There Are No Words for a World Without a Self: Reading Anne Carson's *Autobiography of Red* as a Modern-Day Myth

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Introduction

Anne Carson is a Canadian contemporary poet, essayist, translator and a professor of Classics – a resumé of which elements show throughout almost all her works. An article praising Carson's work in *The New Yorker* suggests:

> [Carson] is accustomed to shuttling among stories and idioms; the classicist has to learn the concepts or attitudes that have been lost with the years, and that must, like a decayed bridge, be reconstructed before the ravine can be crossed. [...] The Carson method involves a kind of mashup of old and new; she proceeds through juxtaposition rather than metaphor-making (O'Rourke 2010).

By combining elements of mythology with modern-day settings on the content level and blending elements of poetry, prose and essay through form, Carson often creates hybrid texts in terms of genre, a noticeable example being her 1998 'novel in verse' *Autobiography of Red*. In *Autobiography of Red*, a monstrous young boy named Geryon deals with the hardships of growing up, falling in love, and finding a place in the world. On the basis of these topics, the novel may seem on one level to be a sort of Bildungsroman – but in its blend of myth meeting modern, and poetry meeting prose, the novel transcends any genre.

Autobiography of Red begins with an introduction, in which Carson mentions Stesichoros (630 – 555 BC), a Greek poet, and Geryon, originally a cattle-herding red monster from ancient Greek mythology: obtaining Geryon's cattle was Herakles' tenth labor. Stesichoros wrote about these events from Geryon's perspective in his *Geryoneis*, of which there are only fragments left. Carson introduces Geryon as follows:

> Geryon is the name of a character in ancient Greek myth about whom Stesichoros wrote a very long lyrical poem in dactyl-epitrite meter and triadic structure. Some eighty-four papyrus fragments and a half-dozen citations survive, which go by the name *Geryoneis* ("The Geryon Matter") in standard editions. They tell of a strange winged red monster who

> lived on an island called Erytheia (which is an adjective meaning simply "The Red Place") quietly tending a herd of magical red cattle, until one day the hero Herakles came across the sea and killed him to get the cattle. There were many different ways to tell a story like this. (Carson 5)

In the next part, Carson shares her translations of these fragments. This section is followed by three appendixes in which Carson discusses Stesichoros' palinode: Stesichoros claims to have been blinded by Helen after speaking ill of her, so he rewrote his text and regained his eyesight. In the last appendix, Carson wonders whether this makes Stesichoros a liar, but she cannot seem to figure out a clear answer. After this follows the main text, *Autobiography of Red: A Romance*, introduced by Emily Dickinson's poem *No. 1748*. The main text consists of 39 regular chapters, 7 chapters describing photographs and the setting they were taken in, and one last regular chapter. The main text describes Geryon's life from youth to adolescence, as he deals with issues surrounding his identity and trauma from sexual abuse during childhood and an emotionally abusive relationship in his teens. He spends his youth at home in an unknown town in the United States, and travels to Argentina at the start of his adolescence, where he remains for the rest of the story. After the main text follows an invented interview with Stesichoros by an unknown "I".

As can be concluded from the references and the variety of pre- and post-texts, there are many different worlds at work in the novel. Geryon, as a side character in the story of Herakles' twelve labors, had been written about in several different ways long before Stesichoros did – the original story of Herakles's labors is said to have first been written down in a now lost epic poem by Peisander, dated to around 600 BC (Müller 103). Why did Stesichoros feel a change in perspective was necessary? And why did Carson decide to adopt this same point of view so many centuries later? "If Stesichoros had been a more conventional poet", Carson states, "he might have taken the point of view of Herakles and framed a

thrilling account of the victory of culture over monstrosity" (6). But it was precisely that monstrosity – in all its delicateness – that Stesichoros was interested in, much more than a hero's blazing victory. So instead, he took the point of view of the red monster – and although only fragments of Stesichoros' Geryon are left, Carson decided to crawl into Geryon's head and fill in the gaps herself.

We are presented with Carson's rendering of Stesichoros' fragments of *Geryoneis* before *Autobiography of Red* really begins, thus first meeting Geryon in *Geryoneis*, but we soon realize that *Autobiography of Red* deals with the same characters, although they exist and move in a different world. Introducing Geryon as part of Herakles' and Stesichoros' story first, the character within *Autobiography of Red* obtains a layered meaning. The character of Geryon becomes fragmented because we are never sure whether our image of him, always already influenced by the way he is portrayed in the account of Herakles' labors and Stesichoros' fragments, is one that fits with how Carson portrays him in *Autobiography of Red*. If a reader is not aware of Geryon's role in Herakles' labors, his monstrosity and wings as they appear in Carson's novel, for instance, seem purely metaphorical. But Carson mentions Herakles' labors and Stesichoros' fragments of Geryon to signify an already layered character when she introduces *Autobiography of Red*'s Geryon – and leaves it up to the reader to decide what is real in this new world and what is metaphorical. The connection to semiotics suggested by the novel's intertextuality will be researched further in this thesis through the theoretical framework of, among others, Roland Barthes' *Mythologies*.

The novel's connection to mythology also raises the question whether *Autobiography of Red* is in itself not also a myth, and if so, if it would be a modern one. How would one define a 'modern myth' to begin with? To answer these questions, we first have to define what mythology entails, what its role is in society and the ways in which this role may have changed over time. I will deal with these matters in the opening section of Chapter 1. This

thesis will then analyze *Autobiography of Red* through these frameworks to see where the novel fits into this concept of a modern mythology.

As we established above, *Autobiography of Red* comes alive through the retelling of an existing mythological character's story. This brings us to the concept of intertextuality, which in the view of Gérard Genette, pioneer of intertextuality, entails that "the object of poetics is not the literary text but its textual transcendence, its textual links with other texts" (Prince ix). And although this textual transcendence, according to Genette, is present within all literary works, "some are more hypertextual than others, more massively and explicitly palimpsestuous" (Ibid.). A 'palimpsest' is a page from a manuscript from which the text has been erased so that it can be used for another document, yet it is a common characteristic of palimpsests that some traces of its original use and thus of the earlier document remain. Genette uses the term to indicate that some literary texts in their connection to earlier texts have not fully erased the traces of presence of the latter, thereby establishing an intertextual link. *Autobiography of Red* may stand alone as a novel, but its characters have walked the grounds of earlier worlds; though Carson situates the characters in a new context, they all show traces of their earlier lives. In *Palimpsests*, his classic study of intertextuality, Genette studies types of textual imitation and transformation, their distinctive traits and possible combinations of each. Exploring the ways in which *Autobiography of Red* fits into these categories will be useful in figuring out the meaning behind its connection to earlier texts. After all, *Autobiography of Red*, leaves us with just as many gaps to fill in as the fragments we have left of Stesichoros' *Geryoneis*.

The first chapter of this thesis, in its search for a definition of the modern myth, will explore different ideas surrounding mythology. This first chapter will lay out the theoretical framework within which *Autobiography of Red* will be analyzed in the second chapter and propose a concept of the modern myth. Applying the concept of the modern myth to a novel

as layered in meaning, themes, and writing style as *Autobiography of Red* can serve as a useful example of the ways in which literature reflects society, shapes it, and is shaped by it in return.

Chapter 1 – Theoretical Framework: Defining the Modern Myth

1.1 Defining Mythology

Before the concept of the modern myth can be explored, mythology must first be defined – both as a historical phenomenon and as a literary genre. Though many different cultures have produced narratives that may be called myths, this thesis will focus mainly on those of ancient Greek mythology. Finnish folklorist Lauri Honko gives the following definition of 'myth':

> Myth, a story of the gods, a religious account of the beginning of the world, the creation, fundamental events, the exemplary deeds of the gods as a result of which the world, nature and culture were created together with all parts thereof and given their order, which still obtains. A myth expresses and confirms society's religious values and norms, it provides a pattern of behavior to be imitated, testifies to the efficacy of ritual with its practical ends and establishes the sanctity of cult. (Honko 49)

In her essay "The Problem of Defining Myth", Honko discusses the various problems that come with attempting to define myth, such as the different possible approaches to be taken when defining and researching mythology. Honko presents a list of ten different approaches, ranging from myth as a form of symbolic expressions (placing myth on par with creative expressions such as poetry), myth as a projection of the subconscious (looking at myths from a Freudian perspective) and myth as a religious genre, to myth as a mirror of culture and social structures. These various approaches can lead to different definitions. As shown in Honko's definition, a shared characteristic of different types of mythology is that it reflects and provides exemplary behaviors. This definition shows mythology's role in history, which helps define the difference between ancient and modern myth.

When looking at myth as a literary genre, however, many other common characteristics occur. Mary McGoulick, folklorist and professor of English at Georgia College, has published a list of general characteristics of myth, consisting of, among others:

1. A story that is or was considered a true explanation of the natural world (and how it came to be).
2. Characters are often non-human – e.g. gods, goddesses, supernatural beings, first people.
3. Setting is a previous proto-world (somewhat like this one but also different).

   (..)
4. Functional: "Charter for social action" – conveys how to live: assumptions, values, core meanings of individuals, families, communities.
5. Metaphoric, narrative consideration/explanation of "ontology" (study of being). Myths seek to answer, "Why are we here?" "Who are we?" "What is our purpose?" etc. – life's fundamental questions. (McGoulick 2015)

McGoulick warns that "these characteristics are neither absolute nor all-encompassing" (Ibid.), but the list serves as a useful starting point in defining myth as a literary genre. Characters in mythological narratives are often gods, superhuman heroes or supernatural creatures, and events bending natural laws are characteristics we often associate with myth. Though characters may not always be human, the presented hardships and lessons learned can be applied to the human experience. This is a function of myth that both McGoulick and Honko mention: mythology mirrors the culture of any society by teaching us certain values, in an allegorical way. These lessons are easier conveyed when told through a mythological setting.

Mythological stories often take place in a world unlike our own; in the words of McGoulick, a "previous proto-world" a world "somewhat like this one but also different" (Ibid.). Because myths take place outside of our world and often show supernatural events or beings, any myth could be considered, to some extent, fictional. Being of religious nature, however, all myths were, to some extent, (once) considered to be true. With regard to this

religious nature, another characteristic of myth as listed by McGoulick occurs, namely the theme of ontology, and the fact that most myths are or were once considered "a true explanation of the natural world and how it came to be". The notion of myths as stories of origin gave them a special place within Greek religion and religious practices. This religious function of the ancient Greek myth already began to fade somewhat with the rise of rational approaches to the universe with the first pre-Socratic philosophers in the 6th century BC, a first step in the undermining of the truth and religious value of myth that would culminate in the Christianization of the Roman Empire, when Catholicism was established as the official state religion in the Edict of Thessalonia in AD 380 (Ehler & Morrall 6). In comparison to Greek mythology, modern mythology has lost this religious function, and as such the myth's function of reflecting society becomes even stronger. For this particular aspect of the modern myth, the term modern-day myth seems more fitting, as it focuses on changes as a result of the passing of time. Because of changes in society, the concept of the myth has evolved and taken new forms. This has led to many new layers of meaning to the concept of mythology: layers of meaning that are essential to what a myth has come to mean in modern times, and thus also to what a modern myth means. These layers will be researched in the following sub-chapters.

1.2 Transtextuality

Now that we have defined the concept of mythology more clearly, the next step in defining a modern myth is to compare it to its predecessor. To be able to compare ancient Greek and modern myth, we must set out some rules in laying out both texts and defining their intertextual relationship: their overlaps, differences, and shared backgrounds, characters or settings. One of the most widely-known theories of intertextual relationships was introduced by Gérard Genette in his 1997 book *Palimpsests*, in which he discusses different types of relationships between texts.

In *Palimpsests*, Gérard Genette explains that the subject of poetics is not the text itself, but its "transtextuality", which he roughly defines as "all that sets the text in a relationship, whether obvious or concealed, with other texts" (Genette 1). The first type of transtextual relationships he describes is *intertextuality*, a term first explored by Julia Kristeva in 1966. Genette regards his own concept of intertextuality as only one of many different types of transtextual relationships. He defines it as "a relationship of co-presence between two texts or among several texts" (Ibid). Intertextuality shows itself in explicit and literal ways such as quoting and plagiarism, or less explicit and literal ways, such as allusion.

The second type of transtextuality described by Genette is *paratextuality*, which is the relationship between a text and its paratext, meaning for instance a title, subtitle, preface, foreword, footnote, illustration, or blurb. These provide a setting for the text and situate it as part of a certain discourse, thus adding meaning to the text to a certain extent.

Genette's third type of textual transcendence is *metatextuality*, which shows a critical relationship between texts: it is the explicit or implicit critical commentary given in one text on another text.

The fourth type is *architextuality*, meaning the designation of a text as a part of a certain genre; this relationship is usually expressed through parts of the paratext, such as a title or a subtitle, and is often not directly articulated through the text itself.

The fifth type of transtextuality is *hypertextuality*, which Genette defines as "any relationship uniting a text B (the hypertext) to an earlier text A (the hypotext)" (5) in a non-commentary way. Genette explains that these five types of transtextuality must not be viewed as separate categories but have crucial relationships to each other as well. He states that the last is the most important form of transtextuality, and that it can take many different forms, and act on different narrative levels.

Genette's analysis of these intertextual relationships and their functions may offer a useful framework for analyzing the role of mythology in *Autobiography of Red* and comparing this role to that of the ancient myths it refers to. By distinguishing these different forms of transtextuality, *AOR (Autobiography of Red)*'s connection to ancient mythology can be researched in detail, which will help situate it in our concept of the modern myth. It can be stated with certainty that each type of transtextuality is, to some extent, present in *AOR*. Regarding Genette's two types of intertextuality, we see Carson's Geryon directly quoting (Carson's translation of) the *Geryoneis* when stating in his autobiography: "Geryon was a monster everything about him was red" (Carson 9, 37). He also alludes to the story of Herakles' tenth labor, as he writes that Herakles killed both himself and his dog (Ibid).

In terms of paratext, *AOR* is also a clear example, as its paratexts consist of many different elements: the books's title, its subtitle, two prefaces and three appendixes, then the story itself, and a postface afterwards. It can be argued, however, that the prefaces, appendixes and postface are all part of the main text, as they are essential to understanding certain elements of the middle part, as we will see in the next chapter. The novel's paratextuality shows an overlap with another type of transtextuality, namely intertextuality in the form of quotation, as one of the prefaces is Carson's translation of Stesichoros' *Geryoneis*. These fragments constituting a text can then be argued to have both an intertextual and hypertextual relationship to the original written myth of Herakles' labours. Unfortunately, this relationship is hard to define precisely, as the original text has been lost. A metatextual relationship to Stesichoros' text is shown in *AOR*'s preface *Red Meat: What Difference Did Stesichoros Make*. The title 'Autobiography of Red' and the subtitle 'A Novel in Verse' also show clearly articulated architextual relationships to different (sub-)genres.

This then brings us to the last and most elaborate transtextual relationship within *AOR*: hypertextuality. Genette explains that the hypertext is derived from a previous text through

either *transformation* or indirect transformation, which he calls *imitation*. This is a difficult distinction in the case of *AOR* as, on the one hand, it is often seen as a 'retelling' of the myth of Herakles or Stesichoros' fragments, but on the other, it places the story within an entirely different context, time and place, and turns the antagonist into the protagonist, which gives any re-used elements a new meaning. Genette explains further that "The less massive and explicit the hypertextuality of a given work, the more does its analysis depend on (…) the reader's interpretive decision". Hypertextuality, in *AOR*, seems to be the least present and explicit within the actual story, meaning that a great deal of its analysis still depends on a reader's own interpretation. This subtler way of evoking the hypotext fits Genette's idea of transformation: the myth of Herakles and Stesichoros' fragments have been transformed into a new story entirely. In the prefaces and postface about Stesichoros, however, Carson directly mentions the character of Geryon from the ancient myth. From this, the reader may expect the story to lean more toward *imitation*, as Carson speaks of the hypotexts directly in the prefaces. There thus seems to be a disconnect between the reader's expectation reading the introduction and the prefaces and seeing the transformation that takes place within the actual story. This disconnect seems to arise from the different layers of transtextuality present within the different levels of hypo- and hypertexts in the story.

Even with Genette's clear organization of different types of intertextuality, he warns that there is "reciprocal contact and overlapping" between them, and that they must not be viewed as "separate and absolute categories" (Genette 7). The overlap and contact become clear when applying the different types of transtextuality to *AOR*, as there are multiple obstacles that make it difficult to analyze certain elements of the text in terms of transtextuality. The main concern is that there seems to be an awareness within the novel of the texts it shows relationships to, an awareness which is common in the paratextual and architextual relationships of a text, but less so in hypertextual ones. What makes this matter

particularly difficult to analyze in the case of *AOR* is that this awareness becomes confusing when the character in the hypertext has been taken, to some extent, directly from the hypotext. Placing the character Geryon from ancient Greek mythology within a modern setting is one thing – but having Geryon write about this in his own autobiography is another, raising many questions. Does the myth exist in *AOR*'s universe, or is Geryon predicting his own future, merely writing about future heartbreak as his metaphorical 'death'? The relationship between hypo- and hypertext cannot be researched as either transformative of imitative if we do not know whether there is supposed to be overlap between both worlds. This overlap and its effects on the presence of mythology in *AOR* will be analyzed further in the following sub-chapter.

1.3 Semiotics and Mythology

In literary analysis, the answer to any research question lies in the relationship between what is said in a text and what is meant by it; in any literary discourse, there is a certain disagreement between both – or rather, a disagreement in the different ways in which the second can be derived from the first. The general concept of something meaning, referring to, or invoking the image of something else in language systems was first explored by Ferdinand de Saussure as 'semiotics' in his 1916 book *Course in General Linguistics*. He states that "the linguistic unit is a double entity, one formed by the associating of two terms" (de Saussure 65) and goes on to explain that "the linguistic sign unites a concept and a sound-image" (66), which he later names the "signified" and "signifier", respectively (68). The signified is signified by the signifier, and the signifier signifies the signified; when we read or hear a certain word (the signifier), it invokes an image or a concept (the signified) in our minds. As a whole, the signified and the signifier are called the "sign" (Ibid.). De Saussure explains that the sign has an arbitrary nature: there is no "natural" relationship between a signifier and a signified, as the words for certain concepts always differ within different language systems.

This means that, though we are used to speaking and writing through a set language system, there seems to be some breathing room between any word or concept and its meaning.

Any text that holds a transtextual relationship to another text shows not only signification, but a new level of signification between the two texts as well. This signification-within signification was explored elaborately by Roland Barthes in his 1957 book, named, interestingly enough, *Mythologies*. Barthes' main goal with *Mythologies* was to show the ways in which representations and reigning discourses of certain topics influence our experience of these topics, which in turn eventually influences new discourses in a certain way – a phenomenon described by Barthes as "ideological abuse" (Barthes 10). Examples of the phenomenon described by Barthes vary from wrestling symbolizing a battle between good and evil with political undertones, to Romans being portrayed as sweaty in films to show their ongoing inner moral debate (with Caesar as the exception), to the social function of drinking red wine. Barthes describes these ideas or images as 'mythologies', as these topics start to be defined more by their connotations than by what they actually are, which can have dangerous consequences. This phenomenon shows, in practice, the arbitrariness of the sign: a definition can be given for a certain word, but it is always subject to change, as we decide ourselves how we look at things.

The second section of *Mythologies* is dedicated to showing the semiotic systems behind these 'mythologies' and developing an approach to analyze them. Barthes begins this section, titled "Myth Today", by asking the question: "what is a myth, today?" (107) - an important question in defining our own concept of modern mythology. His simple answer is as follows: "myth is a type of speech" (107). Barthes goes on to explain:

> Everything can be a myth provided it is conveyed by a discourse. Myth is not defined by the object of its message, but by the way in which it utters this message: there are formal limits to myth, there are no 'substantial' ones. (…) Every object in the world can move

> from a closed, silent state into one open to appropriation by society, for there is no law which forbids talking about things. (…) One can conceive of very ancient myths, but there are no eternal ones; for it is human history which converts reality into speech, and it alone rules the life and the death of mythical language. (107-8)

With regards to our 'modern myth', this seems to be a simple answer. Barthes diverts this, however, when regarding this type of speech as a complicated system which is always moving and changing. Speech, according to Barthes, is not only verbal, but can also be visual: "a photograph will be a kind of speech for us in the same way as a newspaper article; even objects will become speech, if they mean something" (109). We must, thus, not treat mythical speech merely as language: "myth in fact belongs to the province of a general science, coextensive with linguistics, which is semiology" (Ibid.).

This leads us back to de Saussure's systems of signification. Semiology presents a relation between two terms, a signifier and a signified. Barthes explains that this relation is not one of equality but one of equivalence, as the signifier and signified both belong to different categories. This equivalence then leads to a third unit, or term, which is the sign; consisting of signified object, now heavy with the meaning or concept it signifies. "The signifier is empty", Barthes states, and "the sign is full" (112). This full-ness distinguishing the sign from the signifier creates what Barthes calls a 'tri-dimensional pattern', also found in his concept of mythologies. Myth, according to Barthes, is a "second-order semiological system: that which is a sign (namely the associative total of a concept and an image) in the first system, becomes a mere signifier in the second" (113).

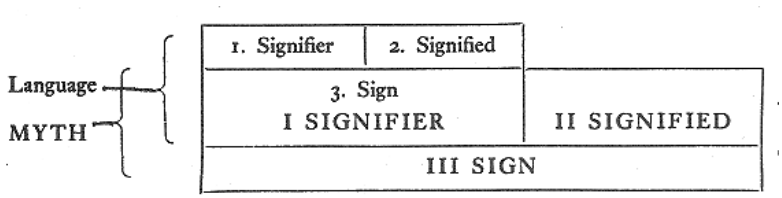

Figure 1. Second-order semiological system. Barthes, Roland. Mythologies. Translated by Anette Lavers. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1972.

Barthes illustrates this system in figure 1. The image shows the second layer to the semiological system, the signification-within-siginification that occurs in the presence of transtextuality: a hypotext consists of language systems showing signification, and a hypertext referring to this hypotext creates a new layer of signification.

Regarding *AOR* as a text conveying many of these mythologies, pre-existing "full" signs borrowed from other texts are now being used as a signifier on another level. To explain this, we will take the character/name 'Geryon' as an example, illustrated through Barthes' system in figure 2. Had there been no context of Herakles' myth or Stesichoros' fragments, the name Geryon would have been an empty signifier, only becoming fuller with meaning as you learn about the character while reading the book, reading the name over and over again. Because of the different types of transtextuality present in the text, however, the name Geryon is already a full sign, with a second signified that has been built up through other texts. The character in *AOR* thus builds on a signifier which is also already a full sign, creating what Barthes calls a 'myth'. *AOR* adds new signified characteristics, images, concepts and ideas to the sign 'Geryon', creating a new and even more 'full' sign.

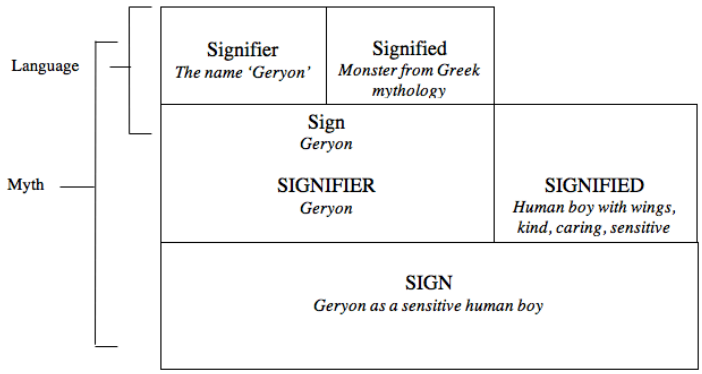

Figure 2. Second order semiological system of the name 'Geryon' in Anne Carson's 1998 novel *Autobiography of Red*.

Barthes explains that he believes the myth to have a double function: "it points out and it notifies, it makes us understand something and it imposes it on us" (115). The signifier of the myth is ambiguous, Barthes explains: "it is at the same time meaning and form, full on one side and empty on the other" (116). The signifier of the myth is already a whole: "the

meaning is already complete", Barthes states, as it "postulates a kind of knowledge, a past, a memory, a comparative order of facts, ideas, decisions" (Ibid.).

The reader knows the story of Geryon after reading the prefaces; there is an entire history in the name. On the myth level of Barthes' second-order semiological system, "the meaning leaves its contingency behind; it empties itself, it becomes impoverished, history evaporates, only the letter remains" (Ibid.). The word 'Geryon' in *AOR* is thus, in a way, a clean slate; there is a new gap to fill in, although the first full sign of the language systems remains in the back of the head of the reader, like the remains of erased words on a palimpsest. "Myth", Barthes explains, "hides nothing: its function is to distort, not to make disappear". The Geryon in *AOR* is not a new one; the previous sign, full with an entire character, is no secret. But layers are added, new perspectives are shown, and the signification's presence is shifted to another time and place, in which it takes on many new meanings.

The stacking of signification levels is an inevitable side-effect of transtextuality. Although, so far, we have only looked at its presence within hypertextual relationships in *AOR*, the phenomenon occurs within other types of transtextual relationships as well. Architextually, for example, both the terms "a novel in verse" and "epic poem" used on the cover and on the blurb of the novel influence the signification of certain words, symbols or concepts in the novel. In a text calling itself a poem a reader will look for new hidden meanings of, for instance, Geryon's wings, even though they are aware it is merely a characteristic transferred from the character in the original sign. The metaphor of fire through the color red is often used when Geryon is upset, angry or just emotional; this is an obvious part of his monstrosity in the original myth, but it takes on a new meaning when looking at it next to the many erupting volcanoes that are mentioned in the novel. These possible analogies, metaphors and symbols will be analyzed in more detail in the next chapter. At this

point of research, they show an overlap between different types of transtextuality within the novel and their application to Barthes' concept of mythologies. Gaining more knowledge of *AOR*'s content in terms of its connection to mythology will help in researching the motivation behind it, and with that its role in the concept of the modern myth. In contrast to the sign, Barthes explains, "the mythical signification (…) is never arbitrary; it is always in part motivated, and unavoidably contains some analogy (…) Motivation is necessary to the very duplicity of myth: myth plays on the analogy between meaning and form" (124-5). Although unavoidable, Barthes states, "motivation (…) is none the less very fragmentary" (125). Carson's motivation behind *AOR* specifically will be looked at in the next chapter, where the text itself will be analyzed in detail.

1.4 Defining the Modern Myth

Before *AOR* can be analyzed in terms of content to discover Carson's possible intentions with the novel, a definition for the concept of the modern myth must be established. As we have seen, there is a duality within in the concept of the modern myth. On the one hand, a myth can become 'modern' if we consider how the function of mythology changed as the times changed. Ancient Greek mythology as we know it and use it nowadays has a very different place within literature than it did in the days the myths were created; new myths created today would inevitably reflect a society very different from the one portrayed in ancient Greek myths. Reflecting the society that creates it, then, is an essential part of what mythology is and how it functions, as we have seen. Regarding the modern myth as 'merely' a modern-day myth, *AOR* would fit that label perfectly: the story deals with many modern objects reflecting modern-day society, such as phones and cars. The essence of the modern myth, however, is more complicated than merely reflecting modern-day society. As society changed through the years, our definition of mythology has changed; we have gained new associations and connotations, which complicates defining the role of mythology in modern-day society.

Roland Barthes considers myth, as presented in *Mythologies*, as any concept changing in meaning as a result of newly arisen associations or connotations. Interestingly, by doing so, Barthes has put the word 'mythology' through this exact same process, as illustrated in figure 3. Barthes' choice to use the word 'mythology' to describe this process makes this theory of extra importance in our analysis of both the concept of the modern myth and *AOR* exemplifying it. As illustrated in figure 3, applying Barthes's theory of mythologies to the concept of mythology itself, we see that the meaning of the word has changed over time due to newly arisen associations and connotations. Before beginning the introduction, Carson quotes Gertrude Stein "I like the feeling of words doing as they want to do and as they have to" (Stein 1935, as cited in Carson 1998, 3). Carson adds, "Words bounce. Words, if you let them, will do what they want and what they have to do" (Carson 3), making it clear that she believes in the agency of words to choose what they do and mean – a concept aligning with de Saussure's arbitrariness of the sign, and exemplified through Barthes' concept of mythologies.

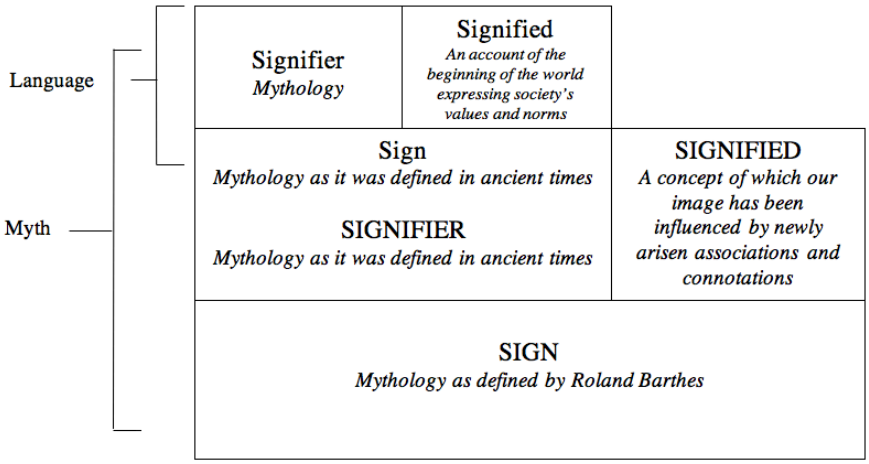

Figure 3. Second-order semiological system of the word 'mythology'.

The concept of the modern myth thus combines the idea of a modern-day myth as a reflection of modern-day society, and the changed meaning of the word 'myth' as a result of that changed society, as we see in Barthes' theory of mythologies. Barthes adds, "the mythical signification (…) is never arbitrary; it is always in part motivated (…) Motivation is necessary

to the very duplicity of myth: myth plays on the analogy between meaning and form" (124-5). This play on the analogy between meaning and form is undeniably present in *AOR* – but to truly understand its meaning, the text must first be analyzed. The following chapter will attempt to find Carson's motivation to write *AOR* through a close analysis of the text and its connection to ancient mythologies, as a means to place the novel within our concept of the modern myth.

Chapter 2 – Reading *Autobiography of Red* as a Modern Myth

2.1 Geryon

Any text introduces itself, first and foremost, through its paratext. The word "autobiography" in the title *Autobiography of Red* may first cause one to wonder whether it is really an autobiography, and if so, of whom – a wondering which is quickly surpassed by the vague and abstract "of red". The reader's attention is then diverted to the subtitle "a novel in verse", which raises the question of whether something can be an autobiography and a novel at the same time. From the start, the novel's self-awareness is exactly what makes you doubt its intentions – does the common autobiography know that it is an autobiography? Does this mean the color red has a conscience? If the novel is an autobiography, then why does it also call itself a "novel in verse"?

Following the roots of the word "autobiography", we find the Greek words auto (self), bio (life), and graphia (writing). Defining the word through its etymology, autobiography would come to mean 'writing one's own life story'. As suggested by Stuart Murray in "The Autobiographical Self: Phenomenology and the Limits of Narrative Self Possession in Anne Carson's *Autobiography of Red*", this then poses the question whether the 'life' in writing one's own life story does not interrupt the act of writing: "Is "life" here closer to the act of writing (graphein), closer to the sense of oneself (autos), or something else altogether escaping the autobiography that strives to contain or convey it?" (Murray 1). As we see throughout *AOR*, Geryon tries to understand his life and himself through autobiography: his own in-story autobiography in the form of sculpture or photography, and *AOR* itself, documenting his life from an outside view. Both autobiographies are constantly interrupted by Geryon's life occurring: Geryon's sense of self and his identity are always shifting, and he is always creating new selves to show to the world. Because of this, his autobiography constantly changes as well: he begins with sculpting, then tries writing for a while, but

eventually finds his preferred medium in photography. *AOR* itself is also constantly shifting because of it living the life it writes about: as Geryon changes from a character in Herakles' labors to one of Stesichoros fragments to one in *AOR,* the novel shifts from prose to poetry and everything in between.

As the title suggests, *AOR* is not an autobiography of only Geryon: it is an autobiography of *red*. Red like the island of Erytheia, the home of the Greek mythology's monster Geryon ("an adjective simply meaning 'the red place", Carson explains in her introduction (Carson 5)), or red like the anger Geryon often feels throughout the story. Erytheia thus forms the first potential answer to the reader's question of what the red in the title is referring to, which immediately connects the novel to its mythological roots. Though Geryon is the main character and the novel is his autobiography, he cannot seem to escape from his earlier lives, as though they have not been scraped off the palimpsest entirely. This duplicity shows through Geryon's character as well: in the story, Geryon wrestles with questions of where he comes from, why he is a monster, whom he loves, and who he wants to be.

When the reader meets Geryon in the novel's introduction, he is referred to first and foremost as a character of Greek mythology and Stesichoros' texts. The first pretext shows Carson's translation of Stesichoros' fragments, telling the story of the monster Geryon guarding his red island with his little red dog – the story of Geryon's life, and then immediately his death, when "Herakles came and / Killed him for his cattle" (Carson 14). Then, after two appendixes with no mention of Geryon, we get to part IV: *AOR: A Romance*.

This is the main text, showing an account of Geryon's life from youth to adolescence. We begin with the sentence "Geryon learned about justice from his brother quite early", followed by a story of Geryon and his brother walking to school together at a young age. From the very beginning, Geryon's mind wanders: he wonders about the lives of the stones

his brother would pick up and throw away, has to "[focus] hard on his feet and his steps", and gets distracted by the smell of grass so much that he "could feel his eyes leaning out of his skull on their little connectors" (Carson 23). It can be concluded from the first page that Geryon is a dreamy child – easily distracted, always overthinking everything. Although the text is not written in first person, we look at things from Geryon's perspective, hear his thoughts, feel his feelings – and yet the third person perspective creates some distance, mirroring Geryon's own imagined distance to himself and his feelings.

Geryon's brother brought him to school every single day until October, when "an unrest was growing in Geryon's brother. Geryon had always been stupid / but nowadays the look in his eyes made a person feel strange" (24). Here the omniscient narrator, through a shift in focalization, shows Geryon's brother's perspective: the reason he gives Geryon for no longer wanting to walk him to school. Because the reader has already adjusted to knowing Geryon's thoughts and feelings, it seems as though Geryon has accepted his brother's thoughts as the truth as well. Adopting others' negative thoughts about him as his own, Geryon's shows the reader his low self-worth from the beginning. "Just take me once more I'll get it this time" (Ibid), Geryon replies, his first direct statement in the story. Here, we see a little boy begging to be trusted, begging his big brother to believe in him. By removing punctuation when quoting direct speech, it seems as though Carson is emulating a childlikeness or breathlessness in Geryon's thoughts and words. Because of the lack of punctuation, sentences move quicker and more chaotically, showing Geryon's fast-paced thoughts and distractions. "Stupid", Geryon's brother replies, and Geryon "had no doubt stupid was correct. But when justice is done / the world drops away" (Ibid.). It is the opposite of justice, this feeling of exclusion and isolation felt by Geryon, but it feels just to him, because he believes what his brother says about him. An anger slumbers through at times, but it is a silent, accepting kind of anger. This feeling of anger invoked in Geryon leads to the first

of many references to fire and the color red in the text: “his small red shadow”, “the fires in his mind”, “the blank caught fire” (Ibid). Geryon’s anger “was total” (Ibid.). But as “justice is pure”, Geryon takes another route to school, hides in the bushes and stands there, motionless. “Small, red, and upright he waited”, while the first snows of winter “silence all trace of the world” (25) and put down the first fires of red anger in Geryon’s mind. Throughout the text, a tension can be felt in Geryon’s thoughts and actions, a tension between him and the world and the people he meets. From the first chapter, Geryon seems to feel as if he is not enough. Although the text speaks of fires in his mind and red taking over him, Geryon remains calm, and calls it “justice”.

In the second chapter, Geryon asks his mother what the word ‘each’ means. “Each means like you and your brother each have your own room” (26), she answers. He loves the word and the meaning his mother had given to it – he loves being alone and having his own space. Then one day his grandmother becomes sick. As a result of this, Geryon has to move into his brother’s room, and “So began Geryon’s nightlife”, while he had only lived “days and their red intervals” before. With the disappearance of his ‘each’ and his days, the happiness the word had once given him also disappears. The “shunk shunk ping ping ping ping ping ping ping ping” coming from the bottom bunk where his brother slept and “*Come on Geryon. / No. / You owe me. / No.”* eventually develop into an “economy of sex for cat’s eyes”: “Pulling the stick makes my brother happy, thought Geryon” (28). When Geryon’s brother threatens to tell their mother that “nobody likes you in school” (28) if he doesn’t let him do what he wants, Geryon gives in. Once again, Geryon becomes red hot with anger, but he keeps it inside. After his brother is done with him, he climbs up into his bunk and “[lies] very straight in the fantastic temperatures of the red pulse as it sank away” (28-9).

With this traumatic event being Geryon’s first ever sexual encounter, he starts to see his body as a site of betrayal. This feeling of betrayal makes him hyper-aware of his outward,

physical presence in the world, which makes him seek comfort within: “Inside is mine, he thought” (29). Geryon realizes there is no place to run to but his own mind. This is the day Geryon begins his autobiography. From the beginning, this autobiography, to Geryon, seems to be his escape: his way of exploring himself and the world without anyone intervening: “he coolly omitted all outside things” (Carson 29). Geryon also sets down in the work “his own heroism / and early death much to the despair of the community” (Ibid). The autobiography as a means of escape for Geryon is something that shows throughout the entire novel. As the way he sees himself changes, his autobiography changes with him – and with that his role in *AOR* as well.

Geryon’s struggle with his identity, though worsened through abuse in childhood and adolescence, finds its roots in his ‘monstrosity’. This monstrosity is often evoked in the novel through imagery of red and fire, which will be further explored in the next sub-chapter.

2.2 Geryon’s Monstrosity

Geryon’s monstrosity is an important part of his character. In the myth of Herakles’ labors, Geryon is described as a red monster; Stesichoros describes Geryon as having “six hands and six feet and wings” (Carson 14). Therefore, the first time the reader reads the name Geryon in the main text, *AOR: A Romance*, the name already carries an entire meaning with it. Geryon’s monstrosity thus becomes implicit and is never directly addressed or explained in the story. For Geryon, however, it seems less evident why he is the way he is, which creates a lot of uncertainties for him.

In “The Monstrosity of Anne Carson’s *Autobiography of Red*”, Leif Schenstead-Harris describes Geryon’s monstrosity as residing in “seeming other”, explaining that “monstrosity emerges of us but, embodying alterity, seems not us, and may change us” (Schenstead-Harris 3). *AOR,* according to Schenstead-Harris, “knows that the monstrous child is an other who can be dangerous and violent, but also dangerously violated (…) the monster – the monstrous

child – is a sign of humanity itself" (4). This violation happens in the first chapter of *AOR*, *Justice*, in which Geryon experiences feeling 'other' for the first time, and this theme of exclusion and isolation only develops further throughout the rest of the novel. Geryon feels different but can never put his finger on why this is. Questions surrounding Geryon's identity are mirrored through the text itself. In chapter six, *Ideas*, Geryon has learned how to write and starts over with his autobiography (consisting of sculptures until this point) through this newfound medium:

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

Partly mimicking Carson's translation of Stesichoros' fragments, the sentences seem childish, nervous. Schenstead-Harris interprets Carson's ambiguous repetition of "Some say (…) some say" (Ibid.) as evoking the continuing indecision of "myth tellers and "Old scholia" surrounding Geryon's background and identity (Schenstead-Harris 6). However, it is not only Carson mirroring this indecision through her language. Geryon seems to be aware of the existing character he signifies and the unclarity surrounding this character's identity, and mirrors this in the main text through an ongoing insecurity about his identity.

In Geryon's new autobiography, he notes his redness as his primary characteristic, as something embodying his monstrosity more than his wings. In *AOR*, the color red often accompanies anger, fire and heat: in *Justice*, for instance, when Geryon experiences feeling 'other' for the first time. Trying to find his way to school without his brother, he "[makes] his way through fires in his minds to where the map should be" (Carson 24). In *Each*, after being

molested by his brother, he "lay very straight in the fantastic temperatures of the red pulse" (28-9). In the next chapter, *Rhinestones*, Geryon's brother asks him what his favorite weapon is. When Geryon replies "cage", his brother calls him an idiot. He then is rescued from this conversation when he hears his mother coming home, and "Inside Geryon something bursts into flame" (33). This time, the feeling of fire inside Geryon accompanies a positive emotion – a relief. It seems therefore that with the color red symbolizing Geryon's monstrosity, it becomes clear that this monstrosity encompasses not only negative emotions, but any emotion which becomes overwhelming for him.

The next chapter, *Screendoor,* describes a "dark pink air" (36) – something almost red, but not quite; a simmered down version of red, as though Geryon's emotions have become less fiery. The chapter is followed by *Ideas,* in which Geryon's teacher changes the ending of his new autobiography from "Herakles came one day killed Geryon got the cattle" (37) into "All over the world beautiful red breezes went on blowing hand in hand" (38). These two chapters seem like a pause in between Geryon's childhood, in which he meets and finds out he cannot control his monstrosity or the red inside him, and his adolescence, beginning with the chapter *Change,* in which Geryon meets Herakles. It seems as though after meeting Herakles, Geryon feels like he can finally let go of control, and the redness disappears:

> Geryon was amazed at himself. He saw Herakles just about every day now. The instant of nature / forming between them drained every drop from the walls of his life leaving behind just ghosts / rustling like an old map. He had nothing to say to anyone. He felt loose and shiny. (42)

But when Herakles becomes the escape, a world away from the pain he used to feel, his childhood home becomes the source of red: "He burned in the presence of his mother" (Ibid.). Geryon becomes very reminiscent of his childhood, his mother's voice "[drawing] a circle around all the years he had spent in this room" (Ibid.). Geryon feels different with

Herakles, but this all falls back quickly whenever he starts to doubt their relationship. When Herakles tells Geryon "I guess I'm someone who will never be satisfied", "fires twisted through" Geryon (44): feeling other again, and experiencing this with the person he loves, Geryon returns to his state of redness. He starts to feel uncomfortable around Herakles when he realizes that he won't be able to keep him satisfied, and this brings back the lack of control over the situation, igniting the fire in Geryon again.

In the next chapter, *Hades,* Herakles tells Geryon that his grandmother once saw a volcano erupt and took a photograph of it, and that he should ask her about it while they are on the road to see her. This is the first mention of a volcano in the story, which will remain an important symbol throughout Geryon's life. When Geryon wakes up the next morning at Herakles' grandmother's house, he is disoriented. After he finds Herakles stretched out on the grass talking to his grandmother, Herakles sees "a big red butterfly [going] past riding on a little black one" (49). This evokes an image of a big red monster and a small, leather jacket wearing boy – an illustration of the way Geryon sees their relationship. "*How nice*, said Geryon, *he's helping him*. Herakles opened one eye and looked. *He's fucking him*" (49-50). The difference between the both of them and their intentions with each other becomes clear, and we see Geryon growing even more uncomfortable in his body and with himself.

"Geryon did not know why he found the photograph disturbing" (51), the next chapter begins. The photograph of the erupting volcano is called Red Patience, and Geryon "kept going back to it" (Ibid.). Red, patient, but always ready to erupt and destroy everything around it, Geryon feels connected to the volcano, which brings back memories of his monstrosity: "These days Geryon was experiencing a pain not felt since childhood" (53), the next chapter begins. In this chapter, the reader finally gets to see this pain from up close, at the root of Geryon's imagined monstrosity, described by a vulnerable, yet determined Geryon:

> 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 black brace and lashed the wings tight. Then put his jacket back on. (Ibid)

Throughout his youth, Geryon felt pain, but kept this pain inside. During this period in the story, his monstrosity seemed more symbolic: a fire, a redness inside him. But when Geryon grows more insecure on a physical level as well, falling in love, struggling with issues of sexuality, his monstrosity starts to take on a physical presence within the story as well. The wings are now tangible and getting in Geryon's way.

In the next chapter, Herakles ask Geryon to "Put your mouth on it Geryon please" (54). This seems almost reminiscent of his brother's "Come on Geryon (…) you owe me" (28) early in his youth – an experience that has most likely shaped the way Geryon sees himself and the way he thinks about sexuality. This time, after the act, however, Geryon feels "clear and powerful – not some wounded angel after all" (54). "I am learning a lot in this year of my life" (Ibid.), Geryon tells himself, and it seems like the fires within him have been put out. This does not last too long, however: when they go out to paint that night and Herakles tells Geryon "All your designs are about captivity, it depresses me" (55) Geryon immediately "[feels] his limits returning", and is reminded of a day in childhood when his ice cream was eaten by a dog, leaving only "an empty cone in a small dramatic red fist" (56). Not long after this, a call from Geryon's mother leads to Herakles telling Geryon it is time he heads back home. The red returns once again: "Geryon was trying to breathe but a red wall had sliced the air in half. (..) Flames licked along the floorboards inside him". When Herakles tells him "Geryon you know we'll always be friends", Geryon's heart and lungs turn to "a black crust", nothing but ashes after the fires have destroyed everything inside him. Geryon returns home, broken-hearted, and spends a lot of time reminiscing about his time with Herakles. When Herakles calls, he feels unable to breathe: "fire was closing off his lungs" (73). Herakles tells

Geryon he wants him to be free, again evoking the theme of captivity, and Geryon's earlier mention of favorite weapon being a cage. Herakles sees love as the cage he is being held in, but for Geryon loving Herakles was an escape from how captured he feels in his own body.

There is a large time jump in between the previous and the next chapter – Geryon is twenty-two. Now that Herakles is gone, and his childhood home is filled with the redness of traumatic experiences, Geryon decides to pack his bags and travel to Argentina. His monstrosity seems more present than ever in these chapters, given the reference to Geryon as "the red monster" (82), who "tightens his wings" (Ibid.). But "although a monster Geryon could be charming in company" (88); Geryon seems to be not as much turned inwardly as he was in earlier chapters and even makes some new friends. One of these new friends is Lazer – in introduction misheard by Geryon as "Lazarus"[1]. Lazer tells Geryon that twelve percent of babies are born with tails, but these are cut off so it will not scare the parents. Geryon wonders what percentage are born with wings but seems to feel less lonely after hearing this fact. He takes a self-portrait of himself on his bed, lying naked in fetal position, "the fantastic fingerwork of his wings outspread on the bed like a black lace map of South America"; he titles it "No Tail!" (97). He wears his monstrosity proudly, from the inside and the outside, on his own in Argentina – there is even mention of his arms and there being "too many of them" (100), a reference to another physical characteristic of the mythological monster Geryon. Geryon is using his time alone to figure out who he is, and to be able to do that, he has to come to terms with his monstrosity, and the traces left of his earlier lives. He "ponders the cracks and fissures of life" (105): "It may happen that the exit of the volcanic vent is blocked

[1] Regarding Geryon's death by the hands of Herakles in the ancient myth and his symbolical death in *AOR* when Herakles breaks his heart, mishearing Lazer's name as Lazarus might be foreshadowing Geryon's rise from the 'death' of his heartbreak towards the end of the story.

by a plug of rock, forcing molten matter sideways along lateral fissures called fire lips by volcanologists" (Ibid). Geryon is more in touch with himself and his monstrosity than ever, and the volcano of red and fire inside him seems ready to erupt – but there is something blocking the way. He reads in a book that "To deny the existence of red is to deny the existence of mystery. The soul which does so will one day go mad". Geryon then says out loud to himself, closing the book: "I'm not the one who is crazy here" (105) – implying that he is, in fact, denying the existence of red. Perhaps the rock that is in the way of the volcano erupting is Geryon still being unable to accept himself fully as a monster. His sudden interest for philosophy in these chapters imply that perhaps the reason he cannot accept his monstrosity is because he does not know why is one. Without an explanation, Geryon does not know who he is, and he cannot accept what he does not know: "there are no words for a world without a self" (107), another self-help book tells him. Right after this becomes clear to Geryon, he runs into Herakles.

But Herakles is not alone: he is travelling South America with his friend Ancash, recording volcanoes for a documentary on Emily Dickinson. Geryon asks Ancash about the meaning of his name, only to be given the answer, "it is a Quecha word" (112). Later on, Geryon tells Ancash he heard his name in a song Herakles sung, and asks him again what it means, but Ancash replies only with "hard to translate" (114). Geryon seems to know this is of significance to him – but perhaps he was not yet ready for the answer. The name Ancash, although Geryon never finds out in the book, comes from the Quechua word 'anqash', meaning light, from 'anqas' meaning blue and/or 'anka' meaning eagle (Parker et al.). The eagle represents freedom, something Geryon went searching for in Argentina, but also Herakles' reason to break Geryon's heart; blue, the opposite of red, is a new color to put out the fires inside of Geryon.

When Geryon gets cold, Ancash takes Geryon's jacket off to wrap a blanket around him. Although Geryon tries to turn the other way, Ancash sees Geryon's wings for the first time and he is amazed. Geryon does not understand why, until Ancash tells him about the volcanic region Jucu:

> In ancient times they worshipped the volcano as a god and even threw people into it (…) like a testing procedure. They were looking for people from the inside. Wise ones. Holy men I guess you could say. The word in Quechua is Yazcol Yazcamac it means The Ones Who Went and Saw and Came Back. I think the anthropologists say eyewitness. (…) People who saw the volcano from the inside. (128)

To Geryon's question of how they come back, Ancash answers: "Wings. (..) That's what they say the Yazcamac people return as red people with wings, all their weaknesses burned away – and their mortality" (129). When Herakles announces they will be travelling to Huaraz, a town near this region, Ancash warns Geryon that some people there still look for eyewitnesses, and that he should keep an eye out whether anyone checks his shadow. Now that Geryon has learned of a possible origin of his monstrosity, he starts to feel more certain of himself. This slight but certain change in Geryon's self-image leads us towards the end of the story.

On the way to Huaraz, Geryon wonders what Herakles is thinking and realizes Herakles has never wondered the same about him: "In the space between them developed a dangerous cloud. Geryon knew he must not go back into the cloud. Desire is no light thing" (132-3). During the trip, Geryon speaks little, but holds on to his camera tightly. "I am disappearing, he thought / but the photographs were worth it. A volcano is not a mountain like others. Raising a camera to one's face has effects no one can calculate in advance" (135). Geryon realizes that although there might be a volcano of burning red inside of him, this makes him special, rather than a monster: he is not a mountain like others. With this

realization, the main part of the novel ends, and Geryon now only speaks through his photographs: what he sees from the car, his guinea pig dinner, Herakles' naked back after making love. But Geryon soon realizes he does not love Herakles anymore, because he is no longer who he once thought he was. Ancash starts a fight with Geryon and asks if he is in love with Herakles. When he realizes this is not the case, Ancash tells Geryon "There is one thing I want from you (…) Want to see you use those wings" (144).

The next photograph is titled *#1748*. Its description reads "It is a photograph he never took, no one here took it" (145). Following Ancash's request, Geryon takes a tape recorder and flies into the Icchantikas volcano, the one the Yazcamac believed the eyewitnesses came from. The term Icchantika is used to describe someone in Buddhism who, because of their many desires, will never be able to reach enlightenment (Lliu 58). As Geryon dives straight into the volcano, he smiles for the camera: "The Only Secret People Keep" (145). The significance of this photograph will be discussed further in the following sub-chapter.

There is one last chapter after this, but it is not a photograph. The final step in Geryon's self-acceptance consists perhaps of no longer living through the escape of his photographs but of being more present in the memories themselves, now that he has found some peace. Geryon, Ancash and Herakles have gone to see the hole of fire in which they bake lava bread, a small volcano in a wall. "We are amazing beings", Geryon thinks, "We are neighbours of fire. And now time is rushing towards them where they stand side by side with arms touching, immortality on their faces, night at their back". And with that, the novel comes to an end.

Throughout the novel the color red symbolizes Geryon's monstrosity which in turn seems to symbolize his trauma and self-deprecation: whenever he feels wrong, regrets something he said or did, or realizes someone does not love him – when he feels 'other', he either feels red inside or it is emphasized that some part of him is physically red. Ancash,

whose names means ‘blue’ – the opposite color of red – is the first one to see Geryon’s monstrosity as something positive, something admirable: he tells Geryon that there is a myth which tells the story of the Yazcamac, people who were thrown into the volcano but grew wings and came out of it, leaving behind their mortality. Geryon’s monstrosity turns into something entirely different; he turns out not to be the monster from Greek mythology after all. The feeling of otherness is still inside of Geryon, but it feels much less like a burden – Ancash’s blue has evened out the red inside of him.

2.3 Immortality and Time

Time is a concept often mentioned throughout the novel, but never fully explored. It is not until Ancash tells of the eyewitnesses that the concept of immortality is evoked, yet it is one of the most important themes of the novel, as the story begins to show from that point onwards.

Thus far, the influence of the sources used for *AOR* have been discussed in terms of meaning. Naturally, however, the presence of much older texts has an inevitable influence on the novel’s form as well. Besides combining substantial elements of stories from ancient myths and modern days, Carson also combines older ways of telling stories such as prose and poetry with a modern-day hybrid of both. In her article ““Volcano Time”: Temporal Plurality in Anne Carson’s *Autobiography of Red*”, Jessica Bundschuh describes the text as a hybrid of “a poem, a novel, a philosophical meditation, [and] an essay” (Bundschuh 2). She states that Carson deliberately “challenges traditional genre distinctions to, ultimately, make her reader’s presence compulsory” (3), as the only way to sustain all the opposing elements of the narrative is “to create a temporality that can envelope her hero Geryon”.

This temporality is present not only for the reader, but for Geryon within the story as well. On his flight to Argentina, Geryon wonders “What is time made of?” (Carson 80) suddenly feeling as though time is tangible up there in the air, massed around him and

squeezing him much too tight: “Fear of time came at him” (Ibid.). Once Geryon arrives in Argentina, he meets a philosopher he calls “the yellowbeard”. When he asks what time is made of, the yellowbeard looks at him surprised and answers: “Time isn’t made of anything. It is an abstraction. Just a meaning that we / impose upon motion” (90). When Geryon is alone in his hotel room a few days later, soaking his photographs in developing solution in the bathtub, the question starts to exercise him again. “Much truer” than the comfort felt by the people in the photographs, Geryon thinks, “is the time that strays into photographs and stops” (93). Time scares Geryon; time passing, in this uncertain time of his life, seems like nothing more than a pathway to more pain. Photographs become Geryon’s preferred medium of expression because they pause everything for just a moment, yet can also bring one back to moments passed, creating the ultimate escape for Geryon.

After Geryon runs into Herakles and Ancash, the latter’s story about the return of the eyewitnesses from the volcano “as red people with wings” (129) whose mortality and weaknesses are burnt away, scares Geryon. Having struggled with his monstrosity all his life, the idea of his wings embodying an immortality is scary for someone who has claimed in the past to be afraid of time passing. This explains why, after hearing Ancash’s story, Geryon turns to photography: “I am disappearing, he thought / but the photographs were worth it. (…) Raising a camera to one’s face has effects no one can calculate in advance” (135).

After this follow the photograph chapters, the first one being called “Origin of Time”, as though Carson is trying to make clear that from this point onward, Geryon finds out where time begins – the more he knows about it, the less scary it becomes. Some chapters later, the photograph of Herakles after they made love is described. Geryon begins to cry and Herakles asks him what is wrong, to which Geryon replies: “I was thinking about time – you know how apart people are in time together and apart at the same time”. Hidden in a general wondering about time, Geryon refers to the ever-growing distance and difference between him and

Herakles, whom he once thought – or hoped – that he would spend his life with. "Just another Saturday morning," Herakles says, "me laughing and you crying. (…) Just like the old days" (141). But, the next photograph's subtitle reads, "It was a photograph just like the old days. Or was it?" (142). Ancash comes up to Geryon and asks him whether he loves Herakles, to which Geryon replies "In my dreams I do. (…) Dreams of the old days" (143).

When Ancash fights with Geryon over Herakles, and tells him he wants to see him use his wings to leave Herakles for him, Herakles bursts into their silence and asks, "Volcano time?" (144). While Herakles means it to be question, 'Is it time to go see the volcano?', Bundschuh argues that "Carsons truncation of the phrase creates a neologistic noun compound, "Volcano-time"" (Bundschuh 3). This volcano-time, Bundschuh explains, is an exploded temporality, comparable to the simultaneous presence of poetry, prose, and essay within the novel. In the novel's introduction, Carson suggests that the fragments of Stesichoros' *Geryoneis* read as if "Stesichoros had composed a substantial narrative poem then ripped it to pieces and buried the pieces in a box with some song lyrics and lecture notes and scraps of meat" (6-7), a statement which can be applied to *AOR* as well. "It includes the past, the present, and the future in one instant, while keeping them still separate" (Bundschuh 3). This is something the text itself does, on its own level of signification: not only does it show both the present context of the text and its origins, but it takes you back to them as well. The concept of time can be applied onto Barthes' double signification: where Carson takes the reader on a trip through many different times, she inevitably drags her character Geryon along with her, where he learns about his earlier lives. Geryon feels this as volcano-time: being so uncertain of his own identity and background that he feels like he cannot love others, in feeling everything so deeply even happiness hurts as those moments will eventually pass. Not loving the current Herakles but loving him still because he loved him once. Stopping time through photographs but immortalizing these moments at the same time. "Not touching / but

joined in astonishment as two cuts lie parallel in the same flesh". This is how Geryon feels, not only about him and Herakles, but about monster Geryon and human Geryon, Stesichoros Geryon and *AOR* Geryon, the Geryon experiencing the events in the novel and the Geryon as Carson wrote him later. They are all, in Barthes' definition, mythologies; stories of new parallel lives, words, names and concepts with their own endless significations, all necessary to form one new, modern, mythology.

Although it is never mentioned by Carson in *AOR* or becomes evident in her translations, Geryon's uncertainty about his background and, consequently, his immortality, can be seen in Stesichoros' original fragments. W.S. Barrett, a classical scholar, reader and translator of Greek literature, described as "one of the finest Hellenists of the second half of the twentieth century" (West 2006), discussed Stesichoros' *Geryoneis* in a collection of papers titled *Greek Lyric, Tragedy, and Textual Criticism*[2]. Barrett begins by laying down Geryon's ancestry, introducing him as "a monster whose father was a shadowy figure called Chrysaor, son of Poseidon by the Gorgon Medousa, and whose mother was the Okeanid Kallirrhoe" (Barrett 4). Barrett then establishes Geryon's immortality through an analysis of an original fragment of Stesichoros' *Geryoneis*, which consists of a speech held by Geryon. He is urged not to risk death by fighting Herakles and replies, in Barrett's translation: "do not try to frighten me by talking of death". Geryon goes on, "if I am going to be immortal and unaging in Olympos, it is better . . . [lacunose]; but if I am destined to old age amid mortal men, it is a far finer thing for me . . . [lacunose again, but without doubt 'to take my chance of death rather than incur disgrace']" (26). Geryon, unsure of his immortality, would rather fight

[2] In the collection, Barrett uses the restored Greek fragments of Stesichoros' *Geryoneis* as found in: D. L. Page, *Supplementum Lyricis Graecis,* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974 to base his findings and translations upon.

and risk death than not fight and be seen as cowardly because of it. Geryon's choice to fight implies a nobility, Barrett states, which "can only be enhanced by his rejection of possible immortality, and I have little doubt that it was solely in order to enhance it that Stesichoros was moved to introduce the question of immortality at all" (27). Barrett states in a footnote to this that he "should suppose the whole business of Geryon's possible immortality to be an invention of Stesichoros". Stesichoros was known for his inventions, and many of these became canonical. Barrett notes that prior to Stesichoros' fragments, Geryon had never been described as having wings; yet many artworks and texts written after *Geryoneis* began to depict Geryon as a winged creature. What Stesichoros' intentions were with these inventions remains unclear. However, in the case of the *Geryoneis*, it seems as though the wings add a poetic element to the story; an added means of defense in Geryon's fight with Herakles, adding a certain tragedy and with that a compassion felt by the reader towards the monster, which seems to be Stesichoros' goal taking his perspective in the first place.

Of course, the proposed immortality adds an even more tragic element to Geryon's eventual death – yet in Carson's text, it is transformed into something powerful, leading to the same decision to be honorable and fight back, yet without the tragic ending of our hero dying. That is, not physically – in a way, in *AOR*, Herakles does kill parts of Geryon. It is implied that, in their affair, Herakles emotionally abuses Geryon, bringing back traumatic childhood memories which return in the shape of Geryon's inner demons throughout the novel. Instead of choosing to fight – not because he's scared to die, but to make sure if he does die, he dies honorably – as he does in *Geryoneis,* resulting in his death, Geryon in *AOR* decides to fight back. He decides he will not let his love for Herakles become the end of him, and when a physical fight over Herakles with Ancash leaves him with "want to see you use those wings", in photograph *#1748*, Geryon leaps into the eye of the Icchantikas volcano. Just as in Stesichoros's fragments, Geryon faces an important battle with Herakles which might result

in his death. In Stesichoros, he decides to fight, yet dies because of it. In *AOR* we see this story inversed. Loving Herakles rather than fighting him is what would have killed Geryon in the end. Just as Geryon realizes he will love Herakles only in dreams of the old days, Herakles barges in, introducing the earlier discussed concept of Geryon's 'volcano-time'. In the chapter following this moment, Geryon decides it is indeed volcano time; time to face the biggest co-existing temporality in which he is both human and monster, mortal and immortal. Rather than fighting over Herakles with Ancash and letting Herakles' unrequited love kill him, Geryon survives because he decides to let Herakles go and embraces who he truly is.

The question is, however, whether this moment ever really happens in the story. As the photograph's description reads, it is a photo he never took. This might imply that the events described underneath the photograph never actually occurred, making Geryon's leap into the Icchantikas merely symbolizie a turn in Geryon's mindset. However, this description is Carson's; in Geryon's world, the events may have been and felt real. It becomes agonizingly clear, because of this single sentence falsifying the most important moment of the story, that perhaps Geryon's reality and Carson's depiction of it do not always coincide. This fits into the concept of Carson's hybrid and Geryon's volcano-time; two different realities, existing in seemingly parallel worlds, yet somehow always converging. This convergence present throughout the entire novel comes to its culmination through the question of Geryon's immortality and what happens in photograph *#1748*.

2.4 *Autobiography of Red* as a Modern Myth

After the many pretexts and before the main text begins, somewhere in between the cracks of the ancient myth of Herakles defeating the red winged monster Geryon and the traumatized little boy seeking a sense of identity, Carson has hidden another paratext, connecting everything around it:

The reticent volcano keeps

His never slumbering plan —
Confided are his projects pink
To no precarious man.

If nature will not tell the tale
Jehovah told to her
Can human nature not survive
Without a listener?

Admonished by her buckled lips
Let every babbler be
The only secret people keep
Is Immortality.

(Emily Dickinson, *No. 1748*, as cited in Anne Carson, 1998)

The poem, though prominently placed in between the two sections of the novel, seems to make little sense at first, and therefore might go unnoticed to many readers – much like the poem's title, number 1748, which is also the title of the second to last of Geryon's photographs. In the photograph, Geryon leaps into the heart of the volcano and smiles for the camera: "The Only Secret People Keep" (145), the chapter ends. According to Ancash's story, Geryon has dived into a volcano before, growing wings to fly out an immortal being – connecting right back to Dickinson's last line "The only secret people keep / Is Immortality".

"The reticent volcano", the poem begins; a description perfectly fitting Geryon. Quiet and reserved, but, with those characteristics, always contrasting his own state of being: a volcano filled with anger, emotion, fire. A volcano is always almost at a point of eruption – but only actually releases when it is ready to. The poem is most often read as depicting nature

as keeping its secrets to be revealed in its own timing, in contrast to humans who can never remain quiet: always writing mythologies of origins, filling in the gaps they find, sharing all findings with their neighbors. We have written stories of our findings throughout all of history - it seems as though, as Dickinson puts it, human nature cannot survive without listeners. The biggest secret nature keeps – the only thing we know nothing about, but which inevitably happens to all creatures – is death. As this is the only thing humans can tell nothing of, the only secret to nature they are left with is the opposite of death: immortality. If human nature cannot survive without listeners, it is exactly their inability to keep secrets which keeps them alive – in other words, we make ourselves immortal through telling stories.

Geryon, the red monster from Herakles' labors and Stesichoros' fragments, is the volcano; nature, keeping its secrets, turning inwards. The Geryon in *AOR* feels that this is a part of him, so whenever he is overwhelmed with life and his emotions, he feels red: he feels the volcano inside of him. The Geryon in *AOR*, however, is not merely a monster – he is human as well. And as Dickinson's poem states, human nature cannot survive without a listener. Although the ancient myth's monstrous Geryon burning inside him makes him insecure, unable to speak and share his secrets, *AOR*'s Geryon finds an alternative way to share his secrets, and tune into his humanity. Ancash's blue balances out the red inside of Geryon when his story of the eyewitnesses shows Geryon his immortality, an immortality which, following Dickinson's poem, actually makes him human. Geryon eventually realizes that he has, indeed, immortalized himself, through rewriting the ancient myth as a modern one, and with that, rewriting himself as much more than a red winged monster. By leaping into the volcano in photograph #1748, Geryon escapes death by Herakles, and rewrites his own ending.

The concept of rewriting something to take back an earlier statement and create a new ending or new truth is what Stesichoros coined as a 'palinode'. In Appendix A, Carson

explains the term as ""Counter song", or "saying the opposite of what you said before." E.g., for writing abuse of Helen Stesichoros was struck blind but then he wrote for her an encomium and got his sight back. The encomium came out of a dream and is called "the Palinode"" (Carson 15). In Appendix B, Carson presents us with the palinode: "No it is not the true story. No you never went on the benched ships. No you never came to the towers of Troy" (17). Stesichoros writes himself as interacting with a character out of the mythologies he writes about, which is strange. In Appendix C, titled, "Clearing Up The Question of Stesichoros' Blinding By Helen", Carson attempts to deduce whether Stesichoros actually lost his sight because of Helen or not, but she gets caught up in her own reasoning. She begins[3]: "1. Either Stesichoros was a blind man or he was not" (18) and then continues to reason about where this blindness may have come from and whether Helen caused it. Carson continues: "6. If Helen had her reasons the reasons arose out of some remark Stesichoros made or they did not" (Ibid.). After writing his palinode taking back this particular remark, it becomes uncertain whether the original remark was a lie or not. Carson continues:

> 9. If it was not a lie we are now in reverse and by continuing to reason in this way are likely to arrive back at the beginning of the question of the blinding of Stesichoros or we are not
>
> 10. If we are now in reverse and by continuing to reason in this way are likely to arrive back at the beginning of the question of the blinding of Stesichoros either we will go along without incident or we will meet Stesichoros on our way back.
>
> 11. If we meet Stesichoros on our way back either we will keep quiet or we will look him in the eye and ask him what he thinks of Helen.

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[3] For full quote, see Appendix A, as each step of this reasoning is, to some extent, relevant to an analysis of its conclusion.

12. If we look Stesichoros in the eye and ask him what he thinks of Helen either he will tell the truth or he will lie.

12. If Stesichoros lies either we will know at once that he is lying or we will be fooled because now that we are in reverse the whole landscape looks inside out (Carson 19).

These appendixes are placed in between the introduction followed by the fragments of Stesichoros, and the main text *AOR: A Romance*. The reader thus has little context when first reading these texts. Looking back after having read the novel, it becomes clear that perhaps Carson has warned us from the beginning. Because Stesichoros' palinode makes it unclear whether his original statement about Helen was a lie or not, and therefore whether he is a liar, we can never be sure whether what he tells of Geryon was true. If Carson does not know whether what Stesichoros told of Geryon is true, Carson cannot be telling the truth about him either. Carson cannot take full agency for *AOR*, which leaves us going in reverse; and if we are in reverse, she says, we will meet Stesichoros on the way back. Carson reasons further: "14. If we are fooled because now that we are in reverse the whole landscape looks inside out either we will find that we do not have a single penny on us or we will call up Helen and tell her the good news" (Carson 20). From this step onwards, after it becomes clear that we may indeed be in reverse, Carson seems to be making us doubt her truthfulness in the same way Stesichoros did after claiming Helen was the cause of the loss of his eyesight, making the reader believe she can simply call up Helen, a fictional character of ancient Greek mythology, to ask her a question. Carson continues:

18. If Stesichoros admits he is a liar either we will melt into the crowd or we will stay to see how Helen reacts.

19. If we stay to see how Helen reacts either we will find ourselves pleasantly surprised by her dialectical abilities or we will be taken downtown by the police for questioning.

20. If we are taken downtown by the police for questioning either we will be expected (as eyewitnesses) to clear up once and for all the question whether Stesichoros was a blind man or not.

21. If Stesichoros was a blind man either we will lie or we will not. (Ibid.)

If we are indeed, as Carson suggests, in reverse, we have no way of figuring out what the answer is to this last question. As Carson does not know the truth about Geryon, however, it is impossible for her to be telling it herself, although an eyewitness – implying that perhaps not every eyewitness tells the truth of what they saw in the volcano. Geryon may not be telling the truth as, in *AOR*, he creates a palinode in the form of a palimpsest of his own previous life story, changing his own ending. Carson, however, may not be either, as after it seems like Geryon has gained an agency within *AOR*, she puts this ending in a doubtful light by noting only after the fact that perhaps the photograph of Geryon leaping into the volcano may never have been taken. But if she lied about this – perhaps Geryon never took back his ending as well – as even in the palimpsest that Geryon created out of *AOR*, she makes sure the traces of his earlier lives will never be forgotten.

Although the photograph and Carson's introduction of it seems to confirm that, like Stesichoros, she may be lying, this only goes if we were truly, from 12 onwards, in reverse. Perhaps we recognize Stesichoros as a liar right away and we know from that point onwards whether what he says is true or false. We move into the flipside of Carson's reasoning, exploring the other options. If we recognize Stesichoros as a liar right away and we know from that point onwards whether what he says is true or false we know the truth about Geryon as well. If we know the truth about Geryon, we know whether what Carson says is true or false. If we know whether what Carson says is true or false, we will know which parts of *AOR* are true or false, and we will know Geryon's true ending. If we know Geryon's true ending, we are not in reverse, and we will not meet Stesichoros on our way back. We arrive at

photograph *#1748*, one which may or may not have been taken; Geryon leaps into the eye of the volcano; Geryon is either an eyewitness, immortal, and survives flying into the volcano, as he has before, or he is not immortal, and only lives to see the last chapter because he never tried to figure out whether he is immortal. Though Carson does not show it in *AOR*, Geryon has this exact internal dilemma before Herakles kills him in Stesichoros' fragments. In Stesichoros' story, Geryon dies, and we know he is not immortal, but he is still a monster. In *AOR*, his immortality is exactly what makes him a monster, but perhaps one less bad as he used to think. Carson has made it clear that, much like Geryon does throughout the story, we do not know where we stand. She ascribes immortality to Geryon, literally, one last time in the very last sentence of *AOR: A Romance*: "And now time is rushing towards them / where they stand side by side with arms touching, immortality at their faces, night at their back". His immortality, suddenly, is shared – perhaps, thus, symbolical, meaning the photograph was indeed never taken and Geryon is the monster he was in Stesichoros rather than an eyewitnesses telling us Stesichoros has been a liar all this time. And as it turns out – he was. The last sentence of *AOR: A Romance* is not the last sentence of *AOR: A Novel in Verse*, because it is, in fact – as it tells us from its very title – a novel inverse. We do indeed meet Stesichoros on our way back: "Interview", the very last sequence, shows an "I" interviewing Stesichoros. This I might be a play on words such as novel in verse and mean "eye", as in eyewitness, as in the eye of the volcano; it might mean Icchantikas, the volcano, symbolizing Geryon; or Carson recognizing her first-person voice for the first time within the novel, acknowledging she is the one with the most agency in *AOR* after all. "11. If we meet Stesichoros on our way back either we will keep quiet or we will look him in the eye and ask him what he thinks of Helen.", Carson states. But with this interview, she shows us that perhaps there has been a third option to these reasonings all along. Because this "I" does not keep quiet, and it does not look him in the eye and ask him what he thinks of Helen. If there is

a third option, we are still not sure whether Stesichoros or Carson are liars. "I" asks Stesichoros, "How about our little hero Geryon", and Stesichoros answers: "Exactly it is red that I like and there is a link between geology and character" (149). If there is a link between geology and character, either Geryon is red because he comes from the red place or Geryon is red because he has survived the volcano and came out an eyewitness. "What is this link", our "I" also wonders. "I have often wondered", Stesichoros replies. "Identity memory eternity your constant themes", "I" says – coincidentally, or perhaps not, the most important themes, looking back, of *AOR* as well. "S: And how can regret be red and might it be / "I: Which brings us to Helen" (Ibid.), the interview continues, a last chance of figuring out which option, and therefore which possible outcome, Carson's reasoning leads to. "There is no Helen", Stesichoros replies, leading the conversation away from an answer to our questions. If there is no Helen, perhaps Stesichoros admits in this way he is a liar, because if there is no Helen she cannot have blinded him. And there is no Helen, no real one; but even though perhaps her influence on the blindness itself may not have been real, Helen still played her part in Stesichoros' rewriting of mythology; and has, through *AOR*, gained a role in another, modern, mythology.

Carson explains Stesichoros' palinode in the beginning of the novel, before the main text begins, and follows this up with a reasoning of why Stesichoros' statements on the reason behind his palinode make him a liar, and where this puts the story that will follow. The main text follows, showing Geryon as a reflection of both Stesichoros' and Carson's text: fragments of a hybrid, monstrous, other; not quite one thing and not quite the other. Stesichoros' and Carson's text seem self-aware and at times even proud of their hybridity but Geryon has not come to terms with his fragmented identity yet. Geryon questions his identity, an important element in most of the events presented in the main text, *AOR: A Romance*. Carson then follows up the main text with a postface, "Interview", referring back to her

reasoning shown in the pretext. This confirms the fragmented role the main text plays in the world of Steschichoros' palinode and the novel's other pretexts and informs the reader about Geryon's ealier lives in other texts. This suggests that because Geryon's identity was ambiguous in all different texts, Carson decided that the only way she could write about this character was to create yet another identity for Geryon, adding to this ambiguity; this time, in reference to Stesichoros' palinode, she gave Geryon more agency. In *AOR*, Geryon rewrites his own identity, as he himself would like to have seen it: as an eyewitness, which, according to how Ancash tells the story, is somewhat of a hybrid, being a monster and a hero. This new layer of identity combining his earlier two forms, is the same layer *AOR* adds to the myths Geryon was a part of before. *AOR* combines Geryon's monstrosity of the original myth of Herakles and Stesichoros's new perspective, blending their forms of prose and poetry and leaving elements and these and other relevant texts scattered around the main text, so the reader does not know exactly which text they are reading anymore, and which part belongs to which. The Geryon in *AOR* is a modern version of who he was in the original myth: a character with multiple sides, with agency over his own story. *AOR* is, in this same manner, a modern version of the original myth: a novel with multiple genres, multiple perspectives, layers, and added pre- and post-texts. This makes *AOR* an important example of what we defined earlier as a modern myth.

Conclusion

When regarding the references to and borrowed elements of ancient myth in Anne Carson's *Autobiography of Red*, one might wonder whether the novel is not, in itself, a myth. If it is a myth, would it be a modern one? How would one define the modern myth? These are very layered questions, which have shown to lead to an even wider variety of answers. An inevitable element of the myth is that it is defined by the society that produces it. This means that as time passes, myths themselves change, but our definition of what a myth entails changes as well, producing an ever-expanding genre. To stop a process like this in its tracks and define its current status is difficult, but taking a step back, one might find that the variety of answers to these questions becomes the essence of what the modern myth entails: the modern myth is a layered one. This layering as the essence of the modern myth, as has been set out in this thesis, is exemplified perfectly though Anne Carson *Autobiography of Red*.

Autobiography of Red shows a wide variety of transtextual relationships, both implicitly and explicitly. The different types of transtextual relationships as described by Gérard Genette in his 1982 book *Palimpsests* are not only all present in the novel but overlap and at times even interact. Textual elements such as quotes, allusions, paratexts and hypotexts shed light on the novel's connection to its characters' earlier lives and the texts that set these out. When applying these findings to mythological texts specifically, keeping in mind the myth's ever-changing meaning and function, we may find a new definition of mythology suggested by Roland Barthes in his 1972 book *Mythologies*. In the book, Barthes uses the word 'myth' to describe the way in which our associations and connotations of something influences our perception of the subject. Barthes illustrates this concept of myth through Ferdinand de Saussure's concept of the sign, suggesting a second level of signification present when the phenomenon of myth occurs, in which an already full sign becomes a signifier again, resulting in a new, more layered sign. Applying this theory to the intertextual

relationships occurring in *AOR*, of which an example is shown in figure 2, supports our proposed definition of the modern myth as one more layered than its predecessor.

The modern myth, then, is a palimpsest; a new text scarred by traces of earlier texts, which can undeniably be said of both *AOR* as a novel and the layered characters it produces. In the case of *AOR,* the newly written story is already so intricate that its characters, at some point, begin to ache at the sight of traces of earlier lives on top of their current misery. For Geryon, this leads to a conflict within his very identity - a conflict Geryon never solves, but eventually accepts, and even embraces toward the end of the main text. It seems as through Carson wondered, before taking on the perspective of the monster from Herakles' tenth labor and Stesichoros' *Geryoneis*, how she could truly convey the essence of the character through her novel and soon realized that the essence of Geryon has always been precisely that uncertainty surrounding his identity and background. She wrote an ending for Geryon, but then, mirroring Stesichoros' palinode, adds a note to it that tells the reader the events from this ending may have never actually happened. The ending shows, either way, that this time around Geryon has accepted the uncertainty as a part of who he is, adding a sense of persistence and confidence to the character that was not present in any earlier texts he occurred in. By letting influences and traces of earlier texts reign free within the novel and making the uncertainty surrounding his background the very battle Geryon has to face in *AOR*, Carson gives an agency to the character that both honors his previous lives and gives him the chance to live a new one. Carson hints at there being multiple worlds, realities and layers to the novel through the use of her own agency as well, purposely making the reader doubt her own truthfulness before the main text even begins, and then following an already uncertain ending up with an interview not resolving these doubts but emphasizing them even more. This intricate web of connected parallel realities both in the novel's form and within the main text shows the modern myth at work. A connection between two realities shows itself in

between the different elements of the novel when Carson presents two different texts in which the character Geryon occurs. It quickly becomes clear that Carson's Geryon is not the same as Stesichoros' Geryon. Hers has more self-awareness, more agency, and more humanity in him. This self-awareness becomes clear through the parallel realities present not only through the texts form, but Geryon's life in the main text as well: the concept he describes as 'volcano time' runs like a common red thread through the entire main text. ""Not touching", Geryon regards his relationship with Herakles, "but joined in astonishment as two cuts lie parallel in the same flesh". This can be said of Stescihoros' Geryon and Carson's Geryon as well; of Carson's novel and of the main text as a separate one: two cuts lying parallel in the same flesh – until it becomes unclear from which of both cuts the blood is coming. While reading the novel, Carson's hints, pre- and post-texts and Geryon's pain blends into a mess of red; for a novel to structured, it becomes clear soon enough that Carson's heart lies in poetry, and as does Geryon's – and that *Autobiography of Red* is not a novel in verse, but a novel inverse.

The modern myth is a layered one, but like Barthes's process of signification, some layers are fuller – more layered, one might say – than others. The modern myth builds itself from remains of its predecessors, then adds more exhaustive layers to it. This new type of mythology will one day decay, but its remaining fragments may begin to form the basis for a new kind of mythology; or perhaps its very definition may change again soon. This uncertainty leaves us with only one certain characteristic of myth that will never change: a myth is not only shaped by the society that produces it, but also shapes the paths that that society will walk next. And as we have learned from Emily Dickinson, we humans cannot survive without a listener; so inevitably, our modern myths will shape the way in which we will someday tell the stories that come next. Because "After a story is told," Carson once wrote, "there are some moments of silence. Then words begin again" (Carson 1995 146).

Afterword

I fell in love with Anne Carson's writing ever since I first ran into a quote from her collection *Plainwater: Essays and Poetry* years ago: "After a story is told there are some moments of silence. Then words begin again". Throughout my studies of English literature, I have always been fascinated with the idea of a text being referred to long after its publication, the moment a text begins to take on a life of its own. As a writer, I know it can be hard to let go of a text and let it out into the world – but as a reader, I believe that the afterlife of a text often becomes more interesting than a text itself. As the above quote comes from a chapter in the collection titled *Afterword*, it felt appropriate to add an afterword to this thesis, and honor Carson with a touch of transtextuality.

Though I have grown familiar with every nook and cranny of *Autobiography of Red*, the last lines never seemed to entirely make sense to me, which led to many frustrations during the writing process. At the end of the interview with Stesichoros, he tells the unidentified "I" that he is glad they never asked him about the little red dog. Though the dog seems to be an essential part of Greek mythology's Geryon and is mentioned by Stesichoros in *Geryoneis*, Carson never mentions the dog throughout her entire novel. The night I finished my first full draft, it began to bother me even more that there seemed to be one puzzle piece I could not find. When explaining these frustrations to someone very close to me, he replied with a simple "maybe it has to do with part two?". I got my copy of *Red Doc>* from the shelve, read the title and everything fell into place: the puzzle piece did not fit because this puzzle was already complete – I had found a new piece, one belonging to a whole other puzzle. I made the decision not to go into the novel's sequel in this thesis as I had already chosen a broad subject matter, but decided to reread it to see just how this last line fit into my findings about *AOR*. As Carson published this sequel fifteen years later, it had never occurred to me that the last line of *AOR* would introduce it so well, and though it may not have been

intentional, it felt to me like both puzzles were finally complete. Though not in every aspect relevant to this thesis, my newfound understanding of the last lines of *AOR* played a large role in feeling like my thesis was truly finished after working on it for a year. I have therefore decided to present my findings about the last line of *Autobiography of Red* and its connection to the novel's sequel *Red Doc>* in a short essay which can be found in Appendix B.

I am certain that the character of Geryon will take on new forms with the passing of time but am happy to have Carson's Geryon immortalized – at last – through *Autobiography of Red* forever; and for me, in some way, through this thesis.

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Appendix A

CLEARING UP

THE QUESTION OF

STESICHOROS' BLINDING

BY HELEN

1. Either Stesichoros was a blind man or he was not.
2. If Stesichoros was a blind man either his blindness was a temporary condition or it was permanent.
3. If Stesichoros' blindness was a temporary condition this condition either had a contingent cause or it had none.
4. If this condition had a contingent cause that cause was Helen or the cause was not Helen.
5. If the cause was Helen Helen had her reasons or she had none.
6. If Helen had her reasons the reasons arose out of some remark Stesichoros made or they did not.
7. If Helen's reasons arose out of some remark Stesichoros made either it was a strong remark about Helen's sexual misconduct (not to say its unsavory aftermath the Fall of Troy) or it was not.
8. If it was a strong remark about Helen's sexual misconduct (not to say its unsavory aftermath the Fall of Troy) either this remark was a lie or it was not.
9. If it was not a lie either we are now in reverse and by continuing to reason in this way are likely to arrive 'back at the beginning of the question of the blinding of Stesichoros or we are not.

10. If we are now in reverse and by continuing to reason in this way are likely to arrive back at the beginning of the question of the blinding of Stesichoros either we will go along without incident or we will meet Stesichoros on our way back.

11. If we meet Stesichoros on our way back either we will keep quiet or we will look him in the eye and ask him what he thinks of Helen.'

'12. If we look Stesichoros in the eye and ask him what he thinks of Helen either he will tell the truth or he will lie.

13. If Stesichoros lies either we will know at once that he is lying or we will be fooled because now that we are in reverse the whole landscape looks inside out.

14. If we are fooled because now that we are in reverse the whole landscape looks inside out either we will find that we do not have a single penny on us or we will call Helen up and tell her the good news.

15. If we call Helen up either she will sit with her glass of vermouth and let it ring or she will answer.

16. If she answers either we will (as they say) leave well enough alone or we will put Stesichoros on.

17. If we put Stesichoros on either he will contend that he now sees more clearly than ever before the truth about her whoring or he will admit he is a liar.

18. If Stesichoros admits he is a liar either we will melt into the crowd or we will stay to see how Helen reacts.

19. If we stay to see how Helen reacts either we will find ourselves pleasantly surprised by her dialectical abilities or we will be taken downtown by the police for questioning.

20. If we are taken downtown by the police for questioning either we will be expected (as eyewitnesses) to clear up once and for all the question whether Stesichoros was a blind man or not.

21. If Stesichoros was a blind man either we will lie or if not not.

From: “Clearing up the Question of Stesichoros’ Blinding by Helen”. Carson, Anne. *Autobiography of Red: A Novel in Verse*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1998, pp. 18-20.

Appendix B

The Little Red Dog: A Short Analysis of Anne Carson's *Red Doc>*

Anne Carson published her 'novel in verse' *Autobiography of Red* in 1998, a prose and poetry hybrid telling the story of a red-winged monster from Greek mythology, reimagined in a modern setting. The novel left many readers wondering what happened to its characters after - and it seems Carson wondered the same thing. Fifteen years later, in 2013, she published *Red Doc>*, a sequel to *Autobiography of Red* documenting what happens to Geryon and Herakles in adulthood. *Red Doc>* tells the story of a grown-up Geryon, illustrated through centered paragraphs racing down the pages in straight lines. These paragraphs are at times interrupted by the mysterious voice "Wife of Brain", narrating the story in more poetical paragraphs. Because of this narrative, the novel reads more like a play, creating distance between the reader and the story. The distance created through the change in narrative mirrors a more distanced, adult Geryon, much more confident and at peace than he was in *Autobiography of Red*. Where *Autobiography of Red* showed Geryon's search for an identity from his own perspective, *Red Doc>* documents Geryon's adult life from the outside looking in, a shift in perspective that seems to be a result from a change in Geryon's character since *Autobiography of Red*.

Autobiography of Red ends with an invented interview by an unknown "I" with Stesichoros, who first took the perspective of Geryon in his ancient text *Geryoneis*. This unknown "I" confronts Stesichoros, doubting his blindness and his truthfulness. After "I" says their time is up, the interview – and with that, the novel – ends on a mysterious note: "S: So glad you didn't ask about the little red dog / I: Next time / S: That's three" (Carson 1998 149). In *Red Doc>*, it seems 'next time' has arrived and "I" has begun to ask Stesichoros about the

little red dog – and the novel documents his answer. In both the ancient myth of Herakles and Stesichoros' *Geryoneis*, Geryon is accompanied by his little red dog. Yet in *Autobiography of Red*, the dog is never mentioned – which makes Caron's sudden mention of it in the interview seem out of place.

"Myths are stories about people who become too big for their lives temporarily", Carson states in the preface to her 2006 novel *Grief Lessons*. This happens to Geryon when he finally gets a chance to show his inside world in *Autobiography of Red* but cannot seem to escape his earlier lives in ancient myth and Stesichoros' *Geryoneis*. Overwhelmed by the multitude of parallel identities too big for one life to hold, Geryon gets lost trying to find himself, and *Autobiography of Red* tells the myth of those events. It seems in *Red Doc>,* Geryon has shrunk to his true size, fitting right into a normal, adult life - because as Carson warns on the jacket copy of *Red Doc>*, "to live past the end of your myth is a perilous thing". *Red Doc>* shows us the life of Geryon past his myth's end, but the perspective has shifted: the story shows the view of outsider, one who may or may not have read *Autobiography of Red*, filling in the gaps with what they know from the ancient myths: Geryon as a monster with a little red dog who peacefully herds his cattle. This essay will explore the way in which the amplification of these characteristics in *Red Doc>* create a shift in perspective, representing a change in Geryon's character since adulthood.

Geryon is placed into an everyday adult-life setting from the very start of *Red Doc>* "Angry why is / everyone always angry on / TV. He shuts it off and / pulls the plug" (Carson 2013 7). Suddenly we get details of his normal life instead of just his inside world and learn about everyday subjects such as his herd, the state of his relationship with his mother and what he does in daily life. Carson has left *Autobiography of Red*'s poetry format showing Geryon's chaotic mind though skipped lines, lack of punctuation and endless behind and switches to a documenting form in *Red Doc>*, organized into centered paragraphs racing

straight over the pages. Geryon moves through time with tunnel vision, leaving his immortality behind and accepting things for what they are. In this new life, somehow Geryon found his way back to Herakles, now called Sad, short for Sad But Great. After leaving his cattle behind Geryon thinks "between us and animals is a namelessness (…)", and he wonders why "when choosing to name animals we pretend they are objects (Spot) or virtues (Beauty) or just other Selves (Bob)" (136). Where does this place the renaming of humans after an emotion? Between *Autobiography of Red* and *Red Doc>,* Herakles has gone to war, now a veteran with PTSD: the name Sad sums up his new state of being, but also describes the emotion Geryon most associates him with. Geryon himself has been renamed in *Red Doc>* as well, now referred to only as "G". Between us and animals is a namelessness, and it seems Geryon has lost most of his name. This might represent how after his search for humanity in *Autobiography of Red*, in *Red Doc>* Geryon has tuned into his animal side, desensitized after the events of *Autobiography of Red*, wild but calm and calculated when necessary. The "Wife of Brain" warns the reader: "don't say you weren't expecting a volcano those / red wings / that not even bad love can / tame" (123). And although it seemed the bad love had tamed Geryon's wings, they have returned in *Red Doc>*, and they seem more natural and normal than ever.

In *Autobiography of* Red, it was uncertain whether Geryon was more monster or more human, and his struggle growing up came from overthinking which of either was worse. *Red Doc>,* on the other hand, shows Geryon beginning to live more instinctively. He lives in a small hut with only his cattle as company. The animals seem to provide the comfort Geryon missed in *Autobiography of Red* whenever he dug too deep into his inside world: metaphors of red emotions have replaced with "Gravel shifts behind him. Perhaps the deer" (7) and "The oxen arrive softly around him" (15). His mind has quieted down since *Autobiography of Red*, creating space for the reader to sit with Geryon as he listens to the sounds of the birds singing

– that is, until he runs into Sad. After this, Geryon and Sad decide to take a trip together and end up spending time living in a glacier in a cave. The glacier seems almost an opposite to the volcano, which represented Geryon's anger and discomfort with his own monstrosity in *Autobiography of Red*. In *Red Doc>*, there is no anger left in Geryon. The only anger in *Red Doc>* is Sad's, but being a result of his PTSD, this inner anger shows itself through an emotionlessness. For Sad, this detachment is nothing new: the disconnect between Herakles' detachment and Geryon's overflowing volcano of emotions is what led to their romance ending in *Autobiography of Red*. It seems, however, that in *Red Doc>* this volcano has become inactive: Geryon's heated youthful anger has simmered down and made place for detachment and silence in the larger part of *Red Doc>*. This detachment is emphasized further through the change in narrative, dissolving the humanity Geryon found and learned to embrace in *Autobiography of Red* and replace it with a kind of monstrosity again.

Towards the end of the novel, Geryon finds himself at his dying mother's bedside, and for a brief moment we see glimpses of humanity returning in Geryon. Mortality becomes more present and tangible than ever in his life, and suddenly everything before it seems unimportant: "In later years this is the one memory he wished would go away and not come back", Carson writes, "And the reason he cannot bear her dying is not the loss of her (which is the future) but that dying puts the two of them in this nakedness together that is unforgivable." (154). Geryon begins to dig deeper into himself again, as we saw in *Autobiography of Red*, and with Geryon watches a van drive of with his mother's coffin: "Here it is the promised clearing where great stags are running at liberty. Say a man has been carrying a mother on the front of his life all these years now she is ripped off now his life if as light as air – should he believe it?" (155). It seems as though Geryon realizes the pain he has felt all his life should be gone now that his mother is, but he is unable to truly let it go. Geryon considers the way the rain touches everything and leaves traces of its history behind –

much like his mother's pain did on his own life. Then once again, Carson ends the novel on an open note: "Well not every day can be a masterpiece / This one sails out and out / and out" (164).

Carson introduces the main text of *Autobiography of Red* with the poem *No. 1748* by Emily Dickinson, regarding nature's secrets and humans' need to share their stories, creating a secret immortality of humans that nature will not ever know. Whereas in *Autobiography of Red*, we saw Geryon as a hybrid of monster and human, it seems in *Red Doc>* Geryon has decided that immortality is nothing to desire: he has found peace with his animal or monster side, living in a hut with his herd, simply accepting anything that comes on his path. Perhaps he has realized that it was precisely his humanity, feeling every emotion so heavily and sharing every thought, that was holding him back throughout his youth and adolescence; in adult life, he has begun to stay quiet, to remain distant. Though this behavior seems to be the result of pain and trauma caused by the events of *Autobiography of Red* and his mother's death in *Red Doc>*, his pessimism has turned into acceptance – and with that, it seems, a newfound peace.

To live past your myth is a perilous thing, Carson states in her introduction to *Red Doc>* – and it quickly becomes clear that she is well-aware of the perils she has put her red monster through. After giving Geryon a new life searching for an identity in *Autobiography of Red*, Carson makes it unclear in her ending whether he finds it; then, showing Geryon's more settled-down, adult daily life in *Red Doc>* she distances him from the reader, leaving them even more uncertain about who Geryon has become. Despite this open ending, the reader is more content saying their goodbyes the second time around – much like Geryon himself. He has hardened in *Red Doc>*, replacing the shield he created around himself in youth and adolescence with actual strength and a newfound peace. This peace is amplified by the voice of the "Wife of Brain" narrating the story from a distance, greatly contrasting the chaos of

Geryon's racing thoughts in *Autobiography of Red*. As the novel's title suggests, it is a documentation rather than an autobiography. When said out loud, the title sounds like *red dog*: the red dog was an essential part of Geryon's character in the ancient myth he first appeared in, but it was left out by Carson in *Autobiography of Red* as it was not the part of Geryon she wanted to explore. *Autobiography of Red* shows Geryon's inside world, but in *Red Doc>,* it feels like the reader is merely walking by his hut, cattle grazing around it, with a little red dog sitting behind the window. This little red dog, or *Red Doc>,* represents who Geryon is in the outside world, an image enabling the reader to finally fill in the gaps of the rest of his life.

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