

In the Wrong: Bad Poems and Errant Teaching in Anne Carson's *Men in the Off Hours*

Simon Reader

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ABSTRACT

In the Wrong: Bad Poems and Errant Teaching in Anne Carson's *Men in the Off Hours*

Simon Reader

This thesis considers the aesthetic and pedagogical potential of error as it emerges in the poetry and criticism of Anne Carson. At stake is error's status as a viable alternative to irony, which I argue is an ethically problematic stance employed both in literary practice and the classroom. Carson's obsession with mistakes makes available a mode of engagement with texts and students that refuses the cool distance of ironic detachment. Irony is a dialectical strategy that allows speakers *not* to commit to critical stances or emotional positions. It puts readers and students on their guard. Invoking error, on the other hand, allows us to discuss a wider range of cognitive, ethical, and emotional events in which we commit or invest in ways generally considered wrong. This thesis has two chapters. The first argues that Carson's poetry engages such phenomena as impersonation, mistranslation, and catachresis in order to stage a poetics of error. The second moves from rhetorical to relational concerns, foregrounding Carson's status as a professor of the humanities in order to draw out the pedagogical consequences spurred by her poetics.

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INTRODUCTION

Carson: “Off” is a big word. I like the word off...the “off” part was a way of thinking about time and the places where time bends that it is not quite infinite but at an angle to the ordinary, where people do some of their best thinking [sic].

Interviewer: Off hours?

Carson: Yes and off mind. If you can get off your mind at an angle – you’ll notice this in teaching, that when students are suddenly a little displaced from what they thought they thought, they begin to actually think. But that angle is hard to get to.

(Carson “In Conversation with Anne Carson” 4)

This thesis is about error, impersonation, and pedagogy in Anne Carson’s poetry. Specifically, it seeks to account for the way in which Carson’s aesthetic and rhetorical engagements make available a model of pedagogical relationality that distinguishes itself from the cool distance of Socratic irony as it is often construed today. “Irony is Not Enough,” she declares in the title of a piece from *Men in the Off Hours*. What is the nature of its insufficiency? What alternative models does Carson’s work afford? The two chapters of this thesis respectively consider the question from two vantage points: the rhetorical and aesthetic, on the one hand, and the relational and pedagogical, on the other. Socratic irony is a stance adopted deliberately for dialectical purposes. It is an “intended simulation...used to challenge received knowledge and wisdom” (Colebrook 2-7), a complex way of both meaning and not meaning what one says simultaneously in order to covertly manipulate a pedagogical encounter (Vlastos 42). Irony involves masking, dissimulation, and calculation at a cool remove from what one says or writes. Both sections of my thesis argue that Carson contributes a subtle but far-reaching complication to classical ironic norms that allows her to engage a richer field of cognitive, ethical, and emotional events. The adjustment involves focusing on error

rather than irony, a move that shifts discussion of Carson's work away from dissimulation and rhetorical controls and towards experiment, accident, improvisation and impulse, terms which are much more relevant in a consideration of her project. In the quotation above Carson suggests one aspect of the distinction when she says she wants to focus on moments "not quite infinite but at an angle to the ordinary." Irrelevant, then, is the "absolute *infinite* negativity" of irony that captured the attention of Hegel and Kierkegaard. Carson wants to distort the ordinary, which I will argue is a very different thing. While many critics have focused on the critical-aesthetic collisions in Carson's intergeneric productions, to my knowledge this thesis represents the first attempt to discuss the specifically pedagogical consequences that issue from such encounters.

In most cases we would think of error as something to be avoided, at the most an event to be tolerated for teaching us what not to do. In terms of aesthetics, however, it may assume a different kind of value. In Plato's *Republic*, the famous assertion holds that imitation should be regarded as an error because it involves creating objects at two removes from ideal forms. The further down the line one gets from the forms, the greater the margin for error. Such mistakenness is counterproductive and therefore undesirable, even dangerous. Aristotle, at least by Carson's account, also describes imitation and metaphor as kinds of errors in both the *Poetics* and the *Rhetoric*, but stops short at calling for the evasion of such mistakes. At stake for Aristotle is the affect of surprise, catalyzed by an impression of the new. Carson narrates his position in "Essay on What I Think About Most":

In what does the freshness of metaphor consist?
Aristotle says that metaphor causes the mind to experience itself
in the act of making a mistake.

...
 Imitation (*mimesis* in Greek)
 is Aristotle's collective term for the true mistakes of poetry.
 What I like about this term

is the ease with which it accepts
 that what we are engaged in when we do poetry is error,
 the willful creation of error,
 the deliberate break and complication of mistakes
 out of which may arise
 unexpectedness. (*Men* 30-35)

Error and poetry, by this account, both share a structure of defamiliarization. Errors are *committed*, we *do* them, just as we do poetry, and both jolt us away from the ordinary surface of life into fresh trajectories previously unthought. The lyric "I" at the centre of the passage tells us what it likes, and a statement of preference could not be more appropriate here, where the value of error and poetry is decidedly affective. W.K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley also observed the erroneous structure of metaphor in their essay "The Affective Fallacy":

The vivid realization of metaphor comes from its being in some way an obstruction to practical knowledge (like a torn coat sleeve to the act of dressing). Metaphor operates by being abnormal or inept, the wrong way of saying something. (36)

So while in the *Republic* mimesis is simply a cognitive error, a failure to obtain the truth, Aristotle's *Rhetoric* detects within error a genetic, affective function. The failure of error becomes a failure to conform to the strictures of habit.

Irony becomes a strategy to avoid error, or a means of escaping the shame and humiliation that the appearance of error tends to attract. It is a dialectical performance that determines in advance of its appearance which interlocutors will be included and

which excluded from the speaker's community. It is at worst a radically skeptical position, one that protects its user from entering into any commitment or reciprocal relationship with other agents and forecloses on the possibility of what Aristotle calls the "new and fresh." Error forsakes irony's insularity and elitism to risk the possibility of the new. Rather than creating a rift between what I say and what I mean, error (that is, the risking of error and even, as Carson puts it above, the "willful creation of error") involves *impersonation*, a way of invoicing statements and opinions not my own yet not *not* my own. Wimsatt and Beardsley's image of the torn coat sleeve serves to illustrate the creation of new adjustments or dispositions out of unexpected and impractical circumstances.

Ever since she wrote *Eros the Bittersweet*, Anne Carson has been thrillingly obsessed with such risks. In that volume she narrates the ancient Greek conception of desire as an extreme example of a mistake, as an "invasion, an illness, an insanity, a wild animal, a natural disaster" (148). "How do apparently external events enter and take control of one's psyche?" is the question that Carson watches the poets and philosophers struggle to answer in *Eros the Bittersweet*. Eros forces humans into new dispositions, new attitudes, new selves. "Change is risk," she writes. "What makes the risk worthwhile?" (159) Desire feels wrong; it assaults the body and the mind as though they were one and the same thing. The verse and prose experiments that have followed that initial onrush all continue the preoccupation with error and its synonyms. Once she frees herself from "fear, anxiety, shame, remorse / and all the other silly emotions associated with making mistakes," Carson is able to try her hand at kinds of writing that from an academic perspective remain as wrong as can be. *Glass, Irony and God* presents a writer

straying from critical norms to emphasize self-reference and subjectivity, using the seduction of her personal life to engender an attention in her reader that slips from text to author, confusing and distorting both in the process. In *Plainwater*, an errant pilgrim on the road to Compostela or roving through American campgrounds records diffuse personal and philosophical impressions in her black notebooks. *Autobiography of Red* presents a poetic fictionalization of the fragments of Stesichoros, creating a queer monster out of the shredded poems: Geryon, a red, winged artist who grapples with the sensation of being born into a mistake.

So why choose *Men in the Off Hours* as the principle text for this thesis? In many ways it is the most “off” of any of Carson’s works. There are no erudite, sixty-page essays in verse or prose. Instead, dozens of short, apparently unedited lyrics announce themselves as drafts or fragments. The book moves at an opaque speed through what seem like sloppy odds and ends, incipient moments of attention directed at an eclectic group of artists and their characters: Woolf, Antigone, Artaud, Edward Hopper, Tolstoy, Catherine Deneuve, to name a few. “Like a cut-and-paste collage of heads from *Vogue* and bodies from *Time*,” one reviewer describes it. The book reads like a series of rapid improvisations by a poetic impersonator who refuses to settle on any one figure or style for too long or in too much depth before she turns the page and distorts the conditions of her writing anew. In this sense the collection represents an extended *series*, rather than Carson’s preferred mode of the long poem. I think that *Men in the Off Hours* can act as a lens for Carson’s entire prolific output. Notoriously, many of the poems in the book are said to fail—some enact a “freeze-dried surrealism,” says one critic, citing “Epitaph: Europe” as his example:

Once live X-rays stalked the hills as if they were
 Trees. Bones stay now
 And their Lent says with them, black on the nail.
 Tattering on the daywall.

I admit to being inspired by the positive and negative judgments of value that Carson seems to attract from critics, other poets, and classicists. Partially, this is due to an urge to praise and defend the work of a poet who has had such an impact on my life, but it also represents a more disinterested interest in Carson's status as a humanist. Over the course of her academic career the humanities have been disturbed by the question of their own value, in many ways even alienated from any sense of their own value. This alienation acts as fodder for Carson's project. Unsatisfied with taking up a merely ironic stance toward the canon, she uses it to defamiliarize her own sense of what a self can be, as what Charles Altieri in *Canons and Consequences* has called a collection of permissions rather than exclusions.

The most famous attack on Carson's own poetic value forms the basis of my first chapter. David Solway believes that Anne Carson is nothing more than a media-supported construct who superficially embodies the public's sense of "poetry." I argue that Solway's accusations find an historical (indeed, a classical) equivalent in the arguments Socrates makes against the profession of the rhapsode in the *Ion*. Rhapsodes fulfilled a public role in reciting and transmitting the aesthetic intensities of other poets, in particular Homer. Socrates accuses Ion of not accomplishing anything real or concrete, of being a sham. Yet do the rhapsodes not play a distinctive social role in impersonating and embodying the mentalities and dispositions that other poets present to them? Do they not consolidate the community of their audience by acting as a focal point or transmitter of possible dispositions, allowing us to see how different roles are imbricated in

permanent flux? Isn't this kind of attention valuable, even as it strays from critical judgment into the byways of error, forsaking the ethics of self-control for immediacy, impulse, and improvisation? Impersonation, therefore, raises the problem of responsibility. It creates a dilemma for those who would prefer to see people as individual, clearly defined entities that can adopt or discard other personae for rhetorical effect at will. The first chapter considers these questions by examining the rhetorical possibilities that Carson's poetry makes available through a reading of poems that exhibit the tropes of impersonation, mistranslation, and catachresis.

The second chapter shifts the discussion from rhetoric to relationality, attempting to articulate the specifically pedagogical consequences that follow from Anne Carson's aesthetics of error. It is preoccupied with a conflict between impersonation and Socratic irony as it is narrated in two versions of the poem "Irony is Not Enough: Essay on My Life as Catherine Deneuve." The overlap of different roles is imminent here: Carson impersonates Deneuve as she narrates a graduate seminar on Sappho, during which she apparently falls in love with one of her female students. Different trajectories for the relationship are all suggested and tangled up with each other: there is the Socratic-ironic relation, the Sapphic-erotic relation, and the cinematic relation energized by Deneuve's presence at the centre of the action. At stake in this chapter are two competing narratives of what it means to teach: one ironically fabricates wrong positions as a means to force students into independent thought, eventually leading to the stabilization of categorical truth; the other sees the teacher-student relation a play of surfaces, a distracted and permanently roundabout sequence of impersonations taken on to continually defamiliarize and readjust the terms or texts under discussion. The second approach

aestheticizes the pedagogical relationship in order to provoke vital acts of attention from the student. Both accounts involve a student focusing on the personality and body of the teacher *as well as* the material taught, but while the Socratic method sees this kind of attention as a problem, the Carsonian method sees it as a reality of education worthy of consideration and cultivation. Two films about women and aesthetic education, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1969) and *Notes on a Scandal* (2006), serve to articulate the anxieties that our culture still feels toward this aspect of pedagogy.

Attending to error, even encouraging it, is a subversive and counterintuitive pedagogical stance, one that imitates an aesthetic attitude with a degree of quixotic impertinence. While Carson seems to crop up as something of an “irritant” within the academic community, I think that in the end her performance contains as much potential for academics as it does for poets, in showing what is possible when we allow ourselves to engage the error of an aestheticized education that takes affective positions and benefits as its point of departure and involves ideological critique only insofar as it assists aesthetic experience. This does not mean viewing art and experience as a pleasure-hunt; what it involves is emphasizing the aesthetics of education itself as a means of sustaining humanist interest. The canon can and should remain, flexible and evolving as it is. Carson is in the business of conserving interest in it by making it strange. “You don’t learn anything when you’re still up on the window ledge, safe. [You] jump from what you know into empty space and see where you end up. I think you only learn things when you jump.”

CHAPTER I
ERROR IN ANNE CARSON'S POETRY

“The trick of judging the whole by the detail, instead of the other way about, of mistaking the means for the end, the technique for the value, is in fact much the most successful of the snares which waylay the critic... We pay attention to externals when we do not know what else to do with a poem”

I. A. Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism*

This chapter presents a study of aesthetic and critical errors in the poetry of Anne Carson. At stake is error's status as a productive alternative to what I see as the problematic operations of irony, understood as an aesthetic, rhetorical, and ethical strategy. Given what Claire Colebrook calls irony's "unwieldy complexity," it would be worthwhile from the outset to clarify how the term will be employed, in order to make clear the identity of the defendant and the context of the charges laid (Colebrook 1).

Carson's classicism, her career as a scholar of ancient Greek literature, makes Socratic irony the obvious context in which to begin the discussion. The central notion I argue against, while attached to the tropic sense of irony (saying the opposite of what is meant), is also deeply concerned with the Romantic elaboration of Socratic irony as a whole way of life. Specifically, I address the conception of irony defined in the writing of Hegel and Kierkegaard as "absolute infinite negativity" or "infinite elasticity." Freedom, for Kierkegaard in *The Concept of Irony*, involves detachment from what one says, isolation from one's community and a bifurcated relation with oneself:

If I am conscious when I speak that what I say is my meaning, and that what is said is an adequate expression for my meaning, and I assume that the person with whom I am speaking comprehends perfectly the meaning in what is said, then I am bound by what is said, that is, I am here positively free... Furthermore, I am bound in relation to myself and cannot detach myself whenever I choose. If, on

the other hand, what is said is not my meaning, or the opposite of my meaning, then I am free both in relation to others and in relation to myself. (Kierkegaard 264-5)

Irony involves distance and a self-affirming mechanism designed to ensure a subject's unique and undefiled protection from the located statements and the "ordinary pedestrian speech" of the world (265). It involves height, a relief from the mundane. It "looks down from its exalted station," in Kierkegaard's words, on the ordinary. In this sense, it would seem to be the quintessential stance for the critic, for irony supposedly guarantees superior, and necessarily negative, reflection on the acts and statements that place people in the world. It also suits a particular vision of the artist, who would playfully engage myriad speakers or ways of seeing without sincerely committing to any of them. As such, irony has earned a reputation for solidifying elitist sensibilities¹. My argument is that Anne Carson exploits and seizes the potential in aesthetic and critical error in such a way that highlights the unsatisfying and ethically problematic operations of irony, making available an attitude toward art and academic practice more concerned with the real effects of inspiration and impersonation.

This chapter has three parts, each of which presents Carson employing a different kind of aesthetic, rhetorical, or critical error, in each case foregrounding the insufficiency of irony to account for particular modes of literary and critical practice. The first part engages a recent polemic in the history of Canadian poetics, the infamous attack on

¹ Linda Hutcheon, of course, argues that irony is transideological, that "nothing is ever guaranteed at the politicized scene of irony" (15). While I agree with Hutcheon when she says that irony may be employed for any political position or cause, and that irony engages the emotions as much as the intellect, I believe irony's ethics are less unstable than its politics, and that there is always something dubious about presuming to adopt a position while always allowing oneself an escape hatch.

Carson's work by the Montreal poet and critic David Solway. I argue for the critical possibility of attached modes of reading and writing about texts, after showing that Solway's criticism relies on a division between Socratic irony and rhapsodic passion first developed in the Platonic dialogue *Ion*, a division that became important for New Critics such as W.K. Wimsatt and Cleanth Brooks in defining the proper role of the critic in a formalist context; Solway, as we shall see, replicates this division in his recent arguments against the value of Carson's works (Wimsatt and Brooks 3-20).

Impersonation and inspiration are the keywords of this chapter, and *Men in the Off Hours* is its central text. Many of the shorter lyrics in *Men in the Off Hours* are less concerned with manipulating distances and parodying different personae at a remove and for rhetorical effect than with developing a different kind of engagement. This mode involves the impersonation of figures and texts in such a way that permits and encourages the overlap of intensities and affective states between author, speaker and the personae that make up the poems' subjects. The heights of irony are replaced with intensities of arousal and inspiration, with an immersion in personae that precedes the decision about what attitude to adopt toward them, the way a brush is suspended in a pool of paint.

The second section focuses on the errors of mistranslation as they are theorized in a series of poems on Antonin Artaud and deployed in Carson's botched translations of Catullus. The inevitable errors that superintend the predicament of the translator become in themselves a source of poetic potential, and allow us to develop a positive view of aesthetic error that prefers the unfinished, improvised, even the frankly bad poem to the polished, dexterous, and refined work. How do such aesthetic errors function positively? Carson has at various times read and relied upon Aristotle's theory of poetry as a

celebration of error: “It was not surprising to Aristotle that poets make mistakes, nor that they enjoy it, nor that such errors can sometimes be more true than correct information” (“Just for the Thrill” 151). The aesthetic error of mistranslation offers a different kind of information than that contained in more proper, accurate translations. By focusing intensely on what is lost in translation, Carson actually shows what can be gained: fresh, immediate collisions that give rise to the unexpected, to the new. More akin to an impersonation, the mistranslated poem means to record the affective responses to both the original poem and the process of rendering it visible in another language. “A translator is someone trying to get in between a body and its shadow,” Carson wrote, describing translation as an interception and so drawing attention to the way in which it imbricates different bodies, personalities, and qualities. “Shadows fall and move,” she says (“Translator’s Forward” 41).

Section three elaborates on these goals, articulating the value of the unfinished and the bad, but through an analysis of the infamously “bad” trope of catachresis (“wrong usage”: an unearned, imprecise, hubristic figure) as it surfaces in the poem/bad translation “First Chaldaic Oracle” and informs Carson’s work as a whole. As Robert Stanton has asked in his essay on Carson’s errancy, “does the impertinence of metaphor lie, then, not in a poet’s specific uses of it, but in its very essence” (32)? Catachresis may not be the “essence” of metaphor, but it does represent metaphor at its most irritating and unusual, often caught in the most vivid errors.

IMPERSONATION

Carson has always had a somewhat vexed relationship with both rigorous classicists and other poets. Is she in fact a bad critic? A bad poet? Consider the following

poetic fragment of the poet Alkman, a piece that resurfaces again and again in her work, always as a performance of the aesthetic and intellectual potential of error. In *Men in the Off Hours*, for example, it is the central text in “Essay on What I Think about Most,” a poem-essay that addresses the possibility of taking metaphor and mimesis as kinds of error:

[?] made three seasons, summer
and winter and autumn third
and fourth spring when
there is blooming but to eat enough
is not. (32)

Carson goes on to describe her enjoyment of this poem that depends on a “computational mistake” whereby a fourth season (spring) appends itself to what was just declared to be a sequence of three. In a critical move forbidden to professional classicists, Carson chooses to read the fragment as though it were a whole poem, for this allows her to let an absence ([?]) stand in for what was more likely a deity from archaic Greece. What is important to note is the way in which Carson responds to “an accident of transmission” with an act of wrong or shoddy critical reading, as though the object—a shredded poem—demanded an equally broken response. The speaker does not adopt an ironic tone but instead lays bare the errors that she is making and the reason why: “textual delight.”

Other scholars have grumbled about this, one reviewer finding it particularly “misleading” to read the Alkman piece as a poem rather than as a fragment (Cropp “Arion”). The most important aspersion cast on Carson’s overall project, however, comes from David Solway, who in several interviews and articles from recent years has criticized Carson’s critical and artistic skill. Carson and her “gullible readership” together sustain what Solway calls a “mediocrity industry.” He uses a wide range of pejoratives to

characterize her work and its reception, all of them associated with fraud or shamming: “sleight of hand,” “forgery,” “negative biomimicry,” “a pyramid scheme,” and “a professional scam” (Solway 39-58). Solway’s point is that pseudo-intellectuals devote themselves to Carson (a “cipher”) because she plays into their mediocre expectations and poor reading skills. His anxiety stems from a broader unease with the general state of the Canadian public’s education, a public that, with its American counterpart, is responsible for Carson’s celebrity. Other Canadian poets of note, in particular Margaret Atwood and Michael Ondaatje, are also a product of our cultural degeneration. Members of our culture hunger after fragmentary pleasures, brief fervors that reassure us about our intellectual position and right to consume. Solway’s argumentation relies on language that echoes Matthew Arnold’s in referencing apparently timeless and unchanging criteria of value: “Carson writes on litmus paper which tells us who and what *we* are...patchwork creatures without genuine moral and intellectual substance, preference machines lusting for unmerited approval, media constructs even in the privacy of our being” (50).

The special deficiencies of Carson’s poetry Solway attributes to a serious absence of “the complex density of effects and tensile strengths that define the *techne* of the vocation” (14-5), a result of it being “oblivious to quality, content, genuine facility with language, and moral and aesthetic grist” (39). Solway’s fear is that all contemporary poems will “degenerate...into a mere rhapsody of impressions or ultralite reflections,” if they have not already done so (13). He also deems Carson’s output inappropriately excessive, claiming, “restraint is a sign of both self-knowledge and charity” (14). In sum, Carson is a poet of with no identifiable skills (“*techne*”), who prefers the mode of

“rhapsody”² and who is in general rampant and uncharitable with her writing. Solway goes on to connect Carson’s lack of control with appropriation and impersonation when he describes her preparing her own punishment in the “Inferno...condemned to protean evanescence, exchanging identities with and repeating the forms and gestures of others” (25).

It is not my intention, at least not directly, to defend Carson’s work by picking apart these statements, especially since the critics Ian Rae and Chris Jennings have both published thorough and precise responses to Solway’s critique. My interest lies in the way that this critique, with its demand for poetic professionalism and definable skills (*techne*) in Carson and other poets, replicates the criticisms that Socrates made of the rhapsode Ion in the dialogue of the same name. The treatment that Carson in *Men in the Off Hours* gives to authors and figures such as Catherine Deneuve, Virginia Woolf, Audubon, Thucydides, Artaud, Freud, Giotto, Edward Hopper, and Ingeborg Bachmann (in a book that Solway calls a “farrago”) finds a parallel with the treatment that Ion gives to the poetry of Homer in the professional displays of passion which it was his job to deliver. W.K. Wimsatt and Cleanth Brooks, in the first chapter of their volume *Literary Criticism*, describe the *Ion* as the beginning of a longstanding argument in literary study between those who read for affective force (Ion) and those who read with critical distance to achieve the goals of reason (Socrates). Here is how they describe the former profession:

² “An exalted or exaggeratedly enthusiastic expression of sentiment or feeling; an effusion (e.g. a speech, letter, poem) marked by extravagance of idea and expression, but without connected thought or sound argument.” (OED)

A rhapsode...was a person who might be described, in terms of our own culture, as a sort of combined actor and college teacher of literature. He gave public recitations from the Iliad and the Odyssey, especially of the more exciting passages; and he undertook to deliver critical and moral lectures. (5)

Why exactly does the dialogue matter in the larger context of Plato's project? The rhapsode's pedagogical or educational extension, the manner in which his enthusiastic, unrestrained performances exerted influence on the public at large, establishes the context of the concern. The profession was "distinguished and lucrative" (Lamb 404), and in the dialogue itself Socrates claims, with characteristic irony, that he envies the rhapsodes' beautiful and luxurious clothing, with Ion himself informing us that he has been awarded a "golden crown" for winning the competition ("Carson is essentially not a poet. She is a prize-reaping machine" [Solway qtd. in Heer]). But what, Socrates wants to know, is Ion's actual skill? What is it that he does? For Ion is only capable of reciting or commenting on the poetry of Homer, not on that of Hesiod or Archilochos, for example, and this leads Socrates to announce that Ion has not mastered any subject (*technē*) whatsoever, and is in fact only impelled by a divine force (*dynamis*)

as a 'Magnetic' stone moves iron rings...This stone not only pulls those rings, if they're iron, it also puts power *in* the rings, so that they in turn can do just what the stone does – pull other rings – so that there's sometimes a very long chain of iron pieces and rings hanging from one another. And the power in all of them depends on this stone. (26-7)

This famous passage illustrates one part of what Socrates find so suspicious about the rhapsode's practice, that is, the magnetism or contamination of force that proceeds

unmediated from God to poet, to rhapsode, to the audience. It doesn't matter at this stage in Plato's career what message is being transmitted through the chain, only that a definable agent negotiating or opposing the affective force remains completely absent. What we get in the *Ion* is a model of the aesthetic that does not depend, as it will come to depend in the *Republic*, on successive imitations of forms with Ideals at the top and art objects at the bottom, but a circuit of collisions that do not *represent* but actually *transmit* force—divine force—itsself, in a manner that anticipates the Longinian sublime. “When I tell a sad story,” Ion tells Socrates, “my eyes are full of tears, and when I tell a story that's frightening or awful, my hair stands on end with fear and my heart jumps” (28). Carson enjoys this kind of magnetic transmission. In “Foam: On the Sublime in Longinus and Antonioni,” she describes the effects of the sublime as a transmission of passion from poet, to character, to critic, to reader, in a succession strikingly similar to the magnetic chain we just saw Socrates describe: “The passionate moment echoes from soul to soul. Each controls it temporarily... To feel the joy of the Sublime is to be inside creative power for a moment, to share a bit of electric extra life with the artist's invention” (*Decreation* 46).

The *Ion*, in sum, places two models of interpretation in opposition: on the one hand, Socrates, characterized by ironic distance, light but respectful mockery, and detachment from the affective impact of poetry and, on the other hand, Ion himself, who stands as an devoted transmitter of poetic power to an audience, one who deliberately enters emotionally charged states. Both Socrates and Ion “take on” certain positions or roles, but the nature of their impersonations are very different. For example, Socrates pretends to respect Ion, but Ion does not “pretend” to be Homer. The relation between Ion

and Homer is much stranger. For one thing, there is no dialectical performance underway, no strategy to uncover a truth that hovers somewhere above the shadows of this world. All that matters is the intensity of Homer himself and the imperative to dissolve into that force in the moment. If, for Kierkegaard, “the ironist is the eternal ego for whom no actuality is adequate,” then Ion presents us with an ego for whom the sound of Homer’s poetry *is* adequate; he is a critic that interprets Homer on the ground the poetry makes available and demands. A large part of the value Kierkegaard assigns to Socratic irony concerns its ability to break away from “immediacy.” In Kierkegaard’s work, the word “immediacy” and its cognates “are linked by the notion of something’s being unmediated, directly given” (Cross 136). The immediate state does not carry the potential for critical reflection. And this uncritical talent of Ion’s, his ability to impersonate Homeric states and deliver them to be felt by an audience is what Socrates attacks. Ion, a beautifully adorned stylist, presents a surface deeper than any ground (Deleuze *Logic* 141).

We can observe Carson’s opinions about the mechanisms of Socratic control and the necessity of controlling the presentation of identity in the concluding sentences of the essay “The Gender of Sound” at the end of the volume *Glass, Irony, and God*. Carson has just been critiquing the Greek (and particularly Socratic) notion of *sophrosyne*, which she translates basically as “self-control”:

I wonder about this concept of self-control and whether it really is, as the Greeks believed, an answer to most questions of human goodness and dilemmas of civility. I wonder if there might not be another idea of human order than repression, another notion of human virtue than self-control, another kind of

human self than one based on dissociation of inside and outside. Or indeed,
another human essence than self. (136-7)

The “dissociation of inside and outside” is one of the most important characteristics of Kierkegaardian irony, which “always involves a contradiction (or opposition) between the external and the internal, between the ironist’s inner state and his outward behavior” (Cross 127). For Socrates, irony is a way of maintaining *sophrosyne*. What would it be like, a poetry or criticism that forewent self-control, choosing instead to engage inspiration and impersonation?

Socrates’s answer for the predicament of the rhapsode is to combine, as Wimsatt and Brooks point out, a positive with a negative answer. Ion is “wrong” (*adikos*) in the human sense, that is, his profession relies upon no discernable skill, but he is also divine, in that his power (*dynamis*) comes from the gods. Socrates believes that Ion has no control over the power he receives, that it is a purely passive event. Carson would appear to exploit the ambivalence in the word “inspiration,” the way we can be inspired *by* something and *to do* something even simultaneously. Inspiration by the Muses, the source of Ion’s power, becomes an explicit motif in the short series of poems called “Gnosticisms.” Each of the six poems in the series involves a frenzied impersonation of a bird, other writers, and philosophers. In eighty lines the speaker flies through Homer, Wordsworth, Frank O’Hara, Jackson Pollock, Gertrude Stein, J.M. Coetzee, and Immanuel Kant. In “Gnosticism V,” Wordsworth possesses the speaker as she mundanely cleans the kitchen floor in the middle of the night. The mop becomes a paintbrush or a pen, the floor a page. Inspiration is solicited and then overtakes the speaker:

--ah

now

recall
 I dreamed
 of Wordsworth—his little vials,
 Wordsworth collected little vials,
 had hundreds of them, his sister stored them on shelves in the pantry—
 and yes

to inspire me is why
 I put in a bit of Wordsworth but then the page is over, he weighs it to the
 ground,
 the autumn of him soaking my mop purple in the dyes of what's falling
 breathless under its own
 senses. (*Decreation* 92)

The poem records an almost heedless reach towards what seems a random object of inspiration: Wordsworth. This does not qualify as an allusion, for there is none of the subtlety or discretion that usually accompanies allusion or even reference, and the gesture of importing the name “Wordsworth” into this set of verses is made so blatantly that the gesture itself becomes the content of the poem. We are presented with a speaker suddenly struck with the idea of Wordsworth but who ends up being completely taken up (“but then the page is over, he weighs it to the / ground”) in the emotions and force that the idea carries with it. It is as though Carson swallows the heady contents of one of Wordsworth’s “little vials” for intoxication. Control is sacrificed, willfully, to participate in an experience of force. The whole “Gnosticism” sequence begins with an image of attached reading:

Heavens Lips! I dreamed
 of a page in a book containing the word *bird* and I
 entered *bird*.
 Bird grinds on,
 grinds on, thrusting against black.
 ...
 For some people a bird sings, feathers shine. I just get this *this*. (87)

The bird in the speaker's book reaches out and forces her into an impersonation, one that proceeds or appears to proceed without self-consciousness or self-control. The speaker's experience of the bird involves a "this," a somatic immediacy (the body of the bird is referenced throughout) that does not circle the animal, describing it in terms of "singing" or "shining" but that *enters* the bird and attempts to enfold within it the whole range of movements and emotions that constitute it in the moment of its apprehension. The same entrance characterizes the speaker's engagement with Wordsworth in the poem discussed above, and echoes the force of the Muse that possesses Homer, then Ion, then his audience in a magnetic chain. Muses make their own appearance in "Gnosticism": "why / at such a pace / Muses / slam through the house" (89), but here the idea of the muse involves everything from divine force to passages from Kant's inaugural dissertation ("what the little word "after" means," as Carson quotes it). Carson attempts to transmit the states of being that these invoked subjects make available. The goal is not to creatively describe or "capture" such entities for the reader's consumption and pleasure but to impersonate them in order to show how different roles are or can be imbricated. Bird, Homer, Wordsworth—these are not just costumes in which to dress ourselves, or gestures to be repeated. In Carson they become singular substances possessed of their own textures, colours, and affects that saturate our attention and through which we gain access to transformative ways of being. Carson's impersonations treat the facts of literary and cultural history as stylistic *aspects* that make demands on her poetic and critical disposition. "For some people a bird sings, feathers shine. I just get this *this*," she writes, diminishing the importance of empirical data (birds do sing, feathers do shine, after all) in order to foreground the attitude and modes of being that the bird opened for the poet in

the first place. Poets have often looked to birds to provide these kinds of adjustments. For Carson, however, passages from Kant's inaugural dissertation may offer as much potential for inspired performances. This leads to another kind of impersonation, a critical practice imitating aesthetic practice, a gesture that might explain the irritation professional scholars and poets such as David Solway feel toward Carson's project.

MISTRANSLATION

In "Essay on What I Think about Most," Carson laments the disposition of philologists who prefer dry facts to the excitement that wrong interpretations and false etymologies can produce. The essay claims to reject philological accuracy on grounds that honoring dependable facts should not take precedence over the reader's pleasure. Carson once defined poetry as "painting with thoughts and facts": facts, for her, display the qualities of materials and substances and may be applied to surfaces with different qualities of shade, tint, thickness, shape, line, or any other technique employed by the painter. Facts feel different depending on how they are arranged with other facts, with other materials. A fact is in conflict with pleasure when it is considered immutable and scientific, when its shape (or *morphe*, the Greek word Carson prefers to describe the spatial nature of concepts) is immune to our experience of it. The diminishment of accepted data and historicism in favour of aesthetic indulgence distinctly reproduces the arguments made in Oscar Wilde's *The Decay of Lying*, a critical dialogue in which the aesthete Vivian makes a quixotic case for lying as the vital activity of poets and artists generally, an activity endangered by late-Victorian utilitarianism, morality, and presumed fidelity to history: "Facts are not merely finding a footing-place in history, but they are usurping the domain of fancy, and have invaded the kingdom of romance. Their chilling

touch is over everything” (Wilde 787). Carson responds to the anticipated philological objection to her method with a similar admonishment:

But as you know the chief aim of philology
is to reduce all textual delight
to an accident of history. (34)

While “Essay on What I Think About Most” does not involve mistranslation exactly, the jab it makes at philology finds new strength in the mistranslations that inform other sections of *Men in the Off Hours*. Mistranslation becomes, in this context, a willful error diverging from what Seth Lerer has called the career of the “dry-as-dust” philologist, a figure such as Casaubon on a tedious mission compiling minor corrections and amendments in the margins of texts and in the shadow of minds greater than his (6). Carson’s own definition of mimesis emerged out of a wrong reading of a broken poem: “the deliberate break and complication of mistakes / out of which may arise / unexpectedness.” This is very much in line with the kind of work Seth Lerer would like to preserve when he reads philology itself as “a sublime art: an inquiry into word roots or poetic fragments that can lead to illumination of the personal, the social, the aesthetic,” as practiced by a “thrilling pedagogical performer” (Lerer 3-6). Carson’s mistranslations, as well as her theories of mistranslation, dwell in the potential errors of immediacy and improvisation in order to exploit the unique aesthetic potential that false starts and unpolished drafts make available.

The “TV Men” series begins with an invented quotation from “On the Sublime”: “TV makes things disappear. Oddly the word comes from Latin *videre* ‘to see’” (61). The source of the epigraph is given as “*de Sublimate*, 5.3,” but as far as I can tell no such section exists. Chapter 5 of *On the Sublime* is one paragraph long and is universally

referred to as 5.1. It concerns the confusion that may occur between good and bad art: “Thus, finely structured sentences, sublimities, and pleasing touches contribute to correctness; but just as with a lucky result, these very same things also contribute to their opposites” (Longinus 36-7). That such a passage is hijacked and rewritten as a comment about television comes as no surprise when we consider Carson’s opinion about TV generally. When asked in an interview “what exactly is terrible about making TV and what is terrible about watching TV,” Carson responds as follows:

Well, they are both dead somehow; they are both dead areas. Dead thinking – the thinking that goes on in them. Ends up being dead. I am not exactly sure why.

When you are making TV a lot of the reason is simply repetition. If you have a script to perform, you probably have to say the parts of it 20 or 30 times before it’s recorded properly...A sentence of Homer couldn’t survive that treatment. (“In Conversation” 5)

Bad art, for Carson, is repetition. The poem “TV Men: Lazarus” figures the Platonic theory of forms as progressive layers of televisions: “our reality is just a TV set / inside a TV set inside a TV set” (89). The art that Plato attacks and that Carson represents as a kind of television involves dilution, a loss of vitality as the object represented gets “further and further away” from its source. Rather than reproduce Longinus, Carson goes off somewhere else. “Essay on What I Think About Most” offers another theory of art that bears mentioning now, a theory based on Aristotle’s notion that metaphor produces errors that give rise to the unexpected. Metaphorical words are the third of three kinds:

Strange words simply puzzle us;
ordinary words convey what we know already;
it is from metaphor that we can get hold of something new & fresh
(*Rhetoric*, 1410b10-13). (30)

For Carson, then, metaphor is useful insofar as it offers something new. While for Plato representations are errors because they weaken or dilute the content of an original, Carson's Aristotle envisions every worthy figurative use of language and act of imitation as an error that introduces new information, to be conserved in a different order of value.

"TV Men" is an ironic title insofar as the material within this section "represents the kind of thing you can't put into TV, whatever real language is in it will disappear," as Carson says ("In Conversation" 5). However, the weird fabrication of a line from Longinus also calls our attention to the way error circumvents or even surpasses the trope of irony as the central aesthetic manipulation of "TV Men." As Wayne Booth writes in the section "Known Error Proclaimed" from *A Rhetoric of Irony*, one of the ways to identify an ironic text is to look for statements from the speakers that contradict commonly held beliefs. "If a speaker betrays ignorance or foolishness that is 'simply incredible,' the odds are comparatively high that the author, in contrast, knows what he is doing" (57). But does this account for the total *rewriting* that occurs in the epigraph? Isn't the error simply *too* wrong to be ironic in Booth's sense? Obviously Carson "knows what she is doing" in this case, but the effect of the error, when taken alongside the passages we've seen so far, is such that whatever irony is achieved is promptly made irrelevant. What is relevant in mistranslations is the lack of polish, their irreverent "badness" and the pleasure the reader gets from material that refuses to clean itself up, as it were, to recover itself to a position of irony, detached from the moment of its composition.

Another poet's mistranslations form the subject of the poem titled "Samedi" in the Artaud sequence of the TV Men series, one that begins ("Lundi") with a meditation on Artaud's madness: "The mad state is, as he emphasizes over and over again, *empty*." The

madness of consciousness characterized as a state devoid of anything unaccountable or tangible (“You can pull emptiness out of it by the handful”) recalls Socrates’s critique of Ion in emphasizing that artists and their interpreters are technically empty and out of their minds (*ekphron*), and also recalls the vials of Wordsworth sought by the speaker of “Gnosticisms.” “To the scandal of language [Artaud] does not consent,” Carson tells us. His refusal leads directly to “false etymology” which, as the speaker explains, makes him “bold.” We get an example of this kind of false etymology in the following excerpt. Carson gives us the text in its original French, translates this precisely in order to call to attention Artaud’s willful mistake (the first stanza), and then describes the error in the second stanza:

For after, said poetically, after will come the time of blood.
 Since *ema* in Greek means “blood,” and *po-ema*
 ought to mean
 “after
 the blood”
 “the blood after.”
 Let us make first *poem*, with blood.

Violence is total here. He deliberately misspells
 the ancient Greek word for poem (*poiema*)
 as “poema.”
 Then misdivides it
 into *po* and *ema* (2 nonexistent syllables in Greek),
 wrongly identifying *ema* with the Greek word for “blood” (*haima*)
 in order to etymologize *poema* as “after the blood after”
 (but in what language does *po* mean “after”?)
 Poetically indeed. (71)

Carson connects Artaud’s madness with etymological error, even hubris, focusing an example of Artaud trying to pull aesthetic practice back from its ironies and toward “blood.” He wants a type of poem whose origin is neither etymologically nor temporally

detached from the body (“let us make first poem, with blood”) and mistranslates in order to make such an event possible. This “abuse” of language presents a broken but passionate and immediate art. Carson tells us that Artaud values the body over the mind: “Body is pure. / Everything loathsome is the mind, / which God screws into body with a lascivious thrust” (68). This sequence exposes a conjunction of error, madness, mistranslation, and somatic immediacy that belies the protective self-reflection of irony:

For Artaud the real drawback of being mad is not that consciousness
is crushed and torn but that he cannot say so,
fascinating as this would be, *while it is happening*.
But only
later when somewhat “recovered” and so much less convincingly. (66)

“Recovered” suggests both the remission from madness but also retreat to a position of safety, of being *recovered*, having traversed a distance from the passionate, mad moment, when inside and outside collapse and error prevails. If irony’s strength, especially as Kierkegaard sees it, involves its capacity to relocate us above the immediacy of our social and historical position, Artaud figures this aspect as a “drawback,” a frailty that denies us the power of madness in the moment when it possesses us. Time’s imposed “recoveries,” said to belie madness and its power, function in a parallel manner to the device used to frame the Artaud poems themselves. TV becomes a species of imitation said to fail exactly because it attempts to make errors “disappear,” to present a smooth unbroken surface, an apparently untroubled imitation that aims only for verisimilitude. Carson prefers flat-out wrongness and negation to any kind of subtle irony, the jarring effect of anachronism or catachresis to winking or shamming. Her mistranslations depart avowedly and globally, without any of irony’s caginess.

Consider the way that error itself is thematized in the following mistranslation,

“*Salve Nec Minimo Puella Naso* (Hello Not Very Small Nosed Girl)”:

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.
 Who cares what they say, you’re not—
 Why can’t I
 Live in the nineteenth century. (39)

Catullus’s poem inveighs against a woman for *not* being the true object of his affection, a beloved who goes under the alias Lesbia. He addresses a woman whose different parts, each of them flawed, combine to form a portrait of a woman who is in error just by existing. The anachronistic intervention at the end of the poem, a botched rendition of the line “o saeculum insapiens et infacetum” (which Peter Green translates as “Oh this tasteless age, ill-bred and witless”) represents an attempt on Carson’s part to reproduce in the reader the sensations involved with looking upon an object whose parts somehow don’t add up to what we know they are meant signify (Green 91). Carson imitates the speaker’s unease in looking at a woman (not his lover) by creating unease in the reader looking at a poem (not the “true” one). Wrong objects of desire and wrong translations are brought to the reader’s attention in a single gesture. This suggests a queer kind of reading, one that favours the replication of aesthetic effects over the transmission of technical facts, a strategy of impersonation similar to the one employed with the figures of “Gnosticisms.” Catullus becomes not an historical figure to be translated and studied at arm’s length but a role that we may choose to inhabit and experience at will.

The fifth verse, “Who cares what they say, you’re not—”, leaves out the word *bellam* (pretty) and the name Lesbia, which appear in the actual text of Catullus’s poem.

Carson's mistranslation produces a suspension that does not appear in the original. The truncation of the line apparently signals a wish to break away entirely from the correct object of desire that supposedly grounds the speaker, followed up by a desire to be relocated in the nineteenth-century. "Why can't I / live in the nineteenth century", also a negative statement, announces the utter distance of the poem from Victorian (specifically Arnoldian) perfection, sweetness, and light, from the security of cultural touchstones and completed and intelligible cultural artifacts. Missing the mark, our pleasures are distinct, wholly changed. The translator, by refusing to incorporate the correct object of desire, insists on dwelling in the failed version of the lover and the failed version of Catullus's poem. Just as the woman in the poem usurps the position of the true beloved, Carson's poem usurps the original, negates it and interposes itself egregiously. It is a gesture that suppresses the urge to merely translate "with a new twist" and dispenses with the notion of a subtle, ironic refashioning. It makes a hubristic, irreverent leap.

Hubristic and irreverent leaps are the subject of the next, final section of this chapter. Catachresis has suggested itself at several points as the trope that comes closest to describing Carson's aesthetic practices and to offering a tropic alternative to irony, for catachresis may mix up its metaphors, appear unearned, counter-intuitive, overreaching, or may involve the confusion of parts of speech, changing a demonstrative pronoun ("this") or preposition into a noun, for example. More than any instance of irony, therefore, catachresis appears to err. The next section will consider exactly how Carson uses catachresis and how this trope may serve to enrich the different aspects of error that I have been arguing for so far.

CATACHRESIS

Against usage. In common discourse, catachresis is understood as a surprising or unearned metaphor or figure, principally a “mixed metaphor.” “Take arms against a sea of troubles,” is the classic example. However, the earliest extant account of the trope comes from Quintillian in his *Institutio oratoria*, where it is defined as a “transfer of terms from one place to another employed when no proper word exists” (Parker 60). Derrida, writing in *White Mythology*, deconstructs the difference between “proper” metaphor, which is limited to the comparison of regular nouns, and “improper” catachresis, that may force words which are not nouns into tropic or figural use, disrupting the opposition between figural and proper meanings: “Every word which resists this nominalization would remain foreign to metaphor” (Derrida 233). So we have a few definitions of catachresis, which together indicate a desire to disrupt or abuse the ordinary surface of language in order to call attention to something previously unavailable. Now irony too involves a complication of surfaces, a manipulation of linguistic regularity that aims to expose language’s inadequacy in representing an order that lies behind, above, or beyond an actuality. Catachresis, however, manifests such complications on the level of the surface, without referencing some ineffable and superior plane. Catachresis may complicate and defamiliarize in an outrageous, and therefore highly visible manner.

Let’s assume for the time being that David Solway is correct when he says Carson “cannot consistently manage metaphor,” and that her metaphors and similes may in general be unearned, farfetched, and certainly mixed (Solway “Interview”). An example from *The Beauty of the Husband* suffices to make his case: “my husband / could fill

structures of / threat with a light like the earliest olive oil.” Is there something to learn from what is superficially a bad use of figure, beyond learning “what not to do?” Derrida asks a similar question: “as the best metaphor is never absolutely good, without which it would not be a metaphor, does not the bad metaphor always yield the best example?” (251). Indeed, even W.K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley in “The Affective Fallacy” note the generally defective quality of metaphors: “the vivid realization of metaphor comes from its being in some way an obstruction to practical knowledge. Metaphor operates by being abnormal or inept, the wrong way of saying something” (36). How might our discussion of error, control, and irony up to this point inform our reading of such catachrestic events in Carson’s work?

The first lyric in *Men in the Off Hours* is “First Chaldaic Oracle,” an exhortative poem composed in the second person, alternating between infinitives and imperatives, describing the process by which the mind tries to “know a thing.” It is worth quoting in full, for the way almost every instance of figurative language in the poem qualifies as catachrestic. The instructional, pedagogical tone of the poem should also be emphasized:

There is something you should know.
And the right way to know it
is by a cherrying of your mind.

Because if you press your mind toward it
and try to know
that thing

as you know a thing,
you will not know it.
It comes out of red

with kills on both sides,
it is a scrap, it is nightly,
it kings your mind.

No. Scorch is not the way
to know
that thing you must know.

But use the hum
of your wound
and flamepit out everything

right to the edge
of that thing you should know.
The way to know it

is not by staring hard.
But keep chiseled
keep Praguing the eye

of your soul and reach—
mind empty
towards that thing you should know

until you get it.
That thing you should know.
Because it is out there (orchid) outside your *and*, it is. (10-11)

What could it mean to “cherry” your mind? Or to “Prague” the eye of your soul?

What kind of a method is “scorch” or “flamepit?” What exactly is your “and?” And what is that orchid doing there in parentheses in the last line? Catachrestic language interrupts and confuses what is in general a plain and direct style of address. Yet the poem also calls itself an “oracle,” an instructional message, characterized by occlusion and riddling. We have nouns used as verbs (“cherry,” “Prague,” “flamepit”), verbs used as nouns (“scorch”) and a conjunction nominalized and controlled by a possessive pronoun (“your *and*”). What oracle is being offered?

Carson is actually translating (again, badly) the first of the Chaldaean Oracles, which name a collection of Neoplatonic religious commentaries generally agreed to have been composed in ancient Greek somewhere between the second and third centuries C.E.,

but that have come to us in fragments (Des Places 7-10). The metaphysical system they delineate involves the division of the universe into three categories: the Intelligible, the Intellectual, and the Elementary. It is a fundamentally dualistic religious system, and also deeply patriarchal: this world disguises a truer one that lies beyond, a justification of the ironic outlook if ever there was one. However, the Oracles also contain injunctions that assist us in apprehending the divine: Neoplatonists were theurgical, that is, they believed magical work could help the soul to attain the goal of knowing the divine. What Carson translates as “by a cherrying of the mind” is *noou anthei*, more literally “by the flower of the mind.” The secondary meaning the lexicon gives for *anthos*, however is “anything thrown out upon the surface, froth, scum.” From these Carson magically gets “cherrying.”

If catachresis is a hubristic figure, then, its overreach does not extend *upward*, toward the heights of critical reflection, toward the “gods” or some persistent ultimate reality. Its overreach extends *across* the surface of our language, along the froth and scum of it; it wrenches words out of their proper places and pastes them into others where they don’t belong. “That thing you should know,” the poet tells us, exists “outside your *and*” (*epei noou exo huparchei*). The possessive pronoun qualifying a conjunction, which does not occur in the Greek, suggests that the addressee is forever compiling things, making lists, linking discrete units together within the proper rules of grammar. By substantivizing “and” Carson subverts the grammatical logic that allows us to relate things alongside one another while maintaining their discretion in the nominal order.

The most unusual and bizarre word in the poem, however (with the exception of “Praguing”), is “orchid” in parentheses in the last line. Indeed, the word does not “scan”

properly: the parentheses themselves, it could be argued, are being wrongly used, for the word within seems to contribute no information to the words that come before and after it. Now orchids are known for their bizarre, complex, utterly beautiful flowers. They grow on the roots, branches, and stems of other flora, surprising the eye as it moves along the surface of a plant or a tree. Thus they interrupt a regular system counter-intuitively, abnormally, excessively, just as catachresis makes a “sudden and unexpected intrusion” into a text. The parenthetical word “orchid” performs the same action on the last line of “First Chaldaic Oracle”, appending itself even as that line enjoins us to forget the simple mechanism of addition, to dwell instead on the adjustment and entrance into unusual states that “cherrying” and “Praguining” demand.

Thus, Carson’s catachrestic use of language exhorts us to seek satisfaction in a mechanism that does not negate the given materials of this world or merely compare existing, stable entities for the satisfaction of conjoining them (as regular metaphor does). Catachresis, like the impersonations of Ion and Carson in “Gnosticism,” requires the entrance into improvisational, incipient states continually adjusting to conditions previously uncharted. Remember that catachresis’ original definition in Quintillian characterized it as an attempt to name something previously unnamed or unnamable. Irony declares the significance of a truer reality behind our words and deeds, behind even the physical world, that will *never* be properly named. Understanding this and declaring its irrelevance, Carson adopts a more pragmatic approach, attempting to name processes, states of being, ways of knowing, and possible responses previously unnamed but just becoming effable. Patricia Parker draws attention to important ideological differences that attend metaphor and catachresis. Rhetoricians from Aristotle to Quintillian to David

Solway have commented on the “mastery” of metaphor, the way its use presupposes a luxury of reflective contemplation and control, “based on the perception of resemblance by a controlling subject who applied the figure at will” (Parker 70). Catachresis, by contrast, foregoes mastery, it “fatigues” the mind with its hubris; the demand it makes is much greater than metaphor, but then again it also makes a greater promise (Parker 63).

“First Chaldaic Oracle” represents a pedagogical encounter, a set of instructions on how “to know a thing” and, because it appears at the beginning of the volume, on how to read the rest of *Men in the Off Hours* itself. An eccentric and quixotic education is the central concern of the poem and of the book as a whole. Carson, obviously, is not just a poet and critic but an active teacher in the academy. What kind of offering might the poetic and rhetorical events discussed in this essay make available for pedagogy and education? How does error function not only as a viable critique of an ironic, masterful aesthetic practice but of distant, ironic pedagogy as well? I have used impersonation, mistranslation, and catachresis as components of error that allow for a movement which irony forbids. Always allowing its users to recover themselves to a position of security and mastery, irony is a defensive posture committed to the belief that error brings “shame and remorse,” as Carson says. Irony allows people to err without “really” erring: all the movement of our everyday ironic speech and action fluctuates around a stability that exists outside of it. But what if we allowed ourselves to be wrong without referring to some secure objective place? Is there a way of accepting error as a productive event that needn’t be thwarted by the shame that attends it all too often? The specifically pedagogical and educational consequences of the rhetorical gestures outlined in this chapter represent the focus of the next.

CHAPTER 2

“WHAT FEELS WRONG?” ERRANT PEDAGOGY IN “IRONY IS NOT ENOUGH”

Who does not end up a female impersonator?

--Anne Carson. *Stanzas, Sexes, Seduction*

Carson refuses the mastery of normative metaphor for catachresis, the ironic posturing of Socrates and Solway for the immediacy of impersonation. Just as Socrates criticizes Ion’s method of interpreting Homer, David Solway faults Carson’s devotion to wayward aesthetics and criticism. Both Ion and Carson are deviant in desiring to err, to descend into the subjects of their work, to impersonate rather than speculate, to inhabit the positions and dispositions that their subjects make available without a will to master those personae or use them to fix universal truths. Carson wants to treat facts as readymade materials with their own aesthetic properties, as surfaces against which other facts and materials may come into focus. Socrates and Solway both oppose this kind of practice on the grounds that it requires no real skill or mastered technique, that such a model does not even seem to require the existence of a thinking, rational agent propelling and managing the action. Instead, there are only generalities, impulsive and energetic, that move through a circuit in which Muses, audience, poets, and actors constitute only the stations such generalities occupy momentarily.

For both Socrates and Solway the problem with this kind of thinking is ethical and pedagogical. They focus on the influence that Carson and Ion wield as powerful impersonators in the public eye. We cannot have magnetized citizens allowing figures and personae from literature and art to stand in for real thinking and thoughtful action. Such behavior can only limit autonomy and enfeeble our attempts at self-mastery. Irony, then, both results from and permits the intercession of reason, a way of gaining an angle and a vantage on one’s own actions and the state of the world—but what does it exclude?

Are we shortchanging ourselves if we embrace it, as Kierkegaard would like, as a whole way of life? A Socratic policy of ironic education and artistry would classify Carson as a problematic educator, for refusing to interpose the requisite distance between her purified, professional self and the sensational, emotional pressures of the moment. As she writes in a “Note on Method”: “There is too much self in my writing” (*Economy* vii), and she means her critical writing. There exists in her work a desire to know if irony is an essential component of critical thinking and writing. How can critical thought occur on paper and in the classroom without sacrificing the sensations that the world makes available to us in the unfolding present? How do we “get a hold” of ourselves on that edge without leaning on some stability beyond this *this*?

The central text of this chapter is “Irony is Not Enough: Essay on My Life as Catherine Deneuve (2nd Draft),” a piece that stages the limits and benefits of Socratic irony in an often neglected nexus of critical thought: the contemporary graduate seminar. It juxtaposes in its very title a declaration of irony’s insufficiency and a will to impersonate; its content concerns the institutionalized split between surface and depth, between a cool, professional code of conduct and the “bits of fire” that stream beneath that exterior. What the poem ultimately compares, however, are two very different *maps* of the educational process, perhaps even two schematic approaches to the kind of work Socrates performs. On the one hand, we have the ironic procedure that adopts a sequence of postures and assumed positions, all of which present different kinds of errors, in order to establish that truth exists somewhere beyond the misrepresentations of this world. Prepositionally, this process goes *up*, ascending the wrong rungs of the ladder one after another, to a place where forms are ideal and pure, persistent and irrevocable. The

educator assumes different wrong positions and forces her students to take up wrong positions in order to draw their attention towards this other plane. But what might happen if an educator erred without a “point” in mind, without forcing attention on some superior reality that our sublunary world failed to obtain? What would replace “the ideal” in this model? In this case the ascent would be replaced by a movement that makes no attempt to orient itself toward a transcendent ideality, but that roves through different positions and roles in order to modulate to intensity of the inquiry, to continually freshen and defamiliarize the terms of that inquiry. The goal here is to keep things moving without *mourning* this movement, as irony does, always trying to raise up a platform from which to overlook the rushes of time. As Carson goes on to say in the “Note on Method”:

“Attention is a task we share, you and I. To keep attention strong means to keep it from settling” (viii). It is a strange statement, considering that we ordinarily think strong attention involves focusing on an object in its discretion for a span of time. The longer the span, the stronger the attention. For Carson the strength of attention depends on a different kind of thinking, on *distraction*, on straying away from normal modes of thought and, as we shall see, erring away from institutionally assigned roles.

We will begin with a summary and close reading of “Irony is Not Enough,” describing how the piece figures Socratic irony as well as threats to its authority. Given that the piece details an erotic relationship between a professor (Deneuve) and her female student (Girl), its obsession with classroom dynamics of power and impersonation, and its very reliance on a cinematic conceit, certain observations that feminist and queer theorists have made on pedagogical relations will assist in translating the discussion into contemporary terms. Along this trajectory, I will read selected scenes from two films that

directly address women and aesthetic education. *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* and *Notes on a Scandal* both exhibit anxiety over alternative pedagogies (based on impersonation and intimacy rather than irony); their narratives code such educational practices as *sexually* threatening. That is, the films cannot imagine teachers and students straying from their institutionally assigned positions without also wanting to engage in sex acts with each other. Intriguingly, Carson's piece does not decide on rigid professionalism or erotic encounter, but it does make important suggestions that we move away from erotic metaphors to describe the possible and probable intimacies and intensities that keep the humanities classroom rolling. At the end of this chapter, therefore, I will conclude by considering the value that error and impersonation have for refreshing the terms of the humanist educational project.

RAPIDS: "IRONY IS NOT ENOUGH"

An author impersonates an actor, a poem impersonates an essay, an essay impersonates a film. In 1996 André Téchiné released *Les Voleurs*, a film starring Catherine Deneuve as a professor of philosophy pursuing a sexual relationship with a female student embroiled in a crime ring. Later in the same year, Carson adapted this episode of the film in "Irony is Not Enough: Essay on My Life as Catherine Deneuve." In Carson's version, Deneuve is a professor of archaic and ancient Greek lyric (specializing in the poems and fragments of Sappho) and the girl one of her wayward students. Any trace of an existing sexual relationship with the girl Carson suppresses to the realm of fantasy. The essay is actually a poem, thirty pages long and arranged in tercets, visually echoing the length and structure of one of Carson's more famous works, "The Glass Essay," that also involves the impersonation of an artistic figure, Emily Brontë. Now

“The Glass Essay” juxtaposes the personal life of a brokenhearted speaker with Brontë’s biographical details and the themes and characters of *Wuthering Heights*, presenting a critic unwilling to detach her writing on Brontë from the conditions in the world that gave rise to the critical act in the first place. The result is a piece on Brontë that encourages the reader’s attention to oscillate between the critic, the author under observation, and the content of that author’s works. In “Irony is Not Enough,” Carson performs the same kind of sublime manipulation but in a specifically pedagogical context, inhabiting and overlapping the roles of Deneuve, Sappho and Socrates simultaneously as she teaches Sappho’s poetry and works on an essay about Socratic irony.

“Irony is Not Enough” actually exists in two versions. What Carson calls the “2nd Draft” is published in *Men in the Off Hours*. Here, fourteen separately titled prose paragraphs present Deneuve lecturing in the seminar, reading poetry with her students, working in her office, or hosting a dinner for her students at home. The first draft gives slightly more extensive readings of both Socratic irony and of Sappho’s fragments. The second draft excludes most of the lyric fragments and philosophy. In prose, it focuses more intensely on a way of being in the world and a way of relating to that world. What kind of attitude does it represent? It refers to the context of Socratic irony without offering many details about it, and is in many ways an incomplete version of its precedent. This is still only a draft (“a plan, a sketch, or a drawing, especially of a work to be executed” [OED]) and as such continues the poetic impersonations, mistranslations, and improvisations of catachresis examined in the first chapter. As a draft it also signals the provisional nature of impersonation, suggesting that in the future Deneuve may even be replaced with another figure for different effects.

This novel inhabitation of roles allows us to consider teaching in a theatrical way. For our teachers do more than instruct us about the works on their syllabi. In many ways they come to *embody* those works, they “act them out” for us, and not only the works, but their authors and the critical heritage that surrounds them as well. Teachers claim a part of the attention we give to texts and authors, whether they like it or not. Catherine Deneuve, a film persona who attracts the magnetized gaze of the audience, becomes Carson’s figure for this effect. When she teaches Sappho or writes on Socrates, she not only embodies those writers but, in doing so, also ends up feeling like Deneuve because of the way her body becomes the locus of student attention. It is not the case that a “real” personality overtakes the teaching persona. Jane Gallop has said of “the personal” in pedagogy that it is always already an impersonation, that pedagogues must find a way of performing the texts *and* their “selves” (*Pedagogy* 12). The wandering impersonations of Socrates, Sappho, and Deneuve exhibit the movement of such a performance. We have seen how Carson views the physical condition of the fragment—the fragment as artifact—as a rich source of information. In “Irony is Not Enough” she considers the material conditions of the pedagogical relation, made up of institutional norms, affects, and role-playing. What force do these conditions exert on our experience of texts?

Now the Socratic pedagogical model involves placing teachers at a distance from their students, from which they attempt to trick or tease those students into independent acts of understanding through an ironic manipulation of different surfaces. As we saw in Chapter One, the rhapsode Ion also participates in a play of surfaces. He wears beautiful clothes, the raiment and jewellery culled from his public success; he impersonates the emotional intensities of Homeric poetry in order for his audience to gain access to the

same force. The two models place a different value on presentation, what is immediately apprehended by students or an audience. Carson illustrates the Socratic method as follows, in two passages from the first draft of her essay:

Socrates

uses “irony”
to draw a veil over
the question that is jutting out from him. The veil

is made of feints and lesser proofs
and half-burnings. Why not just ask the question? (20-1)

...
The surface does not match what is going on inside.
The surface (for example) does not
stream with bits of fire. (17)

Irony allows Socrates to disguise a protruding question “jutting out from him.” This question (unspecified) behaves like an erection, like an uncontrolled part of the body comically and inappropriately drawing attention to itself through its own exaggeration. Ion, on the other hand, wants the “bits of fire” to show. He transmits “Homer” to his audience through affect, by taking on the somatic, affective attitudes of Homer’s language and characters. Rather than a veil donned in order to jolt the student into realizations of their own foolishness (the counterpart to the ironist in classical terms is the *alazon*: the dupe, braggart, or fool), surface in Ion’s pedagogy is a site of communication, connection, and the transfer of information. The disjunction between surface and depth is an essential feature of Kierkegaard’s account of irony; it directly contradicts the Ionic, Longinian mode, where a representation and the object of a representation interconnect in a new synthesis. Homer could be said to possess Ion’s body, while Ion allows, encourages, and adjusts to the possession as it unfolds.

As Stephen Knapp has illustrated, Socrates' distrust of Ion appears to stem from the claim the latter makes for the value of a concrete representation of Homer; this involves Ion claiming a portion of the audience's attention *for himself* (Knapp 65). In general this would seem to account for much of the anxiety that critics such as David Solway feels towards Carson as well. Ion and Carson do not simply and transparently direct their students to the texts on their syllabi. They insert themselves between students and texts in such a way that guarantees for themselves a portion of the "prize money," as it were, a portion of our attention that, in the view of Socrates and Solway, should be reserved entirely for the object under consideration as it exists independent of any concrete manifestation. The more exclusively we attend to the concrete manifestations of ideals, the greater the error. Surface, in the passage from Carson's poem quoted above, is designed to manage the affective conditions of the pedagogical relation, to suppress the "bits of fire" in order to make way for the clear and unpolluted acts of attention the graduate seminar is supposed to engender.

It is not so much of a leap, I think, to take the question of surface quite literally. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Touching Feeling: Performativity, Affect, Pedagogy* mobilizes the sense of touch, the experience of texture, and the importance of surface to ground her wider arguments about, for example, the performative extension of shame, non-paranoid modes of critical reading, and a pedagogy motivated by mutual interest and excitement rather than suspicion. As literary scholars, Sedgwick contends, we are instructed to distrust outward appearances, to suspect that presentations are always disguising (intentionally or not) actual, "deeper" meanings, and that this kind of emotional stance carries with it an implicit set of spatial and temporal relations to the subjects under our

investigation. Meaning always rests *beneath* or *beyond* us in space, *ahead* of us in time, yet wherever meaning lurks its essence and consequences are *inevitable*, that is, they cannot and will not surprise us with their appearance. She counters this arrangement by offering the preposition *beside*:

Invoking a Deleuzian interest in planar relations, the irreducibly spatial positionality of *beside* also seems to offer some useful resistance to the ease with which *beneath* and *beyond* turn from spatial descriptors into implicit narratives of, respectively, origin and telos. (8)³

Carson is an author obsessed with prepositions (“Sometimes at night I awake thinking of prepositions. Perhaps they are clues”) (*Glass* 41). In particular, her proclivity for “with” and the nominalized “withness” involve the kind of resistance Sedgwick argues for.

“What kind of withness is it?” she asks of the Greek preposition *pros*, which begins the Gospel of John: *pros theon* (“The word was with God”) (*Economy* viii).

Different approaches to surface, therefore, correspond to different values.

Sedgwick refers to Renu Bora’s distinction between smoothness, “both a type of texture and texture’s other” (qtd. 14), which blocks information about itself, and another kind of texture (“texxture”) “that is dense with offered information about how, substantively, historically, materially, it came into being.” Bora sees smoothness as the preferred texture of the middle class. Sedgwick’s examples of its opposites include “a brick or a metalwork pot that still bears the scars and uneven sheen of its making” (14). Carson’s examples would include the fragments of poetry written on papyri that “come to us in wreckage,”

³ “We learn nothing from those who say: ‘Do as I do,’” writes Gilles Deleuze. “Our only teachers are those who tell us to ‘do with me’” (*Difference* 23).

an effect replicated in the drafts and sloppy translations of *Men in the Off Hours*. “In surfaces,” she says, “perfection is less interesting” (“Art” 202). Errors themselves constitute disruptions to a surface, a fact that Carson points out in “Essay on What I Think About Most,” paraphrasing Aristotle:

[Aristotle] pictures the mind moving along a plane surface
of ordinary language
when suddenly
that surface breaks or complicates.
Unexpectedness emerges.

Irony operates according to Bora’s definition of “smoothness” (who, after all, is smoother than Socrates?), and Socrates exemplifies Sedgwick’s model of the paranoid critic better than any other. Indeed, in a lecture hall or a seminar room all professors are expected to be both smooth and paranoid in this way, to proceed without interference from the bodies in the classroom toward previously scripted destinations. Catherine Deneuve, bourgeois darling, personifies the middle-class desire for a slick, well-managed outward appearance. The Socratic criticism of Ion concerns in large part the latter’s renunciation of control, authority, and mastery over his passionate displays. “Anyone can tell,” Socrates tells him, “that you are powerless to speak about Homer on the basis of knowledge or mastery” (25). As such, the *Ion* is as much a critique of a pedagogical model as it is a critique of poetry or the wild, affective force of language. Critical thinkers and effective pedagogues are meant to take their affective reactions to texts and students and smooth them down to a slick surface of professional aplomb and exemplarity, all the excesses relegated to subtext. Ion and Carson, however, win the attention of their students and readers by *not* disguising or restraining their reactions and responses as they occur, by moving through time with their interlocutors, alongside them, while the surface

enriches, breaks and complicates, disruptions acknowledged and encouraged as part of the intellectual movement underway. As I mentioned before, this is not necessarily a call for professors to start relating personal anecdotes at every turn. As Carson shows, what matters is that we become aware that the attention of our students involves our “real” presence and the manner in which we manage that concrete event.

Surely though, you might say, Socrates is not simply some dull ogre forcing his students toward absent, inevitable truths on some pleasureless march. His irony is exciting, dramatic, stimulating, and in the end his performance may be much more thrilling than the one Ion offers. At least in “Irony is Not Enough,” it is clear that Carson is well aware of the potential value that arises from a division between inside and outside, but these benefits are rarely, if ever, seen by us in our day-to-day lives:

Do you know how diamonds get to us?

Three hundred miles
underground
are heats and pressures that crush carbon

into sparkling shapes.
These are driven
to the surface along volcanic corridors called diamond pipes

and extruded
onto a crater
at the top. The journey may take months

or days
or hours.

No human has ever witnessed a diamond eruption. (33)

I do not want to say that Socratic irony is ineffective; quite the opposite. What I question, and what I believe Carson’s work puts into jeopardy, is the traditional narrative of the Socratic performance as an ironic procedure that reaches upward to fixed ideals, leaving

all the diamonds behind a locked door. Doubtless the theory of ideal forms offers incontrovertible evidence of the dualistic foundations of the Platonic/Socratic critique, and irony assists Socrates in establishing the existence of such truths beyond our ken. Carson, however, prefers to focus on the movement and flow that a sequence of impersonations offers Socrates just for the sake of their own digression. Throughout her career, Carson has been aestheticizing figures from history, literature, and philosophy, and ever since *Eros the Bittersweet*, her first substantial published book, Socrates has been a favourite figure for her to aestheticize⁴. She tends to ignore the logical and epistemological method that he contributes in order to focus on the “thrill” his method offers as a work of art. For Carson, his “feints and lesser proofs and half-burnings” are meant to rush the interlocutors through different errors for no other reason than the rush, or what at the end of *Eros the Bittersweet* Carson calls “the wooing itself.” Just as Oscar Wilde, in *The Decay of Lying*, narrates art as a kind of lying, so Carson wants to see Socrates as an erring impersonator, flitting across a surface of different positions, rather than as the too-clever ironist philosophy has made him.

Needless to say, this position is neither popular nor strictly correct. Gregory Vlastos, an important contemporary commentator on Socratic philosophy, describes irony as a brilliant device of concealment by which a student is tricked into epiphany by the fascination of the performance (Vlastos 42). Vlastos is particularly concerned with the status of the words *eironeuomenos* and *ironikos* as they appear in the context of the

⁴ “To reach for something else than the facts will carry you beyond this city [of no desire] and perhaps, as for Sokrates, beyond this world. It is a high-risk proposition, as Sokrates saw quite clearly, to reach for the difference between known and unknown. He thought the risk worthwhile, because he was in love with the wooing itself. And who is not?” (*Eros* 173)

pederastic relationship between Socrates and the youth Alcibiades, narrated in the *Symposium* of Xenophon. Should the words be translated as “irony” or as “deceit”? “Shamming” or “trickery”? The relationship between Socrates and Alcibiades doubtless serves as the model for the one between Deneuve and the girl in “Irony is Not Enough,” for Socrates refuses the advances of Alcibiades in the following way:

Socrates would have had ample opportunity to explain that Alcibiades was making a fool of himself, duped by his own wishful thinking. Yet Socrates said nothing. Day after day he watched and kept still. Why so? The only reasonable answer is that he wanted Alcibiades to find out the truth for himself by himself. The irony in his love for Alcibiades, riddling from the start, persisted until the boy found the answer the hard way, in a long night of anguished humiliation, naked next to Socrates, and Socrates a block of ice. (Vlastos 42)

For the student of Socrates, there is no separating knowledge out of the body. The teacher’s body stimulates and directs the student’s attention, an effect that Socrates suspects profoundly. “Humiliation” results. In this account, error will only ever belong on the side of the student, whom Socrates keeps at arm’s length by a mechanism that allows him to equivocate about his feelings and to resist entering any kind of commitment, short or long term, intellectual or erotic. Socrates is left outside the shame of error, protected by his veil of irony, superior to the student and, as Kierkegaard would say, “negatively free.” The student, on the other hand, is left flailing, thwarted, and wrong. His attention moves instinctively toward what Jane Gallop called “the personal”: he believes that by gaining intimate access to the Socratic body ultimate knowledge would be revealed. Carson, were she translating *eirouomenos*, might render it as “impersonating,” or even

as “erring,” for Socrates in her account is not a “block of ice” but someone constantly changing the terms of a conversation in order to keep attention strong.

Carson’s proposal is, in effect, to rewrite the non-affair between Alcibiades and Socrates from the perspective of the pedagogue resisting the student’s advances or her own desire. In Carson, however, the resistance is not achieved by irony (which suggests but defers stable truths) but by the movement of impersonation. In the second draft of “Irony is Not Enough,” the following passage effectively illustrates the alternative way of looking at Socratic effects. Indeed, Carson renders the name as “Sokrates,” suggesting an alternative yet also more authentic version of the figure (for in Greek the name would be spelled with a kappa).

Deneuve sits in her office looking at the word irony on a page. Half-burnt. You have to wonder. Sappho, Sokrates, is it all mental? These people seem bathed in goodness, yet here come the beautiful dangerous white rapids beating onto them. Knife of boy. Knife of girl. Knife of the little knower. Where is the ironic work that picks threads back from that surface into another design underneath, holding rapids in place? Evening fills the room. Deneuve buttons her coat and closes the office door behind her. Staircase is dim and filthy, small dirty deposits on each step. She heads for the Metro. What would Sokrates say. Name the parts. Define each name. Deneuve is turning names and parts over in her mind when she realizes she has ridden the train four stops in the wrong direction. (*Men* 120)

The startling question at the centre of this passage (“where is the ironic work”) loudly announces the stakes of Carson’s whole essay. How can irony guarantee a secure and stable virtue for the educator, undefiled by the “little knower’s” insistence on the primacy

of bodily presence and affective arousal? Of course, in paraphrasing the question as such we exclude the imagery it employs to pose itself: the question in essence places two kinds of substance (indeed, two states of matter) in opposition. Socratic irony is the reconfiguration of a moving, transitional surface (“pick threads back from that surface”) into a tightly-woven, crafted and constant image (“into another design underneath”), which will stabilize the force of desire that the “little knower” projects (“holding rapids in place”). This approach maintains a solid presence at its centre, a source uncorrupted by movement. The physical presence of students, by contrast, is figured as *rapids*, “the beautiful dangerous white rapids” that threaten to dissolve and corrupt the distance that educators like Socrates strive to maintain. The very word “rapids” denotes kinetic force, something that cannot be held in place, as the question suggests. The force of the student pulls teachers off-course, away from the solidity of the lectern⁵.

This particular paragraph is titled “Parts,” for it is the Socratic procedure of naming and defining parts that is under observation (“Name the parts. Define each name”). Deneuve begins with Socratic conventions of elenchus but ends up riding “the train four stops in the wrong direction.” Error interrupts the procedure. The error is a deviation from a system designed to carry the subject toward a preset destination. It occurs on a metro car, a transitional location, a prepositional relation between fixed points. Naming and defining the parts, a taxonomic practice central to the maintenance of

⁵ “I think about it [teaching] as risk. As getting people to risk something. I used to think of it as a tightrope set up in a classroom where the teacher goes up on one end and tries to induce one or more of the students to come up on their end. And just sort of dance around for a while up there...and sometimes it works. Most of the time not. I do think it’s about risk for the teacher even more than the students. I mean to risk leaving the ground. Leaving what you already have thought out and doing something else in that space” (“In Conversation” 5).

sophrosyne, yields a fruitless result. The names and the parts melt into each other, overtaken by what connects them, like Aristotle's nouns in Derrida's account of catachresis surpassed by the prepositions that fall between. Errancy emerges as Deneuve loses herself in these transitions—she is going in the wrong direction, no direction. Thus, on the one hand, we have relations replacing fixed points, and on the other hand we have attention to those relations leading to errancy. Instead of a procession toward tight categorical truths, we have a wayward flux of adjustments that refer to the changing conditions and relations at hand in the present. "The world is like champagne," Deneuve thinks as she encounters the girl, it

crosses her mind
as they circle
one another in the doorway in a wash of light. (37)

Socrates wants to hold the pattern together, wants to be "a block of ice," as Vlastos puts it. Carson wants champagne.

"Irony is Not Enough" presents a problem within education diagnosed by feminist and queer theorists of pedagogy: the presence of bodies, both the teacher's and the student's. Socrates suspects Ion's pedagogy because of its near-total emphasis on the affective exchanges that occur between text, rhapsode, and audience, exchanges mediated by surface presentations and the immediacy of contact. In her piece, Carson demonstrates how thinking of the pedagogical relation in terms of surface distraction and impersonation may assist in keeping attention strong, that what we generally think of as an error (Alcibiades' overvaluation of the Socratic body, for instance, or any student's overvaluation of their professor's "personal life") may in fact engender vital ways of learning about the humanities, about how the canons take on a force in the individual

lives of academics. We should not underrate the advantages of this kind of attention. In order to raise the stakes of my argument for the value of these kinds of effects, I would like to position Carson's filmic essay alongside two films that directly thematize aesthetic education as modeled by women teachers. *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1969) and *Notes on a Scandal* (2006) both dramatize the anxieties associated with a kind of teaching that emphasizes the teacher's personal claim on student attention.

CONTROL: *THE PRIME OF MISS JEAN BRODIE* AND *NOTES ON A SCANDAL*

"Give me a girl at an impressionable age and she is mine for life." So Jean Brodie announces her pedagogical motivation. In each film a young, attractive teacher is admonished for crossing professional boundaries, for involving bodies, movement, and distraction in their projects of aesthetic education in a way that their academic institutions, defined by middle-class mores, cannot allow. Jean Brodie and Sheba Hart (from *Notes on a Scandal*) are both "women of culture" who would like to elevate their students' tastes and aesthetic preferences, but their unorthodox methods conflict with the system of values of each woman's workplace. Both attempt an attached, performative, personally invested teaching method that raises eyebrows among the faculty at each school. I want to say that both of these films are about the anxieties associated with the mobilization of student attention toward the pedagogical performance itself, a situation where aesthetic operations such as impersonation and inspiration come to be coded as inadmissible infractions on the safety and welfare of the students. In many ways these films typify what Jane Gallop sees as the "knotted, thorny, troubling question" of "the personal" in feminist pedagogy, which struggles to legitimate personal contributions even as the inclusion of such material frustrates the equally important feminist demand for a

sanitized professionalism (Gallop 23). Is there a way of imagining or conceiving of an aestheticized, personalized education without succumbing to the anxieties over sexuality or politics that these films foreground? Do such anxieties in fact diagnose (or even enable) potentially valuable dynamics and models of relationality?

Jean Brodie teaches at Marcia Blaine School for Girls, a conservative Edinburgh academy for young ladies. Jean, however, is something of a pariah among the faculty. Rather than teaching the girls about the specific facts or figures of history, she relates thrilling anecdotes of her recent Italian tour and romantic affairs with men. Personal facts and data figure into all of her teaching acts. Her method is perhaps best exemplified in the moment when she covers up a black-and-white poster of Stanley Baldwin (a prime minister of Great Britain) that reads “safety first” with a print of a painting by Giotto. “Safety does not come first,” Jean says. “Goodness, truth, and beauty come first.” These are recognizably Platonic ideals, which Brodie associates with the risks involved in somatic focus and pleasure, with aesthetic error and displays of passion. Like Carson, she frames the search for ideals in a manner that diverges from classical norms.

Jean makes much of her “prime”—a thin euphemism for her sexual peak—that she claims to have devoted to her students, especially an elect group of them called the “Brodie girls.” Jean teaches them about art, poetry, music, manners, food and sex, inviting the scrutiny, or perhaps the envy, of the headmistress Miss MacKay. What is her problem with Jean? Jean’s pedagogical power (“thrilling pedagogical performer” resonates here) is figured as an intrusive aesthetic force that intervenes in the girls’ development. Jean sings the praises of Mussolini throughout the film, and as such comes

to be figured as a version of a fascist, seeking to replicate herself in the behaviours and tastes of her students. This aesthetic force, impelling assent, causes errors of impersonation, made vivid when Lloyd, the art teacher, begins to paint portraits of the Brodie girls. The features of Jean's face inevitably intrude upon the portraits: they all end up looking just like her. The mark of her influence made visible in an art object foregrounds the aesthetic content and method of Jean's pedagogy, and also makes clear that impersonation may function as an error of control, both on the part of the impersonator and the one gazing on. This becomes intolerable to Miss Mackay and Sandy, one of the Brodie set.

Ultimately, it is Jean's approval of fascism, not her eccentric teaching style, which enables the headmistress and Sandy to "assassinate" her. The circuit of imitation between teacher and student is unmediated, direct, infectious, and functions in the manner of the magnetic chain of power that passes through different subjects in the *Ion*. As such, the system of the transmission—just how it is that Jean manages to illicit the devotion of her students—is impossible to codify, calculate, or administrate. In other words, it is a technique impossible for Miss MacKay to *fix* or stabilize, even to name or define clearly and directly. It takes its power from spontaneity and movement. While eating and enjoying fine food on the school grounds, for example, Jean recites poetry from memory, speaks extemporaneously on a variety of liberal subjects, and encourages the girls to do cartwheels for "comic relief." Thus the headmistress's attack on Jean is only effective when directed at right-wing politics, which are readily accusable in the 1930s when the film is set, and not at aesthetics or sexuality. Still, Jean's chain of influence proceeds along a channel that the film conceives as simultaneously sexual and

aesthetic. The conjunction of the two concepts is made vivid when Jean, foretelling the futures of her girls one after the other, comes to Jenny, the “pretty one.” Jean describes Jenny’s future while they picnic on the lawn: “I think perhaps someday Jenny will catch the eye of an artist. Jenny will be painted many times. In years to come, I think that Jenny will be famous for sex” (fig. 1).

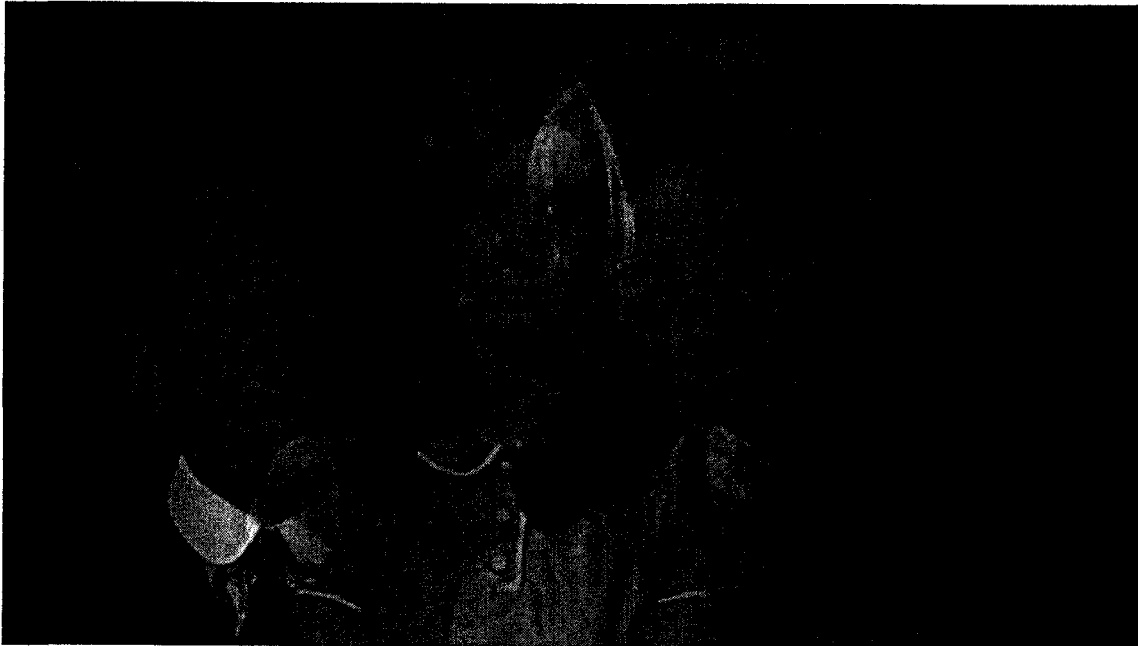


Figure 1

The short monologue begins with a close-up on Jean, flanked by Mr. Lowther (the music teacher, Jean’s sometime lover) on the left. A slow fade to the next shot—Jenny modeling for Mr. Lloyd (also Jean’s sometime lover)—allows Jean’s face and Jenny’s face to be superimposed momentarily. Jenny’s face intercepts Mr. Lowther’s gaze, which was directed at Jean. Just before Jean says “sex” the fade is complete. This last word, hovering over Jenny, intrudes upon and introduces the next scene at Mr. Lloyd’s studio. This strange moment in the film illustrates the simultaneous transmission of both sex, aesthetic power, and socialization, further underscored when Lloyd’s painting of Jenny

unintentionally resembles Jean. It's important to understand that the film represents the error of impersonation as an instance of *too much* control on the part of the teacher in this relation: the students are overcome by the overriding presence of Jean's body and its embodiment of the values, tastes, and culture she means to transmit. However, she exerts control through a more diffuse mechanism than her body alone, as the contaminated portraits of the girls make clear. Jean's power is *general* and takes its power from an educational philosophy based on a way of being in the world, not only from the canonical aesthetic items whose value she wishes to transmit (the paintings of Giotto, *La Traviata*, *Hedda Gabler*, "The Lady of Shallot," to name a few). Thus, the film aligns errors of impersonation with a general, "aesthetic" education, accounting for all aspects of culture from food choices to acrobatics. The rapid movement of the students' attention between the teacher and the material taught is presented as an influence that corrupts the virtue of the young, undermining the middle-class values of Edinburgh and leading to Italian fascism.

Notes on a Scandal, a much simpler film, expresses the opposite anxiety, of a teacher who relinquishes all mastery to a student. There are three main characters. Sheba, the teacher in question, a beautiful bourgeois bohemian, a "wispy novice" who has just begun teaching art at an inner-city high school in the United Kingdom. She is hired, the headmaster tells the other teachers, because the arts are an essential part of a policy of "reform through nurture." Here we can see the historical difference between the films. While Marcia Blaine School for Girls promoted safety through conservative, restrictive methods, St. George's *claims* to promote a safe space of nurture and proximity between faculty and students. The film differs further from *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* in the

portrayal of its main character as well. While Jean was more than qualified to provide an aesthetic education for her students, capable of controlling the impersonations of her students, Sheba is simply a terrible art teacher. She cannot command the attention of her students at all, nor can she control their capacity to impersonate.

Sheba's lover is Steven, a fifteen year-old boy, thuggish and manipulative. Sheba, instructed by the other jaded teachers to "find a gem," discovers Stephen's chance talent for drawing when he brings sketches of her face to school. She fosters his talent after hours in private lessons, where the affair begins, only to be discovered eventually by Barbara, the elder history teacher, whom we might think of as a new incarnation of Miss Mackay. Margaret unreliably narrates the entire film and turns it to her own sexual advantage (she is obsessed with Sheba). Sheba's transgression, however, lies in her being flattered by Steven's drawings, by conforming to the image of her that he produces and insists upon. This is distinctly rendered in the scene where the first physical contact occurs between Sheba and Steven. Alone in the art classroom reviewing Steven's sketches of a hand, Sheba's own hand hovers over the pages. In one swift movement, Sheba points to one drawing, complimenting it (fig. 2). Just as he says "yeah – I nailed it," Sheba sweeps the same hand through his hair, a gesture that marks the beginning of her loss of control, which culminates in her seduction (fig 3).



Figure 2

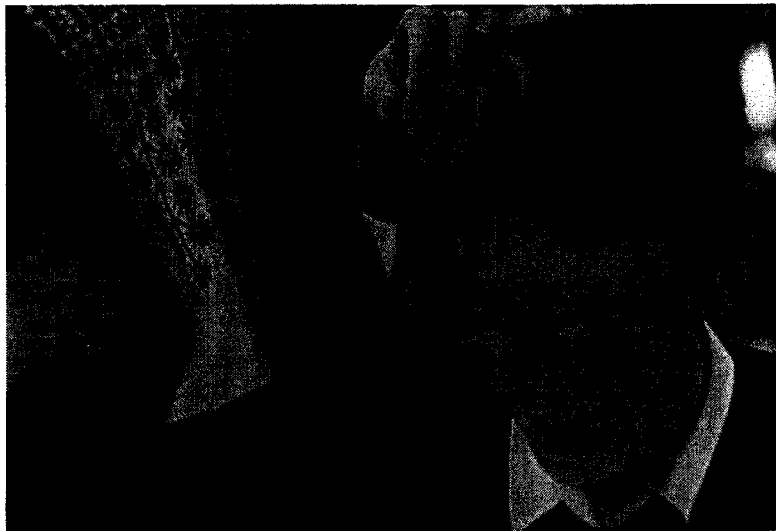


Figure 2

The quick pan up leaves Sheba's head out of the frame, and all we see is her hand hovering over Steven's drawings of a hand and then touching the student in an absent-minded but suggestive way. It suggests, in a simple sense, that Steven's seduction has been successful ("I nailed it") but, more complexly, that the catalyzing gesture that led to Sheba's error—a momentary lack of control in which she touched a student inappropriately—involved the appreciation of an aesthetic representation *with* the very object represented (a hand in each case) which then spurred the first professional error perpetrated, again, with the actual hand. In this case, watching the film, our own attention

moves rapidly between a representation and an object represented in one and the same movement. The proximity of these two things (a hand mimetically rendered and an actual hand) creates a surplus of potential energy that can only be released through touching. Yet the touch actually stops the energetic movement of attention created by the juxtaposition—all that matters to Stephen now is the “real” body of the teacher and possessing it sexually (“do you suck, Miss?” he asks).

Notes on a Scandal presents the fears involved with a policy of “reform through nurture,” a pedagogy that places value on relations of intimacy and in which the aesthetic plays a major role. In many ways, you can read *Notes on a Scandal* as a story that expresses the most extreme and obvious fear about a feminist pedagogy, what Jane Gallop, in “The Teacher’s Breasts” calls a pedagogy “primarily concerned not with feminist curriculum, but with classroom dynamics and teacher-student relations” (24). The fear is, obviously, that such a model can only lead to students seducing their teachers and seizing control of the relationships, or vice versa. Both women teachers in *Notes on a Scandal* end up being persecuted one way or another: Sheba, with her “trendy politics,” for sleeping with a student, and Barbara, whose icy exterior can only be a cover for latent homosexual desires that must also go unrealized. The film makes clear that teachers like Sheba, who practice an aestheticized, nurturing education, can only end up having sex with their students, while conservative, “three-Rs” teachers like Barbara, who regard their students cynically as the great unwashed, are only trying to suppress desire with an ironic and bitter facade. However, as I suggested earlier, *Notes on a Scandal* represents the lack of aesthetic education as a failure in the system that leads to a simplistic eroticization of teacher-student relationships. Sheba is unqualified to do the work she feels needs to be

done. Jean Brodie, by contrast, was decidedly overqualified. Taken together, the films polemically illustrate the anxieties our culture exhibits over an institutionalized “policy of nurture.” In the case of Jean Brodie, the fear is that such a policy can only lead to ideological brainwashing when the strength of the pedagogue is at its height. In Sheba’s case, the fear is that weaker teachers placed in the powerful nurturing position will end up being taken over by the hormones of youth.

GENERAL ERRORS: CARSON’S PROPOSAL

Carson’s piece sketches these anxieties as well. The touch that occurred between Sheba and Stephen also arises as a possibility between Deneuve and the girl:

Perhaps she would brush
 as if by accident
 her backbone. When (later) she is seated in her professor’s chair
 surrounded by seminar students
 listening to her expound
 Solonian monetary reform, this accidental brushing action
 races on her nerves
 like a bit of electricity.

But the touch does not occur—Deneuve withholds it, as Socrates does with Alcibiades and as Sheba does *not* do with Stephen. The difference, however, between Carson and Socrates, what ultimately allows her to continue the intellectual movement without us having to accuse her of deceit or the distantiation of irony, is her simultaneous occupation of several roles. She embodies Sappho and Socrates insofar as she teaches their works to her students. This makes her own body and personal life attractive to her students, an attention she preserves and encourages by impersonating Deneuve. This outrageous but provisional act angles the relationship away from what it was in danger becoming—a

replication of Socrates' ironic norms, a mere repetition that Carson cannot abide. "I will do anything to avoid boredom. It is the task of a lifetime," she says (*Short Talks* 1).

But what happens to the ideological problem? In a poem essay about teaching the "high humanist" canon, does Carson's work offer suggestions about the way we claim value for that canon? She distinguishes herself from Jean Brodie by diminishing her sense of mastery over the students and over classroom relations—certainly the essay does not lean fascistically. Her mechanism of impersonation allows distraction and errancy to play a role in guiding the desire and attention of the student—a desire which is uncontained, unpredictable, active, and fluctuating, as Carson tells us at the end of the first draft:

And what feels wrong

now, as she
looks at it,
is the shamelessly *general* nature of desire. It blows

through the body
like a sunset wind.
Slant and childlike errors (for example, this girl)

reveal themselves,
but the immensity
of the wind does not abate, nor our sense of bending to it

as roots
bend
in the dark underground, blindly and heavily

toward some
smell of light
that drops down matter—who can claim to have chosen love? (42-3)

The narrator goes on to say of desire that "access to the human may justify it overall" and that "it is good to exercise the lungs from time to time," the lungs referring to the last

word of an Ibycus fragment which Deneuve shares with her seminar at the end of the term. It is the “generality” of desire that “feels wrong”: the humanities in their current state tend to be very uncomfortable with general claims of value and universal ideals. The belief in a general aesthetic education equipped to assist us apparently represents its own kind of error, but for Carson it is a problem worth conserving, just like love becomes a problem worth conserving in *Eros the Bittersweet* for the change of self that it imposed.

I have argued that Carson enacts the Socratic process as a string of errors, an errant movement, instead of treating it as an ascendant procedure reaching toward higher and truer ideals. As we have seen, she tends to aestheticize the Socratic pedagogical relation, preferring to assume roles out of a bubbly sense of play rather than a rhetorical-philosophical strategy designed to fix truth claims. This gesture, like its Socratic counterpart, directs student interest toward the body and personal life of the pedagogue in a manner that seems unearned or fallacious, that seems to contradict the universalizing, abstract project of the humanities. The two films we examined allow us to illustrate and elaborate our culture’s fears about this prospect of placing as much emphasis on the impersonation and presence of the pedagogical performer as on the transcendent values she has been hired to transmit—fears which now seem to have more to do with sexual shame than with educational ethics. Carson’s solution is “always impersonate.” What matters is not the perfect and complete transmission of transcendent values to the student, nor is it the personal claim a teacher can make on that student’s attention. Carson emphasizes the way literary and cultural personae offer dispositions and attitudes that students and professors may exchange and inhabit provisionally, so that we can “keep attention strong.” She also acknowledges that such impersonations must take into account

the material condition of the classroom, where students take their seats with all the diffuse and general attention of a theatre audience. The task is to enrich and complicate that attention, to keep it spinning.

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