

**The Gesture of Rage in the Garden of Eden:  
Cliché and Catastrophe in Anne Carson's 'Variations on the Right to  
Remain Silent', 'Just for the Thrill' and *The Beauty of the Husband***

by  
Pey Pey Oh

A submission presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the University of  
South Wales/Prifysgol De Cymru for the degree of Master of Philosophy

May 2018

## Acknowledgements

I would never have been able to take the tiny steps towards even imagining this work, if not for the kind, constant encouragement and teaching I received from my Professors and Supervisors: Dr Philip Gross for my poetry manuscript and Dr Alice Entwistle for my critical paper, my gratitude and highest respect. Always first, my achievement is due to the love and support of my family, Mom & Dad, Giles, Leah and Bea. I would like to also thank my patient friends and readers especially CE, MK, AB & JA, DR, PJ, RS, AN for always believing in me when I couldn't, and my wonderful community of poets.

## Abstract

This thesis uses three significant texts by Canadian poet Anne Carson: 'Variations on the Right to Remain Silent', published in *Nay Rather* (2013), 'Just for the Thrill', published in *Plainwater* (1998), and *The Beauty of the Husband* (2001), in order to examine Carson's imaginative and conceptual use of the terms 'cliché' and 'catastrophe'. These two concepts are central to Carson's poetics and they are profoundly interrelated.

The introduction explores how, in this challenging contemporary poet's creative oeuvre, cliché is a screen that distorts the way of seeing the artist/translator's work. It investigates this conventional narrative as a way "of seeing the world without looking at it", and recognises that Carson's method of catastrophe disrupts the assumptions cliché creates (Carson, *Nay Rather* 18).

In Chapter one, Carson's poetic method is discussed through the lens of translation, in order to explore the transformation of language and its interdependence on the untranslatable silence that surrounds it. I address how Carson turns to the poetic use of the gap or space that is produced when cliché is subverted, and how this enables her to push the work towards the limits of language; a sensation of catastrophe that is freeing.

Chapter two focuses on the personal language of the writer/lover that is easily miscommunicated – by the distortion of clichéd screens – to the intended reader/beloved. The difficulties involved in chaos and confusion that mimic the sensation of catastrophe can, however, be translated into new meaning.

Chapter three examines how, in a subversive portrayal of marriage, the cliché of desire entangles itself with beauty (cliché) and truth (catastrophe), and illuminates how, for Carson, cliché and catastrophe have metaphorical as well as technical implications for her writing and its language.

This study concludes that Carson's art is a series of free marks that is needful from the artist – if a reader is to grasp this, they must "extinguish the usual relation" to seeing the world through the conventional narrative (NR 14).

## Table of Contents

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Chapter One: A Giant Cacophonous Cliché</b>	<b>8</b>
<i>Cliché and catastrophe in 'Variations on the Right to Remain Silent'</i>	8
<b>Chapter Two: A Place Where the Cliff Just Breaks Off</b>	<b>15</b>
<i>Cliché and catastrophe in 'Just for the Thrill'</i>	15
<b>Chapter Three: To Say Beauty is Truth and Stop</b>	<b>22</b>
<i>Cliché and catastrophe in The Beauty of the Husband</i>	22
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>Works Cited</b>	<b>36</b>

## Introduction

*I say catastrophe is an answer because I believe cliché is a question (Carson, Nay Rather 4)*

In her skilful essay on the trope of translation, ‘Variations on the Right to Remain Silent’, Anne Carson, the eminent translator, essayist, professor of Greek classics, and poet, argues that “silence is as important as words in the practice and study of translation. This may sound like a cliché” (Nay Rather 4). For this poet, it would seem that the untranslatable can act as a lens for insights into understanding the nature of language. Carson’s work is a constant dialogue with other works of literature and other authors, as she informs and is informed by the other texts. She rigorously interrogates the clichés that act as screens that surround a person’s everyday reality. While examining Carson’s translation of Euripides, *Grief Lessons*, Erika L. Weiberg notices that:

There are two competing currents in poetry: one that embroiders a veil over the everyday, another that rips it away. Sometimes the same poem is implicated in both motions, embroidering and ripping, but often one current prevails. Euripides, and Carson with him, prefer ripping (200).

Carson teaches ancient Greek and has written over 20 genre-defying publications and highly-regarded translations. She often invokes her own right to remain silent through deflection and non-sequitur in interviews, by disliking the blurbs on her book jackets, and by eschewing complex author biographies, typically allowing only ‘Anne Carson lives in Canada.’ In this dissertation, I would like to show that the following statement is central to her poetics in ‘Variations on the Right to Remain Silent’: “I say catastrophe is an answer because I believe cliché is a question” (Nay Rather 10). The place between cliché and catastrophe is untranslatable. Here exist the spaces that allow freedom – the gaps, the silences, the delays – where the essay and its author contend that Beauty “holds” (Carson, The

Beauty of the Husband 141), and gives the reader's mind a chance for the fluidity of movement it deserves. For Carson, the untranslatable seems a benevolent and important silence that gives us a refuge from the "zero-sum game" (between the choice of naming or chaos, cliché or catastrophe), a "third place to be. In the presence of a word that stops itself, in that silence, one has the feeling that something has passed us and kept going, that some possibility has got free" (Nay Rather 26). Carson gives evidence that the writer has to make an independent mark against these deadening templates, in order to remain original and real. If cliché is the tired naming of everything we already know, then its lack is *catastrophe*, because that is something without a name. There are risks and errors involved in reaching toward this understanding, however, like death, the loss of the lover, or the loss of language itself.

Arguably, Carson's poetry suggests that she thinks of the two terms as being interdependent in some ways; as being dialogically related. Understanding why Carson contends that catastrophe answers cliché brings us to the Greek origins of the word. In the vocabulary of Greek drama, catastrophe signifies an overturning or a sudden turn and/or conclusion to the narrative ("catastrophe"). By willing to risk the catastrophe of chaos and error, to "rage against cliché" by making their own "free mark", the artist may discover something new (Nay Rather 12, 24).

This study will examine Carson's use of cliché, and its answering term – catastrophe – in three significant texts: 'Variations on the Right to Remain Silent' (hereafter 'Variations'), published within *Nay Rather* (NR); 'Just for the Thrill' (hereafter 'Just For'), published in *Plainwater* (PW); and *The Beauty of the Husband* (BH). These are all early pieces in her canon. Although she refers to them all as essays, they are unlike each other in form. They all, however, interrogate layers of ideas throughout. The common flow of all three texts suggests that Carson demonstrates an approach to the 'essay' that incorporates its meaning as both a

noun and verb, as her writing persistently reveals her using language as “the action or process of trying or testing” (“essay, n”), as well as being “put to the proof” (“essay, v”). Carson layers meaning by putting two things next to each other, in order to indicate the possibility of a suggestive silence from the space in-between. In an interview with Sam Anderson in the *New York Times* in March 2013, Carson says, “the things you think of to link are not in your own control. It’s just who you are, bumping into the world. But how you link them is what shows the nature of your mind. Individuality resides in the way links are made.”

All three essays link disparate groups of individuals in time and history, but also in relation to each other, in order to ‘put to the proof’ the poet’s theories of language (cliché/catastrophe) and the untranslatable space of desire/eros:

The stereoscope is Carson's metaphor for making the 'difference between what is and what could be visible. The ideal is projected on a screen of the actual' (*Eros*, 17) in a vision that defers the need to exchange one thing for another, instead comprehending all options and creating a multitude of potential relations between them (Jennings, n. pag).

There is a triangle-like (Fig. 1) connection in Carson’s oeuvre between Lover: (Philosophy)(facts) (Socrates)(anthropology) (naming)(cliché); Beloved: (Lyricism) (residue) (Sappho) (fluidity) (chaos) (catastrophe); Text /Eros: (that which comes between them) (meaning/resistance), (leap of perception).

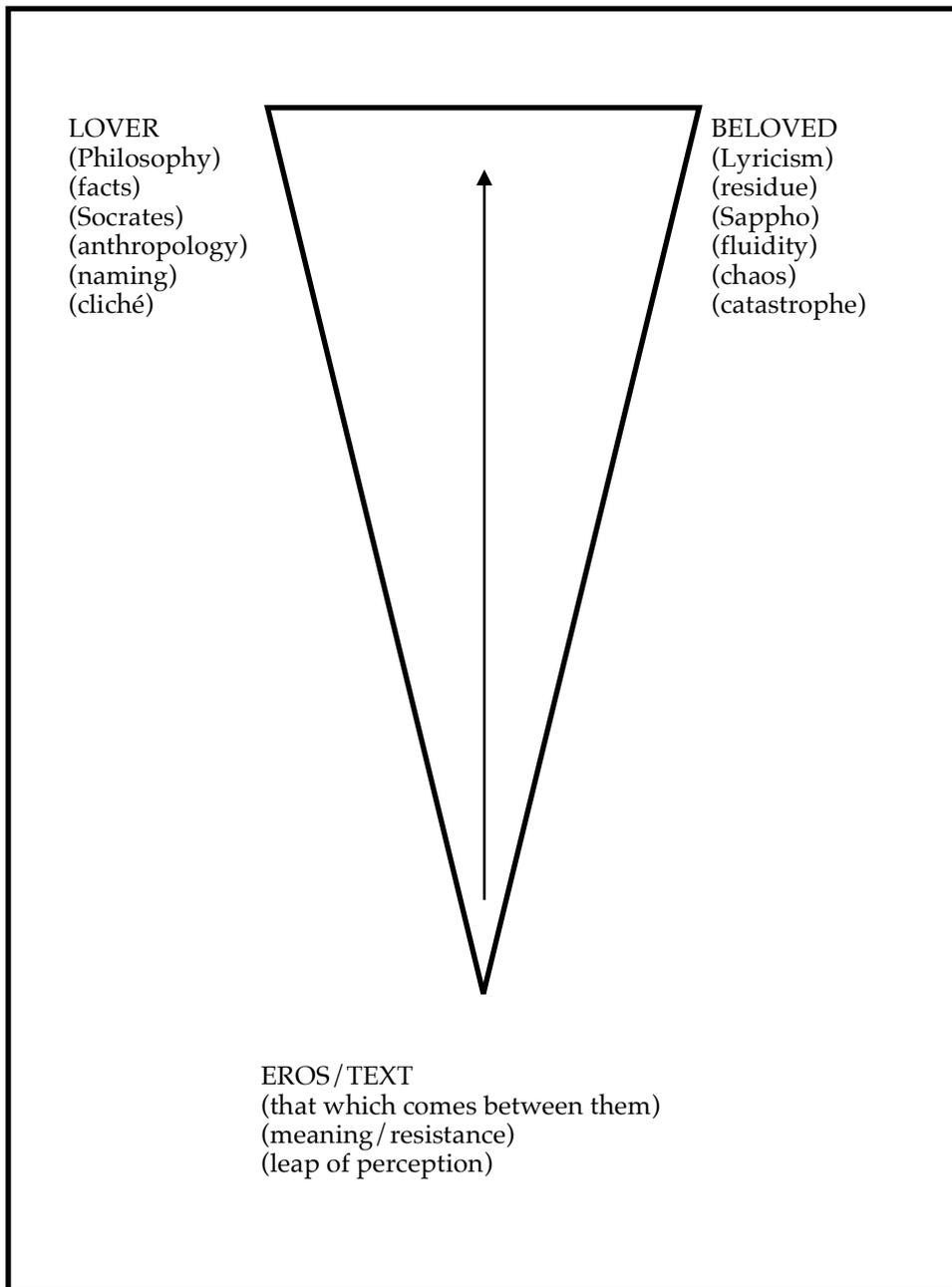


Figure 1

This triangular diagram is intended to portray the essence of the cliché of the writer (who constructs the text) trying to find the middle ground between the head and the mysterious heart; the space caught between a direct connection to the beloved (reader who reconstructs the meaning of the text). It is a constant philosophical ménage à trois in *Eros, the Bittersweet* (EB): “For, where eros is lack, its activation calls for three structural components – lover, beloved and that which comes between them” (16). Where each point of the triangle connects, perception

leaps, fuelled by the connection of electric desire; “something becomes visible, on the triangular path where volts are moving, that would not be visible without the three-part structure. The difference between what is and what could be is visible” (EB 17).

To give an example of the untranslatable in her creative work, in ‘Variations’, Carson takes “a fragment of ancient Greek lyric poetry”, Ibykos fr. 286, and translates it seven times “using the wrong words. A sort of stammering” (NR 32). The seven translations of Ibykos stammer seven different portrayals of the same idea that blossom into unexpected narratives, illustrating how Carson often re-examines variations of similar ideas and themes in her other work. This is the edge of eros that she explores in ‘Just for the Thrill’, when she attempts to translate the emotional into language. The same power-play of desire is also portrayed in *The Beauty of the Husband*. In the realm of how the personal translates into art, her voice is always trying to get away from herself, and yet she speaks directly to her reader.

Chapter one centres around ‘Variations on the Right to Remain Silent’, which was republished by Sylph Editions in 2013 in the Cahier Series as part of a pamphlet entitled *Nay Rather* after it appeared in *A Public Space* in 2008. The Poetry Society Annual Lecture was published in the winter of 2013 under a different title: ‘Stammering, Stops, Silence’. In her latest publication, *Float* (2016), it reappears as originally titled. The recurrence of this essay throughout Carson’s writing career is, in itself, a stammering. As this meditation on translation is her most published and performed essay, I would consider it an exploration of how an artist seeks to fully express what they mean, when no one else can fully move within the mind of another. This phenomenological state of being is what a translator must do in order to translate one language into another. Looking at language through the lens of translation, this essay describes translation as an “acknowledgment of the fact that languages are not algorithms of one another” (NR 4). By linking a series of characters trying to translate their unique experience into the world, ‘Variations’

discusses the role of silence and the untranslatable, mediated partly by the screen's veiling effect of clichéd ideas, words, and phrases on language-use and creative expression, and the essence of reality, which is 'catastrophe'. For Carson, cliché marks and engenders an opportunity "to have something to say and to do so" in her craft (D'Agata 16).

Chapter two focuses on 'Just for the Thrill'. In this diary-like personal essay, Carson explores big questions, such as love, gender, and the patriarchy, in a series of short narratives of a road trip - a cliché in itself. This text sets the scene of the cultural American trope of self-discovery while driving, which was adopted by middle class white male writers, perhaps most famously John Steinbeck and Jack Kerouac. Carson's text interprets the experiential segments of the road travelled with her middle class male lover impressionistically, as if she were an anthropologist. The text reveals her trying to process the visual experience of the road, which unfolds sequentially alongside the narration of the slow death of the relationship. This narrative is told in sixty-seven fragments and flashbacks, while tracing the day to day experience of camping in a succession of locations. Overlaid onto this American map is the map of Lady Cheng's fictional journey, camping along the T'ao River with the Hades Emperor, in a corresponding list of sixty-seven map inscriptions. It could be said that to explore the cliché of desire and human relationships through both metaphorical and literal silences is both productive and transformative. To never attain a lover, brother or father (or indeed, for the poet, the perfect words) can be understood as a kind of tragedy, albeit one which must be enacted (endured) to generate new creative possibilities. As Chapter two shows, 'Just For' reflects this pattern of artist/writer seeking art/language (love and desire) through difficult experiences (cliché and catastrophe) that are both philosophical and literal.

Finally, Chapter three shows how Carson mobilises and exploits both cliché and catastrophe in *The Beauty of the Husband*, the winner of the TS Eliot prize in 2002.

One of the few pieces of work by Carson with a clear narrative line, it depicts the desperation and power play of a dysfunctional marriage. Dedicated to Keats, it explores fully the clichés of Beauty and Truth, as well as the clichés of marriage, fidelity, and seduction. This narrative is told in thirty sections, twenty-nine of which are numbered as tangos, a passionate dance. This reflects the back and forth nature of the performance, and the sexual intoxication of this dramatic relationship. The suffering through the cliché of their marriage into realisation that “this welter of disorder and pain is our life” is a catastrophe that makes this text feel alive (BH 85).

In ‘Variations’, Carson postulated a Garden of Eden where Adam had named everything; in God’s Paradise, ironically, there is nothing new to say. Through that “primordial act of naming”, the clichés of the conventional human narrative are born (NR 26). Eve disrupts the perfect narrative by biting into the apple of Knowledge, which results in catastrophe: expulsion into chaos. But she has put her own distinctive pattern on it, which reminds us of the freshness of our origin. This price of knowledge is a seduction for the artist, but there are risks, as there is a violence that lies underneath creation. The artist seeks the freedom of that ‘third place to be’, a refreshing other place, where the artist can phenomenologically move the mind: “It is a movement of yourself through a thought, through an activity of thinking, so by the time you get to the end you’re different than you were at the beginning and you feel that difference” (Carson, *The Art of Poetry*, n.pag). A transcendent example of reaching for this knowledge is Carson’s highlighting of Sappho’s epithalamium fragment about another apple that is out of reach: “Sappho begins with a sweet apple and ends in infinite hunger. From her inchoate little poem we learn several things about eros. The reach of desire is defined in action: beautiful (in its object), foiled (in its attempt), endless (in time)” (EB 29).

## Chapter One: A Giant Cacophonous Cliché

### Cliché and catastrophe in 'Variations on the Right to Remain Silent'

*After all what else is one's own language but a giant cacophonous cliché*

*(Carson, *Nay Rather* 24)*

*Nay Rather* is the title of the pamphlet in which the essay 'Variations on the Right to Remain Silent' appears. 'Nay rather,' constitutes the central phrase in Carson's seven translations of the Ibykos fragment that we find at the end of this selection. In this exercise of translation, Anne Carson demonstrates how her own 'cacophonous' language, English, can be transformed by the Greek. She takes the English of John Donne, Bertold Brecht's FBI file, Samuel Beckett, Kafka, the London Underground, and a microwave manual - all of which have recognisable tonalities. For example, in one translation, she only uses the words found in the courtly 17th century sonnets of Donne, and in another, she uses the contemporary names of stations on a London Underground map. Carson is playing a game of translation using the language and Greek structure of the Ibykos fragment in order to discipline the polyphonic nature of these words in her own language, "after all what else is one's own language but a giant cacophonous cliché" (NR 24). The following section from '[Ibykos fr. 286 as 'Woman's Constancy' by John Donne]', at the end of 'Variations', could read like a playful declaration of intent:

Nay rather,  
 like that new-made Tomorrow,  
 now disputing,  
 now abstaining,  
 accompanied by Love and his wrath,  
 truly,  
 not truly,

if I would,  
 if I could,  
 [it] justifies my one whole lunatic escape (NR 35).

These newly translated fragments inspire a new narrative arising from the catastrophe, out of the chaos of language. She appears to select the OED definition for 'nay' as 'to refuse' ("nay, v"). For 'rather', the definition of "as a response to a previous statement: by contrast; on the contrary" ("rather, adv") seems adequate. This phrase seems to sum up the philosophy of Carson's desire to respond to dead language (in the form of translation or in clichés of thought and language) by saying energetically 'but on the contrary', and proceeding to dispute any such thoughts she may discover. A "new-made Tomorrow" might be understood as pointing to a moment when fresh ground is gained by the artist, if they have disputed and questioned meaning rigorously enough (NR 35). Carson conducts her own argument in 'Variations' by first stating that, "as a classicist I was trained to strive for exactness and to believe that rigorous knowledge of the world without any residue is possible for us" (NR 32). However, she then contradicts this statement - as a creative writer she would also like to insist on overturning it; "this residue [...] refreshes me [...] gives me a sensation of getting free" (NR 32).

'Variations' explores how Homer, Joan of Arc, the contemporary British artist Frances Bacon, the German Romantic poet Friedrich Holderlin, Paul Celan, and Adam and Eve translate their vision of art, with varying margins of error, into the world. This process sparks a conversation between Carson and her readers about the innovative use of language and negative space, especially in the expressive arts, in order to explore what lies between what is, and what is not. A successful translation from the language of the gods is when Homer in the *Odyssey* allows the untranslatable name of the Herb of Immortality that silent place to be. This deeper mystery makes the *Odyssey* more sensational, as "he wants this word to fall silent"

(NR 6). I agree with Kevin McNeilly's statement that "translation is involved in all that [Carson does], and when she says she likes to 'translate badly'", Carson means to use the clichéd forms as a method of pushing meanings to their limits; an ending, a catastrophe:

I like the space between languages because it's a place of error or mistakenness, of saying things less well than you would like, or not being able to say them at all. And that's useful I think for writing because it's always good to put yourself off balance, to be dislodged from the complacency in which you normally go at perceiving the world and saying what you've perceived. And translation continually does that dislodging, so I respect the situation—although I don't think I like it. It's a useful edge to put yourself against (n.pag).

The error and edge (catastrophe) function to dislodge the assumptions and screens of complacency. Carson's essay suggests that she is referring, in comments like this one, to the practice of translation, not just across different languages, but in what we say to each other; how we translate the world into our own experience; how we create art. Translation is not only applied in the OED sense of "the action or process of turning from one language into another" ("translation, n"), as Carson's translations in her creative essays take on many other, perhaps overlapping, purposes.

Translation can also be interpreted in terms of transference; as the conveyance of a thought, word or meaning from writer to reader ("translation, n"). For example, a poem can convey, or seek to bring about, the transference of an emotion from a personal/confessional experience to an impersonal/artistic statement or event. A road trip, for example, can take on this literal and physical meaning, like the "transference of a body, or form of energy, from one point of space to another" ("translation, n"). As the road trip in 'Just For' makes clear, marriage can also be constructed as the journey of a relationship. Reconfigured as a narrative, the marriage or journey would not only track or translate the relationship through time

(or camping, or a performance of dance), but such a text would also simultaneously translate the experience itself into art, as Carson herself manages in *The Beauty of the Husband*.

In 'Variations', Carson spends much of her time peering into the gaps that cliché opens up in language, partly because these gaps have the potential to reveal just as much as they conceal. In a radio interview in October 2016, she tells Michael Enright that, "any stumbling block is a good thing [because it gives] you a place to reassess assumptions" (12:10). For her, the experience of:

looking down into the gaps to me is seeing something like the way *green* works; something very material, factual, concrete, and molecular, out of which one can build all the other stuff that one can talk about in a piece of literature. But just seeing the wave of green is what makes a poem or piece of writing begin (18:17).

Carson seems to introduce these 'stumbling blocks', such as God, Marriage, War, Gender, and Relationships, in order to cause us to stop and realise they are screens of conventional narrative, and instead look into what she calls the "maddeningly attractive" gap between what we already know and "something we don't yet have eyes for" (NR 8, 14).

Each of the characters featured in 'Variations' are in some kind of custody, being interrogated about their silence and language; they must speak in order to escape with varying degrees of success. Homer's protagonist Odysseus is held captive by the enchantress Kirke [sic] on the island, as she has turned his crew into pigs. Joan of Arc is imprisoned by the Church Judges, Francis Bacon is captive to the entire history of painting when he faces the blank canvas, and Holderlin becomes a recluse in his tower. The characters reach out from this captive, rigid (clichéd) state and the facts of history are assembled in such a way as to show the reader examples of the dangers posed by translation to individual freedoms. Carson uses the space of her essay to defend her characters' right to remain silent; the suspect in police

custody (in Western societies) is typically warned by their custodians to beware of their own language – the words or images they use to represent themselves – lest they end up unwittingly compromised in any consequent judicial procedure. The right to silence is protective; “had silence been a possibility for her, Joan would not have ended up in the fires” (NR 14).

By implication, Carson seems to want to remind us that poor translation can be identified by its resort to cliché; to the hackneyed and familiar phrase that drains the original of its claim to originality. By extension, the poet suggests that any writer should seek to delay that process; to strive to protect the text’s (or word’s) potential or ‘right’ to produce fresh meaning; to signify in exciting new ways. At the same time, Carson warns that this is a process that invites failure. It skirts the possibility of catastrophe when and if the writer becomes obsessed with meaning of the negative space: Joan of Arc is mistranslated and burned at stake, and Holderlin is diagnosed with schizophrenia and babbles in his own language for 36 years. Despite this danger, when Enright asks Carson: “Does catastrophe make us feel alive, you think?” She responds: “Yes! I think it does and then makes you realise the risks of being alive and then you step back” (15:30).

Good translators find ways to assert their right to remain silent within the voices that they express, in order to respect those voices (and their art), to let them speak. Homer keeps the secret of immortality by not translating it when he writes the *Odyssey*, and the gods to whom it belongs to reward him with the immortality of his work. Joan of Arc heard voices but couldn’t embody them, but by listening to the “light in the name of the voice”, the illiterate farm girl led a nation into military victory unseen for a generation (NR 10). Imprisoned and interrogated by her enemies, she refused to give in to the theological trap where her inquisitors wished her to explain this voice, in order to prove it was not divine; to show that the voice

had a story that was not new. They questioned her language and condemned her to death for invoking her right to remain silent and staying faithful to her vision.

Carson finds genius in the rage of Joan of Arc's refusal of the theological cliché. Like Homer, Joan resists turning the voice/word/language into a common story for mortals, that conventional narrative. She will not translate it for the Church judges, as "the light in the name of the voice is a sentence that stops itself" (NR 10). Joan's refusal to compromise the immortal voice leads to the catastrophe of her death. Carson implies that artists must learn to transform their vision into something concrete, birthed from a rage that will help to secure the immortality of their art, despite the tragedy and catastrophe in their lives. This is itself an irony: *εἰρωνεία* *eirōneía* (Greek). The tragic irony of Joan's story is that she was posthumously exonerated and canonised – immortalised - by the Catholic Church. Likewise, Homer's writing remains immortal, despite his failure to transcribe the name of the Herb of Immortality. Carson thereby reveals how the marks of difficulties of language and communication guarantee, rather than impede, these characters' opening of the common narrative and the immortality this earns them.

Carson depicts the writer's/artist's passionate refusal of cliché, while warning that originality will always be elusive and transient. Experimentation and exploration risk exile, punishment, or even death. The cliché in Carson's wider work often signals where her formidable critical skills are being brought to bear, to glimpse a new truth, or as a way to "get somehow into the mind and make it move somewhere it has never moved before" (Anderson, n. pag). She dismantles entire tropes of thinking, in order to use them as prisms to examine how thought can be transformed, converted or translated into language:

[My writing is] an attempt at catastrophe. I think most of it ends up in the middle ground. Most of us, all the time, end up in that middle ground where we're kind of making do with clichés until they run out and then patching in a few original thoughts to try to feel alive (Enright 15:22).

Carson quotes the contemporary artist Francis Bacon, who says that the artist needs to be 'a real seer' who can see beyond the ordinary narrative or screen of clichéd life: "Our normal way of seeing the world without looking at it" (NR 18). Through Bacon, Carson theorises that underneath every creative expression is the violent chaos of reality, which is a truth of the creative essence. This is why catastrophe – both literal discomfort and disaster, and the metaphorical act of overturning the screens we live with – is so essential to art itself. She argues for a "position with drenched layers of nothing," for when you are writing to attempt catastrophe, you may find yourself "in the presence of a word that stops itself, [and] in that silence, one has the feeling that something has passed us and kept going, that some possibility has got free" (NR 32, 26).

## Chapter Two: A Place Where the Cliff Just Breaks Off

### Cliché and catastrophe in 'Just for the Thrill'

*You see desire go travelling into the total dark country  
of another soul, to a place where the cliff just breaks off (Carson, Plainwater 195).*

'Just for the Thrill: An Essay on the Difference Between Men and Women' appears in a series called 'Part V: The Anthropology of Water' of Carson's early collection, *Plainwater*. This text explores the futility of communication between men and women in sixty-seven short narrative sections: "I am thinking the difference between men and women is a boundless sea" (PW 192). This theme is illustrated through the deterioration of Carson's relationship with a lover, whom she calls "the emperor", during a road trip through North America (PW 193). This journey is recounted alongside flashbacks to her relationship with her father, which examine how her childhood traditions have changed throughout adulthood, revealing her father's dementia and loss of language. Travel is a common motif of the search for self in *Plainwater*, and it manifests the cliché of the road trip as a camping trip, in which Carson explores love, romance, and commitment in a dry, factual tone. In 'Very Narrow: Introduction to Just for the Thrill', the unnamed first-person narrator confesses: "I am not a person who feels easy talking about blood or desire", while spending the whole trip "filling many notebooks with data" (PW 189, 190).

Peppered with sayings of 'classical Chinese wisdom' that are never referenced, 'Just For' juxtaposes the speaker's own camping/road trip with a fictional historical Imperial Chinese camping trip to the T'ao River of 1553. The fictional emperor of China is called the Hades emperor, and he is accompanied by his consort, "the forty-year-old Lady Cheng with whom he shared a delight in the

printed page" (PW 195). She is the mapmaker who charts the story with her list of sixty-seven maps, which are overlaid on the narrator's reality like transparent rice paper. The collage of both journeys includes the ideas of Zen philosophy and idioms - clichés of "classical Chinese Wisdom" - and techniques of Chinese painting (PW 195). In the baffling limits of language that emerge between lover and beloved, father and daughter, and writer and reader, the speaker must search for meaning: "There was something I had to explain to myself. I travelled into it like a foreign country" (PW 190). Driving from Montreal to LA, the speaker's lover is revealed as being "an anthropologist of China, using this trip across America to study up on classical Chinese. A language consisting, so far as I can judge, entirely of wisdom" (PW 193).

The narrator tries to distance herself from the catastrophe of romantic lyrical outpourings by playing the scientific anthropologist, stating that "love is, as you know, a harrowing event. I believed in taking an anthropological view of that" (PW 189). The anthropologist translates the rituals of behaviour into meaning for the reader. She ponders the end rituals of an affair, how lovers have revealing habits, and how these habits are gendered stereotypes that render connection difficult. Thus, the narrative of love is depicted in the language of the anthropologist studying rituals of another civilisation, "I was outside my own language and customs" (PW 189). She has to be an anthropologist in order to understand her anthropologist lover and his baffling language of love and classical Chinese Wisdom. The yearning to find meaning within the limits of language is equal to understanding Chinese (and therefore her lover), but the speaker is struggling on this journey: "There are masters of classical Chinese wisdom who know the essential meaning of more than five thousand idioms, of which not a single one makes sense to me. [...] Here is one that means 'Tortoise listens to monkey'" (PW 214). The narrator regards her lover as though the other is speaking a lost language, which, if she could understand, would

translate the difference between men and women. The emperor is a member of a lost tribe (the tribe of men) that she is travelling with, and she is always at risk of losing/misunderstanding him. 'Just For' studies how the personal language of the writer/lover is miscommunicated by clichés between the intended reader/beloved, as "the people we love are never just as we desire them [...] Eros is in between" (EB 109).

Carson's first book on Eros was written from her doctoral thesis, and it draws a theory from Greek love poetry that explores the triangular nature of a desire (Fig.1), which is just as intellectual as it is sexual. This theory resonates throughout her writing: "Where is Eros is lack, its activation calls for three structural components – lover, beloved and that which comes between them" (EB 16). In 'Just For' and *The Beauty of the Husband*, Carson teases out her contention that "what the reader wants from reading and what the lover wants from love are experiences of very similar design. It is a necessarily triangular design, and it embodies a reach for the unknown" (EB 109). The idea of reaching into the unknown is linked to her situating of catastrophe and cliché stereoscopically "between two images that cannot merge in a single focus because they do not derive from the same level of reality – one is actual, one is possible. To know both, keeping the difference visible, is the subterfuge called eros" (EB 69).

The reader is halfway through the essay before they realise that, at the end of this trip to LA, these lovers will separate forever, adding to the sense that they are living on the edge. Not only are they cooped up together in a fragile and temporary shelter, subject to exposure to the elements of nature, but this is their last journey together. The emperor intends to stay in LA, which is on the West coast of North America, "a place where the cliff just breaks off," while the narrator will return to Canada (PW 195). In the article 'Erotic Sufferings', Sharon Wahl recommends a second reading: "In the light of approaching separation, each snatch of song lyric or

'ancient Chinese wisdom' gives sad council, and the scenery aches. It is abandonment that loads each sentence with grief, and it seems like the reader ought to know this" (n.pag).

In the OED, one of the meanings of catastrophe from the Greek is "conclusion" ("catastrophe, n"). The trials and limitations of this journey mimic the sensation of catastrophe. The impending loss of the object of desire brings the writer closer to expressing her art, which has risen out of the phenomenological moment. This is like a technique of Chinese poetry where the description of experience is "their whole mechanism of insight into reality, to capture something of the phenomenal moment and then let that exude a meaning larger than the moment", which connects to what Carson explained about her process of inspiration in the same interview: "What I do with a [a link] depends on all the thoughts I've had in my life up to that point and who I am at that point" (The Art of Poetry, n.pag). Once the traveller sets foot on the road, once the storyteller begins the story, and once two people fall in love, it can only lead "to a place where the cliff just breaks off" (PW 195). Arguably, only this skirting of disaster, this exploration of the edge, can transform the cliché of coupledness into something that is other. Although translating the communication of relationships between men and women is fraught with risk, that is where, in Carson's view, new meaning can be discovered in this very old tale.

When the cliché is subverted and pushed toward the limits of language, it produces a space that extends beyond conceptual thought or dualistic language:

[...] the space where a thought would be, but which you can't get hold of. I love that space. It's the reason I like to deal with fragments. Because no matter what the thought would be if it were fully worked out, it wouldn't be as good as the suggestion of a thought that the space gives you. Nothing fully worked out could be so arresting, spooky (The Art of Poetry, n.pag).

This space functions like a koan: a story or a question (cliché) in which a Zen student can discover their true nature or enlightenment once they have let go of conceptual thought. Catastrophe, like enlightenment, is to be found at the limit of experience or knowledge.

The phrase “enlightenment is useless” reappears throughout Carson’s text (PW 203). The narrator has brought brushes and inks in order to study the technique of “one of the most revered of the classical masters”, which she alludes is a painting called *Blind Men Crossing the Bridge*, by Zen Koan Master, Hakuin Ekaku (PW 215). The narrator states that “enlightenment is useless but the fact that the bridge does not quite reach the opposite shore adds a note of blissful mirth to his painting *Three Blind Men Crossing the Ta’o River*” (PW 215). The scroll features three blind monks with sticks:

trying to cross over into enlightenment but considering Hakuin’s deep interest in the koan system, it may also be interpreted as the Zen student’s struggle with the koan. The grasping and clawing at the air is a symbol of intense effort. The blindness represents ignorance of one’s true nature. The bridge itself may be said to represent the koan. Yet if we make these simple comparisons and go no further we would miss the meaning imbued in the bridge that ends in mid-air (*Blind Men Crossing the Bridge*, n.pag)

The Zen Koan’s purpose is to cause the mind to become blank, as “if you then try to figure out the ‘correct’ response, you will have missed the mark and fallen back into conceptualizing” (*Blind Men Crossing the Bridge*, n.pag). Catastrophe at these limits of language is not only present in the silence between men and women, or in the bafflement of Chinese idiom, but also in the dementia of the speaker’s father: “In his hands were language and speech, decoupled, and when he started to talk, they dropped and ran all over the floor like a bag of bell clappers” (PW 190). As her father’s blank mind ironically renders Zen philosophy useless, the narrator cannot save her relationship with her father or her lover. She cannot translate the

language of dementia, the difference between men and women, or Chinese patriarchy. Therefore, enlightenment is useless. 'Diving: Introduction to the Anthropology of Water' opens with the warning sequence: "Water is something you cannot hold. Like men. I have tried. Father, brother, lover, true friends, hungry ghosts and God, one by one all took themselves out of my hands" (PW 117).

At the same time, this enigmatic text confirms that, in an effort to express these limits of feeling (by translating emotions into words; by confronting the clichés of love and subverting them at the limits of language), a new way of being emerges. The personal becomes a successful translation into a universal experience. In this way, 'Just For' prepares for *The Beauty of the Husband* by dramatising the speaker's dilemma of desiring someone for beauty against her better judgement. As the couple drive through Death Valley towards Los Angeles, she

[watches] the edge of his face in the dark. Its beauty is part of what binds me to him. I don't know how to make this sound virtuous. The soul rises for many reasons. Some of them pure and remote view of mountains and streams. Some of them hot as death (PW 234).

The bafflement of her love for him haunts this last trip, as example after example of the lover's communication is reported as anthropological data, "I have heard that anthropologists prize those moments when a word or a bit of language opens like a keyhole into another person, a whole alien world roars past in some unarranged phrase" (PW 232). 'Just For' exposes how the clichés of rigid Adamic patterns of authoritarian, patriarchal, and opinionated language condition the intimidating speech and demeanour of her lover, her father, and the Hades Emperor, travelling with his many concubines on his fictional camping trip. The speaker's lover's doctoral dissertation on "concubinage and the concept of the traditional wife" reflects his attitudes toward her (PW 234):

*Admonitions of the Imperial Preceptress to the Concubines of Court* is the name of the third-century scroll from which he was reading aloud while I drove ...

*Favor must not be abused and love must not be exclusive, the imperial preceptress reminds us. To me this topic is like unpicking a letter bomb. Exclusive love breeds coyness and extreme passion is fickle. There was so little I could say. My soul is a rough and basic one (PW 235).*

This essay successfully conveys the bittersweet and uncomfortable intimacy that camping and relationships impose upon individuals bound together; “camping is like marriage – locked, that is what the word means” (PW 228). There is dark comedy in Carson’s wry portrayal of the lover as a captive audience on a long journey, which foreshadows the locked battle that marriage will be for the protagonists of *The Beauty of the Husband*.

## Chapter Three: To Say Beauty is Truth and Stop

### Cliché and catastrophe in *The Beauty of the Husband*

*To say Beauty is Truth and stop (Carson, *The Beauty of the Husband* 139).*

Carson's collection of narrative poetry, *The Beauty of the Husband: a fictional essay in 29 tangos*, is arguably a poetic Greek tragedy, as it charts a dysfunctional marriage full of desperation, lies, cheating, and grief. This collection earned Carson the TS Eliot prize in 2002, making her the first woman to have won this Award. I will illustrate the ways in which this work examines how desire entangles itself with fundamentally abstract ideas that condition so much of human behaviour, such as beauty (cliché) and truth (catastrophe).

Carson's dedication of this work to Keats "for his general surrender to Beauty" invokes the cliché of the artist as Romantic Poet (BH 5). In doing so, she implicitly uses her collection to call into question the precepts Keats explores in 'Ode on a Grecian Urn,' and specifically the poem's closing lines - so famous that they have themselves become a cliché:

Beauty is truth, truth beauty, – that is all  
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know (Keats 35).

By framing the work with Keats and his famous words, Carson manages to imply that 'Beauty' is, in fact, not all you need to know. Carson uses the established dialogical power of cliché and catastrophe in this text to contrast Beauty and Truth, and she uses the wordless form (or shape) of tango as a dance of seduction, to represent 'Desire'. Most of the narrative work is arranged into twenty-nine sections of tango, which represent an "unspoken movement, but also a dialogue, and Carson plays up this parallel throughout her text" (Rexilius 111).

The Romantic attachment to Hellenistic traditions affords Carson a rich mine of subversion in her portrayal of the Husband as a satyr, when his grandfather calls him *tragikos*, “a country word meaning either tragic or goat” (BH 30). The ambivalent figure of Eros is still prominent in this work, as it is part of the triangular theory that Carson repeatedly returns to. She quotes Plato’s definition of Eros as ‘want’ or ‘lack’ as the “desire for that which is missing” (EB 10). The triangle connects the relationship between the characters of the unnamed narrators (the Husband and the Wife), who act out this unbearable story:

Where eros is lack, its activation calls for three structural components—lover, beloved and that which comes between them...The third component plays a paradoxical role for it both connects and separates, marking that two are not one, irradiating the absence whose presence is demanded by eros (EB 16).

In the text, the Husband is not only absent from his own wedding (Tango X), he is constantly leaving for other women (Tango XV, XXIV) and visiting other countries like Brazil (Tango IV). Such habits come between him and the Wife, who is enthralled by his Beauty and is desperately bound to him by letters and postcards in his absence, not least because he is able “to use language in the way Homer says the gods do” (BH 33). The Husband continues to see his ex-wife after their break-up: “We had been separated three years but not yet divorced. He turned up anywhere” (BH 19). He continues to seek her attention but the narrator asks despairingly: “If a husband throws the dice of his beauty one last time, who is to blame?” (BH 101). Yet again, she has allowed herself to get into a situation where:

A man who after three years of separation would take his wife to Athens—  
for adoration, for peace,  
then telephone New York every night from the bar  
and speak to a woman  
who thought he was over on 4th Street  
working late (BH 99).

Carson presents each conversation, flashback or interrogation of desire in an overall collection of thirty sections in total, twenty-nine as consecutively numbered tangos. Her choice of identifier is significant. A tango is defined by Andrea Rexilius as a passionate dance, “a dialogue that occurs silently on the level of mood, feelings, interpretations and adjustments” (107). The gesture persuades Rexilius to read the collection as a whole as “a complex translation of ‘the tango’ into a text” (107). The performance of tango as this story gives it the “taste of iron” of raw sensuality, intimacy, and a hint of danger and violence (BH 23). The dance is itself marked by the characteristic pauses that its performers enact, which are linked by a complex series of quick, syncopated movements. In public, the dancers are performing, locked into the embrace of the story, showcasing the resistance between two characters in a war of love that is marriage:

What’s wrong with us.  
 Fog of War.  
 Why are we at war (BH 84).

The unattributed lines of conversation in Tango XIX create a rhythm of pauses, through the use of long lines followed by short lines, which mimic the essence of a tango dance. Ultimately, the collection seems intended to reveal the consequences of asking how “people get power over one another” (BH 15). For Nadia Herman Colburn, “it is desire itself that is the subject of the book, not the particular desire of particular individuals. The references to Homer, Proust, Oe, and others suggest that the wife stands for all of us – depersonalized as we are under eros’s spell” (n. pag). Through this method of layering references in her work, Carson admits “that [BH] might be the work where I’ve come closest to finding a voice that’s not me but is me. Oddly, since it’s such private material. But maybe that’s what it takes. Maybe you have to go so far into the center that you pop out the other side. Pop out the back to a neutral position” (The Art of Poetry, n.pag).

## I. Beauty/Cliché

Beauty as desire - as unattainable eros - is the most obvious trope in this narrative poem. Constantly shuffling between his wife, mistresses, new wife, ex-wife, and different countries, the Husband clearly resembles eros in action.

Paradoxically, “the lover wants what he does not have. It is by definition impossible for him to have what he wants if, as soon as it is had, it is no longer wanting” (EB 10). The poem’s themes encompass the experience of being blinded by Beauty, existence in thrall to Beauty, Beauty as divinity, Beauty as power, Beauty as sex and danger, and perhaps above all, Beauty as language. Although beauty is generally associated with the unnamed Husband, who knowingly uses it, the Wife also admits complicity:

Loyal to nothing  
 my husband. So why did I love him from early girlhood to late middle age  
 and the divorce decree came in the mail?  
 Beauty. No great secret. Not ashamed to say I loved him for his beauty.  
 As I would again  
 if he came near. Beauty convinces. You know beauty makes sex possible.  
 Beauty makes sex sex (BH 9).

Ironically, the Husband exhibits a Romantic delusion of living a life dedicated to beauty and sublime high-minded ideals of imagination, lyrical emotion, melancholy, and freedom. Yet the truth, as the poem’s narrator portrays it, is achieved in the kind of dramatic catastrophe produced in Greek tragedy. Clichés work to veil meaning by blinding the motivations of the protagonists, not only to themselves, but also to each other:

One of the most mysterious of semi-speculations is, one would suppose, that of one Mind’s imagining into another

John Keats

note on his copy of *Paradise Lost*, 1.59-94 (BH 21).

Carson works to rip those veils away by what is revealed in *The Beauty of the Husband*. The journey of the Husband begins when the narrator describes meeting him for the first time in 'Tango XI':

We were fifteen.

It was Latin class, late spring, late afternoon, the passive periphrastic,  
for some reason I turned in my seat  
and there he was (BH 49).

She describes not the man, but the moment that she falls into (a clichéd) desire that will become the catastrophe of this story. The next line recalls the bafflement between the protagonists in 'Just For' when classical Chinese wisdom was called for, in the parable of the Zen Butcher by Chuang Tze:

You know how they say a Zen butcher makes one correct cut and the whole ox  
falls apart  
like a puzzle. Yes a cliché

and I do not apologize because as I say I was not to blame, I was unshielded  
in the face of existence  
and existence *depends on beauty* (BH 49).

In Zen Buddhism, an ox is a common metaphor for the taming of the mind. In Tango XI above, desire causes the mind to fall apart. The artist is surgically dissecting desire on the page with language, and the audience cannot look away. Beauty is to blame, of course, as "Beauty makes sex sex" (BH 9).

The speaker describes how she is seduced by the husband's language, first by his book that she brings home from school, and then with his dexterity with words:

[...] That was the first night

(I was fifteen)

I raised my bedroom window creak by creak and went out to meet him  
in the ravine, traipsing till dawn in the drenched things  
and avowals

of the language that is “alone and first in mind.” I stood stupid before it (BH 23).

The seductive Beauty of the poetic language enthrals the innocent teenager. The gift of the novel, full of language that the boy sends out to the girl, is an erotic metaphor that presages “the relationship between the husband and wife in this story [that is] predicated upon language: love letters, lies, apologies, invocations, pleas” (Revilius 111). Again, eros is constructed as a triangular interaction between the lover/writer/husband; the beloved/reader/wife and that which comes between them eros/language. Carson parses this seductive language in the way she narrates her own fictional essays, as with this following example of the Greek novel by Longus in *Eros*: “As readers, we are invited into its experience, standing on the edge of other people’s desire, arrested, wooed, triangulated and changed by a series of marks on a piece of paper. ‘My Page makes love, and understands it feelingly,’ says Montaigne (1603, bk.5, ch.3)” (ER 87). Not only does the Husband’s Page make love to the Wife, but there is a similar captivating echo for the readers of *The Beauty of the Husband*. The productive but inevitably disastrous articulation of cliché and catastrophe plays out in a tableau enacting Carson’s story, as if on her own Grecian Urn:

What leaf-fringed legend haunts about thy shape  
Of deities or mortals, or of both,  
In Tempe or the dales of Arcady?  
What men or gods are these? what maidens loth?  
What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?  
What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy? (Keats 33).

## II. Truth/ Catastrophe

The Husband’s creative imagination is directed into the powerful fictions and lies he weaves for his wife. As Keats wrote to Benjamin Bailey, “I am certain of

nothing but of the holiness of the Heart's affections and the truth of Imagination - What the imagination seizes as beauty must be truth" (Keats, Letters of John Keats 40). Set against this declaration, the many layers of any lover's manipulation of truth can weave itself through language. The Husband, for example, insists that "[he] never lied to her. When need arose I may have used words that lied" (BH 117). We can never truly understand the mind of the Husband, we can only perceive it through the narrator's lens. Aitken notices that the narcissistic lover frequently recurs in Carson's writing, and Carson concurs: "Yes, the man with the secret self. The unreachable self" (The Art of Poetry, n.pag). The young lovers are locked into the catastrophe of his secrets. The Truth is that:

My husband lied about everything.

Money, meetings, mistresses,  
the birthplace of his parents,  
the store where he bought shirts, the spelling of his own name.  
He lied when it was necessary to lie.  
He lied when it wasn't even convenient.  
He lied when he knew they knew he was lying (BH 33).

Carson also meticulously subverts each cliché of the culture of Marriage that pervades society: authority and divinity (Tango V), fidelity and honesty (Tango VII, XXIV), and equality and togetherness (Tango XXII, XIX). Just as no artist's canvas or writer's page is ever completely blank, no marriage begins with a clean slate, free of expectation. One by one, the screens of expectation/cliché fall away from the narrator, as Carson projects the ideal of Beauty and actual Truth in stereoscopy. *The Beauty of the Husband* sets up the cliché of the institution of Marriage where the ideal is the illusion of Marriage being for love instead of power and sex.

Echoing line 8 of 'Ode to a Grecian Urn', "What men or gods are these? what maidens loth?" (Keats 33), the poet reveals how cliché blinds the characters to the power struggle that is buried in their relationship. The (catastrophically)

mesmerising effect of the Husband's beauty on the Wife in Tango V also blinds her: "Like many a wife I boosted the husband up to Godhood and held him there" (BH 23). In the loss of innocence that Carson traces in Tango V, she names both Napoleon and Hirohito as emperors who sought to be worshipped as gods, but were revealed to be men after their vanquishment. The narrator experiences something similar with her Husband, except that she is the one losing the war: "How to believe God had become human on a designated summer day? Less than a year after our marriage my husband began to receive calls from [a woman] late at night" (BH 24). Tango III lays bare the details:

Clothed in flames and rolling through the sky is how I felt the night he told me  
he had a mistress and with shy pride  
slid out a photograph (BH 16).

Emotionally naked from learning the truth of his actions and suffering from this expulsion from the Eden of Beauty, the wife still cannot resist him or his Adamic naming. She continues to listen to his "voice of betrayal" in a state of adoration, and yet she painfully recognises that his charm lies in this voice: "A puppy learns to listen this way. Sting in the silver" (BH 25).

The Husband loves war-based board games and frequently invites his "pale wrathful friends" (BH 10) over to play, thus neglecting his wife. As the wife says in Tango II:

You will mention of course the war games. I complained to you often enough  
when they were here all night  
with the boards spread out and rugs and little lamps and cigarettes like  
Napoleon's  
tent I suppose,  
[...]  
Jealousy  
formed no small part of my relationship to the Battle of Borodino (BH 10).

Other wars and metaphors of war repeat themselves through the book, such as the Battle of Troy (Tango II), the Battle of Epipolai (Tango XXV), World War II (Tango V), an unnamed Brazilian war film (Tango XVII), and the protagonists have an argument while touring the Peloponnese, a well-known battle site (Tango XXII). According to cliché, it takes two to play a game, two to tango, and two to go to war in the battle of the sexes. The tango is shown to be the tempo that forms this story. While it may appear as if the male lead dancer is dominant, “[tango] is perhaps the only dance that requires the equal participation of both dancers in order to be fluid” (Ceccoli n.pag). Despite the drama of the Husband’s charisma and affairs, the wife’s admission of complicity in the games they play reveals the movement of the poem’s drama from powerful young desire / pursuit, to disillusionment, to (cruel) game-playing and war, to separation and divorce, to more power games, to grief and letting go. The arc must close on the realisation that a possible way out is to refuse the game, leaving the dancer to dance alone. Tango XXVII gives the Husband permission to speak:

Everywhere I went the thing I wanted had already been scooped out. Her naked. Her uncertain edges. I could never get my fill.

She fought me. She lost.

...

I thought changes were holy. I spilled them like grain. How could I know. How could I know she would lose (BH 130).

The catastrophe of Truth is like a cleansing fire or a ripping away of screens, revealing the protagonists to each other. Truth is not Beauty after all. By reciting the drama of this learning process, there is a feeling of release and purification in the narrator’s voice in the last Tango XXIX:

Let's just finish it. Not because, like Persephone, I needed to cool my cheek on death.

Not, with Keats, to buy time.

Not, as the tango, out of sheer wantonness (BH 139).

As a story frozen on a Grecian urn, the narrator would like to take her own advice to "Hold beauty" (BH 141). "The Bold Lover never never canst thou kiss", and remains forever unattainable, as Carson concedes to John D'Agata that she still believes that "the real lover and recipient of this desire is language itself" (Keats 33; D'Agata 8). *The Beauty of the Husband* has an extra element of performance in it that elevates it to theatre, for in the preface to Carson's translation of Euripides entitled 'Tragedy: A Curious Art Form,' she states tellingly to the audience: "There is a theory that watching unbearable stories about other people lost in grief and rage is good for you – may cleanse you of your darkness" (Grief Lessons 7).

## Conclusion

*It is her rage against cliché that draws me to her. A genius is in her rage*

*(Carson, *Nay Rather* 10).*

Joan of Arc has a prominent place in 'Variations'; a virgin in boy's clothing making her mark against the world with a war on language: "It is her rage against cliché that draws me to her. A genius is in her rage" (NR 10). Carson states that, when Adam named the world, he created cliché. Names became part of human history, as the edifice of thought and the answer to chaos that no one would want to dislodge: the "conventional narrative" (NR 8). Cliché is the question that asks: "Don't we already know what we think about this?" (NR 10).

We may need violence to dislodge these ideas, which are like screens that blind us to the original reality. The sensation of catastrophe is what Francis Bacon conveys as violence or creative essence, harking back to the chaos of the time of origin, the true facts. Carson also conveys this sensation of catastrophe in her narration of the trial of Joan of Arc. She demonstrates that the world uses language against us, such as the conventional narrative of the church judges during the trial of Joan, where cliché becomes recognised as the 'usual relations' of things and ideas. This clichéd narrative tries to fill the silences that had "no story" and should have been recognised as the untranslatable wonder of "the light comes in the name of the voice" (NR 8, 10).

To put a stop to cliché, Carson makes a point to "extinguish the usual relation", such as the one that exists between a Husband and Wife, or a Journey and Enlightenment, as seen in the essays examined in this critical study (NR 14). To gain originality and to rage against cliché, the artist has to translate the world by making free marks and disrupting this conventional narrative, as "screens are already in place making it hard to see anything but what one expects to see" (NR 24).

Carson utilises her own free marks by writing “essays, with all their sections [that] work like collage.” She admits to D’Agata: “I’ve always thought of it as painting. Painting with thoughts and facts” (13). Free marks that add up like:

using words so that you create a surface that leaves an impression in the mind no matter what the words mean. It’s not about the meaning of each individual word adding up to a proposition; it’s about the way they interact with each other as daubs of meaning, you know as impressionist colours interact, daubs of paint, and you stand back and see a story emerge from the way that the things are placed next to each other. You can also do that with language (McNeilly Gifts and Questions n.pag).

When I first read *The Beauty of the Husband* as I was beginning to work on this critical essay, I was inspired that such a personal work could be so refreshingly unconfessional. Before I read it, I feared that any work that sailed too close to the personal was doomed to cliché and would be unable to speak to the common experience. My own work reflects this fear; it is veiled in metaphor, especially when it comes to my family story, as I was afraid of offending my relatives. The closer to reality my work got, the more abstract it became. And yet, I long to break the taboo of silence around the fragments of information that surround my family.

I then read *Plainwater*, and slowly realised that it contains real life detail that is indivisible from the other fragments of collage Carson builds up in her narrative, especially in the section called ‘The Anthropology of Water.’ By the time I had reached ‘Just for the Thrill’, I understood that miscommunication and mistranslation of feeling is an issue that all humans risk, especially those tied together by relationships. I learned how Carson could masterfully create dialogue out of silences and gaps to make the “difference between what is and what could be visible” (EB 17). I loved the way she uses anthropology to create a framework for the facts, which made them seem more distant, and yet more real.

Carson's short foray into Chinese philosophy and art in 'Just for the Thrill' allowed me to see how she let the Ancients permeate throughout her work. Carson experiments with Asian philosophies, myths, and religion in the same way that she began to be infused by the Greeks. As an Asian writer, there is always a danger of becoming the baffling cliché she portrays as 'Chinese wisdom' in her essay. Carson's example led the way for me to finally allow some of my Chinese culture to show through my work, hopefully without being too exotic or predictable. More and more of my family story uncovered the same types of cliché addressed by Carson: marriage and relationships, beauty and truth, immigration (the journey), and colonisation (translation).

The culmination was attending Carson's performance (her term) of 'Variations on the Right to Remain Silent,' at The Poetry Society Annual Lecture at the British Museum in 2013. I am not a Chinese scholar and I do not even read or write Chinese, but when I heard her ideas of translation as not being only from one language to another, I knew that it was still possible to translate my culture into English. As a child growing up in the multicultural polyglot of Malaysia, I had difficulty reconciling the multiple influences I had acting upon my identity, and I felt I had to choose one way over the others. It was freeing to hear Carson unleash her polyphony of voices speaking all at once in stereoscopy, in triangles, in layers, and in links. It was as if I could now translate my own chorus of voices into my work.

After researching this critical study, I began to transform the disparate fragments of family history into a collage. I had previously been reluctant to use these fragments because I did not have the whole truth, the timeline, or the language. By being an anthropologist preparing to study my own culture and family, I could collect data and facts. Reading Carson gave me the courage to embrace the gaps and defy the conventional narrative that my own family were trying to tell. To translate the myth and taboo of the family story out of its silence

may be inviting catastrophe, but I brace myself with Joan's final words to her judges:  
"Light your fires!" (NR 14).

## Works Cited

Anderson, Sam. "The Inscrutable Brilliance of Anne Carson." *NY Times*, 14 March. 2013. <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/17/magazine/the-inscrutable-brilliance-of-anne-carson.html>. Accessed 24 March. 2016

"Blind Men Crossing the Bridge, a visual koan." *August Meditations*, 2015. <https://augustmeditations.wordpress.com/2015/04/12/blind-men-crossing-the-bridge-a-visual-koan/>. Accessed 10 August 2017.

Branscum, John. "Chuang Tzu "The Butcher on the Way." *Black and Grey*, 2017. <http://www.blackandgreymagazine.com/chuang-tzu-the-butcher-on-the-way-translated-and-re-written-by-yi-yizzy-yu>. Accessed 10 January. 2018.

Carson, Anne. *Eros the Bittersweet*. Dalkey Archive Press, 1998.

Carson, Anne. *Plainwater: Essays and Poetry*. Vintage, 2000.

Carson, Anne. *The Beauty of the Husband*. Jonathan Cape, 2001.

Carson, Anne. *Grief Lessons: Four Plays: Euripides*. New York Review of Books, 2006

Carson, Anne. *Nay Rather*. Sylph Editions, 2013.

Carson, Anne and Aitken, Will. "Anne Carson, The Art of Poetry, No.88." *The Paris Review*, vol. 171, 2004. <https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/5420/anne-carson-the-art-of-poetry-no-88-anne-carson>. Accessed June 18. 2014.

"catastrophe, n." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, March 2018,  
[www.oed.com/view/Entry/28794](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/28794). Accessed 27 April. 2018.

Ceccoli, Velleda. C. "Tango a Feeling that is Danced" *Psychology Tomorrow*, 2013.  
<http://psychologytomorrowmagazine.com/tango-a-feeling-that-is-danced/>.  
 Accessed 1 February. 2018

Colburn, Nadia Herman. "Review of *The Beauty of the Husband: a fictional essay in 29 tangos* by Anne Carson." *Jacket* 19, 2002. <http://jacketmagazine.com/19/colb-r-cars.html>. Accessed February. 2015

D'Agata, John and Carson, Anne. "A \_\_\_ with Anne Carson." *The Iowa Review*, vol 27, no.2, 1997: pp. 1-22.  
<http://ir.uiowa.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=4868&context=iowareview>.  
 Accessed 12 June. 2013.

"essay, n." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, March 2018,  
[www.oed.com/view/Entry/64470](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/64470). Accessed 27 April 2018.

"essay, v." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, March 2018,  
[www.oed.com/view/Entry/64471](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/64471). Accessed 27 April 2018.

Fisher, Jessica. "Anne Carson's Stereoscopic Poetics." *Anne Carson: Ecstatic Lyre*, edited by Joshua Marie Wilkinson, University of Michigan Press, 2015, pp. 10-16

“Gifts and Questions – An Interview with Anne Carson by Kevin McNeilly.” *Unsaid Magazine*, 2012. <https://unsaidmagazine.wordpress.com/2012/09/11/gifts-and-questions-an-interview-with-anne-carson-by-kevin-mcneilly/>. Accessed May 19, 2013.

Green, Ronald. “Teaching Zen’s Ten Oxherding Pictures through Leonard Cohen’s “Ballad of the Absent Mare.” *ASIANetwork Exchange: A Journal for Asian Studies in the Liberal Arts*, vol 24, no. 1, 2017: pp. 29-58. <https://www.asianetworkexchange.org/articles/10.16995/ane.131/>. Accessed 12 June, 2017.

Jennings, Chris. “The Erotic Poetics of Anne Carson.” *University of Toronto Quarterly*, vol 70, no. 4, 2001. <http://web.b.ebscohost.com.ergo.southwales.ac.uk/ehost/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=a821e840-364e-4840-a918-4661b7d72a61%40sessionmgr104&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZW9vc3QtbGl2ZQ%3d%3d#AN=5846918&db=hlh> Accessed 12 June, 2017.

Keats, John. *Selected Poems*. Methuen Publishing Limited, 2005.

Keats, John. *Letters of John Keats to His Family and Friends*. Macmillan and Company, 1925. Kindle ebook.

Maxwell, Kristi. “The Unbearable Witness of Being: On Anne Carson’s Plainwater.” *Anne Carson: Ecstatic Lyre*, edited by Joshua Marie Wilkinson, University of Michigan Press, 2015, pp. 56-62

"nay, v." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, March 2018,  
[www.oed.com/view/Entry/125490](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/125490). Accessed 27 April 2018.

"rather, adv." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, March 2018,  
[www.oed.com/view/Entry/158456](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/158456). Accessed 27 April 2018.

Rexilius, Andres. "The Light of This Wound: Marriage, Longing, Desire in Anne Carson's *The Beauty of the Husband*." *Anne Carson: Ecstatic Lyre*, edited by Joshua Marie Wilkinson, University of Michigan Press, 2015, pp. 107-113

"The Catastrophic Poetry of Anne Carson." *The Sunday Edition*, CBC Radio, 2016.  
 Accessed 25 July. 2017. <http://www.cbc.ca/radio/thesundayedition/solitary-confinement-edward-burtynsky-manjusha-mail-tent-cities-anne-carson-1.3820890/the-catastrophic-poetry-of-anne-carson-1.3820893>. Accessed August. 2017.

"translation, n." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, March 2018,  
[www.oed.com/view/Entry/204844](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/204844). Accessed 27 April 2018.

Wahl, Sharon. "Erotic Sufferings: "Autobiography of Red" and Other Anthropologies." *The Iowa Review*, vol 29, no. 1, 1999.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/20154716.pdf?refreqid=excelsior:70335f180493597779f0bec960c349b2>. Accessed 15 November. 2017.

Weiberg, Erika L. "Lessons in Grief and Corruption: Anne Carson's Translations of Euripides." *Anne Carson: Ecstatic Lyre*, edited by Joshua Marie Wilkinson, University of Michigan Press, 2015, pp. 200-205

Wilkinson, Joshua Marie., editor. *Anne Carson: Ecstatic Lyre*. University of Michigan Press, 2015.