

Metaphor as Self-Discovery in Anne Carson's *Autobiography of Red: A Novel in Verse*

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In the gap between what one wants to say (or what one perceives there is to say) and what one can say (what is sayable), words provide for a collaboration and a desertion. We delight in our sensuous involvement with the materials of language, we long to join words to the world- to close the gap between ourselves and things- and we suffer from doubt and anxiety because of our inability to do so. (Lyn Hejinian, *The Language of Inquiry*)

Anne Carson is a contemporary Canadian poet, essayist and translator. As a Hellenist, her works are pregnant with Greek mythology she references, modernizes or translates. Her poetry, prose or essays are also deeply influenced by history, literature and art. She blends the sources, ideas and themes from all her fields of expertise and thus often produces hybrid works that make her peculiarity in today's literary scene.

She wrote over the Greek myth of Geryon and Herakles with special reference to Stesichoros (born c. 650 BC) and his *Geryoneis* ("The Geryon Matter"), which only survives in fragments. The myth refers to Herakles' tenth labour that consisted in killing three-bodied giant Geryon and in robbing his red cattle. Not only is Carson focusing on the same subject, but she also sticks to the same form; indeed, the novel is composed of seven sections: an essay on the Greek poet Stesichoros, translated fragments of Stesichoros' *Geryoneis*, a lyric sequence based on the *Geryoneis*, a palinode, a mock interview and two appendices. Those seven sections recall the seven sections of the Greek nomos or lyric performance Stesichoros was famous for.

"What difference did Stesichoros make?" is the very first question Carson asks at the beginning of the first section. We may argue that among all the different versions of Herakles' tenth labour, Stesichoros was the first to propose an account relating the story from Geryon's own perspective and experience.

They [the fragments] tell of a strange winged red monster who lived on an island called Erytheia (which is an adjective meaning simply "The Red Place") quietly tending a herd of magical cattle, until one day the hero Herakles came across the sea and killed him to get the cattle. There were many different ways to tell a story like this. Herakles was an important Greek hero and the elimination of Geryon constituted one of His celebrated Labors. If Stesichoros had been a more conventional poet he might have taken the point of view of Herakles and framed a thrilling account of the victory of culture over monstrosity. (5, 6)

Anne Carson adopts the same angle and presents the Geryon / Herakles relationship as a contemporary love affair. However, it would be far too reductive a thought to assume that Carson's account boils down to a mere love story. The poet does manage a blend of ingredients from different literary genres. *Autobiography of Red* can be read as a Picaresque novel, in which the hero goes through a succession of trials before he reaches maturity in the end, a fairy tale full of dreams and monsters, or a philosophical essay raising metaphysical questions. Carson seems to propose different layers leading to various levels of reading and comprehension.

Carson's full title of her work reads: *Autobiography of Red, A Novel in Verse*. The title raises a paradox, as it combines the term "autobiography", which hints at traits of reality and truthfulness, and the term "novel" implying a fictional writing. As soon as Geryon becomes aware of the existence of an "inside" and an "outside", "he began his autobiography. In this work Geryon set down all inside things particularly his own heroism and early death much to the despair of the community. He coolly omitted all outside things" (29). The little red monster makes it clear that his ambition is to dig his self out in the process of writing and constructing his autobiography. In doing so, he is going to reinvent his own ending through an act of imagination:

Geryon watched his mother pick a fragment of tobacco off her tongue before she said,
Does he ever write anything with a happy ending?
Geryon paused.
Then he reached up and carefully disengaged the composition paper
From the teacher's hand.
Proceeding to the back of the classroom he sat at his usual desk and took out a pencil.

New Ending.
All over the world the beautiful red breezes went on blowing hand
In hand. (38)

Thus, the poem blurs the distinction between autobiography and autofiction. This is physically perceptible on the page in Carson's recurrent use of italics whenever direct speech is at stake, as if the distorted letters reflected the distorted reality the former convey through language. When "*Geryon wrote a note full of lies for his mother*" (46) it becomes clear that life can be modified making the limit between autobiography and autofiction hard to make out. Truth becomes reachable through imagination. Anne Carson uses Stesichoros' fragments and fills in the blanks between them with her own imagination. Besides, what we have to bear in mind is the mythological dimension of the poem. What is a myth? A traditional story, one concerning the early history of a people or explaining some natural or social phenomenon, and typically involving supernatural beings or events. In other words, myths stand at the crossroads between reality and fiction; they re-present a genuine concept in a fantasized way. That is precisely what Geryon stands for: a myth questing for his recognition through the grasp, the understanding and the appropriate reading of his self.

The poem does raise the issue of identity when Carson makes the ordinary collide with the bizarre. The text is cobbled with freaks: Herakles is often compared to a "gorilla" and his grandmother is "asymmetrical"; when Geryon and Herakles meet for the first time they "recognized each other as two italics" (39), in other words as hybrid letters; in a Tango bar in Buenos Aires Geryon encounters a "gnome" and the three musicians are perceived "as one person" (99) like one body with three heads; the peculiarity of the protagonists reflects the hybridism of Carson's style, whose versification is arbitrary with no regular meter observed; the syntax is atypical and follows no convention: she alternates between long and short lines as if the space on the page reflected the turmoil and the ferment inside. Monstrosity is often directly linked to the issue of gender. Indeed, Geryon seems incapable of distinguishing males from females; the philosophy teacher he meets in Buenos Aires is referred to as the man with "a pink mouth small as a nipple" (86), the singer in the Tango bar is presented as a female wearing "a tuxedo with a black tie" (100) and finally Geryon confuses women with animals and then with men when he sees "Two women in furs came towards them swaying on their heels like big gold foxes. No- they are men, Geryon saw as they passed. Ancash was staring too. The foxes disappeared into the crowd" (114). If Geryon is unable to make the difference between sexes, it is all the same about himself. He often stands in an in-between position alternating genders: "He had been here before, dangling inside the word *she* like a trinket at a belt" (57). Carson's red monster hesitates about his gender and beyond that he hesitates about his own identity. He sometimes appears as outside of himself being unable to recognize his reflection: "From the stainless steel of the kettle a small red person in a big jacket regarded him" (102). Geryon undergoes an identity crisis when he wonders "Who am I?" (57). That is what it is all about: Geryon's autobiography does not consist in presenting a "completed self", but the experiment is to show the ontological quest of a self in search of himself. That ontological quest cannot be dissociated from an epistemological one, in that, as Carson seems to put it, knowing oneself cannot be achieved if the world we evolve in is not comprehended either. In the end, knowing one's heart or one's earth is just a matter of assembling the letters in the right order. This is the reason why the poem embraces issues such as time, memory, reality and love. Geryon is a creature who is constantly in the process of learning. The lyric poem starts by "Geryon learned about justice from his brother quite early" (23); the very first verb attributed to Geryon is "to learn"; the second is "thought" and the third is "studied". His autobiography is a place in which he analyses his own life through the process of his own being written. Therefore, language will be at the core of *Autobiography of Red*, even though it is envisaged in a paradoxical way.

Geryon is himself both the subject and the object of his writing. He writes about himself with himself as writing substance:

*No I mean at the bottom
of the picture on the trunk of one of the pine trees little red drops like blood.
Ah yes very good the little red drops
my signature. (66)*

The opening section entitled "Red Meat: What Difference Did Stesichoros Make?" starts with Gertrude Stein's words: "I like the feeling of words doing / as they want to do and as they have to do." Stein insists on the mobility of words which react like electrons, thus emphasizing their freedom and free will. Working on language and its relationship to the individual and to the world requires a closer look at the British philosopher Wittgenstein (1889–1951). If Carson, echoing Stesichoros, compares words and language to "a box", in his *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein compares them to "a tool-box": "There is a hammer, pliers, a saw, a screw-driver, a rule, a glue-pot, glue, nails and screws (...) The functions of words are as diverse as the functions of those objects."

In his metaphor, Wittgenstein implies their usefulness for humans; they can be envisaged as mechanical prostheses in order to excavate some material deep inside. In her essay about Stesichoros, Carson paves the way for that conception of words and language. The latter is described as a formidable weapon to rejuvenate (his)stories—"Makes those old stories new, says Suidas" (4). Language has the ability to change, to transform or to recreate reality making the limit between autobiography and autofiction a porous one. As we have already mentioned, Geryon uses language as a device to rewrite his own myth as soon as he gets familiar with words. The story can be read as an allegory about the power words have to transform the real. In Carson's poem words are in motion; they "went bouncing through Geryon" (73) and they "leapt" (70), thus contradicting Homer and his fixed use of language: "Homer fastens every substance in the world to its aptest attribute and holds them in place for epic consumption." (4). Stesichoros stands as the one who not only released words but beings too, as words "are the latches of being". Geryon needs to be "unlatched"; he is adriary locked by a little padlock, whose key has been lost. Images of imprisonment and enclosure are a leitmotiv in the poem; Geryon's favourite weapon is a "Cage" (33); later, Herakles tells his red lover "All your designs are about captivity" (55), "I want you to be free" (74). Geryon is often presented as "wrapped in himself" and at some point "His body felt like a locked box" (124). Carson's hero seems unable to grasp and to reach words. He is estranged from himself and precisely epitomizes Homer's definition of words in their stasis:

*It was the hour when snow goes blue
and streetlights come on and a hare may
pause on the tree line as still as a word in a book. (91)*

That ambivalence of words is also pregnant in Lyn Hejinian's *The Cell*, whose title hints at a double comprehension of words and language: a structural and functional unit of an organism that is source of life, but also a small room in which a prisoner is kept locked up. Geryon is a mere "captured motionless italic" wishing he could be "read" from the inside; "inside is mine" as he says, but language does not enable him to decipher his "red meat". He has no other alternative but to remain on the surface of things. He cannot scratch the page and get acquainted with what lies beyond, that is his own self, despite the high pressure from his inside to spurt out: "Geryon could feel something like tons of black magma boiling up from the deeper regions of him" (105). He is not in possession of the appropriate tool to "unlatch" his being.

On the contrary, Geryon quickly notices that words are not reliant. They dissemble—"a word like *each*, when he stared at it would dissemble itself into separate letters and go. A space for its meaning remained there but blank" (26), and they are sometimes divorced from their literal meaning and keep "cracking in half" (62) reflecting Geryon's "cracks and fissures of his inner life" (105). He is given access to his identity through the fissures of language. Geryon is urged to relinquish speech when he becomes aware of the limits of language, the same limits Wittgenstein had raised in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* when he wrote that "The limits of

my language are the limits of my world" (5-6). The written space, envisaged as the locus for the construction of the self in the discourse, turns out to be a mere dead end. Consequently, self-construction will have to find other ways and means to make the "inner" crop out to the surface.

If the German word "bildungsroman" could also be spelt "buildungsroman", the term would epitomize Carson's hero's poetical autobiography as stepping into a new dimension stressing self-construction through visual art.

A construct through art work and monstration is at the core of Geryon's self determination. The textual space is going to be the place for a collision focusing on a theorization of the relationship between language and images, such as inscriptions, films, paintings and photographs. We have to bear in mind that before taking to writing, Carson was, and still is, a painting amateur for whom visual representation holds a part of truth.

Before Geryon can handle letters he literally (re)constructs himself when he shapes his own sculpture:

Geryon? fine he's right here working on his autobiography

No it's a sculpture he doesn't know how to write yet

*Oh this and that stuff he finds outside Geryon's always finding things
aren't you Geryon?*

She winked at him over the telephone. He winked back using both eyes
and returned to work.

He had ripped up some pieces of crispy paper he found in her purse to use for hair
and was gluing these to the top of the tomato. (35)

At this stage of his life, Geryon's autobiography seems to boil down to a representation of himself through a reconstruction of his external appearance. His sculpture is composed of fragments, to probably reveal the fragmented perception he has of himself. Those fragments are glued together and are a direct reference to the artistic and literary techniques of collage, echoing Carson's technique in her poem when she superimposes her own literary layers onto Stesichoros' fragments. That technique also mirrors the whole structure of the poem that proposes a fragmented/ "particled" vision of the self, others and the world, which is itself mirrored in the form of the poem and its recurrent use of particles as minor function words that tend to connect all the fragments to one another. This connection between art and words through collage can also be appreciated in Anne Ryan's works. She was a contemporary of Marianne Moore, Gertrude Stein, Wallace Stevens or William Carlos Williams, poets who were acclaimed for their experimental and innovative approach of literature and art. Those authors were aware of the links between poetry and painting and their texts were influenced by modern art, and more precisely Cubism. The technique of collage gives the possibility to confront two or more different alterities in the same space. All the characters in *Autobiography of Red* are individuals living next to one another, trying to get glued together. The very end of the poem is quite representative of that when Geryon, Herakles and Ancash "stand side by side with arms touching" (146) like pieces of fabric or separate daubs of paint on the same canvas. The space between them is hardly perceptible at the end, unlike in most of the poem. Blanks usually express the distance between the protagonists. That distance is a fictive border in which subjectivities fail to meet. That imaginary place is epitomized in the poem by the eye motive, and more precisely the blank that is left when eyes fail to recognize the other.

"Looking", "glancing", "watching" or "seeing" are recurrent verbs in the poem. They are most of the time in the negative form. Geryon, who is the focal point, misses his mother's, Herakles' and Ancash's eyes—"Their eyes failed to meet" (120). Being unable to catch glimpses of his self in the other's look, Geryon will fall back on a prosthetic eye: the lens of his camera.

The autobiography,
which Geryon worked on from the age of five to the age of forty-four,
had recently taken the form
of a photographic essay. (60)

"A photographic essay" implies a fusion between visual and written; each of Geryon's photograph is given a title. The end of the poem literally turns into a photo romance: six out of the last eight chapters are "written photographs". However, Geryon's autobiographical photographs are not always technically possible; they appear to picture things that cannot be seen with the eyes. Carson recalls that in ancient art, language and the visual appeared to be one and the same. If language is associated to autofiction, lies and mutability, visual art is right away standing on the side of truthfulness: "They painted this truth on the long wall of the high school" (46). The visual may achieve what language cannot. For Geryon, a photograph is a means of comprehending himself and time, "*a way of playing with perceptual relationships*" (65) and of expressing the verbally inexpressible. Carson visualizes a monster's pictures in order to lead us away from the world of merely visible things and into the counterworld behind the facts and inside perceived appearance. The poet wants to make the negative become visible. Ancash, Herakles' lover also tries to discover what lies beyond the world of appearance using another prosthesis: a tape recorder. All perceptions are at stake on the way to self-discovery. Whatever tool is used, Herakles' grandmother warns that one has to be careful when interpreting a photograph:

*people think it's a black-and-white photograph of course nobody knows
how to look at a photograph nowadays. (66)*

This lack of recognition may also be due to a congenital inability to see. Herakles seems to be colourblind when he dreams of Geryon as "yellow":

*Yellow? said Geryon and he was thinking yellow! Yellow! Even in dreams
he doesn't know me at all! Yellow! (74)*

Herakles' and Geryon's failure to meet and comprehend each other is the result of a different position in space and time, as the man called Lazer, whom Geryon meets in Buenos Aires, hints at:

*Children make you see distances.
What do you mean distances?
(...)
It was very bright this morning unexpectedly clear like a summer day and I looked up
and saw a shadow of a bird go flashing
across the leaves of the acacia as if on a screen projected and it seemed to me that I
was standing on a hill. I have labored up
to the top of this hill, here I am it has taken about half of my life to get here and on
the other side the hill slopes down.
Behind me somewhere if I turned around I could see my daughter beginning to climb
Hand over hand like a little gold
Animal in the morning sun. That is who we are. Creatures moving on a hill.
At different distances, said Geryon.
At distances always changing. We cannot help one another. (94-5)*

Lazer is remembering the film of his thoughts ("*as if on a screen projected*"); some people are bound to never meet as they do not stand at the same distance and this is precisely what occurs to Geryon and those in his surroundings. Their selves never merge because they are too far away from one another. Carson's style in the textual space mirrors up Lazer's inner thoughts. She alternates between short and long lines as an echo of short and long distances between people. If a distance occurs between two individuals, the same process, the same remoteness may take place within a self, as Herakles' photograph tends to show: "In the photograph the face of Herakles is white. It is the face of an old man. It is a photograph of the future, thought Geryon" (144). The text itself reflects distances within the self, especially when Geryon announces "*when I-knew him [Herakles]*" (143); the subject is physically "distanced" from its predicate. Geryon, through his photographs, tries to seal off the fissures of the self by making the distance between "the inside" and "the outside" as tiny as possible.

If one talks about distance changes, one necessarily has to mention movement. Geryon is a being of "movement", "I am a man in transition" (60) as he puts it when he starts his

photographic essay. The motive of the “edge” is recurrent in Carson’s poem—“Pulling himself onto the edge of the bed” (70)—; he is always exploring new borders and ceaselessly stands in a transitory position, so as to go beyond the “surface of things” with his own subjectivity, shaped by his limited use of words and his camera. Those two prostheses seem to be merging in the metaphor. That trope, whose etymology implies flux and movement, makes the visual domain collide with the world of words. It connects words to each other, making a new subjective reality emerge. The metaphor proposes a mobile and circular way of seeing things in order to better apprehend the whole, and is powerful enough to penetrate the surface; it thus enables Geryon to read and feel what is lying under what Stesichoros called the “RedMeat”; the Meat can now be Read. The metaphor provides us with a glimpse of “not the real itself but rather a knowledge of the dynamics of the real” (Eco). The metaphor is a cognitive instrument, a hybrid trope as it makes the visual and the linguistic domains merge. Geryon himself can be envisaged as a *mise en abyme*, as the metaphor of a metaphor; indeed, he also appears as a hybrid character: a red winged monster with human feelings, a being capable of love and solitude. Furthermore, he uses both language and visual art in his ontological and epistemological quest. In his autobiography, Geryon seems to epitomize a self in flux under constant transformation and construction through monstration as visual and language effects. The metaphor “monstrates” the self in process. Carson thus seems to question the existence of a self as a fixed and eternal entity. Geryon is constructing an autobiography without an “I”.

A photograph that has compressed
on its motionless surface
fifteen different moments of time (...) (51)

*Do you know how far away some of those stars are?
Just believe it. Let's see someone touch a star and not get burned. He'll
hold up his fingers, Just a memory burn!* (65)

Those two quotes epitomize what Geryon is trying to do with his camera: capture a self in flux, obtain a range of fragments in time in order to get a more rounded picture of his own identity as the last chapter’s title suggests: “The Flashes in which a Man Possesses Himself”.

Anne Carson has chosen a double enunciation path for her little red monster’s identity quest, words and visual art, thus proposing a poem in movement constantly oscillating between what is expressed with words and images, between the visible and the invisible, the pictorial space gnawing little by little at the textual space.

The two tropes are gathered in a sort of collage technique, where words and images merge and give birth to metaphors. Carson’s *Autobiography of Red* is a space/ a place where other dimensions are superimposed, where different worlds are paralleled. The metaphor enables Geryon to be freed from his “cage”, particularly at the end of the poem:

*This is for Ancash, he calls to the earth diminishing below. This is a memory of our
beauty. He peers down
at the earth heart of Icchantikas dumping all its photons out her ancient eye and he
smiles for
the camera: The Only Secret People Keep.* (145)

Geryon flies and is finally freed from his qualms. Geryon is literally “transported”, and thus recalls Du Marsais’ definition of metaphor: “A figure by means of which the proper, literal meaning of a word is transported”. For a moment, the piece of art or the metaphor, hybrid products born out of the fusion of two languages, incarnate the meeting between two subjects and two worlds that become one. It symbolizes (in the etymological sense of the term) here the meeting of Geryon with Geryon. The “inside” and the “outside” have come to terms for a short period of time. The red hero finally recaptures the meaning of the word “each” he had lost in Chapter II.

In that long spiritual quest, Carson invites her reader into a maze of signs and images to be deciphered and forces them to plunge under the surface of things straight into the self towards the experience of freedom procured by self accomplishment.

When Jean-François Lyotard recalls Claudel's expression "L'œil écoute", he means that the visible can be readable, audible and intelligible (*LISA*). This is precisely Anne Carson's aim in her poem: through metaphor and monstration she teaches Geryon how to read and how to see, thus enabling him to catch glimpses of his self, even though it perpetually moves and transforms. The metaphor implies dynamics and consequently turns out to be the most appropriatemenal "prosthesis" in the endless process of self-discovery. That is what Gertrude Stein called "beginning again and again", as if *Autobiography of Red* were an allegory of the perpetual beginning as a way to postpone finitude.

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