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**Flying into the eye of the volcano: Dickinson's volcano imagery in Anne Carson's  
*Autobiography of Red***

**Abstract:**

The dissembling six sections surrounding the romance at the core of Carson's verse novel *Autobiography of Red* can arguably be read as a series of 'frameworks' that set up the 'Geryon Matter' as a story that can be told in many ways, as Carson asserts in the opening of her text. Taken together, these six extant sections signpost Carson's treatment of mythic subjectivity as a non-sacrificial construct read against the verse narrative section of her text, subtitled 'A Romance'.

Carson's excavation of mythic subjectivity entails not only reading across the gaps and between the lines of her re-visioning of the ancient Greek poet Stesichoros' *Geryoneis*, but also paying attention to the *infrared* intensity with which she deconstructs issues of gender and genre in *Autobiography of Red*. In this paper, I focus only on the verse narrative section of her text. Linking the incidence of an Andean mythic tale with Geryon's emergent freedom from his ex-lover Herakles' embrace, I suggest that Carson underwrites the Andean Yazcol Yazcamac myth as the turning point in Geryon's formal 'autobiography'. Carson's poetic alignment with Emily Dickinson's 'reticent volcano' foregrounds the energies of resistance and inscription that characterise Geryon's 'autobiography' overall. I argue that Carson's deployment of volcano imagery in *Autobiography of Red* exposes the construction of gender and the work of the gaze in mythic narratives whose re-reading calls the notion of being 'red/read' into question. Geryon's photographic experiments hence mirror Carson's own poetic techniques in *Autobiography of Red*.

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**Key words:** Myth, Subjectivity, Poetic Techniques, Fault lines and Storylines

## Introduction

For Canadian poet and classics scholar Anne Carson, Eros is never a simple matter. In her highly acclaimed book, *Autobiography of Red: a Novel in Verse* (1998), the problem of Eros occupies Carson's red-winged protagonist, Geryon, for the duration of the romance section of the text: 'How people get power over one another, / this mystery' (Carson 1998: 79). Carson structures her text so that this theme becomes second only in urgency to, and ultimately implicated in, Geryon's other driving question, a question cast as his 'favourite': 'What is time made of?' (80). These two unnerving questions, one pertaining to power and the other to the matter of time, underwrite Carson's excavation of mythic subjectivity throughout all seven sections of *Autobiography of Red*.

In relation to the Greek roots of the Geryon story in the romance section of her text, Carson tackles the historic victimisation of the Geryon figure by rendering the gaps in Geryon's 'autobiography' a matter of mobile form: dynamic (incendiary) spaces that transition from the red tomato sculpture of his earliest self-portrait in the poem 'Tuesdays', to the sequence of photographs, or photo-poem-essays, that depict Geryon's emergent process of becoming both subject and object in the still-life lesson of his own (textual) self-portrait. The eight photo-poem-essays that conclude this section of the text thus present a complex sounding of fault lines across issues of gender and genre in *Autobiography of Red*, dramatically culminating in this section's penultimate piece, 'XLVI. PHOTOGRAPHS: # 1748'. As scholar Ian Rae suggests, 'Dickinson's interjected fragment [...] enters the narrative abruptly, yet comes close enough to the end of the romance to frame it' (Rae 2008: 247). Indeed, in this penultimate piece, I suggest that Carson implicitly addresses her protagonist's questions on power and time, while also reinstating the Dickinsonian mystery at the heart of her text.

In this paper, I consider the function of this forty-sixth poem in *Autobiography of Red* in relation to Emily Dickinson's volcano poem #1748. I argue that Carson's elicitation of Dickinson's volcano imagery, as exemplified in this singular instance, operates as one of the multiple ways Carson frames her excavation of mythic subjectivity with notions of 'women's time'. Carson's italicised epigraph to the romance section quotes Dickinson's poem in full:

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

The prominent location of Dickinson's poem in Carson's text effectively frames Carson's contemporary rendering of the Geryon story as a novel in verse. In keeping with Carson's spirit of wit, it can also be read as a novel *inverse*. As Ian Rae observes, '[t]he romance within the *roman* suggests a duplicity befitting the novel's second version of the Geryon myth' (Rae, 2008: 242). Dickinson's #1748 poem thus focalises Carson's re-telling of Geryon's *bios* from childhood to post-adolescence by serving as both epigraph and imprimatur for the verse novel's dramatic finale: the impossible yet fitting flight into the literal eye of the volcano *Icchantikas*, as evoked in Carson's penultimate lyric:

XLVI. PHOTOGRAPHS: # 1748

It is a photograph he never took, no one here took it.

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Geryon is standing beside the bed in his overcoat watching Ancash struggle awake.

He has the tape recorder in hand.

When he sees Ancash's eyes open he says, *How long are the batteries good for?*

*About three hours, Ancash answers*

sleepily from the pillow. *Why? What are you up to? What time is it anyway?*

*About four-thirty, says Geryon, go back to sleep.*

Ancash mumbles a word and slides back under his dream. *Want to give you*

*something to remember me by,*

whispers Geryon closing the door. He has not flown for years but why not

be a

black speck raking its way toward the crater of Icchantikas on icy possibles, why not rotate

the inhuman Andes at a personal angle and retreat when it spins—if it does and if not, win

bolts of wind like slaps of wood and the bitter red drumming of wing muscles on air—he flicks Record.

*This is for Ancash,* he calls to the earth diminishing below. This is a memory of our beauty. He peers down

at the earth heart of Icchantikas dumping all its photons out her ancient eye and he smiles for

the camera: “The Only Secret People Keep”.

(from *Autobiography of Red*, p. 145)

The volcanic imagery made explicit by this singular instance of a frame-within-a-frame, serves on the one hand to underwrite Carson's revisioning of gendered subjectivity across the many forms that Geryon's 'autobiography' adopts. On the other hand, the volcano dramatizes Geryon's central paradox: the ambiguity of his own 'autobiographic' inquiry into the being of red/read. In fact, Carson's synaesthetic evocation of volcanic speech in this forty-sixth poem also proffers a complex example of non-human self-portraiture. I will take up this point in more detail shortly. For now, I wish to suggest that Carson's conflation of auditory and visual realms concurs with the dissolution of other binaries in this instance, (nature/culture, human/monster, male/female), thus evoking the perplexing matter of what a self *is* in Carson's work. In the romance section of Carson's text, Geryon's *bios* depicts an ongoing

enigma: a Kristevan textual 'subject-in-process-and-on-trial', inflected by both the poetry and voice of Emily Dickinson herself.

### **Volcano imagery in Dickinson's poetics**

'In Dickinson's case, there is evidence that confirms the connection between volcano imagery and women's issues,' scholar David Reynolds asserts (2002: 183). Reading the volcano as a popular image in American women's fiction in the mid-1850s, an image that 'represents the quiet but inwardly explosive woman who was denied a viable outlet for her energies' (187), Reynolds locates Dickinson ingenious fusion of contradictory female stereotypes within the cultural contexts of acute female repression that marked her time. 'Dickinson brought a full self-consciousness to the use of volcano imagery, recognising that it applied both to women's lives and to women's literary style,' Reynolds avers (2002: 183). He attributes a sophistication to Dickinson's strategies of fusion, connecting her use of the volcano image with that of the loaded gun, for instance, in ways that 'set[] off a string of lively metaphorical associations that themselves constitute the aggressiveness of the woman writer' (187).

Commentator Helen McNeil also remarks upon the extant problem of female tradition in Dickinson's time. She notes Dickinson's epistolary reference to a particular passage in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's verse novel *Aurora Leigh*, where Aurora's credo takes in '[t]he full-veined, heaving, double-breasted Age', thus locating the metaphoric source of her writing as welling from the female body: 'Dickinson's volcano imagery has a powerful antecedent in this passage: the heaving breast is transformed into the lava of song' (McNeill 1986: 153-4).

Scholar Judith Farr concurs: 'The volcano is [Dickinson's] symbol for passion suppressed, not only love but rage' (1992: 213). Yet Dickinson's poetic range (and rage) goes beyond the popular fiction of her day. As essayist Daneen Wardrop contends, '[t]he experience of disjunctive identity, one of the hallmarks of modernism and postmodernism, is an area Dickinson pioneered' (Wardrop 2002: 142). Focusing on the 'splitting, conflicted, shattering subject' of Dickinson's poetics, Wardrop's insightful essay demonstrates how 'Dickinson conveys identities that are unstable, "always in process", [moving] between singular and plural and male and female subject positions in disconcerting, shifting pronouns' (Wardrop, 2002: 6).

Carson's deployment of Dickinson's volcano imagery extracts from Dickinson's highly coded 'splitting, conflicted, shattering subject' yet another way of rendering the Geryon story.

'Geryon is the name of a character in ancient Greek myth about whom Stesichoros wrote a very long poem in dactyl-epitrite meter and triadic structure,' Carson writes in the opening section of her text. 'Some eighty-four papyrus fragments and a half-dozen citations survive which go by the name *Geryoneis* ("The Geryon Matter")', she explains (Carson 998:5). These fragments

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 1998: 5).

By framing Geryon's story with Dickinson's poem #1748, Carson investigates a number of these 'many different ways'. Indeed, Carson proffers Dickinson's volcano (and by association, the many volcanoes that proliferate throughout Dickinson's oeuvre) as a resonant marker of the philosophic ambiguity of being in *Autobiography of Red*: red like the tomato of Geryon's first self-portrait, the volcano becomes an extended metaphor for the ambiguity of 'self', of *who* the eyewitness *might become* by the end of the text.

In Geryon's case, as in Dickinson's other volcano poems, such a question requires of the viewer an *inverse* questioning of sight. For example,

I have never seen "Volcanoes" –  
But, when Travellers tell  
How these old – phlegmatic mountains  
Usually so still –

Bear within – appalling Ordnance,  
Fire, and smoke, and gun,  
Taking Villages for breakfast,  
And appalling Men –

If the stillness is Volcanic

In the human face  
When upon a pain Titanic  
Features keep their place –

If at length the smouldering anguish  
Will not overcome –  
And the palpitating Vineyard  
In the dust, be thrown?’

(Dickinson's poem 175, *The Complete Poems*, p. 83)

As if following Dickinson's interlocutor by association, Carson's red-winged protagonist finds himself in the middle of the story sitting on the bed in his hotel room in the poem 'Kiss' (with its subtitle 'A healthy volcano is an exercise in the uses of pressure'),

pondering the cracks and fissures  
of his inner life. It may happen  
that the exit of the volcanic vent is blocked by a plug of rock, forcing  
matter sideways along  
lateral fissures called fire lips by volcanologists. Yet Geryon did not want  
to become one of those people  
who think of nothing but their stores of pain.

(from the poem 'Kiss', *Autobiography of Red*, p. 105)

Dickinson's volcano poem 601 continues the biographic impulse implicit in her poetic 'mining' of volcanic introspection:

A still – Volcano – Life –  
That flickered in the night –  
When it was dark enough to do  
Without erasing sight –

A quiet – Earthquake Style –  
Too subtle to suspect

By natures this side Naples –  
The North cannot detect

The Solemn – Torrid – Symbol–  
The lips that never lie –  
Whose hissing Corals parts – and shut –  
And Cities – ooze away

(Dickinson, *The Complete Poems*, p. 295)

And Carson responds in kind:

As he read Geryon could feel something like tons of black magma boiling up  
from the deeper regions of him.  
He moved his eyes back to the beginning of the page and started again.  
'To deny the existence of red  
is to deny the existence of mystery. The soul which does so will one day go mad.  
[...] *I am not the one who is crazy here,*  
said Geryon closing the book. He put on his coat, belted it formally, and went out.

(from 'XXXII. Kiss', *Autobiography of Red*, p. 105)

In Carson's narrative, the characters Herakles and Ancash might seem the most ostentatious 'followers' of Dickinson's poetic trail, since their self-described artistic project is 'a documentary / on Emily Dickinson' (108). Yet it is Geryon, Carson's mythically troubled protagonist, who enacts Dickinson's more subtle philosophic ruminations, albeit in Carson's own ironic and wittily translated ways.

At the beginning of the narrative, the fact that a tomato is also a fruit accrues poignant significance in Geryon's case; by the end of Carson's text, the volcano itself accrues the significance of Geryon's (and Dickinson's) poetic terms of being. Both figures are red/read, and both embody an ambiguous 'object lesson' on the matter of time and subjectivity. As Dickinson writes in poem 1677, 'How red the Fire rocks below – How insecure the sod / Did I disclose / Would populate with awe my solitude' (1970: 685). Causing her three (primary-colour) characters to collide in a chance meeting in the poem 'Fast-Forward', Carson wittily locates their discussion on Dickinson thus:

"On My Volcano Grows the Grass,"

Herakles went on, *is one of her poems. Yes I know*, said Geryon, *I like that poem, I like the way she refuses to rhyme sod with God*. Ancash meanwhile was taking a tape recorder out of his pocket.

( from 'XXXIII. Fast-Forward', *Autobiography of Red*, p. 108).

Yet Carson's undercutting of the mythic terrain of solitary heroism in *Autobiography of Red* is also parodied in the romance section by her subject's five-year-old need for an autobiography marked by a red tomato and some crispy paper, which turns out to be a ten dollar bill from Geryon's tolerant mother's purse. In poignant terms, as depicted in the poems 'Each' (26-29) and 'Rhinestones' (30-33), Geryon struggles from earliest childhood to separate the word 'each' from the 'peach' of Eros.

Indeed, in the poem 'Rhinestones', Carson denotes Geryon himself as a strange red fruit, sitting in the kitchen with the fruit bowl over his head while his brother taunts him, and the babysitter, partially blind to his brother's abuse, patronisingly converses with the fruit bowl that has textually *become* Geryon at the opening of the story (31). In 'Rhinestones', the intensity of Geryon's need to know the time connects the absence and presence of his mother to Geryon's (innocent) inability to separate inside from outside. Considering the Greek origin of the word *bios* (meaning life), it is interesting to note that Geryon's own *biography*, a word usually pertaining to a human life or career, also takes on the *aliveness* or *biogenesis* of a living plant, a fruit of the earth so to speak. Even before he meets Herakles, the *bios* driving Geryon's subjectivity in Carson's text autographs this inarticulate but eloquent maternal matrix of tenderness, cling peaches and pain.

### **Alternative Myths: Yazcol Yazcamac**

Deploying a language of indirection and a complex series of intertextual citations, Carson's verse novel hence re-instates the textual subjectivity of feminine and female speech spaces by causing them to polyphonically supplant the meta-textual (male) narratives at the heart of the myths she exploits. As Ian Rae observes, 'Carson completes this transition from phallic to labial imagery in the concluding lyric where the three men stare at "the hole of fire" in the side of the volcano and Carson explicitly distinguishes between the men and the fire to which

they are “neighbours” (2008: 147). By placing her gay, red-winged protagonist in a contemporary American setting, and linking the mythic revisioning of his origins to an Andean myth involving the worship of a volcano and the return of ‘the Ones Who Went and Saw and Came Back’ (129), Carson effectively extracts from the Greek roots of ‘The Geryon matter’ the ancient and commonly accepted problem of misogyny—of vilifying the ‘Other’ as monster or beast—as highlighted in the six dissembling frameworks that surround the romance proper of her text. Operating thus as one among many frames-within-a-frame, the romance section of Carson’s text ultimately serves to dramatise and displace the textual consequences of culturally accepted misogyny via an accumulative choral protest, which ultimately foregrounds the ‘volcanic’ significance of female speech. This speech takes on many forms, including the personification of such figures as Helen of Troy, Emily Dickinson, Gertrude Stein, Isis and even Geryon himself, ‘dangling / inside the word *she* like a trinket on a belt’ (57).

Yet, in freeing her tortured protagonist from Herakles’ mythically corruptive embrace, Carson also requires of Geryon the emergence of an individuated ‘self’ by the end of the book. She turns to an alternative myth to do this, one that places the potential of sacrifice in contrapuntal relation to the possibility of subjective renewal. Indeed, it is the Andean myth of Yazcol Yazcamac—‘the Ones Who Went and Saw and Came Back’ (128)—that Geryon enacts via his flight into the eye of the volcano at the end of the romance.

This is the myth that Ancash relates in the poem ‘Eyewitnesses’ (125), and it has nothing to do with the hero Herakles whatsoever. Rather, upon sighting Geryon’s literal wings for the first time, Ancash recounts the story of a people north of Huarez, in a place called Jucu, whose worship of a nearby volcano in ancient times had once involved the mysterious return of wise ones, those who had seen the inside of the volcano (perhaps as sacrificial victims themselves) and had somehow returned, changed but alive, to tell the tale. Naturally, Geryon has some questions about this:

*How do they come back?*

*Wings.*

*Wings? Yes that’s what they say the Yazcamac return as red people with wings,  
all their weaknesses burned away—*

*and their mortality.*

(from ‘XXXVII. Eyewitnesses’, *Autobiography of Red*, p.129).

The irony of this scene erupts in the sudden itching that afflicts Geryon. This itch is explained on a literal level by the parrot ticks infesting the blanket Ancash has placed around Geryon's shoulders. But on a compositional and metaphoric level, these are the same parrots that Geryon noticed earlier, in Ancash's mother's kitchen, upon returning from his solitary wandering around Lima with his camera: 'fifty red parrots dove and roared / like a conscious waterfall' (126): 'That would be / a good title for the photograph, Geryon thought as he strode along' (126).

Linking the incidence of this mythic tale with Geryon's emergent freedom from Herakles' embrace, Carson underwrites the significance of the Yazcol Yazcamac myth as the turning point in Geryon's patterned 'autobiography'. His artistic flight into the eye of the volcano forges an act of resistance, occurring as it does on the morning after his fight with Ancash and the realisation that Herakles degrades him. In a similar vein, as another Dickinson scholar asserts, 'she has inside herself the volcano [...], the desert, the threatening sea. [...] When these, without losing their actual identity, become part of her inner landscape, they evoke and define energies of resistance' (Knights 1983: 372). Thus, Carson's adoption of Dickinson's #1748 poem invokes the concentrated energies of Dickinson's own complex poetics of resistance: framed by Dickinson's use of volcano imagery, both in this instance and more generally throughout the book, Carson renders Geryon's (mythic) flight an act of resistance, an *inverse* (textual) irruption, which claims not only a dynamic relation to the material earth, but also to the ineffable mystery of being red/read.

### **Being an eye-witness (is also being red/read)**

As an eye-witness, Geryon smiles into the eye of the volcano, which itself moves with the flash of a camera (like a loaded gun). Whereas the 'reticent volcano' of Dickinson's poem enlists an auditory realm similar to that which Ancash and Herakles say they are aiming to document in their travels, Geryon's penultimate photograph # 1748, ('It is a photograph he never took, no one here took it' (145)), enlists absence in the eye of the 'self': at the threshold of Geryon's freedom, a plenitude of absence inscribes the timelessness of lyric flight.

The significance of this gesture is prismatic and manifold. Writing on Emily Dickinson's 'often reiterated analogy of the self as a dormant volcano' (107), scholar Joanne Dobson observes:

This tendency toward the “articulate inarticulate” locates [Dickinson’s] poetry firmly in its cultural and literary context—a community of feminine expression where women’s articulation was seen as potentially incendiary and women’s reticence perceived as a prudent virtue—yet at the same time it foreshadows the precepts of literary modernism (Dobson 1989: 127).

The shifting gender of Dickinson’s volcano thus denotes the enigma of Geryon as a palimpsestuous figure reconstructed by Carson from literal fragments of Stesichoros’ text. The ambiguous mark of absence in the photo that ‘no one took’ as it occurs in Carson’s text plays upon Dickinson’s own ambiguous but persistent use of the word ‘nobody’ in relation to the ‘I’ at work in her poetry.

Although Geryon dedicates his photograph to Ancash, it is significant that his speech addresses the earth itself, while ascending in flight above it. From this point, Geryon peers down at the ‘earth heart’ of the volcano, which Carson designates an ancient eye. In this instance, it seems that although Geryon has pressed record, and is perhaps filming/recording his own flight by holding the tape recorder away from himself and directing it towards his own face (as in a self-portrait), the ‘icy possibles’ persist: in this immortal space, it would seem that Geryon is also communing with the enigmatically sexed volcano itself.

Invoking both presence and absence, then, Carson’s poem renders the figure of Geryon in relation to the volcano as *both* subject and object in the active play of recording the ‘self’. (Male *and* female. Listener *and* babbler. Sleeper *and* flier. Tape recorder *and* camera.) By this gesture, Carson conflates the literal with the metaphoric: it might not be a photograph that Geryon takes, but whatever it is, Carson manages to conjure the triangular nature of Eros working with the intensity of a Dickinsonian ‘loaded gun’.

The flash of the volcano’s eye hence composes a mythic space of becoming (future, past and present), yet the sound of its being (‘bolts of wind like slaps of wood’) and the sound of Geryon descending into this being (‘the bitter red drumming of wing muscle on air’) might constitute the traces of a flight (im)possible to record. The volcano’s eye assumes *and* exceeds the function and power of the (absent) camera at this point in the romance. Like Geryon, the volcano itself *becomes* both object and subject. As Carson proposes in the poem ‘Huarez’, ‘A

volcano is not a mountain like others. Raising a camera to one's face has effects / no one can calculate in advance' (135).

### **Eros and Volcano Time**

Characteristic of the triangular geometry of Eros as depicted in Carson's *Eros the Bittersweet* (1986), three figures emerge in this penultimate photo-poem-essay: Geryon, volcano and the idea of a 'self' apprehended in motion. Together, these three figures demonstrate the verbal nature of desire. As Carson writes, 'Desire moves. Eros is a verb' (Carson 1986: 17). Yet verbs in Greek also denote gender, and like Eros, gender moves according to the laws of material perspective. Indeed, just as Dickinson's use of volcano imagery connotes 'women's time', Carson renders the secret of immortality as *both* that which is touched by bodies resonant with time and that which cannot be reconciled in a fixed or static form.

In the 'icy possibles' thus evoked, materiality aligns with intensely emotive moments of pause. In these moments of what Carson calls 'volcano time' (Carson 1998: 144), or what Julia Kristeva calls *Zeitlos*, the volcano of Carson's text (itself a transcription of Dickinson's poetic volcano) 'rotates the inhuman Andes at a personal angle' (Carson 1998: 145). The secret of immortality is also biographic. Following the ancient Greek poet, Stesichoros, who, according to Carson, 'released being' through his use of adjectives, Carson revises the Greek roots of the Geryon story in order to entertain a mythic subject position which Geryon inhabits, however fleetingly, as an individuated 'being' in dialogue with his own translation. In mining the gaps between what *is* and what *might be* (im)possible to record in such a translation, Carson's text produces, in sum, tropes of the archaeological body that bear witness to the palpable uncertainty at the heart of all being, including the incendiary possibilities of a living volcanic 'I/eye. Or, as Dickinson so powerfully concludes in possibly her most famous volcano poem, numbered in *The Complete Poems* as 666, 'Ah, Teneriffe! / I'm kneeling – still – ' (331)

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