



Review: *Decreation* by Anne Carson

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***Decreation* by Anne Carson**
245pp / Alfred Knopf (2005) / \$24.95
Review by Sandeep Parmar

It is often said that Anne Carson is unlike any poet writing in English today. Her uniqueness and her erudition preoccupy critics' estimations of her work. She shows up in unusual places; she is name-dropped by filmmakers and painters, as well as by academics and other poets. One would expect that her complexity would relegate her to the closed coterie of "academic poetry." In English departments and creative writing programs in the US, Carson is something of a patron saint, and among English language prize-winning poets she has risen in the ranks in recent years. Her last collection, *The Beauty of the Husband* (2001), is her most readable book to date and was awarded Britain's T.S. Eliot Prize for Poetry. Although she is not quite a "popular" poet—in the sense of her successor, recent Eliot Prize winner Carol Ann Duffy—Carson does what all great poets should do: encourage both poets and general readers of poetry to consider new directions in which the genre should be "pushed." The real "uniqueness" of Carson's work is that she lives up to both demands: she raises the bar for poets and still manages to retain the interest of a wider—though, in most cases, learned—audience. Few poets do this, and even fewer do it with the finesse found in her latest book, *Decreation*.

"Decreation" is a neologism coined by the early twentieth-century religious philosopher Simone Weil. The term is defined in Weil's writing as the "undoing of the creature in us" and can be seen as an attempt of the self to unite with God through a shedding of personality. Carson's book, in turn, constitutes an undoing of many things, among them conceptions of an authorial "self," written genres and textual forms, and meaning within language. Structured much like her earlier collection, *Men in the Off Hours* (2000), *Decreation* is a hybrid text that unites conventional poetic form, essay, shot list, opera libretto, screenplay, and oratorio in a progressive reworking of ideas and genre. The book's epigraph, from Florio's 1603 translation of Montaigne's "Essay on Some Verses of Virgil" hints at Carson's project: "I love a poetical kinde of a march, by friskes, skips and jumps." In this epigraph, Carson invokes a translated phrase from an essay that refers to Virgil's verse as a "kind of march." Ironically, Virgil's verse is unlike a march and will not, like Carson's texts, be pinned down by any definition or name.

What remains when everything—form and self—is undone? This is the question Carson poses but chooses not to answer. Or rather, she answers it several times, and each time answers it in a slightly different way, slightly askew from her original position. Her shape-shifting begins with the poem series "Stops," which appears to narrate the slow death of the author's mother. Stops are kinds of deaths, physical or emotional, real or imagined: "Whatever they say about time, life moves in one direction, / that's a fact, mirroring along." Placid and piercing, these poems are the most personal of her collection. In a subsequent section, a series of prose and poetic meditations on the Sublime, Carson writes, "My personal poetry is a failure. / I do not want to be that person. / I want to be unbearable." Later she adds, "Who does not end up a female impersonator?" To be "unbearable" is to be sublimely indefinable, to be outside any textual form or concept of self.

In another essay, Carson tackles impersonations again in her discussion of the persecuted "psuedo-mulier" or "fake woman." "Society is all too eager to pass judgements on the authenticity of women's ways of being but these judgements can get crazy." Her brilliant essay on Weil, the Greek poet Sappho, and thirteenth-century religious heretic Marguerite Porete, roots out the danger and the appeal of decreation for the female writer. Each woman is a succession of textually manifested "impersonations," and each author meets death, more or

less self-willed, as a result of her desire. About the possibility of decreation, Carson writes, "But to undo the self one must move through self, to the very inside of its definition." Her various forms find exits and entrances into the imagined lives of Virginia Woolf, Vita Sackville-West, Kant, Longinus, Monica Vitti, and even Anne Carson herself. Each text is a "dream of distance" between the writer and his or her own telling, each provides an escape route into another text, another imagination, and finally annihilates all such structures from the *inside*. She revisits the subjects of her essays and subsequently whittles down their authority through the tentative poetic line. Certainly, Carson's essays present the most natural flow of all her work; her intellect operates at its highest pitch in her essays on sleep, the sublime, and literature. However, she allows literary sources to overflow onto one another—to speak through time to each other—in all of her various forms of writing. She does not clamp down on knowledge in the way one would expect; her text is not littered with scholarly references just for the performance of her own "knowing." Her project is engaged, instead, with knowledge itself, with its "accidents of fact" that occur around the act of knowing and that appear here in brilliant revelatory subterfuge. Each of her pieces transcends and speaks to something beyond its subject; words are isolated and scrutinized like "selves" and then re-contextualized. She manipulates words so they become like individuals languishing in memories of their own lives. Carson argues that words, too, have personal histories, and that they "impersonate" meaning. Language, she seems to suggest, is a type of memory that speaks from the "void" of individual human existence towards unity, either divinely external or psychological internal.