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The Space of Anne Carson

What is the difference between prose and poetry? While that may seem like a simple question, one that nearly any student could answer, the fundamental differences between prose and poetry are not always so distinct. Prose is traditionally presented as an essay, novel, or other large body, where poetry is often thought of as a poem, epic, haiku, sonnet, and so on. However, there are other forms of literature, many of which do not strictly fit any of the previous categories. Writers such as James Joyce, Zora Neale Hurston, and more recently David Sedaris are famous for genre -bending and -breaking works of literature. One of the hardest (and least commercial) authors to define is Anne Carson: translator, writer, and professor, yet so much more. The most salient feature that readers immediately notice in Carson's work is her unconventionality. While a small volume of Carson's work does follow traditional structure, the majority of her pieces are structurally unique. Her "new poetics" comes in vastly differentiated forms, from translations to journals, fictional road trips, interviews, and an unending repertoire of unique and undefinable forms. Carson creates a rhetorical loop, one between herself and the audience, that brings readers into contact with Carson's ideas. In her collections, such as *Plainwater*, Carson's idiosyncrasies and new poetics carry the audience into her academic space.

Carson toys with unconventional structures. *Plainwater* itself has five distinct sections, some of which have even small breakdowns within. The first section, called "Mimnermos: The Brainsex Paintings," presents fifteen short poems of different subjects, an essay on the Greek

poet Mimnermos with some relation to author Franz Kafka, and three fictional interviews between an interviewer and Mimnermos. The next section is “Short Talks,” a small grouping of short prose bodies. “Canicula Di Anna” is next, and is comprised of a plethora of fragments that read like a play. The fourth and shortest section is “Life of Towns,” similar to “Short Talks,” but each section features a fictional town. The final section is “Anthropology of Water,” an autobiographical section split up into seven different chapters; it includes essays, journal entries, a fictional road trip, and paragraphs that link her brother and the act of swimming.

Throughout the collection, Carson’s argument is unique because it follows such strange patterns. Each section appears to consumers to be entirely independent of one another, especially when the pieces are indistinguishable as poetry or prose. In those sections, Carson’s arguments are often contained, and the reader is forced to glean Carson’s argument through brevity. For example, in the fifth part of *Plainwater*, “Anthropology of Water,” Carson uses the example of water as an extended simile and metaphor. She starts off “Anthropology of Water” with, “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” (Carson 117). Her curt, truncated sentence structure breaks up the passage into more easily digestible and interpretable statements that resonate with the audience. Through such artistic expression and word choice, one can easily identify with Carson’s personal experiences. Readers dive into her work, much like into water.

Considering how different each of her pieces are, even in the same collection, one is left to wonder what the experience is like for readers. Despite the range of parts, from translation to art, fans still take away a deeply personal experience. The payoff of her new poetics, such as Anthropology of Water and Plainwater as a whole, is a powerful reader response. The reader is

not just an observer in the work, they are electrically present throughout, actively participating in the vision that Carson derives from words. And yet, Carson removes herself from the work; certainly Plainwater contains autobiographical information, but it is presented in such a way that the audience can identify their own personal experiences in her work and adapt them to fit hers.

Echoing the sentiment from "Anthropology of Water," nearly every person has a father, brother, lover, true friend, hungry ghost or God that they can identify with and apply to Carson's memory. The depth of the personal experience that Carson employs invokes both sympathy and empathy from readers. From her father's dementia to her self discovery and romantic awakening, she pulls followers into her personal experience, which is enhanced by her choices in structure. In addition to her unique stylistic expression, Carson is a master of word choice. As a translator of ancient texts, Carson needs an incredible grasp of language in order to succinctly capture the nuance of Greek and Latin works. In an interview with Brighde Mullins of the Lannan Foundation, Carson explains about translation, "You come to a place where you're standing at the edge of a word and you can see across a gap the other word, the word you're trying to translate, and you can't get there. And that space between the word you're at and the word you can't get to is unlike any other space in language. And something there is learned about human possibilities in that space. I'm not sure what, but I like to test it. It's humbling" (Mullins).

And indeed, as both a translator and a creator, Carson must both understand the emotion behind words and be able to accurately represent it. The "gap" that Carson experiences, where she must discover hidden nuances in language, further allows her to characterize whatever abstraction she focuses on. For example, in the interview, Carson comments on "to scream" in ancient plays; she states that there is a plethora of different words and connotations in Greek, but the word in English is simply just "scream". Carson even notes that in some of her translations,

she leaves "scream" untranslated, as she struggles to find the proper words in English to express the same raw emotion (Mullins). This disparity between words is something Carson seems to have a fixation with, and readily employs in her work. Her descriptions and use of metaphor are extremely fluid, creating the characteristic style Carson is so well known for.

The fluidity that permeates through Carson's work is not solely defined by word choice. For example, in the interviews in Mimnermos: The Brainsex Paintings, she puts the historic poet and philosopher Mimnermos in a modern setting, creating a novelty where the ancient Greek figure is aware of New York, America, and other modern, anachronistic understandings (Carson 19). Although the interview may be historical fiction, the message resonates with modern audiences. M(imnermos) exclaims:

> I am not angry I am a liar only now I begin to understand what my dishonesty is what abhorrence is the closer I get there is no hope for a person of my sort I can't give you facts I can't distill my history into this or that home truth and go plunging ahead composing miniature versions of the cosmos to fill the slots in your question… (Carson 25).

And readers pick up on Mimnermos' frustrations, while also observing the absolute lack of punctuation. Without the direction that punctuation provides, a reader must throw their own emphases into the section, choosing themselves what parts to stress and destress, what words include emotion and what words do not. The audience must be involved, active participants in the words they encounter; reading Carson therefore transforms into a personal experience, one charged with passion. The section also lends itself to emotional resonance, as the reader is allowed to choose how much or how little emotion to charge the passage with. Often times, traditional literature does not allow for such experiences, but Carson's new poetics modernizes the conversation and requires participation on the reader's end.

Carson's work is appealing to casual readers because the dense subject matter is difficult to digest. Academics aware of Carson's primary fascination, Greek and Latin figures, enjoy the

modern twists she places those subjects in. Most consumers, however, are not well versed in ancient Latin and Greek works, Carson's specialty. Casual fans of Carson are struck with the sense that her work is an insurmountable obstacle, one so academic and sophisticated that the average reader read a section over and over again, poring over each and every meaning. The literal meanings of her work are often times so strange and abstract that readers *must* ask questions, or risk being caught in abstractions. For example, the "Mimnermos: The Brainsex Paintings" title of the first section lends itself to questioning. The casual reader must ask, who is Mimnermos? What does brainsex mean in this context, and why is the final section an interview? Even further, a reader must now ask why an interview is in a work dedicated to essays and poetry. Many of these questions remain unanswered by even Carson herself. In a 2013 New York Times article by Sam Anderson, Anderson spent time with Carson after she published her work "Red Doc >" (The > was caused by Carson's computer, which she decided to leave in the title). Throughout the article, it becomes apparent to readers that much of Carson's work is inspired by randomness, such as formatting errors and miscommunications (Anderson). Like any good abstract artist, Carson then has the reader do the work to interpret what her writing means.

From that ideology, the audience is forced to analyze any and every work of Carson's through a unique lens. For example, in *Plainwater*, the section "Short Talks" features a large group of small, independent prose bodies on titled subjects, such as "On Walking Backwards" and "On Chromolumism." However, readers are left wondering what exactly these bodies *are*, especially because they do not fit explicitly into *Plainwater'*s subcategories of essays and poetry. Therefore, the audience must assume that these structures (and all of Carson's unconventional works) should be read through the same perspective as essays and poetry; that is, each body has a story, a purpose, and a method to it. Both the Mimnermos and Short Talks sections have unique

structures that lend to the subject material at hand; in Mimnermos, the progression becomes less and less literal, moving from translation to essay and finally to a fictional set of interviews, and in Short Talks, each "talk" takes on a different subject matter, and the short nature of each piece provides a didactic tone. In essence, she defies the expectation that narrative writing must follow any specific genre or medium.

Readers are left to wonder what common thread is prevalent through Carson's Plainwater, when each section appears to be so varied and unrelated. University of Louisville professor Kristi Maxwell best summarizes the common thread through Carson's work as, "...a study of *being with*—being *with* others, *with* oneself, *with* texts, *with* language, *with* bodies of water, *with* bodies of land" (Maxwell 56). Maxwell's "withness" illustrates how Carson can create a common thread between seemingly unrelated topics. For example, she utilizes this presence in her translations of Mimnermos; although the literal translation may seem archaic, the text is brought to life through the inventive interview format. Readers can then associate with the text, as the raw emotion and form make the piece more easily accessible to modern audiences. Hence, the audience experiences a personal "withness," or identifiability, with the text. While the theme of "withness" or presentness may not seem unique on its own, in combination with abstract formats and ideas, Carson effectively allows readers into conversation with the text and with the author.

In all, Carson's new poetics is a powerful medium. As a studier of ancient texts, Carson has an appreciation for tradition and language, and yet also toys with traditional structures and phrasings. Her ability to use the "gap" to see beyond language, creates her own unique, personal space, a place where her writing stands unique among other contemporary writers of our time.

My first experience with Carson was of the "gap." I was skimming "Short Talks," interested in her stylistic choices, when I came across "On Walking Backwards." The passage goes as such:

> My mother forbade us to walk backwards. That is how the dead walk, she would say. Where did she get this idea? Perhaps from a bad translation. The dead, after all, do not walk backwards but they do walk behind us. They have no lungs and cannot call out but would love for us to turn around. They are victims of love, many of them.

Chills ran up my spine. It was in that initial reading, before ever looking at a critique or review of Carson, that I fell for her work. Something struck me in the sophistication of her writing. There was a "gap" between my understanding of literature and Carson as the speaker. That space was the same as Carson feels with her translations; I was searching between my emotions and her words, reaching for the hidden meaning, yet also appreciating the raw emotion I felt after my first encounter with the text. Carson truly capitalizes on uniqueness and emotion, skillfully weaving history, autobiography, and humanity together in *Plainwater*.

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