Anne Carson and The Erotics of Translation

by Kelcie Haas Anne Carson and The Erotics of Translation
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#### **ABSTRACT**

My thesis examines the translation practices of Anne Carson in conjunction with her theory of eros. Carson's poetry is ideal for studying translation, as her adaptations of ancient poetry incorporate critical analysis and creative rewriting to produce translations which are rich and textured lyrics in their own right.

Carson's concept of eros, which I reconstruct from her republished dissertation, *Eros: the Bittersweet*, sees eros as a never-achieving reaching, a desire which can never attain its goal. Eros shows the lover the edge of her self. When the lover desires but cannot obtain the beloved, she sees her limits, her edge. The edge brings with it a profound sense of isolation as the lover sees that she cannot commune with anyone, including the beloved. What inspires eros, what the lover sees in the beloved, is beauty. This beauty is not merely stereotypical good looks, but a recognition of something not within the self in another. This absence in the lover, present in the beloved, creates a gap in the edge of the lover through which the beloved may enter. Similarly, the translator must act as a lover to the texts, for she can never fully cross the linguistic barrier and carry a work wholly into another language.

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I first examine her translations of Sappho's fragment 31 and relate her theory of eros to these poems. Carson's unconventional translations show her awareness of the inability of eros to reach across the language barrier and bring back a fully intact poem. She knows that she could never carry all of Sappho into English; instead, she creates innovative translations which provide us with beautiful poetry and inventive scholarship. I then show how these free translations locate her in a tradition with the Roman poet Catullus, who also produced a loose translation of fragment 31.

From here, I explore Carson's adaptations of Catullus's own poetry, which takes the practice of free translation even further. Carson's Catullus poems hardly appear related to the originals, but I use the concepts of eros, the edge and beauty as terms common to both Catullus's and Carson's writings. I examine the translation of these terms as they move from Catullus's originals to Carson's translations to demonstrate that Carson translates emotion out of Catullus.

Finally, I look at her most recent book, *The Beauty of the Husband*, which also deals with the translation of emotion. *Husband* was written as a creative work in English that chronicles the demise of a marriage. It falls outside the normal parameters for a translation, but I focus on the translation of emotion through epistles, which provide the reader with a reproduction of an original letter much in the way a translation stands in for the original poem. From there, I move to an examination of the wife and husband's relationship to language. The husband, a thief and liar, uses language as a tool, refusing to relate to it as a lover. He stands as a poor translator, a man who does not understand eros or the way that language works. In contrast, the wife understands the beauty of language and, eventually, the beauty in herself in a realization similar to Carson's discovery of the edge of language in her translations.

the closer you look at a word the more distantly it looks back at you

- Chinese proverb, as quoted by Anne Carson

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## **SHORT TITLES**

Eros: Carson, Anne. Eros: the Bittersweet. McLean, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1998.
Husband: Carson, Anne. The Beauty of the Husband. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001.
Off Hours: Carson, Anne. Men in the Off Hours. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000.
Catullus: Catullus, Gaius Valerius. Catullus: A Critical Edition Ed. D. F. S. Thomson.
Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1978.

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## Introduction

Translation may at first appear a passive process, the slavish substitution of one word for another, a task so dull only dusty professors or overeager undergraduates, dictionaries in hand, would ever perform it. But what if we look at the translator as a creator, a writer with as much freedom and power as any other? What if we see the translator not as a slave, but as a lover?

Anne Carson, a poet and professor of Classics, relates to poetry as a philologist, a true lover of language, rather than as an archaeologist. Educated in Greek and Latin, Carson uses her background in Classics to create exciting, creative poetry rather than merely reproducing dead works. Carson animates her poetry by incorporating translation and unconventional scholarship. Her poetry refuses easy classification as she meditates on the space between categories and languages: the meaning of absence. This rejection of traditional categorization and insistence on a richer ambiguity emerge in her translations in poetry which is free from linguistic servitude, radically reinterpreting the original poem and the notion of a "faithful" translation.

For Carson, translation is an act of eros. The translator must read the original as a poet and respond to it as a lover when she reaches across the language barrier to realize the poem. But this reach can never extend fully. The poet cannot carry the original poem, with all of its nuanced language intact, into the translated language. Some aspects alter, some disappear.

This necessary lack in a translation fascinates Carson, as absence plays an essential role in her theory of eros. Carson sees desire as an absence, a never-achieving reaching. "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 [her]self and the hole in [her], unnoticed before" (*Eros*, 30). Eros shows the lover the edge of her self. When the lover desires

but cannot obtain the beloved, she sees her limits, her edge. The edge brings with it a profound sense of isolation as the lover sees that she cannot commune with anyone, including the beloved. What inspires eros, what the lover sees in the beloved, is beauty. This beauty is not merely stereotypical good looks, but a recognition of something not within the self in another. This absence in the lover, present in the beloved, creates a gap in the edge of the lover through which the beloved may enter.

These terms of erotics also apply to translation. The translator must act as a lover to the texts, for she can never fully cross the linguistic barrier and carry a work wholly into another language. But translation works an odd magic on language. In "The Task of the Translator," a seminal work in translation theory, Walter Benjamin writes that an original text taken with its translation begin to approach a "pure language." Together, the two works transcend their individual languages and reach towards true meaning. Gayatri Spivak offers an elaboration on Benjamin's theory, locating translation in "the spacey emptiness between two . . . languages." Spivak also believes that a translator must read the original as a poet and "surrender" to it as a lover to create a poem which does not simply transport the "inessential information" to the reader but recreates the experience of the original.

Carson's work concurs with these theories. The lover or translator can only cross the gap if she surrenders to the beloved. This occurs when she stops trying to make the translation flow smoothly in its new language and, seeing lack in the original, tries to access the beauty in the other language.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Benjamin, Walter, "The Task of the Translator," trans. Harry Zohn, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1969) 76–7.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Spivak, Gayatri, "The Politics of Translation," *The Translation Studies Reader*, ed. Lawrence Venuti (New York: Routledge, 2000) 398.

My thesis will examine the erotics of translation in Carson's poetry. As a Classicist and student of Greek and Latin, she has created translation practices as complicated as her erotic theory. Her work dwells in the gaps in classification, as translation does. Even the primarily academic *Eros: the Bittersweet*, her republished dissertation, refuses to play by the rules of traditional scholarship. The crux of the argument in *Eros* relies on creative juxtapositions between the poetry of Sappho and the fiction of more modern writers from Dante to Pushkin to Virginia Woolf as well as Carson's own translations of many ancient poems which constitute beautiful poetry in their own right. Carson's poetic style merges with her scholarship here, as her rich and gorgeous prose alone would set this work apart from the average critical essay. Men in the Off Hours also defies genre as Carson confuses the boundaries between criticism and creativity, translation and original poetry by introducing Greek personalities and more recent literary figures in her TVMen series. The book also contains her translations of Catullus, which are so radical they are difficult to identify as such. The subtitle to her most recent book. *The* Beauty of the Husband: a fictional essay in 29 tangos, speaks to the inadequacy of categorization. In this "fictional essay," Carson fuses the autobiographical and poetic with an analysis of Keats's statement that "Beauty is truth, truth beauty."

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My thesis examines three forms of translation in Carson's work, from traditional, close translations, to her freer, more idiosyncratic reimaginings, to a work which translates emotion and meaning rather than language. Chapter I focuses on two of Carson's translations of Sappho's fragment 31. I use her traditional version, which appears in *Eros: the Bittersweet*, to better define the terms eros, the edge and beauty. I then compare Carson's close translation with her free adaptation of the poem in *Men in the Off Hours*. This later poem features Sappho as an actress playing a prostitute and reflects further on the multiple personae which Sappho creates

and then eliminates in fragment 31. Carson's dramatic rewriting of fragment 31 places her in a poetic tradition with the classical Roman poet Catullus, who translated Sappho's poem in the first century b.c.e. Catullus also deviates from Sappho's words, creating a commentary on fragment 31 and Roman society. His refusal to slavishly imitate Sappho provides Carson with the literary legacy to freely translate Catullus's own poetry, the product of which I will examine in my second chapter.

Chapter II focuses on the translation of emotion in Carson's Catullus poems from *Men in the Off Hours*. Frequently, her poems concentrate on a single Latin phrase, as in her adaptation of Catullus's ode 58; at other times, she altogether rewrites the narrative of the original by introducing it to a modern setting. Some of her poems seem so loosely connected to the original that only Carson's title makes the connection apparent. I use the concepts of eros, the edge and beauty as terms common to both Catullus's and Carson's writings, and I examine the translation of these terms as they move from Catullus's originals to Carson's translations. Once more, the translations bring about a different understanding of the originals as Carson refocuses on the often-overlooked emotional side of Catullus.

But how do the erotics of translation work when Carson writes an original creation in her native language? The third chapter deals with this problem in Carson's latest book, *The Beauty of the Husband*. This book contains few translations from other languages, but the thirty interconnected poems deal with the translation of emotion in writing, particularly in letters. The correspondence from the husband superficially unites the reader with the wife, but in the end eros creates the necessary gap between the book and the reader. *Husband* also confirms the connection between writing and erotics by introducing the reader to the husband, a cruel lover

and poor translator and his wife, who responds emotionally and thoughtfully to both language and love.

## CHAPTER I: EROS ACROSS

In *Eros: the Bittersweet*, Carson argues that the ancients saw eros as not merely desire, but as desire for the unattainable. "A space must be maintained or desire ends," she says (*Eros*, 26), and she uses Sappho's fragment 31 to support her claim. Carson translates the poem literally but uses it interpretively to explain the triangulation of eros. Sappho places a godlike man between herself and her beloved. He holds them apart and allows Sappho to feel the extreme emotions she does for "where eros is lack, its activation calls for three structural components—lover, beloved and that which comes between them" (*Eros*, 16). Carson gives us her translation of Sappho to illustrate this triangular logic:

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

– *Eros*, 12-3

I seem to me.

Merely looking at the beloved causes Sappho to go into raptures. She loses her ability to speak, hear and see and experiences a fever when "thin / fire . . . rac[es] under [her] skin." If the poet actually had to speak to the beloved, the triangle would break and desire may even end. For once the lover attains the beloved, she does not want, she has. The shift from yearning to possession would destroy eros, for eros is the reaching across that which comes between lover and beloved. As Carson concludes, "properly a noun, eros acts everywhere like a verb" (*Eros*, 63), emanating from the lover towards the beloved, striving to connect them and never achieving it.

When eros grips Sappho, the edge enters the picture. She learns about boundaries when she sees herself as an entity distinct from her beloved. We see this separation in the beginning of the poem in the actions of the three players. The beloved flaunts her "sweet speaking" and "lovely laughing" while the man who watches and listens to her sits god-like. Meanwhile, the poet has gone blind, deaf and dumb from desire. She cannot engage in the same activities as the beloved. The poet's inability even to imitate her beloved heightens their obvious physical separation. The edge appears in this stark differentiation between the lover and beloved. It is the realization that I am me, and you are you, and however much I want it to, eros will never make it across the space between us. The cruelty of eros is that "at the moment when I would dissolve

that boundary, I realize I never can" (*Eros*, 30). I cannot breach the boundary between us, and now I see I am completely alone on my side of the edge.

This loneliness can become a form of self-obsession, as in Sappho's poem. The first five lines deal only with the beloved and the god-like man with the poet present in a single pronoun. After this, Sappho reduces the beloved to one pronoun in the seventh line, and the first-person singular pronouns dominate (seven in the last four stanzas, ending in the narcissistic "I seem to me"). Sappho separates herself from her reader with this technique as well. The reader identifies with the person opposite Sappho, an effect Sappho achieves by never naming the beloved, referring only to "you." The reader then disappears from the poem with the last "you," leaving the poet alone. Sappho's narcissism is only natural, considering the poet's recent realization of her complete isolation from humanity.

While eros forces the lover to define himself, it also creates a hole in his edge where the beloved should be. Look again at the fifth line: "and lovely laughing—oh it." Logically, it should belong to the poet as the rest of the second stanza does. Instead, it describes the beloved's beauty. This presence in the beloved is a conspicuous absence in the lover who cannot speak or even remain conscious. This absence creates a gap in the lover's edge for the beloved to enter. The edge of self blurs when the lover sees something she desires, for she believes she has a right to that beauty, that it should be in her self. Thus, the fifth line. Eros allows the beloved brief entry into the poet's world. Beauty crosses the boundary, punctuated by the poet's sigh. After this, she returns to exile, and the space between lover and beloved empties out again, allowing the reach of eros to continue.

In addition to the discovery of the edge, the lover discovers another paradox with the help of eros: the problem of the bittersweet. Carson begins *Eros* with a short fragment from Sappho

that uses the Greek epithet to describe eros. This adjective,  $\gamma\lambda\nu\kappa\nu\pi\iota\kappa\rho\sigma\nu$ , translates strangely into "sweetbitter" rather than "bittersweet." Carson explains the importance of this word order, as "sweetbitter" allows Sappho first to reveal the obvious delights of eros before reminding the reader of the pain attendant with desire (*Eros*, 4). Describing love in this paradox of a single word also demonstrates that pleasure and pain can exist almost simultaneously.

The pleasure/pain paradox in fragment 31 causes the lover to see herself as multiple people. Carson's critical essay on fragment 31, "Sappho Shock," explains the multiplication of Sappho's person at the poem's end. "[D]ead—or almost / I seem to me" implies at least two Sapphos: one dead, one observing, with the possibility of a third who names the other two and separates them. Carson concludes that "Sappho leaves it unclear . . . just how many people she imagines herself to be." Her multiple personae (the dead, the observer, the poet) disappear in the final lines. Her senses gone, Sappho falls into a deathlike state. That she only "seems dead" strengthens rather than detracts from this argument. Death has certainty. If Sappho claimed to die, the reader could point to the corpse as Sappho's final self. But the poet's ambiguity prevents even this. Her three selves participate in her disappearance, dissolving into nothing. "Who is the real subject of most love poems?" Carson asks. "Not the beloved. It is that hole" (*Eros*, 30). She refers to the gap in the lover's edge, the space in which the beloved belongs, but in fragment 31 Sappho herself becomes the absence.

The multiple roles of the author also suggest the metaphor of theater. Carson introduces this theatrical metaphor in *Eros*, saying "[t]he poem floats toward us on a stage set. But we have no program. The actors go in and out of focus anonymously" (*Eros*, 13). Building on the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Carson, Anne, "Sappho Shock," *Dwelling in Possibility: Women Poets and Critics on Poetry*, eds. Yopie Prins and Maeera Shreiber (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997) 227.

language of performance that permeates her analysis of fragment 31 in *Eros*, "Sappho Shock" envisions the poem as a theater piece, "as brightly lit as a stage and much concerned with the problem of seeming." In "Sappho Shock," Carson's push scholarship even farther into poetics than she did in *Eros*. While she backs up her observations with quotations from Sappho and Aristotle, her analysis seems more speculative and free-associative than the tight, exhaustively researched scholarship of her dissertation. This progress from the scholarly to the academic-creative points toward yet another version of fragment 31, where traditional translation takes a back seat to an imaginative recreation of Carson's own theatrical theory of Sappho.

## THE DIRECTOR CALLS

In *Off Hours*, Carson includes a series of poems called *TV Men* which employs literary figures as characters, placing them in unconventional settings. In "TV Men: Sappho," Carson blurs the edges between scholarly interpretation, original creation and translation. She carries her theater metaphor into the poem, where Sappho becomes an actress before she disappears along with the fragmented words of her poem.

Sappho is smearing on her makeup at 5 a.m. in the woods by the hotel.

He She Me You Thou disappears

Now resembling a Beijing concubine Sappho makes her way onto the set.

Laugh Breathe Look Speak Is disappears

In these lines, Carson constructs Sappho as an actress playing a lover, an apt analogy to the poet's divided self at the end of fragment 31. In addition to the dual character Carson creates for

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Ibid., 226.

Sappho in this poem, she reappropriates Sappho's character from fragment 31, represented in the fragmentary English translation of her poem. As these fragments disappear, Carson introduces and then promptly removes Sappho's self-constructed persona. Then, when Carson eradicates the pronouns, she cuts the reader and all the unnamed players out of the poem as Sappho did by simply not mentioning the beloved after line 7.

The lighting men are setting up huge white paper moons here and there on the grass.

Tongue Flesh Fire Eyes Sound disappears

Behind these, a lamp humming with a thousand broken wasps.

Cold Shaking Green Little Death disappears

These couplets shift the focus of the poem to the body. Before Carson obliterates all Sappho's selves, her physical presence and response to the beloved appear.

Places everyone, calls the director.

Nearness When Down In I disappears

Toes to the line please, says the assistant cameraman.

But All And Must To disappears

Action!

Disappear disappears

Sappho stares into the camera and begins, Since I am a poor man-

Cut

## - Off Hours, 118

The director's "*Places everyone*" confirms Sappho's multiplicity, as she seems to rate a collective noun. Immediately after the director call, she returns as the "I" from fragment 31, only to disappear again. But while her personae from fragment 31 disappear, Sappho still has a voice. Conjunctions and prepositions fall away at the end of the poem, leaving the final "Disappear disappears" as a total annihilation from which, miraculously, a fourth Sappho emerges. In addition to the actress, concubine and character in her own poem, Sappho appears here as a poor man. She still speaks as "I" in her one line until the director intervenes.

And who is this director but Carson herself? As translator, she dresses meaning up in a different language and tells it where to stand. She directs both the words of the fragment and Sappho herself. Carson chooses the focus, which words disappear when, to influence both the reader's analysis of her poem and Sappho's original. Carson's poem divides and eliminates the poem and the poet, creating a genre-defying piece which reads like a poem, contains a translation and projects a critical message.

Carson has begun to show us here the ways in which translation transgresses classification. Incorporating translation, original poetry and the scholarship of *Eros* and "Sappho Shock," she imitates Sappho's three selves at the end of fragment 31. Sappho is dead, sees herself dead, and writes of these other two selves. Similarly, the translator must act different roles toward a poem to achieve a translation which does not simply transmit the "inessential information," but brings the reader to a new understanding of the original. To achieve this, the translator must reach across the language barrier to obtain the poem. The translator plays lover and poet to the original, but carries out of the breach neither a fully original poem nor a

mechanical translation created out of a one-to-one language correspondence. A translation lies somewhere between complete creative freedom and scientific transcription.

#### CATULLUS REDIRECTS SAPPHO

With her radical translation of Sappho, Carson places herself in a critical lineage which includes the Roman poet Catullus. Writing five hundred years after Sappho and in a different language, Catullus idolized the Greek poet, adapting the name of her home, Lesbos, as the pseudonym for his mistress in his poems. He also translated her fragment 31 in his ode 51. In the beginning, Catullus's poem closely resembles Sappho's original, but the superficial similarities make the conceptual differences all the more clear. He begins with

Ille mi par esse deo videtur,

ille, si fas est, superare divos,

qui sedens adversus identidem te

spectat et audit<sup>5</sup>

This sounds very similar to Sappho's first stanza, with the insertion of one point. Catullus hedges his claim that the third man is god-like even more than Sappho does. She qualifies her compliment with "seems to me," implying that he may not be a god or may not even appear god-like to others. Catullus goes further, wondering about the propriety of his statement. He needs the approval of religion to make his comparison, while Sappho speaks for herself comparatively confidently.

who sits opposite you continually

watching and listening [all translations in footnotes are mine]

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> That one to me looks to be equal to a god that one, if it is proper, is superior to the gods

Of the next two stanzas, the first has lost its last line and the second closely follows Sappho's third stanza.

dulce ridentem, misero quod omnis eripit sensus mihi: nam simul te, Lesbia, aspexi, nihil est super mi

lingua sed torpet, tenuis sub artus flamma demanat, sonitu suopte tintinant aures, gemina teguntur

lumina nocte.6

Catullus has many of the same physical reactions as Sappho: he cannot speak or see, hears buzzing in his ears and feels flames beneath his skin. His state of rapture echoes Sappho's, but the second stanza of Catullus's ode alters the reader/beloved relationship which Sappho creates in her poem. Sappho identifies the reader with the beloved using the second person singular, but then closes the reader out of the poem by dismissing the beloved after line 7. Catullus's reader goes through these same stages, but in a different way. Right up to the end of the sixth line, ending in *te*, the reader can identify with the beloved. The first word of the seventh line reveals the *te* to be Lesbia, Catullus's girlfriend and subject of many of his love poems.

but tongue is numb, thin flames run under limbs, sound rings in own ears, twin moons cover

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> to sweet laughing—because, unhappy, all senses rip from me: at the same time I saw you Lesbia nothing remained to me

After the relatively close translation of stanza 3, Catullus's final lines deviate dramatically from Sappho's original.

otium, Catulle, tibi molestum est;
otio exsultas nimiumque gestis;
otium et reges prius et beatas
perdidit urbes.<sup>7</sup>

- Catullus, 112-13

Catullus also creates another persona in this stanza, but instead of Sappho's intensely personal, death-inducing emotions, he addresses himself in the third person, distancing himself from the poem rather than falling into its end. As when he ponders the sacrilegious act of comparing a man to a god, Catullus steps into Roman-citizen-mode, berating himself for his emotions.<sup>8</sup> He suddenly worries about the example he sets and the history lessons he learned.

Catullus's split into two characters serves the purpose of bringing himself back to reality, not heightening the poetry. While Catullus translated much of the emotion of Sappho into Latin by relating a detailed account of the rapture into which the lover falls, he cannot sustain his passionate translation to the end. Catullus's ode shows us the difficulty in carrying anything through the edge of self, let alone accessing emotions through another person, time and language. Carson's translations of Catullus's poems, which are less emotionally charged than the originals, continue to examine the difficulties Catullus found in his own translation practices.

night.

Leisure, Catullus, is troublesome to you.
 Leisure burns [you] and you desire too much.
 Leisure spoils first and most beautiful kings and cities.

#### CHAPTER II: EROS BETWEEN

Carson's "CATULLUS: CARMINA" resides in the middle of Men in the Off Hours. The difficulty in writing about these poems begins at the title. Should it go in quotes, as I have it represented here, or should it be italicized? In other words, are the fifteen groupings stanzas of one poem, or should they be taken individually? Next comes the question of authorial identity. If one has never heard of Catullus, one may believe Carson created these poems entirely, as she does not preface these pages with any explanation. Even if one knows Catullus and has studied his poems, it is difficult to link the originals to the translations, for Carson pushes Catullus's own practice of free translation further than he ever did. Carson uses her imaginative new lyrics to academically comment on the critical history of Catullus. Many scholars consider Catullus simply a witty, frivolous poet who wrote about casual sex. But Catullus takes love, sex and writing quite seriously. His poems have an emotional intensity that Carson's adaptations lack, their flat tone belying the tempestuous language of the originals. But I do not propose that Carson does not understand Catullus. Her stark recreations resemble Catullus's odes more than light, whimsical translations if we keep her terms in mind. Eros, beauty and the edge hold the lover apart from the beloved, allowing for more balanced, calmer language even in the face of great emotion. A glib voice does not convey the pathos of Catullus, but the lack of emotion in Carson's language implies emotion at a distance.

In Catullus's ode 85, "perhaps the most elegant distillate we have" of the pain/pleasure dichotomy inherent in eros (*Eros*, 6), Catullus plays with the space love and hate inhabit.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> For a brief examination of Catullus's use of the word "otium," see O'Higgins, Dolores, "Sappho's Splintered Tongue: Silence in Sappho 31 and Catullus 51," *Re-Reading Sappho: Reception and Transmission*, ed. Ellen Greene (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996) 76-8.

Odi et amo. quare id faciam, fortasse requiris.

nescio, sed fieri sentio et excrucior.9

- Catullus, 182

He expresses his emotions in three short words and seems to feel them concurrently, but the beginning of a possible division along the lines of pleasure and pain emerges here. In the single word γλυκυπικρον, the two feelings cannot separate, but Catullus suggests that the poet can split the emotions into separate verbs, perhaps to be felt by separate selves. Catullus's extreme sensibility appears as he experiences emotions about his emotions. His conflicting sentiments confuse him in line 2 when he watches himself feel, increasing the sense that he plays multiple parts as Sappho did in fragment 31.

Carson's corresponding poem in *Off Hours* can most clearly be identified as a translation of ode 85 by its title. "*Odi et Amo* (I Hate and I Love Perhaps You Ask Why)" begins this poem which otherwise may not look like a translation of Catullus's poem at all, though other connections appear once one associates the texts. The first four lines of Carson's translation distill Catullus's distillate further, focusing on four words. They contain only versions of the first two verbs of Catullus's poem.

Hate hate hate hate hate hate hate.

Hate hate hate hate hate love hate.

Love love love love love love love.

Love love love love love love love.

- Off Hours, 42

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> I hate and I love. How is this done, you may ask. I do not know, but I feel it and it burns.

Carson's poem decreases the emotional intensity of Catullus's ode with her use of repetition and punctuation. While at first the repeated emotions seem intense, the reader probably will not take the time to read each "hate" and "love" individually. He may not even notice the lone "love" in line 2. The excessive repetition causes the words to blur, producing a less concentrated emotion than the simple *odi et amo*. Carson's refusal to enjamb her lines also heightens the distance. When each line ends in a period, the reader must pause, but not with any emphasis as may be the case with an exclamation mark or a dash. Carson's poem demonstrates that repetition does not necessarily make a more intense poem, causing the reader to appreciate Catullus's concise statement of pain. By examining the transmission of the terms eros, the edge and beauty, we will see how Carson continues to translate out this pain and the accompanying pleasure of eros in five other Catullus translations from *Off Hours*.

### DELICIAE MEAE PUELLAE

The second ode of Catullus's collection involves sex, jealousy and a euphemism. His mistress, Lesbia, plays with her pet sparrow while the Catullus figure watches in growing frustration. He clearly views the sparrow as a rival for his beloved's attention. Commentators, Martial, most significantly, have inferred from this sexual triangle of girl, boy and bird that the sparrow symbolizes Catullus's rival's penis. Whether or not Catullus himself thought of the bird as a symbol for the male anatomy, the sparrow certainly stands between himself and Lesbia. The

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> Ode 2 concludes with three lines which may or may not belong to the poem. I omit them here, as I believe their presence would cause more confusion than their usefulness merits. For a brief discussion of their validity, see Dettmer, Helena, *Love by the Numbers: Form and Meaning in the Poetry of Catullus* (New York: Peter Lang, 1997) 22-3.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> Gaisser, Julia Haig, Catullus and His Renaissance Readers (Oxford: Claredon Press, 1993) 236-37.

opening of ode 2 clearly states Lesbia's affections: *Passer, deliciaemeae puellae*.<sup>12</sup> This line both claims Lesbia as Catullus's girl and distances her, admitting that the sparrow is Lesbia's main concern. Catullus goes on to elaborate on Lesbia's obsession with the pet in decidedly erotic undertones.

quicum ludere, quem in sinu tenere, cui primum digitum dare appetenti et acris solet incitare morsus.<sup>13</sup>

Solet can mean "she is accustomed to" or "she is used to," but it holds the same possible sexual connotations as the English word "know." Catullus's use of this verb to govern the infinitives in the sentence, along with the placement of the "sparrow" in Lesbia's lap contribute to the sexual nature of her relationship with the "pet," even if one does not know of or agree with the bird-aspenis theory.

The first part of the poem distances Catullus from his pain by pretending to be about Lesbia's pet, but Lesbia herself and Catullus's desire overtake the second half.

cum desiderio meo nitenti
carum nescio quid lubet iocari,
ut solaciolum sui doloris,
credo, ut tum gravis acquiescat ardor;<sup>14</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> O Sparrow, delight of my girl.

with whom she was accustomed to play, whom she used to hold in her lap to whom she would give the tip of her finger and she would incite to bite sharply

<sup>14</sup> when my shining desire for some sort of dear joke and solace to her pain.
I believe, that then rests [her] heavy ardor.

Desiderio looks most like "desire," but it contains more of eros than the English word. "Absent desire" is closer, for Lesbia's ability to relieve her passions with other men makes her unavailable to serve Catullus's every desire. This sets the reader up for the last two lines, where Catullus expresses his outrage at Lesbia's distance.

tecum ludere sicut ipsa possem

et tristis animi levare curas!<sup>15</sup>

- Catullus, 73-4

Catullus makes his misery explicit. His frustration that Lesbia can be happy without him bursts out, revealing his jealousy and pain.

Carson's translation, though also about a woman and her pet, radically deviates from Catullus's ode, eliminating the pain.

On her lap one of the matted terriers.

She was combing around its genitals.

It grinned I grinned back.

It's the one she calls *Little Bottle* after Deng Xiaoping.

- Off Hours, 38

Carson retains Catullus's odd combination of sex and pet ownership by positioning the dog in the woman's lap, as the sparrow sat in Lesbia's, and by overtly referring to genitals. "One of the matted terriers" implies that the woman has more pets, but the narrator expresses no jealousy. There is a sort of kinship between the narrator and the animal. Not even a comma separates them in "It grinned I grinned back." While Catullus wants to supplant Lesbia's pet (tecum

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> Would I could play with you the same way and lighten the mind of gloomy cares.

*ludere*... possem), Carson's poem joins them together. This is eros. Eros needs a space in which to work its magic. The terrier holds that space in Carson's poem, a canine chastity belt keeping the narrator from Lesbia and desire intact. The narrator grins at his rival, knowing that the dog is essential, while Catullus snarls at the sparrow, wanting his place of privilege. The jealousy has been lost in translation, from person to person and language to language.

Catullus's next poem concerns the death of the sparrow, which he now considers dear to him. The sudden switch from bitterness in ode 2 to mournful eulogy in the next poem is curious, but the end of the poem explains the discrepancy.

Lugete, o Veneres Cupidinesque et quantum est hominum venustiorum: passer mortuus est meae puellae, passer, deliciae meae puellae, quem plus illa oculis suis amabat. 16

The first line sounds like a typical funeral elegy, but the second line undermines the elegiac style with the colloquial *quantum est hominum*. The next line reveals the dead as the sparrow, confirming the parodic quality of the poem. One does not keen over a pet. Catullus then describes the sparrow's life, emphasizing his faithfulness to his mistress.

nam mellitus erat suamque norat ipsam tam bene quam puella matrem, nec sese a gremio illius movebat,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> Mourn, O Venuses and Cupids and all that exist of lovely people: the sparrow of my girl is dead the sparrow, delight of my girl whom she loved more than her eyes.

sed circumsiliens modo huc modo illuc ad solam dominam usque pipiabat;

qui nunc it per iter tenebricosum

illuc, unde negant redire quemquam.<sup>17</sup>

As in ode 2, the sparrow remains in Lesbia's lap, invoking the penis imagery. However, this sparrow "peep[s] to his mistress alone," a fidelity not included in the other sparrow poem. This, in conjunction with the final lines of the poem, explains Catullus's attitude adjustment between odes 2 and 3.

at vobis male sit, malae tenebrae

Orci, quae omnia bella devoratis:

tam bellum mihi passerem abstulistis.

o factum male! o miselle passer! 18

Mihi clarifies Catullus's woe. While in ode 2 the sparrow belonged to his girl and signified other men, he now claims it as his sparrow, his penis, which has "died." Catullus laments his lost erection, and he describes his sadness in terms of Lesbia's grief: tua nunc operameae puellae | flendo turgiduli rubent ocelli<sup>19</sup> (Catullus, 74-5). Lesbia mourns the absence of sex with Catullus

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> He was honey-sweet and had known him herself as well as a girl [her] mother nor moving himself in her lap but leaping at one time here at another there peeping to his mistress alone.

And now he goes through that shadowy journey from which they deny anyone returns.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> May it go badly for you, ill shadow of Orcus, you who devour all the beautiful things you have carried away my so-beautiful sparrow O evil deed! O poor little sparrow!

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> By your doings now eyes of my girl grow red, swollen from tears.

now, as Catullus mourned the loss of her in the previous poem. Neither of them believes in the erotic power of the space between them.

Carson's translation also deviates from a typical funeral poem. But while Catullus tricks the reader into believing in the legitimacy of his poem at the beginning, Carson's first line reveals that the poem concerns the death of a pet. "Today Death stormed in and took *Little Bottle* and left" she begins flatly, skipping the emotional beginning of Catullus's ode. The next two lines are more solemn than Catullus's simple listing of events. "No more little black hooligan clods of earth / Across her white bedspread" illustrates an absence of sex in the image of stained bedclothes which will be stained no more. But unlike Catullus's lament, this speaker appears resigned, acknowledging his risqué past in the whimsical "hooligan" but not otherwise mourning. The end of the poem resembles Catullus's ode much more than the first half.

Death makes me think (I said) about soldiers and autumn.

One carries.

One carries.

One carries it.

- Off Hours, 38

By referencing his own words, the speaker acknowledges himself as part of the poem in a trope similar to Catullus's outburst addressed to Orcus. But while the end matches Catullus's poem in structure and even word choice to a small extent, the tone still differs greatly. The speaker does not feel angry or crushed. Instead, he stands by as an observer. Carson borrows "[o]ne carries" from *abstultis* ("you have carried away"), which occurs in line 15 of Catullus's poem. Carson changes the verb to third person and uses the least personal third-person pronoun, draining the emotion from the word. Once more, eros causes this lack of emotion. The speaker recognizes

that sex cannot be omnipresent. If they do not stain the bedspread for a while, he sees this as only natural in a desire that needs absence for fuel. While Catullus keens over his penis, Carson's speaker accepts his fate and waits for his time.

### LESBIA ILLA / ILLA LESBIA

If many of Catullus's lyrics sound as though they could have been dashed off Frank O'Hara-like in a few spare moments between parties, ode 58 reads like a note passed in study hall from one angst-ridden teenager to another. He once more addresses the topic of Lesbia's chronic infidelity, again in veiled terms. Here, however, he makes no attempt to hide Lesbia's identity.

Caeli, Lesbia nostra, Lesbia illa,

illa Lesbia, quam Catullus unam

plus quam se atque suos amavit omnes,<sup>20</sup>

The poet addresses everyone by name in this poem, focusing on clarity in these first lines. He does not mention Lesbia's infidelity until the final line, but he leaves a clue in the first: *nostra Lesbia*. Lesbia does not only belong to him, but also to Caelius from the start, before her infidelity begins to spiral into the outward reaches of the empire. His despair truly begins with *Lesbia illa, I illa Lesbia*. The repetition emphasizes his confusion, his inability to articulate his thoughts as he resorts to repeating himself to fill up space. Then comes his unambiguous declaration of love, a love greater than that which he holds for himself or his family. The next line heightens the sense of urgency: *nunc in quadriviis et angiportis.*<sup>21</sup> "Now!" he cries. "Now what?" we cry, along with poor, baffled Caelius. First word, last line: *glubit*. Ah, a verb. Oh,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> Caelius our Lesbia that Lesbia that Lesbia that one Catullus loved more than himself and all his own

it's "peels." Doesn't help much. Now she peels what? *Magnanimi Remi nepotes*<sup>22</sup> (*Catullus*, 116). Right. Catullus delays the reason for the poem until the last line, and then the message remains initially ambiguous. Many older editions of Catullus will simply gloss *glubit* as "peels" and leave it at that, sometimes stating that no one knows what Catullus meant here. But Catullus is craftier than they let on. Lesbia does not peel the sons of noble-hearted Rome so much as she peels back the foreskin of the generally uncircumcised citizenry. Once the reader gets through the ambiguity of the poem, the force of the image in the last line is shocking. The reader can suddenly understand the need to let Caelius know about this: their woman is cheating on them with all of Rome.

But even while Catullus declares his love for Lesbia and describes her sexual acts with other men, he distances himself from the poem. The first word, the invocation to Caelius, gives Catullus a partner in despair. Lesbia does not cuckold Catullus only, "their" Lesbia cheats on both of these important men. Caelius's presence keeps Catullus from looking like the lone romantic mourning Lesbia's indiscretions. Catullus also distances himself by referring to himself in the third person. He holds back by writing *amavit* instead of *amo*, and he writes of his love in the past tense. He can talk about Lesbia in the present tense, can even say that she is cheating on him *nunc*, but he cannot refer to his love as present. This effect of distancing himself from his poem tempers the urgent and graphic nature of the poem. It allows Catullus to write very personally without exposing himself completely.

<sup>21</sup> now at crossroads and back alleys

<sup>22</sup> the sons of noble-hearted Rome

Carson's translation contains a similar progression of images. She begins the poem with innocent language, much as Catullus's first lines contain words of love. However, Carson immediately introduces more sexual language.

Nuns coated in sliver were not so naked

As our night interviews.

The first word of the poem evokes an image of religious purity and self-control. Carson complicates this image by comparing it to naked nighttime meetings, which are probably not holy and pure. Her last image explodes as graphically as Catullus's does, though in a very different way.

Now what plum is your tongue

In?

- Off Hours, 40

As in the Catullus poem, this image forces the reader to make the connection between the ideas of "plum," "tongue" and the previously mentioned "night interviews" before it becomes a very graphic image. But Catullus describes a distinctly heterosexual sex act and Carson an oddly vaginal rather than phallic interaction. Lesbia's tongue in another implies that she enters an orifice instead of being entered herself, but the transformation of imagery from Catullus to Carson is not necessarily based on gender. Instead, it illustrates the edge. Lesbia entering another's body equates with entering the hole in the edge left for the beloved. The "In?" left on a line by itself violates the white space of the page, appearing to pierce the space as Lesbia entered her lovers' edges.

Carson's poem differs dramatically from Catullus's in person. Once more, Carson does not use Lesbia's name, though Catullus writes it three times in the first two lines. Carson still

cannot write her name. Catullus writes in third person, while Carson's poem speaks in first: "our night interviews." The poem directly addresses Lesbia, questioning her in the second sentence. While this increases the sense of intimacy (the reader feels as though he is reading personal correspondence), the effect of the question, in comparison to Catullus's knowledge of Lesbia's infidelity in his poem, lends a sense of uncertainty to the poem. Carson's poem does not have the privilege of Catullus's, it cannot determine Lesbia's faithlessness. While Catullus knows enough to write Caelius about it, Carson's poem does not have this surety. The lover does not have full access to the beloved, and the poem makes no claims to know about Lesbia's lovers.

### FORMOSA EST MULTIS

In ode 86, Catullus writes a complicated ode to Lesbia's beauty. He begins not by praising her, but by praising another woman:

Quintia formosa est multis. mihi candida, longa,

recta est: haec ego sic singula confiteor,<sup>23</sup>

Many people think Quintia beautiful, and Catullus does not immediately contradict this. However, his use of *singula confiteor* ("I admit these singly") holds the beginning of the tension in this poem. He does not see the three attractive qualities he lists as unified but as separate aspects of beauty. Then there's the word "admit." He would obviously prefer that people think her ugly, but he allows that people do find her beautiful. He holds back in these first two lines, but in line 3 he bursts out with how he really feels:

totum illud "formosa" nego: nam nulla venustas.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> Quintia is beautiful to many, to me she is shining, tall, straight. In this way, these I admit individually.

nulla in tam magno est corpore mica salis.<sup>24</sup>

He admits parts, but he denies the whole. His initial appreciation of aspects of her appearance makes the abrupt refutation of her beauty all the more devastating. She looks attractive in some ways, but to no purpose; her looks do not amount to anything compelling. She has no "glimmer of salt," a seasoning that would give her character. She does not have beauty now, nor does she have the necessary spark for beauty to evolve within her. Catullus sees beauty as a wholeness: if it is not all there, it is not there at all. In the final two lines, he complicates this idea with a description of Lesbia's beauty.

Lesbia formosa est, quae cum pulcerrima tota est, tum omnibus una omnis surripuit Veneres.<sup>25</sup>

- Catullus, 182

He cannot contain himself. The first words are to the point: Lesbia formosa est. He used the four lines on Quintia as a ruse to make reader think first of attractive and then unattractive women only for Catullus to startle him with the proclamation of Lesbia's beauty. "The most completely beautiful," as Catullus would have it. But the fourth line (which is grammatically anticipated from the second half of the line before it, for cum . . . tum works as "not only . . . but" does in English) explains that she stole beauty. This addendum complicates Catullus's definition of beauty as a wholeness. She was beautiful before she stole the charms of Venus, but these now increase her beauty. But can one augment a wholeness? This paradox attracts Catullus. Lesbia defies his own poetic sense of beauty by her ability to increase her perfection. While Quintia has

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> I deny that whole: beauty. No charm, no glimmer of salt is in her great body.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> Lesbia is beautiful, who is not only most completely beautiful but alone stole all the charms of venus.

all the makings of beauty but not the thing itself, Lesbia exceeds it and amazes the poet by forcing him, a man obsessed with the aesthetic, to reconsider his notions of beauty.

Carson's translation has a very different tone than Catullus's ode:

There was a whiteness in you.

That kitten washed in another world look.

Good strong handshake for a girl but.

But.

- *Off Hours*, 43

This poem is far more melancholy than Catullus's. It begins with the past tense, implying that the girl's paltry charms have degenerated further: she does not even have that whiteness anymore. Catullus's poem begins with a similarly straightforward assessment of Quintia's beauty, the laundry list of her attractions very plain and not separated by conjunction. But Catullus's initial *candida*, *longa*, / *recta* immediately opens up to a less staccato sound, ending with that wonderful assonance, *omnibus una omnis*. Carson does not break this monotony until the last one-word line. This flatness differentiates her poem from Catullus's bright banter and proud boasting about his girlfriend's looks.

Her assessment of the unnamed girl's beauty includes an interesting translation of Catullus's *candida*. Latin does not have words for colors as English does. Roman blood is dark, grass fresh, and gold shining, or *candida*, frequently translated as white because of its association with light. "Whiteness" is thus one of two words in her translation that can be directly associated with Catullus's poem, and in that way it is one of most faithful words in the translation. But she twists the definition of *candida* into a concept Catullus would have never thought of, tainting the fidelity of the word. The word enacts an elaborate pun as well. Whiteness is associated in

English with purity, while Carson's use of it questions and contorts the idea of a faithful translation. The connotations of whiteness run through her poem. To begin, the girl appears virginally white. The reference to a kitten then enhances the innocence and fragility of her appearance. "Good strong handshake" conjures images of honest business deals and polite societal greetings, but the addition of "for a girl" assures the reader of her femininity. This is similar to Catullus's poem, where Quintia is pretty but dull, contrasted with the bad girl Lesbia who steals from the gods.

Carson's translation pares down Catullus's poem significantly at this point. Instead of using four lines to deconstruct Quintia's beauty and extol Lesbia's, as Catullus does, Carson uses one word twice. The first "but" implies that the girl lacks something. She does not possess lines 3 and 4 of Catullus's ode, *illud formosa*. However, the second use of the word references the final two lines of Catullus and concerns Lesbia. The final "But." sits as the last line, lonely and unnecessary, a conjunction with nothing to conjoin. Catullus also uses it in the last line of his poem, but by making it the only word of her last line, Carson emphasizes Lesbia's absence. This "But." defines the edge of Catullus. It reaches out from his poem but links to nothing, making the repetition especially poignant. Twice, Carson's poem reaches for Lesbia, and twice it fails.

This absence of and yearning towards Lesbia in Carson's translation explains the difference in tone between her work and Catullus's poem. Catullus ignores all the negative traits of Lesbia in his poem. Her theft of Venus's charms might remind the reader of her unscrupulous nature and the affairs that make Catullus so miserable in other poems, but Catullus himself does not dwell on these aspects in this poem. As a reader of Catullus and not the man himself, Carson has the distance to see Lesbia more clearly. She can see that Lesbia's beauty is not simply a thing to be praised. It is a force with repercussions that make Catullus miserable in other poems.

Lesbia attracts all members of the opposite sex, but Catullus can excuse the cheating because her beauty also blinds him. Carson's poem see through this beauty to the pain that beauty causes everyone.

Catullus's ode 43 also deals backhandedly with Lesbia's beauty. He greets and then immediately begins to insult the girlfriend of his friend Mamurra. Instead of complimenting and then degrading her looks, as he does Quintia, the first four lines of his poem describe what she is not.

Salve, nec minimo puella naso nec bello pede nec nigris ocellis nec longis digitis nec ore sicco nec sane nimis elegante lingua, decoctoris amica Formiani.<sup>26</sup>

This is a very dismissive rhetorical ruse. Catullus refuses to really think about Mamurra's girlfriend. He says only what she is not, unwilling to look deep enough to see what she actually is. He does not say she is ugly but that she does not fit the standard of beauty. But we must question Catullus's standards. In line 6, he asks, *ten provincia narrat essebellam?* Other people find her beautiful, why doesn't Catullus? He implies our answer in the next line: *tecum Lesbia nostra comparatur?* Catullus has described the beauty of Lesbia as an absence (of her features in the unnamed girl). Catullus cannot directly describe beauty, but he instead must

Hello, girl with not too small nose nor pretty feet nor dark eyes nor long fingers nor dry mouth nor decidedly too elegant speech friend of the bankrupt Mammura

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup> In the provinces is [this] said to be beauty?

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup> With you is our Lesbia compared?

"circle closer" (*Husband*, 115) until the idea becomes clear while never overtly stated. Ode 86 elaborated on his idea of beauty as a wholeness, and this poem confirms it. Lesbia has something no other woman has, something words cannot describe directly. The final line rails against those other voices who speak well of women who are not Lesbia: *o saeclum insipiens et inficetum!* <sup>29</sup> (*Catullus*, 107). Catullus finds all of Rome hopeless because they do not appreciate Lesbia as the only beauty.

Carson's poem begins even more briskly than Catullus's ode. She omits the salutation and begins her complaints immediately:

Your nose is wrong.

Your feet are wrong.

Your eyes are wrong your mouth is wrong.

Your pimp is wrong even his name is wrong.

She mentions some of the body parts Catullus does: nose, feet, eyes, mouth. However, she gives an even less descriptive assessment of the unnamed girl than Catullus did. The girl is simply wrong; Carson does not even explain in what way. Her fourth line radically deviates from Catullus's poem, as Mamurra's girlfriend becomes a common prostitute. This makes her exterior more important because she earns her living by looking attractive, but it also blunts the insult, as she is not a woman of reputation. By turning her into a prostitute, Carson has the opportunity of mocking her more directly than Catullus does. He greets the girl in the first word of the poem, implying a straightforward confrontation, but then does not use a verb in the first five lines. He does not constantly remind the reader of the unnamed girl he addresses, while Carson uses "your" five times in the first four lines, foregrounding her frontal assault on the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>29</sup> O unwise and boorish generation!

woman. Carson enhances the hostility of these first four lines by the short, repetitive phrasing which pulls the eye through the poem quickly, not allowing the woman to recover before receiving the next blow.

Carson reveals the cause of the poem's extreme hostility in the final three lines.

Who cares what they say, you're not—

Why can't I

Live in the nineteenth century.

- Off Hours, 39

As in ode 86, Carson drops Lesbia's name from the poem. She is now present in the dash, stretching from what the unnamed girl is not to the nineteenth century. Carson's harshness to the girl comes from that absence of Lesbia. Her final line confirms this. While Catullus complains generally about his society, Carson's poem cannot bear to exist in a time where Lesbia cannot be appreciated or attained.

Carson's theory of eros influences her translations greatly. In her poems, the Catullus character becomes accepting of the distance between himself and Lesbia, while Catullus the poet raged and burned with desire back in Rome. Similarly, Carson accepts the distance between English and Latin. Her poems are colder and less frantic than Catullus because Carson sees the gap of time, space and culture between them with an awareness that she will never be able to fully breach it and pull all the beauty of the Latin across. Surprisingly, similar issues of emotional translation occur to the wife in *The Beauty of the Husband*, a creative text written in English to which the erotics of translation would not seem to apply.

CHAPTER III: EROS WITHIN

We can now see how eros acts when there exists a clear space between the lover and the beloved or between languages. How does eros behave when the gap is less well-defined; how does it find room to move in a marriage or within a language? *The Beauty of the Husband* offers us the erotics of the postal system as a solution. The husband and wife are separated as teenagers by her parents and, during their marriage, by his infidelities. When separated, the husband writes her "highly poetic" letters (*Husband*, 37). These letters seduce her better than he does in person because eros has the space to work in letters. The wife sees that "[i]n a letter both reader and writer discover an ideal image of themselves" (*Husband*, 94). She puts aside the jealousy and pain when she reads his words, just as Catullus forgot the agony Lesbia caused him when he wrote of her beauty.

The letters provide more than just a space through which to transmit eros. They also translate the emotions of the wife and husband out to the reader, connecting the three of them. Reading a letter quoted in a book is as close to being the fictional character as the reader can get. Dialogue has an aural component missing in a book, and rarely does an author include a picture of what a character sees, but letters allow the reader to participate in the book. When the wife includes a letter she received from the husband in Rio de Janeiro, we read the same words she did.

Rio, April 23

I don't understand this business of linguistics.

Make me crv.

Don't make me cry.

I cry. You cry. We make ourselves cry.

- Husband, 19

After the transcribed letter, the wife ticks off its four main points, including its symmetry and lack of return address, which the reader could easily have discovered on his own by reading the epistle.

When the wife includes the husband's letters, the reader can create his own reading of the husband, which in this case would probably correspond at least in part with the wife's analysis of the husband's character. Many of his letters enact in the reader the emotion they refer to, forcing the reader to participate in the letter to some degree and making it difficult to create a distance there. However, the wife's comments on the letters can override the emotion created in the reader by the letter. As the writer of the book, the wife has created a bond with the reader which causes her increasingly hostile reactions to the letters to resound more with the reader than the letters themselves do. As Carson could see through Lesbia's beauty to remember the anguish she caused Catullus, the wife's temporally distanced reading of the husband's letters gives the reader a more balanced view of the husband and his letters.

The husband writes his first letters while in high school, long before he becomes the husband. His future mother-in-law mistrusts the boyfriend. The girlfriend notes her mother's disapproval but ignores it.

My mother ran counter to him as production to seduction.

When I refused to change high schools she looked at my father.

Within a year we moved to another town

and of course distance made no difference, he was at his best in letters anyway.

- *Husband*, 37-8

The wife includes her boyfriend's letters, which she unsuccessfully hid from her mother, in the book. One forbidden epistle that her mother intercepts reads

This is a case where he has to arouse her.

This is a case where he does not have to arouse her.

There is no difficulty [see illustration].

- Husband, 37

The sexuality of his message is remarkable, for the poem avoids erotic language with the exception of the word "arouse." "This is a case" sounds clinical and legal but not sexy. But the juxtaposition only makes the sensuality more pronounced. The poem enacts its message: he does not have to discuss sex acts to arouse his girlfriend, just as he does not have to be near her to captivate her. The wife does not provide the illustration and does not even confirm its existence to the reader. This conspicuous absence makes the letter all the more erotic. Leaving the illustration up to the imagination allows the reader to picture what he wants, creating a situation where the reader can become aroused with the writer doing nothing more than suggesting arousal. The sexuality in this letter acts upon the reader as much as on the girlfriend. The wife offers only the brief "[t]his one, alas, my mother read" as commentary on the letter. Presumably, the wife still regrets her mother's acquisition of the letter, or perhaps here she channels her adolescent angst here. But since the wife provides almost no interpretation, the reader has nothing to counter the seduction except the marginal mother's remarks.

She continues to offer little commentary, even when the fiancé fails to appear at the wedding. The fiancée provides us with the letter he sent in his stead.

His telegram (day after) said

But please don't cry-

that's all.

Five words for a dollar.

- Husband, 45

As in the erotic letter above, this epistle enacts itself. The words sound ripped from a sentence. The presence of the telegram relies on the absence of the husband, and his absence supplies the implied beginning: "I know I didn't come, but please don't cry." Likewise, the dash implies an unspoken ending of the sentence. If the missing beginning of the sentence symbolizes the absent husband, the dash represents the present wife. "But please don't cry, darling." The husband could have changed the dash for a word, an endearment, but the message has more power when the wife must make the connection herself. The wife acknowledges his skill with absence by including the dash in her word count. The message actually contains four words, but she includes the dash as the fifth word and brings the total to a dollar. The monetary sum is her only possible judgment of the letter. The wife's inclusion of the price assumes that the relationship or his absence at the wedding was only worth a dollar to him. By this time, the reader begins to see the arrogance of the husband and the pain that he causes the wife, and his telegraph does not have the same effect of intimacy with the husband as the love letter did.

One of the final letters she includes breaks this connection with the husband further. Separated for three years, the husband has continued to write her, causing increasing agony for the wife. She tries to stay apart, but his letters still attract her as the school-age notes had, which "fell into [her] life / like pollen and stained it" (*Husband*, 37). Their friend Ray chastises the husband for continuing to chase after the wife while ignoring her pleas to be left alone and carrying on his affairs. On Ray's death, the husband sends the obituary notice along with a note.

It was hard at the end. Ray remembered you. So do I.

I read one of your old letters to him (On the Hole in My Brain) at the funeral.

If you'll be in Venice in December so will I.

- Husband, 133

A reader who has studied many of his letters understands his infidelity and lying at this point and cannot be seduced by his false humility. We all know that he will go to Venice regardless of her, probably with another woman. But the wife does not count on the reader at this point. "No doubt you think this is a harmless document. / Why does it melt my lungs with rage." Nothing about the husband is harmless, as we have learned. Her question to the reader implies that she knows this to some degree. She asks for the reader to explain how such a seemingly inconsequential piece of paper could cause such a volatile reaction in her because we feel the same thing with her. The husband has burned her too many times while we watched to let us believe that his every gesture is not a potential threat.

These letters illustrate the distance between the wife and the husband, though they frequently cause the reader to feel connected to the book. But while the wife's emotions about the letters and the husband's behavior distance the reader from the letters, the letters themselves can show the distance between the reader and the text, as the first partially quoted letter does. The wife found a letter from her husband to his mistress which included "a phrase [she] had copied from Homer: 'εντροπολιζομενη" (Husband, 9). This phrase breaks down the supposed intimacy between the reader and the letters. The wife quotes it out of its context in the letter, reminding the reader of the gap between himself and the book. The reader cannot see the rest of the letter and does not even know the identity of the recipient, which emphasizes how little of the other letters he truly understands. The wife does not mention paper quality, envelope size, postage or handwriting. We only know that the Rio letter has no return address because she

mentions that absence. We don't know if the love letter from the boyfriend contains an illustration or what it depicts if it does. We may read the same words as the wife, but all the letters are `entroparalizomenhamil in the end.

The inclusion of John Keats's letter confirms the reader's distance from the husband's letters. Keats's statement "Beauty is truth, truth beauty" influenced the entire book, a meditation on the nature of beauty. Before each Tango, Carson includes a fragment from Keats to remind the reader of this, and, most importantly, a letter in Keats's hand covers the back of the book jacket of the hardcover Knopf edition. This reproduction looks like a real letter with water spots and illegible handwriting and the faint outline of a crease. Closer to the real thing than the husband's epistles, the back cover still cannot be called a letter. The ISBN obscures a few words, the text falls off the sides of the jacket, and the reproduced water spots remind the reader that the paper does not resemble that which Keats owned. If the reader still stands apart from this letter, so faithfully reproduced, then the husband's transcribed letters which are comparatively unrelated to their originals seem infinitely distanced, shattering the illusion that we share a reading experience with the wife. The translation of the husband's letters from their physical reality to their appearance in *Husband* constitutes a critical reinterpretation of them. Similarly, the husband's theft of meaning in lies and his reappropriation of the wife's words also translates language and distances the reader from him.

### WAS HE A POET?

The inclusion of the letter fragments introduces the husband's linguistic kleptomania. The husband repeatedly steals his wife's writing on a grander scale than one copied phrase from Homer, and he lies compulsively. Why is he a thief and a liar while the wife, who copies Homer

and writes fictional stories, is neither? Their relationship to language separates them, making one a "[f]aithless lecherous child" (*Husband*, 83) and one an author. The wife knows about the husband's predilection for others' words, and she confronts him when provoked by his incessant war games.

It's a game.

It's a real game.

Is that a quote.

Come here.

- Husband, 10

The wife does not even know when the husband speaks his own words, nor does she really expect him to clarify, as the absence of a question mark implies. She expects little honesty from him, though they have only been married six months at this point. Her expectations are met, as he answers her with a command. He remains a thief even at the end of their marriage, for "when he left my husband took my notebooks" (*Husband*, 9). In this same Tango she reveals that he published under his name an essay she wrote, adding that "[o]verall this was a characteristic interaction" (*Husband*, 11). While she does not dwell on his theft of her words, reappropriation of meaning is characteristic of their interaction.

His lying parallels his theft of her written work as he wrests meaning from words. Part of why the wife does not bother to really question her husband about his possible quotation is that the husband "could be counted upon to lie [...]. Otherwise could not be counted upon" (*Husband*, 19). The husband lies pathologically, as the wife tells us.

My husband lied about everything.

[...]

[T]he store where he bought shirts, the spelling of his own name.

He lied when it was not necessary to lie.

He lied when it wasn't even convenient.

## - Husband, 33

How he spells his name is arbitrary, but his need to lie about it implies a complete disrespect for language. He tries to hold the wife to him using language, and he partially succeeds. "[T]he primary function of / writing is to enslave human beings" the wife says (*Husband*, 93), referring to her husband's letters. Years later, the husband uses his belief in the arbitrary nature of language to defend his innocence. "I never lied to her. When need arose I may have used words that lied" (*Husband*, 117). He does not identify himself with his language, presuming that his words can lie without implicating him.

His linguistic beliefs in the utility of language over truth answers two questions the wife poses. Generally, she asks, "What really connects words and things?" (*Husband*, 33). For the husband, nothing does. Language has no inherent value to him. She answers the second question based on his answer to the first.

Poets (be generous) prefer to conceal the truth beneath strata of irony because this is the look of the truth: layered and elusive.

Was he a poet? Yes and no.

# - Husband, 37

Yes, he preferred to lie. Yes, "preferred" is generous. "Needed" is more accurate. But no, he did not lie because it conveyed more truth. Language is a tool for the husband which he can use to gain power, not to uncover truth. This belief prevents him from being a true poet, though he

may write poetically. His allusions and fictions are theft and lies because he wants not art but power.

Similarly, a poor translation creates a smooth poem which sounds as though it was written in the translated language rather than seeking the gap, and hence the beauty, in the edge of the original's language. A poor translator does not surrender to the original but attempts to master it, to recreate the poem in another language and supplant the original. Eros does not act in this scenario because the translator refuses to relate to the text as a lover. The husband does not believe in that "spacey emptiness" between signifier and signified or husband and wife. He sees the former as perfectly separate and the latter as perfectly united. Thus,

He liked writing, disliked having to start each thought himself.

Used my starts to various ends.

### - Husband, 9

She cites the 'εντροπαλιζομενη incident here. The husband doesn't feel he should have to fight for meaning because it does not exist, and he feels entitled to the wife's words, because they are also his. This reductive thinking causes him to lose his wife, and her words with her, when she discovers the beauty inside her he could never understand.

# PRIOR-INSIDE MY OWN HEART

In the beginning, the wife feels the power of his words almost too much. "By letters the husband bound her to him" (*Husband*, 93) because she responds to the beauty and poetry in them. This respect for language also causes her to see the space between word and meaning acutely. She comprehends the capacity for abuse of language, as she witnesses it in her husband's lies, and

thus sees the margin of meaning which connects to words. The gap exists, as poetry and lies make evident, but the relationship is close enough to make lying an actual event. The difference between the wife and the husband's views of language is evident in the 'εντροπαλιζομενη incident. The husband certainly does not admit to his mistress that he took the word from his wife, but the wife not only tells us she took it from Homer but provides the context for it, allowing the reader to find the passage in *The Iliad* if he likes. She does not conventionally cite her source, but she does not steal.

She also refuses to exaggerate and insists on explaining herself when she does, as though she feared overstepping the small gap between word and meaning and becoming like her husband. When she describes the evening her husband first revealed his affairs to her, she assures the reader of her hyperbole.

I broke the glass and jumped.

Now of course you know

that isn't the true story, what broke wasn't glass, what fell to earth wasn't body. But still when I recall the conversation it's what I see—me a fighter pilot bailing out over the channel. Me as kill.

# - Husband, 16

The reader could not assume that she actually threw herself out the window because she survived to write this book. But she explains why she picked this image of a jumper and gives the reader a rare glimpse into her current mental state. The correction of her words, "what broke wasn't glass, what fell to earth wasn't body," enhances the imagery rather than detracts from it by juxtaposing the specific image of the wife breaking the glass with the ambiguous clarification.

Her respect for language and her desire to express the truth speak more poetically than the use of the poetic trope without explanation.

When the wife needs to overtly lie to make her point, she explains to the reader how she has changed language. Near the beginning of the book, she has difficulties talking about the husband. When she discusses the first full letter of the husband, she cannot speak directly.

When I say hidden

I mean funny.

A husband's tears are never hidden.

– *Husband*, 19

She avoids the seriousness of her husband's tears by changing the definition of "hidden." Words do not hold meaning so closely that one cannot alter their meaning, but the wife knows that she must provide her reader with the new definition. She also distances herself from the statement by making a generality. Instead of "my husband," she makes a law of husband, implying that this could pertain to any husband.

The wife treads the ground of the emphatic definite article carefully as well. Her husband does not grasp the intricacies of ownership, assuming that he possesses his wife by virtue of marriage, but the wife, separated from him by his affairs, understands the space between lover and beloved, word and meaning, very well. She mentions the use of italics as a method of emphasis in writing, citing the example, "To Sherlock Holmes she is always *the* woman" (*Husband*, 75). This quote refers to Irene Adler, a woman who outwits Holmes in "A Scandal in Bohemia," earning his respect and the italicized distinction. The wife notes that she does not rate the same commendation from her husband as she looks at herself in a mirror.

[A] wife's eyes, throat, bones of the throat.

It does not surprise her.

she cannot recall when it ever surprised her,

to realize

these bones are not bones of the throat.

- Husband, 76

She sees her throat, but knows that it is not a special throat to her husband. A man with so many mistresses cannot find his wife's body unique or sacred the way Holmes viewed Irene.

The wife does not use pronouns lightly, either. She understands the power of a word which holds so tenuously to meaning. Pronouns are shifty; their meaning changes depending on what is near them. The wife, "a gap in a series" (*Husband*, 74) of mistresses but still one of many women, identifies strongly with the pronoun.

He lied when it broke their hearts.

My heart. Her heart. I often wonder what happened to her.

The first one.

There is something pure-edged and burning about the first infidelity in a marriage.

[...]

I cannot live without her.

Her, this word that explodes.

- *Husband*, 33-4

The wife tries to separate herself from the mistresses before placing her heart next to that of the first mistress. The husband lies to both equally, joining together his wife and mistress, already connected by their common attraction to the husband. This connection gives "her" its power. "I cannot live without her" should properly refer to the wife, but here the husband means his mistress. The overturned expectation creates the explosion in the wife.

The husband does not grasp the cruelty of "her," for he does not understand "this business of linguistics" (*Husband*, 19). He sees the distance between words and meaning, but he does not understand the reach of eros across this space as the wife does. She uses words to connect with her husband and the reader. The translation of her emotion is not smooth and easy but, like any good translation, it brings the reader closer to understanding while reminding him of the distance between the original and the translation, the emotion and the writing of it.

The wife finally realizes this about herself and her husband. Beauty is that hole in the lover's edge where she sees something in the beloved that rightfully belongs to her. In the wife's case, the beauty of the husband belongs to her because it is her.

I overlooked one thing.

That the beautiful when I encountered it would turn out to be

prior-inside my own heart,

already eaten.

 $[\ldots]$ 

Inside. He was already me.

Condition of me.

## - *Husband*, 140

His language, which attracted her to him, was a pale imitation of hers, which she of course possessed all along. Once she has divorced her husband and written a book about him, she has learned to understand eros. As the original and translation reach toward a "pure language" to gain an understanding, the wife's firsthand knowledge of the husband's behavior coupled with the insight she has gained by writing about him has given her a deeper understanding of their relationship. She has discovered the beauty inside of her.

## Conclusion

As Carson writes *Husband* in English, using letters to maneuver translation within a single language, she discovers the beauty of her own language. She does not hesitate to twist or alter meaning in the pursuit of knowledge or beauty but warns the reader of her intentions. She demonstrates this on the first pages.

Fair reader I offer merely an analogy.

A delay.

- Husband, 5

Carson eventually compares a delay to a marriage. She teaches us at the beginning of the book that this erotic relationship will not be a typical marriage, a relationship which is already rare in her writings, for a marriage and a delay seem to have little in common. A marriage should join two people, but a delay implies an absence, a notion heightened by the physical gap which separates the first and second lines on the page. Here, Carson tells the reader that in *Husband*, where vows hold the couple together while their relationships to language separate them, a marriage will become a pause, a delay. As when she titles her bizarre translations of Catullus with Latin from his poem so the reader can connect the two poems, she offers the reader a way of reading the book. This acknowledgment of the rules while breaking them mirrors her translations, which respect the beauty of language even as they refuses to be a slave to it.

These three works by Carson—the fragment 31 translations, Catullus adaptations and *Husband*—all reach for something they cannot achieve. This is the problem at the heart of translation, as the translator can never bring every aspect of a poem, or even a single word, into

another culture, time or language. The chapter titles of my thesis attempt to capture this movement of eros. The prepositions link to nothing; the anticipated subject never appears. This is how I see the erotics of translation: as a reaching toward something in the text I cannot identify; a movement into an absence; a perpetual delay.

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