

## **The Autobiography of the Western Subject:**

### **Carson's Geryon**

#### **1. Wings and Selves**

To an essay about Echo in the *Stanford Literary Review*, the poet Anne Carson once appended the sub-title 'A notional refraction through Sophokles, Plato and Defoe'.<sup>1</sup> My chapter here, an attempt to understand Carson's project in *Autobiography of Red* as a poetic history of western ideas about human selfhood, offers instead a notional refraction of Geryon, a Greek mythical figure in whom Carson has demonstrated particular interest, through Stesichorus, Dante, and Heidegger. Besides the fragments of the archaic Greek poet Stesichorus' lyrical narrative poem the *Geryoneis* (especially those contained in *P.Oxy 2617*), in my view the Christian picture of the objectified Geryon painted by Dante, and Heidegger's identification of time as the chief *locus* by which human subjectivity orients itself, are two of the most important intellectual and aesthetic compass points that can help us reading the poetic map of Carson's poem.

Yet in *Autobiography of Red* (henceforward *AoR*) there are many other significant intertextual authors, including of course English-language poets. Herakles' grandmother, pondering the paradox that photographs of disasters can be beautiful, quotes Yeats' famous phrase, 'Gaiety transfiguring all that dread' (p. 66), from his *Lapis Lazuli* (1936). One function of this poem is usually understood as expressing Yeats' desire to address the question of whether western literary art, from the ancient Greeks (personified by Callimachus) onwards, must fail in the face of the new historical tragedy that was then about to sweep Europe. Another function of the poem is certainly to

assert the rich promise offered by investigating the other, eastern culture of China, carved in the titular lapis lazuli. The humanist hope of salvation through intercultural sensitivity to the achievements of *all* human civilisations is an important link between Yeats and Carson, two poets who share another, closely related passion -- for the poetic achievements of ancient Greece.

The poetic text that is quoted at greatest length in *AoR* (p. 107) is the four lines of Walt Whitman's *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry* (1856, revised 1881), in which the poet confesses that he has known what it is to be evil, like everyone else in Manhattan. This gloomy poem is one of the most famous and frequently anthologised in the North American canon; it is a sonorous and earnest attempt to describe the human condition and the serial generations that march successively through the same urban space. In Carson's poem it is quoted at the point when Geryon's search for understanding of his selfhood in Buenos Aires leads him to a bookshop, where under a pile of novels he finds the Whitman collection, translated into Spanish. The poem is quoted only to be humorously repudiated; Geryon reads the line 'Nor is it you alone who know what it is to be evil...' in Spanish, before he 'put evil Walt Whitman down'. This dismissal of the great North American poet, along with the substitution of the late twentieth-century Hispanic idiom for high 19<sup>th</sup>-century East coast American English, says something significant about Carson's witty, playful and multilingual take on the cultural tradition she has inherited. Geryon opens, instead, a 'self-help' book, whose title, *Oblivion the Price of Sanity?* is intended to bring a smile to the lips of Carson's readers; it tells Geryon that depression is difficult to describe, because 'there are no words for a world without a self, seen with impersonal clarity' (p. 107).

There are no words for a world without a self. The world must have a person in it in order to be articulated. Selfhood, reality, and the way that the self must experience reality through language are indeed the over-arching – and very epistemological -- concerns of Red’s autobiography. Yet within this broad rubric it engages with a dazzling variety of issues and it is already proving to mean very different things to different readers. Its hero, Geryon, is a photographer, and it explores the relationship between cognition and language, between the visual and aural senses, between image and word, and also the way that metaphor can introduce what is visible into the enunciation of the unseen.<sup>2</sup> Even one of Carson’s harshest critics can be found admitting that her work ‘exerts a sort of fascination--if in nothing else than the relentlessness of its visual imagery.’<sup>3</sup> For another, more enthusiastic reader, the poem is an epistemological testing of the degree to which we are imprisoned by perceptions, and in particular by perceptions of genderedness;<sup>4</sup> this view draws on the influential model developed by Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* (1990), by which homosexuality in literature destabilises categories of sex and gender, exploring the post-modern condition of ‘metaphysical homelessness’.<sup>5</sup>

According to this line of analysis, Carson’s Geryon is a hybrid, who suggests that we ask whether his ‘physical and sexual impossibility is meant to rupture everything that seems safe and measurable’.<sup>6</sup> It is true that Geryon is post-gender (or transcends gender) in that he sometimes fails to remember whether people he has met are male or female (for example, his fellow librarians after he broken-heartedly takes a job in canto 24). One of his most endearing characteristics is a tendency to imagine himself sympathetically into the situation of females. But it is always quite clear that he is himself

male, and that he is gay. Along with Carson's intense exploration of Sappho in *Eros the Bittersweet* (1986) and *If Not, Winter* (2002), Red's gayness has made this the text that has most contributed to the heterosexual Carson's acquisition, at least in California, of the status of Lesbian Icon.<sup>7</sup>

Yet it seems to me more accurate to suggest that it is primarily as a sign of ethnic alterity that Geryon, whose red skin and wings mark him out as different, can be read. Although no such connection is ever explicitly drawn, the implicit ethnic associations of 'red' skin in North American and Canadian culture lurk just beneath the poem's surface, certainly after Geryon meets an indigenous Amerindian from Peru (see below). He may no longer suffer from the 'fear of ridicule, / to which everyday life as a winged red person had accommodated Geryon early in life' (*AoR* p. 83), but he still does not know where he belongs. He inhabits an in-between state, of the type that has been labelled 'thirdspace' by some postcolonial theorists -- an ambiguous area lacking any clear coordinates. Homi Bhaba has called it a 'disarticulated space', a realm where hybridisation can occur between bipolar areas of identity.<sup>8</sup>

## **2. Mental Flights**

Although Geryon does indeed allow Carson to explore the subjectivity not only of a gay person, but of an ethnically and somatically different person, I do not think that the poem offers an exclusively *negative* account of the difficulties of living as such a subject. A more insightful reading stresses that the fundamental question Carson asks through Geryon is 'how this monster can negotiate the conflicts entailed by loving and existing in a world more complex than its social, linguistic and literary conventions would suggest'.<sup>9</sup> Carson is

frustrated by the restrictions of language generally, but it seems that her frustrations are mostly focussed on the restrictions imposed by the patriarchal and racist traces lingering in her own English language in particular; this partly explains her attraction in *Economy of the Unlost* (1999) to the poetry of Paul Celan, a Jewish Romanian who struggled all his life with the paradox of writing in German, the 'language of his mother but also the language of those who murdered his mother' in the Holocaust, as Carson herself has put it.<sup>10</sup>

Geryon's wings – his affliction but also, ultimately, his means of discovering his true self -- mean that flying is a crucial metaphor in the poem. A telling moment comes on the first of the several flights, in the plane taking Geryon from Miami to Puerto Rico, when he reads in his *Fodor's Guide to Argentina* about the now extinct indigenous people, the Yamana. Although thought to be primitive, they

had fifteen names for clouds and more than fifty for different kinds  
of kin. Among their variations of the verb  
'to bite' was a word that meant 'to come surprisingly on a hard  
substance  
when eating something soft  
e.g. a pearl in a mussel (*AoR*, p. 80).

Carson's own sadness and envy at the lost potentialities of such a rich, precise language seem to glitter beneath Geryon's own interest in it. Indeed, most of the few critics to write so far on *AoR* have emphasised its more melancholy undercurrent, in particular its commentary on the prison-house of language and the linguistic categories by which we must live. Yet from the moment I

first read it I found that it simultaneously communicated a warmly humorous and joyous strain. This operates in counterpoint to the depression and isolation that does indeed dominate some extended passages of the poem, thus creating a remarkable psychological polytonality. Much of the feeling of joy stems from the exuberant delineation of the sheer vividness of Geryon's *Bildungsroman* – his emotional experiences and adventurous spirit: as Carson has herself said in an interview, 'you can do things when you're young that you can't do when you're older. You can't get simple again'.<sup>11</sup> Some of the most joyful cantos are about youthful experiences of love and Geryon's memory of love – of being alone with his mother, of phone conversations with her (especially the hilarious canto 25), or of revelling in a café meal with Herakles after their first sexual encounter.

The recurrent imagery of flying is intimately linked with Geryon's delighted discovery of his autonomous selfhood. At the moment immediately after this, when the love between him and Herakles has been first physically consummated, Carson introduces the joyous canto (no. 16) with the sentence (p. 54), 'As in childhood we live sweeping close to the sky, and now, what dawn is this.' The very concept of flying in aeroplanes, which is to become so important to the winged little monster, indeed enters the poem on the crest of a laugh as Geryon apparently fends off his mother's prejudices about Latin America. These are based on the movie *Flying Down to Rio*, made decades earlier in the 1930s.<sup>12</sup> The hero of that film was the (famously) joyous bandleader and aviator Roger Bond. But the joyousness in Carson's poem amounts to something much more than this, and something inseparable from the intellectual tenor of the work as a whole. It takes on a complicated

philosophical project as it revisits the steps that the human Subject – at least the western one -- has taken on its journey from Stesichorus to Carson.

Carson has herself said more than once that she believes her poetic voice is better suited to narrative than lyric, and that her lack of a sense of music affects the poetry she writes, making it ‘pretty clunky’.<sup>13</sup> There has been a debate about the extent to which her poetry even counts as poetry -- the conservative and traditional elements of the literary press have tended to say that the sheer artificiality of her language and her enjoyment of self-conscious reflection on the uses to which she is putting words mean that they cease to be poetic at all.<sup>14</sup> While I do not agree with this reaction, it is true that Carson’s verse (perhaps above all in *AoR*) is flamboyantly intellectual. It appeals to the brain. It treats issues she has elsewhere teasingly, and fully aware of the double meaning of the word, described as ‘mental’: not for nothing had she summoned a gathering of Phenomenologists in her *Plainwater* (1995).<sup>15</sup> Poetry that refers to Virginia Woolf and Martin Heidegger is not exactly asking to be enjoyed at an exclusively emotional or sensual level. Nor is verse that paraphrases Einsteinian paradoxes, such as the question Geryon asks on one of his flights, ‘What is time made of?’, when he ‘could feel it massed around him...’ (p. 80). The question ‘What is time made of?’ recurs insistently throughout cantos 29 to 30, during Geryon’s encounter with a professional philosopher.

Running parallel with the topic of time throughout the entire poem is the topic of subjectivity. Nor is the interest just in the subjectivity derived from sense-perception (although that is indeed itself a prominent theme), but in the literary constitution of individual identity, the Subject in the philosophical sense, often called the Self by Social Psychologists. Since

Heidegger's *Being and Time* (*Sein und Zeit*, 1927), it is been generally agreed that a key constitutive element of subjectivity is a sense of linear continuity through time – that is, of *temporality*. Two other philosophical concepts that can now stake nearly equivalent claims to importance in the make-up of the subject's experience of himself or herself are spatiality and corporeality. In recent times, psychologists have also been stressing the importance of *dialogue* to the Self: This is the idea that no subject can define itself in isolation, but can only constitute itself in counterpoint with an interlocutor – an idea related to the Bakhtinian sense of the voice that only emerges dialogically.<sup>16</sup>

The Subject or Self has also been the dominant interest of writers of prose fiction -- of the European and subsequently the American novel -- at least since the 18th century.<sup>17</sup> Carson sub-titles Red's autobiography *A Novel in Verse*, thus locating herself in an important hybrid genre going back via Vikram Seth's sophisticated urban tragic-comic verse romance *The Golden Gate* (1986). A foundational text from this perspective was Elizabeth Barrett Browning's verse epic-novel of female self-discovery *Aurora Leigh* (1857), in which she fulfilled her childhood dream of becoming the 'feminine of Homer' by making a female the narrating subject.<sup>18</sup> Beyond even these lies Pushkin's poem-novel *Eugene Onegin* (1825-30), which (like *Autobiography of Red*) has at its centre the youth and romantic escapades of a trio of appealing male heroes.

### **3. Dante's Geryon**

In *Autobiography of Red* Carson traces the way in which literary texts have treated certain kinds of Subject, through the example of Geryon, from archaic Greece to the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. In delicate interaction with its pervasive



melancholy, the story of the Subject here has an insistently upbeat drive, as Carson's Geryon moves from the sidelines of ancient literature to the epicentre of his own text -- gay, pigmented, other-bodied, confused and philosophically reflective as he is. Indeed, *AoR* is also in a sense the Autobiography of the Subject of Art, who is now quite as likely to be gay, pigmented, other-bodied or female as white, Anglo-Saxon and male. In this process an important role is played by the *Inferno* of Dante Alighieri, the only other major author since the European Renaissance to focus at any length on Geryon.

During their descent into the Inferno, the first part of the *Divine Comedy*, Virgil and Dante have already encountered two monstrous figures from classical mythology -- the ferryman Charon, and the Cerberus, a three-headed dog who represents the sins of the gluttons that he is guarding. But Dante seems much more interested in Geryon, the winged monster. He appears, swimming through the murk, right at the very end of the 16th canto in order to transport Virgil and Dante across a great abyss to the Eighth Circle of Hell, where the crime that is punished is fraud. The 17th canto then opens with Virgil's cry, 'Look at the beast with the pointed tail!' Virgil signals to the beast to land on the shore near the path that he and Dante are taking, and Dante describes Geryon in a detail that implies, as many critics have suggested, that he was wholly fascinated with his own poetic, Christian (re)creation of the ancient monster. Geryon has the face of a virtuous individual but a snake's body, gaudily multi-coloured. Dante's account of his flight on Geryon later in the canto has entranced readers for centuries:<sup>19</sup>

100 Just as a rowboat pulls out from its berth  
Backwards, backwards, so that beast pushed off,

And when he felt himself all free in space,

There where his chest had been he turned his tail,

Stretching it out and waving it like an eel,

105 While with his paws he gathered in the air.

I do not think the fear was any sharper

When Phaethon let the sun's reins drop away

(The reason why the sky is scorched with stars)

Nor when unhappy Icarus felt his flanks

110 Unfeathering as the wax started melting,

His father shouting, "You're going the wrong way!"

Than mine was when I saw that on all sides

I floated in the air and I saw all

Sights lost to view except the beast himself.

115 He flew on slowly, slowly swimming on,

Spiraling and gliding: this I knew only

By the winds in my face and underneath me.

I heard already on my right the whirlpool

Roaring with such horror there beneath us

120 That I stretched out my neck and peered below.

Then I grew more panicky of going down  
For I saw flames and I heard wailing cries;  
So, trembling, I pressed my legs in tighter.

And then I saw, what I had not seen before:

125 His descent was spiraled, since I saw torments  
On every side were drawing nearer to us.

Just as a falcon, a long while on the wing,  
Who, without spotting lure or prey,  
Makes the falconer cry, "Ah, you're coming down,"

130 Descends, tired, with a hundred turnings  
To where he set out so swiftly, and perches,  
Aloof and furious, far off from his master,

So at the bottom Geryon set us down  
Right next to the base of a jagged rockface

135 And, once rid of the burden of our bodies,

He vanished like an arrow from a bowstring.

It is hardly surprising that this stunning episode has inspired many visual artists, including William Blake (1824-7). [**see fig.**]



It forms such a central image in the Western literary and pictorial imagination that it can not be excluded from our understanding of any poem about Geryon composed subsequently. I am, indeed, not the first person to suggest that Dante's Geryon is also important to a full understanding of Carson's, since Rae briefly proposes that Geryon is 'for both authors, the personification of fraud and the pilgrims' guide through the realm of dissemblers'.<sup>20</sup> But Rae seems reluctant to develop what he means by this intriguing parallel. It seems to me that Carson's awareness of this outstanding passage has informed her own Geryon poem in profound and manifold ways, from her central motif of the significant flight to her use of myth, metaphor, and image: the feathers and the star-scorched sky are just two that will feature below. Carson has after all elsewhere blended Greek myth with a topic in Medieval Christianity in a quest for understanding of the post-modern self. The narrator of her prose poem *The Anthropology of Water*, in her collection *Plainwater* (1995), makes a pilgrimage to the shrine of St. James in a quest to find possible ways of mourning her elderly father, but also retells the myth of the Danaids.

#### 4. Subjects and Objects

In Dante's account, the fascinating Geryon is not a Subject. He has no Subjectivity. He is an object to be described and ridden; he is paradoxical and ultimately – both as a voiceless creature and as a fraudster – unknowable. Yet in Carson's novel in verse, a crucial element in Geryon's maturation is the development of his own self-consciousness that he is a separate and individual being – of his subjectivity. In Carson's hands, Geryon's sense of self is born, very explicitly, at the moment of his first sexual encounter, when he submits to sex with his older brother in return for an interesting marble. He then begins to think 'about the difference / between outside and inside. / Inside is mine, he thought.' (29). On the same day he begins to document his own subjectivity through time in the form of his autobiography, from which he 'coolly omitted / all outside things' (29). Corporeality – one of the key *loci* of selfhood – as sensed through sexual contact is thus self-consciously described and distinguished from the cerebral, internal, consciousness-self. This autobiography is to be written entirely from the interior perspective, aided by the camera which he starts wielding in the eighth section, 'Click', when he takes a photograph of his mother at the kitchen sink (40).

The components of selfhood are carefully introduced and negotiated. In section 9, 'Space and time', the necessity of social interaction with another to produce the sense of self constitutes the opening sentence, 'Up against another human being one's own procedures take on definition' (42). And through an increasing sense of alienation from his mother as his relationship with Herakles intensifies, the question of distance – physical and emotional

— is raised in the question ‘How does distance look?’ as he walks across the space physically separating him from his mother (p. 43).

In canto 11, ‘Hades’, the connection of the visit to the fiery underworld with the notion of fraud, which Carson has drawn from her engagement with Dante, **vividly** enters her poem. Here it transpires that Herakles’ hometown, on the other side of the Atlantic island on which Geryon lives, is called Hades, and is adjacent to a volcano. Yet it is before leaving home on this first outing with Herakles that Geryon learns to dissemble. His relationship with his mother changes gear forever as he ‘wrote a note full of lies’ for her and **sticks it** on the fridge (46). Other aspects of the Self come into play in canto 13, ‘Somnambula’, which explores the subjectivity of the experience both of time and of visually perceived objects. Geryon overhears Herakles saying to his grandmother in the garden, ‘*My world is very slow right now*’, while she responds by ‘discussing death’ (p. 49). The young and the old have very different concerns when it comes to the experience of time. Then a big red butterfly goes past, riding on a little black one. ‘*How nice*, said Geryon, *he’s helping him*’. But Herakles retorts, ‘*He’s fucking him*’. This is a very succinct and pungent way of dramatising the relativity of perception (pp. 49-50).

The volcano at the heart of the poem had become important in ‘Hades’ where we learn that Herakles’ grandmother took a photograph of it (p. 46) and also that there was ‘a survivor’ called Lava Man (p. 47). Geryon is obsessed with the photograph of the volcano exploding in 1923, mainly because it was a fifteen-minute exposure on an old-fashioned camera, and that photograph had ‘compressed / on its motionless surface / fifteen different moments of time, nine hundred seconds of bombs moving up / and ash moving down’ (p. 51). Geryon asked Herakles’ grandmother ‘*What if you took*

*a fifteen-minute exposure of a man in jail, let's say the / lava has just reached his window?*' And her response encapsulates the issue that Carson is wrestling with throughout the poem (p. 52). *'I think you are confusing subject and object, she said'*. Here Carson introduces an understanding of the psychological violence inherent in the artistic representation of subject-object relations, a topic that has been developed above all by feminists and by African American cultural theorists such as Henry Louis Gates and Robert B. Stepto.<sup>21</sup>

Geryon, the object of literature from the Greeks to Dante, is in Carson's verse novel becoming its subject. No wonder he is so interested in what it might feel like to be the man awaiting death inside a picture being viewed. That is what has always been the situation for Geryon and his like in literature — they await death for the edification of the consumers of the poem. The boundaries of selfhood and the unknowability of other's inner selves come out in the very next canto, no. 15, 'pair'. Geryon's wings are struggling. 'They tore against each other on his shoulders / like the mindless red animals they were' (p. 53). Geryon is having to objectify his own body parts in order to cope with the pain they are giving him, and moreover to hide the problem from Herakles, with whom he is as intimate as with anyone, by putting his jacket over his head. As the love affair intensifies, so does the examination of representations of consciousness and subjectivity. At the moment when Geryon's mother is lambasting Herakles on the phone, it is no coincidence that it is one of the authors most associated with the development of 'stream of consciousness' techniques, Virginia Woolf, that Herakles' grandmother is telling Geryon about; the old lady had once met her and *'she was a highly original woman'* (p. 58). She had also met Sigmund Freud, who had cracked a

joke when the dog he had given her (also called Freud) had died; the jokes concerned ‘incomplete transference’ (p. 58).

## **5. The Self and its Worlds**

Canto 19 is the turning-point of the poem, when Herakles tells Geryon to go home to his mother, and that they will always be good friends. Geryon is shattered. And this turning-point is paralleled by the title and intellectual interest of the section, ‘From the archaic to the fast self’. On one level this issue is explored in terms of the global shift to chronometric time which philosophers and cultural historians associate with the invention of the railway train in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, and which is regarded as effecting one of the most drastic epistemic shifts in the human subject seen transhistorically. This point is signalled by Carson with the discussion of the precise time of day at which Krakatoa erupted (which happened in the year 1883, a fact not recorded in the poem); Geryon has discovered the answer, 4.00 a.m., in the 1911 edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (p. 61). Geryon’s lapsarian moment when he falls from happiness is equated with the drastic change that happened when humanity changed from the archaic to the fast self during the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The parallelism between photography and poetry in terms of recording and retrieving memories is underlined in canto 21, ‘Memory Burn’, where Herakles states that photography ‘*is a way of playing with perceptual relationships*’ (p. 65). This introduces a discussion of the extraordinary fact that the starlight you see is thousands of years old, and that some of the stars that you see are no longer there at all. Being and time indeed. And when Geryon gets to Buenos Aires he sits in a café writing postcards with bits of



Heidegger on them, having been studying German philosophy at college for the past three years (p. 82). The snatches of German make little sense in their new context, but sound plausibly Heideggerian --- *sie sind das was betreiben*, to his brother, a sports commentator, *zum verlorenen Hören* to his philosophy professor, and *die Angst offenbart das Nichts* ('Anxiety discloses Nothing(ness)') to his mother, about whom he was usually anxious (pp. 82-4). Now naming Heidegger in a poem can signify several things, but in a poem quite so insistently about the parameters of the Self, it is above all *Being and Time* that resonates here.

Geryon writes out his fragments in a café called the Café Mitwelt. 'Mitwelt' is a concept associated with Quantum Physics and Gestalt psychotherapy, but especially with German Existentialism. It means the world that is jointly perceptible to the humans in it – all that the consciousness of each of us shares with the consciousness of others. It is thus distinct from both of the two other worlds that preoccupy the Gestalt analysts, the Existentialist philosopher and Carson's Geryon: the objective *Umwelt* which names the fundamental, invisible ground of existence (the physical conditions of the universe) and from the subjective *Eigenwelt*, which means each individual's own personally and individually constructed reality. And it is in the Café Mitwelt in Buenos Aires that Geryon struggles to distinguish his views of his worlds, although when it comes to his *Eigenwelt*, the poem makes it clear that philosophy is not the answer: he will learn far more from less cerebral, more sensual engagement with experience -- listening to emotional music in a tango bar, or gazing into a baker's oven.

The fragments of Heidegger prove to be a pre-echo of the central encounter between Geryon and an academic philosopher, Yellowbeard, who

has arrived in Buenos Aires for a convention on Scepticism. Here, it seems to me, in the painfully comic account of the conference proceedings, lurks Carson's central thesis about the difference between the philosopher and the poet. Yellowbeard quotes a translation of the famous passage on the limits of human reason to make sense of the human condition, from Blaise Pascal's *Pensées*, ' I see the terrifying spaces of the universe hemming me in...' The line trails powerfully into elipse, while the poem continues,

the yellowbeard quoted Pascal and then began to pile word up all

around the terror

of Pascal until it could scarcely be seen--

Geryon paused in his listening and saw the slopes of time spin backwards and stop.

Space and time merge as so often, while the spaces of the universe induce vertiginous experiences of psychic time travel and Geryon is once again, internally, back with his mother. But this passage is also taken from one of the most famous part of Pascal's defence of the rationality of belief in god, which frames the famous 'wager' resting on the premise that it is more rational to believe than not to believe.<sup>22</sup> Carson was herself raised in a Protestant-humanist tradition, and pours no cynical post-modern or post-Marxist scorn on religious devotion.<sup>23</sup> Although *Red* is not as theological in its focus as much of Carson's work, especially some of the material in *Glass, Irony, and God* (1995), Carson's tangos (her word, out of another context) with metaphysics do not leave *Red* untouched.<sup>24</sup>

The second of the three important conversations which Geryon holds in Buenos Aires is with another philosopher at the conference, called Lazer, the son of atheist Jewish parents who had adapted the name Eleazar (p. 94). Lazer thinks that mortality is merely 'divine doubt flashing over us', and that children, like his four-year-old daughter, make you aware of temporal distance. Humans are all walking over a hill towards death, at distances from each other marked by their respective ages (pp. 94-5). The role of the two philosophers has been to introduce strongly metaphysical interests to the poem, and especially the notion of godhead and its absolute power. In moments of death, '*For an instant God / suspends assent and POOF! we disappear*', as Lazer says (p. 94). Geryon is intellectually disturbed, and sits up at night in his hotel room trying to reassert the idea of a Self in the teeth of the conference of Sceptics. And it is Heidegger to whom he turns for reassurance (p. 98),

He hugged his overcoat closer and tried to assemble in his mind

Heidegger's argument about the use of moods.

We would think ourselves continuous with the world if we did not have  
moods.

It is state-of-mind that discloses to us

(Heidegger claims) that we are beings who have been thrown into  
something else.

He leaves the hotel and stumbles around until he arrives at 'the only authentic tango bar left in Buenos Aires' (p. 99). Here he has a strange encounter with an androgynous woman tango singer who turns out to be just moonlighting --

by day she is a psychoanalyst. But it is in the course of this conversation that Geryon has a profound reaffirmation of what makes a sense of Self -- in a song, within a memory, within that bar in Buenos Aires.

The singer performs her 'typical tango song and she had the throat full of needles you need to sing it' (p. 100); tangos are terrible because their message is always the same -- *Your heart or my death!* (ibid.) Geryon is precipitated into a memory of standing at a high school dance, propping up the wall, no-one to dance with, his body dripping sweat and desire (p. 101), while

...music pounded

across hearts opening every valve to the desperate drama of being  
a self in a song.

In this terrible image of adolescent sexual frustration and emotional yearning, all the philosophical doubts about selfhood and its definitions are swept away in the sensory overload of music, sweat, and the scent of the other boys' colognes arising 'in a light terror' around them. In this powerful moment of recollection, Geryon's self was not only palpable but desperate and dramatic. The power of art and sensory feeling to speak more truly than philosophical argumentation could scarcely be more emphatically asserted than in the three-part colloquy that constitutes Geryon's Buenos Aires episode.

## **6. The Western Subject Subverted**

At the moment when Geryon put down Walt Whitman and selected instead a self-help manual, it looked as though he was about to go on a quest to discover

his true self, by himself. But it is at this point that, after a gap of several years, who should crash back into his lonely life but the black-leather-jacketed Herakles? With Herakles immediately comes a third party, who is to provide a crucial point of reference through most of the rest of the poem. Herakles is accompanied by a Peruvian, 'a man as beautiful as a live feather' (p. 112). His name is Ancash, which is the ancient name of the region housing the oldest indigenous civilisation in Northern Peru, the Chavin (pre-Inca). This people are traceable at least as far back as the 7th or 6th century BCE -- that is, as far as Stesichorus and the 'western' poetic tradition. Ancash becomes increasingly important both to Geryon and to the poem, and it is this relationship which seems to point to the possibility of the discovery of at least a kind of self-understanding. During the journeys of Geryon, Herakles and Ancash, which refract the aerial ride of Dante and Virgil on Geryon's back through the circles of Hell, the autobiography moves towards its mysterious conclusion.

The poetic parallels introduced along with Ancash already seem to signal something more promising for Geryon's quest for self-knowledge than Whitman's injunction to accept that he, too, is evil. Herakles and Ancash are making a documentary film about Emily Dickinson, who wrote poems about volcanoes including *On My Volcano grows the grass*, a poem which Geryon likes very much (p. 108).<sup>25</sup> The two young men are therefore travelling around South America recording the sounds made by volcanoes, presumably to provide an audio background to their documentary (ibid.). With the 'feather man' comes a new optimistic impetus, as well as a beautiful song sung in a language incomprehensible both to Geryon and the reader, and I am sure that beneath Ancash lies Dickinson's well-known poem that begins,

Hope is the thing with feathers  
That perches in the soul,  
And sings the tune without the words,  
And never stops at all.<sup>26</sup>

In the end Geryon and Ancash, after living through the tension caused by the fact that they are both sexually involved with Herakles, discover a much deeper bond based not on sex but on a shared spiritual understanding. They are much more fragile and much more sensitive Selves than Herakles.

He is the consummate North American version of the appetitive ancient hero. Although he hangs around with Ancash, he is blind to issues of first-world imperialism; when he claims brightly to know some Quechua, the ancient indigenous language of the Andes, Ancash 'gave him a raw look' (p. 112). He enjoys risks and adventures, knows what he wants (sex, food, fun), and more importantly knows how to get it. He is insensitive, brash, anti-intellectual, intolerant of emotional claims being made upon him, but Carson is no naïve anti-American polemicist: he is also big, strong, warm, sexually desirable, full of the life force and exuberantly good company. The poetic episode that best captures his spirit is the escapade in the Buenos Aires branch of Harrods: Herakles cuts free a lifesize carved wooden tiger from a carousel in the children's department, finds the department store's central fusebox, plunges the entire shop into darkness, and carries off his trophy, yelling '*Vamos hombres!*' to his friends (pp. 116-17).

It is in the plane to Peru, sitting between the feathered, spiritual, ancient American Ancash and the brash, lifeloving New World hero Herakles, that Geryon begins to soar away as an independent self, thus triumphing over his

treatment in both Stesichorus and Dante. In the justly famous fragments of the archaic lyric describing the death of Geryon, it is entirely written from Heracles' subjective viewpoint or that of an external witness-narrator. Heracles first strikes Geryon, whose helmet falls to the ground (fr. S 15 col. i.13-17); the killing of the monster is then described in gory detail, including the pain inflicted by the arrow poisoned with the blood and gall of the Hydra (fr. S 15 col. ii):

...(bringing he end that is hateful (death), having (doom) on its head, befouled with blood and with...gall, the anguish of the dapple-necked Hydra, destroyer of men; and in silence he thrust it cunningly into his brow, and it cut through the flesh and the bones by divine dispensation; and the arrow held straight on the crown of his head, and it stained with gushing blood his breastplate and gory limbs; and Geryon drooped his head to one side, like a poppy which spoiling its tender beauty suddenly shed its and...<sup>27</sup>

Geryon droops his neck in death at the hands of Heracles, and is likened to a poppy which spoils its beauty by suddenly shedding its petals. In Dante, Geryon had provided the mount for the poet Dante and his companion Virgil. But when transformed by Carson in her poetic novel, this poppy fragment and the flight with the two riders between them provide the material for the climax -- an intense moment of orgasm in the mile-high club, as **Heracles** begins to masturbate the ecstatic red monster in a plane high over the Andes:

He felt Herakles' hand move on his thigh and Geryon's

head went back like a poppy in a breeze  
as Herakles' mouth came down on his  
and blackness sank through him. Herakles'  
hand was on his zipper. Geryon gave himself up  
to pleasure...

At this extraordinary moment of his 'refraction' by Carson through Existentialist models of the self and through earlier poetry, Geryon's right to subjectivity triumphs over his millennia-long objectification as the creature who existed simply to be slain in **Heracles'** tenth labour. Geryon displaces **Heracles** from the centre of his myth, and himself takes centre stage, substituting for his own death or his own treatment as a beast of burden an erotic triumph over the lover who had once (in Carson's story) rejected him.

*Autobiography of Red* charts the history of the western Subject through Geryon. He goes from his archaic self, existing in a poem as the object slain by the macho culture hero Heracles, to what the poem itself calls his 'fast' self, in which he emphatically becomes the *subject* of an intimate experience in an aeroplane. At this moment Carson not only introduces the poem's most vivid and explicit of its numerous references to Stesichorus' *Geryoneis*, but also refers to the representation of Geryon's flight around the circles of Hell in Dante's *Inferno*. The poem's argument about the nature of the western Subject is therefore conducted through references to intermingled images and signs from the three cultural planes instantiated respectively by Geryon's ancient pagan, Christian and postmodern manifestations, with the addition of a dialogue with another -- wholly un-Mediterranean -- tradition altogether.



Carson's Geryon approaches full, autonomous self-hood through coming to terms with, and even at times enjoying, his physical and psychological strangeness. But the density of the underlying philosophical argument ensures that the melancholy yet witty autobiography of Geryon's self is also the more profound autobiography of the western Subject in the form it has only recently begun to believe it can hope to inhabit -- frank, diverse, post-feminist, postcolonial, intercultural and wryly defiant of normative heterosexist constraints.

- 1 Carson (1986a).
- 2 See the excellent study of visuality and metaphor in the poem by Tschofen (2004).
- 3 Renner (2004).
- 4 Battis (2003).
- 5 Butler (1990) 97.
- 6 Battis (2003) 200.
- 7 Discussion of Carson's works triggered a passionate encounter between Jenny and Marina in a notorious episode of *The L Word*, Showtime Network's controversial TV drama serial about lesbians in Los Angeles. See the insightful analysis by O'Rourke (2004).
- 8 Bhaba (1990) 221; see Battis (2003) 202.
- 9 Rae (2000) 35.
- 10 Carson (1999) 28; see Stanton (2003).
- 11 D'Agata (1997) 10.

- 12 According to the poem it was released in 1935 (p. 76) , but the correct date is actually 1933, which raises the possibility that Carson wants to enshrine cognitive and temporal inaccuracy within her text.
- 13 See McNeilly (2003).
- 14 E.g. Kirsch (1998) 37.
- 15 Carson (1995), 77.
- 16 See Hall (forthcoming).
- 17 See in general Burke (1992).
- 18 On Barrett's phrase 'feminine of Homer' see Hurst (2006), 7-10.
- 18 Canto 17.100-36, translated by James Finn Cotter.
- 20 Rae (2000), 35.
- 21 See Hall (forthcoming).
- 22 The relevant sections are published in English translation in Pascal (1962), 200-16.
- 23 See especially the remarks on her attitude towards Celan's 'curiously devout lack of faith' and the mysticism of Simone Weil, in Furlani (2003).
- 24 In an interview with Kevin McNeilly, Carson said that she thinks 'there's a theological aspect in being human. I think it's one of the things you have to decide what you think about, at some point in your life... I just come back to it as one comes back to one's shoes at a certain point in the day' (McNeilly (2003)). On Carson's interest in Christian mysticism, see Furlani (2003).
- 25 This poem is no. 1677 in Dickinson (1970), 685.
- 26 No. 254 in Dickinson (1970), 116.
- 27 The translation and numeration here is that of Campbell (1991), 74-7.

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