

☐ Contemporary
Literary Criticism

CLC

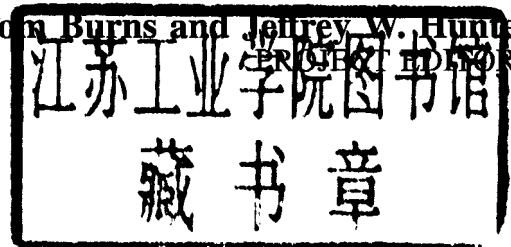
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Volume 185

Contemporary Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works
of Today's Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,
Short Story Writers, Scriptwriters, and
Other Creative Writers

Tom Burns and Jeffrey W. Hunter
PROJECT EDITORS



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Preface

Named “one of the twenty-five most distinguished reference titles published during the past twenty-five years” by *Reference Quarterly*, the *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)* series provides readers with critical commentary and general information on more than 2,000 authors now living or who died after December 31, 1999. Volumes published from 1973 through 1999 include authors who died after December 31, 1959. Previous to the publication of the first volume of *CLC* in 1973, there was no ongoing digest monitoring scholarly and popular sources of critical opinion and explication of modern literature. *CLC*, therefore, has fulfilled an essential need, particularly since the complexity and variety of contemporary literature makes the function of criticism especially important to today’s reader.

Scope of the Series

CLC provides significant passages from published criticism of works by creative writers. Since many of the authors covered in *CLC* inspire continual critical commentary, writers are often represented in more than one volume. There is, of course, no duplication of reprinted criticism.

Authors are selected for inclusion for a variety of reasons, among them the publication or dramatic production of a critically acclaimed new work, the reception of a major literary award, revival of interest in past writings, or the adaptation of a literary work to film or television.

Attention is also given to several other groups of writers—authors of considerable public interest—about whose work criticism is often difficult to locate. These include mystery and science fiction writers, literary and social critics, foreign authors, and authors who represent particular ethnic groups.

Each *CLC* volume contains individual essays and reviews taken from hundreds of book review periodicals, general magazines, scholarly journals, monographs, and books. Entries include critical evaluations spanning from the beginning of an author’s career to the most current commentary. Interviews, feature articles, and other published writings that offer insight into the author’s works are also presented. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers will find that the general critical and biographical material in *CLC* provides them with vital information required to write a term paper, analyze a poem, or lead a book discussion group. In addition, complete biographical citations note the original source and all of the information necessary for a term paper footnote or bibliography.

Organization of the Book

A *CLC* entry consists of the following elements:

- The **Author Heading** cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. Also located here are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose native languages use nonroman alphabets. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the author’s actual name given in parenthesis on the first line of the biographical and critical information. Uncertain birth or death dates are indicated by question marks. Single-work entries are preceded by a heading that consists of the most common form of the title in English translation (if applicable) and the original date of composition.
- A **Portrait of the Author** is included when available.
- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.

- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose works have been translated into English, the English-language version of the title follows in brackets. Unless otherwise indicated, dramas are dated by first performance, not first publication.
- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. All titles by the author featured in the text are printed in boldface type. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.
- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism. Source citations in the Literary Criticism Series follow University of Chicago Press style, as outlined in *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 14th ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993).
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.
- Whenever possible, a recent **Author Interview** accompanies each entry.
- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Gale.

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An alphabetical **Title Index** accompanies each volume of *CLC*. Listings of titles by authors covered in the given volume are followed by the author's name and the corresponding page numbers where the titles are discussed. English translations of foreign titles and variations of titles are cross-referenced to the title under which a work was originally published. Titles of novels, dramas, nonfiction books, and poetry, short story, or essay collections are printed in italics, while individual poems, short stories, and essays are printed in roman type within quotation marks.

In response to numerous suggestions from librarians, Gale also produces an annual cumulative title index that alphabetically lists all titles reviewed in *CLC* and is available to all customers. Additional copies of this index are available upon request. Librarians and patrons will welcome this separate index; it saves shelf space, is easy to use, and is recyclable upon receipt of the next edition.

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Anne Carson

1950-

Canadian poet, essayist, novelist, librettist, and translator.

The following entry presents an overview of Carson's career through 2003.

INTRODUCTION

Carson is regarded by many critics—particularly in her home country of Canada—as one of the greatest English-language poets to emerge in the late twentieth century. Her works are experiments in genre, blurring the lines between verse and prose, fiction and nonfiction. As a classics scholar, Carson draws on her knowledge of ancient history and mythology in much of her poetry, making frequent allusions to classical literature, music, art, and philosophy. Among Carson's most successful works are her book-length “verse novels,” *Autobiography of Red* (1998) and *The Beauty of the Husband: A Fictional Essay in 29 Tangos* (2001), and the poetry and prose collection *Glass, Irony and God* (1995). Carson has received numerous literary grants, awards, and fellowships for her poetry, including a Guggenheim fellowship, a MacArthur Foundation “genius” grant in 2000, and the 2001 T. S. Eliot Prize for *The Beauty of the Husband*.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Carson was born on June 21, 1950, in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. She studied Greek and Latin in high school, which contributed to her life-long fascination with classical literature. Enrolling at the University of Toronto, Carson earned a B.A. and later returned to obtain a M.A. and Ph.D. in classics, graduating in 1980. She also studied Greek metrics for a year at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland. In 1980 she began teaching classics at Princeton University, serving as a professor there until 1987. Carson has also taught classical languages and literature at Emory University, the California College of Arts and Crafts in Oakland, the Humanities Institute at the University of Michigan, and the University of California, Berkeley. While teaching as a visiting professor at the University of Michigan in the fall of 1999, Carson collaborated with her students to create the libretto for an installation-opera titled *The Mirror of Simple Souls*. In 2002 Carson became a



professor of classics in the Department of History at McGill University in Montreal, Quebec. While best known for her poetry, Carson has also published a number of scholarly essays in the field of classics as well as translations of classical texts—such as *Electra* (2001) and *If Not, Winter: Fragments of Sappho* (2002). In addition to the MacArthur Grant and T. S. Eliot Prize, Carson has received several other awards for her work, including the Lannan Literary Award for poetry in 1996 and the QSPELL Poetry Award in 1998. She was also a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award for *Autobiography of Red* and a finalist for the Lenore Marshall Poetry Prize for *The Beauty of the Husband*.

MAJOR WORKS

Carson's works of verse and prose are characterized by several unique formal and stylistic qualities. Most notably, Carson blurs traditional categories of genre, constructing hybrids of the essay, the autobiography, the

novel, the verse poem, and the prose poem. Carson's background as a classics scholar colors all of her writings, which feature frequent references to Greek mythology and such ancient poets, philosophers, and historians as Sappho, Plato, and Homer. She routinely renders elements of history and mythology in contemporary terms and modern settings, often conceptually closing the distance between the past and the present. Her verse places references to modern popular culture, such as film and television, side by side with references to ancient Greek culture. Her pastiche approach to genre, form, and subject matter, as well as the strong element of irony that pervades much of her work, have earned her the designation as a postmodern or post-structuralist writer, although the terms metaphysical, surrealist, and magical realist have also been applied to her work. Her book-length essay *Eros the Bittersweet* (1986) is derived from a line by the ancient poet Sappho. Carson's essay draws upon the poetry of Sappho, the philosophy of Socrates and Plato, and the fables of Franz Kafka to explore the relationship between knowledge, desire, and the imagination. Her volume *Short Talks* (1992) is a collection of miniature essays, ranging in length from a single sentence to a paragraph, that reflect the formal qualities of prose poetry. These "Short Talks"—as Carson labels them—cover such topics as the Mona Lisa, Vincent Van Gogh, Gertrude Stein, Sylvia Plath, and Brigitte Bardot. *Economy of the Unlost: Reading Simonides of Keos with Paul Celan* (1999) is a dense and complicated series of essays on loss, absence, and death, which has little in common with Carson's previous works except for its primary method—juxtaposing the classical and the contemporary. Originally delivered as lectures in the Martin Classical Lectures series at Oberlin College, *Economy of the Unlost* places the fifth-century B.C. Greek poet Simonides in conversation with Paul Celan, a twentieth-century German poet who committed suicide.

Carson has published several collections of poetry, such as *Plainwater: Essays and Poetry* (1995), *Glass, Irony and God*, and *Men in the Off Hours* (2000). *Plainwater* includes the long poem "Canicula di Anna," which is sometimes referred to as a verse novel. "Canicula di Anna" is comprised of a series of fifty-three numbered poems, interweaving the events of a modern-day academic phenomenology conference with the story of a fifteenth-century painter. The modern events are described from the perspective of an artist who has been commissioned to paint a group portrait of the scholars at the conference. *Glass, Irony and God* presents five poetry sequences and an essay. In "The Glass Essay," an extended poetry sequence, Carson draws on the life of Emily Brontë as she attempts to make sense of her own failed relationship with a man. "The Glass Essay" also includes a visit to the narrator's mother and father (who is suffering from Alzheimer's disease), sessions with her psychotherapist, and an

encounter with her former lover. In the collection's only essay, "The Gender of Sound," Carson provides a gender analysis of speech, arguing that women's voices have been repressed throughout history. *Men in the Off Hours*, which derives its title from a quote by Virginia Woolf, is a volume of Carson's writings in a variety of forms—short poems, epitaphs, eulogies, love poems, and essays in verse. A series of poems, under the collective title "TV Men," presents hypothetical television scripts featuring a cast of literary, historical, and mythical figures including Sappho, Antonin Artaud, Leo Tolstoy, Lazarus, Antigone, and Anna Akhmatova. In one of the "TV Men" sequences, Hektor, Socrates, Sappho, and Artaud come together during the filming of a television version of *The Iliad* in Death Valley, California.

Carson's novels in verse, among her most recognized works, include *Autobiography of Red* and *The Beauty of the Husband*. *Autobiography of Red* retells a story from the legend of Hercules in a modern setting—Carson uses "Herakles," the traditional Greek spelling of the name. Carson transforms the ancient myth, in which Herakles kills Geryon, a red-winged monster, and steals his magical red cattle, into a modern day parable in which Herakles breaks Geryon's heart and steals his innocence. In Carson's version, Herakles and Geryon meet while attending high school. Herakles is portrayed as a rough but attractive rebel, while Geryon, who is red and has wings, is characterized as a quiet, sensitive boy. The two become romantically involved, but Herakles insensitively breaks off the relationship, unable to accept Geryon's absolute love for him. Several years later, the two encounter one another in Buenos Aires, whereupon Geryon becomes entangled in a love triangle with Herakles and his boyfriend, Ancash. *Autobiography of Red* is written in a verse form that resembles prose, alternating long lines with short lines. The work opens with an essay on the ancient poet Stesichoros, on whose poetry fragments Carson's narrative is based, and ends with a fictional interview with Stesichoros. *The Beauty of the Husband*, subtitled *A Fictional Essay in 29 Tangos*, narrates the breakdown of a marriage primarily from the perspective of a middle-aged woman. As the subtitle suggests, the volume is broken into twenty-nine sections—named "tangos" after the complex and evocative Latin American dance—and Carson intersperses each section with quotations from the poetry of John Keats. Throughout *The Beauty of the Husband*, Carson experiments with shifting perspective, alternating between the empathetic voices of both the husband and wife.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Though Carson's work failed to receive considerable critical attention until the publication of *Glass, Irony and God* and *Plainwater*, she has since become one of

Canada's most lauded modern poets, receiving praise from such noted critics and authors as Harold Bloom, Susan Sontag, Michael Ondaatje, Alice Munro, and Guy Davenport. Gail Wronsky has stated that *Glass, Irony and God* is "one of the most daring and significant and original books to appear in decades." Jeff Hamilton, commenting on Carson's inventive use of form in *Plainwater* and *Glass, Irony and God*, has asserted that both volumes "accomplish the enormous task of re-imagining the border between the meditative lyric and the autobiographical narrative poem." Reviewers have commended the erudition and ambitious scope of Carson's verse, consistently describing her poetry as inventive, visionary, and highly original. Carson's utilization of the "verse novel" format in several of her works has also been praised by academics impressed with Carson's stylistic innovation and mastery of form. Several scholars have discussed the influence of Carson's academic background on her poetry, with many arguing that the poet's frequent classical allusions bring a wealth of texture and depth to her writing. Roger Gilbert has noted that, "Carson is a professor of classics, but unlike many academic poets she deploys her scholarly voice as a dramatic instrument whose expressive power lies partly in its fragility." However, some have objected to Carson's tendency to cite obscure historical sources, faulting her for overindulging in esoteric textual references. Such critics have claimed that Carson's dense subject material often detracts from the emotional impact of her poems. Regardless, Carson has developed a reputation among scholars and audiences alike as one of the dominant writers in Canada's poetic canon.

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Eros the Bittersweet: An Essay (essays) 1986; revised edition, 1998

Short Talks (essays and poetry) 1992

Glass, Irony and God (essays and poetry) 1995

Plainwater: Essays and Poetry (essays and poetry) 1995

Autobiography of Red: A Novel in Verse (novel) 1998

Economy of the Unlost: Reading Simonides of Keos with Paul Celan (essays) 1999

**The Mirror of Simple Souls* (libretto) 1999

Men in the Off Hours (prose and poetry) 2000

The Beauty of the Husband: A Fictional Essay in 29 Tangos (poetry) 2001

Electra [translator; from the drama by Sophocles] (drama) 2001

If Not, Winter: Fragments of Sappho [translator; from the poetry of Sappho] (poetry) 2002

**The Mirror of Simple Souls* was written collaboratively between Carson and her students at the University of Michigan.

CRITICISM

Guy Davenport (review date spring 1987)

SOURCE: Davenport, Guy. Review of *Eros the Bittersweet*, by Anne Carson. *Grand Street* 6, no. 3 (spring 1987): 184-91.

[In the following review, Davenport asserts that *Eros the Bittersweet* is a "brilliant essay" and observes that Carson's writing "teaches us ancient verities in a bright new way."]

Stephen Dedalus, Joyce's artist named for an artificer who wore wings, a symbol of transcendence, escape and freedom, says in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, using words whose meanings were shaped by Aristotle, Scholasticism and modern science, "The instant wherein that supreme quality of beauty, the clear radiance of the aesthetic image, is apprehended luminously by the mind which has been arrested by its wholeness and fascinated by its harmony is the luminous silent stasis of aesthetic pleasure, a spiritual state very like that to the cardiac condition which the Italian physiologist Luigi Galvani, using a phrase almost as beautiful as Shelley's, called the enchantment of the heart." Shelley's phrase, in *A Defence of Poetry*, is ". . . the mind in creation is as a fading coal." (Charcoal, Shelley means, radiant if blown upon, otherwise black but burning.) ". . . a fading coal, which some invisible influence, like an inconstant wind, awakens to transitory brightness."

Galvani enchanted the hearts and legs of dead frogs by running an electrical current through muscles. That's the word Galvani used: enchantment, *incantésimo*. Or, as we might say in English, he *besonged* it, he magicked it with a spell, a charm. Shaped words perhaps began as magic spells, *charms*. *Lovely sounds* is what *cearm* means in Old English, and by Chaucer's time we were saying *bird charm* for bird song, and were saying as well that church bells are charming the hour. That literacy was kin to casting spells with words can be seen in the fact that *glamour*, the power of beauty to enchant, is *grammar* misheard and mispronounced. Rhymes that bite and accuse—satire—were thought in ancient Rome to be so disruptive of social order that laws proscribed them.

Critics faced with talking about charm quickly find themselves at a loss. Mikhail Bakhtin liked to quote the Kantian Hermann Cohen in noting that there is nothing in us that needs a work of art, and nothing in a work of art that compels our presence before it. But Bakhtin went on to say that art arranges for understanding and communication among us powerful enough to cancel the gaps of loneliness which divide us, and beguiling enough to bind us in social harmonies.

How, then, does art charm? That is the subject of the classicist Anne Carson's "essay" *Eros the Bittersweet* (Princeton University Press), a work of great charm in itself, an intellectual exercise that dazzles (frequentative of *daze*) without stunning, flashes without blinding, and concludes leaving us brighter and smarter. I've put "essay" in quotes to indicate both that the word is being used in its old sense of exploration and try-out and that the modern sense of the word is charmingly taxed: this is a book, and a long book compressed by elegance of style and a rigorous terseness.

Like a good teacher enticing us, Carson (formerly an instructor at Princeton) begins with a fable from Kafka (the one about the philosopher who spun tops) to indicate that this book is about kinesis and balance, about things spinning, moving, fluttering (like Sappho's heart, Eros' wings, Daedalus' wings, vibrances of air which we call music, poetry, talk), colliding frequencies of meaning which sometimes dance together (as in metaphor and simile) after their collision, and sometimes remain opposed but joined, like Sappho's word *bittersweet*, or as the Greek has it, *sweetbitter*. What's bittersweet is Eros, the god of falling in love (being in love is another matter, involving other, wiser gods). Gods and states of mind are contiguous in Greek thought; *eros* is the Greek for that giddy, happy, all too often frustrated conviction that another human being, its returned affection and equal longing for you, are all that's lacking to make life a perfect happiness. The word does not occur in the New Testament, which uses another Greek word instead, *agape*, which also means *love*. The tension between these two words has filled many books and caused much grief down through history, as well as much comedy.

Eros when we first see him (in Anacreon, I think) was a naked stripling with a red ball. The ball later became a bow with erotic arrows, and Eros acquired (or always had) a sister named Peitho, both children whose mother was Aphrodite.

Carson begins the real work of her essay by inspecting a poem of Sappho's, Fragment 31 as classicists know it, in which Eros has bagged a handsome man, a beautiful girl, and an onlooker who speaks the poem. Sappho, if you will, is the onlooker, though I like to deromanticize the matter and imagine that Sappho wrote songs for people to sing; that is, to give definitive words for universal emotions. Poetry is the voice of the commune.

The poem translates: "The man sitting facing you looks like one of the gods listening carefully to what you're saying, and to your lovely laughter. [This sight] makes my heart beat its wings [like a fluttering bird], for every time I look I lose my breath, my tongue won't work, a fire burns under my skin, my eyes go out of focus, my

ears ring, cold sweat breaks out, and I shake with fever. I'm greener than grass, and exist somewhere between living and dead."

We have the Greek text of this poem because an anonymous critic (once thought to be Longinus) thought it a masterpiece, though we would have had its sense in Catullus's translation. Byron, tongue in cheek, lists it among the classical works that abetted the corruption of Don Juan's morals ("Although Longinus tells us there is no hymn / Where the sublime soars forth on wings more ample"). Trust Byron to pick up the imagery of wings. What interests Anne Carson is the triangle: the geometry of the poem. She will build this triangle into the structure that concludes her work. Boy, girl, observing poet. In his late etchings of erotic subjects, Picasso habitually includes what Freudians call a voyeur, who often looks like Picasso himself. Our century is nervous about the geometry of this poem because we are terrified of embodying Freudian sins and have been taught by the popular broth of Freudian odds and ends that we should not watch, but do.

Yet Sappho is eloquently in the vulnerable angle of the figure, the Tonio Kröger embarrassed displacement of the artist. T. S. Eliot remarked (and demonstrated with the figure of Tiresias in *The Waste Land*) that in our time we know far too much about the erotic life of the opposite sex. Do we? And if we do, why is this poem of Sappho's so difficult for us to understand? Is it about jealousy? Is Sappho in love with the girl and suffering the bitterness of exclusion? Is Sappho happy for the lovers, in an ecstasy of observing, *feeling* that happiness? Let us say that she includes herself, visibly, in the business because all artists are there, at that point of observation, or the subject would not exist as a poem. No photographer, no photograph. Poe must send a visitor to the house of Usher, or that story would be Berkeley's silent-movie tree falling without noise.

Later in the book Anne Carson develops this theme of triangulation, using Plato's *Phaedrus*, the dialogue in which Socrates argues that desire (Eros) moves the mind to learn as well as to love. To get to Plato, Carson goes by way of the peculiar genius of the Greek language and its alphabet (the perfection of graphing sounds that had begun with the Phoenicians), Velázquez's *Las Meninas*, and the birth of the novel. *Las Meninas* is a trick painting; Foucault (whose disciple Anne Carson would seem to be) has made much of it. The painting is of the royal children in Velázquez's studio to have their portraits done. The king and queen look on: their presence can be inferred from their dim reflection in a mirror deep in the picture's background. Velázquez, at his easel, gazes out at us; that is, at the king and queen, who are (in the logic of the thing) standing where we are—we, buttermilk-fed back-packing Danes, Mr. and Mrs. Bridge from Kansas City, an Italian dentist

and his brood—we must stand in the ghostly space also occupied by Felipe and Mariana.

This imaginary space, the presence of an absence, is desire's pivot, the lack that love aches to supply a presence for, the ache to know. As Anne Carson disarmingly says halfway through her discourse, to prepare us for its conclusion, "There would seem to be some resemblance between the way Eros acts in the mind of a lover and the way knowing acts in the mind of a thinker." To possess in the act of love (and be possessed), to know. Deep in the prehistory of Greek there was a word root constructed of a *k* or *g*, an *n*, and a vowel. The words springing from this root all have to do with reproduction, both sexual and intellectual: *generate*, *gonad*, *know*, *ignorant*, and forty others. In the King James Bible a husband *knows* his wife and begets children.

* * *

Eros is a transient, irresponsible, mischievous god. He weakens our knees (said Archilochus), melts us, drives us mad. The acquisition of knowledge is without limit; there is always more to know. Both activities, loving and learning, gather momentum the more one pursues them. Their delights are exquisite; grasped, they melt in the hand like ice, freezing and burning all at once. Every lover knows that love is a sweet misery ("a form of madness," Aristotle said) that makes one feel completely alive; every scholar knows a kind of lechery in finding facts, in fitting them together. Which is the more sensual, Leonardo's notebooks or Hokusai's erotic drawings?

Socrates conflated seduction and education in a living metaphor, and we are confused, we moderns, that he was a chaste family man who did not consummate his desire for the charming boys he delighted to teach. What Anne Carson's book makes us understand is that Socrates' living metaphor used the imagery of *eros* as Kafka's professor the spinning top. It is the kinetics of desire that creates the euphoria of loving and of learning, of being alive. We are largely ignorant of satisfied desire as the ancient Greeks understood it. Humanity is humanity; satisfied desire is a fulfillment of some kind, and as a subject belongs to housekeeping, child rearing, reverie; that is, to the world of order. Desire and learning are by their nature disorderly, disruptive, agonizing: bittersweet.

It is no wonder that the Greek erotic imagination invented the ritual game in which it is shameful and unmanly for the beloved to submit to his lover. Greek pederasty was a courtship with no ensuing marriage. The beloved got educated in manners, military science and the code of the tribe. His desirability ended when his beard appeared ("they are for Zeus to love," says a

poem); he married, begat a family, fulfilled himself as scholar, statesman or soldier, and chased boys. Modern liberals miss the whole Greek point; they want to legalize (in the name of freedom) what the Greeks thought slightly absurd, and to repress wholly (in the name of psychology) the Greek erotic game of loving children. Refracted through Western history's second erotic game, courtly love (where again the beloved must not give in to her suppliant), the spectrum of Greek desire has flip-flopped. They chose wives sanely and soberly, with a regard for tribal connections, while Eros spun them giddily in the gymnasium and marketplace.

Anne Carson's subject is not Greek sexuality but Greek thought and poetry. One wishes she had folded in their graphic and plastic arts, where Eros is as vivid as in poetry and philosophy. The lesson she has to teach us is one of aesthetic geometry. Art happens in an act of attention (James's "point of view") which is to be transferred, after being made into an intelligible shape, to other minds. We forget that this is a miracle, a metaphysical unlikelihood. Poplars along the river Epte, Monet painting them, us seeing them a hundred years later. The process is always triangular, even if no work of art gets made. To remember those poplars, if one has seen them, requires a psychological triangulation all in one brain. Event, memory storage and curiously having to find for oneself a vantage in memory, to observe oneself remembering.

This nonexistent, impossible place and its definition form the invisible center of Anne Carson's brilliant essay. She calls it the blind spot. It is where we are when we desire (in a state of lacking) and when we accrue knowledge by experiencing a page of a book. In doing both we are motivated by desire. We want to nibble our beloved's ear, to master the Pythagorean theorem; what we are really doing is defying entropy and moving into the mind's capacity for synergy. The lover's world is a new one to him; he sees whereas before he was blind; things long thought to be dull are suddenly interesting; a sense of wonder lost since childhood returns. Scholars, artists, craftsmen who love their work forget to eat. Their work is not labor. "A thinking mind," Anne Carson writes, "is not swallowed up by what it comes to know."

Eros the god belonged to a world we can scarcely imagine. It becomes visible to us with the alphabet itself (hence a chapter to it, one of the most beautifully written in a beautiful book), which comes from the Greek sense of edges, limits, meticulous definition. Greek can delineate a word in another language: a leap forward: Egyptian hieroglyphs could not graph "Socrates," Greek could graph "Osiris." Anne Carson sees in the metallic beveling of Greek, its sharp edges and sinuous contours, a paradigm of Greek sensibilities. It is a Mozartian language. Sappho's poems were written

for the barbitos, an instrument something like our zither or autoharp. Her meters are fast, decisive; some sound like Mother Goose, or Hopkins at his most chiming.

Persuasive as Anne Carson is, we still need an anthropology of sentiment and a grasp of history to appreciate the dramatic account she gives of the Greek fusion of biological desire and intellectual quest. Greek history in perspective seems to be an adolescence, growing splendidly but never arriving at a maturity. The Romans came and imposed one on them, not quite with success. Their prose and their poetry remained youthful, relentlessly inquiring. A page of Plutarch is somehow younger than a page of Herodotus. Socrates with his daimon and his students, his bare feet and his irony would not last a semester in an American university. The Roman police would have scooped him up along with Musonius. On the other hand, ancient Athenians would have liked Anne Carson. Barbarian, yes, but she speaks our language.

We no longer teach Greek and Latin to university students as a requirement for Bachelor of Arts. What we do teach (in history and survey and art classes) amounts to a feeble exposition. A book like Carson's is all the more welcome in that it derives from Greek ideas and has a measure of Greek wit (along with a measure of French style). It is easy to toss about words like *Greek* and *Roman* without giving (or having) any sense of what they imply, the charm of the one, the plain goodness of the other. Plutarch, who had seen the Roman senate (let's say that if you and I were to see it we might describe it as the American senate with garlic, uncomfortably serious, its oratory windy and undulant), has occasion to describe Alcibiades speaking to an Athenian council. Spoiled charge of Pericles, handsome favorite of Socrates, scapegrace, a Byron before Byron, the fast sporting set's ideal of a real Athenian, he was nevertheless an aspirant statesman and man of affairs. He had brought his pet partridge with him to stroke as he orated. The partridge got loose. The Athenians were delighted. They dove and fell over each other to catch the partridge and return it to Alcibiades, who, his pet secure under his arm, continued his speech, which concerned the gravest civic matters. We cannot imagine this in the Roman senate, nor a Roman historian recording it. It is, as we must say, "very Greek." Why, we can't say, just as we can't say why Sappho's song or Socrates' fusion of desire and philosophy is Greek: gone forever, nonrecurring.

Anne Carson asks us to imagine a city without desire, where philosophers do not run after tops, no poems are written, no novels. For without desire the imagination would atrophy. And without imagination, the mind itself would atrophy, preferring regularity to turbulence, habit to risk, prejudice to reason, sameness to variety. It would be a city that had ostracized Eros. No such city

could exist (boredom is lethal); we need, however, a charmingly percipient philosopher like Anne Carson to teach us ancient verities in a bright new way.

Barbara K. Gold (review date fall 1990)

SOURCE: Gold, Barbara K. Review of *Eros the Bittersweet*, by Anne Carson. *American Journal of Philology* 111, no. 3 (fall 1990): 400-03.

[In the following review, Gold comments that Carson neglects to draw on relevant feminist criticism while formulating her central argument in *Eros the Bittersweet*.]

"Eros makes every man a poet" claims Plato in the *Symposium*, and indeed he might have been describing the author of *Eros the Bittersweet*. Carson, like Eros, is a *mythoplokos*, a weaver of tales to delight, amuse and perplex the reader, and her book is a trove of wordplay, puns, teasing titles, semantic games and epigrammatic twists. Carson's book, first published in 1986 and now reissued in paperback (1988), is an exploration of the characteristic properties of Eros and the relationship between desire, writing, reading and the structure of thought. Her 34 chapters, one of them as short as a single page, are cleverly titled so as to tantalize and mystify the reader: "Gone," "Finding the Edge," "Losing the Edge," "My Page Makes Love," "Ice-Pleasure," "What a Difference a Wing Makes." The wordplay that is immediately obvious from a perusal of the table of contents is an indication of Carson's preoccupation with the post-structuralist ideas that are the underpinnings of her book.

Carson's purpose is to explore the identity of Eros in order "to see what the passion of love has to teach us about reality" (121). Her primary thesis is that Eros is a lack, a searching for an object of desire which must forever recede into the distance in order for Eros to maintain its identity. If an object is known or possessed, it ceases to be an object of desire. Thus Eros, by definition, can never be fulfilled. This, of course, is not a new idea; authors from Sappho to Calvino have explored the fascinating paradox and made it familiar to us. But Carson traces the paradoxical nature of Eros from Sappho's famous definition of it as γλυχόπιχρον in LP 130 to its importance in the later novels of Achilles Tatius, Chariton, Heliodorus, Longus and Xenophon, and she attempts to show that Desire, or what she calls the erotic ruse is fundamental to the very structure of human thought (I have used boldface type throughout my review for the key words that Carson uses to explain her theory).

According to Carson, even the earliest Greek texts draw an analogy between the pursuit of love and the pursuit of knowledge, as seen in the verb μνάομαι, which can