, such as Longinus, Catullus and Ovid, are often used to illustrate a point of style and, as Carson explains in her Introduction to the poems, the translator has to contend with extracts quoted out of context because grammarians and scholars ‘want a dab of poetry to decorate some proposition of their own’ (INW p.xi).

The more I stand out of the way

There exists a considerable volume of theoretical and other writing on the subject of literary translation and it would be impossible to engage with all of it in detail within this brief study. However, it is generally accepted that there are two broad approaches: the ‘word for word’ or ‘literal translation’, in which the translator tries as far as possible to reproduce the original exactly, retaining the ‘foreignness’ and unfamiliarity of the source text; and the ‘sense for sense’ or ‘paraphrase’, which translates the source text into the target language in a way that privileges the ‘sense’ or ‘meaning’ of the original.⁴⁶ Other writers have used different terminology. David Constantine expresses the choice of a translator’s essential approach as being between ‘service’ (a functional text) and ‘autonomy’,⁴⁷ Michael Hamburger distinguishes between ‘mimesis’ and ‘functional equivalence’,⁴⁸ and Jorge Luis Borges uses the terms ‘Romantic’ (literal, focusing on the artist) and ‘Classical’ (paraphrase, focusing on the work of art).⁴⁹ In practice most literary translations fall somewhere between these two contrasting approaches. The approach adopted by a translator may be influenced by the salient characteristics of the source text and by the specific purpose of the translation:

⁴⁵ Balmer, p.26 and Mary Barnard, Footnote, *Sappho: A New Translation*, trans. by Mary Barnard (Berkeley; London: University of California Press, 1958), pp.104-105.

⁴⁶ Reynolds, *The Poetry of Translation*, p. 74. Reynolds explains that this binary approach ‘goes back through St Jerome to Horace and Cicero.’

⁴⁷ David Constantine, *Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p.44.

⁴⁸ Michael Hamburger, ‘On Translating Celan’, in *Testimonies* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1989), pp.279-80, cited in Constantine, *Poetry*, p.42.

⁴⁹ Jorge Luis Borges, ‘Two ways to Translate’, in *On Writing*, ed. by Suzanne Jill Levine (London: Penguin, 2010), pp.55-56.

If it is a commission for a certain theatre director or company, the translator will be given parameters as to what kind of translation is required. If it's a free adventure of creativity, the translator will have their own attitude to that.⁵⁰

Carson is in no doubt about the approach that she has adopted in relation to Sappho. In the introduction to *If Not, Winter*, she says: 'In translating, I tried to put down all that can be read of each poem in the plainest language I could find, using where possible the same order of words and thoughts as Sappho did. I like to think that, the more I stand out of the way, the more Sappho shows through' (INW p.x).

On the Sublime and afterwards

'Fragment 31' has survived because the classical literary critic Longinus cited it in his treatise *On the Sublime*. As Carson says in the notes to her translation, no one knows why Longinus broke off the poem at that point, after four complete stanzas and one odd dangling line, which may have been the beginning of a fifth stanza (INW p.364). The poem has been translated many times. One reason for this may be that as Yopie Prins has suggested, in 'Fragment 31' Sappho seems to give birth to the lyric 'I': 'the conception of a singular self that also speaks as generalised lyric subject'.⁵¹ One of the earliest translators was the Roman poet Catullus. His Latin version ('Poem 51') may have been a model for many of the early English translators. Since then, there have been versions by Sir Philip Sidney, Tobias Smollett, Alfred Tennyson and more recently by a very large number of poets and scholars including Guy Davenport, Robert Lowell, Mary Barnard, Josephine Balmer and of course, Carson herself.

How can a poet produce an original translation of a poem that has already been attempted so many times? One solution is to offer an alternative version, a variation on the original, an imitation, 'recreation' or 'appropriation', rather than an actual translation; a choice made by Sir Philip Sidney and Robert Lowell, among others.⁵² This can be one way of circumventing another problem: who are the three people in the poem and what is the relationship between them? And how much does it matter? The original Greek texts employ feminine endings; it is clear that the speaker is a woman. But when the poem is read in

⁵⁰ Interview with Andrew David King, 'Unwriting the Books of the Dead', Kenyon Review, October 6 2012, <http://www.kenyonreview.org/2012/10/anne-carson-robert-currie-interview/> [accessed 29 November 2015].

⁵¹ Yopie Prins, 'Sappho's Afterlife in Translation', in Ellen Greene ed., *Re-Reading Sappho: Reception and Transmission* (Berkeley; London: University of California Press, 1996), p.38. Prins comments on several translations of 'Fragment 31', including some of the earlier ones.

⁵² Sir Philip Sidney, 'My Muse, What Ails this Ardour?', in *Sappho Through English Poetry*, ed. by Peter Jay and Caroline Lewis (London: Anvil Press Poetry, 1996), p.33 and Robert Lowell, 'Three Letters to Anaktoria', in *Imitations*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1971), p.3.

English, the speaker could be either male or female. Lowell precedes his sequence of Sappho poems with a short note explaining that the man, or hero, loves Anaktoria, later Sappho, so that the poem can be read from a male perspective. Mario Petrucci's more recent adaptation adopts a similar strategy; there are only two people, rather than a triangular relationship.⁵³

Most recent commentators have read 'Fragment 31' as the expression of love of Sappho for another woman, and her jealousy of the man who is apparently about to claim her. However, Josephine Balmer has pointed out that we cannot know for certain that the poem is autobiographical; it could be a small fragment of a larger dramatic work.⁵⁴ And again, Carson makes her own attitude clear, saying 'It seems that [Sappho] knew or loved women as deeply as she did music. Can we leave the matter there?' She prefers to focus on Sappho's poetry rather than on what she describes as 'controversies about her personal ethics and way of life' (INW p.x).

Although I will refer to several recent translations and versions of 'Fragment 31' I have chosen to discuss Carson's translation by comparing it mainly with that of two other translators: Mary Barnard and Josephine Balmer. Both produced complete volumes of all or most of Sappho's poems, both are (or were) practising poets in their own right and both knew Greek. Therefore, on the surface, their approach to Sappho's poetry could be assumed or expected to have much in common with Carson's. Both Barnard's and Balmer's translations are highly regarded and interesting as poems.

The underlying cadence

As Carson reminds us, Sappho was a lyric poet; her poetry was composed to be sung to the lyre (INW p.ix). This means that one important decision the translator has to make is whether to try as far as possible to retain the original verse form, sentence structures and word orders, neatening them only just enough to preserve the sense, or whether to aim for a rendering that respects and preserves the musicality and fluidity of the original.

In translating Sappho, Mary Barnard made no attempt to reproduce the original metre, because Greek normally has more syllables than English.⁵⁵ She explained that instead she tried to find an equivalent for the underlying cadence, one that belongs to the speaking

⁵³ Mario Petrucci, *Sappho: Adaptations – Imitations – Extensions* (Enfield: Perdika Press, 2008), p.19.

⁵⁴ Balmer, *Sappho: Poems and Fragments*, p.14.

⁵⁵ Barnard, *Sappho: A New Translation*, Poem 39. (N.B. There are no page numbers in this edition.)

voice.⁵⁶ ‘I found here in Sappho’s Greek [...] the style I had been groping toward, or perhaps merely hungering for, when I ceased to write poetry a number of years before. It was spare but musical, and had, besides, the sound of the speaking voice making a simple but emotionally loaded statement. [...] It is resonant although unmistakably in the female register.’⁵⁷

Barnard’s version departs from the stanzaic form of the original Greek; instead, she uses tercets, six stanzas with short lines. She uses the stanza break between the third and fourth stanza to convey the abrupt shock of meeting the love object: ‘[...] I can’t| speak...’ The sounds are soft, with lots of vowels (‘allowed’, ‘murmur’, ‘laughter’, ‘paler’) and phrases naturally follow and echo one another, for example, ‘seeing nothing,| hearing only my own ears| drumming’.

Letting Sappho speak for herself

Another factor that will determine a translator’s choice of individual words and particularly of adverbs and adjectives, is the extent to which she wants to reproduce the imagery and vocabulary of the original. Josephine Balmer has said that her aim was to reproduce Sappho’s poetry as faithfully as possible, to preserve the form, content and tone of the original Greek, to allow Sappho to speak for herself.⁵⁸ She was particularly interested in reclaiming Sappho’s power and vigour, countering earlier male translators who tended to use ‘rather florid’ language thought appropriate for a woman poet.⁵⁹

Balmer has commented that the Greek lexicon is far less extensive than the English and therefore its vocabulary is far more flexible, allowing the same adjective to work in several different contexts with several shades of meaning.⁶⁰ As an example, she notes one particular difficulty concerning the Greek word *chloros* in the final stanza. *Chloros* can mean anything from dark green to pale yellow. Carson translates it as ‘greener than grass’, Barnard uses the phrase, ‘paler than dry grass’,⁶¹ while other versions have variously said: ‘more

⁵⁶ Sarah Barnsley, *Mary Barnard: American Imagist* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2013), p.105.

⁵⁷ Mary Barnard, *Assault on Mount Helicon: A Literary Memoir* (Berkeley; London: University of California Press, 1984), p.282.

⁵⁸ Balmer, *Sappho: Poems and Fragments*, p.30.

⁵⁹ Balmer: *Sappho: Poems and Fragments*, p.29 and p.38. See also Josephine Balmer, *Piecing Together the Fragments: Translating Classical Verse, Creating Contemporary Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp.75-80. Balmer explains that her translation was influenced by the work of Mary Lefkowitz and other feminist scholars and implies that later translators (which would have included Carson), appear to have been similarly influenced.

⁶⁰ Balmer, *Sappho: Poems and Fragments*, p.28.

⁶¹ Barnard, *Sappho: A New Translation*, Poem 39.

sallow than grass',⁶² 'I am paler than dry grass',⁶³ and 'paler than straw'.⁶⁴ Balmer explains that while the phrase is thought to refer to colour draining from the speaker's face, the word *chloros* was used to describe the rich colour of foliage and may well be an echo of the Homeric phrase 'green fear': the emotion felt by Homer's warriors in battle, rather than envy.⁶⁵

Other points of difficulty include the verb form *eptoaisen* (particularly important in Carson's translation and discussed later in this chapter) and the unusual verb form *epirrombesi*, which both Balmer and Terence Du Quesne identify as describing the sound of the *rhombus*, or 'bull roarer' used in Dionysian ritual to induce altered states of consciousness.⁶⁶ Carson uses 'drumming' ears (INW p.63), other translators have referred to 'roaring' ears, or to 'thunder' in the ears.⁶⁷ Balmer's third stanza ends with the lines: 'my eyes see nothing, my ears whistle like| the whirling of a top'.⁶⁸

Balmer's translation retains the original structure and appearance of the Greek fragment: four stanzas of four lines each and one separate broken line. 'I wanted to recapture the Sapphic stanza, which had rather fallen out of fashion in English translations, using a syllabic verse count to stand in for the difficulties of Greek metre, measured by syllable length rather than by stress as in English'.⁶⁹ Barnard chose to privilege musicality and cadence, Balmer had to find her own solution to the problems of rendering Sappho's metre into English. Anne Carson has also chosen to preserve the Sapphic stanza.

⁶² *Sappho: Stung with Love: Poems and Fragments*, ed. and trans. by Aaron Pochigian (London: Penguin Books, 2009), p.23.

⁶³ *Sappho of Lesbos: The Poems: A New Translation*, ed. and trans. by Terence DuQuesne (Thame, Oxon.: Darengo Publications in association with Prebendal Press, [c1990], p.38

⁶⁴ Thomas Meyer, *Sappho: Translations by Thomas Meyer* (London: Coracle Press, 1982). (Note: there are no page numbers and the poems are untitled.)

⁶⁵ Balmer, *Sappho: Poems and Fragments*, p.38.

⁶⁶ Balmer, *Piecing Together the Fragments*, p.78 and Du Quesne, p.39. In Chapter 5 of *Piecing Together the Fragments*, 'A Broken Voice Through the Silence', pp.73-99, Balmer discusses her translation of Sappho's poems in detail, explaining the issues and her choices and focusing on several individual fragments.

⁶⁷ Pochigian, *Sappho: Stung with Love*, p.23 and Robert Lowell, *Imitations*, p.3.

⁶⁸ Balmer, *Sappho: Poems and Fragments*, p.38.

⁶⁹ Balmer, *Piecing Together the Fragments*, p.81.

Tongue breaks

This is Anne Carson's translation of 'Fragment 31':

He seems to me equal to gods that man
whoever he is who opposite you
sits and listens close
to your sweet speaking

and lovely laughing – oh it
puts the heart in my chest on wings
for when I look at you, even a moment, no speaking
is left in me

no: tongue breaks and thin
fire is racing under skin
and in eyes no sight and drumming
fills ears

and cold sweat holds me and shaking
grips me all, greener than grass
I am and dead – or almost
I seem to me.

But all is to be dared, because even a person of poverty (INW p.63)

Carson's translation has several interesting features. Her decision to preserve the original word order, where possible, results in the slightly awkward first two lines. The line break falls in the middle of a phrase, emphasising the duplication of 'he' and 'that man' in the first line. Momentarily, the meaning is a little difficult to unpick, although in the remainder of the poem, the sense is plain. But her ordering has the more felicitous effect of giving the poem symmetry; what Carson calls 'a unity of music and sense' (INW p.364). The first stanza begins, 'He seems to me' and this is echoed at the end of the fourth stanza – the 'main body' of the poem as it stands: 'I seem to me', so that the poem comes back to the place where it started – or very nearly. This penultimate line appears to be a near-literal translation. It emphasises the general movement of the speaker's attention as the poem progresses; it begins by looking at the man whose attention is apparently focused on the person loved by the speaker, and then through two lines moves to very briefly consider the speaker's loved one before the speaker's attention settles on herself, and remains on herself from line six onwards. That this movement of attention is Sappho's, not Carson's, is clear from comparing versions by different translators, but both Barnard and Balmer (and most other translators,

including Meyer, Du Quesne, and Poochigan) finish the fourth stanza, and in some cases the whole poem, with the idea of death.⁷⁰ Barnard's last line is 'death isn't far from me' and Balmer's penultimate line is 'a step away from death'.⁷¹

Carson preserves Sappho's alliteration: 'sweet speaking' and 'lovely laughing' and 'greener than grass'. (Compare this with Barnard's 'the sweet murmur of your voice, the enticing laughter' and Balmer's 'the sweetness of your voice and the thrill of your laugh').⁷² In general, Carson's language is plainer and sparer than that of other translators, for example: 'listens close', rather than 'listens intimately', or 'savours, as you speak'; and 'tongue breaks', rather than 'my tongue is broken', or 'my tongue is struck silent'. In her notes, she comments that the transmitted text contains a hiatus that contravenes the rules of Greek metrics, so that most editors mark the verse as corrupt (INW pp.363-364). Carson has retained this, because it 'creates a ragged sound that may be meant to suggest breakdown', which is conveyed in the English by the sudden and unusual colon: 'no: tongue breaks'.

Although Carson's own poetry is not normally noted for its musicality, her version of 'Fragment 31' does, on the whole, move fluently and transmit some of the lyric quality that would have been present in the original. Her decision to produce as literal a translation as possible has meant that some of the conjunctions and personal pronouns that would normally be present in English are omitted, with the result that when the speaker begins to tell her physical symptoms, two things happen.

On the one hand, the sense of the words and phrases indicates fragmentation and brokenness, the way that the speaker seems to be almost literally 'falling apart' or disintegrating. Speech, sight, hearing leave her. Tongue, skin, eyes, ears, each exist somewhere separate and detached from her. It is as if, after the words, 'I look at you', she leaves the poem and only returns in the final stanza, when cold sweat holds her, shaking grips her, forces all of her back together and into herself again, to die – or almost, to say, near the end: 'greener than grass| *I am*' (like an affirmative heartbeat) and then 'I seem to me'.

But on the other hand, rather than the jerkiness and ragged edges that sometimes characterise Carson's own poems, the absence of personal words makes the lines begin to race, like the fire under the speaker's skin. The enjambments in the third stanza, 'thin| fire'

⁷⁰ See also Carson's own analysis of the poem in *Eros the Bittersweet*, pp.12-17 and Prins, 'Sappho's Afterlife in Translation', in Greene, pp.38-46. Yopie Prins' more theoretical reading is based partly on an earlier but very similar translation by Carson.

⁷¹ Barnard, *Sappho: A New Translation*, Poem 39 and Balmer, *Sappho: Poems and Fragments*, p.38.

⁷² Barnard, *Sappho: A New Translation*, Poem 39 and Balmer, *Sappho: Poems and Fragments*, p.38.

and ‘drumming| fills ears’, add to the sense of speed and pulsing urgency. The reintroduction of ‘me’ in the final stanza (‘cold sweat holds me and shaking| grips me all’), slows the pace back down again.

It puts the heart in my chest on wings

In line six, Carson uses an interesting form of words when she translates the verb form *eptoaisen* (used to describe the fear of trapped birds)⁷³: ‘oh it| puts the heart in my chest on wings’. Barnard says, ‘makes my own heart beat fast’, Balmer says, ‘which have so stirred the heart’, while some other translators say that the heart ‘flutters’⁷⁴ or ‘reels’⁷⁵ (language that echoes conventional love poetry). In *Eros the Bittersweet* Carson explains the significance of wings:

Wings, in traditional poetry, are the mechanism by which Eros swoops upon the unsuspecting lover to wrest control of his person and personality. Wings are an instrument of damage and a symbol of irresistible power. When you fall in love, change sweeps through you on wings and you cannot help but lose your grip on that cherished entity, your self.[...] As desire takes over [Sappho’s] body, mind and perceptual functions she says *eptoaisen*, which means something like ‘it puts the heart in my chest on wings’ or ‘it makes my heart fly inside me’.⁷⁶

In Carson’s version of ‘Fragment 31’, putting the heart on wings combines the idea of rapid beating and excitement with the idea of fearful joy; the phrase seems to dance and soar and fly off at the end of the line.

But all is to be dared

Translating ‘Fragment 31’ poses one very particular problem: how to deal with the dangling odd broken line at the end of the poem. Some translators, like Mary Barnard, discard it in the interest of producing a harmonious whole, as the original would have been. Others include the line, but render it in such a way that it ‘belongs’ to the poem, for example: ‘But I must submit to everything’⁷⁷; ‘But I must suffer further, worthless as I am’;⁷⁸ or ‘to suffer this, a slave now.’⁷⁹ Catullus famously added a new verse that had nothing to do with the main body of the poem, in which he berated himself for his idleness. Josephine Balmer provides a close translation that still seems to look back to the previous stanzas: ‘but all can

⁷³ Balmer, *Piecing Together the Fragments*, p.78.

⁷⁴ Sappho: *One Hundred Lyrics*, trans. by Bliss Carman (London: Chatto and Windus, 1930), p.10.

⁷⁵ DuQuesne, *Sappho of Lesbos: The Poems*, p.38.

⁷⁶ Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*, pp.155-156.

⁷⁷ DuQuesne, *Sappho of Lesbos: The Poems*, p.38.

⁷⁸ Poochigilan, *Sappho: Stung with Love*, p.23.

⁷⁹ Meyer, *Sappho*, (note: there are no page numbers).

be endured since even a pauper....’⁸⁰ Carson’s version, as it appears in *If Not, Winter, does* include the final line: ‘But all is to be dared, because even a person of poverty’. In both *Eros the Bittersweet* and *Men in the Off Hours* she omits the final line, whereas in *Decreation*, as in *If Not, Winter*, she includes it. This is the only significant difference between the four versions.

In *Men in the Off Hours*, Carson embeds Fragment 31 in a feminist essay called ‘Dirt and Desire: Essay on the Phenomenology of Female Pollution in Antiquity’.⁸¹ Carson explains that in ancient Greek society, male terror of female leakage and pollution resulted in certain rituals and customs whose purpose was to put boundaries around women. In ancient Greek wedding ceremonies, the moment at which the bride is unveiled, when her face is touched by the male gaze and her boundaries are symbolically penetrated, is the moment at which she becomes married. Carson uses ‘Fragment 31’ to illuminate these ideas of boundaries and permeability; she tells us that the speaker, Sappho herself, is standing behind the love-object of the poem (the bride) and is acting as a kind of bridesmaid, as was customary, helping her to lift off the heavy veil. Carson comments: ‘the bride is unveiled, but the poet renders herself transparent [...] she plays havoc with boundaries and defies the rules that keep matter in its place.’⁸²

In this context, what Carson does with the last line is subversive. Her decision to omit it makes the poem *appear* to be neatly bounded at each end: ‘He seems to me’ at the beginning echoed by ‘I seem to me’ at the end. But the poem, minus its last line, still breaches the boundaries. Instead of ending that line with a full stop, as in her later translation, she ends with an ellipsis, trailing dots; the poem is leaking away.⁸³

This essay ends with ‘Fragment 31’, but in ‘Decreation: How Women like Sappho, Marguerite Porete and Simone Weil Tell God’, ‘Fragment 31’ – this time including the dangling line – is Carson’s starting point. And in this essay, although she repeats some of the same comments she made earlier in *Eros the Bittersweet* and elsewhere, she reads the poem differently. She reads it as a spiritual event, as religious ecstasy, or *ekstasis*, literally ‘standing outside oneself’. For Carson, what points towards this reading is that last broken line, which she translates a little differently from most other translators. For example,

⁸⁰ Balmer, *Sappho: Poems and Fragments*, p.38

⁸¹ Carson, *Men in the Off Hours*, pp.130-157.

⁸² Carson, *Men in the Off Hours*, p.152.

⁸³ Carson, *Men in the Off Hours*, p.150.

Josephine Balmer's version says 'all can be endured'⁸⁴ and others say, 'I must suffer further'⁸⁵ and 'I must submit'⁸⁶. Carson's version says 'all is to be dared', rather than endured or suffered, which suggests a voluntary action, something undertaken willingly, rather than something that the poet submits to. The use of the words 'person of poverty', rather than 'poor man' or 'pauper' is also interesting; Carson evidently intends to suggest the religious or spiritual connotations of poverty, rather than its social or economic ones. This is what she says about the last line:

It is a new thought. [...] Unfortunately we don't reach the end, the poem breaks off. But we do see Sappho begin to turn towards it, towards this unreachable end. We see her senses empty themselves, we see her Being thrown outside its own centre where it stands observing her as if she were grass or dead. [...] Perhaps she is posing not the usual lovesong complaint, *Why don't you love me?* but a deeper spiritual question, *What is it that love dares the self to do?* Daring enters the poem in the last verse when Sappho uses the word *tolmaton*: 'is to be dared'. This word is a verbal adjective and expresses a mood of possibility or potential.⁸⁷

An amiable fantasy

It is to be expected that different versions might evolve as a translator works with the source text over a period of time. However, the existence of different versions does illustrate Carson's own comments in her introduction to the poems: '[transparency of self] is an amiable fantasy within which most translators labor' (INW p.x). Elsewhere, she has said, 'a translation always has a context'⁸⁸ and the context – the train of thought that she follows in each of her lyric essays – has clearly influenced her treatment of that last, dangling line.

Translators do not only make choices about individual poems. They also have to make choices about the way in which they present or organise the whole collection or volume that they have translated. *If Not, Winter* is based very closely on a published scholarly edition of the Greek text: *Sappho et Alcaeus: Fragmenta*, edited by Eva-Maria Voigt (Amsterdam, 1971) (INW p.x). Both Barnard and Balmer also base their collections on specific editions of the Greek texts, but they re-order the fragments; Barnard groups them into six sections loosely by theme (in one instance forming a sequence that tells the story of a wedding) and Balmer arranges the poems under nine different headings: Love, Desire, Despair, Marriage, Mother and Daughter, The Goddess of Love, Religion, Poetry and the Muses, and Nature and

⁸⁴ Balmer, *Sappho: Poems and Fragments*, p.38

⁸⁵ Poochigian, *Sappho: Stung with Love* p.23.

⁸⁶ Du Quesne, *Sappho of Lesbos: The Poems*, p.38

⁸⁷ Carson, *Decreation*, pp.161-162.

⁸⁸ Wachtel, 'An Interview with Anne Carson', p.33. This part of the interview discusses her translation of Catullus 'Poem 101' in *Nox*.

Wisdom.⁸⁹ Balmer has acknowledged that these groupings influence the way in which the fragments might be read: ‘my own decisions on the ordering and grouping of the fragments within these emotive section headings speak far more for my own interaction with the text than for Sappho’s now impenetrable, unknowable authorial intent’.⁹⁰

Carson does not include titles (the poems are headed simply with the number of the fragment).⁹¹ Unlike Balmer, who includes footnotes within her text, she presents notes discussing points of difficulty or conjecture at the back of the volume, separately from the poems themselves. Unlike Barnard’s and Balmer’s volumes, *If Not, Winter* is a parallel text, like the original edition of Sappho that Carson discovered in the bookshop: Greek on the left and English on the right. These strategies are consistent with Carson’s declared approach to the overall translation: to stand out of the way, to let Sappho show through without any kind of mediation between the reader and the fragments.

On marks and lacks

Fragment 31 ends abruptly with an incomplete line. What survives of many other poems is even more fragmentary: single broken lines, a group of words, one isolated single word. As Josephine Balmer explains, many translators have attempted to fill in the gaps to complete the poems. But this has disadvantages. ‘The danger here is that [...] a false voice emerges which has little to do with Sappho and much with the translator’s own preconceptions or literary aspirations.’⁹² Mary Barnard ‘preferred to condense instead of filling in the gaps’, guessing words where necessary, but being careful to avoid ‘spinning the fragment out ‘to make a poem’’.⁹³ Balmer’s own approach has been to present only what is in the original text, indicating any conjectures with square brackets and marking breaks in the papyri with dots.

Carson adopts a similar approach, marking gaps with a single square bracket where there is destroyed papyrus or illegible letters. She explains that she has not marked every gap or illegibility as this would interfere with reading, but continues:

⁸⁹ Mary Barnard mainly used J.M. Edmonds’ edition of *Lyra Graeca*, Vol. 1 (Loeb Classical Library) (see *Sappho: A New Translation*, p. 107) and Josephine Balmer used *Poetarum Lesbiorum Fragmenta*, ed. Edgar Lobel and Denys Page (Oxford, 1955) (see *Sappho: Poems and Fragments*, p.30.)

⁹⁰ Balmer, *Piecing Together the Fragments*, p.96.

⁹¹ Mary Barnard did include titles to individual poems, often letting them serve as the first line (see Footnote to *Sappho: A New Translation*, p. 105).

⁹² Balmer, *Sappho: Poems and Fragments*, p.27.

⁹³ Barnard, *Sappho: A New Translation*, p.106.

Brackets are exciting. Even though you are approaching Sappho in translation, that is no reason you should miss the drama of trying to read a papyrus torn in half or riddled with holes or smaller than a postage stamp – brackets imply a free space of imaginal adventure (INW p.xi).

At the end of *If Not, Winter*, Carson includes the string of single word fragments that most other translators, including Balmer, omit.⁹⁴

Carson's translation strategies emphasise the fragmentariness of the surviving text. Here is a paradox: she stands out of the way to let Sappho show through, but what shows through – what is actually heard – may not be Sappho's voice. In her commentary on Fragment 31 Josephine Balmer says that although she finds much to admire in Carson's version, Sappho's poetry was praised for its 'smoothness', so 'this strange, punctured verse might not seem the Sappho that the Greeks themselves heard when they listened to her poetry; affording her such a new, disjointed voice could be the classical equivalent of "foreign" characters in old British or American films.'⁹⁵

Where the perfect language exists

How has Carson's translation practice influenced her other writing? As I have already stated, there are obvious consequences of working as a translator *and* a poet: translation has exposed her to particular voices that she might not otherwise have encountered; the 'foreignness of the other country' and the 'foreignness of the past' that David Constantine, among others, believes that poets need.⁹⁶ It is very likely that she was consciously learning her craft while she studied and translated Greek lyric poets such as Sappho, Stesichoros and Alkman.

Carson herself has said that because she spends a lot of her life looking at books with left-hand-page Greek or Latin, and right-hand-page English, she has become used to 'thinking in the little channel in between the two languages where the perfect language exists'.⁹⁷ The complicated negotiations involved in the process of 'reading-and-making-sense-and-translating', thinking in this little channel, 'down in the roots of where words work'⁹⁸ would have forced her to concentrate intently on the way in which different

⁹⁴ For example, Fragment 189, 'soda', Fragment 190, 'manyskilled', Fragment 191, 'celery', Fragment 192, 'gold anklebone cups' (INW p.355).

⁹⁵ Balmer, *Piecing Together the Fragments*, p.83.

⁹⁶ Constantine, *A Living Language*, p.25.

⁹⁷ Wachtel, 'An Interview with Anne Carson', p.31.

⁹⁸ Will Aitken, 'Interview with Anne Carson: The Art of Poetry No 88', *The Paris Review*, No 171, Fall 2004, p.199.

languages, and the different parts of language, operate. As John D'Agata has pointed out, Greek is a language unbound by syntax. 'It does not require its words to follow a prescribed sentence pattern to convey meaning.'⁹⁹ In her long narrative poem 'The Glass Essay' Carson seems to be extremely aware of the multiple meanings and associations contained within particular words, such as 'spin', or 'watcher' and of a phrase such as 'Spring opens like a blade there'.¹⁰⁰ In her 2014 poetry pamphlet *The Albertine Workout* she includes Appendices in which she discusses the purpose of adjectives, lists the adjectives that Proust used for air and gives an example of the way in which a character can be disempowered by referring to her in a sentence without a main verb.¹⁰¹

However, Carson's work as a classical scholar has shaped her other writing in more specific ways. The particular approaches that she has taken in her translations of writers such as Sappho and Stesichoros appear to be reflected in works such as 'The Glass Essay', *The Beauty of the Husband*, *Nox* and especially *Autobiography of Red*.

The magic of fragments

Carson's translation of Sappho acknowledges and even emphasises the fragmentary nature of her surviving verse. She has explained why she is fascinated by fragments:

In Sappho's poem, her addresses to gods are orderly, perfect poetic products, but the way—and this is the magic of fragments—the way that poem breaks off leads into a thought that can't ever be apprehended. There is the space where a thought would be, but which you can't get hold of. I love that space. It's the reason I like to deal with fragments. Because no matter what the thought would be if it were fully worked out, it wouldn't be as good as the suggestion of a thought that the space gives you. Nothing fully worked out could be so arresting, so spooky.¹⁰²

Carson's interest in fragments has been carried across into much of her other writing. *Nox*, her elegy for her dead brother, reproduces scraps of letters and photographs, deliberately stained to make them appear older,¹⁰³ while *Autobiography of Red* consists of several separate textual entities (an introductory essay, a translation, some Appendices and an imaginary interview) arranged around the main narrative, in a loose imitation of a scholarly edition of a classical Greek text. The idea of fragmentation and fracture is also important in Carson's work. One of the central motifs of 'The Glass Essay' is the unfinished sentence. The

⁹⁹ John D'Agata, 'Review: Men in the Off Hours', *Boston Review*, June 1, 2000, <https://bostonreview.net/poetry/john-dagata-review-men-hours> [accessed 8 October 2017].

¹⁰⁰ Carson, *Glass and God*, p.3.

¹⁰¹ Anne Carson, *The Albertine Workout* (New York: New Directions, 2014), p.25 and p.35.

¹⁰² Aitken, 'Interview with Anne Carson', p.214.

¹⁰³ Wachtel, 'An Interview with Anne Carson', p.35.

narrator of the poem discusses a scene from Emily Brontë's novel *Wuthering Heights* in which one of the protagonists overhears the apparently devastating first half of what sounds like a completed sentence; he breaks away and does not hear the second half of the sentence, which would have completely changed its meaning.¹⁰⁴ Carson develops this image by using awkward enjambments, line breaks and stanza breaks to emphasise the broken-off, the unfinished and withheld. *The Beauty of the Husband* (another narrative poem about a failed relationship) and many of the poems in *Men in the Off Hours* adopt a similar style, using short, broken lines.¹⁰⁵

Autobiography of Red had its genesis in Carson's attempt to translate the *Geryoneis* of Stesichoros. Carson says: 'I got involved in translating (the fragments) for my own pleasure, then got frustrated because I couldn't work into the translations most of what I thought was interesting in the original language.'¹⁰⁶ In *Autobiography of Red*, Carson presents us with two versions of the Geryon myth; the first purports to be a translation from Stesichoros and the second, much longer, version is a narrative poem that is unmistakably a re-telling, or re-versioning of the story. As she points out in her introductory essay, 'Red Meat: What Difference did Stesichoros make?', the original *Geryoneis* was a very long poem of which only fragments survive.¹⁰⁷

Carson has said that if a translation is 'a free adventure of creativity' she tries to 'work first and most attentively out of the grammar, syntax, allusions of the original while keeping the language alive in a way that interests me, then later crazy it up if that seems appropriate.'¹⁰⁸ Although she presents her first version of the Geryon myth as an authentic translation it is immediately clear that 'Red Meat: Fragments of Stesichoros' has been 'crazied up' to the point at which it has become an imitation, rather than a translation. Comparison with other translations of the *Geryoneis* shows that the only point at which Carson's version properly converges with more scholarly versions is the climactic point at which Herakles' arrow pierces Geryon's skull: 'Made | The boy neck lean At an odd slow angle sideways as when a | Poppy shames itself in a whip of Nude breeze' (AR p.13). The Loeb Classical Library version has: 'Geryon drooped his neck to one side, like a poppy which

¹⁰⁴ Carson, *Glass and God*, pp.18-19.

¹⁰⁵ See also D'Agata, 'Review: Men in the Off Hours', for a discussion of Carson's use of the line break in that collection. D'Agata discusses the ways in which Carson's experience as a classical scholar and translator may have influenced her experiments with form.

¹⁰⁶ Wachtel, 'An Interview with Anne Carson', p.40.

¹⁰⁷ Carson, *Autobiography of Red*, p.5. All future references to *Autobiography of Red* will be given in the body of the text.

¹⁰⁸ Interview with Andrew David King, 'Unwriting the Books of the Dead', [accessed 29 November 2015].

spoiling its tender beauty suddenly sheds its petals and...'¹⁰⁹. Carson's much longer, contemporary version of Geryon's story transforms the poppy image still further, drawing on the double meaning of 'dying': 'He felt Herakles' hand move on his thigh and Geryon's | head went back like a poppy in a breeze | as Herakles' mouth came down on his and blackness sank through him' (AR pp.118-119).

Carson appears to have used what was presumably an initial (unpublished) attempt at a literal translation as a springboard into her first 'crazy' version and then into her much longer verse narrative. Matthew Reynolds offers a possible explanation as to why some translators produce an 'opened' or 'expanded' translation: this type of translation arises not from the source text itself, but from the emotional response of the translator as she interprets it. Typically, desire is the feeling that drives the process of expansion, but it can also come from rage, or grief, or even simple curiosity. 'When a text is allowed to be represented by the feelings and the dreams that it provokes in its rewriter, the limits of translation can be stretched towards and, finally, beyond their breaking point. [...] these poems fill in scenic and narrative possibilities left undeveloped by their sources.'¹¹⁰

On one level, Carson's reversioning of the Geryon myth can be thought of as an attempt to 'fill in the gaps', just as Swinburne's 'Anactoria' was an 'expansive reimagining' that arose from the surviving fragments of Sappho.¹¹¹ But this kind of completion is not all that happens. The poet Michael Longley, who has produced 'opened' versions of Homer, has observed that 'inside epics such as the *Iliad* there are lots of little works of art waiting to be set free.'¹¹² It seems that Carson has glimpsed certain things about Stesichoros that she wants to release, or, in her own words, unlatch.

Undoing the latches

In her introductory essay: 'Red Meat: What Difference did Stesichoros Make?' Carson discusses adjectives. Homer used adjectives as recurring epithets; Stesichoros does something different.

¹⁰⁹ *Greek Lyric III: Stesichoros, Ibycus, Simonides, and Others*, ed. and trans. by David A. Campbell (Cambridge, Mass.; London: Harvard University Press, 1991), p.77.

¹¹⁰ Reynolds, *The Poetry of Translation*, pp.141-142.

¹¹¹ This is one of the examples cited by Reynolds.

¹¹² Jody Allen Randolph, 'Michael Longley in Conversation', *PN Review* 160 (November-December 2004), 21-27, p.26, cited by Matthew Reynolds in *The Poetry of Translation*, p.213.

These small imported mechanisms are in charge of attaching everything in the world to its place in particularity. They are the latches of being [...] In the world of the Homeric epic, for example, being is stable and particularity is set fast in tradition [...] Homer's epithets are a fixed diction with which Homer fastens every substance in the world to its aptest attribute and holds them in place [...] For no reason that anyone can name, Stesichoros began to undo the latches.' (AR pp.4-5)

Carson's narrative constantly reminds the reader that Geryon is red. In an Homeric epic, *red* would be the epithet that attaches Geryon firmly to the world. Geryon's redness is a visible sign that he is a monster. Carson uses the epithet, but she destabilises it. She qualifies *red* by attaching other adjectives that draw attention to Geryon's vulnerability, rather than his monstrosity. He stands on his *small* red shadow when his brother abandons him at school. His mother neatens his *little* red wings. When a dog steals his ice cream there is 'just an empty cone | in a *small dramatic* red fist' (AR p.56). And *red* describes other things that are apparently separate from Geryon: breezes; a volcano; a T shirt given him by Herakles; a butterfly; the title of a photograph: 'Red Patience'; pepper tamales; the intervals between days; the line on a video screen that marks the progress of an aeroplane. The word *red* itself is also unstable. It is sometimes implied by the names of things: cranberry, ruby, poppy, tomato, blood, nouns that can become adjectives. And *red* is capable of being transformed by heat. At the climax of the narrative Geryon flies into the heart of a live volcano; the reader has already been told that the heat of a volcanic eruption changes lava from dark red and hard to brilliant yellow and completely fluid; and that the blood of 'Lava Man' is not red, but ochre.

Wings are the other outward sign of Geryon's monstrosity, but Carson complicates the ostensible meaning of 'winged'. In her contemporary narrative Geryon falls in love with Herakles who breaks his heart instead of killing him. During their first sexual encounter Geryon feels that he is not a wounded angel after all, subtly reminding the reader that wings are not always monstrous; Eros and angels also have wings. This looks back to Carson's discussion of wings in *Eros the Bittersweet*: 'Wings are an instrument of damage and a symbol of irresistible power.' Geryon's wings protrude through slits in his T-shirt, but in public are always hidden by a jacket or an overcoat and sometimes lashed to a back brace. They function as an extension of his sexuality and are also associated with confidence and authenticity. They struggle and tear against each other on his shoulders like 'mindless red animals', but when Herakles is impatient, they 'turn in and in and in' (AR p.53). At the climactic moment of the poem, Geryon surrenders his body to Herakles on an aeroplane flight to Peru; it is significant that he is being flown, rather than flying.

It is not until the closing stages of the poem that Geryon's adult wings are actually described in detail. He photographs himself 'in fetal position', with the 'fantastic fingerwork' of his wings 'outspread on the bed like a black lace map of South America.' This is a defiant but sad gesture after a conversation about babies whose tails have been cut off to suppress their deformity; he gives his photograph the title 'No Tail!' (AR p.97). Herakles' friend Ancash, 'a man as beautiful as a live feather' (AR p.112) is excited by Geryon's wings, running 'his fingers slowly | down the red struts that articulated each wing base' (AR p.128) and telling a story about a tribe of red winged people who are thrown into a live volcano and fly out again, resurrected, with all their weaknesses burned away. Finally, in the penultimate chapter, Geryon does fly, 'a | black speck raking its way towards the centre of Icchantikas on icy possibles, [...] the bitter red drumming of wing muscle on air [...]' (AR p.145). It is a triumphant moment of self-realisation; what was once the outward sign of a monstrosity has at last been transformed into an instrument of irresistible power, a memory of beauty.

A novel inverse

Carson's translations of Sappho demonstrate that she is normally a proponent of 'literal', or 'word for word' translation. This has important implications for her other writing, even for her more 'creative' or 'crazy' translations and imitations. Ted Hughes, who facilitated the translation of many Eastern European poets into English through the magazine *Modern Poetry in Translation*, was also a proponent of literal translation, as opposed to 'domestication' of a translated text. He explained the reason why:

The very oddity and struggling dumbness of word for word version is what makes our own imagination jump. A man who has something really serious to say in a language of which he knows only a few words, manages to say it far more convincingly and effectively than any interpreter, and in translated poetry it is the first-hand contact – however fumbled and broken – with that man and his seriousness which we want.¹¹³

A literal translation does not only 'make the imagination jump' in relation to another, 'foreign' poet. 'Foreignness' may re-make readers and poet-translators 'realise things, very often things we know already, but, because of familiarity, have lost the feeling for.' Poetry can re-awaken the feeling by 'the act of rendering strange.'¹¹⁴ Carson's major works often deal with displacement and unfamiliar, even bizarre, situations, and defamiliarisation is often reflected in the language that she uses.

¹¹³ Ted Hughes, *Selected Translations*, ed. Daniel Weissbort (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p.201.

¹¹⁴ Constantine, *A Living Language*, p.20.

Autobiography of Red is subtitled 'A Novel in Verse'. Ian Rae has suggested that this title has a double meaning: Carson's narrative is 'a novel inverse', or an inverted novel.¹¹⁵ Carson deliberately overturns our expectations in terms of genre definitions (it is unclear whether the work is a poem or novel) and also in terms of point of view. The story is based on the myth of the labours of Herakles, in which the monster Geryon was slain, but both Stesichoros and Carson make Geryon the centre of the narrative, rather than the traditional hero Herakles. The idea of reversal, inversion and strangeness runs throughout the poem, emphasised by the use of unfamiliar, literal, descriptions within the narrative. Some of these phrases read almost as if they have been translated from a foreign language. Stones are 'sailing through the air from a happy human arm' (AR p.23); Geryon's mother is 'rhinestoning past on her way to the door' (AR p.30); the air is 'hot and alive with cries' (AR p.36).

In translating Sappho, Carson has tried to stand out of the way, yet she acknowledges that transparency is 'an amiable fantasy'. The approach that she adopts is generally one of 'word for word' or 'literal' translation, yet what she emphasises is not the lyrical text as it would have originally been presented to Sappho's audience, but her own perception of it – a damaged, fragmented body. And Carson's translation of the text has undergone subtle changes as her perception of it and her dialogue with it has developed over time.

Carson's emotional engagement with the various texts that she has translated has resulted in what could be called creative collaborations with the words and voices of Sappho and Stesichoros and other writers such as Alkman and Catullus. She has expanded the text by creating versions of her own between and around the fragments. But perhaps the most important way in which her translation practice has influenced her poems and lyric essays is connected with the constant need to think in that 'little channel in between the two languages', the way in which the dialogue between Greek or Latin and English, between the other writer and herself prompts her to defamiliarise language and refresh it.

Prowling the meanings of a word, prowling the history of a person, no use expecting a flood of light. Human words have no main switch. But all those little kidnaps in the dark. And then the luminous, big, shivering, discarded, unrepentant, barking web of them that hangs in your mind when you turn back to the page you were trying to translate.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁵ Ian Rae, *From Cohen to Carson: The Poet's Novel in Canada* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2008), pp.224.

¹¹⁶ Carson, *Nox*, Section 7.1.

CHAPTER 3: THIS IS MY FAVOURITE AUTHOR: ANNE CARSON READS EMILY BRONTË

‘The Glass Essay’ might have been a commonplace story, perhaps even a banal story. A woman (the unnamed ‘I’ of the poem) is abruptly told by her lover of five years that he is ending their relationship. Six months later, still imprisoned in her grief, she goes to stay with her elderly mother, who lives alone in the middle of a desolate moor. She accompanies her mother on a visit to her father, who is hospitalised with senile dementia, and she reflects on her relationship with both her parents. She also takes several long walks on the snow-covered, frozen moor, analysing her own situation and her pain.

Very early in the poem, the narrator explains that she is taking the *Collected Works of Emily Brontë* to read during her visit to her mother, because:

This is my favourite author.

Also my main fear, which I mean to confront.
Whenever I visit my mother,
I feel I am turning into Emily Brontë,

my lonely life around me like a moor,¹¹⁷

The narrator’s explicit observations on the life and work of Emily Brontë occupy approximately half of the poem and are interwoven with her account of her visit to her mother, her reflections on her broken relationship and her walks on the moor. In addition, echoes from the narrator’s reading of Emily Brontë seem to reverberate through many of those sections of the poem which do not immediately appear to be directly about her. Why is Emily Brontë so important to the narrator? And in what ways does the Brontë material contribute to Carson’s poem?

One important function of Carson’s reflections on Emily Brontë is that they complicate the narrative, enabling the narrator to defend herself against her lover and the reason that he has given for rejecting her.

¹¹⁷ Carson, *Glass and God*, p.3. All future references to ‘The Glass Essay’ will be given in the body of the text.

Not enough spin on it

Law, the narrator's lover, has made a striking statement to announce that he is ending their relationship. He says that there is 'Not enough spin on it'. On one level, what he clearly means is, 'I do not love you any more' and possibly also that the affair, or the narrator, or both, no longer interest him.

In the Introduction to her essay *Eros the Bittersweet*, Carson refers to a short story by Kafka called 'The Top'. In this story, a philosopher repeatedly tries to catch a child's top as it spins, but immediately the top is caught, it stops spinning and falls over. '....when he held the silly piece of wood in his hand he felt nauseated.'¹¹⁸ Law may be using the image of the falling top as a metaphor for what he believes is happening within the relationship. But there are many other meanings and resonances behind the idea of 'spin', which Carson must have intended the reader to consider. 'Spin' can describe unexpected, mysterious, deceptive changes in the trajectory of a ball or other object in flight, in games such as tennis and cricket. 'Spin' also commonly refers to the distortion of stories for political purposes in journalism and propaganda. Classical literature and folktales use metaphors of spinning and weaving in a more benign sense: spinning a thread, spinning a tale, weaving a tapestry, creating an intertext. 'Spin' also suggests the word 'spinster', a description frequently applied to Emily Brontë (and now also, possibly, the condition of Carson's narrator).¹¹⁹ All these ideas of spin are relevant to the poem.

By weaving an intertext, the narrator can respond to the charge of not being interesting or complicated enough, and of having too thin and threadbare a tale to tell. She can and does generate myriad associations and connections between her own material, and other 'spinnings': the stories and poems made by Emily Brontë and also the secondary narratives spun about the life of Emily Brontë by her sister Charlotte, Elizabeth Gaskell and many other Brontë critics and biographers. Interweaving all these strands creates a far richer tissue of words than she might have produced by spooling out the relatively simple and single thread of her own broken heart. By making the reader view the narrator's situation through a window of Brontë-related quotations, allusions and analysis, Carson can foreground her narrator's intellectual processes as well as her emotional state. By detaching herself from her emotions, the narrator can observe and analyse them more precisely.

¹¹⁸ Quoted in Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet*, p.xi.

¹¹⁹ The term 'spinster' originally meant a girl or woman who is expert at spinning thread, so that she is able to support herself financially and need not marry.

This soul trapped in glass

The title of the poem is significant. It prepares the reader for an essay about glass and its properties; perhaps for an essay in the original sense of the word: an attempt.

It is as if we have all been lowered into an atmosphere of glass.
Now and then a remark trails through the glass. (p.4)

Here, the narrator is sitting at the kitchen table with her mother, eating salad and making desultory conversation while she reads *Wuthering Heights*. The atmosphere is tense. Glass is a substance that can break or shatter, and the image carries this possibility within it (the mother is about to interrupt the narrator's reading with a forthright comment about her current situation). But in 'The Glass Essay', glass more often forms an invisible barrier that literally or metaphorically cuts the narrator off from the outside world, recalling Sylvia Plath's image of her protagonist's depression and nervous breakdown, 'sitting under the same glass bell jar, stewing in my own sour air'.¹²⁰ This image also carries echoes of the glass coffin in which the Sleeping Beauty and Snow White were imprisoned.¹²¹ Glass Town was the name that the Brontë children gave to the earlier version of what later became the Gondal Stories as written by Emily and Anne.¹²²

As Carson's narrator observes, Emily Brontë's work is heavily loaded with images of imprisonment.¹²³ References to actual and metaphorical imprisonment also run through 'The Glass Essay'. The narrator's father is strapped in a chair in the hospital ward and shut away behind a combination lock and her mother could also be said to be held prisoner as a result of her father's illness. It becomes clear to the reader that the narrator believes that she herself is trapped within her own grief and anger.

In Carson's poem there are many references to objects that can be made out of glass, such as specimen slides, mirrors and especially windows (to which I shall return later) and a substance related to glass: ice. Ice is frozen water, trapped water, which may also be transparent or invisible. However, glass has a second important property.

¹²⁰ Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963) p.196.

¹²¹ See Gilbert and Gubar, *Madwoman in the Attic*, p.44 for textual evidence that Carson may have had their discussion of patriarchy in mind when she drew on the imagery of mirrors and glass coffins in 'The Glass Essay'.

¹²² Winifred Gérin, *Emily Brontë: A Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), p.13. Gérin discusses Emily's reading of *Bewick's British Birds*, suggesting that her imagination was stirred by the pictures of the arctic regions and that she would 'seek to know more of their accessibility to intrepid navigators'. Carson probably read this passage.

¹²³ For a discussion of images of confinement and imprisonment in nineteenth-century writing by women, see Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, pp.83-89.

Glass is transparent and windows are made of glass.¹²⁴ A prisoner can look out through prison bars and through locked windows, can or must watch the outside world, even though the glass shuts her in and cuts her off from it. When the narrator relives her life with Law, she describes her sudden ‘awakening’ as the videotape of the memory jerking to a halt ‘like a glass slide under a drop of blood’ (p.11). A glass slide traps a drop of blood or other specimen, but also preserves it and allows it to be closely examined under a microscope. Carson refers to Emily Brontë as ‘this soul trapped in glass, | which is her true creation’ (p.42). Here, ‘trapped’ suggests safety and preservation, as well as imprisonment and confinement. Glass allows the narrator to see, to watch, to closely observe whatever is on the other side of the pane, whatever it is that the glass separates her from.

A scorpion crouched on the arm of the sofa

Another way of detaching yourself from painful memories or narratives is to edit them. The narrator of ‘The Glass Essay’ describes and discusses at some length the ways in which other people have attempted to create ‘spin’ on the life and work of Emily Brontë.

In 1850 Charlotte edited a posthumous edition of Emily’s poems and also wrote a Preface to *Wuthering Heights* and a Biographical Note. Carson calls Charlotte’s Preface ‘a publicist’s masterpiece’ and continues:

Like someone carefully not looking at a scorpion
crouched on the arm of the sofa Charlotte

talks firmly and calmly
about the other furniture of Emily’s workshop – about
the inexorable spirit (‘stronger than a man, simpler than a child’),

the cruel illness (‘pain no words can render’),
the autonomous end (‘she sank rapidly, she made haste to leave us’)
and about Emily’s total subjection

to a creative project she could neither understand nor control,
and for which she deserves no more praise nor blame
than if she had opened her mouth

‘to breathe lightning’. (p.13)

By framing short quotations from the Preface, Carson’s narrator emphasises the genteel and apologetic tone of Charlotte’s defence of her sister’s ‘rude and strange

¹²⁴ For a discussion of the importance of glass windows in the nineteenth-century novel, see Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Glassworlds: Glass Culture and the Imagination 1830-1880* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp.124-132.

production'¹²⁵ and her paraphrase, in contemporary language, of the parts that she has not directly quoted borders on satire. Others besides Carson have read Charlotte's Preface as 'exoneration more than celebration'.¹²⁶ Charlotte is not only defending Emily, she is neutralising her.

Although Carson's narrator never actually states this, it is clear that one reason why she is strongly drawn to Emily rather than Charlotte is that both she and Emily are 'watchers'. Charlotte is not a watcher, she prefers to look away, even when there is an imaginary scorpion inching towards her. Neither is the narrator's mother a watcher; one of her 'Rules of Life' is that curtains should be drawn over windows wherever possible. 'My mother is afraid', says the narrator, after her mother abruptly changes the subject of conversation from women's rights and rape to the whereabouts of her old swimsuit (p.29).

Later in the poem Carson comments that:

My favourite pages
of *The Collected Works of Emily Brontë*
are the notes at the back

recording small adjustments made by Charlotte
to the text of Emily's verse,
which Charlotte edited for publication after Emily's death.
'Prison for strongest [in Emily's hand] altered to *lordly* by Charlotte. (p.27)

The description of the notes as her 'favourite' pages confirms that the narrator is a painstaking and attentive reader who will look beneath the surface of a text or a situation. As far as possible, she wants to read the poems exactly as Emily wrote them. 'Favourite' can be read ironically. The Notes clarify Emily's original intentions, but they confirm that her work *has* been edited.¹²⁷ The particular example of Charlotte's editing cited by Carson is taken from the poem 'Last Words'. Both the 1934 Shakespeare Head edition and the earlier 1910 Clement Shorter edition print the relevant stanza as:

If hard commands can tame your love,
Or strongest walls can hold,
I would not wish to grieve above

¹²⁵ Charlotte Brontë, *Preface to Wuthering Heights*, reprinted in Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, ed. by Philip Henderson (London: Dent, 1907), p.xviii.

¹²⁶ Lucasta Miller, *The Brontë Myth* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2001), p.24.

¹²⁷ The extensive alterations that Charlotte Brontë made to Emily's poems when she prepared the 1850 edition have been catalogued and discussed elsewhere. See Janet Gezari, *Last Things: Emily Brontë's Poems*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 126–150 and Miller, *The Brontë Myth*, pp.180-181.

A thing so false and cold.¹²⁸

But according to the 1995 Oxford Clarendon Edition, which has made more extensive use of the original manuscripts, the text is:

If hard commands can tame your love,
Or prison walls can hold
I would not wish to greive above
A thing so false and cold.¹²⁹

Both *prison* and *strongest* fit the context of the stanza and the poem. A reference to *lordly* walls would appear to be less appropriate and to have less impact than prison walls or even strongest walls. Taken out of context, as it is presented in the text of ‘The Glass Essay’, the note to the *Collected Works* suggests that Charlotte’s changes do not noticeably clarify or improve Emily’s poems; instead, they ‘adjust’ them nicely and precisely so that they have a slightly different, perhaps more acceptable or conventional tone.¹³⁰

As well as remarking on Charlotte Brontë’s attempts to adjust the reading public’s impression of Emily and her work, the narrator of ‘The Glass Essay’ considers comments made by Emily Brontë’s other biographers and critics, particularly in relation to the poems. Carson paraphrases the words of three unnamed biographers:

This sad stunted life, says one.
Uninteresting, unremarkable, wracked by disappointment
and despair, says another.

She could have been a great navigator if she’d been male,
suggests a third. (p.8)

The first two of these present a conventional, mythologized and rather patronising view of Brontë’s life. The third (for which there is an authentic source)¹³¹ is more

¹²⁸ *The Poems of Emily Jane Brontë and Anne Brontë*, ed. by Thomas James Wise and John Alexander Symington (Oxford: Shakespeare Head, 1934) p. 174; *The Complete Poems of Emily Brontë*, ed. by Clement Shorter (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1910), p.71.

¹²⁹ *The Poems of Emily Brontë* ed. by Derek Roper with Edward Chitham (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), pp. 63-64. See also *The Complete Poems of Emily Jane Brontë*, ed. by C.W. Hatfield, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1941), p.84, which also uses ‘prison walls’.

¹³⁰ Where Carson uses actual quotation marks in the text, this generally indicates a direct and accurate quotation from a source, rather than a paraphrase of other writing. I have not been able to trace the particular edition of the *Collected Works of Emily Brontë* from which these notes have been taken. However, see Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights: Authoritative Text, Backgrounds, Criticism*, ed. by William M. Sale Jr. and Richard J. Dunn, 3rd edn (New York: W.W. Norton and Co, 1990) p.282. This reproduces the poems included in the 1850 edition, as written by Emily but with notes on Charlotte’s editing. This shows that Charlotte altered ‘prison walls’ to ‘strongest walls’.

¹³¹ Constantin Heger, from a contemporary memoir, quoted in several Brontë biographies including Margaret Lane, *The Brontë Story: A Reconsideration of Mrs Gaskell’s Life of Charlotte Brontë* (London, Heinemann, 1953), p.148 and originally in Elizabeth Cleghorn Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, (London: Dent, 1908) p.151.

interesting, but draws attention to lost opportunities, the things that did not and could not happen to Emily and also seems to suggest that she might have been a better writer if she had been a man. Carson directly quotes some unnamed critics who describe her work as self-dramatising and posturing, melodramatic and dealing in ‘the cardboard sublime’ (p.24). Remembering these criticisms reminds Carson’s narrator of her therapist’s incomprehension of her own inner life and a dismissive response to her account of the disturbing visions that she experiences while attempting to meditate. She then compares the therapist to ‘a very difficult sister’, clearly alluding to the relationship between Emily and Charlotte (p.25).

Recording small adjustments

By emphasising the way in which editors and commentators have adjusted Emily Brontë’s life and work, Carson highlights the existence and indeed the unavoidability of ‘spin’. But Carson herself, or her narrator, has sometimes put an additional ‘spin’ on the texts and biographical materials that she, or they, make use of.

Carson’s narrator follows the critics that she cites by apparently assuming that many or most of Brontë’s poems are overtly autobiographical. The prevalence of this assumption dates from Charlotte Brontë’s 1850 edition of the poems, which suppressed references to Gondal, the imaginary country created by Emily and Anne.¹³² Poems which were written in the voices of characters in Gondal were therefore presented as if the ‘I’ were Emily herself.

The narrator of ‘The Glass Essay’ quotes extensively from several Brontë poems: ‘Glenelden’s Dream’; ‘The Caged Bird’; ‘Lines’; ‘The Prisoner’; ‘Thy sun is near meridian height’; ‘Light up thy halls! ‘Tis closing day’; ‘At Castle Wood’; and ‘I’ll come when Thou art saddest’.¹³³ Of these poems, ‘Glenelden’s Dream’, ‘The Prisoner’ (from which the narrator quotes in two separate places), ‘Thy sun is near meridian height’ and ‘Light up thy halls! ‘Tis closing day’ are definitely ‘Gondal’ poems, yet this is never acknowledged (neither Gondal nor Glass Town is actually mentioned anywhere in ‘The Glass Essay’).

Carson also allows her narrator to ‘adjust’ at least one incident in Brontë’s life to fit her argument (she is discussing Brontë’s supposed cruelty):

¹³² Miller, *The Brontë Myth*, pp.180-186.

¹³³ *The Poems of Emily Jane Brontë and Anne Brontë* ed. by Wise and Symington, (Oxford: Shakespeare Head, 1934) p. 60; p.116-117; p.85; p.12; pp. 107-110; p.70; p.142; p.50. References here are to the Shakespeare Head edition because it is this edition that is specifically mentioned in ‘The Glass Essay’ and the one which the narrator of the poem appears to be reading.

Reason with him and then whip him!
was her instruction (age six) to her father
regarding brother Branwell. (p.18)

According to biographical sources, this incident actually occurred during a family 'game'. Mr Brontë thought that his children might be more intelligent and advanced than they appeared and 'in order to make them speak with less timidity' he took a mask and told them to put on the mask in turn and under the cover of it, 'speak boldly' in reply to questions he put to them. 'I asked the next, (Emily, afterwards Ellis Bell), what I had best do with her brother Branwell, who was sometimes a naughty boy; she answered, "Reason with him, and when he won't listen to reason, whip him. "'¹³⁴ As it is related above, Emily's response is far less cruel and abrupt than Carson's retelling has made it seem. Carson has taken the remark out of its context, turned it from a response into an instruction, changed the form of words (leaving out the qualification) and added an exclamation mark.

Three silent women at the kitchen table

At the beginning of 'The Glass Essay', Carson presents us with an image that seems to reflect the accepted 'Brontë myth':

my lonely life around me like a moor,
my ungainly body stumping over the mud flats with a look of transformation
that dies when I come in the kitchen door. (pp.3-4)

Then almost immediately the myth is superimposed upon the present time. The next section opens: 'Three silent women at the kitchen table' (p.4). The three silent women are actually the narrator, her mother, and Emily Brontë (represented by the narrator's copy of *Wuthering Heights*), but this first line carries an inevitable echo of the image of the 'three weird sisters' in the famous portrait by Branwell Brontë.

Many of Carson's allusions to *Wuthering Heights* will be immediately obvious to anyone who has read the novel or even seen one of the many film adaptations of it.¹³⁵ The most obvious allusion links the moor that surrounds the narrator's mother's house with the moor that surrounds both *Wuthering Heights* and its real-life counterpart, Top Withens in West Yorkshire. In the novel, *Wuthering Heights* was named because of the 'bracing ventilation' and the north wind; the moor in Carson's poem is similarly swept by fierce and cutting winds.

¹³⁴ Lane, *The Brontë Story*, pp. 39-40 (also in Gaskell, p. 36).

¹³⁵ Like the well-known 1939 film adaptation of *Wuthering Heights*, 'The Glass Essay' concentrates on the first part of the novel and largely ignores the second part.

Another obvious allusion is to windows, which feature at several crucial points in the narrative of *Wuthering Heights*. The first of these is Lockwood's vision of Catherine's ghost outside the window. Heathcliff then breaks down sobbing at the same window and calls out to the ghost of Catherine (early in the poem Carson's narrator is actually reading this part of the novel and begins to sob herself). Heathcliff and Catherine look illicitly through the windows at Thrushcross Grange; Heathcliff's dead body is discovered, drenched with rain, beside an open window. Similarly, there are many references to windows in 'The Glass Essay': the kitchen window through which the narrator and her mother can see the moor; the windows in Law's 'high blue room' through which he could see the sea (and under which the narrator appropriately remembers doves 'chuckling coolly' while she and Law make love) (p.11); the narrator's bedroom window over which she refuses to draw the curtains (a possible reference to Catherine's insistence on standing at an open window while seriously ill);¹³⁶ and the window of her city apartment through which she watches another couple 'making their bed and laughing' (p.46).

During the narrator's final night with Law, they sing to one another in a 'made-up language like the children we used to be' (p.16), an echo perhaps of the Gondal chronicles that Emily and Anne made up together as children and adolescents, also of Catherine and Heathcliff's companionship as children. Like Lockwood and Catherine, Carson's narrator has vivid and significant dreams.

There are many other less obvious allusions. The poem contains a reference to the Diary Papers that Emily and Anne Brontë completed at four-yearly intervals. Some of these Diary Papers recorded fairly trivial domestic detail, for example:

It is past Twelve o'clock Anne and I have not tidied ourselves [...] The Kitchin is in a very untidy state Anne and I have not done our music exercise which consists of b major.¹³⁷

The conversations that the narrator has with her mother over the kitchen table may owe something to these records of the Brontë kitchen in Haworth Parsonage, although their kitchen is not 'kindly' and 'firelit' (p.19), but dark and apparently much less welcoming:

Taxes on the back lot. Not a good melon,
too early for melons.
Hairdresser in town found God, closes shop every Tuesday.
Mice in the teatowel drawer again. (pp.4-5)

¹³⁶ Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, ed. by Hilda Marsden and Ian Jack (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), p.152.

¹³⁷ Diary Paper 1834 quoted in Gérin, *Emily Brontë: A Biography*, p.39.

As in the Brontë Diary Paper, this scene takes place shortly after twelve; the kitchen clock has just buzzed to indicate the hour.

When Catherine is fatally ill, Heathcliff stands outside Thrushcross Grange, in the rain. 'He had been standing a long time in that position, for I saw a pair of ousels passing and repassing scarcely three feet from him, busy in building their nest, and regarding his proximity no more than a piece of timber.'¹³⁸ This scene is echoed towards the end of 'The Glass Essay':

so I drew up close to the window and tried peering through the icicle,
hoping to trick myself into some interior vision,

but all I saw
was the man and woman in the room across the street
making their bed and laughing. (p.46)

In addition, there is at least one veiled (possibly unconscious) reference to a Brontë poem that is not quoted: 'The Caged Bird'. In this poem, the landscape and the weather reflect the poet's own mood (just as the landscape reflects Carson's narrator's mood in 'The Glass Essay'). The final stanza is as follows:

Yet their lives passed in gloomy woe,
And hopeless comes its dark decline,
And I lament, because I know,
That cold departure pictures mine.¹³⁹

Carson echoes Brontë's words in 'The Glass Essay':

She put into him in place of a soul

the constant cold departure of Catherine from his nervous system
every time he drew a breath or moved thought. (p.19)

A kind of half-finished sentence

Carson's narrator does not only allude to *Wuthering Heights*, she appropriates it. She takes certain significant ideas and images from Brontë and develops them, repeatedly returning to them and building on them as the poem progresses. One important instance of this is the half-finished sentence.

¹³⁸ Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, p.203.

¹³⁹ *The Poems of Emily Jane Brontë and Anne Brontë*, ed. by Wise and Symington, p117.

The plot of *Wuthering Heights* turns on a sentence of which only the first part is heard. Heathcliff accidentally overhears Catherine say, 'It would degrade me to marry Heathcliff'. He then disappears over the moor. He does not hear her finish her sentence: 'so he will never know how I love him.'¹⁴⁰ The narrator of 'The Glass Essay' remarks that if only he had stayed in the kitchen long enough to hear the other half of the sentence, 'Heathcliff would have been set free', but Emily Brontë 'broke all his moments in half' (pp.18-19). Elsewhere the narrator considers that Emily Brontë herself may have experienced the world as 'a kind of half-finished sentence' (p.8).

And 'The Glass Essay' is full of half-finished sentences. The narrator's mother's conversation is composed of random inconsequential fragments and abrupt changes of subject, for example:

You remember too much,
my mother said to me recently.

Why hold onto all that? And I said,
Where can I put it down?
She shifted to a question about airports. (p.10)

The first sign of the narrator's father's dementia was his inability to finish sentences, while the narrator's own train of thought is highly fragmented. Carson emphasises this by her extensive use of enjambments, lines of uneven length and unexpected stanza breaks, often making it seem as if a phrase or a train of thought is completed when it is not, for example:

Give and take were just words to me

at the time. I had not been in love before. (p.6)

The presence of so many awkward line breaks draws attention to the relatively small number of sentences that are end-stopped and completed on one line; these seem particularly emphatic in the context of the whole, for example:

He left in the morning. (p.16)

It walked out of the light. (p.47)

There are also repeated references to cutting things off and to breaking. 'Spring opens like a blade there', says the narrator, likening blades of grass to flick knives as she describes the moor (p.3). On the moor, the trees and sky 'carve into me with knives of light' and the April wind is 'scraped' (pp.10 and 16). Her mother's voice 'cuts across' her as she

¹⁴⁰ Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, p.100.

stands in the darkened kitchen, thinking, and she butters her toast ‘with jagged strokes’ (pp.20 and 29). Her father’s face ‘cracks open’ (p.32). The moon (an object associated with romance) is described at different times as ‘a chill fragment’ and ‘just a cold bit of silver gristle low on fading banks of sky’ (pp.15 and 38). Glass and ice (and hearts) can shatter. ‘Breaking up’ is a colloquial term for the ending of a relationship. The narrator felt her heart ‘snap into two pieces’, at the moment when her lover dismissed her (p.15).

She knows how to hang puppies

Sometimes, Carson’s narrator uses material from Brontë to say or suggest things that she cannot quite articulate herself.

At the beginning of the poem, the narrator is reading *Wuthering Heights*. The first thing that she notices is this: ‘In my flight through the kitchen I knocked over Hareton [...] who was hanging a litter of puppies from a chair-back in the doorway...’¹⁴¹

This sentence is taken from Isabella Linton’s account of how she was driven to escape from *Wuthering Heights* and Heathcliff’s murderous brutality. Hareton’s killing of the puppies is incidental to the narrative, and Isabella literally rushes past it and away from it. But the scene continues to haunt Carson’s narrator. When, the following morning, the narrator sobs while reading that Heathcliff cries out to Catherine’s ghost at the window, she remarks, ‘She knows how to hang puppies, that Emily’. Much later in the poem she has a nightmare:

I wake too fast from a cellar of hanged puppies
with my eyes pouring into the dark. (p.34)

The reference to bars in the following stanza suggests that the narrator feels herself to be imprisoned with this grotesque image.

Both Brontë and Carson are preoccupied with the causes and effects of anger and cruelty. For many readers of *Wuthering Heights*, Hareton’s act will recall Heathcliff’s attempted hanging of Isabella’s pet spaniel as she is about to elope with him,¹⁴² also that, when Heathcliff takes possession of Hareton after Hindley’s death, he says, ‘we’ll see if one tree won’t grow as crooked as another, with the same wind to twist it!’¹⁴³ Heathcliff deliberately sets out to brutalise Hareton in order to revenge himself on the Earnshaws, and

¹⁴¹ Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, p.224.

¹⁴² Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, p.158.

¹⁴³ Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, p.230.

Hareton's hanging of the puppies in front of Isabella implies that he has succeeded. Elsewhere in the poem, the narrator observes that:

Someone like Emily Brontë

[...]

had cruelty drifted up in all the cracks of her like spring snow.
We can see her ridding herself of it at various times
with a gesture like she used to brush the carpet. (p.18)

She then cites the well-known story of Emily's reaction when she was bitten by a rabid dog,¹⁴⁴ but, significantly, does not mention another very well-known and disturbing story concerning Emily's brutal punishment of her dog Keeper, that (if true) would be extremely suggestive of cruelty.¹⁴⁵

The specific act of casual cruelty that the narrator equates with hanging puppies is Law's dismissal of her, but this is never explicitly stated. Instead, Carson's narrator considers Heathcliff's sexual despair, suggesting that his condition was the result of 'the years of inner cruelty that can twist a person into a pain devil'; an echo of Heathcliff's speech to Hareton in *Wuthering Heights* (p.19). But although Heathcliff has committed cruelties, he has also endured them.¹⁴⁶ Again, the relevance of this to the narrator's personal life is never spelled out. Later on, she recognises that 'Anger travels through me, pushes aside everything else in my heart' and goes on to analyse the anger and contempt expressed in many of Brontë's poems, but finally acknowledges that 'The vocation of anger is not mine' (pp.35 and 38).

Whacher is what she was

Early in the poem the narrator considers the confusion caused by Brontë's idiosyncratic spelling of the word 'whether', with reference to the first line of 'Glenelden's Dream': 'Tell me, whether, is it winter?' The 1995 Oxford Clarendon edition reproduces Brontë's actual spelling: 'whacher'.¹⁴⁷ Carson appropriates this way of spelling and uses it to develop one of the main motifs in her own poem.

¹⁴⁴ Gérin *Emily Brontë: A Biography*, p. 155 also in Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, p.184. This incident was used by Charlotte Brontë in her novel *Shirley*.

¹⁴⁵ Gérin, *Emily Brontë: A Biography*, pp. 109-110, originally in Gaskell, pp.184-185, but this story is now questioned by Miller, pp.202-203.

¹⁴⁶ Some contemporary criticism has discussed Heathcliff as a victim of post-colonial oppression, for example, Terry Eagleton, *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger: Studies in Irish Culture* (London; New York: Verso, 1995), pp.1-26. On p.19 Eagleton describes Heathcliff as 'oppressor and oppressed in one body, condensing in his own person the various stages of the Irish revolution.'

¹⁴⁷ *The Poems of Emily Brontë* ed. by Roper and Chitham, p. 55.

Whacher is what she was.
She whached God and humans and moor wind and open night.
She whached eyes, stars, inside, outside, actual weather.

She whached the bars of time, which broke.
She whached the poor core of the world
wide open.

To be a whacher is not a choice.
There is nowhere to get away from it, (p.7)

To watch has more than one meaning. The *Concise Oxford Dictionary* gives this definition:

Remain awake for a purpose, be on the watch, keep watch, be vigilant, look out *for* opportunity etc., exercise protecting care *over*; keep eyes fixed on, keep under observation, follow observantly.¹⁴⁸

The narrator of 'The Glass Essay' appreciates Emily Brontë as a close and unflinching observer of the world in which she lived. And Brontë is a 'whacher' in both senses of the word. She is awake at night, communing with something, or someone called 'Thou'. 'Thou' is not a human love object, but a divine or mystical one. 'She describes Thou as awake like herself all night and full of strange power (p.39).' Emily's favourite Psalm is Psalm 130: 'My soul waiteth on Thou more than they that watch for the morning (p.42).'

Like Emily Brontë, Carson's narrator is a watcher in many senses. The poem opens with her awakening at four in the morning and at least once she wakes up in the middle of the night after having a nightmare. She opens her bedroom curtains as wide as possible, because she likes to see everything: 'Moon. Air. Sunrise. All that light on your face in the morning (pp.27-28)'. Neither her mother nor her therapist can understand this need. The narrator experiences a succession of unsettling visions of suffering women, which she numbers, and calls the Nudes. When she describes these visions her therapist asks her: 'When you see these horrible images why do you stay with them? | Why keep watching? Why not | go away?' 'Go away where?' she replies, and later reflects, 'Some people watch, that's all I can say. | There is nowhere else to go' (pp.23 and 25).

'Watching' has a double meaning and 'whaching' also has echoes of 'washing' and 'whipping'. Emily Brontë is associated with whipping ('Reason with him and then whip

¹⁴⁸ *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English*, ed. by H.W. Fowler and F.G. Fowler, 5th edn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), p.1471.

him!') as is Catherine in *Wuthering Heights*, who asks her father to bring her a whip as a present when he visits Liverpool.¹⁴⁹ Three times in the poem Brontë is mentioned as brushing the carpet. According to the narrator she brushes difficult questions such as 'Why cast the world away?' into (rather than under) the carpet, an action that seems like both washing and whipping. 'Whaching' may be a way of overcoming or transcending the limitations of a particular environment or situation. Watching can be a passive action, but it can also be active, as when Carson's narrator walks the moor, closely observing the frozen landscape as she moves and thinks.

I have arrived at the middle of the moor

The final and most important function of the Brontë references is to provide Carson's narrator with an intellectual and emotional springboard, something that she can progress beyond, to create a work of her own.

I have already described the way in which the narrator often appropriates and develops certain words, ideas and images to amplify or clarify her thoughts about her own situation. Nowhere is this more evident than in the way that she depicts the moorland landscape and uses it as a metaphor for her own emotional state.

Emily Brontë's love of the moors and her habit of taking solitary walks are part of the 'Brontë myth'. Charlotte wrote: 'her native hills were far more to her than a spectacle; they were what she lived in, and by, as much as the wild birds, their tenants, or as the heather, their produce'.¹⁵⁰ In *Wuthering Heights*, the moor is the place to which Catherine and Heathcliff escape from Hindley and carry out their 'courtship' and also a place where those who are unaccustomed to it, like Lockwood, can become hopelessly lost. Catherine, like Emily Brontë, loves the moors and believes that the liberty that they offer is preferable to being in heaven. But although the moor features heavily in the novel, there is actually relatively little direct or detailed description of it. The most notable description of the moor comes early in the novel, and depicts it as a featureless waste, obscured by heavy snow.¹⁵¹ In contrast, the moor in 'The Glass Essay' is far from featureless; it is a specific location, very precisely described.

¹⁴⁹ Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, p.264.

¹⁵⁰ Charlotte Brontë *Preface to Wuthering Heights*, p. xix and see also Charlotte's introduction to the 1850 edition of *Wuthering Heights* reproduced in Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights* ed. by Sale and Dunn, p.268.

¹⁵¹ For Lockwood's description of the snow-covered moor, see Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, p.38.

The moor is introduced early in the poem; the first thing the reader learns about it is that ‘Spring opens like a blade there.’ This line combines many significant features. There are blades of grass; things grow and change there with the seasons. It is open; it is the opposite of a prison, but also a place associated with vulnerability and open wounds; perhaps also it is a place of learning where people are open to experience. There are also sudden movements; the suggestion of knife blades springing open, of cutting open, cutting off, and pain. The second thing that the reader learns about the moor is that it is ‘paralysed with ice’ (p.4).

Carson’s moor both acts upon the narrator of ‘The Glass Essay’ and mirrors her complicated emotional state. Furthermore, in her description of and use of the moorland landscape, Carson draws on the work of other writers besides Emily Brontë, following a Romantic tradition of identifying with the natural world and using a landscape to reflect or evoke a state of mind. Law left in September, the beginning of autumn, it is now April, the moor is frozen, but is just beginning to thaw. The repeated references to April suggest T.S. Eliot’s ‘The Waste Land’:

April is the cruellest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain.
Winter kept us warm, covering
Earth in forgetful snow ¹⁵²

On Carson’s frozen wasteland there are dead leaves blowing in the wind, the snow is ‘scarred by pine filth’, rotten matter shed by pine trees, but also an echo of ‘pining’ in the sense of longing and wasting away (p.5). The narrator walks past ‘crops’ of ice; this word suggests rocky outcrops, but also ‘crops’ as in agricultural produce; the moor only ‘grows’ ice (p.10). There are trees, but these are bare. The narrator’s three walks take her from her mother’s house to the middle of the moor, where ‘the ground goes down into a depression and fills with swampy water’, which, depending on the time of day and the temperature, may or may not be frozen (p.23). If the moor is a metaphor for the narrator’s state of mind, this swampy depression could be read as a metaphor for her unconscious. On the first two occasions as she walks towards the middle of the moor she is reliving her separation from Law and thinking about her visions of the Nudes, as well as considering the work of Emily Brontë. At the beginning of the poem:

¹⁵² T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land and Other Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1940), p.27.

the ice has begun to unclench.
Black open water comes

curdling up like anger. (p.5)

If black open water is coming up then the ice is either melting or has been smashed (another reference to breakage). 'Curdling' has an association with separation, as well as with horror ('bloodcurdling') and the black water is reminiscent of bile. The ice is unclenching, which means that a fist or a grip is relaxing.

On the moor, both light and wind make an impression upon the narrator. Sometimes the light almost carries out a physical assault:

The bare blue trees and bleached wooden sky of April
carve into me with knives of light. (p.10)

Out the kitchen window I watch the steely April sun
jab its last cold yellow streaks
across a dirty silver sky. (p.20)

She frequently stands into the wind or walks into the wind, usually at times when she is having distressing memories and thoughts about Law. Wind is also involved in many of the visions that she calls the Nudes:

Woman alone on a hill.
She stands into the wind.

It is a hard wind slanting from the north
Long flaps and shreds of flesh rip off the woman's body and lift
and blow away on the wind. (p.12)

This north wind is associated with the fictional moors around Wuthering Heights and the actual moors around Top Withens.

Sun and light sometimes behave in strange ways. As she walks across the moor, the narrator is 'warmed by drifts from the pale blue sun', as if the sunlight is blown on the wind like snow (p.10). Here the sun is pale blue, rather than white or orange or yellow; it is almost as if it has blurred into the sky. There is another, similar description, further on:

At this time of year there is no sunset
just some movements inside the light and then a sinking away. (p.16)

Light and darkness can move in unexpected directions: 'Bluish dusk fills the room like a sea slid back' (p.17), although if the dusk is filling the room like sea it would normally be expected to slide forward. Similarly, 'The light plunges straight up from the ice to a blue

hole at the top of the sky (p.21).’ The ice is reflecting the sunlight, which bounces upwards, but ‘plunge’ is normally used to describe a downward movement, such as a dive into water. Like Emily Brontë, the narrator is watching actively and authentically, and what she watches mirrors her feeling that the laws of the natural world have been reversed and that she is at odds with this reversed world.

The moor appears to be an inhospitable wasteland but it is also a place where the narrator can meditate on her situation and can begin to understand it. She arrives at the depression in the middle to observe that it is frozen:

A solid black pane of moor life caught in its own attitudes.

Certain wild gold arrangements of weed are visible deep in the black.
Four naked alder trunks rise straight up from it
and sway in the blue air. Each trunk

where it enters the ice radiates a map of silver pressures —
thousands of hair-thin cracks catching the white of the light
like a jailed face

catching grins through the bars. (p.23-24)

On another occasion, she notices that:

Bits of gold weed

have etched themselves
on the underside of the ice like messages. (p.40-41)

Here the motif of imprisonment recurs. The trees and weeds are ‘caught’, and the narrator has the illusion of a jailed face. But on both occasions there is a strong and particular light: ‘...a strange young April light is filling the moor with gold milk’, and ‘Astonished light is *washing* over the moor from north to east...’ (pp.23 and 39; my italics). The narrator is ‘walking into the light’. The morning is ‘wide open’; the words contain the idea of vulnerability, but also of freedom and possibility and perhaps even of transformation. The trees are bare of leaves, but they are moving and their movement, perhaps the beginning of spring growth, is cracking the ice. Even the word ‘radiates’ suggests movement and warmth; the cracks form a map. The weed is golden, rather than black (like the bilious swampy water) or blue (like the cold air and the trees), it is ‘etched’ on the underside of the ice ‘like messages’ and there is some communication and response between the ice and the light; the prisoner can see ‘grins’ (grimaces or smiles) through the bars. In contrast to the

earlier descriptions of the moor, these descriptions leave the reader with an impression of great beauty.

She should have been a great navigator

Constantin Heger, principal of the pension in Brussels that Charlotte and Emily Brontë both attended, is reported to have said of Emily, 'She should have been a man – a great navigator. Her powerful reason would have deduced new spheres of discovery from the knowledge of the old.'¹⁵³

References to navigation and journeys occur throughout the poem. The narrator's memories of her relationship with Law are associated with travelling and movement. She describes falling in love with Law as 'a wheel rolling downhill' (p.6). Elsewhere, she uses a succession of present participles: running, blowing, spraying, singing, touching, to convey the impression of rapid ongoing motion:

I can feel that other day running underneath this one
like an old videotape – here we go fast around the last corner
up the hill to his house, shadows

of limes and roses blowing in the car window
and music spraying from the radio and him
singing and touching my left hand to his lips. (p.11)

This passage stands out from the rest of the poem and contrasts with the more sparing use of present participles and the emphasis on slowness, stasis, and icy paralysis elsewhere.

As 'The Glass Essay' progresses, the narrator navigates Emily Brontë's life and work. She begins her reading of Emily Brontë expecting to see herself and her situation mirrored in the texts; the idea of Brontë is first introduced immediately after the narrator has been contemplating her own tearstained face in the mirror. She says that her main fear, 'which I mean to confront' is that she is turning into the clichéd figure of the lonely spinster stumping over the barren and featureless moor.

However, as she carries on reading, she closely examines the actual words and works that Brontë has written as if they were specimens trapped under a glass slide. Her observations on Brontë's life and work become more detailed and analytical. She comes to understand that turning into Emily Brontë might mean far more than simply the prospect of awkwardness and spinsterhood. As she walks across the moor (another kind of navigation),

¹⁵³ Lane, p.148 (also in Gaskell).

the language in which she reflects on her own emotions becomes more elaborate and specific, progressing, for example, from the commonplace: ‘When Law left I felt so bad I thought I would die’, to the much more vivid and effective:

In the days and months after Law left
I felt as if the sky was torn off my life.
I had no home in goodness anymore. (p.21)

This has echoes of Catherine’s dream in *Wuthering Heights*, in which she chooses to be expelled from heaven because it does not seem to be her home.¹⁵⁴

And the narrator does appear to reach a destination of some kind. Although the end of the poem can be read as ambivalent, in the course of her ‘essay’ she has thoroughly examined and rejected what she has identified as Brontë’s strategies for dealing with the world: cruelty, anger and religious experience. The glass has cleared; the mirror has become a window.

The poem concludes with Charlotte’s lines on Emily’s death (in Carson’s words, ‘Emily had shaken free’ [p.46]) followed by a description of the thirteenth and final Nude. Again, the figure seems to be standing in a landscape like the moor that surrounds *Wuthering Heights*, but this final vision also carries a reminder of Sylvia Plath’s poem ‘Wuthering Heights’:

the wind
Pours by like destiny, bending
Everything in one direction.
[...]
If I pay the roots of the heather
Too close attention, they will invite me
To whiten my bones among them
[...]
The sky leans on me, me, the one upright
Among all horizontals.¹⁵⁵

Plath’s poem emphasises the starkness of the moors and the effect of the unrelenting wind on the ‘I’ of the poem (‘the sky leans on me, me,’). But in ‘The Glass Essay’ the narrator is once again watching objectively:

¹⁵⁴ Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, pp.99-100.

¹⁵⁵ Sylvia Plath, *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), pp.167-168.

I saw a high hill and on it a form shaped against hard air.

It could have been just a pole with some old cloth attached,
but as I came closer
I saw it was a human body

trying to stand against winds so terrible that the flesh was blowing off the bones.
And there was no pain.
The wind

was cleansing the bones.
They stood forth silver and necessary.
It was not my body, not a woman's body, it was the body of us all.
It walked out of the light. (p.47)

This final, more affirmative and redemptive vision echoes the beginning of the narrator's final walk on the moor ('I am walking into the light') and reiterates and connects ideas and images that have occurred frequently throughout the poem: 'hard' air, wind, washing, light, the divine. At the very end, Carson seems to be going back to one of the most ancient and fundamental texts of all: the Bible, for the vertical figure on the hill evokes the image of the Crucifixion. And crucifixion implies the possibility of eventual resurrection.

The narrator begins by seeing herself mirrored in the text. But instead, the *Collected Works* of Emily Brontë offer her a window to read through. On the other side of the window is an emotional and psychological terrain that the narrator closely observes and then explores for herself. Like Brontë, she experiences liberty as:

moving along the moor
into the first blue currents and cold navigation of everything awake. (p. 20)

As she reads and studies and considers the life and work of Emily Brontë more deeply, she travels beyond Brontë's text to create a work of her own. She travels beyond the glass, into the outside world, becoming what Emily could not become: a navigator.

CHAPTER 4: CONTEXTS, HISTORIES, CONNECTIONS, EXPLANATIONS: THE POEMS AND LYRIC ESSAYS

I literally owe my life to books. My parents both went to their local grammar schools on scholarships for the children of miners and they met in a public library, where my mother was working as a library assistant. I grew up in Eastwood, the small town in Nottinghamshire in which D.H. Lawrence was born and brought up. I went to the same primary school that Lawrence had attended seventy years before and which then kept a small photo of him in a very dark corner of the assembly hall. Later on, my daily walk to the local Comprehensive school took me past his birthplace. At that time, in the 1960s and 1970s, Lawrence was still a fashionable writer and to some people even an iconic figure. If you came from a lower middle-class household where there were books, particularly if you were situated north of London and the Home Counties, he was somebody you could not possibly ignore. Because I grew up exactly where I did, *and* I wanted to become a writer, he was inescapable.

I learned of his existence while I was still a child, after I wrote some poems at primary school. And then I discovered his writing for myself, in my early teens, one half term when I picked my mother's old Penguin paperback of *The Rainbow* off the shelf at home. It was a tidal flow of language, descriptions, feelings, something you could almost drown in.

My first encounter with Virginia Woolf came at about the same time, also by picking a book off a shelf on impulse, this time in the school library. It was *A Room of One's Own*. I was attracted by the title and fascinated by the voice of the narrator, her descriptions of the luxurious crème brûlée in one college and the dismal prunes in another. But it was not until I was a second year undergraduate that I read *To the Lighthouse*, gulping it straight down in one afternoon. The sentences pulled me in. To paraphrase Woolf herself, it was like 'being blown through the Tube at fifty miles an hour [...] With one's hair flying back like the tail of a race horse.'¹⁵⁶ I knew immediately that Woolf was important and that I needed to read – and understand – much more.

¹⁵⁶ Virginia Woolf, 'The Mark on the Wall', in *The Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf*, ed. by Susan Dick (London: Hogarth Press, 1985), p.78.

The anxiety of influence: two significant figures

At the time that I began this project, Lawrence and Woolf seemed to me to be the two significant figures in my own 'history' as a reader and as a writer. When I first discovered each of them I was excited by their prose that was also poetry and especially by the ways in which they both used language to foreground the interior lives of their characters. I was also interested in the way that Woolf consciously stretched the boundaries of the novel to include memoir, biography and essay as well as prose poem.

On the surface, my relationship with Lawrence might be said to conform to the model set out by Harold Bloom in *The Anxiety of Influence*: a struggle to overcome the constraining influence of a male precursor. It is a complicated relationship. He represents the place that I started from: roots, hometowns, origins.

Inevitably, *Sons and Lovers* was one of my set texts for English A level; the book is actually set in and around Eastwood and Nottingham. My very close intense reading and re-reading of the novel over those two years was a rich and intoxicating experience, but I began to feel some niggling reservations about the character of Paul Morel, the main protagonist of the novel, which at first I tried not to recognise. In addition, after reading *Women in Love* and some of Lawrence's essays, I developed a subconscious idea of Lawrence as an authority figure, constantly preaching at people and never satisfied. Then my English teacher, who was a young woman, discovered Kate Millet's important feminist work *Sexual Politics*.¹⁵⁷ We read and discussed the relevant extracts from it in class and we were asked to write an essay: 'Paul Morel is a murderer, a homosexual and a male chauvinist pig. Discuss.'

Quite suddenly, over a very few years, Lawrence became someone who was no longer read or studied very much, because his opinions, particularly about women, had become politically unacceptable. And my attitude changed too. When I took 'The Novel' as an option in my final year at university I chose to study George Eliot, Thomas Hardy, Charlotte Brontë and of course Virginia Woolf, but not Lawrence. I felt ambivalent about him and I think that he would have certainly disapproved of me, of the person that I was becoming.

Virginia Woolf wrote: 'We think back through our mothers if we are women'.¹⁵⁸ Woolf began to replace Lawrence as a central figure in my personal literary pantheon at about the same time that Woolf's writing became fashionable and Lawrence's writing fell out

¹⁵⁷ Kate Millet, *Sexual Politics* (London: Virago, 1977).

¹⁵⁸ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (London: Hogarth Press, 1929), p.114

of favour in the wider world. If Lawrence represented the place that I had come from, Woolf represented the place that I had come to: a women's college in an ancient university, where she herself had given the lecture that was to become a significant feminist text, *A Room of One's Own*. Woolf might be assumed to represent the 'female precursor' that Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar discuss in *The Madwoman in the Attic*: someone who 'proves by example that a revolt against patriarchal literary authority is possible'.

I recognised (and admired) Woolf's feminism at the time that I first read her work, but her importance to me was not only or even mainly about overcoming patriarchy. What was important was not her life or her politics but her *writing*. She showed the things that it was possible to do with words. And while on one level Lawrence might seem to be a Bloomian 'precursor', a patriarchal figure whose influence must be overcome and thrown off, he too has often functioned as a more positive example. Nowadays I have considerable sympathy with the view of Bill Potter, a character in A.S. Byatt's 1996 novel *Babel Tower*, who says:

You can go away from Lawrence and get in a frightful rage with him – a *silly* man, even at times a *bad* man – and pompous – and then you come back and open the book and there's the language, and the vision, *shining* at you, with authority, whatever that is.¹⁵⁹

Through my study of the work of Anne Carson and through my reflection on my personal history as a reader I have come to the conclusion that my relation to important writers such as Lawrence and Woolf is not primarily that of apprentice writer and literary forefather or foremother.¹⁶⁰ Carson has conducted long conversations with the texts that she has translated, studied intently and written about. My relationships with other writers and their works have been formed by similar acts of repeated close reading and re-reading over a long period.

Multiple readings: a reading history

When I originally conceived my project I imagined that the majority of the poems would probably take ideas, images, or techniques from novels or other writing as starting points. I expected that it would be my more detached, academic readings of Lawrence and Woolf that would inform my creative responses to their work, and to some extent this has been the case.

¹⁵⁹ A.S. Byatt, *Babel Tower* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1996), p.244.

¹⁶⁰ Although at one point I consciously took Woolf's writing as a model for my own, I do not believe that Lawrence has ever been a direct influence on my own style.

But I knew that I would also need to draw on personal material, at least to a limited extent. I decided to write some notes about my own ‘reading history’, at first intending them to be a fairly cursory and factual account of my early encounters with Lawrence and Woolf. It was when I remembered my first haphazard discoveries of adult literature that I began to write compulsively and the notes took on a life of their own. As well as describing my first encounters with Lawrence and Woolf, I wrote about the importance of Margaret Drabble as a role model, and about a traumatic collision with Sylvia Plath’s novel *The Bell Jar*. I tried to capture the experience of standing on the threshold of a new and captivating world. The opening poem in the collection, ‘Spines in Shining Orange’, grew directly from a memory of standing in the fiction department in Nottingham’s main bookshop, aged about fifteen, and looking avidly at the shelves of Penguin paperbacks as if they were fashionable clothes or make-up, ‘they are spiralling up pearl shimmers in shocking pink, | they are singing like silver varnish.’¹⁶¹

After that I moved on to discuss the books that I had studied for O level and for A level and during the most memorable and formative parts of my undergraduate degree in English Literature. I reflected on what drew me to particular authors and works, where I read them, how I read them, and why.

As I wrote, I discovered a number of recurring themes and ideas. One of these was the way in which readers are sometimes encouraged to approach particular texts by discovering or decoding a system of images and symbols. When I was studying for A level, we read through *Sons and Lovers* in class, very slowly, and very closely. That approach seemed to be especially appropriate for a novel about intense emotion written by a novelist who works by accretion. Every small detail was freighted with significance. Our teacher was very keen indeed on what we all called ‘symbols’ and would point them out emphatically. For example, there is a scene in which Paul Morel and Clara (the married woman with whom he is sexually obsessed) are taking a very strenuous and muddy walk beside the River Trent. In our close reading, great importance was attached to the footprints on the path that they were following, ‘the groove a man’s nailed boots had made’,¹⁶² this being interpreted as an obvious reference to Clara’s estranged husband, almost as if Clara’s husband might literally have been there a few minutes before them. When I re-read that part of *Sons and Lovers* I

¹⁶¹ This poem is included on p.9 of this thesis. All further references to my own poems and prose pieces will be given in the body of the text.

¹⁶² D.H. Lawrence, *Sons and Lovers*, ed by Helen Baron and Carl Baron (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992), p.354.

was struck, yet again, by how good Lawrence is at using landscape to suggest a state of mind. I then wrote the poem, ‘Paul and Clara Walk Beside the Trent.’

This issue was also relevant to my reading of Woolf. In *To the Lighthouse*, the lighthouse itself is a constant presence. As I had written in ‘Paul and Clara Walk Beside the Trent’, the mind struggles to forge significance out of everything, ‘making this mean that exact thing, hammering it down’ (p.66). When Virginia Woolf was asked about the significance of the lighthouse, she wrote:

I meant *nothing* by The Lighthouse. One has to have a central line down the middle of the book to hold the design together. I saw that all sorts of feelings would accrue to this, but I refused to think them out [...]. Whether it’s right or wrong I don’t know, but directly I’m told what a thing means, it becomes hateful to me.¹⁶³

The poem, ‘A Line There, in the Centre’, was my response to this statement. The lighthouse is both seen and seeing, it ‘opens an evening eye’, it is ‘somewhere to get to, | something to hold to’ (p.28). I tried to write about all the things the lighthouse represents, or might represent, at different points in the novel. An early draft concluded with the line, ‘They keep the flame there’, which was correct in both a literal sense and a metaphorical sense; the novel is Woolf’s commemoration of her dead parents. This line was later deleted as it seemed to offer too easy and banal an insight – something that the novel itself deliberately resists. Afterwards, the significance of the lighthouse seemed to be even more elusive; my poem captured one particular mood, perhaps even a truth, about Woolf’s novel, but I was convinced that there was yet another way of representing it. I wrote a further piece, this time a discursive prose poem, ‘*But What, After All, is One Night?*’ which attempted to address something else fundamental about the perception of objects in *To the Lighthouse*: ‘nothing was simply one thing’.¹⁶⁴ By choosing to write in prose, rather than breaking the line, I also tried to convey something of the experience of reading *To the Lighthouse*: ‘Woolf’s lines are not short and still and set in isinglass, but long and rocking, like being swept along in an express train’ (p.29).

Surprisingly, the most important recurring theme turned out to be my personal experience of the act of reading itself. When I remember specific acts of reading what comes first is normally a visual memory of the room I was in at the time. When I remember reading *The Rainbow* for the first time I can see the living room in the house in which I grew up, and

¹⁶³ Letter to Roger Fry, 27 May 1927, in *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, ed. by Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann, 6 vols, (London: Chatto and Windus, 1977), III, p.385.

¹⁶⁴ Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, (London: Hogarth Press, 1927), p.286.

the view through the big window on my left. I shared that view with Lawrence himself; he described it in a letter, as it had been in his own youth, calling it 'the country of my heart'.¹⁶⁵ That was the title that I gave to a short prose piece in which I reflected on our shared landscape and described the view as I remembered it: 'Framed in the centre: the pit hill, a mountain of volcanic black, compelling the eye. [...] Over the pit hill's black shoulder was another, smaller, pale green shoulder, sloping in the opposite direction: Crich Stand' (p.13).

If reading almost always happens in an actual, physical room, it also happens in an emotional or psychological room. There are times when the decoration, or the lack of it, in this inner room, what people call a private life, can drown everything else out, when what should be the background comes to the foreground and the work of literature becomes a mere soundtrack to one's own affairs. But this is not always the case. Sometimes one's own affairs exist alongside and distinct from one's reading; sometimes the study of literature can make the wider world seem like a background noise. The pamphlet length sequence 'Of Time, Snakes and the Falling Snow' is a fictionalised account of my life while I worked towards an undergraduate dissertation on Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte D'Arthur* during the unusually cold winter and spring of 1979. The *Morte D'Arthur* tells the story of the reign of King Arthur and its cataclysmic end; the 'Winter of Discontent' is a period that many now also regard as the disastrous end of an era. At the time, my dissertation and my other work for Finals almost completely overshadowed the public sector disputes and the approaching General Election and also seemed quite separate from a parallel set of circumstances in my personal life. It was only many years later that I realised that all these things were in fact three connected strands of the same story.

I have suggested that Anne Carson's dialogues with other writers began with the intense reading and re-reading that she undertook when she translated their work from the Greek. Unlike Carson, I have very little experience of literary translation. I have included a translation of a short passage from Victor Hugo's *Contemplations* as a response to my study of Carson's translation strategies. The poem that follows it, 'By Heart' is both a response to the experience of producing this translation and a response to the Hugo extract itself (p.34). In effect, the second stanza of this poem is a 'free' translation.

However, I have considerable experience of a discipline that in some ways can be seen as broadly similar to translation. My undergraduate degree in English emphasised an

¹⁶⁵ Letter to Rolf Gardiner, 3 December 1926, in D.H. Lawrence, *Selected Letters*, ed. by James T. Boulton, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p.329.

approach known as Practical Criticism: close reading and detailed analysis of a text (generally one or more poems or short prose extracts) without being told the author or the work from which it was taken. As originally developed by the Cambridge critic I.A. Richards, the objective of Practical Criticism was to encourage students to read disinterestedly and to focus on the words on the page, rather than making stock responses based on their preconceptions about the text or its author. Practical Criticism encourages readings which concentrate on the formal qualities of a work, rather than on its biographical, historical or political context.¹⁶⁶ Close reading became my instinctive approach to texts as an undergraduate, even outside Practical Criticism class. It has much to offer to an aspiring writer.

Over and over again as I reflected on my reading history this idea emerged: there really are multiple readings. These occur over a period of time, as a text is read and re-read and also alongside each other in the same moment. The more formal, detached, analytical readings enrich the personal, instinctive readings and vice versa. And every re-reading can contain the memories of all the earlier readings, together with the physical rooms and the psychological rooms in which they have taken place.

This has certainly been my own experience of reading *Sons and Lovers*. When I first studied it, I read it on two levels at once: I concentrated on the narrative, the themes and the language impersonally and analytically; and I responded emotionally, looking for something that I could learn about the relations between men and women, about marriage, possibly about my own future. As I read, I sometimes visualised places described in the novel as I knew them at that time, or recalled anecdotes that I had heard at various times from various relatives: my grandfather catching a rabbit for the pot on his way home from the pit; my grandparents walking all the way to Nottingham on their wedding day; my uncle's terrifying childhood encounter with a gamekeeper. When I re-read the novel at university and afterwards, certain passages carried memories of the classrooms in which I first read them and of the other things that were happening in my life at the time. When I re-read and reconsidered *Sons and Lovers* for the purpose of this project, I found that I needed to approach the novel differently, to misread it, to swerve, to enter it from a new direction. This resulted in two feminist 'reversionings': 'Miriam Leivers Reads *Middlemarch* and Thinks About Paul Morel', and 'Clara Swimming', both of which I will discuss later in this chapter.

¹⁶⁶ Cambridge University Faculty of English, *Introduction to Practical Criticism*, <http://www.english.cam.ac.uk/classroom/pracrit.htm> [accessed 30 October 2017]. See also Annette Federico, *Engagements with Close Reading* (London; New York: Routledge, 2016), p.34.

This extended consideration of my own formative experiences of reading meant that many of the poems I wrote were concerned with the act of reading in general, rather than with my responses to specific works of Lawrence or Woolf. Some other writers, notably George Eliot and Sir Thomas Malory, also seemed to demand to be included. George Eliot's novel *Middlemarch* found its way into three poems: 'Miriam Leivers Reads *Middlemarch* and Thinks About Paul Morel', 'This Particular Web', a poem about intertextuality, and 'Experience'. 'Experience' was originally intended to be separate from this project, but seemed to fit in naturally after Miriam's reading of *Middlemarch* in the previous poem.

Line break is all you've got: oratory, fragments and music

The status of the line is a significant difference between prose and poetry. Poetry breaks the line; other forms do not.

Line-break is all you've got, and if you don't *master* line break – the border between poetry and prose – then you don't know there is a border. And there is a border. (A prose poem is prose done by a poet.)¹⁶⁷

Mastering the line break has been by far the biggest technical issue that I have faced in moving from writing mainly narrative prose to writing poetry. I have found that there are two ways of considering line breaks: where or why does the line break; and what is contained on or within the line; this second can also be thought of as being about the completed phrase or the melodic, or musical, quality of the line.¹⁶⁸

In her poem, 'Essay on What I Think About Most'¹⁶⁹, Carson celebrates two classical Greek writers: Alkman (the author of the poetic fragment that provides the ostensible inspiration for the 'essay') and Aristotle. Aristotle's *Rhetoric* concerns oratory, the art of persuasion, and it is possible to read 'Essay on What I Think About Most' as an exercise in oratory, rather than poetry. The line breaks are positioned in such a way as to indicate pauses for breath or emphasis. For example, the first quotation from Aristotle is broken into phrases:

Strange words simply puzzle us;
ordinary words convey what we know already;
it is from metaphor that we can get hold of something new & fresh.

so that each line addresses a different kind of word. As well as indicating pauses in the oratory, line and stanza breaks are used to emphasise the central argument by completing

¹⁶⁷ Glyn Maxwell, *On Poetry* (London: Oberon Books, 2012), p.12.

¹⁶⁸ Denise Levertov, 'On the Function of the Line', in *New and Selected Essays* (New York: New Directions, 1992), pp.80-81.

¹⁶⁹ Carson, *Men in the Off Hours*, pp.30-36.

sentences in an unexpected way, sometimes by enjambment across a stanza break. For example:

Metaphors teach the mind

to enjoy error
and to learn
from the juxtaposition of *what is* and *what is not* the case.
There is a Chinese proverb that says,
Brush cannot write two characters with the same stroke.
And yet

that is exactly what a good mistake does.

Carson would have had to make a similar transition to my own, in her case from writing mainly critical prose to writing poetry. She would almost certainly have faced similar technical issues of style and it is noticeable that while her poems make use of line breaks and stanza breaks, she uses very few other of the devices normally associated with poetry in English, such as metrical patterning or rhyme. Her poems typically have irregular line breaks, so that the verse appears jagged and uneven on the page. Given Carson's interest in performance art, and her familiarity with classical rhetorical devices, she may have deliberately chosen to approach the problem of the line break by lineating her poems as if they were dramatic monologues. In 'The Glass Essay', and *The Beauty of The Husband*, which *are* effectively dramatic monologues, the line holds the phrase and the line break marks the pause for breath or dramatic effect.

The jagged line has other uses, besides marking the breath. In Chapter 3 I have shown how, in 'The Glass Essay', Carson uses deliberately awkward and fragmentary line and stanza breaks to emphasise the fractured and uncompleted nature of the narrator's experiences and mental processes.

I have deliberately tried to adopt a similar 'oratorical' method to that used by Carson on at least two occasions. The first was when I produced a dramatic monologue in the voice of a character in *Sons and Lovers*, Miriam Leivers.¹⁷⁰ Like 'The Glass Essay', this poem was concerned with the painful aftermath of a long relationship – in this case, a ten-year long romantic and intellectual friendship that culminated in an unsatisfactory physical love affair. One of the reasons that the early drafts of this poem were less than successful was because the Carson-like phrasing that I used to voice Miriam's thoughts did not give her voice quite the right texture. She sounded too slow, plodding, deliberate, occasionally passive and self-

¹⁷⁰ This poem eventually became 'Miriam Leivers Reads *Middlemarch* and Thinks About Paul Morel'.

pitying. Subsequent versions of the poem had longer lines, and attempted to be much more rapid and fluent and musical. I also found that by lengthening the lines and concentrating on musicality (something that Carson is not noted for) I could achieve sentence rhythms that were a better fit with one aspect of my subject matter: the descriptive possibilities of the novel.

Whereas a novel
packs in the whole world, even a black tom cat,
even a rain-soaked cabbage, layered hemisphere,
muscular, shining. *A cabbage alive.*
Even the unploughable field that they stood in,
while he expounded all this,
dip and then slope up into the woods,
snapped dandelions oozing sour milk,
cuckoo spit gobbets on stalks,
mauve nacreous worms encircled by saddles of eggs. (p.69)

‘Oratorical’ phrasing did, however, work well for some of the poems in the sequence ‘Of Time, Snakes and the Falling Snow.’ I deliberately used long and short lines in the poem, ‘*At Thys Time, Said Merlion, I Woll Nat Tell Thee*’, in which the narrator is remembering voting, for the very first time, in the 1979 General Election. The line breaks are intended both to mark natural pauses and to emphasise the narrator’s confused and rather defiant mental state; she is determined to make her vote mean something to her, although she knows it cannot affect the eventual result (because her college is in a safe seat):

rather, trying to digest,

believe,
in this sudden capering wish
to cross out cynicism

and vote *for* something. (p.54)

Different kinds of attention: poetry and prose

Carson’s work transgresses traditional genre boundaries. A significant proportion of the work that appears in her collections of poetry is actually presented in prose, occasionally in the form of a drama or a screenplay, but more often in the form of a lyric essay. Some works presented as poems, with line and stanza breaks, are described as ‘essays’, for example, ‘Essay on What I Think About Most’ and ‘The Glass Essay’. *Autobiography of Red* is subtitled ‘A Novel in Verse’, while *The Beauty of the Husband* is subtitled ‘A Fictional Essay in 29 Tangos’.

A detailed consideration of Carson's use of hybrid genres is beyond the scope of this study. I have considered Carson's (and my own) use of the line break, which most people regard as one of the important features that distinguish poetry from prose. It is helpful to briefly discuss one further apparent difference between poetry and prose: the kind of attention that each of them demands of the reader. The poet David Constantine has described the reader's usual response to lyric poetry as follows:

We apprehend the poem rather as we do a picture, taking in its details if not quite (as in a picture) simultaneously, at least with a sense that we must hold them suspended, co-existent, in play, and that reaching the chronological end, the last sentence's full stop, we may at once begin again, sorting the imagery differently. Indeed in much lyric poetry there is a tension between chronology and simultaneity, most often we are not encouraged (as we are in epigrammatic poetry) to move to a conclusion and have things fall into place. Much lyric poetry resists the onward progress of its lines.¹⁷¹

Constantine argues that in forms other than poetry language has an agreed purpose (for example, to tell a story or to explain the workings of the Large Hadron Collider) and that language subordinates itself to that purpose. It does not become an end in itself, it does not draw attention to itself. In poetry, language exceeds its basic function. As a general rule, it does draw attention to itself.

Reading a book or an essay *about* poetry, if the writer, for the argument, quotes a poem, it is very easy to feel by the different kinds of attention the discursive prose and the poem embedded in it require, just how differently these two languages work. Often indeed the juxtaposition, giving each its proper due, will be unmanageable. Most likely the poem, demanding more, will get less, and will be subordinated, as material, to the argument; an abuse only justifiable if the prose helps us back to the poem later, for a better reading.¹⁷²

Forms such as the essay, the novel and the epic poem tend to move the reader forward through time. The essay develops an argument and the narrative tells a story. Poetry, especially lyric poetry, generally encourages the reader to read in a very different way, staying with a line or a stanza while it yields up its content through the use of condensed and heightened language.

But of course this is not an absolute distinction. Many novelists and literary essayists, including Lawrence and Woolf, use language that exceeds its basic function of telling a story or advancing and explaining an argument. My experience of reading Woolf is that both kinds of attention seem to be demanded simultaneously. She makes the reader read her as a novelist, following a rapid forward moving line of narrative, and also as a poet, slowly, looking back and forth, working with the words and imagery.

¹⁷¹ David Constantine, *Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p.63.

¹⁷² Constantine, *Poetry*, p.100.

However, this nominal distinction between poetry and prose is useful because it draws attention to a particular characteristic of Carson's work: many of her strongest works are either narratives or advance and develop an argument in some way. There is a forward movement and drive. This may encourage the reader to approach them, at least initially, as if they were prose, even if they possess some of the characteristics normally associated with poetry: line and stanza breaks and language that exceeds its basic function. In his review of *Men in the Off Hours* John D'Agata questions whether what Carson had written in this collection was in fact poetry, or experimental prose presented as if it were poetry. He suggests that 'Essay on What I Think About Most' is too rhetorical and argumentative to perform the lyric's duty, which is to draw the audience into participation with the poem and its lyric activity.¹⁷³

For this reader, Carson's strongest claim to be a poet lies in her awareness of the possibilities of language. The language that Carson uses draws attention to itself. In earlier chapters I have argued that Carson makes extensive use of words with multiple meanings and words that carry multiple associations. I have also suggested that Carson's experience as a translator has enabled her to defamiliarise and refresh her own first language.

There can be no completely robust definitions of a poem, an essay, or a novel. The numerous definitions that do exist are contestable and in any case, literary forms are constantly evolving over time. Therefore, does it really matter whether Carson's work is classified as poetry, prose, essays, or novels? As long as the work succeeds in engaging the reader, probably not. But the issue of genre has been a crucial one for my own recent work and I have often questioned whether the poem is really the most appropriate form for a project such as this one. Given that I enjoyed writing my 'reading notes' and that they produced many interesting insights, why did I not simply develop these into a memoir?

At one point this anxiety prompted me, temporarily, to abandon poetry and instead to write several prose pieces, mainly about my own early encounters with Lawrence.¹⁷⁴ Some of these began as attempts at 'lyric essays', but can more properly be classified as slightly fictionalised memoir. They were written partly because I felt the need to engage more closely with the autobiographical and emotional elements of my relationship with Lawrence and partly to provide an historical and to some extent a political context for the project in

¹⁷³ John D'Agata, 'Review: Men in the Off Hours', [accessed 8 October 2017].

¹⁷⁴ These are: 'The Country of my Heart', 'A Subjective Impression: Lawrence and Me', and 'Lawrence, D.H., *The Rainbow* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1949)'.

general. By that stage I had realised that much, if not most, of my potential audience would not necessarily understand what Lawrence and his work represented to people like my parents and my teachers, grammar school educated readers in the middle of the twentieth century.

But I had never intended to write a memoir. The ‘reading notes’ were a useful and fruitful way of beginning to think about my life as a reader, but I felt that I was the subject of them, rather than the books, and that this gave them a limited perspective. I also felt that the memoir form would be inhibiting in that it would assume a focus on one narrative line, rather than, as W.S. Graham explained, the intention that continually shatters itself. ‘The poet does not write what he knows but what he does not know’.¹⁷⁵

This thesis includes one ‘lyric essay’ that could not have been anything other than a prose piece: ‘The Sense of Things Coming Over and Over Again and Yet Changing: Reading and Re-Reading *The Waves*’. This describes my personal observations and impressions arising from accumulated readings of Woolf’s novel over half a lifetime. The collection would not have been complete without at least one attempt at ‘creative criticism’: work that explores the borderland between creative and critical writing, a literary essay in the tradition of Woolf herself.

In practice, finding an appropriate form is often a matter of trial and error. Carson has said that *Autobiography of Red* was originally written in prose, but then evolved into its present form of long and short lines alternating in couplets. ‘What if I break these lines up a bit? Maybe they’d move along more smartly.’¹⁷⁶ I have observed that changing the form often radically changes the emotional temperature of a piece. When I responded to comments made in a workshop suggesting that ‘Reading *The Rainbow*’ should be a prose poem, I discovered that removing the line breaks actually deadened the emotional impact of the piece, because it also removed the sense of the narrator responding to the novel in the moment. The poem ‘Spines in Shining Orange’ was originally an extract from the ‘reading notes’; when it was re-written as a poem, it became far more energetic and emotionally charged. In contrast, prose seemed to be appropriate to the more reflective and retrospective character of some of the other directly autobiographical pieces.

¹⁷⁵ W.S. Graham, ‘Notes on a Poetry of Release’, *Poetry Scotland*, Number Three, (July 1946), p.57.

¹⁷⁶ John D’Agata, ‘A ___ with Anne Carson’, *The Iowa Review* 27, No. 2 (Summer - Fall, 1997), 1-22, p.20, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20154415>, [Accessed: 23 November 2015].

Perhaps the most important thing that I have learned from my study of Carson's work is that writing about reading needs to be approached carefully, with due consideration for one's own potential readers.

The crossword puzzle: explaining the context

Some reviewers of Anne Carson's collection *Men in the Off Hours* found it unconvincing and problematic.¹⁷⁷ It is not always clear what Carson is trying to achieve in pieces such as the experimental 'T.V. Men' sequence. If the reader is unfamiliar with the work of certain writers, artists and film directors, they are unlikely to fully understand or appreciate these essays, screenplays and poems. Carson's poetry, particularly in *Plainwater*, *Men in the Off Hours*, and *Decreation* is often of the kind that needs to be comprehended verbally and intellectually. It does not employ many of the more traditional devices that many contemporary poets still use: rhyme, metrical patterning, assonance and alliteration, devices that produce a musical or aesthetic effect that might begin to compensate for wilful obscurity or difficulty.

In this study I have chosen to concentrate on the many pieces that do engage the reader, despite the literary references or even, in some cases, because of them. What makes poems such as 'The Glass Essay', *The Beauty of the Husband*, *Autobiography of Red*, and *Nox* succeed in drawing the reader in?

In Chapter 3 I have explained how and why Carson uses the life and work of Emily Brontë to complicate and add interest to the narrator's personal story of betrayal and despair. In this case, Carson's references to another writer enhance the poem, without distracting, perplexing or annoying the reader. Almost all potential readers of 'The Glass Essay' will probably know who Emily Brontë was and what, in the popular imagination, she represents. *Wuthering Heights* has been filmed and dramatised many times, which means that readers are likely to be reasonably familiar with the story of the novel, even if they have never actually read it. At the time when I first read 'The Glass Essay', I had read *Wuthering Heights* only once, more than twenty years earlier (without particularly enjoying it) and I had never read any of Emily's Brontë's poems. I did not feel that my relative lack of knowledge prevented me from understanding and appreciating Carson's poem. In addition, 'The Glass Essay' lives

¹⁷⁷ See David Ward, 'Addressing the Wound', pp.13-16 (quoted in Chapter 1), also see Mark Scroggins, 'Truth, Beauty and the Remote Control: Anne Carson', in *Intricate Thicket: Reading Late Modernist Poetries* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2015), pp.58-73.

up to its title: Carson explains what she is talking about, with quotations where necessary, particularly from the poems; she does not automatically assume that the reader will have read them. For example, when she introduces the central image of the half-finished sentence, in the section entitled 'Kitchen', she frames it with the relevant quotations from the novel, reminding her readers of vital details of the plot as she does so:

More than thirty years in the time of the novel,
from the April evening when he runs out the back door of the kitchen
and vanishes over the moor

because he overheard half a sentence of Catherine's
("It would degrade me to marry Heathcliff")
until the wild morning

when the servant finds him stark dead and grinning
on his rainsoaked bed upstairs in Wuthering Heights.
Heathcliff is a pain devil.

If he had stayed in the kitchen
long enough to hear the other half of Catherine's sentence
(so he will never know how I love him")

Heathcliff would have been set free.¹⁷⁸

Carson followed a similar strategy in writing *Autobiography of Red*. She realised that she had to supply the context that was missing.

I couldn't talk about Geryon and have the audience say, 'Oh yes, the red guy with wings.' So a lot of explanatory blah-blah-blah would have been necessary to make the fragments intelligible as such and I didn't want to do that, so I thought maybe I could do it in another form. What's another form? I've never written a novel, let's try that.¹⁷⁹

She also framed her novel in verse with an essay explaining the significance of Stesichoros and with other explanatory material.

In other works, quotations and references can work slightly differently. For example, the prose poem 'Appendix to Ordinary Time' contains extensive references to the life and work of Virginia Woolf, some of which are in the form of quotations from unpublished letters and manuscripts.¹⁸⁰ 'Appendix to Ordinary Time' is an elegy for Carson's recently deceased mother. Traditionally, an elegy evokes the muses; Carson evokes Woolf and is engaged in a very complex dialogue with her. For any reader who is familiar with Woolf's life and work,

¹⁷⁸ Carson, *Glass and God*, pp.18-19.

¹⁷⁹ Wachtel, 'An Interview with Anne Carson', p.40.

¹⁸⁰ Carson, *Men in the Off Hours*, p.165-166.

looking up the quotations and following the ‘clues’ can be an interesting and rewarding exercise which adds another layer of meaning to the piece as it stands.

But the way in which Carson uses the Woolf material raises the question: does she expect all her readers to engage in the ‘crossword puzzle’? Or is she deliberately occluding this deeper layer of meaning? In practice, for *this* reader at least, ‘Appendix for Ordinary Time’ does stand alone, and would be capable of being read and understood with only a very general knowledge of Virginia Woolf and her work, such as most potential readers of *Men in the Off Hours* are likely to have.

As my project progressed, I realised that I too could not automatically assume that my readers would be familiar with, for example, the general content of *Sons and Lovers* or with its main characters. D.H. Lawrence has been out of fashion for over thirty years and is no longer widely taught in schools or at undergraduate level. The Romantic essayist William Hazlitt (the subject of my poem ‘These Are the Things That Should Remain Unsaid’) is read even less frequently. As Carson discovered, an essay or a novel provides enough space for all the necessary explanations, but a poem generally does not.

Following Carson’s example, I have made extensive use of epigrams. In ‘Embracing the Prune’ and ‘Corridors’ the poem is a response to the epigram, while in ‘Maying’ the extract from Malory’s tale ‘The Knight of the Cart’ is taken from the passage that the narrator is reading and considering as the poem progresses. The poem, ‘Clara Swimming’ is one of two ‘reversionings’ of *Sons and Lovers* and was informed by my reservations about the central character of Paul Morel (and about Lawrence). Paul and Lawrence both seem to put Clara (with whom Paul is having a passionate affair) ‘out of count’, (to use one of Lawrence’s own expressions). As Clara walks away from him into the icy sea, Paul observes that he does not really care for her.

‘Look how little she is!’ he said to himself. ‘She’s lost like a grain of sand in the beach – just a concentrated speck blown along – a tiny white foam-bubble – almost nothing among the morning. Why does she absorb me? [...] What does she mean to me, after all? She represents something, like a bubble of foam represents the sea. But what is *she*? It’s not her I care for.’¹⁸¹

¹⁸¹ Lawrence, *Sons and Lovers*, p.402.

mean that they must be directly personal or autobiographical; for example *Autobiography of Red* could not possibly be anything other than fiction. But although Carson's novel in verse is ostensibly about a red winged monster, the main narrative is essentially a *Bildungsroman* describing and considering universal human experiences: falling in love, being an outsider, being betrayed, searching for an authentic self. As Carson has said, 'We all feel we're monsters most of the time'.¹⁸⁴

The long poem, 'Miriam Leivers Reads *Middlemarch* and Thinks About Paul Morel' is an interesting case in this respect. Like 'The Glass Essay', the poem narrates and works through the aftermath of a long love affair. Like Carson's narrator, Miriam is partly recuperating through her reading, in this case, George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, rather than *Wuthering Heights*. Like *Autobiography of Red*, it re-tells a known story from a different point of view; the second part of *Sons and Lovers* is written in the third person but Paul Morel – the 'Lawrence' character – is at its narrative and moral centre.

Sons and Lovers recognises Miriam, but the novel dislikes and even resents her. Until I came to write my poem, I had not fully appreciated just how much Lawrence's treatment of Miriam had subtly undermined my own sense of self, as a bookish adolescent, reading and studying. I consciously set out to present Miriam's point of view, as opposed to what Lawrence tells us that Miriam thought. At the same time I knew that I wanted to respect my original source. My relationship with *Sons and Lovers* has been far too formative for me to want to contradict Lawrence's narrative, by updating it to the twenty-first century, radically changing Miriam's personality, or inventing an alternative sequence of events. Nor did I want to tell the story of Jessie Chambers, the woman on whom the character of Miriam is based.¹⁸⁵ My concern was with Paul and Miriam, not with their real-life counterparts.

I did, however, want my version to be written in the first person. It was important that Miriam's voice should be heard. I have already discussed my early drafts of the poem, in which Miriam's voice, and therefore her character, were problematic. Lengthening the lines and attempting a more rapid and musical rhythm helped, but the poem as a whole remained unconvincing and unlikely to engage a reader emotionally.

In the meantime I began to work on the poems that eventually became 'On Time, Snakes and the Falling Snow'. As this sequence would contain directly autobiographical material, I decided to write it in the third person. When writing novels I had found that using

¹⁸⁴ Wachtel, 'An Interview with Anne Carson', p.40.

¹⁸⁵ See Jessie Chambers, *D.H. Lawrence: A Personal Record*, by E.T., 2nd edn (London: Frank Cass, 1965).

the third person often provided greater objectivity than a first person narrative might, but at the same time gave me more freedom to engage *myself* emotionally with my material, something that I had realised would be essential if I hoped to engage my readers.

When I returned to 'Miriam', writing in the third person, using 'free indirect speech', as both George Eliot and D.H. Lawrence did, enabled me to solve most of the problems. I no longer had to concentrate on making the character's voice sound authentic. I was able to pay more attention to the focus of the poem, slightly expanding the sections in which Miriam reflects on her reading of *Middlemarch* and attempting to give the character an inner life of her own quite distinct from Lawrence's portrayal of her. Before doing this I re-read both *Sons and Lovers* and *Middlemarch*, not in a consciously analytical or critical way, but trying to simply appreciate what I read, noting anything that caught my attention, reading as I imagined that Miriam might read:

As she reads
she grafts on her own connections,
inner herringbone, chain stitching,
over and under the words, *care of her soul*
over embroidery in her own boudoir. Wings.
The husband's soul *went on fluttering*
in the swampy ground where it was hatched,
thinking of its wings and never flying,
making her think of scales, stretched leather,
something with tepid blood. (p.76)

Reading *Sons and Lovers* and *Middlemarch* in succession and without any particular design, simply allowing impressions to strike me, I noticed some interesting stylistic differences between Lawrence's and Eliot's descriptions. I was able to bring some of this into the latest version of the poem:

In *Middlemarch* a fire can be itself,
can be *a wondrous mass of glowing dice,*
a thing to sit by, source of light,
the words draw what is there,
make it no more. No less.
And not a pent-up euphemism (p.72)

In *Sons and Lovers*, Paul and Miriam were originally drawn to each other through their mutual love of books. My re-reading of the novel reminded me that Lawrence offers veiled criticisms of Miriam's taste in literature on at least two occasions and is subtly patronising when he considers her attempts at writing.¹⁸⁶ By continuing to present Miriam as a reader (as she was in the original novel), but emphasising her own independent dialogue with *Middlemarch* (which is not mentioned in *Sons and Lovers*), I hoped to rehabilitate and empower her, echoing the dialogue of Anne Carson's narrator with Emily Brontë in 'The Glass Essay'. I hoped to demonstrate that Miriam was neither an encumbrance nor a passive victim.

*She felt the largeness of the world.
And changed her life. (p.79)*

Writing about reading involves considerable risks. The creation of poems such as 'The Glass Essay' and 'Miriam' is a complicated and ambitious undertaking. A writer's personal dialogues with her predecessors may baffle or alienate other readers. At worst, the writer may achieve little more than a display of her own learning. These dangers are very real, but in *Autobiography of Red* and 'The Glass Essay' Anne Carson demonstrates that they can be surmounted. In her strongest work, she succeeds in communicating the full complexity and subtlety and redemptive power of literature and the reading process.

¹⁸⁶ See Lawrence, *Sons and Lovers*, p.173, p.248 and p.332. Lawrence implies that Miriam prefers novels and poems in which she can imagine a romanticised version of her own life. He describes her writing as 'little introspective pieces'. See also Paul's comments on Miriam's French exercise on p.247; these form one of the epigrams at the beginning of 'Miriam'.

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