A Biography of Red: An Essay In Prose
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Her name is Anne Carson everything about her is red. Anne Carson is a difficult person to pin down; her identity, like her work, does not fit neatly into a category. Her flagship masterpiece, “An Autobiography of Red” is described as “a novel in verse”. Critics have a difficult time defining the work as either poetry or prose, just as it becomes impossible to whittle Cason down to a simple title. Carson is poet, essayist, playwright, translator, educator and painter. To write on Carson in relation to “Autobiography of Red” (referred to as “AOR” for the rest of this essay) is to delve into the blossoming of her passion for the Greek language and her escape in classics from the minutia of day to day life. Her interviews are few and scattered, as she refers to journalism as a useless form. She finds the highly cultivated inaccurate. As such, trying to piece together truths of her life proves difficult. Carson is a writer who holds all her secrets somewhere between her teeth and her text. Autobiography of Red is a testament to red: to all the unbridled passion it can connotate and to the scope of hot, angry, tender emotions it can encapsulate. Through AOR, Carson pulls back the veil she uses to straddle the classics she has based her work and life on and the modernity she finds herself rooted in. In doing so Carson effaces the boundaries between identity and perception, instead choosing to probe the often opposing natures or multifaceted contradictions of the archetype of the outcast.

“Geryon was a monster everything about him was red,” (Carson 9). There are parallels that are easy to make between Carson and her main character in AOR, Geryon. In the legend of Herakles and his ten labours, Geryon was a monster living on an island and Herakles was tasked with capturing his flock of sheep. Herakles slew Geryon and stole his cattle. Carson’s book is derivative of the account of Geryon written by the Greek poet Stesichorus in his poem “Geryoneis”, which paints a less monstrous picture of the ill-fated Geryon. Carson’s Geryon has a malicious older brother, a stay at home mother who is the epitome of goodness to him, and a father mentioned only once throughout the entirety of the novel in passing, “every second Tuesday in winter Geryon’s father and brother went to hockey practise,” (Carson 34). To
truly delve into the comparisons between Geryon and Carson as characters, the semantics of the backstory become increasingly unimportant and shallow. These bullet points of comparison are mere launching points for increased scrutiny of the ideas set forth in the novel using Geryon as a vehicle. Carson’s reimagining of Greek legend ultimately raises more questions than answers, yet is more telling than any biographic information.

Carson’s interest in Greek began in 1965 at a mall in Hamilton, Ontario. She found a copy of Sappho by Willis Barnstone at a bookstore which included both the original and translated text side by side. She found herself enthralled by the duality of languages that existed within the book. The next year her family moved to Port Hope, where her school Latin teacher, Alice Cowan, was fluent in Greek and began to teach Carson on her lunch breaks. Like Carson, Geryon finds refuge in solitude. He begins writing his autobiography and “[setting] down all inside things, particularly his own heroism and early death much to the despair of the community” (Carson, 29). When asked in an interview with Brick magazine which myths she remembers as her first introduction to the possibility of narrative in Greek mythology Carson replied, “I remember from that book the myth of Tithonus. Tithonus was the young man who fell in love with the goddess of the dawn and they were having a pleasant affair; then one day he asked her to make him immortal. He wanted to be a god and live with her forever. So she went to Zeus and said, “Can you make Tithonus immortal?” And Zeus said “Sure” and made him immortal but he didn’t make him ageless. So poor Tithonus withered away…” (BrickMag) What Carson took away from this myth was “[the importance of] the wording!” (BrickMag) Carson is evasive, unwilling to reveal too much and always leaving the interpreter with a sense of coming up empty. Like Geryon, she is quick to return focus to the lens, to the medium in which she feels an affinity without focusing on her identity. Carson refuses to be commodified, instead choosing to be glib and employ the same slipperiness of the text to her projected persona.

Carson’s fascination with her first Greek lesson in semantics comes across throughout the structure of her texts. *AOR* is broken up into fragmentary pieces of different texts, with the bulk of its structure being the stream of conscious of Geryon. Carson uses this fluctuating method of storytelling in tribute to the fragments of Stesichoros’ “Geryoneis” that
form the base of her novel. Mirroring her early exposure to the duality of language through her copy of Sappho, the effect of breaking up her novel into several segments followed by two appendixes maintains the authenticity of the original Greek version of the story and makes it possible for the reader to see both original and translation coexisting within the page. When she spoke to The New York Times on writing and translation she said “…the struggle to drag a thought over from the mush of the unconscious into some kind of grammar, syntax, human sense; every attempt means starting over with language…” (NY times). *AOR* exposes Carson’s academic fascination with Stesichoros as much as it does hers with Geryon. Her structured texts begin with a short chapter on “What Difference Did Stesichoros make?”: a piece of academia that delves into her reasons for choosing Geryon for this novel. Primarily, when she is explaining the ‘unlatching’ of the traditions of the adjective, she proceeds with “Geryon is the name of a character in an ancient Greek myth about whom Stesichoros wrote a very long lyric poem in dactylo-epitrite meter and triadic structure. Some eighty-four papyrus fragments and a half-dozen citations survive…” (Carson 5-6). As much as Carson admires Geryon for the “tantalizing cross section of scenes, both proud and pitiful, from [his] own experience…his red boy’s life” (Carson 6), the book initially comes across as an academic endeavour to translate the papyrus remains of the work of Stesichoros, or as Carson puts it “the fragment numbers tell you roughly how the pieces fell out of the box. You can of course keep shaking the box.. Here. Shake.” (Carson 7)

Carson does not feel it necessary to differentiate between academic text, like the initial prologue to *AOR* and the creative embellishment of text, namely the bulk of the writing itself. In an interview, when asked about the marrying of creative and academic writing in her work she responded “These distinctions are obscure to me, in practice. People worry a lot about them, why? The boundaries between “forms” (poetic, prosaic) are invented by us. The separation of “academic” from “creative” enterprise is demonstrably false and futile. Why pretend to respect categories like these?” (Catherine Bush) This is perhaps best exemplified in *AOR* when Carson sets up Appendix A, “Testimonia on the Question of Stesichoros’ Blinding by Helen”, as a recounting of factual events to set up Appendix B, notably “Palinode of Stesichoros by Stesichoros”. Appendix B is three lines, a tongue-in-cheek
joke inserted in the midst of academia by Carson. It consists wholly of “No it is not the true story / no you never went on the beached ships / no you never came to the towers of Troy” (Carson 17) and sets up Appendix C: “Clearing up the question of Stesichoros’ blinding by Helen”. Appendix C serves as a longer series of if/so jabs at the myth itself and the introduction of the reader to the blending of ancient myth and modernity that permeates the text, notably “15. If we call Helen up either she will sit with her glass of vermouth and let it ring or she will answer” (Carson 20). These segments lead into the bulk of the novel titled “Autobiography of Red, A Romance” (Carson 21).

The implication of a romance is questionable at best. At no point in the original novel or in Stesichoros’ “Geryoneis” is there any mention of the relationship between Geryon and Herakles being homoerotic in nature. In the novel, instead of killing Geryon as occurs in the myth, the two meet and become lovers before Herakles breaks Geryon’s heart. Geryon and Herakles meet as teenagers and continue a torrid love affair, which serves as Geryon’s sexual awakening. Prior to this Geryon is entirely a solitary character, and the meeting between the two is described as “they were two superior eels at the bottom of the tank and they recognized each other like italics” (Carson 39). When asked what she thought the attraction between the two is, Carson said “Probably mutual strangeness. I think that’s why I used italics. Everyone else is Roman font then these two people show up slanted and they see that. Automatic lightning” (Brickmag). Carson formats her novel so that there are no quotations marks, merely italicized text to infer speech. Each interaction between Geryon and the outside world exists in recognizable italics that he is meant to decipher, a fitting metaphor for the relationship he explores with Herakles. The relationship between Geryon and Herakles is definitely sexual in nature, but to call it a romance is reaching. The word ‘love’ is never expressed between the two. Herakles and Geryon are described as lovers and the act of sex is described as making love, however at no point does Geryon express a love for Herakles or vice versa. As the novel progresses Geryon comes to sexual fruition, the first encounter being his sexual abuse at the hands of his older brother and finally culminating in his sporadic sexual relationship with Herakles that is one-sided and emotionally withholding. Geryon’s feelings for Herakles are constantly unrequited and his rejection by Herakles pushes
him further into isolation, and into his self-imposed belief of his own monstrosity, rooted in his ‘red.’ Geryon feels shame: for his longing for Herakles, for his inability to be hard and unfeeling, for his vulnerability to all the ‘red’ things, like romantic ideals and his dedication to passion. He describes his proximity to Herakles through his interpretation of their distance, when pretending to be asleep on an airplane he leans into Herakles’ jacket and feels “a wave of longing as strong as a colour,” (Carson 118).

Carson’s exploration of the homosexual relationship between the two men is rooted in her own fascination with Oscar Wilde, and with being a gay man. Carson has attributed her deep interest in Wilde with also sparking her interest in Greek as “at that time I was fancying myself a reborn Oscar Wilde and the whole world of intellectual life in Oscar Wilde’s time, which included a lot of Latin and Greek, was sort of a myth to me and I thought, If I learn Greek I could be all the more like Oscar Wilde,” (Brickmag). Carson has commented briefly in interviews before on why she delved into the homoerotic with Geryon. In relation to herself she has said “I guess I’ve never felt entirely female, but then probably lots of people don’t. But I think that at different times in my life I located myself in different places on the gender spectrum, and for many years…I didn’t have any connection to the female gender…There’s no word for the “floating” gender in which we would all like to rest. The neuter comes up in the unbearable poem, the neuter gender, but that doesn’t really capture it because you don’t feel neuter, you feel just wrong. Wrong vis-à-vis the gender you’re supposed to be in, wrong vis-à-vis the other one, and so what are you?” (The Paris Review). However, she does relent that her reasons for engaging so often as a male character is also partially due to “Historically we use man for people of any gender because men win. So it’s useful to do that when cornered.” (The Paris Review) The slipperiness, or fluidity, of identity are engaged with frequently throughout the text, not solely in relation to gender. Carson decries the singular narrative, the distilling down to a single story of man/woman or hero/monster. Carson refuses to dignify the overly simplistic, instead choosing to delve into the myriad of connectors that forge an identity and that these identities themselves can frequently intersect and contradict. To Carson identity is a series of opposing dualities and to attempt to cleave to solely one or distill oneself down to the majority diminishes the
humanity or efficacy of her text. Carson is more interested in the conflict of being human, or a monster, or both.

The way in which Carson can pinpoint the minutia of human grief comes forth at its strongest when she delves into the loneliness Geryon feels both with and without Herakles. Upon his loss of Herakles, Geryon shares a moment with his mother in the kitchen at which point she asks him who gave him his shirt and he replies “Herakles gave it- and here Geryon had meant to slide past the name coolly but such a cloud of agony poured up from his soul he couldn’t remember what he was saying” (Carson 68). This cloud imagery in relation to Geryon and Herakles is repeated when he describes their sexual chemistry as “a dangerous cloud. Geryon knew he must not go back into the cloud. Desire is no light thing.” (Carson 133). Much like a cloud cannot be contained or controlled, Geryon can no more avoid the trappings of his desire for Herakles than he can keep at bay his grief over losing him. By his own admission his favourite weapon is the cage. His reiteration of a fear of being trapped or encapsulated by emotions speaks to his closed off nature and his fear of unleashing his emotions, or rather his ‘monstrosity’, to the fullest of its capacity. Carson explains her draw to the nature of their relationship by saying “I was drawn to the Geryon story because of his monstrosity, although it’s something of a cliché to say that we all think we’re monsters. But it does have to do with gender, though I don’t know what it is about growing up female that makes one think: monster.” (The Paris Review). Her sense of engagement with the text is highlighted by this admission: she creates Geryon as the anti-monster and frequently holds up his vulnerable, more feminine side as a way to diminish perceptions of his monstrosity and perhaps to make sense of her own.

Despite this, throughout the novel the only description of Geryon as a monster comes from his own admission and one moment when Herakles refers to himself “a master of monsters” (Carson 129) when he is wrestling with Geryon. When Ancash sees Geryon’s wings, the thing apart from his red he most associates with his monstrosity, his response is one of reverence. Instead of seeing Geryon as a mutation or a freak, he sees him as a “Yazcamac…Wise Ones. Those Who Went and Saw and Came Back.” (Carson 128). In doing so he gives Geryon a new story, a new myth to be apart of. By Ancash’s definition Geryon is not a being of horror but instead a “Yazcamac…red people with wings, all their
weakness burned away.” (Carson 129). Though Ancash gives Geryon a
new myth to belong to, he also relents that not all people can perceive
him in this way, and he admonishes him to “be careful in Huarez. There
are people around there still looking for eyewitnesses.” (Carson 130).
This description of Geryon, as an eyewitness, is a myth that he can more
actively engage with. By redefining Geryon’s monstrosity in these terms,
he is able to reconcile his liminality with a role he is familiar with: that
of the observer. His monstrosity becomes aligned with his ability to
create records; through his photography or through his journals.

The most vulnerable moment of self-injection of Carson into
Geryon is the act of chronicling histories. Geryon, throughout the novel,
archives his entire life. It begins with sculptures before he can write, then
he writes in his journal, and finally he takes series of photographs. As a
child he is given a journal and “on the cover Geryon wrote
Autobiography Inside he set down the facts / Total facts known about
Geryon / Geryon was a monster everything about him was red…Some
say Geryon had six hands six feet some say wings” (Carson 37). This is
a moment of the metaphysical in the novel, where the myth of Geryon
and his modern creation fuse for a moment and let the reader see both
sides flickering within each other. Like Geryon, Carson has been known
to archive experience to make sense of it, most notably with her more
recent work “Nox”. “Nox” is an elegy to Carson’s brother, whom she
was estranged from for twenty two years before his death. “Nox”, similar
to the fragments of photos and text Geryon keeps to chronicle his life, is
composed of “some photos of [Carson’s] family life, bits of text from
[her brother’s] letters, actual pieces of the letters, some of [her] mother’s
answers to his letters, paint, plastic, staples and other decorative items on
the right-hand side.” (The Paris Review). Carson explained her reasons
for “Nox” as “It was not so much grief . . . I mean, yes, grief partly, but
more the puzzle of understanding him.” (Brickmag). Similarly, Geryon
wrote his autobiography to make sense of the “inside things” that
permeate his day to day. The duality of the lack of context and the act of
writing to create a substance in the void of absence is a theme they both
explore. For Carson, writing “Nox” felt as if she was actively
‘unlearning’ her brother, as she had more questions than answers after
she “got anecdotes from his widow and other people in Copenhagen who
were his friends. But it was like reading bits of a synopsis of a movie that
you never see; it just didn’t add up. Somebody would say, “Oh yeah, I knew [her] brother in his gold-smuggling days”…Little chips of data. They didn’t make any pattern.” (Brickmag). Geryon, as a child, melds his ancient past with his modern incarnation, an example being when he tries to figure out why Herakles killed him, “QUESTIONS: Why did Herakles kill Geryon? 1. Just violent. 2. Had to it was one of His Labors (10th) 3. Got the idea that Geryon was Death otherwise he would live forever.” (Carson 37). At the point of this admission, Geryon is a young child in the novel and writing in his journal. Additionally, Geryon’s titles for his pictures feel like fragments, and there is a deliberate separation from photo and text; a sense of cultivated coolness in regard to the ‘inside things.’ Under ‘XLIV. Photographs: The Old Days’, Geryon describes “a photograph of a man’s naked back, long and bluish.” (Carson 141). His omission of Herakles’ name distances him from the truth of their adultery but also reveals his own lack of clarity on his feelings. Carson felt similarly when writing “Nox”, as if she was distancing herself from her brother and becoming a spectator to his life. She writes “I don’t think anything changed in my view of him. It was more storied but not more complete… It’s hard to keep the dignity of the subject without getting your own fingerprints all over it.” (Brickmag).

Carson writes in and for the margins. Geryon becomes more than a monster or a myth. Through his exploration of his moments of fragility and his perseverance for passion despite his recognition of its own futility, Geryon is lifted from the margins and placed directly in the midst of the novel in verse. If anything, the novel is Geryon’s quest to grapple with both his concept of identity and the red he finds himself bound to struggle with and against. Through writing Geryon as a self-defined monster, Carson both reclaims the term and undermines it. Her exploration of the fluidity of role in both the narrative and one’s own identity is present from the novel’s first pages. Geryon’s monstrosity is both imagined and real; just as his wings are both his great shame and the exaltation of the Quechua. As such the novel is a moment of vulnerability, a glimpse at existing in the myriad of dualities that define a complex existence. Carson addresses the liminality of Geryon: he is not quite the same “monster” he was at the novel’s beginning but he is yet to become “Ones Who Went And Saw And Came Back” (AOR 128). To wit, the attempts to continue to hold on to love are what cements this
transformation, from Geryon the monster to Geryon as an embodiment of red. Geryon is able to begin to redefine and reconcile his monstrosity. This is best described in AOR by Geryon’s copy of the fictitious “Philosophic Problems” as “…I will never know how you see red and you will never know how I see it. But this separation of consciousness is recognized only after a failure of communications, and our first movement is to believe in an undivided being between us…” (Carson 105).

Works Cited


