

The Autobiographical Self: Phenomenology and the Limits of Narrative Self-Possession in Anne Carson's *Autobiography of Red*

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Philosophic Problems.

"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 communication, and our first movement is
to believe in an undivided being between us."

Anne Carson, *Autobiography of Red*

ATTENDING TO MARTIN HEIDEGGER'S phenomenological insight to parse terms etymologically,¹ we find the following Greek roots when we read into the meaning of "autobiography": *auto-* (oneself) + *bio-* (life) + *graphia* (writing; from the verb *graphein*, to write). Thus, autobiography is the written story of one's life, one's life story. And yet, this act of "self"-writing frames "life" (*bios*) in such a way that the meaning of each term is obscured. "Life" interrupts the act of self-writing, exceeds it, even though the writing is about that life, and occurs within it, necessarily prior to that life's completion. Is "life" here closer to the act of writing (*graphein*), closer to the sense of oneself (*autos*), or something else altogether escaping the autobiography that strives to contain or convey it? And will that "life" be legible?² Is it the case, as Heidegger maintains, that what is closest to us experientially is furthest from us intellectually, least susceptible to analysis

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or storytelling, and most resistant to representation and linguistic convention? If “life” holds this place for us, between writing and being, then autobiographical criticism ought to consider the insights of phenomenology, for phenomenology seeks to grasp and to communicate the immediacy of experience while remaining faithful to its rich complexity.

In this study, I turn to the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty as a way to open up Anne Carson’s very scholarly and philosophically informed “novel in verse,” *Autobiography of Red*. Merleau-Ponty helps us to understand perception and human subjectivity in the lifeworld—the *Lebenswelt*—in such a way that begins to do justice to the rich autobiographical life explored in Carson’s text. Although the novel is called an autobiography, this titular term is itself unclear, its meaning unstable, because the novel is ostensibly less the autobiography of its author than the autobiography of its main character, Geryon, and about the world in which he dwells; it is the autobiography “of red,” no less than the autobiography of the reader who writes his or her own life into its pages; and, more generally still, it is the autobiography of autobiographical writing itself. Autobiography and its proper author-subject—if indeed it has one—float almost indiscernibly through the text, ghostly, suspended by the text’s seductive voices, which seem to claim a life of their own. Here, for example, are the opening lines from what Geryon calls his “Autobiography”:

Total Facts Known About Geryon.

Geryon was a monster everything about him was red. Geryon lived on an island in the Atlantic called the Red Place. Geryon’s mother was a river that runs to the sea the Red Joy River Geryon’s father was gold. Some say Geryon had six hands six feet some say wings. Geryon was red so were his strange red cattle. Herakles came one day killed Geryon got the cattle. (37)

What are we to make of these words, almost lyrical, with stilted, interrupting punctuation? They announce but fail to offer up “facts” in any ordinary

- 1 This can be found throughout Heidegger’s corpus but perhaps most famously in his treatment of the concept “phenomenology” through a detailed etymological analysis of *phenomenon* + *logos* (see *Being and Time* 51ff).
- 2 In Ancient Greek, there are two words for “life”: *bios* and *zoē*. Only *bios* is considered to be political life, life that is legible, within the bounds of the law, socially recognizable, or “human” life. In sharp contrast, *zoē* is life in a general sense, animal life, or even inhuman and monstrous life. The task for autobiography is to render life meaningful—as *bios*, with its social and political significance. The question of *Autobiography of Red* is how to write the relation between monstrous and human life.

sense, to be sure, while the periods disrupt the lyric flow, making it seem more list-like and factual. What is a monster? What is red? Or in what sense can one's mother be "a river" and one's father "gold"? Immediately, autobiography is posed as a "philosophic problem": facts will prove utterly insufficient in the expression of subjective life. We are vexed not by facts but by the values, perceptions, feelings, private metaphors, and hearsay that supplant the "facts" in the fragment above. "I will never know how you see red and you will never know how I see it" (105). In a certain manner, this is "true," but autobiography is less a question of concrete facts or "knowledge" than lived experience. In this vein I shall argue that Carson's phenomenological reading of Geryon's own very red, non-factual, experience helps to rescue the expression of subjective life from the strictures of conventional language and thought.

Carson is not the first to tell Geryon's story. Her *Autobiography of Red* offers an extended poetic narrative inspired by the ancient myth of Geryon—a red, winged monster slain by Herakles—whose adventures are told in the few remaining fragments originally written by the Greek lyric poet Stesichoros (ca. 600 BCE) and gathered under the title *Geryoneis* ("The Geryon Matter").³ For Carson, Stesichoros is a proto-phenomenologist and autobiographer: "[T]he extant fragments of Stesichoros' poem offer a tantalizing cross section of scenes, both proud and pitiful, *from Geryon's own experience*" (6; emphasis added). Carson opens her book with several of her own liberal translations of Stesichoros's fragments; she proceeds to offer her rendition of the Geryon myth as the postmodern coming-of-age story of a young boy who is, as in Stesichoros, a "strange winged red monster" (5). Ashamed of his wings, uncertain of what his colour might mean, and passionately in love with an older boy named Herakles, Geryon autobiographically struggles with his own monstrous subjectivity by composing the story of his life through sculpture, words, and photographs—an artful and often philosophical self-styling that would answer or at least push back the burning question, "Who am I?" An authentic answer will not merely deploy given norms and conventions. Thus, through Geryon, Carson calls for the aestheticization of experience, of things, to overturn ironclad logics that strive irrevocably to bind things to their meaningful identities. We find in her language and in her inimitable style an expression of the irreducible life that the body experiences through its complex

3 Carson writes: "Some eighty-four papyrus fragments and a half-dozen citations survive which go by the name *Geryoneis* ('The Geryon Matter') in standard editions" (5). A recent translation by G. P. Goold (1991) is available.

and anxious being-in-the-world. She takes her lead from Stesichoros, who releases being, permits things to become unnamed, freeing them to their renaming. In the end, it is less a philosophical question than a rhetorical one, inspiring the autobiography to ask not just “Who am I?” but, rather, “Who can I *say* that I am?” In other words, autobiography must reflect upon the conditions through which self-writing is made possible, offering insight into the terms by which a self might be said to possess itself in language, even as it is possessed by a life that it will never fully comprehend.

Carson’s poetic novel is set against the infamy of Stesichoros himself, the historical figure whose palinode has occasioned its own mythology, here providing both the frame and the occasion for her romance “novel in verse.” It is fabled that Stesichoros was struck blind by Helen of Troy for blaspheming her, to which he immediately writes a palinode, a “counter-song,” in order to right the wrong and thus to restore his sight. Plato, in fact, praises Stesichoros for being so clever and in the *Phaedrus* (243a)⁴ calls him an intellectual as opposed to a mere poet (like Homer, who was also by legend blind). Plato suggests that not only did Stesichoros recognize his slanderous words as the formal cause of his blindness (Helen or the gods being the efficient cause), but he had the wisdom to know how he might restore his sight. Still, it is unclear whether Stesichoros is best described as a poet, an intellectual, or a sophist; he’s clever, yes, but are his words trustworthy, is he a truth-teller?

Sophist or not, Stesichoros’s palinode is a piece of sophistry that succeeds if not in fooling the gods, at least in appeasing them. And here we might wonder whether such a rhetoric (however effective) excuses him his original blasphemy. Either Stesichoros tells the truth about Helen when he first characterizes her as a whore, or else he lies about this and later tells the truth in his palinode, thereby attesting to his having lied in the first place. We ought to be distrustful of the man who tells us, “truthfully,” that he has lied, because by admitting he lied, we are certain only of one thing: we know he is a liar. But we do not know how or when he has lied: either he lied before and now tells us the truth about his having lied, or else he lies now, lying about having previously told what was true. There is no way to know the difference, at least not if we judge the mere content of his speech.

4 In Plato’s words: “For those who make mistakes in mythology there is an old remedy, which Stesichorus was aware of, though Homer was not. When he lost his sight for speaking ill of Helen, Stesichorus, unlike Homer, was sagacious enough to understand the reason; he immediately composed the poem which begins: ‘False is this tale. You never / Went in a ship to sea, / Nor saw the towers of Troy.’ As soon as he had finished what is called his palinode or recantation he recovered his sight” (*Phaedrus* 44–45).

A performative contradiction destabilizes the categories of truth and lie when Stesichoros declares, in effect, “In truth, I am a liar!” The ironclad law of noncontradiction flies apart, an effect, surprisingly, that does not seem to worry the gods; Stesichoros’s sight is restored in any case.

Thus, in the Greek context, “truth” is free from what we might recognize as a moral injunction to “tell the truth”; simply stated, Stesichoros might merely have been “in error.” In a recent interview, Carson explains:

Lying and error are the same word for the Greeks, which is interesting. That is, “to be wrong” could have various causes: you wanted to lie, or you just didn’t know the truth, or you forgot, and those are all one concept. That interests me, the bundling together and looking at the situation from a point of view of consequences and not motivation. (McNeilly, “Gifts and Questions” 17)

This suggests a way to read Carson’s *Autobiography of Red*. It is also a distinct view on self-writing in general. Rather than attend to the truth-value of a subject’s factual knowledge and rather than attend to that subject’s intentions or motivations, we might instead look to the wider consequences of those actions, the context—in phenomenological parlance, the “world” in and through which they are lent significance. Remarkably, Carson continues: “I guess desire wanders through that area sometimes, but I wouldn’t call it identical with error” (17). Irreducible to error, loosened from the rigidity of truth-claims, desire here opens us on to a world, dispossessing the subject of his intentional certainty, making him suspicious of even his own best intentions.

In the appendices to *Autobiography of Red*, Carson dramatizes the breakdown of ironclad logics in the direction of desire, as a propaedeutic to her “Romance” story of Geryon’s own overwhelming desire. Significantly, the appendices appear *before* the “Romance,” appended in front of her story and after both a brief introduction (“Red Meat: What Difference Did Stesichoros Make?”) and several ancient “Fragments of Stesichoros” from the *Geryoneis*. The three appendices form the pretext to the main work, thereby frustrating the logic of the appendix as a supplement. Carson shows the “supplement” in its logical priority, *before* the text, framing it, as its necessary condition and therefore as much inside as outside the text. “Appendix A” cites Suidas’s, Isokrates’s, and Plato’s mention of Stesichoros’s palinode; and “Appendix B” gives us a barebones fragment of the palinode itself—“No it is not the true story. / No you never went on the benched ships. / No you never came to the towers of Troy” (17).

Irreducible to error, loosened from the rigidity of truth-claims, desire here opens us on to a world, dispossessing the subject of his intentional certainty, making him suspicious of even his own best intentions.

In “Appendix C,” however, Carson sets out to frustrate conventional notions of logic as the backdrop against which the romance will unfold. “Appendix C” offers the reader twenty-one propositions, all ostensible truths because they are logical binaries, presumably exhaustive and presumably obedient to the law of noncontradiction. She begins, “1. Either Stesichoros was a blind man or he was not” (18). This seems irrefutable so far. She continues, “2. If Stesichoros was a blind man either his blindness was a temporary condition or it was permanent” (18). Again, one of these propositions is presumably true beyond any doubt. But Carson wittily proceeds by muddying the logic at every step in her list. While each proposition seems to follow and to build logically from the last, the disjunctions become increasingly suspect, complicated by social and political factors that challenge the truth of the truth-lie binary. Proposition 17 states that “either he [Stesichoros] will contend that he now sees more clearly than ever before the truth about her [Helen’s] whoring or he will admit he is a liar” (20). First, the binary collapses under the weight of the liar’s paradox, as I demonstrated above, but in addition, we “see” here how seeing itself has multiple valences, traveling metaphorically, literal readings yielding to increasingly figurative ones. Language is slippery. Like Tiresias, for instance, Stesichoros could be a “blind seer.” And we read that the truth of Stesichoros’s sight hinges on the truth of what “he will contend”—a contention that may or may not readily be legible. A few lines later: “20. If we are taken downtown by the police for questioning either we will be expected (as eyewitnesses) to clear up once and for all the question whether Stesichoros was a blind man or not” (20). But the “clearing up” of Stesichoros’s blinding by Helen—a clearing up which again would presumably yield the truth of the matter—here appeals to the authority of the police, to a host of social expectations, to our power to bear witness, and thus on the simplest level to our ability to hear (intelligibly) and to respond (intelligibly) to the question as it is posed. Moreover, it is unclear whether this proposition’s final “or not” is meant to suggest that Stesichoros was *not* a “blind man,” to suggest that we will *not* “clear up” the matter “once and for all,” or even that we will *not* “be expected (as eyewitnesses)” in the first place.

In a wider context, then, Carson unmoors the underlying conditions of intelligibility, throwing into question the power of signification, the reliability by which words name things, and the fragility of the social conventions that would uphold both the authority to name and the authority of the name. The liar’s paradox similarly shows the impossibility of true speech even as it reveals the failure of the subject to obtain sovereignty

over words, sovereignty to deploy them as expressive tools, as if they were distinct from the speaker and not always threatening to short-circuit the speaker's speech itself, to haunt him, to blind him, or to bind him to a meaningful world. Again, to cite Carson from a recent interview, "It's not about the meaning of each individual word adding up to a proposition; it's about the way they interact with each other as daubs of meaning, you know as impressionist colours interact, daubs of paint, and you stand back and see a story emerge from the way that the things are placed next to each other" (McNeilly, "Gifts and Questions" 22). Carson immediately adds: "You can also do that with language."

But if authority and intelligibility come unmoored, it is not altogether unpleasurable. Language is freed to new possibilities, and here we find ourselves within the world of desire. The epigraph to Carson's introduction is from Gertrude Stein, and it attests to such pleasure: "I like the feeling of words doing / as they want to do and as they have to do" (*Autobiography of Red* 3). It is a "feeling" Stein likes, in part because it is the words here that express both the desire and the necessity to do something. Words become unbound, freed from their rules and released to their own desires, exhibiting their own agency. As Carson writes in her first book, *Eros the Bittersweet*: "Desire moves. Eros is a verb" (17). And below Stein's epigraph she writes, "Words bounce" (*Autobiography of Red* 3). Describing adjectives as "the latches of being" (4), she praises Stesichoros for undoing the latches, unhinging being from the words that would inexorably contain it:

Stesichoros released being. All the substances in the world went floating up. Suddenly there was nothing to interfere with horses being *hollow hooved*. Or a river being *root silver*. Or a child *bruiseless*. Or hell *as deep as the sun is high*. Or Herakles *ordeal strong*. Or a planet *middle night stuck*. Or an insomniac *outside the joy*. Or killings *cream black*. (5)

While these locutions open for us new ways of seeing, new scenes, multiple delights, the carnivalesque pleasure of seeing the world through a red balloon, all of these, Carson suggests, are more than merely ludic permutations. They also refigure being, refigure the conditions of intelligibility, the meaning of things. And it is just such an injunction that forms the pretext to Carson's storytelling. Let the words (she seems to say) do what they want to do and what they have to do! Allow them to become unraveled! The reader must read with a sense of wonder, a wonder that arises in the face of no specific or nameable object, never arriving at a predetermined destination, but short-circuiting, in bouncing

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language. Models of consciousness are therefore displaced in favour of a corporeal aesthetics⁵ whose truths cannot be conveyed by propositional logic; indeed, as Geryon demonstrates, such a logic is incommensurate with the necessarily poetic expression of sexual desire, “the human custom of wrong love” (75), shame, loss, and the difficult, often dolorous, search for individual identity.

Carson's Geryon forces us to re-examine the body as the site of experience and meaningful life. Through a nascent sexuality that never quite belongs to him, Geryon experiences his body as that which betrays him, as the site of betrayal. Early on, he is traumatized by repeated sexual encounters with his older brother, and he is confused by Herakles's apparently insatiable appetites, even as he recognizes these as somehow instrumental to being loved. The homoerotic episodes with his brother prompt a reflection on the difference between what is inside and what is outside, what belongs to him and what does not, returning him to the surface of his red body as a space of difference:

Geryon would climb back up to his bunk,
recover his pajama bottoms and lie on his back. He lay very
straight
in the fantastic temperatures
of the red pulse as it sank away and he thought about the
difference
between outside and inside.
Inside is mine, he thought. (28–29)

Significantly, it is the next day that he begins his autobiography, in which he “set down all inside things / ... / He coolly omitted / all outside things” (29). The work of autobiography is the work of self-possession, a working through that would hope to shore up his fragile sense of self.

Later, with Herakles, Geryon exhibits a sexual naïveté matched only by his devotion—an overdetermined desire outstripping his ability to consummate or communicate it. The Dionysian Herakles is all brawn, a brute physicality that counters Geryon's brooding interiority, once again returning him to the red surface of his body:

5 Importantly, by “corporeal aesthetics” I am not invoking any implicit theory of artistic beauty or good taste; I am not signaling the utter triumph of form over content. Instead, I wish to suggest a way we might refigure the relation between form and content—and language—through *aesthesis*, the immediate perception of the external world by the senses. Above, I called this an “aestheticization of experience.”

I guess I'm someone who will never be satisfied,
said Herakles. Geryon felt all nerves in him move to the sur-
face of his body.
What do you mean satisfied?
Just—satisfied. I don't know. From far down the freeway
came a sound
of fishhooks scraping the bottom of the world. (44)

The sound defies reality, usurping the imperialism of the eye, causing the whole world to resonate impossibly, speaking Geryon's inner experience. In the aftermath of their failed love, Geryon's fourteen-year-old body enters a suspended animation in which sensations are neither clearly inside nor outside, blurring the distinction between self and other: "Geryon's life entered a numb time, caught between the tongue and the taste" (72).

Between the tongue and the taste, the body folds back on itself in a reversibility that refuses the logical or chronological priority of one over the other—a failure of signification that can, with the right turn, open new horizons of possibility and meaning. A distance that is at once no distance, this self-folding is theorized by Merleau-Ponty as the flesh (*la chair*). Exploiting the Christian metaphor, the flesh is a manner of conceiving how two things can be joined in communion, embodying love or desire. Carson describes Geryon's passionate attachment to Herakles as if they were of one flesh and yet agonizingly distinct: "Not touching / but joined in astonishment as two cuts lie parallel in the same flesh" (45). Again, in the terms of Geryon's philosophy textbook, this is a "philosophic problem": "this separation of consciousness / is recognized only after a failure of communication, and our first movement is / to believe in an undivided being between us" (105). We have opened on to the world of belief, which moves us in the first instance to believe, to experience, an "undivided being between us"—a place where the taste is released from the activity of the tongue, and where they meet in the flesh. Merleau-Ponty insists that the flesh is not brute matter; it is "an ultimate notion ... not the union or compound of two substances" (*Visible and Invisible* 140). Merleau-Ponty describes the flesh as anonymous; it is that which, for instance, organizes or concretizes what I see, ensuring that my particular vision is a modality of an anonymous visibility. Merleau-Ponty wishes to preserve the richness of experience while de-centring the perceiving "I." In the end, it is impossible to say which vision is "mine" and which belongs to the other, because our visions are subtended by a visibility that is a "primordial property [belonging] to the flesh" (142). I meet the other in the flesh. He is not accessible to my gaze, which would consume him,

reduce him to an alter ego I could know and possess. “There is here no problem of the *alter ego*” Merleau-Ponty writes, “because it is not *I* who sees, not *he* who sees, because an anonymous visibility inhabits both of us, a vision in general” (142).

Merleau-Ponty’s famous example of the flesh is found in his description of the two hands touching: “If my left hand is touching my right hand,” he writes, “and if I should suddenly wish to apprehend with my right hand the work of my left hand as it touches, this reflection of the body upon itself always miscarries at the last moment: the moment I feel my left hand with my right hand, I correspondingly cease touching my right hand with my left hand” (9). Despite this so-called failure, Merleau-Ponty asserts that my body tacitly *knows* what it is to touch myself touching, but not because there is an “I” or even a localizable body that perceives between its various parts: “[M]y body does not perceive, but it is as if it were built around the perception that dawns through it” (9). This perception flows from and through the flesh, marked by the infinite reversibility of the touched touching. If the body is the storehouse of such “knowledge,” and if who I am is inextricably tied to such experience—the world-scraping sound of fishhooks, numbness, and an unnameable yet significant difference between the tongue and the taste—then the task of the autobiography to say who I am will demand impossible nuance. How shall I respond to the call to say who I am, to “translate” the intimate knowledge of my living and embodied life—a complex *bios*—into something greater than a biology?

As Merleau-Ponty attests, the reversibility of the flesh is not limited to one particular sense, but the senses are always potentially cross-signifying, so that vision might be configured as touch, or a taste might resonate with a particular sound. Merleau-Ponty claims that our primordial experience in the lifeworld is a synaesthetic experience, a natural commingling of the senses; however, this experience has been forgotten, and it has been replaced by logic and an overly analytical attitude. It is difficult to re-activate. Originally, he writes, humans experienced a “natural unity[,] ... a ‘primary layer’ of sense experience which precedes its division among the separate senses” (*Phenomenology* 227). Thus, we speak of colours as “atmospheric”; they evoke feelings and invoke memories for us, much as smells can do. Colours are not altogether separable from their instantiations, they are not *qualia*, but in their significance they penetrate into the core of a thing. The “sights of sounds” and the “hearing of colours” are not exceptional phenomena, Merleau-Ponty contends: “Synaesthetic perception is the rule, and we are unaware of it only because scientific knowledge shifts the centre of gravity of experience, so that we have unlearned how

to see, hear, and generally speaking, feel” (229). It is in the synaesthetic experience that the thing is most originally presented to us. The thing is never simply an object of intellection, an idea, or a concept. Instead, it belongs to a world pregnant with synaesthetic meaning:

In reality, each colour, in its inmost depths, is nothing but the inner structure of the thing overtly revealed. The brilliance of gold palpably holds out to us its homogeneous composition, and the dull colour of wood its heterogeneous make-up. The senses intercommunicate by opening on to the structure of the thing. One sees the hardness and brittleness of glass.... One sees the springiness of steel, the ductility of red-hot steel, the hardness of a plane blade, the softness of shavings. The form of objects is not their geometrical shape: it stands in a certain relation to their specific nature, and appeals to all our other senses as well as sight. (230)

Carson’s poetry is a beautiful instance of phenomenological synaesthesia. “Red” is never stable, is never purely adjectival, and when it is, it stretches the bounds of sense and descriptiveness, suspending even the most poetic of metaphoric conventions. Describing Geryon’s early experience at school, Carson writes:

Children poured around him
and the intolerable red assault of grass and the smell of grass
everywhere
was pulling him towards it
like a strong sea. (*Autobiography of Red* 23)

Is the grass red? Is the assault somehow red (and intolerable)? Is it a smell? And does it have a force like a sea, a red sea? Or is Geryon’s love as fluid, as unpredictable, as the red magma that breaks through the surface of the earth with volcanic force? In a moment that both problematizes Geryon’s sense of self and collapses once-discrete senses into a phantasmagoric (but faithful, authentic) experience, Carson writes with phenomenological trenchancy:

It was the year he began to wonder about the noise that colours make. Roses came roaring across the garden at him. He lay on his bed at night listening to the silver light of stars crashing against the window screen. (84)

His science teacher ridicules him.

Most
of those he interviewed for the science project had to admit
they did not hear the cries of roses
being burned alive in the noonday sun. *Like horses*, Geryon
would say helpfully, *like horses in war*. No, they shook
their heads.
Why is grass called blades? he asked them. *Isn't it because of
the clicking?*
They stared at him. *You should be
interviewing roses not people*, said the science teacher.
Geryon liked this idea. (84)

The commingling of the senses in Carson's verse captures something irreducibly human about experience and about the body as the unitary locus of selfhood: "The sound / was hot as a color inside" (108), or, "The voice flowed out like a fragrance / released in rain" (113). Through an almost childlike naïveté, Carson captures the child's world, an original animate world of wonder, before it is contaminated by the arbitrary social and linguistic conventions of adulthood.

Moments of Carson's text suggest that Geryon is synonymous with "red," as if his subjectivity, his personal identity, could be encapsulated by the simple adjective, through the epithet (*epitheton*, meaning "adjective" in Greek). But as I suggested above, this is by no means a straightforward equation: to collapse Geryon and "red" ontologically would be a mistake, because it is precisely the difference between them—the difference between Geryon and his proper name or proper identity, between him and Herakles, between the tongue and the taste—that is dramatized and has to be worked through as some future, as-yet-inchoate possibility. While some critics understand Geryon as a "hybrid" and suggest that it is his hybridity that renders him illegible according to received social, linguistic, and literary conventions (see Rae, "Dazzling Hybrids"), I would argue that Geryon is never really a hybrid, his many elements are never successfully commingled—and it is just this frustrating failure that expresses a phenomenological truth, ultimately making his "autobiography" so very meaningful for us. If Geryon works on his autobiography, so that we might say that it is *his*, Geryon's, it is equally the autobiography of "red," of a ghostly subjectivity that might be said to claim him more than he can claim it, an apostrophization that magically breaks the silence of the humbly modifying adjective, letting it speak, letting it claim a subject

position, and compose *its* autobiography, live *its* life. Autobiography moves; it is a verb.

Carson's colours bounce, just like her words, coming to life in order to prompt a reflection on human (and monstrous) identity. The experience of colour, Merleau-Ponty claims, "is a way into the thing" (*Phenomenology* 305). Merleau-Ponty is instructive here again because his work on the perception of colour can be extended metaphorically as a way into the lyric perception of Geryon, the red winged monster, and as a manner of rethinking subjective identity in general. Here Merleau-Ponty raises a perennial problem for philosophers of perception, namely, how do we continue to experience the constancy of a colour despite those things that should empirically affect it? For instance, we just *see* the wall as the same hue of beige, even though it is brighter here and darker over there, in the shadows. Traditional philosophy has arrived at an impasse when addressing this problem, for either the constancy is due to some empirical factor or, on the other hand, constancy must be attributed to the intellect, as a rational act of judgement that goes on behind the scenes. Likewise with subjective identity: if there is a constancy of identity, a perceptible continuation of the self throughout many different experiences, through sleeping and wakefulness, and so on, how do we account for this perceptual identity over time and through difference? Must we posit a sort of transcendental ego that would gather every experience into itself? Is the so-called "real colour"—like the "real thing" or the "real *me*"—an empirical fact (however inaccessible) or no more than an idea in some mind? And finally, who or what is "red," who or what is "Geryon"?

In his answer, Merleau-Ponty steers between the extremes of empiricism and intellectualism. He states: "The weakness of both empiricism and intellectualism lies in their refusing to recognize any colours other than those fixed qualities which make their appearance in a reflective attitude, whereas colour in living perception is a way into the thing" (305). There is a danger in reflecting too cognitively: it removes the colour from the thing, an act of violence, while foreclosing upon our understanding of it. In lived experience, the colour permeates the thing, deeper than the thing's surface, resonating with it in a certain corporeal synergy. What colour is real? "The real colour," Merleau-Ponty claims, "persists beneath appearances as the background persists beneath the figure, that is, not as a seen or thought-of quality, but through a non-sensory presence" (305). Indeed, the constancy of colour, much like one's sense of self, persists as the background persists, the foil against which particular experiences are revealed—indifferent to, and yet also relying on, that background to frame

Here Merleau-Ponty raises a perennial problem for philosophers of perception, namely, how do we continue to experience the constancy of a colour despite those things that should empirically affect it?

and subtend the particular experience, making it what it is. Carson's reader might forget, momentarily, that Geryon is red, but Geryon never forgets, and the reader is reminded that Geryon's experiences are unveiled for him against the persistent question of his colour:

It was not the fear of ridicule,
to which everyday life as a winged red person had accom-
modated Geryon early in life,
but this blank desertion of his own mind
that threw him into despair. (83–84)

If his colour is a non-sensory presence, it is one which works covertly to inform that which is sensory. Colour becomes the unreflected lens through which Geryon's world is revealed: "*Who can a monster blame for being red?*" (104). Given this thing called "red," he seems to ask, who can I say that I am? What are the terms by which I will at last possess myself?

In Carson's story it is, ironically, the photograph that will best say who he is, circumscribing for him those terms within which his identity will be "sayable" and will achieve some expression. It is significant that photography becomes Geryon's fetish of choice, a moment that promises an ontology of red—red as a real being, even if it is doggedly incomprehensible. In a strictly psychoanalytic sense, a fetish operates both to recognize and to disavow a loss. For Geryon it is an originary loss, and this loss is two-fold—both a loss of self and of the power to represent, to signify (although in the end these two may be one). Geryon's autobiography passes from an early sculpture (a red "tomato sculpture") to words that record "facts" about Geryon to a photographic essay that is decidedly counterfactual, opening on to a world of possibilities, concerning what might or could be, full of hope and desire.

The photograph, like the biography, is a receptacle of being. Dynamically, it preserves life by entombing it, serving as a premonition of death. As André Bazin writes, "[P]hotography does not celebrate eternity, as art does, it embalms time, rescuing it simply from its proper corruption" ("The Ontology of the Photographic Image" 14). But the photograph also points, aesthetically, toward transcendence, its permanence testifying to a life greater than life itself. Unlike the written biography, the photograph is said to be an "indexical" icon—it therefore departs and yet returns to itself. The photograph is indexical not just because there is a symbolic or representational reference to its original real life subject-matter. Importantly, in addition, there is a material contiguity⁶ between the photograph and its real-life subject, captured on a photographic plate or on film—"time

that strays into photographs and stops” (*Autobiography of Red* 93), says Geryon. But significantly, Geryon the photographer author-subject is never *in* his pictures, his subjectivity is displaced onto the camera’s point of view, caught in a web of speculations about his choice of “autobiographical” subject-matter, conscious or not. (And this might prompt a parallel reflection on Carson herself as author-subject written into the pages of her novel.)⁷ If, by virtue of an indexical trace, there is something that survives in the image, through its very material referent, it cannot be said to *be* Geryon, even though he is (or was) at that place. Geryon, if he can be said to be there at all, is there only obliquely, through an act of identification no less difficult for us—the would-be viewers of the photographs and readers of the text—as it is for Geryon, the photographer behind the lens-eye.

6 Some have argued that digital photography is the exception to this principle of contiguity.

7 Reading *Autobiography of Red* together with Carson’s earlier work, namely, *Plainwater* and *Glass, Irony and God*, Sharon Wahl speculates that *Red* is autobiographical of Carson’s own life, that Carson herself is “Geryon with wings”: “[S]he gives [Geryon] her heartbreak. Reading Geryon’s heartbreak as an extension of Carson’s gave it far greater impact, for me; perhaps because that weight of loss seemed to belong to someone older, not to a boy of fourteen” (185). Perhaps Wahl has never been a boy of fourteen! Nevertheless, I suspect that Wahl’s consistently literal and anti-metaphorical reading robs the text of its beauty and meaning.

Why is so much of the critical literature on Carson’s work preoccupied with Carson as author, as poet, and as professor? Perhaps this is symptomatic of the crisis of subjectivity that her work discusses and performs. Forgetting the old lessons of the New Criticism, the reader may be compelled to fall back into conventional subject positions and be compelled to locate a stable author-subject within, or behind, the text. For an informative discussion in this vein, see Robert Stanton’s essay, “‘I am writing this to be as wrong as possible to you’: Anne Carson’s Errancy.” Stanton poses the question, “What, then, does Anne Carson stand for?” (39). In the same volume of *Canadian Literature*, devoted to Anne Carson and her work, also see Kevin McNeilly’s introductory “Editorial” titled, “Five Fairly Short Talks on Anne Carson”:

Not only is [Carson] actually a professional scholar, teaching at McGill and elsewhere, but she also literally professes in writing. The Latin *professus*, the name for a public teacher, is the past participle of *profiteri*, to avow or to confess. The poet, in Carson, is a species of public intellectual. Publishing poetry and essays is a means of opening oneself to readerly scrutiny even as it involves an attempt to produce a specific style, at least in Carson’s case, of differential reading. (7–8)

I believe Carson succeeds in producing a style that should suspend speculations (if not obsessions) as to who the “real” Anne Carson is, whether she is an “actual” scholar, a “literal” professor, or a “public” confessor.

In addition to its complex indexical properties, Carson illustrates how the temporal dimension of photography also succeeds in frustrating logics of identity. “*You see memories*” (65), Geryon says to Herakles, explaining how photography is disturbing, “the time that strays into photographs and stops” (93). While Herakles zealously declares that a photograph is “*just a bunch of light hitting a plate*” (71), for Geryon the photograph strives to capture living memories and the extendedness of time—conveying a sense of becoming, recording a life that could never be conceived as static being.

The photograph is titled “If He Sleep He Shall Do Well.”
It shows a fly floating in a pail of water—
drowned but with a strange agitation of light around the
wings. Geryon used
a fifteen-minute exposure.
When he first opened the shutter the fly seemed to be still
alive. (71)

Geryon’s photograph somehow captures the moment between life and death, between being and non-being, a vital difference. Like the autobiography of which it is a part, it is not a look back at a single moment of the past but a looking back that also stretches forward in time, pointing to and suggesting the future present, an extended moment of becoming. Because of such ecstatic temporality (which Carson draws in part from Heidegger), identity is not a stable category: it is not something that can easily be captured unless we admit that the time-lapse exposure of the photograph is in some way phenomenologically true to the temporal “thickness” of life, of perceptual experience, and of the modes by which we would qualify and characterize a thing (for instance, as red).

A thing is a living composite, always in excess of, never exhausted by, a single moment, a single look, a feeling, a touch. We are forced to admit a synaesthesia whereby the thing’s colour-identity is not merely a “pellicle of being without thickness” (*Visible and Invisible* 131), as Merleau-Ponty writes, but is bound up with its very own “certain woolly, metallic, or porous configuration or texture” (132). Colour is not just the conceit of the eye. It is a composite of many senses, never captured fully by any one. And of course colour is only one aspect of a thing, one manner in which a thing is present to us. Colour has a spatiotemporal dimension that demands we take into consideration the context, the memories, and the myriad associations from which the given experience of colour-identity will emerge against the backdrop of the past. As Geryon’s philosophy

textbook says, “To deny the existence of red / is to deny the existence of a mystery. The soul which does so will one day go mad” (105). Like Geryon and his (auto)biographer, Carson, Merleau-Ponty wishes to preserve the mystery of red, only gesturing to the manner in which red is an event in the fabric of being. Merleau-Ponty writes, poetically, that red is

[a] punctuation in the field of red things, which includes the tiles of roof tops, the flags of gatekeepers and of the Revolution, certain terrains near Aix or in Madagascar, it is also a punctuation in the field of red garments, which includes, along with the dresses of women, robes of professors, bishops, and advocate generals, and also in the field of adornments and that of uniforms. (132)

The red event *punctuates* the field of red things, he says, piercing through this field—and so, the event takes place against a background, a field opened up by memory and desire, but it also simultaneously *punctuates* this field, refiguring it, redefining it, repunctuating, retroactively restructuring the grammar and symbolic co-ordinates by which memory is written and deployed. The red event is not the same as these memories but relies on them as much as it reinvents them, imbuing them with a certain mystery: “A certain red is also a fossil drawn up from the depths of imaginary worlds.... a sort of straits between exterior horizons and interior horizons ever gaping open ... —less a color or a thing, therefore, than a difference between things and colors” (132).

Once again, a *difference between* things and colours, a *difference between* the tongue and the taste—it is just such difference that Geryon dramatizes, celebrating how words become “unlatched” from being, freeing “red” to its autobiography. Within this space of difference, “red” has a life—a *bios*—to write, *as if its act of writing were not itself the prior and enabling condition of that red thing*, a red thread that would stitch together a meaningful life through time, forever promised, never fully written or achieved, and always threatening to come unraveled. In this manner, I am proposing that the story prefigures, goes on before, and anticipates—an “appendix” that foregrounds—the meaningful life of the subject. The story is thus a creative opening, storytelling a poietic (from the Greek *poiesis*, which means to create) instance within which the self will be said to style its life in the telling of that life.

We must, then, allow for the illogical possibility that the figure “red” is the author of the autobiography, producing “effects no one can calculate in advance” (135). The autobiography is thus a story with mythic dimensions.

Life is not at
the command
of those who
write.

Fittingly, Carson's story ends with the myth of the Yazcol Yazcamac, "the Ones Who Went and Saw and Came Back" (128)—a mythic subject-position that Geryon will for a moment, awkwardly, inhabit. It is the mythic Quechua story of wise creatures who descend into the volcano and return against all odds:

How do they come back?

Wings.

*Wings? Yes that's what they say the Yazcamac return as red
people with wings, all their weaknesses burned away—
and their mortality. (129)*

But the occupation of this mythic identity is vague, unreal. When Geryon flies into the volcano with the "bitter red drumming of wing muscle on air" (145), the chapter caption reads: "It is a photograph he never took, no one here took it" (145). The photographer or author-subject of the event is elsewhere, released to a frame of "icy possibles" (145) and to becoming—a space characterized by futurity, possibility.

Life is not at the command of those who write. The proper subject of autobiography, called into question here, writes without controlling life and language. But this does not mean that the subject is inexorably imprisoned by language, condemned to a mute livingness. Carson invites us to rethink the possibility of narrative self-possession, to rethink the relation between subjects and language, between being and writing. Language is a kind of vehicle for a meaningful life, a possibility. Rather than tie words to things through a set of rules or rule-binding conventions, Carson maximizes the poietic or creative power of language to "unhinge being," allowing words and things to offer themselves to us in novel constellations, doing what they want to do, what they have to do, inhabiting their desire, unbinding ours, however unpredictably. And while we cannot dispense with rules altogether, Carson gently suspends them, offering up a lyric narrative that is more phenomenologically true to life, to sexual desire, colour, "wrong love," shame, loss, and to the metaphysics of the self than to those abstract norms that govern what one's life ought to be.

"Somehow Geryon made it to adolescence" (39), Carson writes; when she leaves him, Geryon is still only a young man, incomplete, unfulfilled, his life offered up in evanescent flashes—as the final chapter's heading promises, "THE FLASHES IN WHICH A MAN POSSESSES HIMSELF" (146). The possibility for self-writing, it would seem, does not come from the self, and it is not a matter of straightforward self-possession. That self is displaced and does not pre-exist its writing but, rather, follows from this possibility,

as a desire and a promise, as you will see me, as I will be seen. And as we saw above with Stesichoros, it is not, after all, a question of truth-telling so much as telling so that something might have a desired effect or consequence. For Stesichoros, it is a question of seeing and seeing anew, and like Geryon, his future is at stake—in fact, it still is, every time we read his story. The self does not precede its narrative self, as if its narrative were as far as possible the accurate and dispassionate recounting of a life, *ex post facto*. Instead, the self constitutes itself only through its work of autobiography. The self is incumbent on such telling, and through this work an identity unfolds. Through its writing or sculpture or photographs, the self emerges, hesitantly—in mythic, evanescent flashes—but in a way that gives itself a life to be lived through the stories it has and has yet to tell.

This effectively calls the proper *subject* of autobiography into question. We are led to ask: *whose* autobiography, *what* or *whose* life—*bios*—surges up between the self and the act of writing? And what or whose act is it? Is it Geryon's, Stesichoros's, Carson's herself, the life of "red," or the reader's own life woven into the colourful fabric of these pages? From "tomato-sculpture" to photographic essay—the autobiography is, after all, never fully delivered:

Geryon kept
the camera in his hand and spoke little. I am disappearing,
he thought
but the photographs were worth it.
A volcano is not a mountain like others. Raising a camera to
one's face has effects no one can calculate in advance.

(135)

At moments in this text, autobiography threatens to eclipse life, replacing life with art, registering a disappearing self. But the effects of autobiography are volcanic and unpredictable, releasing life to further future significations, opening life to new possibility, a creative reflection that writes and rewrites the animating conditions of life itself. At moments, the "I" who writes and the "I" who is written achieve a synergy. "There is no person without a world. / The red monster sat at a corner table of Café Mitwelt writing bits of Heidegger on the postcards he bought. / *Sie sind das was betreiben*" (82)—you are that which (is) driven, a drive, an instinct, a life-force. The metaphor is economic, energetic. Indeed, part of the vital drive manifests as a deep urge to write one's life, to embody that life more fully, to seize it, and thus to blur the boundary between writing and being. The subject is mutable, as fluid and as fickle as Krakatoa's magma; the vectors

of its agency flow in multiple directions, and its identity is by no means a straightforward enterprise.

The flashes in which a man possesses himself are themselves ephemeral, not easily possessed: possession is as much dispossession, for we are dispossessed by that which possesses us. Thus, if my identity relies vitally on a world that outruns me, my autobiography must index its own undoing, bespeak its own impossibility. In this sense, Carson is writing an anti-autobiography of sorts, calling into question the whole premise of autobiography by refiguring its terms: Geryon's autobiography captures his body's very troubled being-in-the-world and the failure of that world to furnish stable identity categories with a recognizable and salient public meaning. Poignantly, it is at a philosophy conference that Geryon begins to glimpse the limits of philosophy, of language, and of representation in the project of establishing one's identity:

and now Fabian and Tomás were challenging each other's
negritude.

If Fabian is black Tomás is just as black.

So this is skepticism, thought Geryon. White is black. Black
is white. Perhaps soon I will get some new information
about red. (92)

Red is Geryon's being-in-the-world, experienced—sometimes ironically—through the monstrous body that might better be said to possess him, rather than he it. Red is irreducible to a piece of “information” available for philosophic consumption. Nor is it something that might be seized upon and strategically deployed to further a politics of identity.

Autobiography fails, therefore, to answer the question, “Who am I?” In the extreme, it bespeaks the irrecusable solipsism that pierces Geryon's being, a philosophical dilemma discussed authoritatively in his philosophy textbook, *Philosophic Problems*. I have chosen this as the at first despairing epigraph to this essay and will, in ending, return to it here: “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 communication” (105). Remarkably, tentatively, *Autobiography of Red* succeeds in disarming this particular “philosophic problem,” however. Paradoxically, the story succeeds *in* failing and, in so doing, undermines the purported separation of consciousness, mine from yours, by beginning to rewrite the rules for what counts as communication and for what qualifies as autobiography. The *way* that Carson's *Autobiography* fails to capture the life that always exceeds it, in the end, stylistically communicates a more profound

truth about human experience and identity and suggests a way that we might vitally reinvent the conditions for self-writing. Carson's style itself stands as a powerful argument, disclosing the autobiographical self as a kind of rhetorical accomplishment in a language suffused with the transformative and seductive possibilities of desire. In these pages, the life that exceeds and interrupts autobiography is harnessed, momentarily, in richly phenomenological descriptions, thus offering a new paradigm for the way that one's life might be lived and written, for one's autobiography.

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