COAGULATING AN AESTHETICS OF DISJUNCTION

A SEMIOLOGICAL READING OF ANNE CARSON’S DECREATION

Thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Linguistics and Literary Studies (Dutch-English)

Supervisor: prof. dr. Christophe Collard
Co-Supervisor: dr. Douglas Atkinson

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I solemnly declare that I have written this master's thesis entitled “Coagulating an Aesthetics of Disjunction: A Semiological Reading of Anne Carson's *Decreation*” myself. 

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Helena Van Praet

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ABSTRACT

The literary work under scrutiny in this thesis is *Decreation: Poetry, Essays, Opera* (2005) by Anne Carson. This study explores how the notion of ‘decreation’ manifests itself through the signifying strategies whereby the collection communicates. To this end, it adopts a literary semiology in the tradition of de Saussure by revisiting Carson’s stereoscopic poetics and Wolfgang Iser’s branch of reader-response criticism. In practice, this methodological approach hinges on the study of signification strategies that function as guiding devices similar to Iser’s conception of gaps by ushering the reader’s perspective towards a stereoscopic vision of sameness-in-otherness. The analysis demonstrates how these strategies evoke a sense of ‘decreation’ by drawing the reader’s attention to the ineluctable boundary between (apparent) incongruities whilst simultaneously encouraging the reader to forge previously unthought-of connections. This study therefore implies that the transcendence of this edge by means of analogical thinking constitutes the metaphysical project of personal re-creation.

**Key words:** Anne Carson, *Decreation*, analogy, semiology, signification strategies, stereoscopy, reader-response criticism
SUMMARY

In this thesis, I analyse how Anne Carson's *Decreation* breaks the mould of ingrained practices in literature on a number of discrete levels. In more concrete terms, Carson ventures beyond customary concerns in this diverse collection by bringing together categories that seem irreconcilable on the face of it. This stereoscopic vision is achieved through the use of signification strategies that confront the reader with apparent incongruities and thus act as an incentive to pursue a new way of perceiving, without, however, defining what that point of reconciliation looks like. This study is thus concerned with the ways in which the notion of ‘decreation’ manifests itself through the signifying strategies whereby the collection communicates.

Accordingly, Carson’s work is read through the prism of a literary semiology whilst simultaneously revisiting Wolfgang Iser’s phenomenological theory of the reading process (1980), which allows for an understanding of these strategies as guiding devices underlying the communicative system of the work. In other words, these principles *guide* the reader’s perspective towards a stereoscopic vision without establishing an exclusive ‘meaning,’ since the reader remains responsible for delineating that third angle of vision. Crucially, this stereoscopic vision is closely connected to Barbara Stafford’s understanding of analogy as an expression of “similarity-in-difference” (2001). These hybrid strategies thus inspire a transformation from an “aesthetics of disjunction” (Fisher, 2015) into a “dialectics of reconciliation” (Stafford, 2001) by activating an analogical way of thinking, and include intergenericity, multimodality, narrative technique, and the concomitant concepts of polyphony and intertextuality. Since the overall aim is an ‘enlightened’ reconciliation rather than a unification, these strategies are able to keep the dialectic open, whereby a *synthetic disjunction* is generated.

As regards the use of intergenericity in the collection, the analysis demonstrates how Carson’s lacing together of discrete genres – epitomised by her lyric essays – takes the form of a coherent yet palpably estranging interweaving by relying on the serial strategies of repetition and framing (cf. Rae, 2008). Accordingly, the notion of genre is here interpreted as a cognitive sense-making device that readers can negotiate (cf.
Lomborg, 2014), which allows them to re-vision these knowledge structures. More concretely, the readers are galvanised to rethink their frame of reference after being confronted with a combination of otherwise distinct genres. Carson’s reconstitution of genre participation thus amounts to an invalidation of the ‘quiddity’ of classifications across the board.

Furthermore, the analysis indicates the importance of acknowledging the meaning potential deriving from the interaction between the visual and verbal mode, given that multimodality is instrumental in bringing about embodied narrative understanding by merging actual experience with virtual meaning (cf. Gibbons, 2012). In more specific terms, the interaction between the verbal and visual mode generates a multimodal metaphor (cf. Gibbons, 2013), which can be phrased as: ‘To read is to be decreated, or to be confronted with your own humanity.’ This metaphor is evoked through the process of visceral reading, whereby the confrontation with a dual reading experience through the use of images, typography, and layout impedes the reader’s complete immersion in the fictional world. As a result, the readers are faced with a dual challenge: they are not only prompted to coalesce disparate reading paths into a coherent narrative, but also to mediate between the physical world of the medium and the virtual world beyond that surface.

Moreover, the results suggest that Carson’s use of intertextuality paves the way for a re-evaluation of agency in literature through a blurring of identity that questions overt authorial control. In this respect, Bakhtin’s notion of heteroglossia (1981) as a kind of double-voiced discourse that refracts authorial intention and Kristeva’s conception of dialogism (1986) as a type of logic based on analogy and non-exclusive opposition help elucidate how polyphony and intertextuality can function as analogical signifying strategies by means of a multi-voiced discourse of both fictional and historical figures. These intertextual voices often become intratextual echoes, which evoke a system of association belonging to a ‘stereoscopic’ speaker as the distinction between the author-speaker and these various voices is muddled. Consequently, the speaker of Decreation is gradually established through the readers’ (partial) recognitions of themselves in the labyrinth of voices.
Finally, this study shows how *Decreation* is infused with a mythical understanding of time through the use of echoes, which provide the collection with a sense of perpetuity that balances out its paratactic appearance (cf. Rae, 2011). In this respect, Carson’s narrative technique functions as a signifying strategy that exemplifies how the notion of ‘decreation’ is inculcated and continually enriched through a succession of analogies, which take the form of echoes or variations on this unfolding leitmotif. More specifically, the analysis demonstrates how the overarching conceit of ‘decreation’ is repeatedly evoked through the juxtaposition of disparate elements that together form a variation on this key motif. As this juxtapositional technique, which operates on the basis of analogy, allows for a correspondence between the collection’s thematic concerns and its form, a recursive loop (cf. Delville, 2013) is generated that approaches the workings of myth through a continual re-writing of key ideas.

To conclude, the results support the initial hypothesis that the ‘decreation’ of the self is translated into a “desire for ‘sustained incongruence’” (Carson, qtd. in Fisher, 2015) across the various signifying systems, as the strategies discussed draw the reader’s attention to the ineluctable boundary between seeming incongruities. Upon closer examination, this study also implies that by actively engaging with these strategies and thereby transforming said aesthetics of disjunction into a dialectics of reconciliation, the principle of analogy can function as a tool for readerly emancipation. However, this stereoscopic reconciliation of dissonant elements remains a life-long, metaphysical *project*. Nevertheless, this endless pursuit of a more nuanced way of seeing inherently carries a heuristic potential by inspiring a re-creation of the self through a process of re-visioning. This study thus reconceptualises the relationship between the signifier and the signified from a processual angle, since ‘meaning’ happens not once, but repeatedly at the point of convergence between different genres, modes, voices, and echoes.
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1. INTRODUCTION

MDM: Some works need sections entirely on their own. Is this a problem for you? For reviewers? For publishers? For bookstore clerks?

AC: Not a problem but a question: What do ‘shelves’ accomplish, in stores or in the mind?
— Anne Carson in an interview with Mary di Michele (qtd. in Rae 2008: 223)

When reading Anne Carson’s work for the first time, it is conceivable that one is struck by the unconventionality of this writer’s heterogeneous creations. Being a Canadian poet, essayist, translator from Ancient Greek, classical scholar and professor herself (Morra 2007), ‘unclassifiability’ is hailed as her trademark, as “Carson’s astonishing range and ambition make her extraordinarily difficult to categorize” (Gilbert 1996: 299). According to Louis Ruprecht, Jr., she “has been writing impossible things for more than 20 years – impossibly evocative, impossibly creative, impossibly beautiful, and hence impossible to summarize neatly” (2008: 101). Yet whether this is true or not – Carson has equally been accused of superficiality and gratuitous showmanship by relying on intentional obscurantism, misguided erudition, and eminent names to boost her own achievements (Thorp 2015: 6, 9, 10) – much can be said for his statement that “to describe her work well would require an eloquence and creativity which matches her own” (101). The existing categorisations and labels indeed seem unsatisfactory for literary works situated at the crossroads of poetry, prose, and essay. Carson’s “genre-averse approach to writing” (Kuiper 2011) finds explicit expression in Decreation: Poetry, Essays, Opera (2005), in which she further muddles the boundaries of form and genre by tackling poems, essays, a screenplay, cinematic shot list, pseudo-interview, an ekphrastic poem, opera libretto, and the text of an oratorio (Pollock 2012: 44). Such a hybrid approach to literature necessarily entails a different, ‘post-classical’ reading experience, the implications of which constitute the core of this study.

Despite the fact that Carson is “notoriously reticent about her personal life” (Rae 2001), it is known that she made her debut as a writer in 1986 with an amalgam of literary history, translation, and philosophy entitled Eros the Bittersweet: An Essay (Kuiper 2011), while Men in the Off Hours (2000) firmly established her reputation as a poet

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1 Henceforth, this work will be referred to as simply Decreation.
(Morra 2007). Her “heretic form of poetry” (Carson 2004) is said to defy categorisation by drawing upon a range of literary forms and is often described as opaque and highly allusive, evoking Greek mythology as well as more recent authors such as Virginia Woolf, Gertrude Stein, and Emily Brontë (Morra 2007). Carson is especially known for her peculiar blend of poetry and especially free verse with prose, in particular the essay, while recurring themes in her poetry include love, the spiritual, and the divine (ibid.). Also taking into account her formal innovation and “academic foundations for creativity” (Thorp 2015: 12), this particular combination of elements might help account for the fact that she was awarded the T. S. Eliot Prize for The Beauty of the Husband (2001) (Morra 2007). Decreation is one of her more recent works and is rightly described as a collection that “showcases her experimentation as well as her consistent interest in the complexities and varieties of human longing and loving — romantic, spiritual and filial” (ibid.). At the same time hermetic and lucid, poignant and incisive, Anne Carson can be considered a subversive writer and poet whose literary endeavours have enduring implications for readers’ assumptions about the boundaries defining both genre and literary form. Hence, it seems most appropriate to examine how meaning is vehicled at a semiological level in Decreation.

In the light of Carson’s generic experimentation and ‘unclassifiability,’ it is not very surprising that her work has not attracted considerable (academic) investigation yet. Nevertheless, a few noteworthy studies discussing a particular aspect of her work have been conducted so far. Ian Rae (2011), for example, has investigated narrative technique in ‘The Glass Essay’ (1995), and the blurring of boundaries between poetry and prose in Canada in general (2008). Both of his works will serve an important role in my own analysis of Carson’s use of form. Within that same context of literature in Canada, Drew McDowell’s (2015) elaborate dissertation focuses on Carson’s use of the lyric form and the sublime in relation to her literary influences and the prevailing lyrical tradition in Canada. However, Jennifer R. Thorp’s well-wrought dissertation (2015) most closely approaches the purpose of this thesis, since it examines Carson’s liminal position and her use of innovative form in the contemporary poetic landscape. Yet, Carson’s formal experimentation is primarily conceived of in a Beckettian fashion, since Thorp places emphasis on doubt and failure as effective means for poetic survival and vitalisation (7). In addition, her dissertation fails to address Decreation. Accordingly, the most
comprehensive study of Carson’s work to date is arguably the outstanding *Anne Carson: Ecstatic Lyre* (2015), edited by Joshua Marie Wilkinson, which comprises a varied collection of essays probing different aspects of Carson’s literary practice, including her poetics, translations, and use of genre, as well as several essays exploring her individual works. Notably the discussions of her poetics by Fisher and by Corless-Smith, as well as the essay on *Decreation* by Skibsrud will function as a starting point for this study.

Furthermore, articles on a wide range of topics have also appeared, including on Carson’s poetics (e.g. Jennings 2001), her use of poetic form (e.g. Linden 2014) and ekphrasis (e.g. Tschofen 2013), her status as a subversive scholar-poet (e.g. Northrup 2012), and creative collaboration with visual artist Roni Horn (Harvey and Cheetham 2015). Other scholars, by contrast, discuss Carson’s literary lineage. In this respect, Andre Furlani (2003) has written on Carson’s poetic engagement with Celan’s literary heritage, whereas Line Henriksen (2005) has studied the verse novel in relation to Carson and Les Murray. Furthermore, Adam Watt (2016) has written on the poetic reciprocity between Proust and Carson, while Rae (2010) has studied the affinities between Carson and the character of Juliet in Alice Munro’s stories. Moreover, Leah Souffrant (2012, 2014) looks into the centrality of silence and the ensuing importance of form in the works of, *inter alios*, Anne Carson and Marguerite Duras. In a similar vein, Alison Phipps (2013) examines the embodied relationship between pain and porosity in languages by considering Carson’s creations amongst works by other authors.

Apropos of *Decreation*, considerable attention has been devoted to the spiritual content of the collection, including sublime decreation (e.g. Disney 2012, Pollock 2012), and in particular Carson’s engagement with the French philosopher and mystic Simone Weil (e.g. Coles 2013, Fan 2007). Other works by Carson that have been discussed include *Autobiography of Red* (1998; e.g. Georgis 2014; Murray 2005), *Nox* (2010; e.g. Fleming 2016; Parr 2014; Plate 2015; Reinhardt 2016; Tanderup 2016), *Antigonick* (2012; e.g. Hjorth 2014, Silverblank 2014), and *Red Doc>* (2013; e.g. Scranton 2014). However, despite Carson’s reputation for rethinking the notion of genre, thus far little attention has been paid to the signifying processes underlying the hybrid communicative system of her literary works. Especially considering the exceptionally experimental nature of *Decreation*, there would therefore seem to be a definite need for semiological research
into the meaning-making systems of said work. Accordingly, this thesis aims to fill that lacuna by adopting a literary semiology in the tradition of de Saussure as opposed to a Peircean semiotics, given that this study focuses on the linguistic constitution of entities – and therefore, on categorisation – rather than on ‘stand-for’ relations (Daylight 2012: 48). In short, this thesis reconceptualises the relationship between the signifier and the signified as a tension rather than a one-to-one relation.

More specifically, the aim of this study is to investigate in what way(s) the notion of ‘decreation’ manifests itself through the signifying strategies whereby Anne Carson’s Decreation communicates. This particular stance towards her work is in part a response to the statement in Decreation that “decreation is an undoing of the creature in us – that creature enclosed in self and defined by self. But to undo self one must move through self, to the very inside of its definition. We have nowhere else to start” (DC 179). In a nutshell, the objective is to demonstrate that a fundamentally human project lies at the heart of Decreation. Not only does Decreation address several human concerns – filial, romantic, artistic, and mystic – on a thematic level, formally, it also explores what it means to be human in its most literal sense. To use Skibsrud’s words: “What are the limits of the human ‘creature’ itself? Carson asks. Is it possible to confront those limits, or even move beyond them?” (2015: 132). This study can therefore be placed under the aegis of literary semiology, and to a lesser extent, reader-response criticism, since it analyses techniques readers rely on when interpreting the text of Decreation, and it thus aims to provide a nuanced contribution to the study of signification strategies. In this respect, it is desirable to bear in mind that Decreation is a self-reflexive work in the sense that it frequently alludes to notions of signification and interpretation. “Our film is almost over and we haven’t explained anything” (DC 142) illustrates this point clearly.

As a working hypothesis this research project considers the notion of ‘decreation’ to be manifested in two ways simultaneously. On a general level, the ‘decreation’ or annihilation of the self is translated into a “desire for ‘sustained incongruence’” (Carson, qtd. in Fisher 2015: 12) across the various signifying systems in Decreation. More specifically, however, by engaging with the text and transforming this “aesthetics of

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2 All further references are to the 2006 Jonathan Cape edition of Decreation, abbreviated DC, and will be inserted parenthetically in the text.
disjunction” (Fisher 11) into a “dialectics of reconciliation” (Stafford 2001: 14) by means of signifying strategies, the reader is not only emancipated, which comprises a heuristic dimension aimed at a more nuanced understanding of the self and reality, but also takes part in the interpretation of ‘decreation’ adopted here, namely as a metaphysical project. In short, by achieving the “union of [things] hitherto unconnected in experience” (Eliot 1993: 51), the reader succeeds in transcending established boundaries and realises personal decreation. That said, it is clear that this ideal of reconciling disparate experience always remains a metaphysical endeavour, and hence, a continual process enacted in everyday life and exemplified in Decreation. The point at issue is therefore an examination of the specific ways in which this process is translated into the signifying strategies of the collection.

Accordingly, Decreation will be read through the prism of a semiology of literature, and this for two reasons. Firstly, as has already been touched upon, there has not been extensive research into the signifying strategies of this work yet, despite its highly experimental nature and protean character. Secondly, a semiological reading is well-suited to a work of literature that takes as its starting point the undoing of self and, by extension, form. Since form is various here, and notions of the self equally kaleidoscopic, interpretations will proliferate accordingly. Hence, it seems most appropriate to “describe the conventions and semiotic operations responsible for these interpretations” (Culler 2001: 54). As such, this research project is concerned with interpretive criticism by means of an analytic literary analysis. That said, it is undeniable that this methodological approach may wrongly assume a so-called architecteur or model reader, or in the words of Culler, that it may “pos[it] as a norm a ‘competent’ reading which other readers ought to accept” (2001: 55). Alongside Culler, I want to stress that the semiological reading adopted in this thesis merely attempts to account for the signifying strategies underlying literary interpretation and that it does not claim to disclose the extent to which readers (dis)agree in their interpretations (2001: 55). In this sense, it is clear that my reading will always be a misreading and, with luck, a necessary falsification (Bloom 2001-2002: 70).

In more concrete terms, the methodological approach adopted here is based on Carson's stereoscopic poetics, given that in Decreation, Carson can be seen to focus on the “edge between two images that cannot merge in a single focus because they do not derive from

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the same level of reality – one is actual, one is possible” (Carson 1988: 69). Crucially, stereoscopy's optical illusion can thus be regarded as the experience of both the desiring lover and the reader in terms of a “sustained incongruence” (Carson, qtd. in Fisher 2015: 12). However, by "show[ing] us the simultaneous proximity and distance between things" (Fisher 2015: 12), Carson's aesthetics of disjunction must be understood as an expression of apparent incongruence inviting reconciliation. I will argue that Decreation inspires such a dialectics of reconciliation by operating on the basis of analogy. To this end, I will develop a semiological reading of Wolfgang Iser's (1980) phenomenological theory of the reading process through Barbara Maria Stafford’s conception of analogy as “the vision of ordered relationships articulated as similarity-in-difference” (2001: 9).

In practice, this reading hinges on the study of signification strategies that include intergenericity, multimodality, polyphony-intertextuality, and narrative technique. The limitation of this approach is that such a selection of strategies is bound to be partially subjective. However, this factor has been counterpoised to the greatest possible extent by selecting these concepts on the basis of their hybrid character and concomitant conciliatory potential. Accordingly, the aim is to demonstrate how these principles function as guiding devices underlying the textual system (cf. Iser’s reader-response criticism) by challenging the reader to find sameness-in-otherness, and hence, to take part in the metaphysical project of personal decreation. In the light of Iser’s theory, it is crucial to emphasise that the reader remains responsible for creating these analogies as the activity of linking always entails an emotional, personal component (Stafford 2001: 141). The merits of this particular approach thus include its indisposition to projection by not having to fall back on a rigid – and hence reductive – methodological framework.

In the light of said ambition, this thesis will be structured as follows: in the first chapter, the communicative system of Decreation will be elucidated by establishing a connection between the thematic concerns of the collection, i.e. the central conceit of ‘decreation,’ and the crossing of boundaries that such a project entails. This insight then functions as a stepping stone to a reading of the collection through Carson's conception of Eros, which in turn necessitates a discussion of the associated concepts of triangulation, stereoscopy, and the deferral of meaning. In a next stage, the semiological framework will be developed by revisiting Iser’s branch of reader-response criticism in relation to Carson’s stereoscopic poetics through the concept of analogy as a structuring principle.
The next chapters are devoted to my literary analysis of the collection, the first part of which is concerned with the intergeneric nature of *Decreation*. More specifically, this chapter examines how the notion of genre functions as a signifying strategy that invites a transformation from apparent incongruence into a “reconcil[iation] [of] the dualism between structure and agency” (Lomborg 2014: 47), similarity and difference (Devitt 2004: 167), whilst bringing in Carson’s reconstitution of genre participation. In a next phase, the collection’s seeming disconnectedness will be evaluated in relation to Rae’s (2008) discussion of the serial poem. Subsequently, Carson’s lyric essays will be discussed with regard to their combination of thought and feeling through T. S. Eliot’s notion of the dissociation of sensibility (1934a). The following chapter then focuses on the use of multimodality in the collection by examining the interplay between the not-so-distinct semiotic modes of the verbal and the visual in *Decreation*. In the penultimate part of the analysis, the concepts of polyphony and intertextuality will be studied as signifying strategies that engender a blurring of identity between the different voices in the collection, which in turn complicates notions of authorial presence and control. Finally, Carson’s narrative technique will be analysed whilst arguing that her use of echoes or analogies permeates *Decreation* with a sense of perpetuity that countervails the collection’s paratactic appearance through a mythical understanding of time.

Thus, the overall aim of this study is to demonstrate that the notion of ‘decreation’ manifests itself through a generic, modal, phonic, and referential multiplicity that can result in readerly emancipation through a critical interaction with the text, thereby achieving a more nuanced way of seeing and the re-creation of the former self.
2. **THE EDGE AND THE DEFERRAL OF MEANING**

I don’t know that I’ve ever thought of myself as doing poetry, frankly. But I like to make things, and I think to make a page of words and stop is not often satisfying anymore. [...] Taking the page of words and unfolding it at angles. [...] Exploding it. That is satisfying from time to time. I’m not sure I’m going to find the form I want. I don’t believe it exists.

— Anne Carson in an interview with Peter Streckfus (2015: 221)

Anne Carson’s hybrid literary practice is often said to defy categorisation (e.g. Carson 2004; Kuiper 2011; Ruprecht 2008: 101). The assumptions behind this particular understanding of her work will be addressed in the present chapter by focusing on Carson’s poetics. More specifically, this chapter is devoted to the intricate notion of ‘decreation’ in Carson’s collection, as a more profound understanding of this concept can provide helpful insights into the variegated ways the work communicates. Thus, in the first part of this chapter, the notion of ‘decreation’ as an undoing of the self will be introduced, since on a semiological level, this has enduring implications for Carson’s poetic programme. In a next stage, the triangular structure underlying Carson’s erotic poetics will be analysed in relation to *Decreation* by means of the metaphysical conceit of stereoscopy. The last part of this chapter then deals with the deferral of meaning in the collection through a discussion of Marchel Duchamp’s *The Large Glass*, as the structuring principle underlying both works can be conceptualised as a Derridean “strategy of delays” (Judovitz 1995: 59). The aim is thus to elucidate the communicative project at the heart of *Decreation* by means of these referential frameworks.

### 2.1 **SELF-ANNIHILATION**

Before the numerous interpretations of ‘decreation’ as adopted in Carson’s collection are broached, it is important to note that ‘decreation’ is both the title of an essay and an opera libretto by Carson, ‘Decreation: How Women Like Sappho, Marguerite Porete and Simone Weil Tell God’ and ‘Decreation: An Opera in Three Parts,’ respectively. This observation is interesting in itself as it implies a crossing of (medial) boundaries (Swensen 2015: 128), the implications of which will be discussed later in the present section. Carson borrowed the term ‘decreation’ from Simone Weil, a twentieth-century
French philosopher (DC 157), who introduced the term but never defined it properly, so that it can be understood at best as an endeavour “to undo the creature in us” (Weil, qtd. in DC 167). In its simplest definition, ‘decreation’ can be understood as the metaphysical undoing of self. Yet, as Heloise remarks in Decreation, to be nothing is “metaphysically difficult” (DC 135). Therefore, the term ‘metaphysical’ is here used in the sense that, as Skibsrud justly points out, the state of self that is being referred to in the collection is one of “being beyond any place from which one might ‘tell’ of it” (2015: 132, emphasis added), while metaphysics can be defined precisely as a branch of philosophy that “think[s] beyond itself and its limits […] into openness” (Adorno 2001: 68, original emphasis). The implication is that, pace James Pollock, Carson does not simply “displace[e] herself from the centre of her writing” (2012: 50) through various techniques of depersonalisation in a way that is reminiscent of T. S. Eliot, as he claims, but rather that a fundamentally metaphysical project lies at the heart of Decreation, which has profound implications for the reader.

In his chapter entitled ‘Anne Carson and the Sublime,’ Pollock interprets ‘decreation’ as the sublime annihilation of the self (2012: 43). He argues that Modernism’s anti-subjective element has had a strong influence on Carson, as a result of which she is trying to dislocate the self from the centre of her writing, not in order to make way for “the cold, inhuman babble of Language,” but to clear the way for spiritualism (2012: 44). Furthermore, he claims that Carson is thus aligning herself with the Romantic and Modernist tradition of the sublime, but that she goes even further by involving herself with more classic sources of sublime potency, i.e. God, than for example, the image of the wind for the English Romantics (44). However, as Pollock indicates, wind is also a recurring motif throughout Decreation (ibid.), which can be most clearly illustrated by the various references in the Stops, Sublimes, and ‘H & A Screenplay.’ Even though Pollock’s biographical criticism is too simplistic an interpretation for Carson’s highly intricate work, the discussion below seems to corroborate his statement that each of the four essays in the collection offers a distinct perspective on sublime experience (ibid.).

3 Pollock does not elaborate on his understanding of the anti-subjective element in Modernism, but he possibly refers to a kind of writing in the tradition of T. S. Eliot that reacted against romantic poetry by drawing upon an (apparently) anti-subjectivist or impersonal poetics (Eysteinsson 1990: 27).

4 Pollock fails to provide more context, but his example of D. H. Lawrence’s “Not I, not I, but the wind that blows through me” (qtd. in Pollock 2012: 44) seems to indicate that he is (again) referring to an impersonal kind of poetry that expresses divine potency.
As Pollock points out, these deft, erudite essays display Carson as an incisive literary critic, yet at the same time they are highly personal as they evoke her (presumed) childhood memories (44-45). A brief overview of each of these four essays will now be provided through Pollock's work (2012) in order to shed light on the manifold interpretations of ‘decreation’ at play.

The first essay in the collection, entitled ‘Every Exit is an Entrance (A Praise of Sleep),’ deals with the general notions of the uncanny, the sublime, and the supernatural as well as their consolatory potential (Pollock 2012: 45). Interestingly, the essay’s title echoes T.S. Eliot’s “In my end is my beginning” (2001c: 20) from ‘East Coker’ (1940), as well as Samuel Beckett’s “The end is in the beginning and yet you go on” (2005: 1056) from Endgame (1957). Carson explicitly references the latter work in Decreation (DC 121), which is telling as both allusions already point to the existential impetus underlying her essay. In more specific terms, the essay is concerned with the extraction of something incognito, some secret content, from sleep (Pollock 2012: 45), as well as with the sublime transactions between the realms of waking and sleeping, epitomised in the ‘tear of sleep,’ which is the sublime residue (DC 36). By extension, the essay is concerned with the metaphysical notion of the fundamentally real, Kant’s thing-in-itself, “which is likewise secret or hidden” (Pollock 2012: 45). In this sense, Carson refers to “the emptiness of things before we make use of them, a glimpse of reality prior to its efficacy” (DC 24). The essay’s centre of gravity, however, is the “border between nothing and something” of which sleepers are the perfect agents (DC 24). Carson illustrates this “possibility of dispossession” by way of a story in which a treasure, i.e. the ghosts’ light, is buried in a sleeper’s heart (DC 25-26). Crucially, she states that the poetic imagination is precisely this “power to turn nothing into something” (DC 39). In short, Carson centres her essay around the leaking boundary between the realms of waking and sleeping (DC 37-38), nothing and something, as a metaphor for the metaphysical project at the heart of her collection. To put it differently, as Ruprecht points out, just like sleep can be considered a “temporary decreation” or a “little death,” the ‘little death’ that is (in French) an orgasm can evoke a loss of self, a central topic in Greek erotic poetry, with which Carson is so familiar (2008: 104). As will be discussed in the next section on triangular structures, this orgasmic loss of self is part of the larger paradigm of self-loss culminating in romantic love (Ruprecht 2008: 104).
The second essay, then, entitled ‘Foam (Essay with Rhapsody): On the Sublime in Longinus and Antonioni’ is concerned with the sublime nature of quotation (Pollock 2012: 46). According to Carson, “the Sublime is a documentary technique” (DC 45) as it involves extensive citation. Moreover, the joy of the sublime corresponds to the feeling of creative power and the act of spilling with the artist (DC 46). Accordingly, the sublime can be understood as a “passionate moment [that] is created, quoted, spilled” (DC 47). This “alternation of danger and salvation” is “always threatening to go out of control” (DC 48) and as such, the sublime is directly connected to the transgressive crossing of boundaries, which Carson relates to the “possibility of foam” (DC 49). In this respect, Carson’s choice for ‘rhapsody’ is highly interesting. Not only does it denote multiple things, including an “ecstatic expression of feeling,” “a free instrumental composition in one extended movement,” or “an epic poem [...] of a suitable length for recitation at one time” in ancient Greece (“Rhapsody” 2017), in combination with the recurring image of the wind it is also reminiscent of T. S. Eliot’s ‘Rhapsody on a Windy Night’ (1917), the opening lines of which are given here: “Twelve o’clock. / Along the reaches of the street / Held in a lunar synthesis, / Whispering lunar incantations / Dissolve the floors of memory / And all its clear relations, / Its divisions and precisions” (2002: 16). In the context of Carson’s work, this poem contributes to the sense of dissolution and loss of conceptual control that pervades the essay.

Not very surprisingly, Pollock relates Carson's third essay in the collection, ‘Totality: The Colour of Eclipse,’ to eighteenth-century sublime experiences of nature, in this case the aesthetic experience of a total eclipse (2012: 46). More specifically, Carson describes a total solar eclipse as a “moment of reversal within totality” (DC 149). Furthermore, she states that “people who experience total eclipse are moved to such strong descriptions of its vacancy and void that this itself begins to take on colour” (DC 149). In short, a total eclipse literally amounts to a completely different way of seeing. This basic insight has profound implications for Carson’s poetics, as will be elucidated in the next section on stereoscopy. In similar terms, Carson relates this experience of a total eclipse to her essay on sleep by comparing it to “waking from a dream in the wrong direction and finding yourself on the back side of your own mind” (ibid.). What is interesting, moreover, is that Carson mentions how in the literature of totality, or eclipse literature, explanations of eclipse are often linked to marriage or copulation (DC 150). In other
words, vision and desire form an important associative cluster that can cast light on the communicative principles underlying Decreation. In this sense, Pollock’s statement that “nature isn’t really Carson’s forte” (47) is highly misplaced. Furthermore, his image of a total solar eclipse as a metaphor for the ‘decreation’ or annihilation of the self (47) is dissatisfying, as it reduces the intricate project that is Decreation to a singular, simplistic idea and thus fails to take account of the nuanced ways in which it communicates.

However, much can be said for Pollock’s description of Carson’s last essay, ‘Decreation: How Women Like Sappho, Marguerite Porete and Simone Weil Tell God’ as the “intellectual heartland” (47) of the collection. This last essay is also the longest of the four, and it consists of four parts. The first part is devoted to a discussion of Sappho’s fragment 31, which Carson reads as an “ecstatic lyric about the ‘theology of love’” (Pollock 47) in which Sappho’s “Being [is] thrown outside its own centre where it stands observing her as if she were grass or dead” (DC 161). However, Carson interprets this event of ecstasy as a means towards an unreachable end, which culminates in her reading of Sappho’s fragment as a consent to an absolute potential, as “love dares the self to leave itself behind, to enter into poverty” (DC 162). The second part of the essay is concerned with the spiritual endeavours of the thirteenth- and fourteenth-century French mystic Marguerite Porete and her theological treatise entitled The Mirror of Simple Souls (Pollock 47). In a similar vein, Carson relates how Porete consents to a certain absolute demand in reality and is thereby split in two, since she experiences the event as an “ecstasy in which the soul is carried outside her own Being and leaves herself behind” (DC 163). Crucially, in both cases the ecstatic moment is described in terms of a love triangle, but Porete’s triangle is unusual in the sense that it consists of God and Porete’s divided self (Pollock 47). The third part of the essay, then, is devoted to the twentieth-century French philosopher Simone Weil, who, just like Porete, feels the need to render the self back to God (DC 167). It is important to note that she envisages this process of decreation as a triangle as well, but in this case, it involves “God, herself and the whole of creation” (DC 168) as she experiences herself as an unwelcome third party between God and the world.

Dan Disney offers an interesting contribution to the matter while stating that “through self-erasure, a form of perhaps supra-sensible Platonic reality may be apprehended,
extra-systemically, as if from outside the boundaries of self and reality” (2012: 27). In this way, he draws attention to a compelling paradox by arguing that Carson’s discussion of the sublime lays bare the contiguity between (spiritual) disembodiment and immersion in a metaphysically ‘real’ reality (ibid.). In more specific terms, Disney interprets Carson’s vision of the sublime as a “metaphysics of the self-as-other” (29) and argues that Carson’s hybrid style is reminiscent of Joanna Zylinska’s description of the feminine sublime as accepting “the relationship of both pleasure and pain, or life and death, and the potential dispersal of the self” (qtd. in Disney 2012: 27). Yet, like Pollock, Disney’s criticism bears a potentially restrictive biographical stain, since he interprets Decreation’s central notions of decentring and dispersal as “Carson’s rewriting of creativity as a form of selfless, sublime disembodiment” by relying on texts from outsider intellectuals (ibid.).

However, as Pollock rightly points out, there is yet another contradiction in Sappho, Porete, and Weil (48), as the self-assertiveness of their writerly project cannot be reconciled with their intentions to annihilate the self (DC 171). To put it simply: “Shouldn’t the decreated soul stop creating?” (Ruprecht 2008: 106, original emphasis). In order to accommodate these two contrasting states of being, something and nothing, which are “two sides of one coin, at least in the mind of a dialectician” (DC 172), Carson relates in the fourth part of the essay how each of them “feels moved to create a sort of dream of distance in which the self is displaced from the centre of the work and the teller disappears into the telling” (DC 173). Further analysis would result in a digression from the main argument, which concerns Carson’s use of boundaries, but what is important in terms of her poetics, is that each of these women tries to reconcile two different planes of reality. For Simone Weil, these are looking and eating in her quest for eternal beatitude, for Marguerite Porete, time and space in her description of God as the ‘FarNear’ who gives the soul a glimpse of eternity in an act that resembles both copulation and feeding, and for Sappho, this is the difference between two places in her kletic (or calling) hymn to Aphrodite (Pollock 49-50). Crucially, Carson mentions that the function of the hymn is not to destroy but to decrease this difference (DC 178), as “there is no clear boundary between far and near; there is no climactic moment of God’s arrival” (DC 179).
In sum, Sappho, Marguerite Porete, and Simone Weil are all situated at a liminal position since they are both near and far at once from the object of their desire. Furthermore, in each of the four essays, a certain boundary is crossed: in the first essay, this is the active boundary between the realms of waking and sleeping, in the second essay the boundary between artist and reader through the act of quotation, in the third essay the boundary of established vision, and in the final essay the boundary of the self. In this sense, Skibsrud remarks that “[writing] is a manner of creating – through a simultaneous inability to equate experience with meaning or retreat from that possibility – the ‘FarNear’ space of the encounter, or ‘collision,’ between subjective experience and that which will always exceed it” (2015: 136). In short, writing is that very space where the self is decreated through the “collapse of the opposing terms of being itself (I, non-I; contact and distance; the given and the withheld)” (Skibsrud 2015: 137, emphasis added). The next section will demonstrate that precisely this edge, this leaking boundary, plays a pivotal role in Carson’s erotic poetics and can provide a key to the communicative strategies at play in Decreation.

2.2 Triangulations and Stereoscopy

In the first part of her opera entitled Decreation, Carson provides the following image of love:

I just want to be clear
to be more and more clear
until finally
all you see
is the line
left by the cutting tool
in the heart,
not even
the heart. (DC 204-205)

The description of the line presented here aptly illustrates Carson’s poetics, which is the topic under scrutiny in the present section. However, that is not to say Decreation is representative for the whole of Carson’s poetics; the aim is rather to elucidate the
communicative system of *Decreation* by drawing upon Carson’s own literary criticism. More specifically, Carson’s poetics will be read through the prism of her conception of Eros, or desire, as explored in her monograph entitled *Eros the Bittersweet: An Essay* (1986). In this respect, it is important to note that Carson explicitly references this monograph in *Decreation*: “Claiming to have no word for ‘desire,’ / you brimming burning *glukupikros* [bittersweet] liar, / you candybitter being” (*DC* 80, original emphasis). In a much-quoted passage from Carson’s *Eros the Bittersweet*, she writes that

> Eros is an issue of boundaries. He exists because certain boundaries do. [...] But the boundaries of time and glance and I love you are only aftershocks of the main, inevitable boundary that creates Eros: the boundary of flesh and self between you and me. And it is only, suddenly, at the moment when I would dissolve that boundary, I realize I never can. (1988: 30)

In her lambent essay entitled ‘Anne Carson’s Stereoscopic Poetics,’ Jessica Fisher identities Carson’s use of desire as the “very human essence that might supplant *self*” (2015: 10, original emphasis). In *Decreation*, this erotic understanding of self is voiced through the figure of Simone Weil when she exclaims that “out goes desire, / out goes disorder, / [...] Out goes ‘I!’” (*DC* 230). Fisher interprets Carson’s understanding of desire as Lacanian while arguing that desire engraves blindness both at the point of the desired object and within the subject him- or herself (11). More concretely, through the act of seeking our self-recognition by the other, humans are confronted with the limits of self and the central absence within us that can be understood as the very cause of desire’s perpetual flux (ibid.). Said absence or hole results from the fact that desire for an object essentially equals desire for a missing part of the self (Carson 1988: 33). This drama of the vanishing point can be regarded as a visual metaphor to depict the split subject (Fisher 11).

In *Decreation*, this crisis can be illustrated by the statement that “to catch sight of this fact [I can never be alone with God] [...] forces the perceiver to a point where she has to disappear from herself in order to look” (*DC* 169). According to Carson, by pointing out the lacunae or holes in being, poetry can draw attention to the “absent presence of desire” (qtd. in Fisher 2015: 13). This play of absence and presence is directly related to Carson’s liminal semiology. By “finding [...] lacunae in the metaphysical silence of an
untranslatable world,” Carson is “weaving absence into the web of presence” and thus demonstrating the movement of desire (Fisher 13). In ‘Quad,’ Carson’s discussion of Samuel Beckett’s *Quadrat I* and *Quadratt II*, she expresses this duality succinctly through the use of *nec tecum* (*DC* 122), which is part of the larger phrase *nec tecum nec sine te* that Beckett used to describe the relationship between Hamm and Clov in *Endgame* (Connor 2008: 42), and which presumably derives from Ovid’s *nec sine te nec tecum vivere possum*, meaning “I cannot live with you, nor without you” (Connor 43).

More concretely, blocked visual perception and especially stereoscopy are frequently adopted as figures for desire’s triangular structure in Carson’s work (Fisher 11). This structure should be understood as a visual expression of “the difference between what is and what could be” (Carson, qtd. in Fisher 2015: 11). In more specific terms, Carson argues that

[...] we think by *projecting sameness upon difference*, by drawing things together in a relation or idea *while at the same time maintaining the distinctions between them*. [...] In any act of thinking, the mind must reach across this space between known and unknown, linking one to the other but also keeping visible their difference. It is an erotic space. To reach across it is tricky; a kind of stereoscopy seems to be required. (1988: 171, emphases added)

In other words, in their quest for a meaningful sense of existence, human beings try to reconcile different planes of reality. In this respect, Carson focuses on the “edge between two images that cannot merge in a single focus because they do not derive from the same level of reality – one is actual, one is possible” (Carson 1988: 69). Crucially, stereoscopy’s optical illusion can thus be regarded as the experience of both the desiring lover and the reader in terms of a “sustained incongruence” (Carson, qtd. in Fisher 2015: 12). This ‘sustained incongruence’ can be directly linked to Fisher’s remark that Carson “show[s] us the *sustained proximity and distance* between things, and in this sense she is always a translator – that is, one who carries something across a distance” (12, emphasis added). Carson’s “aesthetics of disjunction” (Fisher 11) must therefore be understood as an expression of *apparent* incongruence, as will be further elucidated in Chapter Two.
In her essay on sleep, Carson relates this stereoscopic vision to the sleep side of life in the form of “seeing with both eyes” (Plato, qtd. in DC 39), while in her essay on the solar eclipse, references to a spectroscope (DC 149), a “third angle of vision” (DC 152), and the ‘marrying’ of “incongruous ideas” (DC 152) are made. Furthermore, in her discussion of ancient Chinese ghost authors in the oratorio, Carson refers to a symbolic ‘gun’ as a “line that separates this from that [...] and it is neither the one nor the other but possesses the blackness of both” (DC 111). In short, Scranton summarises Carson’s erotic poetics as follows: “She holds that desire’s constitutive lack brings into relief the boundaries or edges between things or persons, and that desire’s action is an imaginative projection of similitude across these boundaries—which in the end only heightens the sense of difference and lack” (2014: 204). It is important to note that similarity and difference are thus far from diametrically opposed entities, but rather make up two sides of the same coin. In other words, “sameness is projected onto difference in a kind of stereoscopy,” and according to Carson, “there is something irresistible in that” (Carson 1988: 34), which can be read as a pragmatic translation of Eros that will also be adopted in this thesis.

Likewise, in his article entitled ‘The Erotic Poetics of Anne Carson,’ Chris Jennings (2001) draws attention to Carson’s liminal poetics, which have already been briefly touched upon. According to Jennings, Carson’s predilection for liminal positions constitutes the fundamental link between herself and Eros (2001: 936). More specifically, he argues that “Carson gives her writing a triangular structure by binding the terms juxtaposed not only to each other but to a liminal position between them” (923), and he goes even further by claiming that said triangular paradigm forms the underlying structure of her poetic vision (924). In more concrete terms, Jennings argues that Carson’s third component arises from a process of simultaneous combining and shifting (926). In this sense, Carson’s focus on the edge resembles a metaphor given their shared “ability to hold in equipoise two perspectives at once” (Carson, qtd. in Jennings 2001: 926). Furthermore, Jennings remarks that Carson succeeds in achieving this poetic vision by focusing on the question of ‘withness’ or relation, which allows for the differences to remain rather than to be resolved (928). In almost mystical terms, he describes how Carson’s “oracular vision” emanates from a liminal position by stemming from her capacity to discuss the gaps in perception in relationship to the visible (935).
This liminal position or edge can be regarded as a potential platform for critical reflection, since it questions notions of membership and thus forces readers to rethink their own politics of judgement, echoing Carson’s “what’d it be like if your brain were this fit / all the time?” (DC 90).

Martin Corless-Smith offers a similar perspective on the matter in his essay entitled ‘Living on the Edge: The Bittersweet Place of Poetry.’ In his discussion of the term ‘bittersweet,’ he states that the “frisson of the simultaneity of these dissonant counterparts [...] is Carson’s essential investigation” (2015: 22). His statement gains in importance in the light of Carson’s description of the moment of desire as “one that defies proper edge, being a compound of opposites forced together at pressure” (Carson 1988: 30). Crucially, he remarks that, although it is the prominent example in Carson’s work, the (triangular) structure of erotic crisis should not be confined to the experience of a frustrated lover, since it denotes the crisis of being in general (23). More specifically, he argues that “the split becomes itself a realm of investment. The schism between lover and beloved or the discontinuous and the continuity, a whole broken into two, now becomes three” (25, original emphases). Moreover, it is precisely this schism that provides the screen upon which human consciousness is projected (27), since “the self forms at the edge of desire” (Carson 1988: 39).

Pace Corless-Smith’s statement that the meaning of ‘bittersweet’ as uniting two incompatibilities should be read as an “intentional impossibility” (27), the term seems to invite, first and foremost, critical engagement, turning it into an apt platform for a metaphysical project. Essentially, this project involves an attempt at reconciling disparate levels of reading and experience.

To illustrate this stereoscopic vision and the possibility for readerly emancipation it bears, Carson’s cinematic shot list entitled ‘Longing, A Documentary’ from Decreation will be discussed here. Firstly, the title of this shot list is interesting in itself as it combines both desire and vision. Secondly, the first six lines provide an important associative cluster consisting of reconciliation, the edge, and the act of watching, as “she was not a person who aimed at eventual reconciliation with the views of common sense” (DC 243, emphases added). In other words, “facts lack something” (244), which is later defined as a situation of “overtakelessness” (245). Finally, after the protagonist watches how black water engulfs the photographic papers she placed on the bottom of a river, a
flash of strobe light leads to a sudden illumination (244). This sense of equanimity is accompanied by a familiar image of the wind as windows that are blowing (245). In sum, by stressing the importance of vision, reflection, and discovery, the reader is encouraged to connect the disparate elements of the shot list, thus becoming the protagonist of the documentary who never settles for the established vision or status quo.

To conclude, the structure underlying Decreation's communicative system can at best be described as “a system of contradictions curving in and out of impossibility without arriving at refutation” (DC 33-34). In this sense, Carson's poetic vision echoes Schulz's observation that “this is Carson's obsession, and her gift: to make meaning from the fragments we get, which are also all we get – of time, of the past, of each other” (2013, original emphasis). After having described how the “naked collision of […] two realities brings the lover to a sort of breakdown […] whose effect is to expose [the] very Being to its own scrutiny and to dislodge it from the centre of itself” (DC 165), Carson hints at the metaphysical ideal at the heart of Decreation as a situation where the subject “is rendered into the simple Deity, in full knowing, without feeling, beyond thought […] Higher no one can go, deeper no one can go, more naked no human can be” (Marguerite Porete, qtd. in DC 166). In sum, ‘decreation’ can be regarded as a consequence of desire that manifests itself through a longing for sustained incongruence. To find similitude in that web of apparent difference without losing sight of the edge, or, in other words, to achieve a stereoscopic or third angle of vision, is to partake in the metaphysical project of decreating and re-establishing the self.

It should be clear by this point that Anne Carson can be considered a modern heir of T. S. Eliot. Among the characteristics reminiscent of Eliot's literary practice can be mentioned (Sirc 2005: 135): her polyglot fragments (e.g. DC 80, 93, 130, 209-211, 214, 216), intertextual references, strong emphasis on the presence of the past through her intertextual and intermedial work, and her interlacing of thought and feeling inviting comparison with the metaphysical poets of the seventeenth century. Their shared Renaissance practice of inserting echoes or “mosaics of speech” from the past into their creations (Sirc 2005: 134-135) identifies both their works as ‘mosaic’ in nature, characterised by fragmentation and a formal multiplicity and hybridity. In this sense, their works echo Walt Whitman's famous “Do I contradict myself? / Very well then I
contradict myself, (I am large, I contain multitudes.)” (vs. 1323-1325) from his ‘Song of Myself’ (1881). Yet, while T. S. Eliot makes a case for “amalgamating disparate experience” (1934a: 287), meaning in Carson’s work is ultimately postponed due to her emphasis on the edge. In other words, closure is delayed, which results in an endless deferral of the signified reminiscent of a Derridean différance. The metaphor of glass as a strategy of delays aptly captures this sense of deferral.

2.3 GLASS AND DIFFÉRANCE

When Jacques Derrida coined the term ‘différance’ in his eponymous essay in 1968, he referred to the fact that words, or signs in general, take on meaning both by virtue of their differences with other signs and by the fact that they bear a trace of signs that are yet to follow. In this sense, Derrida writes that

Differance is what makes the movement of signification possible only if each element that is said to be “present,” appearing on the stage of presence, is related to something other than itself but retains the mark of a past element and already lets itself be hollowed out by the mark of its relation to a future element. (2002: 561)

In short: meaning is based on a two-fold core consisting of difference and delay, which correlate with the axes of space and time respectively: “The two apparently different meanings of différance are tied together in Freudian theory: differing [le différer] as discernibility, distinction, deviation, diastem, spacing; and deferring [le différer] as detour, delay, relay, reserve, temporalizing” (2002: 564, original emphases). To recapitulate briefly, in Carson’s poetics, the edge functions as a liminal platform that invites a stereoscopic vision of similarity-in-difference. Precisely because of the teleological, prospective nature of this projected vision – which is essentially a mirage – meaning is inherently postponed, which invites comparison with Derrida’s concept of différance. Arguably, this led one reviewer of Decreation to write that “the book is transparent – yes, but slippery” (“Outlaw Time” 2006).

Moreover, on the first page of Carson’s The Beauty of the Husband, the reader is confronted with the following instance of metalepsis: “Fair reader I offer merely an
analogy. // A delay. // ‘Use delay instead of picture or painting – / a delay in glass / as you would say a poem in prose or a spittoon in silver.’ / So Duchamp / of The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors” (2001: 6). As will be elucidated in Chapter Two, the principle of analogy can be regarded as a specific conception of similarity-in-difference, which is already hinted at here. More interesting at this point, however, is Carson’s explicit reference to Marcel Duchamp’s The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even, also known as simply The Large Glass (1915-23), as it might provide insight into the communicative strategies at play in Carson’s work in general and Decreation in particular. The reason for this at first sight rather flippant extrapolation is that glass is a recurrent trope throughout Carson’s oeuvre. ‘The Glass Essay’ is arguably the most clear example of this larger glass paradigm, but examples can also be found in Decreation, of which a few are given here: “Do you know that in the deepest part of the sea everything goes transparent? / [...] and I say Do you know how afraid I am?” (DC 65, emphasis added), “his face a glass that has shattered but not yet fallen” (DC 90), and “I returned / the same glass answer. / I answered nothing” (DC 215). In all cases, communication is jeopardised but the potential for meaningful exchange has not been lost yet.

The previous statement gains in meaning when considering Dalia Judovitz’ argument that “[...] Duchamp’s desire to strip painting bare by redefining it as a transitional activity, as a set of impressions or imprints, leads to the redefinition of this work [The Large Glass] as a strategy of delays” (1995: 59, emphasis added). She elucidates this strategy of deferral by stating that it “does not involve the mere transposition of painting into another medium such as glass but rather, the redefinition of [the temporal dimension of] the medium [...] in terms of a deferral, a passage that postpones the pictorial becoming of painting” (1995: 60). Within the context of Decreation, this postponement is best viewed in terms of the collection’s stereoscopic semiology and the triangular structure it involves. As a result of Decreation’s reliance on sustained incongruence, readers are continually encouraged to project a vision of reconciliation across the disjunctive signifying systems, which turns their hermeneutic activity into a project for critical reflection and ensuing emancipation. Therefore, this project can appositely be conceptualised as a perpetual collision between openness and closure, or a “flowering focus on a distinct infinity” (Hejinian, qtd. in Thorp 2015: 24).
In this respect, Corcoran’s remark that “[...] hers [Carson’s] is an aesthetic of the oblique, the wried and the skewed, signalled by unpredictable crossings, transits, collocations and juxtapositions” (2014: 185) further emphasises Carson’s aesthetics of disjunction. In addition, he states that “hers is work that consistently alerts us to the inevitability of disjunction, non-correspondence and destabilization” (ibid., emphasis added). This inescapable character of her disjunctive aesthetics gains in importance in view of the fragmented nature of human cognition, perception, and identity in general. *Decreation* is thus best viewed as a human project: to succeed in the metaphysical objective of reconciling what T. S. Eliot has called the “two ways” (2001a: 7) in ‘Burnt Norton’ (1936), is “the aim / Never here to be realised” (2001b: 31). In other words, to overcome fragmentation and incongruence by establishing a stereoscopic or third angle of vision without losing sight of the differences, is decreation. This heuristic dimension paves the way for the role of the reader, which is dramatically illustrated at the end of the first series of literary experiments in *Decreation* called the *Stops*, when the narrative comes to a literal standstill: “Goes back up the path, no sign of you. [Pause.]” (*DC* 16). The question that needs to be asked, therefore, is: “How does this work communicate, then?” The next chapter on literary semiology aims to address this question by focusing on the principle of analogy as sameness-in-otherness (cf. Stafford 2001).
3. A SEMIOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION OF ISER’S THEORY OF THE READING PROCESS

Yes it is a mantle, the confidence that you can ever know what words mean because really we don't. They're just these signs that we pretend to nail down in dictionaries [...] Disassembling it is a way of exposing that myth at the bottom of language. [...] The myth that you can know it ever definitively. Use it, yes. Make sense, yes. But know it, I’m not sure.
— Anne Carson in an interview with Eleanor Wachtel (2012, emphasis added)

Anne Carson’s Decreation can be considered a multi-modal hybrid that forces the readers to rethink their own politics of judgement by focusing on the mechanism of interpretation through metafictionality on the one hand, and the “unrest of the signifier” (Collard 2017b) on the other hand. Accordingly, it prompts two basic questions. Firstly, the generic labels stimulate ontological questions, including the straightforward question: what is this? Secondly, the reader is thus confronted with the question: how does this work generate meaning, then? The present chapter aims to demonstrate that Decreation inspires a dialectics of reconciliation by operating on the basis of analogy (cf. Stafford 2001), which can broadly be understood as a manifestation of parallels between all layers of signification (Collard 2017c). More specifically, it refers to a vision of “similarity-in-difference” on the level of the signifying strategy (Stafford 9). In this way, the communicative system of Decreation will be conceptualised as what Robin Blaser has called a ‘carmen perpetuum,’ or a “continuous song in which the fragmented subject matter is only apparently disconnected” (qtd. in Thorp 2015: 16, emphasis added).

3.1 DISSECTING MEANING-MAKING

Since Carson’s Decreation will be read through the prism of a semiology of literature, it seems beneficial to address the notion of semiology first, especially since semiotics and semiology have often been conflated in recent decades (Daylight 2012: 37). Jonathan Culler’s work (2001) offers a comprehensive overview of the study of signs by providing a critical examination of both the obstacles and projects of a semiotics of literature (viii), including the difficulties that deconstruction has pointed up (x). Despite the fact that this study focuses on semiology instead of semiotics, his work is still highly useful since it addresses semiotics as an investigation of the system of literary signification (viii),
which is the methodological approach adopted in this thesis. Therefore, after having established what such a project entails, Culler's use of the term ‘semiotics’ will be replaced by ‘semiology.’ The present section accordingly aims to elucidate what is understood precisely by a semiology of literature on the one hand, and what its advantages and limitations are on the other.

As this research project adopts a literary semiology instead of a literary semiotics, it seems worthwhile to consider the specificities of each approach first. Russell Daylight provides a convincing analysis of the differences between the two schools of thought whilst arguing that both fields of study constitute disconnected but contiguous theories of explanation (2012: 37). Semiotics and semiology are typically associated with their own founding fathers, Charles Sanders Peirce and Ferdinand de Saussure respectively, and are often said to overlap largely in both function and meaning (Daylight 2012: 37). Crucially, Daylight’s approach differs considerably from such theses, including those of semioticians like Thomas Sebeok and Umberto Eco, who consider semiology to be a subset of semiotics relating only to intentional communication acts, including literature (ibid.). Instead, Daylight distinguishes a series of distinctions between the two domains, of which a short overview will be provided here.

A first difference between semiotics and semiology relates to the nature of the sign. Peirce insists on the triadic nature of the semiotic event, which consists of three minimal units: the sign or representamen, the interpretant or the sign that the first sign creates, and the object for which it stands (Daylight 2012: 38-39). In the words of Peirce himself: "A sign stands for something to the idea which it produces, or modifies [...] That for which it stands is called its object; that which it conveys, its meaning; and the idea to which it gives rise, its interpretant" (qtd. in Eco 1976: 1460-1461, original emphases). However, Peirce later elaborates that

A sign, or representamen, is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, it creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. That sign which it creates I call the interpretant of the first sign. The sign stands for something, its object. It stands for that
object, not in all respects, but in reference to a sort of idea, which I have sometimes called the *ground* of the representation. (qtd. in Eco 1976: 1461, original emphases)

In short, the sign bears a relation to an object, and this relation entails an interpretant (Cobley and Jansz 2012: 21). Thus, the interpretant is the constitutive element of the semiotic event that proposes the object (Eco 1976: 1464). Furthermore, as Umberto Eco points out, there is a slight difference between sign and *representamen*, which can be related to a theory of communication and a theory of signification respectively: whereas the sign is the concrete element or the utterance used in the communication process, the *representamen* stands for a “type-expression[…] conventionally correlated to a type-content by a given culture, irrespectively of the fact that [it] can be used in order to effectively communicate something to somebody” (1976: 1460). The Saussurean sign, by contrast, is characterised by a twofold nature, namely as a union of the signifier and the signified, which can be related to the planes of expression and content respectively (Barthes 1986: 38-39). More specifically, the signifier can be understood as the *sound-pattern* while the signified makes up the mental *concept*, and crucially, both the signifier and the signified are of an entirely psychological nature (Daylight 2012: 41). Eco provides a more concrete definition by describing the two entities as *sign-vehicle* and *meaning* respectively (Daylight 40). Interestingly, Daylight argues that the Saussurean sign can also be easily conceptualised in terms of a triadic structure through the interpretant of social agreement (48).

The second difference between semiotics and semiology is concerned with the Peircean possibility of ‘non-semiosis,’ which takes place when the sign does not represent something other than the self and thus corresponds with the object: a tree is simply a tree (Daylight 39). In this case, a “presentation” without signs has occurred (ibid.). A third difference between the two domains relates to the distinction between natural and conventional sign systems, of which the former should be understood as concerning a relationship of cause and effect (Daylight 38, 43). As has already been touched upon, in Eco’s reading of Saussurean semiology, signs are characterised by an intention to communicate (Daylight 41). However, according to Daylight, Saussure’s *Course in General Linguistics* (1916) only specifies that signs are part of social life (41). In the words of de Saussure, semiology is a science “which studies the role of signs as part of
social life” (2013: 18). Through an analysis of Roland Barthes’ reading of de Saussure, Daylight argues that “the boundary between intentional and unintentional communication may not be critical in a Saussurean semiology,” since Barthes includes both examples of intentional and unintentional communication but excludes natural signs such as smoke, which stands for fire (42). Therefore, Daylight states that, based on Peirce’s categorisation of signs into symbols (arbitrary signs), icons (signs that resemble what they represent), and indices (signs with a causal relationship, including smoke and fire), the Saussurean notion of the sign would include both symbols and icons, “with the most arbitrary signs demonstrating the semiological process best” (42).

A fourth, crucial difference deals with the unequal attention that is devoted to the notion of a referent (Daylight 38). Semiotics aims to “mediate between the natural environment and its perception in consciousness” (38) through the stand-for relation, as it concerns the relationship between a stimulus object and a referential object through the process of interpretation (43). Semiology, by contrast, “limits itself to the intralinguistic and mental sphere, cut off from the experiential world by an idealised world of concepts” (38) in the sense that it steers clear of a relationship with objects (43) by defining the bipartite relationship between signifier and signified as “purely negative and differential” (de Saussure, qtd. in Daylight 2012: 44). Daylight thus argues that by refusing to theorise the referent, de Saussure creates a theory of communication that radically differs from Peirce’s, as both models of the sign offer “completely independent but complementary domains of explanation” (38). By restricting the sign to a bipartite, arbitrary, and psychological relationship between sign vehicle and mental concept, Saussurean semiology lacks the thirdness of Peircean semiotics, which concerns the interpretative function “by which objects become signs for ideas,” as in the case of smoke, which is an object, but which becomes a sign when it evokes the idea of fire (44).

He then proposes that semiotics and semiology operate at different levels, namely at the level of representation and articulation respectively (38).

According to Daylight, de Saussure’s originality does not derive from his notion of the arbitrariness of the sign, since that idea harks back to the writings of Plato, but rather from his conception of language as a “system of pure values” (de Saussure, qtd. in Daylight 46) in which meanings are a product of articulation and the differential system.
of language (45-46). In other words: no meaning is fixed before a linguistic structure has been introduced and therefore signs do not constitute merely an order of representation (46-47). After Samuel Weber, Daylight argues that Saussurean signification does not constitute an act of representation, a stand-for relation, but rather an act of articulation (47). To corroborate this argument, Daylight quotes a section of de Saussure’s Course in which he defines the language faculty as articulation:

This idea [that the language faculty is not by nature phonic] gains support from the notion of language articulation. In Latin, the word *articulus* means "member, part, subdivision in a sequence of things". As regards language, articulation may refer to the division of the chain of speech into syllables, or to the division of the chain of meanings into meaningful units. (de Saussure, qtd. in Daylight 2012: 47)

It could thus be argued that Peirce and de Saussure both evoke Derrida’s notion of *différence*, and as such offer one side of the same coin, with Peirce emphasising the aspect of delay and de Saussure insisting on the difference between signs. Both models could therefore be conceptualised as complementary rather than as opposing theories. Furthermore, de Saussure defines the linguistic sign as “a part or member, an *articulus*, where an idea is fixed in a sound, and a sound becomes the sign of an idea” (qtd. in Daylight 2012: 47-48). In short, the signifier no longer equals a *representamen* and the signified is no longer on a par with the referential object (48), but both should rather be understood as sound-pattern and idea or mental concept respectively. Daylight concludes by defining Saussurean semiology as follows: “the Saussurean theory of value describes the process by which our experiences of the natural world become articulated as concepts through the medium of language” (48). The crucial difference between semiotics and semiology is thus not rooted in the bipartite or in the conventional nature of the sign, but in an interest in representation and interpretation on the one hand, and articulation and description on the other hand (48-49). In more specific terms, Peircean semiotics is interested in the ways in which an object can evoke another idea through a relationship between entities on the same level, whereas Saussurean semiology is concerned with the linguistic constitution of those objects (ibid.).

However, as has already been mentioned, semiotics falls short of cases of non-semiosis where the sign does not evoke another idea, that is, “when the object simply stands for
itself,” whereas semiology “describes that experiential, pre-semiotic moment prior to representation, when identity within a system of differences is first articulated” (Daylight 48). Because of this lacuna in Peircean semiotics, this research project deals with a literary semiology as opposed to a literary semiotics. In addition, given that this study focuses on operations performed by readers in their encounters with the text, it aims to examine “literature’s social role as conditioned by language” in the Saussurean tradition (Veivo and Ljungberg 2009: 1). However, as Veivo and Ljungberg point out, drawing a firm line of demarcation between the two theories is counterproductive as both the structural approach of de Saussure and the pragmatic approach of Peirce are equally valid in different research domains depending on the specific questions at play (2009: 1-2). That is to say, even though it would prove highly interesting to investigate how signs in literature can evoke other ideas through the act of interpretation, this thesis analyses the linguistic constitution of signs and the social system of literary signification. In other words, the reader takes centre stage.

After this overview of the major differences between semiotics and semiology, the rest of the present section is concerned with a brief elaboration on the notion of literary semiology. According to Roland Barthes, semiology “aims to take in any system of signs, whatever their substance and limits […] [since] these constitute, if not languages, at least systems of signification” (1986: 9, original emphasis). In short, semiology constitutes “that part covering the great signifying unities of discourse” (Barthes 1986: 11, original emphasis). In more concrete terms, Jan Mukařovský considers the work of art to be an autonomous sign⁵ that comprises the following components (1988: 2, 4, 7): the ‘work-thing’ or signifier, which constitutes the sensuous symbol as created by the artist, the distinct ‘signification’ in the form of an aesthetic object, which is “laid down in the collective consciousness”⁶ (7), and the relation to the signified, which is directed at “the total context of social phenomena (science, philosophy, religion, politics, economy, etc.) in a given environment” (7). In a nutshell, according to Mukařovský, the sign in art thrives on a combination of symbolic-material product, collective signification, and its entrenchment in a social context. It is important to note that Mukařovský thus adds a

⁵ According to Mukařovský, the arts of ‘subject,’ i.e. the arts with a theme or a certain ‘content,’ have a second function as well, namely that of communication (1988: 7). In this case, “the thing signified refers to a distinct existence (an event, person, thing, etc.)” (ibid.).

⁶ Mukařovský illustrates this collective consciousness by comparing the reception of an impressionist painting by any individual to that of a cubist painting, which he argues are fairly different (2).
collective as well as a third dimension to de Saussure’s bipartite nature of the sign, namely that of a referent, although he seems to refer to the referent as the thing signified, and to the signified as collective signification. However, his assertion that “the individual states of consciousness provoked by the ‘work-thing’ represent the aesthetic object only in terms of what they all hold in common” (1988: 6, emphasis added) is interesting in itself yet hard to delineate, not least since his “central core” (1988: 2) seems to presuppose a model reader.

Therefore, the semiology of literature that is being proposed in this thesis intends to “describe the system of literary signification that is drawn upon by readers and critics in their encounters with literary works” (Culler 2001: viii, emphasis added). Culler remarks that, in general, there are two ways of approaching such a methodology: either semioticians emphasise that one cannot interpret literary works without mastering the systems and procedures that they endeavour to clarify, which could include a profound understanding of the conventions of narrative in the case of a novel, or semioticians stress that one cannot study literary signification without examining how literary works communicate with their readers (viii). This research project is particularly concerned with the latter approach, as in more concrete terms, the objective is “not to produce new interpretations but to construct an account of the rules and conventions, the system of signification, […] that enable[s] cultural objects to function as they do—to have the meanings that they do for members of a culture” (Culler 2001: xv). In this case, ‘meaning’ is interpreted specifically as the evocation of a sense of ‘decreation.’ Accordingly, this research project aims to address the following question: in what way(s) does the notion of ‘decreation’ manifest itself through the signifying strategies whereby Anne Carson’s Decreation communicates?

The benefit of this particular methodological approach is that literary semiology is an internal as opposed to an external method. As Julia Kristeva remarks,

At every moment in its development semiotics must theorize its object, its own method, and the relationship between them; it therefore theorizes itself and becomes, by thus turning back on itself, the theory of its own scientific practice. [...] It is a direction for
As a result, mere projection is avoided as much as possible, although, as Tzvetan Todorov remarks, it is inevitable that “the viewpoint chosen by the observer reconfigures and redefines his [or her] object” (2000: 197). Such an internal approach is especially apt for literature, which Culler argues is the most complex of sign systems (2001: 39). Yet whether this is true or not, much can be said for his statement that literature is a compelling case of semiosis for various reasons (39). Firstly, due to the fact that literary works are isolated from the immediate pragmatic context, the inherent complexities of signifying processes are given free rein in literature (ibid.). Secondly, even though signification is undoubtedly taking place, it is impossible to map out exhaustively what is being communicated, although the phenomena are far from meaningless (ibid.). In this way, literary works compel one to face the inherent yet paradoxical hallmark of semiological systems, i.e. the indeterminacy of meaning (ibid.). The final reason can be regarded as both literature’s strength and its major weakness, given that “literature is itself a continual exploration of and reflection upon signification in all its forms” (Culler 2001: 40), which arguably makes literary signification immensely complex and endlessly interesting at the same time. In the words of Culler, “in so far as literature turns back on itself and examines, parodies, or treats ironically its own signifying procedures, it becomes the most complex account of signification we possess” (40). By way of illustration, the flouting of conventions in literature paradoxically provides evidence for the existence of a semiological system as the basis of literary signification, while at the same time literary works make it abundantly clear that one cannot define the signifying processes or systems of convention exhaustively (Culler 41).

However, this limitation does not make the question at issue less pertinent: “Instead of taking the proliferation of interpretations as an obstacle to knowledge, can one attempt to make it an object of knowledge, asking how it is that literary works have the meaning they do for readers?” (Culler 52). This investigation constitutes the core of this research project, and accordingly, this thesis aims to “identify the conventions and operations by which any signifying practice (such as literature) produces its observable effects of meaning” (Culler 52-53). In short, “because literary works do have meaning for readers,
semio[logy] undertakes to describe the systems of convention responsible for those meanings” (Culler 43, emphasis added). The implication is that by unearthing how communication in literature occurs, we can better understand ourselves as socio-cultural beings (ibid.). The latter is especially relevant for a work that is as concerned with human relationships and the (metaphysical) limitations of being human as *Decreation*, which is appositely exemplified by the following lines from ’Stanzas, Sexes, Seductions’: “My personal poetry is a failure. / I do not want to be a person. / I want to be unbearable” (DC 72, emphasis added). In short, *Decreation* revolves around the quest for an all-encompassing understanding of reality hampered by the limitations of being human and our embodiment in the world, which preclude such a comprehensive vision.

However, as Culler points out, a semiology of literature is based on two assumptions, both of which can be disputed: firstly, that a literary work should be regarded as an act of signification and communication, insofar as the description of the work must touch upon the meanings it bears for readers, and secondly, that it is possible to identify these effects of signification (2001: 53). Objections to the first assumption regard the literary work as an objective artefact, while objections to the second insist on the ungraspable nature of responses, as these cannot be collected and analysed (Culler 2001: 53-54). These limitations are real and should not be brushed aside. I thus grant the objections and would like to stress alongside Culler that this research project studies literary signification by *endeavouring* to describe the semiological operations underlying literary interpretation (54), which in this case is understood specifically as the evocation of a sense of ‘decreation.’ Furthermore, it might be more appropriate to refer to ‘sense’ and ‘making sense’ instead of ‘meaning’ when discussing the semiological programme, since, as Culler points out, ‘meaning’ implies an intrinsic property of a literary text, while ‘sense’ points to the interpretive operations performed by readers that need to be analysed when studying literary signification (54-55).

3.2 Iser’s Phenomenological Theory of the Reading Process Reassessed

These operations can aptly be conceptualised through Wolfgang Iser’s branch of reader-response criticism. The present section is largely based on a discussion of Iser’s conception of the reading process as applied to T. S. Eliot’s *Four Quartets* (Van Praet
2017). More specifically, Iser's essay entitled ‘Interaction between Text and Reader’ (1980) will be used to examine the relationship between the literary text and its readers. As the title of the essay suggests, Iser perceives the reading process as something that is interactive and that occurs between text and reader (Bennett 1995: 20). Precisely this interaction is crucial for instigating critical reflection and (metaphysical) contemplation. The central idea of his essay is that texts produce ‘gaps’ in the reader's interpretation, and that these ‘gaps’ or uncertainties in turn encourage the reader to come up with connections him- or herself that complete the text (Bennett 1995: 20). The assumptions behind this particular understanding of the reading process will be examined in the present section.

When it comes to a work of literature, the phenomenological theory of art focuses on the interaction between its structure and recipient (Iser 1995: 20). As a result, the study of a literary work involves both the text and “the actions involved in responding to that text” (Iser 1995: 20-21). The text is said to offer “schematized aspects” (Iser 1995: 21), and these aspects enable the reader to “actualise” the text, namely to transform the text into a “virtual” aesthetic work (Bennett 1995: 20). It is important to note that the reading process is therefore never merely an arbitrary activity. The work is virtual since it cannot be reduced to either the ‘objectivity’ of the text or the ‘subjectivity’ of the reader, and this virtuality provides the text with its dynamic character (Iser 1995: 21). Iser concludes that a literary work has two poles: the artistic pole, which can be identified as the author's text, and an aesthetic pole, which is the text as realised by the reader (21). The literary work is thus neither the text itself nor its realisation by the reader; it must be situated between the two poles (ibid.). Its actualisation accordingly becomes the result of an interaction between said poles (ibid.). Interestingly, Mukařovský draws a similar inference while stating that “the work of art can neither be identified [...] with the creator’s state of mind, nor with any of the states of mind that it provokes in the subjects who perceive it” (1988: 1). Iser stresses, however, that we must not deny the importance of the author’s techniques or the reader’s psychology (1995: 21). Nevertheless, he makes a case for the relationship between both components of the reading process, as “separate analysis would only be conclusive if the relationship were that of transmitter and receiver” (ibid.). The crucial difference, however, is that in works
of literature the message is transferred in two ways, since “the reader ‘receives’ it by composing it” (ibid.).

In order to describe this text-reader relationship, Iser draws upon the findings of the Tavistock School. More specifically, R. D. Laing’s following thesis serves as a model for Iser’s assessment of the communicative problem in literature (Iser 1995: 21). Laing argues that we only have experience of others insofar as we know their conduct, but “we have no experience of how others experience us” (Iser 1995: 22). In this respect, Laing states that “your experience of me is invisible to me and my experience of you is invisible to you” (qtd. in Iser 1995: 22). This invisibility lies at the heart of interpersonal relations and Laing names this basis “no-thing” (Iser 22). We constantly build on this basis of ‘no-thing’ by “react[ing] as if we knew how our partners experienced us” (ibid.). Iser pursues this line of thought by remarking that “contact therefore depends on our continually filling in a central gap in our experience” (ibid.). Moreover, he claims that interaction only occurs because of this ‘inexperienceability’ of the other’s experiences (ibid.). He concludes by asserting that the need for interpretation arises out of this invisibility, this ‘no-thing,’ and that interpretation functions as a regulating mechanism in the process of interaction (ibid.).

However, there are two basic differences between the text-reader relationship and interaction between people: there is neither a face-to-face situation nor a frame of reference when it comes to reading (Iser 1995: 22). As a result of the first difference, a reader can never ask a text how accurate his or her views of it are (ibid.). Iser then draws a parallel between social communication and the reading process by arguing that in both cases, the gaps give rise to communication (23). In the first case, these gaps are the result of the ‘no-thing,’ the ‘inexperienceability’ of one another’s experiences (ibid.). However, a common situation and a common frame of reference regulate the way in which the gaps are filled (ibid.). In the latter case, the gaps arise out of the lack of said conventions and a common situation, which tallies with the ‘no-thing,’ and which Iser calls the fundamental asymmetry between text and reader (ibid.).

At this point in his essay Iser sheds light on an aspect of the reading process that is crucial for this thesis while stating that “if communication between text and reader is to
be successful, [...] the reader's activity must also be *controlled* in some way by the text” (23, emphasis added). He believes that the “*guiding devices* operative in the reading process have to initiate communication and to *control* it” (ibid., emphases added). He then elaborates by defining communication in literature as “a process set in motion and *regulated* [...] by a mutually restrictive and magnifying interaction between the explicit and the implicit, between revelation and concealment” (24, emphasis added). Further analysis would result in a digression from the main argument, but for this thesis it is crucial to note that gaps, or blanks, “*trigger off* and *simultaneously* control the reader’s activity” (ibid., emphasis added). The process of ideation that the reader carries out is always *on terms set by the text* (ibid.). This research project is thus concerned with what Iser calls an “unseen structure that *regulates but does not formulate* the connection or even the meaning” (ibid., emphasis added). Interestingly, this specific understanding of the reading process tallies with Umberto Eco’s notion of the open work or *opera aperta*. In this sense, Eco writes that

A work of art [...] is a complete and *closed* form in its uniqueness as a balanced organic whole, while at the same time constituting an *open* product on account of its susceptibility to countless different interpretations which do not impinge on its unadulterable specificity. Hence, every reception of a work of art is both an *interpretation* and a *performance* of it, because in every reception the work takes on a fresh perspective for itself. (1989: 4, original emphases)

In a nutshell, the act of reading can be seen as the nexus between personal and technical components, but it always remains first and foremost an interactive *process*.

Naturally, what Iser proposes is an abstract theory that is not easily put into practice. Therefore, this research project will examine several communicative strategies that operate in a similar way. More specifically, these signifying strategies function as guiding devices underlying the textual system, since in Iser’s conception of the reading process, ‘gaps’ both control and trigger off the reader’s activity, which results in an interaction between text and reader that allows for critical reflection. The strategies discerned here, which are by no means exhaustive, include intergenericity, multimodality, polyphony and intertextuality, and narrative technique in *Decreation*. It is crucial to note, however, that these strategies or techniques are a variation on Iser’s gaps, since he states that the
control “although exercised by the text, [...] is not in the text” (1995: 23, original emphases), whereas the distinguished strategies are very much present in the text. To be more specific, said techniques simultaneously govern and fuel the reader's interpretation in the sense that they encourage the reader to find similarity-in-difference. These strategies are thus inherent to the textual system of Decreation, but still allow for personal reflection on the part of the reader, and as such function as guiding devices. In other words: said techniques usher the reader's perspective towards a stereoscopic vision of sameness-in-otherness without establishing an exclusive connection or 'meaning,' since the reader remains responsible for making the connections, i.e. for establishing a third angle of vision, which can complete the metaphysical project at the heart of the text.

3.3 COMMUNICATING SAMENESS-IN-OTHERNESS

In her comprehensive study entitled Visual Analogy: Consciousness as the Art of Connecting (2001), Barbara Maria Stafford makes a cogent case for a revalorisation of connectedness through the concept of analogy as a webworking strategy and “practice of intermedia communication” (8). This particular understanding of analogy is especially interesting in view of Decreation's (apparently) fragmented nature and intermedial composition. Hence, the aim is to set in concrete how experience can be turned into agency by the reader's transformation of an aesthetics of disjunction into a “dialectics of reconciliation” (Stafford 2001: 14), since analogy originated as a figure of reconciliation that developed into a form of dialectics (Stafford 8). As this conception of analogy as sameness-in-otherness (xvi) implies a reconsideration of categories and their defining features, analogy will thus be recuperated as a strategy for readerly emancipation.

In more specific terms, Stafford defines analogy as “the vision of ordered relationships articulated as similarity-in-difference” (2001: 9). As has already been mentioned before, in Eros the Bittersweet, Anne Carson asserts that “we think by projecting sameness upon difference, by drawing things together in a relation or idea while at the same time maintaining the distinctions between them” (1988: 171, emphasis added). Furthermore, Carson argues that the mind’s reaching across this space between the familiar and the unfamiliar is an erotic experience that requires some degree of stereoscopy (ibid.). In a
similar fashion, Stafford claims that analogy can be considered a passionate process, as it is “born of the human desire to achieve union with that which one does not possess” (2001: 2). In a highly evocative passage, Stafford states that

> Perceiving the lack of something – whether physical, emotional, spiritual, or intellectual – inspires us to search for an approximating resemblance to fill its place. That theological, philosophical, rhetorical, and aesthetic quest gave birth to the middle term: the delayed not-yet or the allusive not-quite. This fleeting entity – participating both in what one has and what one has not, like and unlike the yearned-for experience – temporarily allows the beholder to feel near, even interpenetrated by, what is distant, unfamiliar, different. (2001: 2)

Although this study adopts a more pragmatic approach to analogy, it is interesting to note that both Carson and Stafford draw attention to the erotic origins of analogy as a reaching out towards the distant or unfamiliar by means of a stereoscopic vision. Furthermore, Stafford relates how in late antiquity, before the introduction of a universalising Church, analogy was considered an erotic-religious force within an eroticised theory of correspondences that could provide insight into the secret source of that hypnotic power which inexplicably captivated and revolted humankind (98-104).

In the words of Stafford, analogy “put[s] the visible into relationship with the invisible and manifest[s] the effect of that momentary unison” (2001: 23-24). It thus refers to the “similarity that exists between two or more apparently dissimilar things” (Stafford 8). Interestingly, Stafford references Steve Barry’s installation piece (Our) Predilection (1997) to illustrate the visual process that transforms dyadic into triadic relations in a stereoscopic fashion (Stafford 2001: 24). More concretely, as each person looks down the barrel of a microscope, his or her face is reflected back from a mirror whilst a rose miraculously appears as tucked into the viewer’s hair (24-25). Stafford argues that this ‘gift’ works analogically since every person “integrates the same attribute in a creatively individualistic way” (25). In other words, individual and installation piece are momentarily united in a stereoscopic image. It is important to bear in mind that Carson evokes a similar image in Decreation:

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7 Amongst others, Roland Barthes (1973) and Susan Sontag (1966) have also discussed the erotics of art from a semiological angle.
backed-up roses bleed out the ends of my hair—
I beg you
keep looking.
for the logic I could follow
out of
here. (DC 192, original emphasis)

Moreover, Stafford’s statement echoes a similar observation by Iser, since in his theory of the reading process, every reader engages with the same text in an individualistic way in order to complete it. In short, analogy forges bonds between apparently incongruent entities (Stafford 8, 10). It can thus be regarded as a “metamorphic and metaphoric practice for weaving discordant particulars into a partial concordance [that] spurs the imagination to discover similarities in dissimilarities” (Stafford 9). However, it is crucial to note that analogy does not refer to a “subsumption of two inferior, dichotomous terms into a superior, third one” in a Hegelian sense (Stafford 9). Rather, analogy is an apt tool for stimulating critical reflection on the part of the reader, as it can help to address the question at issue in Decreation, namely: “How […] do we craft a coordinated mosaic from this heterogeneous broadcast of splintering fragments?” (Stafford 53, emphasis added).

This specific understanding of analogy is particularly worthwhile as it comprises a heuristic dimension, i.e. it can provide insight into the more advanced phenomena of cognitive processing as well as conceptions of selfhood. Thus, it can make readers more resourceful by providing them with a framework that allows them to better understand themselves. More concretely, Stafford draws attention to analogy’s function as a visual capacity that brings incongruities into unison and thus plays a pivotal role in perceptual judgement and the formation of elusive, sensuous ideas and fleeting emotions (28-29). This conjunctive process can be conceptualised as follows: as visual stimuli enter the brain, perceptual organisation happens as salient features are first discerned and then recombined and processed unequally in the mind’s eye (146). Furthermore, this act of coupling representations is vital to understanding selfhood as the activity of linking comprises an emotional component (141). Crucially, analogy “might [therefore] help us discover not only how the mind seeks out and binds clear with fuzzy arrangements, or manages to synthesize the vast quantities of chaotic data with which we are increasingly inundated, but [also] how […] it stiches our mutable, compound selves into a single self”
This conjunctive faculty is thus “capable of engendering figures of differentiation and reconciliation” (142) and thereby plays a synthesising role in cognition and (self-) perception. Interestingly, Stafford remarks that complex artworks such as collage demonstrate the advanced processes of high-order cognition (179) and are therefore particularly useful techniques “for capturing the chimera of consciousness in action” (146). As a hybrid collection of literary experiments that transgress boundaries, *Decreation* can be counted among those intricate works. This can be illustrated briefly by means of the following self-reflexive excerpt:

> They found the dog! Mother died! He didn’t mean to hang up just / a bad connection! No time for lipstick if I answer that but isn’t / there a Ladies outside Philosophy anyway they never start / till ten after oh rats now I’ve lost the Gertrude Stein / quote was it beefsteak?—what // swarm of clearnesses [sic] and do they amaze you, / inbetween [sic] when you hear the phone and when you get it, / all palpable explanations of why it rang and what to do. 

By combining a stream-of-consciousness technique with the factual tone of non-fiction, Carson is able to reflect upon the complex processes of cognition and consciousness. In this sense, it is telling that Stafford refers to Duchamp's *The Large Glass* in her discussion of box art in the twentieth century, and relates how the “Duchampian readymade sparks the leap to coordinate detached or divided associations,” thereby hinting at the juxtaposition of experiences connected with the five senses (153). In *Decreation*, Carson evokes such an instance of synaesthesia by referring to “the noise of stars” (*DC* 68), thus uniting sound and vision.

To conclude this section, Carson’s position as a writer will be discussed in relation to the notion of analogy. More specifically, Stafford argues that there are two major strands of cognitive processing running through Western thought, which tally with two different properties of brain function, namely “the conscious, analytical decomposition of information” on the one hand, and “the unconscious, holistic intuition of a topic in its entirety preceding awareness” on the other (151). Furthermore, she mentions that both methods for collating information can be related to Modernism and Postmodernism respectively. In this sense, the first, minimalist procedure is geared towards a geometric Absolute reminiscent of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe’s designs (151). The second
approach, by contrast, evokes a prismatic, Postmodernist syncretism in the sense that it “plac[es] novel findings in contact with existing knowledge so that the old becomes simultaneously constructed and deconstructed by the new” (ibid.). Within the context of Decreation, both categories become pointless in itself, since Carson’s work foregrounds the interplay between both mental operations. In more concrete terms, its stereoscopic semiology is aimed at a reconciliation of apparently insuperable incongruities that is reminiscent of a metaphysical Absolute, but in the end, this vision turns out to be a mirage, since her focus on the edge implies that “startling dualities are always on the verge of coalescence but never, finally, cohere” (Staffords 2001: 152).

However, it could be argued that Decreation is undoubtedly Postmodernist in nature because of its heterogeneity, porosity, dialogism, re-visioning of the authorial voice, and rejection of content in favour of signifying activity on the one hand, and due to notions of the self as refracted and recomposed, the pivotal role of the reader, and the ensuing rejection of autonomous poetry through the possibility of its transformation on the other, which are all considered trademarks of Postmodernist poetry (McCorkle 1997: 46, 45, 43). Yet, categorising Decreation as purely Postmodernist would not do justice to its hybrid communicative system, since it pits the working principles of the Modernist and the Postmodernist long poem against each other. In other words, a Modernist pull towards coherence and a focus of locale on the one hand, and a Postmodernist predilection for discontinuity and the recombinatory properties of language on the other (McCorkle 1997: 48), are constantly in counterpoint in the collection. This can be illustrated most clearly by means of the following poem entitled ‘Blended Text’ (DC 79, original emphases), which can be read either vertically or horizontally corresponding to a more coherent and a more intricate reading respectively:

You have captured:
my heart:
with one glance:
with one bead:
of your eyes:
you have something of mine:
again the moon:
the rule:
pinned upon
the wall of my heart is your love
as one
as an exile of the kings of royalty
my heart
a torn thing
now
(who knows)
Furthermore, as Pollock points out, and as her occupation as a professor of classics already hints at, Carson can also be considered a “radically traditional writer” (2012: 43). To put it differently, Carson is not only an avant-garde writer because of her formal experimentation, she is also a Modernist writer who is inspired by trailblazers such as Gertrude Stein and Samuel Beckett and who continually reworks existing material, and these constant revisitations of the ancient roots of Western literature equally imbue her work with a sense of tradition (Pollock 2012: 43). However, as Stafford points out, “this replication of the past [...] does not preclude innovation. [...] Precisely because this correlation between what has been and what is or will be is analogical [...] it does not replicate hallowed models but enables their comparison” (131, original emphasis). Therefore, the starting point of this thesis to a certain degree echoes Thorp’s remark that

[Anne Carson is situated] at a kind of crossroads of postmodern and more traditional techniques, within a realm that explains her significance to contemporary poetics: that of the experimenter, the protean artist who creates in liminal space and is perpetually probing what ‘genuine’ art actually means. (2015: 18)

Carson’s position as a (post-)Modernistclassicist drawing upon the tension between the past and the present will be addressed accordingly, namely as an artist who creates in liminal space in order to question, disrupt, and then revalorise established models from a third angle of vision.

3.4 CRUX: TOWARDS A SYNTHETIC DисJUNCTION

After having expounded on the choice for a literary semiology, what this project entails, and how it can be conceptualised in relation to Decreation, I aim to tie the previous discussions together in the present section in order to establish the methodological approach adopted in this thesis. In a nutshell, this research project will focus on the edge or boundary between apparent incongruities as a platform for reconciliation and critical reflection. In this way, the notion of ‘decreation’ is translated into a “desire for ‘sustained incongruence’” (Carson, qtd. in Fisher 2015: 12) across the various signifying systems. Anne Carson’s Decreation thus evokes Brecht’s estrangement principle: the work looks
recognisable but is not, since it does not deal with meaning itself, but rather with the
process of signification (Collard 2017b). It thereby prompts the ontological question:
what am I? However, since Carson’s work seems to defy categorisation, this question is
better approached from the angle of the signifying process instead. In other words,
Decreation’s apparent disjunction should be envisaged as a strategy of communication:
as the readers put all their effort into the construction of an interpretation, they
simultaneously have to recognise why their specific interpretation has the quality it has
(Collard 2017b). More specifically, the readers’ concocting of an interpretation thus
entails that they need to forge bonds between discordant entities, as “to think logically is
to be perpetually astonished” (DC 192) succinctly illustrates. In this way, experience can
be turned into agency as the readers transform this aesthetics of disjunction into a
dialectics of reconciliation by adopting an analogical way of thinking. Crucially, however,
this stereoscopic vision of similarity-in-difference is essentially a mirage due to Carson’s
focus on the edge, which results in a sheer endless deferral of the signified.

In practice, this research project will be realised by studying the notion of ‘decreation’ as
sustained incongruence along four lines: intergenericity, multimodality, polyphony and
intertextuality, and narrative technique. These specific concepts were selected on the
basis of their potential to stimulate interaction between apparent incompatibilities, as
will be demonstrated in the following chapters. In this way, these signifying strategies
function as guiding devices, as they underlie the textual system in a fashion similar to
Iser’s gaps by stimulating reflection without establishing a conclusive ‘meaning.’ More
concretely, they challenge the reader to find ‘sameness-in-otherness,’ which functions as
the overarching structuring principle of the work. By thus transforming said
juxtapositional aesthetics into a dialectics of reconciliation, the reader is emancipated
since she or he has had to rethink their politics of judgement. Said dialectics is best
conceptualised as a dynamic interplay or tension between opposing forces, and this
interplay distinguishes the term from dualism’s emphasis on static opposites in parallel
(Baxter and Montgomery 1996: 10).

In more specific terms, this dialectics can be conceptualised as a disjunctive synthesis in
the tradition of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, i.e. not as a synthesis of contradictory
terms but rather as a synthesis “reaffirm[ing] the individual separate existence of the
terms it conjoins, [as] it remains open and not closed in the circularity of the dialectic” (Lecercle 2010: 20), precisely because of the fact that the reader remains responsible for forging the analogies. According to Deleuze and Guattari, it is “a disjunction that remains disjunctive, and that still affirms the disjoined terms, that affirms them throughout their entire distance, without restricting one by the other or excluding the other from the one” (2000: 76, original emphasis). However, since the term *disjunctive synthesis* implies an ultimate union which Carson’s stereoscopic poetics does not necessarily seem to entail, the term *synthetic disjunction* will be adopted instead in order to highlight the novel way of perceiving that recognises both dissimilarity and discovered similarity. Accordingly, ‘decreation’ is here interpreted as a metaphysical project that aims at eventual reconciliation, i.e. a kind of ‘enlightened’ reconciliation based on a different, more nuanced way of seeing that arises from a process of relational reflection. It is therefore transitory and pragmatic, aware at once of its possibilities and – especially – of its imperfections. The literary semiology that will be adopted reflects this ambition by being crafted so as to allow for perpetual self-criticism. In the words of Stafford: “the seer is encouraged to raise her sights, *not* in order to reproduce an identical view valid for all, but to gain access over time to as many intertwined coexistent and coextensive partial aspects as possible” (2001: 184, emphasis added). The next chapters aim to demonstrate that this disjunctive aesthetics manifests itself through a generic, modal, phonic, and referential multiplicity inviting (critical) harmonisation.
4. **INTERGENERIC HYBRIDS, OR OSCILLATION BETWEEN TRADITION AND INDIVIDUAL TALENT**

When I’m writing, usually I mush around first with the form, and if I don’t get it in a few days then I don’t try to write the thing because I can’t begin without a form.

— Anne Carson in an interview with John D’Agata (qtd. in Rae 2011: 165)

In a review for *The Guardian*, Fiona Sampson claimed that *Decreation* “outlines one of the most idiosyncratic intelligences at work in contemporary literature,” but that in spite of its questioning of generic boundaries, it is “most of all [...] inimitable poetry” (2006) because of its profound lyric images. Yet, such a statement is highly subjective and difficult to demonstrate. More interesting in this sense, therefore, is her argument that “Carson makes control *and* surrender both her topic and her practice” (2006, emphasis added). This conjunction of what T. S. Eliot has called ‘tradition and the individual talent’ plays an enduring role in Carson’s work in general and *Decreation* in particular. From her amalgamation of scholarly criticism and lyricism in *Eros the Bittersweet* to her novels in verse including *Autobiography of Red* and *The Beauty of the Husband*, Carson has continually crossed generic boundaries. However, a hint of tradition\(^8\) is usually lurking around, as evoked by the various references to celebrated models and names. Incidentally, this has given her a reputation of exhibiting an inappropriate erudition, and equally resulted in her place in the canon being rather contentious, especially after her winning of a Guggenheim Fellowship and a MacArthur Genius Grant (Thor 2015: 6). The present chapter is concerned with Carson’s use of form and her emphasis on the line or ‘edge’ demarcating generic boundaries.

4.1 **RETHINKING THE BOXES**

In this thesis, *Decreation* is studied from the angle of a non-coalescent work of art that *aims* at eventual reconciliation but does not arrive at refutation either. This neither-nor approach entails a critical re-evaluation of the parameters defining literary genres. According to Stafford, “when confronting an apparently ‘chaotic’ tangle, individuals [...]”

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\(^8\) While the notion remains amorphous, ‘tradition’ will here be defined as the conscious historical sense of both the timeless pastness and the temporal presence of the (literary) past (Eliot 1934b: 14).
must quilt these simultaneously occurring variegated stimuli together into a personal interpretation” by creating analogies (2001: 144). This kind of heterogeneous reasoning comprises an important cognitive dimension, since “the external patterns assumed by this subjective process mimic the brain’s internal piecing together of a diversified input” (Stafford 2001: 144). This cognitional component is supplemented by a personal aspect, since stitched-together genres confront individuals with momentary solidifications in an otherwise obdurate world and thereby paradoxically highlight the “stony specificities of our own self” (Stafford 145). However, as Stafford points out, the confrontation with laced-together genres has a Shklovskian defamiliarising effect as well, in the sense that the “fragility of [...] coherence also makes us conscious of how contingent, jumbled, and nonlapidary all material things, including ourselves, in fact are” (145). In other words, in our encounters with the world, the protean character of reality and a desire for a unified vision are constantly in counterpoint.

This longing for conceptual coherence is equally present when being confronted with a literary work such as Decreation. In this sense, Jennings writes that “juxtaposing genres within a work not only enables her [Carson’s] writing to slip between and beyond generic boundaries, it destabilizes those boundaries, defining genres by relation rather than internal coherence” (2001: 924, emphasis added). To put it differently, as Iser’s conception of the reading process has already aptly demonstrated, ultimately the reader remains responsible for the (narrative) completion of Decreation by adopting the analogical or relational way of thinking it inspires. Crucially, Jennings states that by thus transgressing generic boundaries, “Carson assumes another kind of liminal position, and inscribes another triangle, when she makes genre disappear into sui generis [a class by itself]” (2001: 932). In general, Carson’s hybrid works are characterised by an unusual combination of lyric intensity and strong narrative, often accompanied by an interpretive frame such as an essay (Jennings 932). Jennings therefore argues that “Carson positions herself on a generic dividing line that defines both individual limits and greater unity, and her genres threaten to erupt across their local boundaries and make each an inherent part of the other” (933, emphases added). In other words, Carson’s liminal perspective makes the reader aware of generic boundaries in order to transcend those limitations and achieve a stereoscopic re-evaluation and ensuing harmonisation of both.
However, in order to get at the heart of Carson’s generic project, her lacing together of genres calls for some more background. To this end, Thorp identifies several dominant features in Carson’s oeuvre, which will be discussed here in relation to Decreation. Firstly, Carson’s work is usually self-conscious as it reflects upon the restricted nature of genre by “existing in liminal spaces between categories and adopting different forms” (Thorp 2015: 8). Besides Carson’s peculiar choice of labels in Decreation, which will be addressed later in this section, explicit references to the notion of genre can also be found. “Do I detect a question of genre?” (DC 122) illustrates this point clearly. Secondly, her works are often narrative-based and (seemingly) personal, whilst being imbued with cultural as well as classical influences and references, on which “she riffs in complex, often obscure patterns” (Thorp 8). In the case of Decreation, Carson makes reference to a plethora of names on whom she offers a peculiar reflection, including Longinus, Sappho, and Kant, to name but a few. Thirdly, her modus operandi is a “counter-intuitively flattened” syntax, which can be conceptualised as “an unadorned mode of phrasing that is pared and solid” (Thorp 8). In Decreation, her distinctive incisive style can be appositely exemplified by the opening lines of the collection, which also make up the poem entitled ‘Sleepchains’ (DC 3):

> Who can sleep when she—
> hundreds of miles away I feel that vast breath
> fan her restless decks.
> Cicatrice by cicatrice
> all the links
> rattle once.
> Here we go mother on the shipless ocean.
> Pity us, pity the ocean, here we go.

As this short excerpt demonstrates, Carson’s dominant structure is the sentence (Thorp 8). Thorp rightly argues that, because of the serene quality of Carson’s sentences, what could otherwise be interpreted as “a formal maze of cultural anecdotes [and] oblique pronouncements,” is “distilled into more controlled, fragile work” (9, emphasis added). The icy quality of Carson’s style thus permeates her work with a sense of both solidity and delicacy.
However, in order not to generate a confusion with Carson’s intricate use of language, it is pertinent to return to her use of genre. In this respect, Thorp draws attention to a crucial aspect of her generic practice while stating that “an interrogation of ‘authenticity’ and its possibilities […] is at the heart of Carson’s work” (2015: 16). More specifically, this notion of authenticity is related to Carson’s name-dropping reminiscent of a Kristevan “mosaic of quotations” (Thorp 15). In this regard, Thorp writes that “the idea of the plural text, of writing-as-rewriting, that Solway saw as an ‘IKEA-type’ assemblage of quotations violating poetry’s inherent requirements to be ‘original,’ is a problematised part of her work, containing overt authorial control” (15). Due to Carson’s emphasis on the leaking boundary between literary tradition and individual talent, her work is characterised by an oscillating dynamic revolving around the question of what can be called ‘genuine art.’ In more concrete terms, she achieves this dynamic by constantly appealing to the readers’ assumptions about literary genres and then destabilising those expectations. It could thus be argued that Carson’s attitude to categorisation is more one of “simultaneous recognition and rejection than of wholesale belonging,” since her literary practice is “at its heart, deeply restless work” (Thorp 11). In this sense, Carson’s approach to genre can be said to offer an answer to Umberto Eco’s conception of the postmodern condition as a revisitation of the past with irony (1985: 17) by “contemplat[ing] how originality and authenticity might work in modern poetry” (Thorp 15).

In other words, Carson not only pits tradition against innovation, she achieves this formal experimentation precisely by combining (seemingly) incongruous genres. Carson’s stereoscopic vision is thus translated into an oscillation between apparently disparate genres of which the distinction is eventually blurred as the readers rethink their frame of reference. However, a note on genre and form seems appropriate since both have often been conflated in recent discussions (e.g. Devitt 2004: 166). While drawing a firm demarcation line between the two would be counterproductive for this thesis, a brief elaboration on both notions can avoid unnecessary confusion. Although this research project does not deny the historic specificity of genres (cf. Devitt 2004: 168), for the purposes of clarity, a literary genre will be defined as a class of literature that can either be poetry, drama, or the novel (Peck and Coyle 2002: 1). Form, then, should be envisaged as the overall form or pattern adopted within those genres, as can
be illustrated by the sonnet and the tragedy within the genres of poetry and drama respectively (Peck and Coyle 2002: 155). It is important to note that this particular conception of genre and form radically differs from earlier generic divisions into epic, tragedy, lyric, comedy, and satire (Peck and Coyle 1).

That said, in the context of Decreation, genre will be conceived of as dynamic and participatory, since recognition necessarily entails differentiation as “a text participates in genres that it rejects as well as in those it accepts” (Devitt 2004: 167). In other words, as “[a]ll understanding of verbal meaning is necessarily genre-bound” (Hirsch, qtd. in Devitt 2004: 166), genre will be regarded as a social construct that is negotiable. Thus, the romantic notion that the greatest literary works flout categorisation and escape genre is rejected in this thesis (cf. Devitt 166). This might seem surprising in view of Carson’s reputation as a writer defying categorisation, but the purpose of this study is to demonstrate that Carson’s self-conscious work constitutes a rethinking rather than a disregarding of genre by capitalising on the readers’ expectations in order to instigate a process of critical reflection. In the words of Thorp, Carson’s praxis can be considered a “self-destructive interrogation of poetry’s form and function” (2015: 22). However, as Amy Devitt aptly points out, “variation within literary texts is generally more highly valued than is similarity” (176), which can be illustrated by the wording that is used to describe authors who ‘resist’ generic conventions by ‘appropriating’ different genres resulting in ‘hybrid’ works (174). It might therefore be more appropriate to conceive of generic instability as inherent to the notion of genre and to regard genres as being stabilised-for-now, after Catherine Schryer’s phrase (Devitt 187). Interestingly, Prince remarks that in the eighteenth century, genre’s resistance to theorisation was related to the sublime – a predominant topic in Decreation – as the sublime breaking of form came to stand for the surest affirmation of those categories (2003: 472).

The question that needs to be asked, then, is how Carson achieves this unfamiliar junction of various genres and forms, and how this process can be envisaged concretely. In this respect, Devitt draws attention to genre’s inherent quality of similarity-in-difference:
As such dynamic entities, they [genres] contain within themselves the seeds of divergence as well as convergence. [...] Using lateral thinking, the writer or reader must perceive a genre by converging many unique texts into a single pattern, a genre. Using vertical thinking, the writer or reader creates a unique text within a genre by seeing how this text can diverge within the common pattern, the genre. (2004: 152)

In short, genre can be regarded as the nexus between convergence and divergence, similarity and difference, tradition and individual talent. By sustaining the tensions between these apparent oppositions, genre can function as a creative signifying strategy that stimulates critical reflection (Devitt 2004: 162). Stine Lomborg draws a similar inference by considering of genre as a cognitive orienting device for making sense of the world that is “both unique and indexical of a more general genre pattern” (Coulter, qtd. in Lomborg 2014: 47). She pursues this line of thought while stating that “genre arguably reconciles the dualism between structure and agency, in identifying structure as not external to human action, but embedded, generated, negotiated, adjusted, and developed in an iterative oscillation between stability and change” (2014: 47). However, she takes this argument further by claiming that genre can be considered “a socially distributed and situated cognitive structure that is oriented to, drawn upon, and reworked, when making sense of media and texts” (Lomborg 42, emphasis added). This statement seems to imply that genres do not merely constitute an “objectified or institutionalized knowledge structure” (Lomborg 42), but that individuals can also negotiate and reshape these external semantic patterns. If genre is considered a cognitive sense-making device, then an individual's negotiation of those social constructs necessarily entails a novel perspective on reality, which amounts to Carson’s third angle of vision. In other words, Lomborg opens the door to Carson’s reconstitution of genre participation.

In this sense, Jacques Derrida’s law of genre can provide helpful insights into Carson’s generic praxis and its cognitive implications, especially in relation to Decreation’s stereoscopic semiology. With regard to genre participation, Derrida draws attention to the following pertinent question: “Can one identify a work of art, of whatever sort, but especially a work of discursive art, if it does not bear the mark of a genre, if it does not signal or mention it or make it remarkable in any way?” (2000: 229). Since a genre is a
cognitive device by means of which individuals organise their thinking and make sense of the world, the answer must be ‘no.’ Yet, Derrida maintains that genre participation does not equal a belonging to that genre:

[The law of the law of genre] is precisely a principle of contamination, a law of impurity, a parasitical economy. [...] I would speak of a sort of participation without belonging – a taking part in without being part of, without having membership in a set. (2000: 224)

This seemingly paradoxical statement gains in meaning when considering the following passage from Derrida’s ‘The Law of Genre’:

To formulate it in the scantiest manner – the simplest but most apodictic – I submit for your consideration the following hypothesis: a text cannot belong to no genre, it cannot be without or less a genre. Every text participates in one or several genres, there is no genreless text; there is always a genre and genres, yet such participation never amounts to belonging. And not because of an abundant overflowing or a free, anarchic and unclassifiable productivity, but because of the trait of participation itself, because of the effect of the code and of the generic mark. (2000: 230, original emphasis)

In other words, Derrida draws attention to the human aspect of genre participation: a text cannot be genreless, but at the same time, such categorisations are never cast in concrete, due to humankind’s propensity to organise and classify reality continually. To put it differently, human cognition is a dynamic process, since, according to N. Katherine Hayles, “cognition is both embodied and technologically mediated, and [...] the human brain [...] is [accordingly] characterized by an exceptional degree of neural plasticity” (Collard 2015: 146, original emphasis). Moreover, as Umberto Eco has already pointed out, humankind’s capacity for relational thinking is a “neurological fact” (qtd. in Collard 2014: 271), since data impulses are matched through an analogous relationship (Collard 2017a). In short, human beings cannot think but in terms of categories or genres, but this particular ‘window on the world’ should not be regarded as static or fixed. In this sense, Carson’s reconstitution of generic labels becomes all the more relevant.

More concretely, Carson’s collection is divided into the following sections (with the exception of her essays, oratorio, and opera): Stops, Sublimes, Gnosticisms, ‘Seated Figure
with Red Angle (1988) by Betty Goodwin, ‘Quad,’ ‘H & A Screenplay,’ and ‘Longing, A Documentary.’ When bearing in mind that the collection’s full title is Decreation: Poetry, Essays, Opera, these rather unusual labels should thus all be placed under the aegis of poetry. Yet, when confronted with these respective texts, such a classification seems either to be a misnomer or to entail a radically different positioning towards the genre of poetry. ‘Longing, A Documentary,’ for example, takes the form of a cinematic shot list, while ‘Seated Figure with Red Angle (1988) by Betty Goodwin’ can be conceptualised as an ekphrastic poem consisting of an enumeration of if’s. These findings gain in meaning when considering Carson’s statement that

*A poem, when it works, is an action of the mind captured on a page, and the reader, when he engages it, has to enter into that action. His mind repeats that action and travels again through the action, but it is a movement of yourself through a thought, through an activity of thinking, so by the time you get to the end you’re different than you were at the beginning and you feel that difference.* (2004, emphasis added)

Therefore, there seems to be a more profound implicit level to Carson’s use of generic labels, which concerns a heuristic and emancipatory dimension. By giving the different sections of her collection seemingly arbitrary names, Carson is questioning generic boundaries by drawing attention to the protean, kaleidoscopic character of signification and human experience, which is directly related to Decreation’s stereoscopic structure inviting a novel perspective. By thus bending the rules of genre, Carson’s alteration of a defining dimension of the established style of thinking or ‘conceptual space’ can be regarded as an example of transformational creativity (Boden 2013: 6-7). In more specific terms, Decreation undermines the quiddity of generic classifications by making the readers responsible for the concrete ‘meaning’ of genres as they are encouraged to concoct their own working definitions of poetry, prose, and drama. In short, binary oppositions are supplanted by a subjective, but all the more interesting analogical middle term. When asked why The Beauty of the Husband is called a fictional essay, Carson replied that “calling [something] an essay means that it’s not just a story but a reflection on that story” (qtd. in Jennings 2001: 932). In other words, by means of self-conscious work, Carson is able to reflect upon processes of meaning-making in order to usher the reader’s perspective towards a third angle of vision formerly not thought of.
4.2 The Serial Collection

However, such a description of Carson’s generic praxis remains rather abstract and calls for a more concrete representation of her use of form. In this respect, a kind of long poem known as the serial poem may shed light on Decreation’s structure (Rae 2008: 19). In more specific terms, the serial poem is a “recursive form of narrative, initially a non-narrative form, which evolved out of poetic interpretations of serialism in music, television, and the visual arts” (Rae 2008: 19). This variation on the lyric sequence was developed by Robert Duncan, Jack Spicer, and Robin Blaser, all members of the San Francisco Renaissance⁹ who were active in Vancouver in the 1960s (Rae 2008: 19-20). In order to formulate alternatives to the lyric ego and surmount the synchronic quality of the lyric (Rae 20), Spicer and Blaser proposed an aesthetic that can be conceptualised as

A narrative which refuses to adopt an imposed story line, and completes itself only in the sequence of poems, if, in fact, a reader insists upon a definition of completion which is separate from the activity of the poems themselves. The poems tend to act as a sequence of energies which run out when so much of a tale is told. (Blaser 2006: 5)

Blaser then references Ovid’s carmen perpetuum, or “continuous song in which the fragmented subject matter is only apparently disconnected” (Blaser 2006: 5). This serial form of narrative thus allows for a sense of duration without foregoing the conciseness of the lyric (Rae 2008: 261). Even though the aim is not to demonstrate that Decreation is a serial poem as such – Spicer, for one, claimed that a serial poem is chronological in the writing of the poems (1998: 53), and it would be quite impossible to find out if this is true for Decreation – a comparison with the serial poem can be revealing in terms of the collection’s use of genre. Therefore, a few remarks on this conception of the serial poem are pertinent at this point. Firstly, the serial poem as developed by Blaser, Duncan, and Spicer has an open character since it “may utilize any number of forms” (Foster, qtd. in Rae 20). Secondly, this type of long poem disregards the mark of an individual ego, given that both the long poem as a whole, i.e. the ‘book,’ and the individual poems should be

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⁹ The San Francisco Renaissance is often exclusively associated with the Beat Movement, although the Beats comprised only one strand of this broader, more eclectic movement (Davidson 1989: 60).
characterised by a so-called ‘dictated’ quality (Spicer 1998: 54), which provides a novel perspective on Spicer's advocation of a more decentred subjectivity over a personal lyricism (Rae 20). Incidentally, this particular stance towards the authorial voice in poetry may elucidate Pollock's earlier statement that Carson “displaces herself from the centre of her writing” (2012: 50) through various techniques of depersonalisation. More significant to this study, however, is the ensuing use of framing devices that “make explicit the implicit doubleness of voice in the author/speaker of the lyric” (Rae 20). Consequently, the restrained ‘I’ of the poet often resurfaces in different guises typically associated with prominent artistic names (Rae 20). As has already been mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, Carson has made name-dropping in the form of inter-authorial work her trademark, and this topic will be addressed more at length in Chapter Six. A final remark pertains to the role of the reader, as the serial poem gives the reader free rein by means of his or her pivotal role in the development of the narrative sequence – an aspect which Iser's theory of the reading process has already equally emphasised. More concretely, Blaser describes this activity of constructing a narrative as follows:

The sequence of energies may involve all kinds of things—anger may open a window, a sound from another world may completely reshape the present moment, the destruction of a friendship may destroy a whole realm of language or the ability to use it—each piece is in effect an extended metaphor (another word is probably needed), because in the serial poem the effort is to hold both the correspondence and the focus that an image is, and the process of those things coming together. (Blaser 2006: 5-6, emphasis added)

In other words, Blaser draws attention to the responsibility of the reader to create a profoundly personal narrative that is based on the linking of ‘energies’ or poems without, however, losing sight of the distinct images, which roughly equates to a stereoscopic vision of sameness-in-otherness.

The serial poem thus provides an apt framework for a discussion of Carson’s Decreation. However, Blaser and Spicer’s use of the term ‘serial’ calls for some more background first. As the serial poem stems from instances of serialism in music, television, and the visual arts, cross-media comparisons are unavoidable when discussing this poetic interpretation (Rae 19, 22). However, Rae remarks that the notion of serialism must be
interpreted loosely here, given that Spicer’s coinage of the term ‘serial poem’ originated as a joke (22). Furthermore, since interpretations of the ‘series’ and the ‘serial’ abound, and Spicer’s own interpretation of ‘serial music’ is equally amorphous (Rae 24), it seems pertinent to establish a working definition of the ‘serial poem’ to avoid terminological confusion. In short, the serial poem here refers to a discontinuous, recursive narrative that is open-ended (Rae 24). More generally speaking, the serial form can be defined as “a literary work that is built around a series of not necessarily related ideas and images” (Varner 2012: 263). Thus, when discussing a hybrid generic work such as Decreation, an apt analogy for the poet-novelist’s technique relies on “motivic repetition of serial music, [...] a discontinuous narrative out of discrete units as in the television series, and [a] question[ing] [of] its own framing practices in the manner of the visual arts” (Rae 25, emphases added). Crucially, however, these individual units are discrete and allow for a reading of them as complete works unto themselves, since in a serial narrative “things do not connect [...] they correspond” (Spicer, qtd. in Rae 2008: 36), which is where the notion of analogy comes into play.

Further analysis of the serial poem would take this discussion too far, but for this study, a comparison with the serial characteristics of repetition, discontinuity, and the use of framing devices is instructive. These features can be illustrated briefly by means of the first series of literary experiments from Decreation entitled Stops. Firstly, references to an anchor (DC 12) and a buoy (DC 13) imbue the short poems of the Stops with a sense of destabilisation, which can be connected to the relationship between the speaker and his or her mother in the poems. The first poem, ‘Sleepchains,’ not incidentally starts with an invocation of the distance separating mother from child: “Who can sleep when she—/ hundreds of miles away I feel that vast breath / fan her restless decks” (DC 3). This sense of separation is reiterated through the many references to the past, which include a Roman wall (DC 8) and old companions (DC 13). Furthermore, the reference to April (DC 14), that liminal, ‘cruellest’ month, evokes an atmosphere reminiscent of T. S. Eliot’s The Waste Land (1922). Nevertheless, this sense of disruption and discontinuity is countered by the use of framing devices and repetition, which provides the poems with a structural unity. On the one hand, the references to Samuel Beckett can help give substance to the authorial voice, whereas the feeling of desolation that accompanies the loss of a parent gains in meaning when considering the collection’s overarching theme of
'decreation.' On the other hand, recurring images such as rowing (DC 13, 15) and wind (DC 8, 9, 11) offer the reader a focal point. The following poem entitled 'Nothing for It' ties in all these elements and is presented to illustrate the serial character of Decreation:

Your glassy wind breaks on a shoutless shore and stirs around the rose.
Lo how
before a great snow,
before the gliding emptiness of the night coming on us,
our lanterns throw
shapes of old companions
and
a cold pause after.
What knife skinned off
that hour.
Sank the buoys.
Blows on what was our house.
Nothing for it just row. (DC 13, emphases added)

To recapitulate briefly, Decreation relies on serial strategies to create a narrative out of apparently distinct units (Rae 25). Said serial strategies include patterns of iteration, including myth, instead of causal connections, and the use of framing devices to justify the seeming discontinuous storyline (Rae 25). In this case, Simone Weil’s notion of 'decreation' constitutes the overarching framework, since it is not only the title of the collection as a whole, but also the title of both an essay and the opera libretto in the collection, as has already been mentioned in the first chapter. Furthermore, as Rae justly points out, these framing devices favour particular themes and patterns in the work, but due to the fact that Carson provides such a particular perspective on the notion of 'decreation' in the essay and opera libretto, her reconfiguration renders the text exempt from any singular interpretation (Rae 25-26). According to Rae, every act of framing is therefore an act of unframing since the frame proves an unstable structural device, and he refers to this double movement accordingly as '(un)framing' (25-26).

\[^{10}\] Carson’s use of myth in Decreation will be addressed in Chapter Seven.
In relation to the discontinuous series, Rae also mentions Robert Kroetsch’ conception of the “contemporary Canadian long poem” as a mode of narration based on delay and the rejection of closure (29), which can be directly related to Decreation’s stereoscopy’s structure and its deferral of the signified. While such a characteristic of poetry is hard to classify as quintessentially Canadian,11 his description of said long poem as capable of “combin[ing] lyrics with fragments of found documents, symbolic anecdotes, dramatic monologues, epic catalogues, nonsense poetry, visual media, and any number of other genres” (Rae 29) is particularly reminiscent of Decreation, except for the obvious fact that Decreation is a collection of generic and intermedial experiments rather than a long poem. By way of illustration, Carson’s lyric essays have a documentary quality, as will be demonstrated in the next section, while her Gnosticisms are suffused with a sense of symbolism, which can be briefly illustrated by the reference to a heavenly bird (DC 87). Furthermore, ‘Quad’ can be considered a dramatic monologue due to its composition in the form of a pseudo-interview, whereas ‘Seated Figure with Red Angle (1988) by Betty Goodwin’ can be regarded as a catalogue of if’s in the tradition of Gertrude Stein. Moreover, some of her (Sublime) poems, including ‘Swimming in Circles in Copenhagen,’ can be considered non-sensical, as can be illustrated by the following excerpt with a sing-song quality (DC 80, original emphases):

The palace guards, the palace guards
    telephoned to ask for shards.
        I sent out the hard dogs.

    Dark swallow.

It is no simple red, he said.
    Each thread
        spun from a different reason for marrying.

    Dark swallow.

11 While such a statement calls for more context and the label ‘Canadian’ is highly contentious, further analysis would take this discussion too far. For more information on the (English-)Canadian long poem, see, e.g., Kroetsch (1988), Kamboureli (1991), or Rae (2008).
Lastly, *Decreation* is characterised by a strong visual quality as well, which is the topic under scrutiny in the next chapter. In addition to Kroetsch’ previous observations on the (Canadian) long poem, Smaro Kamboureli claims that “the long poem is definitely not a simple extension or expansion of the lyric […] Rather, it is a lyric fracturing its ‘wholeness,’ parodying its own lyrical impulse” (qtd. in Rae 2008: 30). This lyrical desire for wholeness is especially interesting in view of the metaphysical longing for a stereoscopic unity at the heart of *Decreation*, which is simultaneously parodied due to Carson’s focus on the edge between discordant entities.

In sum, *Decreation* adopts the serial strategies of repetition and framing to unite the distinct genres and forms present in the collection, thereby encouraging a stereoscopic vision. Paradoxically, however, it is simultaneously based on a rejection of closure and a self-reflexive stance towards the longing for narrative coherence or ‘wholeness’ through its emphasis on the (leaking) edge demarcating generic boundaries. *Decreation* can thus be described as a serial collection in the tradition of Blaser and Spicer, which allows for a more tangible description of its hybrid communicative system. A concrete example of Carson’s lacing together of genres will be discussed in the next section.

### 4.3 The Lyric Essay and the Dissociation of Sensibility

Not surprisingly, the four essays in *Decreation* can be regarded as the intellectual core of the collection (Pollock 2012: 44). However, these essays also testify to an interesting union of seeming incongruities, i.e. thought and feeling, since they can be conceptualised as *lyric* essays. The choice for this particular term derives from Rae’s statement that “American critics have countered accusations of ‘chopped prose’ in Carson’s writing by positioning it as the exemplary case of a hybrid and increasingly prominent genre, the ‘lyric essay’” (2011: 164). Yet, at first glance, such a term appears rather problematic, as it seems to conflate fiction and non-fiction, given that an essay usually denotes “an analytical prose medium that strives for objectivity” (Rae 2011: 166). However, Deborah Tall and John D’Agata’s description of their coinage can help shed light on this ambivalence:
The lyric essay partakes of the poem in its density and shapeliness, its distillation of ideas and musicality of language. It partakes of the essay in its weight, in its overt desire to engage with facts, melding its allegiance to the actual with its passion for imaginative form. (qtd. in Rae 2011: 166)

In other words, the lyric essay combines the genres of poetry and nonfictional prose by uniting facts with imaginative form. Interestingly, Rae even suggests that Tall and D'Agata’s definition of the lyric essay was molded out of Carson’s writing (166). In relation to this versified prosiness of her essays, Rae elsewhere refers to Dorothy Livesay’s advocacy of a new kind of genre that is documentary in its “conscious attempt to create a dialectic between the objective facts and the subjective feelings of the poet” (2008: 18, emphasis added). While such a statement might seem contradictory in the context of feelings, this dialectic is here interpreted as open in nature by affirming the distinctness of the entities without precluding the possibility of similarity (Lecercle 2010: 20; Deleuze and Guattari 2000: 76). According to Livesay, the documentary poem can be conceptualised more precisely as a “tradition of the long poem that is didactic and factual as well as emotive and lyrical” (Rae 2008: 18). In this sense, it is important to note that Carson often refers to the documentary in Decreation, as can be illustrated by, inter alia, her statement that “the Sublime is a documentary technique” (DC 45) as well as Abelard's metafictional comment that Heloise’s and his film is in fact a documentary and thus has no thesis (DC 142). Moreover, the collection also includes a documentary entitled ‘Longing.’ Crucial in this respect, however, is Livesay's assertion that this hybrid genre resists continuous sequence, since the

*Documentary* poem [is] based on topical data but held together by descriptive, lyrical, and didactic elements. [The] narratives, in other words, are not told for the tale's sake or for the myth's sake: the story is a frame on which to hang a theme. (qtd. in Rae 2008: 18-19, original emphasis)

However, as Rae justly points out, the documentary elements in Carson’s work are often dispersive, in the sense that “they recover historical information while at the same time questioning the dominant media of historical representation” (2008: 19). By way of illustration, in her essay on the sublime, Carson relates how film director Michelangelo Antonioni draws attention to history's constructedness by “giv[ing] you two successive
shots of the same portion of reality, first from close up, then a little further away,“ or by making use of a procedure called *temps mort* to open out the frame by letting the camera run "after the actors think they have finished acting [the scene]" (*DC* 49). Furthermore, in that same essay, Carson comments on Longinus’ treatise *On the Sublime* by describing it as incoherent and lacking a paraphrasable conclusion, but nevertheless constituting a thrilling aggregation of documentation (*DC* 45).

Therefore, it is more useful to approach Carson’s unity of thought and feeling from the angle of her stereoscopic poetics itself. In this sense, Jennings writes that

> Carson’s poems produce illumination when perspectives comment on one another [...] : one provides the necessary distance of an ordered frame while the other gives an intimate proximity that produces meaning on a human scale. The poem occupies a position between – *marking the two as not one, yet making their necessary intimacy visible.* (2001: 934, emphasis added)

This statement is the most concrete exemplification of Carson's emphasis on the edge thus far. In this case, the essay provides the narration with a frame, while the personal reflections that make up her extended riffs allow for a sense of intimacy. However, a critical remark is pertinent at this point. Since the notion of analogy as the act of establishing links between discordant entities – including thought and feeling – always entails an emotional component (Stafford 2001: 141), it is important to emphasise that all signifying strategies here discerned, including the use of genre, only *guide* the readers towards a stereoscopic vision of sameness-in-otherness, but never establish that point of intersection. In other words, these signifying strategies confront the reader with seemingly incongruous elements and thus act as an incentive to search for a new way of perceiving, but they do not delineate what that third angle of vision should look like. In this instance, Carson’s lyric essay results in a friction between the established domains of thought and feeling. By way of illustration, two excerpts from her essays on sleep and the solar eclipse respectively are given here:

> The dream of the green living room was my first experience of such strangeness and I find it as uncanny today as I did when I was three. [...] For despite the spookiness,
inexplicability and later tragic reference of the green living room, it was and remains for me a consolation to think of it lying there, sunk in its greenness, breathing its own order, answerable to no one, apparently penetrable everywhere and yet so perfectly disguised in all the propaganda of its own waking life as to become in a true sense something incognito at the heart of our sleeping house. [...] Incognito means “unrecognized, hidden, unknown.” [...] What is incognito hides from us because it has something worth hiding, or so we judge. As an example of this judgement I shall cite for you two stanzas of Elizabeth Bishop’s poem “The Man-Moth.” (DC 20-21, original emphases)

It was 1930. Marriage was going well with the Sapphic Vita, marriage was going well with the virginal Virginia. Besides that, they were enjoying their affair, looking forward to spending the weekend after the eclipse together at Long Barn (Vita’s ancestral estate). [...] Totality is lightless, and should be colourless, yet may intensify certain questions that hang at the back of the mind. What is a spouse after all? Will this one stay, can this one keep me alive? (DC 153)

In both cases, scholarly criticism and personal reflection are inextricably intertwined. Interestingly, T. S. Eliot already referred to this paradigm shift separating thought from feeling in his essay entitled ‘The Metaphysical Poets’ (1921): “The poets of the seventeenth century [...] possessed a mechanism of sensibility which could devour any kind of experience. [...] In the seventeenth century a dissociation of sensibility set in, from which we have never recovered” (1934a: 287-288). More specifically, this ‘dissociation of sensibility’ that took place in the seventeenth century refers to a rift between images and ideas, or between feeling and thought (Austin 1962: 309-310). By stimulating an interaction between these two contiguous domains, Decreation encourages the reader to reflect upon the genres of poetry and nonfictional prose on the one hand, and their defining features on the other. In the words of Carson, “this capturing of the surface of emotional fact is useful for other people in that it jolts them into thinking, into doing their own act of understanding” (2004, emphasis added). As the lyric essay thus manages to combine the distinct domains of thought and feeling, the way is paved for a re-evaluation of the categories constituting human experience.
5. **Multimodality: Materialising the Third Angle**

I preferred drawing, but wasn’t very good at it. It was putting titles on drawings that eventually extended itself into writing. But on the whole, drawing doesn’t relate much to writing; they refresh one another, are alternate ways of using the mind.

— Anne Carson in an interview with Kate Kellaway (2016)

When Anne Carson (2000) spoke to poet and literary critic Stephanie Burt, she declared that she thinks of herself as mostly a visual and not a verbal artist. Since Carson is not only a writer but also a painter (Rae 2008: 28), and Ruprecht called *Decreation* Carson’s “most visual book to date” (2008: 102), it seems worthwhile to consider how pictorial art might influence the way *Decreation* communicates. In spite of Carson’s above-mentioned statement that writing and drawing “are alternate ways of using the mind,” Stafford relates how in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, painting and poetry, drawing and writing, were considered equivalent, complementary constituents of the same ideogrammatic practice, epitomised in the doctrine *ut pictura poesis*, due to their expressive and technical similarities (2001: 55). Consider, for example, the following excerpt from ‘Gnosticism VI’ in *Decreation*:

> Watch “naked” (*arumim*) flesh slide into “cunning” (*arum*) snake in the next verse.
> And suddenly a vacancy, a silence,

is somewhere inside the machine.
> Veins pounding, (*DC* 93, original emphases)

Carson hereby literally points to the gap between the visual (“watch”) and the verbal (“verse”) by manipulating the layout of her work. In addition, she alludes to the bewilderment felt on the part of the reader when confronted with this schism, that ‘human machine’ grappling with the multidimensional nature of reality. Therefore, the

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12 Ruprecht made this statement in 2008, before Carson wrote *Nox* (2009), which is arguably her most visual work to date as it is a notebook of memories that was created after the death of her brother and which contains photographs, collages, paintings, poems, typed fragments, and a letter (O’Rourke 2010).

13 Therefore, most excerpts of *Decreation* in this thesis are conveyed in a way that replicates the original layout as much as possible.
use of layout can here be regarded as a tool to represent the verbal mode, i.e. silence, through the visual mode, i.e. the unfilled space (Nørgaard 2010: 120). Accordingly, the aim here is to investigate how the verbal and visual modes interact in *Decreation*. The use of such terms, however, calls for some more background first.

5.1 **Embodied Signification**

The visual plays a prominent role in *Decreation*. This is evident in the case of both the essay on the solar eclipse and the collection’s documentary entitled ‘Longing.’ More generally speaking, various references to the notion of vision and the act of seeing are made on a thematic level. This can be briefly illustrated by means of the following excerpts: “one may // observe so many methods of moving green” (*DC* 62), “‘undaunted’ (so Kant) on his freezing bed in its midnight glare” (*DC* 66), “What shall I do with my eyes?” (*DC* 66, original emphasis), “What did you wish to explain? / The darkness, for one thing” (*DC* 142), and “that light’s blackness pouring / out the bulb” (*DC* 227), to name but a few examples. However, on a formal level, *Decreation* also features three illustrations and confronts multiple ways of seeing through its use of typography and layout. These illustrations include a reproduction of *Seated Figure with Red Angle* (1988) by Betty Goodwin, a still from Beckett’s *Quadra* t I & II, and a photograph of Monica Vitti in the film *Il Deserto Rosso* (1964), which opens the *Sublimes* and follows the collection’s essay on the sublime and the subsequent ‘rhapsody’ – both of which feature director Antonioni. Accordingly, the basic premise of this chapter is, to use Alison Gibbons’s words, that “if the body is more involved in the act of reading [by foregrounding the act of seeing], then that particular reading may become more meaningful” (2012: 42).

As Gibbons rightly points out, embodiment plays a pivotal role in human understanding and experience (2012: 42). In more concrete terms, ‘embodiment’ can be understood as “the dynamical interactions between the brain, the body, and the physical/cultural environment” (Gibbs, qtd. in Gibbons 2012: 41). To put it differently, the manner in which the human mind makes sense of reality by structuring and conceptualising experience is largely reliant on bodily interactions – physical, sensory, and perceptual (Gibbons 41). Although the notion of ‘embodiment’ remains amorphous and (incompatible) definitions abound, the embodied approach to cognition is thus rooted in
the basic statement that “some cognitive abilities depend upon features of human bodily experience” (Garratt 2016: 6-7). Therefore, embodied cognition takes as its starting point the premise that bodily features outside of the brain are also involved in cognitive processes (Garratt 2016: 2). In short, embodied cognition is concerned with “bodily contribution to thinking in a general sense” (Garratt 6). In Decreation, the mind/body dualism is rendered invalid by foregrounding the role of the body in reading,14 as the analysis will elucidate, but this view is also expressed explicitly by Aphrodite, who sings that “the mind is the body. I hate this fact. I love this hate” (DC 193, original emphasis).

In the context of Decreation, it is therefore important to emphasise that “literature has a physical context which criticism should not ignore: the printed book” (White, qtd. in Gibbons 2012: 1). In the words of N. Katherine Hayles, “texts that employ their bodies to create narrative complexity must be read not for their words alone but for the physical involvements readers undertake to access their materialities” (qtd. in Plate 2015: 93). Hayles thus advocates a reader-response theory that is guided by the embodied reader or the mind-body interface (Hayles 2013: 231), and thereby reiterates Jonathan Safran Foer’s statement that “[…] when a book remembers, we remember. It reminds you that you have a body” (qtd. in Plate 2015: 96), as Liedeke Plate rightly points out. In other words, the way in which readers engage with the materiality of the medium is pivotal in the process of literary signification. This idea is intrinsically nothing new, but as Plate remarks, the contexts of production and reception do have changed,15 as in recent years literature has become part of a “media ecology” of which digitalisation is the linchpin (96). By bringing into view the physical, i.e. sensory and affective, dimensions of engaging with literary texts in their utilisation of multiple sensory stimuli, such experimental works can be said to offer a reflection on the activity of reading in our so-called digital age (Plate 95; Gibbons 2012: 40). This “aesthetics of bookishness” (Pressman, qtd. in Plate 2015: 95) can be closely related to what Henry Jenkins has called ‘convergence culture’ (Plate 96). According to Jenkins, ‘convergence’ refers to “the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences” (2006: 2). Crucially,

14 See also Mc Laughlin (2015) for a more detailed account of the reading body.

15 The book publishing industry is rapidly transforming as digital media play an increasingly important role in the production and distribution process, which has resulted in the virtualisation and distribution of ‘text’ across multiple platforms, and in cooperation with other media industries, such as film (Plate 96).
however, Jenkins asserts that the circulation of ‘content’ across multiple media systems is largely reliant on the active participation of consumers (3), or prosumers in this case.

Since this study focuses primarily on the interplay between the semiotic modes of the verbal and the visual in Decreation through the reader’s embodiment of the text, Alison Gibbons’s Multimodality, Cognition, and Experimental Literature (2012) provides a useful framework, as she makes a cogent case for a multimodal cognitive poetics. More concretely, her work studies the experimental genre of multimodal printed literature. According to Gibbons, such works “employ multiple semiotic modalities [modes], primarily the verbal and the visual” (2012: 1). Therefore, the term multimodal literature refers to integrated works of literature in which the various modes, although they constitute different means of communication, continually interact in the process of meaning-making (Gibbons 2). In other words, multimodal literature “experiment[s] with the possibility of book form, playing with the graphic dimensions of text, incorporating images, and testing the limits of the book as a physical and tactile object” (Gibbons, qtd. in Plate 2015: 97). In this respect, it is telling that Carson has a background in graphic design and a penchant for multimedia projects (Plate 102), as can be illustrated by, inter alia, the creative collaboration between Carson and visual artist Roni Horn (Harvey and Cheetham 2015). In the words of Carson, “even when the thing I’m doing is just writing I try to make it into an object. Try to make it something to look at or experience as well as read, so I worry about the topography [sic] and spacing, and just the presentation of it” (qtd. in Plate 2015: 102). Interestingly, Plate argues that the hallmark of Carson’s writing is thus a predilection for ‘moving words,’ i.e. a penchant for “carrying them across languages, transporting them to new contexts, making them convey meaning, but also ‘trying to make people’s minds move, [...] make it [the mind] move somewhere it has never moved before’ (Carson qtd. in Anderson)” (Plate 102), which captures Carson’s stereoscopic poetics.

16 As Gibbons uses the terms mode and modality interchangeably, modes will here be regarded as variants of four modalities in accordance with Lars Elleström’s model of the modalities and modes of media (2010: 16). For this study, the sensorial and material modality are relevant. The first consists of “the physical and mental acts of perceiving the interface of the medium through the sense faculties,” and of which the most important modes are seeing, hearing, feeling, tasting, and smelling, whereas the latter is defined as “the latent corporeal interface of the medium,” of which demarcated materiality is a mode (2010: 36).
Multimodality, then, refers to “the coexistence of more than one semiotic mode within a given context” (Gibbons 2012: 8), whereby a mode is here defined as “a way to be or to do things” (Elleström 2010: 14), or “a system of choices used to communicate meaning” (Page, qtd. in Gibbons 2012: 10). Crucially, however, Ruth Page asserts that “what might count as a mode is an open-ended set, ranging across a number of systems including but not limited to language, image, color, typography, music, voice quality, dress, gesture, spatial resources, perfume, and cuisine” (qtd. in Gibbons 2012: 10). Within the context of Decreation, Carson’s use of language, image, and typography stand out specifically. In this respect, Gibbons identifies several formal features typical of multimodal novels, including “unusual textual layouts and page design, varied typography, [...] concrete realisation of text to create images [...], devices that draw attention to the text’s materiality, including metafictive writing, [end]notes and self-interrogative critical voices” and the “mixing of genres” (2), all of which are present in Decreation to a greater or lesser extent. Decreation is thus not a multimodal work per se, but rather features multimodal elements including illustrations and typographical experimentations (cf. Gibbons 87). Therefore, in accordance with Kress and van Leeuwen’s understanding of communication, written verbal language is here conceived as multimodal in the sense that it does not only encompass wording, but also comprises a visual aspect, i.e. the use of typography (Nørgaard 2010: 116). The implication is that the work’s visual dimension does not merely serve an illustrative purpose, which in turn necessitates an assessment of the meaning-potential of particular word-image relations (Nørgaard 2010: 115, 123). However, as Page rightly points out, “given the fluid nature of modes, central questions are how, why, and to what extent some modes become privileged in certain contexts” (qtd. in Gibbons 2012: 10, emphasis added). Therefore, the question at stake here is how and to what end the visual and verbal modes interact in Decreation.17

On a cognitive level, such an approach emphasises the neurological reality that human cognition is an integrative phenomenon, as recent neuroscientific research suggests that sensory modalities – or modes – are processed in an integrative manner (Gibbons 19, 40). Gibbons’s approach to multimodality illustrates this point by exploring the cognitive implications of multimodal meaning-making within the context of literature

17 Since Elleström’s model (2010: 36) does not allow for a necessary distinction between written verbal language and images, the verbal mode will here be associated with written language or words, while the visual mode is conceptualised as comprising the submodes of image, layout, and typography.
The suggestion is that, through its multisensory nature, multimodal literature is more representative of our own cognitive processing of reality than more conventional literary works (Gibbons 40), which is instructive in the context of analogy’s synthesising role in cognition. Indeed, analogical reasoning does not merely constitute a cerebral component, but is also a highly affective process. However, as Gibbons rightly points out, this representational dimension should not imply that more traditional works cannot be experienced in a multimodal manner as well, given the broad scope of literary experience ranging from the reader’s imaginative faculties, including projected realities, to the physical context in which the act of reading takes place (40). Rather, multimodal works foreground their use of several sensory stimuli as they “are self-conscious of their material form, playing upon the integrative nature of cognition” (ibid.). This statement holds far-reaching implications, as recent research also suggests that the amalgamation of two senses gives rise to an enhanced neurological response, and thus, by extension, a more intense narrative experience (Gibbons 40-41). For despite the fact that words and images are sometimes classified as two forms of visual stimuli, research conducted by Khateb et al. in 2002 demonstrates that written and pictorial recognition involve different neural activity (Gibbons 40). Consequently, word and image may be regarded as distinct modes (Gibbons 40).

In more concrete terms, since literature can be understood as “a specific form of human experience” (Gavins and Steen, qtd. in Gibbons 2012: 26), the aim is to study “the cognitive practices by which we not only read literature but perceive and understand the world” (Gibbons 26). In other words, cognitive poetics is rooted in the premise that “structures of language and literary devices are expressions and materialisations of patterns of human thought” (Gibbons 26). Within the context of Decreation, however, the aim is not only to examine “how these modal integrations are processed, understood, and experienced by readers” (ibid.), but also, first and foremost, how this formal modal organisation can act as an incentive to recalibrate entrenched patterns of thinking. Put differently, Decreation does not confront readers with a formal synthesis, but rather brings them face to face with a radically disjunctive encounter, as the material surface of the page calls into question the very process of reading by galvanising the readers into agency. Gibbons’s notion of the multimodal metaphor in experimental literature is a fruitful concept in this regard.
5.2 Mode, Metaphor, and Adaptation

The present section takes Gibbons’s (2012, 2013) accounts as a constructive starting point for the investigation of multimodal metaphor in Decreation. Accordingly, it aims to illustrate how the interaction between the verbal and visual mode in Decreation results in a “troubled tension” (Collard 2014: 265) between affective perceptions of ‘meaning’ and an enhanced recognition of the techniques that shape our cognitive awareness. More specifically, this ‘troubled tension’ gives rise to what Gibbons has termed a multimodal metaphor, i.e. a conceptual metaphor that is generated through the interaction between modes, which renders such metaphors inherently integrative in nature (Gibbons 2013: 181-182). In addition, the term implies active, performative engagement, since these metaphors call for an adaptation on the part of the reader (Gibbons 2013: 182). As Gibbons does not define the latter term, ‘adaptation’ can best be approached from a processual angle so as not to restrict its scope. Thus, adaptations will here be conceptualised as analogous relations hinging on the “cognitive concretization of heterogeneous impulses” (Collard 2014: 271). In this way, a multimodal metaphor can be studied as an analogical middle term or unifying agent mediating between the verbal and the visual mode. In addition, this allows for a recalibration of firstly, the act of reading as a performative phenomenon, and secondly, multimodal meaning-making as “a cognitive activity of modal integration,” including linguistic composition, material design, and physical engagement (Gibbons 2013: 196).

The analysis presented below proposes that the multimodal metaphor under scrutiny in Decreation can be conceptualised as ‘to read is to be decreated, or to be confronted with your own humanity.’ This can be accounted for by the fundamentally embodied activity of reading that is called upon in the collection, as multimodality is instrumental in coalescing virtual literary meaning and actual literary experience into an embodied narrative understanding (Gibbons 2012: 89). The following excerpt is presented to illustrate this claim (DC 136):

where the
soul with its soft
edges
cuts
into
the
sharp
body.

As Decreation thus foregrounds the reader's physical involvement in the process of literary experience and, by extension, cognitive meaning-making, readers are said to engage with the work at the “embodied and ontological interface of actual and virtual, corporeal and cognitive” (Gibbons 2012: 88-89). In other words: the medium of the printed work functions as an interface between visceral and intellectual considerations. In this regard, it could be argued that Decreation is characterised by a haptic or bodily orientated aesthetics, in the sense that narrative consequence sometimes derives from physical interaction with the materiality of the text (Gibbons 2012: 97). Consider, for example, the following excerpt from ‘Quad’ (DC 122, original emphases):

Quadrat quiz
Match each item of Column A
with that item from Column B
which most effectively completes its lessness:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Column A</th>
<th>Column B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>nec tecum</td>
<td>what the right hand is doing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Troy</td>
<td>slump cue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>three are too few</td>
<td>two are too few</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

However, as Gibbons points out, merely identifying the multimodal metaphor as a thematic trope does not engender a satisfactory account of the signifying processes involved in the diverse expressions of that metaphor (2012: 98). Within the context of Decreation, it is thus crucial to take account of the materiality of the literary work as an object, i.e. as a “corporeal realisation of the blending or conceptual integration of two conceptual domains, book and body” (ibid.). By way of illustration, the cover page of the 2006 Jonathan Cape edition of Decreation features a transparent illustration of female underwear against a black background, which is reminiscent of a jellyfish. In this way,
the book’s visual design immediately evokes the impression of looking through the work, and in combination with the collection’s title, it hints at a dissecting of the human body and soul.

More specifically, Decreation inspires the metaphor ‘to read is to be decreated, or to be confronted with your own humanity’ by involving the reader in what Anne Cranny-Francis has termed visceral reading, which stands for the “relationship between the text and the embodied practice of reading” (qtd. in Gibbons 2012: 104). In more concrete terms, the reader is confronted with the schism between the visual and the verbal through, for example, a blend of book and body that takes the form of a helix. In other words, the structural similarity between the visual design of the page and the molecular structure of DNA allows for a comparison between the shared acts of literary and human creation (Gibbons 104). In the words of Gibbons:

Literature is always a joint venture, the cognitive compromise between the intentions of the writer and imagination of the reader. The analogy of the interweaving structure of DNA with the reading process constructs another blend of book and body, reliant upon their shared property of mutual creation: our DNA shows that each one of us is the genetic combination of mother and father, while the text is the product of writer and reader. (2012: 104)

The visual design of ‘Guillermo’s Sigh Symphony’ (DC 77) is based on that helix shape and draws explicitly on human experience in all its facets. In this way, virtual meaning and actual experience reinforce each other (Gibbons 2012: 89). The following excerpt is presented to illustrate this claim (DC 77):

People kissing stop to sigh then kiss again.
Doctors sigh into wounds and the bloodstream is changed forever.
Flowers sigh and two noon bees float backwards.
Is it doubt.
Is it disappointment.
The world didn’t owe me anything.
Leaves come sighing in the door.
Bits of girl sigh like men.
Forgeries sigh twice.
Yet, precisely because of the fact that this metaphorical blend of book and body sometimes hinders the linear reading process, the reader is forced to adopt multiple reading paths. The following excerpt from ‘Swimming in Circles in Copenhagen’ (*DC* 81, original emphases) imitates a helix shape as well and illustrates this point clearly:

I defy you to find those deep approaches  
where ordinary air is.  
The tough wound plucks itself.

*Dark swallow.*

Between grief and nothing  
*I’d take grief* (Jean Seberg)  
*I’d take nothing* (Jean-Paul Belmondo).  
Perhaps we overvalue conversation.

*Dark swallow.*

The palace thief, the palace thief  
overturned his dear ones leaf by leaf.  
For his eyes loved faint things.

*Dark swallow you.*

While the main body of the poem is easy to read, the inserted variations on ‘dark swallow,’ which constitute a narrative sequence by virtue of the conspicuous repetition as well as their italicised quality, prove almost impossible to read (and remember) in succession. In this way, two different reading paths are juxtaposed. As Gunther Kress points out, the to-be-constructed reading path of multimodal texts thus involves the imposition of a certain order (2003: 50), and hence, active involvement on the part of the reader. In other words, reading is here conceptualised as design (Kress 2003: 50), and accordingly, readers become agents as the possibility of choice is passed on to them. When reading the variations on ‘dark swallow’ separately, it becomes clear that the poem ends in a culmination of these repetitions with the phrase "dark swallow you do return but not to my balcony" (*DC* 83). Thus, the verbal and visual mode should not be
associated with one of these reading paths (horizontal-vertical) each, since both play a pivotal role in every reading experience.\textsuperscript{18} However, precisely this – often neglected – importance of eye movement is foregrounded here, as it is phenomenologically possible to read the text in one flow (visual mode), but not without sacrificing the text’s meaning-potential (verbal mode). Put differently, through a conspicuously embodied involvement in the reading process, the reader is confronted with the schism between the visual and the verbal mode, and thus with his or her own humanity. Nevertheless, owing to the page’s visual design, Decreation suggests that the successful integration of apparent incompatibilities might be ingrained in our DNA.

However, the confrontation with humankind’s limited sensory experience of reality is already hinted at earlier in the collection, for example when Monica Vitti relates that

\begin{quote}
especially since I came out of the clinic, a clinic for people who want everything, everything I see everything I taste everything I touch everyday even the ashtrays and at

the clinic I had only one question \textit{What shall I do with my eyes?}
\end{quote}

(\textit{DC 66}, original emphasis)

That same underlying idea of juxtaposing the different senses through multiple reading directions can be found even more explicitly in ‘Spring Break: Swallow Song,’ another sublime of the collection, of which an excerpt is presented here (\textit{DC 74-75}, original emphases):

\begin{quote}
Ocean air plush as kissing or the secret parts of plants secrets were dropping out of us there.

\textit{swallow song is a begging song}
open up

Walking through a restaurant all together to our table past eyes and sugarbowls we realized—

\textit{swallow song is a begging song}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{18} While words always entail a material, often visual component, i.e. a signifier, the verbal mode is here specifically associated with a sign’s meaning-potential, i.e. the signified. See also my discussion of Kress and van Leeuwen’s understanding of written verbal language as multimodal in section 5.1.
same moment he did—my brother’s shame of us. We saw girls notice him, stiffening their backs.

swallow song is a begging song
open up
or I’ll cry off the lintel,
The door, the wife within
open up

The fact that most examples given here are part of the *Sublimes* in the collection is not accidental: to be able to reconcile these different reading directions would amount to sublime decreation. However, mastering this point of intersection is, as T. S. Eliot would say, “an occupation for the saint” (2001b: 30). In short: the creation of a dual reading experience that literally materialises the schism between the verbal and the visual mode evokes the multimodal metaphor that ‘to read is to be decreated’ through the reader’s embodied understanding of the text.

5.3 Visualising the Edge: Bistable Perception

An implicit corollary to this dual reading experience is a foregrounding of the textual surface of the collection. However, this heightened awareness of the work’s materiality also hinders total imaginative immersion (Gibbons 2012: 113). For, by contrast with other literary works, *Decreation* does not aspire to ‘transparent immediacy,’ in the sense that the collection does not draw upon “a style of visual representation whose goal is to make the viewer forget the presence of the medium” (Bolter and Grusin, qtd. in Gibbons 2012: 114). Consequently, multimodal works of literature like *Decreation* obscure the relationship between the concrete, or the actual, and the virtual, or the imaginary (Gibbons 114). More specifically, multimodal works’ exploitation of their visual design results in a fluctuating oscillation between discourse-world and text-world, which Gibbons describes as

A slippage [...] between discourse-world and text-world, in which the surface of the book’s pages also becomes a significant conceptual plane. In other words, multimodal
texts demand a dynamic reading strategy in which the reader must “toggle” between the mediating textual surface and cognitive worlds. (2012: 114)

As the reader’s complete immersion in the virtual world is thus impeded, a kind of ‘bistaple perception’ is explicitly called upon, which is related to “the shifting perceptual dimension of all literary experience” (ibid.). In this respect, multimodal texts can be regarded as hypermedial, in the sense that

Where immediacy suggests a unified visual space, contemporary hypermediacy offers a heterogeneous space, in which representation is conceived of not as a window on to the world, but rather as “windowed” itself with windows that open on to other representations or other media. The logic of hypermediacy multiplies the signs of mediation and in this way tries to reproduce the rich sensatorium of human experience. (Bolter and Grusin, qtd. in Gibbons 2012: 115, emphasis added)

In other words: by virtue of their non-transparent, distinctly visual nature, multimodal texts constitute ‘windowed objects’ of windows opening on to “an intangible realm of imagination” (Gibbons 115) through the entanglement of different modes.

In this way, multimodal works can be said to initiate a dual vision, which involves what Richard Lanham has termed bistable oscillation, or “perceptual fluctuation between looking at the material surface of the page and looking through the page to immerse oneself in its content” (Gibbons 115, original emphases). Hence, a metafictional double situatedness is evoked (ibid.), which is comparable to the notion of double consciousness in the theatre. More concretely, Astrid Ensslin refers to ‘double situatedness’ as a situation where “readers are at once ‘direct receivers’ of the text as well as psychologically involved with the represented narrative” (Gibbons 88). ‘Double consciousness,’ by contrast, is characteristic of theatrical performances where spectators and performers alike are co-opted by an “oscillating dynamic” (Walker, qtd. in McConachie 2008: 41) between affective engagement and ‘objective’ analytical vantage point (McConachie 2008: 42). Both terms thus imply that, through the reader’s cognitive and corporeal engagement, the act of reading is experienced as a dual locative phenomenon, in which the perceptual component plays a pivotal role through bistable oscillation (Gibbons 2012: 88, 124). Crucially, however, this sense of dual positioning
can be found in all reading experiences, but multimodal texts in particular call attention to this phenomenon (Gibbons 88). The following excerpt from ‘Mia Moglie (Longinus’ Red Desert)’ illustrates this point through its particular use of typography (DC 67):

A caught woman is something the movies want to believe in.
"For instance, Sappho," as Longinus says.

greener

Caught from within, she has somehow got the Sublime inside her.
“As though these could combine and form one body.”

than

Her body vibrates, she is always cold, there is a certain cold industrial noise, she is also hot, has stuck a thermometer

grass

under her arm and forgotten it and at the wall she turns glistening, aghast: your prey. “Are you not amazed?”

The kind of embodied reflection thus evoked is instrumental in the reader’s adoption of a stereoscopic perspective. For, as Decreation inspires a dual vision oscillating between material artefact and abstract representation by virtue of its multimodal nature (Gibbons 115), this dual vision is then doubled once more through the conspicuous interplay between the verbal and visual mode. As the readers are thus stuck behind the metaphorical looking glass separating the visual surface of the page from the imaginary world of the collection, they are confronted with a dual challenge: that of coalescing two reading paths into a third angle of vision whilst balancing on the edge between the actual and the virtual world.

However, in the case of the sublime ‘Mia Moglie (Longinus’ Red Desert),’ this process is even more prominently present through the use of not only italics, but also a different font for the inserted words. These bits of speech can be read in succession as ‘greener than grass and dead almost I seem to me’ (DC 67-68). This enigmatic statement gains in
meaning when taking into account that these words constitute a variation on Sappho’s “greener than grass / I am and dead—or almost / I seem to me” (DC 159) from her fragment 31 included in Decreation, which is not altogether surprising given that this poem has been preserved by Longinus (DC 160). Yet, the reader is likely to miss this intratextual link due to Carson’s intricate use of layout, which will be discussed now alongside her use of typography. Inspired by van Leeuwen, Nørgaard distinguishes between three semiotic typographical principles, namely index, icon, and discursive import (2010: 118). In the case of iconicity, the typographical signifier bears a resemblance to the signified, whereas the meaning-potential of the index can be attributed to a physical and/or causal correlation between the signifier and signified (ibid.). Lastly, typographic discursive import takes place when “the associations of a given typeface are imported along with the typeface into a new domain from the domain where it originally belonged,” such as when the classic typewriter font, Courier, does not function as an indexical marker denoting actual creation by a typewriter but rather conveys the meaning of ‘typewritten’ in a different context (ibid.).

While a discussion of all the instances of typographical deviation in Decreation would take this analysis too far, a quick glance at some examples can be instructive in terms of the meaning potential residing in the specific materiality of the medium. In ‘Chorus of the 33 Questions,’ which belongs to the second part of the collection’s opera entitled Decreation, certain letters are printed in boldface. In the first paragraph, this is the letter ‘j,’ in the second paragraph the ‘a,’ in the third paragraph the ‘l,’ and so on, until the French jaloux is formed, which is then printed vertically on the following page as a series of thirty-three letters ending in a question mark (DC 217-219). These thirty-three symbols in boldface can be regarded as an example of typographical iconicity, given that the feature of boldface, which is associated with visual salience, is “employed to convey the sonic salience of someone shouting” (Nørgaard 2010: 118) the question, which is related to Marguerite Porete's troubled relationship with God. In this way, the semiotic principle of iconicity can bring about a response on the part of the reader that is both effective and affective.

In ‘Kant’s Question about Monica Vitti,’ by contrast, typography is related to narrative perspective and sometimes even focalisation. While Kant's side of the narrative is
printed normally and thus backgrounded, Monica Vitti’s is italicised: “Kant noted a rustling aside of sensible barriers. / Her unquiet drifts in her, spills, drifts on” (DC 70, original emphasis). Thus, Carson’s use of typography can be said to imitate a camera perspective here. She adopts a similar cinematic technique in her Sublimes, where the repetitions with variation in the form of inserted phrases may be related to the moving image in film, a practice reminiscent of Gertrude Stein (Delville 2013: 12). As Delville notes, Stein’s writings, which are characterised by “a succession of similar enunciations undergoing various additions, subtractions, variations and permutations,” can be regarded as the equivalent of filmic movement in literature (2013: 12-13). Especially in ‘Spring Break: Swallow Song’ and ‘Swimming in Circles in Copenhagen,’ of which excerpts have already been presented, as well as in the first part of the opera, Carson seems indebted to Stein. This is not altogether surprising given that the oratorio in Decreation, ‘Lots of Guns,’ was originally composed as part of a ‘Tribute to Gertrude Stein,’ which was organised by Susan Sontag for Pen American Center in 2003 (DC 115).

In the case of the ‘H & A Screenplay,’ however, typography can be associated with Kress and van Leeuwen’s concept of modality in visual communication. More concretely, modality stands for “the truth value or credibility of (linguistically realized) statements about the world” (2006: 155). In other words, it indicates “whether a given ‘proposition’ (visual, verbal or otherwise) is represented as true or not” (154). However, as Kress and van Leeuwen point out, whether or not a representation is deemed believable is not always a question of absolute truth, since notions of truth are context-bound and modality generates social affinity (171). In Decreation, such a clash between high and low modality occurs when the didascalia in the ‘H & A Screenplay’ are suddenly printed in plain typography instead of in italics (DC 132):

Film this however you like.
Important to make it look different from the following scene
where Heloise returns from hell to her same life.
How to subtract hell:
faintly.
While readers may recognise the use of plain typography for direct address as high modality, “this meaning at the same time appears to clash with what must (still) be considered the (expected) high modality” (Nørgaard 2010: 119) of stage directions in screenplays, i.e. typography that deviates from the spoken parts in some way. As a result, this modality clash can be said to imbue the ‘screenplay’ and, by extension, Decreation with a postmodern irony (Nørgaard 119).

Finally, layout too constitutes a semiotic submode that is frequently backgrounded in literary texts (Nørgaard 119). As Nørgaard remarks, “while clearly participating in the multimodal construction of meaning in literary narratives, layout is so conventionalized that it is typically not noticed” (120). As has already been amply demonstrated throughout this chapter, Carson, by contrast, employs the layout of her work in often subtle ways to convey meanings usually related to humankind’s (finite) sensory ability. However, as Nørgaard points out, line length, and therefore visual space, can also be used to evoke meanings associated with time (120). Consider, for example, the following excerpt from the poem with the loaded title ‘Lines’ (DC 5, original emphases):

```
Out
the window snow is falling straight down in lines. To my mother,
love
of my life, I describe what I had for brunch. The lines are falling
faster
now. Fate has put little weights on the ends (to speed us up) I
want
to tell her—sign of God’s pity. She won’t keep me
she says, she
won’t run up my bill. Miracles slip past us. The
paperclips
are immortally aligned. [...]
```

While layout is here used to convey the approaching of death or the experience of running out of time, in ‘Some Afternoons She Does Not Pick Up the Phone’ (DC 9), the spatial length of the sentences conveys decay and subsequent renewal reminiscent of George Herbert’s ‘Easter Wings’ (1633):
It is February. Ice is general. One notices different degrees of ice.

Its colours—blue white brown grey black silver—vary.

Some ice has core bits of gravel or shadows inside.

Some is smooth as a flank, you cannot stand on it.

Standing on it the wind goes thin, to shreds.

All we wished for, shreds.

The little ones cannot stand on it.

Not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, can stand.

Blindingly—what came through the world there—burns.

It is February. Ice is general. One notices different degrees of ice.

Incidentally, that same Herbert is referenced later in the collection (DC 228). Moreover, a kind of visual-verbal cohesion by means of meaning-making ties is sometimes evoked as well when “the same meaning is simultaneously constructed visually through the [sub]mode of layout” (Nørgaard 121). By way of illustration, in 'Swimming Aria,' sung by Marguerite Porete in the second part of the opera libretto (DC 212), the layout of the page evokes a sense of movement – a device similar to concrete poetry.

Lastly, as regards Carson’s use of images in the collection, Plate remarks that the reader’s involvement in “acts of recreation through the appropriation, recycling, and recontextualization of already existing material” (2015: 107) does not necessarily equate non-creativity. Rather, these images confront the reader with issues of reframing and the possibility of choice in this process, as the new “context becom[es] the new content” (Goldsmith, qtd. in Plate 2015: 107-108, original emphasis). In short: in all above-mentioned instances, the use of images, typography, and layout (paradoxically) hinders complete immersion in the fictional world by foregrounding the medium’s material properties, and hence, it creates a visceral friction between the visual and verbal mode that invites embodied reconciliation. In other words, the multimodal approach developed in this chapter has hopefully demonstrated that Plate’s conclusion about Nox, namely that by “using the materiality of the book to engage the senses, Carson’s book reminds the reader that reading is a material and affective practice, as well as a cognitive skill” (2015: 105) is equally applicable to Decreation.
5.4 **Intermedial Excursion: Ekphrastic Encounter**

After these extensive comments on the visual dimension of *Decreation*, the present section turns to a specific instance of this reasoning. In more concrete terms, it aims to contribute to Monique Tschofen’s lambent study (2013) on Carson’s use of ekphrasis in *Decreation* by adopting a literary semiology. Tschofen, by contrast, examines *‘Seated Figure with Red Angle (1988)’* by Betty Goodwin – which she calls a poem – through the lens of Gilles Deleuze’s “new image of thought” (2013: 233). She asserts that her article

Shows how, in refusing representation as its central operational mode, the poem reaches “to the edge of the thinkable” to demonstrate art’s capacity to offer its own uncertain form of thinking that, in its dynamism, provisionality, and conditionality, brings into being “that which does not yet exist.” (Tschofen 233)

It is clear that this statement is closely tied up with Carson’s stereoscopic poetics as discussed thus far. Therefore, the analysis presented below intends to demonstrate how this specific instance of media combination (cf. Rajewsky 2005: 51-52), which integrates an enigmatic sequence of if’s and Goodwin’s drawing, can result in what has been called a *synthetic disjunction* in this thesis through a particular encounter between literary language and visual arts. Interestingly, Tschofen starts off her article with a quote from Deleuze that reads: “To think is to create — there is no other creation — but to create is first of all to engender ‘thinking’ in thought” (Tschofen 2013: 233, emphasis added). This statement is instructive within the context of the present chapter as it implies that the concomitant activities of thinking and creating should not be confined to a purely cognitive realm. According to Tschofen, the poem thus represents “a meeting between two modes of representation — one speaking and one silent; one temporal and one spatial; one cognitive and one possessing ‘embodiment’” (235). The assumptions behind this particular understanding of Carson’s ekphrastic poem will be explored here.

Accordingly, the present section sets out to address Carson’s peculiar amalgamation of verbal and visual language from the angle of her stereoscopic poetics. In this respect, it is telling that the sentences making up the poem are incomplete as they only consist of a conditional if-clause or protasis (Tschofen 236). Tschofen argues that these fragmented
sentences are related to visual language in the sense that they generate a realm of thought that refuses to be named, i.e. to be pinned down (ibid.). Tschofen describes this affinity between the poem and the drawing as follows:

As the unfinished preludes to an idea that cannot be uttered, the sentence fragments show a way for language to point to or reach towards rather than objectively represent. The poem seeks to verbalize something about the visual arts’ ineffability, and so its approach is to remain silent in matters that reside in the realm of the inarticulable. (Tschofen 236)

In this way, Carson is able “to phrase that which is mute and apparently beyond language” (Tschofen 236, original emphasis), which is directly related to the drawing’s central themes of political interrogation and torture (Tschofen 233). Incidentally, this thematic dimension is explicitly referenced in the poem on several occasions, of which “if interrogation is a desire to get information which is not given or not given freely” (DC 97) is a clear example. In addition, Tschofen’s remark that “a sentence is a logical unit that works towards resolution and closure” (236) is telling in view of Carson’s emphasis on the edge and the subsequent deferral of the signified, as said unfinished sentences thus refuse closure. Rather, these fragmented units can be said to “offer a way to articulate potentiality” (236), since they constitute indicative conditionals that denote factuality, i.e. they provide “a statement of what is true if the antecedent is true” (ibid.). This potential that needs to be accounted for can also be read within the broader context of literature and hermeneutics, as it challenges the positivist belief in the extrapolation of a definite ‘meaning.’

Interestingly, Tschofen relates the poem’s conditional syntax to interrogation, and, by extension, Carson’s figure of the edge. More specifically, Tschofen argues that “Carson uses the poem’s incomplete conditionals to comment self-reflexively on the conditional mode’s function as a connector of two parts” (236, emphasis added). In more concrete terms, the notion of interrogation as a relationship that hinges on an ambiguous distancing between subject and object is connected to the poem’s configuration of interrelationships expressing both distance and closeness (Tschofen 236-237). By way of illustration, the protasis “if conditional comes between condiment and condolence” (DC 101) represents an abstract relationship between the two terms constituting the
binary by relying on mere assonance and alphabetic ordering as uniting principles (Tschofen 236). Crucially, Tschofen states that the poem thus “offers a relationship based on contiguity and sharing” (237), which is a direct expression of the notion of analogy as similarity-in-difference. According to Tschofen, this idea of connection is elaborated in the poem’s core imagery revolving around the edge (237). The following lines are crucial in this respect as they form a key associative cluster tying together Deleuze’s new image of thought, the verbal and visual arts:

If it begins, a trickle, this thin slow falling of the mind.
If you want to know why the sliding affects your nerves.
If you want to know why you cannot reach your own beautiful ideas.
If you reach instead the edge of the thinkable, which leaks. (DC 99)

As Tschofen points out, the edge is indeed a recurring motif throughout Carson’s œuvre (237). Moreover, as the discussion of Carson’s stereoscopic poetics has already amply illustrated, edges are paradoxical as they constitute figures of both distance and contact (Tschofen 237). In this sense, identity always entails difference (ibid.), which can be related to Derrida’s aforementioned notion of différance, as well as Carson’s conception of Eros as a question of boundaries, and the erotic origins of analogy as a reaching out towards the unfamiliar (see also sections 2.2 and 3.3). Epistemologically speaking, edges thus “mark the place beyond which resides that which is not yet contained in the categories of the known” (Tschofen 237). Hence, the boundary between the thinkable and the unthinkable constitutes a line that one can never truly reach, but only reach towards as these edges leak (ibid.). In this way, the poem employs a metaphor “to make a picture of the limits of categorical thinking as well as thinking about categories” (Tschofen 237). This statement can be interpreted quite literally, since the unfinished sentences in the poem – with full stops – can be said to materialise this limit or edge. Thus, the verbal and visual mode reinforce each other to engender a liminal, analogous middle term in the form of a leaking edge. Tschofen relates this emphasis on the edge to the notion of heterotopia, as the poem presents an illusion of order or a logical grid only to “brin[g] that order to the edge past which it becomes unthinkable” (239).

At this point in her article, Tschofen draws attention to an aspect of Carson’s praxis that is crucial for this thesis whilst arguing that “in refusing to re-present something about
Goodwin’s drawing, Carson is offering a critique of representation itself and its relationship to both literary language and visual arts” (239). More concretely, Tschofen claims that “representation posits relationships between thoughts and things based on resemblance or similitude” (ibid.). At first sight, this statement seems to flagrantly contradict the conceptual underpinning of this thesis as a system operating on the basis of similarity-in-difference. Yet, as Tschofen elaborates her argument, the following quote proves that this is not necessarily the case: “[Representation] asserts correspondences, analogies, and associations between elements at the expense of their differences” (Hertzog, qtd. in Tschofen 239, emphasis added). In other words, Tschofen conceives of representation as “a tactic that seeks to ‘stop the leaks’ in an otherwise dynamic and shifting field of knowledge” (ibid.), which is precisely what Stafford’s conception of analogy too protests against. By thus rejecting “the representational image of thought [that] cannot think qualitative change or real difference” (Huygens, qtd. in Tschofen 239), Tschofen actually praises analogy’s conciliatory power as a “practice of intermedia communication” (Stafford 8) that maintains the distinctions between entities.

According to Tschofen, Carson’s ekphrastic poem discards a representational account of the visual image it discusses by not making the drawing speak and by not maintaining its distance from it – aspects which are both related to the overarching theme of political interrogation (240). In other words, Carson’s verbal account of the drawing indirectly comments on the theme of torture by refusing to treat the image “as though it were something that could be reached, and known rather than reached to” (240, original emphasis). Instead, Carson’s poem “enters into a relationship of reciprocity with the drawing to offer a new image of thought, an image of that which cannot be pictured” (ibid., original emphases). Thus, Carson’s work privileges interaction, reciprocity, and liminality over mimesis. In this way, Carson engages obliquely with analogy’s mediating role and thereby celebrates its relational functioning as an alternative to modes of mere representation. Bearing this in mind, Tschofen’s statement that “Carson's disturbances of the syntax of the phrase, of genre, of person, of order, and of representation itself are designed to expose techniques of control and to subvert them by offering models of how new dynamic interrelationships might be configured” (235, emphasis added) offers a refreshingly new angle on Carson’s stereoscopic image of thought.
6. Plurality of Writing, Plurality of Selves: Writer’s Writer Revisits Benjamin

Well, I think there are different gradations of personhood in different poems. Some of them seem far away from me and some up close, and the up-close ones generally don’t say what I want them to say. And that’s true of the persona in the poem, but it’s also true of me as me.


As a writer’s writer and “one of the great pasticheurs” (Merkin 2001), Carson has been praised and criticised for her extensive use of intertextual references, as though she were self-consciously testing the limits of creative reproduction in a fashion reminiscent of Walter Benjamin’s Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction (1935). In fact, Carson cites Benjamin’s quote on quotations in the text of her oratorio (DC 109-110). ‘Name-dropping,’ or writing as rewriting through wholesale reliance on other authors, has accordingly been established as a hallmark of her literary praxis (Thorp 2015: 15). Whereas Thorp regards this problematised aspect of her work as a poststructuralist technique to reflect on notions of authenticity in contemporary poetry (ibid.), this chapter takes Carson’s use of intertextuality as a starting point to argue that Decreation thus evokes a blurring of identity that complicates and refutes overt authorial control. In this way, Carson’s collection instigates a critical re-evaluation of the notion of agency in literary production. As she pits numerous literary voices against one another, the reader is ultimately coaxed into assessing Decreation from a perspective that can encompass these distinct voices. What this novel angle should look like remains to be established, and hence, what is at stake in the present chapter. In this regard, Parmar’s statement that “her [Carson’s] text is not littered with scholarly references just for the performance of her own ‘knowing.’ Her project is engaged, instead, with knowledge itself” (2006) offers a good starting point for discussion as it acknowledges the futility of analyses that are restricted to the authority of authors and thus ignore the inherent meaning potential that needs to be accounted for.

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19 By way of illustration, in the chapter with the loaded title ‘The Trouble with Annie,’ the Canadian poet and critic David Solway razes Carson’s work to the ground while claiming that “Anne Carson’s sudden cometary prominence provides us with a textbook example of how the mediocrity industry works in our time, attuned not to merit or talent but to celebrity […]” (2003: 39). Furthermore, he asserts that “the scholarship for which she is celebrated merely exacerbates her overall performance” (2003: 41).
6.1 Dialogism, Refracted Intention, and Rewriting

Ever since Julia Kristeva introduced the concept of *intertextuality* in the 1960s in 'Word, Dialogue and Novel' (1966), the term has allowed critics to verbalise a long-standing literary practice. Akin to T. S. Eliot's notion of a sense of tradition where “the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past” (1934b: 15), Kristeva's central idea that “any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another” (1986: 37) has already been discussed at length in a great many other works. Therefore, the present section builds on these studies by incorporating Kristeva's understanding of dialogism into the discussion, particularly in relation to Carson's polyphonic collection. Such a polyphonic work is characterised by “a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses” that are “not only objects of authorial discourse but also subjects of their own directly signifying discourse” (Bakhtin 1999: 6-7, original emphases). In more general terms, *polyphony* can therefore be regarded as a kind of writing that frees the voices of the characters from the authority of the authorial or narratorial voice (Buchanan 2010). Christopher Norris remarks that by defying the passive consumption and conventional habits of response characteristic of readerly texts, Roland Barthes' notion of the writerly text at the limit resembles such “a domain of intertextual traces and allusions where the author function is dissolved into an open polyphony of surrogate voices” (2010: 738). In other words, a phonic multiplicity that discards authorial control also implies a reconstitution of the relationship between writer and reader.

Admittedly, it would be too easy at this point to simply posit that the reader evolves from merely being a consumer to personifying a prosumer, i.e. a producer and consumer at the same time. Moreover, such a broad, sweeping statement does not offer a satisfactory account of Carson’s particular re-evaluation of literary agency in *Decreation*. However, it is certainly true that extensive reliance on intertextual references propels the reader into active participation by capitalising on the reader's literary knowledge and recognition. Yet, *Decreation* complicates this interactive process by relying on a stereoscopic third angle of vision as its organising principle. Two closely related terms

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are instructive in this regard and allow for a more precise description of how polyphony and intertextuality act as analogical signifying strategies in Decreation: Bakhtin’s heteroglossia and Kristeva’s above-mentioned interpretation of dialogism. The first term stands for “another’s speech in another’s language, serving to express authorial intentions but in a refracted way” (Bakhtin 1981: 324, original emphasis). Furthermore, Bakhtin asserts that such speech can be regarded as a particular type of double-voiced discourse that is internally dialogised, as two voices simultaneously communicate “the direct intention of the character who is speaking, and the refracted intention of the author” whilst being dialogically interrelated (ibid.). Since this thesis is driven by a literary semiology that is inspired by Iser’s branch of reader-response criticism and as it thus places a high value on notions related to the intentional fallacy, it should come as no surprise that authorial intention is here interpreted accordingly as the author’s intention as perceived by the reader.

The architectonics of dialogism, then, revolve around the central ideas of analogy, relation, and non-exclusive opposition (Kristeva 1986: 42, 56). In more concrete terms, dialogism or dialogical discourse can be defined as

The logic of distance and relationship between the different units of a sentence or narrative structure, indicating a becoming – in opposition to the level of continuity and substance, both of which obey the logic of being and are thus monological. Secondly, it is a logic of analogy and non-exclusive opposition, opposed to monological levels of causality and identifying determination. Finally, it is a logic of the ‘transfinite’, [...] which [...] introduces a second principle of formation: a poetic sequence is a ‘next-larger’ (not causally deduced) to all preceding sequences of the Aristotelian chain (scientific, monological or narrative). (Kristeva 1986: 42, original emphases)

In short, stating that Decreation relies on a modality of thought that operates on the basis of dialogue implies “a logic of distance, relativity, analogy, non-exclusive and transfinite opposition” (Kristeva 56). It is clear that this dialogical logic is closely tied up with what has been termed a synthetic disjunction in this thesis: both notions emphasise simultaneous distance and proximity by proceeding through analogy and non-exclusive opposition whilst bypassing mere causal deduction through a pragmatic reasoning that is both effective and affective. Moreover, Kristeva relates how dialogical discourse “includes carnivalesque and Menippean discourses as well as the polyphonic novel. In its
structures, writing reads another writing, reads itself and constructs itself through a process of destructive genesis” (47), which establishes the relationship between dialogism, polyphony, and intertextuality as a process of “concomitant creation and destruction” akin to Nietzsche’s concept of the Dionysian (Parkes 2005: xxv). Kristeva then provides a description of dialogism that manages to encapsulate the analogical quality of Carson’s stereoscopic poetics:

The notion of dialogism, which owed much to Hegel, must not be confused with Hegelian dialectics, based on a triad and thus on struggle and projection (a movement of transcendence) [...] Dialogism replaces these concepts by absorbing them within the concept of relation. It does not strive towards transcendence but rather toward harmony, all the while implying an idea of rupture (of opposition and analogy) as a modality of transformation. (Kristeva 1986: 58, emphasis added)

Kristeva thus allows for a more precise definition of what has thus far been called a dialectics of reconciliation as a dialogism of reconciliation. Even though said dialectics has not been conceptualised as Hegelian in this thesis but rather as open-ended by giving rise to a synthetic disjunction as opposed to a disjunctive synthesis, Kristeva’s term will be used within the context of this chapter on intertextuality and polyphony, as it underlines Carson’s rampant use of voices.

Finally, the correlation between polyphony, heteroglossia, and dialogism can be elucidated through Kristeva’s first dialogical model, which she defines as follows:

Within the polyphonic structure of a novel, the first dialogical model (S ⇄ A) plays itself out entirely within the writing discourse; and it presents itself as perpetually challenging this discourse. The writer’s interlocutor, then, is the writer himself, but as reader of another text. The one who writes is the same as the one who reads. Since his interlocutor is a text, he himself is no more than a text re-reading itself as it rewrites itself. The dialogical structure, therefore, appears only in the light of the text elaborating itself as ambivalent in relation to another text. (Kristeva 1986: 56-57)

In this way, double-voiced discourse that obscures perceived authorial intention and dialogical discourse in the form of an analogical logic based on non-exclusive opposition merge into an intertextual project of which a rewriting of literary history lies at the heart – all of which encapsulate the underlying principles of Decreation. Moreover, this
reasoning demonstrates how polyphony and intertextuality fit into a modus operandi that operates on the basis of analogy. Accordingly, polyphony and intertextuality are recuperated as signifying strategies that engender a blurring of identity between the different voices in *Decreation*, which in turn brings about a multi-voiced discourse that questions authorial control and necessitates a pragmatic, analogical third angle of vision. The novel speaker that is thus concocted is a profoundly individual construct of which the reader remains the ultimate creator, as this analogical enterprise is subject to a logic that is both cerebral and affective.

6.2 FROM INTERTEXTUALITY TO INTRATEXTUALITY: MEDITATIONS ON ‘I’

To substantiate this reasoning, it would not be unwise to take a closer look at the notion of voice in *Decreation*. In his article on narrative technique in Carson’s *The Glass Essay,* which is a rewriting of Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* (1847), Ian Rae puts forward a cogent argument concerning Carson’s use of intertextual echoes:

As the text progresses in this fashion, the intertextual allusions (between distinct authors and texts) transform into intratextual echoes (within Carson’s poem), and Carson thereby achieves the effect of blurred identity between Brontë and her speaker. [...] the author makes the reader feel this transformation taking place by showing how language draws the reader into a vortex of thought and emotion by establishing systems of association that become part of the speaker's subconscious response to phenomena. (Rae 2011: 174)

In other words, whilst intertextual references evolve into intratextual repetitions throughout Carson’s work, a blurring of identity takes place as these mental associations become part of the speaker’s subconscious. In this way, Carson offers a metareflection on the notion of a singular, unified voice, since she demonstrates that in addition to Bakhtin’s socio-literary polyphony, “there is difference and polyphony within every voice” (Bennett and Royle 2004: 75, original emphasis). Consequently, the voice of the author, or more accurately, the speaker, is “always phantasmagoric or ghostly and itself in turn always haunted” (ibid.). While this statement might seem self-evident, the particular techniques that are adopted to convey this sense of fragmented self become all the more interesting.
In *Decreation*, Carson consistently makes reference to a plethora of names. Yet, crucially, the collection opens with an unnamed speaker who addresses her or his mother, which gives the impression that this speaker is presumably a persona that is close to the author. However, towards the end of the first series of poems called *Stops*, the figure of Samuel Beckett is introduced when the speaker proclaims that “going to visit my mother is like starting in on a piece by Beckett” (*DC* 14). Beckett’s work then takes centre stage in the following two poems as well as in ‘Quad,’ Carson’s enigmatic discussion of his *Quadrat I* and *Quadrat II* in the form of a pseudo-interview. In this way, a first transformation from intertextual reference to intratextual echo takes place. Moreover, this introduction of Beckett is strongly reminiscent of a sentence in ‘The Glass Essay’ that reads: “Whenever I visit my mother / I feel I am turning into Emily Brontë” (1998: 3). In *Decreation*, Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* is referenced as well, not incidentally in ‘Quad’: “But Beckettpeople [sic] pounce on such remarks as if they were Catherine pulling feathers out of a pillow in *Wuthering Heights* [...]” (*DC* 123). In other words, these intratextual echoes take on a greater dimension within the context of Carson’s oeuvre as a whole. In any case, in both works the intertextual allusions conspicuously cloud the speaker’s assumed identity as she or he identifies with established literary names.

Such intertextual allusions are manifold in *Decreation*, but the *Gnosticisms* are especially metafictional, as they frequently offer a self-conscious reflection on intertextuality and notions of originality. The first poem entitled ‘Gnosticism I’ makes a tentative start: “[...] Astonishment // inside me like a separate person, / sweat-soaked. How to grip. / For some people a bird sings, feathers shine. I just get this *this*” (*DC* 87, original emphasis). In ‘Gnosticism III,’ however, Carson’s reliance on intertextuality is far more explicit as the “first line has to make your brain race that’s how Homer does it” (*DC* 89) illustrates, while ‘Gnosticism V’ gives up any pretence of ‘originality’ in literature when the speaker asserts that “to inspire me is why / I put in a bit of Wordsworth but then the page is over, he weighs it to the / ground” (*DC* 92). This preoccupation with literary names remains a constant throughout Carson’s work. However, it is not always clear who is being addressed or referred to. By way of illustration, the second half of ‘Ode to Sleep’ (*DC* 41, original emphases), Carson’s unorthodox conclusion to her essay on sleep, moves in rapid succession from a second person ‘your’ to a third person ‘her’ and ‘she,’ a first person ‘me,’ and a third person ‘they’:
later! Later,
not much left but a pale green upsilon embalmed between butter and fly—
but what's that stuff he's dabbing in your eye?
It is the moment when the shiver stops.
A shiver is a perfect servant.
Her amen sootheth.
“As a matter of fact,” she confides in a footnote, “it was
a misprint for mammoth.”
It hurts me to know this.
Exit wound, as they say.

In ‘Seated Figure with Red Angle (1988)’ by Betty Goodwin pronouns too occupy an important position. Tschofen argues that Goodwin’s idiosyncratic use of the second person pronoun for the first or third person, i.e. an impersonal ‘one’ or a personal ‘I’ (2013: 237), results in a situation where “what takes the appearance of a dialogue (Carson the poet addressing Goodwin the artist) turns out to be a kind of intertextual sampling (Carson quoting Goodwin) within which what is presented as a dialogue (Goodwin addressing her interviewer) is in part actually a monologue (Goodwin is talking about herself)” (238). Even though Tschofen grants that it remains to be seen “whether this ‘you’ refers to the reader of the poem, another viewer of Goodwin’s drawing, Goodwin herself, or the seated figure in the picture” (238), her conception of a subject/object ‘you’ ultimately stems from a belief in authorial control. In this respect, it is unclear as to why exactly “the second-person addressee appears to be Goodwin herself and the poem an intimate letter to the one who inspired it” (237). It could equally be argued that this ‘you’ refers to a paradigmatic instance of a torturer and thereby indirectly implicates the reader, as “if you had the idea of interrogation” (DC 97) clearly illustrates, especially since readers often subject the works they are reading to interrogation in their quest for absolute ‘meaning.’ Tschofen’s resort to biographism thus actually impedes a profound understanding of “the complex work of pronouns in articulating relationships” (237), although she does draw attention to the pivotal shift from the ‘you’ who thinks to the ‘you,’ and ultimately the ‘I,’ who affectively experiences at the end of the poem (238). Yet, whereas Tschofen connects this transformation to an acquired mastery of written language in the here and now of the phenomenal world (238), the final phrase “where is a place I can write this” (DC 101, original emphasis)
rather seems to hint at a blurring between speaker and reader, and by extension, a rejection of authorial control, as the choice for agency and reflection in writing is passed on to the reader.

Moreover, in ‘Quad,’ a similar questioning of voice takes place when the speaker relates how most of Beckett’s students whom he lectured to in Paris in 1931 “were doing their nails but one of them (Rosie) wrote down everything he said in a small notebook which she was courteous enough to show me” (DC 121). This statement is troubling for a number of reasons. Firstly, the reader is confronted with the ontological validity of the account as Carson seems to blur fact and fiction. It seems probable enough that a reader would take the first part of the statement on Beckett’s teaching position at face value, but the character of Rosie casts doubt on the whole account. Secondly, it seems unlikely that Carson could have met this person, that is, if the reader assumes the speaker of ‘Quad’ to be Anne Carson herself. However, it should be clear by this point that this ‘I’ in the collection is not the author, however autobiographically inspired Carson’s lyric essays may (appear to) be. Instead, Carson self-consciously complicates notions of authenticity and verity in a genre that could be called autobiographical fiction by directing the reader’s attention to the fact that her collection remains fictional. Carson’s Autobiography of Red, which is a rewriting of an ancient Greek myth concerning the red monster Geryon, can be placed within this same troubling paradigm. Yet, this fictional aura is nevertheless convoluted by the numerous intertextual references that stem from a very human author who “wears her brain on her sleeve” (Merkin 2001). In Decreation, Carson reflects on notions of authorship and ‘presence’ in writing while stating that “to be a writer is to construct a big, loud, shiny centre of self from which the writing is given voice and any claim to be intent on annihilating this self while still continuing to write [...] must involve the writer in some important acts of subterfuge or contradiction” (DC 171). The issue becomes even more complex when considering that Carson does not seem to make a fundamental distinction between her academic and fictional writing:

When I started to write the libretto, I had already worked on an academic lecture about Simone Weil, Marguerite Porete, and Sappho. The analytic level was there. The libretto was the fumes coming off that analytic effort, the sort of intoxicating fumes left in the
room by mashing up all the grapes of the academic part. So, not that different but more pleasant. Not a different part of my mind. (Carson, qtd. in Streckfus 2015: 216)

In this respect, it is telling that Carson’s essay on decreation appeared in an academic journal entitled *Common Knowledge* in 2002, before *Decreation* was published as a collection, while two of the three operas on decreation, *The Mirror of Simple Souls* and *Fight Cherries*,21 were performed in 1999 and 2001 respectively (Streckfus 2015: 214; Carson 2002b). Thus, according to Carson, there is no clear opposition between these two realms of her writing, which has enduring implications for the notion of voice in her collection. Incidentally, ‘Lots of Guns: An Oratorio for Five Voices’ was originally sung by Anne Carson herself, who was one of the performers during its debut in 2003 (*DC* 115), but crucially, the text of the oratorio does not indicate who these five voices represent or which parts of the text they each take on. All the same, this still does not resolve the point at issue in this chapter, that is: Who is speaking? To use Carson’s words: “What is a voice? Yes. I’ve been so long fascinated by all the information conveyed in a voice” (2012). However, such a question calls for some more background still.

As it would be too time-consuming and admittedly, not very insightful to take a closer look at every instance of intertextuality in the collection – and perhaps even impossible given Carson’s remarkable erudition – only specific intratextual echoes will be examined here. A first one of these has already been discussed and concerns the figure of Samuel Beckett. A second major literary figure in *Decreation* is Homer, whose *Odyssey* and *Iliad* are discussed at length in the essay on sleep and in the oratorio, and who also makes an appearance in the essay on the sublime, ‘Gnosticism III,’ ‘Quad,’ and the third part of the opera. Furthermore, Virginia Woolf plays a prominent role in the collection as well, since the story ‘A Haunted House,’ her essay entitled ‘The Sun and the Fish,’ and her novels *To the Lighthouse, The Waves*, and *The Voyage Out* are discussed extensively in the essays on sleep and the solar eclipse. Philosophers, too, are rewarding objects of study in the collection. Immanuel Kant, for one, is mentioned in the essay on sleep and in several of the *Sublimes*. Plato’s *Krito*, too, is referenced in the essay on sleep and he later also reappears in the sublime entitled ‘L’ (Ode to Monica Vitti)’ as well as in the third part of the opera. Moreover, the treatise *On the Sublime* by the ancient literary critic Longinus

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21 In *Decreation*, the second part of the opera is called *Her Mirror of Simple Souls.*
provides a conceptual basis for the essay on the sublime, and Longinus subsequently makes an appearance in the *Sublimes* and in the first part of the essay on decreation, where he is credited with the preservation of Sappho’s fragment 31. Finally, the director Michelangelo Antonioni plays an equally important role in the essay on the sublime, the accompanying rhapsody, and the *Sublimes* as a whole, of which the opening poem bears the telling title ‘Longinus’ Dream of Antonioni.’ Other names that are mentioned in the collection include Byron, Artaud, Keats, Milton, Tolstoy, Hegel, Nabokov, Emily Dickinson, and Annie Dillard, to name but some. Not incidentally, Carson too makes reference to Tom Stoppard, the master of “artistic recycling” (Meyer 1989: 105), and more specifically to his rewriting of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, thus offering a reflection on metafictional work (*DC* 35-36).

Yet, it is not always clear whether the information that is attributed to these historical figures is accurate or fictional, as Carson does not always provide a source, for example when she writes that “‘Lovers all show such symptoms as these,’ Longinus says” (*DC* 160) without providing a reference. Furthermore, the sublime ‘Mia Moglie (Longinus’ Red Desert)’ starts off with a presumed quote by Longinus that reads “‘For instance, Sappho,’ as Longinus says” (*DC* 67) and then continues with a series of sentences between quotation marks of which both the source and the speaker are unclear, thereby evoking a lingering monologue that does not seem to be addressed to or spoken by anyone in particular. Yet, crucially, the poem ends with another quote that is supposedly written by Longinus: “‘as I believe I said,’ Longinus adds” (*DC* 68). The poem thus blurs the distinction between quotes and chunks of conversation, and by extension, fact and fiction, as Carson uses quotation marks for both purposes. In this respect, the formal organisation of the collection plays a pivotal role as well, given that *Decreation* opens with a series of poems entitled *Stops*, to be followed immediately by the essays on sleep and the sublime, where quotation marks do represent actual quotations, accompanied by endnotes. What is more, Carson heightens the sense of (false) factual representation in ‘Mia Moglie’ by printing the speech (and thought) representation of other unnamed characters in italics, as “On the street she pulls herself along, to get there will be worse” and “What is that antenna for? she asks a man. To listen to the noise / of stars—” (*DC* 68, original emphases) clearly illustrate. In this way, Carson is able to riff on historical figures in intricate, fictional patterns.
Moreover, the notion of voice becomes even more problematic when taking into account that *Decreation* is not only suffused with fictionalised accounts of historical figures, but also with narratives of actual fictional figures. By way of illustration, the ‘H & A Screenplay’ revolves around the affair between the theologian Abelard and his student Heloise, one of the most famous couples of the Middle Ages (Bulman 2012: 2, 15), whereas the first part of the opera, ‘Love’s Forgery,’ is based on an ancient Greek myth concerning the love triangle between Aphrodite, Hephaistos, and Ares. Furthermore, some passages in the collection hinge on mere speculation rather than textual documentation, such as the conversations between Simone Weil and her parents in the third part of the opera. In general, Carson often provides an additional, fictionalised account of the topics and figures she introduces in her essays – although their lyric quality already imbues these expositions with a fictional strain. In this regard, the *Sublimes*, the *Gnosticisms*, and the rhapsody ‘The Day Antonioni Came to the Asylum’ can be said to revisit and complement the essay on the sublime, the opera in three parts the essay on decreation, and the ‘Ode to Sleep’ the essay on sleep by evoking a dream logic. Yet, different media and genres call for different ‘content,’ a process which is also known as transduction. In more concrete terms, ‘meaning’ is thus transposed from one medium to another (Collard 2011: 23), which does not constitute merely a kind of translation, as Kress states, but rather a negotiation (Kress 2010: 125). In the case of *Decreation*, this phenomenon can be illustrated by the fact that the opera does not comprise a fourth part, in contrast with the ‘three-part’ essay, and more importantly, the first part of the opera is not simply based on Sappho, the woman writer under scrutiny in the first part of the essay, but rather on her object of worship, i.e. the god Aphrodite. This intratextual rewriting thus confirms adaptation’s potential as syncretic structuring process rooted in increased pattern recognition and analogical thought (Collard 2011: 23-24).

To conclude, the reader of *Decreation* is coaxed into ‘toggling’ between fictional and fictionalised accounts of mythical and historical figures. In many instances, these intertextual references take the form of intratextual echoes, which together evoke a system of association that gives rise to a blurring of identity between the author, wrongly assumed to be the speaker, and the polyphony of voices. Jennings rightly adds that this alienation of self results in “another kind of juxtaposition, another means of creating a cusp between the ‘normal’ and the unknown or occult to invest the poem with
a dual focus” (2001: 931, emphasis added). This “reinterpretation of the self in the context of others” (McCorkle 1997: 46) goes hand in hand with a vision of heterogeneity that “attempts to re-vision language and how it constitutes both the self and society” (McCorkle 48). In other words, this multiplication of intersubjective frameworks can be seen as “the first step in a semantic expansion, a multiplication of possible viewpoints and interpretations that destabilizes the unity of the self” and it thereby gives rise to a less bounded text (Rae 2008: 34). As the (perceived) intention of the author is thus refracted, Decreation succeeds in showing the pitfalls and limitations of a belief in overt authorial control. This third angle of vision that the reader is consequently confronted with hinges on the “analogical recurrence of semantic units across different […] texts” (Collard 2011: 27). As this analogical reasoning is largely reliant on the reader’s own idiosyncratic associations, the syncretic speaker of Decreation ultimately becomes the sum of the reader’s (partial) recognitions of him- or herself in the plethora of voices.

6.3 A NOTE ON GENDER AND WOMEN’S WRITING

In relation to women’s writing, Carson asserts that not particular ‘feminisms,’ but “particular females are of interest to [her]” (qtd. in Rae 2008: 248), thus clearly not depicting herself as an advocate of an écriture feminine (Rae 2008: 248). Rae argues that gender and genre can be related in Carson’s work, insofar as Carson develops gender as a question of genre: by exploring gender through fictional guises, Carson is able to probe the potential of different perspectives and approaches (ibid.). In more concrete terms, Rae states that “Carson parodies autobiography’s pretense to objective self-expression by using the genre as a means of fictional disembodiment” (250). In this sense, Carson’s numerous literary disguises must be understood as part of an “identity collage” that shapes the reader’s perception of who the author is as a person (251). Yet, while his argument is conceptually sound within the context of Autobiography of Red, Decreation seems to address a more pertinent question. For despite the fact that many intertextual references in the collection refer to male writers, philosophers, and artists, the collection’s central essay on decreation is concerned with the lives of three women who “had the nerve to enter a zone of absolute spiritual daring” (DC 179). In this respect, Rae’s statement that Carson’s “feminist enquiries devote attention to the lives of childless female intellectuals (Dickinson, Stein, Woolf), or married women whose
behaviour departs from normative maternal roles (Sappho)” (2008: 254) is revealing, especially since all these women play a role in Decreation. Carson references Emily Dickinson’s and Virginia Woolf’s work in the essay on the solar eclipse, while the oratorio originated as a contribution to a ‘Tribute to Gertrude Stein’ in 2003 (DC 115). Stein also makes an appearance in ‘Gnosticism IV,’ whereas Woolf’s work is discussed in the essay on sleep as well. Moreover, the first part of the essay on decreation is devoted to the ancient Greek poet Sappho, while the second and third part are concerned with the lives of Marguerite Porete and Simone Weil respectively, all women who established a personal relationship with divinity that radically questioned the status quo in the form of a particular annihilation of the self.

Crucial here is the writerly project shared by all of them, which allows Carson to reflect on their writings and especially the reasoning behind them, both directly in her essays and indirectly in her other literary experiments. In this sense, it could be argued that Decreation is engaged in a project of recuperation, i.e. an attempt to “re-evaluate forgotten or neglected texts by women” (Hawkins 2015: 156, original emphasis). The following excerpt from the essay on decreation adds weight to this theory:

Society is all too eager to pass judgments on the authenticity of women’s ways of being but these judgments can get crazy. As a case in point, the book for which Marguerite Porete was burned in 1310 was secretly preserved and copied after her death by clerics […] saintliness is an eruption of the absolute into ordinary history and we resent that. We need history to remain ordinary. We need to be able to call saints neurotic, anorectic, pathological, sexually repressed or fake. These judgments sanctify our own survival. (DC 180)

In this way, Carson invites her readers to read and especially think differently, to disregard their own ‘survival’ temporarily by choosing not to condemn these women on the basis of entrenched categorisation. Instead, Carson concludes her essay on decreation with the ambiguous statement that

[...] in the end it is important not to be fooled by fake women. If you mistake the dance of jealousy for the love of God, or a heretic’s mirror for the true story, you are likely to
spend the rest of your days in terrible hunger. No matter how many pages you eat. \textit{(DC 181, emphasis added)}

Whether one reads the first part on ‘fake women’ ironically or not, it is clear that Carson indirectly comments on the need for hermeneutic responsibility at the heart of any textual engagement, as she contrasts critical reflection with literal readings or blind ‘consumptions’ of texts. Carson thus advocates an ‘enlightened,’ critical way of reading that refrains from passing judgement on literary works in terms of the restrictive categories their authors belong to, most notably gender. She thereby draws attention to the capacity of language to convey the dominant hegemonic patterns and concomitantly condemns the binary thinking that all too often excludes certain authors from critical discourses. Instead, Carson advocates a language-centred approach to literature that discards easy co-optation:

Each of her [Carson’s] pieces transcends and speaks to something beyond its subject; words are isolated and scrutinized like “selves” and then re-contextualized. [...] 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. (Parmar 2006)

Such an approach is far more constructive as it takes account of the whole of human history and literature. Said ‘personal’ histories, however, are only truly personal in relation to the denotation of these words and the reader’s response to and recognition of the inter- and intratextual references. Yet, all the same, Carson’s recontextualisation of words allows for simultaneous reflection on and criticism of the historical and literary contexts in which these words were and are used, as Carson’s “my intention in this essay is to burrow like a mole in different ways of reading sleep” \textit{(DC 19)} clearly illustrates. Carson’s extended riffs on the sublime, the solar eclipse, and ‘decreation’ in both her essays and the accompanying literary experiments further exemplify this sustained process of inter- and intratextual recontextualisation. Bearing this in mind, Carson’s statement that “I cannot stand reading reviews of my work (I skim) or in general sentences in which I appear as ‘she’” \textit{(qtd. in Rae 2008: 247)} only adds to \textit{Decreation’s} rejection of facile categorisation in favour of a more inclusive intersubjective space.
7. **Narration, Myth, and Echoes: Congealing Disparate Experience**

Prowling the meanings of a word, prowling the history of a person, no use expecting a flood of light. Human words have no main switch. But all those little kidnapes in the dark. And then the luminous, big, shivering, discandied, unrepentant, barking web of them that hangs in your mind when you turn back to the page you were trying to translate.

— Anne Carson in *Nox* (qtd. in Stang 2012)

In his article on sublime disembodiment, Disney states that “the poems in ‘Stops’ speak less of integration by assembling parts of a life into an imaginative order, and more of a rhapsodic swerve towards disintegration” (2012: 35). Yet, this sense of disintegration is countered by the numerous echoes, which can rightfully be described as the kernel of Carson’s literary project (Thorp 2015: 23). As a serial collection, *Decreation* makes use of repetition and framing to connect the distinct genres and forms, and thereby inspires a stereoscopic vision. The present chapter examines Carson’s use of repetition to argue that these echoes instil a sense of continuity that counterbalances the paratactic quality of the collection in an eternal, mythical time. *Decreation* can be seen as a concerted work of literature, in the sense that “any idea must be perpetually rewritten, re-understood, re-transformed” (Thorp 23). This chapter is thus not concerned with literal repetitions, such as the figure of the wind or the swallow in the collection, but rather with the reassessment of central ideas. Whereas Thorp suggests that rewriting – in the sense of exploring the notion of a bounded text – constitutes the crux of her praxis (24), Carson’s narrative technique will here be treated as a signifying strategy that illustrates how a concept, in this case the notion of ‘decreation,’ is established and continually enriched by a succession of analogies in a constant oscillation between the known and unknown (Hofstadter and Sander 2013: 3). This specific understanding of an echo as a variation on a leitmotif allows for a sense of repetition-through-difference, which engenders continued creation in an analogical whirlwind of personal associations.

To corroborate this reasoning, the present chapter builds on Ian Rae’s incisive account (2011) of Carson’s narrative technique in ‘The Glass Essay.’ In this respect, it would not be unwise to consider that Rae reads ‘The Glass Essay’ as a bilingual pun on the Canadian compound term *verglas*, which stands for a fine, glass-like layer of limpid ice.
caused by April thaws or freezing rain (2011: 164, 182). Moreover, he claims that “‘The Glass Essay’ has come to define Carson’s narrative technique” (163). The similarity between ‘The Glass Essay’ and ‘Gnosticism II’ in Decreation may be simply fortuitous, but the latter too draws on the concepts of ice and glass through the image of windows at night. The following excerpt from ‘Gnosticism II’ (DC 88, original emphasis) is presented as a stepping stone to my own investigation of narrative technique in Decreation:

Forgot? how the mind goes at it, you open
the window (late) there is a siffling sound,
that cold smell before sleep, roofs
frozen staircase, frozen stair
a piece of it comes in.

Comes in, stands in the room a bit of a column of it alive.
At first no difference then palely, a dust,
an indentation, stain
of some guest
centuries ago.

Some guest at this very hour [...]
inspired by Longinus and Antonioni but are ultimately centred on Monica Vitti, Immanuel Kant, and an unnamed speaker who presumably lives in Canada (cf. DC 74). Other examples of triadic configurations abound in the collection: the essay on the solar eclipse deals with, *inter alia*, the love triangle between Vita Sackville-West and Virginia and Leonard Woolf, Sappho is entangled in a similar triangle involving a girl and a man, and each of the three parts of the opera on decreation concerns a triad: that between Hephaistos, Aphrodite, and Ares in part one; God, Marguerite Outer, and Marguerite Inner in part two; and Simone, Madame, and Monsieur Weil in part three.

Yet, these triadic configurations do not account for the echoes that pervade *Decreation* and thereby evoke a sense of repetition-through-difference. Since such a question calls for more background, Rae's statement about Carson's use of conceits proves helpful:

Whereas Donne's conceits draw unlike entities into a convergent state of synonymy through brilliant but outrageous comparisons, Carson clusters related entities together and explores their similarities without ever finally unifying or arresting them. Instead, these affinities serve as means for the author to change narrative foci, defer conclusions, explore ideas from different angles, negate initial hypotheses, and develop new ones. (167-168, emphasis added)

Rae thus argues that Carson draws on the affinities between related elements to advance her poem. However, I am arguing that by juxtaposing seemingly disparate elements in *Decreation*, Carson's narrative technique encourages distinct entities to be viewed through the prism of analogy, which captures what has been termed a metaphysical project of decreation. Whereas Rae thus states that the aim of this method is to "clarify[y] their subtle but important differences" (168), the present chapter shifts the focus by letting Carson's juxtapositional method take centre stage: the purpose is not to foreground similarity and elucidate minor differences, but rather to inspire a new understanding of distinct elements that allows for similarity despite difference, or in other words, a synthetic disjunction. In this way, the overarching conceit of 'decreation' is evoked by juxtaposing incongruous entities that together offer a variation on this key motif. For this claim not to remain an empty, hollow statement, the following excerpt from 'Gnosticism IV' is presented:
at the moment in the interminable dinner when Coetzee bask ing
icily across from you at the faculty table is all at once
there like a fox in a glare, asking
And what are your interests?
his face a glass that has shattered but not yet fallen. (DC 90, original emphasis)

While this thesis does not claim to account for (personal) interpretation but rather approaches Decreation from a processual angle, the excerpt demonstrates that Carson connects seemingly unrelated elements, including the figure of Coetzee, academia, and a fox. However, on second thought, it becomes clear that this juxtapositional method allows Carson to reflect on the dangers of the competitive streak in academic life. Crucially, here, too, ice and glass play a prominent role, and both contribute to the sense of insecurity and confrontation that characterises academia in general and the ‘soft’ sciences in particular. Especially the phrase “his face a glass that has shattered but not yet fallen” points to a potential burn-out, which can be regarded as a particular instance of the overarching metaphor of ‘decreation.’ This “process of congealing wherein things are connected by a medium of glace yet do not abandon their distinct identities” (Rae 171, original emphasis) is thus instrumental in evoking an atmosphere of disintegration.

Another example of what is meant by Carson’s method of juxtaposition that generates echoes of ‘decreation’ throughout the collection can be found in ‘Our Fortune’ (DC 6):

In a house at dusk a mother’s final lesson
ruins the west and seals up all that trade.
Look in the windows at night you will see people standing.
That’s us, we had an excuse to be inside.
Day came, we cut the fruit (we cut
the tree). Now we’re out.
Here is a debt
paid.

Again, the speaker’s mother, the downfall of the West, people standing, and debt seem unrelated to one another, but Carson manages to tie these elements in with a sense of sublime transcendence. As the mother’s “final lesson” on her deathbed amounts to a
rejection of Western capitalism and materialism, the speaker and his or her mother are ultimately able to perceive reality in a fashion reminiscent of Plato’s cave. Rae thus rightly notes that “the clarity of Carson’s work is enhanced, not obscured, by this circuitousness because each variation of the [...] motif is like a lens magnifying the significance of the preceding and succeeding variations” (165). To put it differently, Carson’s narrative technique in *Decreation* operates on the basis of analogy at two levels simultaneously: both within the juxtaposed entities that evoke a sense of ‘decreation’ on a micro level and between the resulting variations on ‘decreation’ throughout the collection on a macro level. In this respect, the unfolding leitmotif “serves to cluster percepts, affects, and memories in a constant state of becoming” (Rae 170) or *recreating* the self, thereby once again blurring the distinction between speaker and reader.

As Carson thus “layers one interpretive lens on top of another” (Rae 173) and the readers forge links within and between dissonant chains of elements, reverberating echoes are created and recuperated within a paradigm that rejects referential thinking. Within the context of this intricate network of relations, Rae postulates that ‘The Glass Essay’ fuses “the paratactic qualities of the modernist lyric (in which the poem leaps from one topic to another without transitional matter) with the hypotactic logic of the essay (in which the essay develops an argument using classical techniques of rhetorical persuasion)” (164). In relation to *Decreation*, I am thus arguing along Rae that Carson’s collection “camouflages hypotaxis as parataxis, such that her seemingly fragmented poetry retains an element of rhetorical coherence and force, while at the same time undermining the element of subordination in the hypotactic logic [...]” (Rae 183) by favouring an analogical over a referential logic. In other words: by relying on relationships of similarity-in-difference, the collection offers an alternative to the hypotactic logic now characteristic of prose where “clauses and arguments are subordinated to a principal one” (Rae 182), without, however, comprising on coherence.

At this point it should be clear that Carson’s juxtapositional technique, which can be regarded as a trademark of her style (Rae 2008: 258), mirrors the thematic concerns of the collection. As content and medium thus reflect and reinforce each other, a recursive loop is generated of which a “revisiting effect” (Delville 2013: 223) lies at the heart, not least since the variations on the central metaphor of ‘decreation’ reverberate throughout
the collection. This kind of repetition with a difference, also known as iteration (Callens 2014: 77), is characteristic of the loop, which can be defined as “a structuring device which, unlike mere repetition, intentionally ‘returns upon itself’ by ‘revisiting’ previous compositional units or segments of a given artwork” (Delville 2013: 222). As a result, these units “can only be reread as a copy or trace of their first occurrence in the artwork as they undergo further repetitions, variations, complications and displacements in the subsequent sections of the piece” (Delville 2013: 222, original emphasis). By way of illustration, the poem ‘Stanzas, Sexes, Seductions’ is suffused with variations on key themes, which include the colour green, love, the intOLERABILITY of existence, and by extension death, through phrases such as “green room,” “the greenness of love,” “things unbearable,” “to be unbearable,” “this little size of dying,” “still die,” and “legs die” (DC 72-73). As might be expected, the colour green is a loaded term in this respect since it echoes Carson’s central dream of the uncanny green living room, as mentioned in the essay on sleep. More relevantly in terms of Carson’s use of iteration, however, these apparently unrelated variations on said key themes – which are already reverberations in themselves – together echo the overarching conceit of ‘decreation,’ as the poem reflects on heartbreak and the ambiguities of love (DC 72-73):

The oceans remind me
of your green room.

There are things unbearable
Scorn, princes, this little size
of dying.

[...]
I tempt you.

I blush.

There are things unbearable.
Legs alas.

Legs die.

Hence, Carson’s paratactic narrative technique of juxtaposing seemingly disconnected elements – visually reinforced through her use of layout – formally echoes the overarching theme of personal annihilation. Crucially, the recursive loop that is thus created can be closely related to the workings of myth. In this respect, Rae references
Michael Ondaatje, who states that myth is produced through “a very careful use of echoes—of phrases and images. There may be no logical connection when these are placed side by side, but the *variations* are always there setting up parallels” (qtd. in Rae 2011: 174, emphasis added). Furthermore, Rae draws attention to the particular understanding of myth that is put forward in *The Beauty of the Husband*: “All myth is an enriched pattern, / a two-faced proposition, / allowing its operator to say one thing and mean another, to lead a double life” (Carson, qtd. in Rae 2011: 176). It is clear that the deliberate use of variations on a key idea often results in the text’s meaning potential being Janus-faced or even multifarious – which is exactly where the importance of analogical thinking manifests itself. Yet, such an “enriched pattern” has implications more far-reaching than mere polysemy.

Indeed, the continual rewriting of central ideas inspires a sense of perpetuity that is capable of counterbalancing the paratactic quality of the collection. Carson’s literary project of perennially re-engaging with her material thus plays a pivotal role in evoking an eternal, mythical time – a quality so very characteristic of Carson’s writings. Said paratactic shifts therefore not only result in a “parallel present tense” (D’Agata, qtd. in Rae 2011: 183) of juxtaposed elements, but in a wholesale reconceptualisation of time – and, by extension, literature – as not merely layered (Rae 173) but as representing a continuity between past and present. Meanings become transitory as “each variation of the key motif in Carson’s […] [collection] cycles through moments of dominance, subordination, blurred identity, and complementarity before congealing in a surprising state of suspension” (Rae 183), yet, crucially, the variations encourage analogical reasoning and imbue the collection with a sense of coherence and continuity. This cyclic rather than linear progression is therefore instrumental in instilling a mythical quality in the core of *Decreation*, which allows for a reconceptualisation of Carson’s praxis as aporetically probing the meanings of not only words, but entrenched patterns of thinking in general. As Carson revisits the past and thus reevaluates the present in a recursive loop, Heloise rightly notes that “still the absence of time divides itself perpetually / into the one same moment / (repeat)—” (*DC* 131).
8. Conclusion

A meaning spins, remaining upright on an axis of normalcy aligned with the conventions of connotation and denotation, and yet: to spin is not normal, and to dissemble normal uprightness by means of this fantastic motion is impertinent. [...] To catch beauty would be to understand how that impertinent stability in vertigo is possible. But no, delight need not reach so far. To be running breathlessly, but not yet arrived, is itself delightful, a suspended moment of living hope.

— Anne Carson in Eros the Bittersweet (1988: xi)

In his work on the blurring of boundaries between poetry and prose in Canada, Rae rightly notes that Carson’s “preferred subject of inquiry is [...] a centripetal force whose centre cannot be reached” as “she enucleates the master narrative that would supply the interpretive centre and stabilize the hermeneutic axis” (2008: 258). This thesis has demonstrated precisely that by confronting multiple dimensions, Carson’s refutational approach to hermeneutic finality naturally results in a myriad of readings – both formally and thematically – which in turn allows for a far more constructive outlook on ‘meaning’ than mere absolutism or even intentionalism. Yet, it is equally important to recognise that such a project cannot succeed without extensive reliance on technique, especially when it comes to a work of literature that is concerned with “not [...] poetry per se, but [...] [with] translation—between languages, between identities, and ultimately between genres” (D’Agata, qtd. in Rae 2011: 167). This study augments said claim about Carson’s Men in the Off Hours by showing how Decreation addresses the notion of translation – or transduction, which necessitates mediation – through the prism of a stereoscopic looking glass.

The central investigation at issue is thus the pursuit of knowledge – in the first place knowledge of oneself and the ineluctable boundaries that are in place when being confronted with the object of one’s desire. However, this central pursuit is not limited to an erotic poetics (cf. Fisher, 2015; Jennings, 2001); the edge between various levels of experience has continually been put forward. Indeed, “reason remains undaunted” (DC 62) as the collection fictionalises the everyday process of synthesising and reconciling disparate experience. Yet, despite the fact that this “little rip in their minds” (DC 64) is established as the status quo, Decreation equally recognises that the attainment of this
third angle of vision remains an ideal, as “it would be a very high test of dialectical
e endurance to be able to, not just recognize, but consent to this breakdown” (DC 165).
Accordingly, Decreation interweaves reader and literary technique – and thereby gives
concrete form to Iser’s theory of the reading process (1980) – by taking the human body
as its starting point, as “if Vitruvius says no temple can be coherently constructed unless
it is put together exactly as a human body is” (DC 100) clearly illustrates. Decreation thus
fuses content and medium by calling for an embodied reading, as appositely exemplified
by Simone Weil’s statement that “I create myself by work” (DC 233), which is echoed in
the final sentences of the collection: “As usual she enjoyed the sense of work, of having
worked. Other fears would soon return” (DC 245). In this way, ‘decreation’ must be
understood as a process of perennial re-creation through the act of re-visioning rather
than as singular destructive annihilation. This Dionysian interpretation of the term as a
process of simultaneous creation and destruction (Parkes 2005: xxv) incidentally attests
to the collection’s heuristic potential.

In more concrete terms, said stereoscopic vision – necessitated by the collection’s
emphasis on the edge or leaking boundary between apparent incompatibilities –
requires the projection of sameness upon difference. This particular understanding of
analogy as a three-part structure in turn allows for a reassessment of Carson’s
“aesthetics of disjunction” (Fisher 2015: 11) as an expression of apparent incongruence.
Accordingly, the signifying strategies discussed evoke a sense of ‘decreation’ while
simultaneously co-opting the reader’s potential to overcome this sense of fragmentation,
yet without arriving at transcendence. In other words, the goal is a partial concordance
or harmony as the collection is rooted in a metaphysical, life-long project of continuously
confronting and reassessing discordant dimensions of reality. Deleuze and Guattari’s
understanding of such a “dialectics of reconciliation” (Stafford 2001: 14) as a disjunctive
synthesis must therefore be re-termed a ‘synthetic disjunction,’ given that these
signifying strategies propel the reader to discover “similarity-in-difference” (Stafford
2001: 9) whilst keeping the dialectic open by passing the responsibility for concocting
the analogies on to the reader. This processual approach to signification is closely tied
up with N. Katherine Hayles’s conception of a pattern/randomness-dialectic, where
“meaning is not front-loaded into the system, and the origin does not act to ground
signification. […] [Rather] complexity evolves from highly recursive processes being
applied to simple rules” (1999: 285). In other words, the basic principle of analogy as a process of pattern recognition, i.e. similarity-in-difference, on a number of discrete levels gives rise to a complex network of relations.

In terms of the collection’s use of intergenericity, Carson’s lacing together of what are commonly perceived as distinct genres in essence constitutes a coherent yet palpably estranging interweaving that encourages the readers to rethink their frame of reference. Carson’s self-conscious approach thus does not defy genre but rather rethinks the concept by capitalising on the readers’ expectations in order to bring about a process of critical reassessment. In this sense, the notion of genre is understood as a tool or cognitive sense-making device that is negotiable as a social construct (cf. Lomborg 2014: 42). As a case in point, her lyric essays stimulate interaction between the contiguous domains of thought and feeling, and thus promote reflection on the apparently discrete genres of poetry and nonfictional prose as well as on their distinctive features. Carson’s reconstitution of genre participation therefore comes down to a refutation of the ‘quiddity’ of generic classifications by relying on intergenericity as a signifying strategy for harmonisation. In other words, the readers are forced to devise their own working definitions of generic classes after being confronted with an unusual co-occurrence of genres. To this end, the collection adopts the serial strategies of repetition and framing to achieve a harmonious coexistence of distinct genres and forms, and to counter the discontinuity of the narrative. In this way, Decreation inspires a re-evaluation and questioning of the categories that make up human experience.

Moreover, Decreation’s multimodal nature underlines the necessity of considering the meaning potential residing in the interaction between the visual and verbal mode. The collection’s modal organisation thereby acts as an incentive to reassess how meaning in literature originates. In other words, reading Decreation proves a disjunctive encounter, since the visual surface of the page is used to foreground the material process of reading. In more concrete terms, the interaction between the verbal and visual mode brings about a multimodal metaphor, which is here conceptualised as an analogical middle term or unifying agent that mediates between said two modes. The specific multimodal metaphor at issue in Decreation is ‘to read is to be decreated, or to be confronted with your own humanity,’ and is accordingly evoked through the fundamentally embodied
practice of reading that the collection inspires, since multimodality plays a pivotal role in integrating actual experience and virtual meaning into an embodied narrative understanding. More concretely, this embodied understanding arouses said metaphor through the process of visceral reading, as the creation of a dual reading experience that gives concrete form to the edge between the verbal and visual mode hinders the reader’s complete immersion in the fictional world. As the use of images, typography, and layout thus prevents this complete immersion by necessitating engagement with the medium’s material properties to advance the narrative, the collection generates an affective friction between the visual and verbal mode that calls for embodied congruence. By thus drawing explicit attention to the bistable perception or oscillation involved in all reading experiences, the collection evokes a metafictional double consciousness. As a result, the readers are galvanised into (dual) action: they are not only encouraged to integrate two reading paths into a stereoscopic third angle of vision, but also to ‘toggle’ between the actual world of the textual surface and the virtual world beyond the page.

Furthermore, this research project has demonstrated that Carson’s use of intertextuality engenders a re-evaluation of literary agency by capitalising on a blurring of identity that convolutes and refutes overt authorial control. In more specific terms, Bakhtin’s notion of heteroglossia as a kind of double-voiced discourse that muddles perceived authorial intention and Kristeva’s understanding of dialogism as a logic that proceeds through analogy and non-exclusive opposition give rise to an intertextual rewriting of literary history (cf. Bakhtin 1981: 324; Kristeva 1986: 42). In this way, polyphony and intertextuality can function as signifying strategies that prompt a stereoscopic angle of vision by generating a multi-voiced discourse that obliquely questions authorial control in writing. More concretely, these intertextual voices frequently live on through intratextual echoes, which establish a system of association that blurs the distinction between the author-speaker and the plethora of voices. As the polyphonic collection thus pits fictional and fictionalised accounts of mythical and historical figures against one another, the reader is ushered to a third angle of vision. Said angle ultimately pivots on analogical reasoning and is therefore largely dependent on the reader’s own idiosyncratic associations. Consequently, the speaker of Decreation can only be dynamically concocted through an accumulation of the readers’ (partial) recognitions of themselves in the various voices. This finding can be extended to Carson’s sustained
process of inter- and intratextual recontextualisation, which also favours a more inclusive intersubjective space over easy categorisation and concomitant discrimination.

Finally, this thesis has used Rae’s study (2011) as a starting point to argue that Carson’s use of echoes imbues the collection with a sense of coherence and continuity that is able to counterpoise the paratactic quality of the collection through a mythical understanding of time. In this regard, Carson’s narrative technique functions as a signifying strategy that demonstrates how the principle of ‘decreation’ is entrenched and continually reassessed by means of a succession of analogies. These analogies take the form of echoes or variations on an unfolding leitmotif, which kindles a sense of repetition-through-difference. In more concrete terms, the collection evokes the overarching conceit of ‘decreation’ by juxtaposing distinct elements that together constitute a variation on this key motif. In other words, Carson’s narrative technique of juxtaposing discordant entities in Decreation operates on the basis of analogy at two levels simultaneously: the readers not only concoct relationships of similarity-in-difference within dissonant chains of elements, but also between the resulting echoes. As this juxtapositional technique allows for a conceptual coherence between content and form, a recursive loop is generated that is closely tied up with the workings of myth through a continuous re-engagement with central ideas.

Adopting Stafford’s conception of analogy (2001) as a structuring principle has thus allowed for a nuanced investigation of the ways in which the notion of ‘decreation’ is evoked and translated into the signifying strategies whereby the collection communicates. On the face of it, the literary analysis supports the initial hypothesis that the annihilation or ‘decreation’ of the self is remodelled into a “desire for ‘sustained incongruence’” (Carson, qtd. in Fisher 2015: 12) across the various signifying systems, as expressed through the hybrid signifying strategies of intergenericity, multimodality, polyphony-intertextuality, and narrative technique. Upon closer examination, however, the analysis also suggests that by actively engaging with these strategies and thus transforming said aesthetics of disjunction into a dialectics of reconciliation, the principle of analogy can be recuperated as a tool for readerly emancipation within an overarching metaphysical project. The synthetic disjunction that is thus inspired yields a
constructive approach to knowledge that recognises both dissimilarity and discovered similarity through a process of re-visioning.

Rather than reinventing the wheel, this thesis thus indirectly comments on the ostensible distinction between Modernism and Postmodernism. In fact, Decreation demonstrates that similarity and coherence on the one hand, and difference and discontinuity on the other, are constantly in counterpoint. After all, the liminal edge between seemingly dissimilar entities has continuously been put forward throughout this thesis. The implication is that said distinction must be reconceptualised as a tension between what could be termed a “modernist crisis of representation” (Lewis 2007: 2), which has not given up on representation or partial similarity yet, and a Postmodernist representation of crisis that “abandon[s] the quest for a single, unifying meaning” (Lewis 239) and thus foregrounds difference. As a case in point, this central issue is explicitly referenced in the collection through Kant’s musings on the thing-in-itself (DC 70). At the same time, it is undeniable that Decreation’s extensive reliance on parody, metafiction, intertextuality, and in more general terms, a pervading sense of the weight of tradition by means of a “literature of exhaustion” establishes the work as Postmodernist (Lewis 245). Yet, whether defined as Modernist or Postmodernist in nature, Decreation de facto renders such questions invalid by ceaselessly probing on what basis the readers are criticising: categories and labels become pointless as Decreation is concerned with the (leaking) boundaries that define distinct entities. Carson’s ideal of “projecting sameness upon difference, by drawing things together in a relation or idea while at the same time maintaining the distinctions between them” (1988: 171) has thus continually reasserted itself at various levels throughout this study.

To conclude, Decreation has proven its ability to instil in the reader a metaphysical process of ‘enlightened’ reconciliation between apparent incongruities by operating on the basis of analogy. However, the sustained focus on the edge ultimately results in a sheer endless deferral of this harmonising potential. Concomitantly, this insight paves the way for a deconstructionist reading of Decreation in future research, specifically with regard to the synthetic disjunction that underpins the collection. Yet at the same time, the indeterminacy of interpretation has continually been emphasised, and this brittle balance is arguably both the strength and limitation of this study. There is no such
thing as a model reader, but nevertheless, semiological research of the kind carried out in this thesis can help to elucidate the signifying processes at the root of literary interpretation. In this respect, Iser’s theory of the reading process has amply demonstrated that the author’s literary technique and the reader’s own idiosyncratic interpretation are in a constant state of flux. Signification and interpretation are never wholly arbitrary and hence, the existence of a communicative system with underlying guiding devices is undeniable. All the same, this study has equally indicated that the emotional component can never fully be accounted for: the dialectic is never closed but remains open as the readers forge the analogies imposed by the text. ‘Meaning’ is never merely the accomplice of the signifier in a one-to-one relation, but occurs continuously at the point of convergence between different genres, modes, voices, and echoes.

At this point it is apt to return to Merkin’s following very pertinent question: “What her fellow poets would do well to ask themselves is not whether what Carson is writing can or cannot be called poetry, but how has she succeeded in making it – whatever label you give it – so thrillingly new?” (2001). Rae already hints at a possible answer while stating that “Autobiography of Red [...] demonstrates that the frameworks of myth, genre, and gender are volatile and constantly subject to revision” (2008: 259). This study has extended Rae’s points by demonstrating that analogy’s triadic structure as a projection of sameness across difference brings about a perpetual reassessment and rewriting of categories and their distinctive features. Whether this three-part configuration concerns the use of genres, modes, voices, or echoes, Decreation succeeds in making readers aware of a different – although not necessarily better – way of seeing. In this so-called digital age, literature is still grappling with the challenges posed by technology (cf. Sanz and Romero 2007: 2), while this denial of the multidimensionality of a complex reality comes down to a missed opportunity to explore different kinds of attention (cf. Hammond 2016: 18; Hayles 2007, 2010). When terms such as ‘reality’ are becoming ever more elusive in the wake of post-truth politics and fake news, the importance of calling attention to different ways of confronting reality is nowhere more explicit than in creations that continuously force readers to engage with multiple planes of signification. By approaching Decreation from a processual angle through the prism of semiology, this thesis has hopefully demonstrated that humankind’s capacity for adopting a different way of perceiving is just as powerful as one’s inclination for facile categorisation.
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