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ANNE CARSON: SHAPING THE SELF AND SHIFTING UNDER THE READER'S GAZE

Margaret Shelton

Two bodies outlined on a bed, the eye (“I”) of one rising up and feeling the distance between conscious choice and compulsion of the soul. Two desks, one placed at each extremity of the writerly self as its owner fights to define and to escape definition. Thirteen still images of the self in stop-motion, and one subject shifting in thirteen frames. Covering such topics as loss of love and search for self, “The Glass Essay” floats between essay and poem, borrowing from each genre, liminal like the space in which poet, scholar, and literary critic Anne Carson seats the self, edges alternately blurring and sharp like a shard of glass. In this piece and in interviews, Carson works to move toward a self that she can understand and accept—one that she can define. Yet Carson’s drive to create a shared meaning battles with her joy in being the only one to know all of the secret selves within her. Carson in literature and in life prizes both crisp lines and elusiveness, which shows in the contrast between her precise language and shadowed meanings, loving the liminal, craving connection as well as the ability to craft a self purely her own.

Writer and literary critic Vivian Gornick in *The Situation and the Story* addresses the presence and necessity of the self in writing, emphasizing the importance of the stability of the self. According to Gornick, “the way the narrator—or persona—” or self “sees things is, to the largest degree, the thing being seen,” especially in non-fiction writing.¹ Gornick explains that “[t]he

¹ Vivian Gornick, *The Situation and the Story: The Art of Personal Narrative* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002), 7.

situation is the context or circumstance, sometimes the plot; the story is the emotional experience that preoccupies the writer: the insight, the wisdom, the thing one has come to say,” but to take her claim one step further, to consider what preoccupies the reader, it is the discovery of self, both the author’s self and the reader’s, that motivates the reading.² The situation is the background, the story is the fuel for the writer, but as a reader, I come to non-fiction for connection, a sense that in writing her story the author has woven into it something of mine, something of me. The setting and the action are essential but essentially disparate things; the self strings the reader along and makes the narrative cohesive.

The creation of a self fascinates Gornick, especially when she thinks in terms of persona, which allows the writer to draw her own lines around the sections of self that she wants to present. Gornick’s ideal persona can be defined by, or rather is, one attribute. She explains after rereading a diary that she had written earlier:

With relief I thought, I’m not losing myself. Suddenly I realized there was no myself to lose. I had a narrator on the page strong enough to do battle for me. The narrator was the me who could not leave her mother because she had become her mother. She was not intimidated by “alone again.” Nor, come to think of it, was she much influenced by the me who was a walker in the city, or a divorced middle-aged feminist, or a financially insecure writer. She was apparently, only her solid, limited self—and she was in control.³

The beauty of this self for Gornick is that it allows her to isolate one element of her personality, of her life, and to communicate that alone to the reader. The ability to section off the self allows the author to ensure that the reader sees the written self from a certain angle because the persona like Gornick’s only presents

² *Ibid.*, 13.

³ *Ibid.*, 22-23.

one angle. In contrast, Anne Carson sees the multiplicities inside herself and connects to the reader by shattering the self to see inside and offering the pieces for the reader to put back together to make something meaningful.

While the self runs through the piece like a thread, stringing together seemingly disparate sections, the complexity of its weave keeps the self from ever being fully exposed or understood. Rather than showing her self to the reader in neat even stitches, Carson brings the self to the top of the poetic pattern only to let it sink again into the background, giving the reader images of the speaker in the Nudes and letting the self speak through the words of others like Emily Brontë, but never quite saying, “Here I am.” Carson examines the self from several different angles in “The Glass Essay,” but the self that she illustrates is distanced, fluid, fleeing.

Carson’s ability to situate this fluid self within a clearly structured form is what makes “The Glass Essay” a complex study. The piece consists of nine distinct subtitled sections, each of which comprises several three- or four-lined stanzas. The sturdiness of this structure allows Carson to establish on the page a liminal self as well as a written piece seated in the liminal space where two genres touch—poetry and non-fiction. As critic Ian Rae points out in his article on Carson’s narrative technique in the poem, Carson has been criticized by some American critics as writing “‘chopped prose’ . . . positioning it as the exemplary case of a hybrid and increasingly prominent genre, the lyric essay.”⁴ Carson published “The Glass Essay” in her book of poetry *Glass, Irony, and God*, but she labels it “essay” from the start. Poetry allows for embellishment, but essay suggests reality. This straddling of genres prepares the reader for the vivid, often enigmatic imagery that the idea of poetry connotes, but it also looks forward to the detail- and fact-oriented prose through which Carson communicates.

⁴ Ian Rae, “Verglas: Narrative Technique In Anne Carson's ‘The Glass Essay,’” *English Studies In Canada* 37, no. 3-4 (2011): 164.

Rae further explores the duality between the studied and the secret self that runs through Carson's work, looking especially at the significance of her title, "The Glass Essay." He writes that "Carson employs the logic of the lyric essay to produce an extended, bilingual pun on the multiple senses of the English 'glass' (transparent material, magnifying lens, mirror) and the French *glace* (ice, mirror)."⁵ Carson brings into play the idea of glass as a mirror in the first section of the poem when she writes, "My face in the bathroom mirror / has white streaks down it. / I rinse the face and return to bed. / Tomorrow I am going to visit my mother."⁶ This scene gestures toward philosopher Jacques Lacan's work on the Mirror Stage, which he describes as "*an identification . . . namely, the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes [assume] an image*"—which, in this case, Carson creates of and for herself in the poem—and comes to view the individual pieces of the whole gestalt that is the self.⁷ This section holds the first indication of the division between Carson's selves that reappears throughout the piece in her choice to use a dissociative article, "the face," instead of claiming "my face" a second time. It is when Carson looks into the mirror and confronts her own image that she starts to view herself from a distance.

Carson speaks about the process of placing these distinct images next to one another in an interview with Rae for the *Paris Review*, explaining that "particular images begin the thinking or the work. For example, 'The Glass Essay' began with staring at a frozen ditch near my mother's house, which I think actually occurs in the poem somewhere. So some phenomenological thing gives rise to the idea."⁸ Rae asserts that the author's continued reexaminations of the "phenomenologi-

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Anne Carson, "The Glass Essay," in *Glass, Irony, and God* (New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1995), 1.

⁷ Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006), 76.

⁸ Rae, "Verglas," 170.

cal thing” stack up to form the poem and that “[the] evolving glass/*glace* motif thereby serves to cluster percepts, affects, and memories in a constant state of becoming.”⁹ The self acts in the same way in “The Glass Essay,” evolving and changing, fracturing further with each section.

Carson narrates the splitting of the self, this “becoming” during her final encounter with Law, her ex-lover in section four of the piece, titled “Whacher.” The speaker notes that Law will not meet her eyes when he tells her that there was “not enough spin on . . . our five years of love,” and she “[feels her] heart snap into two pieces / which floated apart.”¹⁰ This signals the initial break in Carson, the duality that she establishes throughout this section between body and mind, between “soul” (love’s “necessities”) and “I” (conscious choice).¹¹ After removing her clothes, the speaker describes herself not as naked but as “nude.”¹² The term “nude” here echoes the Nudes, the metaphorical paintings in terms of which the speaker thinks of herself. As “nude” is a term used typically to describe art that Carson here uses in reference to the self, it furthers the point that the speaker feels that she is in ownership of her body, like an artist in technical terms owns a painting that she creates, but that her body is operating outside of her control like a painting that has meaning not necessarily in connection to the artist but in itself. When disconnected from the consciousness attached to it, the speaker’s body, like a painting, betrays her and determines its own meaning.

She becomes a consciousness living in a body that rebels against her, distinguishing between the two in a pronoun change, “I turned *my* back because he likes *the* back” (emphasis mine).¹³ She possesses the body but is distanced from it; owns it but does not control it. The body is drawn to “a man who no

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Carson, “The Glass Essay,” 11.

¹¹ Ibid., 12.

¹² Ibid., 11.

¹³ Ibid.

longer cherished me” and runs through the empty motions of something that used to have meaning, but the “I,” the self, is only unwillingly dragged along:

There was no area of my mind
not appalled by this action, no part of my body
that could have done otherwise.¹⁴

The speaker then complicates further the distinction between the body and the “I” attached to it when she writes:

But to talk of mind and body begs the question.
Soul is the place,
stretched like a surface of millstone grit between body
and mind,
where such necessity grinds itself out.
Soul is what I kept watch on all that night.¹⁵

Not only are “I” and body separating, but the speaker now tries to separate soul and self-awareness in the form of “I.” The thinking and rational “I” watches over “soul,” symbolic of love, in two senses—watching over as in caring for something and watching over as in guarding against something—seemingly both to preserve the love with Law that occurred in the soul and to protect the speaker from feeling it. When Law and the speaker grow closer, physically and emotionally, the speaker’s consciousness, the “I,” ejects itself from the body in what seems an attempt at defending and removing itself from the potentially destructive emotions of the situation. “I” floats “high up near the ceiling looking down / on the two souls clasped there on the bed / with their mortal boundaries [bodies] / visible around them like lines on a map.”¹⁶ While the speaker stays through the souls’ division, “I” takes itself away.

Carson’s syntax and diction in this section reinforce this idea of a flight from emotion. When describing the develop-

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

ment of the encounter with Law, Carson uses heavily descriptive and figurative language, describing the night as “a night that centred Heaven and Hell,” “as if it weren’t really a night of sleep and time.”¹⁷ The religious language of Heaven and Hell gives the impression that the two of them—the speaker and Law—are in the middle of their own private apocalypse, a final coming together and a final falling away with their universes swirling around them. The night is suspended outside of time, spanning forever and an instant, but the speaker is also out of time in the sense that she feels her relationship with Law expiring, its final minutes ticking away. Yet after “I” rises up, rises away from body and soul, separating consciousness from carnal impulse, after Law and the speaker become just “two souls clasped there on the bed,” caged in by two bodies, Carson’s language becomes more factual and terse:

I saw the lines harden.
He left in the morning.
It is very cold
walking into the long scraped April wind.
At this time of year there is no sunset
just some movements inside the light and then a sinking
away.¹⁸

For the speaker, this final interaction with Law is like the sunset; it lacks closure. There is no finality to their relationship, just one shared night and the slow sink of two “I’s” back into body and soul, away from each other and into their separate selves. The lines that divide Law and the speaker harden.

In an interview with John D’Agata, Carson addresses this blurring and redrawing of lines: “I just remember writing in second grade every Friday afternoon. It was such a pleasure. We’d draw a picture then write on it and tell what it was.”¹⁹

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ John D’Agata and Anne Carson, “A _____ with Anne Carson,” *The Iowa Review* 27, no. 2 (Summer/Fall 1997): 9.

When D'Agata asks, "Why was that pleasurable?" Carson responds, "How could it not be pleasurable?"²⁰ Even as a child in grade school, Carson enjoyed condensing entities into images into the written word, illustration, and description working both to share and to shroud. Carson shows her love of translating lines into letters in her final images of "The Glass Essay" and explores the division within the self in the sections of "The Glass Essay" entitled "Liberty" and "Thou" when she describes herself as a set of paintings—Nudes No. 1 through No. 13. The speaker explains that these Nudes came to her when she meditated in the mornings as "nude glimpse[s] of my lone soul," the same self in thirteen iterations, from thirteen angles, shifting and fracturing like light through glass.²¹ She writes that the nudes are "as clear in my mind / as pieces of laundry that froze on the clothesline overnight."²² Frozen suggests ice, which suggests fragility. Though these Nudes are the clothing in which the speaker dresses herself, the images are not enduring; they capture the self in one instant and are apt to shatter in the next, like ice, like glass.

These images act as crystals, freezing a moment of herself so that she can turn it around in her mind and use it as a lens through which to look out at her life. When the speaker tells her therapist about the Nudes, her therapist asks her, "When you see these horrible images why do you stay with them? . . . Why not go away?" the speaker responds, "I was amazed. / Go away where? I said."²³ Her response suggests that to escape the Nudes, the variations of self that manifest to her, would be impossible. Not only do these Nudes contain something of her; they are contained in her. These nude portraits are on display in the gallery of her body: "Woman caught in a cage of thorns . . . unable to stand upright," "woman with a single great thorn implanted in her forehead . . . endeavouring to wrench it out,"

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Carson, "The Glass Essay," 17.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., 18.

“woman on a blasted landscape / backlit in red like Hieronymus Bosch.”²⁴ She is aware that they are not her but pictures of her. Yet to quote David Shields, quoting Orson Welles, quoting Elmyr de Hory, whose quote is so far removed from its author that it has taken on an existence independent of him, “If my forgeries are hung long enough in the museum, they become real.”²⁵

Foucault muses over this disconnect between the object pictured and the picture-object itself in René Magritte’s painting “The Treachery of Images,” in which Magritte places the painted image of a pipe above the words, written in “a steady, painstaking, artificial script,” “Ceci n’est pas une pipe”—this is not a pipe. Foucault also discusses a second iteration of the image, in which Magritte depicts the original painting “set within a frame” on an easel on a floor, above which floats “a pipe exactly like the one in the picture, but much larger.”²⁶ Foucault muses over the piece, wondering if it is more accurate to say that there are “two pipes” or “two drawings of the same pipe.”²⁷ The reader can ask the same question of Carson’s nudes. They are separate paintings; no two images are the same. Yet while none of the nudes are identical, they represent the same subject and attempt to convey the same idea in different scenes—the same self from different angles. Foucault explains that while the individual elements of the picture are identifiable as pipe, easel, floor, the piece lacks the cohesion necessary to convey a clear meaning. The larger, unframed pipe “lacks coordinates” and floats suspended in space, and the easel’s legs are uneven, foretelling collapse.²⁸ Both artists paint their images with a specificity of detail that

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 17.

²⁵ David Shields, *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto* (New York: Vintage Books, 2011), 34.

²⁶ Michel Foucault, *This Is Not a Pipe*, ed. James Harkness (Berkeley: University of California Press: 1983), 15.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 16.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 17.

suggests that they know the secret meaning. Yet Carson, like Magritte, presents the viewers with the materials that make up the art but disguise the process, leaving the discovery of means and the creation of meaning to the reader.

Carson calls back to these artistic elements of “The Glass Essay” in a later interview for *The Paris Review* with fellow writer Will Aitken, elucidating her choice to incorporate the Nudes as a sort of mock-ekphrastic exercise, writing them as paintings and not simply incorporating them into the poem as frameless images:

[Aitken:] “There’s too much self in my writing.” Is the range of work that you do—poetry, essays, opera, academic work, teaching—is that a way of trying to punch windows in the walls of the self?

[Carson:] No. I would say it’s more like a way to avoid having a self by moving from one definition of it to another. To avoid being captured in one persona by doing a lot of different things.²⁹

This quote suggests a possible reading that she approached each Nude as a potential angle for the self but intended that the combination would lack the coherence necessary to allow the self to be pinned down. Carson remarks at one point during the interview that one of her books “is like architecture because the poem, the original ancient poem which does exist, is in the center.”³⁰ Similarly, the core of the speaker in “The Glass Essay,” that self, exists at the center of the poem; the reader can feel the words winding around her. Carson goes on to say though that there was “no adequate representation of it I could give, so I made up all these angles for it . . . so there are ways of moving into and out of a room from other rooms in the building, but really what I want to show is glimpses of that

²⁹ Will Aitken, “Anne Carson: The Art of Poetry No. 88,” *The Paris Review* 171 (Fall 2004).

³⁰ *Ibid.*

main room in the center.”³¹ Carson moves the reader through the house of herself, offering views through keyholes and cracks in the wall, but she never opens the door for the reader to see her self in its entirety. If this is the case, the essential quality of the self that Carson presents in the poem is its desire to understand itself but to remain undefined.

Carson elaborates on this struggle between self-determination and disguise in her interview with D’Agata in a discussion of the two writing desks in her home. D’Agata explains that he understands Carson to have two separate writing desks, one for writing poetry and one for academic writing. Carson confirms the assertion. She then comments that after she wrote *Eros the Bittersweet*, which D’Agata described as both a critical examination of and a lyrical meditation on Sappho’s writings, “It was possibly the last time that I got those two impulses to move in the same stream—the academic and the other. After that, I think I realized I couldn’t do it again.”³² D’Agata then argues with Carson, trying to convince her that “some people would say you’re still doing it . . . [t]hat there’s no suggestion of two desks at work,” but Carson refuses to let herself be pinned down or outlined by others.³³ The two desk method seems a way of splitting, not only her written self but her writing self, into the Carson who writes academically and the Carson who writes (and is) “other.” “No,” she says. “No?” he asks. Silence.³⁴ She knows the answer. She knows herself. She eludes.

Carson translates the desire for an elusive literary self into the self that inhabits her physical body through an expression of gender fluidity. According to gender theorist Judith Butler, “Gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*” which

³¹ Ibid.

³² D’Agata and Carson, “A _____ with Anne Carson,” 9.

³³ Ibid., 10.

³⁴ Ibid., 11.

“constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self.”³⁵ For Butler, gender is self-determined. It is “*stylized*,” something performed and constructed by each individual and not tied to the body that the individual inhabits. In the interview with Aitken, Carson’s speech parallels Butler’s idea of gender as performance and illusion, saying, “I guess I’ve never felt entirely female, but then probably lots of people don’t. But I think that at different times in my life I located myself in different places on the gender spectrum.”³⁶ Her active voice attests to the elective aspect of Carson’s gender. She does not say, “I’ve found myself in different places,” or even “I’ve been in different places,” but “I have located myself in different places.”

Carson also varies the way in which she performs gender, just as she varies the literary genres in which she writes, conscious that while she works toward self-expression, she must also work against the literary and social constructs that would confine her to a certain definition of genre or gender. Speaking to her desire to live in a liminal gender space, or a space altogether un-gendered, Carson equates her experience to “a problem of extended adolescence: You don’t know how to be yourself as part of a category, so you just have to be yourself as a completely strange individual and fight off any attempt others make to define you.”³⁷ Carson struggles to make what society would have marked as a phase in adolescence into a place in which she can fully inhabit herself; rather than assimilate society’s truth she can create her own.

Or she can let her own truth radiate out from within her. The last nude in her series of self-iterations, “Nude #13 arrived when I was not watching for it”—“a human body / trying to stand” against winds that tear away the flesh, “cleansing the

³⁵ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York and London: Routledge, 1999), 179.

³⁶ D’Agata and Carson, “A _____ with Anne Carson,” 8.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.

bone,” “and there was no pain.”³⁸ Speaker and I and the outside world write and whittle away at an idea of the self, and then Carson steps out from the midst of them. In the image of the 13th Nude, Carson is the source of speaker; she is the “I” and the words and the wind “so terrible that the flesh was blowing away from the bone.”³⁹ The craft and the chaos of Nudes and selves clings as dust to the heels of her feet, and then Carson is the pillar of bone, “[standing] forth silver and necessary.”⁴⁰ Maintaining eye contact, she blows away the dust.

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³⁸ Carson, “The Glass Essay,” 38.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

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