

## A Disruption of Academic Writing and Anne Carson's *Short Talks*

When we write in a way that maintains the expectations of academic writing, we limit ourselves in our ability to think creatively. To discover new terrain requires adventuring in the physical, artistic and intellectual realms. In Anne Carson's *Short Talks*, the normative connections are thrown out and replaced by a style of reflection that feels simultaneously more organic to human thought and beyond. The creative work is divided by topic, each section filling no more than one page but containing material that spans a wide berth of experience.

This method of writing engages reader and writer in thinking that exceeds the normal definitions of subject matter. Although Carson's writing is primarily considered creative, she informs the reader by occupying space in historical and philosophical realms as well. This balance of creative and informative writing can be shifted to make the technique more useful and accessible to academic writing. This quality has great potential to be useful to academic writing, for it serves to motivate both reader and writer to engage concepts deeply and participate in innovative thinking. Literature is a relationship between reader and writer. It can be used to communicate certainties, impressions and even unknowns. Writers who are able to move beyond the delineation of the known are able to bring the reader into a deeper understanding of the experiences which are qualitative, personal, and difficult to articulate.

In *Short Talks* Anne Carson ventures into the world of non fact, educating her reader on the matter that surrounds a subject, rather than focusing on a single kernel of

quantifiable truth. From the beginning Carson makes some intent known. The introduction plainly states that boredom is to be avoided at all costs. Boredom is the resting state of the mind, the mind without fuel. Carson introduces her own writing with the sentiment, "I will do anything to avoid boredom. It is the task of a lifetime."

This desire to avoid boredom is likely motivated from a hunger to obtain knowledge, to grow intellectually and emotionally. How this boredom is avoided is the critical step. Carson does not suggest a menial solution, her work points to an upsetting of the status quo as a method to avoiding this state. To this affect Carson constructs short pieces of writing that explore topics in history and culture without relying on overused methods of interpretation and analysis. Her writing is slippery; it contains double meanings, it is poetic at times and prosaic at others. It engages the reader by pulling away. Carson's tone is aloof in the sense that it does not babysit the reader. It seems to appeal to its own senses alone. In appealing to these specific senses, it reveals the relation of ideas outside of the ordinary definitive body of the subject.

Typical academic writing functions as summary and analysis of known information. This is especially true in the scientific and historical genres, where much attention is directed towards developing a concrete factual basis. There is great value in this process, for it develops the trust of the audience and allows knowledge to be documented. However, writing is a study in its own respect, and can help accomplish much more than simply cataloging exploration. Writing as communication can be a form of exploration in itself. If the qualities within Carson's writing that swell her topics with

relevance, making potentially sterile subjects evocative, are allowed to exist within academic writing, there is a much greater potential for reader investment.

Carson's piece on Camille Claudel is an excellent example of these qualities contained within a single talk. The first line launches into the subject, "Camille Claudel lived the last thirty years of her life in an asylum," immediately the reader is aware of the biographical significance for the piece. The title of the talk "On Sleep Stones", makes the intent of the text more ambiguous. Simultaneously the subjects of Camille Claudel, suicide, sleep stones, madness and art become significant. Each subject moves to the forefront of the text, linked by the poetic context. The effect of this combination is that the reader is able to extract connections and meaning that may have previously been too abstract to grasp. The dry biographical information on a single person is expanded to invest the reader personally and emotionally in the knowledge. This composition is a form of divergent thinking, which allows both parties to move beyond the current understanding of a subject and begin to form a new understanding. This way of writing and thinking is exploratory. It has the potential to be beneficial to both parties in the literary transaction. The writer is able to express ideas that may not fall within standard definitions, and the reader is able to take solace in the knowledge of the great variety in important ideas as well as be challenged to redefine their own understanding of a subject.

In Carson's writing this tool takes a decidedly artistic and poetic approach, but this is not the only way to use the method. Above all this harnessing of the variety of ideas surrounding a subject can help insure that no ideas are lost, and that all new

thinking is given some value. Some of the most highly valued scientific concepts and inventive thinking is born from the ability of scientists to relate between fields we culturally separate. Einstein admitted that he credited his work with his ability to think creatively and imaginatively, more than his ability to absorb information in a linear and academic fashion (Newbold 153). Similar claims are made for many of the world's greatest thinkers, a fact which demands we question the standard values in academia. Why have we structured such a rigid model for the act of written communication?

An obvious reason to demand consistency in the model of academic writing is to allow the writing to function as a catalogue of ideas. This concept is powerful, because it allows academic writing to become directly connected to the historical documentation of discoveries. I believe the problem with this approach is its dependency on finality of models of thought. When an academic takes part in the process of writing to communicate new concepts, they are reaching out to the rest of the community to participate in stretching the model of thought into new approaches and understandings. When academic writing is developed to trim out any excesses, potential new pathways to discovery are being trimmed out as well. This is negative for the community in an external sense; other writers and thinkers are no longer able to engage the sprouts of thoughts that grew off of the original idea. It is also detrimental to the writer's own process, if we train thinkers to be overly critical of the more creative aspects of their intelligence we are severely stunting their ability to write innovatively.

If we are to move towards an academic model that encourages divergent thinking and individuality in academia, it will be necessary to encourage the documentation of

these qualities within writing. As students we develop many of our learning habits from the readings surrounding our subjects of interest. The recognition of the importance of creative intelligence in all fields is increasing as education cringes slightly away from factory models developed by capitalism and patriarchy.

## Works Cited

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