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‘TAWDRY, STAGGERING, IRRESISTIBLE, LIKE HUMAN LOVE’: THE IMPLICATIONS OF DESIRE IN ANNE CARSON’S PLAINWATER AND AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF RED

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Introduction

Anne Carson is a classicist, professor, and poet whose writing has often been called uncategorizable. With books such as *Eros the Bittersweet* (1986), *Glass, Irony and God* (1995), and *Autobiography of Red* (1995), Carson is renowned for blurring boundaries between genre, gender, and history and exploring modern love through the lens of ancient myths. A notorious review from the *New York Times* says that Carson "gives the impression — on the page, at readings — of someone from another world, either extraterrestrial or ancient, for whom our modern earthly categories are too artificial and simplistic to contain anything like the real truth she is determined to communicate" (Anderson). She "flips channels, shuffles tracks, and splices cuts with a daring verging on insolence," and possesses the unique ability to "shape antique shards into a disco ball incandescent with freak genius" (Scranton, 206).

Some critics have rebuked Carson for how she allows her scholarly interests to invade her prose and poetry, arguing that it sacrifices the integrity of her subject—often an ancient primary text—and ruins its palatability for the modern reader. One such critic, Adam Kirsch, says that "Carson's erudition and intelligence wreak havoc on poetry" and that the appendices, translations, syllogisms, and imagined interviews with long-dead thinkers often included in her books are "showy" and "deliberately exterior to the main enterprise," (Beasley, 175). Others are more wary of how her mastery over ancient texts allows for her manipulation of them: "While critics laud Carson's daring language and admire her command of ancient Greek, they also express concern about her lack of responsibility toward both her texts and her audiences. Certainly part of Carson's allure has always been in her willfulness, but now that she occupies a position of such authority and esteem, such willfulness can look like caprice" (Scranton, 209).

But preserving purity is an impossible task for a translator, especially one like Carson that takes liberties for the sake of art. In any text, just as in life, "... identity and experience are fragmentary, layered, hybrid, muddled, chaotic, tumultuous and riddled by holes. According to Carson, the artist is tasked with articulating such a reality," (Mindell, 4). Carson excels in the "chaotic," and her fascination with absence and presence, translation and meaning, and resurrecting long-dead stories and filling in their gaps has produced brilliant writing that gives voice to the aches of human existence. Carson says of her interest in fragments, "no matter what the thought would be if it were fully worked out, it wouldn't be as good as the suggestion of a thought that the space gives you. Nothing fully worked out could be so arresting, spooky." She enjoys translation for a similar reason: "I like the space between languages because it's a place of error or mistakenness, of saying things less well than you would like, or not being able to say them at all" (Aitken). To Carson, "mistakenness" is as essential to the art of storytelling as it is to the stories themselves.

As seen in her Classical scholarship as well as her prose and poetry, Carson is drawn to stories about empty space carved by language, loss, and love. Her uncategorizable generic style maps onto her "long fascination with the ache of erotic desire, with pleasure/pain made exquisite in lyric poetry, *with how words feel*," (Wahl, 185). Bruce Hainley calls Carson "a philosopher of heartbreak," and Scranton observes that "entanglements between poetry and life, between the eros of bodies and the eros of words, are elemental to Anne Carson's work, and for her, such entanglements always limn a void—lack pangful with longing, grief, lost lives surviving in tatters and hearsay" (Mindell, 202). In this way, Carson's so-called exploitation of translation can be linked to her interest in "the erotic possibilities of language" (Wahl, 185).

My thesis will investigate *Plainwater* (1995) and *Autobiography of Red*, two books that exemplify the incomparable "havoc" Carson wreaks on fixed conventions of genre, language, love, and translation. *Plainwater* is a collection of prose and poetry with five sections, each meditating on love, grief, and the fallibility of language. I will be primarily drawing from the book's longest essays, "Kinds of Water: An Essay on the Road to Compostela," which follows a speaker on a guided pilgrimage through Spain as she muses about water, sex, and penance, and "Just for the Thrill: An Essay on the Differences Between Men and Women," which traces a speaker's camping road trip across the United States with her then-lover.

Autobiography of Red is a queer coming-of-age story inspired by the Greek myth of Geryon and Herakles—in which the mighty Herakles' tenth labour was killing three-bodied giant Geryon and stealing his red cattle—and riffs off of Stesichoros' *Geryoneis* ("The Geryon Matter") which only survives in fragments. In a whirlwind love affair, fourteen-year-old Geryon becomes completely enamored with Herakles, a few years older, only to be left brokenhearted and alone until the boys reunite in Argentina many years later. Some critics have complained that, in her reimagination of Geryon, the mythic aspects of his character were not sufficiently explored, "but Carson's mind, and *Autobiography of Red* itself, are the real monstrous figures here: hybrid, multiple, contradictory, unassimilable, full of deliberate mistakes, deceptions, category errors" (Beasley, 175).

What connects *Plainwater* and *Autobiography of Red*, namely, is their portrayal of desire as a state of endless suffering. Carson is obsessed with what is missing, as established by her interest in "the space between languages." In her prose and poetry, she is fascinated with boundaries between lovers, and how they attempt to reach across these boundaries but constantly fall short of claiming what they desire most. This thesis will investigate the three modes in which

Carson explores desire—disempowering attachment, profound loss, and coming to knowledge. As the conceptual framework for my analysis of desire in Carson's prose and poetry, I will be relying on *Eros the Bittersweet*, her critical-lyrical meditation on love in ancient Greek literature and philosophy. Interestingly, Carson often uses the word "human" in *Plainwater* and *Autobiography of Red* to describe certain behaviors associated with desire, such as "the human custom/of wrong love" and "that rather fundamental human trait—the desire to know." When applied to her nonhuman protagonist Geryon, Carson's idea of the "human" may seem nebulous, but reimagination of Geryon in the modern world is what makes him susceptible to "human" threats—and these threats are just as fatal as Herakles' mythic bow and arrow. Carson creates tension between myth and truth, and in her retelling elevates the stakes of love—because when we are experiencing it, love feels like prophecy.

As Jeanette Winterson says, "Humans suffer, and, gay or straight, they break themselves into pieces, blur themselves with drink and drugs, chose the wrong lover, crucify themselves on their own longings, and lets not forget, are crucified in a world that fears the stranger—whether in life or in love." Carson's characters are the same: crucified outsiders that often crucify themselves. Regardless of gender, sexuality, or monstrousness, they face the same struggles and tend to facilitate their own destruction. They are human at their core.

I. 'How people get power over one another,/ this mystery': Desire as disempowerment

According to Carson, "When an individual appreciates that he alone is responsible for the content and coherence of his person, an influx of eros becomes a concrete personal threat. So in the lyric poets, love is something that assaults or invades the body of the lover to wrest control of it from him, a personal struggle of will and physique between the god and his victim" (*Eros* 45).

In *Plainwater* and *Autobiography of Red*, Carson traces this precise struggle for autonomy. Both speakers are positioned as victims of love, mentally debilitated by its sensations and physically disempowered by its constraints. Their desire becomes a thing outside of them, pulling at them, demanding complete devotion, and giving nothing in return. When taken in tandem, these self-documented love affairs claim powerlessness as a consequence of love—and suggest that this state can be fatal.

In "Very Narrow: Introduction to Just for the Thrill," the speaker calls falling in love a "harrowing event," and describes how her lover compromised her spatial and personal boundaries by usurping control over her own environment:

> I lived alone for a long time.
>
> What happened to me after that takes the form of a love story, not so different from other love stories, except better documented. Love is, as you know, a harrowing event. I believed in taking an anthropological approach to that.
>
> Even now it is hard to admit how love knocked me over. I had lived a life protected from all surprise, now suddenly I was a wheel running downhill[1], a light thrown against a wall, paper blown flat in the ditch. I was outside my own language and customs. Why, the first time he came to my house he walked straight into the back room and came out and said 'You have a very narrow bed.' Just like that! I had to laugh. I hardly knew him. I wanted to say, Where I come from, people don't talk about beds, except children's or sick beds. But I didn't. Humans in love are terrible. (*Plainwater*, 189).

This memory identifies how love behaves—with unapologetic entitlement over the body of another. The momentum of this passage is aggressive and irresistible, and the list of displaced objects—"wheel running downhill, a light thrown against a wall, paper blown flat in the ditch"—evokes an undeniable feeling of helplessness. In love, the speaker is not a person but an object to be manipulated in space. Not even beauty is spared from this fate: the most delicate subject, "light," is violently "thrown against a wall." As Carson expands on in *Eros the Bittersweet*, early poets similarly described love as a force that comes in swinging: Anakreon, a

[1] In "The Glass Essay," Carson uses an almost identical simile: "I had not been in love before./It was like a wheel rolling downhill."

Greek lyric poet, said, “With his huge hammer again Eros knocked me like a blacksmith” (7). But the invasive force of love goes beyond just metaphors: the speaker’s lover physically transgresses her boundaries by entering her home and commenting on her bed, a bluntness she is not used to. “Up against another human being, one’s own procedures take on definition” (*Autobiography*, 42). Her unnamed male lover defies the rules that governed the speaker’s upbringing—“Where I come from, people don’t talk about beds”—and though she “wanted to say” something in retort to his heedlessness, she does not. This is “a concrete personal threat” as defined by Carson. There is no way for the speaker to ask for help, as she is unfamiliar with the “language and customs” of this new relationship.

With a disappointed tone, the speaker says “Humans in love are terrible,” though it is uncertain to whom she is referring. If the statement is made in reference to her male lover, we can assume she is disturbed by the human desire to assert control over another. However, an alternate interpretation is entirely plausible given that the sentence immediately precedes it is “But I didn’t,” a reference to her inability to speak up against her lover’s behavior. The disappointment could be directed at her own inaction. By framing her narrative as an “anthropological” documentation of love, the speaker grants herself room to make universal statements such as “Humans in love are terrible.” She uses herself as a case study of “human” love, thereby insinuating that the power struggle between her and her lover is representative of all humans in love. Seemingly, there is a “god” and a “victim” in every relationship.

In addition to her universal claim that “Humans in love are terrible,” the speaker also suggests that living “protected from all surprise” is not sustainable. She makes constant reference to her placid solitude before she fell in love, saying things like “I lived alone for many years content with the reclusive life. Nice work if you can get it. But emperors do come along”

(*Plainwater*, 210). Her story, every time she tells it, is tinged with a tone of resignation to an inevitable fate. The phrase "if you can get it" ascertains that it is rare to go through life without encountering the disruption that is love. Though a solitary life can be "nice," sometimes "emperors"—powerful figures that demand submission—"do come along." When love enters your life, you are at its mercy; it destroys any plans you have and propels you in new directions. Whether this change of course is positive or negative is irrelevant, for "In a good story, Aristotle tells us, everything that happens is pushed by something else." (Plainwater, 29). For without the presence of another in your life, how would you ever learn of your own boundaries? learn of other "languages and customs"? Carson seems to be, at least implicitly, making the case that love is painful—but also unavoidable. Contentedness is not meant to stay. Although love may be "harrowing," it is meant to untether us.

Through *Plainwater*'s "better documented" love story, Carson corroborates her claim that "love is something that assaults or invades the body of the lover to wrest control of it from him." The speaker initially wants to protest the emperor's forceful entrance into her life, but she does not—she submits to his will, allowing herself to be consumed by the gravity of his orbit. A few pages later, she expands on the beginning of her love affair and how it made her feel powerless. The sensations she associates with desire are extremely self-destructive. She also briefly expands on the epithet she chose for her lover, the emperor, which further exacerbates the power imbalance in their relationship:

> Well it was about a year ago, we became lovers, all I wanted was for the pulling to stop. Pulling pulling pulling. It was pulling on my arms. Pulling on my eyes. Pulling on my lungs. Pulling on the sweat on the backs of my legs. Pulling at night, pulling all day, pulling not falling, not burning, not matter, what does pulling matter? 'It's only love', he would say, laughing, opening my clothes. He called our flesh "this luxury." "No luxury is endless," I said, and he said, "That's okay we don't have much time." Love made him so

> happy I began calling him the emperor of China. There were places where luxury dropped away, where I waited. I saw something flash open then lost it *(Plainwater,* 193).

Though it was "a year ago" since they became lovers, the speaker is still obsessed with this pulling sensation that overcame her, as suggested by the sheer number of times she repeats the word as well as the present form of the verb "pull." Love is an aggressive force that endlessly exerts movement against the speaker. The distinction between "pulling not falling" is important to note, as it emphasizes the lack of autonomy in this sensation—the speaker is "not falling," which would be a more passive action, nor "running downhill," but instead being pulled at by an external force. Carson asserts, "Eros moves or creeps upon its victim from somewhere outside her" (*Eros*, 4). The speaker seems to mentally resist and resent this pulling—"all I wanted was for the pulling to stop"—yet there is no description of her attempting to win the "struggle of will and physique" described in *Eros the Bittersweet*. In the face of "the emperor of China," submission seems the only natural choice.

That being said, the speaker does intellectually challenge love's power by interrogating the properties of this foreign, relentless feeling—"pulling not falling, not burning, not matter, what does pulling matter?". A common trait of Carson's writing, this line of questioning is syntactically strange and lends itself to multiple interpretations of its meaning. Not only does she employ two different definitions of the word "matter," but the question of "what does pulling matter?" has multiple interpretations. It would be more naturally read as "why does pulling matter?" or "does pulling matter?", yet Carson chose neither of the two options, instead opting to invent a third. The language is grammatically uncomfortable, which parallels the disorientation the speaker is experiencing. The word "what" can be read one of two ways: The speaker's question could be read as an interrogation into whether or not pulling matters, or a total surrender to the feeling regardless of the pain it causes.

Given the diaristic nature of the essay, the question "what does pulling matter?" should be answered by the speaker, or left as rhetorical, but an external voice interrupts. The "emperor of China," an epithet used from this moment on in the essay, assures that "'It's only love'" and puts an end to the speaker's line of inquiry. Paired with the fact that he is "laughing," an condescending tone emerges in his words, as if the speaker is ignorant to what love means. To him, the thing between them is simple. He does not feel the ever-present "pulling," nor the need to question his attraction to the speaker. His experience of love is not intrusive, or robbing him of agency. This depiction of desire is entirely one-sided. There is an implication that the disempowering torrent of desire only claims one "victim."

Carson is also very interested in how language itself can exacerbate power dynamics. Centrally, the speaker chooses to call her lover "the emperor" for the entirety of the essay, which solidifies her subordinate position in their relationship. Though this epithet is related to his occupation as "an anthropologist of China" who is "using this trip across America to study up on classical Chinese," she could have given him a name that does not hold such weighty power (193). Yet she herself anoints him "the emperor of China," condemning herself to a fate as his concubine. Though the speaker never explicitly compares herself to one, she is obsessed with the terms "*Emperor, concubine, fire, paper*" and spends a lot of time thinking about how linguistic structures perpetuate a patriarchal worldview (194). For instance, she writes that "Concubinage is what linguistic anthropologists call a 'limit accusative in the grammar of desire.' *Bed* requires no proposition, a simple verb of motion. Simple" (202). The speaker—and by extension, Carson—is grimly fascinated by how language can reflect the belief systems of those who use it. Related to this idea, she explains that "The original Chinese ideogram for *woman* shows her in a bowing position. Later the character was reduced to that of someone kneeling. For ease in

writing" (198). Her sarcastic tone reveals her distaste towards this depiction of women, yet she is in this exact position. Love forced her to kneel, and she can do nothing but write about it.

Plainwater's "Just for the Thrill" outlines how love naturally forces submission. The speaker accepts that "emperors do come along," and does not attempt to fight against the "pulling" feeling that overpowers her. The "battle of will and physique," outlined by Carson in *Eros the Bittersweet*, is barely a battle at all. This acquiescence is bolstered by the speaker's interest in linguistics, as she interrogates "the grammar of desire" and finds that the character for woman in Chinese depicts her in a "kneeling" position. On all levels, "Just for the Thrill" defines love as an experience that leaves the "victim" helpless. *Autobiography of Red* also illustrates love as a disempowering phenomenon, as teenage Geryon undergoes intense mental and physical distress caused by his tenuous relationship with Herakles.

At fourteen-years-old, Geryon falls in love with Herakles and begins to lose the "struggle of will and physique." His introduction to Herakles is not as physically transgressive as that between *Plainwater*'s speaker and the emperor, but their meeting triggers an instant change in the trajectory of Geryon's life: "Then he met Herakles and the kingdoms of his life all shifted down a few notches./They were two superior eels/at the bottom of the tank and they recognized each other like italics," (*Autobiography*, 39). This is Geryon's first encounter with love—and it is electrifying. The invocation of royal power in the word "kingdoms" deserves pause, as it suggests that falling in love with Herakles called for an immediate reorganization of power structures in Geryon's life. After they meet, the importance of all other things besides Herakles "shifted down a few notches." Though their relationship begins on such positive terms, the power Herakles has over Geryon eventually becomes oppressive.

That "they recognized each other" posits the love between Geryon and Herakles as a mutual realization, a fated love—"the young men can sense destiny in one another," says Mindell (20). Similarly, the likening of the boys to "two superior eels/at the bottom of the tank" also presents them as operating on the same plane, in the same form, with the same "superior" positionality. Introducing the lovers in this way, in which one brief moment at a train station triggers an instantaneous change in Geryon's character, makes Herakles' later rejection of Geryon's love all the more devastating. The key difference between the *Plainwater* essays and *Autobiography of Red* lies in the physical, observable symptoms of love's effects; while the female speaker experiences a figurative "pulling," Geryon's heartbreak manifests in the literal dysfunction of his wings:

> These days Geryon was experiencing a pain not felt since childhood.
> His wings were struggling. They tore against each other on his shoulders
> like the little mindless red animals they were.
> With a piece of wooden plank he'd found in the basement Geryon made a back brace
> and lashed his wings tight.
> Then put his jacket back on. Y*ou seem moody today Geryon anything wrong?*
> said Herakles when he saw Geryon
> coming up the basement stairs. His voice had an edge. He liked to see Geryon happy.
> Geryon felt his wings turn in, and in, and in.
> *Nope just fine*. Geryon smiled with half of his face. (53)

Though he calls them "little mindless red animals," Geryon's wings respond to the emotional turmoil he's experiencing. As Geryon struggles in love, his wings experience "a pain not felt since childhood," which links his experience with love to a loss of physical autonomy, as well as a regression to a period in his life where he had less control over his circumstances. Even further, that his wings "tore against each other on his shoulders" reflects the conflict occurring within Geryon himself—this being that his feelings of desire towards Herakles are at odds with the integrity of his body and mind. While the exact capabilities of Geryon's wings are never

established[2], they are a profound symbol of freedom, the dysfunction of which demonstrates how Geryon's love for Herakles facilitates his own physical disempowerment. The deeper he falls in love with Herakles, the more estranged he is from salvation: "Geryon felt his wings turn in, and in, and in."

While constructing a back brace for his wings could be considered an attempt to "wrest control" of his body, this scene is better read as Geryon sacrificing himself to love. He is clinging to his relationship and clipping his own wings in order to keep it. Despite the acute pain, Geryon refuses to acknowledge that his relationship with Herakles is what's causing his wings to struggle. Although it is unclear whether or not Herakles can see Geryon's wings, he is hyper-aware of Geryon's emotions: "His voice had an edge. He liked to see Geryon happy." The younger boy knows this, so he attempts to steel himself in front of Herakles by replying "*Nope just fine*" and smiling "with half of his face." Lashing his wings, the one thing that would allow him to escape, Geryon is intentionally surrendering to the pain of love.

Geryon's fortitude does not last long, however, as Herakles quickly ends their relationship by insisting that "*Freedom is what I want for you Geryon we're true friends you know that's why/I want you to be free*." To which Geryon replies, "Don't want to be free want to be with you" (Autobiography, 74). Even after Herakles expresses his desire for them to go their separate ways, Geryon would prefer to be with Herakles than to be "free." Just as how he clipped his own wings, Geryon is so desperate for love that he would trap himself in an unhappy relationship. This heartbreak takes him by surprise, the way love did for the speaker in "Just for

[2] The lack of clarity surrounding the capability of Geryon's wings, as well as their inconsistent presence in the narrative—who can see them and who cannot, and under what circumstances—has been thoroughly critiqued by scholars. Beasley elucidates, "Carson strands her Geryon somewhere ambiguously between being the red-winged monster of ancient myth and the Geryoneis and merely identifying, in his sense of difference and vulnerability, with his mythic namesake, his monstrosity sometimes figurative, sometimes quite literal" (171).

the Thrill," and the aftermath is devastating. Through the visceral splicing of teenage heartbreak and mythical prophecy, Carson illustrates that love, when rejected, is fatal:

> Anger slammed the red fool awake at three a.m. he kept trying to breathe each time
> he lifted his head it pounded him
> again like a piece of weed against a hard black beach. Geryon sat up suddenly.
> The sheet was drenched.
> He switched on the light. He was staring at the sweep hand of the electric clock
> on the dresser. Its little dry hum
> ran over his nerves like a comb. He forced his eyes away. The bedroom doorway
> gaped at him black as a keyhole.
> His brain was jerking forward like a bad slide projector. He saw the doorway
> the house the night the world and
> on the other side of the world somewhere Herakles laughing drinking getting
> into a car and Geryon's
> whole body formed one arch of a cry-upcast to that custom, the human custom
> of wrong love (*Autobiography*, 75).

At this point in the novel, Geryon can no longer hide his pain under a jacket. Geryon's heartbreak, "a freedom so clear it is simply pain," causes his entire body to betray him (*Plainwater*, 172). Even on a syntactical level, Geryon is unable to fight against his own feelings: The inverted construction of "Anger slammed the red fool awake at three a.m.." personifies the emotion as an adversary, mocking Geryon for being a "red fool." Geryon attempts to overpower this raw emotion but fails: "he kept trying to breathe each time/he lifted his head it pounded him." This cycle continues as Geryon is likened to a paltry "piece of weed" being beaten "against a hard black beach," a simile that evokes nothing but pity for the teenage boy sweating through his sheets, unable to sleep off his heartbreak. This imagery feels akin to another of Carson's metaphors, "paper blown flat in a ditch." Both Geryon and the speaker of "Just for the Thrill" are likened to displaced objects because of their subordinate position in their relationships. Carson seems to suggest that there is something dehumanizing about love's power, while at the same time asserting that the "custom of wrong love" is specifically a "human" one.

Though Carson spares her Geryon from death, she places him in the realm of the "human" which leaves him vulnerable to other attacks and new kinds of pain—namely, love.

Keeping the original myth of Geryon and Herakles in mind, "Geryon's/whole body formed one arch of a cry" strikes readers as Carson's interpretation of Geryon's death by Herakles' bow and arrow—his moment of utter vanquishment. Carson promotes this association by repeatedly using the symbol of the poppy to describe Geryon's murder in the original myth as well as Herakles' sexual conquest of Geryon in *Autobiography*. In "Red Meat: Fragments of Stesichoros" she writes, "Arrow means kill It parted Geryon's skull like a comb Made/The boy neck lean At an odd slow angle sideways as when a/Poppy shames itself in a whip of Nude breeze," and later describes a sexual encounter between the boys as follows: "He felt Herakles' hand move on his thigh and Geryon's/head went back like a poppy in a breeze" (*Autobiography*, 13, 119). The similar imagery in these two moments pinpoints where Carson's translation diverges into a personal interpretation of fatal heartbreak. By reducing Geryon from a three-bodied creature of myth to an awkward teenager with wings and a tail, younger than Herakles and thus easier to manipulate, Carson "concentrates the reader's empathy on her little red misfit" (Rae 40).

It is essential to note that Herakles is not even present during this moment, but instead "on the other side of the world somewhere." Merely the idea of Herakles is enough to devastate young Geryon. As Carson aptly discerns, "A hunter is someone who listens./So hard to his prey it pulls the weapon./Out of his hand and impales./Itself" (*Plainwater*, 104). Though Herakles must be assigned some blame, it is undeniable that Geryon facilitates his own self-destruction: He ignores the telltale discomfort of his wings and chooses to construct "a back brace" to stifle their movement. Additionally, the most devastating phrases in the passage above—"his brain was

jerking forward like a bad slide projector" and "Geryon's/whole body formed one arch of a cry"—do not involve Herakles. Geryon's own emotions are causing him pain. "Animals ensnare themselves in plants and tendrils," says Carson (*Plainwater* 144).

The descriptor "bad" invokes the idea that his mind is not functioning as it should, that there's something incorrect with what love has done to him. This idea is bolstered by the lines "the human custom/of wrong love." The use of the word "human" to describe painful love calls back to the claim "Humans in love are terrible" that appeared in *Plainwater*. Carson seems to be interested in love as an experience that affects humans in particular. Rae believes that this "wrong love" is related to Carson's manipulation of her source material:

> By translating the power struggle between Herakles and Geryon in the Geryoneis into a story of sexual conquest and unrequited love, Carson once again addresses "that custom, the human custom / of wrong love" (Red 75). Geryon's love is not wrong because he is gay. On the contrary… Geryon's sexuality serves instead to complete his alienation. His desire pushes him away from his (otherwise) supportive mother and makes him dependent on Herakles at the very moment that Herakles terminates their love affair. It is from this perspective of powerful desire and disempowering attachment that Carson prefers to explore "How people get power over one another,/ this mystery" (Red 79). Dominant-subordinate relations—particularly their inversion—fascinate Carson, whether the relations be between men, between women, between men and women, or between a master-text and its adaptation (Rae, 30).

Rae highlights Carson's interest in subverting typical power structures, which she does on many levels in *Autobiography of Red*. Firstly, Carson asserts power over a "master text" by adapting it into a queer coming-of-age story set in the modern world. Furthermore, she refuses to obey the original "dominant-suborniate" structure the myth imposed. Though Geryon does spend most of the book reeling from his heartbreak, "pulling his body after him/like a soggy matress," he eventually realizes that his relationship with Herakles was "degrading" and is able to achieve freedom (*Autobiography* 85, 144). Carson gives Geryon a second chance at life as he "undergoes

rhetorical transformation into a character in a different mythology: survivor rather than victim, hero-Herakles of his own myth, immortalized rather than slain" (Beasley, 170).

These changes to the original narrative underscore the fact that Carson is fascinated by "How people get power over one another." Rae says she "prefers to explore" the answer through love stories—but why? Because human love happens on a mythic scale. Our lovers become our emperors, and we kneel for them whether we want to or not; meeting a beautiful boy at a train station can shift the "kingdoms" of your life and create a new one. And even if we had big, red wings that could take us anywhere, we would instead choose to lash them and remain tethered to someone who does not want us. Carson's texts tell us that love corrupts preconceived notions of freedom, to the point that we put the shackles on ourselves. If love is disempowerment, then what happens to the "victim" when left subject to the will of the "god"?

II. 'My want of you partakes of me': Desire as lack

In *Eros the Bittersweet*, Carson asserts that "Eros is expropriation. He robs the body of limbs, substance, integrity and leaves the lover, essentially, less. This attitude toward love is grounded for the Greeks in oldest mythical tradition: Hesoid describes in his Theogony how castration gave birth to the goddess Aphrodite, born from the foam around Ouranos' severed genitals. Love does not happen without loss of vital self. The lover is the loser" (32). This seems to hold true against the experience of the speaker in *Plainwater*'s "Just For the Thrill." Love is constantly pulling at her, taking parts of her—leaving her "less"—yet she does not resist. Similarly, Geryon's "wrong love" strips him of valuable selfhood: "I am disappearing, he thought" (*Autobiography*, 135). Carson's scholarship tells us that eros incites a critical loss of the "vital self," and her prose and verse seems to say the same. But specifically, her work outlines

two types of loss—the loss of the love object, and the more detrimental loss of the self—both of which add dimensionality to her construction of a specifically "human" form of love.

In "The Unbearable Withness of Being: On Anne Carson's Plainwater," Kristi Maxwell says, "Position determines relation: how one is positioned in relation to water determines whether one drowns or swims" (137). Carson is obsessed with positionality, as shown by her fascination with "dominant-subordinate relations" as they appear in myth, history, and language, and *Plainwater* investigates a relatively traditional alignment between submissive femininity and fallible love. "Kinds of Water" and "Just for the Thrill" both explicitly describe heterosexual relationships between a female speaker and a male lover, and the relevance of this binary as it relates to love is reinforced through constant comparison of how the two genders behave. A prime example of this is the subtitle of "Just for the Thrill: The Differences Between Men and Women." Although the speaker in *Plainwater* eludes gender categorization by describing herself as "a young, strong, stingy person of no particular gender" and later in her life attempts to "suppress the natural facts of 'woman' altogether," she simultaneously acknowledges that "such things are the natural facts of what we are, I suppose we have to follow out these signs in the endless struggle against forgetting" (*Plainwater,* 123, 189).

Given the essay's intention "taking an anthropological approach" to love, the speaker's choice to concede to the "natural facts" of her womanhood makes sense. Just as she explores love through an outsider's perspective, she discusses her experience with love in very gendered terms to combat "the endless struggle against forgetting." Though Greek ideology believed that "The female flourishes more in an environment of water, from things cold and wet and soft," this is not true in *Plainwater* ("Putting," 137). To be a woman in this text means constantly yearning for the unattainable, and Carson relies on metaphors of water to establish this. The introduction

of "The Anthropology of Water" mentions the Greek myth of Danaos' fifty daughters—forty-nine of which stabbed their bridegrooms to death on their wedding night because "they loved their father so much it was as if they were parts of his body" (Plainwater, 118). The speaker explains, "This archetypal crime of women was rewarded by the gods with a paradigmatic punishment. Danaos' forty-nine killing daughters were sent to hell and condemned to spend eternity gathering water in a sieve[3]" (117).

Seemingly, Carson alludes to this ancient curse of "gathering water in a sieve" to make sense of her own experiences with love, as she then asserts that "Water is something you cannot hold. Like men. I have tried. Father, brother, lover, true friends, hungry ghosts and God, one by one all took themselves out of my hands." The speaker appears to be suffering from the "punishment" of Danoas' daughters, forever precluded from being able to keep those that she loves. Loss, she understands, is part of the female canon. As she sets out on her trip with the emperor, she can already see its end: "When the ritual is over, campers go their separate ways" (220). Jennifer Dick says of *Plainwater*, "this is the study of something running away, mourned, sought, ungraspable slipping off through the fingers, touched, perhaps seen or seen through or which has only a projected reflection on its surface" (142). For these women, love and loss are intrinsically linked, as they are "condemned to spend eternity" aware of how they will always fall short of grasping what they desire

This motif resurfaces in "Kinds of Water," as the speaker constantly conflates her lover with water that she cannot capture. She writes, "He grows heavier and heavier like a piece of bread soaking, or a fish that floats dreamily out of my fingers down deeper and deeper into the

[3]The sieve is a pervasive symbol of female sexuality in Greek art and poetry. Carson says, "it sums up in a single hellish image all that is problematic in the relation between women and boundaries" (Putting, 155).

tank, turning as if it does not recognize me—gold shadows flash over it, out of reach, gone" (*Plainwater*, 138-139). In this passage, it appears that the loss of the object causes the loss of the self: In sequence, her lover escapes and then and no longer recognizes her. Though her male lover seems to be aligned with water in a positive way—he "floats dreamily"—the female speaker suffers from water's flaws: the inability to take concrete shape without the support of a vessel. "Kinds of Water" continues to suggest that love causes the loss of "vital self." The speaker observes her lover and comments, "His voice is joy, his steps are joy, moved along like a waterwheel in water. While for my part I feel I have broken in half" (*Plainwater* 177). Once again, "how one is positioned in relation to water determines whether one drowns or swims," and the speaker is drowning. Conversely, her male counterpart moves with natural ease, "like a waterwheel in water." "Eros robs the body of limbs," as Carson tells us, and she is "broken in half."

Geryon's experience with love can also be mapped onto the phenomenon of "expropriation," but at the age of fourteen, the consequences of such a personal loss are much more severe. The first week of his meeting with Herakles, "The instant of nature forming between them drained every drop from the walls of his life/leaving behind just ghosts/rusting like an old map. He had nothing to say to anyone. He felt loose and shiny" (*Autobiography*, 42). Though "loose and shiny" mimics a feeling of freedom, this passage is indicative of a larger thematic struggle that this text traces in its plot—as well as in its position as a translation—which is estrangement from verbal speech. In Geryon's experience, love drains him of his ability to verbally interact with his surroundings; after meeting Herakles, "He had nothing to say to anyone." Love's power, which isolates Geryon to the point of near-death, is inextricably linked to his loss of "vital self."

Similar to Rae's argument that Geryon's "desire pushes him away from his (otherwise) supportive mother and makes him dependent on Herakles," Mindell asserts that "He is robbed of language and patience in the presence of his mother by his adoration for Herakles" (31). Geryon is often presented as "wrapped in himself" and describes his body as "a locked box[4]" (Autobiography, 124). But it is this estrangement from himself that adds to Carson's interrogation into the characteristics of a universal "human" love. Mindell explains, "Even though we are, according to both Butler and Carson, incapable of ever experiencing true unity (be it within ourselves or with each other), we are united, at the very least, by the fact that we will all experience love and grief. 'Loss,' as Butler observes, 'has made a tenuous 'we' of us all. And if we have lost, then it follows that we have had, that we have desired and loved, that we have struggled to find the conditions of our desire'" (31). Though "the lover is the loser," Mindell underscores that this state of lack is only possible because "we have desired and loved." Loss must follow love. Though we may never be whole, we are united by our experiences with loss. In this way, Carson's writing is an ode to the simultaneous pleasure and pain that governs our existence.

As Geryon senses his relationship with Herakles crumbling, he is flooded with childhood memories in which he lost something. Herakles expresses distaste towards Geryon's graffiti by saying "*All your designs are about captivity, it depresses me*," and "Geryon watched the top of Herakles' head/and felt his limits returning. Nothing to say. Nothing. He looked at this fact/in mild surprise. Once in childhood/his ice cream had been eaten by a dog. Just an empty cone/in a small dramatic red fist" (*Autobiography*, 56). This is a moment of profound loss for Geryon, in

[4] This metaphor of the mind as a "box" also appears in Plainwater. The speaker says, "An idea glazed along the edge of the box and whipped back down into the canal behind the wings/and it was gone" (81).

which he feels as though he's left with "nothing." Looking at his lover's body— specifically, "the top of Herakles' head" which denotes the boundary of Herakles' form— makes Geryon hyper-aware of the space between them, and thus he "feels his limits returning." This forcefully carved space is, according to Carson, an essential component of eros: "For, where eros is lack, its activation calls for three structural components—lover, beloved and that which comes between them" (*Eros*, 16). Geryon is suffering from the "lack" that comes with unfulfilled desire.

Interestingly, this awareness of himself, Herakles, and "that which comes between them" summons a memory from Geryon's childhood in which "his ice cream had been eaten by a dog," and what was left as "an empty cone/in a small dramatic red fist." "Surprises make a child of us," says Carson, and Geryon "looked at this fact/in mild surprise" (*Plainwater*, 148). Without any kind of transitional thought, the coupling of these two moments seems odd at first, yet to Geryon the association is completely natural. In this moment, the relationship he had imagined with Herakles becomes untenable, and a boundary is erected between them: "he felt his limits returning." Hence, the "empty cone." Geryon experiences love as lack, precisely as Carson defines it in *Eros the Bittersweet*, and perhaps even likening Herakles to the dog[5] that stole his ice cream as a child.

There is a helplessness present in Geryon's narration, as the "small dramatic red fist" shows that Geryon has regressed to a childlike state because of the unfulfilled longing he is experiencing. This calls back to when Geryon's wings were "struggling" and he was "experiencing a pain not felt since childhood." He cannot do anything to prevent the ice cream from being eaten, in the same way that he cannot stop love from placing limits on his mind and

[5] In fact, Herakles is likened to a dog on multiple occasions throughout the novel. One such example is when he's described as "jumping ahead like a dog" (113).

body. And similar to the speaker in *Plainwater*'s "Just For the Thrill," he had no retort to Herakles' words—"Nothing to say. Nothing." But this moment is less about power—it is more about loss. In this scene, all hopes of their relationship surviving, of Herakles ever understanding him, are shattered.

In *Eros the Bittersweet,* Carson argues that love has a specific "trajectory" and it explains why Geryon feels such emptiness when looking at the boy he loves:

> If we follow the trajectory of eros we consistently find it tracing out this same route: it moves out from the lover toward the beloved, then ricochets back to the lover himself and the hole in him, unnoticed before. Who is the real subject of most love poems? Not the beloved. It is that hole. When I desire you a part of me is gone: my want of you partakes of me. So reasons the lover at the edge of eros. The presence of want awakens in him nostalgia for wholeness (30-31).

This passage defines movement, boundaries, and lack as fundamental characteristics of desire, which seems to align with Carson's descriptions of love in both *Plainwater* and *Autobiography of Red*. Indeed, the "real subject" of most of Carson's writing is the "hole" left by desire. The above "trajectory" perfectly traces the sequence of movement in the scene from *Autobiography:* "it moves out from the lover toward the beloved" — "Geryon watched the top of Herakles' head"—"then ricochets back to the lover himself—"/and felt his limits returning." Looking outward towards the lover is naturally followed by looking inward. According to Carson's theory of eros, longing for another person creates awareness of a hole inside oneself that was "unnoticed before." With this in mind, Geryon's memory of "an empty cone/in a small dramatic red fist" makes complete sense. Mindell argues, "Erotic desire gives rise to a new understanding of self, 'a self not known before and now disclosed by the lack of it—by pain, by a hole, bitterly'" (49). Similar to the argument that "if we have lost, then it follows that we have had," the desire for

another person reveals the hole inside oneself. We continue to see this representation of eros throughout Geryon's journey, as his love for Herakles causes him immense grief.

After Herakles severs their relationship, "Geryon's life entered a numb time, caught between the tongue and the taste" (72). He is trapped in the throes of love, in the experience of desire, yet cannot achieve the "taste" of what he truly wants. His grief continues in waves: "It was raining on his face. He forgot for a moment that he was a brokenheart/then he remembered. Sick lurch/downward to Geryon trapped in his own bad apple. Each morning a shock/to return to the cut soul" (*Autobiography*, 70). His cut soul" is an example of "the loss of vital self," but the most intriguing phrase in this passage is "Geryon trapped in his own bad apple." Deploying the symbol of the apple in the context of desire is not an accident on Carson's part; she has done a scholarly analysis of a Sappho poem of this nature. Fruit is a renowned symbol of sexual desire, and Carson discusses how its presence in lyric poetry often represents love that is inaccessible:

> We cannot certainly say whether Sappho composed this poem for a wedding and intended it as praise of a bride, but its overt subject remains clear and coherent. It is a poem about desire. Both its content and its form consist in an act of reaching:
>
> *As the sweetapple reddens on a high branch,*
> *high on the highest branch and the applepickers*
> *forgot –*
> *no, not forgot: were unable to reach… (Eros,* 26-27)

Of this poem, Carson says, "A space must be maintained or desire ends… The poem is incomplete, perfectly… Desiring hands close on empty air in the final infinitive, while the apple of their eye dangles perpetually inviolate two lines above" (*Eros*, 27). As it is imagined that this poem was epithalamion, or a poem celebrating a marriage, Carson says that "If there is a bride, she stays inaccessible. It is her inaccessibility that is present."

These imaginations of desire as endless reaching, as a heightened awareness of the space between a lover and the object of their affection, align very closely with Geryon's

disillusionment surrounding his love for Herakles. The "Sick lurch/downward" he experiences is reminiscent of the "hole" that Carson says is characteristic of eros, and the sensation of being "trapped in his own bad apple" invokes Sappho's notion of unfulfilled desire, suspended in space and time. Geryon is "trapped" by these bodily manifestations of his heartbreak—his continuous desire. Carson goes on to say, "The reach of desire is defined in action: beautiful (in its object), foiled (in its attempt), endless (in time)" (Eros, 29). An essential component of desire is inaccessibility. Geryon's first attempt at love was foiled, and his heartbreak manifests in an endless cycle of "He forgot…/then he remembered."

It is this "hole," this "loss of vital self" required by eros, that forces the lover to look inwards for what is missing. This feeling of lack necessarily leads to the question of one's positionality, and Carson examines this in detail in both *Plainwater* and *Autobiography of Red*.

III. '*The erotics/of doubt'*: Desire as knowledge

Empty space yearns to be filled, thus Carson's work is plastered with the tormented imaginations of people in love. Desire, though stimulated by an external force, is completely contained within one's mind and body; it is "a movement that carries yearning hearts from over here to over there, launching the mind on a story" (*Eros* 172). It is for this reason that Carson's essays and "novel-in-verse" feel somewhat insular—because they mimic the natural "story" of unrequited love, the obsessive spiraling over someone who doesn't love you as much as you love them or loves you in the "wrong" way. Regardless of their age, gender, or sexuality, Carson's characters are imbued with a heightened self-awareness that leads them to critically and creatively investigate how love affects them and why. They have a desperate need to understand their place in the world, and they do this by adopting the perspective of an "outsider" and

relaying what they see—through diaries and film in *Plainwater*, and photography in *Autobiography of Red*. Thus Carson establishes a connection between the state of desire and the search for knowledge.

These implications of a connection between love and knowledge are confirmed by *Eros the Bittersweet*, in which Carson explains, "'All men by their very nature reach out to know,' says Aristotle. If this is so, it discloses something important about the activities of knowing and desiring. They have at their core the same delight, that of reaching, and entail the same pain, that of falling short or being deficient" (*Eros*, 71). Carson insists that "falling in love and coming to know" are the same. Notably, they both involve crossing spatial boundaries. The act of "reaching" is physical, as is "falling short." Crossing into another person's territory is a natural part of love—though it can be aggressive, as seen by how the emperor bursts into the speaker's bedroom in *Plainwater*— and this movement similarly occurs when people "reach out to know.: Carson links knowing and desiring more clearly when she says, "Stationed at the edge of itself, or of its present knowledge, the thinking mind launches a suit for understanding the unknown. So too the wooer stands at the edge of his value as a person and asserts a claim across the boundaries of another" (71). According to Carson, the acts of loving and questioning are the same; her characters perform both simultaneously, suggesting that one necessitates the other.

Plainwater's speakers adopt a scientific approach to their quest for knowledge, which they justify by claiming "Love makes you an anthropologist of your own life." Both "essays" are written in diaristic form, each entry demarcated by the city the speaker has stopped at, and they serve as a means for the speakers to study themselves and the properties of desire. They use writing, photography, and video diaries to answer the burning question of "What are these ceremonies and why should we take part in them?" (217). She confesses, "I found myself during

the days of my love affair filling many notebooks with data. There was something I had to explain to myself" (*Plainwater*, 190). Seemingly, the only way to understand love is to remove yourself from the experience entirely; in order to "explain" love, one must rely on "data" rather than personal experiences. Carson discusses this perspective in depth:

> This science of man, which is always about other people, whose details are exotic, calms us and opens out the further possibility of anthropologizing ourselves. Hence modern love. Well enlightenment is useless but I find interesting the distinction anthropologists make between an *emic* and an *etic* point of view. Emic has to do with the perspective of another member of society itself and etic is the point of view of an outsider seeing the society in his own terms. Lovers—correct me if I'm wrong—insist on bringing the two perspectives together, a sort of double exposure (*Plainwater*, 223).

Lovers, according to Carson, occupy a unique position in society: They can simultaneously adopt "the perspective of another member of society itself " and "the point of view of an outsider seeing the society in his own terms." They are both within and without, inside and outside, which allows them to "anthropologize" themselves—but attempts to codify the nuanced struggles of love do not protect them from the pain it causes.

In "Kinds of Water," the speaker also associates desire and knowledge, but she asserts that lovers seek knowledge in two distinct ways rather than a "double exposure." She writes, "It is already late when you wake up inside a question… Are there two ways of knowing the world—a submissive and a devouring way? They end up in roughly the same place" (*Plainwater*, 135). The "hole" created by desire has prompted her to question her position in love, and from this, our speaker arrives at a hypothesized classification of "ways of knowing." The binary of "submissive" and "devouring" personalities has very gendered undertones; it seems that the speaker is interrogating the existence of a stereotypically gendered desire—but

finds that such distinction is entirely irrelevant, for they "end up in roughly the same place." Carson is fond of overthrowing fixed categories, and she frequently does this in *Plainwater*.

In the vein of dissolving any distinctions between genders, the speaker often opts to discuss her desire using animalistic metaphors. A frequent saying of hers is "Animals who ride on top of one another [6] become entangled in ways they do not expect" (*Plainwater*, 174). She repeats this many times throughout the essay, seemingly as a way to simplify complicated human relationships and study love from an objective point of view. In a climax of rage, desire, and desperation, the speaker fervently questions what love is doing to her:

> During these hard days, I, a pilgrim, am giving my consideration to this. I trudge along the bottom of the river and the questioning goes on in me. What are we made of but hunger and rage? His heels rise and fall in front of me. How surprised I am to be entangled in the knowledge of some other animal. Does that mean I hand myself over? What is knowing? That is the question no one was asking, although I went from place to place and watched and listened to all that they said. I began to suspect some code was in operation. It had me terrified. Why? It plunged me in a pit, why? Because it is your question." (*Plainwater*, 175).

While it seems that her "questioning" is somewhat of a distraction from the "hard days" of pilgrimage, the speaker states that her romantic relationship triggers her curiosity: "How surprised I am to be entangled in the knowledge of some other animal." This portrays relationships as an exchange of knowledge—a primal one, as shown by the use of the word "animal." As she wonders "Does that mean I hand myself over?", the speaker is aware of love's disempowering quality but unsure whether or not she is already a victim of it. Expertly, Carson turns this interrogation on us, telling us that "it is your question." Again, Carson invokes the "tenuous 'we' of us all." She suggests that the speaker's experience with love is actually ours, that we have the same questions as she does. In this passage, the genderlessness and

[6] Interestingly, this euphemism also appears in *Autobiography of Red*. Geryon notices a red butterfly riding on a black butterfly, and comments, "how nice, he's helping him," while Herakles looks at them and pronounces, "he's fucking him" (49-50).

animalization of Carson's characters seem to serve a larger purpose, which is encouraging readers to identify with their struggles. In reading, we also hand ourselves over; we look for ourselves in the speaker, the same way the speaker looks for themselves in their lover.

Autobiography of Red traces a slightly different arc in its portrayal of love as knowledge. Geryon initially experiences love as an endowment of sexual knowledge that inflates his ego, but once Herakles breaks up with him, knowledge of each other—and lack thereof—becomes volatile. After having sex with Herakles for the first time, Geryon thinks, "It tasted sweet enough. I am learning a lot in this year of my life,/thought Geryon. It tasted very young./Geryon felt clear and powerful—not some wounded angel after all/but a magnetic person like Matisse/or Charlie Parker!" (54). Carson portrays sex as an advancement of knowledge—"I am learning a lot"—that reveals an entirely new self—one that performs creation rather than being the thing that is destroyed. Geryon compares himself to a "magnetic person" like Matisse, an artist, and Charlie Parker, a musician, emphasizing that Geryon's concept of power is defined by the ability to create and be lauded for what you are. Additionally, the use of the word "magnetic" suggests that he wants people to be attracted to him, rather than repelled by his redness—and in this moment he achieves this feeling. Sex momentarily transforms him from subject to artist, monster to human; Carson grants "her little red misfit" this one moment, until the book's end, where he feels that he is "not some wounded angel after all." Yet this is the only time in the novel that knowledge brought on by desire has a positive connotation.

This quest for knowledge fits into Carson's obsession with "erotic sufferings" in part because the protagonists of her text are never understood by the ones they love. The emperor does not attempt to understand the speaker of *Plainwater,* and Herakles acts with the same disinterest. In "Just for the Thrill, the speaker and her emperor have the following exchange that

illuminates the disparity in their relationship: "'I suppose you do love me, in your way,' I said to him one night close to dawn when we lay on the narrow bed. 'And how else should I love you —in your way?' he asked. I am still thinking about that" (191). The "narrow bed" appears again, referencing the moment the emperor entered her home for the first time and reinforcing his egotistical, unyielding personality. When he asks 'how else should I love you—in your way?,' the emperor is shown to be completely uninterested in truly getting to know his romantic partner, ignorant to the fact that there is any other "way" to love aside from his own. He does not want to seek more knowledge about the speaker

Similarly, Herakles is self-obsessed and does not see Geryon for who he truly is. Though their romance is initially described as "the opposite of blindness," Herakles fatally misunderstands Geryon—a pattern that begins with which color he associates the younger boy with. Geryon's identity is inextricably linked to the color red and its connotations of shame, anger, and desire—"Geryon was a monster everything about him was red" (9)—but Herakles has a dream in which Geryon appears to him as a "big yellow bird." Geryon attempts to stifle his outrage at this comparison, but he is in utter disbelief: "*Yellow?* said Geryon and he was thinking Yellow! Yellow! Even in dreams/he doesn't know me at all! Yellow!" (74). Herakles does not understand Geryon at all, emphasizing the disharmonious nature of their love. "If he had loved me he would have seen me," says a poem in *Plainwater* (108).

This does not change even after the two boys reconnect in Argentina:"What Geryon was thinking Herakles never asked. In the space between them/developed a dangerous cloud./Geryon knew he must not go back into the cloud. Desire is no light thing./He could see the thorns gleam/with their black stains" (132-33). As the book develops, Geryon learns to avoid knowledge in order to protect himself, while Herakles remains completely uninterested in

Geryon's interiority. It is not often that the word "desire" is used in this text—often the sentiment is simply implied through descriptions such as "fire was closing off his lungs" or "something like tons of black magma boiling up from the deeper regions of him" (73, 105). To directly name the feeling of desire, in conjunction with portraying the interiority of a person as knowledge to be tapped into or ignored—as Herakles does—Carson connects the acts of desiring and knowing. Carson says, "In any act of thinking, the mind must reach across this space between known and unknown, linking one to the other but also keeping visible their difference. It is an erotic space" (171). But Geryon now understands that "this space between known and unknown," though it is erotic, will only cause him pain; he is able to recognize that desire has "thorns" and is not to be trifled with. Yet, these thorns still sparkle with an attractive "gleam" that entices lovers to explore the "dangerous cloud."

Despite Geryon choosing to no longer entertain "the space between them," Carson's description of desire as having a natural, deceptive "gleam" implies that people often fall victim to this trap. She is sure to leave readers with the idea that the questioning prompted by falling in love is entirely natural, as Geryon meets a philosopher towards the book's end who insists that "the desire to know" is a specifically "human trait":

> *I want to study the erotics*
> *of doubt. Why?* Geryon asked.
> The yellowbeard was pushing back his chair—*As a precondition*—and saluting
> the waiters across the room—
> *of the proper search for truth. Provided you can renounce*—he stood—*that*
> *Rather fundamental human trait—*
> He raised both arms as if to alert a ship at sea—*the desire to know*. (*Autobiography*, 86)

This is the second poignant use of the word "human" in a text about a distinctly nonhuman boy with red wings; Carson clearly wants to tell us something. If "truth" can only be found by studying "the erotics of doubt," and Geryon must renounce "the desire to know," then we can

infer that truth can only be found in the space between question and answer. And we must delight in this space, for "the desire to know" will only lead to disappointment. Carson champions doubt as truth, and suggests that we must embrace the eroticism of the unknown. Though love necessitates knowledge, that does not imply the existence of an answer. This idea aligns with Carson's interest in fragments and translation: "I like the space between languages because it's a place of error or mistakenness, of saying things less well than you would like, or not being able to say them at all." As a writer, she must also renounce "*that fundamental human trait—the desire to know.*"

Plainwater and *Autobiography of Red* both portray the connection between desire and knowledge—it can be sought after, ignored, or renounced entirely. *Plainwater*'s essays assert that being in love means being "entangled in the knowledge of some other animal," but this knowledge, like kinship, is difficult to understand—there is a "code" in place. Thus Carson's characters "anthropologize" themselves in an attempt to understand love's strange ways, and its many forms. Carson believes, "Reality is a sound, you have to tune in to not just keep yelling" (*Autobiography*, 60). She is tuned in to the frequencies of human relationships—with others and themselves, with myths and history—and though she is skilled at capturing the mysticism of love, she must be content with "falling short or being deficient" in her portrayals.

Conclusion

Though it's been said that Carson's work moves "in directions that a human brain would never naturally move," the author insists that she simply writes what she observes (Anderson).

Carson says, “A scholar is someone who takes a position. From which position, certain lines become visible. You will at first think I am painting the lines myself; it’s not so. I merely know where to stand to see the lines that are there. And the mysterious thing, it is a very mysterious thing, is how these lines do paint themselves.”

She goes on to say, “Before there were any edges or angles or virtue—who was there to ask the questions?” (*Plainwater*, 94). Her writing is full of questions and often “riddled with holes”—those that call her work confusing are not entirely wrong. Yet it is her dedication to describing the ineffable, her passion for “saying things less well than you would like, or not being able to say them at all,” that makes her a scholar of our time.

“To desire and be desired, what could be simpler?” Carson asks. Yet every time Carson uses the word “simple,” you should be wary. She continues, “Well here is what it looks like on the videotape. You see desire go traveling into the total dark country of another soul, to a place where the cliff just breaks off. Cold light like moonlight falling on it” (195). As love is a journey into darkness, tinged with fear, Carson’s books follow the “human,” which takes place outside of normal boundaries, on a cosmic scale that feels like the exact convergence of past and future that Carso employs in her writing. She claims she merely knows “where to stand to see the lines that are there,” but her ideas are visionary, and her versions of love are frighteningly true.

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