

Figuring an Ethical Reading Practice: Anne Carson's 'Whaching'

Keegan Cook Finberg

University of California at Santa Cruz

What is an ethical reading practice for the twenty first century? And why do we need it? This essay wagers that by investigating the ways readers figure within poetry, we can gain insight into reading and ethics on multiple scales. This investigation also contributes to our contemporary conversation about the importance of studying reading practices.¹ When Gayatri C. Spivak proposes that literature should “come to supplement, fill a hole in as well as add to, the decision-making authority of the social sciences” (420), she wants the works we read to teach us about ethical possibilities, our relationships to others, and the consequences of our actions. My essay extends from a critical tradition of examining readers in order to study ethical reading practices. Like Spivak, Paul de Man, Derek Attridge and J. Hillis Miller argue that reading literature involves ethical responsibility. Each theorist studies a reader in order to fathom reading practices, but each chooses a different medium and mode of production in making this argument; Attridge, his own singular response to poems; de Man, the history of literary criticism; and Miller, writers reading their own work. Each concludes that re-reading and an open response to the unknown constitute an ethical reading practice. For Attridge, this unknown is defined as the “other;” for de Man, embodied in “blindness;” and for Miller, it is constituted by “failure.” They

¹ Recent scholarship has focused on reading practices. For example, the Fall 2009 special issue of *Representations* “The Way We Read Now,” the 2011 English Institute conference on the theme “Reading,” and the 2004 conference “Polemic: Critical or Uncritical.” Also see Heather Love’s 2010 “Close but not Deep: Literary Ethics and the Descriptive Turn,” and Eve K. Sedgwick’s 2003 “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You’re so Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You.”

each argue that an ethical response to the unknown within the reading process has far-reaching consequences.

The figure of the reader in a poetic text allows us to think through these aporias, or unknowns, and glimpse areas otherwise outside of our vision; this figure prevails in the work of contemporary Canadian poet Anne Carson. Because poetry differs from everyday language, reading poetry is necessarily an encounter with difference and, as a consequence, it demands an ethical response.² Thus poetry often figures its own ethical encounter, but Carson's work heightens the process because it figures a reader experiencing this encounter in the text. Carson's poetry tells us that our affective relationships to texts have consequences outside or beyond the moment of reading the text. Her work suggests that loving texts and honoring that love through a reading practice creates an ethical encounter. Spivak considers it the reader's task to "imagine yourself [...] really letting yourself be imagined without guarantees" by the literatures read (52). The guarantee relinquished here is that of complete understanding; we can never access another directly and completely. Spivak uses the term *teleopoiesis* to refer to this passive ethics of reading, which emphasizes being made rather than making. *Teleopoiesis* is a way of transferring agency that allows an encounter with the unknown, as figured in the text, to create our ethical stance and our reading practice.

This essay examines Anne Carson's dialogues with literary figures across history in order to define a twenty first century ethical reading practice. The concept of "ethical reading practice" suggests a way of reading and responding to literature responsibly and carefully in order to

² In *Structuralist Poetics*, Jonathan Culler defines poetry as a "strategy of reading" (163). By reading, we enter "a process of finding ways to grant [the poem] significance and importance" (Culler 175). He follows de Man in stating that all poetry is in some sense "an allegory of the poetic act" (178); the poem serves as a tale of its own event of writing and reading. As Karin Littau points out, for both Stanley Fish and Jonathan Culler, emphasis is on the reader, or the method of reading rather than the text. For Fish, the reader is emphasized so heavily that the text falls away (Littau 114). My hope is that this experiment of looking at readers in and of the text opens new possibilities.

produce a generative encounter with the text. Such an encounter has implications that reach far outside the text, demonstrating ethical relationships and the formation of an ethical stance. To consider what literature can teach us about ethics, and how it teaches us, I focus on the figure of the reader and the drama of reading in Carson's poetry.

Carson's works often explore affective relationships to texts; they stage conversations between a lyric I—a speaker who is not only the speaking subject in the poem but also a reader of other poems—and a body of past literature. In "Mimnermos: The Brainsex Paintings" (1995), an imagined interview creates the temporal possibility and the poetic space for a meeting between a contemporary "I" and an ancient "M," the seventh-century BCE Greek poet Mimnermos. In *The Beauty of the Husband* (2001), reading Keats' poetry and marginalia dictates the undoing of the narrator's marriage. *Nox* (2010) depicts how studying and translating an elegy by the Roman poet Catullus enables the speaker to grieve for the early death of her brother. In each of these cases, the reader as speaker feels strongly about the author she reads and the narrative is paired closely with the drama of reading. Each unfolds a story about the ways that reading with an affective relationship to the text produces consequences in relationships outside the text. Carson's translations likewise show how the act of translation itself is emotionally fraught and ethically weighty. Most recently, *Antigonick* (2012), a disloyal translation of Sophocles' *Antigone*, transfers the time and grief of the ancient tragedy into our contemporary landscape. It addresses a "you" full of rage, a "you" who yells at your wife when she makes a wrong turn behind the wheel.³ The work's reader ("you") participates in the author's emotional and intellectual work of translating from Ancient Greek.

³ See Judith Butler's review of *Antigonick*, "Can't Stop Screaming," for a discussion of this "different kind of transposition."

In Carson's long poem, "The Glass Essay" (1995), the speaker tells the story of losing her lover through reading Emily Brontë. While reading *The Collected Works of Emily Brontë*, the speaker reveals that Brontë is her "favorite author" ("The Glass Essay" 2). Throughout the speaker's account of her lost lover named Law and a difficult relationship with her mother, reading Brontë's work provides a conduit for feeling and relating. From Brontë, she learns a type of transformative reading practice, defined as a kind of watching, or "whaching;" as the speaker tells us, "whacher" is "Emily's habitual spelling of this word" (Carson, "The Glass Essay" 4). In the text, reading leads to understanding through watching, rather than doing. Furthermore, the speaker tells us that the act of "whaching," unlike "watching" is without a choice (4), and always carried out in uncertainty. Uncertainty comes to mind as the "wh" in Brontë's word aligns it orthographically with common interrogative words: the contingency of "whether," the openness of "what," the uncertainty of "who," in a practice of seeing. In contrast to Brontë's editors who habitually misunderstand and hypercorrect her work, the speaker's practice is informed by her singular love for Brontë's texts. From the orthography of Carson's "whaching" to its interpretation, it is a contingent practice—sometimes meaning one open question, sometimes another. Exploring this attentive but passive and contingent reading practice through Brontë's work enables Carson's speaker to understand her failed love relationship, as well as tell its story. The relationship between the speaker, Brontë, and Brontë's texts allows for the transformation and the drama of Carson's text: the speaker sees her body differently, understands her difference and relates to others differently because of it. In this way, Carson's work connects affect and ethics; the speaker studies feelings with and through the body as she works through an encounter with difference, which is sometimes her own pain.

Throughout “The Glass Essay,” the speaker’s body is depicted as both subject and object: she sometimes claims her body parts as her own; at other times she feels estranged from them. The use of possessive adjectives, pronouns and articles marks this oscillation most clearly. For example, on the first page, the speaker’s face belongs to her (“my face”) but then it becomes modified by a definite article, as “the face,” in the following lines:

My face in the bathroom mirror
has white streaks down it.
I rinse the face and return to bed.

(Carson, “The Glass Essay” 1)

Here, “the face” could read as the mirror, suggesting that the speaker has washed streaks off the “face” of a reflective plane and additionally off her own face. The poetry creates its own type of ekphrastic reading event, since it is unclear what is described as containing streaks and being rinsed, the mirror or the speaker’s face. Usually in ekphrasis,⁴ there is a clear object described verbally, but here something is created in the text. Whether the mirror surface looks dirty or the human face has been crying, the confusion exemplifies the questions “The Glass Essay” raises about the relationship between ontology and ethics. This scene does not resolve the distinction between self and image. When she looks at “the” face as an image, the speaker can act on it. But when the face belongs to her, it is acted upon—it can only possess, or have, not rinse. Her seeing and describing the face afford the agency required for *poiesis*, though here she merely modified the face with a definite article, and then by rinsing it. Reading oneself as another produces multiple possibilities, here it produces action in particular.

A toggling of personal pronouns, possessive pronouns and articles happens many times in the work. A few pages later, the speaker envisions her arms not as her own, but as the arms of a remembered self, someone else’s (8). She shares a collective knee with her reader when

⁴ Ekphrasis is most commonly defined as “a verbal description of, or meditation on, a non-verbal work of art, real or imagined, usually a painting or sculpture” (Baldick 104).

discussing Charlotte Brontë's denial of Emily's phobias (10). Later she shifts positions, and adopts an objectifying gaze; when describing an encounter with her ex-lover, she calls her own back "the" back (11). In the difference between "my" and "the" the narrator shows how reading Brontë's text is at work in her own life. She watches and describes parts of herself from a distance. If reading and loving Brontë affords the narrator new insights into the lives of others, if it instills feelings of community and compassion, it also enables her to gain insight into her own life, independently of Brontë.

This insight results from the adoption of a particular type of ekphrasis—whaching. Brontë's "whaching" consists in an "unsociable" and "awkward" activity (5). The speaker explains that for Brontë, whaching is unavoidable and vulnerable; it compares to "a swimmer / who walks out of the water at sunset / shaking the drops off, it just flies open" (5). An "open" stance, whaching allows Brontë to get closer to that which she calls "Thou," an eroticized spirituality that haunts her work. For the speaker of "The Glass Essay," whaching practices a way of looking at her life from a distance. In the first part of the text, she cannot help watching herself and others; as she reads Brontë, she identifies with her and explains, "some people watch" (19). In "Ekphrasis and the Other," W.J.T. Mitchell proposes a philosophy of ekphrasis that helps to illuminate whaching. He claims that ekphrasis shows a "working through" of how to deal with metaphysical assumptions about media, the senses, and representation. It raises questions about appropriating, or confronting the other, textual or otherwise. In his view, the roles in ekphrasis are often gendered, with the penetrative gaze of the male subject verbalizing the aestheticized object of ekphrasis, which is often feminized (Mitchell 170). He examines canonical examples where ekphrasis reveals a gender hierarchy and sometimes also a

masturbatory quality.⁵ Yet, for Mitchell, gender dynamics are just one part of this trope that exposes “the social structure of representation as an activity and a relationship of power/knowledge/desire— representation as something done to something, with something, by someone, for someone” (Mitchell 180). Barbara Fischer and Jane Hedely have written recently about the ways these categories change when the ekphrasis is focused on a woman’s body from a woman's point of view (Hedley, Halpern, and Spiegelman). Hedley, Halpern and Spiegelman’s book reverses the dynamic of Mitchell’s canonical examples and show that ekphrasis can be a site of resistance to “the male gaze.” In fact, Hedley argues that the term itself is transgressive. Made from a compound of the Greek verb *phrazô*, meaning “to speak or tell” and *ek*, a prefix meaning “outside” or “off from,” Hedley glosses ekphrasis as “speaking out,” or “telling in full,” or “speaking otherwise” (20).

These moments of toggling between possession and self-address in Carson’s work bring issues of ownership, desire, and resistance to standard ideologies into question, but additionally, these moments raise questions about ethics. Or rather, the ethical challenge posed by the poem subsumes questions of ownership and ideology under issues of formation and decision-making. It is in the interchange between the owning “my,” and the othering “the,” that the narrator shows how reading Brontë’s work affects her own life; it enables her to see herself among others. These moments tell us that insight into one’s own life require seeing oneself among others; we need the ability to watch ourselves from afar in order to gain this level of understanding and we must have this understanding to act. Sometimes the speaker sees parts of her body through the eyes of another. In the middle of the poem, for example, Carson writes a dialogue between the body and the soul:

⁵ Mitchell looks at Wallace Stevens’ “Anecdote of a Jar,” William Carlos Williams’ “Portrait of a Lady,” Keats’ “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” and most thoroughly, Percy Bysshe Shelley’s “On the Medusa of Leonardo Da Vinci in the Florentine Gallery.”

Soul is what I kept watch on all that night.
Law stayed with me.
We lay on top of the covers as if it weren't really a night of sleep and time,

caressing and singing to one another in our made-up language
like the children we used to be.
That was a night that centered Heaven and Hell,

as Emily would say.
(Carson, "The Glass Essay" 12)

In a moment that recalls John Donne's "The Ecstasy," the lover sees her soul as separate from her body. She then reads herself through Emily Brontë's quotation. In Carson's poem, multiple readers are interpellated throughout, but by the end, reading is not as ambiguous as it is in Donne's poem; the narrator gains insight by reading with empathy through distance—or through another's words. The speaker floats "high up near the ceiling looking down / on the two souls clasped there on the bed / with their mortal boundaries / visible around them like lines on a map" (12). Thus a singular affective attachment to a text produces a type of detached but insightful reading. Emily Brontë is a latent reader of the lovers—latent because it is not Brontë, but the speaker's way of reading Brontë, that reads the lovers.⁶ In other words, the speaker reads herself through the medium of Brontë's text. To remind us that both the narrator and also we, the readers, are watching—that we are doing Brontë's practice of "whaching"—we hear the echoes of the "wh" and "w" in the passage: "what I kept watch on all that night."

As Carson tells us earlier in the poem, the speaker's lover's name is Law, and here he is called by name: "Law stayed with me." But Law (as both codified ethics and the speaker's deceitful lover) escapes the realm of the ethical in "The Glass Essay." In this poem, Law (as

⁶ The line "centered on Heaven and Hell" is a reference to Emily Brontë's poem, "Often rebuked, yet always back returning." In this poem, the speaker reads "The earth that wakes one human heart to feeling" as having the possibility to "centre both the worlds of Heaven and Hell." It is interesting to note that there has been some dispute about whether this poem is authored by Charlotte or Emily Brontë, since no known copy of it exists in Emily's hand (Brontë 255).

lover) leaves the speaker without explanation; this character provides the definition of “law,” which ultimately helps us understand ethics, as law is set apart from it. For Roland Barthes, the sphere of the lovers is a unique realm of ethical relation. In this sphere, people relate to each other not because of qualities that they have, but, in Barthes’s words, because they are “tel” or “thus” (Barthes 262). In other words, there is a “just because” aspect of loving someone that can never be determined or codified, as the law can. This is the type of ethics at work in Carson’s poem—an ethics that is related to being, or at least to becoming “thus.” In this dialogue between body, soul and Brontë, Carson shows that this type of ethical relationship does not exist between the two lovers in the bed, but in the speaker’s role as a reader of Emily Brontë’s work. We see this because she keeps “watch,” exercising Brontë’s practice, while Law only “stayed.” While the speaker exercises a transformative textual ekphrasis, Law does not move. The passage continues, telling us that the speaker “came / again and again, each time accumulating lucidity” (12). She gains clarity and insight as she quotes Brontë and Law “remained limp, although happy” (12). Unlike the speaker, he is not transformed.

In Carson’s “The Glass Essay,” the speaker’s invocation of female nudes, described as if they were artworks⁷ exemplifies Hedley’s ekphrasis. In these passages, the speaker meditates on her own figuration as a reader of her life through looking at numbered nudes. Yet unlike the nudes we know from the tradition of Western art, these nudes are both self and other as an aesthetic object. The nudes are herself because the speaker believes that they are visions of her soul; at one point she claims, “I am my own nude” (35). Yet they separate from her, and as she

⁷ Much of Carson’s work shows this type of visual to verbal ekphrasis. For example, in “Hopper: Confessions” Edward Hopper’s paintings speak to Augustine’s *Confessions* (Carson, *Men in the Off Hours* 49–60). See “Postmodern Ekphrasis in the Poetry of Anne Compton, Anne Carson, and Anne Simpson,” “Picture Theory: On Photographic Intimacy in Nicole Brossard and Anne Carson” and “Noisy Brides, Suspicious Kisses: Revisiting Ravishment in Experimental Ekphrasis by Women” for critical work on Carson’s ekphrasis (Campbell; Mayer; Fischer). Chris Jennings examines the erotic power that comes from what he calls Anne Carson’s “triangular paradigm” in her work, which is often ekphrastic (Jennings).

tells her therapist, she cannot stop watching them. The nudes that the speaker watches intently in her meditations have been subjected to bodily torture. Some are afflicted by thorns (“The Glass Essay” 17, 36); Nudes #5 and #6 are flayed (35). But just when the speaker has become “entirely fascinated with [her] spiritual melodrama,” (37) she stops seeing the nudes altogether and repeats, “I saw nothing” (37). After the nude visions cease, the speaker herself (not a nude she watches) is flayed. In a scene that recalls the receptivity of Emerson’s transparent eyeball,⁸ the speaker has her “nerves open to the air like something skinned. / I saw nothing” (37). Here the image of the speaker flayed and unable to see creates an exhausted ekphrasis, an ekphrasis that can no longer perform. On one hand, the simile fails; she cannot be aesthetically rendered. The image has been removed—in this moment, the speaker becomes “like something.” On the other hand, the text shows the need for a new way of receiving and reading that may be “open to the air.” In other words, ekphrasis, or Brontë’s watching, is one element in the hermeneutic practice “The Glass Essay” suggests, but this moment in the text calls for another practice.

Toward the end of the poem the nudes disappear. The speaker claims, “I stopped watching / I forgot about Nudes / I lived my life” (38). As the speaker abandons her earlier reading practice, we are interpellated into this figuration of abandoned watching. Seeing that there is only one more page of Carson’s text, moreover, the reader becomes the “I” who will soon return to her own life. The poem thematizes this transformation by shifting between the pronouns “you” and “I”:

you and I will never know. But I can tell you what I saw.
Nude #13 arrived when I was not watching for it.
It came at night. [...]

It could have been just a pole with some old cloth attached,
but as I came closer

⁸ Sophie Mayer argues that Nude #7, which appears a few pages before, “recasts the transparency of vision from the (female) inside, watching the eyeball watching” (110).

I saw it was a human body

trying to stand against the winds so terrible that the flesh was blowing off the bones.

And there was no pain.

The wind

was cleansing the bones.

They stood forth silver and necessary.

It was not my body, not a woman's body, it was the body of us all.

It walked out of the light.

(Carson, "The Glass Essay" 38)

This image of strength signals that the narrator has now been violently "cleansed" of the break up with Law. Importantly, it is also a gesture toward relational ethics, a move away from aesthetics, and a pointed revelation of reader responsibility. The speaker experiences her lack of pain through the experience of another (at first ambiguously human) body. The ending couplet, "It was not my body, not a woman's body, it was the body of us all. / It walked out of the light" (38), further removes the former reading practices that the speaker employed. It shows us that we must figure ourselves as readers even after we finish reading "The Glass Essay." The speaker's love for Brontë's work guides and illuminates her confession until she abandons it and "stop[s] watching." This ending then points outside the text toward its reading, telling us that the figure is now our figuration, or, "the body of us all;" we are also required to make our own "light" through reading. The body is revealed as a collective singular ("*the* body of *us all*"), and is then concealed by darkness. Through acts of whaching adapted from her "favorite author," the speaker has transformed ekphrasis into a collective and ethical reading practice.

This transformative love of literature across a distance is what Jacques Derrida refers to as *teleiopoetics*. For Derrida, who coined the term,⁹ *teleiopoiesis* means a process of beginning to

⁹ Derrida uses a Latinized French version of a Greek word rendered "téléiopoièse," which George Collins translates as teleiopoiesis; Spivak will later change the meaning and spelling. See Corinne Scheiner's "Teliopoiesis, telepoiesis, and the Practice of Comparative Literature" for a discussion of its orthography and etymology.

Keegan Cook Finberg

arrive at an end (one meaning of *tele*, or *telos*, is “end“ or “goal”). It is also a process that takes place at a distance (*tele* here meaning “at a remove”). The word holds itself in contradiction. It privileges “rendre, faire, transformer, produire, créer, voilà ce qui compte” [rendering, making, transforming, producing, creating] as what “counts”] and also emphasizes that the very process of working, moving or “spanning of space” is itself the end or aim (Derrida, *Politiques de l’amitié* 43; Derrida, *Politics of Friendship* 32). Derrida shows how the operation of reading distantly, through quotations, brings us closer to what is considered a primary work. He claims that in true friendship, and democracy as well, one cannot see love through the love object, but only by looking at the friend who loves, or the loving subject (*Politics of Friendship* 9). The implications of Derrida’s assertion about love extend to criticism and poetry. To better study a work, we must study those who love it or study it with love. In Carson’s “The Glass Essay,” multiple creative events of reading take place and are mirrored in a process like quoting; the self is read through others in a process that apprehends both meanings of *tele*. Spivak’s revision of Derrida’s concept, which she calls *teleopoiesis*, emphasizes that it is a reading practice. Spivak’s notion of imagining yourself being imagined “by and in another culture, perhaps” while reading (52) shows us that through *teleopoiesis*, the reader is *made* by reading rather than *making* when reading, and there is no assurance that this goal of a reader being made by reading will arrive. Like *teleiopoiesis*, Carson’s world-making results in a probing of our reading practice as a form of making. As a reader of Emily Brontë, the speaker prefigures us as readers of Carson’s poem. Just before the speaker sees her last vision in “The Glass Essay,” she writes, “Something had gone through me and out and I could not own it” (38). We are asked to figure ourselves as open, being made by that which we encounter, and without hopes of possession.

In “The Glass Essay,” the speaker creates her story through her understanding of Emily Brontë’s reading practices, and by reading it we experience the formation of a singular ethical relationship to a text. By witnessing this creation of a meeting place between the narrator and Brontë, by experiencing mirrored reading-writing through her story, we question our own practices. We wonder if we are able to “watch” and also, if we want to, to “stop watching.” We consider making our own “light” and being more receptive, “open to the air” (37, 38). Carson’s texts do not model a codified reading practice for us, but rather enable a possibility for us to think differently through the mirrored event of reading. One of the many ways Barthes defines the term figure is as that which can “disent l’affect, puis s’arretent” [“utter the affect, then break off”]; it suspends a possibility for transformation and then disappears (Barthes, *Fragments d’un discours amoureux* 10; Barthes, *A Lover’s Discourse* 6). Carson’s figures break off in “The Glass Essay,” as the speaker’s figures break off. The speaker reads Brontë through loving her work, she reads her life similarly, and then the figure, a body, vanishes. The narrator shows the need for new figures—“the body of us all”—through mediation. In other words, the teleopoetic reading practice engaged in this work enables us to see the need for, and possibility of, an ethical and transformative reading practice for ourselves.

Yet this transformation is also incredibly violent; it comes from difficulty and looks like being flayed. As this special issue points out, figuring contemporary women’s writing in Canada and Québec today is also difficult. It is as complicated as the slash marks and linguistic doubling in the subtitle “Alliances / Transgressions / Betrayals—*Alliances / transgressions / trahisons.*” Like *teleopoiesis*, these slash marks call on the possibilities of our transformative imagination; the connection between each word and the next never quite arrives in this structure, or in its translation, but we must try to connect them nonetheless. How, then, does teleopoiesis, as a way

of ethical reading, relate to the formation of a national and regional identity? Many would argue that Carson's work does not fit easily into the landscape of Canadian women's writing today.¹⁰ For example, Canadian reviewers have claimed that she appears more American than Canadian because her books often come out of U.S. publishing houses. Probing this issue, Kevin McNeilly has asked Carson if she sees any "any national aspect" to her work. Her answer was honest and noncommittal; it focused on the affect of geography. Carson said that she looks to "those kinds of light and rocks and smells and moods and maybe that would add up to a Canadianness of the mentality at some deep level" (McNeilly). Yet while here she defines her Canadianness by geography, she often defines her career through her nation. Where we expect a biographical sketch of the author, her early books simply state, "Anne Carson lives in Canada."¹¹

Geography, if not necessarily nation, is significant to "The Glass Essay," which begins as the speaker travels to see her mother, who "lives on a moor in the north" where "spring opens like a blade" (1). Despite the fact that both Carson and her critics connect this "north" to Northern Canada, the narrative works to liken it only with rural Yorkshire where the Brontës lived. In any case, the affect of the landscape is clear; the speaker's mother lives in a place that is cold, cruel and wide.¹² Ian Rae argues that there is a strong connection to Canada not only in the landscape of "The Glass Essay," but in its language as well. He reads the title of "The Glass Essay" as a pun "that mediates between English and French, Ontario and Québec, while stressing the attachment to a wintry landscape, at once sublime and menacing, which is central to the

¹⁰ The *Cambridge Companion to Canadian Literature* claims that Carson "shar[es] little with her Canadian predecessors" and looks instead to the "timeless power of the classics" and modernist works (Staines 153).

¹¹ This issue of Carson's Canadianness as well as the cheekiness of the blurb has become rather controversial in Carson scholarship. See Dean Irvine, Ian Rae and Jorie Graham. Graham argues that like Carson's work this biography tests the power of language (Graham), while Irvine and Rae both discuss David Solway's proposal that the blurb works to demean Canadian national literature.

¹² The speaker has to travel all day by train to see her mother (1). Her father lives in a nursing home "50 miles from here" (30). Carson and her critics have connected it to the home of Carson's mother, who does live in Northern Canada (Rae, "Verglas" 170). Perhaps embedded in the geography of this text is something of a Canadian emotional landscape of reading, a "mentality at a deep level."

literatures of both official languages” (“Verglas” 180-1). Furthermore, Rae suggests that Carson’s work comments on the notion of a Canadian sensibility. It also comments on the impossibility of reaching or representing one Canada; the perhaps familiar landscape must be read through far away Yorkshire.

While this question of Carson’s Canadianness remains open, her work surely suggests an ethics of a global literary practice. Her work has won international acclaim including many of the most prestigious prizes and awards from the 1990s to the present.¹³ Importantly, this acclaim continually questions notions of any categorization—be it genre, influence or nation-state. Her prize-winning along with her recognition by major US American publishing houses prompted a transnational debate; first a surge of praise and then a backlash for reasons having to do with adherence to form, and for reasons (perhaps) having to do with sexism.¹⁴ Over all, her work is known as controversial and genre defying. And while I have discussed “The Glass Essay” as poetry, like many of her other works, it could be classified as criticism, fiction, or a hybrid text.¹⁵ Carson’s work brings many types of boundary-crossing to our attention. In reading this speaker as learning from reading Brontë, I want to be careful not to suggest a politics of Canadian or

¹³ Carson has earned a Lannan Literary Award (1996), the Pushcart Prize (1997), a Guggenheim Fellowship (1998), a MacArthur Fellowship (2000), a Griffin Poetry Prize (2001) for *Men in the Off Hours*, the T. S. Eliot Prize (2001) for *The Beauty of the Husband*, and a PEN Award for Poetry in Translation (2010). It is not as frequently cited, but she has also won several Québec Writers’ Federation awards like the QSPELL.

¹⁴ See Meghan O’Rourke’s “Hermetic Hotties: What’s Anne Carson Doing on the L Word?” for a clear description of the backlash against Carson as well as a description of her more transgressive fame (O’Rourke). As Ian Rae explains in his discussion of a series of articles that claim that Carson is a hoax, Canadian critical reception only began after she was first written up by the *New York Times* in the U.S. (Rae, “Anne Carson and the Solway Hoaxes”). Critical reception then turned sour after Carson’s T.S. Eliot prize, prompting Robert Potts to complain that *The Beauty of the Husband* “fails as poetry, simply because it shows either crashing inability or an unbecoming contempt for the medium. Its materials—the narrative, its details and a dry wit are engaging enough—would have made for a compelling short story” for the UK’s *The Guardian* (Potts). The vitriolic “The trouble with Annie: David Solway unmakes Anne Carson” is so degrading that both Chris Jennings and Ian Rae have suggested that perhaps it is not entirely serious (Jennings, “Dear Editor”; Rae, “Anne Carson and the Solway Hoaxes”). Solway writes that he is furious that critics could possibly like this “phony,” at one point claiming that she does not exist but instead is the creation of critics (25).

¹⁵ As Jacqueline Plante argues, “Carson’s work is a pallet of mythos, fantasy, queer theory, fantasy, poetry, novel, classicism, and postmodernity. And perhaps her lack of commitment to a particular agenda places her light-years ahead of the feminist effort in regards to transgressive writing” (180). As well as defying genres, Carson has helped create new ones; Carson’s work was important for formulating Tall and D’Agata’s “lyric essay” (1997).

Québécois identity that glorifies a British transnational imaginary.¹⁶ Rather, I would like Carson's texts to help us think through what it means to read national and transnational literatures while staying attuned to the ethics of encountering the unknown. We should take this reader figure into account when thinking through national and transnational texts.

To examine the reader *in* the text (as opposed to the reader *of* the text) in order to study readership and relation in general is valuable because it permits literature as a basis of ethical concern and its study. The form of reading discussed here is difficult, emotional, and indeed for many texts, may be impossible. Yet readership in texts deserves the attention of what John Guillory calls both "professional" and "lay" readers, as we both participate in ethical formation in our reading. For Guillory, reading in general "is the *principal* ethical practice of modernity, the site where a practice of the self has not been entirely or easily subordinated to the moral code, or rendered solely an instrument of power/knowledge" (39). This study of readership does not banish the political for the sake of the ethical, nor does it reject the "real world." Rather, I suggest that reading texts ethically is part of the real world, and our attention to other readers is one step toward achieving insight in this framework. Readers can show us how to cultivate ourselves and how to connect to others. It is then the reader's prerogative to connect the ethics of the text, or the ethics of the reader in the text, to her surroundings.¹⁷

¹⁶ Rae and Irvine warn of this. While Rae points out that the "transposition of Bronte's moors onto the Ontario landscape is the product of a colonial or transnational imaginary," he also suggests that there is something transformative in this reimagining ("Verglas" 182). Irvine argues that Anne Carson's work is an example of late capitalist globalization.

¹⁷ Many thanks to the participants and organizers of "Alliances/Transgressions/Betrayals: Women's Writing in Canada & Québec Today"; Andy Hines; Kendra Dority; Brenda Sanfilippo; Jody Greene; and most especially Karen Bassi for her rigor and support of this piece.

WORKS CITED

- Attridge, Derek. *The Singularity of Literature*. London: Routledge, 2004. Print.
- Baldick, Chris. *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*. 3rd ed. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008. Print. Oxford Paperback Reference.
- Barthes, Roland. *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*. Trans. Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang, 2010. Print.
- . *Fragments d'un discours amoureux*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1977. Print. Collection Tel Quel.
- Brontë, Emily. *The Complete Poems of Emily Jane Brontë*. Ed. Charles William Hatfield. New York: Columbia UP, 1941. Print.
- Butler, Judith. "Can't Stop Screaming." *Public Books*. 5 Sept. 2012. Web.
- Campbell, Wanda. "Postmodern Ekphrasis in the Poetry of Anne Compton, Anne Carson, and Anne Simpson." *Canadian Poetry* 65 (2010): 9–21. Print.
- Carson, Anne. *Antigonick*. 1st ed. New York: New Directions, 2012. Print.
- . *Eros the Bittersweet*. 1st Dalkey Archive ed. Champaign: Dalkey Archive, 1998. Print.
- . *Men in the Off Hours*. New York: Vintage, 2001. Print.
- . "'Mimnermos: The Brainsex Paintings,' Plainwater." *Plainwater*. New York: Vintage Books, 1995. 1–27. Print.
- . *Nox*. New York: New Directions, 2010. Print.
- . *Plainwater: Essays and Poetry*. New York: Vintage, 2000. Print.
- . *The Beauty of the Husband: A Fictional Essay in 29 Tangos*. 1st ed. New York: Knopf, 2001. Print.

Keegan Cook Finberg

---. "The Glass Essay." *Glass, Irony and God*. First ed. New York: New Directions, 1995. 1–38. Print.

Culler, Jonathan D. *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics, and the Study of Literature*. Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell UP, 1975. Print.

Derrida, Jacques. *Politics of Friendship*. Trans. George Collins. London: Verso, 1997. Print.

---. *Politiques de l'amitié*. Paris: Editions Galilée, 1994. Print.

Fischer, Barbara K. "Noisy Brides, Suspicious Kisses: Revisiting Ravishment in Experimental Ekphrasis by Women." *In the Frame: Women's Ekphrastic Poetry from Marianne Moore to Susan Wheeler*. 1st ed. Ed. Jane Hedley, Nick Halpern, & Willard Spiegelman. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2009. Print.

Graham, Jorie. "On Anne Carson." *Brick Magazine* 57 (1997): 13. Print.

Guillory, John. "The Ethical Practice of Modernity: The Example of Reading." *The Turn to Ethics*. Ed. Marjorie B. Garber, Beatrice Hanssen, & Rebecca L. Walkowitz. New York: Routledge, 2000. 29–46. Print. Culture Work.

Hedley, Jane, Nick Halpern, and Willard Spiegelman, eds. *In the Frame: Women's Ekphrastic Poetry from Marianne Moore to Susan Wheeler*. 1st ed. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2009. Print.

Irvine, Dean. "Fugitive Places: Anne Carson and the Unlost." *Language Acts: Anglo-Québec Poetry, 1976 to the 21st Century*. Ed. Jason Camlot & Todd Swift. Montreal: Véhicule Press, 2007. 272-89. Print.

Jennings, Chris. "Letters to the Editor." *Books in Canada* 30.3 (Sept./Oct. 2001): 39. Print.

---. "The Erotic Poetics of Anne Carson." *University of Toronto Quarterly* 70.4 (2001): 923–936. *MetaPress*. Web. 9 Feb. 2013.

- Littau, Karin. *Theories of Reading: Books, Bodies, and Bibliomania*. Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2006. Print.
- Love, Heather. "Close but Not Deep: Literary Ethics and the Descriptive Turn." *New Literary History* 41.2 (2010): 371–391. Print.
- De Man, Paul. *Blindness & Insight; Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*. New York: Oxford UP, 1971. Print.
- Mayer, Sophie. "Picture Theory: On Photographic Intimacy in Nicole Brossard and Anne Carson." *Studies in Canadian Literature/Études en littérature canadienne* 33.1 (2008): 97–117. Print.
- McNeilly, Kevin. "Gifts and Questions—An Interview with Anne Carson, by Kevin McNeilly." *UNSAID: noun /uhn•'sed/* NOTE: This interview was originally published in the spring issue of *Canadian Literature* 2003. Web. 9 Feb. 2013.
- Miller, J. Hillis. *The Ethics of Reading: Kant, De Man, Eliot, Trollope, James, and Benjamin*. New York: Columbia UP, 1986. Print.
- Mitchell, W.J.T. "Ekphrasis and the Other." *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995. 151–82. Print.
- O'Rourke, Meghan. "Hermetic Hotties." *Slate* 11 Feb. 2004. Web. 9 Feb. 2013.
- Plante, Jacqueline. "In the Spirit of Process: A Braiding Together of New Utopianism, Gilles Deleuze and Anne Carson." *The Influence of Imagination: Essays on Science Fiction and Fantasy as Agents of Social Change*. Ed. Lee Easton & Randy Schroeder. McFarland, 2008. 174–82. Print.
- Potts, Robert. "Neither Rhyme nor Reason." *Guardian* 26 Jan. 2002. Web. 9 Feb. 2013.
- Rae, Ian. "Anne Carson and the Solway Hoaxes." *Canadian Literature* 176 (2003): 45–65. Print.

Keegan Cook Finberg

---. "Verglas: Narrative Technique in Anne Carson's 'The Glass Essay.'" *ESC: English Studies in Canada* 37.3-4 (Sept./Dec. 2011): 163–186. *Project MUSE*. Web. 3 Feb. 2013.

Scheiner, Corinne. "Teleiopoiesis, Telepoesis, and the Practice of Comparative Literature." *Comparative Literature* 57.3 (2005): 239–45. Print.

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. "Paranoid Reading and Repartive Reading, or, You're so Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You." *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. Durham: Duke UP, 2003. Print.

Solway, David. "The trouble with Annie: David Solway unmakes Anne Carson." *Books in Canada* (July 2001): 24–6. Print.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *Death of a Discipline*. New York: Columbia UP, 2005. Print.

Staines, David. "Poetry." *The Cambridge Companion to Canadian Literature*. Ed. Eva-Marie Kröller. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2004. 135–55. Print.

Tall, Deborah, and John D'Agata. "New Terrain: The Lyric Essay." *Seneca Review* 17.2 (1997): 7–8. Print.