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## **Translations of the Self: A.E. Housman and Anne Carson Between Scholarship and Creativity**

### **Abstract:**

In my PhD thesis I have explored some aspects of the interface between classical scholarship and creativity, through the work and careers of two scholar-poets, Anne Carson (1950 - ) and A.E. Housman (1859-1936). I have shown how, within their social and cultural contexts, they attempted to craft their careers by using both genres of their work to help them construct carefully-crafted public profiles, and how these self-translations within their careers relate to received versions of their work by different readerships. By connecting explorations of their social and cultural contexts with their biographies and with close readings of their scholarly and creative work, I explore the shifting relationship between creative and scholarly ‘cultural fields’, as well as the recent social, cultural, and institutional changes which have turned these fields from ‘homogeneous poles’ to ‘heterogeneous poles’ (to use Pierre Bourdieu’s terms). I examine the surprising similarities in the unusual personalities of Carson and Housman, who both have, or had, a tendency to use their reputations for independence and reclusiveness to help them navigate around important issues and conflicts which could have threatened their success. I show how they have constructed versions of themselves, both within and beyond their writings, which have enabled them to make grand assertions of the self in the teeth of social and cultural necessities.

**Translations of the Self: A.E. Housman and Anne Carson  
Between Scholarship and Creativity**

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**2013**

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## Introduction

The aim of this thesis is to contribute to the increasingly productive study of classical reception by exploring some aspects of what Lorna Hardwick has called the ‘interface’ between classical scholarship and creativity.<sup>1</sup> It is an attempt to provide a model for negotiating the subtle nature of this interface, as well as showing at least a small part of how it operates. Though this is an area of increasing interest to scholars and creative artists, its nature and ramifications are as yet only partially defined. This is partly because the work of bringing the two together involves exploring areas which lie beyond conventional academic boundaries for classicists, such as modern biography and autobiography, aesthetic criticism, as well as the study of social, cultural, and institutional factors. Indeed, to view the situation recursively, it is the expansion of boundaries resulting from recent changes within the academy which allows these areas to be included in classics, and makes possible the existence of this kind of study in the first place.

Clearly, however, this is not an interface that lies between two entirely stable entities called ‘scholarship’ and ‘creativity’. Though they have some similarities and overlaps of meaning, there are also obvious differences in the kinds of writing these terms define. These terms are used to delimit particular works and practices, but their relationship has changed through time. Historically, institutions and practices of both scholarship and creativity were assumed to be what Pierre Bourdieu, the French sociologist, anthropologist and philosopher, calls ‘autonomous poles’, that is fields of endeavour independent of, and to some extent isolated from, other cultural contexts.<sup>2</sup> While this is still held to be true to some extent, today such institutions and practices have become more permeable, (‘heteronomous poles’ in Bourdieu’s terms). This permeability is one of the main concerns of this study, because it affects the way we conceptualise both creativity and scholarship, and how individual artists and scholars, and we ourselves, construct specific subjectivities in relationship to both scholarly and creative enterprises. The study of these new boundaries in academic discourse, through the examples of particular scholars and creative artists, also allows us to take the temperature of the historical contexts within which they lived and worked.

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<sup>1</sup> Using the word ‘interface’ in this context was prompted by Lorna Hardwick, whose paper on ‘Scholarship and Creativity’ at the ICS conference, ‘Scholarship and/as Reception’, in November 2008 was one of the inspirations for this project.

<sup>2</sup> Bourdieu 1993: 40-43.

All scholars and creative artists live and work within particular social, cultural, and historical contexts. I trace how the social and cultural backgrounds of two writers who have worked in both areas affect the scholarly stances they take (or avoid taking), the creative concepts they explore, and the ways in which they have asserted themselves and constructed their careers within academic and non-academic institutions and contexts. The ways in which they do this involve complex negotiations with the social and cultural necessities within and around them, and I argue that the result of these negotiations is the production of versions, or translations, of the self which tap into the assumptions of readers and audiences who receive them.

Bourdieu is an important guide to the ways in which individuals, or ‘agents’ as he calls them, improvise their own trajectories within and between what he calls ‘cultural fields’, meaning any human arena in which status and position determine influence and rewards. However, it is also important to state the limits of my use of Bourdieu. Though some of his conceptual tools are useful within the social and cultural aspects of this study, I am not prepared to see creativity or scholarship simply as a set of sociological phenomena. I believe it makes a better investigation if the writing of my chosen subjects, both scholarly and creative, is studied within its own conventions and its own genres, as well as within its social and cultural context. The assumptions made within this study, concerning these matters, are well expressed by the North American poet, Aaron Fogel:

I want it to go on, art’s defiance of power: even if it’s an illusion,  
Imagine having instead to depend entirely on sociologists  
Like Bourdieu to explain to us that there is no such thing as art

In their own overly artful prose styles ...<sup>3</sup>

It is certainly the case, as Fogel writes, that Bourdieu’s style of writing about art and literature is at least as artful as some of his objects of study. Therefore, though some of his concepts and his terminology are used within this study, this does not imply a wholesale subscription to his critiques or his methods. In the end, it may be the case that Bourdieu’s concepts are not especially useful for the task of interpreting creativity (unless it is not particularly impressive creativity, as in the case of his analysis of early nineteenth century French Academic art), but are very useful in analysing the circumstances of its production.<sup>4</sup>

My first subject is the classical scholar and poet A.E. Housman (1859-1936). Housman’s scholarship and his poetry are still highly regarded by those who read them, but I have

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<sup>3</sup> Fogel 2001: 89.

<sup>4</sup> Bourdieu 1993: 238-53.

focused upon him specifically because he himself was determined to keep the two activities completely separate from each other. He was successful in this in the sense that, even today, Housman's scholarship and poetry can still appear to be the work of two separate people: the fierce, austere scholar and the broken-hearted romantic poet. This situation makes Housman a significant test case for the concept of an interface between classical scholarship and creativity. I also discuss some of the effects on posterity of the example he set, as a fearsome, scornful, sarcastic, and brutally-critical textual scholar. I make a social and cultural investigation of Housman's career which shows that the public version of himself that he created, as an independent and personally austere figure, which subsequently helped to create the legend of Housman the scholar, is not the only possible representation of his relationship with his social and cultural environment. Behind his forbidding, fierce, austere persona Housman was a much more social creature than he appeared; he was a well-travelled gourmet, knowledgeable about wine, and had lovers in various parts of Europe. He translated his persona and career, however, into a version which worked well for him, but which was far from being the whole story.

However, he was not simply being deceitful or hypocritical in this: my exploration also reveals powerful reasons why he needed to create such a version of himself; what this persona allowed him to do, and, perhaps more importantly, what it enabled him to avoid. Defining himself as a professional scientific scholar, he had to struggle with the challenged but still powerful forces of amateur, upper-class religious humanism and the Anglican establishment on one hand, but he also had to be wary of the broader moralistic prejudices against 'pure' scientific endeavour that almost condemned the work of figures like Charles Darwin and Thomas Huxley. In Victorian England the title 'man of science' was a telling one, placing as much emphasis on the personal character and reputation of the man as on his work. Housman was in a difficult position, both socially and professionally, in attacking established classical scholars who possessed effective and sometimes insidious ways of deflecting criticism from those who stood beyond the conventional boundaries of Anglican humanism.

This situation was intensified by a serious and long-lasting moral panic over sexual behaviour in this period which, as a homosexual, presented a further threat to Housman. One aspect of this panic was moralistic concern over the influence of classical examples upon the new 'agnostic' science, especially the supposedly decadent examples of Democritus and Epicurus.<sup>5</sup> In the light of this, it is not surprising that Housman felt the

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<sup>5</sup> Dawson 2007: 2.



need to distance himself both from his own romantic, classically-inspired poetry and from aesthetic concerns more generally; to try to translate himself into a straightforwardly patriotic Conservative so as not to be stigmatised as a 'pagan sensualist', a choice term of condemnation in this period.<sup>6</sup> For a scholar of Housman's generation, at least in the earlier part of his career, credibility was synonymous with respectability. I explore the life and work of Housman as a paradigm of personal and professional self-presentation, especially with regard to Victorian respectability, questioning the separateness of his academic work and his poetry, and the rather intellectually aristocratic, reclusive persona this attempted separation enabled him to construct. I examine the extent to which Housman's choices were the result of his responses, both necessary and voluntary, to the cultural and institutional field he inhabited. With his rigour and outward respectability, but also his hidden affairs, private desires and agonies, Housman created a version of himself which was received as the stamp of his seriousness and independence in a fierce academic and social context.

Housman was born in the year *On the Origin of Species* was published (1859), and therefore belonged to the first generation forced to try to absorb its social and cultural consequences from a young age. There is a continuing debate on the origins and consequences of the Victorian 'crisis of faith'. Though other factors, such as the Industrial Revolution and the increasing urbanisation which followed it are held by some writers to be as important as Darwinian materialism, it should not be underestimated how much pain their loss of religious faith caused Housman and his contemporaries, not merely as private individuals but in material and institutional changes as well.<sup>7</sup> Putting these factors into the framework of this study shows that Housman could not, unlike some of his socially privileged contemporaries, set up aestheticism in place of religious belief: partly because he was not a member of the humanist establishment, but also because of popular criticism of the perceived connections between science, atheism, and aestheticism. He was, therefore, in a potentially exposed position, socially, between privileged and popular cultural perceptions. This gives us a further reason for his disparagement of literature, including his own poetry; he did not want to be associated with the humanist, literary scholars he criticised, nor with the aesthetes whose morality was criticised in the popular press, especially after the trial of Oscar Wilde. His poetry was also a professional risk, in that it gave equally fierce classical scholars like John Postgate material with which to

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<sup>6</sup> Dawson 2007: 2, 93.

<sup>7</sup> Stray 1998: 117-119, 14.

attack, and even ridicule, his scholarly methods. I discuss the extent to which Postgate was right about Housman, even if he could do little to diminish the extent of Housman's fame and influence.

My second subject is Anne Carson, the Canadian poet, classical scholar, translator and visual artist. Carson's increasingly significant cultural presence and her large readership make her work an important subject in its own right, but I have also chosen to place her alongside Housman because of the significant similarities and differences between them, and the things these tell us about social and cultural changes in twentieth-century classics and creativity. As a woman writer and scholar in the late twentieth/early twenty-first centuries, her cultural position and her work are of course very different to Housman's; yet she, like him, has used her reputation for reclusiveness and independence to fashion her own public image, in a successful translation of her persona into different cultural fields. My social and cultural exploration of Anne Carson's career reveals the strong networks of patronage in the literary scene and publishing industry in the USA, within which her work has become increasingly successful. I identify the particular characteristics of these networks of patronage by comparing them to Bourdieu's analysis of the French Academy of Arts in the early nineteenth century.<sup>8</sup> By investigating the awards Carson has won, and who else has won them, a landscape of patronage comes into view which is very similar to Bourdieu's descriptions of self-replicating cultural fields. Moving through this landscape, Carson has set up a version of herself as an independent and reclusive writer; a version responded to differently by different readers, for some of whom she conforms to the stereotype of the lonely, heroic genius, but which belies the cultural and social aspects of her success.

In the context of Carson's creative work, this approach shows that, although the history of poetry in the USA is remarkable for its great variety, it is currently, for the most part, the kind of poetry that Carson writes, loosely categorized as 'poetry of the mind', which attracts most of the great awards, prizes, fellowships, and positions, even though this kind of poetry is not as popular amongst the majority of non-academic poetry readers; readers who prefer more accessible poets like Mary Oliver and Billy Collins.<sup>9</sup> There is, therefore, a specific cultural field in which the poetry that succeeds is often difficult, appearing not to make concessions to the level of knowledge or capacity of the reader. This is paradoxical

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<sup>8</sup> Bourdieu 1993: 238-53.

<sup>9</sup> Poetry Foundation website, biography of Billy Collins <<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/billy-collins>> [accessed 10 October 2011]. Poetry Foundation website, biography of Mary Oliver <<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/mary-oliver>> [accessed 10 October 2011]

however, since it is this kind of poetry, in which the style is often obscure, that is favoured by this particularly influential readership. The main reason for the distance between these disparate readerships is the alignment between the powerful academic creative writing programs which are heavily influenced by the legacy of modernism, the ‘superstar’ writers they want to obtain, and the corporatisation of the publishing industry in the United States.<sup>10</sup> Thus, the progress of the poetic career is controlled by publishing, academic, and prize-giving institutions which work together. Since almost all prize-winning poets in the USA are also academics, it is significant that Carson’s first book, *Eros the Bittersweet* (1986), which contains many of the concepts she went on to explore in her subsequent creative work, was developed from her doctoral thesis. I discuss how this book is, in itself, an example of the greater permeability of academic boundaries, in its attempt to blend the scholarly and the aesthetic.

Having examined the social, cultural, and biographical contexts of Housman and Carson, I go on to explore some significant aspects contained within their scholarly and creative writing. The recent interest in career criticism, and particularly the book *Classical Literary Careers and their Reception* (2010) (edited by Philip Hardie and Helen Moore), is another influence upon this project, allowing it to bridge the external, social and cultural aspects of Housman’s career and Carson’s with the internal dynamics of their writing. Rather than focusing on the career of an author outside her works, career criticism explores an author’s *oeuvre* in order to see what its shaping, contents, patterning and autobiographical references (if any) tell us about the author’s sense of his or her own career. The emphasis is on finding the author within the literary texts. Career criticism also restores the author as an important focus of investigation in the study of literature, after decades of concentration upon the text as an autonomous site of meaning, independent of its author.

Informed by this approach, my reading of Housman’s scholarship reveals significant aspects of his career as a philologist. One of its most prominent features was his legendary fierceness, which was received as a sign of his seriousness and moral passion for accuracy, as it often still is today. However, this fierceness also functioned as a useful weapon in Housman’s career; firstly to attract attention to work which might otherwise have been ignored by his peers; secondly to signal affiliation with great scholars from the past such as Bentley and Scaliger; and thirdly to create a version of himself which emphasised tough independence in work which was, in reality, a dialogue with other scholars; contemporary, historical, and ancient.

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<sup>10</sup> McGurl 2009: 15.

Housman's determination to be regarded as a scientific scholar and not a literary figure is also evident within his scholarship, where it takes the form of an absolute dismissal of literary considerations in his interpretations of ancient poetry. I examine one occasion when his determinedly narrow focus led him astray, resulting in a rather blinkered interpretation of lines from Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis*; an interpretation produced by his determination not to take account of the richly-patterned dramatic, thematic, and poetic qualities of the play as a whole. In his determination to drag English philology into a rational, scientific future, he jettisoned too much useful knowledge of the ancient texts upon which he comments. This is one of the main drawbacks of the fierce and independent version of himself he created, however successful it was for his career.

My exploration of Carson's scholarship, specifically her first book *Eros the Bittersweet* (1986), shows the opposite situation, in which aesthetic considerations are very much part of her classical scholarship. Her argument on Greek lyric is somewhat circular, combining a developmental view of how the Greek lyricists helped to create the modern reader, with a subjective sense of herself as representing that modern reader, and therefore as the ideal interpreter of lyric. There are also some evidentiary problems in this large scale interpretation of ancient lyric, especially concerning the spread of literacy in the Greek world, the supposedly special, abstract qualities of the Greek alphabet, and her assumptions on the differences between oral and literate cultures. However, these flaws in her argument are not simply bad scholarship, rather they serve the creation of a large-scale mytho-poetic interpretation of *eros* and its place in Greek lyric; an interpretation which not only yields some very insightful readings of individual fragments, it also sets out the aesthetic and emotional concerns of much of her subsequent creative work, allowing us to see both the origins of these concerns and how they continue to re-shape themselves as her career continues. As she re-shapes these ideas, so she also re-shapes the version of herself that is presented within her work, emphasising, like Housman, her individuality and independence.

Unlike Carson, Housman kept his poetry away from his scholarship, though the subjects of his scholarly reading are often present in his poetry, if in a somewhat veiled manner. In my chapter on Housman's poetry, I show that the influences of Lucretius, Horace, and Propertius upon his own verses, below the surface of their English ballad form, are more extensive and deeper than is usually recognised. As well as straightforward parallels with Latin verses, and the ways in which these poets affect the themes and emotional atmosphere of his poetry, these influences are also sometimes used, within particular

poems, to twist simple, wholehearted sentiments at the surface of a poem's meaning into a much more subtle, ironical tone, distinguishing his poems from more straightforward kinds of romantic and patriotic verse. What these influences show is both how much Housman owes to his Roman poets, and how wary he was of making this obvious to his wider, non-classicist readership, to which these references would not have been obvious. I also examine particular receptions of his poetry which show the cultural literacy of his choices within it. For the same reasons, Housman made very few English translations of Latin verse, not wishing to advertise the depth of his emotional response to it, which would have sat oddly with the version of A. E. Housman he wished to present to his peers and his readers.

For Anne Carson, the presence of herself, as author, within her writing has become an increasing preoccupation in her creative work. The vision of *eros* formed in *Eros the Bittersweet* (1986), which offers the possibility of greater self-knowledge through erotic experience, changes direction into an emphasis on breaking through the limitations of the self. From *Autobiography of Red* (1998) onwards one finds an increasing interest in not merely learning from human subjectivity, but in escaping from it into a different order of being, which she sometimes calls Law and sometimes God. It is as if she aspires to make literary technique into a way of losing the self, or at least writing away from it. These ideas culminate in her exploration of the idea of 'decreation' of the self, a term taken from the philosopher and mystic, Simone Weil. Under the influence of mystical Christian writers such as Weil and Marguerite Porete, Carson tries to put into creative effect her proclamation about herself: 'I do not want to be a person'. This seems intended to be her final version (in every sense) of herself, and connects with a mystical understanding of God, through attempting to remove the self as a mediator between God and Creation. This change of direction also radically alters Carson's interpretation of Sappho, to whom she keeps returning throughout her career.

Paradoxically, Carson's determination to find a creative style which escapes the self, which leads her to forge radical methodologies in her work, produces a mode of expression which is instantly recognisable as the work of Anne Carson. I explore the ramifications of this paradox, particularly for her work as a translator of classical texts. Carson has translated Greek lyric and drama extensively, at different levels of formality and for various readerships. In Chapter Ten I explore her full-length translations of plays by Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, as well as her translation of all the fragments of Sappho, showing their relationship to her other, more creative translations and her other

work. For a writer so interested in getting away from the self, her dramatisation of the predicament of the classical translator emphasises her own presence within the text, and has been another factor in the shape of her career and her translations of herself within it.

My final chapter draws together the instructive similarities and differences between Carson and Housman, showing the ways in which these particular scholar-poets have constructed their careers, and the ways they have presented themselves through and beyond their work. I argue that their most significant similarity is that they have both fashioned versions of themselves which stress their independence and reclusiveness, and they have both been able to use these to signify their seriousness and sincerity, and to defend themselves against urgent social and cultural issues which could have threatened their success. Both of them have been received as lonely and heroic figures to some extent, by specific readerships, showing that their self-projected reclusiveness has had an effect on the ways in which their work is read, though not all these receptions are ones they would be prepared to recognise or endorse.

## Part One

### Chapter One

#### A.E. Housman: Introduction and Biography

I begin with a problem involved in interpreting Housman's work identified by Butterfield and Stray:

The division between scholar and poet has operated to retard our understanding of Housman in several ways. The biographies or semi-biographies have all been presented with the problem of assessment. How can a classical scholar assess Housman's poetry? How can a literary biographer assess his scholarship?<sup>1</sup>

I have chosen A.E. Housman as a subject partly because of the challenge represented by this problem of assessment, which has its origin in his own insistence on a rigid separation of his scholarly work from his poetry. To insist on reading the two together, and searching for the connections between them, makes an ideal test case in exploring the interface between classical scholarship and creativity. As well as examining the reasons he made such a division, in terms of both the personal impulses behind it and the social and cultural advantages he gained from it, and the disadvantages he avoided (which emerge as just as important), I show that there are, in fact, connections of several kinds between his scholarship and his poetry despite his wishes. These connections, I argue, give us valuable information about the radical changes in the study of classics which gathered momentum in his lifetime, including the battle between the humanism of classicists like Sir Richard Jebb and the new forces of rationalism and professionalism which Housman saw himself as representing. They also show some of the history of the fierce and still ongoing struggle over the place of the aesthetic within the academy, as well as the characters of some of the strong personalities who fought it. Putting Housman into this context reveals how he forged, in scholarly combat, a version of himself designed to protect himself and help defeat his opponents.

As a classical scholar and poet, Housman can be linked, historically, with the subject of

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<sup>1</sup> Butterfield and Stray (eds) 2009: 2.

the second part of my thesis, Anne Carson. Both writers coincided with profound (and still-ongoing) social, cultural, and intellectual changes in the field of classical studies and in the academic enterprise generally. On this level, we can see that the institutions of Anglo-Saxon classical scholarship of which Housman was part, have, in Carson's lifetime, begun to be transformed by a number of different (though linked) pressures coming mainly from the social, cultural, and political 'periphery'. Indeed, this study itself can be seen as a part of that process of change. As well as this historical connection, there are other, perhaps surprising, similarities between Housman and Carson, especially in terms of receptions of their work, which they were able to use to create particular versions of themselves as reclusive and independent writers.

Firstly, I sketch a brief biography of Housman, both to give some introductory information about him, and to show that, though his life was not an eventful one, it was punctuated by moments of dramatic change or defining decisions which, though much-discussed by biographers and literary critics, have been hard to define amongst the several factors which seem to determine them. One way to make progress is to explore in detail the connections between these moments of change and their consequences in relation to the personal, social, and cultural circumstances in which they happened; in other words in terms of his *habitus*. My main line of argument is that Housman transformed himself into a revered and feared philologist by constructing a carefully defined, consistent persona in his scholarship and his professional life. This persona was also used to distance himself from his own poetry, and my argument is that this was not merely an idiosyncrasy on his part: rather, in order to survive socially and professionally, it was necessary for him to distance himself, not only from his own poetry, but from any notion that he was really an aesthetic figure behind a scholarly facade. Both environmental pressures and personal, emotional ones went into the formation of this persona, but the man behind the mask had rather different qualities. As well as his desire to write objective textual criticism which counted as scientific work, an intention made clear in his well know lecture, 'The Application of Thought to Textual Criticism', the shaping of a particular version of himself, and the construction of a career, can also be seen clearly in his scholarship and his creativity, and especially by comparing them.<sup>2</sup> As a result, one can see the full dimensions of Housman's grand assertion of personality in the teeth of unavoidable personal, social, and cultural necessities.

As with other aspects of Housman's life and work, there is a tension between the poet

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<sup>2</sup> Ricks (ed.) 1988: 325-339.



and the subject matter of his poems right from their inception; for Alfred Edward Housman was not, himself, a Shropshire lad. Rather the county of Shropshire, the setting for the poems of his best known collection, *A Shropshire Lad* (1896), was the romantically distant landscape on the horizon, the ‘blue remembered hills’ of one of his most well-known poems.<sup>3</sup> He was born in 1859 to a then prosperous Worcestershire family, the eldest of seven children all born within a space of ten years. There had already been quite a large stock of what Bourdieu terms ‘social and cultural capital’ within the family, as both his grandfathers were preachers and one, the Reverend John Williams, his mother’s father, was also a classical scholar.<sup>4</sup> There was also, at the time of his birth, a large amount of family money to be handed down, but Housman’s father, Edward, nominally a solicitor, was determined to play the role of country squire, mismanaging the estate, losing money, even defrauding his own father’s estate, which alienated his mother to the point at which she, eventually, cut him out of her will.<sup>5</sup> It was a class obsession; a self-conscious, deliberate misreading of his own cultural trajectory and status.<sup>6</sup> Though this attempt to construct an aristocratic persona eventually left his family almost entirely without means, Housman apparently retained a lot of affection for his father, with whom he shared, in a different form, a tendency to aristocratic self-presentation. Much later, in his only lecture to the Classical Association in 1921, A.E. Housman said of his lifetime’s occupation, ‘Textual criticism, like most other sciences, is an aristocratic affair, not communicable to all men, nor to most men’.<sup>7</sup> The main difference between father and son, however, was that Housman senior’s conception of the aristocratic life was one that did not include working, whereas the work ethic has a central, even notorious, place in A.E. Housman’s scholarship. One of the most common faults for which he berates other editors is their perceived indolence which makes them, in his view, unwilling to think hard enough about their textual emendations.

Housman gained a free scholarship to Bromsgrove School in 1870, as a day-boy in a combined day and boarding school, before going on to win a scholarship to St. John’s College, Oxford; and this status in itself was an objective manifestation of the hard times his family had fallen upon. Just before Housman’s time, the free-scholars at the school were known as ‘blue-boys’, and had to wear long blue coats, breeches, and stockings, along with conspicuous hats, though their status was elevated to equality with the other

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<sup>3</sup> *A Shropshire Lad*: XL.

<sup>4</sup> Bourdieu in Richardson (ed.) 1986: 241-258.

<sup>5</sup> Graves 1979: 21, 30-2, 43-4.

<sup>6</sup> Webb, Schirato and Danaher 2002: xi.

<sup>7</sup> Ricks (ed.) 1988: 339.

pupils in the reforms of the headmaster and classicist, George Blore.<sup>8</sup> However, the new headmaster from 1873, Herbert Millington, often made his class prejudices very clear, so it was necessary for Housman, as a free scholar, to be more competent than those around him in order to fight for the same status. Housman escaped Millington's scorn by sharing the head's interest in botany, so, from his school days, the demonstration of intelligence and knowledge was closely connected with social acceptance.<sup>9</sup>

At Oxford Housman gained a First in Moderations at the end of his second year, but went on to fail Greats two years later and therefore his degree, putting in a performance 'so ludicrously bad as to show that he had not made any effort, and to give the examiners the impression that he was treating that part of the business with contempt'.<sup>10</sup> His failure has often been attributed to personal reasons, given that Housman had fallen in love with the science student and athlete, Moses Jackson, though his sister Katherine Symons blamed his 'intellectual arrogance', which he had allowed 'to lure him into slackness or negligence instead of making assiduous preparation for his Schools'.<sup>11</sup> Housman's friend A.W. Pollard's view was that Housman had simply 'underrated the standard for Greats'.<sup>12</sup> Richard Graves, Housman's biographer, sees his loss of religious faith as a factor; that he could not bear to read the philosophy texts, a major component of the syllabus, since they brought up so many questions on religion and existence that he did not want to confront outside of the poetry of Matthew Arnold, which he loved.<sup>13</sup> P.G. Naiditch even thinks it possible Housman failed because he was agonising over whether to convert to Roman Catholicism.<sup>14</sup> However, there were other, cultural factors involved in Housman's rejection of the Greats syllabus, the significance of which has not been acknowledged. Christopher Stray has examined the social and cultural changes of this period, which produced an enormous structural change in the teaching and studying of classics, and which also puts Housman's failure into a slightly different light.<sup>15</sup> Within this context, it is clear that that the stance Housman took, against the study of ancient philosophy for the truth of its content, in favour of focusing only on the scientific establishment of texts, reflected the emerging anti-liberal-humanist attitude to classical scholarship of which Housman would one day be a leading advocate when he became Kennedy Professor of Latin at Cambridge.

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<sup>8</sup> Graves 1979: 12.

<sup>9</sup> Graves 1979: 23.

<sup>10</sup> Graves 1979: 54.

<sup>11</sup> Richards 1941: xiv.

<sup>12</sup> Page 1983: 214.

<sup>13</sup> Graves 1979 52: 53.

<sup>14</sup> Naiditch 1995: 11-13. Also cf. Page 1983: 38.

<sup>15</sup> Stray 1998: 140.

As early as his undergraduate days, he had formed his ambition to ‘give the world the first edition of his chosen author’s work which would meet the requirements of modern critical science’.<sup>16</sup> There is also evidence for this interpretation in one of his early marginal comments: ‘Plato’s doctrine of Forms or Universals is useless as a way of explaining things – it is up to Science to show what is the reality of the world’.<sup>17</sup> Clearly Housman already knew what he wanted to become, and was charged with the vitality of the intellectual and scientific current of his times; though he could not, at such a young age, be expected to appreciate the strong forces of institutional resistance to such radical change. Stray comments on the teaching of classics in Cambridge at that time:

The movement from an earlier world of gentlemanly amateur scholars to that of professional researchers took place in university environments where the literary-humanist ethos remained fully embedded in college teaching, and where institutional autonomy, cumbrous organisational structures, and powerful vested interests all obstructed change.<sup>18</sup>

The pace of change was even slower at Oxford, and the young Housman’s response to it was an angry and somewhat arrogant one. He held his tutors and professors in contempt, since his ambition was to achieve the scientific status of German classical scholars, and among British classical scholars his biggest influence was the textual editor H.A.J. Munro, whom he described as ‘the foremost English Latinist of the century’, with whom he corresponded as an undergraduate.<sup>19</sup> Presumably it felt liberating, at the time, to dismiss so much intellectual enquiry and so much cultural history, as well as the institutional status of his superiors. After he subsequently failed his degree, Housman became a clerk in the Patent Office in London for nearly ten years (which may, in itself, have influenced his scientific outlook), while studying Latin and Greek texts at the British Museum Reading Room in the evenings. When the nature of his feeling for Moses Jackson became obvious, and they separated, Housman started to focus with much greater intensity upon his classical studies. Such was the reputation he built up by publishing emendations that in 1892 he was appointed Professor of Latin at University College London.

Perhaps it should not be surprising that Housman’s drastic early failure turns out to have several causes: as well as his youthful arrogance about his destiny as a textual scholar, and his personal crisis of faith, both of which led him to ignore the ancient philosophy of the Greats syllabus, and the time he was spending with Jackson (who had already secured his

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<sup>16</sup> Graves 1979: 48. Also cf. Page 1983: 35.

<sup>17</sup> Graves 1979: 48.

<sup>18</sup> Stray 1998: 117.

<sup>19</sup> Graves 1979: 47, 49.

First), his father also had a stroke six days before the exam. Norman Page's view, in his critical biography of Housman, is that this event produced a heavy sense of family responsibility in Housman, which combined with his awareness of his own lack of preparation to produce 'a paralysis of the will'.<sup>20</sup> Perhaps just as significantly, as Stray points out, it was not unusual for young men from Housman's background, educated in a grammar school rather than a public school and therefore having an almost purely linguistic training in Greek and Latin, to do well in Mods but find the Greats syllabus very challenging.<sup>21</sup>

In 1895, shortly after Moses Jackson left Britain for good (apart from occasional visits), Housman wrote most of the poems of his first collection, *A Shropshire Lad*, in only a few months, in what he described much later as a period of 'continuous excitement', though he had been writing occasional verse since his childhood.<sup>22</sup> Here, too, there were other influences upon this impressive burst of creativity. Firstly, there was the famous 'relaxed throat': Housman claimed to write his best verse when he was 'rather out of health'. Secondly, he had recently lost a protracted and aggressive scholarly dispute with John Postgate, later a colleague at Trinity College, Cambridge, over the transmission of the manuscripts of Propertius. The dispute was conducted in the pages of *The Classical Review*, and later research has confirmed that Postgate's view was more probably the correct one.<sup>23</sup> After Postgate had the last word in the argument, Housman seems to have completely abandoned work on Propertius, even though he had already tried to publish an edition of Propertius as early as 1885, rejected by the publishing company Macmillan on the grounds that he was an unknown scholar.<sup>24</sup> So we can say that classical scholarship, in its most publicly acrimonious aspect, was at least part of the occasion, and perhaps part of the motivation, for writing poetry.

After initially failing to attract much attention, *A Shropshire Lad* became extremely popular, especially after 1918, partly thanks to the strenuous efforts of its publisher Grant Richards. Housman was not a prolific poet, and did not publish another collection till *Last Poems* in 1922. Nearly all his verse is pastoral and romantic in style, influenced by the traditional English ballad in its form, though with a much more terse and ironic emotional edge. However, those poems which reflected his own emotional life too closely, such as

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<sup>20</sup> Page 1983: 45.

<sup>21</sup> Stray 2009: 164.

<sup>22</sup> The very brief preface to *Last Poems* 1922.

<sup>23</sup> Hopkinson in Butterfield and Stray (eds) 2009: 177-9.

<sup>24</sup> Page 1983: 56, Graves 1979: 68.

the one he wrote about Oscar Wilde's imprisonment, were only published posthumously.<sup>25</sup>

Housman was much more prolific as a scholar, publishing a large number of classical papers and articles throughout his career, including editions of Lucan and Juvenal's *Satires*, but his greatest work, in terms both of intensity of labour and acuity of judgement, was his edition of Manilius' *Astronomicon* in five volumes, which he regarded as the work he 'came on earth to do'.<sup>26</sup> Book I was published in 1903 and Book V in 1930. His choice of Manilius for his *magnum opus* has often surprised, or even bewildered, non-classicists who admire Housman the poet, and who tend to view Manilius as an obscure, minor Roman poet unworthy of him, and therefore his choice to spend so many years working on Manilius as a form of emotional self-burial, a view put succinctly by E.J. Kenney:

It has often been remarked as strange, and many would say deplorable, that Housman, a poet and connoisseur of poetry, widely and deeply read in some of the best literature in the world, should have spent so much of his life editing and explaining a poet for whom he did not pretend to feel anything but contempt.<sup>27</sup>

This view is expressed more vividly in W.H. Auden's poem on Housman:

No one, not even Cambridge was to blame  
(Blame if you like the human situation):  
Heart-injured in North London, he became  
The Latin Scholar of his generation.

Deliberately he chose the dry-as-dust,  
Kept tears like dirty postcards in a drawer;  
Food was his public love, his private lust  
Something to do with violence and the poor.

In savage foot-notes on unjust editions  
He timidly attacked the life he led,  
And put the money of his feelings on

The uncritical relations of the dead,  
Where only geographical divisions  
Parted the coarse hanged soldier from the don.<sup>28</sup>

In this poem, Auden is clearly reading the scholarship as a reaction to, and a way of screening, the personal. There may be some truth in this, in the sense that Housman saw striving for such high standards in establishing texts as a way of escaping his mental and emotional turmoil by losing himself in difficult work, though we must also recognise other, scholarly influences on Housman's choice. First, the sheer scale of corruption in Manilius'

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<sup>25</sup> *Additional Poems*: XVIII.

<sup>26</sup> Ricks (ed.) 1988: 12.

<sup>27</sup> Kenney 2009: 256.

<sup>28</sup> Auden 1991: 182.

text provided Housman with both an enormous challenge and an opportunity to test and prove himself as an editor. Housman's hero, the English classical scholar, critic, and theologian Richard Bentley (1662-1742) had published his edition of Manilius in 1739, though it was clear that much work remained to be done. Lucretius was the poet Housman should have edited, according to Kenney, but Lucretius had already been edited by Munro and was not, therefore, self-monument building material.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, Housman knew that he would have no serious rivals in this work, and that it would be very difficult for fiercely adversarial contemporaries like John Postgate to criticise his textual judgements. Manilius was also a good choice for a scientific scholar who wanted to show that the content of his chosen text was irrelevant, whereas in editing Lucretius he might have become distracted by his emotions, whilst also bringing himself uncomfortably close to the contemporary public controversy about the influence of Epicureanism on 'agnostic' science, which is discussed in the next chapter.

Having become Kennedy Professor of Latin at Trinity in 1911, a feared and revered textual scholar, and a popular poet, Housman then became a rather reluctant literary figure. However, he kept the two activities completely separate, and his main way of doing this in public was by distancing himself from his own poetry and pouring scorn upon literary considerations in his scholarship. He was persuaded to give only one lecture on the subject of poetry in general: his Leslie Stephen Lecture of 1933 at Cambridge, entitled 'The Name and Nature of Poetry'.<sup>30</sup> In this prestigious and still continuing literary event, in memory of Sir Leslie Stephen, the author, critic, mountaineer, and father of Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell, Housman attributed his own poetic inspiration solely to physical causes:

... like the pearl in the oyster ... I have seldom written poetry unless I was rather out of health.<sup>31</sup>

Walking alone, after drinking beer at lunchtime, was another occasion of poetic inspiration:

So far as I could make out, the source of the suggestions thus proffered to the brain was an abyss which I have already had cause to mention, the pit of the stomach.<sup>32</sup>

Alongside Housman's determined anti-intellectualism in literary matters, these slightly comic but deadpan references to beer and the stomach also give us a glimpse of the hedonistic side of Housman's personality referred to earlier, an aspect inconsistent with the

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<sup>29</sup> Kenney 2009: 256.

<sup>30</sup> Page 1983: 133-139, Graves 1979: 253-255.

<sup>31</sup> Ricks (ed.) 1988: 370. Also cf. Page 1983: 137, Graves 1979: 254.

<sup>32</sup> Ricks (ed.) 1988: 370-1.

received version of him as a reclusive and independent hero of scholarly austerity, and a broken-hearted poet. In such comments, he is not being serious about his poetry in order to emphasise his seriousness as a classical scholar, but he is also letting slip his hearty appetite for life and pleasure.

Housman would not permit poetry to have intellectual effects any more than intellectual causes, identifying, in his lecture, the physical effects of a good poem as a 'shiver down the spine' and 'constriction of the throat'. Nor was the subject matter of a poem important; he defined poetry as 'not the thing said but a way of saying it'. He commented that some of Shakespeare's 'loveliest verses' say nothing at all.<sup>33</sup> Responding later to criticism of these views by F.R. Leavis, Housman said, 'I did not say that poetry was better for having no meaning, only that it can best be detected so'.<sup>34</sup>

At the end of his life, when he entered the Evelyn Nursing Home in Cambridge at the age of seventy seven, Housman knew he had a worsening heart condition. Yet, at this time, he wrote that his 'real trouble, which I have often had before, is nervous depression and causeless apprehensions'.<sup>35</sup> Today the term 'depression' tends to be used in a medical or semi-medical sense, yet Housman is partly suggesting a medical complaint himself by describing it as 'nervous'. His 'causeless apprehensions' would probably be called panic attacks today, and Housman himself described as suffering from a mental illness. Modernising his vocabulary, however anachronistically, helps to show that this was a man who seems to have found it difficult to maintain his mental equilibrium and was engaged in a life-long struggle to do so. If some of the personal strategies he used to achieve this, which I go on to discuss in the following chapters, seem excessive in places, perhaps they are best seen in the light of this unusually open late comment.

The chapters which follow show how Housman constructed his career as a leading classical scholar, asserting himself in response to social and cultural necessities, reacting to established views and attempting to overturn them, and putting himself in the vanguard of a rational and avowedly scientific future which had no place for the gentlemanly humanism of well-born amateur scholars. They reveal how he created a fearsome reputation of austere independence and reclusiveness in order to show his seriousness as a scholar, and also to forestall criticism of himself as a person. They also show the intimate connections between his poems and those of his favourite Latin poets, but also how he distanced himself from his poems in order to emphasise his credentials as a scientific

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<sup>33</sup> Ricks (ed.) 1988: 366.

<sup>34</sup> Graves 1979: 255.

<sup>35</sup> Page 1983: 156, Graves 1979: 256.

scholar; and how being a famous poet both helped him and made him vulnerable in his career. This examination of Housman's life and career helps towards defining the interface between classical scholarship and creativity, as well as allowing us to take the temperature of his times, especially with regard to contemporary radical changes in the teaching and studying of classics, the advent of new boundaries in academic discourse, and the changing relationship between aesthetic interpretation and the academy.



## Part One

### Chapter Two

#### Housman, Science, and Humanism

This chapter explores the life and work of A.E. Housman through his social and cultural context, focusing on the ways in which he responded to it and attempted to shape it. One of his main challenges was to find a successful response to very strict notions of public respectability in late nineteenth-century England, and these concerns were given an added dimension by the fact that he aspired to be a professional, scientific scholar, which placed him beyond the boundaries of the mainstream, established cultural field of humanist classicism, with its belief in the ‘spirit’ of humanism originating in the Renaissance. As well as the challenge from within the humanist, Anglican establishment, he also had to contend with rival scholars who saw themselves as being just as rigorous and professional as he was. Beyond the cultural field of classics, these social necessities were also policed by harsh criticism of the new agnostic, scientific world, as well as by popular representations of its prominent figures. Housman was born into a vicious argument about science and theology; as a philologist who was inspired by the new, ‘pure’, agnostic scientists, he crossed the line in the subsequent struggle for cultural centrality between science and classics. On the literary side, he also had to keep his distance from specific readings of his poetry which could have done him professional harm, but which he could not control. These social and cultural necessities can be summed up in the formula that, in this historical period, credibility equalled respectability; and respectability was not assumed, it had to be constructed in public. Housman constructed his own respectability by translating himself into a fierce, reclusive, independent figure both within and beyond his scholarship. He also presented himself as a patriotic Conservative in political matters, though, as I discuss, there were elements in his verses which threatened to undermine this self-presentation.<sup>1</sup>

One of the most intelligent challenges to the new scientific spirit that Housman espoused

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<sup>1</sup> For fuller discussions of Housman’s intellectual context, which are too extensive to distil within these chapters, see Jenkyns 1980, 1991, Macfarlane 2007, Turner 1974, 1981, 1982, Vance 1997, 2007.

came from the classical scholar and politician Sir Richard Jebb. This chapter closes with an exploration of Jebb's critique of science-based specialisation in classical scholarship, and what he saw as its tendency to distort the nature of the ancient texts it examined. As shown in Jebb's Romanes lecture, one of the most remarkable things about scholars of Jebb's generation is that they believed themselves to be the inheritors and guardians of Renaissance humanism and the Enlightenment. This makes them appear to be somewhat antiquated in comparison with Housman, who, as a secular middle-class professional is in some ways more familiar in both his role and his attitudes. Nevertheless, Jebb had some pertinent things to say about the limits of specialisation in the study of classical texts. He was particularly concerned about the dismissal of aesthetic judgement in what were then new specialisms, and in the following chapter I explore an example of Housman's work which bears out some of Jebb's concerns.

### **Housman and the Naturalists**

Housman's reputation for personal austerity was one he cultivated in his actions and dispositions as well as in his writing. As Gowan Dawson's *Darwin, Literature and Victorian Respectability* (2007) shows, cultivating a public reputation of any kind, even into the first half of the twentieth century, meant being very respectable indeed, especially in one's sexual behaviour, following the moral panic over sexuality in the middle of the nineteenth century.<sup>2</sup> For the new kind of naturalists represented by Charles Darwin, Thomas Huxley, and their circle, soundness of character was more difficult to demonstrate because evolutionary science came to be associated, in the public mind, with atheism and with unconventional sexual attitudes and behaviour. Dawson's book begins by relating the occasion of an address to the Geological Society of London, in 1856, by Sir Richard Owen, 'the foremost comparative anatomist and perhaps the most eminent man of science in mid-Victorian Britain'.<sup>3</sup> Owen was extremely influential: among other high-points in his career he was the first Superintendent of the Natural History Collection at the British Museum, led the campaign for the establishment of the Natural History Museum to be built in South Kensington, and taught biology to Queen Victoria's children. He also coined the word *dinosauria* which became the more popular 'dinosaurs'. On this occasion, he used the end of his talk to the Geological Society to warn his audience against what he called

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<sup>2</sup> Dawson 2007: 4.

<sup>3</sup> Dawson 2007: 1.

‘irreligious scientific doctrines’, meaning the growth of ‘pure’ scientific naturalism, which was attempting to distinguish itself from natural theology, and which would make its major breakthrough three years later with the publication of Darwin’s *The Origin of Species* in 1859, the year of Housman’s birth. Dawson draws our attention to the language Owen uses in his attack, describing the promulgators of the new science as ‘unfruitful’, and practising ‘masked advocacy’:

Recent exponents of such specious doctrines were, Owen proclaimed, not ‘healthy’ or ‘normal’, and afflicted with ‘some, perhaps congenital, defect of mind’, they might corrupt the otherwise wholesome minds of others, and the impressionable and conspicuously capitalized ‘Young’ especially.<sup>4</sup>

By using such language, and by stressing the need for ‘constant watchfulness and prompt exposure’, Owen aligns his warning, according to Dawson, with ‘a distinctive rhetoric of moral anxiety and furtive surveillance which closely resembled the language of numerous contemporary treatises on the dangers of juvenile masturbation’.<sup>5</sup> Owen tells us that the attack succeeded in unnerving the usually witty and acerbic Thomas Huxley, scientific naturalist and colleague of Darwin, who was present, and in whose direction the warning was pointedly made.

Dawson goes on to show that Owen’s views represented the dominant moral attitude of the second half of the nineteenth century, and that this had an enormous effect on the initial reception of Darwin’s work:

... from the late 1860s attention shifted increasingly from general concerns with political propriety to specific anxieties over sexual respectability, and it was actually Darwin’s surprisingly recurrent connection with sexual immorality, in various sectors of the period’s burgeoning print culture, which emerged as perhaps the most significant impediment to establishing a naturalistic world-view as a morally acceptable alternative to earlier theological outlooks. These iniquitous associations, moreover, would prove remarkably difficult to shake off.<sup>6</sup>

Darwin and his circle had great difficulty in separating the theory of evolution from these connections with sexual licentiousness, and may not have achieved it if Darwin hadn’t been so careful to construct a conventional public persona. Dawson makes it clear that such respectability had to be deliberately constructed, rather than being simply the natural condition of Darwin’s class, and that it was a difficult task to achieve and maintain it:

Darwinian men of science ... were constrained significantly by the allegations made by antagonists

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<sup>4</sup> Dawson 2007: 1.

<sup>5</sup> Dawson 2007: 2.

<sup>6</sup> Dawson 2007: 4.

such as Owen, and often had no choice but to fashion their model of professional scientific authority, as well as their public personae, in accordance with the standards of respectability laid down by their most bitter adversaries ... this book makes clear that the fashioning of such respectability was by no means a straightforward or unproblematic endeavour. Maintaining an unsullied personal reputation, vitally important in an age when much of the intellectual credibility of science relied upon the virtuous character of its leading individual exponents, was often an extremely precarious process, even for such a model of scientific propriety as Darwin himself.<sup>7</sup>

Nor was this a brief struggle, for the ‘principal exponents [of Darwinism] continued to struggle to maintain their respectability throughout the later decades of the nineteenth century.’<sup>8</sup>

Housman was not, of course, a naturalist like Darwin, Hooker or Huxley, but he did regard textual criticism as a science and said so in public.<sup>9</sup> He was deeply conscious of, and to a certain extent inspired by, the evolution of *Altertumswissenschaft* in Germany, and between Housman and Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff there was a mutual admiration.<sup>10</sup> Housman’s interest, however, lay solely in recreating the poet’s song literally, on the page, with his early-conceived ambition to ‘give the world the first edition of his chosen author’s work which would meet the requirements of modern critical science’.<sup>11</sup> To re-create the poet’s song or the thought of the philosopher in any sense beyond this was an irrelevance to Housman; and he had absolutely no interest in attempting to recreate the ancient ‘bustling life of market or port’, in Wilamowitz-Moellendorff’s well-known statement of intent.<sup>12</sup> Though he never said it directly, it seems that he felt closer in spirit to the evolutionary naturalists of Britain than to the conception of science in nineteenth-century German classical scholarship, partly because of what he saw as the latter’s deterioration, but mainly because of the former’s thorough displacement of the human; a displacement that Freud described as ‘the second blow’ to ‘the universal narcissism of men’, the first blow being Copernican cosmology.<sup>13</sup>

The atmosphere of Victorian science in Britain also informs the background to Housman’s poetry, particularly in the classical influences it shares with the evolutionary naturalists.<sup>14</sup> Like them, his version of science was both professional and anti-establishment. The social effect of this was that, unlike his flamboyant, bohemian brother

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<sup>7</sup> Dawson 2007: 8.

<sup>8</sup> Dawson 2007: 11.

<sup>9</sup> Ricks (ed.) 1988: 325-326.

<sup>10</sup> Page 1983: 144, 162-163.

<sup>11</sup> Graves 1979: 48.

<sup>12</sup> Wilamowitz-Moellendorff 1982: 1.

<sup>13</sup> Freud 1953-56: 17: 140-141, Beer 1983: 12. For Housman’s opinion of contemporary German classical scholarship, cf. Ricks 1988: 308. He linked what he saw as its deterioration into ‘quantity’ rather than ‘quality’ to the rise of Germany as a military and industrial power.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Beer 1983 on the influence of popular science on the literature of the period and later.

Lawrence, who was also homosexual and a well-known writer, as well as a friend of Oscar Wilde, he had to be very careful to achieve the kind of status which would allow him to build himself into his own scholarly monument. His affairs with Venetian gondoliers, for example, had to be kept well away from his public persona at Cambridge. He was ‘very annoyed’ when his publisher, Grant Richards, returned to him by post, in Cambridge, a pornographic book which Housman had passed on to him on holiday in France.<sup>15</sup> The Housmanic cult of scholarly austerity tends to ignore this side of him, as well as his extensive knowledge and enjoyment of fine food and wine, and his many holidays abroad, to which he often flew on dangerous early passenger flights. The very different version of Housman which still tends to predominate originated as his own translation of himself into the language of his social and cultural field.

In attempting to be seen as a respectable public figure even though he was at the controversial edge of his field, Housman not only had to behave very carefully, he had to positively construct a persona which would make sure he did not acquire the wrong kind of reputation. If, in all those legendary anecdotes about his resolute behaviour, he seems an exaggeratedly dour or aggressive figure, there were social and cultural necessities which led him to this; not merely to compliance, but to construct a speculation-proof version of himself, just as Darwin was forced to do in a different public sphere.

Richard Owen’s attack upon the scientific naturalists included the disparagement of some classical texts:

... these heretical views, Owen insisted, derived originally from the demeaning ‘tenets of the Democritic and Lucretian schools’ that were formulated in ancient Greece and Rome.<sup>16</sup>

In making this connection Owen was adding moralistic force to his argument by finding the origins of scientific naturalism in writers who, Dawson writes, ‘for centuries had been denounced as dangerous pagan sensualists’<sup>17</sup>:

Owen himself was certainly aware of the strategic potential of such insidious associations with the moral corruption of the ancient world, having earlier condemned his anatomical opponents, in *On the Nature of Limbs* (1849), for sinking into an ‘Epicurean slough of despond’ from which ‘every healthy mind naturally recoils’.<sup>18</sup>

This classical connection gives a further possible reason for Housman’s choice of

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<sup>15</sup> Graves 1979: 168.

<sup>16</sup> Dawson 2007: 1.

<sup>17</sup> Dawson 2007: 2.

<sup>18</sup> Dawson 2007: 2.

Manilius, rather than Propertius or Lucretius, for the main professional work of his career. Though the latter poets would certainly have been more congenial to him, perhaps he feared that displaying a suspiciously acute understanding of the erotic enslavement of Propertius, which he certainly possessed, or of the Epicureanism of Lucretius, would risk tainting the respectable image he had worked hard to achieve. Editing Manilius enabled him to work scientifically on uncontroversial content, as well as on a text opposed to Lucretius' atomistic materialism.<sup>19</sup> He put his admiration of Lucretius and Propertius into his own poetry instead.<sup>20</sup>

As well as these factors, the public disputes over science, art, and religion produced an odd double bind which meant that it was even more important for figures like Housman to dissociate themselves from aestheticism. Dawson quotes from the popular journal *The Contemporary Review* of 1880:

‘Science, culture, and aesthetics, or their best advertised professors, are at present united by a joint cupidity, founded on a common atheism; or let us say, agnosticism’, and this underlying conceptual unity, it was claimed, had resulted in an ‘appeal so eagerly made by artistic immoralists to science, begging her, on ground of a common atheism, to come down and deliver them from virtue’.<sup>21</sup>

Aware of such popular views, it was a smart move for Housman to denounce any aestheticism in scholarship, and to keep quiet (at least beyond the circle of his colleagues) about his own atheism, so that he could take his stance as a scientific scholar, but not be seen as an ‘immoralist’. The fact that he was an increasingly famous poet made these issues more urgent. However, we should not see Housman as overly self-sacrificing in his pursuit of academic respectability. There is no doubt that he considered the maintenance of his persona a price worth paying. It is difficult for us to appreciate now the sheer promise that the pursuit of science, in both its theoretical and technological forms, seemed to offer to the secular-minded in the second half of the nineteenth century in Britain, even if, as the literary historian Philip Davis shows, this same revolution was a source of metaphysical and emotional anguish for many Victorians, including Housman to some extent.<sup>22</sup> What it appeared to offer then, but no longer seems to offer now, was the possibility of a final resolution to the major difficulties of social and material existence. There may also have been a personal influence in that Housman's beloved fellow student and athlete, Moses

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<sup>19</sup> Dykes 2011: 220.

<sup>20</sup> See Chapter Four, pp. 63-66, 70-73.

<sup>21</sup> Dawson 2007: 9, Tyrwhitt 1880: 481.

<sup>22</sup> Davis 2002: 55-97.

Jackson, was a science graduate.<sup>23</sup>

Kenneth Womack finds the same influence of Lucretius and Epicureanism in the essays of Thomas Huxley as in Housman's poetry, writing that 'Victorian science informs the historical dynamic of Housman's poetics'; producing an aesthetic which connects the scientific conclusions of the ages of Lucretius and Darwin:<sup>24</sup>

To Huxley, a confessed agnostic, faith was a concept that operated outside of the bounds of scientific consideration (Marlow, 1958, p.152), and his ideas about the validity of the soul, as well as his discourse on atomic matter within the body, truly demonstrate Huxley's own Epicurean-like conclusions.<sup>25</sup>

As well as these connections, it is possible to add a cultural dimension to Womack's conclusions on Huxley and Housman. For Huxley, who, as described above, had to endure Richard Owen's attempt to tar his most cherished scientific ideas with dirt and furtiveness, was not merely an agnostic; he coined the word itself. As Phillip Davis shows, the invention of agnosticism began as an attempt to fend off such attacks by creating a socially neutral place in which scientific naturalists could establish themselves:

For Charles Lyell and Charles Darwin, burdened with anxieties about the reception of their ideas in orthodox religious circles, the new specialization was the scientists' modest attempt to create and defend a neutral space defined by the limits of knowledge. ... Hence the coining of the protective term 'Agnosticism' by T.H. Huxley in 1869 at the inaugural meeting of the Metaphysical Society. Agnosticism confined knowledge to the world of material phenomena: beyond that the First Cause was unknown – perhaps unknowable, perhaps non-existent. Agnosticism began as the name for a method in scientific discipline: there could be no compulsion to believe anything without adequate reasons or proofs. But in the slippery uncertainties of the century it also became a position mid-way between belief and unbelief or, more aggressively, a statement of scepticism.<sup>26</sup>

These defensive manoeuvres, so important to the subsequent development of natural science, reveal how carefully Huxley and the other 'pure' naturalists had to tread; and, in his own social and cultural context, even a generation later, so did Housman. For, despite Richard Owen's moralistic prejudices in his speech to the Geological Society of London, he was right about the classical influences of Epicurus and Democritus upon the naturalists; and his insidious linking of classical texts and furtive sexuality was a point of vulnerability for them, and potentially even more so for Housman. Like them, Housman

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<sup>23</sup> Page 1983: 42, Graves 1979: 54.

<sup>24</sup> Womack 2000: 77. For the influence of Lucretius on Housman's poetry cf. Chapter Four, pp.63-66, also Gillespie and Mackenzie 2007: 313, Gardner 1992: 76, Marlowe 1958: 58-59, Haber 1967: 155-65 and Burnett 1997: 343, 463.

<sup>25</sup> Womack 2000: 80.

<sup>26</sup> Davis 2002: 57-8.

confined his public utterances, both in his scholarship and in the poems he published in his lifetime, to this same careful line of agnosticism, and his well-known iconoclasm, though controversial, did not contradict this line as much as overt atheism would have done. This careful attitude is also shown in the fact that some of his posthumously-published poems are more explicitly sceptical or atheistic:

June suns, you cannot store them  
To warm the winter's cold,  
The lad that hopes for heaven<sup>27</sup>  
Shall fill his mouth with mould

The coexistence of classical texts, authors, and ideas as culturally central and yet as controversial, even disreputable, is an urgent issue in Housman's social and professional context, as Simon Goldhill writes:

... by the end of the nineteenth century, Classics and sexuality were linked in fascinating ways within the discipline as an institution. Hellenism and homosexuality went together like a horse and carriage in the Victorian university, and the trial of Oscar Wilde brought it into the limelight of public scandal.<sup>28</sup>

Any association with pagan sensualism, therefore, would most likely have led to speculation about Housman's sexuality, though he was proud of the fact that his poems had been read to Oscar Wilde in prison by Wilde's friend Robert Ross. He even sent Wilde a copy of *A Shropshire Lad* when Wilde was released, but he would not have dared to publish during his own lifetime the poem (first drafted in August 1895) that he wrote about Wilde's imprisonment:

Oh who is that young sinner with the handcuffs on his wrists?  
And what has he been after that they groan and shake their fists?  
And wherefore is he wearing such a conscience-stricken air?  
Oh they're taking him to prison for the colour of his hair.

'Tis a shame to human nature, such a head of hair as his;  
In the good old time 'twas hanging for the colour that it is;  
Though hanging isn't bad enough and flaying would be fair<sup>29</sup>  
For the nameless and abominable colour of his hair.

Housman's attitude to homosexuality, as revealed in this poem, shows an intriguing connection with Darwin's theory of evolution, and with the popular and academic

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<sup>27</sup> *More Poems* XXII.

<sup>28</sup> Goldhill 2011: 4.

<sup>29</sup> *Additional Poems* XVIII, Haber 1955: ix, 21.



receptions of it discussed earlier. Homosexuality is taken here to be something Wilde *is* rather than something he *does*, an identity that comes from his basic nature rather than a sexual practice. This, according to Michel Foucault, was a relatively new attitude at this time:

Homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it was transposed from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphroditism of the soul. The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species.<sup>30</sup>

As well as the surface satirical point Housman is making about social attitudes in this poem, it also shows a Darwinian, deterministic version of human nature governing both sexual orientation and hair colour. Surprisingly, this poetic connection between scientific truth and a socially deviant sexual identity is made by Housman himself, not by the tenacious critics of Darwin such as Sir Richard Owen or the popular journals. This, together with the fact that he did not publish this poem, suggests that Housman was well aware of the reasons for the hostile reception of the work of Darwin and Huxley discussed earlier, and of the potential dangers for himself.<sup>31</sup> It also shows the extent to which he had absorbed the still relatively recent ideas of scientific naturalism, and that he was in sympathy with its challenge to established views.

Apart from these considerations, there were other professional risks Housman took in publishing his poetry. The classical scholar John Postgate (grandfather of Oliver Postgate, the well-known animator and children's programme maker) was one of Housman's colleagues at Trinity College and perhaps his most serious rival. Six years after he defeated Housman in a bitter public row over the transmission of Propertius, Postgate returned to the attack. This time it was Housman's methods of emendation he took exception to, and, crucially, he used quotations from Housman's own poems to make his point. Neil Hopkinson, in his chapter on Housman and Postgate in *A.E. Housman: Classical Scholar* (2009), quotes from an article by Postgate in which he accuses Housman of being too literal in his approach to Latin poetry.<sup>32</sup> As part of his critique of Housman's style of textual criticism, Postgate invokes a fictional comic character called Lord Dundreary, who objects to proverbs such as 'birds of a feather flock together', on the grounds that, 'It would be a dashed silly bird that would go and flock in a corner by itself!'. He implies that Housman's approach to editing is similarly absurd:

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<sup>30</sup> Foucault 1990: 43.

<sup>31</sup> Efrati 2002: 284-286.

<sup>32</sup> Hopkinson in Butterfield and Stray (eds) 2009: 179.

The same treatment may be applied to any kind of literature with interesting results, as for example to the following:

Now, of my threescore years and ten,  
*Twenty* will not come again.<sup>33</sup>

Nor will the ‘fifty’ for that matter. Or to the following:

Buoyed on the heaven-heard whisper  
Of dancing leaflets whirled  
From *all* the woods that autumn  
Bereaves in *all* the world.<sup>34</sup>

Why not ‘From all the woods in the world’ or ‘From the woods in all the world’?<sup>35</sup>

In seizing on Housman’s poetry to make this point, Postgate’s main intention is obviously to inflict some suffering upon his rival. Nevertheless, he is also making an important point; that he believes Housman, as a poet, ought to know enough about the workings of the creative imagination not to be so literal and narrow-minded in his textual scholarship on ancient poems. In other words, he implies that Housman the scholar would benefit from the input of Housman the poet. Though Postgate no doubt intended this as a specific criticism of Housman, it also connects to the broader defence of aesthetic considerations within textual scholarship, and the criticisms of over-specialisation, made by the great humanist and classical scholar Sir Richard Jebb, which I discuss later in this chapter. It is also a significant issue in exploring the classical scholarship of my second subject, Anne Carson, in Part Two of this thesis; since her scholarship is partly based on the assumption that her poetic sensibility, in itself, gives her important insights into ancient Greek lyric.

Hutchinson records that Housman ‘published no response’ to Postgate’s critique, and given how easy it was for Postgate to satirise him by reaching out for his poetry in this way, it is hard to see how Housman could have responded successfully. Housman finally triumphed, however, by beating Postgate to the position of Kennedy Professor of Latin at Cambridge, which one could read as the final victory of his determined separation of Housman the scholar from Housman the poet; a separation which helped him to construct his fearsome academic reputation.

## Housman and the Journalists

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<sup>33</sup> *A Shropshire Lad* II.

<sup>34</sup> *A Shropshire Lad* XLII.

<sup>35</sup> Hopkinson in Butterfield and Stray (eds) 2009: 179-80.

As we have seen, the division Housman insisted on making between his classical scholarship and his creativity, and the legendary persona into which he translated himself, far from being eccentric, were practical choices; improvisations in the field, in Bourdieu's terms, which were appropriate for him in his circumstances. He worked hard at this particular set of improvisations in his barbed and censorious cultural field, maintaining his austere and remote image at all levels of social interaction, as well as in print. Two sketches of his behaviour and appearance show his consistent determination to maintain this persona. After a weekend party Housman once attended, W.S. Blunt wrote of him:

I took Housman for a walk and asked him how he had come to write his early verses and whether there was any episode in his life which suggested their gruesome character, but he assured me it was not so. ... He shows no trace now of anything romantic, being a typical Cambridge Don, prim in his manner, silent and rather shy, conventional in dress and manner, learned, accurate, and well-informed ... with Meynell's help we got him to discuss his own poems, though he refused absolutely to read them out ... Housman's personal appearance is one of depression and indifferent health. He does not smoke, drinks little, and would, I think, be quite silent if he were allowed to be.<sup>36</sup>

One student who attended his lectures in Cambridge observed:

At five minutes past eleven he used to walk to the desk, open his manuscript, and begin to read. At the end of the hour he folded his papers and left the room. He never looked either at us or at the row of dons in the front.<sup>37</sup>

Yet, though his own behaviour in public, and the impression it made, was something he could control, the reception of his writing was not so easily contained. In both his scholarship and in some of his poetry Housman was clearly an iconoclast, yet often he seemed also to want to connect: in the language of his poems, to become one of the 'lads'. It was the ambiguous status of his iconoclasm that caused one of his most publicly uncomfortable moments, when his public self-translation was brought to a minor moment of crisis by the assumptions of a specific, confident readership.

One day in early 1911, somewhat against his will, a group of forceful journalists and writers led by the adventurer Frank Harris descended on Housman and insisted on taking him out for lunch. Afterwards, the writer Richard Middleton, also present in huge felt hat and enormous beard, was scathing about Housman's appearance:

He looked elderly and insignificant and suggested in some subtle way an undertaker's mute, the kind of man who wears kid gloves too long in the fingers, and generally has a cold in the head ...<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Graves 1979: 170-1, Page 1983: 126.

<sup>37</sup> Graves 1979: 171, Page 1983: 109-111.

<sup>38</sup> Graves 1979: 95-6. Max Beerbohm described him as 'like an absconding cashier', Page 1983: 152.

To Housman's annoyance, Harris and his friends also 'sympathised with him over his luckless environment'.<sup>39</sup> Housman may have regarded other aspects of his life as 'luckless', but he was very proud of his status as Professor of Latin at UCL. Graves points out that the attitude of these fellow writers was patronising because, having met Housman and been unimpressed by his appearance and manner, they were attempting to find the man worthy of his own work. But Housman only began to express his anger openly when they started to interpret his poems. Harris congratulated Housman on 'the bitter sarcasm' of his verse, particularly in the opening verses of *A Shropshire Lad*, '1887', which commemorated the Golden Jubilee of Queen Victoria:

From Clee to heaven the beacon burns,  
The shires have seen it plain,  
From north and south the sign returns  
And beacons burn again.

Look left, look right, the hills are bright,  
The dales are light between,  
Because 'tis fifty years to-night  
That God has saved the Queen.

Now, when the flame they watch not towers  
About the soil they trod,  
Lads, we'll remember friends of ours  
Who shared the work with God.

To skies that knit their heartstrings right,  
To fields that bred them brave,  
The saviours come not home tonight:  
Themselves they could not save.

It dawns in Asia, tombstones show  
And Shropshire names are read;  
And the Nile spills his overflow  
Beside the Severn's dead.

We pledge in peace by farm and town  
The Queen they served in war,  
And fire the beacons up and down  
The land they perished for.

'God save the Queen' we living sing,  
From height to height 'tis heard;  
And with the rest your voices ring,  
Lads of the Fifty-third.

Oh, God will save her, fear you not;  
Be you the men you've been,  
Get you the sons your fathers got,

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<sup>38</sup> Graves 1979: 96, Richards 1941: 95.

And God will save the Queen.

To Harris the poem was clearly iconoclastic, though Housman, according to Harris in his memoirs, protested that he never intended anything of the sort:

I never intended to poke fun, as you call it, at patriotism, and I can find nothing in the sentiment to make mockery of: I meant it sincerely; if Englishmen breed as good men as their fathers, then God will save their Queen.<sup>40</sup>

In this direct confrontation with a particularly strong reading of his poetry, Housman insisted on its straightforwardness, to the bemusement of his hosts, who thought he was being coy. In the end, Housman grew angry and accused them of taking him to lunch merely to get him to allow them to publish his poems.

This reception of his poems by a group of well-read, confident writers and editors represented a not inconsiderable threat to Housman's career, since they considered themselves to have access to Housman's real, underlying intentions, and their views were widely read in the weekly journals. Housman was, at the time, a candidate for the post of Kennedy Professor of Latin at Cambridge, after the death of John Eyton Bickersteth Mayor in 1910. A reputation as a blasphemous anti-monarchist would have almost certainly lost him the post, especially as he was by far the most famous of the candidates, as well as a controversial one thanks to his harsh treatment of other scholars, so his views would be unlikely to escape attention. In the light of this, we can see that Housman's customary distancing of himself from his poems was a practical piece of cultural literacy in a delicate situation.

This argument over the meaning of Housman's poetry raises the issue of what it means to understand a poem. Certainly Harris and company felt they had understood '1887' precisely, but Housman told them firmly they had misunderstood both it and him. This issue of conflicting interpretation is also relevant to my exploration of the poetry and classical scholarship of Anne Carson in Part Two of this thesis. On the surface Housman's poetry would appear to be much more accessible than hers, and yet the same questions raised by the receptions of particular readerships are relevant here, especially in the context of one kind of reader deciding that another kind of reader has made a category error or simply a mistake. What has changed since Housman's time is that the potential consequences of clashing readings are usually not so dangerous in career terms. Unlike Housman, Carson can happily let the reader, any reader, make what they will of her

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<sup>40</sup> Bayley in Holden and Birch (eds) 2000: 157.

creative work, within the defence that it is Art, though this lack of danger reflects in itself a diminution in the cultural status of poetry. But what is the same, in both cases, is that readers of lower cultural status who are criticised for not ‘getting it’ have, in reality, often got it very well, but not in a way approved of in culturally-sanctioned readerships, and this is the case with the Harris circle’s interpretation of Housman’s poetry. They identified immediately the iconoclasm which has also been found in Housman’s poems by other readers, and which is probably much more obvious today, especially in the light of his posthumously-published poems. There was, in other words, a tasteful, prescribed relationship with the text that Housman’s first readers were expected to agree to receive, in order to consider themselves culturally literate, but a different kind of reader insisted upon a different negotiation. For Housman, these alternative negotiations could be dangerous, and this was much more of a risk with readings of his poetry than with his scholarship. Though a rival like Postgate could on several occasions criticise his scholarship successfully, such alternative negotiations were difficult to achieve. Housman presented his unique mode of mocking scholarly iconoclasm as the necessary demolishing of those who did not share his passion for truth, and to get his peers for the most part to accept that presentation. There was, therefore, a much smaller possibility in Housman’s lifetime of the kind of alternative reading which is made in subsequent chapters in this thesis. His cultural dominance was partly the result of what Pierre Bourdieu calls *illusio*, in which agents in a particular cultural field become over-impressed by their perception of its inevitable characteristics, and therefore help to create that inevitability. The fear and awe Housman inspired in other classicists, Postgate aside, was as much based on his combination of aggression and self-righteousness as on his excellent scholarship.

Housman’s disagreeable lunch is also discussed by the literary critic John Bayley, who comments that it was as if Housman had ‘fallen into his own trap’. He goes on to examine the tone of the poem:

But where a poet like Sir Henry Newbolt would have been rapt in simple (and self-congratulatory) enthusiasm for the ‘Lads of the Fifty-Third’, as he was for those exhorted to ‘play up, play up, and play the game’ of war, Housman introduces a much odder note into his poem, a more serious but also more sardonic one. And suddenly we see a flicker of the poet’s own guarded but at moments quite confidential personality. He seems at such moments almost to be giving the reader a wink ... Housman is being not so much blasphemous as quietly and even innocently sober. He is indeed dead serious, and yet a joke lurks in this very seriousness, for the idea of giving God a hand in this work of saving the Queen is surely one that would have given the troops themselves a certain amount of ribald amusement.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Bayley in Holden and Birch (eds) 2000: 157-158.

This is a precise description of the subtle twist of meaning characteristic of Housman's poetry; the transposing of romantic or patriotic sentiment into a subtle minor key.<sup>42</sup> Less convincing, however, is the way that Bayley ascribes both this quality, and Housman's behaviour at his lunch with Harris, entirely to his stubborn autonomy. He concludes:

Frank Harris ... really did meet the Housman he expected to meet – the sardonic and sarcastic poet - and yet Housman happened to be not prepared to play the game according to Frank Harris principles. Intensely his own man, Housman never does, or seems to be, anything that is quite expected.<sup>43</sup>

I would argue that, on the contrary, that if one puts Housman into his social and cultural context, this is the kind of behaviour one would expect in response to such a public challenge, especially since Housman already knew he would be a controversial choice for the post of Kennedy Professor of Latin because of his attacks on other scholars, despite the aura of inevitability he had tried to create around himself. He could not afford to 'play the game according to Frank Harris principles', not merely because he was his own man, as Bayley argues, but because the writers he met were not disposed to negotiate their way through the intricate act of reception practiced by readers who constituted most of the poetry reading public, but who did have a strong connection with the much wider weekly-journal-reading audience whose predecessors caused so many difficulties for Darwin and Huxley: people like the minor official, discussed in Chapter Four, who thought *A Shropshire Lad* was the 'filthiest book I ever read'.<sup>44</sup> Like the evolutionary naturalists, Housman had to live within his adversaries' version of public respectability, precisely because he attacked them so often. Outrageous in one area, he needed to make sure he conformed in all the rest. It was certainly not in Housman's interests to be seen as unpatriotic or blasphemous in this poem, given the other social risks he was taking. His strong reaction at this lunch was a social and professional necessity, rather than simply personal or mysteriously austere.

Housman seems to have become slightly less guarded in these matters in old age, though perhaps the world of classical scholarship did not change as much as he did. As late as 1931, Housman could not get an article published that dealt with sexual references in Latin texts, even though, to avoid controversy, he wrote it in Latin.<sup>45</sup> The prudishness and anxiety of late Victorian discourse was still in place well into twentieth century in Britain. But if Housman became less cautious in his choice of scholarly subject matter, he still

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<sup>42</sup> An effect that he would have found in his youth in Propertius and Horace, as discussed in Chapter Four.

<sup>43</sup> Bayley in Holden and Birch (eds) 2000: 158.

<sup>44</sup> Bayley in Holden and Birch (eds) 2000: 58. Cf. Chapter Four, p. 60.

<sup>45</sup> Efrati in Holden and Birch (eds) 2000: 204.

maintained his distance from his poems. Writing to Percy Withers on the extremely successful publication of his *Last Poems* in 1922, Housman poured cold water: ‘Your generous enthusiasm is very nice, but I have not myself felt more than a faint pleasure in the success of the book, which is not really a matter of much importance’.<sup>46</sup> This attitude seems to be a somewhat feigned indifference, since we know the book was personally very important to him. The impetus for writing or revising most of the poems included in *Last Poems*, in a burst of creativity in 1922, was Housman’s discovery that Moses Jackson was dying of cancer in Canada.<sup>47</sup> Of course, he could be saying that it was specifically the worldly ‘success’ of the book that was not important to him, though this does not fit with the fact that he suggested his publisher should order a first print run of 10,000 copies.<sup>48</sup> Yet, in the letter he sent to Jackson accompanying a copy of *Last Poems*, he takes pleasure in telling him that he has become an ‘eminent bloke’, even quoting sales figures of his books. Housman had long before settled into this hearty, jovial tone of voice when he wrote to Jackson, a voice that represented the only terms upon which he could keep this channel of communication open with a man who knew how Housman felt about him, avoiding anything too emotionally dangerous, and therefore enabling him to keep torturing himself on a regular basis. It is the fact that he sticks to this light-hearted tone, in what he knew would be his last letter to Jackson, which makes it so poignant. Housman tells him that, despite his own eminence, he would rather have followed Jackson around the world and blacked his boots. Attempting to get Jackson to accept future royalties for *Last Poems*, he says, ‘you are largely responsible for my writing poetry and you ought to take the consequences’.<sup>49</sup> Though this is a private letter, the tone is not too dissimilar to the one Housman uses in his Leslie Stephen lecture of 1933, discussed in the previous chapter, where he attributed his poetry, not to Jackson of course, but to the effects on his brain of drinking beer at lunchtime or having a sore throat. If he could not entirely dissociate himself from his poetry, the next best thing was to trivialise it.

Since Housman tells Jackson in this final letter that he is ‘responsible’ for his poetry, it is worth considering how much part Jackson in fact had in the success of Housman’s career overall. Most literary and biographical writing on Housman assumes that his unrequited love for Moses Jackson was responsible for him failing his degree at Oxford. As discussed above, there were other biographical, cultural, and intellectual factors involved in this early

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<sup>46</sup> Burnett 2007: 529.

<sup>47</sup> Page 1983: 130-132, Graves 1979: 223-30.

<sup>48</sup> Page 1983: 131-132.

<sup>49</sup> Graves 1979: 230.



failure as well as his feelings for Jackson, but equally, if Jackson was part of his downfall he may also have been part of his resurgence. As well as the factors involved in Housman's career already discussed in this chapter, it seems plausible that one of Housman's motivations in becoming 'an eminent bloke' was to impress Jackson, from a distance, in order to prove himself worthy of his love. Since Jackson was a science graduate, the practice of a scientific discipline could have been an emotional spur to Housman's passion for 'modern critical science', as well as the more remarked upon hopelessness expressed in his poetry.

### **Jebb's Romanes Lecture: a humanist's warning**

While Housman was establishing his position in the final years of the nineteenth century, he also had more than one battle to fight within the world of classics. The influence of Anglican humanism on the teaching and studying of classics was still dominant, whatever might be happening in the wider world beyond it. Some of the amateur gentleman classicists that Housman savaged were easy prey, but he also had more formidable opponents, among whom probably the most socially and culturally prominent was Jebb.

Sir Richard Claverhouse Jebb was very much an establishment figure. He was Member of Parliament for Cambridge University as well as an eminent classical scholar who published editions of Theophrastus, Sophocles, Bacchylides, and the Attic Orators with his own translations and commentaries, an introduction to Homer, a book on the growth and influence of Classical Greek poetry, and a book on modern Greece. He also translated into Latin and Greek, and published a collection of these translations.<sup>50</sup> Hailing from a Scottish family of lawyers and important social reformers, he was Professor of Greek at Glasgow, then Cambridge Regius Professor of Greek, as well as Public Orator of Cambridge University. He was knighted in 1900, and awarded the Order of Merit five years later. Such was his heroic status that he was caricatured as 'Ajax MP' after the publication of the final volume of his edition of Sophocles in 1896.<sup>51</sup> Jebb was eighteen years older than Housman, and took a much more humanistic and aesthetic stance in his scholarly work. Christopher Stray has described the changes in the structures and functions of classical scholarship in this period in his book *Classics Transformed* (1998), and Housman clearly saw himself as in the vanguard of the new professional model of scientific scholarship, as

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<sup>50</sup> Jebb 1880, (ed.) 1893, 1901, 1905, (ed.) 1906, (ed.) 1883-1908, 1909, 2010, Sandys (ed.) 1909.

<sup>51</sup> Stray 2009: 163.

well as being in the tradition of Bentley and Porson.<sup>52</sup> In his inaugural lecture as Kennedy Professor of Latin at Cambridge in 1911, Housman said:

Scholarship, that study of the ancient literatures for which chairs of Greek and Latin are founded, is itself a department (as I said before) not of literature but of science; and science ought to be scientific and ought not to be literary. The science, though it has works of literature for its subject, does not make its appeal to the same portion of the mind as do those works themselves. Scholarship, in short, is not literary criticism; and of the duties of a Latin Chair literary criticism forms no part.<sup>53</sup>

Though Jebb himself is not mentioned in this lecture, it is clear that Housman is using it to declare a complete break with the kind of aesthetic, humanist, literary, wide-ranging scholarship that Jebb practiced. Housman's specialism was philology, and he never called himself a 'classicist'; a much too loose description which risked presenting him as having the same social functions as men like Jebb. He refused to join the Classical Association, presumably because it was precisely an association of amateurs.<sup>54</sup> In Housman's scholarly disputes with Jebb it seems to be Jebb's humanism and his aestheticism that aroused Housman's scorn as much as particular disagreements over interpretation. When they argued over metrics in Bacchylides, for example, Housman insisted on applying the metre completely consistently to conjectural material, claiming that Jebb did not understand it. Jebb in reply stressed the importance of understanding the spirit as well as the letter of the meter, and claimed that the best way to understand a meter is to compose in it, as he regularly did, sometimes for important public occasions.<sup>55</sup> It was a highly complex debate, and it is very difficult to compare the two on equal terms, since when Housman wrote verse himself it was almost always in English except on rare occasions. Gilbert Murray, though, said that Housman's dedicatory verses to Moses Jackson, at the beginning of Housman's *Manilius* I (1903), in Propertian elegiacs, was the only modern composition in Latin he had read that could have been written by a classical poet.<sup>56</sup>

On 7<sup>th</sup> June 1899 Jebb gave the recently established Romanes lecture in the Sheldonian Theatre. His subject was 'Humanism in Education'; previous topics had included 'Evolution and Ethics' (Thomas Huxley), 'The Obligations of the Universities towards Art' (Holman Hunt), and 'The English National Character' (Mandell Creighton).<sup>57</sup> The scale of

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<sup>52</sup> Stray 1998: 123-4.

<sup>53</sup> Ricks (ed.) 1988: 302.

<sup>54</sup> Hopkinson in Butterfield and Stray (eds) 2009: 182.

<sup>55</sup> Stray 2009: 158-60.

<sup>56</sup> Goold in Holden and Birch (eds) 2000: 143.

<sup>57</sup> Huxley mentions both Democritus and Epicureanism, the 'insidious associations' that worried Richard Owen, in his Romanes lecture, among many other classical references. He says that the world was not ready for the teachings of Democritus. He speaks of Epicureanism as a derisive philosophy, but then

the lecture's subject matter is very large; nothing less than the history of humanism from the Renaissance and its influence on education down the centuries. It is an impressive display both of his erudition and of his passion; here is a defence of humanism put by one of its most able advocates. He begins with the humanism of the early Renaissance:

Petrarch was born in 1304, when Dante was thirty-nine years old, and died in 1374. That great movement in which he was a pioneer, and which we call the Renaissance, had its central inspiration in the belief that the classical literatures, which were being gradually recovered, were the supreme products of the human mind; that they were the best means of self-culture; that there alone one could see the human reason moving freely, the moral nature clearly expressed, in a word, the dignity of man, as a rational being, fully displayed. All this is implied in humanism, when we speak of humanism as the direction in which the Renaissance chiefly tended.<sup>58</sup>

Among several historical examples and quotations on the great impact of humanism, Jebb quotes Pope Leo X (1475-1521) on the subject of the re-emerging classical texts:

We have been accustomed ... even from our early years, to think that nothing more excellent or more useful has been given by the Creator to mankind, if we except only the knowledge and true worship of Himself, than these studies, which not only lead to the ornament and guidance of human life, but are applicable and useful to every situation; in adversity consolatory, in prosperity pleasing and honourable; insomuch, that without them we should be deprived of all the grace of life and all the polish of social intercourse.<sup>59</sup>

This gives a flavour of the pitch of Jebb's lecture, in which he defends the large scope of his address, saying that he wants to correct the impression that the Renaissance was mainly interested in copying merely the form and style of the ancient writers:

Europe owes to humanism the creation of a new atmosphere, the diffusion of a new spirit, the initiation of forces hostile to obscurantism, pedantry and superstition, forces making for intellectual light, for the advance of knowledge in every field, and not merely for freedom, but for something without which freedom itself may be a burden or a curse, the power to comprehend its right limits and to employ it for worthy ends.<sup>60</sup>

He is also very keen to stress the wide-ranging knowledge of Renaissance classical scholars:

The outlook of the greater humanists was a wide one. Filelfo, already mentioned, was a typical scholar of the fifteenth century: when he was professor at Florence, about 1428, he lectured in the morning on Cicero, then on Livy, or Homer: in the afternoon, on Terence, followed by Thucydides. Meanwhile, among other private labours, he translated into Latin Aristotle's 'Rhetoric,' some speeches

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defends Epicurus in the notes to the lecture, saying that his philosophy has been misunderstood, <[http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Evolution\\_and\\_Ethics](http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Evolution_and_Ethics) [accessed 23 November 2012]

<sup>58</sup> Todd (ed.) 2002: 506-44.

<sup>59</sup> Todd (ed.) 2002: 510.

<sup>60</sup> Todd (ed.) 2002: 516.

of Lysias, extracts from Xenophon, and some of Plutarch's 'Lives'.<sup>61</sup>

Jebb goes on to praise a long line of eminent names in classical scholarship, including Scaliger, Casaubon, Bentley, Porson, Elmsley, Hermann and Lachmann, as well as the recent rise of 'special branches of classical study'. At this point appears his first note of warning:

But the very progress made in recent times has brought us to a point at which the larger educational benefits of humanism become more difficult to harmonise with the new standards of special knowledge. A full comprehension of Greek and Latin literatures demands at least *some* study of ancient thought, ancient history, archaeology, art. But each of the latter subjects is now, in itself, an organised and complex discipline; to become an expert in any one of them is the work of years.<sup>62</sup>

Jebb's response to this situation is to advocate a two-part university course, much in line with the *Literae Humaniores* division of Moderations and Greats; languages and literature first, specialisation afterwards. He clearly perceives dangers ahead, though, because he returns to the subject of specialisation:

It may be added that, when specialization has been carried far in any study of literature or art, that study tends to become technical; and then a danger arises lest the pursuit of exact method should obscure the nature of the material with which the study has to deal, namely, productions of human thought and imagination; there is a danger lest analogies drawn from studies conversant with different material should be pushed too far, and what is called the scientific spirit should cease to be duly tempered by aesthetic and literary judgement.<sup>63</sup>

Jebb does not name Housman in this lecture, but it is clear that it is the sceptical and specialist approach to classical texts to which he is referring when he speaks of the 'scientific spirit' and 'studies conversant with different materials'. This lecture is also a clear indication of just how alien a species of scholar Housman was to the humanist establishment, and how concerned they were about his influence.

Jebb's lecture as a whole is refreshing to read in the context of Housman's scholarship and creativity, in its breadth and scope, and most of all in its willingness to engage with the wider world and the history of communal scholarly endeavour. Perhaps the most striking point about this argument, connecting the scientific spirit with aesthetic judgement, is that such a fine scholar and poet as Housman never made it: indeed, went to such great lengths to deny it. It also shows the important difference between Jebb's appeal to the history of classical scholarship and Housman's reverence for great scholars of the past. For

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<sup>61</sup> Todd (ed.) 2002: 515.

<sup>62</sup> Todd (ed.) 2002: 525.

<sup>63</sup> Todd (ed.) 2002: 527.

Housman, the history of classical scholarship is the history of great and rare individuals, marked out from the inadequate and ignorant scholars around them by the quality of their intellects and single-minded determination. Moreover, such greatness in thought could not be taught; it was, intellectually speaking, an elite affair. For Jebb, conversely, the history of classical scholarship is presented as the progress of the greatest passion and energy of intellectual endeavour, emanating from the humanism of the Renaissance, passing its transforming spirit down the centuries through a great cultural effort: in other words, it has everything to do with teaching. There is an irony at the centre of the opposing versions of knowledge presented by Housman and Jebb: Housman the middle-class, professional scholar's version of the history of classical scholarship, and its boundaries, is much more elitist than that of Jebb, the upper-class gentleman scholar.

Though Jebb may have been right to some extent in his critique of specialisation in classical studies, his views did not impede Housman in the progress of his career and work. Housman succeeded in establishing the boundaries of his approach to textual criticism, in response to oppressive social and cultural necessities, by constructing and maintaining a version of himself as a serious and independent scientific scholar, and by the sharpness of his fearsome scholarly style. This self-translation involved a high-handed dismissal of all the aesthetic considerations which were so important to Jebb; and, in order to be consistent in this (and consistency was everything in his time) he also tried to avoid becoming a literary figure himself. Above all he was a professional, and one can see in Jebb's argument some of the outmoded elements which would, in time, ensure the marginalization of his socially-elite assumptions about the humanities (he devotes a large number of paragraphs to discussing the history of the school curricula at Eton and Harrow, for example). However, it would be wrong to dismiss his argument as quaint: in the next chapter I analyse an occasion when Housman does exactly what Jebb warns against; where his over-technical approach does indeed 'obscure the nature of the material with which the study has to deal, namely, productions of human thought and imagination'. For this reason alone we should treat Jebb's argument seriously, even if it is hard not to read it as an elegy for a vanishing age.

## Part One

### Chapter 3

#### Satirical Scorn: Some Examples from Housman's Scholarship

One of the most well-known qualities of A.E. Housman the scholar is his passion for accuracy. The previous chapter showed how his conflation of the morally good with the accurate helped him to establish his career as a professional, scientific scholar, by distinguishing him from, and defining him against, the Anglican humanist establishment, and by creating a reputation for scholarly seriousness and rigour which few dared to challenge. This chapter explores how Housman's grand assertion of authority is represented within his scholarship, focusing on the techniques he uses to attack other scholars, as well as on one occasion where his determinedly anti-literary stance is too narrowly focused. One might imagine that a person with such a reputation would show a certain dispassionate aloofness or even disdain towards what might be called the lower forms of discourse, such as sarcasm, mockery, rhetorical tricks and sleights of hand. As this chapter shows, however, Housman was not above using all these things. He may have wished to be seen as dispassionate and scientific, but was far from dispassionate in the ways he expressed himself in his scholarship. What this reveals is not so much falseness or hypocrisy, as someone trying to steer his way through conflicting social, cultural, and personal pressures from both outside and within. Just as career criticism shows how Roman poets developed their careers through their relationship with particular genres, Housman can be seen setting up his career, in his scholarship, through the attitudes he takes to other scholars, both contemporary and historical, and the means he uses to make himself un-ignorable, unavoidable, ineluctable.

One technique that his victims complained of most was his tendency to regard human evil as a synonym for being wrong, and to use a devastating combination of religious language and harsh satire to attack such alleged evil. For example, at one point in the introduction to the first volume of his edition of Manilius he uses the editors Buecheler and Sudhaus as an example of how protégés can sometimes, in their work, exaggerate the faults of their mentors:

I imagine Mr. Buecheler, when he first perused Mr. Sudhaus' edition of the Aetna, must have felt something like Sin when she gave birth to Death.<sup>1</sup>

As well as his determination to demolish other scholars, we also see in this witticism Housman's religious background and his love of Milton. His use of this kind of invective has often been attributed to his great passion for truth, but G.P. Goold is, in turn, quite caustic about this attribution:

Housman's strength was intellectual not moral. I do not of course mean to question his essential integrity and nobility of soul, but many others possess these qualities. When he castigates lesser scholars with a spiteful scourge, we should not exculpate his infliction of pain by irrelevantly endowing him with the purest reverence for truth: this does not dwell in a soul habituated to fierce passion and intemperate invective.<sup>2</sup>

Or especially, one could add, in a soul habituated to mockery. For Goold, the motive for these attacks was not moral, but Housman's ambition to shine by demolishing rivals. However, it should also be admitted that this cruelty makes the introduction to Housman's edition of Manilius a very entertaining read, and shows above all how performative Housman's language is. It is hard to square this kind of writing with the image of Housman often presented by literary critics and biographers; for example Richard Graves' biographical sketch:

The outward life of the austere classical scholar nourished and sustained the inner life of the broken hearted romantic poet, who might otherwise have drifted downhill towards suicide; while the inner life of the poet gave insight and understanding and elegance of thought to the great classical scholar.<sup>3</sup>

Rather than this supposed 'austerity' and 'elegance of thought', Housman comes across as a satirical virtuoso when he picks up his pen, in his scholarship as much as some of his poems. We should not be surprised that he was fond of taking his friends to the music hall, since the comic put-down is part of his scholarly style:

Mr Bechert's way of using [the Florentine codex Laurentianus] is to neglect the good conjectures because he does not see that they are good, and to adopt the bad because he does not see that they are conjectures.<sup>4</sup>

If a man will comprehend the richness and variety of the universe, and inspire his mind with a due

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<sup>1</sup> Housman 1903: xliv.

<sup>2</sup> Goold in Holden and Birch (eds) 2000: 141.

<sup>3</sup> Graves 1979: 80.

<sup>4</sup> Housman 1903: xii.

measure of wonder and of awe, he must contemplate the human intellect not only on its heights of genius but in its abysses of ineptitude; and it might be fruitlessly debated to the end of time whether Richard Bentley or Elias Stoeber was the more marvellous work of the Creator: Elias Stoeber, whose reprint of Bentley's text, with a commentary<sup>5</sup> intended to confute it, saw the light in 1767 at Strasbourg, a city still famous for its geese.

Both these passages depend upon the surprise of the unexpected last word rendering the subject ridiculous in what seemed at first to be a straightforwardly serious tone. In the world of stand-up comedy, today, this is one of the most effective techniques in what is known as punch-line mechanics. The critic Colin Burrow also traces the influence of Richard Bentley in this passage:

Gibbon and Johnson underlie the shape of Housman's sentences, and give his prose a civilised cruelty Bentley never quite mastered. But the spirit of Bentley is also there.<sup>6</sup>

Yet he is also careful to remain within bounds which ensure he does not attract the kind of criticism which might reflect upon his character or his 'general habit of mind'.<sup>7</sup> Some of the classical scholars he attacks are long dead, and with the living he confines himself to disparaging what he sees as their deficient mental capacities and their indolence; harsh enough treatment, of course, but not as harsh as Thomas Huxley, who was warned by his proof-reader not to refer to opponents like the scientist Sir Richard Owen as 'emasculate monks'.<sup>8</sup>

Why then, given his passion for science, given his need for respectability, did he write in this sarcastic, facetious style? His tone seems especially odd given that Housman tells us how he wants to write. In his lecture 'The Confines of Criticism', he quotes Isaac Newton's *Philosophiæ Naturalis Principia Mathematica* (1687); 'Let S represent the sun, T the earth, P the moon, CADB the moon's orbit' and then commenting, 'This is how scholars should write about literature. If the botanist and the astronomer can go soberly about their business ... let the scholar amid the masterpieces of literature maintain the same coolness of head.'<sup>9</sup> Yet Housman himself never writes like this, except in the most drily technical parts of his scholarship when, for example, he is giving a long list of variants from a particular manuscript. Even then he usually goes straight back into battle in the next paragraph. One is forced to conclude that Housman's *logomachy* was not dispassionately Newtonian; rather it was a declaration of superior force, the social practice

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<sup>5</sup> Housman 1903: xix.

<sup>6</sup> Burrow 2011: 36-38.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Chapter Eleven: p.172.

<sup>8</sup> Dawson 2007: 11. The influence of agnostic evolutionary science upon Housman is discussed in Chapter Two, pp.24-25.

<sup>9</sup> Ricks (ed.) 1988: 304.



of an ambitious professor with an acute sense of cultural literacy in his field. In 1903, when he published the first volume of his edition of Manilius, he feared his best work would be simply ignored by other scholars, so he decided to make it impossible to ignore, as Goold confirms:

Housman knew well enough that he had performed dazzling feats and in an ideal world would have received the instant accolades of universal recognition; but he also knew that among his contemporaries his genius might pass unnoticed or, if noticed, unacknowledged: many would permanently judge him by his failure in *Greats*. Beside himself with chagrin at this prospect he decided to assert his own rank in the hierarchy of scholarship by speaking out rather than condoning the ignorance of others by keeping silent.<sup>10</sup>

Another reason for Housman's tone is the influence of the historical scholars he admired; he saw himself as following, to some extent, in the footsteps of earlier textual editors such as the abrupt, mocking Scaliger, and especially of Richard Bentley. Burrow's observation on Bentley could equally apply to Housman:

He began to hone his own distinctive style, that of an infinitely learned man whose spirit was entirely untainted by generosity ...<sup>11</sup>

Concerning Scaliger and Bentley, Housman said, in his Inaugural Lecture at Cambridge in 1911, that to study the great scholars is 'to enjoy intercourse with superior minds'.<sup>12</sup> As E.J. Kenney observes, 'Nothing, I think, does Housman more honour than his admiration for the great scholars of the past'.<sup>13</sup> His harsh style also had the benefit of distancing him from his immediate predecessors, the more gentlemanly humanist scholars, whilst showing them where he placed himself in terms of the history of classical scholarship.

Alongside the question of whether it is morally acceptable to treat one's colleagues and peers in this way is an issue about scholarly evaluation: in other words, to what extent did they deserve it? As a small piece of evidence, I offer an example from Housman's scholarship where it would be hard to say that his victim did not deserve at least some of his scornful humour. And yet Housman's treatment of this particular scholarly victim is still problematic, because the counter-interpretation that Housman gives of the particular lines of ancient Greek poetry in question is, in some ways, just as mistaken as that of his target. Moreover, the kind of mistake Housman makes here is exactly the kind that Jebb identified, in his *Romanes* lecture, when he warned that an over-technical approach to the

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<sup>10</sup> Goold in Holden and Birch (eds) 2000: 144.

<sup>11</sup> Burrow 2011: 36-38.

<sup>12</sup> Ricks (ed.) 1988: 313.

<sup>13</sup> Kenny 2009: 256.

text could 'obscure the nature of the material'.<sup>14</sup>

Lines 6 -7 of *Iphigenia at Aulis* is the moment when Agamemnon, who begins the play pacing anxiously in front of his tent, and repeatedly sealing and unsealing a letter, scribbling on it and crossing out again, points up to the sky and asks his old attendant: what star is that? The old man replies that it is *σειρίος*, near *τῆς ἑπταπόρου / Πλειάδος*:

*Ἀγαμέμνων*  
*τίς ποτ' ἄρ' ἀστὴρ ὄδε πορθμεύει;*

*Πρεσβύτης*  
*Σείριος ἐγγὺς τῆς ἑπταπόρου*  
*Πλειάδος ἄσσων ἔτι μεσσήρης.*<sup>15</sup>

Housman's note on these lines was originally published in *Classical Review* in 1914:

ACTHP CEIPIOC IN EUR. I.A. 6-7

Philologists who lie snug in bed while Prof. Harry is squirrel-hunting may continue to indulge their sloth without any fear that he is stealing a march upon them either in the science of astronomy or in the art of interpretation. His description of dawn is a description of what never happened even in Kentucky, and shows that his attention was chiefly fixed, as it naturally would be, on the squirrels. When Aldebaran is on the meridian, μεσσήρης, it cannot be the last star to disappear in the light of day. So long as Aldebaran is twinkling, Capella, a little to the north, will twinkle too, and so will the Dog-star; for although it is some way further east, and therefore more exposed to the extinguishing power of the daylight, its greater brilliancy preserves it longer from extinction. But Mr. Harry's astronomy interests me less than his exegesis. Agamemnon inquires *τίς ποτ' ἄρ' ἀστὴρ ὄδε πορθμεύει/σειρίος ἐγγὺς τῆς ἑπταπόρου Πλειάδος* and Mr. Harry contends that 'the Pleiades are no longer visible'. Is it then the habit of squirrel-hunters to define the position of a visible object by its proximity to an object which is not visible? And, if so, do they catch many squirrels?

The ἀστὴρ *σειρίος* was neither Aldebaran (as Matthiae, snug in bed, suggested) nor any other of the fixed stars. Had it been, Agamemnon would not have asked his question. To know the fixed stars was part of a general's business, because they told him the points of the compass, the hour of the night, and the season of the year; and the appearance of a familiar luminary in its usual place would not provoke the most distracted commander to enquire its name. The ἀστὴρ *σειρίος* of Euripides is, as Theon says (Hillier, pp.146-7) a planet: *ὁ τραγικὸς ἐπὶ τινος τῶν πλανητῶν τί ποτ' ἄρ' ὄστὴρ ὄδε πορθμεύει *σειρίος**. Agamemnon lifts his eyes to the Pleiads and sees in their neighbourhood a star which he is not accustomed to see there; and hence his question.<sup>16</sup>

This is a fairly typical example of his scholarly style, though it is certainly not Housman at his most brutal; we would have to turn to his excoriating introduction to the first volume of his edition of Manilius for that.<sup>17</sup> The introduction (and one can also see this to some extent in this note) presents the reader with a vision of a world full of ignorant, vain, wilful, lazy classical scholars, and sometimes it is not only classical scholars he condemns for their weakness, but the whole of mankind. His colleague and rival at Trinity, Professor

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Chapter Two: p. 42.

<sup>15</sup> Eur. *I.A.* 6-8.

<sup>16</sup> Housman 1914: 267.

<sup>17</sup> Housman 1903: vii-lxxv.

John Postgate, called Housman's style 'brilliant logomachy' but also wrote that Housman's 'immediate object was not to set out the truth, but to discredit a rival attempt to ascertain it'.<sup>18</sup>

However, if one reads this note together with the one it answers, in the *Classical Review*, by Professor J.E. Harry of the University of Cincinnati, one sees Housman's note in rather a different light. Harry's note begins:

Daniel Boone, or any squirrel hunter of Kentucky, could doubtless have solved the difficulties of Euripides I.A. 7-8 for the philologists, even if he were so untutored as to be able to call the star by name, for he would be able at least to point out the σείριος ἀστήρ near the Pleiades. And he would also know what the philologists (usually snug in bed at this time) do not seem to have known – that hours apparently elapse from the time the hunter begins his watch until the glorious orb of day rise above the horizon. No sound of birds is yet heard; no squirrel comes leaping over the branches of the forest to the feeding tree. The gloom of darkness prevails on earth; but the first streak of dawn has appeared in the east, and the sky gradually becomes brighter. Soon the lesser lights, and the constellation of the Pleiades itself, are extinguished. The σείριος Aldebaran alone remains twinkling in this part of the heavens. It is just at this time that Agamemnon emerges from his tent in haste.<sup>19</sup>

Harry's argument is initially naturalistic, then linguistic. If Aldebaran is the last star twinkling in the immediate region of the Pleiades at sunrise, and especially if there is a slower sunrise in Aulis than in Kentucky, because, as he contends, the sun must clear Mount Olympus before it appears in the sky, then Aldebaran must be the star to which Agamemnon refers. After refuting the interpretations of other scholars, Harry argues that Agamemnon would be asking a silly question if he were able to see any other stars, for he would then easily be able to place the star he can see. For Harry, *πορθμεύει* must refer to 'some bright bark crossing the ferry of the empyrean sea' that Agamemnon can see when the others have vanished. He tells us that the Greeks unquestionably used the word *σειριος* to refer to any bright star in the sky, quoting from Theon of Smyrna to support this, and that this must be the case here since the Dog-star is not, astronomically, *ἐγγὺς τῆς Πλειάδος*. He also claims confidently that the participle *ἀσσων* refers to the 'throbbing of the star'.

So it turns out that the 'philologists snug in bed' of Housman's note were not the product of his own sarcasm after all, and Professor Harry really was writing about actual squirrels. The scene Harry conjures up for us here is clearly a pastoral one, in which the squirrel hunter is a kind of Arcadian shepherd, or a noble savage, whose instinctual, salt-of-the-earth knowledge is more reliable than that of a classical scholar. More specifically, it represents a United States version of pastoral, in which American classicists like Harry

<sup>18</sup> Hopkinson in Butterfield and Stray (eds) 2009: 184.

<sup>19</sup> Harry 1914: 191.

considered themselves closer to the earth, and therefore better equipped to understand the quality of authentic earthiness in Greek literature, than European philologists. One can see why this drew Housman's attention; his arch 'even in Kentucky' shows that he is well aware of the nationalistic aspect of this claim to pastoral authority. More generally, the idea that lived experience is enough to make one a good textual scholar is the very opposite of his assumptions about the specialisation of knowledge; a challenge to his professional pride. It is also, surely, a description which invites some mockery, and therefore puts Housman's sarcasm, at least in this case, into a more sympathetic light.

However, it is also the case that Housman's response, despite its extensive display of knowledge, to some extent compounds Harry's irrelevant assumptions about these lines. Housman's determination to avoid aesthetic criticism means that he will not consider these lines as part of a literary work belonging to a particular genre. Instead, he presents a peculiarly literal interpretation of Agamemnon in terms of the knowledge of a real Greek general. Like the soldiers in Housman's own poem, *Epitaph on an Army of Mercenaries*, this is Agamemnon as professional specialist, and it is amusing to see Housman casting himself, or someone like himself, as king of all the Greeks.<sup>20</sup> He will not allow Agamemnon to be distracted enough to forget his astronomy even if he is about to have his own daughter killed. It hardly needs saying that Agamemnon is not a real Greek general but a dramatic creation, and that if one wants to discuss him in psychological terms (as Housman does, despite his disavowal of literary considerations) then one can counter that sometimes people ask questions to which they already know the answer but which they do not want to hear, and also that Agamemnon is usually portrayed as lacking the qualities befitting his status. This is a good example of a scholar projecting his own ego onto his material, and to replace Daniel Boone with Brasidas does not help very much in interpreting the passage.

Housman tells us that *σείριος* is a planet, which he does not name, and quotes from Theon of Smyrna who also thought this.<sup>21</sup> At first sight this seems to be Housman aligning himself with the scholarly tradition, his respect for which, as E.J. Kenney wrote, is one of his most attractive qualities. But in this case he is replying to Harry, who also quotes from Theon in order to argue that the star is Aldebaran.<sup>22</sup> Housman's use of Theon is the more precise, since the quotation he uses comments on these particular lines, but since, as Harry shows, Theon also wrote that the name *σείριος* was used in fifth-century Greece to mean

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<sup>20</sup> *Last Poems* XXXVII.

<sup>21</sup> Hillier 1878: 147.

<sup>22</sup> Harry 1914: 191.

any bright star, the evidence is inconclusive.

If we indulge ourselves with the kind of criticism of which Housman did not approve, and begin with the themes and given circumstances of the play itself, we find that taking the word *σειριος* simply to mean the Dog-Star is replete with literary and mythical associations. The basic physical circumstance of the play is that the Greek fleet is becalmed at Aulis and unable to sail to Troy. At the very beginning Agamemnon, in his turmoil, is looking for omens. Straight after he is told that the star is Sirius, he mentions the lack of wind, the silence of the sea and the absence of birdsong. It is from the Greeks that we get the idea of the ‘dog days of summer’, named after the Dog Star, Sirius, and mentioned in Aristotle's *Physica*.<sup>23</sup> Harry's argument implies that these details are merely used to set the scene, but Hesiod tells us that the rising of Sirius is a time of male feebleness, as well as great heat.<sup>24</sup> Since then the phrase has always meant a time of sultry weather, dullness of spirit, lack of progress, stagnation. The name of the star also means ‘the Scorcher’; Homer mentions it as a sign of evil which brings fever to mortals, and the old attendant makes it clear that Agamemnon is pacing feverishly.<sup>25</sup> Both the basic physical circumstances of the play, and their literary and mythical implications, point towards a straightforward identification of *σειριος* with the Dog-Star.

The other reason that the fleet is becalmed is because Agamemnon is in trouble with Artemis, who is the presiding goddess of the play. A fragment of the *Cypria* tells us that this was because Agamemnon had shot a stag and boasted that he was a greater hunter than she.<sup>26</sup> Agamemnon the hunter, then, points at a star which Homer links directly with Orion in the *Iliad*, and the *Odyssey* tells us both that Orion was a voracious hunter and that he was killed by Artemis.<sup>27</sup> So when Agamemnon points at Sirius, in the constellation of the hound of Orion, it is a strong reminder of the danger he is in. It is true that, in astronomical terms, the Dog-star is not near the Pleiades, though it does follow them into the same part of the sky. However, if we take the Old Attendant to be referring to Sirius as much mythologically as astronomically, then Orion and his Hound, as constellations, can easily be said to be near the Pleiades, which are in Taurus, the constellation next to Orion. Also, if we take *ῥσσων* in its most common sense of a quick shooting motion, rather than Harry's ‘throbbing’, a definition not given in *LSJ*, then we have an image of Orion, with

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<sup>23</sup> *Ph.* 199a2.

<sup>24</sup> *Hes. Op.*: 586-587.

<sup>25</sup> *Il.*5: 4-5.

<sup>26</sup> West 2003: 75.

<sup>27</sup> *Od.*11: 572-77, *Od.*5: 121-4.

his Hound, pursuing the Pleiades across the sky.

Since my argument is that both Housman and Harry are being over-literal in trying to nail down the identity of *σείριος* in terms which have limited relevance to the play, I cannot fall into the same trap by saying that the star Agamemnon points at definitely *is* Sirius in some authoritative sense beyond the play. However, the ominous associations, both physical and mythological, of the Dog-star are entirely in keeping with the both the feverishness of Agamemnon's behaviour and the dramatic situation he faces in deciding whether to sacrifice Iphigenia. Since Housman ignores this despite his enormous knowledge of literature and how it works, in favour of a literalist interpretation of the real knowledge of a real Greek general, I conclude that there is at least some truth in Postgate's criticism of his style of scholarship. There are occasions when the scholar should have listened to the poet.

One of Housman's most direct attacks upon aesthetic criticism in classical scholarship came in his Cambridge Inaugural lecture of 1911:

Literature is so alien from science that the literary temper in himself is a peril against which the scholar must stand on his guard. The aim of science is the discovery of the truth, while the aim of literature is the production of pleasure; and the two aims are not merely distinct but often incompatible, so that large departments of literature are also departments of lying. Not only so, but man is generally more of a pleasure seeker than a truth-seeker, and the literary spirit, if once admitted to communicate with the scientific, will ever tend to encroach upon its domain.<sup>28</sup>

Housman's note on Euripides, though it is only one example, shows that literary concerns are not so easily dismissed from the study of ancient texts, or even from scientific ones. Gillian Beer makes this clear in the context of the writer who had a massive influence on Housman's work and career, as well as those of many others: Charles Darwin:

... the organisation of *The Origin of Species* seems to owe a good deal to the example of one of Darwin's most frequently read authors, Charles Dickens, with its apparently unruly superfluity of material gradually and retrospectively revealing itself as order, its superfecundity of instance serving an argument which can reveal itself only *through* instance and relations.<sup>29</sup>

This complex two-way traffic between nineteenth-century literature and its most influential scientific text does not allow the kind of certainty Housman is trying to establish by making a simple distinction between pleasure and truth. In his note on Euripides he has, to use Beer's terms, emphasised instance while suppressing relations. Nor is he above using artful prose himself in his Cambridge lecture, where he dismisses aesthetic judgements 'by

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<sup>28</sup> Ricks 1988: 305.

<sup>29</sup> Beer 1983: 8.

men who are not themselves men of letters, but merely scholars with a literary taint, on disputed passages written hundreds and thousands of years ago by an alien race amidst an alien culture'.<sup>30</sup> Whilst admitting that this could apply to the present writer, I also note the slyness of 'literary taint' replacing 'literary bent', and the phrase 'hundreds *and* thousands' which calls to mind the phrase 'hundreds *of* thousands', thereby seeming to extend the interval of time between us and the ancient world telescopically. One doesn't have to be a 'man of letters' to be so linguistically crafty, but it helps.

Putting Housman's style of scholarship into its cultural and its scholarly context, one sees that, far from being the linguistic equivalent of a fortress, or a blazon of his passion for truth, it is in fact an ongoing dialogue with other scholars, contemporary and historical. This is implied in Postgate's description of Housman's work as 'logomachy', since if one goes to war there must be an enemy to fight, rather than merely simpletons to chastise and correct. A major part of Housman's logomachy was his determination to keep scholarship and literature completely separate, and, in order to achieve this, he sometimes used what Jebb called 'analogies drawn from studies conversant with different material'.<sup>31</sup> In this case, neither the astronomical knowledge Housman gained for his work on Manilius, nor his idea of what a real ancient Greek general would know, helps very much in the interpretation of Euripides' *Iphigenia in Aulis*. By disengaging from his own knowledge of a wide range of literature from different ages, he deliberately narrows his interpretation in the name of scientific scholarship; creating a good example of what Jebb meant by specialist scholarship which is not 'tempered by aesthetic and literary judgement'.<sup>32</sup> In trying to make sure that between scholarship and creativity there was no interface at all, Housman inadvertently makes a good case for exploring it.

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<sup>30</sup> Ricks 1988: 306-307.

<sup>31</sup> Todd (ed.) 2002: 527.

<sup>32</sup> Todd (ed.) 2002: 527.

## Part One

### Chapter Four

#### Receptions and Influences in Housman's Poetry

One of the purposes of the kind of scholarly prose A. E. Housman writes is to display a particular version of the classical scholar A.E. Housman. He is determined to make clear that he is not an amateur or a gentleman: not an aesthete or a complacent humanist but a conscientious and diligent professional philologist, not to be ignored and to be challenged at one's peril. This was, for him, a mode of career survival (and indeed success); it is a stance also shown, indirectly, in some of his poems; for example in 'Epitaph on an Army of Mercenaries':

These, in the day when heaven was falling,  
The hour when earth's foundations fled,  
Followed their mercenary calling,  
And took their wages, and are dead.

Their shoulders held the sky suspended;  
They stood, and earth's foundations stay;  
What God abandoned, these defended,  
And saved the sum of things for pay.<sup>1</sup>

In this poem, it is not the worthy or the just that save civilisation; they have disappeared along with God. Rather, it is the professional specialist. It is an intensely romantic scene, bearing some resemblance to the 'western' movie genre: the mercenaries holding the world together for no better reason than it fell to them to do it. One can only imagine the extent to which Housman privately cast himself in this heroic role in his scholarship; saving philology, with no faith in God or humanity, because it fell to him to do it, and, of course, because he was rewarded for it.

However, this kind of straightforward connection between Housman's scholarship and his poetry applies, if at all, only to a very small number of his poems. Therefore, in this chapter, I explore the more subtle kinds of connection beneath the surface of his poems, whilst also returning to the implications of these connections for his scholarly persona. I

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<sup>1</sup> *Last Poems*: XXXVII.



also explore the connections between Housman's scholarship and poetry that two prominent literary critics have identified, especially the attitudes of blasphemy and comic reasonableness in the face of the absurd, before putting them into the context of my own interpretation. Finally, I detail the deep influences upon Housman's poetry of his three favourite Roman poets: Lucretius, Horace, and Propertius.

One notable aspect of literary criticism of Housman's poetry is the variety of ways in which critics have attempted to define a peculiar, elusive quality within some of the poems, often those identified as his best poems. This is usually described as a strange quality within the tone of the poems, or of a shift in tone, which disturbs the surface of their romantic despair, lyricism, and ballad-like form. This tone has been variously described as showing 'a divided consciousness, an odd double awareness', as a 'disparity between the detached and casual stance and the ultimate imaginative realisation', as a 'bardic tone of anonymity', offering a 'comfortless consolation' to the reader.<sup>2</sup> The thread running through these accounts is the theme of incompatible or even contradictory ideas being somehow held together in Housman's best poems. In *A.E. Housman: a Reassessment* (2000) John Bayley has written a perceptive essay on this quality in Housman's poems, entitled 'Lewis Carroll in Shropshire', which compares Housman to the character of Alice in Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*. Bayley says it is easy to misunderstand Housman's personality because of his combination of 'definiteness' and evasiveness.<sup>3</sup> Sometimes, in parts of his Leslie Stephen lecture for example, or in the views on religion and society he expresses in his letters, Housman writes like a fin-de-siècle superior aesthete, looking down upon the petty emotions of ordinary people from a great height. At other times, however, particularly in the tone of some of his poems, he comes across as 'the little man of ordinary tastes and practices', a reasonable human being trying his best to take a down-to-earth, pragmatic view of his romantic despair and the indifference of the universe:

Twice a week the winter through  
Here stood I to keep the goal:  
Football then was fighting sorrow  
For the young man's soul.

Now in Maytime to the wicket  
Out I march with bat and pad:  
See the son of grief at cricket  
Trying to be glad.

Try I will; no harm in trying:

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<sup>2</sup> Lindsay 1999: 336, Brashear 1969: 89, Stevenson 1972: 48, Corcoran (ed.) 2007: 60.

<sup>3</sup> Bayley 2000.

Wonder 'tis how little mirth  
Keeps the bones of man from lying  
On the bed of earth.<sup>4</sup>

In presenting this idea that a despairing young man can be saved by playing cricket, this poem, according to Bayley, skirts on the edge of being absurd.<sup>5</sup> What saves it and makes it moving is the poem's awareness of the absurdity of the situation, shown in the observation of 'how little mirth' is required to distract the poet, whose nature is revealed as being small and contingent, but interestingly self-aware, in a profound and death-struck world. The attitude is one of 'comic reasonableness', an attitude shown, for Bayley, in some of Housman's best poems, where the tragic absurdity of existence is contended by the attempt to face it reasonably, often sardonically.<sup>6</sup> Bayley also sees this same attitude of 'comic reasonableness' in Housman the scholar's style of writing, when he is judging textual emendations.<sup>7</sup> He explains this by describing Housman, in both his poems and his scholarship, as a sardonic persona inhabiting a romantic world, 'romantic' here meaning the extremely speculative and unfounded textual emendations of his peers as well as the style of his poetry. Like Alice in Wonderland, Housman is reasonable and increasingly impatient with the absurdity surrounding him. Bayley says that Housman 'never does, or seems to be, anything that is quite expected', though this is also combined with his 'ordinariness' and 'lack of oddity'; a combination of qualities he shares with Alice herself.<sup>8</sup> His often-remarked-on sense of superiority is deeply involved with his view of himself as a man uniquely gifted with good sense and lack of pretension. This was no doubt a stance he learnt early in life, since in the John Bull world of Midlands Tory patriotism there would be something suspect, something perhaps specifically feminine, about being a poet at all. Hence, 'Terence', the persona of most of the poems, can't be one of the 'lads', yet this is exactly what he longs to be. He both values his perspective as an outsider while simultaneously longing to be an insider.

Bayley's interpretation is perhaps not as surprising as it appears, since both Housman's scholarly version of himself and Carroll's Alice are, after all, donnish creations. I question, though, whether Housman's attitude of ordinary reasonableness is predominantly comic. It is true that some of the poems share a matter-of-fact tone about the extremes of emotion they describe, and that it is in the tone of calm comedy identified by Bayley that the

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<sup>4</sup> *A Shropshire Lad* XVII.

<sup>5</sup> Bayley 2000: 160-1.

<sup>6</sup> Bayley 2000: 160-1.

<sup>7</sup> Bayley 2000: 162.

<sup>8</sup> Bayley 2000: 159.

wryness, especially towards romanticism, of these poems is found. Other poems, however, take a tragic view, expressing a hopeless yearning or alienation from life which is not comic at all. *A Shropshire Lad* X, for example, shows a persona alienated from the world, ‘the rusted wheel of things’, by his unrequited love. In XXI the lovers lying on the hill are, at first together, isolated from the world of the loud bells calling people to church, but they agree to join in with that world on their wedding day. When she dies and ‘goes to church alone’ it is as if she has betrayed him by joining in with societal conventions without him. XXVII shows the brutality of the way life goes on heedlessly, forgetting those who have died. In XLIV Housman praises a young soldier who has shot himself to cure his unrequited (and implicitly illicit) love. He declares that the poem is a ‘wreath’ for the young man: no comedy here either in content or in style. In XLVIII Housman takes comfort from the brevity of life, though XLIX gives almost the opposite message; one can live happily so long as one does not think.

In the context of this study, the most significant quality Bayley finds in Housman’s verse is one which subtly undercuts the surface meaning in some of the poems; a sceptical undermining of simple, wholehearted emotions such as patriotism. He discusses the first poem of *A Shropshire Lad*, ‘1887’, in the context of the striking reception of both Housman’s poetry, and of Housman himself, by Frank Harris, Richard Middleton and their friends, when they took Housman out to lunch and made him angry.<sup>9</sup> For Bayley, this sceptical quality is not immediately apparent in the poem: he argues that the first two stanzas could be from a much more straightforwardly patriotic poem about war:

From Clee to heaven the beacon burns,  
The shires have seen it plain,  
From north and south the sign returns  
And beacons burn again.

Look left, look right, the hills are bright,  
The dales are bright between,  
Because 'tis fifty years to-night  
That God has saved the Queen.

But after these lines the tone of the poem changes:

Now, when the flame they watch not towers  
About the soil they trod,  
Lads, we'll remember friends of ours  
Who shared the work with God

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. Chapter Two: pp. 33-35.

To skies that knit their heartstrings right,  
To fields that bred them brave,  
The saviours come not home tonight:  
Themselves they could not save.

The sudden introduction of the viewpoint of the dead, in the negative sense of them not being able to watch the beacons, and the linking of their absence with the presence of the soil they walked on every day, turns this into a very different kind of poem, as does the allusion to Christ from the Gospel of Matthew at the end: 'He saved others, himself he cannot save'.<sup>10</sup> In commemorative verses dead soldiers are conventionally presented in terms of 'sacrifice' and 'glory', but their sacrifice, though often linked with Christ's, is not usually put on equal terms with it so boldly. The idea that they shared God's work in saving the Queen, as well as being technically blasphemous, raises the question of whether God in fact saves anyone. However, though Housman was prepared to raise such questions subtly, he did not go further, at least in the poems published in his lifetime. In distancing himself from his poetry in public, he was also distancing himself from his own subversive tendencies.

In 'Tacit Pledges', the poet Geoffrey Hill traces Housman's dismissive attitude to his own poetry, not to the practical social reasons and personal conflicts identified in this study, but to the influence of the philosopher John Stuart Mill on Victorian attitudes towards poetry and artistic creativity generally.<sup>11</sup> Mill's ideas on culture, according to Hill, had a profound influence on the intellectual temper of Housman's times, relegating poetry to an activity practised by sentimental eccentrics. Mill's famous definition of poetry is that, while eloquence is heard, poetry is overheard:

Poetry and eloquence are both alike the expression or utterance of feeling. But if we may be excused the antithesis, we should say that eloquence is *heard*, poetry is *overheard*. Eloquence supposes an audience; the peculiarity of poetry appears to us to lie in the poet's utter unconsciousness of a listener. Poetry is feeling, confessing itself to itself in moments of solitude, and embodying itself in symbols, which are the nearest possible representations of the feeling in the exact shape in which it exists in the poet's mind.<sup>12</sup>

The implication of this view is that poetry becomes an essentially private dialogue that the poet has with himself, one that is not intended for an external audience, though its readers may still benefit from it emotionally. Geoffrey Hill is definitely not prepared to excuse Mill this antithesis, stating that this marginalisation of the role of the poet, and of the

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<sup>10</sup> Matthew 27: 42.

<sup>11</sup> Hill in Holden and Birch (eds) 2000: 53-75.

<sup>12</sup> Mill 1981: 348-9.

poetic itself, had a highly detrimental effect on Victorian verse, including Housman's poems. It is unlikely, however, that Housman's attitude to his poems came from Mill in any direct sense. His aversion to philosophy is well-known; he regarded it as useless in comparison with his conception of scientific truth. Though we might now see this attitude as a philosophy in itself, he certainly did not. However, as an unconscious assumption embedded into the cultural background of Housman's time, and therefore into his own *habitus*, Hill's interpretation provides perhaps a further reason why Housman distanced himself from his own verses. Readers of his poetry were permitted, in Mill's terms, to 'overhear' him, but they should certainly not confront him in public with their own interpretation of his private creativity, as if he had wished to be 'heard'. The fact that he had chosen to publish his poems is to be disregarded in this undeclared compact between poet and reader. It follows from this that those who tried to communicate with him in any way, appreciative or otherwise, about his poetry, showed themselves, in the very act, to lack an understanding of it.

There is a more direct connection with Mill's essay in Housman's attitude to science and scholarship. Mill's overall argument in *On Genius* is that what he calls the conceptive genius is a higher form of thought and activity than the creative genius. Housman, in his Inaugural Lecture at Cambridge in 1911, appears to agree with this hierarchy of thought:

A desire to create and a pleasure in creating are often alive and ardent in minds whose true business later is to be not creation but criticism; and even if the things created have small intrinsic merit, the intellectual stir and transport which produced them is not therefore vain, and has other results than these.

I could take no better example of what I mean than the early Greek hexameters of Richard Dawes. In themselves they are almost worthless, and they swarm with errors unsparingly exposed and censured by himself. But this, till he was nearly thirty years old, was evidently, in alternation with bell-ringing at St Mary's, his favourite occupation, and its true fruits are to be found elsewhere. It set up a propitious ferment in the mind, by which its faculties were enlivened, invigorated and developed; and these compositions, no monuments to his fame, are yet stepping stones, by which he advanced to his unique achievement and celebrity in his own proper province.<sup>13</sup>

This sheds light on Housman's assumptions about creativity in general: its main purpose is to stimulate the mind, which then goes on to higher things if it has the capacity to do so. That which creativity produces is not important, however, and its cultural status can be equated with bell-ringing in church.

However, these assumptions about creativity and the function and nature of poetry only work on an imaginative level if the 'hearer' or 'over-hearer' of a poem agrees to share

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<sup>13</sup> Ricks (ed.) 1988: 298-299.

them. I have already discussed one social occasion, in Chapter Two, when Housman's readers refused to conform to the expectations he had of them. Geoffrey Hill relates another telling biographical incident, reported by Housman to his brother Laurence in 1929, which, though small and rather comic in itself, is significant in the context of the contemporary reception of Housman's poems. When Housman's publisher, Grant Richards, went bankrupt, the official receiver requested a copy of *A Shropshire Lad* to read, as one of the main commercial assets of the firm. Housman wrote:

He did, or as much as he could; then in his own words, "I put it behind the fire. Filthiest book I ever read: all about rogering girls under hedges".<sup>14</sup>

Hill comments on this particular reader's response:

... one may find, in this extravagant response, if it took place as Housman describes it, a brutish but not incomprehensible denial, a disabling of the book's oblique formalities and mannered remote intimacies.<sup>15</sup>

This particular act of reception in response to Housman's verse, by a man who probably did not read much poetry, and who was merely trying to assess the commercial worth of the book, suggests the extent to which reception is a matter of cultural literacy and context. Housman seems to anticipate such non-literary responses within some of his poems: no doubt he would have been familiar with them from his middle-class, Tory background in Worcestershire, and indeed he includes a cheerfully philistine attitude within the world of *A Shropshire Lad* itself, most directly in LXII. The voice that begins the poem objects to Terence's poems, not on the grounds of 'filth', but because they are depressing and useless:<sup>16</sup>

`Terence, this is stupid stuff:  
You eat your victuals fast enough;  
There's nothing much amiss, 'tis clear,  
To see the rate you drink your beer.  
But oh, good Lord, the verse you make,  
It gives a chap the belly-ache.  
The cow, the old cow, she is dead;  
It sleeps well, the horned head:  
We poor lads, 'tis our turn now  
To hear such tunes as killed the cow.

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<sup>14</sup> Hill 2009: 411.

<sup>15</sup> Hill in Holden and Birch (eds) 2000: 58.

<sup>16</sup> The reference to the 'tunes as killed the cow' alludes to a popular ditty of the time, in which a piper feeds his cow with music as he has nothing else to give it, and the cow starves to death. The persona in the poem, therefore, is saying that Terence's poems are useless, not that they are boring. Cf. McReynolds 1973: Item 39.

Pretty friendship 'tis to rhyme  
Your friends to death before their time  
Moping melancholy mad:  
Come, pipe a tune to dance to, lad.'

Later in the poem Terence defends his verse in terms of the consolation it will give on 'the embittered day':

It will do good to heart and head  
When your soul is in my soul's stead;  
And I will friend you, if I may,  
In the dark and cloudy day.

The voice of Terence, however, does not seem to disapprove of this attitude, even regarding it, despite the comic tone, as a healthy person's response to poetry, until the inevitable 'trouble' comes to the speaker one day. I think this view of himself as different, as not one of the 'lads', together with the attitude outside his poems I have explored, shows that he was always aware of the potential for this kind of response to his poems. His astuteness in downplaying his relationship to his poetry shows a culturally literate awareness of what are today referred to as readerships, and of the risks he was taking in publishing his verse: that not all readers would recognise what Hill calls its 'oblique formalities and mannered remote intimacies'. The official receiver (who made a very unauthorised act of reception on this occasion) assumed that the impulse behind the poems was a heterosexual one, but Housman must have feared that other readers could have a different suspicion.

### **Latin Influences on Housman's Poetry**

Another significant aspect of Housman's poetry is the ways it brings together the themes, viewpoints, attitudes, ideas, and sometimes even specific stanzas and phrases, of his most treasured Roman poets, adapting them to the form of the English Romantic ballad. This is not an influence that Housman emphasised, probably due, at least in part, to the oppressive social and cultural reasons explored in Chapter Two. There is not much trace of Latinity left on the surface of the poems, where any references to ancient texts are made in a breezy, second-hand manner, as stories or legends a non-classicist might have picked up informally. However, a closer examination shows that among the significant influences on Housman's poetry are, firstly, the Latin poet that in E.J. Kenney's opinion Housman should have edited: Lucretius; secondly, the author of the only poem to make Housman

almost break down in tears in public at the end of one of his lectures: Horace; and thirdly, the poet an edition of whom Housman worked on for many years but never published: Propertius. Manilius, the poet whom Housman spent most of his career editing, has a minor influence, though Housman emphasised his own scientific credentials by expressing only contempt for his chosen subject's literary worth. The influence of these three poets exists at several levels in Housman's poetry. At the most detailed level there are close correspondences between individual phrases, lines, or stanzas, in poems which otherwise are not influenced by a Roman antecedent. Occasionally there is a complete poem of Housman's which clearly has a Latin poem as its shadow text, though the most significant connections are in the shared themes and attitudes, the existential assumptions, and the angle of the poet's viewpoint, which Housman has received from his models. These were poets he admired so deeply and knew so well from his scholarship, that it was perhaps inevitable they should influence his own verses.

Housman left a small clue as to the pervasiveness of this Latin influence. He originally intended to call his first collection of poems not *A Shropshire Lad* but *The Poems of Terence Hearsay*.<sup>17</sup> There is a certain logic in this choice for his invented persona's name, since, of the pre-Christian Latin writers, only Terence, Horace, Titus, Cornelius, or possibly Marcus, would have been plausible as English first names at the time, though they all have upper-class associations apart from Terence, which is still familiar in its diminutive form, 'Terry'. It is tempting to look for connections with the original Terence, the playwright of the Roman Republic, in Housman's choice of name for his persona: in the fact that Terence was a freed slave, for example, or in the reputed brevity of his life, but it is not clear that Housman intended any closer connection, unless he was inspired by the famous quotation from Terence's play, *Heauton Timorumenos*, '*Homo sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto*'.<sup>18</sup> Though the title was changed, the name survives in the poem partly addressed to Terence at the end of the book (*A Shropshire Lad* LXII), as well as in VIII.

## Lucretius

In the *Cambridge Companion to Lucretius* (2007), Stuart Gillespie and Donald Mackenzie argue that Housman 'reveals a Lucretian substratum through his poetry':<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Housman 1937: 82-83, Graves 1979: 101-102.

<sup>18</sup> Ter. *Haut.* 77.

<sup>19</sup> Gillespie and Mackenzie 2007: 313.



... [*De Rerum Natura*] counts for Housman's poetry principally in its treatment of death, dissolution and not being. Housman draws on Lucretius in single phrases and images, or else for an overarching vision of human mortality. A phrase may expand, as *per loca pastorum deserta et odia dia* (*DRN* 5.1387) does in the enchanted pastoral and psychopompic procession of 'The Merry Guide'; or it may be deployed with a deliberate offhandedness, as when *summa rerum* jostles with the mythological and the mundane in 'Epitaph on an Army of Mercenaries' ...<sup>20</sup>

The poem 'Epitaph on an Army of Mercenaries' also shows a direct connection between Housman's poetry and the way he viewed his own function as a scholar, as discussed at the beginning of this chapter. One can see in this example a thread of influence from an ancient poem, to Housman's own poetry, to his scholarship on other ancient poets.<sup>21</sup> However, the poem which I would argue shows the most obvious influence of Lucretius, in both its matter and in some of its phraseology, is *A Shropshire Lad* XXXII. There are several sections from *De Rerum Natura* which could have been chosen to illustrate this, but the following is the most direct:

sic anima atque animus per se nil posse videtur.  
 ni mirum quia [per] venas et viscera mixtim,  
 per nervos atque ossa tenentur corpore ab omni  
 nec magnis intervallis primordia possunt  
 libera dissultare, ideo conclusa moventur  
 sensiferos motus, quos extra corpus in auras  
 aëris haut possunt post mortem eiecta moveri  
 propterea quia non simili ratione tenentur;  
 corpus enim atque animans erit aër ...<sup>22</sup>

quid dubitas quin ex imo penitusque coorta  
 emanarit uti fumus diffusa animae vis,  
 atque ideo tanta mutatum putre ruina  
 conciderit corpus, penitus quia mota loco sunt  
 fundamenta foras manant animaeque per artus  
 perque viarum omnis flexus, in corpore qui sunt,  
 atque foramina? multimodis ut noscere possis  
 dispartitam animae naturam exisse per artus  
 et prius esse sibi distractam corpore in ipso,  
 quam prolapsa foras enaret in aëris auras.<sup>23</sup>

From far, from eve and morning  
 And yon twelve-winded sky,  
 The stuff of life to knit me  
 Blew hither: here am I.

Now— for a breath I tarry

<sup>20</sup> Gillespie and Mackenzie 2007: 313.

<sup>21</sup> Womack 2000: 76 also summarises the influence of Lucretius on Housman's poems: 'Lucretius' Epicurean ontology profoundly influenced Housman's poetry, particularly in the poet's 1896 volume, *A Shropshire Lad*, while at the same time impinging upon Housman's own interest in the means of human existence and the *topos* of atomic theory – Lucretian concepts that fathered the notion of 'the stuff of life' so prevalent in Housman's poetry.'

<sup>22</sup> *Lucr.* 3.565-73.

<sup>23</sup> *Lucr.* 3.582-91.

Nor yet disperse apart—  
Take my hand quick and tell me,  
What have you in your heart.

Speak now, and I will answer;  
How shall I help you, say;  
Ere to the wind's twelve quarters  
I take my endless way.

The telling phrases are 'blew hither' and 'Nor yet disperse apart', but it is not only in its use of a specifically atomistic view of the body's dispersal, and the soul's, at death that marks this poem as Lucretian. The quality that, famously, distinguishes *De Rerum Natura* from the Epicurean materialism it propounds is the poetic inspiration and source of beauty that Lucretius finds in this, potentially bleak, view of nature and human existence. Housman also finds a romantic poignancy in the scientific facts here, and there is no dwelling on bleakness or despair in this poem at least. Rather he focuses on what he *is* able to do for his friend in the brief time he is here.

As with Lucretius, this sense of poignancy within nature offers great consolation, though it never, in either poet, is intensified into a trans-mundane experience, as it would probably be if it were written by Keats or Wordsworth. This limit on the power of beauty, to console but not to transcend, is expressed wryly by Housman in *Last Poems XL*:

Possess, as I possessed a season,  
The countries I resign,  
Where over elmy plains the highway  
Would mount the hills and shine,  
And full of shade the pillared forest  
Would murmur and be mine.

For nature, heartless, witless nature,  
Will neither care nor know  
What stranger's feet may find the meadow  
And trespass there and go,  
Nor ask amid the dews of morning  
If they are mine or no.

There are echoes of Lucretius' atomism elsewhere in Housman's *Last Poems* (1922).<sup>24</sup> The first poem after the introductory verse, 'The West', has the line 'When you and I are

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<sup>24</sup> As well as the direct influence from Lucretius, Housman's poetry was probably also influenced indirectly through his reading of contemporary and near-contemporary poetry, such as Tennyson's *Lucretius* (1868) and especially Matthew Arnold's *Empedocles on Etna* (1852), which contains many elements from Lucretius, and which Housman knew by heart. Cf. Mackenzie 2007: 160. More broadly, Housman's reception is part of a burgeoning of poetic interest in Lucretius in the nineteenth century, cf. Gillespie 2011: 150-162.

spilt on air'. In XIX the poet speaks of joining the dead who are knocking on his door in a winter storm: 'I will arise and follow along the rainy wind'. XX speaks of a dead man who 'wears the turning globe'. The Lucretian idea of death allows Housman to make being dead a physically active, even dramatic state, which can be rendered in poetic images of storms, travel to far-flung places like 'Africk and Ind', of becoming one with the whole of the earth, at the same time as being, mentally and emotionally, mere oblivion.<sup>25</sup>

## Horace

From Horace's verse I find only two direct phrase-for-phrase borrowings by Housman, though the first involves one of his most famous poems:

Vides ut alta stet nive candidum  
Soracte nec iam sustineant onus  
silvae laborantes geluque  
flumina constiterint acuto?<sup>26</sup>

On Wenlock Edge the wood's in trouble,  
His forest fleece the Wreckin heaves;  
The gale, it plies the saplings double,  
And thick on Severn snow the leaves.<sup>27</sup>

Obviously the weather in the two verses is different, though in Housman's poem, apart from the labouring woods there is also a river, and, in what seems to be a sly reference to Horace, the verb for the leaves falling on the River Severn is 'snow'. Given this parallel, perhaps it is relevant to wonder whether, when Housman closes the poem with the words, 'Now the Roman and his trouble | Are ashes under Uricon', he was only thinking of a Roman soldier staring at the same hill long ago, or if he also had Horace himself in mind. In David West's 1997 translation of Horace, he invokes recursively Housman's use of Horace's ode in his own version:

You see Soracte standing white and deep  
with snow, the woods in trouble, hardly able  
to carry their burden, and the rivers  
halted by sharp ice.<sup>28</sup>

The other phrase which is too close for coincidence is from Horace, *Odes* 2.17:

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<sup>25</sup> *Last Poems* XIX.

<sup>26</sup> Horace *Odes* 1.9.

<sup>27</sup> *A Shropshire Lad* XXXI.

<sup>28</sup> West 1997: 33.

a, te meae si partem animae rapit  
maturior vis, quid moror altera,  
nec carus aequae nec superstes  
integer?

He would not stay for me, and who can wonder?  
He would not stay for me to stand and gaze.  
I shook his hand, and tore my heart in sunder,  
And went with half my life about my ways.<sup>29</sup>

Apart from these details, there is also in Horace the attitude of reasonableness in an unwieldy world which Bayley identified in Housman's poems. This is a recurring attitude in Horace; in *Odes* 1.6 for example, when he declares himself not suited to writing poems of large-scale triumphs and praise of great warriors. Instead, he sings of drinking parties and lovers' fights in his own free and cheerful fashion, or in 2.1 where he laments the horrors of war and urges his muse to stay away from them. If Housman took this attitude from Horace, then it should also be noted that, according to Hardie and Moore's introduction to *Literary Careers: Classical Models and their Reception* (2010), Horace was partly using it to position his writing career at a distance from the triumphal progress, the literary *cursus honorum*, of Virgil:

Horace is the most autobiographical of the Latin poets, allowing us to see (a carefully manicured version of) the external and internal pressures to which his writing responded at various junctures in his life. Great patrons, Maecenas and Caesar, are both empowering and constraining.

... Equally important, so Horace tells us, as a determinant of literary choice is an inner desire for freedom that makes him kick against the demands of patrons, politics, and the literary marketplace, a drive for independence that finds most sustained expression in *Epistles* 1.<sup>30</sup>

Like Horace, Housman also had a drive to distance himself from the conventions of the poetic career; an intention shown clearly in his preface to his collection *Last Poems* (1922), which is terse and conspicuously unpoetic:

I publish these poems, few though they are, because it is not likely that I shall ever be impelled to write much more. I can no longer expect to be revisited by the continuous excitement under which in the early months of 1895 I wrote the greater part of my first book, nor indeed could I well sustain it if it came; and it is best that what I have written should be printed while I am here to see it through

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<sup>29</sup> Additional Poems VII in Housman 1939. This poem is used to great effect in Tom Stoppard's play about Housman, *The Invention of Love* (1997), where it is spoken by the younger Housman after he tells Moses Jackson of the real nature of his feelings for him, with the spotlight rising on the older Housman on the last line, 'And went with half my life about my ways', cf. Stoppard 1997: 78.

<sup>29</sup> Hardie and Moore (eds) 2010: 10.

<sup>30</sup> Housman 1922: 5.

This is the entire preface, and it is hard to imagine Tennyson or Wordsworth writing such an off-hand piece to front their own work. Housman is positioning himself against such public literary figures through his writing, just as Hardie and Moore show that Horace positioned himself against Virgil. In this case, there is no *cursus honorum* involved, rather the question of whether Housman wants to be seen publicly as a poet at all, or as a remote scholar who happens to have written some verses and now needs to see that they are properly edited; editing texts being his true profession.

Housman also shares Horace's emphasis on the pleasures and consolations of drinking alcohol, for example in *Odes* 1.7, 1.18, 1.37, 1.38, 2.3, etc., though Housman changes the wine to beer since he is, on the surface, writing in a different drinking tradition:

Say, for what were hop-yards meant,  
Or why was Burton built on Trent?  
Oh many a peer of England brews  
Livelier liquor than the Muse,  
And malt does more than Milton can  
To justify God's ways to man.  
Ale, man, ale's the stuff to drink  
For fellows whom it hurts to think:<sup>32</sup>

Other qualities Housman shares with Horace include the combination of images of nature and thoughts of death, a tone of existential resignation, and the device of allowing voices from the dead to speak within a poem, for example *Odes* 1:28 and *A Shropshire Lad* XXVII.

Housman's lectures were, notoriously, highly technical and sarcastically critical in style, but on the single reported occasion when he told his audience at the end of the lecture that he would like to consider the text purely as poetry for a few moments, then read part of his own translation of it to them, and had difficulty controlling himself, it was Horace's *Diffugere nives* (4.7) which had this effect on him. Before he fled from the room, he declared this poem to be, in his opinion, the most beautiful in all of ancient literature. His own translation was published posthumously by his brother Lawrence in the *Collected Poems* of 1939, and it is easy to see why this ode, in particular, had an influence on Housman. It opens with an evocation of the arrival of spring, but links the changing seasons with mortality, as Housman's poems often do. The phrase *pulvis et umbra sumus*

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<sup>32</sup> *A Shropshire Lad* LXII.

at the end of the fourth stanza summarizes the viewpoint of much of Housman's poetry, and the last two stanzas directly recall one of Housman's poems, quoted here after Housman's translation of these lines:

cum semel occideris et de te, splendida, Minos  
fecerit arbitria,  
non, Torquate, genus, non te facundia, non te  
restituēt pietas;  
  
infernīs neque enim tenebris Diana pudicum  
liberat Hippolytum  
nec Lethaea valet Theseus abrumpere caro  
vincula Pirithoo.<sup>33</sup>

When thou descendest once the shades among,  
The stern assize and equal judgment o'er,  
Not thy long lineage nor thy golden tongue,  
No, nor thy righteousness, shall friend thee more.

Night holds Hippolytus the pure of stain,  
Diana steads him nothing, he must stay;  
And Theseus leaves Pirithoüs in the chain  
The love of comrades cannot take away.<sup>34</sup>

Crossing alone the nighted ferry  
With the one coin for fee,  
Whom, on the wharf of Lethe waiting,  
Count you to find? Not me.

The brisk fond lackey to fetch and carry,  
The true, sick-hearted slave,  
Expect him not in the just city  
And free land of the grave.<sup>35</sup>

This poem, like his translation of *Diffugere nives*, was not published in Housman's lifetime, suggesting that he regarded them both as, in some sense, too personal to make public. With the poem it is easy to see why he felt this, if the poem is addressed to Jackson, but less so with the translation, unless, as I suggest, he was wary of being seen to be too emotionally involved with Latin poetry. Moreover, Housman would have wanted to avoid, while he lived, the biographical interpretation made possible by reading the poem with the translation. If the grave is a 'free land', this implies that Housman (if he is assumed to be speaking as himself) would not be waiting for Moses Jackson by the River Lethe, not because he is in chains like Pirithous, but because death has freed him from his love. It does not amount to a complaint about his own Theseus, but it does look forward to

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<sup>33</sup> Horace 4: 7.

<sup>34</sup> *More Poems* V.

<sup>35</sup> *More Poems* XXIII.

being free from his emotional bond with him. As with my second subject, the classical scholar and poet Anne Carson, translation can be on occasion a highly personal form of writing.

## Propertius

Turning to Propertius' influence on Housman's poems brings some of his private and public tensions into focus. In both poets love and fate are closely linked, but where Propertius speaks of owing his life to a cruel star (1.6), Housman tends to generalise the problem to life itself being flawed, though he does also write in the voices of poetic personae who speak in a similar way to Propertius:

For so the game is ended  
That should not have begun.  
My father and my mother  
They had a likely son,  
And I have none.<sup>36</sup>

However, one important difference is that, though both are heart-sick and helpless, Propertius' erotic enslavement to Cynthia is presented as a drama of the vicissitudes of her love and cruelty, with victories and defeats, pleasure and pain, whereas in Housman the lover's struggle is already lost. It is also well hidden, for obvious social and legal reasons, behind euphemisms like 'friend' and 'lad'.

S.J. Heyworth, in his chapter 'Housman and Propertius' in *A.E. Housman: Classical Scholar* (2009), begins by finding very little connection between Housman's poetry and Propertius, writing that 'one very striking aspect of Housman's dealings with Propertius is how little effect they seem to have had on his poetry'.<sup>37</sup> However, he then undermines this by identifying several links between the two:

Of course, the two poets share major themes: in particular love and death. Ghosts speak in Propertius 1.21, 4.7, 4.11; and in *A Shropshire Lad* XXI, XXVII, XLII. But it is perhaps willingness to make poetry of the physical effects of death that is the most important shared characteristic: thus Housman emphasises the skeleton in *A Shropshire Lad* XLIII 'The Immortal Part' as Propertius in (e.g.) 4.8.94 *mixtis ossibus ossa teram*, and thus he ends XXIV (5-12):

Send me now and I shall go;  
Call me, I shall hear your call;  
Use me ere they lay me low  
Where a man's no use at all;

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<sup>36</sup> *Last Poems* XIV.

<sup>37</sup> Heyworth 2009: 23.

Ere the wholesome flesh decay  
And the willing nerve be numb,  
And the lips lack breath to say,  
'No, my lad, I cannot come.'

apparently in imitation of Prop. 2.13, which envisages the poet's funeral and then ends as follows (51-2):

sed frustra mutos reuocabis, Cynthia, manes:  
nam mea quid poterunt ossa minuta loqui?<sup>38</sup>

The speaking ghost Heyworth cites in Prop. 1.21 is a dead soldier on an Etruscan battlefield, whereas Housman's speaking dead are lads and lovers rather than soldiers, though a considerable number of his poems are addressed to dead soldiers buried far away.

Heyworth also wonders whether Prop. 3.4 had an influence on '1887' in that 'both combine celebration of an empire and its sovereign with awareness at home, in peace, of lives lost', and in its juxtaposition of foreign and familiar rivers.<sup>39</sup> He concludes, however, that these connections amount to only 'a small haul':

Housman's language is more metaphorical; ... Moreover, their attitudes towards love are very different: Propertius speaks nearly always in his own voice and concentrates from his first word on Cynthia. He cannot travel away from her; their love should last beyond the grave. Housman, on the other hand is a poet of separation, whether through death or difference, and he varies his voice persistently: any sense of identification between poet and the 'I' is as fleeting as love and life themselves (he is not of course, a Shropshire Lad). Love is an emotion the poet knows, but he uses his knowledge for general reflection rather than to reveal his pain. The tone is thus far more like the experienced Horace of the *Odes* than an elegist.<sup>40</sup>

It is true that Horace has a greater influence on Housman's verse than Propertius, but the idea that Housman does not use his poetry to reveal pain is easily refuted, even by the most cursory reading of his poems. In fact one could argue that, since permanent separation is one of his deepest themes, there is actually *more* pain in Housman than in Propertius' erotic battles with Cynthia, where there is often the thrill of the chase and a chance of success. Housman did not come from Shropshire, but in his poems Shropshire is his Cynthia, his 'land of lost content'.<sup>41</sup>

As for Housman not speaking 'in his own voice', there were important social, cultural, and professional reasons why Housman could not be more direct, but equally, Heyworth seems to have a rather simplistic idea of what it means for a poet to speak in his own voice. Oliver Lyne makes this point succinctly in his introduction to Guy Lee's translation of

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<sup>38</sup> Heyworth 2009: 24.

<sup>39</sup> *A Shropshire Lad* I.

<sup>40</sup> Heyworth 2009: 25.

<sup>41</sup> *A Shropshire Lad* XL.



Propertius:

I do not doubt that a historical Propertian Cynthia existed. But Propertius would have been a poor servant of fashion if he had not felt himself bound to love her at least as much and as agonizingly as Catullus loved Lesbia in his epoch-making poems – just as he would have been a poor poet if he had not had an eye on presenting his love affair in a way that did not in some way cap and supercede the Catullan collection. Historically founded, ‘Cynthia’ must inevitably be an embellished literary construct too ... We will never disentangle what is historical reality and what is embellishment in ‘Cynthia’ – any more than we will disentangle reality from embellishment in the ‘I’- construct ‘Propertius’ who figures in Propertius’ poems.<sup>42</sup>

In the light of this, Heyworth’s claim that Propertius speaks in his own voice while Housman does not is too simplistic, since it begs questions about the nature of literary artifice and the ways in which it can play complex games with the relationship between poet and persona. One example of such artifice in Propertius connects directly to the attitude of ‘comic reasonableness’ which Bayley identified in Housman’s poems. In 1:16, Propertius speaks through the voice of a personified house-door, which comments on the sexual intrigues of its owner:

nec possum infamis dominae defendere noctes,  
nobilis obscenis tradita carminibus;  
(nec tamen illa suae revocatur parcere famae,  
turpior et saeculi vivere luxuria.)  
has inter gravibus cogor deflere querelis,  
supplicis a longis tristior excubiis.  
ille meos numquam patitur requiescere postis,  
arguta referens carmina blanditia:<sup>43</sup>

The contrast between the reasonableness of the door and the madness of the lovers who go (or don’t go) through it recalls Bayley’s characterisation of Housman as Alice in Wonderland.

Despite the fact that Housman spent much of his career editing Manilius, Manilius’ verses have little influence on Housman’s poetry, though there is in some passages of Manilius a similarity in attitude to Housman’s poetry:

Vain Man forbear, of Cares, unload thy Mind,  
Forget thy Hopes, and give thy Fear to Wind;  
For *Fate* rules all, its stubborn law must sway  
The lower world, and *Man* confine'd obey.  
As we are Born we Dye, our Lots are cast,  
And our first hour disposeth of our last.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Lee 1994: xvii.

<sup>43</sup> Prop. 1.16: 9-16.

<sup>44</sup> Creech 1697: 120.

The troubles of our proud and angry dust  
Are from eternity, and shall not fail.  
Bear them we can, and if we can we must.  
Shoulder the sky, my lad, and drink your ale.<sup>45</sup>

The connections explored in this chapter show that Horace, Lucretius, and Propertius had a significant influence on Housman's poetry in several ways. It should also be acknowledged, though, there were many other literary influences upon it; especially the nineteenth century German lyrical poet, Heinrich Heine (who was himself a Hellenist), and of Edward Fitzgerald's translation of the *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* (first published in 1859).<sup>46</sup> The full list of greater and lesser influences and references in Housman's poems would have to include Shakespeare, Ecclesiastes, the Psalms, Matthew Arnold, Milton, Christina Rossetti, Robert Louis Stevenson, Tennyson, Thomas Moore, Goldsmith, Walter Scott, Blake, Pope, Gray, Browning, Wordsworth, Byron, W. H. Davies, Robert Bridges and Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and the English ballad tradition going back at least as far as the late medieval period. Just as his style of scholarship was not as proud and independent as his legend would have it, but also a dialogue with other scholars, so his poetry also positions itself in a fruitful dialogue with many other poets, including the Roman poets he deeply admired.

In his introduction to the *Collected Poems and Selected Prose* (1988), Christopher Ricks argues that the 'blasphemy of the poems is their central energy'.<sup>47</sup> He identifies a sexual and a religious 'turning aside' from orthodoxy: 'The poems are steeped in the Bible, and a bitter drench it is'. On occasion, he argues, the biblical allusion is a clear and direct challenge to scripture, for example:

As for him that wanteth understanding, she saith to him, stolen waters are sweet, and bread eaten in secret is pleasant. But he knoweth not that the dead are there; and that her guests are in the depths of hell.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> *Last Poems* IX.

<sup>46</sup> The name of W.H. Mallock (1849-1923), writer and economist, comes up in two apparently unrelated contexts in connection with Housman, though it would be difficult to assess what influence he had in either case. In 1887 Mallock published a book on Lucretius which included some verses from *De Rerum Natura* translated into English verse in *ottava rima* form. Later he published *Lucretius on Life and Death* (1900) in which Lucretius was rendered in the metre of Fitzgerald's *Omar Khayyam*, and we know Fitzgerald did influence Housman's poetry, for example, in *A Shropshire Lad* IV. It is not known whether Housman read either of Mallock's Lucretius books (and the second is too late to have influenced *A Shropshire Lad* which was published in 1896), but he certainly did read Mallock's *Is Life Worth Living?* (1879) when he was still an undergraduate: a defence of Roman Catholicism which Naiditch thinks may have contributed to a crisis of faith around the time of his failure in Greats, cf. Naiditch 1995: 11-13.

<sup>47</sup> Ricks (ed.) 1988: 10.

<sup>48</sup> Proverbs 9: 16-18

Ho, everyone that thirsteth  
And hath the price to give,  
Come to the stolen waters,  
Drink and your soul shall live.<sup>49</sup>

Ricks also finds this blasphemy in Housman's scholarship:

Christ says of himself, 'a greater than Solomon is here'; Housman wrests it to a matter of self-deluding scholarly pre-eminence: 'a greater than Lachmann is here'.<sup>50</sup>

Yet alongside such blasphemy (and arrogance) Ricks also finds 'angry humility' and comedy in Housman's scholarly prose, both these qualities serving his passion for truth. According to Ricks, the passion expresses itself, both in the poetry and the scholarship, as an iconoclastic energy devoted to exposing the 'endlessly factitious, inaccurate and self-deceiving'.<sup>51</sup> He concludes: 'Housman, in poetry and prose, writes as a paying guest in the depths of hell'.<sup>52</sup>

When Ricks says that the sarcasm, the anger, and the blasphemy are there to serve Housman's passion for truth, and when Bayley portrays him as rightly impatient with the absurdity of his peers, they are essentially getting the message; receiving the translation of himself that Housman wanted to disseminate. They have taken Housman's style as the blazon of his war on error, as he intended. However, as with his note on Eur. *I.A.* 6-7 in the previous chapter, there is no inevitable correlation between Housman's fierce scholarly style and his well-known passion for truth. Bayley and Ricks, however, because they deeply admire his poems, see a stoic sincerity there which extends to his scholarly provocations, and which leads them (and most of us, if we are honest) to enjoy his witty, scathing, biblical insults:

Everyone can figure to himself the mild inward glow of pleasure and pride which the author of this unlucky article felt while he was writing it; and the peace of mind with which he said to himself, when he went to bed that night, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant." This is the felicity of the house of bondage, and of the soul which is so fast in prison that it cannot get forth; which commands no outlook upon the past or the future, but believes that the fashion of the present, unlike all fashions heretofore, will endure perpetually, and that its own flimsy tabernacle of second-hand opinions is a habitation for everlasting. And not content with believing these improbable things it despises those who do not believe them, and displays to the world that stiff and self-righteous arrogance of the unthinking man which ages ago provoked this sentence from Solomon: "the sluggard is wiser in his own conceit than seven men that can render a reason."<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> *More Poems* XXII.

<sup>50</sup> Ricks (ed.) 1988: 12.

<sup>51</sup> Ricks (ed.) 1988: 14.

<sup>52</sup> Ricks (ed.) 1988: 18.

<sup>53</sup> Ricks (ed.) 1988: 311-312.

In these chapters I have attempted to show that such invective is not simply the righteous indignation of an austere classical scholar with a passion for accuracy. There were other reasons, emerging from Housman's personal, social, cultural, and institutional circumstances which drove him to write like this. In short, he would probably never have succeeded in establishing himself as a major classical scholar had he not developed this unique style of scholarly prose. This particular example of his ire is from his Cambridge Inaugural Lecture, and is directed at the *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae*. In his published writings there are many criticisms of the *TLL*, for various reasons of error and omission, in many of which Housman employs his familiar scorn; bristling and mocking where he could have merely pointed.<sup>54</sup> (He was especially vicious about the *TLL*'s first General Editor, Friedrich Vollmer.)<sup>55</sup> Yet the *TLL* was also a publication he used extensively, and an institution he supported warmly and sincerely and assisted generously over many years. The gap between Housman's attitudes and his behaviour in this and in the other examples explored in these chapters, which is too consistent to be explained simply as hypocrisy or eccentricity, (it is a *habitus* rather than a habit), shows the extent to which he shaped his own version of himself as an austere and forbidding figure in order to advance his career and protect himself, professionally and personally. This shaping of his career also necessitated distancing himself from his poetry, or even suppressing it, because though he knew its value (however dismissive he was) its public reception was also a risk to his status. The poem that Ricks quotes from does indeed demonstrate Housman's blasphemy; but it was also one he never dared to publish in his lifetime.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Keeline 2010: 64-66.

<sup>55</sup> But see Naiditch 1988: 29-41.

<sup>56</sup> Cf. Tom Stoppard's play, *The Invention of Love* (1997), in which the older version of Housman, 'AEH', who dreams he has died and is waiting on the banks of Lethe, only quotes his own poems or translations which were unpublished in his lifetime. Stoppard 1997: 40, 82, 86.

## Part Two

### Chapter Five

#### Anne Carson: Introduction and Biography

Part Two of this study is an exploration of Anne Carson's classical scholarship and poetry, examining the connections between her different forms of writing, read within their social and cultural context. I show how well her writing fits into the contemporary North American literary scene, and how some of the qualities of her work helped her to become one of its, currently, most consecrated artists. I also show the uniqueness of some aspects of her work, which are more difficult to connect with her cultural field, where extremes jar together; the erotic and metaphysical patterns and the deliberate breaking of such patterns, and her conscious ambivalence over theoretical influences, autobiography, and literary form. I also explore the way in which the idea of the fragmentary, as well as being a subject within her work, is also used to express her relationship with her material, and sometimes even her relationship with herself.

After a brief biography of Carson, I focus upon the social and cultural background to her career as a classical scholar and poet. I find some similarities between Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of French Academic art in the early nineteenth century and the system of literary patronage in the USA today, with its creative writing programs, writers-in-residence and networks of awards and prizes.<sup>57</sup> I use Bourdieu's analysis as a conceptual tool to examine the cultural and institutional practices of the American poetry scene, both within and outside the academy. I also attempt to describe the relationship between the academy and the poetry scene through the pattern of awards given to its most successful poets. Some reference is also made to the institutional relationships of relevant contemporary poets such as Derek Walcott and other MacArthur and Guggenheim Fellows.

It is important to make clear, however, that these social and cultural concerns do not involve a relegation of the category of the literary, which is another area of connection this chapter investigates. In fact, specifically literary critical considerations are shown to be important at many points, and my exploration is guided by the renewed importance of close reading in the field of career criticism. After exploring the cultural field Anne Carson

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<sup>57</sup> Bourdieu 1993: 238-53.

inhabits, I go on, with this in mind, to show the connections between classical scholarship and creativity in her published works. The main points of discussion here are the striking erotic mythos which emerges from Carson's early study of Greek lyric, *Eros the Bittersweet* (1986), and which informs and often shapes much of her subsequent poetry. I also trace the main changes in the development of this influence as her creative work proceeds, in which self-knowledge through *eros* jars against a starker vision of the impossibility of self-knowledge. And this bleak vision, in its turn, competes with a developing theme of religious self-abandonment and a mystical union with the divine through the 'decreation' of the subject.<sup>58</sup>

At the same time I also show the ways in which, despite this deep interest in mystical self-abandonment, Carson repeatedly draws attention to her own presence in her interpretations of ancient Greek lyric, by the style in which she translates them. Increasingly, it is as if she is attempting to counterbalance her own centrality within her texts by a claim to be moving beyond into a larger, non-personal landscape where she is somehow no longer present.

I explore Carson's more formal, full-length translations of Greek drama, showing how she dramatises the translator's dilemma over whether to bring the reader to the text or the text to the reader, and how these techniques work, despite her declared intentions, to draw attention to Carson's presence in the translated text; indeed, that her translation work is sometimes her most personal writing. After this, I examine her recent books, *Nox* (2009) and *Antigonick* (2012), showing how Carson is increasingly focusing purely on forms of presentation and juxtaposition in her work, in order to construct specific creative tensions, and leaving the room for interpretation by the reader as wide as possible.

By combining knowledge of Carson's public persona with an exploration of her writing, I show that, as with Housman, her reclusiveness and independence are something of a construct, and that, although her writing and her personality have been described as eccentric, both have been used to help her make successful manoeuvres within the possibilities of her social, cultural and literary contexts. I conclude that, for both Housman and Carson, the construction of a reputation for somewhat isolated independence of mind has been one of their most important social positionings in terms of their careers, and in the relationship between their classical scholarship and creativity.

One of Carson's poems in her book *Decreation* (2005) contains the words, 'I do not want

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<sup>58</sup> Carson 2005: 155-184.

to be a person | I want to be unbearable'.<sup>59</sup> This cryptic assertion (especially the final 'unbearable') is partly illuminated by related ideas Carson has expressed in interviews, and the idea of the absent 'unbearable' poet is a prominent theme in some of her more recent work. Carson's desire to get away from the personal, and the authorial decisions and interpretations she makes in the light of it, are among the significant themes explored in subsequent chapters. Connected with this wish, and with her interest in the fragmentary text, are Carson's notoriously brief profiles on her book jackets, which said until recently, 'Anne Carson lives in Canada'. (One of her recent publications has expanded this to 'Anne Carson was born in Canada and teaches ancient Greek for a living'.)<sup>60</sup> As these chapters will show, this description of herself is somewhat misleading, since she does much more, professionally and creatively, than teach ancient Greek. However, in a small way, this description shows Carson engineering her own public image. As I demonstrate in the following chapters, this crafting of her public image is something she does on a much larger level throughout her work, including when she tells us that she does not want to be a person. It would be hard to imagine, for example, that someone who really did not want to be a person would translate ancient texts in such a way as to draw the maximum possible attention to their own presence within the text. Her striking presence within her translations is one manifestation of the centrality she assumes in her work, including in her classical scholarship, where her special position and function as a poet is the basis of her interpretation of Greek lyric. The success of this stance shows, more broadly, the recent radical changes in the study of classics and especially in the boundaries of scholarly discourse, and allows us to take their temperature. These changes include, for a variety of social, cultural, and institutional reasons which I explore, the official re-admittance of aesthetic considerations into classics, and the movement from homogeneity to heterogeneity (in Bourdieu's terms) in academic institutions more generally. It is these broad movements, in turn, which make possible Carson's grand assertion of personality in response to the social and cultural necessities of her career and context. Like Housman, as I explore in the final chapter, they allow her to achieve a large cultural presence by creating a received version of herself as an independent, reclusive figure; a version which acts as the stamp of her seriousness, as well as protecting her from criticism, and creating an illusion of inevitability about her success. Putting her into the social and cultural context which has underwritten her success, however, shows (as with Housman) that she is neither

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<sup>59</sup> Carson 2005: 72.

<sup>60</sup> Carson 2012.

as independent or as reclusive as she seems.

Anne Carson, unlike Housman, was not born into a family which already had a leaning towards classicism and poetry. Born in 1950 in Toronto, Carson's childhood was quite an itinerant one, as her father was a bank manager and it was the bank's policy to move their managers every three years. So Carson went to a new school every time they moved, which she believes 'added to her survival skills', but also made her reluctant to try to make new friends, implying a certain amount of social isolation.<sup>61</sup> She started learning Greek at high school when her Latin teacher, Alice Cowan (to whom Carson's 2009 translation, *An Oresteia*, is dedicated) agreed to teach her in the lunch hour, and they read Sappho together.<sup>62</sup>

While at high school, Carson and her friends became fascinated with Oscar Wilde, learning his aphorisms, 'constructing conversations in the lunch-room', dressing and acting as if they were Wilde and his circle. Carson credits this with giving her 'an education in aesthetic sensibility' and 'a kind of irony towards myself which was useful in later life – an ongoing carapace of irony that I think lots of gay men develop in order to get through their social and personal lives, and which I found useful for myself, too'.<sup>63</sup> This role-playing was a significant influence upon her later creative writing, especially *Autobiography of Red* (1998).<sup>64</sup> (She still likes to dress like Wilde on occasion: at a recent performance of her work she described herself as wearing her "Oscar Wilde suit".)<sup>65</sup> It is a remarkable connection that, whilst her early persona was partly based on a figure who dealt with being a gay man, in a prohibitive century, by being flamboyant, her later persona is more like Housman in its combination of assertiveness and reclusiveness: another gay man who went to Oxford, but one who found a much more austere way to fight the world.

Her father was also an air-force pilot during the Second World War. They had a strained, uneasy relationship on the evidence of her poems, in which a silent dinner-table scene in a father's presence often recurs. In old age he suffered from dementia, and Carson writes about visiting him in hospital and the emotional effects upon her mother and herself.<sup>66</sup> Carson's mother, a traditional wife and homemaker, is also often found in her poems. She writes about staying with her elderly mother in *Plainwater* (1995), and visiting her in a nursing home in *Decreation* (2006). The mother persona in the poems is often critical of

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<sup>61</sup> Aitken and Carson 2004: 197-198.

<sup>62</sup> Aitken and Carson 2004: 198-99.

<sup>63</sup> Aitken and Carson 2004: 208-9.

<sup>64</sup> As discussed in Chapter Eight: pp.122-126.

<sup>65</sup> Anderson 2013: 20.

<sup>66</sup> Carson 1995: 119-123.



her daughter's lifestyle and views. Carson also had an elder brother called Michael, who became a drug addict and spent his life wandering around Europe. When he died in 2000, Carson had not seen him for twenty-two years. She made a personal document which she called her 'white book' as a way of mourning him. Later this became her publication *Nox* (2009).

Carson enrolled at St. Michael's College at the University of Toronto in 1968, but she left twice, at the end of her first and second years, because she was unhappy with the curriculum, particularly by a required course on Milton.<sup>67</sup> She tried a job, and then a course in graphic arts ("designing cereal boxes," she says) at Toronto's Humber College.<sup>68</sup> Eventually she returned to the University of Toronto where she completed her B.A., her M.A., and subsequently her Ph.D. entitled *Odi et Amo Ergo Sum*, in 1981 (later *Eros the Bittersweet* (1986)). In her first year at Toronto she met Professor Emmett Robbins, whom she describes as 'the most civilized man I have ever known'. Robbins was her teacher and her mentor, and they became friends. Carson was also influenced by a Catholic priest called James Sheridan, who 'taught us Plato's *Apology* by walking up and down and telling us stories about Ireland'.<sup>69</sup> When one considers the various ways in which Carson re-contextualises ancient Greek lyric and drama, often into contexts which are far from obvious, it seems likely that Father Sheridan's way of teaching classics had a profound and long term effect on her work.

In an article for the University of Toronto magazine, Val Ross (a Toronto writer and editor, 1950-2008) gives some historical background to the academic and political *Zeitgeist* of the campus where Carson was an undergraduate:

By the early 1970s, right after the shootings at Kent State University in Ohio and the computer riot at Sir George Williams (now Concordia) in Montreal, studying Latin and Greek was almost counter-revolutionary. Like Carson's fictional Geryon, the protagonist of her first novel, *Autobiography of Red: A Novel in Verse* (Geryon is winged, red-coloured and gay), classicists were freaks. Carson recalls how Leonard Woodbury, her thesis adviser, polarized his classes merely by wearing a waistcoat and tie – a red flag before the bulls of campus radicalism.<sup>70</sup>

Carson has not commented directly on how, if at all, this radical and angry atmosphere influenced her (her unwillingness to study Milton may mean she was with the radicals

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<sup>67</sup> Ian Rae, 'Anne Carson', *The Literary Encyclopedia*, 27 December 2001  
<<http://www.litencyc.com/php/speople.php?rec=true&UID=758>> [accessed 27 May 2013]

<sup>68</sup> Val Ross, 'Classic Carson', *University of Toronto Magazine*, Spring 2001  
<<http://www.magazine.utoronto.ca/feature/about-anne-carson-poetry/>> [accessed on 11 October 2011]

<sup>69</sup> Val Ross, 'Classic Carson', *University of Toronto Magazine*, Spring 2001  
<<http://www.magazine.utoronto.ca/feature/about-anne-carson-poetry/>> [accessed on 11 October 2011]

<sup>70</sup> Val Ross, 'Classic Carson', *University of Toronto Magazine*, Spring 2001  
<<http://www.magazine.utoronto.ca/feature/about-anne-carson-poetry/>> [accessed on 11 October 2011]

culturally, if not politically), though Ross makes an interesting connection with the idea of classicists as freaks by linking it to Geryon in *Autobiography of Red* (1998), Carson's recreation of the monster killed by Heracles. In an interview in the *Paris Review* Carson also speaks of other, more personal, reasons which drew her to identify with Geryon the monster:

I was drawn to the Geryon story because of his monstrosity, although it's something of a cliché to say that we all think we're monsters. But it does have to do with gender, though I don't know what it is about growing up female that makes one think: monster.<sup>71</sup>

Another connection between Carson's Geryon and her nationality has been made by Ian Rae, professor of literature at McGill (Carson herself became a Full Professor at McGill in January 1999). The red island of Erythea where Geryon grows up in *Autobiography of Red* (1998), Rae writes, has the same colour associated with the political status of Montreal, where Carson later lived and taught:

Since Carson wrote the novel in the mid-nineties, the notion of Montreal as Erytheia would have particular resonance, because the electoral maps leading up to 1995 referendum depicted Montreal as an island of federalist red in an ocean of separatist blue.<sup>72</sup>

Though Carson is well-known for the obscurity of some of her writing, it may be the case that *Autobiography of Red* is less obscure precisely because, as well as its complex personal, social, and cultural reconfiguration of Stesichoros' Geryon, it is also an autobiography of Carson herself to some extent, (and Geryon, through his transfiguration, ceases to 'be a person' towards the end of the book).<sup>73</sup>

These autobiographical connections suggest that experiences of difference and isolation made a lasting impression on Carson. They also suggest she has had her share of pain from romantic relationships, if the very unequal passion between Geryon and the careless, dominant Heracles bears any relation to her own life. As well as this, there has also been much speculation that her book *The Beauty of the Husband* (2001), a collection of 29 poems or 'Tangos' as she calls them, describes the break-down of her marriage, though this is difficult to determine as she is so reticent about her private life.

Carson initially saw herself as a visual artist rather than a poet, and now prefers to call herself a 'maker': a word which describes her own broad, genre-free understanding of her own creative role, but also presumably refers, given that she is a classicist, to the Greek

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<sup>71</sup> Aitken and Carson 2004: 212.

<sup>72</sup> Rae 2008: 243.

<sup>73</sup> Hall in Harrison (ed.) 2009: 218-237.

word *ποιητής*. The definitions of *ποιητής* include maker, painter, inventor, law giver, workman, poet, composer, and author of a speech. Carson is clearly interested in defining her work in terms of the largest possible range of creativity, as she makes clear in her own account of the origins of her first book of poems, *Short Talks* (1992), describing it as:

... initially a set of drawings with just titles. Then I expanded the titles a bit and then gradually realised nobody was interested in the drawings, so I just took the titles off and then they were pellets of a lecture.<sup>74</sup>

From drawings to titles to a lecture to poetry: there is perhaps a studied casualness in the way she explains the process as if it were almost an everyday transformation, but she also says she is much happier and more fulfilled when drawing than when she is writing; that writing ‘doesn’t gather up my being the way making an object does’, but that she writes ‘to find out what I think about something’. Her system is to set up three desks with three different kinds of project; perhaps one academic, one literary, and one artistic, and move between them, allowing them to ‘cross-pollinate one another’.<sup>75</sup>

Carson has also been a recipient of many major awards, prizes and honours; the most prestigious are the Lannan Literary Award for Poetry in 1996, the Pushcart Prize in 1997, the Guggenheim Fellowship in 1998, the MacArthur Fellowship in 2000, and the Griffin Trust Poetry Prize in 2001. In 2005, Carson was appointed to the Order of Canada by Adrienne Clarkson, Governor General of Canada. The order was established in 1967 to recognize outstanding achievement and service in various fields of human endeavour and is the country’s highest honour for lifetime achievement.

Most of Carson’s scholarly work, including *Eros the Bittersweet* (1986) and *Economy of the Unlost* (1999), were originally published by Princeton University Press, as well as an essay entitled ‘Putting Her in Her Place: Woman, Dirt, and Desire’ in *Before Sexuality* (1990). Her most significant publishing relationship, however, is with Alfred A. Knopf, who have published six of her books: *Plainwater* (1995), *Autobiography of Red: A Novel in Verse* (1998), *Men in the Off Hours* (2001), *The Beauty of the Husband* (2001), *If Not, Winter: Fragments of Sappho* (2002), and *Decreation: Poetry, Essays, Opera* (2005). Knopf is a diverse publisher with a prestigious list of writers, including 17 Nobel Prize and 47 Pulitzer Prize winners.<sup>76</sup> The house style of Knopf suits Carson since, from its foundation, it has been notable for its distinctive typographies and close attention to visual

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<sup>74</sup> Aitken and Carson 2004: 204.

<sup>75</sup> Aitken and Carson 2004: 205.

<sup>76</sup> David Oshinsky, ‘No thanks, Mr Nabokov’, *New York Times*, 9 September 2007  
<<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/09/09/books/review/Oshinsky-t.html>> [accessed on 11 October 2011]

design. However, it is significant for my focus, in Chapter Six, on the corporatisation of North American literary and academic publishing, to note that Knopf is no longer an independent publisher, but is now Knopf Doubleday, an imprint of the Random House Corporation. Carson has also published *Glass, Irony, and God* (1992), *Nox* (2009), as well as a translation of Sophocles' *Electra* (2001); *Grief Lessons: Four Plays by Euripides* (2006), *An Oresteia* (2009) with Faber and Faber, and, most recently, an illustrated translation of Sophocles' *Antigone* entitled *Antigonick* (2012), with Bloodaxe Books.

The above is a sketch of Carson's life and work, to which the subsequent chapters add colour and body, fleshing out the social and cultural background within which she has established herself, and how this connects with the details of her scholarly and creative work, and with the connections between them. These areas, in combination, represent the size and nature of the interface between her classical scholarship and creativity, an interface characterised by some social and cultural circuits which run very smoothly, and some aesthetic circuits which are disruptive, unpredictable, and often deliberately badly aligned.

## Part Two

### Chapter Six

#### **Instituting Originality: the Social and Cultural Background to the Career of Anne Carson**

This chapter attempts to identify the main characteristics of the social and cultural environment within which Anne Carson has become an important literary figure. It also shows how the interface of scholarship and creativity within this environment is very much an institutional interface, within which academic and literary production constitute a single cultural field in their own right. The most important feature of this cultural field, for the career of Anne Carson, is a hierarchical process of literary patronage, involving major awards and prizes and academic institutions, within which she has been able to shape her career in order to achieve her prominent status as a writer. The cultural presence that Carson has achieved would not have been possible without the increasing institutional and cultural heterogeneity which has brought together aesthetic and academic practice within changed boundaries of discourse.

In terms of its institutional history, this literary and academic cultural field in the USA became fully developed in the last quarter of the twentieth century. I discuss how the rise of ‘superstar’ poets such as Carson has been partly brought about by the extraordinarily successful phenomenon of the creative writing programme in American universities. For example, in *The Program Era: Post War Fiction and the Art of Creative Writing* (2009), Mark McGurl argues that:

... the rise of the creative writing program stands as the most important event in post war American literary history, and that paying attention to the increasingly intimate relation between literary production and the practices of higher education is the key to understanding the originality of post war American literature.<sup>1</sup>

Though McGurl’s book is specifically about the writing of fiction, much of it relates equally well to the production of poetry in this context. These programs are a significant cultural phenomenon, especially when one considers that, for much of the previous two centuries, creative writing was assumed to be an un-teachable art form, being a matter of

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<sup>1</sup> McGurl 2009: x.

inspiration rather than technique. One consequence of this ‘increasingly intimate relation’ is that it creates, for writers like Carson who carefully craft their own versions of the interface between scholarship and poetry, an advantageous cultural field, containing landmark career moments as well as an ascending arrangement of prizes, designed to create lives and works such as those of the MacArthur Fellowship poets, discussed below.

An instructive historical parallel to this kind of institutional arrangement is provided by Pierre Bourdieu’s analysis of the French Academy in the early nineteenth century. In ‘Manet and the Institution of Anomie’, Bourdieu analyses the hierarchical process of artistic production which dominated pre-Impressionist French art, and the prizes which formed the stages of this process, culminating in the highly coveted *Prix de Rome* prize.<sup>2</sup> He concludes that the symbolic revolution that led to Impressionist painting in France can only be understood by analysing the social structures of the academic painting which it replaced, especially the institution of the *Académie des Beaux-Arts* and the *ateliers* and *salons* that it controlled. I explore the similarities between the ways in which this hierarchy of prizes operated in this historical example, and the criteria and effects of the awards and prizes Anne Carson has received during her career. As with the historical example of French Academic art, the centre of Carson’s cultural field for most of her career in the USA has been the university. It is the university, together with the networks of patronage in the form of awards and prizes, which have made possible her success, as much as the qualities of the work itself.

One of the most distinctive features of her creative work is its perceived originality. However, one of the paradoxes I discuss in this chapter is that Carson’s determination to make it new is highly influenced by her modernist forebears, especially Gertrude Stein and T.S. Eliot (as she is also influenced by the ways in which the modernists recreated ancient texts). As McGurl writes, the creative writing program, as an institution, is the great cultural guardian of literary modernism in the USA. Therefore, as in the French example, the academy acts as the sole guarantor of this aesthetic valuation and its intimate relationship with literary production ensures its dominance in the cultural field. This creates the further paradox that originality has become institutionalised, and the avant-garde is simultaneously the literary establishment.

I make a distinction between the prestigious status Carson has achieved within the cultural field of literary academia, and the more popular status which she has gained more recently in mainstream publishing. Her new popular status exists, in some ways, in

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<sup>2</sup> Bourdieu 1993: 238-53.

cultural tension with her literary-academic status, and in Chapter Ten I go on to discuss reviews of her work which include criticisms of more mainstream, popular readings, describing them as category errors or as straightforwardly mistaken. I argue there that, on the contrary, popular readings often contain kernels of truth which can elude more sophisticated readings of her work.

According to Mark McGurl in *The Program Era: Post War Fiction and the Art of Creative Writing* (2009), there are currently approximately three hundred and fifty university creative writing programs in the USA, and the number continues to grow. He presents his book as a plea for more research into the subject, as well as an exploration of it, on the grounds that the creative writing program is a central part of the literary history of the USA since the Second World War:

... for all its variety, post war American literature can profitably be described as the product of a system, though one (as it happens) ingeniously geared to the production of variety.<sup>3</sup>

McGurl writes that the academy is the ‘inheritor’ of the New Critical idea that ‘aesthetic value’ can be ‘produced’ and ‘appreciated’ in an academic environment:

For better or worse colleges and universities are now the central conservators of modernist literary Value as such, and they are where most “serious writers” (of which there is now an oversupply) and “serious readers” (of which there can never be enough) are trained.<sup>4</sup>

Towards the end of his book, McGurl asks his central question: ‘what, finally, does the discipline of creative writing mean to the university?’<sup>5</sup> His answer is that, despite the apparent contradiction between creative writing as an ‘exercise in subjectivity’ and the ‘scientism’ of the institutional context in which it flourishes, the creative writing program is valued as a public display of the central values of the new corporate university system:

The University ... has begun instead to behave like a corporation, integrating new management techniques and market valuations into its wholly self-referential, self-producing practices. In this scheme, excellence is the “integrating principle that allows ‘diversity’ (the other watchword of the University prospectus) to be tolerated without threatening the unity of the system”.<sup>6</sup>

McGurl argues that, in a corporate culture which espouses pluralism, a certain amount of

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<sup>3</sup> McGurl 2009: x.

<sup>4</sup> McGurl 2009: x.

<sup>5</sup> McGurl 2009: 404.

<sup>6</sup> McGurl 2009: 406, Readings 1996: 32.

symbolic activity (or ‘showing off’ as he also calls it) is necessary in order to demonstrate the ideal standard of ‘excellence’. The rhetoric of excellence is vitally important to the university because, as well as being vague enough to encompass competing cultural claims, it has of necessity taken the place of appeals to older unifying standards.

Indeed, insofar as American culture has become a corporate culture, the rhetoric of excellence could be understood as a deep expression of that national culture, and seems for now to be holding educational institutions together fairly well.<sup>7</sup>

What such educational institutions are displaying is what McGurl calls their ‘more or less impressive capacity to waste’; a waste of resources which demonstrates their standard of excellence and their capacity to show it. However, McGurl also points out that the waste is less than it appears since creative writing programs do not require expensive equipment to set up, and also make a lucrative return in tuition fees.<sup>8</sup> The creative writer adds to the university’s social and cultural capital whilst being simultaneously a profitable and deliberately useless ornament.

The system McGurl describes here is a mutually reinforcing combination of values, practice, and display: an ordering of subjectivity created to support and reinforce wider assumptions and replace more traditional ones. Bourdieu describes an instructively similar example from institutional history; one in which creativity is also placed in the service of a social and cultural system, in his chapter, ‘Manet and the Institution of Anomie’. The Academic art of early nineteenth-century France began as a reaction against Romanticism as well as against what was perceived to be the decadence of eighteenth-century art, in order to service the new bourgeois establishment produced by the French Revolution and subsequent Empire. (The origins of academic art are also an interesting example of classical reception, involving the re-establishment of supposedly classical values, in reaction to the French Revolution.) Bourdieu describes this process as a ‘cultural restoration’, born in crisis, as well as an attempt to legitimate, politically and socially, a cultural consensus. It was also very much institutionally-based:

One can ... undertake a structural explanation of this art by relating it to the institutional conditions of its production: its aesthetic is inscribed in the logic of functioning of a sclerotic academic institution.<sup>9</sup>

This ‘logic of functioning’ involved a steadily ascending series of competitions and prizes,

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<sup>7</sup> McGurl 2009: 407.

<sup>8</sup> McGurl 2009: 407.

<sup>9</sup> Bourdieu 1993: 240.



with all the other institutional activities such as curricula, hierarchies, training, and exhibitions directed towards these rewards: a system which, according to Bourdieu, reduced the painters competing within it to a state of infantile dependency. Within this system, the successful artistic life is defined, not by its unique characteristics, but in terms of the progress of a career:

... the Prix de Rome was itself a progressive conquest: one would attain the second prize, then one year later (like Alexander-Charles Guillemot in 1808, Alexandre-Denis-Joseph Abel in 1811, etc.), two years later (like François Eduard Picot in 1813) or even three years later ... the first prize.<sup>10</sup>

This system of prizes was also self-replicating:

The most consecrated painters among them competed all their lives for the Ecole's laurels, which they themselves award in their turn, in their capacity as professors or jury members.<sup>11</sup>

In this system of patronage and preferment the institution was able to define the kind of painting that possessed artistic value, and then taught the precise techniques the young painter needed in order to attain that value. Those who developed their techniques in orthodox ways reached the highest academic positions and, because this was a state-sanctioned art, they also reached the highest social positions; becoming 'civil-servant[s] of Art', exchanging 'symbolic consecration' for the rewards of 'temporal recognition'.<sup>12</sup>

The specific values consecrated by academic art were, in terms of its subject matter, an uplifting moral message in order to 'deify human grandeur' and a display of historical and literary knowledge. There were legitimate and illegitimate subjects to paint: this was art with a clear meaning which was designed to be read by the (bourgeois) viewer, who, given the sanctioned social aspects of the painting, was highly likely to get the message and to approve of it. The required style is therefore the one most suited to this purpose of readability: the painting should be 'finished' and 'clean', there should be no evidence of work such as brush-strokes. Drawing and line have primacy over use of colour. Bourdieu calls this kind of work 'too skilful – both brilliant and insignificant by dint of impersonality' and defines it as work which 'seeks less to say something than to show it is well said'.<sup>13</sup>

Clearly there are some important differences between the systems of patronage McGurl

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<sup>10</sup> Bourdieu 1993: 242.

<sup>11</sup> Bourdieu 1993: 240.

<sup>12</sup> Bourdieu 1993: 243.

<sup>13</sup> Bourdieu 1993: 244.

and Bourdieu describe. In the case of twentieth-century literature, there is no required emphasis upon the smoothness of the literary surface or on an uplifting moral message, if anything just the opposite is favoured. Nor would I claim to be able to completely explain this enormous corpus of poetry by ‘relating it to the institutional conditions of its production’. As I wrote in the introduction to this thesis, my assumption is that only fairly unimpressive art can be explained in the way that Bourdieu has explained all those melodiously expiring classical nudes and symbolic landscapes from the *Salons* of the nineteenth-century *Académie des Beaux-Arts*. A complete explanation is also prevented by the fact that, as McGurl writes, the American literary system is ‘ingeniously geared to the production of variety’. My argument is that the other part of Bourdieu’s argument holds as much for late twentieth-century literature in the USA as for nineteenth-century France: that the underlying aesthetic shared by poets, including Anne Carson, who have recently won the major awards and prizes, can be related to the ‘logic of functioning’, as Bourdieu phrases it, of the system of patronage which has rewarded them and within which their careers have developed. In the rest of this chapter, I attempt to establish this logic of functioning; focusing on five of the most prominent of the awards and prizes Anne Carson has received. I also show how this logic envisages and encourages a particular career pattern, and that Anne Carson’s career fits neatly into this pattern. Finally, I outline the kind of aesthetic that Carson’s poetry shares with her peers and contemporaries, and identify its paradoxical relationship with its own social and cultural setting.

Anne Carson has won a number of major prizes and awards in a relatively short space of time. In 1996 she was awarded the highly lucrative Lannan Literary Award for Poetry. The Lannan awards are a series of literary awards and fellowships given out in various fields by the Lannan Foundation, to both established and emerging writers, as well as to political writers and activists. Recipients include W.S. Merwin, Barbara Ehrenreich, and Edward Said. Lannan awards and fellowships cannot be applied for, rather the foundation’s literary committee chooses candidates recommended anonymously ‘by a network of writers, literary scholars, publishers, and editors’.<sup>14</sup>

In 1997 Carson was included in the *Pushcart Prize: Best of the Small Presses* anthology, a prestigious American literary prize which celebrates the best poetry, short fiction, and essays published in the small presses. The anthology is among the most influential in the American literary publishing world, according to the journal of the American Library

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<sup>14</sup> Lannan Foundation web site, ‘Literary Awards and Fellowships’,  
<<http://www.lannan.org/literary/awards-and-fellowships/>> [accessed on 12 October 2011]

Association, *Booklist*, which comments, 'Winning a Pushcart Prize has become a rite of passage in American literary life as each set of prizewinners nominates the next'.<sup>15</sup> Magazine and small book press editors can nominate up to six works they have published over the previous year, and nominations are also accepted from contributing editors. Anthologies of the selected works have been published annually since 1976. Among the writers who received early recognition in Pushcart Prize anthologies were Raymond Carver and Paul Muldoon.

In 1998 Carson was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship, a prestigious grant given to writers, scholars, and scientists by the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation since 1925. The Fellowship's website states that Guggenheim grants are intended as 'mid-career' awards for 'advanced professionals': aimed at 'men and women who have already demonstrated exceptional capacity for productive scholarship or exceptional creative ability in the arts'.<sup>16</sup> Candidates must apply to the Foundation, which receives 3,500 to 4,000 applications each year. There are two annual competitions: one open to citizens and permanent residents of the United States and Canada, and the other open to citizens and permanent residents of Latin America and the Caribbean. Applications are assessed anonymously by previous Guggenheim Fellows.

In 2000 Carson was awarded a MacArthur Fellowship, commonly known as the genius grant, given by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation each year to typically twenty to forty United States citizens or residents, of any age and working in any field, who 'show exceptional merit and promise for continued and enhanced creative work'.<sup>17</sup> The current amount of the award is \$500,000, paid as quarterly instalments over five years. The Fellowship has no application. Candidates are chosen by anonymous nominators who submit recommendations to a small selection committee of about a dozen people, also anonymous. The committee then reviews every nominee and passes along their recommendations to the President and the Board of Directors.

In 2001 Carson received the Griffin Trust Poetry Prize for her book, *Men in the Off Hours* (2000). The Judges' citation reads:

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<sup>15</sup> D. Seaman, 'The Pushcart Prize, 2003, XXVII', *Booklist*, 1 January 2003  
<<http://www.booklistonline.com/The-Pushcart-Prize-2003-XXVII-/pid=306450>> [accessed on 23 March 2013]

<sup>16</sup> John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation web site, 'About the Foundation',  
<<http://www.gf.org/about-the-foundation/the-fellowship/>> [accessed on 25 March 2013]

<sup>17</sup> The MacArthur Foundation web site, 'About the MacArthur Fellows Program',  
<<http://www.macfound.org/pages/about-macarthur-fellows-program/>> [accessed on 12 October 2011]

Anne Carson continues to redefine what a book of poetry can be; this ambitious collection ranges from quatrains studded with uncanny images (“Here lies the refugee breather | who drank a bowl of elsewhere”) to musing verse essays, personal laments, rigorous classical scholarship, and meditations on artists’ lives, caught in the carnage of history. All are burnished by Carson’s<sup>18</sup> dialectical imagination, and her quizzical, stricken moral sense.

Carson was subsequently a judge for the Griffin Poetry Prize in the 2010 competition, joining the company of Paul Muldoon, Charles Simic, and Michael Hofmann, all of whom have both won and judged the prize.

What are immediately apparent from the summary above are the qualities that the nomination and assessment processes of these prizes and awards share. Only one of them, the Guggenheim, can be applied for, though, like the Pushcart and the Griffin Poetry Prize, Guggenheim applications are assessed by previous winners. The Lannan, the Guggenheim, and the MacArthur awards are all assessed and awarded anonymously. Taken as a whole, these processes emphasize continuity of judgement and confidentiality.

Focusing on what is possibly the most prestigious of these awards, the MacArthur Fellowship, one finds confidentiality together with a structure of progression. Anne Carson was awarded a MacArthur fellowship aged fifty, just three years short of the average age of a poet receiving the award. Exploring further into the history of the MacArthur poets, we see that twenty-six of the forty-two poets to receive the MacArthur since its beginning in 1981 have also received Guggenheim Fellowships, including Carson. These two awards seem to exist as stages in the ideal literary career, in that those poets who were given both awards all received the Guggenheim first. The Guggenheim Fellowship existed many years before the MacArthur Fellowship, but those poets who received a Guggenheim after 1981, the first year of the MacArthur Fellowship, all received it before they were awarded the MacArthur. To give some examples, Carson received the Guggenheim two years before the MacArthur, Edward Hirsch two years before, Richard Kenney two years before, Daryl Hine six years before, Brad Leithauser one year before, Alice Fulton five years before, Ann Lauterbach seven years before, Thylia Moss one year before, Linda Bierds three years before, Campbell McGrath one year before. The latest poets to receive a MacArthur Fellowship were Kay Ryan and Alicia Elsbeth Stallings in 2011. Ryan received her Guggenheim in 2004 and Stallings in 2011, the same year as her MacArthur Fellowship (an interesting case in point: the Guggenheim is announced in April

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<sup>18</sup> The Griffin Trust for Excellence in Poetry web site, ‘Awards and Poets: Anne Carson’, <<http://www.griffinpoetryprize.com/awards-and-poets/shortlists/2001-shortlist/anne-carson/>> [accessed 25 March 2013]

and the MacArthur in September).<sup>19</sup>

The relationship between these two awards is too consistent to be accidental. Possession of a Guggenheim Fellowship is, for a poet, clearly one of the qualifications for being recommended for a MacArthur Fellowship. According to the MacArthur Fellowship Program website, however, the award is not linked to any specific accomplishment:

Although nominees are reviewed for their achievements, the fellowship is not a reward for past accomplishment, but rather an investment in a person's originality, insight, and potential. Indeed, the purpose of the MacArthur Fellows Program is to enable recipients to exercise their own creative instincts for the benefit of human society.<sup>20</sup>

Clearly it is inconsistent to claim that the MacArthur Fellowship is ‘not a reward for past accomplishment’ whilst, at the same time, (at least for poets) using the Guggenheim Fellowship as a selection criterion. It is also significant that the MacArthur Fellowship Program should find it necessary to make this claim: after all, rewarding outstanding individuals for their achievements is hardly an unworthy activity. Yet, in the statement above, they stress creativity and originality over and above accomplishment, stressing the uniqueness of the award and suggesting that it exists in a different part of the field from notions of career structure and progression. However, this is not the case, since the criterion they most often use for poets, the Guggenheim Fellowship, is specifically awarded to ‘advanced professionals’ in ‘mid-career’. For poets to be eligible for a Guggenheim, and therefore (unofficially) for a MacArthur, they need to have amassed sufficient cultural capital to be considered for the award.

Furthermore, as the list of poets who have won the MacArthur makes clear, achieving sufficient cultural capital to be an award-winner assumes that one already has a career as a professional academic. All of the thirty-eight MacArthur poets (with the exception of Douglas Crase in 1987) were academics as well as poets.<sup>21</sup> Significantly, the fact that Carson is female does not make her an unusual recipient. After an unbroken line of male poets from 1981 to 1986, the first woman to become a MacArthur Fellow was May Swenson in 1987. Since then, including Swenson, seventeen out of twenty-seven poets

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<sup>19</sup> The John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation web site, ‘Fellows’, <<http://www.gf.org/fellows/all?page=5>> [accessed on 12 October 2011]

<sup>20</sup> The MacArthur Foundation web site, ‘About the MacArthur Fellows Program’, <<http://www.macfound.org/pages/about-macarthur-fellows-program/>> [accessed on 12 October 2011]. I note, however, that this page has been rewritten since first accessed, and that it now, [26 March 2013], includes the criteria of “a track record of significant accomplishment”, suggesting that the program directors have become aware of the inconsistency I explore in this chapter.

<sup>21</sup> The Poetry Foundation web site, ‘Biography: Douglas Crase’, Poems and Poets section, <<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/douglas-crase>> [Accessed 25 October 2011]

have been female. Yet in terms of origin she is an unusual choice: thirty out of the thirty-eight poets were born the USA, and six out of the remaining eight poets, who were eligible as US residents, became fellows between 1981 and 1987, so the prize has become much less international, at least for poets, in the last two decades. It is, therefore, more remarkable that Carson received this prize as a Canadian than as a woman.

Despite being near the average age for a MacArthur poet, and possessing a Guggenheim Fellowship, Carson's nationality puts her in the minority of recipients. Since the poets who receive the prize are academics, and the majority of them, unlike Carson, are born in the USA, it is possible to say that if Carson had not been an academic she would almost certainly not have been awarded this prestigious 'genius grant'. Being an academic is a basic requirement of eligibility, at least for a poet, for the highest rewards in this system of literary patronage.

As a leading literary figure, Carson is a product of a system of patronage which is as highly developed as the early nineteenth-century *Académie des Beaux-Arts*, as analysed by Bourdieu. To set out the system of literary patronage in the USA in simple terms: if you are a poet who has been awarded a MacArthur Fellowship, then you will almost certainly have already been awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship. Since the Guggenheim defines itself as a 'mid-career' award, when you receive it you will already have an established career as a poet. If you have an established career as a poet you will also be a professional academic. If you are an academic and an award-winning poet you will very probably teach on a lucrative and prestigious creative writing program at some point in your career, thanks to the corporatization of higher education and the publishing houses, and the close links between them. At the upper end of the cultural field occupied by consecrated poets like Carson is a web of prizes and fellowships, for the most part awarded 'by a network of writers, literary scholars, publishers, and editors' which is self-replicating. This is an environment in which the winners are chosen by other winners, or those who have reached the required status to be asked to do the choosing, and where the prizes tend to confirm the awarding of other prizes.

Anne Carson's career has been an almost conventional one in terms of this pattern, apart from the fact she was born in Canada rather than the USA. She passed the 'rite of passage' of the Pushcart Prize in 1997, and was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship in the following year, having already become an established academic and publishing writer. She has also taught on the creative writing program at New York University as 'Distinguished Poet in

Residence’, and has judged the Griffin Poetry Prize, which she also won.<sup>22</sup> Whether she has been involved in assessment panels for the Guggenheim or MacArthur Fellowships is not possible to determine since membership for both is anonymous. It seems probable that, if we knew who was involved in these decisions, that the self-replicating nature of the field would be much more obvious, which in turn helps to explain why anonymity is the convention.

The logic of functioning of this particular cultural field of literary patronage goes beyond its system of rewards. As with the successful painters of the early nineteenth-century *Académie des Beaux-Arts*, there is an aesthetic shared by these award-winning poets which can be related to this logic. This is the kind of connection between poetry and its social and cultural context that has recently been made in the context of ancient Roman poetry, in the area of career criticism. In *Classical Literary Careers and their Reception* (2010) Philip Hardie and Helen Moore, *et al.*, explore the work of Roman poets whose literary careers reflected the fortunes of their wealthy and influential patrons. These reflections are found not in the biographies of these poets (where they exist), but in their *oeuvres*, and particularly in their changes in the use of poetic genre as their careers progress alongside those of their patrons. As the status of the patron ascended through the stages of the *cursus honorum* to the Consulship, so the poet would progress through genres to literary triumph, and this was sometimes marked in the poetry by references to the poet’s own social status and to corresponding praise of the patron. The paradigm of this kind of career is Virgil, especially his progression through genres in his three major works:

There is a seemingly inevitable, and almost prescribed, development from the small-scale and self-reflexive green cabinet of the *Eclogues*, through the didactic intervention in the world of the farmer in the *Georgics*, to the sublime epic flight of the *Aeneid*, engaging with the widest themes of Roman history and imperial power.<sup>23</sup>

However, Hardie and Moore also write of the disintegration of this form of literary career in the post-classical world, and of ‘the increasing fragmentation in post-classical centuries of the shapeliness of Virgilian and Ovidian models’.<sup>24</sup> Clearly modern poets do not move through verse-genres alongside a parallel progression through defined stages of a literary career. However, it is possible to see correspondences, in the American context, between the system of patronage discussed above and the particular aesthetic it engenders in the

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<sup>22</sup> New York University web site, ‘Creative Writing Program’, <<http://cwp.fas.nyu.edu/page/welcome>> [accessed 26 March 2013]

<sup>23</sup> Hardie and Moore (eds) 2010: 5.

<sup>24</sup> Hardie and Moore (eds) 2010: 8.

creativity of its poets; an aesthetic which interacts with other aspects such as cultural identity and politics, but which is especially marked by a commitment to experimentalism and intellectuality. In order to argue this I focus upon poets who, like Carson, have become MacArthur Fellows since the foundation of the Program in 1981. The MacArthur Fellowship poets are significant as a group since they can be seen as, in Bourdieu's terms, the most consecrated poets in the USA.

In his biography of the twentieth century St. Lucian poet Derek Walcott, *A Caribbean Life* (2000), Bruce King comments on the choice of Walcott as a MacArthur Fellow. This was in the very first year of the MacArthur Fellowship Program, 1981, an early period which King sees as one in which good, interesting choices were made, but which did not last:

... in recent years, after a long established academic became director, the awards have appeared to seem politically correct or cautious, being given to members of minorities and the well-established avant-garde of previous generations.<sup>25</sup>

The appointment of an academic as director and the corresponding social and political agendas operating upon awarding decisions support my argument on the systemisation of this cultural field, but my point of interest here is in King's strange, almost oxymoronic phrase 'well-established avant-garde'. He does not clarify whether he means poets who were once avant-garde, on the cutting-edge of culture, but who are no longer avant-garde since they became well-established, or poets who continue to write in a style identified as avant-garde, even though they are already established. In reality, the evidence of the MacArthur Fellowship poets themselves suggests the latter interpretation. From the mid-eighties to at least the turn of the century, when Carson won the prize, the poetry of the MacArthur fellows tends to be free or experimental in its form, and in its subject matter either intellectual in terms of aesthetic or historical subject matter, or politically committed, or predominantly self-conscious about language and the writing of poetry itself. Though there is no uniformity in style or subject matter in these poets; what they often share is a bent towards particular kinds of significance which are often referred to as poetry of the mind, rather than a predominant concern with the emotional or spiritual qualities of verse.

However, poetry of the mind was not the dominant style at the beginning of the MacArthur Foundation Fellowship Program. Surveying the list of poets, we find in 1981 (the first year of the Fellowship) Derek Walcott, who also won the Nobel Prize in

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<sup>25</sup> King 2000: 402.



Literature in 1992, and Joseph Brodsky, who won the Nobel in 1987. Placing them with the other poets who received a MacArthur Fellowship in the early years of the award; A.R. Ammonds, Robert Penn Warren, Brad Leithauser, A.K. Ramanujan, Robert Hass, Charles Simic and Galway Kinnell, there is little to pick out as a common thread or style of writing which they share, but the choice of the experimental poet John Ashbery in 1985 was a turning point. Whether or not we agree with Bruce King that the choice of fellows became more cautious, they certainly became easier to categorise.

In the line of experimentalists after John Ashbery comes Mark Strand, whose poem *Keeping Things Whole* is, both in style and sentiment, not too far away from Carson's own later poetry, which is explored in Chapter Eight:

In a field  
I am the absence  
of field.  
This is  
always the case.  
Wherever I am  
I am what is missing.<sup>26</sup>

May Swenson, who became a MacArthur fellow in 1987 was also an experimental poet, as were Ann Lauterbach in 1993, Carson herself in 2000, and C.D. Wright (though not her early work) in 2004.

Those seen as predominantly intellectual poets, who sometimes use scholarly or scientific material in their poetry, include Richard Kenney, of whom William Logan in the *New York Times Book Review* wrote, 'Such poetry is not afraid of having intellect, or requiring it'.<sup>27</sup> One of Kenney's books, *Orrery*, was described as 'a dazzling, book-length poem of the mind'.<sup>28</sup>

Also in this category of intellectual poets are Jorie Graham, John Hollander, Alice Fulton, Eleanor Wilner, Amy Clampitt, Richard Howard, Linda Bierds and Daryl Hine, who wrote these lines in his long poem entitled *&: A Serial Poem*:

Such pejorative deformities of sound  
Without meaningful speech or musical equipoise,  
Annoyances none but *hoi polloi* enjoys,  
Through our winding whispering galleries resound

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<sup>26</sup> Mark Strand, 'Keeping Thing Whole', The Poetry Foundation web site, <<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/archive/poem.html?id=177001>> [accessed on 12 October 2011]

<sup>27</sup> The Poetry Foundation web site, 'Richard Kenney', <<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/richard-kenney>> [accessed on 6 September 2012]

<sup>28</sup> The Poetry Foundation web site, 'Richard Kenney', <<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/richard-kenney>> [accessed on 6 September 2012]

Unwelcome, & like a tedious siege surround  
Us with that ubiquitous nuisance, noise,  
Which may take the shape of inflated reputation,  
Able neither to stun, astonish nor astound  
Those whom obscene publicity annoys,  
Who prefer the decent obscurity of publication.<sup>29</sup>

A third category is the politically committed poets, some of whom would account for Bruce King's 'minorities' label (and who are, as it turns out, only a small portion of the list), including Eleanor Wilner, Adrienne Rich the poet and political thinker, Sandra Cisneros, Thylia Moss, Ishmael Reed and (again) C.D. Wright.

It is easy to see how well Carson's poetry fits into this cultural field. Firstly, there is the intellectuality of her style of poetry, as well as its classical and scholarly aspects, which were a feature of literary modernism from its inception. Many of the other MacArthur poets have written poems drawn from or inspired by classical mythology, and some of them are also translators. Secondly, there is the experimental style of her poems and poetic essays, and the influence upon it of modernists such as Gertrude Stein. Thirdly, she can even be linked in some of her work with the more politically committed and 'minority' poets in her awareness of ethnicity and its consequences, especially for her version of the mythological monster, Geryon, in *Autobiography of Red* (1998), as Edith Hall has discussed in 'The Autobiography of the Western Subject: Carson's Geryon'.<sup>30</sup> By viewing Carson's work from this angle, I do not wish to suggest that she deliberately constructed her work in order to win the maximum number of prizes. Nor do I think that identifying the social and cultural status of her work satisfactorily accounts for its qualities or content. Rather, my intention is to show that her cultural presence has depended, through most her career, on an influential and wealthy readership which welcomed the kinds of scholarly and artistic strategies which they recognised in her work, and were ideally placed to reward. This in turn has allowed her to go on developing her art as she wished to, without the constraints placed on less consecrated writers.

Although there are no precise prescriptions for successful poetry in this cultural field, as there was for academic artists in post-revolutionary France, nevertheless one can identify Carson's intellectual, scholarship-influenced, experimental poetry as the kind likely to be rewarded. Successful poetry in this field is likely to be difficult to understand either because of its style or its references or both. This difficulty is partly due to the influence of literary modernism, and associated modernist ideas on creativity are important both in the

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<sup>29</sup> Daryl Hine, '&: A Serial Poem', The Poetry Foundation web site,  
<<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/archive/poem.html?id=238280>> [Accessed on 12 October 2011]

<sup>30</sup> Hall in Harrison (ed.) 2009: 218-37.

writing and the reading of such poems; for example the view that understanding a poem rationally is not necessarily important or desirable. As with the historical example of French academic art, the centre of this cultural field in the USA is the university. It is the university, together with the system of patronage and the publishing corporations, which funds and promotes the continuing tradition of literary modernism. This has created the paradoxical situation in which the literary avant-garde is simultaneously the literary establishment: a paradox which manifests itself in the reputation of Carson herself as a highly original maverick; a creative mixer of scholarship and poetry who, in reality, fits, defines, and helps to reinforce a series of interconnected institutional investments.

The *ateliers* of this literary-academic establishment are the creative writing programs (the program that the novelist Toni Morrison founded at Princeton was actually called an ‘*Atelier*’), and the *Salon* is the market place in which literary ‘superstars’ can be ‘bought’ both by corporate universities and by corporate publishing houses, (though one important difference with the French system is that there is very little prospect of the large majority of students in the programs going on to literary careers).<sup>31</sup> These writers gain their cultural capital from other writers as well as editors, publishers and agents, in a self-replicating system which favours writing influenced by literary modernism or which is otherwise self-consciously pluralist. The academy acts as the sole guarantor of this aesthetic valuation and has an intimate relationship with literary production. The awards tend to act to confirm each other, and are seen as ‘rites of passage’ in the literary career. In the centre of the literary and institutional apparatus are writers like Anne Carson, the most visible parts of the machine. Carson’s appointment as Distinguished Poet-in-Residence at New York University makes her, according to one particularly bitter literary blogger’s mixed metaphor, ‘a freak on display in the monster’s mouth.’<sup>32</sup> This is not the first time she has been called a freak: it is also the word Val Ross used to describe Carson’s position as a undergraduate at the University of Toronto in the early 1970s, when studying classics was ‘almost counter-revolutionary’, as reported in the previous chapter.<sup>33</sup> However, as I have shown, in the context of the background to Carson’s achievement, this word is misapplied. She is not an aberration but a consecrated and even fairly conventional member of a social and cultural structure and of the institutions which it controls. A gold tooth in the

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<sup>31</sup> Harrison (ed.) 2009: 352, Princeton Arts web site, ‘About the Princeton Atelier’,  
<[http://www.princeton.edu/arts/arts\\_at\\_princeton/princeton\\_atelier/history/](http://www.princeton.edu/arts/arts_at_princeton/princeton_atelier/history/)> [accessed 26 March 2013]

<sup>32</sup> T. McGonigle, ‘*ABC of Reading: Homage to Anne Carson and Larry Kart*’, 6 April 2010  
<<http://abcofreading.blogspot.com/2010/04/homage-to-anne-carson-and-larry-kart.html>> [accessed on 13 October 2011]

<sup>33</sup> Val Ross, ‘Classic Carson’, *University of Toronto Magazine*, Spring 2001  
<<http://www.magazine.utoronto.ca/feature/about-anne-carson-poetry/>> [accessed on 11 October 2011]

monster's mouth would be, perhaps, a more accurate image.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Characteristically, Carson makes her own function in the great creative writing program industry sound accidental: 'when i began to be published, people got the idea that i should 'teach writing,' which i have no idea how to do and don't really believe in. so now and then i find myself engaged by a 'writing program' (as at nyu, stanford) and have to bend my wits to deflect the official purpose', Anderson 2013: 20.

## Part Two

### Chapter Seven

#### Emotional Geometry in Anne Carson's *Eros the Bittersweet*

*Eros the Bittersweet*<sup>is</sup> Carson's first full-length work of individual scholarship, originating as her PhD thesis, later published in book form by Princeton University Press in 1986, then for a wider audience in the 'Canadian Literature Series' by the Dalkey Archive in 1998, and now into its second edition with the independent publisher, W. W. Norton and Co. It is an exploration of the concept of *eros* in classical literature and philosophy, focusing on lyric, the ancient novel and Plato, together with some material from epic and tragedy. Carson is particularly interested in the way the Greek lyric poets portray the violent advent of human desire, the attack of *eros* on the psyche and its ramifications. In this chapter, I explore how Carson creates a unique mixture of classical scholarship, aesthetic criticism, and historical argument in order to interpret the concept of *eros*, though her interpretation is partly based on the placement of herself as the ideal reader of her material through her status and function as a poet. Examining the flaws in her historical account, I show how, though her central position within her own argument involves her in a certain amount of special pleading, it also produces an impressive synthesis of classical scholarship and aesthetic concerns which has informed most of her subsequent creative work, as well as producing some effective readings of individual Greek texts.

In the opening chapters of *Eros the Bittersweet*, Carson focuses on the idea of *eros* as lack or loss, when the lover is shown struggling with her inner emptiness and need in their separation from their beloved. Carson's first example of this, and in many ways the blueprint for the subsequent ones, is Sappho fragment 31:

Φαίνεται μοι κῆνος ἴσος θεοῖσιν  
ἔμμεν' ὄνηρ, ὅττις ἐναντιός τοι  
ἰσδάνει καὶ πλάσιον ἄδω φωνεί-  
σας ὑπακούει

καὶ γελαίσας ἡμέροεν, τό μ' ἦ μὰν  
καρδίαν ἐν στήθεσιν ἐπτόαισεν,  
ὡς γὰρ ἔς σ' ἴδω βρόχε' ὡς με φώναι-  
σ' οὐδ' ἐν ἔτ' εἴκει,

ἀλλ' ἄκαν μὲν γλῶσσα ἴεαγε λέπτον  
δ' αὐτικά χρωῖ πῶρ ὑπαδεδρόμηκεν,  
ὀπάτεσσι δ' οὐδ' ἐν ὄρημι', ἐπιρρόμ-

βεισι δ' ἄκουαι,

ἴεκαδε μ' ἰδρῶς ψῦχος κακχέεται ἴ τρόμος δὲ  
παῖσαν ἄγρει, χλωροτέρα δὲ ποίας  
ἔμμι, τεθνάκην δ' ὀλίγω 'πιδεύης  
φαίνομ' ἴαι<sup>1</sup>

Carson gives her own translation of this fragment in *Eros the Bittersweet*:

He seems to me equal to gods that man  
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, a moment, then 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<sup>2</sup>

This much-translated lyric depicts the suffering persona watching the girl she loves sitting beside a man who ‘sits and listens close | to your sweet speaking’, and, as discussed below, it is the relationship between the speaker’s suffering and the other two figures in the fragment, as well as the suffering itself, that interests Carson. Within and beyond this particular fragment, Carson’s exploration centres upon the most violent aspect of *eros*, which is its tendency to attack the lover’s *psyche* or *phrenes* without warning; with no regard at all for the sanity or well being of the person assaulted. She finds this theme repeated obsessively in Greek lyric, as well as in the ancient Greek novel and philosophy, but most urgently in Sappho. *Eros* is the enemy of its victim: it splits the lover’s emotional response, generating overwhelming love for the beloved and, simultaneously, hatred towards the loss of control involved in being so overwhelmed. This is why, according to Carson, Sappho calls *eros* ‘bittersweet’ (*γλυκύπικρον*).<sup>3</sup> Consequently, *eros* destroys the lover's hitherto stable sense of self while simultaneously splitting her view of the beloved in two. Because of the metaphysical intensity of this transformation, it also, according to

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<sup>1</sup> Carson 1986: 12.

<sup>2</sup> Carson 1986: 12-13.

<sup>3</sup> Carson 1986: 3-9.

Carson, is capable of changing the lover's response to language, and to conventional ideas about space and time, since different combinations of space and time are what keeps lovers apart.<sup>4</sup>

The crucial point for Carson's argument is that this suffering, this lack as she calls it, is expressed as a triangulation of erotic emotion in Sappho fragment 31, with poet/persona, beloved girl and listening man as the three points of a triangle, presented to us, Carson writes, almost as if it were a stage setting. The response of the poet/persona to the scene is split in the angle of her position between the girl and the man: the side of the triangle travelling between poet and girl creates the customary feverish longing of the lover. The side between poet and listening man, however, is more complex and difficult to describe. It is this relationship that Carson finds most compelling in the book as a whole.<sup>5</sup> The greater part of her exploration can be summed up as the attempt to explain it; what the third figure in such a triangle might represent. In this fragment, the third figure is a man, but in other ancient texts, according to Carson, the third point of the erotic triangle can be all sorts of things: enforced separation of lovers in time or space, walls or angry fathers coming between them, trials of love, in fact any barrier to the lovers being together. This third element separates the lover from the beloved, but also connects them by suspending the lover in a state of prolonged agony.

According to Carson, the reader is implicated in this emotional tension by Sappho, who forces us to try to connect with both the calm response of the listening man to the lovely girl, and that of the agonised poet, simultaneously. The main implication of this is that Sappho, for Carson, is not merely writing about *eros*, she is actually trying to recreate the effect of *eros* upon the reader in this fragment. Carson goes on to define this effect as both the lover's longing to cross the boundary to the beloved, and the simultaneous recognition that it is only the boundary which produces the intensity of the longing. This, for Carson, is the strongest effect of *eros*: the instant that the lover longs to cross the physical boundary between himself and his beloved is the instant he knows it to be forever unbridgeable, since we only desire that which we lack. Carson identifies this point of knowledge as 'the edge' and then extends the idea: the edge is not only a matter of erotic emotion but also is involved with strategies of thought and of language. It gives us an urgent need to know where (and who) we are, but at the same time it stops us from finding out. It does this by creating a kind of 'blind-point' within the mind, like the feeling one gets from staring at

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<sup>4</sup> Carson 1986: 18-25.

<sup>5</sup> Carson 1986: 12-17.

one's own face in the mirror too long:

If we follow the trajectory of *eros* we consistently find it tracing out this same route: it moves out from the lover toward the beloved, then ricochets back to the lover himself and the hole in him, unnoticed before. Who is the real subject of most love poems? Not the beloved. It is that hole.<sup>6</sup>

In a chapter entitled 'Losing the Edge', Carson enormously expands the implications of this interpretation of Greek lyric concerning the lover's new self-knowledge through *eros*. She writes that *eros* may be involved in nothing less than the actual creation of our concept of self. She takes this idea back to the Greek poets via the influential classical scholar Bruno Snell, who claimed that 'love which has its course barred' leads directly to emotional self-awareness, and therefore to individual consciousness.<sup>7</sup> (There is clearly a Freudian pattern influencing Snell's formulation here which also informs Carson's work, though her rather ambiguous relationship with the theories of Jacques Lacan is discussed later in this chapter). From this perspective, Sappho in fragment 31 is describing not merely the divided mind of the lover, but the actual creation of the individual, self-conscious human personality: 'the discovery of the mind', in Snell's terms.

Carson sees, however, an important element missing in Snell's analysis of the discovery of the mind: the Greek alphabet itself. 'What is erotic about alphabetization?' she asks rhetorically. Her central argument, implied in this question, is that the existence of the Greek alphabet in itself brought something new to lyric poetry, and that this something new is closely involved with *eros*. These poets were the first to leave us poems in written form. The use of writing creates a new kind of literature according to Carson because, she says, 'oral cultures and literate cultures do not think, perceive or fall in love in the same way'.<sup>8</sup> In oral cultures, she argues, an open connection to the immediate environment must be maintained. With the advent of literacy, however, the senses must be trained to focus upon the written word. This brings a sense of personal separateness, individuality and isolation, promoting a new focus on internal emotions and self-awareness. This change, however, is a new and difficult training, and Carson sees this difficulty in the slowness of the alphabet's spread throughout the Greek world and the gradual changes in literary practices, such as leaving gaps between written words. Oral poetry is written in phrases, written poetry in individual words, she says. As words begin to develop edges so selves also develop edges, and the invasions of *eros*, endurable within an oral culture, become

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<sup>6</sup> Carson 1986: 30.

<sup>7</sup> Carson 1986: 38, Snell 1953: 53.

<sup>8</sup> Carson 1986: 42.



intensely threatening to the stability of the newly vulnerable literate self.

Carson sees Archilochos as a prime example of the move to literacy. She speculates on his biography, believing it most likely that he began in an oral culture and moved to letters. In one fragment *eros* steals the longing lover's *phrenes*:

τοῖος γὰρ φιλότητος ἔρωος ὑπὸ καρδίην ἐλυσθείς  
πολλὴν κατ' ἀχλὺν ὀμμάτων ἔχευεν,  
κλέψας ἐκ στηθέων ἀπαλὰς φρένας.<sup>9</sup>

Carson translates *phrenes* as 'lungs' here. She connects 'lungs' with 'breath', which she says is an important concept in Greek oral culture where perception and communication have their source, biologically, in the middle of the chest. So *eros* has stolen the lover's speech organ. Carson asks if this is why the poem breaks off suddenly, failing, in the process, to answer its own demonstrative pronoun *toios* with the relative pronoun *hoios*, though she admits this may be an accident of transmission rather than of authorial intention. She comments:

... the fragmentary condition of Archilochos' text, would account for the unfulfilled syntactical expectation set up by the correlative pronoun with which the poem begins (*toios*). On the other hand, it is a very careful poem, as far as it goes.<sup>10</sup>

I return to the curiousness of this use of 'on the other hand' below.

Carson keeps expanding into further definitions and explorations of *eros*, seeing it as a concept too slippery to be explained in only one way. The peculiar kind of 'stereoscopic vision' created by *eros* is re-stated in further metaphors. Her next definition is *eros* as the disrupter of direct intercourse; between writer and reader; between lover and beloved. *Eros* insists upon prising open a space in between the giver and receiver of meaning, as between lover and beloved. In this space lives the play of imagination, as well as of fantasy and mystery. Writers help to create that space with 'metaphors and subterfuges'.<sup>11</sup>

Carson then turns to an erotic conception of time. The lover, she says, is always trying to narrow the distinction between 'now' and 'then' or, ideally, collapse it. But there is a paradox here, since collapsing the two times together means the end of desire. So this is a dilemma about time as something the lover both does and doesn't want. Carson uses a

<sup>9</sup> Carson 1986: 46 = West *IEG* 191.

<sup>10</sup> Carson 1986: 48.

<sup>11</sup> Carson 1986: 109.

powerful image from a Sophocles fragment to demonstrate this.<sup>12</sup> The image is of a child holding a piece of ice, her delight in the experience tempered by the physical fact that the ice is melting through her fingers. Too fascinated to put it down, the child's desire is what causes the ice slowly to disappear. The novelty ensures its own transience. Carson reminds us that, in Greek lyric, desire is often a matter of heat and melting.<sup>13</sup> She also links Sophocles' image to Sappho's description of *eros* as 'bittersweet'. The lover cannot both attain his desire and keep it, since he cannot control time. Likewise, *eros* expressed as words on a page is both unchanging and inaccessible: 'A piece of ice melts forever there'.<sup>14</sup>

In the final chapter she tells us that *eros* is inseparable from imagination. Without imagination we would have no image of the object we desire. A people without imagination would be a people who never reach beyond what they already know. Equally, however, imagination is inseparable from desire. The object of desire is, she says, 'a fiction arranged by the mind of the lover'.<sup>15</sup> However, the third angle which triangulates desire and imagination is knowledge: knowledge of the paradox of *eros*, and therefore of one's own desiring self.

Since Carson's argument begins with, and is to some extent based on, her interpretation of Sappho fragment 31, it is significant that she is selective in her quotation and translation of the text. As shown above, she omits the final line (17) which was originally quoted by Longinus, and which appears to be the beginning of a lost fifth stanza.<sup>16</sup> This would not be significant in itself; especially since the second half of line 17 is conjectural. However, this last line is centrally important in a later essay in her collection *Decreation* (2005), where Carson's interpretation of this fragment is much more spiritually orientated: less to do with the idea of lack in human desire than with the abandonment of the self in pursuit of the divine.<sup>17</sup> She also includes this line in her own edition and translation of Sappho's collected fragments, *If Not, Winter* (2002).<sup>18</sup> Given that the point at which a lyric fragment breaks off, and the possible significance of the break, is often important in Carson's exploration in *Eros the Bittersweet*, it is significant that she varies her choice of the point of fragmentation, depending on the argument she wants to present: this is the reader

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<sup>12</sup> Soph. fr. 149, Radt 1977: 166-167.

<sup>13</sup> Carson 1986: 111-115.

<sup>14</sup> Carson 1986: 121.

<sup>15</sup> Carson 1986: 169.

<sup>16</sup> *Subl.* 10: 1-3.

<sup>17</sup> Carson 2005: 155.

<sup>18</sup> Carson 2002: 62.

shaping the text in a more direct way than might be expected.

A larger problem with Carson's argument is her views on the differences between oral and literate cultures, the idea that Greeks who lived in an oral culture were more alive to their immediate environment and less vulnerable to the dangers of being overwhelmed by *eros*, since they lacked a sense of individual, isolated mental and emotional life. The main difficulty with this view is the large and increasing body of work which shows that no such linear development occurred; that orality and literacy were so symbiotic and intertwined as to challenge the very existence of the notion of oral culture in general. Ruth Finnegan, in her book *Oral Poetry* (1977), published nine years before *Eros the Bittersweet*, finds the source of such theories in eighteenth and nineteenth-century assumptions about primitive spontaneity and communality as opposed to modern societal constraint and individualism. She also shows how this glamorised, romantic view of oral poetry and oral tradition can easily flip over into its disparagement: if those who produce oral poetry are not individual or conscious, it is only a short step from this view to Snell's more subtle conclusion that Homer lacked a concept of, and therefore a language for, the individual human consciousness. Rosalind Thomas has also written about the linear fallacy in *Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece* (1992), as has William V. Harris in *Ancient Literacy* (1989).

As for Carson's argument about the unique effects of the advent of literacy in archaic Greece, the only evidence she presents for this are the texts themselves. The demonstration of a particular way of reading and its effects, especially when the effect claimed is so dramatic and far-reaching, would need to be supported by some kind of evidence of its social and personal functions and consequences. There is nothing in *Eros the Bittersweet* which demonstrates that these texts were more than visual prompts, or scores, for oral performances.

There is also a problem of colliding time-scales. Carson sees Archilochus as a poet whose life began in orality and culminated in literacy, with the consequent enormous changes in consciousness she finds in his poems happening within his single lifetime. However, she also thinks that literacy spread slowly because it was a 'difficult training'. So there is a contradiction in Carson's interpretation of the slowness of the spread of literacy culturally, with the swiftness of its effects on individuals.

Another difficulty is that the connections Carson makes between eroticism and literacy are not clear enough to answer the question of how central the written word is to the particular kind of erotic experience she describes. Lyrics of love and loss, written or collected orally, seem to be universal in human culture. For example, if one moves to a

very different cultural context, one can compare Carson's claims for Sappho with this translation of a Maori song of mourning by Te Heuheu Herea, from Finnegan and Mitcalfe:

#### MOURNING SONG FOR RANGIAHO

Many women call on me to sleep with them  
But I'll have none so worthless and so wanton  
There is not one like Rangiaho, so soft to feel  
Like a small, black eel.  
I would hold her again -  
Even the wood in which she lies;  
But like the slender flax stem  
She slides from the first to the second heaven  
The mother of my children  
Gone  
Blown by the wind  
Like the spume of a wave<sup>19</sup>  
Into the eye of the void.

Though this lyric does not, as Sappho fragment 31 does, focus on the physical suffering of the speaker, it certainly does try to bridge the gap between the 'now' of life after Rangiaho and the 'then' of when she lived. There is also an erotic triangle in this lyric, with the third point, the point of separation between lover and beloved, being death itself. The poet has such a strong need to overcome this erotic separation he is prepared to embrace Rangiaho's coffin. There is also a second erotic triangle involving the speaker, his suitors, and the dead Rangiaho which works in tension with the first. So some at least of the qualities Carson ascribes to Sappho, as a poet wrestling with the new capacity for suffering caused by literate consciousness, are present more generally in non-Western verbal art that has been categorised as lyric, but which is not in any sense literate.

It is clear that the uses Carson makes of the Greek alphabet are central to her argument. She develops Bruno Snell's ideas by identifying two qualities she sees in the Greek alphabet, bringing a greater intensity to his theme of the discovery of the mind. First, she emphasises the visual aspect of Greek letters, linking the aesthetic qualities she finds in them to her ideas about *eros*. It is worth mentioning in this context that Carson herself was a visual artist before she was a writer; as described earlier, her own creative writing began as inscriptions below or beside her drawings. The visual appearance of words is very important to Carson as a poet, and she believes that it was important to the Greeks too. She makes much of a few explicit references to the alphabet in extant fragments, and especially in a fragment of Euripides' play *Theseus*, where an illiterate man recognises the approach

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<sup>19</sup> Finnegan 1977: 13, Mitcalfe 1961: 20.

of Theseus by describing the shapes of the letters of his name, written on his ship.<sup>20</sup> Her writing becomes highly speculative at this point: she describes how a Greek audience would have reacted to hearing the shapes of letters described on stage, or, on another occasion, seeing them represented physically in the ‘Alphabetic Review’ of the comic playwright Kallias.<sup>21</sup> Carson begins a sentence with ‘presumably’ followed by three sentences beginning with ‘perhaps’:

Presumably, some considerable proportion of the audience at these plays could participate in the fascination and chagrin of tracing out alphabetic shapes. Perhaps they had practiced it themselves when learning letters. Perhaps they had been daunted by the task and never learned letters. Perhaps they listened to their children complaining about it at the dinner table every night.<sup>22</sup>

Without evidence, she concludes:

In any event, the people to whom such theatre appealed were people whose imaginations could be seized by the spectacle of *grammata* taking shape in air as if they were real. These are vividly pictorial imaginations and they evidently take some pleasure in the plastic contours of the alphabet.<sup>23</sup>

In fact, there is little evidence of Greek interest in the visual appearance of words apart from the small number of examples Carson cites. She does not present nearly enough evidence to justify her argument as a general truth about ancient Greek audiences, and it seems that the highly visual imagination she is describing here is her own poetic vision of language and *eros*.

Carson also relies heavily on the view that the invention of the Greek alphabet was a unique contribution to the development of human culture, because the abstract form in which it records all possible combinations of phonemes means (by a rhetorical sleight-of-hand) that it is also peculiarly suited to abstract thought. Certainly the Greek alphabet, more than any earlier script, led to our own Latin alphabet, but this does not mean one can assume, as Carson does, that it was developed for the same purposes for which it is presently used. Gregory Nagy, among others, finds that its form was much more to do with the faithful reproduction of oral delivery, and this explains why Greek script was not separated into individual words until the ninth or tenth centuries CE, over fifteen hundred years after its inception:

*scriptio continua* promoted the phonological realism of continuity in speaking or singing or reciting in

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<sup>20</sup> Kannicht 2004: 429-430.

<sup>21</sup> Kaibel 1961: 485.

<sup>22</sup> Carson 1986: 58.

<sup>23</sup> Carson 1986: 58.

ways that people really spoke and sang and recited. Stopping at the wrong place between words could impede the flow, the continuity. Stopping could only be allowed at the right place, that is, at the end of a word that coincides with the end of a phrase or a clause, with the end of a colon or a verse. That would be phonologically right. Stopping elsewhere would be phonologically wrong, ruining the rhythmic and melodic contour of the phrasing. The systematization of when to stop and when not to stop between words is evident in some surviving ancient texts. ... Even if the process of reading such texts in *scriptio continua* was cognitively more difficult than the process of reading the more recent *scriptio discontinua* as simulated in the printed pages of modern editions, the older way of formatting offered the advantage of reading something that was far closer to the reality of live performance.<sup>24</sup>

The long history of *scriptio continua* undermines Carson's argument about the similarities between the edges of written words and the edges of (literate) selves, for, both at the period she is writing of and for a long time afterwards, written Greek words had no edges except (sometimes) at the beginning and the end of the line. Writing accurately recorded oral delivery, and in this sense it could even be seen as a move away from the visual. A useful point of comparison are the ancient Semitic alphabets, which are much more efficient at drawing attention to the words on the page, especially their morphological and syntactical function, or Sumerian cuneiform in which visual puns appear. In her essay 'Letters as Correspondence, Letters as Literature', for example, in *The Oxford Handbook of Cuneiform Culture* (2011), Fabienne Huber Vulliet quotes passages from the Sumerian epic *Emmerkar and the Lord of Aratta*, from the Old Babylonian period, circa 2000-1600 BC. These passages contain 'an aetiological explanation of the invention of letter-writing', in which the ruler Emmerkar inscribes a message he wishes to send because it has grown too long for his messenger to remember:

The poet emphasises the symbolism of this passage by playing with the meanings of the cuneiform sign IM, which can be read as *im* 'clay', *tumu* 'storm', and *iškur*, the name of the storm-god, who began to rage as the lord of Aratta looked at the tablet.<sup>25</sup>

Moreover, unlike the Greek examples Carson uses, this use of the ambiguity of the visual sign is part of the narrative of the *Emmerkar* epic itself, since it is only when the ruler looks at the written words he had received from Emmerkar that the god whose name is contained within the sign for 'clay' creates the storm which is also implied by the same word:

The lord of Aratta looked at his kiln-fired tablet. At that moment ... the god Iškur, thundering in heaven and earth, caused a raging storm.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Nagy 2009: 420-1.

<sup>25</sup> Vulliet in Radner and Robson (eds) 2011: 487.

<sup>26</sup> Vulliet in Radner and Robson (eds) 2011: 486.

So all three meanings are played off the same visual symbol, at the levels of narrative, character, and object. These must have been readers with much more ‘vividly pictorial imaginations’ than Carson’s Greeks.

Once these detailed criticisms of Carson's argument in *Eros the Bittersweet* have been made, we are left with the wider question of Carson's relationship to her material. Essentially, her argument relies upon a profound connection between her interpretation of the Greek lyric poets’ concept of desire, and the metaphors they use for desire, in response to the effects of the spread of literacy, and the literate interpretation offered by Carson herself. Adjusting Carson’s argument slightly it could be conceded that, even if the long persistence of *scriptio continua* shows that the lyric poets did not invent the self-consciously individual reader themselves, or at any rate readers whose selves developed edges from the edges of words, there is still a potentially valid argument to be made that they started a process that eventually culminated in that reader. However, the obvious counter-argument to this would be that these developments were caused by much later and larger forces that had nothing to do with the lyric poets themselves. Since it is Carson herself who has identified and described this cultural transformation, she then becomes, teleologically or perhaps circularly, the very reader that she is describing. The lyric poets, in this view, created the sensibility which, many centuries later, Carson is using to reveal their meaning. This has the paradoxical effect of turning Carson into the self-appointed ideal reader of both Greek lyric and the other ancient texts she includes in her interpretation. Carson becomes the centre of her own argument, reaching back to unlock ancient texts with the aesthetic and metaphorical key she claims to have found within them.

This identification also has an effect upon the style of her writing. It leads Carson to attempt to reproduce in the form of her book the elusive qualities of *eros* she finds in lyric, in that her developing argument on *eros* reflects its own content, teasing the reader with definitions of *eros* that never amount to a definitive statement. Such an approach, inevitably, stresses authorial intentionality over historical contingency, as we can see in the mysterious statements Carson is apt to make about breaks in transmission. I return to Carson’s comment, quoted above, on the unanswered demonstrative pronoun in Archilochus fragment 191:

... the fragmentary condition of Archilochos' text, would account for the unfulfilled syntactical expectation set up by the correlative pronoun with which the poem begins (*toios*). One the other hand, it

is a very careful poem, as far as it goes.<sup>27</sup>

What exactly does she mean by ‘on the other hand’? (A characteristic rhetorical move by Carson). She makes the same kind of remark about Mimnermos fragment 4 in her collection of essays and poetry, *Plainwater*:

The poem begins by setting out the first half of an unusually common Greek construction: the particle *men* (“on the one hand”) to create a balanced sentence or two-part remark. It is as if some other side of Tithonos’ story were about to be set in motion and carry him on past petrification. Sadly this does not happen. Of course the fragment may be incomplete. But then so is Tithonos.<sup>28</sup>

These are odd comments, if only because, by definition, a fragment of anything must be incomplete. Carson seems to be saying that the poems are meant to break off where the break in the text actually occurs; or at least that, in the case of the Archilochus fragment, the poem was heading for a sudden lack of voice which is appropriately expressed by the break in transmission. This interpretation must infer, however, an intentionally fragmentary effect from an accidentally fragmentary form. Certainly Mimnermos’ two-line comment on Zeus’ terrible gift to Tithonos, included in Stobaeus’ anthology, is complete in itself in terms of its perceivable meaning, but this surely has more to do with the intentions of Stobaeus rather than the intentions of Mimnermos.<sup>29</sup> Carson’s line of interpretation, at one level, is preposterous; and even her usually beguiling writing becomes rather ungainly here. At another level, this reading only serves to emphasise Carson’s centrality as the ideal reader of Greek lyric poets: her comment on Tithonos seems to remain teasingly incomplete (‘But then so is Tithonos’) because Tithonos himself is suspended and because the fragment breaks: Mimnermos loses his voice, and the rest of the poem vanishes. It is Carson who brings these different elements together in the eye of the reader.

What is at issue here is the validity of this interpretation due to its dependence upon a particular sensibility. Ann Sheppard, for example, clearly regards this kind of approach as a valid one, even as a superior one, when she says in her review of *Eros the Bittersweet*:

Poetic sensibility such as [Carson's] often leads to a better understanding of poetry than the dry tools of the scholar can provide on their own.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Carson 1986: 48.

<sup>28</sup> Carson 1995: 16.

<sup>29</sup> Stob. *Flor.* 33.

<sup>30</sup> Sheppard 1987: 375-376.



In using the phrase ‘on their own’, Sheppard may be referring here, at least partly, to the recent closer association between classical scholarship and creative interpretations of classical texts, as explored later by classical scholars and poets in books such as *Living Classics* (2009) and *Classics in Post-Colonial Worlds* (2007).<sup>31</sup> As the poet and translator Josephine Balmer writes, in her chapter in *Living Classics*, ‘Jumping their Bones: Translating, Transgressing, and Creating’:

... translation can give silent poets back their voices or stale jokes back their humour, finding new possibilities in damaged, fragmented works, which scholarship, uneasy perhaps, with absence or ignorance, might consider more problematic.<sup>32</sup>

However, when the work is not a translation or a creative interpretation, but a piece of classical scholarship making an argument about ancient lyric, partly on historical grounds, through a poetic/linguistic vision, this raises some extra considerations. Even if one grants Carson the kind of special poetic insight into lyric that Sheppard praises, when she develops her insights into a historical interpretation of lyric on such a grand scale, and this historical perspective is then contradicted by material facts, the whole structure of her argument begins to look insecure. Moreover, the assumption that, as a poet, she therefore has a better understanding could be seen as an overly romantic understanding of poetic sensibility which unfairly privileges it in relation to the interpretations of other scholars.

There is also the question of how much Carson’s position, as a specifically poetic reader, obscures an understanding of these texts because of an unhelpful circularity in the idea of ancient poets speaking to a modern poet, who is able to understand them better since she is herself a poet. There is a straightforward identification of ‘poet’ and ‘poetry’ in the quotation from Sheppard, when she is referring to ancient poetry and a twentieth century poet. This assumes a universal idea of a poet’s activities and functions, from the ancient to the modern worlds. This reflects Carson’s similar use of words like ‘us’ and ‘we’, and her interpretation of the ways in which ancient poets used the emotional effects of *eros* also tends towards the universal. Her notion of ‘the lover’ is also a timeless one, and a large part of her argument about the historical importance of the lyric poets depends upon the privileging of aesthetic continuity over historical specificity.

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<sup>31</sup> Harrison (ed.) 2009, Hardwick and Gillespie (ed.) 2007.

<sup>32</sup> Balmer in Harrison (ed.) 2009: 64.

## Carson and Lacan

In an interview in *The Paris Review*, Carson said:

I don't feel much direct relevance of ancient things to modern things. ... What's entrancing about the Greeks is that you get little glimpses of similarity, embedded in unbelievable otherness, in this huge landscape of strange convictions about the world and reactions to life that make no sense at all.<sup>33</sup>

This is an uncontroversial statement from a late twentieth century classicist, but though this represents Carson's general view on the relationship of the ancient world to modernity, on the evidence of her scholarship Carson sees quite a lot of direct relevance, and much more than 'little glimpses' of continuity. She does not 'other' the Greeks at all to the extent that this view suggests, but, as explored earlier, takes a more progressivist approach to Greek culture, in which the Greeks have produced 'us' in some very direct ways. Carson's creative work is also, like her scholarship, often based on a strong aesthetic connection with ancient texts, a connection which is often also combined with highly personal emotions and experiences within her poems and creative interpretations. Both as scholar and maker, Carson gives us her take on ancient otherness at both an intellectual and emotional level, but at other times she writes as if she has a clear insight into the intentions of these writers, even describing them in terms of easy familiarity. Indeed, ambivalence and the jarring of contrary ideas is a distinguishing feature of her work.

This ambivalence is also evident in her response to the theoretical ideas often said to have influenced her. The original reviewers of *Eros the Bittersweet*, from the traditionalist perspective to the politically radical, were mostly of the opinion that its approach was highly influenced by the postmodern linguistic and philosophical writings of Jacques Derrida.<sup>34</sup> However, to the extent that Carson does use theory in *Eros the Bittersweet*, (and she is never easy to pin down in this regard) the more significant influence is that of the structuralist psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan.

Lacan is often described as a theorist, though his relationship to a body of writing designated as theory is in fact a complex one; for example, he explicitly denied the possibility of any form of totality in understanding. He himself described his work as a return to Freud, and particularly to the importance of Freud's three early works, which, according to Lacan, 'one might call canonical'; *Die Traumdeutung* (1899), *Zur*

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<sup>33</sup> Aitken and Carson 2004: 185.

<sup>34</sup> Sheppard 1987: 375-376, Sienkewicz 1987: 89-90, Sinos 1988: 232-233, Walsh 1988: 369-373, Gold 1990: 400-403.

*Psychopathologie des Alltagslebens* (1901), and *Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewußten* (1905).<sup>35</sup> But if Lacan made use of Freud's ideas, he also developed them, especially with regard to the significance of language, both in the formation of the human psyche and in the clinical application of psychoanalysis itself. Many of Lacan's ideas spring from a linguistic reading of Freud, ideas which Lacan insists were implicit in Freud's writing, even if Freud himself was not conscious of them.

In Lacan's writings, the neurotic symptom of the patient is relieved by the deciphering of linguistic symbols in the unconscious; indeed, for Lacan, the unconscious itself is structured like a language, and therefore can be read like a text:

[The analyst] interprets the symbol and ... the symptom, which inscribes the symbol in letters of suffering in the patient's flesh, disappears.<sup>36</sup>

This connection between symbol and symptom is based on the assumption that, as soon as we open our mouths to say what we think or feel, it is the operations of language that speak for us, not what we most intend to say. Moreover, the subtle structures and associations of language mean, for Lacan, that these symbols in the unconscious are never isolated, but exist in what he called chains: so, for example, the word 'tree' signifies not just one particular image but a whole string of connected meanings, including the 'robur and the plane tree', the qualities of 'strength and majesty', the 'symbolic contexts suggested in the Hebrew of the Bible', the cross of Christ, the capital Y, 'circulatory tree', the 'tree of life of the cerebellum', 'tree of Saturn', 'tree of Diana', etc.<sup>37</sup> If this is the case with the word 'tree' then it applies much more so to the word 'I', which means that when one uses the first person pronoun one is speaking from a crux in the nexus of language at least as much as one is referring to oneself as an individual speaking; it is this crux that Lacan calls the subject. When we let our words speak for themselves, that is exactly who they speak for. So there is an inevitable gap between what we actually say and what we mean. Lacan uses examples from many branches of knowledge, particularly the sciences and mathematics, to illustrate and support his theories, however, he has sometimes been criticised by specialists from the different fields he makes use of, for failing to understand the knowledge he draws on.<sup>38</sup>

Some of the ideas on language in *Eros the Bittersweet*, and even some of the

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<sup>35</sup> Lacan 1977: 170.

<sup>36</sup> Lacan 1977: 92.

<sup>37</sup> Lacan 1977: 154.

<sup>38</sup> Sokal and Bricmont 1999: 24, Roudinesco 1997: 46.

phraseology, show that Carson is a reader of Lacan. Consider this paragraph, for example, from Lacan's essay, *Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious*:

This signifying game between metonymy and metaphor, up to and including *the active edge that splits my desire between a refusal of the signifier and a lack of being*, and links my fate to the question of my destiny, this game, in all its inexorable subtlety, is played until the match is called, *there where I am not, because I cannot situate myself there.*<sup>39</sup> [My italics]

In *Eros the Bittersweet*, as discussed earlier, Carson says that the effect of *eros* is to 'split' the lover's desire, creating a blind spot in being which she calls the 'edge', and goes on to define *eros* as 'lack'. There is also, in both writers, the idea of the split in desire being deeply involved with language, as well as the conclusion that all love is ultimately a form of self-love: one puts oneself in the place of the beloved, or the beloved in place of oneself.

However, if Carson is influenced by Lacan it is also the case that she is highly selective in the ideas she takes from him. This eclecticism will come as no surprise to her readers, but it is also necessary for the coherence of her argument in *Eros the Bittersweet*, since there is as much in Lacan which contradicts her argument as would support it. Firstly, it would be impossible, according to Lacan, for the *psyche* to be changed radically by the historical development of literacy, which much of Carson's argument depends on, because, for Lacan, history itself is only the manifestation of the structuring of the subject's experience through the structuring of his or her unconscious. Indeed, he can be very dismissive of the study of history in general:

Thus the subject, too, if he can appear to be the slave of language is all the more so of a discourse in the universal movement in which his place is already inscribed at birth, if only by virtue of his proper name.

Reference to the experience of the community, or to the substance of this discourse, settles nothing. For this experience assumes its essential dimension in the tradition that this discourse itself establishes. This tradition, long before the drama of history is inscribed in it, lays down the elementary structures of culture. And these very structures reveal an ordering of possible exchanges which, even if unconscious, is inconceivable outside the permutations authorized by language.<sup>40</sup>

So much for Carson's envisioning of the inhabitants of an oral culture as being more in touch with their environment and therefore less vulnerable to the effects of language. For Lacan, the advent of literacy is as nothing compared to the effects of being given a name at birth.

Equally, the replacement of concrete, social experience within an oral culture by isolated, literate existence, by means of a Greek alphabet uniquely suited to abstract thought, would

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<sup>39</sup> Lacan 1977: 166.

<sup>40</sup> Lacan 1977: 148.

not be accepted by Lacan, according to whom language is abstract *before* it is concrete; concreteness in art and culture being a function of sophistication, not the primitive. Religion, for example, according to Lacan, began not as individual responses to dreams and other inexplicable phenomena, but as an abstract separation of the sacred from the profane. Therefore, Lacan could not allow the idea of the Greek alphabet itself having special qualities which engendered a tendency to abstract thought.

We can see from this that Carson, in *Eros the Bittersweet* (1986), though she is influenced by structuralist theory, is not more committed to it than she is to her other sources and influences. What she is determined to do, though, is to place the interpretation of Greek lyric firmly within the sphere of the aesthetic as well as in the scholarly and the historical. To this end, she makes a hybrid argument which combines elements of theory, history, philology, literature, visual art, and psychoanalysis. Though there is nothing inherently problematic with such hybridism, it does not entirely succeed in this case because, as I have shown earlier, some of her historical argument is doubtful to say the least. Where she is most influenced by Lacan is in the general assumption that language speaks for itself when we most want it to speak for us. This is the assumption that lies behind many of the radical things Carson does with language in her subsequent creative work. As an artist, she has a very concrete imagination. If language is in the way, then the best artistic response, for her, is to dismantle it, displace it, and even remove it, in order to try to say what one means.

In demonstrating the weaknesses and omissions in Carson's argument it is easy to make her reading of Greek lyric seem simply a flawed one. However, this conclusion would not do justice to the many insights into particular verses and fragments that she gives along the way. The most important point, however, is that the deficiencies of *Eros the Bittersweet* as a work of scholarship are not unconnected from each other, nor are they simply the work of a bad scholar. In the following chapter I read Carson's poetry and creative interpretations of lyric in the light of her argument in *Eros the Bittersweet*. What this reading shows is just how much the creative work she went on to write afterwards owes to the interpretation of Greek lyric, and especially Sappho, explored in this chapter. These connections are most apparent in her verse novel *Autobiography of Red* (1998), which is Carson's twentieth century creative reworking of the fragments of Stesichoros' *Geryoneid*, and of the myth of Heracles and Geryon more broadly. However, *Autobiography of Red* also shows how her preoccupations with the meaning of Greek lyric are combined with contemporary, social and cultural influences, as well as autobiographical aspects, as Carson begins to move on

from her vision of *eros* as a harsh instructor of imaginative truth and self-knowledge, to a somewhat different vision of the self and what lies beyond it.

## Part Two

### Chapter Eight

#### Carson's Creative Project

Having explored Anne Carson's interpretation of the functions and ramifications of *eros* in ancient Greek lyric in her monograph *Eros the Bittersweet* (1986), I show in this chapter how the matrix of ideas she develops in this work of scholarship is a significant influence upon her subsequent creative work. Rather than undertake a survey of Carson's published works of poetry and creative interpretations, I follow a particular thread of influence through her creative work, showing how it shapes both the form and content of a large part of her work, and how it changes as her career develops, from a concern with the nature of the (erotic) self to truths which lie beyond the self and may be incompatible with it. In the next chapter I explore how this change of emphasis, in which Carson attempts to move away from the self, exists in creative tension with her dominating presence within the texts of her translations of Greek drama, and in Chapter Ten how it has transformed the direction of her recent creative work. In the final chapter I bring these aspects together to show how their reception has enabled Carson to construct a public version of herself almost as autonomous and reclusive as Housman's, exploring the similarities and differences between their grand assertions of personality and cultural presence in response to social and cultural necessities.

In *Eros the Bittersweet*, as discussed in the previous chapter, there are three aspects of the self working closely together under the dominance of *eros*: the effects of *eros* on the individual self, breaking it down and reconstructing it; the role of *eros* in developing the literate, self-contained self historically, and, overarching these, the centrality of Carson's self as reader in revealing and interpreting the significance and subtleties of the other two aspects. It should come as no surprise therefore, that in Carson's creative work, most of which engages closely with ancient Greek literature, explorations of selfhood are very important. Moreover, the specifically erotic and metaphysical version of the self from *Eros the Bittersweet* is a significant presence in her creative work.

However, there is a twist in the story: although the techniques Carson uses to call attention to herself as a reader of ancient texts continue through her writing career

(especially in her translation work which is explored in the next chapter), her exploration of the meaning of selfhood in her creative work changes its emphasis. Instead of continuing to focus upon *eros* as a facilitator of the imagination and consequently of knowledge, she shows a developing interest in the theme of escaping from the self, in self-abnegation and self-abandonment, or as she calls it, 'decreation'. It is quite ironic that an author so famous and well-rewarded for her unique, even idiosyncratic, style of creation and interpretation should work increasingly hard, in both her writing techniques and in the direction of her work, to find a position to write from that is as impersonal as possible.<sup>1</sup> This developing theme begins with Carson referring to her urgent need to escape from her own mind and how this drives her writing techniques to extremes, emerges into a rather obscure interpretation of Mimnermos which resides somewhere between the psychoanalytical and the mystical, continues more transparently in her large-scale reconstruction of Stesichoros' *Geryoneid* in *Autobiography of Red* (1998), and develops finally into a radically different return to Sappho via the mysticisms of Simone Weil and Marguerite Porete in *Decreation* (2005).

### ***Plainwater* (1995)**

I emphasise this. I will do anything to avoid boredom. It is the task of a lifetime. You can never know enough, never work enough, never use the infinitives and participles oddly enough, never impede the movement harshly enough, never leave the mind quickly enough.<sup>2</sup>

Thus ends Carson's introduction to her first collection of prose-poems, *Short Talks*, as reprinted in her book *Plainwater* (1995). This is a strikingly different voice from that of *Eros the Bittersweet*, with its vivid explorations of charged emotions and the implications of erotic passion. Of course, this use of a more personal voice could simply mark the change of genre from scholarship to poetry, though, as shown below, this is often a highly permeable membrane for Carson. She is still writing about extremes of experience, though now it is about leaving the mind rather than discovering the mind. One of the prose-poems in this section, entitled 'On Hedonism', also indicates a different relationship to desire in this book:

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<sup>1</sup> This attitude may be at least partly inspired by the Modernist influence in Carson's work: cf. T. S. Eliot's famous statements on the impersonality of the poet in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', Eliot 1932: 10.

<sup>2</sup> Carson 1995: 29.



The book begins, though, with Carson's creative translation of the fragments of Mimnermos, entitled 'Mimnermos: The Brainsex Paintings', and these poems are accompanied by an essay entitled 'Mimnermos and the Motions of Hedonism', as well as three short, witty 'Interviews' conducted between a surprisingly modern-sounding Mimnermos and his unnamed interviewer.<sup>4</sup>

On one level, it is no surprise that Carson moves from Sappho's fragments to those of Mimnermos, given the proximity of the two historically, culturally and in terms of subject matter and genre. On the evidence of *Eros the Bittersweet* one would expect, in Carson's approach to Mimnermos, an emphasis on *eros*, the letter, and time, and the knowledge that can be gained from their interactions. And, indeed, some of these aspects are present in Carson's approach. In the essay, she tells us that Mimnermos, though he turns historical military victories into verse, is not interested in 'explaining historical references'. Rather, she says: 'he stitches together two moments – 'Then and Now''.<sup>5</sup> This is familiar language from Carson: as discussed in the previous chapter, she has a great deal to say about these two moments, in the context of Sappho's temporal markers, in *Eros the Bittersweet*; there are always these two points in time that, according to Carson, the desperate lover ineluctably connects. She uses her creative translation of Mimnermos fragment 1 to give us an example of what she sees as his interest in bringing together 'Then' and 'Now'.<sup>6</sup>

#### **What Is Life Without Aphrodite?**

*He seems an irrepressible hedonist as he asks his leading question.*

Up to your honeybasket hilts in her ore – or else  
Death? For yes  
How gentle it is to go swimming inside her the secret  
swimming  
Of men and women but (no) then  
The night hide toughens over it (no) then bandages  
Crusted with old man smell (no) then  
Bowl gone black nor bud nor boys nor women nor sun no  
Spores (no) at (no) all when  
God or hardstrut nothingness close  
its fist on you.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Carson 1995: 44.

<sup>4</sup> Carson 1995: 3-26.

<sup>5</sup> Carson 1995: 3-26.

<sup>6</sup> Fragment 1 in Allen 1970, which Carson also entitles 'Fragment One'.

<sup>7</sup> Carson 1995: 3.

From this creative reconstruction we see that in Carson's vision of Mimnermos he is an emotional absolutist. He wants to be up to his 'hilts' in Aphrodite's 'ore', or else dead. Carson also characterises the forces of human decay and destruction, making them more active agents than in the original. The movement in this poem takes the form of an escape, through hedonistic excess, from the contingent self into a superior, perhaps divine experience. The image of the swimmer is one Carson has used several times, and this recurrent idea seems to be based on a kind of existential ideal of the self being in complete harmony with the surrounding medium she moves through: the swimmer being at one with the water. However, this is followed instantly by the horrors of age and then destruction by a force which may be God, time or simply nothingness. The individuality of Mimnermos' viewpoint, according to Carson, is that the 'Now' and the 'Then' which collide in this fragment, are not the lover's desolate present and his imagined, perfect, longed-for state, but just the opposite. Carson emphasises the fact that the subject matter in this lyric turns abruptly, half way through, from the pleasures of youth to the horrors of age in the middle of a verse. She further argues that, linguistically, this effect must be intentional since it defies the ancient convention of avoiding 'word-end at mid verse' in Greek dactylic hexameter.<sup>8</sup> Therefore the collision of youth and age in the middle of the middle verse must be, according to Carson, a deliberate effect, and this contrast between youth and age, with nothing in between, is the key to Carson's interpretation of the fragment, and its main point of interest for her.

However, in the essay which follows the poems, Carson tells us that Mimnermos was far from being the hedonistic poet he appears to be.<sup>9</sup> She admits that he writes of 'boys and flesh and dawn and women' and that, as she puts it, 'he likes to get the sun in every poem'. But then, in a surprising move, she immediately quotes Franz Kafka on the nature of the poet's task, which is 'to lead the isolated human being into the infinite life, the contingent into the lawful'. Her subsequent argument creates a different emphasis from *Eros the Bittersweet*, or at least the parts of it which relied upon Snell's development of the mind thesis. In *Eros the Bittersweet* she told us that the Greek lyric poets recorded the creation, not only of the literate reader, but perhaps even of the individual, isolated self-consciousness, the private mental space that we inhabit.<sup>10</sup> The vulnerability of this new kind of self to assault by *eros* was for Carson the main subject of the Greek lyricists, as the mental and emotional space created by *eros* made them reach towards new knowledge of

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<sup>8</sup> Carson 1995: 15.

<sup>9</sup> Carson 1995: 12-17.

<sup>10</sup> Carson 1986: 44-45.

themselves. According to Carson, Sappho in fragment 31 attempts to force the reader to re-enact this process. However, in this essay she argues that Mimnermos is leading the reader beyond subjective separation, not merely into greater self-knowledge but into something called ‘the infinite life’. In *Eros the Bittersweet* she wrote of reaching from the known to the unknown; but now she is beginning to tell us about what she thinks the unknown contains, and that this is something to do with the ‘lawful’ and the ‘infinite life’. What she means by these terms is not completely clear, and it is a characteristic rhetorical move of Carson’s to tell us there is really something else going on below the surface of Mimnermos’ lines, while at the same time only dropping hints about what that might be. As in *Eros the Bittersweet*, she teases the reader.

According to Carson, Mimnermos’ real interest lies not in hedonism but in a place ‘down behind the world’.<sup>11</sup> This idea is explored further in the following ‘Interview’ with Mimnermos, where the phrase ‘down behind the world’ seems to be related to the unconscious mind.<sup>12</sup> It is relevant in this context to mention that according to Sigmund Freud, who is referred or alluded to several times in the essay and ‘Interviews’, the psychic entity he calls the *es* (id) has no sense of linear time, and it seems to be to this kind of timelessness Carson is alluding.<sup>13</sup> For her, Mimnermos is interested in timelessness, in eternity. These themes of the mind, desire, the destruction of the self, all come together towards the end of her second interview with Mimnermos, when they discuss the value of dreams, which Mimnermos dismisses. In response, the interviewer suggests there is an ‘organising effort’ that lies beneath the surface of dreams, implying psychoanalytic truth and the importance of the unconscious. Mimnermos responds abruptly:

M[mimnermos]: Nothing takes place but the place

I[interviewer]: Are you serious

M[mimnermos]: Just a telephone ringing in an empty house<sup>14</sup>

Here we arrive at the core of what Carson sees as Mimnermos’ vision of reality. There is no such thing as a solid self in Mimnermos’ vision, there is only eternity, or the timeless unconscious. This strange vision also seems to include the Freudian unconscious and the idea of spiritual enlightenment, and Carson clearly sees no reason to have to choose

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<sup>11</sup> Carson 1995: 13.

<sup>12</sup> Carson 1995: 18-26.

<sup>13</sup> Thurschwell 2009: 80.

<sup>14</sup> Carson 1995: 22.

between them or deliver a final verdict. There is a sense of the mystical in Carson's creative translations and comments which creates a quite different sense of the world of Greek lyric than *Eros the Bittersweet*. Her historically progressive view of the self seems to be reaching a destination, even if it is a place where no one can answer the phone.

More generally, though Carson's creative translations of Mimnermos, and her comments on them, share some of the interest in emotional transformations evident in *Eros the Bittersweet*, the absence of anything except youthful passion and death here sits rather strangely beside the idea that *eros* represents knowledge through erotic experience. In this view, the only thing that there is to discover is the end, and eternity. It is as if she has created her own mythos in her scholarship in order to dismantle it in her creativity; dismantling being one of Carson's most often recurring ideas.

### ***Autobiography of Red (1998)***

Often described as Carson's breakthrough book, *Autobiography of Red* contains fifteen poems which recreate the fragments of Stesichoros, with an accompanying essay and poetic 'appendices' followed by a long contemporary narrative; a novel in free verse, described in its blurb as:

an unconventional re-creation of an ancient myth and a wholly original coming-of-age story set in the present.

The ancient myth in question is the story of Geryon, the monster killed by Heracles as the tenth of his labours, which was to possess Geryon's cattle. The origin of the colour in the title, *Autobiography of Red*, is partly the island of Erytheia, where Geryon lived, meaning 'red place'. Carson turns the colour red into a ubiquitous presence in the first section of poems; Geryon is a red monster with red wings on a red island with red cattle standing in a red wind. Carson's multiple uses of the colour in the book as a whole suggest she may have read the lyrical meditation *On Being Blue* by William H. Gass (2007). The colour represents desire at some points of the story, anger or lust at others. In this interpretation Geryon also lives the life of a human child, then an adolescent, then a love-lorn, travelling young man. His gay lover is called Heracles from the town of Hades. Geryon is also a keen photographer and student of philosophy. After the failure of his love affair with Heracles he travels to Buenos Aires in order to find both himself and the answer to his constant question: what is time made of?

Carson's Stesichoros poems in *Autobiography Of Red* tell a version of the story of Geryon, but not in linear chronology.<sup>15</sup> This Geryon has a 'war record' but later on the same page describes himself as a 'little boy'. In Carson's seventh poem Geryon drinks wine at the home of Phocus the centaur, just as Athenaeus tells us Stesichoros' Geryon did.<sup>16</sup> Like other boys he has an anxious mother and a dog, but he can also take off and fly high above the Atlantic. In this version he does not do battle with Herakles, rather Herakles, who is not characterised at this point in the book, simply turns up and kills Geryon and his dog. Carson uses Stesichoros' image of the 'poppy' to describe Geryon's head falling sideways as it is pierced by Herakles' arrow.<sup>17</sup> The references Carson makes in these poems to the actual fragments of Stesichoros are interesting in themselves, but the strong presence of another story, mixed up with them, makes them of little use in trying to understand the ancient poems in any conventional sense. Rather, Carson seems deliberately to have made a puzzle that can only be approached through the verse-novel which follows the fragments.

Yet this is also a rather extended puzzle, since one of the main influences on this verse-novel is Carson's interpretation of Greek lyric in *Eros the Bittersweet*. In some chapters, the novel follows the scholarship quite closely, in terms of its thematic and narrative parallels. We first see Carson's Geryon as a small boy, and at this point he is presented as living in the oral culture of childhood, deeply connected with and alive to his environment in exactly the ways Carson tells us, in *Eros the Bittersweet*, the pre-literate archaic Greeks were. In order to make this clear she makes language physical:

The word *each* blew towards him and came apart on the wind.<sup>18</sup>

As an oral being, with a psyche not yet made fragile by writing and desire, Geryon is left relatively unscathed even by experiences such as sexual abuse and bullying by his elder brother. They are even said to develop an 'economy' of sex for gifts.<sup>19</sup> He remains in this resilient state until Chapter Nineteen, when his lover Herakles decides he has had enough of him and sends him home. Tellingly, Geryon describes himself at this point as a 'man in transition' on the first page of this chapter, which is full of references to different kinds of writing – examination questions, the constitution of Argentina, the *Encyclopaedia*

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<sup>15</sup> Carson 1998: 9-14.

<sup>16</sup> Page 1974: 13.

<sup>17</sup> Carson 1998: 11.

<sup>18</sup> Carson 1998: 26.

<sup>19</sup> Carson 1998: 28.

*Britannica* (1911 edition), as well as Geryon's autobiography. When Geryon experiences the full pain of love and falls apart, his reaction to being rejected is a physical one:

Geryon's heart and lungs were a black crust. He had a sudden strong desire to go to sleep.<sup>20</sup>

This is a slightly different reaction to Sappho fragment 31, though it is equally physically intense. It also echoes the abandoned Sappho's desire to die in fragment 94: 'I simply want to be dead'.<sup>21</sup> What makes Carson's intentions clear is this chapter's title: 'From the Archaic to the Fast Self', which could easily have been the title of a chapter in *Eros the Bittersweet*.

In the next chapter Herakles' grandmother, a literary figure with connections to Freud and Virginia Woolf, takes Geryon and Herakles to visit a volcano. From Geryon's arrival in the town of Hades, the nearby volcano has been a symbol of the flow and eruptions of desire, but the passion of the volcano has also become deeply involved with ideas of time thanks to a photograph, taken by Herakles' grandmother, showing a time-lapsed superimposed image of the volcano erupting in 1923. So the continuous flow of lava has been split into moments of time, a series of instances of 'now' merging with 'then', one of the effects of *eros* that Carson describes in *Eros the Bittersweet*. Geryon is 'disturbed' by this photograph.

Following the implications of this symbol (which Carson derived from the Emily Dickinson poem, 'No. 1748', which acts as prologue to the novel), this way of recording the eruption, and therefore of recording desire, is shown to be more accurate (and therefore disturbing) than would be a linear representation of the eruption, precisely because the linear representation would include all the history between *then* and *now*.<sup>22</sup> Not only does this use of symbolism strongly recall Carson's approach in *Eros the Bittersweet*, it has important implications for what happens to Geryon later (that is, 'later' in the linear narrative that Carson does use). However, the photograph also recalls references to time in Carson's essay on Mimnermos in *Plainwater* (1995), which were, there, linked with eternity, so other levels of meaning are included in this photograph, as well as the erotic vision of time from *Eros the Bittersweet*.

When they reach the volcano itself, Geryon steps out of the car onto a smooth, glassy

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<sup>20</sup> Carson 1998: 62.

<sup>21</sup> Carson 2002: 184-185.

<sup>22</sup> Dickinson 1976: 708.

surface that was once lava.<sup>23</sup> So, symbolically, the free-flowing volcano is now a glass volcano, symbolising Geryon's resilient, responsive oral self becoming a fragile, literate lover. However, if *Autobiography of Red* followed the conceptual framework of *Eros the Bittersweet* throughout, it would surely have ended differently, perhaps with recreation of Geryon into someone with greater imagination and more self-knowledge, having learnt from the madness of desire. He would, in other words, still be a recognisably human character as well as a monster with red wings. But, as with the poems explored above, there is also something else going on. It doesn't end like this, rather Geryon's viewpoint on the erotic triangle in which he is involved, and on himself, begins to move to a much stranger level of experience. What happens to him in the end is much more transcendent than merely gaining new knowledge, and the extent to which there is still a subjective being called Geryon, at the end, is questionable, once Geryon has completed his transition.

Towards the end of *Autobiography of Red* Herakles, Geryon, and Herakles' new lover Ancash, plan a visit to Huarez in Peru. In chapter xxxvii when Ancash finally sees Geryon's wings he tells him about the traditional beliefs of the people of Huarez, and specifically about the *yazcamac*, the transfigured ones who saw and survived the 'inside' of the local volcano and came back, shaman-like, to tell others about it.<sup>24</sup> Like Geryon, the *yazcamac* were red and had wings. So now Geryon, who has also survived his own volcano of desire, becomes linked with the idea of transfiguration. Further, Ancash tells Geryon that anthropologists translate *yazcamac* as 'eyewitnesses', which gives us a clue as to what Geryon's role will be in the remainder of the novel: both a transfigured being and a maker of images. On arrival in Huarez in Peru, as he is about to take photographs of the volcano, Carson writes:

I am disappearing, he thought, but the photographs were worth it.<sup>25</sup>

This change would appear to go beyond the knowledge he has gained about himself as a lover by, for example, attempting to bring together the moments of *then* and *now*. He is not becoming a new self: rather only the photographs continue to exist. His viewpoint is becoming objectified as he is mystically transfigured into an 'eyewitness'. Six of the seven remaining chapters are entitled 'Photographs' and all of these chapters begin with the words 'It is a photograph of ...'. This also reminds the reader that, even right back in

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<sup>23</sup> Carson 1998: 63-64.

<sup>24</sup> Carson 1998: 128-129.

<sup>25</sup> Carson 1998: 135.

Chapter Nineteen, Geryon's autobiography had recently changed its form from words to a 'photographic essay'.<sup>26</sup> Significantly, this is the chapter in which Geryon originally referred to himself as being a man in transition. There seems to be a parallel symbolic structure here to the one concerning oral words and written words; one in which all the words are running out.

In chapter forty-five Geryon goes through a 'red EXIT sign' in the hotel and into 'the debris of the hotel garden'.<sup>27</sup> Ancash says he wants to see Geryon use his wings. Then, in the penultimate chapter, Geryon actually flies away, and this photograph has a number as its title, '#1748', the same number as the Emily Dickinson poem involving a volcano at the beginning of the book, which ends 'The only secret people keep | Is Immortality'. This photograph is described as having been taken by 'no one'. Geryon has not only exited the erotic triangle into the debris, not only flown off on Blake-like wings of desire, he has also gone into the impersonal in some sense. The three young men are described as having 'immortality' on their faces.

At the end of the book, Carson defines Stesichoros' themes as 'Identity, memory, eternity', but to understand more about where it is Geryon flies off to, one has to read it in the light of Carson's other creative works. Hers is, to some extent, a creative project that continues and develops from book to book. Also, it is also worth considering that *Autobiography of Red* is probably the closest Carson comes to writing her own autobiography. We have already seen above that Carson identified with gay men from a relatively early age, especially the 'carapace of irony' she says they use to survive, and she sometimes, in her writing and interviews, reveals an indeterminate sense of her own gender. As well as this, she was also a classicist 'freak' at Toronto University, and said in her *Paris Review* interview, 'I don't know what it is about growing up female that makes one think: monster'.<sup>28</sup> It would be impossible to correlate the events of Geryon's life in the verse-novel with those of Carson's, and yet Geryon's transfiguration at the end, the end of his existence as a subject, is an interesting link, if hard to define, with Carson's statement about not wanting to be a person and her declaration that her personal poetry is a failure. This link is made more explicit by the fact that Geryon disappears into a visual medium, a series of photographs, and Carson herself has always been a visual artist.

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<sup>26</sup> Carson 1998: 60.

<sup>27</sup> Carson 1998: 142.

<sup>28</sup> Aitken and Carson 2004: 212.



## **Decreation (2005) – ‘Me, as ever, gone’**

Carson’s collection of poetry and prose *Decreation* (2005) is very much concerned with self and its absence. In the second section of the book, an essay entitled ‘Every Exit is an Entrance’, Carson relates a dream she had, as a child, about standing in the emptiness of the family living room.<sup>29</sup> At the time it seemed to her that she had caught the living room asleep, though now she interprets it in more mystical terms, as if the living room was somehow being itself, unobserved by human eyes: like the proverbial tree in the forest when no one is looking. She uses the simile of the swimmer again, seen earlier, in her creative translation of Mimnermos, in this context. Also in this chapter is a psychoanalysis-based exploration of *Odyssey* 6 and 19, which focuses on the simultaneous sleep of Odysseus and Nausikaa.<sup>30</sup> About sleep she says, ‘no other experience gives us so primary a sense of being governed by laws outside us’. In this context it is useful to remember that Geryon’s first reaction in *Autobiography of Red*, when Herakles rejects him, is to want to fall asleep, and that the lover who leaves the poet in *Glass and God*, whom the poet is trying to get over, is named ‘Law’. Carson’s creative books are connected by their themes and images: this theme, as well as the vision of *eros* that it counterpoints, are often carried forward from book to book (though they are not equally relevant in all her work). There is a kind of thematic dance between these two motifs of desire and ‘Law’ which contain somewhat different versions of the self.

In another essay in *Decreation* entitled ‘FOAM’, Carson returns to the subject of volcanoes again in order to focus on the concept of the sublime.<sup>31</sup> As in *Autobiography of Red*, she quotes Longinus’ description of the sublime as ‘bigness’ or ‘magnitude’; an overwhelming aesthetic experience which contains ‘volcanoes, oceans, ecstasies’, which breaks the limits of the isolated self, and which can also be destructive. The important point for Carson is that in response to this, as she puts it, ‘the sublime soul is *all but* lost’.<sup>32</sup> As an example of this she cites Longinus’ image of Homer foaming at the mouth, lost in his own poetic evocation.<sup>33</sup> Turning this idea onto Longinus himself, Carson says that he recreates rather than defines the idea of the sublime: therefore, he too is ‘all but lost’.

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<sup>29</sup> Carson 2005: 19-20.

<sup>30</sup> Carson 2005: 27-35.

<sup>31</sup> Carson 2005: 45-50.

<sup>32</sup> Carson 2005: 48.

<sup>33</sup> *Subl.* 9.11. The foaming mouth is originally Hector’s. Longinus quotes *Il.* 15. 605, and applies the image of Hector fighting to Homer himself describing the scene.

As far as it is possible to summarise Carson's interpretation of the sublime, it seems that she is, in effect, reading Longinus' treatise through the prism of eighteenth-century conceptions of the sublime, particularly through their drawing together of the idea of immensity in the experience of the sublime (hence the volcano) with Christianized ideas of the sublimity of God and of the self. She, in turn, draws together these two strands of God and selfhood, connecting them with the erotic and spiritual near-annihilation of the poet in Sappho fragment 31.

In order to illustrate her interpretation, Carson uses the example of the film director Michelangelo Antonioni trying to make a documentary set in an asylum. The patients, who have helped with the equipment and the *mis-en-scene* calmly and quietly, suddenly go wild when the enormous lights for the set are turned on. Carson tells us, 'You have to admire the mad, they know how to value a passionate moment', but it is their abandonment of themselves to this moment which she really admires, their lostness.<sup>34</sup>

Carson also returns again to her great interest in textual fragmentation in this essay, and in particular to her obsession with how to interpret the particular point of fragmentation. Longinus' treatise *On the Sublime* breaks off before the end, and, Carson writes:

The next page is too damaged to read and after that you cannot say how much is missing. Longinus skates away.<sup>35</sup>

It seems that for her a break in a fragmentary text is almost a sublime moment in itself. The vanishing Longinus connects to the disappearing Geryon and to Mimnermos' use of the setting sun.

In the 'rhapsody' which follows, which is inspired by her essay on the sublime, she writes

My personal poetry is a failure.  
I do not want to be a person.  
I want to be unbearable.  
Lover to lover, the greenness of love.<sup>36</sup>

The idea of the 'unbearable' here seems to be also connected with her understanding of the sublime, and the 'greenness' is clearly a reference to Sappho fragment 31, where the suffering, almost dying lover describes herself as 'greener than grass'.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Carson 2005: 50.

<sup>35</sup> Carson 2005: 50.

<sup>36</sup> Carson 2006: 72.

<sup>37</sup> Carson 1986: 13.

In the essay which bears the name of the book, 'Decreation', Carson returns to Sappho fragment 31. The essay is sub-titled, 'How Women Like Sappho, Marguerite Porete and Simone Weil Tell God'. Carson's interpretation of this fragment, and of Sappho herself here, make it clear how much Carson's aesthetic has developed since *Eros the Bittersweet* (1986). Here Carson envisages Sappho as a much more hieratic figure, a priestess of Aphrodite perhaps, whose poems are deeply involved with her sacred office. Her new interpretation of Sappho fragment 31 focuses upon the last line (line 17) that she didn't include in *Eros the Bittersweet*, and it is an important line here for Carson's purposes:

*ἀλλὰ πᾶν τόλματον, ἐπεὶ ἴκαι πένηταί*

She translates it as 'But all is to be dared, because even a person of poverty ...'.<sup>38</sup> To Carson, it shows the subject matter of the original poem beginning to move to somewhere new. Though she admits we cannot know how the poem ends, the extreme psychological dissociation she now sees in it suggest to her that it is an example of *ekstasis*, a standing outside of the self usually associated with the ecstasy and self-abandonment of religious mystics.<sup>39</sup>

Carson then turns to Marguerite Porete, the Christian mystic who was burnt at the stake for heresy, and who wrote the theological treatise, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*. According to Carson, Porete, like Sappho, also described her surrender to God as a state of poverty.<sup>40</sup> As well as this similarity, Porete also speaks of her love of God in terms of a triangular relationship, which, of course, was one of Carson's main themes in *Eros the Bittersweet*. Carson quotes Porete:

Then he asked me how I would fare if it could happen he should love another more than me. And here my sense failed me and I knew not what to say.<sup>41</sup>

The third writer explored in this essay is the French philosopher, mystic, and activist, Simone Weil. The connection with Weil may have been suggested directly by the reference to a 'person of poverty' in line 17 of Sappho fragment 31, given Weil's life of extreme self-denial and deliberate poverty, together with her philosophy of love as radical

<sup>38</sup> Carson 2005: 159. *τόλματον* is more commonly translated as 'endured' rather than 'dared', though both appear in *LSJ* 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition (1983): 1803. Denys Page points out the meaning could be: all *has been* ventured or endured; Page 1979: 26.

<sup>39</sup> Carson 2006: 161.

<sup>40</sup> Carson 2006: 164.

<sup>41</sup> Carson 2006: 165.

self-sacrifice and her insistence upon the need to extinguish the self. Carson describes Weil's belief that she could only achieve union with God by becoming an 'annihilated soul', that love of God in itself was not enough, since the self that one uses to love with will always get in the way. Carson points out that Weil also expresses this predicament in terms of an erotic triangle:

I am not the maiden who awaits her betrothed but the unwelcome third who is with two betrothed lovers and who ought to go away so that they can really be together.<sup>42</sup>

The difference between the two situations Weil describes here is almost a summary of the way Carson's attitude to selfhood has changed since *Eros the Bittersweet*, and may even be one of the sources of that change. For the first situation, the maiden awaiting her betrothed, is very similar to Carson's description of 'the fiction arranged by the mind of the lover' in the absence of the beloved; the gap or lack created by *eros*.<sup>43</sup> The idea of the 'unwelcome third' is close to Carson's new interpretation of Sappho's emotional self-immolation within the erotic triangle in fragment 31. Weil called the process of annihilating herself 'decreation'. She writes of trying to see a landscape as it is when she is not there, without the beating of her heart disturbing the silence of heaven. For Carson, this is what all three are trying to achieve:

... Sappho found a way to record the beating of her heart while imagining its absence - for surely this is the function performed in her poem by "the man who opposite you sits and listens close." This man, Sappho tells us, is "equal to gods"; but can we not read him as her way of representing "the landscape as it is when I'm not there"?<sup>44</sup>

Though we cannot, of course, say that Carson has found the real Sappho, her re-visitation of fragment 31 is more persuasive than some passages in *Eros the Bittersweet*. It has the virtue of bringing together, plausibly, some of the different Sapphos who have been imagined historically; the poet, the lover, and the priestess of Aphrodite. The similarities between the erotic triangle of fragment 31 and the writings of Porete and Weil are intriguing, though it should be said this interpretation alters Carson's interpretation of Sappho in *Eros the Bittersweet*, in that this is a Sappho attempting to decreate rather than recreate herself, and the reader. While these two versions do not necessarily contradict

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<sup>42</sup> Carson 2006: 168.

<sup>43</sup> Carson 2006: 169.

<sup>44</sup> Carson 2006: 169. There may also be a connection to Jacques Lacan here, who wrote: "I" am in a place from which a voice is heard clamouring "the universe is a defect in the purity of Non-Being"; Lacan 1977: 317.

each other, the new vision is much more extreme. It seems that as Carson has become more interested in what she sees as the mystical nature of Sappho fragment 31, she has replaced the metaphorical and aesthetic vision of *eros* she originally created. She has also used these writers to dismantle the geometry of her own erotic triangle. The whole effort of Weil's and Porete's attempt (and now, for Carson, Sappho's attempt) to become absorbed into God involves removing the self from the erotic triangle. The three angles become, therefore, merely a line between God and nature (or between the man 'equal to the gods' and the girl), and the triangle disappears.

There is also a significant connection here with the kind of interpretative authority that Carson originally established in *Eros the Bittersweet* (1986). There she sometimes claimed special knowledge, beyond the available evidence, as a poet writing about (ancient) poets. In this context, she makes use of other women writers who sought or described a particular relationship with God, in support of her own interpretation of Sappho's relationship with the divine. In the first case it was as a poet that she placed herself in the position of ideal reader; in the second it is as the representative of a historical and mystical relationship between gender and the religious sublime.

It should also perhaps be mentioned that Carson made a third, less successful, attempt to interpret Sappho, in between *Eros the Bittersweet* and *Decreation*, in her collection of poetry and prose, *Men in the Off Hours* (2000). Here we get a third reading of Sappho fragment 31, in which Carson's translation ends 'greener than grass | I am and dead – or almost | I seem to me ...'. She has attached a note about line 17, stating that 'as critics have noted, verses 1 through 16 appear to constitute a rhythmical and conceptual whole'.<sup>45</sup> On this occasion, Carson imagines the poem to be part of the ritual moment of the *anakalypteria*, the moment of unveiling in an ancient Greek wedding, with Sappho attending the bride. In this version, the triangle of Sappho, girl, and listening man is very different from that in *Eros the Bittersweet*: now Sappho is standing behind the bride, facing the man who 'opposite you sits and listens close'. As always with Carson, this is a subtle and interesting exploration, though Denys Page makes a salutary reply to this kind of interpretation of fragment 31:

This is in fact neither bride nor bridegroom in this poem; and there is neither schoolteacher nor pupil in the general tradition. Sappho loves this girl with a passion of which the nature is no more disguised than the intensity. The ancients, who knew this poem in its completeness, had no doubt about its meaning. To 'Longinus', to Catullus, to Plutarch, it was a masterpiece among poems of passionate love; the perfect delineation of 'the emotions that accompany a love in ecstasy', in the

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<sup>45</sup> Carson 2000: 157.

ancient critics phrase ... Only for one generation in 2,500 years has it ever been mistaken for anything else.<sup>46</sup>

### Carson's rhetorical moves

Turning back to *Eros the Bittersweet* in the light of Carson's subsequent, creative work produces a different perspective on its argument. Carson's scholarly exploration of Greek lyric is seen to serve an extended mytho-poetic project which has a life far beyond its original context. One aspect of this can be seen if one compares the vocabulary of falling in love in Greek lyric with the words Carson uses to describe it. If one were to deconstruct the language of *Eros the Bittersweet*, it would become clear how Carson uses a positive vocabulary in order to transform what is, in her quoted examples from the fragments, a very negative experience for the Greek lyric poets. Even Mimnermos' young lovers, as Carson herself puts it, make love beside their graves. In the chapter 'Losing the Edge', Carson describes just how negative an experience it was:

The physiology that they posit for the erotic experience is one which assumes eros to be hostile in intention and detrimental in effect. Alongside melting we might cite metaphors of piercing, crushing, bridling, roasting, stinging, biting, grating, cropping, poisoning, singeing, and grinding to a powder, all of which are used of eros by the poets, giving a cumulative impression of intense concern for the integrity and control of one's own body.<sup>47</sup>

After this, however, Carson's language begins to transform these descriptions of emotional disaster. First of all she tells us the Greeks must have learnt a great deal from the destructiveness of *eros*; learning, of course, having more potential than simply suffering. A few pages later, this experience turns from a loss into a 'lack'; the empty space she sees as being opened up by *eros*. A lack is not quite the same as a loss, since it implies something which could be filled, which allows Carson to speak of *eros* as an experience of reaching; and reaching implies an object for which to reach. Carson calls this object 'knowledge'. Desire makes us reach towards knowledge, even as it makes us suffer. At the end of *Eros the Bittersweet*, she tells us that Socrates, the Socrates of Plato's *Phaedrus*, was 'in love' with this process.<sup>48</sup> We are left, at the end, with the paradox of desire both destroying us and recreating us in greater knowledge. But if, as she later writes, the object that is reached for is God, and the self is simply an obstacle to achieving this, then the

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<sup>46</sup> Page 1979: 33.

<sup>47</sup> Carson 1986: 39.

<sup>48</sup> Carson 1986: 173.

destructive moment described by the Greek lyric poets does not need to be re-presented in terms of a positive recreation of the self in greater, hard-won knowledge; it is now a question of ‘decreation’, the conniving of the self in its own disappearance. The vision is a starker one; as stark, perhaps, as the lyric poets’ images for it: no transfiguration without annihilation.

In her *Paris Review* interview, Carson was asked about her very different, later reading of Sappho fragment 31. Of the last line of the fragment she says:

The poem up until that point is concerned with an erotic triangle, but then in this half-verse it goes to a new place, which I chose to understand as a place facing God.<sup>49</sup>

Is choosing to understand the same thing as understanding? Certainly the fragment is concerned with an erotic triangle, and it may be going to a new place in line 17; it is after all the beginning of a stanza. But it only goes to the new place that Carson thinks it does if Sappho intended *τόλματον* to mean something like *daring*, as Carson translates it, rather than *enduring*, in this context. Once again, Carson interprets from her own centrality as poet-reader, but in this second exploration her centre has moved. Her first interpretation of this fragment, and Greek lyric more generally, involved assumptions of historical progressivism; but her second interpretation involves claims about divine truth which transcend historical contingency. This is shown in her reference to God; clearly she does not simply mean Zeus or Aphrodite here, but a trans-historical understanding of God; her idea of God. It also tells us more about Carson as a reader and writer. If one lists the writers she keeps returning to and clearly identifies with - Weil, Plath, Woolf, Emily Brontë, Porete, we discover two suicides, two deaths from tuberculosis hastened by self-neglect, and one burning at the stake for refusing to recant. These are all writers who wished to be gone, though they expressed (and indeed enacted) it in different ways. Carson not only identifies with them herself (on the evidence of much of her poetry); by positioning Sappho alongside Weil and Porete, speaking of her in the same terms, and applying to her the same categories of thought and intention, she also places Sappho as the first of the line. Though this could not quite be said to amount to a tradition of women’s writing, it is clearly a succession which, for Carson, leads to her own work. And, within this line, the focus on and approval of denial of selfhood or even self-annihilation means she is not, to say the least, a feminist writer in any of the ways in which that label is usually understood. As she said herself, what she misses in feminist writing is the

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<sup>49</sup> Aitken and Carson 2004: 213.

‘function of worship’.<sup>50</sup>

Carson’s scholarly and aesthetic interpretation of *eros* rests to a large extent on her own poetic sensibility, progressing from *Eros the Bittersweet* (1986) into her creative work. To some extent this change in sensibility, especially the shift in emphasis from the erotic to the mystical, could be ascribed straightforwardly to naturally changing priorities during the course of a long career. However, it is also the case that her poetic sensibility does anything but mellow, becoming, if anything, even more emotionally extreme in its later manifestations. From her version of Mimnermos, longing to escape from time and himself, to Geryon’s flight and transfiguration into an objective ‘eyewitness’, to the volcanic all-but-lostness of the sublime soul in Longinus, to the abandoned, decreed self, Simone Weil and the *ekstasis* of Sappho, Carson interprets lyric afresh through her own developing creative obsessions. One consequence of this is that reading Carson’s creative work puts her scholarship into a different light, given the continuation of themes, subjects and references from *Eros the Bittersweet* into her creative books. Indeed, in order to gain an adequate understanding of her work, one needs to read them together.

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<sup>50</sup> Di Michele in Allen and Carr (eds) 2001: 10.



## Part Two

### Chapter Nine

#### Carson as Translator

As we have seen in previous chapters, Anne Carson's work is often hard to categorise. This is no doubt intentional on her part, and so, to some extent, in exploring the links between classical scholarship and creativity, categorisation difficulties are to be assumed. This chapter is devoted to the scholarly and creative links in what I refer to as her more formal, full-length translations of ancient Greek plays and poetry. Distinguishing between her 'creative' and 'full-length' translations is somewhat artificial since there are significant overlaps between the two, though it has the advantage of making it possible to bring out particular issues of interpretation concerning the range of Carson's work as a translator, especially the extent to which she makes her presence, as translator, clear within the translated text. I focus on two, in many ways contrasting, book-length translations she has published: firstly, her translation of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides in her recent book *An Oresteia* (2009), especially upon her characterisations of Cassandra and Electra within these plays, and, secondly, on her translation of all the extant fragments of Sappho in *If Not, Winter* (2002). Comparing and contrasting these translations helps to define issues of interpretation shared by Carson's translation work as a whole, as an arena where her scholarship and creativity meet, and which contains, perhaps surprisingly, some of her most personal writing.

#### *An Oresteia* (2009)

*An Oresteia* is a collection of three full-length translations from Greek tragedy: Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, Sophocles' *Electra*, and Euripides' *Orestes*, each play preceded by an introduction by Carson. The most immediately striking point about it is its title, which both highlights a specific authorial intention and brings to the fore significant issues of creativity and canonical status. Drawing attention to the fact that Aeschylus' own trilogy of plays was itself a particular selection from the Orestes narrative, it expresses a somewhat subversive attitude towards the boundaries of the classical literary canon. *An Oresteia* which is not *The Oresteia* of necessity raises issues about the definitive,

culturally-guarded status of the original; forcing questions about the similarities and differences between the three plays assembled and translated by Carson, and Aeschylus' canonical trilogy. One can see Carson's rationale easily enough: since all three plays chosen here concern the story of Agamemnon's murder and Orestes' revenge this trilogy is also, and equally, entitled to be called *an Oresteia*, even if only the first of the plays is by Aeschylus. However, in practice the most direct effect of these decisions is to emphasise the presence of the translator herself, and her control over the texts. After all, with a different title this book could be simply a collection of three translated plays rather than a trilogy, with all the implications of coherence and contrast involved in this term.

Within the trilogy itself, the main consequence of Carson's selection of plays is that the dramatic movement of Aeschylus' trilogy has been completely removed. *The Oresteia*, famously, has an almost musical shape; from the entrance of Orestes at the beginning of the *Choephoroi* to the end of the *Eumenides* the action moves in a narrative momentum which is powerful and inevitable in comparison with the trilogy Carson has created. In Carson's version, it is as if the myth dismantles itself; the through-line of dramatic progress is much less straightforward than in Aeschylus. This is largely because the middle translation, Sophocles' *Electra*, leaves in its wake a disturbing sense of the moral ambiguity of the characters of Electra and Orestes: the profound pathos of Electra's laments turning into explicit blood-lust once the killing starts, and Orestes' detachment in allowing her to think he is dead, seeming to relish her grief before he reveals his identity. This moral ambiguity is then both re-emphasised and burlesqued by the third play, Euripides' *Orestes*. Rather than enduring and enjoying the long journey to sanity and civil (if problematic) justice, as in Aeschylus, the reader is left with the sense of a myth and a theatrical form teetering, ready to crash down. In her own introduction to *Orestes*, she makes this approach explicit:

Yet we sense in all of Euripides' playwrighting a mind out of patience with this straitjacket of fixed truths and predictable procedures. He has revolutionary instincts. He wants to shatter and shock. He goes about it subversively. Leaving the external form of the myth and the traditional form of the play intact, he allows everything to go a tiny bit awry. It creates a mad tension between content and form that builds to a point of explosion in the final scene.<sup>1</sup>

These comments reveal where Carson's sympathies lie in this translation, as well as her scholarly understanding of Euripides' text: it is as if this were an *Oresteia* produced and directed by Euripides himself.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Carson 2009: 176.

<sup>2</sup> Carson's approach agrees with that of Walter Burkert in *Greek Religion* (1985): '... that tragedy loses its

The greatest technical challenge Carson has set herself in this trilogy is to find three equivalent styles of poetic English for these three very different playwrights, and with all three plays, taken individually, she certainly succeeds. Taken together, though, she perplexes the reader by preventing a continuing sense of character from play to play. The question of what is meant by a character has long been a vexed one in Greek drama (as well as outside it), and the sudden change in Electra between the second and third plays; from a voice expressing herself in profound laments and terrible anger in Sophocles' *Electra* to the cheap, brittle, witticisms of Electra in Euripides' *Orestes* a few pages later, is disconcerting. Carson is clearly interested in problematizing the sense of a through-line of character motivation or coherence, as it must have been, to some extent, in the different versions of the myth performed in the original festivals in ancient Athens. Once again, a scholarly understanding is shown in her attempt to recreate an ancient predicament in a modern text.

There are also other ways in which she disturbs the reader. At moments of high emotion Carson will often leave the Greek words of the original untranslated. This is Electra:

And instead my beloved,  
luck sent you back to me  
colder than ashes,  
later than shadow.  
OIMOI MOI.  
Pity,  
PHEU PHEU  
oh beloved,  
OIMOI MOI  
as you vanish down that road.<sup>3</sup>

In practical terms, this is an effective way of dealing with these notorious ejaculations which are almost untranslatable except into inadequate or obsolete formulations like 'woe!' or 'alas!' or 'oh!'. Conversely, in other places she translates into very up-to-date, informal English idioms. Electra to Chrysothemis:

After all what are you waiting for?  
Let's be blunt, girl, what hope is left?<sup>4</sup>

Or later, in *Orestes*:

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own foundation with the annihilation of myth, is what makes Euripidean drama so problematic and perplexing'; Burkert 1985: 318.

<sup>3</sup> Carson 2009: 150.

<sup>4</sup> Carson 2009: 138.

HELEN     The fathers of those who lie dead at Troy,  
              them I have reason to fear.

ELEKTRA    No kidding.<sup>5</sup>

One effect of these techniques is to keep the original Greek text as a presence in its own translation, and therefore to make strange her own translation of it, setting up a tension between the two languages; a tension consistent with the larger unevenness of tone and linguistic register between the plays. The idiomatic use of English, especially, seems to ironize the very idea of translation even as it makes the text more familiar to us, and this is re-emphasised when, at the highest moments of intense emotion, the Greek letters keep breaking through. However, because she often does this so disruptively the effect, once again, is to draw the reader's attention to the presence of the translator herself and to the difficulties of the task she is wrestling with. This intention is particularly clearly shown when Carson breaks the fictional surface by making a character provide an English definition for one of the words within her own speech, as in this example from Cassandra:

[scream] [scream] [scream] for my ruined city  
[scream] for the offerings my father made  
                                  to save its towers he  
                                  killed animal after animal  
                                  it did no good  
                                  we suffered anyway  
                                  and I am soon to hit the ground  
I with my *thermonous*  
                  *thermonous* means hot soul, burning mind,  
                  brain on fire<sup>6</sup>

The presence of the translator within the text could hardly be more clearly signalled. Instead of trying to be consistent, Carson dramatises the translator's dilemma, vacillating between bringing the reader to the text and the text to the reader.

Alongside Carson's emphasis of her own presence within the translation itself, her introductions to the plays sometimes stress her close personal engagement with the material. This is most striking in what she has to say about her relationship with Cassandra in *The Agamemnon*: a scene personally very important to Carson:

As a translator, I have spent years trying to grasp Cassandra in words. Long before I had any interest in the rest of *Agamemnon*, I found myself working and reworking the single scene in which she appears with her language that breaks open. ... I dreamed of her weirdly mixed with the winters of my childhood and imagined a play where someone like Björk would sing wild translingual songs

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<sup>5</sup> Carson 2009: 187.

<sup>6</sup> Carson 2009: 53.

while sailing down a snowy river of ancient Asia Minor.<sup>7</sup>

In her translation of the ἀμοιβαῖον of the Cassandra scene she characteristically breaks up Cassandra's wild, mantic speeches on the page, and this is effective in demonstrating her state of mind. In stylistic contrast to this, she renders the Chorus' responses to Cassandra in rhyming couplets, presumably in order to find an equivalence for the juxtaposition of Cassandra's dochmaic speeches and the Chorus' measured iambs. There is a precedent for this approach; Gilbert Murray also translates the Chorus into rhyming couplets at these points in his translation of the *Agamemnon*, setting them against the alternating rhymes he gives to Cassandra's lyric songs (like Carson, he also left some of Cassandra's initial cries untranslated).<sup>8</sup> However, in Carson's translation this approach has a tendency to render the confusion of the Chorus as doggerel. Here are some of the choral responses to Cassandra:

Some of this I don't get.  
Some of it is old hat.

Riddles altogether with oracles tossed.  
I'm still lost.<sup>10</sup>

Prophecy usually goes right over my head.  
Still it sounds grim what she said.<sup>11</sup>

This style of translation undermines the dramatic power of the scene. Carson's intense identification with Cassandra means she neglects the power of the Chorus' position between tragic character and audience or reader. The effect of this is that the Chorus' inability to understand Cassandra fails to connect with our own inevitably inadequate response to the tragic power of Cassandra and her circumstances. As Simon Goldhill argues in *How to Stage Greek Tragedy Today*, the chorus in a Greek tragedy does not need to be seen as an 'ideal spectator', or as the audience's representative on stage, but it does need to be worth listening to and taking seriously.<sup>12</sup> The Chorus' attempts to respond to Cassandra, despite Apollo's curse, are part of her unique presence and function in the play: even in their lack of knowledge, they help to give Cassandra the full dimensions of her own dramatic and tragic status. If they are baffled, it is an important bafflement which creates a tension between tragic individual, chorus and audience. Fraenkel, for example,

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<sup>7</sup> Carson 2009: 4.

<sup>8</sup> Murray 2011: 46-48.

<sup>9</sup> Carson 2009: 50.

<sup>10</sup> Carson 2009: 50.

<sup>11</sup> Carson 2009: 51.

<sup>12</sup> Goldhill 2007: 50.

gives a clear description of the necessary dramatic response of the Chorus to Cassandra:

There is a sharp contrast between the excitement of the prophetess and the calm rationality of the Elders, a contrast which finds its expression in gestures no less than words. But the aloofness of the old men cannot be maintained for long. The power of the visions and revelations is too strong for them. They know only too well the doings of that Erinys, *Στάσις*, in the house ... , and when Cassandra mentions the evil spirit, they are horror stricken. Infected, as it were, by the ecstasy of the unfortunate maiden, they are swept off from their cool moderation and rushed into the excitement of dochmiacs and wild movements.<sup>13</sup>

Carson's jingling couplets, on the other hand, invite us to dismiss them as trivial. Her long imaginative relationship is not with the scene but purely with the figure of Cassandra herself, which leads her to try to lift Cassandra out of her dramatic context, which has already been left behind in Carson's vision of Cassandra floating and singing down a snowy river. This is a reminder that, as a poet and translator, Carson has a strong lyric talent rather than a dramatic one. Linked to this, she shows much more awareness of readership than of audience, and this applies to her scholarship as much as to her creative work. When she does write about audience, in *Eros the Bittersweet* (1986), specifically in the context of the fifth century Athenian theatre audience, she claims they were particularly responsive to visual representations of written letters on stage, though there is little evidence for this.<sup>14</sup> This also applies to Carson's 'librettos' in *Decreation*, which it is hard to imagine working in practical terms on stage as part of a real opera before an audience. Carson's emphasis has always been on the literary and the visual. However, as with the vision she creates in *Eros the Bittersweet*, if this is a limitation then it is also part of her success. This can be seen most clearly not, after all, in the Cassandra scene in this translation, despite what Carson tells us about her relationship to it, but in the powerful laments of Sophocles' *Electra*, which are, perhaps, the outstanding achievement of this book. For example, when *Electra* is holding what she thinks are Orestes' ashes, Carson's translation has her say:

If this were all you were, Orestes,  
how could your memory  
fill my memory,  
how is it your soul fills my soul?  
I sent you out, I get you back:  
tell me  
how could the difference be simply  
nothing?  
Look!  
You are nothing at all.

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<sup>13</sup> Fraenkel 1950: 539.

<sup>14</sup> Carson 1986: 58.

Just a crack where the light slipped  
through.  
Oh my child,  
I thought I could save you.  
I thought I could send you beyond.  
But there is no beyond.<sup>15</sup>

When one considers how much Carson has written about the disappearance and death of her own brother, Michael, culminating in the publication of *Nox* in 2010 (explored in the following chapter), it is perhaps possible to see why Carson's translation of these passages is so poignant. Certainly, this passage is more emotionally expressive and economical than the rest of the translation. Taking this together with the other evidence of Carson's presence in the translation, as discussed above: the lifting of Cassandra out of her context, the dramatisation of the translator's dilemma, the selection of material and the way the material is framed, reveals clearly that Anne Carson is a person after all; a person with a fairly developed sense of her own centrality, as well as a gifted translator with an intense feeling for and knowledge of lyrical poetry. However, as explored below, in her translation of Sappho she has made a serious effort to write away from her own presence within the text. Her motivation for doing so could be because she has always felt a close connection with Sappho, as shown in the fact she often returns to her, and this in turn raises a possible gender division in Carson's approach to her classical authors. In deconstructing the cultural authority of *The Oresteia*, she also forces the three great, male tragedians into an Oresteia of her own devising, but when it comes to Sappho, she is happy to disappear.

### *If Not, Winter*

If *An Oresteia* is an example of Carson calling attention to her own presence within her translation work, her translation of Sappho, *If Not, Winter* (2002), is in some ways a rare example of her attempting the opposite approach. The most immediately striking quality of *If Not, Winter*; the book itself as an artefact, is its presentation. The hard-back edition is made from thick paper with uncut page edges, used by publishers to give a book an antiquarian appearance, striking visual presentation having long been a speciality of Knopf, as shown in their re-launching of the Everyman series. This is, in itself, a clue to the approach Carson has taken within its pages: it is, at least for her, in some ways a rather reserved, traditional piece of work, which places the emphasis upon the translation rather than the translator. Inside, there is a full page to each extant fragment of Sappho, no matter

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<sup>15</sup> Carson 2009: 148.

how brief, printed in red ink (at least up to fragment 169, from which point the remaining fragments, consisting of single words, share their pages), with a full opposing page to each translation, printed in black. There are also no notes on the page since Carson has placed them in the back of the book, and no numbered references attached to the text or the translation, apart from the Voigt fragment number: for example:

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τὸ μέλημα τῶμον

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my darling one

These words are the contents of two whole pages.<sup>16</sup> This creates an enormous amount of white space around the shorter texts and translations. Carson has been criticised for this, among other things, by Daniel Mendelsohn in the *New York Review of Books*, specifically for creating an aura around the fragments which makes them seem more like poems in themselves rather than small pieces of much larger works.<sup>17</sup> Clearly this is a danger with this style of visual presentation; however, there is also one great advantage to it in relation to Carson's work as a whole. Her use of white space here emphasises the fragmentary nature of the text directly, without giving the reader strange theories about the intentionality of fragmentation or about the edges of words and their relationship with the edges of selves, which do not have much of a presence in this book. Instead, fragmentation and the edges of the words are emphasised visually, rather than explained mystically and metaphorically (as they are in *Eros the Bittersweet* (1986) and *Plainwater* (1995)) and the rest is left to the reader's imagination. Since the very short fragments are placed at the top of the page, rather than in the middle, it could be argued that the visual effect emphasises the words that are missing rather than making them look like complete poems in themselves. Perhaps the impression taken depends upon the subjective response of the reader, but this style of presentation is also evidence of Carson's life-long interest in the physical form of books, as a visual artist, as well as its limitations, and is one of several ways in which *If Not, Winter* is a more successful meeting of classical scholarship and creativity; a more effective interface, than some of Carson's other attempts to bring them together, such as *Nox* (2010) or *An Oresteia* (2009) above. This in turn may be because her

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<sup>16</sup> Carson 2002: 328-329.

<sup>17</sup> Mendelsohn 2003: 26-29.



translation is the one occasion, in her recent work, in which, rather than telling us how much she wants to disappear, she actually succeeds in not placing herself at the centre of the text. As Emily Wilson writes in the *London Review of Books* (in the context of Sappho's reference to 'a person of poverty' in fragment 31), 'The great thing about this translation is its poverty'.<sup>18</sup>

Carson writes in her introduction that her intention is to 'stand out of the way' in her translation of Sappho, since she feels that the more she does this the more Sappho herself shows through. Perhaps the origin of this uncharacteristic approach lies in the direction of her recent creative work, in which she also shows great interest in the idea of 'standing out of the way' in a spiritual and mystical sense.<sup>19</sup> One could see this 'poverty' as linked to her attempt at (de)creative self-withdrawal in her poetry (and her interest in other writers who tried to achieve this), or, alternatively, as a return to her training as a classical scholar. No doubt scholars like A.E. Housman, and those who influenced him, would approve a translator's attempt to 'stand out of the way', though perhaps one should not make too much of this, since Carson also writes, 'This is an amiable fantasy (transparency of self) within which most translators labor'.<sup>20</sup> Yet it is possible to place this attempt to 'stand out of the way' beside what she has to say about Sappho a few years later in her essay 'Decreation, How Women Like Sappho, Marguerite Porete And Simone Weil Tell God'.<sup>21</sup> There she imagines Sappho as a divinely inspired, hieratic figure who is also standing out of the way, and that fragment 31 shows her escaping, painfully, her own personality in order to reach ultimate divine truth, in a similar way to Porete and Weil. She writes:

... Sappho found a way to record the beating of her heart while imagining its absence – for surely this is the function performed in her poem by "the man who opposite you sits and listens close". This man, Sappho tells us, is "equal to gods";<sup>22</sup> but can we not read him as her way of representing "the landscape as it is when I am not there".

Carson may have felt that, as Sappho's translator, the way to have the greatest possible affinity with her was by practising the same poetic and personal withdrawal she now finds in Sappho: to show Sappho as she is when Anne Carson is not there.

As Sappho's translator, she cannot, of course, stand entirely out of the way, since there are decisions to be made, (including, paradoxically, the interpretational choices necessary

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<sup>18</sup> Wilson 2004: 27-28.

<sup>19</sup> Carson 2002: x.

<sup>20</sup> Carson 2002: x.

<sup>21</sup> Carson 2005: 155-184.

<sup>22</sup> Carson 2006: 169.

to try to stand out of the way). The text that Carson uses is that of Eva-Marie Voigt's edition, first published in 1963, though she does not use the very first word of Voigt's text, in fragment 1, the 'Hymn to Aphrodite':

*Ποικιλόθρον' ἀθάνατ' Ἀφρόδιτα*

Instead, Carson has the epithet *Ποικιλόφρον* to describe Aphrodite, a variant of *Ποικιλόθρον'* which was accepted by Gerardus Vossius (1577-1649) and Richard Bentley (1662-1742).<sup>23</sup> In her notes, Carson comments:

Now certainly the annals of ancient furniture include some fancy chairs, especially when gods sit on them; and initial mention of her throne provides an elegant point of departure for the downrush of Aphrodite's next motion. On the other hand, it is Aphrodite's agile mind that seems to be at play in the rest of the poem and, since compounds of *thron-* are common enough in Greek poetry to make this word predictable, perhaps Sappho relied on our ear to supply the chair while she went on to spangle the mind.<sup>24</sup>

Carson is engaging here with a long tradition of variation, emendation and scholarly reflection; a history which is very well captured in her comment that one word can be heard within the other. Carson seeks to stand out of the way not only by engaging with the long history of the text, but by making a textual choice which sounds the resonance of both possibilities together rather than choosing between them.

More generally, one can see Carson's intentions in this book clearly by examining its relationship to tradition. Though the textual tradition is important to her, she is much less interested, at least in this book, in other aspects of scholarly tradition concerning Sappho, as she makes clear in her introduction:

Controversies about her personal ethics and way of life have taken up a lot of people's time throughout the history of Sapphic scholarship. It seems that she knew and loved women as deeply as she did music. Can we leave the matter there?<sup>25</sup>

Mendelsohn objects to the speed with which Carson disposes of Sappho's historical context in this casual question:

In two scant sentences she breezily dispenses with any discussion of crucial issues of Sappho's performative context.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Voigt 1971: 31.

<sup>24</sup> Carson 2002: 357.

<sup>25</sup> Carson 2002: x.

<sup>26</sup> Mendelsohn 2003: 26-29.

<sup>27</sup> Carson 2002: xi. For some recent examples cf. Boedeker 2009, Caciagli 2011, Ferrari 2010, Greene (ed.)

It is true that Carson does not write about Sappho's performative context in her introduction, but then, as we have seen in earlier chapters, Carson has a blind spot about the idea of audience and its functions (and may also wish to avoid entering a highly contested field).<sup>27</sup> However, it seems obvious that Carson's intention here has more to do with Sappho's biographical rather her performative context (even if these are connected): specifically the long, contentious, and often moralistic history of its scholarly and cultural debate. Her intentions become particularly clear when one considers that she herself has written more than most on the topic of Sappho's identity and motives. The fact that she has, for the most part, left her own ideas about these matters out of her introduction, shows how determined she is not to give us an image of the poet within which we can mainly see Anne Carson.

A distinctive feature of Carson's translation, and one in which her scholarship and creativity meet, is in her use of square brackets to indicate the fragmentation of the text within the translation. She does not do this, she admits, in a papyrologically precise way:

It is not the case that every gap or illegibility is specifically indicated: this would render the page a blizzard of marks and inhibit reading. Brackets are an aesthetic gesture toward the papyrological event rather than an accurate record of it.<sup>28</sup>

In terms of their meaning, Carson's brackets are intended, she says, to 'imply a free space of imaginal adventure, the drama of trying to read a papyrus torn in half or riddled with holes or smaller than a postage stamp'. Though it can appear that they are intended mainly for visual effect, on occasion these effects resonate with her other, more freely creative translations of Greek lyric. Her translation of Sappho fragment 87D (Voigt) is a good example of this:

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1996: 58-75, 113-174, Nagy 1995.

<sup>28</sup> Voigt 1971: 95.



αἶψα δ' ἐξίκοντο· σὺ δ', ὦ μάκαιρα,  
μειδιάζαις' ἀθανάτῳ προσώπῳ  
ἦ ἄρ'· ὅττι δὴν ἔπεπονθα κῶττι  
δὴν ἔτε κ' ἀλ-η-μμι

they arrived. But you, O blessed one,  
smiled in your deathless face  
and asked what (now again) I have suffered and why  
(now again) I am calling out<sup>31</sup>

Anyone who has read *Eros the Bittersweet* would know why Carson highlights the typical adverb δὴν ἔτε by bracketing it in this way, and by using two time references to translate it, rather than a commonplace expression like ‘this time’ or ‘again’. It connects with her theme of the different kinds of time involved in erotic experience (*now* and *then*), and the way the lover attempts to bring them together. However, it is instructive to compare the note she gives on this word in *If Not, Winter* with the way she writes about it in *Eros the Bittersweet*. In *If Not, Winter* she writes:

Sappho's “(now again)” does more than mark repetition as a theme of her poem, it instantiates the difference between mortal and immortal perspectives on this painful feature of erotic life: Sappho is stuck in the pain of the “now”, Aphrodite calmly surveys a larger pattern of “agains.”<sup>32</sup>

Whereas, in *Eros the Bittersweet* she also writes, in a wider context, on the lyric poets’ use of this adverb:

The untranslatable adverb *dēute* comes like one long, rather wild sigh at the beginning of the poem [Sappho fragment 130], as the lover perceives her attacker and understands that it is (oh no!) already too late (not again!) to avoid desire.<sup>33</sup>

Although the brackets themselves have passed from the essay into the translation, the difference in style here is a measure of Carson’s restraint in *If Not, Winter*, where she is content merely to suggest her poetic apprehension of the meaning of δὴν ἔτε even though it was an important part of her argument in *Eros the Bittersweet* sixteen years earlier.

Not surprisingly, the most concentrated example of Carson’s chosen combination of scholarly engagement and aesthetic restraint, is her translation of fragment 31; the fragment which contains, in microcosm, a great deal of her scholarly and creative interests.

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<sup>31</sup> Carson 2002: 2-3.

<sup>32</sup> Carson 2002: 357-358.

<sup>33</sup> Carson 1986: 119.

Mendelsohn praises her for the ‘exactness’ of her translation:

But the best and most persuasive aspect of Carson's rendering is to convey the odd stilted quality of the Greek when it describes the symptoms that make Sappho not the subject but the object of the phenomena she describes.<sup>34</sup>

Again, it is obvious to readers of *Eros the Bittersweet* why she is keen to emphasise in her translation the strange objectification of Sappho's suffering in this fragment; as if she were looking back at herself from the outside, describing (in Carson's earlier view) her own dissociation from herself in the gap created by her strong desire. However, alongside this echo of Carson's earlier interpretation of Sappho, there is also in this translation a sign of Carson's later, rather different, interpretation from her book *Decreation* (2005), in the last line of this fragment (line17):

ἀλλὰ πᾶν τόλματον, ἐπεὶ καὶ πένητα<sup>35</sup>

This is the line that she did not include in *Eros the Bittersweet*, but which was central to her return to Sappho in *Decreation* (2006). Most other translators who include this conjectural line have translated *τόλματον* as ‘endure’ or ‘suffer’; not ‘dared’ as Carson does here, though ‘dared’ is equally possible.<sup>36</sup> It is easy to see why they do so: ‘all must be endured’ fits with the physical suffering, and the willingness to describe it, in the previous stanzas, appearing therefore to be an extension of the same idea into the beginning of the next stanza. ‘Endured’ is also a suitable verb to be applied to a ‘person of poverty’. Carson, however, takes a different view, as she comments in her notes:

Sappho's account of the symptoms of desire attains a unity of music and sense in vv. 1-16, framed by verbs of seeming (“he seems to me,” “I seem to me”), so if the seventeenth verse is authentic it must represent an entirely new thought. It is worth noting that Catullus' translation of the poem into Latin includes, at just this point, an entirely new thought.<sup>37</sup>

Significantly, however, she does not tell the reader what she thinks this new thought is by

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<sup>34</sup> Mendelsohn 2003: 26-29.

<sup>35</sup> Carson 2002: 62.

<sup>36</sup> *LSJ* 3rd. ed. (1983): 1803.

*τόλματον* translated as 'dared': H. T. Wharton, ‘The Divine Sappho’ website, Sappho fragment 2 (Bergk) <<http://classicpersuasion.org/pw/sappho/sape02.htm>> [accessed 5 October 2012], also Aldington and Storer 1919: 15.

*τόλματον* translated as ‘suffer’: Barnstone 2006: 73; as ‘endure’: Davenport 1984: 85; as ‘endured’: Rayer 1991: 57, Balmer 1992: 38, Powell 2007: 11, also David A. Campbell, ‘Sappho's Choral Music’ website <<http://earlywomenmasters.net/cds/sappho.html>> [accessed 5 October 2012]

<sup>37</sup> Carson 2002: 364.

including her interpretation of Sappho as a mystical writer and spiritual warrior in the mould of Simone Weil or Marguerite Porete; a Sappho ‘daring’ to take these extreme emotions to their ultimate destination, which is the point of her own disappearance: daring to be disintegrated so as to be recreated. This is another example of Carson’s restraint in this book, though it should be added that the ‘new thought’ she refers to in Catullus’ version of the poem would not help her describe the mystical possibilities of the next stanza had she chosen to do so, since this thought is nothing more extreme than a lecture to himself on the dangers of too much leisure:

*otium, Catulle, tibi molestum est:  
otio exsultas nimiumque gestis.  
otium et reges prius et beatas  
perdidit urbes.*<sup>38</sup>

Daniel Mendelsohn describes *If Not, Winter* as ‘stranded between the scholarly and the impressionistic’, which is another way of saying, in the terms of this study, between scholarship and creativity.<sup>39</sup> He insists that the book should signal the appropriate conventions, so as to give him his cue in which manner (in which readership) he should respond. He already knows how to respond to her creative work, as he praises Carson as a serious poet ‘whose oeuvre thus far represents, to my mind, the most distinguished, original, and successful adaptation and reconfiguration of classical models produced in the past generation’. However, a complete translation of Sappho with introduction and notes, yet which does not clearly signal on which shelf it belongs, troubles his categories. This is surely part of Carson’s intentions, since she has never had much respect for categories: ‘What do “shelves” accomplish, in stores or in the mind?’, she asks in her Matrix interview with Mary di Michele.<sup>40</sup> In this translation, however, far from being stranded, Carson achieves a more effective interface between her classical scholarship and creativity, perhaps because, in her career-long obsession with Sappho, the ways in which her own reading has developed make her less ready to ignore the long tradition of reading of this particular text. This, in turn, has led her to use her creativity to allow the reader space to respond and reinvent, rather than doing it for us.

Carson’s restraint in this translation has paid off, in that it allows her singular sensitivity and range of knowledge to come to the fore, which means in turn that this book represents a rare occasion on which her classical scholarship and creativity work together smoothly,

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<sup>38</sup> Catull. 51.13-16.

<sup>39</sup> Mendelsohn 2003: 26-29.

<sup>40</sup> Di Michele in Allen and Carr (eds) 2001: 7.

rather than co-existing uncomfortably (and often deliberately so in Carson's other work). In this translation, unlike *An Oresteia*, she dramatises the text itself rather than her own act of translating it, and her re-framing of the text in visual terms works much better overall than some of her other obscure reconstructions or strange theories, with the exception of *Autobiography of Red* (1998). In *If Not, Winter*, the frustrating nature of Sappho meets and cancels the frustrating nature of Anne Carson: both are unbearable, so neither is.



## Part Two

### Chapter Ten

#### *Nox and Antigonick*

This chapter focuses on two of Anne Carson's most recent books: *Nox* (2009) and *Antigonick* (2012), exploring new developments in the direction of her creative work, especially her developing use of form and techniques of juxtaposition. The ways in which she uses Greek and Latin texts in these books reveal an attitude to the written word which, to some extent, goes all the way back to her first scholarly book, *Eros the Bittersweet* (1986). However, what is new in these books is the extent to which techniques of presentation are becoming ever more important in Carson's particular kind of creativity. The striking connections and juxtapositions made possible by her focus on the visual and material qualities of her books have become almost the central point of their meaning. For Carson, increasingly, the creative process is the point.

Moreover, Carson's creative techniques have repercussions for the ways in which she uses classical texts in these works. The notion of translation and what it means has always been, to a greater or lesser extent, problematised within Carson's translation work as a whole. In these two books she attempts to respond to these issues in a different way, using a mixture of words and images in parallel; in *Nox* translating Catullus into her own experience of grief, and in *Antigonick* by working into the form of her book, and into its text, the cultural and performance history of Sophocles' *Antigone*, and especially the play's reception by Hegel; or, to be more precise, its reception by Hegel as interpreted by Miriam Leonard.

The new direction of Carson's creative work has also gained a broader readership than the largely literary-academic one which established her as a successful writer. With *Nox* and *Antigone*, she is moving beyond the *avant-garde* literary-academic cultural field analysed in Part Two, Chapter 6; a fact which can be perceived by the lack of response to these books by commentators from that field. This broadening of readership does not mean that these recent works are less high-wire creative and intellectual experiments than her previous books. However, the ways in which she combines words and images in both books allows non-academic readers, and readers unaccustomed to *avant-garde* art and literature, to respond to them more readily than to her previous work. *Nox* and *Antigone*

represent a development in Carson's creativity which interacts in significant ways with the receptions of a wider audience. In previous chapters I have already discussed examples of popular responses to Carson's work, and how, alongside their superficiality, they sometimes contain a grain of truth missing from more sophisticated responses. In practice the advantages and disadvantages in mainstream readers' responses work together and are hard to disentangle. For example, when her books were discussed by two characters in the celebrated, award-winning TV drama series, *The L Word* in 2004, the critic Meghan O'Rourke responded:

... the energy of Carson's writing makes it look heroic that her characters are usually all alone in the end. But that's not its point. She may write about extremity, but she's not trying to justify or man the ways of alienated, self-regarding young women.<sup>1</sup>

This is an important point, yet it would also be hard to argue that the image of Carson herself which emerges from her work is anything other than that of a 'heroic' emancipated loner. One significant aspect of *Nox* and *Antigone* is how well they fit with this heroic image of Carson as a person, which is ironic in the light of her declaration, 'I do not want to be a person', from *Decreation* (2005). Carson emphasizes her own presence, in the very act of attempting to escape or 'dismantle' it, even more directly than in her previous work; firstly, by exploring much more autobiographical material in *Nox*, and then using Sophocles' *Antigone* to recreate Antigone herself as a sophisticated, witty, knowing and isolated hero in *Antigonick*.

Though there are dangers in reading a particular image of Carson into her books, perhaps a more important issue for Carson's mainstream readers is the possibility they may focus entirely on form at the expense of content, and the extent to which this is encouraged by Carson's style of interpretation. If, for an advanced thinker like Carson, the creative process has become the point, then her less sophisticated readers may assume that, in responding purely to the surface of her visual juxtapositions, they are already responding successfully to the power of her poetry and need make no further effort; that Carson is making, as one critic has put it, 'a book of poems you don't even have to read'.<sup>2</sup> This concern speaks to recent cultural anxieties about the disappearance of the serious reader outside the academy: in one view Carson is liberating the power of poetry from the word; in another she is inviting empty responses to her work, in which readers are likely to ignore

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<sup>1</sup> Meghan O'Rourke, 'Hermetic Hotties: What is Anne Carson doing on *The L Word*?', *Slate*, February 11<sup>th</sup> 2004 <<http://www.slate.com/id/2095317/>> [Accessed on 13<sup>th</sup> October 2011]

<sup>2</sup> Burt 2011: 22.

its more challenging aspects. In the last section of this chapter, I show how mainstream criticism of *Antigonick* does indeed tend to focus on its striking form but has difficulty interpreting its content, partly because the content is both difficult and obscure, but also because the range of its possible interpretations is left extremely wide by Carson herself.

### *Nox* (2009)

Formally speaking, Anne Carson's *Nox* is not a book at all, but a long piece of paper folded up into a box that is, on the outside, designed to look like a book. Though the form and style of *Nox* are a novelty for Carson's readers, they are far from new to Carson herself. For *Nox* is the published version of what was perhaps her most personal creative work, the previously private 'white book' she made in response to the death of her brother, Michael. Carson described the process of making this 'white book' in an interview in 2004 in *The Paris Review*:

It's based on a poem of Catullus ... whose brother died in Troy when Catullus was living in Italy. Catullus travelled to Troy ... and buried him and wrote a poem about him, which has the refrain in it, *ave atque vale* (goodbye and farewell).<sup>3</sup> In my book I printed out a text of the poem, and then took it apart. I just read an article in which T.S. Eliot is quoted as saying, "Poetry is punctuation." It was followed by a quote from Jacques Lacan: "The reason we go to poetry is not for wisdom, but for the dismantling of wisdom," which I thought was totally cool. So in this book, I dismantled the Catullus poem, one word per page, and I put the Latin word and its lexical definition on the left-hand side, and then on the right-hand side a fragment of memory of my brother's life that related to the left hand side of the page. Where the lexical entry didn't relate, I changed it. So I smuggled in stuff that is somewhat inauthentic. But it makes the left and the right cohere, so that the whole thing tells the story of the translation of the poem, and also dismantles my memory of my brother's life.<sup>4</sup>

The form and process Carson describes here is exactly that of *Nox*, in which each left hand page has one word of Catullus with its dictionary definition in English (sometimes added to by Carson), and the fragments of memory on the right hand pages include family photographs, snippets of letters, parts of envelopes, written text, drawings, and large amounts of empty space. On one left hand page (no page numbers) is printed:

*Mutam*  
mutus muta mutum adjective  
[onomtaopoeic [sɪC] cf. *musso*, *mutio*, Gk  
μυκός] (of an animal) that can only  
mutter, inarticulate: (as substantive)  
dumb creature; (of utterance)  
inarticulate; (of persons) lacking the  
faculty of speech, dumb, a dumb person,

<sup>3</sup> Catull. 101.10.

<sup>4</sup> Aitken and Carson 2004: 201.

*dea muta* a nymph struck dumb by Jupiter for talkativeness = Lara (mother of the Lares); (of persons) saying nothing, silent; (of animals) uttering no cry; (of objects) making no sound; *persona muta* a person who says nothing on stage; (temporarily) robbed of utterance, (speechless) with some emotion; (of places) not filled with utterance or other sound, silent; *silentia muta noctis* deep speechlessness of night; (of actions) not accompanied by sound, noiseless; *artes mutae* silent arts (not famous); (of things) giving no information; *mutum dico* I do not say a word; *tempus magis mutum a litteris* there was a better reason for not writing; (of a consonant) that cannot be sounded by itself, mute.

And on the facing page:

5.1. What he needed from me I have no idea. When I Caught up to him in high school (he was older by four years) he liked me to do his homework but that wasn't it. My moral advice he brushed aside, **you're different**. He called me **professor** or **pinhead**, epithets implying intellectual respect but we never had a conversation about ideas in our life. And when he telephoned me – out of the blue – about half a year after our mother died he had nothing to say.

Carson has made only slight adaptations in her dictionary sources in this example. In Lewis' *Elementary Latin Dictionary* the definition of *mutus* is illustrated with, 'tempus magis mutum a litteris; i.e. *in which there was a better reason for not writing*', and Carson misses out two words to change it to, 'there was a better reason for not writing', which makes it sound more like it is addressed to her dead brother.<sup>5</sup> The more detailed definition of *mutus* in Lewis and Short's dictionary is illustrated with a quotation from one of Cicero's letters to Atticus, 'Of times: nullum fuit tempus, quod magis debuerit mutum esse a litteris, *in which nothing should have been written*'.<sup>6</sup> This illustration has missed out some of Cicero's words; '*nullum fuisse tempus post has fugas et formidines nostras quod magis debuerit mutum esse a litteris*'.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps the idea that letters *should* not be written, rather than merely having a better reason for not writing, did not appeal to Carson, since it could suggest, in the context of her brother Michael's silence, that there are times (and perhaps lives) when silence is for the best. Alternatively, her version, 'there was a better

<sup>5</sup> Lewis 1963: 525.

<sup>6</sup> Lewis and Short 1891: 1181.

<sup>7</sup> Cic. Att. 8.14.1.

reason for not writing', could be a response to Cicero, who writes in this letter that his fear, since his flight from Rome, would have made silence more appropriate. In this case, Carson could be saying that there was a better reason *than fear* for Michael not writing to her. Following the scholarly trail raises some interesting possibilities, but does not reveal what the 'better reason' was. As she writes: 'What he needed from me I have no idea.' There is also a bitter irony in this example for Carson, in that Cicero in his letter apologises for writing daily to Atticus, without having very much to say.

The effect of the work as a whole is clearly intended to be as least as much visual as literary: a kind of collage of estrangement, longing, and grief. Michael died in Denmark in 2000, after years of wandering, drinking, and sleeping rough; and Carson says in her *Paris Review* interview that, at the time of his death, she had not seen him for twenty-two years.<sup>8</sup>

In terms of the interface of classics and creativity, one of the most important aspects of *Nox* is raised by Carson herself in her description of how she created it. For, if she needed to change the Latin definitions in order to make them 'cohere' with the fragments of her own memories facing them, what kind of coherence can involve smuggling in 'stuff that is somewhat inauthentic'? For Carson, the dismantling of personal memory by relating it to the life and work of an ancient poet requires that its scholarly aspect be modified, so that this smuggling serves the greater coherence of the parallel between them. Once again, we are brought back to the fact that Carson's response to ancient poets and their work does not involve much of a sense of otherness. Her assumption of centrality puts her in the position of the ideal reader of Catullus, as it did with Sappho, enabling her to elide differences in the role and function of poets in the ancient and modern worlds, and merge long stretches of history together within the parallel she creates.

However, I would argue that, even in Carson's own terms, coherence is the wrong word for the relationship between the Latin text and the personal material in *Nox*. Rather than cohering, they juxtapose each other uncomfortably, making meaning out of the contrast between the lexical definitions in black-and white and the messy, emotional collage of the personal material. (Unlike Carson's previous work, here it is her interpretation rather than the ancient text which is fragmentary.) Indeed, a reader who was unaware of Carson's intention to make the 'left and right cohere', would assume that she was trying to create an uncomfortable collage between the two sides, in order to demonstrate the nature of her feelings for her dead brother. Even the inauthentic material she adds is not described accurately as smuggled, since there is little attempt to make the dictionary definitions seem

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<sup>8</sup> Aitken and Carson 2004: 201.

plausible. This sense of discomfort has always been a central feature of Carson's work, often, as here, most visible on the edge between her scholarly and poetic selves. It is discomfort, rather than coherence, which is the most striking feature of *Nox*, and which gives it its emotional impact on the reader.

However, the nature of this emotional impact is itself discomfiting in relation to *Nox* as an artefact. Like Stephen Burt in his long review in the *London Review of Books*, I found *Nox* a 'moving document', but more for the obvious truths that lie behind what Carson documents, rather than for the nature of the document itself.<sup>9</sup> What seems plainly to be the case from the personal fragments in *Nox* is that Carson's brother did not value her and wanted very little to do with her, and therefore that the whole effort of *Nox* is a doomed attempt to try to fill that emotional chasm. We all want to feel we have been loved by those who were supposed to love us, but if Carson's brother disappeared permanently and phoned home only five times in twenty-two years, then it is fairly obvious that, whatever else he felt, the well-being of his mother and sister was not a high priority in his life, and no scrap book collection alongside Latin words can make that truth more interesting. Presumably this is why the words 'love you, Michael' from the end of Michael's one and only letter, not to Carson herself but to her mother, are blown up so large on the page. It is possible that Michael may have had so much to feel guilty about, concerning what happened at home, that his behaviour would be more understandable, and therefore more sympathetic, if we knew more. If the childhood of Geryon in *Autobiography of Red* (1998) bears any similarity to Carson's own childhood this could certainly be the case. But since no such development of character or information is included in *Nox*, that avenue of sympathetic response is closed.

The desperate effort which created the artefact, therefore, takes on tragic dimensions without the artefact itself saying anything new or significant about that effort. Of course, it could be argued that this is Carson's intended effect; to show the futility of aesthetic expression, the futility even of language itself, in the face and the fact of death. There are occasions in art, however, when words do manage to retain some meaning and power in the face of death. There is nothing in *Nox* to equal, for example, the emotional power of Electra's lament for her brother in Carson's own translation of Sophocles' *Electra*. Catullus did not find words futile in the face of his grief for his brother, nor did Carson find Catullus' words futile, otherwise why use them as part of her own grieving process? How, in her own words, would she have been able to use them to dismantle her memories of her

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<sup>9</sup> Burt 2011: 22.

brother if they had not been written? If language is entirely futile in the face of death then silence would seem to be the most appropriate choice. It feels rather cruel to write this, and the critic's sense of guilt is a problem Burt also acknowledges:

It creates a double bind familiar from memoirs, and from the confessional poetry of two generations ago. If you like it, you like the pathos and the rawness of the personal document; if you don't like it, you are attacking the genuine evidence of somebody's real life.<sup>10</sup>

This double bind will no doubt continue to be a critical difficulty with works of this kind, but focusing upon the interface between scholarship and creativity in *Nox* makes it easier to show how it works as a presentation as well as a confession. For, alongside 'the pathos and rawness of a personal document', Carson also presents the reader with a new representation of the relationship between her classical scholarship and her creativity. By presenting Catullus' words individually, then adding their dictionary definitions, and finally, when the dictionary fails her, modifying what it says, she puts the reader progressively at three different distances from Catullus. This distancing process gives an (albeit imperfect) therapeutic power to Carson's scholarly knowledge of the text; a forgetting of grief within the process of isolating words and looking up dictionary definitions, and then a remembering and return to grief through the distancing effect of these layers of meaning, when she relates Catullus' words to the fragmentary history of her own grief for her brother.

It is the final part of this process, the relation of Catullus' text to her own experience, where it becomes difficult to determine what Carson is trying to say. She tells us that she makes 'the left side and the right side cohere', and that this both tells the story of the translation and dismantles her memory of her brother. However, their uncomfortable relationship, in which the two sides have their own separate emotional and linguistic logics which do not meet directly, but throw each other into relief at certain points, seems unrelated to her declared intentions. Carson has left this issue unresolved, perhaps in order to create the maximum space for interpretation by the reader, or it may be that she felt unable to choose between comparison and contrast in this context. In *Antigonick* (2012), however, she does make this choice, opting for a deliberate lack of coherence between words and images, but then in *Antigonick* she has also found a theoretical framework for her choices.

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<sup>10</sup> Burt 2011: 21.

## *Antigonick* (2012)

*Antigonick* continues the visual/textual format of *Nox*, but this time the right-hand pages contain Carson's translation of Sophocles' *Antigone*, with additional material of her own. The left-hand pages are blank, and between the two (though not invariably) are inserted drawings by Carson's collaborator, the poet and artist Bianca Stone, printed on translucent paper. The drawing can be turned to face the translation on the opposite page, or, alternatively, by turning the translucent page over, the drawing, seen in reverse from its other side, overlays the words, so that the words become part of the image. Carson's translation itself is printed in her own handwriting, in capital letters with little punctuation, echoing the appearance of Greek letters on a papyrus, as Josephine Balmer points out.<sup>11</sup> The same red/black ink combination from *If Not, Winter* (2002) is also used, red for the character names and black for their words. This is a snappy, pithy translation which often radically transforms Sophocles' words into simple, direct statements, sometimes brutally so. For example, the five Greek verses of the Chorus' final speech are reduced to one line:

πολλῶ τὸ φρονεῖν εὐδαιμονίας  
πρῶτον ὑπάρχει· χρὴ δὲ τὰ γ' εἰς θεοὺς  
μηδὲν ἀσεπτεῖν· μεγάλοι δὲ λόγοι  
μεγάλας πληγὰς τῶν ὑπεράχων  
ἀποτίσαντες  
γῆραι τὸ φρονεῖν ἐδίδαζαν.<sup>12</sup>

LAST WORD **WISDOM** BETTER GET SOME EVEN TOO LATE

On occasion she simply dismantles the original text for striking effect, as when Creon's first speech is reduced to lists of verbs and nouns, though it also produces some arrestingly raw poetry, as when Antigone describes the body of her brother Polyneices as:

UNBURIED SWEET SORRYMEAT FOR THE LITTLE LUSTS OF BIRDS<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Josephine Balmer, 'Antigonick: Anne Carson', *The Times*, 2 June 2012, 'Poetry' section, also available at <<http://thepathsofsurvival.wordpress.com/reviews/>> [Accessed 9 November 2012]

<sup>12</sup> Griffith (ed.) 1999: 118.

<sup>13</sup> Carson 2012: no page numbers.



There is also quite a lot of material added by Carson to her translation of Sophocles' words, such as the brief, comic discussions between Antigone and Ismene about Hegel which I discuss below. Other additional dialogue by Anne Carson includes the Chorus reminding Antigone of how Brecht staged the play *Antigone*, and Eurydice complaining that her speech is the only one she has in the whole play, with reference to a character in Virginia Woolf's novel *To the Lighthouse*.<sup>14</sup> Carson also introduces a new character into the cast named Nick, described as 'a mute part [always onstage, he measures things]'.

Before discussing *Antigonick* in detail, it is worth making an observation about Carson's choice of collaborator. Without trying to make too much of this connection, Carson's choice of the poet and artist Bianca Stone is a reminder of the self-replicating nature of her literary/academic cultural field (as discussed in Part Two, Chapter Six), since Stone is both the granddaughter of the acclaimed poet Ruth Stone (to the memory of whom *Antigonick* is dedicated) and one of Carson's ex-students at NYU. This is a combination which neatly illustrates the consanguinity of the literary-academic cultural field in North America.

Bianca Stone's drawings have as much in common, in stylistic terms, with her other artistic work outside *Antigonick*, (as can be seen on her blog, *Poetry Comics*, where images and words are often combined) as they do with Carson's translation.<sup>15</sup> Their relevance to Carson's version of *Antigone* is hard to determine; in many cases it is difficult to see what the drawing has to do with the words facing it, or beneath it, depending on which side the drawing is placed. A clue to understanding why the text and images are arranged in this way is in Carson's references to Hegel both in the text and in the quotation on the back cover. Hegel, famously, discussed Sophocles' *Antigone* in his major philosophical work, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, originally published in 1807. Hegel's ideas on what he defines as 'Spirit' and the 'Ethical Order' are deeply influenced by his reading of *Antigone*, which can be seen more in the terms of his philosophical argument and the way it proceeds than by the number of times he mentions the actual play.<sup>16</sup> For Hegel, *Antigone* is centred upon the struggle between human law, represented by Creon, and divine law, represented by Antigone herself. The human law governs the public sphere, whereas the private sphere belongs to the family, whose male offspring must make the difficult passage from family, individuality, and particularity, to the political, the universal, and the community. Though these two spheres exist in opposition, the situation is complicated by the fact that the community relies entirely upon the family for its continuance, since it is composed of

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<sup>14</sup> Woolf 1994: 95.

<sup>15</sup> Bianca Stone, 'Poetry Comics', <<http://whoisthatssupposedtobe.blogspot.co.uk>> [accessed 23 May 2013]

<sup>16</sup> Hegel 1977: 284-289.

families.

Hegel also associates the human, public sphere with consciousness or self-consciousness, and the family with unconscious, deeply rooted emotions and identities. When, in Sophocles' *Antigone*, Thebes has survived the war and Polyneices' body has been left exposed on Creon's order, the community assumes it has won a victory over a rebellious individual, but in fact the battle has just begun, for it has 'thereby merely entered on a conflict with the divine law, a conflict of self-conscious Spirit with what is unconscious'.<sup>17</sup>

The community naturally wishes, through Creon, to punish Polyneices, as it sees him as the instigator of the war. However, in leaving him unburied it offends powers which, though ostensibly much weaker, can take revenge since they lie within each individual as a family member. Therefore, for Hegel, in making such a decision the state undermines itself by cutting off its own roots. This situation places Antigone, who is responsible as a woman for the operation of the divine law within the family, and specifically responsible for Polyneices' relationship to the divine law as his sister, in a relationship of mutually assured destruction with Creon; a destruction which, in the pathos of their downfall, reveals the higher power which was in charge all along:

The victory of one power and its character, and the defeat of the other, would thus be only the part and the incomplete work which irresistibly advances to the equilibrium of the two. Only in the downfall of both sides alike is absolute right accomplished, and the ethical substance as the negative power which engulfs both sides, that is, omnipotent and righteous Destiny, steps on the scene.<sup>18</sup>

In Carson's translation of *Antigone* Hegel is an influential presence, and this in turn implies that Carson herself is, as usual, a much greater presence in her interpretation than the source text. She does our reading for us, placing Hegel right at the beginning; making her versions of Antigone and Ismene discuss Hegel briefly at the beginning of the first scene, in a playful dialogue just before her translation of Sophocles' words begins:

[ENTER ANTIGONE AND ISMENE] **ANTIGONE:** WE  
BEGIN IN THE DARK AND BIRTH IS THE DEATH OF  
US **ISMENE:** WHO SAID THAT **ANTIGONE:** HEGEL  
**ISMENE:** SOUNDS MORE LIKE BECKETT **ANTIGONE:** HE  
WAS PARAPHRASING HEGEL **ISMENE:** I DON'T THINK  
SO **ANTIGONE:** WHOEVER IT WAS WHOEVER WE ARE

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<sup>17</sup> Hegel 1977: 286.

<sup>18</sup> Hegel 1977: 285.

DEAR SISTER EVER SINCE WE WERE BORN FROM THE EVILS  
OF OIDIPOUS WHAT BITTERNESS PAIN DISGUST DISGRACE  
OR MORAL SHOCK HAVE WE BEEN SPARED AND NOW  
THIS EDICT YOU'VE HEARD THE EDICT ...<sup>19</sup>

Carson makes Antigone and Ismene sound rather like graduate students here, which is a reminder that, although her recent books have found a broader readership, her style of writing was formed within the literary-academic establishment. Her own presence in this exchange is emphasised because, as shown in this quotation, she makes no attempt to blend her own added material with her translation of Sophocles, and the join between the two is perhaps deliberately clumsy.

By putting Hegel right at the start, Carson gives us a large clue about the form of the book: the words and images are made to oppose each other just as the divine and human laws oppose each other within Hegel's interpretation of the play. She has dramatised this conflict in *Antigonick* by having the drawings on one side of the page and the words on the other pulling against each other, in terms of content, rather than complementing or interpreting each other. This is why the illustrations in the book illustrate only themselves, apart from a small number of tenuous connections with the text. One can see this most clearly by considering *Antigonick* in the light of this description of Hegel's interpretation of the play by Miriam Leonard in her book, *Athens in Paris*:

Through his complex distribution of moral order, Hegel sets up an opposition between the universalist outlook of the human law and the particularist vision of the ethics of the family. In contrast to the picture of the complementary nature of the two orders, a vocabulary of opposition and conflict forces its way into Hegel's narrative. The divine law does not live side-by-side with its human counterpart but exists 'over against this power'. Mired in the particular, the 'simple, immediate essential being of ethical order' is represented as a resistant kernel which will not allow itself to be assimilated into the universalist aspirations of the human law. That 'something other than the power of the state' which it represents must in some senses always be a threat to that power - an alternative axis of identification. But in contrast to the abstracted identification with the human law, the familial ethical order is immediate, pre-rational, not to say natural.<sup>20</sup>

In *Antigonick*, Bianca Stone's drawings equally do not live 'side-by-side' with the translated text, but can be placed as either 'over' or 'against' it. Indeed, it is possible to say that Carson and Stone's whole approach in this book is contained in the phrase 'over against this power', if power is understood to mean both the power of words and the power of the human law. Leonard's reference to Hegel's 'particularist vision of the ethics of the family' parallels Stone's own particularist vision in her drawings, which contain a large

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<sup>19</sup> Carson 2012: no page numbers.

<sup>20</sup> Leonard 2005: 97-98.

number of domestic objects; cutlery, an old shed, an old armchair, a sink, a bed, an oven with a kettle and a frying-pan on it, a plug socket, domestic rooms and tables, and an unravelling ball of thread. (And, of course, Stone's own family is inscribed in the text through the dedication of the book to her grandmother.)

The phrase 'immediate and pre-rational' is an accurate description of the style of Stone's drawings, particularly in her use of disturbing, surreal elements which tend to cut through some of the domestic settings. As Leonard writes, the unconscious is an important topic in twentieth-century responses to Hegel's interpretation of *Antigone*. This is partly because Hegel himself made both consciousness and unconsciousness an important part of his interpretation of Antigone's, and Creon's, motivation and responsibility:

... the one character like the other is split up into a conscious and unconscious part; and since each itself calls forth this opposition ... each is responsible for the guilt which destroys it.<sup>21</sup>

This led to Hegel's interpretation of *Antigone* becoming an important focus of debate in the post-war period:

By placing the question of consciousness at the heart of his discussion of the ethical order, Hegel inaugurated a debate about the role of the unconscious in the ethical life of the community which has dominated ethical writing in the second half of the twentieth century.<sup>22</sup>

Carson's references to Hegel in *Antigonick*, therefore, alert us to possible unconscious links to Bianca Stone's drawings. The grouped figures that recur in the drawings may represent the Chorus, though this is not clear. These figures tend to have their heads replaced by pieces of stone which could be gates, perhaps intended to be the gates of Thebes. In others, a horse struggles in pain in domestic contexts where one would expect a human being. An empty bed has feet sticking out of the end and what look like two tiny ghosts arguing on the bed cover. The overall impression given is certainly 'pre-rational'; a disturbance of the unconscious breaking through the surface of the image.

Carson shows her familiarity with the twentieth century debate inaugurated by Hegel in a further exchange between Antigone and Ismene:

ANTIGONE: SOME THINK THE

WORLD  
IS MADE OF BODIES SOME THINK FORCES I  
THINK A MAN KNOWS NOTHING BUT HIS FOOT WHEN

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<sup>21</sup> Hegel 1977: 285.

<sup>22</sup> Leonard 2005: 100.

HE BURNS IT IN THE HOT FIRE

ISMENE: QUOTING HEGEL AGAIN

ANTIGONE: HEGEL SAYS I'M WRONG  
ISMENE: BUT RIGHT TO BE WRONG ANTIGONE: NO  
ETHICAL CONSCIOUSNESS ISMENE: IS THAT HOW  
HE PUTS IT ANTIGONE: SO I WONDER, LET'S SAY MY  
UNCONSCIOUS WHILE REMAINING UNCONSCIOUS COULD  
ALSO KNOW THE LAWS OF CONSCIOUSNESS BY WHICH I  
AM CONDEMNED FOR DISOBEYING THEM I MEAN

There is a large gap of empty space on the page, after which Antigone continues:

CAN A PERSON BE SO  
COMPLETELY CONSCIOUS OF BEING UNCONSCIOUS  
THAT SHE IS GUILTY OF HER OWN REPRESSION, IS THAT  
WHAT I'M GUILTY OF

This may be simply intended to mock the intellectuality of the Hegelian debate, or it may be intended to show Antigone wresting back the debate over herself which has had, among its main proponents, Hegel, Jacques Lacan, Luce Irigaray, and Jacques Derrida. If so, there is an irony in this, in that these words are actually Irigaray's words, who attacked Hegel's reading of Antigone on the basis that he makes her unconscious enough to lack an ethical consciousness, because she is a woman, but, conversely, wants her to be conscious enough to be guilty of committing a crime and to be punished for it; putting the female, as Leonard comments, 'both on the side of the unconscious and on the side of the guilty'. Here is the relevant passage from Irigaray, as quoted by Leonard:

*What an amazing vicious circle in a single syllogistic system. Whereby the unconscious, while remaining unconscious, is yet supposed to know the laws of a consciousness – which is permitted to remain ignorant of it – and will become even more repressed as a result of failing to respect these laws.*<sup>23</sup>

Carson puts Irigaray's words into Antigone's mouth, though there is no sense, in the book as a whole, that Carson subscribes to Irigaray's feminist critique of Hegel or of Lacan. According to Leonard, Irigaray wanted to put the political dimension back into the play that Lacan, in his interpretation, had removed when he lifted Antigone out of her dramatic context:

Antigone's action is thus doubly marginalized by the *polis* – its other – both as an *a*-political and as an *anti*-political action. For Hegel, woman combines within her this double and utterly inconsistent

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<sup>23</sup> Leonard 2005: 132.

threat. Irigaray, on the other hand, wants to repoliticize Antigone's choice by bringing it precisely back into the realm of the conscious, of the civic.<sup>24</sup>

Yet, despite including Irigaray's words against Hegel and Lacan, Carson simultaneously prevents a repoliticization of the play, re-distancing Antigone from her dramatic context by turning her conflict with Creon into a conflict with time.

Carson's use of Irigaray, via Leonard, is an example of the way she often uses theory eclectically in her work, pulling in sentences that she likes while often ignoring their implications. On this occasion, however, the implications are difficult to ignore, because they return us to a Hegelian reading of Antigone's character and context which is re-emphasised in Carson's interpretation. If the concept of time replaces Creon as Antigone's antagonist, this would amount to the very de-politicising of the play that Irigaray accused Lacan and Hegel of perpetrating. Carson is avoiding the importance and relevance of the political world of the play in her version, therefore reinforcing the idea that a woman does not belong in that world, since the conflict of personality and time is far removed from a political, civic conflict.

In one review, Michael Lista argues that Carson's 'hand is forced by history' in this choice of pitting Antigone against time rather than against Creon, because a post-twentieth-century audience is utterly unable to sympathise with the suffering of a tyrant, which would be necessary for there to be two valid, opposed viewpoints struggling with each other within the play.<sup>25</sup> This makes a significant point in putting Carson's interpretation into its historical context, but unfortunately, in saying that her hand has been forced, he is taking away from Carson the same ability to make conscious decisions, as interpreter of Sophocles' *Antigone*, that Hegel and Lacan took away from Antigone herself within the play. Perhaps this speaks to a larger problem for Carson herself, that some of her readers will want to see her as an Antigone-like figure even as they read the book, just as the characters in *The L Word* saw her as a heroic loner. But then, this is perhaps an inevitable consequence of leaving the room for interpretation so wide.

Carson also appears to intend a further level of meaning in her juxtaposition of text and image. It is already clear from Carson's previous work that she thinks of written letters as having abstract qualities rather than simply being tools which record phonemes. In *Eros the Bittersweet*, the Greek alphabet was said to be unique in that it was peculiarly suitable

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<sup>24</sup> Leonard 2005: 133.

<sup>25</sup> Michael Lista, 'On Poetry: Antigonick by Anne Carson', *National Post*, 1 June 2012 <<http://arts.nationalpost.com/2012/05/25/michael-lista-on-poetry-antigonick-by-anne-carson>> [accessed on 15 November 2012]

for abstract thought.<sup>26</sup> Letters, for Carson, have symbolic value in their own right; however she also says that the written words themselves are dead artefacts, a verbal surface which can merely impersonate life.<sup>27</sup> This view of language-as-abstraction is also present in *Antigonick*, where the images supply the liveliness and particularity that the written words cannot achieve because they are dead and abstract, just as Hegel's 'familiar ethical order', with its focus on the individual and the particular, opposes the 'abstracted identification with the human law' in Leonard's comment above. In her interpretations of classical texts Carson is increasingly unwilling to let words speak for themselves.

In an interview earlier in her career, Carson talked about her strategy of working on three projects simultaneously (one literary, one scholarly, and one artistic) at three different desks, and of allowing the projects to influence each other.<sup>28</sup> In this case it seems that all the desks were involved from the start: Miriam Leonard's *Athens in Paris* on one desk, Sophocles' *Antigone* on the second, Bianca Stone's drawings on the third. The ideas and quotations that Carson uses or puts into Antigone's mouth are not drawn directly from Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* but from Leonard's account of Hegel's interpretation of *Antigone*, together with her account of Lacan's and Irigaray's critiques of Hegel. It is a remarkable, if undeclared, example of a creative writer and an artist drawing inspiration from a work of contemporary scholarship on the receptions of an ancient text.

### **On Getting (and Not Getting) Carson**

Stephen Burt ends his review of *Nox* in the *London Review of Books* with some reservations about the kind of praise it has received:

For many readers, and not a few editors, *Nox* and its 'poetry of a kind you're not used to' has turned out to be poetry of the most welcome kind: a work you can admire and interpret simply by opening the box and unfolding the pages; a book of poems you don't even have to read.<sup>29</sup>

For Burt, readers who welcome the ease of not having to work to read it are in some way deceived or self-deceiving; they have made a 'category error'. There is an anxiety implied in this comment about the current reception of poetry within mainstream culture, and about readers' willingness and indeed competence to receive it at all. However, Burt is also keen to distance Carson herself from this kind of reception, making it clear that he believes it is

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<sup>26</sup> Carson 1986: 58.

<sup>27</sup> Di Michele in Allen and Carr (eds) 2001: 10-11.

<sup>28</sup> Aitken and Carson 2004: 205.

<sup>29</sup> Burt 2011: 22.

a product of her ‘celebrity’ and the ‘aura’ surrounding her work, rather than her own intention. He also blames ‘the continuing prestige but diminished actual interest that poetry as such seems to hold these days’.

However, this kind of reception is also the indirect product of assumptions about literature and its meaning which are dominant within the literary-academic cultural field in which Carson established herself. There are wider responses to poetry in the USA which are more complex than Burt suggests when he speaks of the ‘diminished interest in poetry’. It is not simply that there are large numbers of non-academic readers content with the kind of visual para-poetry that *Nox* represents, there is also a very large number of people who do read poetry, but whose favourite poets are often not those favoured in the reading lists of corporate academia. The poet Mary Oliver, for example, currently has, according to one newspaper in Seattle, half a million copies of her work in print, and news of her forthcoming readings regularly sparks a minor public frenzy:

The appearance by the 71-year-old writer from Massachusetts, arguably the country’s most popular poet, had sparked the fastest sell-out in the 20-year history of the hallmark literary series. The response was so feverish that Oliver ticket buyers and sellers<sup>30</sup> moved into the unlikely realm of Craigslist with prices as high as \$100 per seat.

Billy Collins and Nikki Giovanni are two other living North American poets with a large following, and what distinguishes them from many of the academic-establishment poets is the accessibility of their poetry. In other words, their status is, at least to some extent, bound up with their readers’ assumptions that they ‘get’ what these poets are writing.

The terms ‘getting’ and ‘not getting’ are useful in trying to assess the receptions of Anne Carson’s recent work and her unusual position in North American literature. My use of these terms is suggested by the psychoanalyst Adam Phillips, whose essay, ‘On Not Getting It’, claims that, despite the fact that the idea of ‘getting’ it, of knowing what others seem to know, is universally privileged, whether the ‘it’ that one must get is a joke, a poem, or a relationship; nevertheless, psychoanalysis (or the after-education that psychoanalysis represents, according to Phillips) has something to tell us about the value of not always getting it, especially where the ‘it’ proves notoriously hard to get, such as with sexuality, and with other people more generally, or where the effort of always trying to get it may limit or inhibit a more fully satisfying response.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> John Marshall, 'Revered poet shows her witty side', *Seattlepi*, 5<sup>th</sup> February 2008  
<<http://www.seattlepi.com/default/article/Revered-poet-shows-her-witty-side-1263577.php>> [accessed 13<sup>th</sup> October 2011]

<sup>31</sup> Phillips 2012: 34-80.



With both Burt and Meghan O'Rourke (quoted at the beginning of this chapter), the very fact that they tell us there has been a mistake over the reception of Carson's work in mainstream culture implies that they believe they get Carson in a way that the mainstream does not, and they both explain the nature of the mistake that they think other readers have made. However, these attempts at defining errors of interpretation do not take account of the nature of the cultural field from which Carson has emerged. For the influential readership Burt refers to as the 'North American avant-garde', which is also the literary establishment, this concern with getting Carson, and getting her right, would in itself be wrong-headed. To try to get a poem, for these readers, can be a facile or even wrong-headed response in comparison with the rich experience of not getting it. This way of reading is neatly summarised by Phillips:

... in the audience being actively prevented from getting it, something else becomes possible in relation to it. Not being able to find out what the writer wants from the reader – exhausting the possibilities of the reader getting it – forces the reader, if he is sufficiently intrigued, to do something else.<sup>32</sup>

Phillips quotes the highly influential avant-garde North American poet John Ashbery (whose MacArthur award in 1985 heralded the ascendance of avant-garde poets to the Fellowship in subsequent years), who said that 'the worse your art is the easier it is to talk about'.<sup>33</sup> The logical corollary of this view is that, with the greatest art, interpretation is impossible.

Since this literary-academic cultural field is also the place where literature is made as well as received, it would be surprising if its assumptions did not influence the poetry written within it: and this is what we find with Carson's work. Like many of her avant-garde poetic contemporaries, she does not intend to be gettable. Rather, she wants to leave her work open to the maximum possible range of interpretation, for which she does not consider herself responsible. This is perhaps all that can be said about her authorial intentions as regards the form of *Nox* and *Antigonick*. For Carson, increasingly, the creative process is the point, or in other words, the juxtaposition of media, and not the aesthetic, cultural or political implications of this juxtaposition, is her message. The literary and visual techniques she has used in *Nox* or, with Bianca Stone, in *Antigonick*, do not serve any final statement beyond themselves. Hegel is part of the creative process, and Irigaray is part of the translated text, though Carson engages with neither philosopher on

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<sup>32</sup> Phillips 2012: 44.

<sup>33</sup> Phillips 2012: 44.

any consistent level. This is, and to an extent always has been, the famous difficulty of Carson. She is essentially an artist, a maker in the uncategorisable ancient Greek sense of the word *ποιητής*, and this concentration upon the creative process can be seen as early in her career as the teasing explorations in *Eros the Bittersweet*; explorations which do not deliver a final definition of *eros*, thereby attempting to replicate her own interpretation of Sappho's interpretation of *eros* within the structure and style of the book itself. No doubt this increasingly process-orientated stance serves, on a personal as well as an aesthetic level, her own project of decreation, as discussed in Part Two Chapter Eight; her wish not to be a person, writing away from the self and allowing the creative process she initiates to go its own way. This ambition, and the ways Carson pursues it, inevitably creates a problem for criticism, both in terms of getting Carson and in the enormous scope for possible interpretation, and one can see this difficulty clearly in the reviews of *Antigonick*, which inevitably focus for the most part on form rather than content. One on-line review by the poet Chrissy Williams spends the vast majority of its three and a half thousand words describing the form of the book; asking, but not answering, questions about its content, and making general remarks about literature and 'the book'. The last paragraph is typical:

To go back to the title of this essay then, to ask what the hell *Antigonick* is and try to understand why it matters, is simpler than all this might have made it seem. *Antigonick* invites us to forget any critical and commercial obsession with genre, definition and categorisation, and see instead a work which is uniquely communicated in the form which has been chosen for it: the book. The form, here, is the perfect expression of the work's own concern with space and time. It articulates the importance of the form of the book as medium for communication and, in this strange period of human history we find ourselves, in this infancy of digital publishing, it shows us just what a book is capable of. *Look at me*, says the book, *Aren't I amazing?*<sup>34</sup>

In going back to her original question, Williams is able to tell us why *Antigonick* matters, in her opinion, but not much about what it actually is, beyond its form.

What we really can see in Carson's translation of *Antigone* is her familiar poetic obsessions: time and eternity, the inadequacy of words and consequent dismantling of language, the meaning of empty space on the page, the isolated female figure and her dissociation from the world around her, the constant presence of death. In re-framing the myth, Carson has once again drawn attention to the difficulties of translation, and in the process emphasised her own presence in the text, as ever. But then she and Stone have

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<sup>34</sup> Chrissy Williams, 'Antigonick: what the hell it is and why it matters', *Hand and Star*, 7 July 2012 <<http://www.handandstar.co.uk/index.php/2012/07/antigonick-what-the-hell-it-is-and-why-it-matters/>> [accessed 15 November 2012]

added a further layer, which has the effect of de-centring Carson again, re-framing her in the Hegelian conflict between her words and Stone's images, and attempting to emancipate the power and success of poetry from the word.

## Part Three

### Chapter Eleven

#### **‘In that protected and rather arrogant atmosphere personalities exuberated’: Carson and Housman Compared**

A.E. Housman and Anne Carson are both unusual, even strange, figures to some extent: both of them, for different reasons, can be seen as ‘classicist freaks’, as Carson was once described: unusual both in themselves as reclusive yet arresting personalities and in the dual positions they have occupied in both the academic profession and the literary world.<sup>1</sup> There are not many others like them, and consequently one has to be cautious in treating them as representative figures of their times.

However, one of the notable aspects of the periods they have both lived through is that they were times of radical, and sometimes traumatic, change for classical studies and for the world beyond. The fact that they both achieved significant cultural presence, as classical scholars and poets, and helped to set new boundaries in academic discourse during such times is, I would argue, no coincidence. Rather, the very instability of boundaries in such periods, I suggest, allows and even encourages grand assertions of personality such as we see in the work and careers of Housman and Carson. In other words, their unusual qualities and the unsettledness of their times are intimately connected. It is this parallel that makes it possible, through my chosen framework, to take the temperature of the connections between classics and creativity in the historical periods in which they have lived and worked. In this chapter I discuss their similarities, especially the specific way in which they both reacted to established viewpoints and assumptions, and other powerful forces, which were dominant during their careers; in other words, how they found their way successfully through them without being excessively criticised or, in career terms, thwarted. I argue that the main technique they used to achieve this was their self-projected independence and (megaphone) reclusiveness, the pose of heroic isolation which has enabled them to some extent to choose their battles, deciding which challenges it was possible to hide from or to skirt around. I also discuss some of the consequences involved when such large and unusual personalities come to dominate their fields.

There will probably always be some difficulty of assessment in the study of classical

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<sup>1</sup> Val Ross, ‘Classic Carson’, *University of Toronto Magazine*, (Spring 2001)  
<<http://www.magazine.utoronto.ca/feature/about-anne-carson-poetry/>> [accessed on 11 October 2011]

scholarship and creativity, since the connections between them, on the evidence of these two writers, are likely always to be disputed and uncomfortable. This is because such connections spring from larger issues of changing literary and academic boundaries, and their effects on particular readerships, which are equally disputed and uncomfortable. The careers of both Carson and Housman emerged out of social and cultural crises; particular historical moments which involved the challenging of tradition on a much larger scale than that shown in the field of classics and creativity, but which have had deep repercussions for both areas. These crises brought about realignments of the relationship between classical scholarship and its wider cultural context, and therefore between institutions of scholarship and creativity. Carson's career and Housman's form part of larger historical movements, such as the entrance of women into cultural discourse, to name but one obvious example.

This wider historical perspective also shows the changing boundary lines of who is sanctioned to speak or write, and who will be given a hearing, especially in terms of changes in the position of scholarly boundaries, (in Bourdieu's terms, from homogeneity to heterogeneity). Such realignments, in an academic context, often involve a parallel realignment of the place of the aesthetic within the academy: a vexed issue which, historically, is never settled but, equally, never avoided. A simple but not too simplistic formulation would be to say that, in Housman's cultural context, there was an attempt by the new professional scholars to drive the aesthetic out of the academy, in the name of science, but that, conversely, in Carson's context the aesthetic has been, at least to some extent, officially readmitted. These movements happened for very different reasons in each case; with Housman they had to do with new attitudes to science and the rise of middle-class professionalism in the academy, whereas in Carson's social and cultural context the *rapprochement* of the aesthetic and the academic has been caused by a complex combination of social and political reforms, the rise of English as a subject and the popularity of New Criticism in the USA, the corporatisation of the universities and the major publishing houses there, and the continuing influence of literary modernism.<sup>2</sup> One manifestation of this, as described by Mark McGurl in *The Program Era* (2009), is the phenomenon of the creative writing program, and its cultural importance in demonstrating wealthy North American universities' capacity to waste (or appear to waste), in order to display their status, as discussed in Chapter Six.

Housman's long battle against what he called the 'literary taint' in classics was also a battle with the assumptions and influence of the Anglican, humanist establishment. He

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<sup>2</sup> McGurl 2009.

was not the originator of this struggle, however, which began with supporters of materialistic scientific rationalism in the generation immediately before his, as Sir Richard Jebb, the classicist who was effectively the leading spokesman for humanism in Britain in the latter part of the nineteenth century, describes in his Romanes lecture of 1899, in a clearly biased but informative account:

It was rather more than thirty years ago, towards the end of the period during which the classics had enjoyed a virtual monopoly in literary education. The educational claims of science had been fully developed, and were being powerfully urged by champions of whom Professor Huxley was the most brilliant; but these claims had not yet been effectively recognised by adequate provision for the teaching of science in schools and Universities. Several able men, who had been trained in classical studies and had been successful in them, were discontented with the classical system, were conscious of personal needs which it had not satisfied, and felt a sort of resentment against it. In education, as in other matters, some of these men were advanced and eager reformers, who, by their general habit of mind, apart from their particular complaints against the classics, were unlikely to feel any prejudice in favour of tradition,—were apt to be sceptical, or even scornful, of anything alleged on behalf of the humanities which appeared to them sentimental or conventional,—and were little disposed to conserve any element in education to which they could not assign a definite rational value.<sup>3</sup>

One can get some sense, from Jebb's lecture as a whole, of just how difficult an adversary he was for Housman, who challenged him in several scholarly disputes. Firstly, there is the engaging progressivism of his historical account of the influence, for the great good of humanity, of classical studies from the Renaissance through the centuries. For humanists like Jebb, man was still the measure of all things; a position buttressed, rather than undermined, by the religious establishment's views of the day. According to their assumptions of historical (Christian) progress and development, the spirit of the Greek poets had been revived in Italy in the fifteenth century and handed down to them. They saw little cultural estrangement between the humanism of the Renaissance and that of their own times, produced by changes of historical context and culture.

Secondly, as can be seen in this extract from the lecture, there is Jebb's dangerous reasonableness. He is prepared to concede that there needed to be 'adequate provision' for the teaching of science in schools, and that its advocates had a case when this had not yet been achieved, implying that by 1899 it had been. He describes his adversaries as 'able' and paints them as men who insisted on 'definite rational value' in education, while at the same time describing them as resentful, as having unsatisfied, and unnamed, 'personal needs' (a suggestion of the insidious language of Richard Owen's attack on Thomas Huxley here, as discussed in Chapter Two). He also manages to suggest that they were against tradition in general more than classics in particular, and not only from a particular complaint or set of complaints, but from 'general habit of mind' and a tendency to be

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<sup>3</sup> Todd (ed.) 2002: 535-536.

extreme and ‘scornful’, thereby gently suggesting that most terrible of faults in Victorian public life, a character not entirely sound.

Added to this, Sir Richard Claverhouse Jebb was a culture-hero of his time: as well as his very wide-range of publications, including his edition of Sophocles which is still influential today, he was Member of Parliament for Cambridge University (caricatured as ‘Ajax MP’ in 1897 in *Vanity Fair*), also friends with famous literary figures like Matthew Arnold and Robert Browning, and a member of the Athenaeum Club.<sup>4</sup> He was, in other words, very much a figure of the British establishment; the same establishment to which Housman, like Darwin and Huxley before him in a different context, had arrived to tell inconvenient truths.

This struggle produced a fierce time for English classics: the pressures were great, as can be read in the account given by Raymond Postgate, the son of Housman’s rival John Postgate, of his childhood spent among these scholars, in the introduction to his own edition of *The Agamemnon*:

In the early years of the twentieth century, and the last years of the nineteenth, the life of learning was almost equally agitated, and the characters agitating it were almost as formidable and unusual [as the early years of the eighteenth century].

All figures, no doubt, are more than life-size to a small boy; but the magnitude and oddity of father and his associates did not exist only in the eye of the beholder.

There was a world of learning, led by classical studies; beyond it were mostly shopkeepers and men who worked with their hands. In that protected and rather arrogant atmosphere personalities<sup>5</sup> exuberated.

Housman needed to have an exuberant personality in order to survive in this environment, even if the kind of exuberance he adopted was unusual in form. As I argued in Chapter Two, this is partly the origin of his aggressive prose style: it is the voice of a triumphant former underdog, determined to drag his contemporaries into the rational scientific future, but also somewhat arrogant and defensive; a voice that takes no prisoners; often, in his published classical papers, launching into an area of philological controversy without any preamble or introduction, as if to say, ‘Come on, keep up!’.<sup>6</sup> There is, however, also a more attractive side to this voice, in its stoicism, its arch weariness and resignation at the follies of others, and especially in its almost vaudevillian comic turns. Housman needed the shocking, even outrageous, elements in his style in order not to be ignored by this

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<sup>4</sup> Stray in Butterfield and Stray (eds) 2009: 163.

<sup>5</sup> Postgate 1969: 5-6.

<sup>6</sup> Diggle and Goodyear (eds) 1972: *passim*.

establishment. Goold may be right to say that Housman's strength was intellectual not moral, but one needs to ask whether intellectual strength alone would have got his work noticed.<sup>7</sup> Like Milton's Satan he shakes his fist at the Almighty, and, in his attitude to humanity in general, either takes the world to be an abyss of meaningless absurdity or in itself a condemnation of its maker.

In these attacks on other scholars Housman also had to steer a very careful course, not only socially but in terms of the kind of knowledge he wished to promote. Housman's scholarship often works by putting the ancient text at issue into a larger historical and scholarly context than that assumed in the conventional conjectural arguments of older scholars of his time. However, having opened the field so forcefully he then had to delimit it within a new boundary.<sup>8</sup> With a devastating combination of the historical scholarship of great figures like Bentley and Scaliger, a rigorous methodology which he considered scientific, and blunt logic he tore apart their assumptions, which meant in effect that the particular text at issue could never be discussed again without reference to Housman, even if his argument was not always accepted.<sup>9</sup> This allowed him to create his own sternly-policed arena within the arena of classical *logomachy*, but it also raised a further difficulty for him in social and cultural terms. How could one make a fierce attack on convention and tradition without risking being labelled unsound, together with accusations of 'resentment', stemming from 'a general habit of mind', or of having insidious 'personal needs' (the last charge being obviously the most dangerous for Housman)?

The way Housman dealt with this problem can most easily be seen in his social behaviour: not for him the social boldness of a Huxley or the clubbable ease of a Jebb. Perhaps the strangest inconsistency in Housman's personality, greater than that between Housman the scholar and Housman the poet, is that between Housman the fearsome warrior for truth and Housman the silent figure at social gatherings, though in fact these two modes complemented each other. Within his scholarship he was fearless and ruthless, sometimes straightforwardly verbally abusive, but beyond his scholarship he was forbiddingly remote and famously unapproachable. His un-reachable severity was, in public, the stamp of his seriousness: making it harder for him to be as easily explained away as Jebb's 'able men'. In a society dominated by the word 'no', he made sure his was

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<sup>7</sup> Butterfield and Stray (eds) 2009: 41.

<sup>8</sup> For example, Housman did not want to open the boundary as far as a working knowledge of metaphysics, as Benjamin Jowett, the reforming Master of Balliol and translator of Plato (1817-1893), did; even though Jowett in his later years thought the main point of understanding metaphysical systems was to get rid of them; see Stephen 1898: 136-137. Housman had always been, from his undergraduate days, dismissive of philosophy: if he would not admit Plato, then Hegel had no chance at all.

<sup>9</sup> Butterfield and Stray 2009: 108-109.



always the most emphatic ‘no’ around. One of the more comic aspects of his disastrous lunch with the buccaneering journalist Frank Harris and friends is that they did not understand that, in treating him as if he were as cheerfully rebellious as themselves, they bypassed his main defence system, forcing him openly to fight against their version of him, which threatened to explain him away in more senses than one.

Though there were definite advantages to this way of behaving, for Housman himself, the reputation it produced has also left some problems for posterity. This can be perceived if one asks why Housman’s anti-social, or even occasionally solipsistic behaviour has been so readily tolerated or admired; or even, in the case of literary critics like John Bayley and Christopher Ricks, enjoyed.<sup>10</sup> After all, this is a man who was so emotionally untouched by the First World War that he could write, in a letter of 1919, of ‘my sacrifices for my country during the war’, meaning his financial donation to the Treasury to support the war effort.<sup>11</sup> He also complained about the noise the soldiers billeted in his college made, and about the infections they might spread, and about the difficulty of getting to France for his holidays during the war years. This is the least sympathetic aspect of Housman the ‘no’ sayer: it is one thing to hate the world, quite another to be so ignorant about the suffering right on one’s doorstep as to whine about one’s own trivial discomforts as a whole generation is being destroyed.

Richard Graves, in his biography of Housman, is keen to stress how much of a ‘real interest’ Housman took in ‘soldiers in general’.<sup>12</sup> Of course, it is much easier to take an interest in anyone ‘in general’, and Graves view implies that Housman’s behaviour should be placed within a larger context in which one feels sympathy for his emotional predicament. However, it is clearly the case that soldiers, for Housman, belonged in poems. His romantic, idealistic view of them remained completely unmodified by the fact that millions of them were killed on an industrial scale, and that the vast majority of these were not lads who were ‘in love with the grave’.<sup>13</sup>

The fact that Housman does not get a worse press for his behaviour and attitudes, I would argue, has a great deal to do with his reputation for independence of mind and social self-isolation, as well as his authoritative scholarship (which is, for the most part, necessarily taken on trust by most of those who write admiringly about Housman the man). These qualities work together, not only as the sign of a special form of cultural authority, but

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<sup>10</sup> Bayley in Holden and Birch 2000: 154-66, Ricks 1988: 7-18.

<sup>11</sup> Burnett 2007: 411.

<sup>12</sup> Graves 1979: 174.

<sup>14</sup> From Housman’s poem *Illic Jacet*, which he sent to his sister when his nephew was killed in action in the First World War, see Burnett 2007: 346-347.

because they allow him to slip over or around large issues which otherwise could have exposed him to much more criticism. He is seen, in many cases, as too serious and truthful to challenge. At the beginning of the war, for example, he had agreed with the young Bertrand Russell, at that time a lecturer at Trinity, that conscription was morally wrong. However, when Russell was condemned for his views Housman turned against him, refusing to sign a letter of outrage at the treatment of Russell by Trinity College. The letter was signed by twenty-two Fellows of Trinity, as well as by Gilbert Murray, but Housman refused on the grounds that Russell, finally exasperated, had asked for his name to be removed from the books of the College. Graves excuses Housman by saying:

His reaction to the Bertrand Russell affair clearly shows that he would not tolerate any behaviour which he felt was a slight to the College.<sup>14</sup>

This must be an abstract version of Trinity College, then, which somehow does not include the twenty-two Fellows who backed Russell at the time. Housman is exonerated, allowed to pass for no better reason, it seems, than that he was the kind of character who would pick on something slightly obscure in such a situation, and then defend it to his last breath. The fact that there were much larger issues at stake in this affair, involving justifications for war and deaths on a massive scale, has been put far into the background. Housman was offended on behalf of an abstract notion of Trinity College, Cambridge, and, after all, Housman was Housman. It seems that Graves, as well as Ricks and Bayley and others who have written about Housman, require a figure to fulfil a particular role, a place-holder for the position of lonely independent hero against the vicissitudes of cultural life and history.

This would not be important if it were only a matter of enjoying Housman's bad behaviour, but, beyond his own real and lasting achievements in philology, there is also the matter of his unfortunate influence on subsequent generations of scholars. This is not only a matter of the cult of personality of Housman himself, rather the idea of what it means to be an authentic scholar, (or, in the literary field, an authentic writer), derived from the reception of his legend, has been disseminated both historically and culturally to powerful effect.

In its historical aspect, the heroic figure of Housman fixed the nature of future classical scholarship at Cambridge (and therefore beyond), according to Neil Hopkinson, and his influence lasted for a long time:

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<sup>14</sup> Graves 179: 184.

If Postgate instead of Housman had been elected Professor of Latin at Cambridge, the Classical course might have developed in a different direction. ... Postgate, a keen administrator who had strong views about the merits of composition and translation for weaker students, might well have introduced reforms. ... Postgate ... might have persuaded his colleagues to make Part 1 of the Tripos less like school work and more stimulating for those not destined for academic life. As it was, Housman's fame and example meant that philological and textual study remained at the heart of the curriculum in Cambridge until the reforms of the 1960s.<sup>15</sup>

A sad example of the cultural influence of this image of the scholar is described by Charles Rowan Beye in the book *Compromising Traditions* (1997), in which several well-known classical scholars explore the relevance of using a more personal, autobiographical voice in their scholarship, in response to what they perceive as the inadequacy and the social and political problems associated with the supposedly objective, impersonal voice of traditional classical scholarship.<sup>16</sup> (Alongside this they also explore the problems and possible limitations of the personal voice; especially the unreliability of the autobiographical self and the problem of how to criticise work which bases itself on personal truth.) Beye writes of his experience of North American classical scholars, who were heavily influenced, historically, by the great nineteenth century German scientific classical scholarship which Housman also admired. However, a by-now-familiar tendency to narrowness of focus, isolationism, as well as social exclusiveness, was also very much in evidence. Some of Housman's ferocity was there too, though in a degraded form:

The Harvard classics department in those days was sundered by the personal rivalries of most of the senior faculty. It always struck me that there was a kind of gender tension in the division between the ancient historians, epigraphists, and archaeologists and their rivals, the historians and critics of ancient literature. There was one old bird in particular who in his gravel voice, devoid of any inflection that would acknowledge much of the range of human emotion, was forever inveighing against interpretation, arguing for the simple truth of so-called "facts". His condescension directed at the literary figures, the critics, translated the advocacy of interpretation into something feminine, flighty, if not hysterical, and definitely second or third rate and hardly lasting. Whenever I ventured timidly upon interpretation or mildly advanced some idea about any aspect of our subject, his devotees would immediately bark out harshly, gruff as they could be: "What are your refs [references]?"<sup>17</sup>

This is surely a debasement of the scientific attitude promoted by Housman, among others, but it is also exactly the undesirable result of over-specialisation that Richard Jebb is afraid

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<sup>15</sup> Hopkinson in Butterfield and Stray (eds) 2009: 186.

<sup>16</sup> Hallett and Van Nortwick (eds) 1997: 1-4.

<sup>17</sup> Beye in Hallett and Van Nortwick (eds) 1997: 155. This barking obsession with facts is also the exact sentiment captured by Charles Dickens in the character of the school headmaster Mr Gradgrind, in his novel *Hard Times*, written a century earlier (1854), which begins with these words: 'Now what I want is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else. You can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon Facts: nothing else will ever be of any service to them. This is the principle on which I bring up my children, and this is the principle on which I bring up these children. Stick to Facts, Sir!'

of in his Romanes lecture:

I only say that the tendency to make those methods too technical is one of the besetting temptations of the higher and more esoteric classical study,—a fashion in which it sometimes appears even to exult, as though it were a warning to the profane to stay outside; and I say that such a tendency is adverse to the appropriate and sympathetic treatment of any subject-matter derived from literature or art. Aristotle observes in the *Rhetoric* that a speaker unconsciously but inevitably passes out of the province of that art if he begins to reason in the technical terms of a particular science; and one feels that the modern specialist, in certain branches of classical study, may come perilously near to passing out of the province of humanism.<sup>18</sup>

‘A warning to the profane to stay outside’ is exactly what Beye’s barking professors intended. Despite the great changes in school and university education since his time, both in Britain and North America, Jebb still has something valuable to tell us about the importance of a broader outlook and about retaining a sense of the aesthetic, in order to avoid becoming a practitioner of what Sean Gurd calls, with reference to Housman, the ‘Cyborg Discipline’.<sup>19</sup>

To many classical scholars of a similar outlook to the ones Beye describes, Housman represented a great example of scholarly behaviour as well as method. However, they probably did not perceive that, in many of the well-known anecdotes about his independence and fearlessness, he was not simply a hero of independence but a man manipulating his public image; that he was not, as a scholar, as independent as he seemed, and that some of the behaviour they admired in him was not so admirable when put into context, and read against the obvious intellectual capital it helped him accrue. The social context in particular, often missing from the stories about Housman, makes him look much less eccentric and dogmatic, and more like a skilled practitioner of cultural literacy.

With hindsight, it is possible to see the crisis that the narrow scholarly culture described by Beye is heading towards: the social and cultural challenges, protests, and reforms of the nineteen-sixties, and therefore, in terms of this study, to conditions which make possible the emergence of Anne Carson, among many other writers. This larger crisis manifested itself in her cultural context as the rise of Canadian nationalism and the protests against a European model of education, including classics, as well as European-centred cultural values, including assumptions about impersonality and social exclusiveness.<sup>20</sup>

One can see this crisis coming, specifically, in Beye’s portrait of an Irish-American classicist, (‘Ted’), who taught at Yale and Stanford, whom he describes as ‘a thoroughly conflicted person’, working-class Catholic in roots and outlook yet also ‘just as snobbish,

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<sup>18</sup> Todd (ed.) 2002: 528.

<sup>19</sup> Gurd 2005: 37.

<sup>20</sup> As discussed in Chapter Six.

elitist, self-effacing Yankee protestant seeming as he could manage'.<sup>21</sup> Beye writes:

Ted was obviously the first Irish person they [the worthies] had encountered out of the kitchen. Ted was such a conflicted person that he would have hated the personal voice. I mention him because he is a demonstration of the truth that more than anything else my generation's dislike of the personal voice theory stems, I think, from a profound need to use classics as a place to hide.<sup>22</sup>

The need of scholars like 'Ted', and like Beye himself, to hide their true identities, and the social tensions produced by this situation, could not last indefinitely. Already, in Carson's context in the late nineteen-sixties and early seventies, away from the prestige of Harvard and Yale, there was less need to efface the self in classics. When a Catholic priest taught her Plato, he did so via stories about Ireland.<sup>23</sup> Here we find the kind of approach to classics more recently explored as personal voice theory, but which was definitely not available to Beye's self-censoring Irish Catholic colleague at Harvard. This in turn suggests that the personal voice, in a similar way to the explosion of creative versions of classical texts explored in *Living Classics* (2009) and *Classics in Post-Colonial Worlds* (2007), was originally used and developed in places regarded as being on the cultural periphery, where the dominant culture was mitigated by those who could teach in their own style, slightly beyond its sanctions and definitely beyond its rewards.

In those high-status institutions by-passed by the changes of the nineteen-sixties, such hiding in classics would have taken some of its inspiration from the example of Housman. However, as I have shown, Housman was not just hiding; he was setting up a public image of heroic, ferocious independence as a defence against powerful and established public forces ranged against him. Under that banner, he was able to take a challenge-me-if-you-dare stance that made his work impossible to ignore: whatever his scientific credentials the last thing he was being was self-effacing, however many times he give his opinion that one must get rid of 'self-will' to be an effective textual editor. In reality, he could not have been self-effacing and survived in that environment.

Anne Carson's book *Eros the Bittersweet* (1986), based on her PhD thesis, is in itself evidence of the changing boundary, post-nineteen-sixties, between the academic and the aesthetic, and the ways in which Carson constructs her scholarship speak to this changed boundary; even if her argument is too large-scale historically, as well as being, in places, a grand assertion of subjectivity and special pleading. Though her scholarship clothes itself

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<sup>21</sup> Beye in Hallet and Van Nortwick (eds) 1997: 154.

<sup>22</sup> Beye in Hallet and Van Nortwick (eds) 1997: 154.

<sup>23</sup> Val Ross, 'Classic Carson', *University of Toronto Magazine*, (Spring 2001) <<http://www.magazine.utoronto.ca/feature/about-anne-carson-poetry/>> [accessed on 11 October 2011]

in historical evidence, one does not have to dig very far to find its underlying aesthetic origins. If one allows that, nevertheless, she gives us valuable insights into ancient Greek lyric by doing this, then classical scholarship is, to the extent one allows this kind of truth, no longer (in Bourdieu's terms) an autonomous pole. There is greater permeability within academic reading, caused by a larger change in what counts as knowledge in classics. It is this permeability which sanctions Carson's rhetorical moves, and, in career terms, helps her to achieve the cultural and literary authority that, in turn, allows her to make such rhetorical moves. This vicious, or virtuous, circle has now put her in a culturally consecrated position in which even she finds it remarkable that she has become almost beyond criticism in her work.<sup>24</sup>

Though there is much less biographical information on Anne Carson to draw on than there is on Housman, it is possible to say from exploring her work that, despite her attempts to write away from herself and her wish not to be a person, she is also hardly a self-effacing figure. Putting Housman and Carson into the same framework shows that one quality she shares with him, despite the differences in context and genre, is that she often draws attention to herself by undermining assumptions about classical texts in startling ways. Like him she also strives to write in a style that makes her work difficult to ignore. Like him she also has a strong sense of cultural literacy: it is no coincidence, for example, that she publishes *Antigonick* (2012), an illustrated version of *Antigone*, just as the graphic novel form is becoming fashionable.

Carson's scholarly voice also has an element of *hauteur* in its tone on occasion: like Housman, its most attractive quality is its wit, though hers is a more ironic, more subtle wit than his, with a Wildean love of paradox. It combines a slightly hip informality with a very wide range of reading and a somewhat arch tone, giving the overall impression that one is in the company of a very learned person who has also lived and seen it all, a little like T.S. Eliot's Tiresias in *The Waste Land*:

And I Tiresias have foresuffered all  
Enacted on this same divan or bed<sup>25</sup>

Of course, Tiresias had 'foresuffered all' because he/she had lived both as a man and a woman, and mentioning Tiresias in this context is also a reminder of Carson's unsure sense of her own gender. When one connects this with feminist criticism of Carson's work, one

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<sup>24</sup> Aitken and Carson 2004: 222.

<sup>25</sup> Eliot 2002: 37.

can see how her reputation for remoteness and independence works in a similar way to Housman's; giving her a useful distance in her response to difficult large-scale issues. This is not a distance she has maintained uniformly, however. In her essay 'Putting Her in Her Place: Women, Dirt, and Desire' for Halperin, Winkler and Zeitlin, published in their collection *Before Sexuality: The Construction of Erotic Experience in the Ancient Greek World* (1990), she examines the ways in which women are associated with transgression and pollution in ancient Greece, and how these ways are constructed within social reality.<sup>26</sup> Yet, despite this work, it would be difficult to call Carson a feminist writer. Her wish to get away from the self in her writing; her sense of herself as androgynous; her comment that she did not know what it was about growing up female that made one think, 'monster', all point away from such an affiliation.<sup>27</sup> This is also apparent from the answers she has given in her occasional interviews, such as this one in her *Matrix* interview with Mary di Michele (she is speaking of the Belgian feminist writer Luce Irigaray):

What I miss most in such writing is a concern for the activity of praise and the function of worship. These are essential to human works of language ...<sup>28</sup>

This is a strange response; criticising a major feminist philosopher, sociologist, and cultural theorist for not being worshipful enough. And the words 'praise' and 'worship' are not the first that come to mind with regard to Carson's own writing. It would be hard to decide from which angle to criticise this view, though, just as Housman's strange response to the Russell Affair, and more generally to the privations of the First World War, remained unchallenged. As with Housman's odd reason for abandoning Bertrand Russell, above, it gives the reader the sense that Carson is a serious figure, perhaps a conservative one in some of her values, but in its radical shift of focus is also unanswerable. This tendency to present a somewhat removed individuality is also apparent in Carson's influences. The writers she keeps returning to in her own writing are consistently those remarkable for their suffering and isolation: Emily Brontë, Sylvia Plath, Simone Weil, Marguerite Porete, Emily Dickinson, and Virginia Woolf. Aligning herself with them, her reputation as an independent, even reclusive, serious classical scholar, poet, and sufferer, allows her to maintain a distance from the issues that became so important for many women writers in the period she has lived and worked; issues which are explicitly to do with them being women; enabling her to draw upon feminist issues or make them irrelevant whenever she

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<sup>26</sup> Carson in Halperin, Winkler, and Zeitlin (eds) 1990: 135-170.

<sup>27</sup> Aitken and Carson 2004: 212.

<sup>28</sup> Di Michele in Allen and Carr (eds) 2001: 9-10.

wishes.

The ability to do this may, of course, be considered the ultimate freedom of the woman writer to say whatever she wants, and a sense of freedom is indeed an important factor in both the literary and the popular receptions of Carson's creative work. There is, however, an issue of projection associated with the reception of this sense of freedom, when Carson's readers associate her freedom with the image they have of her as a lonely, heroic genius. As discussed in the previous chapter, the critic Meghan O'Rourke was concerned that the discussion of Carson by two characters in the TV series *The L Word* involved a misinterpretation of her work. For O'Rourke, the TV program had presented Carson as if she were a lonely hero of the erotic, learning from erotic experience but ultimately remaining alone. As with Housman, this is an act of reception in which the receivers seem to require a lonely independent hero to represent their own desires; the hero's singularity being the blazon of his or her sincerity. This idolisation of the lonely, heroic genius also creates, in cultural terms, an illusion of inevitability regarding their success: that such a supposedly private and reclusive artist was somehow noticed and became an international cultural presence, without compromising the honesty of his or her position above the fray. However, as is re-emphasised by this study, such writers are not made famous because of some rule of nature that the talent of lonely geniuses will out. This idea that talent naturally comes to prominence may be many readers' preferred version of artistic success, but in reality their careers involved many complex negotiations, both within and beyond their work, with the ineluctable social and cultural necessities surrounding them, and inside them.

The connections between the classical scholarship and creativity of both Housman and Carson are uncomfortable ones. Neither of them seemed to feel the need to make them more comfortable, even if they developed opposing strategies to them, as part of the process of transforming themselves into successful academics and poets. Such self-transformations are probably most necessary in times of great social and cultural upheaval, and it is at these times that large and intense personalities like Carson and Housman tend to 'exuberate'. Housman clearly saw no need to resolve his two personae into one, even if the gap between them bewildered those readers who knew something about him and his work. Equally, however, it was not possible for him to escape the uncomfortable edge between his scholarship and creativity, either by denying its existence or presenting himself as utterly independent of his own *oeuvre*. This study has explored the connections between his scholarship and his poems, connections which he often perceived as



threatening, and which on a few occasions really did threaten him.

In Carson's very different social and cultural circumstances, she took the opposite approach, making much use of the uncomfortable edge which Housman sought to escape. Throughout her work tension of one kind or another is prominent; between objects, emotions, times, ideas, texts. Her most successful contribution to classics is in the edginess of her translations, in which she chooses to emphasise the static interference and the silences existing between source text and translation, unlike many previous translators whose main intention was to present smoothness and simplicity. Carson also attempts to write her poetry from the uncomfortable edge between classics and creativity; indeed this edge is sometimes her actual subject.

Yet there is one sense in which both of them did wish to resolve the selves they had constructed; in their well-known and often-declared desire to be rid of themselves in one way or another. This study has discussed some of the ironies that result from these statements, particularly in the way they exist alongside a most vehement emphasis upon their own presence, in both cases. They may have been determined to disappear, but would never countenance being ignored. In addition, this exploration of their careers and their work also shows how useful such a declared desire is in forestalling criticism, both as a counter-foil to their exuberance with the cultural fields they have occupied, and as a badge of sincerity to those readers, from different cultural levels of readership, who required them to despair heroically.

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