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## Dialogical Interspecies Ethics: Ataraxia, Desire and Hope in the Post-Human World of Anne Carson's Pastoral

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# Dialogical Interspecies Ethics: Ataraxia, Desire and Hope in the Post-Human World of Anne Carson's Pastoral

## **Cover Page Footnote**

This review is an extended version of a paper given to the annual meeting of the Western Literature Association, Victoria, B.C., November 2014. With thanks to Laurie Ricou for proposing that I attend; thanks to Lisa Szabo-Jones for editorial advice; and thanks to Louise Westling for elevating the ideas resident in a draft version of the paper.

# Dialogical Interspecies Ethics: ataraxia, desire and hope in the post-human world of Anne Carson's pastoral



Review Essay  
of

Anne Carson's  
*Autobiography of Red: A Novel in Verse*  
&  
*red doc>*

by  
Tom Bristow\*

This review essay implicitly revisits human and non-human power relations within a critical animal studies context informed by emotions theory. It understands the affective conjunction between the degrees of involvement with others and the modes of manipulation that unfold within our relationships. Anne Carson's work takes the issue of intimacy to the question of representation with a view to disclosing the post-human being seeking to re-conceive the human. I take Louise Westling's study of animal existence as the platform for an analysis of two book-length poems by Anne Carson, *Autobiography of Red* (1998) and *red doc* (2013), which centre on the life of a shepherd, Geryon. Rather than revisit classical pastoral, these texts extract power-relations that classical myth and pastoral spatialize. In so doing, I argue, they reclaim a site of the emotions within the scene of herding—itsself a metaphor for containing animals, for channelling and managing resources, framing wildness. Carson's treatment of emotions positions the reader to evaluate the border between human and non-human animals, to unpack and complicate the terms by which we might wish to make or unmake that very demarcation. My analysis of these poems portends a mode of pastoral that might decolonise affect theory from the position of more-than-human agency.

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Anne Carson's *red doc* plays on the classical European myth of Geryon, a fearsome giant monster with three human faces, according to Hesiod, Homer's contemporary. *red doc* is loosely based on the tenth labour of Herakles: for killing his children, Herakles must obtain cattle from the monster, Geryon. In Carson's world, the spectrum of being runs from progeny (the result of sexual or asexual reproduction) and the adult humans to the domesticated beast, and on to monsters and the gods. Readers familiar with Carson's prequel to *red doc*, *Autobiography of Red*, will be aware of the ways historical scholarship combines with a highly imaginative sense of keeping animals close to us. This conceptual space is turned into event and situation in the poems – plot development and character defined by emotions, respectively – where human-animal hybrids allegorise our degrees of care, our motivations for love (or its affectation). Readers are thrown into various point of reflection throughout these unfolding long poems that provide an informed sense on how we can either develop insight for our actions or willingly ignore cultural feedback – to be responsive to how our desires are received by others. Symbolism and filmic sequences register how deep emotions lie within us, and how some are more reachable and thus manipulated. These texts not only allude to personal and cultural practices of affective control, they also point to the two most significant

methods that account for our emotions in the academy: history and evolution. The former argues for a degree of cultural construction in its demonstration of how emotions change over time in society; the latter argues that emotions came before humans, they are in animals, and they can be seen to develop with the mammalian brain – some of us are more emotionally attuned or biologically wired to affect than others, and can thus work with our emotions either in the moment or after their events.<sup>1</sup>

A third term is required if we are ever to bridge these two domains of thought. Ever seen yourself crying or shaking uncontrollably when confronting a difficult subject with the object of your desire, and ever thought of how you could have worked differently with the events leading up to this visceral occasion that floored you? Did you not see this coming, or happening even? Perhaps you instinctively constructed a narrative to make sense of it all for your wellbeing? More honestly, and true to the occasion, Carson's poetry skips the compulsion to historicise and by consequence does not miss an affective beat. Her use of winged red monsters (one of whom is Geryon) and her use of volcanoes as metaphors for emotion and empowerment speaks to blushing desire and rankling rage; earthly worlds that are not apart from the realm of deliberation once we have coupled action to consequence. The poems are of wild passion and surging energies, and yet the mind is rarely frozen in the moments of time taken up by the body; in short, thought and feeling are embodied in the material performance of animals and human/non-human hybrids.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, upon a canvas of parent-sibling relations, themes of homosexuality, desire and betrayal are framed within the pursuit for affective literacy – a semi-rational thing-in-itself that appears to be the unmappable quality on an imaginary 'z' axis that is placed alongside the Cartesian coordinates of maturity ('x' axis) and requited love ('y' axis) in the story of Geryon and Herakles. And yet this literacy, which might sharpen our sense of feeling, is just reachable, somewhere between the words. Distinct merit lies in Carson's craftwork, a visionary intertwining of affective embodiment and ejaculation that operates in this third dimension: emotion, or a biography of affect.

In *red doc>* desire is no light thing; it weighs heavy on its protagonist, Geryon, and it rises to precarious heights. In *Autobiography of Red*, Geryon is a damaged, artistic teenager with wings that lift upwards without his knowing why. His doomed love affair with the charismatic rebel, Herakles, leaves Geryon shy and fragile at the peak of infatuation. There is something of a failed Prometheus in Geryon's pursuit for desire while attempting to make sense of his emotions. The text is angled towards empathy for this hybrid creature who is damaged by the self-contained and selfish Herakles: a figure of a human stealing the heart (not the cattle) from the 'monster.' Haven't we all thought that our lot in life was already hard,

<sup>1</sup> See Jan Plamper, *The History of Emotions: An Introduction*, trans. by Keith Tribe. Oxford: OUP, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Readers will be forgiven if the English novelist, Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley (1797-1851), comes to mind.

without someone coming in to steal our heart? Or did we let it happen because we were aiming to construct our relations within a mythical or unrealistic paradigm? Carson is playing with character type and species to warp the affective domain that is evident in pastoral. In *red doc*, Geryon is now 'G', still a cattle-herder; Herakles is now called Sad But Great ('Sad' for short), a traumatised veteran of a recent war (read Afghanistan). This twofold move to reduce one character's name to a letter [G] and the other character's to an emotion [sad], provides a hint, I think, on Carson's naming of being. While anchored by meaningful passages on human emotions, these two novels present complex and tricky perspectives on the relationship between self-discovery and our human-animal relations, which explore the conditions of possibility for emotions to pass between species. Such conditions are of considerable import in our moment of inconceivable rates of species loss owing to the unsustainable and destructive behaviour of one species: humans. Perhaps the Anthropocene began with agriculture?

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Francis Pryor identifies a "gradual switch to loose herding" in fifth millennium BCE, which is followed by "close herding towards the Later Neolithic and Early Bronze Age" – with a possibility of dogs assisting shepherds in these smaller, tighter spaces (125). Herding in *red doc* is not assisted by dogs; the tracking and control of cattle is left to the human-animal hybrid, Geryon, whose wings point us to the ancient monster myth and by extension to the practice of animal husbandry without a mediating (i.e., domesticated) animal. In this site of raw contact zones, early European gathering and hunting peoples "moved with the herds of herbivores and birds around them in seasonal patterns" as Louise Westling notes after reading Pryor (98). Keeping close to the untethered animals indicates behaviour that "required richly sensitive and complex cross-species awareness, communication and interaction" (98). Intimacy is key to the politics of Carson's project that speaks to the border between humans and animals to rethink how difficult it is to attain such rich communication, and why. Cross-species interaction takes on particular form as we move to North America while keeping one foot in ancient Europe in *red doc*:

TYPICAL NIGHT-

HERDING SONGS gallop  
their rhythms and tell of  
love. G doesn't usually  
sing to the heard at night.  
He may talk to them listen

stand in the herd. Listen.  
That community. A low  
purple listening but with a  
height to the sound. Them  
listening. They direct it up  
and out. They stand in a  
circle facing away from the  
center (calves in the center)  
and the long guard hairs  
hang down to brush  
their ankles like pines. Like  
queens. Like queens  
dressed in pines. Musk  
oxen are not in fact oxen  
not castrated bulls nor do  
their glands produce musk.  
Much is misnomer in our  
present way of grasping the  
world. But pines do  
always seem queenly as  
they sway so grand and  
anciently from the sky to  
the ground. Motion is part  
of listening. (24)

If this scene involved herding dogs we would be thrust into the territory of “muted predation,” that is “an *ancient adaptation* of wild canid predation, with dogs moving around the flock of sheep as wolves do” (Westling 139). However, the intersecting *umwelt* of *red doc>* does not involve the hierarchically structured communication and cooperation of shepherd-dog-cattle. Alternatively, relations between categories of species are horizontalized, and thus, we infer, modernised: firstly by the shepherd figure as an always-already complicated subject (a human-animal hybrid, a boy with wings). Secondly, by this figure settling into the disposition of the herd, conjoining with others via an entrance into an inclusive creaturely sensorium, and participating in their listening. Ultimately, this song of inclusion derives from empathy, or at very least

from altruism, care and a shared sense of security, for the cows are protecting the young in the centre of the circle. Carson is invoking a metaphor for the complicated line between love and desire while also invoking the problem of the Anthropocene for humanists: for the impulse to protect the species (and thus assert identity and agency) alongside the ability to step outside of the self and think of others (thus diluting subjectivity and agency). The scientific and historical backdrop confirms this allusory contour that offers rhythm and pace to the prose-injected lyricism expected in verse novels. Predation is not adapted to the canine world, and therefore modernised; it is coupled to human desire. Geryon's keeping of his animals close to him parallels the silencing of his unrequited emotions, keeping them silenced, inside, pre-verbal, sub-symbolic. Two things to consider here: the monster is affectively humanized and the relationship is subject to breakdown. This combination anthropomorphizes the classical myth and it emphasises disunion. These two effects do not initially appear worthy of an ecocritical celebration; ecocritics are normally wary of such attributions of human form on things not human. Thus, the theme of commonality is worth exploring further.

*Autobiography of Red* complicates the trope of wild non-human bestiality—the hybrid human-monster falls in love and has sex with a human. As we have seen in this first quotation from *red doc*> (above), the complication of identity is based on a triangulation of species rather than the opposition of two species. Oxen-queen-pine thus points us to an alternative reading of animals other than that of a gesture towards a human descent into savagery or into 'wild' and 'uncontrollable emotions', which would be more easily developed from within a binary than a triangulation (especially one that includes an 'evergreen'). Within Carson's poetics of association triggered by adverbs and similes, continuum and commonality invite a complex sense of difference. Ultimately, the mythic gravitas of allegory in Carson's texts invokes no dualism for our deconstruction, while it denies any conceptual attempt to affectively upgrade the creaturely figure into an emotionally literate loving being. What is happening here? One answer lies within the phenomenological approach, as Mark Hansen has clarified. Carson's transformation of the European myth of Geryon speaks to a complex background to life, the "trans-spatial emergence [of human and non-human animals] from the physiochemical" (251). For example, the synaesthetic understanding ('purple listening') opens up a distinct possibility in relationship to that which is nameless between animals i.e. the fabric and emergence of being. Hansen draws on Maurice Merleau-Ponty's work, to express how the framing of emergence "introduces a fundamental correlation of behaviour and morphogenesis" (251),<sup>3</sup> and thus acts as a secure ground for the deconstruction of opposites. This particular correlation is embodied in

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<sup>3</sup> This idea is developed during an analysis of embryology in the section 'Animality and the Tendencies of Modern Biology' in Merleau-Ponty, *Nature: Course Notes from the Collège de France*. Trans. Robert Vallier. Illinois: Northwestern UP, 2003, 129-158.



Carson's characters who transgress a fault line bringing into relief externalised attitude and internal emotional development. In *Autobiography of Red*, the symbol of the volcano underlines the emotional complexity of Geryon—who cannot find a mode by which to express his love for Herakles, nor can he fully understand his wings: he simply bursts with rage and passion, sometimes suddenly leaping into flight. If we take seriously Carson's refusal to setup binary oppositions, we learn to feel for a commonality across landscape and human (i.e., between character and geology), for the trans-spatial emergence of life from the physiochemical: love, fire. In this model, human and non-human animals remain different *and* they share the world's history and destiny.

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Whether we wish to stress a human-animal distinction, or posit a continuum between our species and other creatures is irrelevant in *red doc*>. More pertinent is the dismissal of human and non-human animals to mechanistic and reductionist descriptions of biology and organic behaviour. As counterpoint to the presentation of human and animal kinds set in opposition, *red doc*> offers the reader a poetic example of thinking on the multiple kinds of perception and consciousness that have evolved over the many millennia of the emergence of life on the planet.<sup>4</sup> We see these distinct kinds enacted by the people, animals and landscape in these poems.

And yet there is some latency here. Look again: the low “purple listening” (above), is contrasted with the “misnomer of human perception.” Positive sentience here—the auditory imagination—is a kind of animal awareness, a glowing sensitive soul, cradled by the fundamental and irreducible structure of being-in-the-world—which is home to desire, and flight. To be close to things, to sway with things, to be in motion is to be alive, like a verb, subject to/illuminated by emotions. The passage is concerned with night herding songs. The partial loss of vision and the alert auditory imagination point towards sense experience; however, it is of use to engage with the metaphorical sense of ‘grasping’ here. Reaching for the concrete specificity of things portends one is only being uncertain, in the dark, lacking security: unfixed, and potentially perhaps, free. Elsewhere Carson has written: “To keep attention strong means to keep it from settling” (*Economy* viii). There is a world in that sentence which conflates lack of settlement and a peculiar form of security. Carson seems to be relating her work to Simone Weil's sense of ‘vegetative energy’ and ‘vegetative egoism’ (*Gravity* 27, 36) —an author I'll return to shortly. In the vegetative realm the mind opens up to experience,

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<sup>4</sup> For full discussion of these perspectives, please see: *The Semiotics of Animal Representations*, eds. Kadri Tüür and Morten Tonnessen, Amsterdam & NY: Rodopi, 2014.

deletes the ego and the desire to inscribe the individual as a distinct, self-same subject, while the body is prepared to dissolve into the larger arcs of decay and growth that are the domain of life.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Carson praises sleep as “a glimpse of something *incognito*”, the unrecognized that “hides from us because it has something worth hiding, or so we judge” (*Economy* 20). There is spiritually-positive poverty in acute and long held attention (Cf. meditation), as there is in somnambulance: loss of self, and thus more potential for entering into the other. Thus, in Carson’s presentation of the oxen, we have the opposite of Giorgio Agamben’s understanding of “the anthropological machine” which for Westling “produces the concept of the human *from* the animal realm” (72). Here, in contradistinction to the emphasis on progression towards human life, we have signifiers for the affective background that affords the realisation of many forms and behaviours of human and non-human animals. Carson’s poetry provides us with a glimpse into how we can connect these energies to cultural and biological formations.

Such an affective background might be subject more readily to literary criticism if it were viewed through the lens of critical animal studies and/or feminism. Such an approach grounded in “a dialectical process of looking inward,” as Ariel Salleh has written, “holds on to the materiality of the everyday world” (9). It might enable us to fix our attention on what Felix Guattari has termed the “corporealized imaginary” (56). For example:

Then as one  
rhythm they pass the sway  
from shape to shape around  
the circle its amplitude  
increasing its warmth rising  
from knees to hearts to eyes  
its pressures rolling across  
the large loose joints of the  
shoulders and down the  
long bones of the hips until  
at some point with a  
phrasing as simple as a  
perfect aphorism one of

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<sup>5</sup> For an animated and exacting thumbnail sketch of the way that Jacques Derrida sees “the self-definition of the human in contradistinction to the ‘so-called animal’”, see Robert McKay “Animal Ethics and Literary Criticism” *The Minnesota Review* 73/74 (2009/2010): 263-268.

them spins up off its shanks  
and performs a 360-degree  
spin in air and returns to  
place. Slotting itself into  
the undulation of the others  
as firmly as *temptation* into  
I can resist anything but.  
He slips from thought to  
thought. Wilde Wild  
Wildness does surely attract  
him although what he  
knows about it is not much. (*red* 24)

In returning to the herd from our first quotation where we saw herding songs turned animal (they galloped), we can see how these lines register individual bodily movements and the collective movement of the herd – and then the fall into the human. The most significant subject here, the movement itself, is considered as something possibly abstracted from the event of its happening, a ‘thing’ to be passed between parts of the whole. If not a metaphor for contagion, at least it is a gesture towards bonding, complicity or intimacy. While this abstraction might lend itself to comparison with the result of emotional insight – perhaps a concept for a feeling, I suggest that Carson’s point is more directly concerned with the way movement itself has become an object, and how the space between things has a status equal to the things themselves. The invisible is turned visible here in the transcorporeal moment. Movement makes material the immaterial, as emotions embody (or bodily signify) feelings. To me, this particular embodied materialism is a euphemism for feeling (rather than transubstantiation); the passage is thus an extended metaphor for the vector between things that can transport us.<sup>6</sup>

Furthermore, the animal’s movement is turned literary: its spin is likened to an aphoristic phrasing. This partly ironic and imaginative idiom, for the energies and feelings that can pass between members of a species, collapses a simple nature/culture dichotomy while inviting us to question a number of things central to our critical analysis. Firstly, is this imaginary example of the agency of animals a satisfactory critique of Cartesian dualism, of subject-object relations? The ox returns itself to the larger undulation of its community; it is not a thing-in-itself. Do we have a problem with agency here? Secondly, this community-

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<sup>6</sup> For an account of emotions and transport within the pastoral genre, see Bristow (2015).

based species is discussed simultaneously to the foregrounding of interior monologue. The interior mode presents the expression of human emotions at the same time that the “slotting” into an *umwelt* is compared with “temptation.” While we remember that ‘G’ is infatuated with the character Sad/ Herakles, does this shift into the human voice deny a space for or detract from animality in any way? These are not questions that Carson has placed for us explicitly, for the texts are not treatises on human-animal ethics; however, we might want to evaluate just how much depends upon the use of the adverb “as” in these lines: “as a | perfect aphorism” and “as firmly as temptation.” In both examples, “as” is not simply a comparative, there seems to be an equation here that makes a distinction between animal actions and human skill, and yet suggests that they are alike, if only by association within the stanza (or that they share space). This representation of human and non-human commonality and co-presence on the page speaks of the ways that communion across and between species might be perceived. It thus speaks to the idea of creatureliness, which for brevity I define here as the *interface* (rather than union) of body and mind. And that interface is present in animals human and non-human. I shall return to a sense of equation or symbols in mathematics shortly. For now, if we direct our attention to the human creature’s intuitive connection to the wild in the last quotation, we reveal an impulse relating to a *lack of knowing*. This theme dominates *Autobiography of Red*, and it comes into play in various ways in *red doc*>. Analysis of this theme –for reader and critic alike– might quash the problems of anthropocentrism and dualism indicated in the questions on agency that I raised above.

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Imagine the following scene: there is a misunderstanding between G and an artist, Ida, while they are sat looking at the herd of cattle. Ida says that the cattle are like cats—not that they are similar to cats in their behaviour, but that they look easy to draw (in the way cats look easy to draw). Cats-cattle. A Carson pun that underlines the instrumentalist human gaze subjecting the animal to the status of other and disregarding differences between species. This gaze opens outwards as the observation is met with a denial of its truth: “but it’s so not true” she says. “Ah | he says. I don’t hate it she | says but G is frowning | now. His wings are rising | up on his back and he | wants to know why” (12). G was led into one position of feeling—of likeness between species (that both can be easily drawn)—and then he was denied the validity of the idea, which undermined the desire for species commonality. He doesn’t quite follow Ida, either, which is in itself another kind of breakdown, here between an oxen (Ida) and a hybrid (G). I intend to read a lot into this small moment of unknowing, and I feel justified in doing so as the whole of *Autobiography of*

*Red* details the gap between Geryon's body and mind (as I have said, his wings keep rising beyond his control, an erection for which he has no clear understanding), and the positioning of humans with respect to our animal others. Here, in the example from *red doc>*, the politics of representation (the painter's point of view) shifts into the bodily manifestation of the pre-symbolic, the display of G's confusion and mixed emotions. The wings are *rendering visible the hidden meaning experienced by the living being*. This is important for literary studies of animals and emotions. In this example, the invisible is made visible: anger/rage at misunderstanding, and desire for better relations with the artist Ida, with whom he's discussing the difficulty of painting an image of the herd. And we see these emotions at play in Geryon's distinctive *umwelt* (not an abstraction)—located in the fusion of art and affect, human-animal relations. It is a microcosm of the text where the body as a natural form of expression registers a lack of containment, a lack of knowing: the inability to frame and keep things still for our analysis, exploitation, and understanding. Movement betrays such impulses. At this point, Geryon is alone. The delineation of his character marks a sharp contrast to the oxen in the herd.

Westling is precise in locating key moments in Merleau-Ponty's sense of creatureliness that are most relevant to cultural studies. The meanings that we find in the world are detached by acts of "ideation" from an underlying or surrounding "brute being" that is "dynamic and mysterious." Ideation is the creative process of generating, developing, and communicating *new* ideas. Brute being is developed by Merleau-Ponty's reading of Heidegger:<sup>7</sup> "What is primary is Being [...] [A] wave of being [...] A brute [primary existence with] wild meaning [that is expressed in a] language which is everything since it is the voice of no one, since it is the very voice of things, the waves and the forests" (Merleau-Ponty 110, 136, 155; cited Westling 102). This primary, brute being finds itself in Carson's creaturely pines and their rhythms. Merleau-Ponty is speaking of intercorporeality: all culture rests on the polymorphism of the wild. Echoing Merleau-Ponty's restatement of Edmund Husserl's concern for restoring "a power to signify"—to couple experience to "meaning" within the power of signs (Merleau-Ponty 155)—Westling underlines the primacy of wild meanings and their import for transmitting meaning (cooperation, conflict, courtship, nurturing): "we have to continually return to their wild state to rediscover those meanings" (102).<sup>8</sup> Carson has gone back to ancient texts, the fragments of Stesichoros and Hesiod, and yet her modernizations seem to place characters as

<sup>7</sup> Westling offers a succinct analysis of the differences between Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger in 'Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty: Ecopoetics and the Problems of Humanism' in *Culture, Creativity and Environment: New Environmentalist Criticism*, eds. Fiona Becket and Terry Gifford. Amsterdam & NY: Rodopi, 2007. 233-247. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology is indebted to Husserl much as Karl Marx influences it, and yet he paraphrases the poet, Paul Valéry.

<sup>8</sup> See also Monika Langer, Monika, "Neitzsche, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty" in *Eco-Phenomenology: Back to the Earth Itself*, Eds. Charles S. Brown and Ted Toadvine. Albany, SUNY P, 2003. 103-120.

disoriented subjects rather than those who have recovered meaning, and by extension secured selfhood. Conversely, they are not in wild states, there is no nostalgia here, no clear return to an idea like noble savagery. Characters are not advanced in any sense of the word into pure experience, nor are they at home in these 'wild' situations; they do not *rediscover* meanings in the moment. Rather than securing character type or fixing a poetic mode of subjectivity, Carson's poetry works beyond these simple oppositions and leaves the reader feeling that her animals (human and non-human) leave meaning open/unfinished. Things are unknown. As a result, characters/bodies/emotions remain within flux. Is this worth exploring any further? At the risk of alienating my reader, I suggest that this particular form of disorientation that is embodied in Carson's poetics of unknowing relates not to animals but to a particular sense of *emotionlessness*. This form of emotionless might be mobilised as an ethical counterpoint to anthropocentric instrumentalism.

To take hold of this idea, I need us to think of a scene in *Autobiography of Red*. We overhear a conversation between Geryon and a professor on his way to a conference on the philosophy of scepticism. This is the type of event only Anne Carson can place into her text with such purpose and humour. It is nice to acknowledge that there is a good exchange of ideas in this moment between boy and pedagogue, unlike within most of the poem that seems to speak to a breakdown between the generations. Bonds are being brought into view. And yet, the professor's conference subject is "Emotionlessness... That is to say, what the ancients called | ataraxia." Geryon seeks clarification of this word: "[is it] the absence of disturbance[?]" he asks. Yes. The professor expands: "I want to study the erotics of doubt... As a precondition... of the proper search for truth. Provided you can renounce... that rather fundamental human trait... the desire to know" (86, ellipses mine). This speaks deeply to Geryon who is yet to either fully move on from his failed relationship with Herakles, or yet to give up his infatuation owing to his emotionally development (or enduring reptile brain) blocking insight and response to feedback – the other does not love him. He might thus learn of how to take responsibility for his feelings. He might understand forgiveness as an act of giving up or letting go of a past desire; to accept the moment for what it is, not for what it is lacking in terms of one's unrealised feelings. A little exercise of insight here might help us to think how desire (and its close cousin, hope) appears to hold back reality from blossoming. These enduring themes are clearly in view in Carson's text. As a means to read their philosophical gravitas, I am asking the reader to bring together the idea of disturbance and movement here, as discussed in relation to emotion, transcorporeality, and openness (above) – of *being* over and above *knowing*. Here, human values of desire, expectation and trust (read hope) are dissolved into an emergent space for less instrumental and goal-oriented relations. It

portends a mode of pastoral that might decolonise affect theory from the position of more-than-human agency.

Geryon's raised wings suggest that he is a figure of "semiotic emergence" as figured by the biosemiotician, Jesper Hoffmeyer, "which 'implies that while there is no centralized director "behind" the person or organism, the organism or person is continuously regenerated as an active, creative authority" (27). And following Merleau-Ponty, it is one like brute being that we do not know, it is not something that can be a property of mind, so how can one colonise this space? If this is working for us, Carson's texts are suggesting that persons and animals are not stable beings but rather *constant becomings with common ground* (Westling 143). And this ecologically sound proto-process metaphysics reminds us that vehicles of feeling (humans and animals) are less easily conquered. This model of freedom comes from within a European tradition of an erotics of doubt, which seems to cut across modern dualism that is the legacy of Cartesian hyperbolic doubt. Perhaps we can recoil from this enthusiastic application of continental philosophy for one moment? It might be more conservative to argue that *red doc>* at least puts the human in the frame by placing onus on the reader to recognize the *emergent autonomy* of various levels of organisation, agency, power. In Carson's two verse novels, examples of autonomy extends from the ability to enter the herd, to becoming part of the scene of larger rhythms than the 'I'; however, focus on agency does not extend into naming the self and the other as wild or cultured. It points to affect.

It might be fortunate that, as Donald Griffin has argued:

behaviourism and related charges of anthropomorphism are fading away as more and more species respond to serious interest in their ways of communicating among themselves and with other creatures, their social arrangements, and their ways of *intentionally manipulating their worlds*. (Griffin 20-21; cited Westling 89)

Drawing from the discipline of primatology, Westling reminds us that we reason from limited experience, including "our understanding of the inner lives of other people" (142).<sup>9</sup> Knowing the other extrapolates from our worldliness, which depends upon a radical critique of human exceptionalism, to Westling. This cultural and biological thread unravels into the more clearly marked terrain of the emotions:

"because we evolved together with the other animals from simple microorganisms millions of years ago and have similar brain structures and organs and social habits, we can understand each other's behaviours and subjective states that are in many ways like our own" (89). There is great potential for cross-species empathy here.<sup>10</sup> And there are also limits.

<sup>9</sup> See Mary Midgley. *Animals and Why They Matter*. Athens: U of Georgia P, 1983.

<sup>10</sup> See Frans Dee Waal. *The Age of Empathy: Nature's Lessons for a Kinder Society*. New York: Harmony Books, 2009.

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Simone Weil has written on the emotional impact of an ‘I’ upon the scene of nature: the desire “to see landscape as it is when I am not there. But when I am in any place, I disturb the silence of heaven by the beating of my heart” (*Roots*: 37). Perhaps it is true, that no landscape can ever be quiet as they always are animated by life. Furthermore, what would we think about a world in which we were not there, not present—or, more relevant to Carson’s treatment of disunion and commonality (above)—what would it mean “in” a world to which we were identical, and thus erased? These questions attain greater significance for humanists in the context of the Anthropocene. If we wished to consciously resist entering into the flesh of the world, as Merleau-Ponty offers, we might have to go back to a humanist dimension of Martin Heidegger.

Carson draws from Heidegger’s “argument about the use of moods” in *Autobiography of Red*: “We would think ourselves continuous with the world if we did not have moods. | It is state-of-mind that discloses to us | (Heidegger claims) that we are beings who have been thrown into something else” (98). For some ethicists and historians of the Anthropocene, it is important to claim the self, the human ‘I’, as an agent *in* the world: it is the first step to critiquing the degrees and modes of this agency. And yet, I’m still thinking of Carson’s ox slotting itself into the herd, to be *of* the world. And this appeals to me more than securing the human. It is interesting that Carson writes of “something else” and not “other.” Is this choice underlying a stance *to be with things*?

I am not sure whether Carson seeks a dispute between Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty. However, Weil is thoroughly mobilised in Carson’s oeuvre, and can be examined in these terms. Weil is discussed not for the idea of erasing the self on the way to communion with God—which is Weil’s larger idea that I contemplate as a metaphor for an ethics of community and worldliness—but for the ways in which we disclose our comportment to the world. Carson is interested in how Weil’s metaphor might flesh out (or dilute) our character and our senses of the more-than-human. For Weil, the ability to say ‘I’ is the total human worth. In her essay, ‘The Self’, the I must be renamed in order to *enter into a different relation with things*. Once erased, the ‘I’ can no longer be subject to affliction. A little later in her essay, “Decreation,” Weil argues that the value in the world lies outside the self, thus the need to withdraw the screen of selfhood that necessarily protects and defers union between God and earth. We might begin to see an odd depiction of this withdrawal in the sense of subjectivity and individuality brokered by the movement of the cattle herds in Carson. Weil’s sense of withdrawal enacts a version of “not being” that allows God to love



the individual as part of the whole of the world, as part of God's self. Moreover,—and this is what I think interests Carson—this “not being,” as it were, is to participate in the creation of the world (“Decreation” 20). These spiritual and ecological ideas are worked through in Carson's treatise on an *écriture féminine* in “How Sappho, Marguerite Porete and Simon Weil Tell God.” Carson argues that Weil, like Porete, writes of the need to render back what the world (or God) has given her: the self. To yield the ‘I’ is to drop our only possession: the power to say ‘I’ (Weil paraphrased in Carson *Decreation* 167, 194.) To decreate is to dislodge the self from its anchor points in the world, its particular frames of reference and grips on life—be they epistemological or biological, perhaps even biographical in the case of leaning on the prop of a narrative arc for our life story rather than confronting our emotions. To lose the self is to lose the illusion of control for Weil; for Carson, the world of physical causes and sensations undermines our ideas of control (including the power of interpretation). For Carson's Sappho and Carson's Weil, the act of decreation reveals things previously disclosed or hidden in an event that is “spiritual” (from the Greek, charged with “ecstasy”): both speak of presences under the form of absence (Carson *Economy*). There is a warped analogue here between the absence of Herakles' equal desire for Geryon and the visibility of Geryon's emotions that arise in the poetic unfolding of the correspondence between behaviour and morphogenesis or the link between attitude and development (partly allegorized by the motif of the volcano that brings together geology and character). It is interesting that Weil's impersonal ‘I’, or quashed ego echoes transcendental phenomenology; Carson's is more bodily, material, affective, animal.

Anne Carson indicates her willingness to explicitly enter into the ethical terrain that I have invoked in this review essay. In *red doc>* the voice of the poem's eye clarifies the politics of naming the other:

BETWEEN US AND

animals is a namelessness.

We flail around

generically –

camelopardalis is what

the Romans came up with

for “giraffe” (it looked to

them like a camel crossed

with a leopard) or get the

category wrong – a musk

ox isn't an at all but

more closely cognate with

the goat – and when  
choosing to name  
individual animals we  
pretend they are objects  
(Spot) or virtues (Beauty)  
or just other selves (Bob). (136)

The boundary between humans and animals is marked by foregrounding our failure. To “flail” around “generically” is to know things by imposing patterns, grids, and concepts onto things. In terms of species we do name *indifferently*. In terms of individual animals, the poem here offers three forms of failure: the first, as with the example of “spot,” we underline species hierarchies and invoke dualism by turning life into objects; the second form registers our reflexive, judgemental abilities that aim to clarify aesthetic attributes, another version of the “other,” or thing-in-itself, to be consumed by us, as with the object; lastly, we have the anthropocentric will to power that deletes the already flawed category of animal completely.

In Val Plumwood’s outline of “dialogical interspecies ethics,” the Australian ecofeminist argues: “colonialist, racist and fascist thinking is especially notable for its invariant categorisations” (173). These are “unnecessary and invariant, context-insensitive rankings of [human] beings by broad categorical types” (173). Race, class and gender are three examples we know well, so too, species. For Plumwood, Weil’s *The Need for Roots* (1952) offers an alternative disposition: “non-ranking.” This is discussed within an ethical framework that aims to respect the “other” while avoiding or minimising ranking: an important part of the content of human equality and respect, rather than the scalar kind of equality that assigns equal weight on some ethical scale in moral deliberations. We have already witnessed this ethic within Carson’s poetics. Simon Weil writes, “Respect is due to the human [and non-human] being *as such* and it is not a matter of degree” (*Roots*: 173). Plumwood is keen to alert the reader that ranking non-human animals and other human animals on a scale as “equal” still allows us “to think of “greater” or “lesser”, and thus a matter of degree” (173). How to avoid this relativistic framework?

It would be contentious to suggest there is such avoidance in Carson’s use of the symbol of relation [ $>$ ] in the title of her sequel to *Autobiography of Red*, and yet I wish to remind the reader of the import given to signs by Husserl and Merleau-Ponty (above). The symbol of relation commonly known as the “greater-than-sign” first appears alongside its partner [ $<$ ] in the 1631 publication *Artis Analyticae Praxis ad Aequationes Algebraicas Resolvendas* (*The Analytical Arts Applied to Solving Algebraic Equations*) by

Thomas Harriot.<sup>11</sup> The symbol denotes inequality. Is it not deployed by Carson to request further exercise of the historical imagination by the reader, to indicate the transatlantic movement of ideas and culture (in both directions, as with the myth of Geryon), and to insist upon an historical imaginary that is mindful of alternative uses of language to sing the world without reduction to logos, to static categories? It reminds us of the book as ontologically at one remove from the animals, yet something that resides in the common place of 'red' – a literary signifier with multiple symbolic meanings. And might this request to resist reduction of life to stasis (while accepting the terms by which we might do this i.e. in language) in turn point us towards a critique of an evolution in language, by which we might argue that in modernity or in humans, "the semiosis that is apparent in all nature achieves a new, and more complex level of articulation" (Westling 102; Wheeler 14-21)? Perhaps Carson paradoxically resists such a form of progression while modernising ancient myths, particularly in *Autobiography of Red* where the emotional plot line belies the poetic reconfiguration of the scene of herding that does not transport us to idealised wild states; equally it refuses to see progress from animals to humans. This double-edged resistance is amplified in the use of pastoral space as a vehicle for the constitution and deconstitution of cultural and political identities, which *red doc>* places in terms of creatureliness that are counterpoint to extreme epistemological relativism, if not somewhat adumbrated by playful, precise, protracted and performative poetics.

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<sup>11</sup> Credited as the first astronomer to artistically represent an object seen through a telescope, Harriot's map of the moon preceded Galileo's. Legend has it that Harriot saw this symbol [>] in a native North American community when he was surveying the continent for Sir Walter Raleigh in the late sixteenth century. Harriot's name is also associated with the introduction of the potato to the British Isles.

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