“You can of course keep shaking the box”:
Errant Versioning and Textual Motion in the
Iterations of Anne Carson

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Abstract

This thesis develops an iterative conceptual framework, derived from poststructuralist and translation theory, to demonstrate how diverse aspects of the work of poet and classicist Anne Carson can be understood as part of a common iterative poetics. I show how Carson’s iterative strategies connect the erring of translation and the incompleteness and erring of language to the continuous need to renegotiate cultural questions around sexuality, textuality, and the authority of historical accounts. Identifying these strategies also allows me to locate Carson, a writer whose work has often seemed to resist classification, within a broader iterative turn in contemporary poetry.

In chapter 1, I discuss a selection of Carson’s poems from *Men in the Off Hours* and *Plainwater* that employ iterative strategies of citation, repetition, recontextualisation, and multiple drafts. I show how Carson’s repetitions and alterations of pre-existing texts highlight the iterative qualities of language. I also show how these strategies emphasise errant versioning over authoritative interpretations and fixed notions of sexuality, gender, and textual authority. In chapter 2, I show how Carson’s iterative poetics extends to her practice of translation. I demonstrate Carson’s anxiety around imposing fixed translations on ancient texts in *Autobiography of Red* and *If Not, Winter: Fragments of Sappho*. I also show how she renegotiates static understandings of ancient and contemporary notions of gender and sexual power. In chapter 3, I extend Carson’s methodology of unease in translating ancient texts to encompass her errant approach in translating a life and in writing history in *Nox*.

In her poetry and translations, Carson figures errancy and interpretive unease not as faults to be avoided, but rather, as inevitable and integral aspects of literature’s iterative process. This thesis argues for the value of errancy and for the therapeutic usefulness of the ability to continually re-tell, re-describe, and reiterate personal stories and ancient narratives.
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INTRODUCTION

Anne Carson is a poet who insistently practices errancy. Whether publishing radically different drafts of the same poem within the one book, rewriting fragmentary ancient texts several times within an anachronistic, contemporary adaptation, or using a multiply translated Roman elegy to make sense of a delinquent brother’s death, Carson repeatedly insists on errant versioning over fixed, definitive interpretations.

Carson’s poetry animates the relationship between repeated acts of language, and the repetitions of lived experience, personal and family identity, and cultural assumptions about sexuality. As I will show, her writing connects the erring and incompleteness of language, to the erring of translation, and the errancy of historical accounts. In this way, Carson’s writing offers a novel approach to the problem of how to reconcile repetition and alteration, authority and freedom, in language, translation, and the making of history.

Just as Carson’s poetics are preoccupied with errancy and iteration, locating her in the field of contemporary poetry is an errant task. A lauded poet, Carson has been the recipient of Canada’s prestigious Griffin Poetry Prize and a MacArthur Foundation “genius grant,” among other honours. However, her academic career in Classics (not English) and her claim that she learned to write poetry from studying ancient examples (not contemporary ones) makes it troublesome to situate her in a contemporary literary context. The task of locating Carson in the field of contemporary literature is perhaps as problematic as classifying her books, which combine translations of ancient texts, original poetry and prose-poetry, and scholarly essays. Faced with this problematic task, one of Carson’s earliest interviewers says: “Plainwater is described or ‘packaged’ as an anthology of essays and poetry yet I found it in the critical anthologies shelf of a large bookstore. Some works need sections entirely of their own. Is this a problem for you?” Carson answers: “Not a problem but a question: What do ‘shelves’ accomplish, in stores or in the mind?” (di Michele 1996, 10). Clearly, an evasion
of definitive categorisation is central to Carson’s work. Her poetry stages tensions between competing, sometimes contradictory, interpretations. Carson’s emphasis on the unstable materials of language in her poetry extends to her practice of translation. She offers multiple interpretive possibilities by producing several errant versions (as in Autobiography of Red), and by privileging brackets and white space (as in If Not, Winter: Fragments of Sappho). In Nox, Carson uses blank spaces, purposefully fragmented family artefacts, and a multiply translated Catullun elegy to write errant versions of history, and errant versions of a life. At the level of both the poem and the book, Carson stresses her work as a site of revision and correction. Carson’s work thus presents problems for anyone seeking to situate her definitively within a literary-historical and philosophical-theoretical context.

Still, no one writes in a vacuum, least of all Carson, whose poetry cites, translates, and recontextualises earlier writing. Poststructuralist and feminist thought influenced Carson’s development as a classicist and poet in the 1980s and 1990s, and her work can be meaningfully situated within a broader turn towards “unoriginal” writing.

Carson published her first book, Eros the Bittersweet, in 1986. Eros the Bittersweet opens with an analysis of Sappho’s fragment 31, the “sweetbitter” taste of which serves as a model for the book’s radical meditation on the tensions of erotic desire (Carson 1998a, 3–5). The book was initially published as a work of classical scholarship. John D’Agata writes that Eros the Bittersweet “stunned the Classics community” before it was repackaged as a work of creative writing and “finally stunned the poets” (2000). At that time, radical changes were being worked upon the field of Classics by the “infiltration” of disruptive schools of theory, including the “new Amazon” of feminism (Katz 2000, 507). In the late 1970s, writes Marilyn Katz, it was possible to survey the entire field of scholarship on women in antiquity by examining one book, one special issue of Arethusa, and a handful of articles. In contrast, Katz indicates thirty books written from 1997–2000 on the subject. “This burgeoning of interest and this plethora of new scholarship are remarkable—especially considering the character and history of Classics as a discipline,” which, Katz notes, bring to mind “traditionalism and
conservative values” (505).

Carson’s disruptive debut was therefore part of a larger sea change in Classics. Katz argues that the focus of Classics on preserving and transmitting antiquity, “a hypothesized golden age of ‘texts and unrefracted facts’” (507), largely persisted until the late twentieth century. Then along came feminism, what Allan Bloom in 1987—a year after the publication of *Eros the Bittersweet*—called the “latest enemy of the vitality of classic texts” (Bloom 1987, 284). In that same year, the *American Journal of Philology* asserted in an editorial that its emphasis was “still on rigorous scholarly methods,” which included traditional philological practices such as papyrology, linguistics, and textual criticism. Katz writes that, at this time, the Johns Hopkins University’s Classics department, which houses the editorship of *AJP*, was “moribund and in disarray” (Katz 2000, 507). Thirteen years later, the revitalised department was headed by a woman whose areas of expertise included gender and the history of sexuality. Katz cites the evolution of the *AJP* as an analogy for the upheaval and evolution in the 1980s and 1990s of the discipline of Classics as a whole. In 2000, the *AJP* website stated: “The department’s main orientation, aside from the focus on language, is toward anthropology on the one hand and a dialogue with contemporary issues on the other hand” (507).

Feminism was not the only fruitfully disruptive discourse to influence Carson and change the nature of classical scholarship. Reception theory also began to change the practices of Classics departments during this time, with its emphasis on viewing ancient texts not as “unrefracted facts,” but as fodder for investigating new issues and posing new questions, as a way of making sense of the present as well as the past (Greene 1996a, xi). In her introduction to *Reading Sappho: Contemporary Approaches*, editor Ellen Greene highlights how the essays she selected depart from “conventional classical scholarship which seeks ever more sophisticated or detailed answers to questions inherited from earlier scholarship,” in order to “[follow] the trajectory of literary studies more generally, moving toward more deeply historicized and contextualized interpretations” (xi-xii). As feminism demanded that literary texts be historically contextualised and challenged in their assumptions about sexuality and gender roles, reception theory
placed a poststructuralist emphasis on the role of the reader. The influence of both feminism and poststructuralism on classical studies was to emphasise what Greene calls “the inevitable incompleteness of human knowledge” (xiii). While philology retains an important place in classical scholarship, the nucleus has unquestionably shifted towards exploring ancient ideologies and sexualities, and away from an insistence that scholars deal only with linguistics, close readings, and historical facts.

This time of upheaval, characterised by a radical shift toward dialogues with contemporary issues and evolving schools of theory, and a growing assertion of the “incompleteness” or fundamental errancy of “human knowledge,” formed the context for Carson’s training as a classicist and poet. Carson’s books after *Eros the Bittersweet* were published in the mid– to late–1990s and 2000s. They incubated in an environment of growing respect for writers refracting classical texts through feminist and poststructuralist lenses. These dialogues continue today. As recently as February 2013, leading American feminist and poststructuralist philosopher Judith Butler played the part of Kreon in a New York University staging of Carson’s most recent translation project, *Antigonick*.

Shaped by feminism and poststructuralism, Carson’s renegotiations of cultural questions around sexuality, textuality, and the authority of historical accounts germinated in a philosophical climate fundamentally occupied with language. The twentieth century’s “linguistic turn” saw problems of knowledge and representation come to be regarded as, fundamentally, problems about *language* (Glendinning 2004, 5). In Jacques Derrida’s words, the current “historico-metaphysical epoch must finally determine as language the totality of its problematic horizon” (1976, 6). As Derrida’s theories showed, language’s putative “self-assured, guaranteed and contained” nature is far from guaranteed; it is “menaced in its very life” (6). Fixed meanings and unproblematic representations, composed as they are of language, were also shown to be fundamentally unstable: “Everything that seemed solidly to render its status as essentially *un*problematic, everything that had assured us that it *is* what we thought it *should* be . . . has begun to melt into air” (Glendinning 2004, 6).

The meanings and representations that occupy Carson—including knowledge
of the ancient world, representations of sexuality, and the problem of how to write a life—are refracted through her poetics of problematisation. While questions of sexuality, translation, and writing history might seem to occupy separate areas of discourse, Carson connects the texts of these seemingly disparate areas of thought as aspects of “the text,” which, as Derrida famously claimed, “nothing is outside of” (1976, 158, emphasis mine). For Carson, errancy is fundamental to language, and therefore, fundamental to the work of translating classical texts. Understandings of sexuality, both ancient and contemporary, are also fundamentally errant if they are transmitted through language. Likewise, Carson frames the writing of a life—and, more broadly, the work of writing history—as an unavoidably errant exercise of translation.

Carson’s errant writing can be understood as a form of iterative poetics, a term Jacob Edmond uses to describe poetic strategies that “stage the relationship between individual, embodied instantiation and system: between original and copy, variation, translation, adaptation” (2011, 110). In his explication of iterative poetics, Edmond draws on the theories of Derrida, Judith Butler and Homi Bhabha, which connect iteration in language to iterations of culture, and emphasise that “identity [is] produced through repeated but alterable performances” (110). Like Edmond, I adopt Derrida’s notion of iterability as a tension between sameness and difference, or between “repetition” and “alterity” (Derrida 1977, 7). Carson’s poems draw on a poststructuralist understanding of language that rejects the notion of texts as closed, static objects. Poststructuralism conceives of language as fundamentally iterative: it both draws from (repeats) and feeds back into (alters) an evolving web of intertextuality and interpretation. Throughout her poetry, Carson applies this iterative understanding of language to highlight the tensions between interpretive authority and textual motion: at the level of language, in the work of translation, and in the writing of history.

I also augment Edmond’s concept of iteration by adopting notions of repetition and errancy from recent translation theory. In his writings on the difficult project of contemporary translation, translation studies theorist Lawrence Venuti articulates the idea of a “remainder”—those aspects of the text that are left open to the multiplicity of meaning once the “invariants” have been brought over
(Venuti 2004b, 484–5). While remainders are those aspects of the text that are most vulnerable to error, they are also, paradoxically, the site of potential cross-cultural understanding and connection. By connecting Venuti’s notion of unavoidable errancy in translation to a poststructuralist concept of language, I show how Carson’s errant versions insist on the impossibility of “unmediated or transparent communication” (Venuti 2004a, 5). I also expand Edmond’s concept of iteration by using poststructuralist and translation theories to understand the errancies of psychoanalysis, and the errant reception of classical texts. By applying this iterative framework to close readings and contextual discussions of Carson’s texts, I seek to understand what Carson’s iterative, errant textual performances can show us about the tensions between authority and instability in our understanding of the key cultural questions that occupy her work.

Some critics have meaningfully engaged with Carson’s preoccupation with errancy (Stanton 2003) and her strategies of citation (Solway 2001). Several more have written about her frustration of definitive categorisations and interpretations (Rae 2000; Jennings 2001; Battis 2003; Murray 2005; Carr 2007; Rae 2008). However, no scholarship to date has linked these strategies of citation, errancy, and translation. Nor have critics connected Carson’s strategies at the level of language to her uneasy approach to the iterative work of translation, and to her methodology of errant versioning in writing a life, and in writing history. My iterative framework allows me to see these seemingly separate features—citation, errancy, and translation—as connected aspects of Carson’s iterative poetics.

While Chris Jennings connects Carson’s insistence on the instability of language with her insistence on the instability of translation, his master paradigm is duality: “[Carson’s] poetics of lack . . . employs and enables duality as an essential component of its unity” (2001). In Eros the Bittersweet, Carson reads Sappho’s fragment 31 through the figure of the triangle. In an iterative reading, Jennings uses this triangle notion to highlight an interpretive tension in Carson’s poetry and translations. His treatment of Carson looks at the way her poetry shifts between the contemporary and the ancient world, and between Greek and English meanings and grammatical structures. However, by reading Carson’s poetry and translations through this paradigm of duality—with the third point of the triangle
representing the gap or liminal space between languages—Jennings limits an understanding of the iterative and interpretive possibilities of her work. I argue that Carson’s errant versioning transforms the gap into a space of festive, errant, and ceaseless process. Carson’s affirmation of the instability and errancy of language and translation animates not only the shifting relationship between languages, but also between versions of translations, between different authorial and individual personae, and between competing theoretical readings. Instead of Jennings’s “unity,” I build on Ian Rae’s description of Carson’s translations as producing a “monstrous and multipartite body” (Rae 2008, 7). I also map some of the “diversity of readings” (Rae 2000, 18) made possible by Carson’s practice of errant versioning. While Rae focuses solely on errant composition in *Autobiography of Red*, I widen my discussion to connect Carson’s errant versioning in citational poems from *Men in the Off Hours* and *Plainwater*, with her translations in both *Autobiography of Red* and *If Not, Winter*, and her writing of history in *Nox*.

Robert Stanton’s analysis of errancy highlights some important aspects of Carson’s practice. He discusses the way Carson’s metaphors “work primarily through paradox and incongruence,” and maps what he terms her “poetic ‘mistakes’” throughout several of her books (2003). However, Stanton’s division of Carson’s practice into “poetic ‘mistakes’” and “scholarly accuracy” fails to take full account of Carson’s practice of errancy, which informs not only her original poems but also her scholarly productions, such as the Sappho translations, and, to a degree, the pseudo-scholarly appendices of *Autobiography of Red*. Both of these works are self-consciously presented as errant versions. Carson complicates their claim to scholarly authority or accuracy. And the iterative and citational strategies of these works—an aspect that Stanton glosses over—are key to understanding their engagement with errancy.

Several critics have adopted poststructuralist and feminist frameworks to read Carson. However, no scholarship to date has addressed Carson’s iterative poetics as a whole. Nor have critics explored how her iterative approach might illuminate a broader turn towards iterative and unoriginal writing in contemporary poetry. In *Unoriginal Genius: Poetry by Other Means in the New Century*, a study of poetics
in the digital age, Marjorie Perloff contrasts the preoccupation with “verbal originality” that, despite their clashes, linked the language and lyric poets of the 1960s and 70s, with a new poetic shift towards so-called uncreative writing (2010, 9). Perloff characterises this shift as a turning away from a poetics of expression, from poetry of a “strong individualistic cast” (11), toward conceptual writing that appropriates, transcribes, cites, and engages in “a dialogue with earlier texts or texts in other media, [and] with ‘writings through’ or ekphrases” (11). The kinds of framing, citing, recycling, and recontextualising that have been central to the visual arts for decades—ever since Duchamp’s influential readymades—have found a more suspicious audience in poetry. Carson has certainly been attacked for her citational strategies. David Solway calls her a “patchwork creature” and a “phony” (2001). “Whatever magic one may find in her work is largely borrowed or stolen,” he warns (2001). The same iterative strategy that Solway slighted is celebrated by Perloff. She claims that “inventio is giving way to appropriation . . . and reliance on intertextuality” (Perloff 2010, 11). The poets Perloff studies devise complex practices of citation and constraint, intertext and intermedia, like Kenneth Goldsmith’s extreme transcriptions and Charles Bernstein’s poetics of constraint. Goldsmith is resolute that his conceptual work is “uncreative writing” that “[makes] no claims on originality” (Goldsmith 2008). His piece Day, for example, transcribes word-for-word the entire New York Times newspaper for 1 September 2000. The subject of Perloff’s chapter on Goldsmith is his piece Traffic, which transcribes a twenty-four-hour period of New York radio traffic reports.

While Carson’s iterative poetry is, in some senses, “unoriginal,” it does not fall under Goldsmith’s banner of uncreative writing. Although Carson’s poetics involve conceptual citation and recontextualisation (as in the “Freud” poems), and “writings through” (as in Autobiography of Red), she does not reject the “verbal originality” or the strong individualism that drove earlier American lyric and language poets. Carson’s conceptual citations, recontextualisations, and translations still labour to address personal and social experiences, as well as theoretical and philosophical questions. Her unoriginal or iterative strategies are, in many ways, original and creative, in the sense of being distinctive, often
startling, and recognizably Caronesque. Thus, Carson’s work does not quite fit with the avant-garde practices described by Perloff, which generally reject the notion of original voice and direct expression and, rather, assert the primacy of the concept (Perloff 2010, 11; Goldsmith 2008).

Instead, my study of Carson suggests that the iterative turn found in what Perloff calls “unoriginal” writing is just part of a much broader shift towards citation, versioning, translation, and recontextualisation in contemporary poetry. While the term “avant-garde” does not necessarily fit Carson’s work, her “reliance on intertextuality” and her citational strategies suggest that these conversations around unoriginal writing might be more broadly extended to encompass work like Carson’s, which is located on different parts of the map of contemporary poetry. Jacob Edmond calls this broader shift “the iterative turn” (2011; 2012), and his study of the iterative practices of poets as diverse as Caroline Bergvall, Kamau Brathwaite, and Dmitri Prigov reveals how their strategies of repetition and alteration create errant versions, which “[speak] to the urgent need to rethink originality and agency in an era in which such concepts seem threatened” (Edmond 2013). These poets cite and recycle pre-existing texts, and write and perform errant re-versions of their own poetry. Through these strategies, they engage with an understanding of culture and experience as iterative. Edmond’s study of Caroline Bergvall shows how her iterative strategies are aligned with a treatment of gender and culture as not original or derivative, but as “the product of repeated acts” (Edmond 2011, 110). Just as Carson draws attention to the processes of citation, translation, and recontextualisation in her poetry, Bergvall’s work “emphasizes” and “unsettles the very relation of theory to practice” (Edmond 2011, 110). Like Carson, Bergvall stages the working out of the Derridean relationship between repetition and alterity, to engage with cultural questions of gender and sexuality.

Brian Reed’s essay on substitutional poetics (2012) also points to a broader iterative turn in contemporary English-language poetry by highlighting the widespread use of poetic constraint in recent American writing. Poetic constraint is an aspect of Perloff’s “unoriginal” avant-garde, involving “arbitrary word-selection” and “rigorous compositional rules” (Reed 2012, 207). However, Reed
looks at the proliferation of the *abecedary* form in the work of poets such as Robert Pinsky and Catherine Wing, whose work cannot be categorised as avant-garde. The use of such iterative forms provides a way of working out the tension between “maximal freedom of choice and strict adherence to order: the abecedary provides . . . a neat formal solution to [the] paradoxical wish to embrace both restraint and freedom simultaneously” (208). The form repeats the order of the alphabet, the “building blocks of language,” which, “[t]hank goodness . . . have not changed!” (209), while enabling the freedom of alteration, of “unbounded possibility” (209). Reed’s study highlights a further way that contemporary poets are using iterative forms to engage with questions of authority and agency. It lends support to the argument that unoriginal writing might be conceived of as part of a broader tendency that is not only found in avant-garde, conceptual poetry, but also in the work of a range of other contemporary poets, such as Carson, who have made the poetics of iteration central to their practice.

Carson uses strategies of citation, recontextualisation, repetition, and translation to frame poems, cultural representations of sexuality, and interpretations of history as errant versions. Her radical translations of ancient Greek and Roman poems engage with a sense of textual and scholarly boundaries, while insisting on an ongoing motion of reinterpretation and reiteration. Carson’s practice of recontextualising earlier texts through citation and translation extends to the ways in which she recontextualises personal memories, family artefacts, and traditions of elegy, in order to write a life. Carson applies the errant system of language and the errancies of translation to write an (unavoidably errant) account of personal and family history. In this way, she engages with a new kind of history making and conceives of therapeutic delvings as a ceaseless process of narrative renewal.

Carson figures errancies and interpretive renegotiations not as mistakes to be avoided, but rather, as inevitable and integral aspects of literature’s iterative process. Her emphasis on the *process* of writing poetry, translations, and grief-work is ultimately hopeful. Carson’s mistrust of *final or original* versions (of texts, of translations, of histories, and of selves) enables her textual performances to “keep shaking the box” (Carson 1999, 7). Her errant versions and
representations of textual motion emphasise the value of renewal and renegotiation. The purpose of this thesis is to use my iterative conceptual framework, derived from poststructuralist and translation theory, to understand how Carson’s work connects the erring of translation and the incompleteness and erring of language to the continuous need to renegotiate cultural questions around sexuality, textuality, and the authority of historical accounts.

In chapter 1, I discuss a selection of Carson’s poems that employ iterative strategies of citation, repetition, re-contextualisation, and multiple drafts or “entries” to set into motion a performative erotics of the text that emphasises errant versioning over authoritative interpretations and fixed, prescriptive notions of sexuality, gender, and textual authority. In chapter 2, I look at two of Carson’s books that prescribe and perform a methodology of unease in approaching the translation of ancient texts, and betray an anxiety around imposing fixed translations and static boundaries on contemporary understandings of ancient texts, identities, and gender and sexual relationships. In chapter 3, I look at Carson’s extension of conversations around psychotherapy, and show how her iterations argue for a methodology of unease in approaching the work of making history, and for the therapeutic usefulness of the ability to continually re-tell, re-describe, and reiterate personal stories and ancient narratives.
CHAPTER 1: LANGUAGE

In this chapter, I establish Anne Carson’s use of iteration in the poems “Freud (1st draft)” and “Freud (2nd draft)” (Carson 2000a), and the narrative sequence “Just for the Thrill: An Essay on the Difference Between Men and Women” (Carson 2000b). I show how these works employ iterative strategies of citation, repetition, recontextualisation, and multiple drafts or “entries” to set into motion a performative erotics of the text that emphasises errant versioning over authoritative interpretations and fixed notions of sexuality, gender, and textual authority. My analysis will show how Carson’s iterative techniques connect an unsettling of textuality with an unsettling of normative sexuality, and set into motion a dynamic exchange between the multiple layers of personal and authorial personae present in her work. By identifying Carson’s iterative language strategies in this chapter, I lay the groundwork for my subsequent discussions of Carson’s iterative practice, as it extends to reading, interpreting, and translating in chapter 2, and to writing family history and biography, and interpretation in a psychotherapeutic sense, in chapter 3.

Throughout her work, Carson uses strategies of citation, repetition, recontextualisation, and versioning to explore themes of sexuality and gender. Besides the “Freud” poems, multiple drafts of several other poems appear throughout Men in the Off Hours (2000a). “Irony Is Not Enough: Essay on My Life as Catherine Deneuve (2nd draft)” versions the 1996 French film Les voleurs (Thieves). Carson iterates the film’s themes of desire and sexual power, and extracts alternative possible versions of the film’s narrative. In these alternative versions, Carson cites Socrates and Sappho to recontextualise the film’s female characters in language that complicates heteronormative gender roles. “Lazarus (1st draft)” and “Lazarus (2nd draft)” connect phrases from the bible with images that disrupt gender conventions, as in, “What is a Lamb of God? People use this phrase. / I don’t know. / I watch my sister, fingers straying absently about her mustache, / no help there” (Carson 2000a, 21). Similarly, the poem sequence “The
Truth about God” (Carson 1998b) iterates biblical passages—in the Derridean sense of iteration as an action that both repeats and alters—in new and sometimes erotically shocking recontextualisations, in order to stage inverse positions on the relationship between language and gender.

A parallel impulse to cite texts that are errant, early, or in the process of revision also appears throughout Carson’s work. *The Beauty of the Husband* (2001), a book-length sequence of poems that narrates the disintegration of a marriage, is organised into 29 sections. Each section is prefaced by an epigraph that cites lines or marginalia from the manuscripts of John Keats:

{Not for the glance itse}
{Not for the fiery glance itself perhaps}
{Nor at the glance itsef}

(Carson 2001, 137)

Like all epigraphs, this epigraph is inherently iterative, in that it takes a text and places it in a new context. Taken from the margins of Keats’s manuscript for *The Jealousies: A Faery Tale*, this epigraph is also iterative in that each line is an iteration—again, in the sense of repetition and alteration—of the one that comes before. Keats revises and renegotiates the phrasing each time the line is repeated, emphasising the epigraph as a site of revision and correction. Carson uses errant paratexts like this throughout *The Beauty of the Husband*. They are aptly suggestive for a work in which the theme is the re-negotiation of fixed wedding vows and definitive notions of marital fidelity.

A similar strategy is at work in the last essay of *Men in the Off Hours*, which cites crossed-out lines from the manuscripts of Virginia Woolf:

Obviously it is impossible, I thought, looking into those foaming waters, to compare the living with the dead make any comparison compare them.

(Carson 2000a, 166)
Like the Keats epigraph, here Carson cites three versions of a phrase: “compare the living with the dead,” “make any comparison,” “compare them.” But here, the impossibility of comparison is underscored by the crossing out even of statements about the impossibility of comparison. Instances of errant versioning like this in the work of other writers are clearly important and generative for Carson’s iterative practice. As she writes in the piece on Virginia Woolf, “Crossouts sustain me now. . . . It may be I’ll never again think of sentences unshadowed in this way” (166). This notion of “shadowed” sentences references a poststructuralist understanding of texts as processual, as drawing from and feeding back into an evolving web of textuality and interpretation, as “adrift in the threat of limitlessness” (Derrida 1976, 6). In this example, then, we might think of the “living” as the word itself, the physical object on the page, and the “dead” as the signified: the intangible, ungraspable meaning. The impossibility of comparison can be read as the impossible task of fixing the relationship of the sign to the signified, or the text to its meaning. Rather than words or texts as closed objects with a final form and a fixed meaning, Carson’s work continually enacts the tension in language between “limitlessness” and “finitude” (Derrida 1976, 6). Her language emphasises the tension between the “absolute absence of the receiver”—that is, the impossibility of a fixed, ideal interpretation or “indefinitely repeatable ‘meaning’” (Glendinning 2004, 8)—and the kind of repetition that enables “‘written communication’ to retain its function as writing, i.e. its readability” (Derrida 1977, 7). This irresolvable tension is what Derrida terms *iterability*.

There are many other examples of Carson’s use of citation, repetition, and errant versioning as a means of addressing questions of desire, sexuality, and gender difference that I might cite. For example, in Carson’s long poem about the breakdown of a marriage, “The Glass Essay,” she cites and recontextualises the authoritative, editorial corrections that Charlotte Brontë made to her sister Emily’s poems, as a way of figuring Emily’s outsider status and questioning her putative spinsterhood (Carson 1998b). In “Very Narrow: Introduction to Just for the Thrill” (Carson 2000b), ambiguous epigraphs serve as a paratextual way in to the speaker’s ambivalent feelings about her own fixed gender designation. Any of the poems and sequences I have noted would be illuminated by an analysis of their
use of iteration. I have chosen to discuss the “Freud” poems and the sequence
“Just for the Thrill: An Essay on the Difference Between Women and Men”
because of the formal and thematic parallels between the two texts. Both use an
iterative form of repeated or serial structures: the “Freud” poems use the repeated
structure of multiple drafts, and “Just for the Thrill” uses a serial structure of
multiple “entries,” like the entries in a travel diary. Both texts cite or reference
theories, whether scientific, literary, or popular, on the nature of desire and gender
difference. Lastly, these texts convey the patent unease of both speaker and author
towards fixed notions of sexuality and textuality. My analysis anticipates later
discussions of these issues in chapters 2 and 3, where I show how Carson extends
her iterative practice to reading, translating, interpreting in a psychoanalytical
context, and re-writing family history and biography.

Errant Versioning in the “Freud” Poems

The poems “Freud (1st draft)” and “Freud (2nd draft)” display a tension between
competing versions of textuality and sexuality. A dynamic interaction between
layers of personal and authorial personae sets into motion a performative erotics
of sexual and textual exchange. “Freud (1st draft)” cites and recontextualises
words from two of Freud’s personal letters. In this new context, the letters
function as sites of revision and correction. They enact and suggest the revisions
and corrections of Freud’s personal aspirations and sexual desires, alongside the
revisions and corrections of his own theories on sexuality and gender difference.
By “correction,” I do not mean a process impeded by errancy that eventually
arrives at a fixed or final version. Rather, Carson insists on Freud’s texts as works
in progress. She frustrates the possibility of pinning down a definitive version of
Freud the man, while problematising the notion of an authoritative theory of
human sexuality.

In a 2003 interview, Kevin McNeilly asks Carson about process and errancy:
Perhaps this connects to ideas of error or mistake, but if your thinking is
drawn to sites of revision and of correction, and of re-making, is there any
relationship between that and what I take to be your own notion of ‘voices
in process’ or voices in poetry that discover themselves, rethink
themselves, or revise themselves as they go? You have second and third
drafts of poems throughout *Men in the Off Hours*.

Carson answers:

I’m not sure where that comes from. There’s a mistrust there of the
surface. Possibly it’s scholarly hesitation, because the texts that I deal with
in classics are most of the time incomplete, emended, full of mistakes,
conjectured, and so on, and you learn to kind of resist the surface in
dealing with classical texts, and if you transfer that to your own work, then
there’s no reason to trust the first version you put on the page—it might be
wrong. You could emend your own work, and it’s interesting to think of
what you’re emending towards, when you emend your own work, what
came before the thought in what you thought was the first version, or the
true original version. You can dig through your own original version, I
don’t know what that would be, but prior opinion.

(McNeilly 2003)

Earlier in the interview, in response to a question about “translating badly,”
Carson says, “I like the space between languages because it’s a place of error or
mistakenness, of saying things less well than you would like, or not being able to
say them at all.” Carson here is talking specifically about translating from ancient
Greek into English, but her point can also be applied to the work of
recontextualisation and citation. There is a tension in these two answers between
appreciating and recognising the errant processes of translation, and an impulse to
“dig through” or “[emend] toward” a final or “true original version.” Carson
implicitly admits that this “true original version” is in some way unreachable or
unknowable: “I don’t know what that [original version] would be.” Her work
suggests that the idea of the original can only be experienced as an iteration.

Carson’s curious reaching for the “original” is tempered by her distrust of the text’s surface. By insisting on her poems as versions, Carson highlights language’s competing frameworks of “limitlessness” and “finitude,” and actively “[works] out . . . the logic that ties repetition to alterity” (Derrida 1977, 7).

Carson’s distrust of her own first versions is mirrored by her distrust of original or final versions of other authors’ texts, whether Sappho’s riddled papyrus fragment or Freud’s reproduced letters. Carson’s poems describe a tension between fixing and unfixing, between citing original texts, and then unsettling the meanings and implications of those citations.

A dynamic exchange between distrust and curiosity sets the poem “Freud (1st draft)” into motion:

FREUD (1st draft)
Freud spent the summer of 1876 in Trieste researching hermaphroditism in eels.
In the lab of zoologist Karl Klaus

he dissected
more than a thousand to check whether they had testicles.

“All the eels I have cut open are of the tenderer sex,” he reported after the first 400.
Meanwhile

the “young goddesses” of Trieste were proving unapproachable.
“Since

it is not permitted
to dissect human beings I have
in fact nothing to do with them,” he confided in a letter.
(Carson 2000a, 20)
Carson’s curiosity about Freud the man, and the origin of Freud the doctor’s theories of sexuality, is offset by a sly tone of ridicule. She alters the meaning of Freud’s words by recontextualising them in a new form. Freud’s word choice in speaking about the lab work of dissection (“cut open,” “tenderer”) creates a wincing effect when placed alongside the ironic account of young Freud’s feelings toward the “unapproachable” Italian women. The word “tender,” an adjective commonly attached to the female body in the nineteenth century, takes on a particularly visceral feeling here as the tender eels yield to the Freudian knife, as the researcher searches for concrete evidence of his own gender within the eels’ bodies. By selecting the adjective “tenderer,” Freud situates the dissected eels not as hermaphroditic animals; he gives them a human, womanly quality. Carson emphasises this connection by citing Freud’s joking reference, from earlier in the letter, to “dissecting” Trieste’s “precocious” girls, who “already temper their beauty with face powder” (Freud 1990, 146). These two key citations set up the poem’s sexual and authorial tension. While Freud means to communicate his indifference to and dismissal of the town’s young women (“Unfortunately, they are not beautiful in our German sense,” he writes elsewhere in the letter [Freud 1990, 144]), Carson’s recontextualisation shifts the direction of the indifference. Through the recontextualising power of citation and arrangement, the poem draws out an atmosphere of sardonic violence by placing Freud the biologist’s work of gender dissection alongside his social and sexual studies in the streets of Trieste, and the formation of his personal views about gender difference. In other words, Carson’s iterative strategies highlight the layers of autobiography and authorial presence that carry on a constant interplay within Freud’s texts. Appignanesi and Forrester write that this period of Freud’s life was one of “self-conscious and self-ironizing superiority to females and to affairs of the heart.” While “women may have fascinated him, [the] desire to pursue them was sublimated to the desire to pursue knowledge” (Appignanesi and Forrester 1992, 23). However, in “Freud (1st draft),” the evasiveness of the hermaphroditic eels is reframed as a metaphor for the evasiveness of the “young goddesses,” rather than Freud’s evasion of them. The eels are reluctant to give up proof of their gonads in order to let Freud the biology student possess a clear answer to the
salient question of his laboratory assignment. Likewise, the young women of the foreign town evade the romantic possession of Freud the young man. These multiple evasions mirror the textual evasions of the poem itself. While the poem disturbs prior interpretations of the original text of Freud’s letters, it also evades a definitive answer to the question of gender difference.

The citational strategy of the poem also suggests the importance of ongoing renegotiations of other, pre-existing recontextualisations of Freud. The letter, originally written in German, has been archived, and then photographed, transcribed, and translated for inclusion in *The Letters of Sigmund Freud to Edouard Silberstein: 1871–1881* (1990). While it might be argued that these recontextualisations or translations are straightforward copies, merely repeating the object of the text without alteration, in fact this kind of iterative recontextualisation unavoidably alters the text. In the preface to *The Letters of Sigmund Freud to Edouard Silberstein*, editor Walter Boehlich writes in a tone of regret that in order to transcribe the letters he sometimes had to work from “unclear photocopies” or from “unreliable” copies transcribed by “an unknown hand” (Freud 1990, vii). He also admits to more purposeful alterations: “slips of the pen have been silently corrected” (viii). In chapter 2, I use the loaded terms “distortion” and “contamination” (Venuti 1998, 31) to discuss similar alterations in Carson’s iterations of ancient Greek texts. According to contemporary translation theories, alteration or correction of this kind is not a mistake that can be avoided. Rather, it is an inevitable and integral aspect of literature’s iterative process. A further action of recontextualisation occurs in the numerous biographies where Freud’s letters are cited and interpreted (one of which I have already quoted). The citational strategy of “Freud (1st draft)” binds the poem explicitly and implicitly to these pre-existing and necessarily errant recontextualisations of Freud’s words. These other versions of Freud, and other interpretations of Freud’s words, move within and between the poem’s textual layers.

On several levels, Carson frames the source letters and the poem itself as sites of revision and correction. Freud’s letters confide the processual revision of his laboratory hypothesis; his idea of the eels’ gender is being corrected and revised.
Even when Freud’s research stay had ended, writes Peter Gay, the hypothesis remained conjectural. Freud could debunk the traditional view of eels as hermaphrodites, but only “partially, inconclusively” (Gay 1988, 32). These letters are also the site of Freud’s revisions and corrections about the direction of his life, his career, and his sexual desires. In 1875, at the age of 19, one year before his posting in Trieste, the young Freud’s career aspirations “began to shift away from the theoretical and philosophical zoology and evolutionary biology he was up to then enthusiastic about toward the plan to become a doctor who helped people, who might be of practical use . . . . He began to take seriously the project of medicine, with the mastery that the idea of cure implies” (Appignanesi and Forrester 1992, 24–25). The inconclusive eel research must have helped propel Freud toward a career of putative conclusivity. As I show in chapter 3, Freud continued to struggle throughout his career with the tension between the interminable, “Sisyphean” task of psychoanalysis, and the desire for conclusive cures and definitive theories. The multiple drafts of the “Freud” poems enact this tension between reaching for an understanding of gender difference, and unsettling any sense of a final version or final, definitive understanding of these ideas.

The textual uncertainties of the poem iterate a further errant version of the young Freud’s aspirations, which had to be corrected or revised: his expectations in marriage. Freud had been in love with the daughter of some family friends, Gisela Fluss, and had hoped to marry her. However, “it was not to be” (Appignanesi and Forrester 1992, 23); she married another man. Freud kept up a correspondence with Gisela’s brother, and in this epistolary context Freud gave Gisela the nickname “Ichthyosaura” (23), an extinct sea creature. This fitting epithet for the love that slipped away was coined at the same time that Freud was dissecting the slippery, sea-dwelling eels. Thus, Freud’s expectations of marriage, and his expectations of career, were being corrected and emended, even as his research hypothesis on gender difference was undergoing its own slippery progress toward inconclusivity. Freud’s deflation of expectation (the cutting disappointment of his fantasy of marrying Gisela (Appignanesi & Forrester 1992, 23), and the disdain with which Freud would look back on his time in Karl
Klaus’s lab (Gay 1988, 32)) is mirrored by the poem’s final deflation. The triumphant declarative tone of “I have / in fact nothing to do with them” is tempered and flattened by the poem’s closing insistence on the action of writing: “he confided in a letter.” As I have shown, Carson views writing as a fundamentally iterative project. She views texts themselves as open forms that are subject to the motion of ongoing recontextualisation and renegotiation. Thus, the last line insists on ongoing revisions of Freud’s texts and identity.

The relationship between the poems “Freud (1st draft)” and “Freud (2nd draft)” continues the performance of textual motion. “Freud (2nd draft)” moves away from the frank, direct citational approach of “Freud (1st draft),” and applies instead a citational strategy of slant paraphrasing. Through the use of this iterative technique, as well as intertextual references, homonyms, and repetition, the poem registers a tension between authority and errancy. This complicates the relationship between the observer and the observed, and emphasises the errancy of the author and the renegotiable movement of the text:

FREUD (2nd draft)
If you go to Iowa visit the Raptor Center.
Down a long gravel road
then over slats
to big wooden boxes.
Bend and peer, it’s dark in there.
Set of knobby yellow talons big as jumper cables
glows slowly out
from a shelf near the wall and
above these
the godly tucked presence of (say)
a bald eagle
shuts itself.
That shock of white at the top of the dark
is no daystar no bit of annunciation —
it is head.
Eye shifts this way
and back.
Through a screen
eye watches yellow twigs move on wind.
Body does not move, has only one wing.
20
All guests of the Center are maimed, rapt away
from the narcissism of nature.
Ultimate things are pleasure
said Freud (1914).
Ultimate things are death
said Freud (1937).
Meanwhile (to cite Goethe) one perfect thorn.
For all his sadness there were moments it seemed to him
he had only to make some simple movement
(a swimmer’s)
30
and find himself right back on top.
(Carson 2000a, 128)

“Freud (2nd draft)” begins with a narrative of visitation. The speaker describes the
pathway leading to, and the appearance of, a centre in Iowa for the care of
disabled birds of prey. The directive in line 5 commands the poem’s addressee to
perform a strained visual reaching: “Bend and peer, it’s dark in there.” This
directive to look through the layers of “screen” and darkness to perceive the
object of curiosity resembles Carson’s description of the revision process in the
interview quoted above. The description of digging back to a mythic, unreachable,
“original” version of the text is echoed by the multiple figures of the speaker/poet
and addressee/reader, bending and peering to view the errant (maimed, one-
winged) bird. The maimed bird is like the errant source text, which also moves
and shifts, as emphasised by the focus on the bird’s eye, which looks back at the
speaker: “eye watches yellow twigs move on wind.” As I discuss in chapter 2,
Carson’s translation practice looks to versions of texts—such as the texts of
Stesichoros and Sappho— which survive in papyrus fragments riddled with holes.
All iterations of these texts, therefore, whether in transcription or translation, are necessarily errant. This sense of the fundamental errancy of the source text, or source idea, connects to an understanding of language itself as processual and undergoing continuous versioning and revision. Carson emphasises errancy and alteration in her paraphrased citation of Freud’s theories on human drives:

Ultimate things are pleasure
said Freud (1914).
Ultimate things are death
said Freud (1937).

Carson uses a repeated form into which different words can be slotted to stage the Derridean sense of iteration as both repetition and alteration, and to emphasise the revision and correction of Freud’s own ideas during his lifetime. Both “Freud (1st draft)” and “Freud (2nd draft)” ultimately draw the reader’s attention back to the action of writing (“he reported,” “he confided in a letter,” “said Freud,” “said Freud”), and to their own status as errant versions (“1st draft”, “2nd draft”). Carson suggests the importance of uncovering different versions of Freud, and the necessity of renegotiating his ideas around gender and sexuality.

“Freud (2nd draft)” registers the tension between authority and interpretive multiplicity through imagery of motion and capture. The “big wooden boxes,” the “tucked” presence of a bird which “shuts itself,” and the “screen”—all of which separate the observer from the observed—suggest containment, capture, and closure. “Body does not move, has only one wing,” declares the speaker in line 20. Conversely, the “jumper cables” (with their connotations of re-starting), the “yellow twigs” that “move on wind,” and the last image of “some simple movement (a swimmer’s)” suggest a contrary sense of textuality in motion. “Rapt away” simultaneously embodies notions of containment and movement. The word’s implicit connection with its homonyms “wrapped” (describing something that is closed up, but ready to be opened) and “rapped” (the motion of door knocking, an action that precedes the opening of the door) implies a sense of latent motion. The word also has erotic and scholarly denotations: rapt describes
intense emotion, as well as a state of fascination. *Rapt* also suggests a sense of
hurt or violence, as in “a rap on the knuckles.” This connotation looks back to the
violent atmosphere of dissection in “Freud (1st Draft).” The errant birds are “rapt
away / from the narcissism of nature.” They turn from an alignment with the
ccaught, unconsummated status of the mythical Narcissus, who is eternally pinned
to his own reflection in the water. Narcissus is caught, contained. Instead, the
subject of the poem (the errant bird and the errant text) moves implicitly with
Narcissus’s rejected lover, Echo, whose iterated words reverberate out into the
environment. Even the poem’s attempt to pin down what *kind* of bird is being
contained (“the godly tucked presence of (say) / a bald eagle”) is undercut by a
talky aside that unsettles definitive labelling. It is telling that the word “say,” used
here in context of “for example,” draws the reader’s attention again to the
renegotiable action of writing, saying, having said. Carson sets notions of
authoritative or definitive interpretation against notions of errant versioning, but
the poem ultimately insists on the latter.

Carson also complicates the relationship between the observer and the
observed. The poem undergoes a shift at line 21: “All guests of the Center are
maimed, rapt away . . .” At this point, there is a complication of the distinction
between the observer and the observed, the seer and the seen, as *both* are in fact
“guests of the Center.” Both the speaker and the bird are visitors, with the notion
of impermanence and transit that the idea of visitation suggests. This shift
unsettles the positions of the observer and the observed that have been staged in
the preceding images. The “Eye” that “shifts this way and back” now becomes
potentially “I,” the human visitor/speaker, and not the bird/text who is the object
of her observation. The “screen” of the cage, through which the bird’s “eye”
watches twigs move in the wind, out in the open, where the visitor stands,
becomes a “screen” of layered textuality through which the “I” watches and
participates in the motion of the text. The “I” is observing the bird (the text), but
there is also a sense of “eye/I” watching herself, observing the motion of her own
ideas as they revise themselves on the page. The question in “2nd draft” of who is
observing whom raises a similar question in “1st draft,” of who is dissecting
whom, or what. Freud the biologist is dissecting the eels. He is also dissecting the
female species, searching in both scientific and social contexts for an essential proof of the difference between men and women. In his later psychoanalytical work, of course, Freud would write extensively on gender difference and notions of sexuality. Throughout his career, Freud rewrote and revised his theories on these questions in a continuous digging through or emending towards the impossible “true original version” of the nature of femininity and masculinity. But while Freud is cutting open the eels, Carson is also performing a dissection of Freud. The poem’s citational method cuts up and extracts phrases and words, staging a search for the definitive Freud, just as Freud was staging a search for the eels’ definitive sex. Both of course result in failure. Carson’s performative critique of fixed definitions ultimately stresses a continuous revising motion.

The many trajectories of observation in the “Freud” poems perform of a kind of textual erotics. In the essay “Dirt and Desire: Essay on the Phenomenology of Female Pollution in Antiquity,” Carson expands the notion of “touch” to include contact that is “physical, moral, emotional, or imaginary” (Carson 2000a, 130). Elsewhere, she describes the motion of observation in Sappho’s fragment 31 as “touch not touching” (Carson 1998a, 16). If we adopt this metaphor and think of observation as a form of touch, then the mutable relations between the layers of personal and authorial personae set up a dynamic erotics of intertextual exchange: Freud is touching the eels and the Italian females; the female writer is touching Freud; the female writer is touching biographical recontextualisations of biographers who are touching Freud; the poem’s 1st draft is being touched by the poem’s 2nd draft, where speaker and subject touch each other in a shifting exchange; and the reader is touching the poem, and the source letters, and Freud’s writings (iterated and transformed through transcription and translation), and the biographical and scholarly recontextualisations of Freud, as well as the many iterations of Freud-as-cultural-icon. This dynamic interchange of scrutiny and interpretation, which operates within the textual layers of the poem, sets into motion a performative erotics that suggests the potentially limitless ways any final, definitive notion of Freud, femininity, masculinity, or textual authority can be confounded within the finite form of the poem.
“Just for the Thrill: An Essay on the Difference Between Women and Men” is a road trip narrative that maps the motion of a pair of lovers, a man and a woman, as they travel across America. As part of a larger section in *Plainwater* titled “The Anthropology of Water,” “Just for the Thrill” stages a kind of anthropological investigation into questions of sexuality, desire, and gender difference. The woman of the couple narrates the progression of the road trip in a confessional but characteristically obfuscating first-person persona. She emphasises emotionally charged imagery at the expense of some of the standard connective strategies that more straightforward fictional narratives employ. The man is literally “an anthropologist of China, using this trip across America to study up on classical Chinese” (Carson 2000b, 193). He is the dominant partner, both sexually and textually: he is the more experienced lover, and seduces the woman who was up until then a virgin; he is also framed as the possessor of definitive knowledge about the difference between men and women. He instructs his lover by repeatedly citing aphorisms of classical Chinese wisdom, such as, “In love women get what they want, men what they need” (193). He makes definitive proclamations about the nature of women, such as, “Women don’t know maps, I never met a woman who could read a map” (201). We never learn his proper name. The woman simply calls him “the emperor of China” (193).

Meanwhile, the woman performs a non-authoritative, poetic anthropological investigation into questions of sexuality and gender difference, by unsettling the emperor’s definitive textual declarations. The sequence recontextualises Chinese proverbs and idioms alongside the lyrics of blues and soul songs, in a way that upsets and questions their meaning. While the “Freud” poems stage a dynamic interaction between the layers of Freud’s personal and authorial personae, “Just for the Thrill” performs a similar dynamic. The sequence animates the layers of Carson’s authorial and personal presences, and frustrates fixed notions of sexuality. While the “Freud” poems use a repeated structure of multiple drafts,
“Just for the Thrill” uses a serial structure of multiple “entries,” like diary entries, each marked by a place name or road stop along the progression of the journey, such as Indiana, Route 40 or Illinois, Route 19. The entries attempt to map the progress of the couple’s investigation into questions of desire and gender difference. However, the couple inevitably get lost. The entries are staged as sites of errancy, and the mapping motion itself is represented as a process of revision and correction.

The female anthropologist’s iteration of Chinese proverbs stages a tension between reaching for, and unfixing the use of, these textual artefacts. Most of the cited proverbs and idioms are sayings of supposed social and moral wisdom: “A person without a smiling face should not open a shop” (196); “Living dog better than dead lion” (197); “Who stands near the ink gets black” (220). The classical Chinese idioms that the emperor is mastering throughout the course of the road trip ostensibly serve a classic aphoristic function: they present general and generally acknowledged truths in the form of pithy, memorable sayings. Proverbs gain their social and cultural power from being repeated. Their function is so contrary to Ezra Pound’s poetic injunction to “make it new” that one might argue proverbs are the very antithesis of the reigning modernist notion of poetry. They have been repeated so many times that they have hardened into artefacts of petrified morality; that is, they would have been hardened in this way for the culture to which they originally belonged. As proverbs in translation, however, imported from their origins in ancient China to a contemporary American setting, they have already been altered through recontextualisation. They have already been “made new.” Even their status as classical Chinese proverbs is uncertain; at least one proverb has its origins in the Bible, not in ancient China. (“A living dog is better than a dead lion” is from Ecclesiastes 9:4.) Carson slyly references the muddy source of the proverbs with the anachronistic place-name marker of the sequence’s very first diary entry, the starting point for the couple’s journey: “China City, Indiana” (192).

The female anthropologist of “Just for the Thrill” investigates these textual artefacts, staging a tension between their hardness and their mutability, between their fixed meanings and their infinite openness to reinterpretation. Often this
tension takes the form of a kind of black humour, by recontextualising the proverb as the “way in” to interpreting an erotic situation: “Dawn. The emperor turns in his sleeping bag. Opens his eyes. Smiles and says quietly, ‘Fuck me.’ Bad at pelting the rat for fear of smashing the jade bowl beside it, says classical Chinese wisdom” (195). Whether or not this is an authentic piece of classical Chinese wisdom, it humorously references sayings for masturbation in English, like “spanking the monkey” and “choking the snake.” Other instances of recontextualisation convey the speaker’s extreme unease with sexual contact in a more solemn tone:

It was a full-moon night about a year ago, the first time I went to his house. I wore a gray dress with buttons, and not telling him that it was the first night I went to any man’s house, ate chicken. Then he so carefully washed each pot. Standing at the sink he rinsed each pot. Standing there he dried each pot. And said. Turning, “I like this dress.” (Why?) “Because there are so many ways to take it off.” Who thinks herself a treasure is soon parted from it, says classical Chinese wisdom. What makes life life and not a simple story? Jagged bits moving never still, all along the wall. (196)

The proverbs are detached from their function of providing definitive wisdom and guidance, in situations that seem intensely for the speaker to require a kind of moral and spiritual compass. They are represented instead as absurd, as in the citation that implicitly describes the sex act as “pelting a rat.” Or else they are represented as darkly and confoundingly useless. The speaker recalls the proverbs in moments of intense unease and questioning, but finds them no help. However, it is in the female speaker/author’s power to actively unsettle the ability of the proverbs to help or provide guidance or insight, by choosing to iterate them in contexts where they cannot appear as anything but useless or absurd. In the narrative context of a sexually inexperienced woman entering into a relationship with a dominating male, who is both more knowledgeable in a scholarly sense and more powerful in a sexual sense, the traditional function of these proverbs to fix
and define moral and social questions is unbalanced. While the male character dominates, the power of recontextualisation still lies with the female writer. *She* possesses the ability to upset the sexual and textual power dynamic.

The activity of camping serves as a metaphor for further enacting the tension between definitive categorisation, and textuality and sexuality as an errant process:

Camping is a system of mutually enacted paradoxes, like any lost tribe—inside and outside, space and surface, love and lust. Be careful they reverse. Nonetheless I am learning to build a fire. It has a lot to do with lining up sticks in regimented sizes. I enjoy ranking my sticks. By the time I finish, it is too late for breakfast, we drive to town for lunch. “Paper is fire; fire is paper” says the emperor, citing classical Chinese wisdom. I am not sure this helps me but I will keep working. Enlightenment is not a place, no use rushing to get there.

(202)

The progression of this entry stages the tension between an impulse to definitively categorise, and the shifting motion of the system of language within which the categorisations are contained. This entry moves from motion, to stasis, to motion. It represents the shifting paradoxes of “camping” through the mutually possessive but shifting relationship between two contiguous but oppositional word sets: “inside and outside, space and surface, love and lust.” The entry then progresses to the momentary satisfaction of “ranking . . . sticks.” This is a moment of stasis, where the objects of camping can be categorised in a way that is evaded more broadly by Carson’s textual performances. This momentary satisfaction is then frustrated by yet another piece of classical Chinese wisdom, one that reads like a Zen koan: “Paper is fire; fire is paper.” Paper can provide the materials for lighting a fire. Therefore when paper is on fire, it could be said to be fire. The reference to fire summons the erotic and romantic associations of “lighting a fire” or being “on fire” for someone. (As I discuss in chapter 2, Geryon’s desire is often represented through imagery of fire and burning.) Paper provides the materials for
writing and interpreting desire. “Fire is paper” thus suggests the inability to separate representations of desire in language from desire’s essential or ideal nature. And since language cannot absolutely fix interpretation or meaning, Carson lends her representations of desire or gender difference the ability to shift or “reverse.”

The citation of song lyrics and bedroom talk stages a similar dynamic tension between definitive interpretations and shifts or reversals. Lyrics of pop songs playing on the radio are interspersed with an anthropological questioning of the difference between men and women’s practices of lovemaking:

Radio crackles. *Standin’ in the rain*, Robert Johnson is singing. *Ain’t a drop fell on me*. Is it true men envy women their way of making love? Slow and spiritual is how the emperor describes it. *My clothes is all wet*. Sometimes he closes his eyes and says, “Make me your boy slut.” *But my flesh is dry as can be.*

(200)

Instead of the intended meaning as a kind of joyful defiance of the inclement weather, Carson alters the lyrics of this old blues tune through recontextualisation, to convey a kind of recoiling from the male partner’s libido, as well as from his ability to articulate his desire in forceful ways—an ability that the female partner finds both distressing and enthralling. As well as recontextualising the cited proverbs, the speaker also repeats the bedroom talk, turning it into its own kind of proverb and creating another version of guidance into the question of sex. “Make me your boy slut” (200) commands the emperor. The quotation marks designate the phrase as direct speech uttered for the first time. However, two entries later, the phrase is repeated and altered. It is italicised, which transforms it into a new kind of repeatable proverb: “*Make me your fuck boy, I hear one of us whispering in the midst of dark tent nights—where do I go for a map into that country?”* (201). Gender difference here is confused, as the reader (and speaker) is unsure who, now, is speaking. In this entry, Carson stages a tension between the moral usefulness and confounding uselessness of the proverbs. She contends that the difference between men and women is still open to renegotiation.
While these iterations could be read as perverting the true meaning of the proverbs in order to condemn the uninhibited (and non-normative) sexuality of the male character, in fact they reflect Carson’s broader intention of sexual and textual questioning. Throughout the narrative, the emperor is represented as the guardian of logos. He represents definitive interpretations and a powerfully singular selfhood. The female speaker, on the other hand, represents herself as a fractured being, open to multiple interpretations: “Think of all the women I am. The emperor however is powerfully one, a scholar of pleasure, ever on the vulture peak” (206); “The emperor is videotaping out the window while I drive. Explaining to me that in classical Chinese the character for *cornfield* plus the character for *oneself* means freedom. Well I came on this trek to leave one self behind” (199). The speaker’s role is to renegotiate fixed definitions of self, and fixed notions of sexuality and textuality. She stands in opposition to the emperor’s smug sexual and textual supremacy. When the emperor says, “Anthropologists avoid such words as *perfect, correct, pure, total, final, ultimate, absolute*” (204), the statement is one of deep irony. It is the woman’s approach to anthropology that he is describing, not his own. However, her role of framing alternative, mutable interpretations through poetic repetition and alteration does not penetrate the emperor:

Yes, enlightenment is useless but I am hurrying along with a lion in both legs, there is something here I want to explain. *If lions could talk we would not understand them*, says classical Chinese wisdom, but I know there is something here I can explain. I am rushing through the forest like a pile of roaring twigs and I am sure I can explain this if I get back in time. I arrive at camp breathless. Billie Holiday is on the radio, the smell of wood is hot, the emperor looks up. “Tables,” I say. “Each shadow,” I say. “The bell,” I say. He is looking around him on the ground. “Could you get the coffee out of the truck?”

(210)
In this passage, the speaker attempts to communicate non-rational answers to questions about language. This is met by the male character with inattention at best, disdain at worst. The sometimes naïve tone of the speaker’s anthropological investigations exaggerates the divide between an authoritative knowing and an errant questioning, as in this exchange:

There is a nucleus of terms I never get right. (Pleasure). “Pleasure? You know what pleasure is—fun.” “Is pleasure important?” “Yes.” “Is language important to pleasure?” “No.” “When you say, Enjoy me, what does that mean?” “Means I want you to have pleasure too.” “Who am I?” “You? My partner. We’re such good partners,” he mumbles by now falling asleep—then why am I so utterly alone? But the tape broke before this.”

Although the quest of the “I” persona in the narrative is to find fixed answers to questions of sexuality and language (i.e. “Is language important to pleasure?”), the text stages the tension between fixing and unfixing. The author draws attention to the necessity of renegotiation. Each “entry” in the road trip diary is another questioning “entry” into the problem of sexual and textual mastery.

The “Freud” poems stage a shifting intertextual performance between the many recontextualisations of Freud. In this way, Carson sets into motion a performative interaction between the layers of Freud’s personal and authorial presences. Because of its citational strategies and thematic content, “Just for the Thrill” stages a similar performance that brings the multiple levels of Carson’s authorial and personal unease into shifting relation. On one level, the sequence’s iteration and disruption of the authority of ancient Chinese idioms iterates Carson’s unease in translating ancient Greek texts. The female character’s unease with the definitive authority of “classical Chinese wisdom” connects her uneasy relationship with ancient texts to Carson’s authorial persona and her role as a translator and scholar of ancient Greek.

Another level of persona is Carson’s uneasiness with definitive gender designations. In an early interview with Carson, Mary di Michele cites a passage
from the lyric essay that introduces “Just for the Thrill”: “I am not a person who feels easy talking about blood or desire. I rarely use the word woman myself. . . . The truth is, I lived out my adolescence mainly in default of my father’s favour. But I perceived I could trouble him less if I had no gender. . . . I made my body as hard and flat as the armour of Athena. No secrets under my skin, no telltale drops on the threshold” (Carson 2000b, 189). Then di Michele asks, “What is the relationship of your writing to this word ‘woman’? To being a woman?” Carson answers, “A relationship of dis-ease as is suggested in the passage you quote” (di Michele 1997, 14). Later in the interview, Carson admits that she “cannot stand” reading reviews of her work, “or in general sentences in which I appear as ‘she’” (17). Carson the interviewee/woman/author’s uneasy relationship with gender designation comes across strongly in other texts and interviews, as well. The unsettling of gender roles in Autobiography of Red, the grammatical complication of the use of pronouns in the “Possessive used as a drink (me)” video poem series, and the staging and problematisation of competing viewpoints on essential femininity in the sequence “The Truth About God” are other examples where this aversion to a definitive “she” surfaces.

Another level of authorial and personal presence that Carson evades more successfully in interviews, but which comes through strongly in all of her books of poetry, is the relationship of unease the “I” persona has to performances of romance and desire. Autobiography of Red, The Beauty of the Husband, “Irony Is Not Enough: Essay on My Life as Catherine Deneuve (2nd draft),” “H & A Screenplay,” “The Glass Essay,” and “Canicula di Anna” all stage narratives of unease where the central characters (usually female) play out scenarios of sex and love that are anxious, painful, troubled, and disquieting. In “Just for the Thrill,” the speaker’s feelings of deep unease in her erotic entanglement touch, in implicit intertextual ways, these other contexts where the “I” persona experiences a similar unease. Because the theme of erotic unease is iterated throughout Carson’s oeuvre, in repeating but altered ways, it is tempting to read biographical inferences into these scenarios. However, unlike in Freud’s case, there are no books on Carson’s life, no letters, no intertextual support for a biographical reading. Nevertheless, there is a shifting relationship at play between “I” the
woman and the interview subject, “I” the character-persona, and “I” as Carson the scholar and translator.

In “Just for the Thrill,” the male character embodies textual and sexual authority, and the female character represents the unnerving of that authority. This polarity raises an important question: if the sequence represents the difference between women and men as a divide between authority and uncertainty, between definitive answers and errant versions, then one might argue that the text enforces a kind of absolute gender binary between masculinity and femininity, between what it is to be male and what it is to be female. However, the male and female characters in “Just for the Thrill” are not stand-ins or absolute metaphors for the essential nature of man and the essential nature of woman. Rather, they embody different ways of thinking about language, and their coupling unsettles the possibility of their total separation or opposition. In Carson’s work, these two different ways of approaching and understanding language are coupled on the page. They animate a kind of performative erotic exchange. Carson’s poetry generally employs normative syntax and linguistic transparency, which is unsettled by moments of imagistic revolt and subversion. The interplay between these two language strategies confounds the possibility of any one mode achieving dominance over the other. “Brush cannot write two words at the same time, says Classical Chinese wisdom” (207). And yet, this is precisely what Carson’s errant versioning accomplishes.
CHAPTER 2: TRANSLATION

In this chapter, I examine Anne Carson’s iterative practice in two of her works of translation: *Autobiography of Red: A Novel in Verse* (1999) and *If Not, Winter: Fragments of Sappho* (2003). Through contextual discussions and close readings, I show how Carson’s translation strategies renegotiate fixed understandings of history and sexuality, by emphasizing errancy and multiple trajectories of interpretive motion. I extend my discussion of Carson’s language in chapter 1 to show how her translations emphasise the tensions between repetition, alteration, authority, and freedom. Both *Autobiography of Red* and *If Not, Winter* register an engagement with textual and scholarly boundaries, while insisting on an ongoing motion of bound-less reinterpretation and reiteration. Translation studies theorist Lawrence Venuti writes that the dominant mode of translation practice in English-speaking cultures is to “[suppress] the linguistic and cultural differences of the foreign text” (Venuti 1998, 31). He writes,

> Given the reigning concept of authorship, translation provokes the fear of inauthenticity, distortion, contamination. Yet insofar as the translator must focus on the linguistic and cultural constituents of the foreign text, translation may also provoke the fear that the foreign author is not original, but derivative, fundamentally dependent on pre-existing materials. It is partly to quell these fears that translation practices in English cultures (among many others) have routinely aimed for their own concealment... In practice the fact of translation is erased by suppressing the linguistic and cultural differences of the foreign text, assimilating it to dominant values in the target-language culture, making it recognizable and therefore seemingly untranslated.

(31)
Instead of suppressing the differences between Greek and English, Carson stresses the fraught process of translating fragmented and errant source texts. She betrays anxiety around imposing fixed translations and static boundaries on the text, and implicitly prescribes a methodology of unease for the practice of translation.

In *Autobiography of Red*, Carson translates fragments of the ancient Greek poet Stesichoros’s long poem, the *Geryoneis*. She insists on these fragments as an iteration of an existing poetic form, while altering that form radically. Her diction and narrative choices reference the ancient Greek codes that governed the homoerotic relationship between an *erastes* and an *eromenos*, while simultaneously unbalancing the fixed power dynamics of that relationship. Carson translates the same fragments multiple times within the body of *Autobiography of Red*. Each time, the translation is different. By offering multiple, errant versions, Carson rejects the notion of originality as non-iterative, and embraces a potential contamination of authorship by emphasizing the errant and iterative processes of translation. Her version of the *Geryoneis* re-imagines the act of translation not as the maintenance of “a uniform identity for the text across languages and periods,” but as an act that integrates elements from different epochs and “speech genres” into a shifting, anachronistic composition (Rae 2008, 236). With this shifting composition, Carson sets into motion a performative critique of authoritative interpretations and fixed, prescriptive notions of sexual and textual authority.

Both Stesichoros’s *Geryoneis* and the poetry of Sappho survive in the form of half-disintegrated, fragmented scraps of papyrus. While Carson fills in her version of the *Geryoneis* with details and scenes that conspicuously do not belong, in *If Not, Winter: Fragments of Sappho*, she emphasises the blanks. Carson self-consciously avoids the imposition of boundaries on the multiple layers of Sappho’s corpus: the body of Sappho’s work, and the body of Sappho the woman. By iterating and reframing ancient notions of purity and pollution, Carson renegotiates errancy, contamination, and anxiety as necessary tools in the work of the translator.

In her translations, Carson is concerned with both sexual and textual power. In *Autobiography of Red* and *If Not, Winter*, Carson animates a kind of intercourse with the original texts. Her translations set into motion a dynamic textual erotics,
which attempts to feel the enchanting tingle of contact with some essence of the ancient Greek. They are committed to hearing what Walter Benjamin calls the “echo of the original” (Benjamin 1968, 79). At the same time, Carson disrupts her own attempt to authoritatively represent the real Sappho, the truth about Stesichoros and Helen of Troy, the best translation of the Geryoneis, or the truth about Greek sexual practices. Like Benjamin, Carson is wary of claiming an unproblematic re-presentation of the original text. Likewise, she is wary of claiming an unproblematic transmission of Sappho and Stesichoros’s culture and identity. She pushes against a rationalist uncovering of the truth of history, and foregrounds questions and anxieties around the authority of translation, as a way of unsettling fixed understandings of both ancient and contemporary sexual power dynamics.

**Translation’s Errancy in *Autobiography of Red***

*Autobiography of Red* re-creates the Greek myth of Geryon, in a multi-part, generically unique configuration of long poem, short essay, translation, fictional interview, and pseudo-logico-propositional fallacy. The many sections of the book iterate the texts of the ancient Greek poet Stesichoros—texts that provide a partial source for Geryon’s story—while renegotiating these iterations within and between the different sections.

The book is organised into seven sections. At its centre is a long poem, titled “A Romance.” The romance narrates the fictional childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood of Geryon (a character from Greek mythology who is little-known outside of classical scholarship) and Geryon’s sexual conquest by Herakles, the well-known Greek folk hero. *Autobiography of Red* is subtitled “A Novel in Verse,” and this central long romance makes up the narrative, novelistic aspect of the book. It is flanked on both sides by pseudo-scholarly appendices, which perform the dual work of directing and frustrating the reader’s intellectual access to the central long poem. The first section of the book is a short essay on the surviving papyrus texts of the ancient Greek poet Stesichoros (630–555 BCE).
The essay concerns Stesichoros’s revolutionary use of adjectives. Carson claims that Stesichoros’s poetics departed from the “fixed diction” of the Homeric epic, where “being is stable” (Carson 1999, 4). Stesichoros “released being” by unlatching the substances of the world from their fixed attributes (4). The second section presents a translation of the fragments of Stesichoros’s Geryoneis. Some of these fragments are then iterated within the central romance. Appendices A, B and C (section three, four, and five, respectively) concern the putative blinding of Stesichoros by Helen of Troy—a punishment for affixing an insulting, licentious adjective to her name. Appendix B contains a translation of the palinode, or counter-song, which Stesichoros composed in order to retract the offensive adjective and regain his sight. Appendix C proceeds like a philosophical proposition, which purports to clarify what really happened with the blinding of Stesichoros by Helen of Troy:

1. Either Stesichoros was a blind man or he was not.
2. If Stesichoros was a blind man either his blindness was a temporary condition or it was permanent.
3. If Stesichoros’ blindness was a temporary condition this condition either had a contingent cause or it had none.
4. If this condition had a contingent cause that cause was Helen or the cause was not Helen.
5. If the cause was Helen Helen had her reasons or she had none.
6. If Helen had her reasons the reasons arose out of some remark Stesichoros made or they did not.

(18)

The proposition continues until its logic is thoroughly obfuscated, leaving the reader confused as to the truth about Helen and Stesichoros: “If it was not a lie either we are now in reverse and by continuing to reason in this way are likely to arrive back at the beginning of the question of the blinding of Stesichoros or we are not” (19). This dual motion, of playfully offering scholarly direction to the
reader, and then retracting or confounding that direction, is performed throughout *Autobiography of Red*.

The appendices profess to show the reader how to read the central long poem. As a professor of Classics, Carson has intellectual access to historical and literary frameworks of knowledge about antiquity that her average reader does not possess. In this formulation, Carson is an authority on Stesichoros, Geryon, Herakles, Helen, and the rest, and the appendices construct a framework of reading and understanding for the reader to put to use. Appendix titles like “RED MEAT: WHAT DIFFERENCE DID STESICHOROS MAKE?” and “CLEARING UP THE QUESTION OF STESICHOROS’ BLINING BY HELEN” clearly designate problems to be solved, but the titles and the solutions are playful. “This is a big question,” writes Carson, “the question of the blinding of Stesichoros by Helen (see Appendixes A, B), although generally regarded as unanswerable (but see Appendix C)” (5). The author plays a game of hide-and-seek with the reader, a strategy that mimics the game that Carson, as a scholar of classical texts, plays with the fragmented artefacts of papyrus that she studies. Like the incomplete texts of Stesichoros and Sappho, Carson holds out an offer of access to knowledge—about antiquity, language, and sexuality—and then frustrates it, producing instead a many-bodied, monstrous textual performance that complicates questions of both textual and sexual power. The last section of the book stages a fictional interview between Stesichoros, “S,” and an unnamed “I.” “I” designates both an invented interviewer persona, and the author herself. In response to questions about the dichotomy of blindness and sight, “S” proclaims that, “up to 1907 . . . I was (very simply) in charge of seeing for the world,” and, “everything everyone saw everyone saw because I saw it” (147–48). This grandiose claim of total authority for the vision of all humanity (“everyone”) is frustrated first through humour (“Of course it had its disagreeable side I could not blink or the world went blind”), and then through evasion and a pretence to heedlessness. “S” claims that “the war” began, he forgot about seeing, and “The world went ahead much as before let’s talk about something else now” (148). Studded with anachronisms and animated by evasion, this interview between reader and author circles back on itself. The interview mirrors the circling motion
of Appendix C’s logical proposition. It also reflects the dynamic, iterative relationship between the *Geryoneis* translations of the second section, and the book’s central romance.

The central romance and the *Geryoneis* translations offer different, competing models for translating ancient Greek culture into the modern world. The iterative relationship between the two sections provides a useful way to track Carson’s staging and complication of these alternative models. Certain facts about the myth of Geryon are generally acknowledged. Geryon was the grandson of Poseidon. He was a three-bodied or three-headed monster. He lived on an island called Erytheia, which means “red place,” with his two-headed dog and a herd of fabulous cattle. As one of his labours, the Greek folk hero Herakles was sent to kill Geryon, steal his cattle, and bring them back to Greece in a golden boat shaped like a cup (Roman and Roman 2010, 211; Curtis 2011). Carson’s translation of the fragments of the *Geryoneis* incorporates many of these “facts.” It also raises many questions: about authenticity, distortion, and errancy in translation. Should translations emphasise, or minimise, linguistic and cultural differences? How can a translator avoid imposing her textual authority, and “stand out of the way” (Carson 2003, x) of a text? Because translations undergo an unavoidable “domesticating” process (Venuti 2004b, 482), can a translation ever connect us to the foreign culture? Even a translation ethics that seeks to emphasise the foreignness of the foreign text is practised in domestic terms, “in domestic dialects, registers, discourses, and styles” (Venuti 2004b, 483).

Compared to other translations of the *Geryoneis*, Carson’s version is certainly radical. She elaborates the blanks in Stesichoros’s surviving text with anachronistic and experimental narrative strands. One might argue that Carson’s translation is best characterised as an adaptation rather than a translation, and group it with works like Margaret Atwood’s *The Penelopiad* (2005) or Louise Glück’s *Meadowlands* (1998). Both Glück and Atwood retell aspects of Homer’s *Odyssey* from a female subject position, arguably similar to retelling the story of Herakles’s labour not from the perspective of the conquering hero, but from the point of view of the penetrated, passive partner of the violent/erotic relationship. Neither *The Penelopiad* nor *Meadowlands* claims to be a translation of the foreign
Rather, they incorporate aspects of the foreign text’s narrative and iterate them in manifestly feminist ways to investigate issues of rape, divorce, and sexual power. Alternatively, Venuti might categorise Carson’s version of the *Geryoneis* as a “pseudotranslation,” which he defines as “an original composition that its author has chosen to present as a translated text” (Venuti 1998, 33). As a case study of a pseudotranslation, Venuti cites the literary hoax perpetrated by French writer Pierre Louys. Louys presented his collection of prose poems *Les Chansons de Bilitis* (1895) as a French translation of the ancient Greek poet Bilitis, said to be a contemporary of Sappho. Venuti writes, “On the one hand, *Les Chansons de Bilitis* exposed the multiple conditions of authorship, questioning the claim of originality; on the other hand, it exposed the many values that inform scholarship, questioning the claim of historical truth” (34). Venuti argues that by presenting himself as a translator instead of as an author, Louys drew his reader’s attention to the cultural materials—both ancient and contemporary—from which he produced his text. Although Carson’s translations are not a hoax—Stesichoros is a genuine historical figure, and the *Geryoneis* is a genuine literary artefact—Carson’s creative versioning performs similar work. One might argue that her revision of Stesichoros’s text is so radical, so far from the “original” text, that it has nothing to show us about the values and methods of the practice of translation in general. However, I argue that her errant versioning creatively foregrounds important questions around distortion, interpretation, and errancy in translation. Carson reframes errancy not only as a valuable part of the translation process, but as an inevitable part. She also draws attention to the necessary distortion that all classical scholarship works on the foreign text. As Carson states in an interview, “I like the space between languages because it’s a place of error or mistakenness, of saying things less well than you would like, or not being able to say them at all” (McNeilly 2003). Carson’s translations are fundamentally preoccupied with this space between languages. The shifting, errant, necessarily incomplete ways that Carson fills in the blanks prescribe a methodology of unease. They produce an errant text that is perhaps a truer representation of the translation process than more conventional translations.
In the short essay of *Autobiography of Red*’s first section, Carson sets herself up as heir to Stesichoros’s legacy of literary mutation. She praises Stesichoros for his revisionary use of adjectives, which depart radically from the example set by Homer. Homer’s recurring epithets—such as *black* blood, or *the blue eyebrows* of Poseidon—fixed the things of the world into a code: “Homer’s epithets are a fixed diction with which Homer fastens every substance in the world to its aptest attribute and holds them in place for epic consumption” (Carson 1999, 4). Carson argues that Stesichoros “released” these worldly substances by attaching to them revolutionary adjectives (5). In a startling passage that evokes both beauty and violence, Carson writes:

> Stesichoros released being. All the substances in the world went floating up. Suddenly there was nothing to interfere with horses being *hollow hooved*. Or a river being *root silver*. Or a child *bruiseless*. Or hell *as deep as the sun is high*. Or Herakles *ordeal strong*. Or a planet *middle night stuck*. Or an insomniac *outside the joy*. Or killings *cream black*.

Stesichoros radically translates the standard epithets of Greek poetry, and in doing so, he transforms the nouns, the substances, of the world. Carson inherits Stesichoros’s legacy by engaging in equally releasing translations. What this passage pays tribute to is Stesichoros’s renegotiation, not of what things are, but of what things are becoming. “Being,” here, is not a noun. It is an ongoing, mutable, renegotiable action. There are echoes here of Carson’s much-quoted declaration from *Eros the Bittersweet*: “Desire moves. Eros is a verb” (Carson 1998a, 17). The desire to write the substances of the world is the desire to rewrite, to mutate, to keep the text moving.

While slantly claiming a poetic heritage in Stesichoros’s radical unsettling, Carson also claims a fidelity to the surviving corpus of Stesichoros that is equal to other, more conventional, translations. She urges the reader to engage in their own interpretation about Stesichoros’s legacy based on her version. “You can answer for yourself the question ‘What difference did Stesichoros make?’ by considering
his masterpiece” (Carson 1999, 6), she writes, addressing the reader directly and encouraging an autonomy of reader-response that is supposedly of equal weight to the response any reader, including herself, might have to the text. However, this statement is complicated by the direction to read his masterpiece through the unstable lens of her version. Carson buttresses her translation with scholarly apparatus, and this destabilises her claim to the reader’s unhindered independence of interpretation. “Some of its principal fragments are below,” she writes. “If you find the text difficult, you are not alone. Time has dealt harshly with Stesichoros. No passage longer than thirty lines is quoted from him and papyrus scraps . . . withhold as much as they tell” (6). Carson writes that the whole body of Stesichoros’s text has been published thirteen times by several different editors since 1882, and no version is exactly the same in its contents or chronology. In this way, she situates her own translations as equally conventional as these other versions, none of which is “exactly the same as any other” (6). However, as I have already noted, Carson’s translation is radically different. Like the citational strategies of the “Freud” poems and the citation of proverbs in “Just for the Thrill,” Autobiography of Red animates a shifting relation between textual authority and errant versioning. She includes multiple, competing versions of the same fragment in different sections of the book. She fills in the blanks of the papyrus scraps with iterated scenes and narrative strands from the central romance, which extends the unconventionality of the Geryoneis translations to a full-blown fictional adaptation. In this way, Carson acknowledges the aspect of pure invention of her translations, and knowingly unsettles their claim to authority.

In the second section of the book, titled “Red Meat: Fragments of Stesichoros,” Carson’s version of the Geryoneis is presented as a straightforward and authoritative translation. The last two fragments of this section read:

XV. TOTAL THINGS KNOWN ABOUT GERYON
He loved lightning He lived on an island His mother was a Nymph of a river that ran to the sea His father was a gold Cutting tool Old scholia say that Stesichoros says that
While these texts are presented as straight translations of the surviving fragments of Stesichoros, they actually adapt textual moments from the surviving fragments, and blend them with intertextual information about the Geryon myth, plus inventions from Carson’s imagination. This creates a kind of hybrid monster of a translation. The “island” where Geryon lived is “Erytheia” (Curtis 2011, 87), the red place or mythical red isle that some late Greek writers identified with Spain (97). David Campbell’s translation identifies Geryon’s mother and father as Callirrhoe and Chrysaor. The fragments of Campbell’s translation that correspond to the fragments of Carson’s version, cited above, are labelled S10 and S11. They read: “. . . painful . . . ; no, my friend, . . . your mother Callirrhoe and Chrysaor, dear to Ares, . . .” (Campbell 1991, 67). Paul Curtis’s version (fragment 5 in his rendering of the order) reads: “Grievous . . . ; but dear, mother [Kallirrhoe] and Chrysaor, beloved by Ares” (76). It is widely noted that Callirrhoe was an Oceanid sea nymph (Roman and Roman 2010, 108), and Chrysaor was the son of Medusa and a warrior whose attribute was a golden sword (117–18). In Carson’s version, the named mother, “Callirrhoe,” a genuine textual moment from Stesichoros’s surviving corpus, is iterated as: “His mother was a/Nymph of a river that ran to the sea.” Similarly, “Chrysaor” becomes: “His father was a gold/Cutting tool.” These translation choices seem to distort the details that survive in Stesichoros’s original text, or contaminate them with more substantial intertextual embellishments. Still other aspects of Carson’s translation seem to be
pure invention. No scholia testify that Geryon loved lightning, and nowhere in 
Stesichoros’s body of surviving fragments does the phrase “red breezes” appear. 
However, Carson here is taking up Susan Sontag’s dictate to enact an “erotics” 
not a “hermeneutics” of the text (1961, 14). She purposefully blends textual 
evidence with imaginative fictions, to set into motion a performative erotics of 
exchange between the papyrological evidence, testimonia by later Greek writers, 
and different and potentially errant interpretations of the text. In Curtis’s version, 
“Callirrhoe” is spelled “Kallirrhoe,” and the certainty of the translation of the 
mother’s name is questioned by a set of parentheses. This is a further example of 
the unavoidable errancies present in all translations of Stesichoros’s texts.

In the body of the romance, these fragments are iterated—in the Derridean 
sense of repeated and altered—when Geryon the schoolboy begins to write his 
autobiography:

His mother’s friend Maria gave him a beautiful notebook from Japan with 
a fluorescent cover.

On the cover Geryon wrote Autobiography. Inside he set down the facts.

*Total Facts Known About Geryon.*

_Geryon was a monster everything about him was red. Geryon lived on an island in the Atlantic called the Red Place. Geryon’s mother was a river that runs to the sea the Red Joy River Geryon’s father was gold. Some say Geryon had six hands six feet some say wings. Geryon was red so were his strange red cattle. Herakles came one day killed Geryon got the cattle._

He followed Facts with Questions and Answers.

*QUESTIONS Why did Herakles kill Geryon?*

1. Just violent.

2. Had to it was one of His Labors (10th).
3. Got the idea that Geryon was Death otherwise he could live forever.

FINALLY

Geryon had a little red dog Herakles killed that too.

(37)

This re-presentation of a further errant version of the “total facts known about Geryon” highlights the multiple representations of Geryon in different ancient texts and paintings: “Some say Geryon had six hands six feet some say wings.” In some classical texts, Geryon is represented as three-headed with a single body. In others, he is represented as three-bodied. Willis Barnstone claims that Stesichoros’s description of Geryon influenced subsequent sixth century vase paintings, giving the monster wings where before he had had none (2010, 96). Even when Carson imaginatively enables Geryon to write his autobiography, it is still represented as an errant version. Geryon’s mother comes to visit Geryon’s classroom and sees the kinds of stories he has been writing. “Does he ever write anything with a happy ending?” she asks (38):

Geryon paused.
Then he reached up and carefully disengaged the composition paper from the teacher’s hand.
Proceeding to the back of the classroom he sat at his usual desk and took out a pencil.

New ending.
All over the world the beautiful red breezes went on blowing hand in hand.

(38)

This particular errant version is emotionally charged, as Carson’s Geryon is an unhappy child who wants to represent an untruthful “happy ending” for the sake
of his mother. However, Carson’s multiple, errant translations suggest that there is no truthful or original version of the story of Geryon.

Like the poems discussed in chapter 1, these multiple, errant versions draw attention to and emphasise the action of writing: “Old scholia say that Stesichoros says that”; “Some say Geryon had six hands six feet some say wings”; “Does he ever write anything with a happy ending?”; “Inside [Geryon] set down the facts” (emphasis mine). Carson’s insistence on the action of writing within her narrative registers the wider iterative movements of texts about Geryon. It also sets into motion a shifting relationship between the text’s many levels of authorship. Stesichoros is authoring Geryon, who was authored by other ancient poets and performers before him; Geryon is subsequently authored by other writers and artists who repeat but alter Stesichoros’s influence; Carson is authoring Stesichoros; Carson is authoring Geryon; Geryon is authoring himself. While Carson references these multiple trajectories of authorship within her book, and thus complicates the notion of a singular or definitive textual authority, as author of the book she nevertheless wields a certain power of representation. Her authorial unease about this textual power dynamic is mirrored by Geryon’s struggle with the dynamics of sexual power, which is one of the book’s key themes.

Carson’s uneasy approach plays with what translation theorists term the “invariant” and the “remainder.” Venuti uses these terms to understand how features of a translation “both enable and set up obstacles to cross-cultural understanding” (Venuti 2004a, 5). Invariants are features of the text that stay the same when carried over from the foreign text into the domestic language. Invariants include aspects such as the basic elements of narrative form, the actions of the characters, chronology, sequences of events, dates, places, and names. Remainders are everything else: the particulars of the text that are open to interpretation and vulnerable to decisions. According to Venuti, the translator inscribes domestic intelligibilities onto the text to enable it to be received by the domestic audience. Because the remainders are vulnerable to alteration, “translation never communicates in an untroubled fashion” and “the ,ing process is totalizing, even if never total, never seamless or final” (Venuti 2004b, 482).
Both Carson and Venuti use the word “releasing.” Carson writes of Stesichoros releasing adjectives, and Venuti writes about translations releasing domestic remainders. It is as if there are caged potentialities within the text that translation or versioning can set into free motion. Within the bounded form of the book, near-limitless domestic intelligibilities can be inscribed upon the text by both translator and reader. Venuti argues that while the remainder is the site of potential errancy, it is also the site of the text’s potential for connection with a new readership community (Venuti 2004b, 498–499). It is the locus for the kind of communication that is necessarily partial and incomplete, but still valuable. Remainders enable translations to communicate the foreign culture’s experience of the text—albeit in a partial and necessarily errant way.

In Carson’s hands, however, even the foreign text’s invariants become remainders. The ancient, mythic context of the translated fragments is brought into jarring juxtaposition with objects from the twentieth century. The plain facts of the characters’ actions are reframed as metaphorical. Herakles does not slay Geryon: he seduces him. The invariants of time and place are jolted through the use of anachronistic lines like “the ticking red taxi of the incubus,” “Coil of the hot plate” (10), and “in those days the police were weak Family was strong” (12). While Carson’s domestic inscriptions seem extreme, they draw attention to the alteration that any act of translation works upon the text. In the introductory appendix to Autobiography of Red, she writes: “the fragments of the Geryoneis itself read as if Stesichoros had composed a substantial narrative poem then ripped it to pieces and buried the pieces in a box with some song lyrics and lecture notes and scraps of meat. The fragments’ numbers tell you roughly how the pieces fell out of the box. You can of course keep shaking the box” (7). By comparing different translations, we see how the “shaken box” of any Geryoneis translation embodies the iterative tension between repetition and alteration. Curtis’s chronology of the Stesichoros fragments differs from Campbell’s, which of course differs from Carson’s. Textual uncertainties are inescapable. As Curtis speculates in the notes to his Geryoneis translation: “perhaps in fr. 5 Menoites addresses Geryon before the speech of Kallirrhoe in fr. 6. Fr. 7 could be some preamble from Geryon as he meets Herakles for the first time. Fr. 8 also contains a vocative
and so is placed after fr. 7. This is out of convenience. All one can do really is guess” (2011, 64).

Like Curtis, some translators acknowledge the textual uncertainties, but aim to present as stable a version of the original text as possible. Carson, on the other hand, keeps “shaking the box” within *Autobiography of Red*. Errant versions of the *Geryoneis* compete within the different sections of the book. Like the push-pull motion of guidance and obfuscation in the scholarly appendices, Carson proposes a translation of the text and then renegotiates that translation by offering another. Her iterations avoid presenting even a stable version of *her own* translation of the ancient text.

Meanwhile, Carson’s erotically charged translation choices release domestic remainders that connect the reader to aspects of ancient Greek literature and sexuality that more conservative or supposedly faithful translations do not. Carson connects the fraught and iterative processes of translation to a key theme in both ancient Greek literature and *Autobiography of Red*: the fraught tension between care and violence in erotic relationships. Citing the first publication of the complete Stesichoros fragments by Bergk in 1882, Carson writes, “Bergk says the history of a text is like a long caress” (Carson 1999, 6). This follows on the heels of her statement about time’s relationship with the corpus of Stesichoros, which I cited earlier: “Time has dealt harshly with Stesichoros” (6). The “harshness” of the “caress”—of both eros and the work of translation—is a constant theme.

The first two “fragments” of Carson’s *Geryoneis* translations are as follows:

1. GERYON
   Geryon was a monster everything about him was red
   Put his snout out of the covers in the morning it was red
   How stiff the red landscape where his cattle scraped against
   Their hobbles in the red wind
   Burrowed himself down in the red dawn jelly of Geryon’s
   Dream

   Geryon’s dream began red then slipped out of the vat and ran
Upsail broke silver shot up through his roots like a pup

Secret pup At the front end of another red day

II. MEANWHILE HE CAME
Across the salt knobs it was Him
Knew about the homegold
Had sighted red smoke above the red spires

(9)

While there is no surviving Stesichoros fragment that corresponds to Carson’s “I. GERYON,” her second fragment has a traceable source in papyrological evidence. There is a definite correspondence with David Campbell’s version:

…over the waves of the deep brine they came to the beautiful island of the gods, where the Hesperides have their homes of solid gold; . . . (buds?) . . .
(1991, 65)

and Paul Curtis’s version:

They arrived over the waves of the deep brine to the beautiful . . . of the gods, there the Hesperides have their golden homes.
(2011, 75)

In Carson’s version, “waves of the deep brine” becomes “salt knobs,” “homes of solid gold” or “golden homes” becomes “homegold,” and “they” becomes “Him.” The choice to transfigure “waves” into “knobs” echoes the shape of Campbell’s questioned “(buds?)” and thus infuses the radically altered landscape of both the sea and the text with a hidden question mark. “Salt knobs” has a definite sexual overtone, as does much of the language of Carson’s first fragment. The totalising domestication process registers the genital connotations of “knobs” and “stiff.” Alliteration connects many of the erotically charged words, such as “salt knobs,”
“snout,” “stiff,” “broke silver” and “shot up.” The reference to the “front end” of the day strengthens the sexual overtones of Geryon’s “stiff” morning-in-bed landscape, which combines with phrases like “Burrowed himself down in the red dawn jelly of Geryon’s / Dream” to effect a strong erotic mood.

These erotic images also suggest textual motion in the migration from one language to another. In a 1997 interview, Carson says, “When you’re travelling around in Greek words, you have a sense that you’re among the roots of meaning, not up in the branches. . . . More reality in the words. They just shine right out at you” (D’Agata 1997, 7). Carson conceives of the Greek language as originating down in the “roots” of meaning, as opposed to English, which is “up in the branches,” with its history of monstrous or many-bodied borrowings from preceding language systems. While it is difficult to reconcile this fantasy of origins with Carson’s foregrounding, throughout her poetry, of the instability of meaning or “reality,” the tree image is actually an apt description of Carson as a speaker of both languages, who is pulled in two directions: upwards and downwards from the newer to the older language and back again, forwards and backwards in time. In Carson’s narrative, Geryon, too, is pulled in several directions. His iteration in the contemporary world is not an easy one. A connection to the idea of English’s iterative migration can be read in the lines:

Geryon’s dream began red then slipped out of the vat and ran
Upsail broke silver shot up through his roots like a pup

In this reading, it is not only Geryon’s sexual desire that has “slipped” out of the “vat” of his body and “broke . . . up through his roots”; it is also the migration of the textual presences of Geryon that have “shot up” through the roots of Greek and branched into the derivations and deviations of other languages, including English.

Stesichoros’s model as the unsettler of fixed textual certainties is also referenced here. The “silver” colour of sexual and textual motion iterates Stesichoros’s “root silver” river. The many grey shades of interpretation and iteration are represented as an enchanting, seducing “silver” shimmer of textuality.
that “shines right out at you.” While Carson emphasises erotic features of Stesichoros’s text, the dynamic erotics of the text’s multiple, errant versions performs a kind of seduction on the author.

Campbell and Curtis’s translations do not register such erotic or seductive effects. In Carson’s translations, then, is this emphasis on erotic themes a complete deviation from Stesichoros? In another of Carson’s fragments, she clips down one of the most substantial of Stesichoros’s surviving papyrus fragments to focus “on the moment of penetration in the conquest of Geryon by Herakles” (Rae 2008, 236), when Herakles’s arrow parts Geryon’s skull:

XIV. HERAKLES’ ARROW

Arrow means kill It parted Geryon’s skull like a comb Made The boy neck lean At an odd slow angle sideways as when a Poppy shames itself in a whip of Nude breeze

(13)

Ian Rae argues that the homoerotic subtext of the Geryoneis would have been obvious to Stesichoros’s Greek audience (Rae 2008, 237). Campbell translates this last image as: “Geryon drooped his neck to one side, like a poppy which spoiling its tender beauty suddenly sheds its petals” (1991, 77). Curtis’s version reads: “Geryon tilted his neck like a poppy when spoiling its gentle body suddenly drops its petals” (2011, 84). In Carson’s translation, “spoiling” becomes “shame,” which, along with “whip” and “nude,” registers a darkly sexual, even sadomasochistic, tone. “Geryon’s” neck becomes “the boy neck,” “boy” being a common epithet in antiquity for the “passive” or receiving partner in a homosexual relationship, no matter their age (Hornblower, Spawforth, and Eidinow 2012, 701). Carson’s connection between violent penetration and sexual penetration emphasises an aspect of Greek culture that other translations suppress.

As Martha Nussbaum shows in her study of eros and Greek ethical norms, describing erotic situations with war imagery was a common trope of Greek literature. Nussbaum cites the chorus of Euripides’s Hippolytus as illustration: “Eros, you who drip longing down upon the eyes, bringing sweet delight to the
souls of those against whom you lead your armed assault” (Nussbaum 2002, 60). Of course, warlike sexual metaphors are also lodged in contemporary English. We talk about “sexual conquests” or “sexual advances.” Carson’s translations foreground this connection between the foreign and the domestic cultures.

Geryon’s casting as the passive boy partner, the subject of sexual and violent conquest, clearly references ancient Greek sexual practices. The relationship between Geryon and Herakles in the central romance iterates the Greek practice of older men courting beautiful youths, and persuading them into relationships that were both sexual and pedagogic. Ideally, the older man (the erastes) takes a generous and caring interest in the youth’s (the eromenos’s) development as a man, and, once his desire is sated, a lifelong friendship supports the youth to develop the qualities of good reasoning and self-control. These qualities—sophrosyne in Greek—characterised the ancient Greek ideal of masculine conduct (Carson 1994, 17; Nussbaum 2002, 67). As the older and more experienced partner in Carson’s romance, Herakles is sensibly cast as the erastes, Geryon as the eromenos. During Herakles and Geryon’s first sexual encounter in the romance, their ages are revealed:

He [Geryon] was fourteen.

*Sex is a way of getting to know someone,*

Herakles had said. He was sixteen. Hot unsorted parts of the question were licking up from every crack in Geryon, he beat at them as a nervous laugh escaped him.

(44)

Herakles plays the role of instructor, of sorts. In keeping with the conventions of the erastes–eromenos power balance, Geryon allows the first sexual encounter, but does not particularly enjoy it, as evidenced by the lines: “*Tell me,* said Geryon and he intended to ask him, *Do people who like sex / have a question about it too?*” (45). Martha Nussbaum writes that the Greek eromenos, “conventionally, normatively imagined,” has no strong sexual desires of his own (2002, 69). The experience of eros belongs, normatively speaking, to the erastes. The eromenos
should be compliant, but remain cold. Although only two years younger, Geryon is the naïf, the boy of the pair, while Herakles is the initiated man—as this passage demonstrates:

A big red butterfly
went past riding on a little black one.
*How nice*, said Geryon, *he’s helping him*. Herakles opened one eye and looked.
*He’s fucking him.*
*Herakles!* said his grandmother. He closed his eyes.
*My heart aches when I am bad.*

(49–50)

This passage also registers the tension between the pedagogic responsibilities and the erotic disturbances of the *erastes*, and hints at which aspect will win out in Herakles and Geryon’s relationship. However, Herakles’s role as *erastes* and Geryon’s role as *eromenos* is not fixed or static. While he has a complicated and novice relationship with sex, Geryon is also taken over by the madness of eros, and both Herakles and Geryon are imagined through recurring metaphors of heat and burning: “Hot unsorted parts of the question were licking up from every crack in Geryon” (44); “Flames licked along the floorboards inside him” (62); “*You’re cold*, said Herakles suddenly, *your hands are cold. Here. /* He put Geryon’s hands inside his shirt” (39); “Herakles lies like a piece of torn silk in the heat of the blue saying, / *Geryon please*” (54). Towards the end of the narrative, Carson iterates Stesichoros’s revisionary “root silver” adjective to further disturb the *erastes–eromenos* balance of power, by casting Geryon in the position of active, penetrating partner:

Geryon liked to touch in slow succession each of the bones of Herakles’ back
as it arched away from him into
who knows what dark dream of its own, running both hands all the way down

54
from the base of the neck
to the end of the spine which he can cause to shiver like a root in the rain.

(141)

The sound connection between “root silver” and “shiver like a root in the rain” is undeniable. As Stesichoros released the substances of the world, so Geryon is released from his fixed role as the passive partner.

The fixed roles that Carson’s narrative releases were actually far from fixed in Greek literature itself. Nussbaum cites a speech from Plato’s Symposium that pushes against the normative understanding of the erastes as possessed by eros. It suggests that beautiful young men should encourage a proposition from a lover who is not in love with them, rather than from a lover who is (Nussbaum 2002, 65). This speech, Nussbaum argues, combines a cultural paradox with sound cultural good sense, because an erastes who is not blinded by the “unreasoning ‘mad’ passion” (67) of eros is more likely to be a caring and educative partner. The speech highlights a cultural tension that recurs in Greek literature: the good and noble intentions of eros in constant conflict with its darker elements. As Socrates says in Plato’s dialogue, “As wolves love lambs so lovers love their loves” (Jowett 1953, 147). Nussbaum translates this phrase slightly differently: “As wolves love lambs, so erastai love a boy” (2002, 66). She speculates that the speech “to some extent may be exploiting a gap between social norm and reality” (69). It acknowledges that eromenoi did in fact have erotically–driven motives of their own, but dared not acknowledge them (69). Details from the Geryoneis translations iterated (repeated and altered) within the body of the book’s romance also register the tension between violence and care in the erastes–eromenos relationship, as in “IV. GERYON’S DEATH BEGINS”:

Geryon walked the red length of his mind and answered No
It was murder And torn to see the cattle lay
All these darlings said Geryon And now me

(10)
This fragment, from the book’s second section anticipates Geryon’s slaying by Herakles—the moment of violent penetration and the conquest of the hero over the monster. Characteristically, it is placed out of a meaningful chronological sequence, perhaps reframing the death of Geryon as the “little death” of orgasm and the pain of the heartbreak that is to slay him in the romance. Certain word choices from this fragment are iterated in a lovemaking scene in the romance, where Herakles pleads for satisfaction:

Herakles lies like a piece of torn silk in the heat of the blue saying,
Geryon please. . . .
Put your mouth on it Geryon please. . . .
Geryon felt clear and powerful—not some wounded angel after all
but a magnetic person like Matisse
or Charlie Parker!
(54)

The iteration of “lay” as “lies,” “torn” as “torn silk,” “the red length of his mind” as “the heat of the blue,” and “please . . . please” as “answered No,” creates a connection between the passages. While in the second passage Geryon still plays the role of the penetrated partner, his position as the slain victim of eros’ violence is overturned. Momentarily, he is the powerful one, noble and “magnetic.” As the thematic and narrative elements of the romance shift between, complicate, and enact the tension between the noble and violent aspects of eros, power shifts from Herakles to Geryon and back again—a sexual unsettling that enacts the unsettling of the textual authority of the translator.
Textual Motion in *If Not, Winter: Fragments of Sappho*

*If Not, Winter: Fragments of Sappho* presents Carson’s translations of the surviving fragments of the poetry of Sappho (c. 600 BCE). In the introduction, Carson claims: “In translating I tried to put down all that can be read of each poem in the plainest language I could find, using where possible the same order of words and thoughts as Sappho did. I like to think that, the more I stand out of the way, the more Sappho shows through” (Carson 2003, x). This manifesto of translucency seems, at first, to be diametrically opposed to the translation strategies in *Autobiography of Red*. Carson’s version of the *Geryoneis* fills in the gaps of Stesichoros’s papyrus fragments with anachronistic scenes and out-of-place diction. She radically alters the “original” Greek version by plugging the spaces with self-consciously anomalous speech genres and narrative strands. The effect of these strategies is manifold. *Autobiography of Red* foregrounds the inevitability of distortion in translating ancient texts, reframes errancy as both an inevitable and valuable aspect of the translation process, and illuminates notions of Greek sexual power politics in the *Geryoneis* that other translations suppress. *Autobiography of Red* emphasises the author’s power to reinterpret and recontextualise the text—to make up a new version—while renegotiating the idea of a singular, authoritative, or definitive final draft.

In *If Not, Winter*, conversely, Carson does not fill in the blanks in an attempt to reconstruct a complete poem out of the surviving fragments, as other translators of Sappho have done. She claims a kind of fidelity to *what is there*, the text in its fragmentary state. Her strategy is to represent the text’s holes with brackets. This is not a strategy original with Carson, but one commonly used in Classics texts. She writes, “When translating texts read from papyri, I have used a single square bracket to give an impression of missing matter, so that ] or [ indicates destroyed papyrus or the presence of letters not quite legible somewhere in the line. It is not the case that every gap or illegibility is specifically indicated: this would render the page a blizzard of marks and inhibit reading. Brackets are an aesthetic gesture
toward the papyrological event rather than an accurate record of it” (Carson 2003, xi).

It is telling that Carson evades a definition of her version of Sappho as “an accurate record.” She presents herself as an authority, as evidenced by her close knowledge of the papyrological evidence. Then she undercuts her scholarly authority by drawing attention to the necessary errors of her translation. A similar undercutting motion can be seen in the introduction when, after claiming to “stand out of the way” in order to let Sappho “[show] through,” she states: “This is an amiable fantasy (transparency of self) within which most translators labor” (x).

In taking up the project of *If Not, Winter*, Carson is unavoidably joining a long line of cultural conscriptions of Sappho. Sappho’s poetry and the so-called facts of her life (most of which are almost certainly invented, such as her role as the teacher of a music school or, more racy, the mistress of a sex academy for pubescent girls [Parker 1996]) have been put to many different uses in different eras and cultural climates. Joan DeJean’s book *Fictions of Sappho* maps how Sappho’s image has been “adapted to new purposes” (1989, 3) in successive eras of literary reception, from the Enlightenment’s use of Sappho as a paragon of bourgeois maternal bliss and devoted motherhood, to her image as a woman of “easy virtue” some hundred years later, and a fearful suppression of her lesbianism throughout (117). More recently, in a review of Erica Jong’s unashamedly pulpy picaresque of the life of Sappho (a total fiction), Meryl Altman lists the results of a cursory internet search with “Sappho” as keyword:

141 Amazon.com hits revealed (among other things) a handful of rivalrous, and widely divergent, translations; a revival of serious scholarship; links to second-wave and later feminist theory and practice (*Sappho Was a Right-On Woman, Sappho Goes to Hollywood* (lots of pix of Garbo and Dietrich), *Sappho Goes to Law School* (critical legal theory); other women poets, Greek and non-Greek; the *Sappho T-Shirt Calendar* (sold out); lesbian formula romances from pulpy to earnest; a young adult book, blessed by an eminent gay historian; and a DVD, ‘The Witches of Sappho Salon.’ Customers who bought this last also bought ‘Sin Sisters’
and ‘Vampire Vixens,’ whereas customers who bought Willis Barnstone’s translation of Sappho’s poems also bought The Golden Notebook, Colette, and The Second Sex.

(Altman 2004, 8)

This list, with its examples of scholarly texts and pop culture products rubbing shoulders, shows the myriad uses to which the cultural currency of Sappho has been put. It is this history of spilled ink and cultural enlistments that Carson reacts against when she writes: “Controversies about [Sappho’s] personal ethics and way of life have taken up a lot of people’s time throughout the history of Sapphic scholarship. It seems that she knew and loved women as deeply as she did music. Can we leave the matter there?” (Carson 2003, x).

DeJean’s thesis is that Sappho is a product of cultural imagination, and that scholars and translators project their own standards of female sexuality onto the fictive corpus (both sexual and textual) of Sappho. She writes, “Anyone who still believes that scholarship can be ideologically neutral has only to turn to virtually any monument in the history of Sappho interpretation to learn just how innocent this view is” (DeJean 1989, 10). Echoing these sentiments of Sappho as a figure both made-up and unknown, John Winkler writes: “Monique Wittig and Sande Zeig in their Lesbian Peoples: Material for a Dictionary devote a full page to Sappho. The page is blank.” Classics scholar Holt Parker responds, “Perhaps an even better image for Sappho than the blank page is the palimpsest. There does exist a text of Sappho, but it is so thickly written over with critical accumulation that it is almost impossible to make out the words beneath” (1996, 148).

Certainly, Carson’s translations are not “ideologically neutral.” While If Not, Winter errs on the side of the blank page (as opposed to Autobiography of Red, which, with its scholarly and pseudo-scholarly appendices and its own internal revisions and iterations, tends more toward the palimpsest), the choices Carson makes in translating the foreign text are unavoidably infused with her philosophical interpretations and preoccupations. If we take this to be a given, then the question is: what are the ideologies that seep through in Carson’s
translation of Sappho? What preoccupations inform her translation strategies?
And what does this reveal about the authorial process of translating texts?

In works other than *If Not, Winter*, Carson has iterated Sappho’s name and her poetry to issue a challenge to singular authoritative interpretations. In the poem series *TV Men* (Carson 2000a), Sappho’s famous fragment 31 is deconstructed, as the poem imagines a kind of behind-the-scenes making-of TV show, with Sappho at its centre:

*TV Men: Sappho*

Sappho is smearing on her makeup at 5 a.m. in the woods by the hotel.
He She Me You Thou disappears

Now resembling a Beijing concubine Sappho makes her way onto the set
Laugh Breathe Look Speak Is disappears

The lighting men are setting up huge white paper moons here and there on the grass.
Tongue Flesh Fire Eyes Sound disappears

Behind these, a lamp humming with a thousand broken wasps.
Cold Shaking Green Little Death disappears

*Places everyone,* calls the director.
Nearness When Down In I disappears

*Toes to the line please,* says the assistant cameraman.
But All And Must To disappears

*Action!*
Disappear disappears.

Sappho stares into the camera and begins, *Since I am a poor man—*
Cut

(Carson 2000a, 118)
The poem iterates Sappho’s fragment 31 in the contemporary context of the TV show. Carson reframes the words of fragment 31 to emphasise the directives and circumscriptions acted upon Sappho by contemporary iterations of her poetic texts and her desire. The second lines of every couplet of “TV Men: Sappho” are taken from Carson’s own translation of fragment 31:

He seems to me equal to gods that man
whoever he is who opposite you
sits and listens close
to your sweet speaking

and lovely laughing—oh it
puts the heart in my chest on wings
for when I look at you, even a moment, no speaking
is left in me

no: tongue breaks and thin
fire is racing under skin
and in eyes no sight and drumming
fills ears

and cold sweat holds me and shaking
grips me all, greener than grass
I am and dead—or almost
I seem to me.

But all is to be dared, because even a person of poverty
(Carson 2003, 63)

*TV Men: Sappho* enacts an intertextual performance that integrates and shifts between many possible recontextualisations of Sappho. It references culturally charged interpretations of the erotic themes of Sappho’s poetry. The image of
Sappho made over like “a Beijing concubine” iterates some scholars’ claim that Sappho was a prostitute. The image of “paper moons” conveys a sense of both naturalism and artifice. It suggests that the different contexts and interpretive backgrounds against which scholars and readers receive Sappho are, to some extent, constructed and able to be dismantled. Many competing naturalistic translations (“white paper moons,” plural) complicate the sense of a single natural or indisputable version of the text. The poem’s set, where these artificial objects are intended to look natural, echoes DeJean’s claim that no scholarship can be “ideologically neutral.” The repeating, iterative form of the poem, where the words of Sappho’s fragment steadily disappear in the glare of the set lights, echoes Carson’s statement about the impossibility of transparency for the translator: when translators shine an interpretive light on fragmented papyrus, there is a necessarily dual motion of illuminating and obscuring. Some aspects of the text are highlighted, while others are pushed into the dark. In Venuti’s words, the process of domesticating the text is “totalizing” because “the translator negotiates the linguistic and cultural differences of the foreign text by reducing them and supplying another set of differences, basically domestic, drawn from the receiving language and culture to enable the foreign to be received there” (2004b, 482). The repeating form of the poem, into which different word combinations can be slotted, performs a reverse recontextualisation of the word “disappear.” The poem frames “disappear” as part of Sappho’s original poem: “Disappear disappears.” In this way, Carson suggests that absence in the form of errancy and incompleteness inheres in all texts. This inherent errancy is only emphasised in texts like Sappho’s, which survive in fragmented form.

The agents of direction in the poem—the director and the assistant cameraman—exercise a heavy leverage over Sappho’s reception. The assistant cameraman’s order, “Toes to the line please,” demands that the poem’s subject conform to a clear boundary and follow the rules. By juxtaposing the director/author’s attempted enforcement of boundaries with the text’s disappearance, the poem complicates the idea of the author’s ability to fix textual boundaries and definitively interpret.
The brilliance of Sappho’s fragment 31 is the interplay of speaking and not speaking; it registers a dynamic interaction between muteness (the disappearance of words) and declarative agency. The lyric subject claims not to be able to speak—“when I look at you, even a moment, no speaking / is left in me”—and yet she is the speaker, the agent of desire and language in the poem. The implied speaker tells the reader about the powerful man who is so directly engaged with the object of desire, but she does not tell us his words. Thus, the godlike man who opens the poem is effectively muted. TV Men: Sappho stages a relationship between illumination and opacity, freedom and boundaries, authorial power and interpretive multiplicity. If Not, Winter carries on this work, alerting us to the tension between textual boundaries and free textual motion in the Sappho translations.

The translation choices in If Not, Winter are fundamentally concerned with textual, sexual and cultural boundaries. Carson iterates the ancients’ notion of females as beings with incomplete and undefined physical and metaphysical boundaries, and reacts against the ancients’ need to enforce boundaries for the female. Like the director and the cameraman in TV Men: Sappho, the translator exercises an unavoidable influence over the representation and reception of a foreign text. First, she selects the text she wishes to translate. Venuti argues that the “domesticating process” begins here, even before the work of translation begins (2004b, 482). Then she makes choices about presentation and ordering, releases certain domestic remainders in her choice of language, and, in the case of Sappho, whose poems survive as scraps of papyrus fragments, makes decisions not only about how to translate, but what to translate. Carson’s attempt to “stand out of the way” of the text is born of an anxious awareness of these powers that she, as translator, wields over Sappho’s motion. To an extent, the act and practice of translation cannot avoid imposing certain boundaries on the domestic text. It exercises an unavoidable leverage over the text’s movement. Books, like Greek women, are, after all, supposed to be bound. (The unusual un-binding of Carson’s Nox is a notable counter-example.) However, Carson is manifestly uneasy about wielding this binding power, and her translation strategies in both If Not, Winter and Autobiography of Red convey this unease. The translations in If Not, Winter
release suggestions of the essential unboundedness and mobility of the ancient woman; but through translation choices that evade the imposition of paratextual directives, the fragments renegotiate the alleged passivity of this notion of woman’s motion and unboundedness. Thus, they create a dynamic space where the trajectories of textual authority can travel in many directions.

In the essay “Dirt and Desire: Essay on the Phenomenology of Female Pollution in Antiquity” (Carson 2000a), Carson writes that the boundaries of women—perceived as pliant, porous, and unreliable by the ancients—posed a perceived threat to the moral order of Greek society. The Pythagorean Table of Opposites places “masculine” on the same side as “boundary” or “limit,” against “feminine” and “unbounded” (along with “motion,” “darkness,” “crooked,” and “evil”) on the other side (2000a, 133). Plato aligns women with the qualities of “receptacle” and “reservoir,” which is “shapeless, viewless, all-receiving” and which “takes its form and activation from whatever shape enters it” (132–133). There is an interesting connection between the “receptacle” or “reservoir” of the female body and character, and the “vat” from which Geryon’s desire and the interpretive liquidity of the text escapes in Autobiography of Red. For the ancients, women and boys as receptive (penetrated) sexual partners occupied a similar passive space on the axis of power. In Greek social practice, writes Carson, woman’s passivity is intrinsic to her role as a mobile unit. While the male citizen has a fixed place in the social and physical world, a woman, when married, moves away from her father’s house and into the house of her husband. Carson writes,

This transgression is necessary (to legitimate continuation of the house), dangerous (insofar as the house incorporates a serious and permanent crisis of contact), and creates the context for illicit varieties of female movement, for example, that of the adulteress out of her husband’s house, with attendant damage to male property and reputation.

(Carson 2000a, 131)
In Carson’s estimation, the mobility of the Greek female, and the porousness of her boundaries, was a threat to *sophrosyne*, the social ideal of masculine self-control. The ancients’ images of the porousness and polluting action of the female form are representations of female sexuality, which spills over the ordered male world like water from a leaky jar. Woman’s wildness, wetness, and wantonness must be contained. Carson writes,

The Greek female was expected to be no more in command of herself or her impulses than a bitch in heat. This conviction was given early expression in the legislation of Solon, which restricted the walks, feasts, trousseaux, mourning, food, drink and sexual activity of women, and also later by the institution of the *gynaikonomoi* (supervisors of women), special magistrates appointed to maintain feminine ‘decency’ or ‘good order.’ Solon’s legislation is but one well-publicized example of a complex array of restrictions on the movements and attire and actions of woman, on the spaces and gestures and garments within which she lived. (Carson 2000a, 142)

Women, as transgressors of boundaries, embodied the ancients’ notion of dirt. Dirt must be firstly be avoided, and secondly, cleaned up. Clear physical and moral boundaries were the way to keep the ethical order of things as uncontaminated as possible.

The containment of women was also a feature of Greek architecture and wedding imagery. John Gould writes that in Athenian houses, women’s quarters were located on the upper floor and in the recesses of the house. Such houses had no side doors or back doors. There was only a single front door (Gould 2001, 132–133). Women were “boundary-crossers” (154), wild, unbroken horses whose fearsome sexuality knows no borders, and “marriage is a yoke” (143). A single front door and a husband were two of the ways containment was practised on the Greek female.

With this in mind—ancient Greek society’s enforcement of women’s movement and expression—how are we to read a text such as *If Not, Winter,*
which gives Sappho’s fragments an abundance of breathing space, which places lines, phrases, and even single words on pages entirely to themselves, and which privileges the white space, the incompleteness of the surviving poems, and the permeated boundaries of the papyrus? Most of the pages in If Not, Winter are mostly blank. Phrases and single words are surrounded by a field of white page, what Carson calls in her introduction “a free space of imaginal adventure” (Carson 2003, xi). This free space is an “imaginal adventure” for the translator, and for the reader, who can imagine the context and the lost specifics of the poems for herself. But does this formal strategy also cast the figure of Sappho—the only Greek female poet whose lyrics have survived—as a woman whose permeable and transgressive erotic boundaries are free to remain so? In order to answer this question, I now turn to examine Carson’s decisions about how and what Sapphic texts to translate, and how these decisions privilege motion as a way of avoiding the imposition of interpretive boundaries.

Many of the Sappho fragments echo Carson’s formulation of desire as movement in Eros the Bittersweet: “Desire moves. Eros is a verb” (Carson 1998a, 17). If we start to look for the motion of desire in Sappho’s poems, we find it everywhere. Some of Sappho’s fragments are isolated gems of erotic reaching on the part of the speaker:

36
I long and seek after
(Carson 2003, 73)

While others reverse the trajectory:

38
you burn me
(77)

Sappho’s fragment 2 begins with a summoning motion: “here to me from Krete to this holy temple” (7). Fragment 1, the famous and much-translated Hymn to
Aphrodite, begins with a motion that calls the “Deathless Aphrodite” down from her “father’s golden house” and summons her to Sappho’s side (4). Sappho asks the goddess to be her ally in an erotic conquest, and Aphrodite responds with what many scholars have interpreted as her assurance to the poet/speaker that she will win her beloved; that her unrequited desire will be fulfilled. The stanza in question reads:

For if she flees, soon she will pursue.
If she refuses gifts, rather will she give them.
If she does not love, soon she will love even unwilling.

(5)

However, as Carson has argued in an essay on fragment 1, Aphrodite “does not say that the girl will pursue Sappho, she does not say that the girl will give gifts to Sappho, she does not say that the girl will love Sappho. She merely says that the girl will pursue, give gifts, and love” (Carson 1996, 226). Aphrodite does not state that the object of the beloved’s desire will become the speaker herself—a straightforward reversal—although the poem has generally been interpreted that way. Instead, Carson interprets this textual detail as evidence that the poem is talking broadly about the justice of love. Rather than a reassurance to Sappho that she will win her mark, Carson suggests that the poem is a reassurance that all lovers suffer heartbreak as a result of unrequited desire. All lovers will (someday, inevitably) pursue a beloved who does not return their desire, and your girl, says Aphrodite, is no exception. Read in this way, the poem is an affirmation of desire’s movement, without the goddesses’ imposition of boundaries and directives on desire’s arc or target.

As well as the more substantial, well-known, and almost-complete poems of Sappho’s, such as fragment 1, Carson’s translations show that some of the most fragmentary Sappho artefacts are fundamentally concerned with desire’s movement. Fragment 8 is rendered as an offering from Sappho to Atthis, one of her female companions (a common euphemism in Sappho discourse):
The particulars of the gift, whether physical or metaphysical, have been lost in the disintegration of the papyrus. The phrase that survives is a gesture of pure offering, of erotic kinesis. The receiver (Atthis) is named, and the preposition “for” shows the direction of the speaker’s feelings and offerings. That the details of those offerings have been lost only highlights the poem’s clean motion. Fragment 29C and 29H name other companions:

29C
| robes
| necklaces

(57)
In Carson’s version of 29C, gifts of garments and jewellery travel down through six open brackets, like six doors, to reach Sappho’s lover. In 29H, the motion is even more basic, as the particulars of the gift have been lost in the papyrus’ disintegration. Gyrinno is the destination, the preposition “for” is the arrow, and the unknown mental or physical expressions of desire travel freely towards her through the poem’s lacunae.

Aspects of Carson’s translations correspond to the work of Charles Olson, the innovative American poet and essayist. Olson often opens a line or phrase of poetry with a bracket that never closes. This strategy is one of the ways he executes his notion of projective (or open) verse, which proclaims the role that the breath plays in the composition of poetry. The energy and the rhythm of the poet’s breath is key to this mode of writing: “I take it that PROJECTIVE VERSE teaches, is, this lesson, that that verse will only do in which a poet manages to register both the acquisitions of his ear and the pressures of his breath” (Olson 1966, 17). The poet transmits the energy of his thought and breath in the metre-less diction, free form, and idiosyncratic spacing of the poem. Indeed, in Olson’s belief, a poem is fundamentally the transference of energy: “A poem is energy transferred from where the poet got it (he will have some several causations), by way of the poem itself to, all the way over to, the reader. Okay. Then the poem itself must, at all
points, be a high energy-construct and, at all points, an energy-discharge” (16). If we read Carson through the mode of projective verse, then Carson’s ear acquires the words—and the gaps—of Sappho’s text, and transfers the energy of those words and gaps into a new form. The “pressures” of Carson’s breath produce English-language words, white space, and brackets. Through her eyes and her ears, Carson acquires the silence that was once Sappho’s moving words.

(Sappho’s poetry once moved verbally and was received aurally, as the poems in their originary context were the lyrics of songs.) In composing her translations, Carson exhales a pressurized breath, which keeps Sappho’s silence moving in altered form. The gaps become brackets, to mark the trail where Carson the poet/translator/reader has transferred the poem’s energy from the papyrus to the page. (Carson might also disagree with the masculinist bent of projective verse, however, which calls the listening, receptive ear the passive “sister” of the masculine mind [Olson 1966, 18].)

In fragment 12, Carson pairs a motion of the mind with a motion of the feet, without the containment of shoes:

12

| ]
| ]
| ]
| ]thought
| ]barefoot
| ]
| ]
| ]

(23)

This poem has seven open doors through which the unshod thought can travel. Each lacuna could be read as an opening into another thought, through which the reader might pass. The half rhyme of “thought” with “foot” suggests mind and
body in movement, as well as the rhythm of feet, which marks the lost meter now suggested by the repeated brackets. With so much white space and so many seductive gaps, the bracketed poems in *If Not, Winter* invite the reader to entertain multiple possible trajectories of desire and interpretation.

The translations of Sappho’s poetry in circulation are almost countless. Most translations of Sappho decline to translate the more shredded fragments; instead they include only the more complete-seeming poems and the neater phrases. Willis Barnstone’s 2009 translation, one of the latest Sappho translations to appear, is curiously titled *The Complete Poems of Sappho*. In fact, fragment 1 is the only one of Sappho’s poems to survive in a complete form. In Barnstone’s collection of Sappho’s “complete” poems, he does not translate fragment 8, fragment 12, or fragment 29, among others. Presumably none of these gems of pure motion seemed “complete” or “poem” enough to include.

Barnstone gives all of Sappho’s fragments titles. Sometimes, Barnstone’s titles are self-reflexive, as in his rendering of fragment 153:

*Girl*

A sweet-voiced girl

(Barnstone 2009, 29)

Or fragment 122:

*Wildflowers*

A tender girl picking wildflowers

(28)

These examples frame the translations without imposing too much commentary or context. However, they do make an authorial attempt to distil the poem and direct the reader in terms of tone and subject. A title of “Tender” on fragment 122 would supply a different emphasis, foregrounding the tenderness of the girl in her deflowering work, and thus importing a different set of cultural connotations and associations. These paratexts, added by the translator, also domesticate Sappho’s
poems by making them appear more like modern English-language poetry. The choice to append titles to the untitled fragments certainly provides more editorial and interpretive direction than the near-invisible, almost scientific use of numbers—although the use of numbers is also notable, as it is a strong marker of scholarly authority. Other titles of Barnstone’s are far more contextually directive, as in his translation of fragment 3, which he includes in a section titled “Weathercocks and Exile.” (The collection has eleven titled sections in total, including “Walking to a Wedding,” “Secret of My Craft,” and “Dream and Sleep.” This sectioning is another paratextual device that shapes, directs, and contains the surviving fragments.)

Barnstone also conveys completeness by eliding missing text, as in his version of fragment 3:

_To My Brother Haraxos_

By giving

good fame
your beauty and nobility
to such friends
you sicken me with pain

Blame you? Swollen
Have your fill of them
For my thinking it is poorly done
and all night I understand baseness

Other
minds
the blessed

(80)
Arranged as it is on the page, the poem does indeed seem “complete.” Readers familiar with Sapphic testimonia will associate this rendering of the fragment with the story of Sappho’s brother. It is said he fell in love with a prostitute and paid a great deal of money to free her. In his appendix of “Testimonia and Encomia,” Barnstone cites Herodotus’s *Histories*: “When Haraxos returned to Mytilini after setting Rodopis free, he was ridiculed by Sappho in one of her poems” (2009, 126). It seems that Barnstone believes this to be the ridiculing poem, and frames it as such.

Carson translates the same fragment quite differently:

3

]to give
]yet of the glorious
]of the beautiful and good, you
]of pain [me
]blame
]swollen
]you take your fill. For [my thinking
]not thus
]is arranged
]nor
all night long] I am aware
]of evildoing
]
]other
]minds
]blessed ones
]
)
(Carson 2003, 9)
The use of brackets and spacing emphasises the text’s incompleteness. Various tabbed lines, and brackets inserted within phrases, disrupt the flow of potentially whole phrases. Single lines separated by tabbed spaces recall the holes and blanks in the original papyrus. Barnstone’s left-aligned poem, on the other hand, follows the normative conventions of modern and contemporary English-language poetry. He translates Sappho’s text into English phrases that are grammatically correct: “By giving / good fame / your beauty and nobility / to such friends / you sicken me with pain.” Along with the title, “To My Brother Haraxos,” this translation stabilises the feelings of the speaker: sister Sappho is sickened and pained by her brother’s inappropriate liaison. The grammar of Carson’s version is more fragmented: “[to give / yet of the glorious / of the beautiful and good, you / of pain / me.” In this version, the pain is not fixedly attached to the speaker, nor is the cause of the pain definitively stated. The motion of Barnstone’s “giving” moves fixedly from the brother to “such friends,” therefore sickening the speaker with pain. Sappho herself is reprimanding and attempting to impose boundaries on the motion of her brother’s desires. In Carson’s version, however, the “give” moves more freely within a broader context of eros, which acknowledges both the noble and dangerous aspects of desire. Instead of disgust and reprimand, Carson’s version conveys a fragmented mind: “For [my thinking / not thus / is arranged / nor / all night long].” The diction and line breaks imagine the speaker’s “thinking” as pained ambivalence. This subtler rendering conveys unease and disturbance, but not a decisive judgement on the brother. (These feelings of unease and disquiet emerge strongly in Carson’s writing of her own brother’s life in Nox.) In Carson’s version of fragment 3, there is no authoritative reprimand. Desire still moves.

Desire, for Carson, is fundamentally motion: “Eros is a verb” (1998a, 17). In the notes to Sappho’s famous apple poem, Carson names desire as the motion of “infinite deferral” (Carson 2003, 374). Sappho’s poetry of desire has troubled and irritated scholars for centuries, and inspired hundreds of years of biographical speculation. The history of Sappho’s text can be read as a cultural effort to construct and impose boundaries on something that has none: the truth of Sappho’s life and sexuality. In Sappho is Burning, Page duBois writes that
Sappho’s desire, which makes her poetry both charged and treacherous, is transgressive because “she is truly heterogeneous. . . Her desire is asymmetrical to that of the male subject and incompatible with the reputed passivity of the female object. . . [She] exhibits neither a neat, symmetrical, and virtuous willingness, the modest complement to masculine desire, nor an absence of desire, nor the lustful indiscriminate but distinctly heterosexual hedonism of Aristophanes’ comic women” (1997, 131-132). It is not that Sappho is indiscriminately, erotically ravenous. This would fit the Greek notion of the female that Carson critiques: a female that has no self-control, who can contain her desire no more than the leaky jar can keep its contents from seeping out. The objects of Sappho’s desire are selected and select. However, they fall outside the motions of normative desire sanctioned by Greek culture. Ancient texts such as The Oxyrhynchus Papyri and The Suda Lexicon describe the nature of Sappho’s desire for women as “irregular” (Barnstone 2009, 123) and “shameful” (124). However, the desire to locate the definitive Sappho in the afterlife of her texts is, like desire itself, a process of infinite deferral or infinite process.

Carson’s Sappho translations register similarities with her dissecting search for a definitive Freud in the “Freud” poems, and her search for definitive answers to questions of sex and desire in “Just for the Thrill.” In If Not, Winter, Carson attempts to “emend towards” (McNeilly 2003) the original version of Sappho the woman, Sappho the poet, and Sappho the lover. However, Carson also insists that this impulse to connect with the “original” Sappho is inevitably errant. This errant task provokes different reactions in different scholars. Barnstone imposes paratextual containers, and binds the gaps with interpretive filler, in order to allay anxiety about the text’s incompleteness. Carson, on the other hand, is anxious about the very act of imposing such authorial boundaries. She attempts instead to preserve the text’s incompleteness.

In “Dirt and Desire: Essay on the Phenomenology of Female Pollution in Antiquity,” Carson writes: “Greek attitudes to and treatment of the female” provoke an “anxiety about boundaries” (2000a, 130–131). The ancient Greeks were anxious that permeable or incomplete boundaries propagated physical and moral pollution. In Greek and anthropological discourse, “purity” and “pollution”
form a binary opposition. Pollution arises as a result of certain boundaries not being sufficiently maintained. In *Autobiography of Red*, Lord Chesterfield’s definition of dirt as “matter out of place” (Douglas 1999, 109) frames the whole anachronistic, shifting, and combining narrative structure of the book as “dirty.” The foreign text freely contaminates the domestic, and vice versa. Time periods and language modes mingle and pollute each other. Translation is reframed as inevitably dirty work. In Carson’s approach to translation, we see an anxiety about boundaries, like the ancient Greeks. However, Carson’s’ anxiety is inverted. It stems from the authorial work of enforcing boundaries—an anxiety that can never be fully abated, so long as books are bound, and translation choices are bound to be made.

In *Autobiography of Red*, the boundaries between the foreign and the domestic text are muddied through a blending of contemporary and ancient modes, as a way of addressing questions of sexual power and control. In *If Not, Winter*, the surviving proofs of polluting female transgression (that is, lesbianism, or unsanctioned desire) are reframed as pure movement. The unease that the Greeks felt about non-normative sexuality—whether between women or men—is still felt in our culture today. Carson subverts this unease by attaching it to the imposition (not the absence) of boundaries. Thus, she implicitly prescribe a (paradoxically non-prescriptive) methodology of unease in approaching the translation of ancient texts.
CHAPTER 3: HISTORY

In this chapter, I look at how Anne Carson builds on psychoanalytical approaches to address the problem of how to write the history of a life. From the beginnings of psychoanalysis, the relationship between writers and analysts has been close and uneasy, collaborative and rivalrous. Sigmund Freud used literary texts — notably, ancient Greek texts like Sophocles’s *Oedipus Tyrannus* — as inspiration for and confirmation of his psychoanalytical insights. He also acknowledged that the poet-philosophers before him were, like psychoanalysts, engaged with the work of understanding the unconscious. Freud left a legacy as a great writer, and the literary nature of his case histories has blurred the boundaries between psychoanalysis as an art and as a science. Psychoanalysis is that problematic thing: a science where the lab is in the patient’s mind, and which uses methods and materials of experimentation and discovery that are composed solely of the unstable systems of language. Rachel Bowlby notes that questions about psychoanalysis are, fundamentally, questions about language: “What is the right kind of language for talking about psychological matters, when the patients’ own words are the medium of the treatment?” (Bowlby 2007, 51).

While poetry and psychoanalysis share many points of connection, translation provides a more specific analogy for investigating Freud’s writings in complex relation to Carson’s poetry. Freud’s case studies enact the therapeutic conflict between versions of stories, or versions of patient’s histories. The metaphor of translation illuminates how the therapist translates the patient’s words, dreams, actions, and stories into a “better vocabulary” (Phillips 2000, 130). This therapeutic translation is meant to aid the patient in the cathartic work of processing painful life events. There are many ways to frame this work of therapeutic translation. It can be framed aggressively, as a battle between patient and analyst for “superior” insight (Rieff 1997, xi). Or, it can be framed multipliciously, open-endedly, as “a consciousness of aspirations and possibilities” (Phillips 2000, 128). This multiplicitous, open-ended approach is
more aligned with Carson’s writing practice. As I have shown, Carson avoids the imposition of fixed, authoritative translations and static boundaries on her texts and ideas. Instead, she practices a poetics of errant versioning, and insists on multiple interpretive trajectories.

In *Nox* (2010), Carson attempts to find a “better vocabulary” to process and understand the death of her estranged brother. A welter of fragmented evidence—in the form of family letters, photographs, transcriptions of phone conversations, images, and memories—is arranged in *Nox*’s scrapbook format, in an attempt to understand her brother’s destructive, repetitive patterns of behaviour. As in Freud’s psychoanalytical writings, *Nox* uses ancient texts as models for understanding and processing difficult family relationships and personal psychic pain. Iterations of Catullun elegy, Herodotan history, and a key image from Hekataios serve as “stereotypes” (Bowlby 2007, 218) for investigating the self-destructive stereotypes of Carson’s unhappy brother. These iterations also provide models for Carson’s expressions of guilt and grief.

In this chapter, I discuss *Nox* in relation to one of Freud’s most famous case studies, *Dora: An Analysis of a Case of Hysteria*, first published in 1905. I examine how both these texts undertake the iterative work of redescription as a way of analysing repetitive and destructive models of behaviour. I compare the different ways that Freud and Carson represent, conceal, or otherwise negotiate the errant versions of their incomplete published texts. I also consider the complex question of whether, in either case, these therapeutic translations result in a definitive cure. I examine *Nox* and *Dora* as examples of a new kind of history making. I also argue that their parallel methods of moving forwards, while looking backwards, engage with a sense of history as ceaseless process and ongoing narrative renewal.

Finally, I show that Carson’s iterations eschew the notion of an authoritative original text. Instead, they serve as powerful support for the therapeutic usefulness of the ability to continually version and revise personal stories and ancient narratives.
Psychoanalysis as Translation

Before I examine translation as a useful analogy for understanding the sympathies, insights, and negations between Freudian psychoanalysis and Carson’s errant versioning, I want to speak to a more basic relation: the parallels between writers and psychoanalysts. Adam Phillips writes that, from the beginnings of psychoanalysis, the relationship between literature and psychoanalysis has been both close and uneasy. For Freud, poets were an inspiration as well as an irritant: “The poet, in a psychoanalytic context, was initially cast as an inspiring but also irritatingly usurping presence. Psychoanalysis has always been mindful of the poetic pasts that might have preceded it, of the literary influences that might have prefigured its figures of speech” (Phillips 2000, 3). Of course, Freud used literary works—most obviously Sophocles’s *Oedipus Tyrannus*—to lend authority and universality to his insights about human impulses and behaviour. The sense of authority that Freud gained in his use of ancient texts contrasts with the rivalry he felt with writers of his father’s or grandfather’s generation. Rachel Bowlby contrasts the competitiveness Freud felt towards his immediate literary and philosophical predecessors, with the advantage that using the tropes and narratives of ancient Greek authors afforded him: “It seems that one advantage of ancient Greek authors was that the temporal distance removed any sense of rivalry. No Oedipal or post-Oedipal sibling or father-son battles needed to be fought with long-gone progenitors, whose ideas lent an ancient authority rather than detracting from present originality” (Bowlby 2007, 39). Freud’s enlistment of ancient writers in his intellectual crusade was one way to allay his anxiety of influence. The figure of Oedipus became so irrevocably associated with Freud’s theories that it became “the literal icon of the psychoanalytic movement”: a reproduction of Ingres’s painting “Oedipus and the Sphinx” hung over Freud’s couch; a version of the picture was inscribed on a medallion that was presented to Freud on his fiftieth birthday; and the image also became the logo of the official press of psychoanalytical discourse during Freud’s lifetime (Armstrong 2005, 52).
Despite the high visibility of Freud’s use of this ancient text, he also acknowledges the insights he gained from his more immediate predecessors. In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud writes, “In what was at first my utter perplexity, I took as my starting-point a saying of the poet-philosopher, Schiller, that ‘hunger and love are what moves the world’” (Freud 1969, 54). Here, Freud acknowledges, in a spirit of gratitude, that he found the seed for his initial ideas on the basic human instincts of sex and self-preservation in the writings of the German poet Friedrich Schiller. At other times, he betrays exasperation and envy at what Phillips calls “the poet’s apparent easy access to profound psychological truth” (2000, 3). After quoting some lines from Goethe’s *Faust*, Freud writes, “One may well sigh when one realizes that it is nevertheless given to a few to draw the most profound insights, without any real effort, from the maelstrom of their own feelings, while we others have to grope our way restlessly to such insights through agonizing insecurity” (Phillips 2000, 3). These quotations betray attitudes of fraternity, co-operation, rivalry, and an implicit anxiety about originality, all jostling for psychic space.

While works of literature obviously had great meaning and utility in the development of Freudian psychoanalysis, the other side of the coin is Freud’s own legacy as a great writer. The blurb on the back of a Touchstone edition of *Dora: An Analysis of a Case of Hysteria* (Freud 1997) testifies to this cultural legacy. It praises Freud’s “analytic genius and literary skill” in his ability to turn out a scientific case study “that has all the intrigue and unexpected twists of a first-rate detective novel.” The blurb is a tribute to Freud’s ability to write up a cracking good tale, a fascinating story, of Dora’s “forbidden sexual desires” (according to the blurb—obviously written with the popular reader in mind). However, it skims over a deeper conflict: the conflict between Freud-the-poet and Freud-the-scientist. Phillips writes: “The psychoanalytic theory he found himself writing was science that sometimes sounded like literature. The form chosen was the scientific treatise, the genre endorsed by the profession he wrote for; but the so-called content smacked of poetic drama, or fiction” (2000, 1). The text of *Dora: An Analysis of a Case of Hysteria* also draws attention to this conflict of roles. At the moment in the text when Freud has identified Dora’s repressed desires for
both her father and for Herr K., a middle-aged friend of the family, and he is about to complicate the analysis by identifying Dora’s repressed lesbian desires for Herr K.’s wife, Freud writes:

I must now turn to consider a further complication, for which I should certainly give no space if I were a man of letters engaged upon the creation of a mental state like this for a short story, instead of being a medical man engaged upon its dissection. The elements to which I must now allude can only serve to obscure and efface the outlines of the fine poetic conflict which we have been able to ascribe to Dora. This element would rightly fall a sacrifice to the censorship of a writer, for he, after all, simplifies and abstracts when he appears in the character of a psychologist. But in the world of reality, which I am trying to depict here, a complication of motives, an accumulation and conjunction of mental activities—in a word, overdetermination—is the rule.

(Freud 1997, 52)

Freud, the writer, clearly takes pride in the skilful work of selection and description that has effected the “fine poetic conflict” of his patient’s case. While one might read into this passage an implicit apology for Freud the medical man’s unavoidable complication of “reality,” the passage also betrays a sense of rivalry. Freud, the doctor, has a duty to represent “reality” in all its inconvenient complications and multiple interpretive trajectories. Writers, on the other hand, can freely “simplify and abstract.” (Not, however, a writer such as Carson, who constantly complicates simplifications and abstractions; indeed, literature usually writes the particulars of a life, whereas psychoanalysis, as a science, attempts to fix generalisable rules.) The reference to the “character of a psychologist” is also worthy of remark. If a writer can appear in the character of a psychologist, is Freud, then, in writing this case study and performing writerly digressions on how he is writing the case study, a psychologist appearing in the character of a writer? What freedoms of narrative structure and interpretation is the writer of a short story entitled to that the analyst is not? Where does Freud draw the boundaries
between history making and creative writing, between scientific rigour and
literary skill? As I discuss below, the boundaries in Freud’s case histories are not
the fixed, definitive boundaries he might have wished them to be. Freud
experienced “agonizing insecurity” around Dora: An Analysis of a Case of
Hysteria and other case studies’ potential textual and interpretive errancies
(Phillips 2000, 3). This anxiety was exacerbated by the solidification of the
boundary between the arts and the sciences during Freud’s lifetime. As Phillips
writes, “The two cultures of Science and Art that were to polarise so dramatically
during the twentieth century were sufficiently differentiated—understood to be at
odds with each other—that Freud couldn’t help but be perplexed by the ambiguity
of his own work” (2000, 2). The dynamic interactions between Freud’s multiple
 personas of creative writer and physician—like the layers of textual authority that
Carson sets into motion in her “Freud” poems—were a source of unsettling
anxiety for the man himself.

The difficulty of definitively categorizing Freud’s case histories prompted
attacks on, and staunch defences of, his status as a scientist in pursuit of definitive
truths. The argument continues today: is psychoanalysis a science or an art? In
Nox, Carson enlists psychoanalysis in the service of art. She connects its iterative
processes to the creative work of translation, and to the writing of a life. Like the
analyst translating the analysand’s stories, Carson translates and interprets the life
of her brother. It is difficult to categorise psychoanalysis because its iterative
interpretations are hypothesised in, tested by, and demonstrated through the
unstable materials of language. The practice of translating texts from a foreign
into a domestic language is inevitably errant; so is the iterative practice of
translating a patient’s words. On the occasion of his seventieth birthday, Freud
said, “The poets and philosophers before me discovered the unconscious; what I
discovered was the scientific method by which the unconscious can be studied”
(Phillips 2000, 9). As Phillips notes, the troublesome question is: what exactly is
the difference? If poets like Carson do not study the unconscious, do they enact it,
perform it, translate it? In my discussion of Nox, I consider the text of the book in
relation to the text of Freud’s patient Dora, to demonstrate the complex points of
connection and negation between the work of these two scholars of the mind.
In *Nox*, Carson reconstructs and re-describes memories, childhood events, and visual and textual artefacts in order to analyse her brother Michael and examine feelings of grief and guilt. The therapeutic grief-work of *Nox* takes after iterative psychoanalytical approaches to writing a life, writing history, and understanding repetitive behaviours. Carson employs a history making methodology that resembles psychoanalytical accounts such as Adam Phillips’s. Like Phillips, she rejects presenting the work of interpreting and writing a life as a battle to define a superior version. Carson and Phillips’s approach contrasts with that taken by Freud in the Dora case history, where the relationship between analyst and analysand is represented as a conflict of versions. The patient’s repressed memories and unacknowledged desires are in conflict with Freud’s analysis, which uses the Oedipus complex as its authoritative master-text. In his introduction to *Dora: An Analysis of a Case of Hysteria*, Phillip Rieff couches his argument about the authority of Freud’s analysis in a formulation of the therapeutically beneficial versus the therapeutically obstructive:

By any practical test, Freud’s insight was superior to Dora’s. Hers had not helped her win more than pyrrhic victories over life, while Freud’s, engaged as he was in the therapeutic re-creation of her life, demonstrated its capacity to make Dora superior to some of the symptomatic expressions of her rejection of life. Her own understanding of life had in no way given her any power to change it; precisely that power to change life was Freud’s test of truth. His truth was, therefore, superior to Dora’s.

(Rieff 1997, xi)

According to Rieff, the version that Dora held fast to was ultimately unhelpful. In fact, she cut off the sessions with Freud after only three months, ending the treatment before Freud had been able to satisfactorily apply his generalised theory to her particular case. But despite Rieff’s claim that the goal of this relationship is the therapeutic purging of Dora’s unhappiness, the metaphors he uses to describe the conflict between patient and analyst are disturbingly aggressive. The patient and therapist are engaged in “combat” (xi), in a “battle of wits” (xii). The therapist
“had to hammer away” at the patient (xi), and his “intelligence had to become rather cruel at times” (xiii). When she ends the therapy abruptly after just a few months, Rieff describes Dora as “[taking] her revenge” (xi). At one point in the case study, Freud writes that it is Dora’s uncle’s birthday. She cannot bring herself to wish him happy birthday, and she cannot explain why. He writes, “I let her go on talking, and she suddenly recollected that it was Herr K.’s birthday too—a fact which I did not neglect to use against her” (Freud 1997, 52). The language that composes this attempt at therapeutic translation is decidedly violent. The original German text, “was ich nicht versäumte, gegen sie zu verwerten” (Freud 1905, 33), also registers this aggressive tone, with the choice of the word “verwerten” conveying an almost animalistic sense of digestive or exploitative use for one’s own benefit, compared to the tamer and more common “verwenden” which is used in a less self-serving way. While Freud may have entertained doubts about the difficulty of confirming and presenting his truth, his bloody-mindedness in hammering home his version of the patient’s mind is alarming, when you consider that the patient, although “intelligent and engaging” (Freud 1997, 16), was a deeply unhappy, physically ill, and vulnerable teenage girl.

With *Nox*, Carson repudiates this view of analysis as a stubborn, violent struggle for superior insight and interpretive authority. Her methodology is in sympathy with Phillips’, who equates psychoanalysis with translation in an open and various way. Phillips writes that psychoanalysis, “at its most useful and interesting,” can be “a consciousness of history, a consciousness of alternatives, a consciousness of aspirations and possibilities: a wish for translation” (Phillips 2000, 128). While psychoanalysts do not tend to think of themselves as “translating people,” Phillips argues, the analyst’s work of interpreting, reconstructing, questioning, and re-describing is remarkably like the work of a translator (129). This is a particularly apt description for Carson’s translations, which draw attention to the questions they ask of the original text and highlight their own interpretive, reconstructive, and re-descriptive processes. Phillips continues, “People come for psychoanalysis when their present language no longer works. Indeed, one could sensibly say that they are in need of translation; to move or be moved from one place to another, through language. . . . People
come for analysis when they have reached the limits of their language; and this
means, going on using their own available descriptions of what’s happening—of
what they feel—has become too painful” (130). People come to psychoanalysis
not for Rieff’s “superior” insight,” argues Phillips, but rather, for a “better
vocabulary” (130).

As a work that combines Carson’s errant translation strategies with a
therapeutic delving into family issues, Nox also performs the work of
reconstruction and re-description in its attempt to find a “better vocabulary” for
the pain of mourning. Nox—which means “night” in Latin—is an unusual book
with an unusual form. It is published not as a codex, but as a concertinaed scroll
of folded pages, packaged into a hard box casing. Once the lid of the box is raised,
the contents can be lifted out like a long paper accordion. While the book can be
read similarly to a codex, with the regular folds forming a sense of left– and
right–hand pages that can be flipped through, the book is actually one continuous
page. All the text and imagery faces the reader, and a long continuous blank page
forms the underside. Initially, Nox was a private scrapbook that Carson showed
only to friends. She didn’t think of reproducing it for wider distribution until
husband and designer Robert Currie played around on a high-
quality scanner and
discovered a way of creating a facsimile of the book that retained a sense of its
materiality.

Carson made the book as an elegy for her bother Michael, who died in
Copenhagen in 2000. Throughout the course of Nox’s “unfolding,” we learn that
Michael disappeared in 1978, escaping Canada and police prosecution to wander,
sometimes destitute, in Europe and India for many years. We are not told what
Michael was wanted for, but we do learn that he had dealt in drugs, that he
married twice (at least), and that he loved a young woman named Anna who died
young and who mattered more to him than either of his wives. Michael clearly led
a difficult life on the margins of society, and his estrangement from the family is
tacitly tragic. In Nox, Carson grapples to understand and uncover a true version of
Michael’s painfully mysterious life, while foregrounding the inevitable errancies
of any version she might write.
The scrapbooked evidence of Michael’s life consists of the one letter he wrote home to his mother in his twenty years of absence, plus black-and-white photographs (sometimes torn up) from a box Carson retrieved from Copenhagen after his death. These texts are torn up, sketched on or written over, and then collaged onto the book’s right-hand pages/folds, along with quotations from Herodotus’s *Histories*, meditations on Carson’s family history, a copy of Michael’s widow’s elegy, transcriptions of phone conversations Carson had with her brother during his absence (sometimes one-sided), scrawled pencil reprises, paint daubs, and scraps of lyric. The way this evidence is presented in *Nox*—in fragments—echoes the texts that Carson works with in her capacity as a scholar and translator: the papyrus fragments of Sappho, Stesichoros, and others, all of which require translation, and all of which demand a decision to either fill in the blanks or allow the blanks to remain. In *Nox*, Carson enacts the tension between conclusiveness and process. She reaches for an understanding of Michael’s life, and then frustrates that understanding. This tension between knowing Michael, and the impossibility of knowing him, is also reflected in the tension Carson enacts between the finality of the farewell to the dead, and the sense of an ongoing haunting. She uses textual, imagistic, and material strategies to convey these tensions. On the very first right-hand page or fold, Carson writes, “I wanted to fill my elegy with light of all kinds. But death makes us stingy. There is nothing more to be expended on that, we think, he’s dead. Love cannot alter it. Words cannot add to it. No matter how I try to evoke the starry lad he was, it remains a plain odd history. So I began to think about history” (1.0). Alongside these lyric meditations and pasted fragments of personal and family history, Carson translates Catullus’s 101, the Roman poet Catullus’s elegy for his own brother. Initially, the translation takes the form of doctored glosses of each of the poem’s Latin words, pasted onto the book’s left-hand pages/folds (see figure 1). For example, the gloss of the first Latin word of the Catullus poem, *multas*, includes

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1 As the form of *Nox* is one continuous scroll, the pages/folds are not paginated. Carson organises the contents of the book by section numbers: “1.0,” “5.5,” etc. These suggest an almost scientific ordering of the evidence at hand.
the shades of definitions you would expect—“numerous, many, many of, many a . . . many things, much, to a great extent”—along with applications that are obviously charged with the book’s themes of loss and anxiety, such as:

*multa dies* or

*multa lux*: broad daylight, *multa nox*: late

in the night, perhaps too late.

(1.0)

*Nox* is an extended textual re-description or translation of Carson’s family history, which looks to ancient Greek and Roman models of history and elegy “to find stories for the inappropriate” and create “[a] fresh account of the unacceptable” (Phillips 2000, 131). However, Carson simultaneously insists on the text as an unavoidably errant version, and foregrounds the ceaseless process of the making of history.

There are both parallels and negations between the ways Carson and Freud make use of ancient texts in their re-descriptive projects. In *Dora: An Analysis of a Case of Hysteria*, Freud implicitly makes use of his reading of Sophocles’s *Oedipus Tyrannus* as a literary work that registers the repression of a fundamental human impulse: erotic feelings for one’s parent. The play’s protagonist—Oedipus, solver of riddles—eventually brings the evidence of this impulse to light. Solving the putative riddle of Dora, Freud claims that she has repressed erotic feelings for her father, and he re-describes her hysterical symptoms as the result of these repressed desires. As discussed above, Freud’s interpretations are often registered in the language of combat—as a battle between analyst and analysand in which interpretive authority is at stake. In *Dora: An Analysis of a Case of Hysteria*, Freud wrangles Dora’s story to fit the Ur-text of the Oedipus myth. The imposition of interpretive boundaries, paradoxically, complicates Dora’s case into a tangled web of repressed and acknowledged desires, screen memories, and painful events apparently imagined by the patient. Freud’s interpretive obstinacy is evident in the use he makes of the patient’s reactions to his insights, whether negative or affirmative: “The ‘No’ uttered by a patient after a repressed thought
has been presented to his conscious perception for the first time does no more than register the existence of the repression and its severity. . . . ‘No’ signifies the desired ‘Yes’” (Freud 1997, 51). Jeffrey Masson points out that Freud’s impatience with Dora as she “kept on repeating her complaints against her father with a wearisome monotony” might have evaporated had he only attended to the validity of the version she was expressing: “One cannot help wondering if Dora’s complaints might not have ceased had Freud acknowledged their truth” (1988, 58). Freud does not entertain the idea that his authoritative rejection of Dora’s own version of her story might have contributed to her “unhinging” (Masson 1988, 51). His attempt to simplify the case history by imposing the master story of infantile Oedipal desires actually creates an artifice of complication—a maze of screens, repressions, and stand-ins. Freud’s pronouncements of these must have been infuriating for Dora to endure.

The way that Carson puts ancient texts to use is of a different order. Carson’s adaptations, versions, and translations of the texts of Stesichoros and Sappho unsettle fixed notions of sexual and textual authority, and assert an ongoing motion of reinterpretation and reiteration. In Nox, Carson selects a poem, Catullus’s poem 101, which historically functioned both literally and figuratively as a part of the Roman funeral rite. Carson uses this poem to address the silent ashes of her deceased brother. Her appeal to the “mute ash” (7.2) of her dead brother performs a similar action to Freud’s interrogation of Dora’s mute unconscious. However, the texture of the interrogation is decidedly different. While Freud stresses his interpretive authority, Carson invokes errancy, mystery, and interpretive multiplicity. The question of how to mourn a brother, of how to process grief, is what occupies both Nox and Catullus’s 101. The circumstances of Michael’s death are unacceptable; the distance between siblings is unacceptable. Catullus’s 101 provides a model for finding a “fresh account of the unacceptable” (Phillips 2000, 131). Carson’s full translation of the poem only appears three-quarters of the way through Nox, after the reader has already passed through many versions of the poem’s words. This apparently final version of the translated poem sits opposite Carson’s entry for the word “prisco,” meaning (among other things, of course), “belonging to a former time”:

88
I arrive at these poor, brother, burials
so I could give you the last gift owed to death
and talk (why?) with mute ash.
Now that Fortune tore you from me, you
oh poor (wrongly) brother (wrongly) taken from me,
now still anyway this—what a distant mood of parents
handed down as the sad gift for burials—
accept! Soaked with tears of a brother
and into forever, brother, farewell and farewell.

(7.2)

Scholars have noted both the funerary tone of the poem (“ave atque vale” was spoken at the closing of a Roman funeral rite, and also appears in funerary inscriptions) and the literary echoes of “ritual formulae” (Feldherr 2000, 210) in the poem’s language. It is possible that the poem was performed at the actual funeral rite for Catullus’s brother. The poem conveys a tension between the delivery of the formal valediction, which it is the poet’s duty to pronounce, and a lamentation with a tone of sad irony at the insufficiency of the valediction (Quinn 1970, 440). Catullus understands the gesture to be inadequate and incomplete, and in Carson’s translation, “poor . . . burials” and “sad gift for burials” clearly registers this sense of woeful inadequacy. Carson’s translation presents the paradox of the poem’s address as a conversation with the wordless: “talk (why?) with mute ash.” The implicit need to carry out the therapeutic rituals of mourning is unsettled by a question mark, which interrogates the status of the lamentor’s object, and complicates any sense of a definitive or satisfactory end-point. The phrases “talk (why?)” and “now still anyway this” return the reader’s attention to the action of speech, to the speech of the poem-as-elegy. They draw attention to the poem’s lamentation, which continues to reverberate and change in subsequent translations and recontextualisations. The last line, “ave atque vale,” is commonly translated as “hail and farewell,” a translation so common that J. Kates assumes it to be “already stuck in almost every reader’s brain almost to the point of cliché”
(2013). Instead, Carson translates the famous last phrase as “farewell and farewell,” a repetitive form that performs a tension between finality—the double assertion of “farewell” implying a sense of final goodbye—and a suggestion of the valediction continuing “into forever”: “farewell and farewell (and farewell and farewell . . .).” There is a sense in Carson’s translation that the act of farewelling the dead can perhaps never be done, that grief can never, perhaps, be definitively purged. This sense of unceasing therapeutic process is carried right through the material and textual performances of Nox. A pasted scrap toward the end of Nox reads, “And then there’s the funeral feast or saekken afterwards” (10.3). On the following page, opposite the entry for vale, “farewell,” is another scrap, which reads, “He refuses, he is in the stairwell, he disappears.” The brother refuses the definitive ritual send-off. He resists the closing of the rite.

Just as Nox functions as an epitaph for Carson’s brother—with its hard box casing as closed as a coffin, and its repeated gestures of farewell and farewell—the text and the materiality of Nox’s form blur the boundary between keeping Michael alive in memory and releasing him into the next world. Feldherr argues that Catullus’s own elegy for his brother performs a similar confusion of boundaries. His reading builds on “older critical assumptions,” which establish that the poem’s “traditional, liturgical elements,” including tone, diction, and emotional intensity, gave the poet’s expression of grief its power (Feldherr 2000, 210). Quinn notes that the poem is “a dramatic monologue, based on the formal rites of a traditional ceremony” (1970, 439). Feldherr furthers the connection between the poem and the Roman funeral rite by showing how the poem mirrors the very structure of the rite. The Roman funeral, he argues, enacted the creation and the dissolution of boundaries. The event of a death set the family of the deceased apart from the rest of society, a boundary most obviously marked by the donning of black mourning robes to mark the family’s contamination by death. The funeral rite definitively dispatched the corpse, both physically and metaphysically, into the world of the dead (creating a boundary between living and dead). It marked the reintegration of the family into the normal social sphere (dissolving the boundary between the mourners and their society). Feldherr writes, “the poem's elaborate ten-line structure . . . moves from the isolation of the
mourner, contaminated by death, to the final separation from the dead that returns the speaking poet to the world of the living” (2000, 215). However, Feldherr’s reading complicates the definitive marking of these boundaries. He points out that the word “brother” (“frater” in Latin), which is repeated four times throughout the poem, is “inherently reflexive,” unlike other terms for family relationships (like father and son) (217). Particularly in the last two lines, it becomes difficult to tell which brother is being called on or referred to—Catullus or his deceased brother. Feldherr notes that nequiquam (“in vain”) from the line “et mutam nequiquam alloquerer cinerem,” which Carson translates as “and talk (why?) with mute ash,” asserts the “inaccessibility of the very brother whom Catullus addresses” (216). It reinforces a tension “between figuring the dead as cut off from the living and as present to them” (216).

Similarly, while Nox laments the author’s separation from her brother, its unusual form (one long connected page) suggests continuity across borders. Carson echoes the original Latin poem’s sense of continuity between siblings. Her active, therapeutic investigation of her brother’s life (on the facing side of Nox) is continuous with her brother’s muteness (the long white page on the back). Carson’s iteration of Catullus’s elegy in a fragmented form throughout Nox suggests her continuity with the ancient poet, as well as her difference from him. This iteration also suggests Carson’s repetition and alteration of the tradition of the dirge. A reference to the single, connected page of Nox can be found in the entry for perpetuum from the poem’s last line, “atque in perpetuum, frater, ave atque vale,” which is glossed in the Nox lexical entry as: “having an unbroken extent or expanse, continuous in space.” The text of Nox’s therapeutic questioning figures itself as “an unbroken extent,” and on the back of the single long page of fragmented text is an unbroken, continuous fraternal page of pure, mute whiteness. The language of Catullus’s poem blurs and complicates the boundary between the living and the dead. It laments the insufficiency of the funeral gesture. Nox, too, effectively renegotiates the sense of a definitive processing of grief, suggesting instead a ceaseless process in farewelling the brother and processing the fraught implications of the sibling relationship.
An earlier translation of Catullus 101 appears in *Men in the Off Hours* (in 2000—the year of Michael’s death), as part of a series of radical Catullus translations. This translation provides a sort of prescription for *Nox* as well as a version of Catullus’s insufficient mourning gestures:

*Multas per Gentes et Multa per Aequora Vectus*
(Through Peoples Through Oceans Have I Come)

*Catullus buries his brother.*

Multitudes brushed past me oceans I don’t know.
Brother wine milk honey flowers.
Flowers milk honey brother wine.
How long does it take for the sound to die away?
I a brother.
Cut out carefully the words for wine milk honey flowers.
Drop them into a bag.
Mix carefully.
Pour onto your dirty skeleton.
What sound?

(Carson 2000a, 45)

The directive to “cut out carefully” the words for the items offered as part of the Roman funeral rite reads like an instruction for the making of *Nox*. The collaged artefacts in *Nox* perform a shifting iteration of meditations on grief and memento mori of the dead brother. *Nox* keeps “shaking the box,” so to speak. The iteration of the line “Brother wine milk honey flowers” in the repeated but altered form of “Flowers milk honey brother wine” anticipates similar textual iterations in *Nox*, such as the cut-up, vertical strips of Carson’s translation of Catullus’s 101, which are blurred, scribbled on in charcoal, and overlaid upon each other (see figure 2). The reference to the ritual items of wine, milk, and flowers, which were traditionally offered to the Roman dead, emphasises the poem’s origin as either an
actual component of the brother’s funeral rite, or a figurative and formal mirror of it. The rites at the tomb served to “punctuate moments of communion between dead and living with emphatic reminders of difference. The offerings made to the dead—salt, cereals, beans, wine, milk, and violets—are again deposited on the ground, or on a tile or stone, while the living by contrast take part in a human banquet reclining at a table” (Feldherr 2000, 213).

On one level, Catullus’s poem reflects the punctuation of boundaries between the living and the dead, which provides a definitive resolution to the mourners’ grief. However, the re-ordering of the offerings in “Multas per Gentes et Multa per Aequora Vectus” echoes Feldherr’s argument that the “order” of the ritual—the progression of definitive boundaries—is actually unsettled by the form and diction of the poem. “I a brother” signals Feldherr’s point about the reflexivity of sibling terms. It echoes the blurring of boundaries between brother and brother in the original Latin. It also anticipates Nox’s renegotiation of the finality of grief-work: “How long does it take for the sound to die away?” Carson asks. This is a question about the therapeutic processing of grief. Then, she asks, “What sound?” interrogating both the source and the direction of grief’s anguish. Carson returns us to the source of the therapeutic necessity, and offers no fixing ritual to solve the problem of how to grieve, and how to write grief and family history.

Nox’s use of the Catullus poem complicates the answer to the question of how to translate a brother. This complication is a willing engagement with multiple versions. It is in contrast to the way Freud imposes complication on Dora’s story, in order to translate it according to a single interpretive Ur-text. The progression of glosses on words from the Catullus poem throughout the pages/folds of Nox entertains multiple possible interpretive trajectories, while performing a kind of archaeology of consciousness that rejects a definitive interpretation of the brother’s psyche.

Besides Catullus, the other ancient model Carson puts to use in Nox is Herodotus. She uses citations from Herodotus throughout the book as a model for writing family history and grief. In one place, Carson reproduces Herodotus’s citation of a fantastic Egyptian myth, which he follows with the interpretive disclaimer: “So much for what is said by the Egyptians: let anyone who finds such
things credible make use of them” (10.1). The following page cites another of Herodotus’s disclaimers. This one, however, is layered on top of another piece of text, which the reader can figuratively unfold to discover the last scrap of brother Michael’s only letter (see figure 3; note the tiny, dark image of stairs pasted below the letter). The prototype of Herodotus’s interpretive scepticism and questioning, physically laid over Michael’s own words, creates a heartbreaking questioning into the scarce evidence of the brother’s feelings for his family. The Herodotus quotation reads: “I have to say what is said. I don’t have to believe it myself.” And underneath, Michael’s last words from his letter: “Love you. Love you. Michael” (10.1). This wrenching textual juxtaposition questions even the most taken-for-granted of familial truths, and emphasises multiple interpretations, however painful, of Michael’s meaning of love.

The insistence on errant versions over definitive interpretations also takes the form in Nox of an investigation of repetitive behaviours. Freud and Carson undertake the iterative work of re-description in Dora: An Analysis of a Case of Hysteria and Nox, respectively, as a means of analysing repetitive and destructive models of behaviour. Carson adopts the classic Freudian symmetry between childhood neurosis and adult unhappiness, by paralleling images of her brother’s childhood and his difficult adult life. She writes:

My brother’s widow tells me that when she first met him (Amsterdam) he was penniless. He walked into the bar and she looked up and said, That one I want to marry. They lived for two years on the street, sleeping in stairwells, eating once a week, this was after Anna, drinking a lot. Stairwell smell (I remember) him huddling in the stairwell where we kept our coats and boats winter Sunday blood on his face he was about nine and my mother around him with all her hands crying What now oh what now?

(5.3)
The transitional space of the stairwell is translated into a figurative bridge between child and adult, connecting separate moments of Michael’s social isolation and self-destruction into a potentially decipherable pattern.

The image of blood on the brother’s face is repeated, later in Nox, when Carson translates her feelings about Michael’s social deviance as an adult by describing a childhood memory connected with a black-and-white photograph. Again, this passage links the traumas of childhood with self-destructive patterns in the adult:

When we were children the family moved a lot and wherever we went my brother wanted to make friends with boys too old for him. He ran behind them, mistook the rules, came home with a bloody nose, it puzzled me from the beginning, it made my heart sink. I have a photograph of him (taken in the bush behind Bald Rock) about ten years old standing on the ground beneath a treehouse. Above him in the treehouse you can see three older boys gazing down. They have raised the ladder. He is giving the camera a sideways invisible look. Years later, when he began to deal drugs, I got the old sinking feeling—not for the criminality of it, not for the danger, but that look. No one knew him. He was the one who was old.

(8.2)

The evidence for interpreting the text of Michael’s psyche is sparse: a few photographs, a single letter, some childhood memories, and a handful of telephone calls. Carson’s attempt to derive understanding from this scarcity is represented throughout Nox as muteness, blindness, and silence. In a sense, Michael’s whole life is, to his sister, “a sideways invisible look.” If we cast Carson in the character of the analyst and Michael in the character of the patient,
then the patient is a particularly elusive and evasive one. “What he needed from me I have no idea,” Carson writes. “And when he telephoned me—out of the blue—about half a year after our mother died he had nothing to say” (5.1).

Carson’s re-descriptions of memories and images of Michael attempt an understanding of what Freud called the “stereotype plate” of human behaviour. In “The Dynamics of Transference,” Freud theorises that people’s patterns of behaviour are iterative: they are repeated again and again, in altered contexts, throughout the course of a life (Bowlby 2007, 218). Commenting on this passage, Rachel Bowlby writes, “The purpose of therapy . . . would then be to help us to break the mould of our private clichés or stereotypical patterns of behaviour” (2007, 218). Carson’s investigation of her brother’s iterated, destructive behaviour patterns stages a search for a better vocabulary of imagery and association; it seeks Phillips’s “fresh account of the unacceptable” (2000, 131). In this way, Carson engages in the kind of therapeutic re-description that Phillips equates with psychoanalysis. She makes a motion towards processing the past, and reaches for an understanding of the events and essence of Michael’s life and death.

Yet Nox contends that the essence of these events is ultimately unreachable. The repeated behaviour patterns are represented with texts and images of errancy and fragmentation. On one page is a photographic image of a staircase, which iterates the images of the stairwell in the texts quoted above (see figure 4). This image registers a tension between continuity and fragmentation, as the continuous climb of the staircase—the scraps of which appear to be taken from the same photograph—is cut into broken pieces that are laid apart from one another, suggesting a sense of the broken continuity of the climb. The iterated images of the stairs function both textually and materially as the site where memories of the shadow side of Michael gather. They also register the broader tension in Nox between a definitive categorisation of Michael’s character and psyche—an attempt to make sense of his life through these “stereotype” moments—and a sense of the errant and irresolvable process of knowing him and grieving for him. Because of his death, it is too late now for Michael to “break the mould” of his “private clichés.” As the lexical entry for “multas” suggests, it is “late in the night,
perhaps too late” (1.0). The poet’s attempt to break into these moulds is figured as an extended performance of try and try again.

The evidence for Freud’s analysis of Dora’s case is more substantial than the material of Nox. Three months of therapy sessions furnished Freud with enough material to draw some considerable conclusions about Dora’s self-destructive stereotypes of behaviour. However, for Dora, none of Freud’s psychotherapeutic translations were acceptable. She did not integrate Freud’s “better vocabulary”; Dora was not, in Freud’s estimation, cured. Similarly, Michael’s self-imposed psychic and physical distance from his family amounted to a rejection of the therapeutic version his sister might offer him. Carson’s attempt in Nox to understand Michael’s repetitive, destructive behaviour patterns would have to reach through the boundary of death in order to penetrate and cure her brother.

Necessarily Errant Texts and the Making of History

The translations of people’s stories in both Nox and Dora: An Analysis of a Case of Hysteria are incomplete, or errant. However, Freud and Carson choose different ways to emphasise, conceal, or otherwise negotiate this incompleteness. The Dora case history was first published as Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria (1905). Note the initial incompleteness or errancy—“fragment”—that has been rounded up, over time, to completeness. Its current status as a whole and final case is reflected in its title: Dora: An Analysis of a Case of Hysteria. Several factors compelled Freud to initially present the case as a version, including Dora’s decision to discontinue the therapeutic relationship after only three months. Freud was frustrated that he could not satisfactorily apply his general theory to the particulars of the case. Despite the authoritative, even arrogant ways that Freud presents his “superior” translation of Dora’s psyche, he was manifestly anxious about publishing “the results of his inquiries without there being any possibility of other specialists testing and checking them, particularly as those results were of a surprising and by no means gratifying character” (Freud 1997, 1). These “surprising” and “by no means gratifying” results speak to Freud’s lament, cited
above, of the tangled web of Dora’s repressed desires, which obscures the “fine poetic conflict” of her case (52). A therapeutic relationship is not, of course, a repeatable experiment. Yet Freud, the scientist, felt compelled to publish the particulars of the case to support his broader psychoanalytical findings, and to “make it accessible to the judgment of the world” (1). Therefore, one source of Freud’s anxiety was the impossibility for his errant translation of Dora to be empirically tested. While later editions of the case history included footnotes to correct or amend minor aspects of his findings—such as the retraction of an early “extreme view” that leucorrhoea in young girls was caused by masturbation (68)—the salient analyses of the case endured without correction. This suggests that Freud’s unease was based not on a fear that his analysis was errant, but rather, on a desire for other specialists to confirm his interpretation of the case.

A second source of anxiety for Freud was the “technical difficulties” of writing up the case history (4). Without the aid of written notes, and without, of course, any kind of recording device, Freud had to write up the details of the case history after its termination, from memory alone. He explains that he “overcame” these difficulties by writing the history soon after the therapy sessions had come to an end, while his recollections were “still fresh” (4); and that the wording of Dora’s two dreams, which the case history is structured around, were recorded immediately after each sitting. Freud claims that these dreams “thus afforded a secure point of attachment for the chain of interpretations and recollections which proceeded from them” (4). Just how secure are these points of attachment? And, comparatively, how secure are the points of attachment that make up Nox’s imagistic and textual evidence?

The “[points] of attachment” in Nox include the fragmented black-and-white photograph of the stairs, a photograph of Carson’s brother at about age eight, and a transcribed phone conversation. Carson adopts the image of the stairwell as a metaphor for Michael’s status as an outsider, in both his childhood and his adult life. Similarly, the “sideways invisible look” (8.2) that Carson sees in the photograph of her brother as a boy becomes a locus point for her understanding of Michael’s absence and self-imposed exile. The “chain of interpretations and recollections” that Carson creates from these concrete attachment points is a
subjective, lyrical, and personal expression of grief and pain. The attachment points in *Nox* require translation, but the source material is unstable. Carson writes, “Because our conversations were few (he phoned me maybe 5 times in 22 years), I study his sentences the ones I remember as if I’d been asked to translate them” (8.1). As we know from recent memory studies, memories (like languages) are inherently unstable (Lehrer 2007). A common assumption is that the memories we recollect most often are the ones that are truest and most faithful to the originating event. However, scientists tell us this notion is fundamentally flawed. Paradoxically, the memories that are the least altered are the ones we never remember. Every time we recall an event, like a childhood image or a telephone conversation, we create a new version of that memory in our mind. Subtle alterations are worked upon the memory when we recollect it. Each instance of remembering creates another errant version (Lehrer 2007). As Carson implies, her process of studying and translating her memories of her brother is as necessarily errant as the process of translating from Latin or Greek into English.

One of the narrative’s unstable points of attachment is this one-sided transcription of a phone conversation with Michael:

Lots of crime in Copenhagen.
Danes are hardworking.
I am painting the flat.
We have a dog that’s him barking.
Yes he barks in Danish.
Don’t go back to the farm don’t go alone.
What will you do sit on Bald Rock and look down at the graves.
Put the past away you have to.

(8.1)

This transcription is as unavoidably manipulated as the lexical entry of the Latin word that occupies the page opposite. It is another errant entry into the brother who evades definitive interpretation. Each lexical entry recalls the entryway of the
stairwell, which, as I noted above, is an imagistic entry point to understanding Michael’s shadow side. “Entry” also means “note,” a provisional account or an aid to memory, of which Nox is composed (the word nox shares its first two letters with “note”). Nox’s notes are secured in place by glue, and then by the iterative process of photographic reproduction for general publication. However, Carson emphasises the insecurity of these attachment points by tearing up the photographs, fragmenting the letters, and otherwise pulling apart the material evidence of Michael’s life. This exemplifies her anxiety around the paucity of her understanding of her brother, and the “sad gift for burials” that she has to offer.

Michael refuses to be analysed, and Nox enacts this refusal, alongside a refusal to do what Michael urges: to “put the past away.” Carson writes of Michael: “He refuses to be ‘cooked’ (a modern historian might say) in my transactional order” (1.3). While Freud acknowledges that taking notes in the middle of a sitting would “disturb” his view of the material unfolding before him, he does not confess that the post-therapy write-up also involves an unavoidable doctoring of the text (Freud 1997, 4).

Carson’s willing engagement with silence, blanks, and unanswerable questions in Nox can be usefully contrasted with Freud’s anxiety around representing process. Freud grappled with the question of how to represent the slow, recursive, unfolding story of Dora’s memories and symptoms, which “[emerged] piecemeal, woven into various contexts, and distributed over widely separated periods of time” (Freud 1997, 6). A literary representation of the therapeutic process is in tension with Freud’s desire to communicate his final analysis clearly and scientifically. Ultimately, Freud sacrifices the representation of process:

I have as a rule not reproduced the process of interpretation to which the patient’s associations and communications had to be subjected, but only the results of that process. Apart from the dreams, therefore, the technique of the analytic work has been revealed in only a very few places.

(Freud 1997, 7)
In the case history’s narrative, every question Freud asks is furnished with a response, even if that response is delayed in order to effect suspense and elicit reader intrigue. As readers, we never hear Freud’s uncertain silence, or see him grappling with unanswerable questions.

Conversely, *Nox* emphasises the uncertain process of translating a person. The textual and visual images convey silences, blanks, and unanswerable questions. “WHO / WERE / YOU,” asks *Nox* (2.1). The question is rendered as letters erased from within black fields of pencil shadings (see figure 5). The response, a page later, under the secure point of attachment of an old photograph, reads: “I make a guess, I make a guess.” As I discussed in chapter 2, Carson’s methodology of unease in approaching translation, whether of texts or people, involves drawing attention to process. *Nox* privileges an attention to the errant process of interpretation and analysis, over an authoritative representation of the results. Carson applies her methodology of unease not only to the work of translating her brother’s identity but also to the work of making history.

Freud and Carson are driven by a shared impulse: the desire to understand the psyche, to make sense of personal histories, and to represent them in writing. While I have set up a tension between Freud’s preference for results over process, and Carson’s privileging of process over results, their methods of making history are not in fact as unalike as they might seem.

Carson takes Herodotus as her guide in the making of history. She claims that Herodotus’s model of history making involves attempting to comprehend facts that are simultaneously “concrete and indecipherable” (1.3), and that may not yield what Freud would call “results” (Freud 1997, 1). “Herodotus is an historian who trains you as you read,” Carson writes. “It is a process of asking, searching, collecting, doubting, striving, testing, blaming and above all standing amazed at the strange things humans do” (1.3). With this list of verbs, Carson prescribes a paradoxically non-prescriptive method of attending to the process of writing history. She rejects possibility of a definitive answer to history’s difficult questions.
Within the first few pages of Nox, Carson cites an image from Hekataios’s *How to Go Around the Earth* (c. 500 BC):

He makes out of myrrh an egg as big as he can carry. Then he tests it to see if [sic] he can carry it. After that he hollows out the egg and lays his father inside and plugs up the hollow. With father inside the egg weighs the same as before. Having plugged it up he carries the egg to Egypt to the temple of the sun.

By way of explanation, Carson writes:

Hekataios is describing the sacred phoenix which lived in Arabia but came to Heliopolis in Egypt once every five hundred years to bury a father there. The phoenix mourns by shaping, weighing, testing, hollowing, plugging and carrying towards the light. He seems to take a clear view of necessity. And in the shadows that flash over him as he makes his way from Arabia to Egypt maybe he comes to see the immensity of the mechanism in which he is caught, the immense fragility of his own flying—composed as it is of these ceaselessly passing shadows carried backward by the very motion that devours them, his motion, his asking.

(1.1)

This powerful image conveys a duality of forwards and backwards motion. The phoenix carries the egg forward. It travels with its burden of family grief over distances and through time, in order to arrive at a place where that grief can be processed through some kind of necessary funeral rite. At the same time, the “ceaselessly passing shadows” are “carried backward,” to the place where the
phoenix originates. This image beautifully distils the dual motion of Nox, the simultaneity of the forward textual motion of the book’s grief-work, and the backwards passage of the poet’s interpretive essays though layers of errant memory. The continuous, concertinaed page unfolds the fragmented facts of Michael’s life. The first and the last page are, in a sense, the same page, which can be lifted out and travelled through, in an unbroken passage, from beginning to end.

The egg image also aptly suggests the work of psychoanalysis. It implies continuity between past and future: visiting the past, and bringing it into the present, in order to translate it into a more acceptable or useful story. In one of Freud’s earliest publications—Studies on Hysteria with Josef Breuer (1895)—Freud writes that the process by which hysterical symptoms are cured involves returning to a past, painful memory, and allowing it to be resurrected into the present. The patient is encouraged to return in memory to the event, and to describe its details aloud as vividly as possible. This returning summons the symptoms connected with the event—including spasms and hallucinations—which are felt powerfully by the patient one last time, and then “vanish for ever” (Freud 1953–75, 12: 7). Commenting on this passage, Rachel Bowlby writes: “The order outlined here involves three stages: a return to a point of origin, a repetition or re-reaction, and a final ending. Past, present and future interfere with one another and reconnect; a return of or to a painful past moment, resurrected and relived, makes possible a future ‘for ever’ free of the symptom that has taken the place until now of an unhappy memory, and kept it out of the way of conscious knowledge” (Bowlby 2007, 47). This dramatic rebirth of the painful past, followed by a final, sudden death, is a mirror image of the phoenix’s life cycle: a death, followed by a dramatic and fiery rebirth. Bowlby writes that, elsewhere, the description of these last moments has a mystical overtone. They are described as “the end of a haunting: ‘the image vanishes as a rescued spirit is laid to rest’” (Bowlby 2007, 57). This language presents the patient’s cure as final and definitive. The symptoms are experienced one last time, and the patient is then freed forever from the influence of these unacceptable reminiscences; the repressed histories are translated definitively into their conscious cause. The
history making of therapeutic treatment is thus a kind of detective work, where, once the solution (repressed memory) is found, the case is solved.

Yet other imagery in *Studies on Hysteria* re-negotiates this linear, results-based version of therapeutic treatment. Freud writes, “each individual hysterical symptom immediately and permanently disappeared when we had succeeded in bringing clearly to light the memory of the event by which it was provoked” (Freud 1953–75, 2: 6). This consensus echoes the motion of Hekataios’s phoenix carrying the egg “towards the light.” However, other descriptions speak more to the “ceaselessly passing shadows carried backward by the very motion that devours them.” The work of therapy is described by one of Freud’s patients as “chimney-sweeping.” Breuer and Freud also use metaphors of wiping away, sweeping up, and brushing away to describe the removal of patients’ symptoms (Bowlby 2007, 74). Like housework, psychoanalysis is figured as never-ending, its accumulation of symptoms always needing to be newly dealt with. Perhaps the most memorable image of psychoanalysis’ ceaseless process is toward the end of *Studies on Hysteria*, when Freud characteristically adopts a model from Greek mythology and calls the work of psychoanalysis “a Danaids’ task” (Bowlby 2007, 72). In Greek mythology, the Danaids were condemned to perpetual punishment by filling leaky containers with water, over and over again. Like Carson’s adoption of the ancient image of the phoenix and the egg, Freud’s image of the Danaids casts psychoanalysis not as a linear and results-based work, but as cyclical, repetitive, moving forward and yet “ceaselessly passing . . . backward.”

Like the images registering the stereotype behaviours cited above, the image of the egg is repeated again and again throughout *Nox* to assert the iterative, ceaseless process of making history. Carson describes the church where Michael’s funeral was held as “white and clean as an eggshell inside” (5.4). Then she writes that when Michael came to stay with her in 1978, before he disappeared overseas, “the apartment got dirty, cigarette butts everywhere and at last I was glad he moved on. One morning he butted a cigarette in a frying pan on the stove, sunny side up” (5.4). Further on, she writes that both her parents were laid out in their coffins, years apart, in bright yellow sweaters. “They looked like beautiful peaceful egg yolks” (5.5). The description of the cigarette butted “sunny side up”
and the image of the dead parents as “peaceful egg yolks” connects Michael’s absence, silence, and self-destructive behaviours with the pain he caused his parents—particularly his mother, who, in the last seven years of Michael’s life, began to believe he was dead. “When I pray for him nothing comes back,” she is quoted as saying (4.2). Carson writes, “Hopelessness built a wall in her. From her point of view, all desire left the world” (4.3). She interprets her mother’s grief for Michael as a wall, a stopper, a silencer. She cannot feel the motion of her prayers for Michael arriving anywhere, though he is still alive during her lifetime. There seems to be a stopping of motion in the mother’s therapeutic process. This lack of motion banishes desire and imports a wall-like darkness into the mother’s life. *Nox*, on the other hand, adopts the image of the egg to open up that motion. The egg that connect Michael’s destructive stereotypes with the family’s pain also implies birth, and, in relation to the phoenix, rebirth. Travelling backwards into painful memories is ultimately a hopeful process.

In Carson’s explanation of her use of the Catullus poem, she writes, “No one (even in Latin) can approximate Catullun diction, which at its most sorrowful has an air of deep festivity” (7.1). In an interview about *Nox*, Michael Silverblatt suggests that the book might provide a model to help people work through their processes of grief. As he is searching aloud for a way to talk about *Nox*, he tries out a series of possible adjectives before being gently interrupted by Carson with her own idea of the way the book works out its grief:

Silverblatt: “It’s an absolutely great pleasure to be able to bring this book to others who may themselves find, through a process of grief, that they need a process of creation that will in some way demobilise, or diminish, or gradually —”

Carson: “Make it festive.”

Silverblatt: “—transform into festivity.”

Carson: “I hope so.”

Silverblatt. “I hope so.”

(Silverblatt 2010)
These are the last words of the interview, and their double acknowledgement of hopefulness suggests an antithesis to the “hopelessness” of Carson’s mother’s “wall.” Like Catullus’s diction, the image of the egg also finds a way to bind sorrow to festivity. The cigarette butts of Michael’s “dirt” are metaphorically connected to the peaceful, festive, bright egg yolk yellow of the parents’ twin funeral sweaters.

This transformation into festivity does not mean, however, that the shadows of grief and memory disappear. On the page in Nox that explains Carson’s reading of the Catullus poem, the lines describing the sorrowful yet festive Catullun diction are covered over by a semi-opaque strip of material, which darkens just that section of the text (see figure 6). Similar textual and material strategies throughout the book bind insights into the brother’s history to a repeated insistence on the night, the nox. Carson questions these insights, unsettling their status as fully processed proofs of catharsis. It is telling that Carson chooses the metaphor of the egg to represent her family history. The egg, of course, is a symbol for the eternal, clichéd question of what came first, a question that is ultimately unanswerable. Has the grief-work of Nox been an interpretive cure for the mystery of Carson’s brother and for the experience of mourning him? “I guess it never ends,” writes Carson. “A brother never ends. I prowl him. He does not end” (7.1). In Carson’s writing of history, there are motions towards understanding and there are moments that transform sorrow into celebration, but there is no end, no final cure—no definitive interpretation that can evaporate the need for therapeutic exploration. The errant version of the past that the poet has vivified with Nox will always be available to a renewable process of renegotiation.

Freud’s representation of the ceaseless process of psychoanalysis is somewhat less hopeful than Carson’s radiant egg metaphor. Rachel Bowlby cites Freud’s claim, toward the end of Studies on Hysteria, that “the physician will not be spared the depressing feeling of being faced by a Sisyphean task” (Bowlby 2007, 76). While it is interesting that the editors chose to translate the original German Danaidenarbeit, “Danaids’ task,” into “Sisyphean” (Bowlby 2007, 76)—to translate the women’s work of the water-collecting Danaids into the more manly effort of pushing a boulder endlessly up a hill—both of these Greek images are
invoked as examples of the depressing punishment of eternal process. On the one hand, Freud is frustrated when his case studies refuse to provide clean answers or clear results. In Nox, Carson expresses (then undermines) a similar wish for clarity:

We want other people to have a centre, a history, an account that makes sense. We want to be able to say This is what he did and Here’s why. It forms a lock against oblivion. Or does it?

(3.3)

On the other hand, Freud’s case studies do not read like the tidily linear histories that would have been familiar to his readers. Rieff calls Dora: An Analysis of a Case of Hysteria: “a preparatory exercise in a new mode of historical writing” (Rieff 1997, ix). He compares the case history, with its organisation along “multiple analytic perspectives, all converging upon Dora’s repressed desires,” with the “experiments with the expression of interior consciousness” of James Joyce and Virginia Woolf (ix). In his case histories, Freud advances his analysis by perpetually pressing backwards, in complicated and layered ways:

Freud pushes the protesting girl back through her inner history—of which she is largely unaware—descending ever deeper, cutting across levels of the same event, beyond the outer shell of her protective self-interpretations, to her relations with her mother, father, brother, governess, other girls, and that famous couple: Herr K. and his wife.

(Rieff 1997, ix-x)

Freud was not satisfied with incompleteness, open-endedness, or unanswered questions. However, the tension in his case studies between what Richard Armstrong calls history as “res gestae” and “res digestae” did contribute to a reappraisal of the making of history in the twentieth century (Armstrong 2005, 132). Armstrong calls this tension an “internal vacillation” between “characterizing history as an objective record of facts and deeds done, or as a
digested, evolving narrative serving present needs and mapped exclusively from the present horizon” (132). This tension in the work of both Freud and Carson testifies to the necessity of continually re-negotiating personal and historical narratives. As Armstrong notes, “We must be certain of one thing: no matter how radically psychoanalysis reworks historical narrative, it still clings to the notion of history, if not in the form of a final narrative, then at least as an on-going project of narrative renewal” (132).

Carson and Freud’s parallel methods of narrative renewal provide mutually illuminating ways to think about the work of making history and translating a life. By reading Freud through Carson, and reading Carson through Freud, I have shown how they both write versions of history that move forwards while pressing backwards. I have also shown how they reveal, conceal, or otherwise negotiate the processes of therapy, and the different ways they acknowledge their translations as errant versions. The new Penguin Freud Reader (Freud 2006), edited by Adam Phillips, collects texts translated by diverse hands, with no attempt to standardise the terminology across volumes or translators. Rachel Bowlby describes the new volume as having an “unfixing and renewing” effect on the reception of Freud. She writes, “It will reinforce the sense of a Freud always open to rereading and repackaging, a Freud whose meaning is not established and standardised once and for all, whose texts necessarily fulfil and take on different roles at different historical moments” (2007, 219). While Freud’s case studies contributed to a rethinking of history as processual and “open to rereading,” in his therapeutic sessions he still commanded, sometimes cruelly and aggressively, singular interpretations of his patient’s texts. Nox, on the other hand, opens with multiplicity. The first lexical entry is for the Latin word “multas”—“many.” Even an apparently straightforward translation task, such as listing the many possible meanings for a foreign word, is inflected with the author’s subjectivity and emotional preoccupations. Nox is history as res digestae: it maps the needs of Carson’s personal and historical moment. With Nox, Carson offers not a promise for a superior insight, but insights: errant versions that insist on an ongoing project of attempted understanding.
CONCLUSION

“We’re talking about the struggle to drag a thought over from the mush of the unconscious into some kind of grammar, syntax, human sense; every attempt means starting over with language. Starting over with accuracy. I mean, every thought starts over, so every expression of a thought has to do the same. Every accuracy has to be invented.”


In this thesis, I have connected errant versioning and textual motion at the level of language to a philosophy of errancy and incompleteness in translation. I have connected translation’s errancy to the unavoidable errancies of writing a life and making history. And I have connected language, translation, and history to questions of sexual power and textual authority. As I have demonstrated through Carson’s work, these seemingly disconnected areas of thought—language theory, translation theory, notions of sexuality and gender, questions of how to write history, psychoanalytical debates—are actually closely connected discourses, as they all address the tension between repetition and alterity. In Derrida’s words, all these discourses fundamentally try to “work out the logic that ties repetition to alterity” (1977, 7). Carson’s work registers the tensions between boundaries and free motion, between the preservation of pre-existing texts and their radical recontextualisation, and between seeking to understand a life and imposing restrictive interpretations on that life. She resists the offering of a final or absolute solution.

An iterative conceptual framework has been key to unlocking the ways that Carson “work[s] out the logic” between sameness and difference in her poetry and translations. In chapter 1, I showed how Carson recontextualises and alters Freud’s words to address the relationship between gender and violence, desire and disappointment, and authorship and autobiography. By repeating and altering Freud’s texts, Carson highlights the processual repetitions and alterations in
Freud’s lab work, his personal and career ambitions, and his notions of gender difference. I also showed how Carson’s road trip narrative, “Just for the Thrill: An Essay on the Difference Between Women and Men,” frames the male character as the possessor of authoritative knowledge about language and sex, while giving the female character the power to frustrate and unsettle that authority. Both of these aspects—knowing and not knowing, wisdom and confusion, repetition and alteration—form the fundamental poetic tensions in Carson’s diction, phrasing, and imagery. In chapter 2, I highlighted the errant iterations of Stesichoros’s poetry in *Autobiography of Red*, and showed how these alternative translations suggest alternative ways of viewing the balance of sexual and emotional power between passive and active partners. I also showed how Carson’s formal and textual decisions avoid the imposition of interpretive boundaries on Sappho’s text and sexuality, while simultaneously acknowledging the unavoidably subjective impositions that a translator works upon her text. In chapter 3, I showed how Carson extends a conversation about the tension between definitive analysis and multiplicitious translation in psychoanalytical practice to write a therapeutic grief-work about her brother’s life and death. I showed how Carson connects repetition and alteration in psychotherapy to repetition and alteration in the writing of history, and I showed how both these practices involve ceaseless process and ongoing narrative renewal.

I have also shown how Carson’s “unoriginal” strategies of citation, recontextualisation, rewriting, and translation do not reject expressiveness and verbal originality—repuiations that drive the “unoriginal” poetics of the contemporary avant-garde (Perloff 2010). Carson’s unoriginal strategies, paradoxically, serve to further her originality, and drive her modes of expression and verbal creativity. Carson’s iterative strategies bind questions of textual freedom and restriction to renegotiations of sexuality and history. She uses these strategies to express both personal and social experiences. Thus, her work shows us how we might widen our understanding of unoriginal writing to encompass other modes of contemporary poetry, which also employ iterative strategies to grapple with questions of social, sexual, and personal identity.
Carson’s iterative poetics “keep shaking the box”: they illuminate how gender roles, sexual identities, and models for family relationships are repeated and altered as they are transmitted through human history and cultural productions. The way that individuals relate to and embody those roles, identities, and models of behaviour involves a necessary tension between sameness and difference, repetition and alterity. In her poetry and translations, Carson draws attention to the tension between repetition and alterity in what it means to be a woman, what it means to translate a text, what it means to “translate a person,” and what it means to understand and to write a life. Ultimately, Carson emphasises hopeful and process-based ways we might think about and make sense of the past—whether the ancient past, or the past of our own memories.
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Appendix A

Figure 1. The lexical gloss for “multas.”
Figure 2. Carson’s translation of Catullus’s 101, in collage form.
Figure 3. A quote from Herodotus glued over an excerpt from Michael’s letter.
Figure 4. Fragmented images of stairs.
Figure 5. The question “Who were you,” scratched out from within black fields of pencil shadings.
7.1. I want to explain about the Catullus poem (101). Catullus wrote poem 101 for his brother who died in the Troad. Nothing at all is known of the brother except his death. Catullus appears to have travelled from Verona to Asia Minor to stand at the grave. Perhaps he recited the elegy there. I have loved this poem since the first time I read it in high school Latin class and I have tried to translate it a number of times. Nothing in English can capture the passionate, slow surface of a Roman elegy. No one (even in Latin) can approximate Catullan diction, which at its most sorrowful has an air of deep festivity, like one of those trees that turns all its leaves over, silver, in the wind. I never arrived at the translation I would have liked to do of poem 101. But over the years of working at it, I came to think of translating as a room, not exactly an unknown room, where one gropes for the light switch. I guess it never ends. A brother never ends. I prowl him. He does not end.

Figure 6. Carson’s explanation of Catullus’s 101.