Geryon the Bittersweet: An Essay

To say the Ancient Greeks had a rich culture would be to say the queen of England has a few diamonds. (In other words, a gratuitous understatement.) Ancient Greek culture was so rich and powerful that it resurged some 1500 years after the culture had disappeared. Among the philosophy, intellect, and fashion that defined Ancient Greece, there was the rich tradition of story-telling. Homer is, undoubtedly, the most famous storyteller of the ancient era. Others, such as Euripides and Aeschylus, are known from the era, but often live in Homer’s shadow. Stesichoros, however, “came after Homer and before Gertrude Stein, a difficult interval for a poet” (Carson 3). Stesichoros wrote the story of Geryon, the winged red monster and Herakles, the demigod who slain him.

Like The Odyssey a thousand times before, an industrious writer took it upon herself to retell the story of Geryon and Herakles. Anne Carson, a celebrated poet and essayist, turned Stesichoros’ story into Autobiography of Red: A Novel in Verse. Geryon is still winged and red, and Herakles (either willingly or unknowingly) destroys him. In Stesichoros’ story, everything about Geryon is red. This is something Carson takes and runs with. Not only is everything about Geryon red, but everything in the Autobiography of Red is well, red. But what does red mean? Is the book, in fact, an autobiography of the color red as written by Anne Carson? Not likely. Red is a striking color, more striking than gray, or brown, or blue. Red is striking and unique, and, as such, red is the perfect metaphor for otherness, which Carson utilizes throughout Autobiography of Red (as well as Geryon’s wings) to communicate Geryon’s role as an outcast, a challenge to heteronarrative.
Geryon had what most would describe as bad childhood, and likely an uncommon one. His mother was well-meaning, but useless. His father was more or less absent. Geryon’s older brother sexually abused him. Geryon was red even in his childhood, as was everything about him, from the “red silk chalk” used by his teachers to the “dark pink air” that surrounded his home (Carson 26, 36). In Geryon’s autobiography, he set down the total facts known about himself, first and foremost of which is that “Geryon was a monster everything about him was red” (Carson 37). Geryon was such an Other that he would not take the traditional route to his classroom at school. He would walk to the far end of the building and “stand motionless until someone inside noticed and came out to show him the way. He did not gesticulate. He did not knock on the glass. He waited. Small, red, and upright he waited” (Carson 25). He was away from his peers, not even in the same building. There he stood and waited to be included. The outcast, the Other.

Now, the question becomes, is Geryon, as a character, literally red? It is a challenge to describe a character as red over and over and over again without some sort of physical indicator. Sharon Wahl disagrees in her review of Red entitled “Erotic Sufferings: Autobiography of Red and Other Anthropologies.” For Wahl, “it seems that Geryon is not literally red” (Wahl 182). I concede having a contemporary protagonist who is literally red is somewhat of a convention breaker, but what good is using red as a metaphor if yellow or orange would work just as well as a striking color? Geryon must me red or the metaphor simply doesn’t hold as much water as it should.

Despite being a (literally) red individual, “Geryon made it to adolescence” and there he met Herakles (Carson 39). And from then on, his world was nothing but red. (Interesting for a
man whose name is an anagram for “no grey.”) Any hope of becoming grey or brown evaporated when Geryon met Herakles. Geryon was a red winged “monster” who fell in love with a man who would destroy him.

Homosexuality, in addition to being one of the traditional others, is the ultimate challenge to the typical heteronarrative that we are used to reading. Boy meets girl, boy and girl fall in love, boy and girl get married, boy and girl have children. The end. Male homosexuality is even more challenging to heteronarrative, if possible, than female homosexuality. Female sexuality is a scale with a well-oiled slider. There is a lot more wiggle room to move the slider from hetero to homo to anything and everything in between. Male sexuality is a scale with only three marks: hetero, bi, homo. Males may reside in one and only one of the categories. There is no wiggle room. Nothing challenges heteronarrative quite like a homosexual male protagonist.

Eventually, Herakles and Geryon end their relationship (or rather, Geryon gets dumped like yesterday’s rubbish), but Geryon remains red. He remains red and winged. At first, Geryon’s wings are on display. His mother used to “neaten his little red wings and push him out the door” (Carson 36). As time went on, Geryon decided to bind his wings between small wooden planks (Carson 53). Geryon did not accept his winged nature, something that set him apart, so he tried to hide it. One day, however, in Buenos Aires, Geryon became aware of some information. It seemed that some “twelve percent of babies in the world are born with tails” (Carson 97). This tidbit leads Geryon to ask how many babies are born with wings. This question leads Geryon to put his wings on full display in a photograph entitled “No Tail!” (Carson 97). This is an expression of self-acceptance. Geryon embraces his otherness. The
photograph is called “No Tail!” as in “twelve percent of people are born with tales, but only I’ve been born with wings.”

Again, a question arises. Are Geryon’s wings real or another type of metaphor attributing to his otherness? I contend they are real. They can be neatened, bound, and spread. While one can argue for Geryon being literally red or not, it is much harder to argue a physical trait such that of wings can be simply metaphorical. Wahl agrees with me on this point, but asserts that “in some of the scenes where [the wings] seem most crucial, they are missing” (Wahl 182). Herakles, one with whom Geryon had been intimate with numerous times, doesn’t seem to notice the wings. Does Herakles not notice the wings because he does not understand Geryon, as Wahl postulates? Or, is love (and/or lust) so blind a man does not notice a “map of South America” on his lover’s back (Carson 97)? Perhaps Herakles is both blinded by love and completely oblivious.

Wings or not (but mostly wings), Geryon’s newfound self-acceptance does not extend to others. Even after his epiphany, Geryon keeps his wings hidden from others. After reuniting with Herakles and meeting Ancash, Herakles’ new lover, the trio travel to Peru where they stay on Ancash’ mother’s roof. In attempting to wrap Geryon up in a blanket, Ancash uncovers his wings (Carson 127). And then Geryon learned something that set him apart as the ultimate Other. Not only was he gay, red, and winged . . . he may also be immortal (Carson 129).

And so, unlike Stesichoros’ version, Geryon’s tale ends not with his death, but with three men staring at a fire, admiring its beauty and uniqueness. Fires are red, aren’t they?
Works Cited
