

## **Textes et contextes**

ISSN : 1961-991X

: Université de Bourgogne

17-2 | 2022

Clandestins, clandestinités - Gestes de couleur : arts, musique, poésie

# Coloured Openings in Anne Carson's *Autobiography of Red: A Novel in Verse*

*Ouvertures colorées dans l'Autobiographie du rouge : un roman en vers  
d'Anne Carson*

15 December 2022.

**Nancy Pedri**

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PREO

# Coloured Openings in Anne Carson's *Autobiography of Red: A Novel in Verse*

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I would like to thank Dr. Jennifer Lokash (Memorial University of Newfoundland) who provided sharp comments on earlier versions of this paper; they helped stimulate further thought and provoked an even greater excitement for Carson's work.

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- 1 Colour, it was widely believed in the ancient Greek world, can be experienced with all the senses and not just sight alone. From Theophrastus and Pindar to Aristotle and Apollonius Rhodius there is abundant evidence that “there was an overlapping between senses such as sight and touch, so that something seen could be described naturally in terms of touch” (Irwin 1974: 210). Colour might thus be configured as touch or taste, as sound or sight, or as a combination of all the senses. Indeed, examples of colour as a synaesthetic experience – an experience where the senses commingle – abound in an-

- cient Greek and Roman literary treatments of colour.<sup>1</sup> Not restricted to the external traits of things seen, colour was believed to stand in relation to the qualities of things perceived and of the person perceiving. Colour is thus a synaesthetic experience intimately associated with knowledge of the world, including self.
- 2 Canadian poet and classicist Anne Carson not only shares the appreciation of colour as a synaesthetic experience, but moves away from it to propose that colour extends beyond the strictly sensory. In *Autobiography of Red* – a poetic narrative of the ancient myth of Geryon, the red-winged monster slain by Herakles – colour partakes in the realm of cognitive experience as well. Much more than a physical aspect of a thing, colour betrays the felt quality of how it is experienced, processed, perceived, in short, known. In this sense, Carson's conception of colour is aligned with that of the Ancient Greek world, where colour "was a fluid, subjective, interactive unit of value and meaning" (Bradley 2009: xi). However, in *Autobiography of Red*, colour is not only a subjective experience rooted in a perceiving mind; it is also emotional, sexual, psychological, active, and physical. It is a fully living, pulsating entity, so unpredictably complex and mysterious that it is deemed worthy of an autobiographical account.
  - 3 To account for Carson's complex treatment of colour, a treatment that moves between colour as an experience and as an experiencing entity, the article begins and ends by paying particular attention to the rich interconnections between colour and identity as they are developed in *Autobiography of Red*. Whereas the first section explores the relation between colour and the character Geryon's personal identity, the last examines the relation between colour and its own identity. The middle section delves into colour's narrative role and its implication for the reading process, thus drawing the reader's identity into the exposition of colour. Although identity is a binding thread, it is not meant to supersede the article's attempt to chart the repeated adjustments in thinking about and through colour fuelled by Carson's use of it in *Autobiography of Red*.
  - 4 To this end, close analysis of formulations of colour in *Autobiography of Red* are enriched with reference to ancient theories of colour, especially those of Plato, who proposed a dialectical understanding of colour that underscores the perceiver's interpretation of the sensible

world. After asserting that Carson's approach to colour aligns itself with her appraisal of Stesichoros's use of adjectives, as formulated in the book's proem, attention is given to the way in which colour in Carson's *Autobiography of Red* puts a stress on the narrative. Although ancient theories of colour shed light on her treatment of colour as highly subjective and volatile, they fall short when considering how it is that a colour, red, can function as a narrative agent that authors an autobiography. The essay's concluding section thus draws on current theories of autobiography to examine the implications of the multiplicity and uncertainty of colour on autobiography in general and on the autobiography of a colour in particular.

## 1. Living Colour

- 5 In *Autobiography of Red*, colour is configured as taste, touch, sound, and even as a “funny red smell” associated with Carson's protagonist, Geryon (Carson 1998: 75). Geryon is introduced to readers via a series of fragments that are said to have been written by Greek lyric poet Stesichoros (ca. 600 BCE), who in his *Geryoneis* tells the story of how Herakles killed Geryon to get his red cattle “from Geryon's own experience” (Carson 1998: 6).<sup>2</sup> Classically, Geryon is a mythic three-headed, six-legged monster whose own murder and that of his cattle was one of Herakles' labours. In Carson's rewriting, “everything about [Geryon is] red,” including his snout, his wings, and his cattle (Carson 1998: 9). As in antiquity, he is a red, winged monster, but one that is coming of age in a modern (and somewhat harsh) world. Throughout most of *Autobiography of Red*, he is grappling with his own identity as a homosexual adolescent in love with Herakles, an older, slightly aloof and emotionally abusive lover.
- 6 Apart from distinguishing Geryon's physical features, colour references often allude to the particulars of his character, his likes and dislikes, his fears and desires. When his lover Herakles leaves him, Geryon is described as a “red fool” (Carson 1998: 75) who has red dreams. And, when filled with sexual desire he confesses that a “blackness sank through him” (Carson 1998: 119) or that a “[r]eddish yellow small alive animal / Not a bee moved up [his] spine on the inside” (Carson 1998: 11). In these and other similar instances, colour words indicate a quality, an emotional state, not a thing; they express

disposition, nature, character, humour, and other individual, personal attributes.

7 That colour is always more than the strictly sensory is suggested throughout *Autobiography of Red*. When an estranged Herakles relates a dream he had to Geryon in which Geryon saved a big yellow bird that was drowning in a pail by spreading its wings and freeing it into the sky, Geryon's reaction to the dream's details focuses on the psychological import of colour: "Yellow?" said Geryon and he was thinking Yellow! Yellow! Even in dreams / he doesn't know me at all! Yellow!" (Carson 1998: 74; italics in original).<sup>3</sup> Yellow, it is suggested, is the wrong experience to have in relation to Geryon for it does not relate to *who* Geryon feels and quite arguably even knows himself to be. In Lockean terminology, all that has to do with Geryon should cause the experience, idea, or sensation of the colour red to be produced in Herakles' mind, even when in a dream state.

8 Despite the error of Herakles' dream, his experiencing Geryon in relation to things yellow accentuates how the colour one sees and experiences depends upon the relationship between the seer and the thing seen. Rejecting the stability of colour ascription, Plato, in his *Theaetetus*, has Socrates argue that colour is subjective (158a), relative (156e), and private (154a). For him, different perceivers see differently:

Socrates: [...] precisely that which we say each color to be will be neither that which applies (strikes against) nor that to which there is application (struck against), but something in between that has become private (peculiar) for each. Or would you insist that what sort each color appears to you, it's that sort for a dog and any animal whatsoever?

Theaetetus: No, by Zeus, I wouldn't. (154a)<sup>4</sup>

9 In Plato's dialectical argument,<sup>5</sup> colour is not an inflexible, unambiguous phenomenon. Instead, it is fluid and interactive, dependent on the perceiver who experiences, who *sees* in a certain way. In this light, Herakles' blindness to Geryon's 'true' colour at a time when they are estranged reinforces Carson's exposition of colour as an individual, highly subjective emotional experience. Colour relies on the

observer for its existence, and produces different effects (here, yellow) under different circumstances or viewing conditions.<sup>6</sup>

- 10 In *Autobiography of Red*, colour is also a dazzling blend of the physical with the abstract, its meaning extending far beyond popular allegorical, symbolic, or thematic understandings colour has accrued.<sup>7</sup> Carson oversteps recurring configurations of colour, which can be so strong that colours are often approached as having “inherent characteristics [...] perceived as objective fact” (Cirlot 1991: 52). Disregarding fixed systems of colour associations – even physical or concrete associations – Carson postulates colour as gaining its full significance neither outside (as it would with adjectives) nor inside (as it would with symbolism). Instead, the meaning of colour takes place in their mixing, unsteadily located between inside and outside, which exist in a relationship of interdependency, one informing the other so to give shape, however loosely or uncertainly, to all things.<sup>8</sup>
- 11 Insubstantial and illusive, colour moves beyond its function of adjective that “attach[es] everything in the world to its place in particularity” (Carson 1998: 4), as Carson understands it to have done in the Homeric tradition. In the book’s first section, “Red Meat: What Difference Did Stesichoros Make?”, the narrator specifies that in his use of adjectives Stesichoros broke from the standard language of Homeric epic.<sup>9</sup> Opening this first section with an epigraph by Gertrude Stein and specifying that Stesichoros “came after Homer and before Gertrude Stein” (Carson 1998: 3), Carson draws a parallel between Stesichoros’ break with tradition and that of Stein who “repudiated the conventions of syntactical causality” (Kostelanetz 1980: xiv). Just as Stein obscured traditional syntax, so Stesichoros approached adjectives as a means to unfix or unname things, ensuring that “[a]ll the substances in the world [go] floating up” (Carson 1998: 5). Praising Stesichoros as a “sweet genius in the use of adjectives!,” the narrator returns to the title’s question to conclude that the difference Stesichoros made was that he “was making adjectives” (Carson 1998: 4), and not simply adopting them. He was, in other words, changing the way people see.
- 12 The proem emphasizes how Stesichoros broke the “still surface of the [adjective] code” where “being is stable and particularity is set fast in tradition” (Carson 1998: 4).<sup>10</sup> Once released from the regulations of a

precise signifying order, adjectives drift into unpredictable aesthetic formulations. In Barthean terms, Stesichoros' adjectival use broke free of the very act of imposing meaning or naming, where the "relationship which adjectivizes" dominates, strangles, exhausts the subject (Barthes 1994: 43). To avoid the trap of adjectivizing, the proem concludes with an invitation to "readers to create their own work" (Rae 2008: 234). "Here. Shake," readers are told after learning that Stesichoros' Geryoneis survives in numbered fragments "as if [the poet] had composed a substantial narrative poem then ripped it to pieces and buried the pieces in a box" that readers can "keep shaking" (Carson 1998: 7) so as to produce a new ordering and, consequently, a new meaning of the contents. Expressed in these two short concluding imperative statements is the wish that the writing that follows float into different, unpredictable meanings.

- 13 It is in this context that colour in *Autobiography of Red* escapes the traditional fixity of its function as adjective. In so doing, it engages in what Roland Barthes describes as a "truly dialectical form of erotic discourse" (1994: 43), that is, a discourse where meaning tends towards multiplication and dispersion. Monique Tschofen has convincingly argued that in *Autobiography of Red*, Carson "reveals a great sensitivity to the poetic quality of adjectives," inviting her readers to "perceive with all of [their] bodily senses – to make [them] feel" (2004: 39). This is particularly true of colour that in Carson's book fluctuates between the realm of concrete reality (outside) and that of subjective, ever-changing cognitive experiences (inside).
- 14 Although colour does not attach itself definitely to things, it does provide a general sense of overwhelming clarity and ambiguity of experience, a feeling of sorts. This paradoxical situation brings Stuart Murray to propose that "Carson's colours bounce, just like her words, coming to life in order to prompt a reflection on human (and monstrous) identity" (2005: 113). Such a reflection is possible if the perception of colour comes about when perceiver and thing perceived are in dialogue, as proposed by Plato and practiced by Carson. Through this inter-relational process, individual sensual experiences construct colour and colour perception partakes in the formation of self. Ekai Txapartegi, who examines the relation between colour perception and identity in Plato's *Timaeus*, concludes that colour "does

not automatically exclude the possibility of the soul's acquiring a deeper knowledge of its nature" (2011 : 325).<sup>11</sup>

- 15 Indeed, colour is where Geryon's experience of the world informs his sense of self. When his brother begins sexually molesting him, thus forcing him to leave the security that comes with living the "days and their red intervals" (Carson 1998: 26), Geryon is described as "voyaging into the rotten ruby of the night" (Carson 1998: 28). Both day and night are marked out by the colour red (one red is warm, the other pungent) and both day and night are marked by a blank space that Geryon struggles to fill with meaning or experience. Whereas day is characterized by joyous discovery instigated by winds that blow "life bolts against the sky each one blue enough / to begin a world of its own" (Carson 1998: 26), night entails "an economy of sex" (Carson 1998: 28) that brings Geryon to think "about the difference / between outside and inside" (Carson 1998: 29). The coming to consciousness of his inner self as distinct from his outer self prompted by his brother's violence leads Geryon to explore his own subjectivity, to lay claim to the part of himself that is his alone: the inside.
- 16 At this turning point in his life when childhood innocence comes to an end, Geryon begins his autobiography, "set[ting] down all inside things / particularly his own heroism / [...]. He coolly omitted / all outside things" (Carson 1998: 29). Geryon's self-declared focus as an autobiographer is the obscure, somewhat allusive internal workings of his self. In an interview, Carson notes that there is not "much control" in the inside; instead, there is "an effort of collaboration with whatever insights are available there" (2003: 24). The inside is where the personal, the imperfectly knowable, the ever-changing self resides. It is where raw emotion prevails and where Geryon retreats to work through the "cracks and fissures of his inner life," his "stores of pain" (Carson 1998: 105). Geryon's autobiographical effort to grasp, assert, or even create a personal sense of self is most urgently felt when his experience of self in the world is at odds with the way in which others experience him and the world they share. And, like all emotions in *Autobiography of Red*, these instances where confusion about self reigns are entangled in a whirlwind of colour.
- 17 Colour is central to Geryon's sense of self, indeed, to his very coming into being. Throughout *Autobiography of Red*, colour actively moulds



his person, marking his subjectivity and releasing his inner self into meaning. When in despair due to the “blank desertion of his own mind” (Carson 1998: 84) – a feeling experienced by our protagonist whenever overwhelmed by his surroundings – Geryon recalls that in the seventh grade he began worrying about whether or not he was mad.<sup>12</sup> That year is described as “the year he began to wonder about the noise that colors make” (Carson 1998: 84). As Geryon takes the first steps toward maturity, he hears “[r]oses [roar] across the garden at him” (Carson 1998: 84). At night, he listens “to the silver light of stars crashing against the window screen,” and during the day he hears “the cries of roses being burned alive in the noonday sun” and the grass “clicking” (Carson 1998: 84). Geryon’s awareness that colour aurally manifests agency not-so-surprisingly incites his analysis – in the shape of a science project – of his own mental make-up. Through interviews with his classmates, Geryon realizes that only he is able to hear the “colossal intimacies” that come from burning roses (Carson 1998: 84). Geryon’s introspection and its consequent discovery of his unique self confirms the chapter’s central point as summarized in its epigraph: “There is no person without a world” (Carson 1998: 82). And, Geryon’s world is, without a doubt, that of the colour red.<sup>13</sup>

## 2. Colour as Stress

- 18 In *Autobiography of Red*, colour produces a new fold in the narrative’s already complex network of meaning. It is a visual cue that invites speculation, and not a concrete, stable meaning. For instance, when Geryon is said to have “walked the red length of his mind” (Carson 1998: 10) after witnessing the slaughter of his red cattle by Herakles, readers are left to ponder what meaning red adds to this event.
- 19 That colour invites speculation, unfixing meaning and introducing openings around which meanings multiply is particularly evident when reference is made to colour itself. When the sound of rain is described by Geryon as being as “hot as a color inside” (Carson 1998: 108) or when his longing for Herakles is felt to be “as strong as a color” (Carson 1998: 118), the meaning of colour expands into unsayable possibilities, passionately experienced, but allusively communicable. Throughout *Autobiography of Red*, colour serves as an invitation for readers to experience colour in its fullest force, urging them to

learn, once again, how to see colour, not as merely restricted to sight, but as an explosive sensual, intellectual, emotional, and intensely subjective experience, an experience that is so complex it evades full comprehension, much less representation.<sup>14</sup>

- 20 Potential narratives, and not instants of recording, are the prerogative of Carson's use of colour in *Autobiography of Red*. Organizing openings around which meanings can collect and layer across the narrative's linear progression, colour places a stress on the narrative, disrupting the narrative frame and accommodating a wide spectrum of meaning. Colour as stress, then, has little to do with colour's adjectival function of constricting meaning through qualification. It reaches beyond what one sees to invite, instigate, accentuate the constant flux of both the object of experience (the noun to which colour is attached) and the experiencing subject (Geryon as well as each reader).
- 21 Once colour is understood as that which places stress on the narrative, it takes on a central role in the narrative's development. Mary Ann Caws defines stress as both "the accentuation of rhythm, of scansion in our reading, and of the heavy emphasis on certain parts – and the passionate, even anxious, sense we have and give of our own vital inclusion in the process of the reading" (1989: 4). Stress has to do with rhythm, described by Mieke Bal as an aspect of the structured story "as striking as it is elusive" (1997: 99) for the recognition of its importance for the narrative's temporal progression and the impossibility of its rigorous examination. Stress also has to do with activating the reader's participation in the narrative. The semantic and phenomenal ambiguity of colour in *Autobiography of Red* works to invite readers to be active members of the meaning making process. Just as Geryon continually hopes to "get some new information about red" (Carson 1998: 92), so too are readers urged to experience the awesome potential of colour. In this way, colour enacts a sense of narrative possibility.
- 22 The potential narratives instigated by the power, the nature, the language of colour are narratives grounded in the sort of seeing described by James Elkins as "entangled in the passions – jealousy, violence, possessiveness; and [...] soaked in affect – in pleasure and displeasure, and in pain" (1996: 11). Colour opens the experience of ob-

serving into a multifarious one, one where everything and every emotion is experienced in relation to all else. Richard Rorty describes colour as pre-conceptual, existing as raw feeling. Caught up so completely in the senses, colour is outside of any ordered response. Rorty writes: "But suffocation, heat, ecstasy, pain, fire, redness, parental hostility, mother love, hunger, loudness and the like, are 'known' pre-linguistically. They are known just by being *had* or felt" (1980: 184; italics in original). Colour, understood as such, relates to a non-propositional subjective awareness that cannot be formulated into language. Colour thus defies classification; it cannot be fixed, or, as Geryon admits, communicated fully (Carson 1998: 105). An intensely personal experience, it comes before words, and can never be quite covered by them.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, Carson initiates a sort of seeing and subsequent telling that belongs to the spaces between adjectives and nouns, that is held in that silence between words, that inflection that carries meaning outside, beyond what is or can be said.

23 This space can be theorized as similar to the "blank space where / [Geryon's] consciousness is" (Carson 1998: 48). Far from empty, it is this blank space that colour inhabits, communicates across and in which it begins to incite knowledge. Not surprisingly, it is also the space Geryon occupies when he begins his autobiography. He writes in "a blurred state between awake and asleep when too many intake valves are open in the soul" (Carson 1998: 60). Too many intake valves, too much colour, too much meaning attached to colour: this is what colour in *Autobiography of Red* urges readers to experience.

24 Here, colour is not meant to be experienced as "sensations (as most of us know them) or even as empty words (as the congenitally blind experience them)" (Elkins 1996: 220). Nor is Carson's a purely Symbolist aesthetics where colours are "the paradigmatic literary expression of [...] a crisis in epistemology" (Meltzer 1978: 254). Although certainly caught up in questions of how and what colour can mean, Carson's formulation of colour is equally concerned with self-identification and perception, which are always in flux. Carson thus aligns herself with Stesichoros. Her adjectives, her colour words are not divorced from meaning, but their meaning stands apart from any adjectival relationship to things in the world. In *Autobiography of Red*, colour is left to speak what it is, to say as it feels itself to be, to be felt as an open possibility.

### 3. Colour Talks

- 25 Only in this state of autonomy and growing self-reflexivity can colour secure a subjectivity that can give rein and expression to its own being. In *Autobiography of Red*, Stesichoros' lesson is put into practice, and red is thus able to engage in a sustained process of individuation. Released from its traditional adjectival function, no longer a "latch of being" (Carson 1998: 4), red is free to explore its inner being and its experience in the world.<sup>16</sup> It partakes in the "red assault of grass" (Carson 1998: 23), the "dark pink air ... hot and alive with cries" (Carson 1998: 36), a "live red line" that marks "the progress of [an] aeroplane" (Carson 1998: 79), and the "Pacific at night [which] is red and gives off a soot of desire" (Carson 1998: 130). If "[n]one of us lives without reference to an imaginative singularity which we call our 'self'" (P. Smith 1988: 6), then red in *Autobiography of Red* has come into its self. It is alive and active, a subject that, like all subjects, possesses an extraordinary range of attributes (psychological, cultural, physiological) and is in "dialogue with the world, others, memory, experience, and the unconscious" (S. Smith 1990: 15). An entity inside itself, red is "an apostrophization that magically breaks the silence of the humbly modifying adjective, letting it speak, letting it claim a subject / position, and compose its autobiography, live its life" (Murray 2005: 112-113; italics in original). In this sense, red is a living, embodied agent experiencing the world exterior to itself through all of the senses, and in a truly autobiographical vein, struggling to configure its individual identity through the experiencing and telling of its self as understood by its self.
- 26 Again, the identity of the colour red is not a stable one, nor is it an easily identifiable one. As Murray specifies, in *Autobiography of Red*, "red [is] a real being, even if it is doggedly incomprehensible" (2005: 114). Its incomprehensibility results from partaking in the freedom of words, and adjectives in particular, to do "as they want to do and as they have to do," as specified in the proem's epitaph by Gertrude Stein (Carson 1998: 3). Here, as in Stein's work, words are nonrepresentational entities, mobile and dynamic; they roam into uncertain meanings and experiences, and explore their qualities as words. For red, this means the sustained pursuit of its inside qualities, qualities

that are tied up, always, with seeing as it is understood in *Autobiography of Red*.

- 27 In the book's final section, "Interview," Stesichoros the fictional interviewee explains how he was "(very simply) in charge of seeing for the world after all seeing is just a substance" (Carson 1998: 148). As a substance, seeing is a thing, a reality in itself. Hence, seeing not as the activity of perceiving with the eyes, but rather as a cognitive activity born from recognising, appreciating, understanding with the aid of all of one's faculties. Seeing, Stesichoros specifies, "poured out [his] eyes" (Carson 1998: 148), and not into them. To see, then, is to imagine, to penetrate the surface of the thing being seen, to engage in subjective meaning creation.
- 28 Geryon practices this type of seeing. Throughout most of his life, he is able to see tangible and intangible things as they are *per se*.<sup>17</sup> As a child, when amused with the many kinds of stones he could see, he would "stop and imagine the life of each one!" (Carson 1998 : 23). Imagination, as specified in *Autobiography of Red*, "automatically recolors the landscape" (Carson 1998: 107), thus allowing colour to take on smell and texture, as well as emotion and other abstract qualities.<sup>18</sup> Imagination is that subjective engagement that gives rise to a seeing that goes beyond and beneath the surface, to the inner structure of that which is seen. As an adolescent experiencing a broken heart, Geryon is said to photographically record the experience of a "red rabbit giggle tied with a white ribbon" in his autobiography, which at this point in his life is a photographic essay (Carson 1998: 62). This photograph, like others in *Autobiography of Red*, pictures something – a giggle – that cannot be seen with the eyes. The seeing it does capture is one that comes from an exceptional aptitude to imagine with all faculties. This is confirmed in adulthood when Ancash (Herakles' new Aboriginal lover whose name means blue)<sup>19</sup> after seeing Geryon's wings relates the story of the Yazcol Yazcamac, wise "people from the inside" who "saw the inside of the volcano" and returned to the surface "as red people with wings, / all their weaknesses burned away - / and their mortality" (Carson 1998: 128-129). "A volcano is not a mountain like others" (Carson 1998: 135), nor is the person who can see the inside of a volcano and return to the surface unharmed like all other people. In all instances, Geryon stands apart

from others, not for his strangeness, but for his unique ability to see that which others are unable to see.

- 29 When the story of the Yazcol Yazcamac is considered alongside Geryon's and Stesichoros' extraordinary way of seeing, one may conclude that Geryon's "redness and wings stand for creativity, its power and its pain" (Padel 1988: n.p.). Indeed, *Autobiography of Red* enacts the type of seeing that gives rise to an autobiography, a seeing that reminds readers over and over again that "[r]aising a camera to one's face has effects / no one can calculate in advance" (Carson 1998: 135). Although the link between red and creative power is central to understanding colour in *Autobiography of Red*, it is equally important to consider the way in which red expresses itself in and through Geryon. Red is Geryon's inmost being; "everything about him was red" (Carson 1998: 37). One reader (perhaps somewhat over-enthusiastically) comments that Geryon "becomes Red, in a way — hard to think of him as Geryon" (Macklin 2012: n.p.). He is so entirely and fully red that his question about self-identity, "Who am I?" (Carson 1998: 57), is indiscernible from getting "some new information about red" (Carson 1998: 92). Red is also that which relates its own being through Geryon's inner experiences. It is within Geryon that red moves, dreams, makes sound (Carson 1998: 57), desires (Carson 1998: 11), in short, *is*. It follows that Geryon's autobiography — whether sculpture, written text, or photographic images — holds within its folds the autobiography of the colour red. Their sensory and cognitive experiences intermingle in the understanding and creation of self.
- 30 As suggested above, unhinging the stabilizing bond between modifier and noun in the autobiography of a colour threatens the traditional autobiographical standards of legibility and coherence.<sup>20</sup> Just as red is not a singular, specific and nameable subject, so too is *Autobiography of Red* a generically complex fictional autobiography "characterized by a violent cataclysm of the classical and contemporary" (Lim 2009: 1).<sup>21</sup> In it, fragments work alongside short verses, appendices, interviews and more to explore and relate the existence of a red, winged monster as well as the colour red. One critic notes that "*Autobiography of Red* can be read as a Picaresque novel, in which the hero goes through a succession of trials before he reaches maturity in the end, a fairy tale full of dreams and monsters, or a philosophical

essay raising metaphysical questions” (Ducasse 2007: 78). Whatever one decides about genre, one thing is for sure: the instability of the autobiographical subject is directly reflected in the autobiographical writing. Like red, the writing is volatile, impalpable, allusive, and highly actuated.<sup>22</sup>

## 4. Conclusion

- 31 In *Autobiography of Red*, colour is a structuring agent, albeit one that opens up a surprisingly large (and excitedly confusing) narrative potential. Enveloped in mystery, its meaning never concrete or precise, colour nonetheless retains its imperativeness for “[t]he soul which [denies the existence of red] will one day go mad” (Carson 1998: 105), as argued in a philosophy book Geryon reads. It goes without saying that Geryon felt, lived, and believed in the vital importance of colour for the coming into being of his very self long before reading of it in *Philosophic Problems*. Colour in *Autobiography of Red* is always *more than*, more than the strictly sensory, more than it appears to do or to be or to symbolise. Carson gives colour complexity and life in the fullest sense. And, if it can tell its own life story, it has agency, so much so that it calls out for reflection. Although incorporeal, colour interacts with human and non-human embodied agents with which it shares the narrative universe. It exists in relation to them, engaging in experiences of self and its interaction with the world and the entities that occupy that world to gain in understanding of self. In this way, the lived experience of red, its full expression always reaches beyond the factual, outside world to reside in the mysterious, inside world of the mind.
- 32 Even Geryon, who is engaged in a sustained analysis of his red self in a red world, comes to realise that a mutual understanding of red cannot be reached: “I will never know how you see red and you will never know how I see it” (Carson 1998: 105). For Geryon to realize what Jonathan Cohen calls the perceptual variation of colour – the “wide interspecies, interpersonal, and intrapersonal variations with respect to color perception” (Carson 1998: 19) – in an autobiography of red is to embrace formulations of identity as an ecstatic decentering of the subject. Autobiography then, not so much of “the autobiographer [who] has implicitly seen him/herself as the whole and coherent

human being who underwrites, subscribes to the possibility of a knowledge about the self" (P. Smith 1988: 104), but rather of a self that is in the crux of discovering itself, a self fully engaged in its physiological, emotional, psychological, sexual, and expressive modes.

- 33 The concrete uses of colour coupled with Geryon's declared focus on inside things, things that are red and in need of discovery, in an autobiography of the colour red, forces readers to join critic Jes Battis in asking if red is "a state, a substance, [or] a mindset?" (2003 : 198). But what needs to be kept at the forefront of our thinking is that to propose that red is fluctuating and unpredictable carries it beyond the senses to imply a rich cognitive experience such as humour, laughter, lust, or love. In this sense, red is not an essential property of that which is described as red. Instead, it is a relational property, one that takes on meaning through a perceiving mind, a mind that creates ideas about colour and that is created by thinking about colour. Ultimately, colour in Carson is a cognitive experience and not the result of a visual action, a thinking entity and not a state or a mindset. It is an agent active in the formation of identity.

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1 This understanding of colour was adopted and expanded upon by modern philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1968: 230; 1962: 305). For an extended analysis of the way in which Carson's *Autobiography of Red* is informed by Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, see Murray (2005).

2 The narrator specifies that "[some eighty-four papyrus fragments and a half-dozen citations survive, which go by the name *Geryoneis* ("The Geryon Matter") in standard editions" (Carson 1998: 5; italics in original). Carson claims that with the book's seven sections, she "wanted to show glimpses" of this original ancient poem, which does not exist in its entirety, but is, as she puts it, "in the center" of *Autobiography of Red* (2004: n.pag.).

3 Rae (2008: 244) argues that Herakles is associated with the colour yellow, an observation that would cast this dream into a reflection of Herakles' character.

4 Seneca proposes a similar argument in his *Natural Questions* (1.5.12). Later philosophers who revisit these reflections on colour include Locke (see, especially, 2.32.15, 2.8.17, 2.8.19, 4.3.15) and Berkeley (8-10).

5 See Burnyeat.

- 6 See Seneca 1.5.12. The notion of perceptual variation continues to be a topic of debate. For a detailed analysis of its development that also draws on several contemporary theorists, see Cohen (2009: 19-67).
- 7 These allegorical, symbolic or thematic understandings are so popular that Jung was able to identify colour archetypes.
- 8 Carson (1999: 54) presents a similar analysis of how meaning in Leonidas' verse happens between the words.
- 9 Although classicists disagree as to how Stesichoros used adjectives, my reading relies entirely on the one Carson provides within *Autobiography of Red*.
- 10 Cf. Rae (2008: 234) who claims that Carson's proem focuses on fragmentation.
- 11 Note that this insight is embedded in a discussion that aims to discredit prevailing understandings of Plato's approach to colours as phenomenological objects shared by this article.
- 12 Madness is discussed at a later point as designating a group of "subnormals" (Carson 1998: 96). Realizing that he is perhaps not so abnormal, Geryon feels a rare moment of joy, admitting "Things good on the inside" (Carson 1998: 97).
- 13 Cf. Ducasse who argues that Geryon "remains on the surface of things" (2007: 80).
- 14 In her use of colour, Carson can be said to fully embrace Jean-François Lyotard's call of postmodernists to "be witnesses to the unrepresentable" (1984: 82) and aim toward the "invention of new rules" (1984: 40).
- 15 Berger (1977: 7-10) makes a similar observation with relation to seeing.
- 16 On the complexity of the autobiographical terms of Carson's text, see Battis (2003: 198), Murray (2005: 102), Rae (2008: 242), and Tschofen (2004: 33). For McCallum, "the referent of *Autobiography of Red* [is] the series of photographs described at the end" (2007: n.p.).
- 17 That red is absent from the narrative when Geryon begins his relationship with Herakles strongly suggests that his love blinded him.
- 18 Seneca, too, underscored imagination's role in the conception of colour. See Bradley (2009: 44).
- 19 In an interview with Sam Difalco, Carson says she invented the name An-cash because she "couldn't settle on a meaning" (2001: 31).

20 In her writing, Stein questioned autobiography's generic assumptions about selfhood and language.

21 Many critics have stopped on Carson's penchant for genre mixing. See, for instance, Davenport (1995: ix-x) and Rae (2008: 224).

22 This is not to say that *Autobiography of Red* is without a semblance of coherence. On the contrary, its seven sections recall "the seven sections of the Greek *nomos* or lyric performance *Stesichoros* was famous for" (Ducasse 2007: 78).

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### English

A close examination of the colour red in Anne Carson's *Autobiography of Red: A Novel in Verse* shows that in it colour extends beyond the synaesthetic experience theorized by the ancient poets. In Carson's book, colour is a complex living entity. Granted agency, red functions as a narrative agent able to author its autobiography.

### Français

Une étude approfondie de la couleur rouge dans *Autobiography of Red: A Novel in Verse* d'Anne Carson montre que, dans cet ouvrage, la couleur s'étend au delà de l'expérience synesthésique théorisée par les anciens poètes. Dans le livre de Carson, la couleur est une entité vivante complexe. Doté d'agentivité, le rouge fonctionne comme un agent narratif en mesure de rédiger son autobiographie.

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### Mots-clés

autobiographie, Carson (Anne), rouge, sens (les), adjectif, symbolisme

### Keywords

autobiography, Carson (Anne), red, senses, adjectif, symbolism

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