



**Universidad  
Zaragoza**

## Undergraduate Dissertation

### ***ANHAGA*, or: The Epistemological Quest in Anne Carson's "Kinds of Water"**

Author

Aitana Monzón Blasco

Supervisor

Dr. Silvia Martínez Falquina

FACULTY OF ARTS

June 2022



## **ABSTRACT**

This dissertation focuses on Anne Carson's lyrical essay "Kinds of Water" (1995) as a case of a transmodern text concerned with the consequences of *posthumanist suffering*, such as the lack of affection, or human connection. Establishing a continuum between epistemology and anthropology, Carson presents water as an ungraspable symbol, as a pretext for critical inquiry, self-discovery, and acceptance. Taking this element as limitless and fluid, we aim to analyse certain paradoxes related to H<sub>2</sub>O that psychologically and linguistically affect the narrative voice. These are materiality and fluidity, but also the dichotomy between excess and absence, as well as movement and stillness.

**Key Words:** Knowledge – Water – Transmodernism – Limits – Pilgrimage

## **RESUMEN**

Este trabajo se basa en el ensayo lírico de Anne Carson titulado "Kinds of Water" (1995) como ejemplo de texto transmoderno interesado por las consecuencias del *posthumanist suffering*, como pueden ser la falta de afecto o las conexiones humanas. Estableciendo un continuo entre la epistemología y la antropología, Carson presenta la figura del agua siendo un símbolo inasible que sirve como pretextos para la indagación crítica del ser, el autoconocimiento y la aceptación. Tratando este elemento como ilimitado y fluido, pretendemos analizar ciertas paradojas relacionadas con el agua y sus efectos psicológicos y lingüísticos en la voz narrativa. Estos son la materialidad o fluidez, la dicotomía entre exceso y ausencia, así como el movimiento y la quietud.

**Palabras clave:** Conocimiento – Agua – Transmodernidad – Límites – Peregrinaje



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Introduction: ALL THINGS ARE WATER	1
2. CAN A PILGRIM HOLD THE WATER?	4
3. ANHAGA, OR: THE TRANSMODERN ELEGEIA	9
4. THE FEMALE MYSTIQUE	14
5. Conclusion: REACHING THE SHORE	17
6. Works Cited	19



Why upon your first voyage as a passenger, did you yourself feel such a mystical vibration, when first told that you and your ship were now out of sight of land? Why did the old Persians hold the sea holy? [...] Surely all this is not without meaning. [...] But that same image, we ourselves see in all rivers and oceans. It is the image of the ungraspable phantom of life; and this is the key to it all.

*Moby Dick*, Melville

Los cuerpos de los ahogados en la mar meditan boca abajo, pero no ven el fondo con los ojos vacíos [...]. Ésta es la verdadera canción, pensaste, y luego te fuiste diluyendo despacio, muy despacio, en lo no descifrable.

*Fragmentos de un libro futuro*, Valente

mas dónde hallar ahora tanta tierra

*La sed*, Ada Salas





## 1. Introduction: ALL THINGS ARE WATER

*L'eau sépare les mondes, introduit vers l'ailleurs, la géographie*

Bernard Ribémont

In medieval symbolism, the ocean is seen as a vast desert of water (Muela 150). Its space, its time, or its fluidity have been sufficient motifs to build a whole poetics that deals with the very flow of existence, the transcendental search for knowledge. Deserts of water or deserts of soil act as a reminder of the insignificance of bodies –whether corporeal or textual– and make the human wonder about the great paradigm of thought. But how can one take shelter amid their spatial or metaphorical immensity? How can one avoid the grooves, or the boundaries that separate land from water, while emerging unscathed? Heraclitus's famous quotation declaring that "[y]ou cannot step in the same river twice" for neither you nor water will be the same (121), could shelter the Canadian contemporary work that will be analysed in this essay. The ungraspable but at the same time overflowing nature of water, as well as its mutability may serve as a pretext for critical inquiry, self-discovery and a search that transcends the fluvial space, ignoring any physical or psychological barrier. "[M]editation and water are wedded together" (Melville 12), and for this reason, as we contemplate the flowing of the waves, we simultaneously reach an individual and universal presence, for an invisible force urges us to transcend. Carson's "Kinds of Water" envisions this element as a process by which the narrator mourns, dissolves, confronts herself, dissociates or drifts. This process involves the culmination of an experience –of contemplative or meditative nature–, a longing or, in Medieval terms, a *quest* towards its gnoseology.

Carson's aphoristic essay establishes a continuum between human existence and water. For her, "[k]inds of water drown us" (*Plainwater* 165). If everything is made of water, then our bodies, like linguistic constructions, flow and are in continuous permutability, subconsciously craving to reach an origin in which everything is disembodied, free of physical limits that prevent the overflow of thought or fluid matter. Virginia Woolf once wrote that "there are tides in the body" (240). By *tides*, we may assume anthropological concerns, desires, impulses, reactions to one's consciousness. Thus, we will see how water stands as a deterritorialised space (Neimanis 19), an illusion in which to reflect upon those mysterious, abstract *loomings* that have fascinated humankind for as long as there has been textual evidence. Water has existed before civilisation. Somehow, when the narrator dives into its depths, she seeks pre-existence, the return to a figurative Pangaea, to a unification or pre-word or pre-border feeling. If *to swim* is to accept that the present must return to an origin without delimitations –since there is no establishment, no oppressive, binary hierarchy–, then *to drown* shall be to be aware of that anthropocentric, dualistic oppression. In other words, the self, once it has entered the water as in an illusion, warns –from that other utopian and original side– against the dangers of naming borders, and insistently tries to dilute forms, to undo them.

Symbolically, the immensity of the sea provokes fear and at the same time, an irreparable desire to drown, to submerge ourselves in its infinite undulations and possibilities. As Linton points out, "water is what we make of it" (3). In such a case, we will say that this fluid exists because there is a preconceived idea of water when we invoke it, when we use it as a channel in our search for transcendence. Carson's text accepts water as an emotional and intellectual nourishment, as a healing power of retreat and redemption. Entering the fluvial means crawling towards the unknown but original, to return to the centre of every image, idea or thought. If "[I]as aguas simbolizan la suma

universal de las virtualidades [...], [el] depósito de todas las posibilidades de existencia [y] preceden a toda forma [sosteniendo] toda creación” (Eliade 165), we can add that this creation must be textual, formal and corporeal in order to be complete, because once any form has been separated from the water, it loses its virtuality and “cae bajo la ley del Tiempo y de la Vida; adquiere límites” (166).

Anne Carson’s “Kinds of Water: An Essay on the Road to Compostela” forms part of a collection of essays published in 1995 under the title *Plainwater*. Written in a context that could be regarded as *transmodern*, water, its quintessential symbol, acts as a transitional process, a deviation, a transcorporeal flow. Our rational capacity cannot explain the intangible or the absolute. However, we can perceive that which overflows the limits, such as water, but also gender, or the existential void itself. Water, like the concept of transmodernity, does not stagnate, as it requires a fluid, complex and hybrid way of thinking that is under construction. In Rodríguez Magda’s words, “[t]odo estado inestable causa ansiedad, suscita un anhelo de resolución” (17). Perhaps in “Kinds of Water” there is certain anxiety to transcend, to reach the unknown, and in that process the narrative voice looks for her mystical origin.

However, in our transmodern context, the absolute is not the whole anymore, but the void, which is preceded by grief and abandonment, as we are told at the beginning of the essay. Surrounded by electronic gadgets, by interconnectivity, the human being is intrinsically a wanderer of body and thought. This is the case of Carson’s work, a diaristic essay in which aphorisms predominate in a search for self-knowledge and the acceptance of the loss of a body, an idea, or water. And this is also why a transmodern discourse on water is complex to achieve, for its centrality must refer to “[el] vacío, la ausencia, el simulacro” (Rodríguez Magda 17). As in T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, here the narrator is discouraged by the lost values of her society, such as affection, care, or oral

communication. Therefore, we shall be attentive to the silence, to what precedes the text, to the loss of the loved body. The voice works from what is not known or has been lost on a tangible level, towards the unknown and ungraspable. That is why we will see how the narrator resorts to the mythical figure of the wanderer who, in her journey or inner exile, recognises herself and wonders about futility, disassociation or longing in this search for water, which may be geographical –Finisterre– or symbolic: knowledge. Thereupon, the aim of this dissertation is to discuss Anne Carson’s exploration of the symbolism of water in “Kinds of Water” by analysing certain paradoxes attributed to that element, such as movement and stillness; excess and absence; or materiality and fluidity as confluent in the narrator’s identity and in her epistemological quest.

## 2. CAN A PILGRIM HOLD THE WATER?

*Le vase donne une forme au vide*

Georges Braque

“Clothe yourself, the water is deep” (Carson *Plainwater*, 118). With this *captatio benevolentiae*, Anne Carson warns us in the introduction to “Kinds of Water” of the tone that the text will take on. In the form of an aphoristic diary, the Canadian author –awarded with the T. S. Eliot Prize and the Princesa de Asturias Prize, among others– uses the mythical motif of pilgrimage to elaborate a discourse based on the loss of a loved one. One of this essay’s main themes is the disappearance of the male figure of authority, such as the husband, father, or brother. Her work is highly autobiographical, but in this case, we will resort to formalism to analyse its content, leaving behind any aspect of the writer’s personal life. However, to approach “Kinds of Water”, we will consider the elegy written after the death of her brother, *Nox*, as well as some other essays that form part of

*Plainwater* and orbit around the image of the brother and the drowning motif. Starting from here, it is not surprising that we are led into the text with the notion that “[w]ater is something you cannot hold. Like men” (117).

Throughout the essay, the idea of water acts as a symbol of self-knowledge and acceptance of loss or mourning. Hence the irony of the narrator’s unconscious effort to define, enclose, sustain water. Mourning, like any liquid, overflows and is intangible, incorporeal. It floods bodies and subdues the identity of those who name it. It is an emotional and epistemological process that symbolises the eternal human obsession to reach the infinite or that which has no explanation and dwells beyond understanding. This obsession could be referred to as *posthuman suffering*, for there is certainly a personal and transcendent longing of seeing oneself “incapable of fully knowing [one’s] self (epistemologically, ontologically, or biologically) without the aid of technological systems” (Miccoli 2017). As in “The Glass Essay”, published in 1995, the narrator resorts to isolating herself in nature to know herself and cope with loss, as the beloved body always appears as an entity dependent on technology. In the aforementioned essay, the narrative voice recalls the presence of Eros through the photographs or selfies that appear as flashes with the designation “Nude #1”, “Nude #2”, and so on. In another case, the memory of the father figure is conditioned by dementia and appears tied to an electronic device in a hospital. This would explain why the narrator turns to the natural environment seeking a possible remedy, process, or regeneration away from all non-organic adornments. Perhaps this is why water acts as a unitary vehicle, recalling the relativity and fluidity of fluvial bodies, which are nothing more than a metaphor for all ontology. “Kinds of Water” begins with the Eurocentric division of body and mind, thus

establishing a rigid and omnipotent boundary when we read that the beloved body, in this case the father, “has lost the use of some of the parts of his body and of his mind” (119).

The melancholy over the organic body wasting in contemporary Western society uncovers an emotional lack in the care system and reinforces the utilitarianism from which the narrator will try to flee. While the beginning of the essay is slightly influenced by a possible cybernetic-posthuman longing, by the conclusion of the narrative one will come to the notion that body and mind are inseparable. Holding water, then, will prove impossible. Water, like knowledge, overflows. Too much knowledge can lead to emotional or even physical sinking, “[f]or an intact virgin can develop the skill of diving into deep water but a woman who has known love will drown” (Carson *Plainwater*, 117).

The liquid state with which the narrator presents bodies and things not only encounters a natural barrier that intrinsically separates the solid from the liquid –as we shall comment on later– but being a narrative about the Camino de Santiago, the narrator will have problems crossing an invisible barrier: the linguistic one. Proof of this is the sentence in which she indicates the difficulty of translating water when she announces that “I do not know the word for drowned” (Carson *Plainwater*, 124). All bodies are water, or that is the narrator’s wish. That is why she inserts fluvial nouns that question the rigidity of the material. These elements can be organic and indicate a liquid existence/resistance, as is the case with “river” (124), “waterfall”, “falls”, “water”, “drops” (128), “rain”, “sea”, “tears” (130). Let us not forget, however, the “not rain” (136), for it announces another of the themes that we will deal with in this work: the absence of water is also a disembodied presence that overflows the text. As far as the narrator is concerned, we do observe a constant individual –but universal– consciousness

rooted in the idea of identity that seeks to transcend, to be liminal or to position herself in the background. This could explain the choice to include a narratee, as occurs on page 126 with “[y]ou will see this as the journey proceeds, see him sailing through danger”, or “[y]ou would not see me –I lie in the dark listening, swirling” (128).

The image of the pilgrim seeing or being seen is not fortuitous. As a diaristic essay, in each of the sections there is an introductory aphorism that acts as an epigraph. The section referring to the arrival at Compostela, at the end of the wandering, is preceded by Antonio Machado’s famous lines saying that “*the eye you see isn’t/ an eye because you see it/ it’s an eye because it sees you*” (*Plainwater*, 183). The eye is used by Carson not as an external element, but as the gateway to an inner, mystical knowledge capable of disavowing the automaton and instantaneous responses of transmodern society. In Rodríguez Magda’s words, “*andar desorientados es un mirar sin ver, el anhelo de trascendencia nos habla de una visión interior más plena*” (157). This establishes the idea of the search for water through the gaze as an anchor for thought and sanity. “Kinds of Water” is riddled with semantic constructions that link the body to water, thus dissolving its boundaries, as can be seen in “[m]orning drifts on” (Carson *Plainwater*, 128), “street dissolving” and “we filter westward”, which introduce the idea of movement and direction that will be discussed later. For the narrator, everything overflows outside and inside the body, which is why she observes the “[r]ain during the night” (135). Contrasting the idea of movement with stillness, as well as measuring its materiality, at a certain point we read the expression “a pool of thoughts” (130), that reinforces the search for a recipient that can fill all that is concave or empty.

Apart from water, another recurring symbol in Carson's work is glass. On repeated occasions, Carson's poetics is built around this dual symbol, as it recalls the fragility and the reflection of the narrative voice. At the beginning of the essay, we read a quotation from Machado, saying that "*the good thing is we know/ the glasses are for drinking*" (*Plainwater*, 124). The glass acts as an insulating element, or as a mirror. Mythically, it is an element of containment linked to water –ergo, to Narcissus's myth. Both elements are ambivalent and imply discontinuity, as they contain and absorb images, while at the same time reflect the consciousness of those who approach them (Cirlot 211). According to Rae, within Carson's work, this motif reflects "the speaker's mental and emotional states, out of fragments of biography, theology and literary analysis" (Rae 167). Water is the juxtaposition of glass. However, its liquid character does not allow for fragility, but for fluidity and regeneration. Why, then, does the voice resort to Machado's aphorism? A glass, if it does not break, contains water that can be drunk. Along the way, the pilgrim feels thirsty. But if water symbolises knowledge, then the pilgrim will drink knowledge. And if the glass is empty, then the glass will be the only material element that can contain both the ungraspable –the emptiness, the mourning– and the regenerating liquid.

"Kinds of water drown us. Kinds of water do not" (Carson *Plainwater*, 130). The depth of water recalls the depth of the knowledge of absence. The narrator sees herself "like someone testing the depth of a well" (122). The image of the glass inaugurates the incorporation of other containers that may hold water. We find objects such as a "gaffe" (124), a "jar" (130), or "a goatskin bag (*odra*)" (146), but there are also constructions such as "canals" (160), "aqueducts" (138), or "bridge[s]" (132). These reinforce the changing, fluid nature of H<sub>2</sub>O and act as liminal elements between stillness and movement. They symbolise the diffuse or ambiguous, for they unite as well as separate;



they establish boundaries as well as erase them. The contrast between the materiality of these constructions and the lightness of water and knowledge leads the voice to wonder about depth and grief. She laments the fragility of glass and stone, saying that “the mechanisms that keep us from drowning are so fragile: and why us?” (128) On containment and the impossibility of transcending the material, she thinks that “we live by keeping water caught in the trap of the heart” (139). We could consider in Anne Carson, a connoisseur of Medieval French poetry, to be including this “heart” as a double symbol, for in Cirlot’s words, the glass or crystal cup is used as “a symbol of the human heart [...], as a material of expression of the surrounds of ‘wrapping’ around the mystic Centre” (119). Letting the water flow or trapping it in a container is the same as letting the memory of a non-existent body flow or sink into the deepest well. Not to delimit. Not to dematerialise water, the body, memory, or knowledge. The attraction of the abyss, of the ungraspable, or of absolute knowledge is the main obsession of the pilgrim or *anhaga*. Letting go as the greatest act of love and resilience to dispossess oneself and reach an ascetic state that breaks with the material excesses of contemporaneity.

### 3. ANHAGA, OR: THE TRANSMODERN ELEGEIA

*Wat se þe cunnað/ hu sliþen bið/ sorg to geferan*

(The well-travelled know how slicing/ sorrow can be by one’s side)

“The Wanderer”

The reflective and personal character of the pilgrimage motif pervades the pages of “Kinds of Water” and is reminiscent of the old Anglo-Saxon elegies, as well as of the first testimonies written on papyrus, parchment, or stone. The medium is not what is sought here, but the message, which is always the same: to sing what is lost. Mourning

accompanies the wanderer and expatriate bard or, using Anglo-Saxon terminology, the *anhaga* (“The Wanderer”). In the essay, the narrator is more than a pilgrim, for she adopts the role of the chronicler of her own self-knowledge, and in detailing her experiences along the way, she is capturing her contemporaneity. The high content of lyrical structures such as “[w]ater abandons itself” (Carson *Plainwater*, 156), “[p]ilgrims were people in scientific exile” (131) or “[e]vening falls” (125) demonstrate that she not only observes and walks with the purpose of reaching Finisterre, but that she also grieves. She is completely aware of the loss and of the symbolic constructions she is noting down along the journey. Aphorisms such as “[p]ilgrims were people who got the right verb” (139), full of irony and double meanings, remind us of the gnomic lines used in old Anglo-Saxon elegies, for they consisted of meaningful and memorable short maxims (Gomes 19). In this sense, “Kinds of Water” should be treated as an elegy, for this term comes from the Greek *elegeia*, being “a mournful or plaintive poem [...] of sorrow and lamentation” (“Elegy”). From this traditional form, it is important to perceive the narrator’s subversion and gender analysis when she places herself in an embodied state, thus contrasting the disembodied nature of water. Combining these two forms, she confirms the liminality of water, of bodies and of knowledge. On the one hand, she makes clear that being a woman, she occupies a symbolic space, altering the idea that the figure of the wanderer or *anhaga* was usually a man. On the other hand, she rescues and gives substance to the notion that, since ancient times, women have been wavering stories –from Penelope or Scheherazade to the Anglo-Saxon poem “The Wife’s Lament”. However, while perpetuating the image of women as eternally dependent on male abandonment, in “Kinds of Water” the narrator takes action, walks, and in her wandering, she names things, asks questions, and seems to reach a conclusion to her epistemological quest. Knowledge and loss open like a scar tearing the water.

Knowledge as a direction towards oneself is present in the pilgrim's internal exile. If in "The Wanderer" the voice constantly asks himself "[w]here are my kindred" (l. 90), in Carson's essay, the narrator searches for the origin –or loss– of identity and communication in a society devoid of affection or community. Therefore, she asks: "[w]hat is a man" (139), "[w]hat are we doing here, and why are our hearts invisible?", and "[w]hat is the conversation of lovers?" (*Plainwater*, 142). The understanding of one's own identity and the lack of communication between bodies leaves a trace of alienation. Cid, the other character in the narrative, "is not the one who feels alien" (131). This is a reminder that there are emotional limits that are not given a name. It also refers to the Romantic notion of the attraction of the abyss and the construction of an individuality alien to any community. Just like emotional limits, the linguistic barrier also causes unease, for it entails the impossibility of translating certain Spanish expressions such as "[n]o me mates con tomate, mátame con bacalao" (180), or "[y] la paloma volvió a él a la hora de la tarde" (167). This impossibility of translation produces estrangement and alienation, undermining any attempt to remain united to the Other through speech. Nevertheless, throughout the text, communication and self-consciousness are key to the journey's process, for the narrator says that "I am a pilgrim (not a novelist) and the only story I have to tell is the road itself" (152).

Wandering implies a yearning for knowledge, a quest towards the intangible and transcendence. "Pilgrims were people wondering" and wandering (Carson *Plainwater*, 133). There is in Carson a correlation between body, water, and language that is in constant circulation. In this sense, we could speak of a linguistic journey. The more one wants to know, the more one fears and, therefore, the more one is aware of the pain, absence, and vital anguish intrinsic to the human species in general, and to the *anhaga* in particular. With clear references to St. Augustine's mystical concerns, the voice addresses

the reader and exposes her fears about the importance of communication as a human process:

I am telling you this because a conversation is a journey, and what gives it value is fear. You come to understand travel because you have had conversations, not vice versa. What is the fear inside language? No accident of the body can make it stop burning. (141)

The tone of the essay gradually acquires a mystical tone, which is related to the epigraphs that introduce each section and refer to, mostly mystic-ascetic poets. The journey, as a vital motif, requires affection and communication with our fellow human beings. The pilgrimage's mystique here lies in the critique of earthly wealth against the value of what is true, that is, the eternal and heavenly. The *camino*, for Carson, is a linguistic and meta-reflexive journey, for she wonders about limits and their cognitive scope when the voice says that the *camino* "has a language, but not one I know. It has a story, but I am in it. So are you. And to realize this is a moment of some sadness. [...] I am asking you to study the dark" (*Plainwater*, 152). In Anne Carson's essay, what is said is as important as the silences hidden behind the questions. Silence refers to water, to the liminal, to loss, to a pre-body or a pre-textual experience. It also alludes to the bareness of a technological age, which seems to be excessive in interconnectivity and networks but ironically, turns out to be cold and dehumanising. This emptiness is nothing more than an extension of the lost values of a whole generation, and this has to do with the desire to transcend, for "[l]os valores no son una cosa más entre las cosas, no suceden, expresan una parte del sentido del mundo, y con ello [...] el de lo inexpresable, aquello que no se dice, sino que se muestra, esto es: lo místico" (Rodríguez Magda 140).

Caroline Bergvall, in her multidisciplinary exilic work *Drift*, resorts to questions of direction and arrival such as "[w]hat is north. Is it a direction or a process" (127), or

“[w]hat is a solid structure. The hard boundary that one crashes into” (137) to compare the material with the waving, as well as the natural with the imposed limits. These questions are reminiscent of Carson’s eagerness to break down the membrane between what is corporeal and what is incorporeal, or the fate and origin of knowledge itself. It seems ironic, nonetheless, that this movement revolves around the flow of water in an essay describing the contemplation of pilgrimage –so to say, of dry land. The waters symbolise the *fons et origo* that precedes all creation (Cirlot 365). For Carson, water is a process, a flow that filters loss, abandonment, emotional or creative drift, and the dissolution of bodies or earthly limitations for the sake of overcoming mourning. Like the pilgrim or wanderer, the movement is dual, for it involves wondering as well as wandering in that transcorporeal flow of knowledge. Internal exile is the –ancient or transmodern– natural response to psychological imprisonment, to the solid and stagnant state of identity. If water solidifies –becoming glass–, it paralyses the body’s motion and the purpose for the journey – or life itself. Water symbolises both death and rebirth (Eliot *The Waste Land*, 16; Eliade 165). In another of the essays that form *Plainwater*, “Water Margins: An Essay on Swimming by My Brother”, the stagnation of H<sub>2</sub>O recalls death, for we read that “[t]he water is dark and waits in its motionless kingdoms” (Carson *Plainwater*, 233). This liquid takes on different shapes and personalities along the way, resonating in the narrator’s psyche. Applying Frazer’s laws of contagion and similarity, water acts as a mythical element mirroring the voice’s consciousness (Frazer 173). The body of water, whether in “drops”, “waterfall”, or “tears”, implies a deterritorialisation that would explain the return of beings to a dissolved, permeable, and abstract state, incapable of establishing divisions or oppressive norms. That is why we read that “I cannot read maps –why press a seal on running water” (Carson *Plainwater*, 123). Dissolving all constraining elements, the narrator glimpses a possible regeneration at the

end of the essay. This brings us back to Heraclitus's quotation, for in Carson's words, "[p]ilgrims were people to whom things happened that happened only once" (167). For this reason, it is necessary to go deeper into the *camino*, for she urges us not to "come back the way you went. Come a new way" (123).

#### 4. THE FEMALE MYSTIQUE

*O Lord, Thou pluckest me out [...] / burning*

T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*

Hunger is a recurring motif in Anne Carson's work, as is thirst. The lack of fluids or food in the body makes it succumb, find itself helpless and disposed from its ontology. Love for the Other, for water, or for the road is what keeps the narrator going. Throughout the journey, the pilgrim searches for her metaphorical nourishment, so that "[t]here is no question I am someone starving. There is no question I am making this journey to find out what that appetite is" (Carson *Plainwater*, 143). The absence of the tangible image of water, the allusion to the desert (138) or to the idea of "[n]ot rain [...] Water is less, and less" (136) induces abandonment, and the possibility of "drowning on the Meseta" (156). Dispossession entails entering a liquid place, moldable and far from any boundary. "Water abandons itself" (156), like a body "[s]e abandona" (178). The loss for the beloved body, for communication or water leads the voice to a state of decreation, that is, of making the created pass into the uncreated, to the renunciation of the material, to exile from space and the body (Weil 57). The renunciation of material goods, as well as of the flesh—erotically or fraternally— leads the narrator to embark on a self-imposed path of meditation and penance (166). To undo the self, "one must move through the self to the very inside of its definition" (Carson *Decreation*, 179).

Abandonment as a response to conscious grief. Abandonment as a result of the failed communication between the dead body of the brother or the irreparable dementia of the father. That is why the absent presence of water, in its mythical and original dimension, symbolises a return to the animal instinct, to the community, to the roots. Penance is a process, just as knowing water is a process. Understanding is a burden, an obstacle, and a stillness. That is why it is necessary to keep walking. Throughout the essay, there are explicit allusions to this feeling, as we read in “[p]enance is one form we find, one form we insist on” (Carson *Plainwater*, 174) and “[w]hat is the relation of rage to penance? Of entanglement? [...] I am not one to interfere, but sadness is sadness” (171). Grief, as the infinite fluid of human existence, is the central motif of the essay. The mystique of the journey implies a new direction: entering the unknown of one’s own ontology. The immensity, the infinity of wandering through arid lands, will lead the narrator to wonder if there is a possible destination –external and internal. Yet here is the paradox: the constant presence of the absence of water will bring a possible regeneration, so that “we are not at the end” (186). The narrator constantly questions herself about her own existence, removed from the non-existence of the beloved body and, in turn, contemplates herself from a superior, unfolded position, when she says that “[h]ow surprised I am to be entangled in the knowledge of some other animal. I know the animal. Does it mean I hand myself over? What is knowing?” (175).

Knowing the animal means knowing the fall, the instinct, the survival, the thirst. In the case of Anne Carson, we might be helped by Emily Dickinson’s lines which exclaim that “[w]ater is taught by thirst [...] Love, by memorial mould” (in Ardanaz 86). This is the peak of self-reflection in “Kinds of Water”, as it questions the imprisonment, the self-imposition of cognitive and corporeal barriers that deprive the narrator of free movement, making her responsible for the disappearance of the male body and intangible

existence. Accepting thirst means understanding and accepting loss. Although the journey begins with a self-imposed sacrifice, as we are told that “I prayed and fasted” (Carson *Plainwater*, 122), along the way, the voice sheds guilt and understands that it is necessary to accept that which is unknown or unattainable. Openly Christian, the voice states that the way to get to the bottom of things is through the inner look. To unload the invisible weight of the brother’s death and the disappearance of the father’s conscience, the narrator needs to let go of her own corporeality, for the flesh encloses and limits. That is why “I prayed and fasted. I read the mystics. I studied the martyrs” (122). This explains why each diaristic entry contains a maxim alluding to water or fire, to the absence or presence of meditative poets such as Machado, Zeami or Kan-ami. The absence of water entails exercising one’s conscience and questioning one’s own existence. Hence the importance of the fluvial idea because it acts as “an answer as water into thirst” (123).

There are certain symbols that appear from time to time in the essay that reinforce the existence of water insofar as they embody its absence. At one point, we are told that Cid hardly needs to drink because he was born in the “desert” (Carson *Plainwater*, 138) and, unlike the narrator, perhaps he would have entered that liminal state of the self earlier, once he had understood the lightness of being and the physical impossibility of transcendence. As for the punishment of the flesh, the “knives” (137) are reminiscent of the pilgrim’s sacrifice, of his wounds, or of blood, another liquid that makes corporeal existence possible. The knife, physically and metaphorically, describes pain. Like drought, pain makes understanding impossible. The image of fire is also interesting, as it rarely appears with its own word, but with semantic allusions such as “I stand, mind burning” (147) or “[w]hat is the fear inside language? No accident of the body can make it stop burning” (157). Burning implies a movement, as does “drowning” (149). If sinking implies a realisation of anthropocentric oppression, then burning implies rebirth. In the



same way, when the body goes into fire or water, organic regeneration is possible. Not so the soul, for in mysticism, fire is the true vehicle for reaching God, knowledge, and penance. According to Cirlot, fire is “a mediator between forms which vanish and forms in creation” (105). In this sense, “like water, [it is] a symbol of transformation and regeneration” (105). If a body cannot cross the same river twice, neither can it cross the same fire twice. The experience of mourning, like the experience of regeneration, must be unique, non-transferable, free of forms and attachments. Approaching these elements implies abandoning one’s own entity for the survival of the spirit. They are thus cooperating agents, complementary and necessary to achieve this generational rebirth, and their relationship makes their coexistence possible.

## **5. Conclusion: REACHING THE SHORE**

*All things swept sole away/ This is/ Immensity*

Emily Dickinson

Anne Carson’s *camino* in “Kinds of Water” (1995) entails a rite of passage to accept and understand grief. The repeated allusions to both the overflow and the absence of water act as a symbolic baptism to which the narrator exposes herself. A baptism of self-knowledge and penance after the loss of the beloved body. Going into the water means leaving behind any form, image, or oppressive preconception of the material to accept a liquid state. As Carson writes, “[y]ou can lead a pilgrim to water” (*Plainwater*, 157). The journey ends in Finisterre, which means tempting the body to drown, for only in the absolute can the metaphysical depths of things be known. But water, like bodies, also abandons itself. In this sense, abandoning oneself would mean acquiring a non-form which has been dispossessed of all ontology, knowledge, and memory. Devoid of affection, language or understanding, the narrator withdraws into external contemplation

—at once individual and universal— and mystical meditation. Her language becomes more self-reflexive as her diaristic essay progresses, but it also becomes fragmented, aphoristic, and hesitant. In this process, water is an element that leads unconsciously to knowledge. It also acts as a superior and transcendental force and implies the total dissolution of the barriers that oppress or limit. The search for water as *fons et origo* becomes a symbolic and penitent act, a pretext for the pilgrimage.

The road to Santiago de Compostela also produces a sense of alienation that separates the *anhaga* from other beings and makes her more reflective and critical of his society. The narrator falls prey to mourning and *posthuman suffering*, as she contemplates the organic waste which is subordinated to a hospital machine and wonders about the futility of the flesh and the survival of knowledge. But if there is something that increases the mourning, it is not the absence itself, the infinitude, or the emptiness, but the transmodern irony of living in a hyperconnected and transversal context in which linguistic or semantic, corporeal, or affective closeness is being lost. Eventually, the road is left behind and the pilgrim's transcendental and epistemological quest endures. That is why Carson writes: "How is a pilgrim like a No play? His end is not the point" (*Plainwater*, 184). Realising that the absolute cannot be reached is the lesson of the road. And therefore, the pilgrim becomes aware of the expiration of the body and its insignificance in an increasingly individualistic and cynical society. However, like all cyclical processes, water reminds us of death and resurrection. So, the pilgrim, the *anhaga* or the wanderer, once she is in front of the vastness of the end of the *camino*, shall proclaim that "[i]n my beginning is my end [...] In my end is my beginning" (Eliot *Four Quartets*, 12-19).

## Works Cited

- Ardanaz, Margarita, ed. *Poemas, de Emily Dickinson*, edición bilingüe. Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 2016.
- Bergvall, Caroline. *Drift*. New York: Nightboat Books, 2014.
- Carson, Anne. *Decreation*. New York: Vintage, 2005.
- . *Plainwater: Essays and Poetry*. New York: Knopf, 1995.
- Cirlot, Juan Eduardo. *A Dictionary of Symbols*. London; Routledge, 2001.
- “Elegy”. Online Etymology Dictionary.  
[https://www.etymonline.com/word/elegy#etymonline\\_v\\_5722](https://www.etymonline.com/word/elegy#etymonline_v_5722). Accessed 8 June 2022.
- Eliade, Mircea. *Imágenes y símbolos*. Madrid: Taurus, 1986.
- Eliot, T. S. *Four Quartets*. New York: Harcourt, 1971 (1941).
- . *The Waste Land*, edited by Michael North. Los Angeles: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001 (1922).
- Frazer, James. *The Golden Bough*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- Gomes, Miguel Ángel. *Elegías anglosajonas*. Madrid: La oficina, 2019.
- Heraclitus. *Fragments: The Collected Wisdom of Heraclitus*. Translated by Brooks Haxton. New York: Viking, 2001 (5<sup>th</sup> c. BC).
- Linton, Jamie. *What Is Water? The History of a Modern Abstraction*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2010.
- Melville, Herman. *Moby-Dick or The Whale*. London: Penguin Classics, 2003 (1851).
- Miccoli, Anthony. “Posthumanist Suffering”. *The Genealogy of the Posthuman*. 2017.  
<https://criticalposthumanism.net/posthuman-suffering/>. Accessed 5 June 2022.
- Muela, Julián. “Atributos y funciones del mar en el viaje literario medieval. Algunos ejemplos de la narrativa francesa (siglos XII y XIII)”. *Cuadernos del CEMyR*, vol. 15, December 2007, pp. 145-172.
- Neimanis, Astrida. *Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2017.

- Rae, Ian. "Verglas: Narrative Technique in Anne Carson's 'The Glass Essay'". *ESC: English Studies in Canada*, vol. 37, 2011, pp.163-186.
- Ribémont, Bernard. 'Physique et fiction: une mythologie "scientifique" de l'eau dans les encyclopédies médiévales', in *L'eau au Moyen Âge: symbols et usages: Actes du Colloque, Orléans-Mai 1994*, edited by Bernard Ribémont. Orléans: Paradigme, 1996, p. 97.
- Rodríguez Magda, Rosa M. *Transmodernidad*. Rubí: Anthropos, 2004.
- "The Wanderer", tr. Aaron K. Hostetter. Old English Poetry Project. <https://oldenglishpoetry.camden.rutgers.edu/the-wanderer/>. Accessed 8 June 2022.
- Weil, Simone. *La gravedad y la gracia*. Madrid: Trotta, 2012 (1947).
- Woolf, Virginia. *Mrs Dalloway*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000 (1925).