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### **The Monstrosity of Anne Carson's *Autobiography of Red***

[W]e are not asked to condemn this being with the mad heart, this being with whom there is something constitutionally wrong. On the contrary, we are invited to understand and sympathize. But there is a limit to sympathy. For though he lives among us, he is not one of us. He is exactly what he calls himself: a *thing*, that is, a monster.

David Lurie, J.M. Coetzee, *Disgrace*

What is the relationship between humans and monsters? With treacherous sympathy Coetzee's David Lurie opens the question by dividing the species of monsters and humans, and thus missing one of many third terms possible: what of the child? What happens when society places the full force of its existential angst—its foundation though exclusion, Lurie's "among us, he is not one of us"—at the feet of a child marked as exceptionally, irreducibly other? Mobilizing the latent ambiguity of a society in which, as Ellen Pifer argues, we experience grave difficulty in "distinguishing between our fears *for* and *of* the child" (12), novels such as Anne Carson's *Autobiography of Red* (1998) figure monstrous children as haunting questions, ostracized others, borderlines between the monstrous and the human. Addressing this question begins to identify the strategies by which that monstrous part of humanity is identified and managed. Carson and Coetzee understand that civil society founds itself by excluding the monstrous other, a figure that finds no more pure embodiment than in the child whose egregious difference continues to be foundational to living culture. But to what ends?

What common ground does a child negotiate when entering the field of cultural activity? As new life, a child obtains a basic commonality with other living things as such, but there is a different field of existence—cultural society. Giorgio Agamben helpfully traces out two distinct "types" of life from Greek etymological history: *zoē* and *bios*. *Zoē* denotes "the simple fact of

living common to all living beings” while *bios* indicates “the form or way of living proper to an individual or a group” (1). This distinction clarifies a child’s relation to adults and societies: on the one hand children mature physiologically; on the other, they develop into a qualified cultural adulthood. Pifer describes the power dynamics here:

children can claim strength in incompleteness. From an adult’s point of view their vulnerability is an aspect of their power. Children are weak, socially as well as physically, because they contain so much potential. *Not yet complete, they are not yet fully clothed, or formed, by culture.* (19, my emphasis)

Singular because of their potential difference, children carry the burden and threat of radical potential, while the question of so-called completion—being “fully clothed”—is a dangerous fantasy, as culture necessarily continues to evolve. Growing into culture means changing that culture just as it means changing oneself. A risk here is that negotiation may mean that a child, “growing up,” will disappear into the invisibility of normative cultural life; alternatively, irremediably monstrous, a child may be ejected from the terms of negotiation altogether.

The child’s threat thus lies in the perception that she or he will reveal the cut of the adult’s clothing in a manner inversely reminiscent of the famous naked emperor. No wonder myths of pure childhood innocence have sanitized children’s images for so long. Reinhard Kuhn reminds us that “[e]ver since Rousseau one popular conception of the child is that, as a personage living in the state of nature, he [or she] is basically good until the forces of civilization corrupt his [or her] naïve essence” (40-41). To expose this thesis as a strategic lie is not to pose the question of children’s “basically evil” nature in quick substitution. Rather it means we see children as beings of monstrous alterity. A child negotiates not only the common grounds of

culture, but the definition of humanity. Carson, however, is uninterested in recuperating children as necessarily *human* in the sense that they must become “fully clothed, or formed, by culture”; we read in this text of Geryon: a red child with wings.

In at least one ancient sense a monster is utterly fantastical, “a mythical creature which is part human and part animal” (*OED*). This definition attenuates alterity’s revolutionary strength with a conceptual sidestep that neuters the child’s threatening potential for adults. Monsters cannot forcibly renegotiate human social communities because they *a priori* could never be part of those communities. Yet monster signifies more than myth. The truth is that monstrous children are not fantastical creatures, but are born of human flesh.

The Latin *mōnstrum* implies not a mythical hybrid but rather a “portent, prodigy, monstrous creature, [or] wicked person” (*OED*). Tracing the word into contemporary usage illuminates the monster as “[a]n ugly or deformed person” or a “person of repulsively unnatural character, or exhibiting such extreme cruelty or wickedness as to appear inhuman,” and drops the prophetic from obvious use (*OED*). The two developments are distinct: one argues on physical grounds, the other on moral sense; both, however, perceive alterity as disturbing, and both acknowledge a monster’s fundamental humanity. Monstrosity here lies in *seeming other*, and in this seeming re-emerges the portent, recalling “monster”’s other roots in the Latin *monstrare*, to demonstrate, and *monere*, to warn (Punter 263). Andrew Ng contends that “[m]onsters are born in language, but take root when meaning falters” (3). This radical idea casts us back to the word’s Latinate roots, for if a being is called monstrous “when meaning falters” then such nomenclature recognizes new possibilities in failures of understanding. Monstrosity emerges of us but, embodying alterity, seems not us, and may change us. A child is a natural monster whose naked

threat to expose the adult's performative, invisible clothes portends a revolutionary change—as Allen Weiss writes, monsters “are indicators of epistemic shifts” (125), and thus monsters, in Franco Moretti's words, serve to “synthesize phenomena of different natures, but also to *transform them*: to change their form, and with it their meaning” (105). Carson's *Autobiography of Red* knows that the monstrous child is an other who can be dangerous and violent, but also dangerously violated; more than a mythic cipher the monster—the monstrous child—is a sign of humanity itself. Portents invoke challenges; monsters require care.

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The verse narrative of Anne Carson's *Autobiography of Red* opens with a chapter called “Justice” that begins with the following sentence: “Geryon learned about justice from his brother quite early” (23). This judicial sentencing strongly resonates within the language of familial societies. Geryon, named “stupid” and abandoned by his brother on his trip to kindergarten, perhaps unsurprisingly assents. In mute analysis Geryon thinks “*stupid* was correct. But when justice is done / the world drops away” (24). Understanding justice is understanding exclusion, standing solitary outside a classroom while snow eradicates the signs of fissure and “silence[s] / all trace of the world” (25). Geryon's first justice is a falling away from the world, an intense isolation, a smothered silence. Anne Carson's “novel in verse” tells a red, winged child's story of navigating the multiple forms of exclusion and isolation which “justice” marks on his monstrous body. A constant tension defines both *Autobiography of Red* and Geryon, for each responds to a continuing play between inclusion and exclusion, a dead isolation and a murderous love and, ultimately, between the unreality of mundanity and the pained reality of the monstrous.

Geryon is a monster with a history. Carson explicitly follows Greek poet Stesichoros' ancient version of the myth, and her retelling stages the ghosts of traditional interpretation at its margins. Geryon, tradition tells us, is a red winged monster killed by Herakles' arrow in a story usually described as "a thrilling account of the victory of culture over monstrosity" (Carson 6). Stesichoros' version—or those fragments remaining—is notable because it "reverses the roles of protagonist and antagonist and thus shifts the point of view" (Tschofen 38). Carson translates the extant fragments of Stesichoros' *Geryoneis*, together with other elusive appendices as paratexts to her narrative, and as Tschofen argues, by incorporating discourses as varied as "the scholarly and the lyrical, the narrative and the journalistic" Carson's text itself becomes "a hybrid," a monstrous text reflecting Geryon's monstrous body (33). Carson thus invokes to embody the long conflict between civilized culture and monstrous nature of the stories presenting Geryon and Herakles. Perhaps most crucially for me, Carson further revises Stesichoros' retelling. In her version Geryon is not just a red monster with wings. He is also a modern child.

The modernity of Carson's Geryon is not unreflexive, however, and he seems aware of the disjunction between his own existence and Stesichoros' epic. In one of his many elementary school attempts at autobiography (which include efforts in textuality, sculpture and photography) Geryon assembles a short list of significant facts and events about his life:

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)

These childish, breathless sentences tell an irony as old as Icarus. Geryon's wings, so often dangerous signs of freedom, mark his alterity. Meanwhile, his red cattle lure Herakles' interest, a fact that Stesichoros' fragment XV makes clear, echoed by Geryon's autobiography previous.

Titled "Total Things Known About Geryon", Carson's translation of fr. XV runs thus:

He loved lightning He lived on an island His mother was a  
Nymph of a river that ran to the sea His father was a gold  
Cutting tool Old scholia say that Stesichoros says that  
Geryon had six hands and six feet and wings He was red and  
His strange red cattle excited envy Herakles came and  
Killed him for his cattle  
The dog too

Although classicists dispute Geryon's exact nature, most important here is the repeated insistence on redness: Geryon's red monstrosity reinforces, predetermines, his alterity, for it is the sole quality held certain.<sup>1</sup> In Carson's story Geryon's identity is frustratingly unclear, a legacy of the myth-tellers and "Old scholia" whose continuing indecision Carson evokes with ambiguous repetition: "Some say [...] some say," and who only agree to conclude that Geryon is the perpetual exception. Autobiographical sketches help Geryon define himself from this history. At his school-teacher's impatient prompting he gives his modern list of "total facts" a new ending:

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<sup>1</sup> Classicist W.S. Barrett traces a history of artistic depictions and literary representations to show the variety of Geryon's bodies (7-10, 19). Artists often give Geryon three bodies, the first of which is arrow-shot while his other bodies fight on. Most interestingly, Barrett writes that Stesichoros seems to have introduced Geryon's wings (5).

“All over the world the beautiful red breezes went on blowing hand / in hand” (38). Only redness lives on, a memory of blood-bright viscera and a melancholy call to the novel’s title, again echoed in some of the book’s final lines: “how can regret be red and might it be” (149). In this new ending Geryon does not rectify his death.

Geryon and Carson are both confounded by the myth’s traditionally brutal murder which seems totally arbitrary. Attic Herakles, tasked only to steal livestock, kills monstrous Geryon. Is this a victory of “culture”? Perhaps, as *Beowulf* reminds us, slaying monsters guards cultural purity. Carson’s novel engages with this troubling murder and unearths it from an ancient past. Following Stesichoros’ *Geryoneis*, Carson’s retelling questions the usual approbation given this brutal gratuity. Geryon is no longer a monster slain by Herakles’ arrow but a winged child who falls for Herakles’ love: a romantic, metaphoric death caused by language (and with shades of *la petite mort*). Words and arrows have much in common: both pierce. Words can be troped as arrows turned, however, and in Carson’s narrative Geryon struggles to understand his senseless mythical death by writing and rewriting his biography turned autobiography as he matures from childhood to a tormented, love-torn adolescence.

Yet *Autobiography of Red* is not a straightforward autobiography, though it traces brief, intense moments in Geryon’s life in motion. Monstrosity’s familiar companion, violence, appears, but here accompanying love—arguably one of society’s hinges. When Geryon’s mother confronts the fourteen-year-old over his new love for sixteen-year-old Herakles, Geryon realizes that “Love does not / make me gentle or kind” (42). Geryon’s adolescence is marked by his deeply ambivalent feelings about love and sex. With youthful intensity he writes “LOVESLAVE” on town walls (55) and, as he lies next to Herakles, they are “joined in astonishment as two cuts



lie parallel in the same flesh” (45). The metaphor explodes with the young lovers’ vitality: wounded, red, and alive. But while Geryon learns that love’s violence, like that of justice, moves him to mute reverence, when fickle Herakles flees it kills him. Arrested by shock Geryon “enters a suspended animation” after this abrupt falling away from love (Murray 109); excluded from the intimate and human society of Herakles’ love, Geryon enters another isolation.

Why do the pains of love and sex cut Geryon so deeply? Geryon is sexually abused by his brother early in the story, and as familial affection blurs with threats of social exclusion sex becomes the common interface of social transaction. His brother’s invasion of Geryon’s body prompts an evaluation of boundaries and bodies as the young boy thinks “about the difference / between outside and inside. / Inside is mine, he thought” (29). Immediately following

he began his autobiography. In this work Geryon set down all inside things particularly his own heroism and early death much to the despair of the community. (29)

Murray argues that Geryon’s “work of autobiography is the work of self-possession” (108), but this autobiography is more than just an assertion of self-identity through bodily affirmation. Geryon is more than just a red boy with wings. He is a social being, and his continuing autobiographical work records his relationships and desire for inclusion. Geryon learns about carnality and how sexual behavior is wrapped up in social transactions. From the inner throbbing pain “of the red pulse” he learns to write, to inscribe himself in culture life (29).

Geryon faces an adolescence troubled by old questions about the names of monstrosity and humanity. Alone in an Argentinean hotel room Geryon wonders “[a]t what point does one say of a man / that he has become unreal?” (98). The haunting thought that troubles him here is

spoken by a mysterious psychoanalyst-turned-tango dancer. Demonstrating a gift for turning Geryon's unspoken thoughts to words, she asks "*Who can a monster blame for being red?*" (104). In another version of this melancholic question of identity Geryon reads a poem by Walt Whitman, partially reproduced by Carson's text:

*It is not upon you alone the dark patches fall,  
The dark threw its patches down upon me also,  
The best I had done seemed blank and suspicious,  
Nor is it you alone who know what it is to be evil. (106)*

These incomplete lines from "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" are twisted out of the poem's body missing a couplet. Against Whitman's emphasis on the body Geryon's quotation blends identities of speaker and addressee to bring together in darkness two bodiless identities who, the quotation implies, we should assume to be evil. His reflections situate Geryon in the long quarrel of monstrosity and civilization, savagery and culture, good and evil: a conflict marked on his monstrous body and rooted in his mythological history; Geryon knows that ambiguous borders can be clarified with his ejection from civil society in an old strategy described by David Punter: "boundaries can [...] be reinstated as the monster is despatched, good is distinguished from evil and self from other" (264). This outcome haunts Geryon as a form of death, but so too does the erasure of self implied in normalizing acculturation: both are forms of unreality.

Melancholy lives on in the colour red, but Geryon's fate is less sure. While he will move into an unseen future Geryon can escape neither his memories of abusive "justice" nor his wings. Geryon's death to Herakles' arrow, like his fall to Herakles' fickle love, finds no fix nor cure. As monstrosity's markers remain Geryon disappears into the narrative's clear lack of closure, caught

to escape in his autobiography turning in its last pages to photography. But before narrative verse gives way to ekphrastic sketches, and before the child disappears into the adult, we are given in brief and incomplete red flashes a vision of documents that, in Benjamin's phrase, witness both civilization and barbarity. Like red itself, "a composite of many senses, never captured fully by any one" (Murray 116), Geryon comes across in snaps and pieces, permitting the reader glimpses of his identity and radical challenges to what we think about children who are monsters.

Finally we must accept Carson's *fait accompli* of non-resolution as the monster enters civil society only as the vanguard of the miraculous. The text suggesting Geryon's immanent departure is an images of Geryon, Herakles, and Herakles' lover Ancash watching bread baked in a Peruvian alleyway by a bakery whose ovens use volcanic heat. Carson's last chapter is called "The Flashes in which a Man Possesses Himself," but does self-possession become or avoid unreality? To become real is to forget his own red nature, and to remain unreal is to effectively maintain the sacrificial status quo. Derrida's "Structure, Sign and Play" narrates this paradoxical movement in its final words: "the yet unnamable which is proclaiming itself and which can do so, as is necessary whenever a birth is in the offing, only under the species of the nonspecies, in the formless, mute, infant, and terrifying form of monstrosity" (370). Is it any surprise that monstrous children figure the very act of deconstruction? Geryon, still outside of time, an unassimilated but unsacrificed monster, closes the novel watching an activity marked by the beginnings of civilization, and one that draws here its heat from volcanic fire. As Anne Carson knows, the miracle of living with monstrous children, of understanding alterity's violence, can be as prosaic as baking bread.

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When perception changes, so too does language, and in this regard the new languages of these two children come to prominence.<sup>2</sup> The formal choices of Lessing and Carson reflect Ng's general observation that "[c]ontemporary monster narratives [...] reposition the monster in the first-person," and that "the monster is no longer an object about which is being written or spoken, but the monster writing and speaking" (176). This choice should not be under-emphasized, as it reflects a profoundly hospitable openness, a tentative beginning to a conversation that includes the other's voice, even if in a brief and fragmented form; it comes close to accepting the monstrous child by permitting a renegotiation of common ground, of *bios* and what it means to live in so-called civil society. Furthermore, resisting the contemporary slant Ng associates with this narrative tactic, Carson's intertextuality with Stesichoros' ancient fragments argues that such hospitality is by no means found only in modern narrative. Ben and Geryon are monstrous children traditionally cast as exceptional: their eradication founds the law of civil society. Perhaps only attending to the sometimes wordless voice of this new and monstrous child, as Derrida calls us to do, might circumvent such monstrous logic, if this is possible. As Carson's narrative ending indicates, such an attempt may require an intense opening to the other; it might even involve comprehending a new form of expression.

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<sup>2</sup> Geryon expresses a startlingly synaesthetic understanding of the world around him: at one point he contemplates "the noise that colors make. Roses came / roaring across the garden at him" (84).