

# WRITING, EROS AND EXCESS: RESISTING CAPITALIST LOGICS OF PRODUCTION IN WRITING PRACTICE

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## ABSTRACT

This paper takes up the writing of Pierre Klossowski, and notions of eros, to consider how writing practices are shaped by, and work to resist capitalist logics of production. Discussing Agnes Varda's, *The Gleaners*, this paper argue that creative "products" can be read, reframed and celebrated as a kind of excess which emerges through playfulness. This manoeuvre of valuing excess enables this writer to re-engage with the making process as an act of play which positions desire rather than productivity as the impetus for writing. It concludes with a discussion about how positioning desire in such a way may be useful when experiencing blockages or obstacles which emerge as a result of the tension between creativity and logics of production.

## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Hayley Elliott-Ryan is a writer of fiction, poetry and performance works. She recently completed a PhD at Deakin University in the area of narrative impasse, political ontologies and theories of bricolage, as well as on broader questions of waste, excess, currency, and interventionist narratological methods. She is the founder of the Deakin magazine *Wordly*, which is now in its eighth year of regular publication, as the central in-house outlet for emerging Deakin writers. She has been shortlisted for the Right Now poetry prize and the Judith Rodriguez Prize.

## KEYWORDS

Writing—Desire—Excess—Economy—Carson—Klossowski

In *Eros the Bittersweet* (1998), Canadian classicist and poet, Anne Carson, argues for an eros performed on/with the page. Her text begins: ‘It was Sappho who first called eros “bittersweet.” No one who has been in love disputes her’ (1998:3), and she applies this definition of eros as first a delight, and then the presence and paradox of both pleasure and pain, in a series of essays on classical philosophy and literature.

For Carson, eros is a triangulation between lover, beloved and ‘the space between’. The ‘space’, or gap is generative. It allows for both the possible (the necessary fantasy of the beloved) and the actual. To be able to understand that these two states cannot merge, because they do not originate from the same reality, yet to acknowledge the presence and aliveness of both, is the unstable constellation Carson terms eros. To long, on some register, for these states to merge, to understand that they cannot, and to experience the shimmering dissonance that this creates is why eros is *bittersweet*.

While *Eros the Bittersweet* begins with the representation of romantic love, Carson could just as easily be describing something about the process of writing. Writing might be a triangulation between the writer, the writing, and the reader, or at least conceptualising it this way might create a scaffolding for the practice required for writing projects which seek to eschew logics of productivity and which value or take up as a method, a playful cobbling together of excesses. Carson considers the experience for the reader as witnessing two realities, that of the characters in the novel and that of reading the novel and having the knowledge of the text. These two realities never merge but again create the dissonance or generative gap which is ‘almost like love’ (2015:83).

For the writer cobbling together from excesses, we could understand the “dissonance” as a state of awareness that whatever constellation of events and desires exist in a text may be rearranged, reorganised in another way. In other words, that the narrativising or organising of events and desires in a text is unstable and (perhaps) arbitrary. In Carson’s reading of desire, the desire of the characters mirrors the production of the work in that they continually encounter obstacles, contradictions and pluralities as the writer does. Their desire is not only for a person, an object, *a beloved*. It is forever complicated. In Carson’s words, novels can sustain an intensity of ‘textual incongruence’ both emotional and cognitive (2015:85) in which the characters can indulge, seemingly without end, in the complexities, the ambivalence, the contradictions of their desire. She establishes her definition of desire as previously mentioned from the Queer poet, Sappho’s description of eros, and so I read Carson’s description of desire as inherently Queer and I consider my own recent work which takes up theories of desire,

*Garbage* as, among other things, a Queer novel. It is loosely organised around a same-sex romance; however, this is not the reason I frame the writing as Queer, because, arguably, creative works that apply a singular sexuality and prescribed relationship trajectory are still performing traditional romance narratives under the guise of an uncritical reversal. I recognise my writing as Queer and recognise Queerness as relevant to this discussion because the novel frames desire as *a priori* and plural. In other words, desire is something which might be experienced as a process or flux, for which romantic desire and sexual practice constitute only some elements.

Australian writer and academic, Dallas John Baker, also frames Queerness performed through writing as a self that is plural, via the concept of the bricoleur, who cobbles together subjectivities on the page. He claims (quoting his own previous article):

... the Queer “bricoleur uses heterogeneous forms, such as critical theory, creative fiction, reflexivity and deconstruction, and adapts them in an opportunistic way to meet his/her “needs” (or creative and critical intent) in the context of an intervention into subjectivity”, or a Queer becoming (Baker in Baker 2013:374).

When I began writing my novel, *Garbage*, I was asking myself how to write a work of extended fiction which, at its heart, expressed Queerness beyond a set of social or sexual practices. In other words, could a protagonist and the text itself be formed by a desire to engage with excess and wasting in a way that suggested plurality and play. Wasting became a preoccupation because waste, excess or garbage, seemed to occupy a space defined by the materials cast out into the gap. In other words, when we dispose of something it can lose its identity and gain the “non-identity” of garbage. This category offers up interesting possibilities for play and creativity neither of which are concerned with efficient modes of production. They are sites where categories of *garbage* are not stable because any material may be brought back into the fold at any time to continue the making or the playing.

### The Gleaners and I: play and excess in the text

French Film Maker, Agnes Varda’s documentary, *The Gleaners and I* (*Les Glaneurs et la Glaneuse*) (2000), provides a salient example of a project which investigates excess and plurality in both content and form. I read it as a queer text and draw on it to inform my process for two reasons. It asks the viewer *to witness* Varda gleaning and playing, and there are interventions and detours made by the filmmaker which call into question her own desires around gleaning, playing and

artmaking. These desires evade any approbated replication of production and consumption. The film in this way draws together eros, logics of excess and production, and creative practice.

In the documentary film, Agnes Varda investigates the way gleaning practices have existed alongside monetary economy in France throughout history. In its original definition, gleaning pertains to the collection of food goods from the ground after a harvest. Its modern use is more general and refers to any kind of gathering, collecting or scavenging of goods which have been abandoned or wasted. Interviewing a judge, an expert on gleaning laws, she asks whether anyone can glean, considering French law indicates that the activity is legal so long as the gleaner is taking what they need. The judge replies that if a person wishes to glean for fun, then they *need* that fun, and so anyone can perform the activity for the love of it. Gleaning can also mean forming an understanding by scraping together pieces of information, and this is also what Varda does in her film at the level of her practice. The film performs gleaning as such, and in the process, we come to understand the many reasons and ways that people perform non-transactional relations with objects, ideas, materials, matter, and with other beings.

For Varda, and for me, gleaning—made possible by processes of accumulating and wasting—is a way of understanding and perhaps making sense of the world through *play* (and here I am referring to play as Winnicott uses it, in reference to imaginative activities rather than structured and competitive games). In light of this preoccupation with gleaning and with her own art making, Varda is demonstrating how the film product is a kind of excess, while at the same time, interviewing others who speak to this logic in relation to other art/social/political practices. She is making a film about gleaning, but this is in itself a process of gleaning, and this process does not sit docilely within any capitalist process of production and consumption. In Baker's words, it performs an intervention into subjectivity via the cobbling together, or bricolage, of all her filmed 'materials'. While the film begins with a history of gleaning, it also investigates bricolage art practices, scavenging, the film maker's own impulse to collect and arrange, as well as more impromptu scenes of investigation (she films her hand in close up, observing its texture and appearance, as well as passing trucks, people and objects which pique her interest). The result of this cobbled together footage is a film which performs its subject matter, including the necessary (playful) detours and self-reflexive process which Varda engaged in to make the work.

The film keeps at the surface some other representation of desire which holds within it a paradox, which Carson identifies as a 'principle of the genre' of the novel (2015:83), of desiring objects, and desiring which

cannot be categorised and cannot conjure in fantasy an “object” which might satisfy it. In order to make a documentary on gleaning Varda seeks to capture something of the aptitude to glean and its relationship with desire and play. Arguably this is something that is easier done when the maker is one of the subjects of the work, however I have used the relationship between creative artifact and exegesis, which I will expand on in later paragraphs and which Carson writes on in *Eros the Bittersweet* to emulate and experiment with Varda’s approach.

### Desire, economy and writing

French writer, translator and artist, Pierre Klossowski (1905-2001) might refer to the kind of texts I am reading as swerving from logics of production, and texts which I consider Queer, such as *The Gleaners and I*, as expressing *voluptuous emotion*. In his final text, *Living Currency* (1970), he argues that monetary economy is ‘a simulacrum or parody of the economy of the passions’ (Smith in Klossowski 2017:1). This claim is significant because it ‘overcame the tension between Marx’s *political economy* and Freud’s *libidinal economy*’ (Smith in Klossowski 2017:1). In other words, Before *Living Currency* was published, these ‘economies’ had not been theorised as interrelated, nor critiqued, in this way. Klossowski claimed that these seemingly separate economies were structured by the same triangulation of ‘desire, value and simulacrum’ (Foucault in Klossowski 2017:41), and this claim called into question the definitions of desire that underpinned both schools of thought: Marxism and psychoanalysis.

Klossowski claimed that this triangulated structure was at play in both the economy of the passions, or erotic economy, and monetary economy. Monetary economy pertains to the trade and sale of goods and services for currency. The ‘economy of the passions’ refers to the production and consumption of voluptuous emotion *once it is separated from* procreation. We could understand, at a simpler level, that Klossowski’s term, ‘voluptuous emotion’ includes both erotic pleasure and eros. However, we should note here that he was also drawing on Nietzsche’s claim in *The Will to Power* that each of us contain ‘a vast confusion of contradictory drives, that we are multiplicities and not unities’ (Klossowski 2017:5).

In order to understand what erotic pleasure, eros, or voluptuous emotion might mean to Klossowski, it is important to be open to how vast and contradictory the drives that fall under these terms can be, especially because when we think about erotic desire, or eros, our imaginaries are full of images and concepts about what this can *and cannot* be—in other words, full of absences or elisions—and this bears

on which acts are supposed to be more satisfying or to ‘hold more value’ (which I read as meaning that some act(ivitie)s are understood as falling more clearly under the definition of erotic, while others exist in a hazier periphery, or do not register at all).

To summarise, voluptuous emotion is a term Klossowski uses to identify practices or desires which are not performed for the purposes of (re)production, and I am extending this term, using it to refer to creative drives which are not governed by the expected outcome of a saleable product. He contemplates voluptuous emotion in a way that mirrors the way Carson plays with eros, but his intention is to critique how monetary economy is a parody of libidinal economy, and that the excess or waste produced is unavoidable because any object acquired, any transaction which occurs in a monetary economy will not satisfy or eradicate, the shimmering dissonance of desire.

Returning to eros, Reading Carson’s *Eros the Bittersweet* clarified a question I had been asking myself about how to write desire, informed by Klossowski, and in a way that responded with a follow-up question to the provocation at the beginning of Klossowski’s, *Sade and Fourier* (2017). The latter was published alongside, and under the same imprint as, *Living Currency*. In it, Klossowski asks: ‘in what respect does the economy – all on its own, but perhaps also by the very law of supply and demand that governs exchange – reveal itself to be a mode of expression, representation and self-interpretation of affective life?’ (2017:79). This provocation does not seem an obvious prompt for producing Queer texts. To further tease out this connection I will return to the provocation in following paragraphs. In order to do this, I will first briefly address Klossowski’s reading of Fourier and de Sade.

Charles Fourier and the Marquis de Sade were mid-eighteenth-century French writers and philosophers who wrote sexually explicit, parodic (and in Fourier’s case, sarcastic) critiques of their societies. They did this by writing alternative societies or communities which were organised by desire, rather than typical economic exchange. Fourier’s communities are often referred to as ‘utopias’, because they offer a hopeful alternative to the ‘anthropomorphic phenomenon of economic exchange’ (Klossowski 2017:80), or in other words, monetary economy. His writing influenced early socialist movements and is referenced in the writings of Karl Marx (Yassour 1983:199). Fourier and Klossowski read Sade’s writing, which often reproduces and restages the kind of exploitation imbedded in a capitalist economy, doing this in sexual contexts, and as a shrill (re)representation of the apparent inevitability of capitalism. In *Living Currency*, Klossowski tends to agree with Sade’s driving concerns, but celebrates what he refers to as Fourier’s ‘crackpot and yet visionary’ writing (2017:81). Sade and Fourier’s fictional communities predate Marxist logics, and arguably seek to centre desire

and bodies, rather than monetary currency, as modes of exchange. In structuring his fictional society around diverse desires, Fourier is, in a sense, resisting what philosopher and cultural studies professor, Byung-Chul Han refers to as '*the inferno of the same*' (2017:1), while Sade is replicating it to the letter critically. This *inferno of the same* is almost inevitable in societies structured by economic exchange, according to Klossowski and Han.

In the final chapter of *The Agony of Eros* (2017), Han considers the role of eros in the writings of Plato, Heidegger, and Deleuze and Guattari, concluding that:

thinking, in the strong sense, begins with eros. To be able to think, one must first have been a friend, a lover. Without eros, thinking loses all vitality and turmoil, and becomes repetitive and reactive. Eros infuses thinking with desire for the atopic other (2017:53).

When we think in comparisons, or with the dualism of sameness and difference, we flatten the other and reduce them to 'sameness' according to Han. In this *inferno of the same*, 'erotic experience does not exist' (Han 2017:1). This is where Han and Carson align, because desire presupposes *otherness* (and otherness to ourselves), and in Han's words, our shared 'exteriority and asymmetry' (2017:2). Recalling Carson's description of eros as made up of the actual, the possible and the space in between, it would seem that in a world reduced to 'sameness' *disguised as 'consumable differences'*, there is no room for the possibility of the other, and so no possibility for eros. The repercussion of this, for Han, is that without eros, thinking cannot happen. Without the 'atopic other' or the other which exists on a different plane of reality and so cannot 'merge', we are reduced to the flat plane of consumables, and transactions with those consumables.

We can understand this in the way we have multiple *different varieties* of the *same products*, which we are told we have the 'freedom' to choose between. Even sexual activities can be reduced to prescribed sets which can be performed and repeated with *different partners* or in *different outfits* or a *different order*, or with some amount of selection, yet much of this still relies on the sameness, uniformness and homogeneity of 'desire'. To comprehend the existence of a desire that remains other, and cannot be compared, merged with or reduced to sameness, is what Han and Carson consider eros or the erotic. This may exist in the context of romantic love, but it may also occur in writing and thinking. Carson writes:

Think of how it feels. As you read the novel your mind shifts from the level of characters, episodes, and clues, to the level of ideas, solutions, exegesis. The activity is delightful, but also one of pain. Each shift is

accompanied by a sharp sense that something has been lost. Exegesis mars and disrupts pure absorption in the narrative. The narrative insists on distracting your attention from exegesis. Yet your mind is unwilling to let go of either level of activity and remains arrested at a point of stereoscopy between the two. They compose one meaning (Carson 1998:90).

The process of producing this paper was not extended fiction as research, and then research paper as reportage. The production of words in two different registers happened, to borrow Carson's term, in stereoscope, but during the process I experienced a struggle between writing as eros and writing which was being shaped by the idea that I must produce a creative product. In other words, while I wanted to trust my practice, I struggled against the internalised idea that what I should produce was, in the most recent instance, a novel which performed *the same tropes but differently*.

### Eros and writing practice

In my experience, writing without eros can slip into something that feels violent because, without the desire for the other, our impulse can be to erase any trace of a self—divided, unknown, changing—in the work. In Carson's definition, eros, marked by tension and longing, may involve 'pain', but this tension could best be described as something closer to bittersweet, because it is simultaneously pleasurable or delightful. In this definition, the presence of pain *does not suggest the presence of violence*. The pain Carson writes about is an inescapable part of eros *because* it recognises the 'other' as separate from the self. Eros might be disruptive and complicated in the way it lands on us or reorganises us, but it does not flatten, erase or seek to annihilate.

Throughout the early writing and editing processes of writing, I was tending to suppress, without knowing it, any writing that threatened to *reveal* a kind of textual 'self', and I decorticated such passages of writing with the delusion of displaying a more refined or precise 'core' (as I feared the exercise demanded). I understand there is no core, just as the identity of the self 'always refers to the identity of something outside of us' (Deleuze 2015:304), and so the idea of editing, in order to display a stability, is like searching for (or imposing) a divine identity in the work: something predetermined; a spectre. In this way, my suppression was an action that upheld the absence it conjured as a myth, and this impulse, I came to see, is annihilating, and did not generate the work I longed for.



While I have previously not been conscious of this impulse in the early drafting stages, I have produced works of subterfuge without intentionality. I was trying to maintain the fantasy of a work without excessive voice (or, and I cringe to put it in writing, to perform the ‘perfect author’, who I imagined would also be the absent author). This created inertias, which eventually became obstacles to the writing. I had to return to Varda’s approach and adopt the stereoscopic mind once again. This required holding the fantasy of the fictional world, and the fantasy of the completed work, alongside the actuality of the messy happenings, and the possibility of revealing something through text, that had not been intended. In other words, I had to stop engaging in processes which were trying to hide the excesses and the digressions (which in Varda’s work make up a significant portion of the film) because they sought to erase anything that seemed like subjectivity or ‘presence’. I had to re-engage with the eros that I found difficult to acknowledge as fundamental to my writing practice and allow this to structure the work.

As Han suggests, ‘only eros is capable of freeing the “I” from depression, from narcissistic entanglement in itself’ (2016:67). Without eros, writing becomes ‘repetitive and additive’ (Han 2017:47). And love without eros deteriorates into sensuality: ‘Sensuality and work belong to the same order. They both lack spirit and desire’ (Han 2017:47). Writing or redrafting with the intention of annihilating the presence of a textual self is tantamount to a kind of withholding. It works as a mode of punishing of the writer, which may well produce the kind of writing that feels also impenetrable and ungenerous to a reader. The result of this early impulse was a kind of writing that seemed to reject the reader, rather than, in Anne Carson’s words, to ‘woo them’ (Carson 1998:90), and it did not invite the reader into the work. Recalling Varda’s method in *The Gleaners and I*, I had to allow myself to play and be forming in the text, rather than continue to remove traces of the self that I deemed as excesses. This “efficient” approach to writing did not involve the imagined ‘other’ of Han, or any generative fantasy of the other (which, in this context, would be the *unanticipated* reader). Rather, it anticipated that what the reader would want would be for a sleek and efficient *product* which was just different enough in its sameness to be recognised as consumable difference. This approach also indulged the fantasy that I might be reflected back via the text, as a faultless absence. As if, by achieving a work that had as few identity traces as possible, I might be able to sustain the illusion of disappearance.

At the conclusion of this paper, we can understand that in the process described above it was as if I were the waste left over from the production process that the sleek and saleable reading artefact requires. Rather than abandon projects with this inflection, I use this obstacle to

re-engage with the work and to become curious about why I feel compelled to perform this operation. For this reason, the ways in which the logics of productivity and production, informed by capitalist politics, intervene in creative writing practices remains a significant motor of my research.

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