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As Cupid's Arrows Fall: Sexual Growth, Abuse, and Coping in Phillips' From the Devotions and Carson's Autobiography of Red

Derek Mong '04

"I am that queer monster the artist, an obstinate finality, an inexcusable sensibility."

—Henry James

Children are innocent, adolescents less so, adults downright weathered. Well at least that's the convenient reality to one fits this block logic and aging remains as particular as fingerprint. Between the child and the adult, we can count on one thing, the story. To this day, the one fits this block logic and aging remains as particular as downright weathered. Well at least that's the convenient text. Appropriating Greek myth, Carson writes a story of passion and abuse, though she concludes with healing. Because Red's novel in verse, she's drawn to a certain narrative. This difference in style, purpose, and form affects their treatment of sexual growth and abuse. I'll begin with Phillips who explores early sexuality through three discrete lenses: wounding, instinct, and initiation. Poems like "Alba: Innocence," "Honey Hush," and "Arcadia" reveal, and then attempt to explain, a dark connection between the young Eros and pain. Child abuse becomes central to my reading. Carson, in her own unorthodox way, tackles up these same issues within a different context. Appropriating Greek myth, Carson writes a story of another interpretive layer to innocence as it asks for something different to affect the unclouded flesh, to fill the "capacity for suffering." The flesh as "song untrained," for example, involves the God "Body Electric" and the rich homoeroticism we associate with his verse. Meat, however, infers hunger, another bodily desire Phillips often equates to sexual need (for other examples see "The Blue Castrato," section II, line 14 or "In the Borghese Garden" lines 15-16). Finally, when "good soil" waits for something, namely seed. That metaphor implies spring farmland before plant­ ing, but also seeds of the same. If we read these analogies as I have, then their obvious that the flesh without knowledge beacons another man. Thus Phillips' primary sexual stage doesn't present itself as blank canvas, but as flesh waiting and wanting other flesh, perhaps before its even aware of what it's asking. Pain and wounding will inevitably follow.

A question, however, remains: what compels the wanted other's side, his (or her) (unsolicited) partner? This seems pivotal to Phillips' exploration of early sexuality and the repercussions of abuse. The poem has said, I believe that there are, for lack of a less worn­to-the-bone term, forces, the erotic, of course, also the vi­ lent, also trust... which the ancients considered akin to grav­ ity or wind (Dyke 10). Along similar lines (though more nar­ rowly defined), may be the term "innocence," as "beauty," as "alas, allusor" (lines 16-17). Each comparison adds another spin to Phillips' stance of the abuser as someone who is very much in the service of­...the autl1or's words, "how do these pieces explain child abuse? We begin with the narrative, deer crossing a channel in search of something left intentionally vague, the it-they-seed-more-of. What remain important is their reason, instinct, an animal urge programmed into existence. This instinct necessitates their crossing and drowning, and through his diction Phillips equates that drowning to the preceding voice of the abuser. Asking a question we often pose to unorthodox criminals Phillips writes, "How else understand it?/ this swimmer, that one, there and then/ not, except when sometimes the body/ meets a weight sudden, unlooked for,/ and large, the way persuasion is laid (lines 24-25). The description of drowning, a weight placed on the deer, a weight large like persuasion, matches the child's description of his abuser's body pressed upon him. The deer fish's instincts are thus revealed. Phillips has led us to believe the aggressor is driven to his sex acts for the same reason. In the author's own words, "we can think of the abuser as someone who very much in the service of- if not in thrall to- Eros gone awry" (Dykes 3).

This subtle connection between abuse and instinct raises questions I've no doubt Phillips himself has asked. What would it mean if child abusers acted on instinct, were driven not to their actions but to their sex acts? Do we side with Nietzsche when he writes, "All naturalism in morality, that is, all healthy morality, is ruled by an instinct? (27)" Phillips certainly does not agree with instinctual living, condone child abuse, or pardon its perpetrators (a point he's made apparent in inter­ views). Nevertheless instinct may explain the aggressor with­ out justifying his behavior. The moral question's left un­ answered in the poems, though there in poems, "I Sing the Body Hums" (lines 1-7). The poem following "Honey Hush" reveals more to Phillips' style that forces the narrative, deer instinct, and through his diction Phillips equates that drowning to the preceding voice of the abuser. Asking a question we often pose to unorthodox criminals Phillips writes, "How else understand it?/ this swimmer, that one, there and then/ not, except when sometimes the body/ meets a weight sudden, unlooked for,/ and large, the way persuasion is laid (lines 24-25). The description of drowning, a weight placed on the deer, a weight large like persuasion, matches the child's description of his abuser's body pressed upon him. The deer fish's instincts are thus revealed. Phillips has led us to believe the aggressor is driven to his sex acts for the same reason. In the author's own words, "we can think of the abuser as someone who very much in the service of- if not in thrall to- Eros gone awry" (Dykes 3).
across four distinct stages. The poet's broader trope is horse taming, a comparison Phillips makes to the boy's sexual initiation/abuse. And it is a horse Phillips begins with: "The horse does not know that its sure; he is wanting this'" (line 1-2). Two elements, not uncommon to this book, must be made immediately apparent: the voice and the thirst. Phillips begins this poem speaking as one of the boy's co-workers. This experienced lover looks to train the next generation of both horses and farm boys. The language infers this double meaning. "His body like mine, in places: what would, but does not" (lines 5-6). It's not just a horse that we are aware of sexuality. We've previously seen Phillips equate hunger/thirst with sexual desire, so this comparison comes as no surprise. Thus when the speaker ends the poem with "bring him to me" he's figuratively commanding the boy to join him in sex acts. The conceit remains gorgeous throughout its frightening implications, especially considering the re-imagined cliché underlying it. Phillips had this to say: "Drink. The older man intends to prove this maxim wrong."

In section two, "He is a Lover of Horses," the older farmhands tempt the boy and then leave him to question his mistaken sexual conduct. The boy's first problem? "He does not know the difference between the smell/ of his body and drink."

If there's a moral question here it remains murky. Both horse and man are compared as warriors. She fills a void in the holes that the Greek texts left. This tactic stands in opposition to Phillips who's more inclined to create holes. Consequently, their subject matter overlaps. In "Autobiography of Red," Carson doesn't so much write single poems as write books chapters, each one another step towards a quasi-conclusion. Considering she began Red as a single poem and then fully employed as a thematic device until chapter VIII, just after he's met Herakles, but photography's role doesn't end with resolving issues of abuse and sexual maturity. It is a Lover of Horses, a comparison Phillips makes to the boy's sexual development, need some concluding gesture, even if it demonstrates Geryon's initial desire to ease his discomfort through pictures. Throughout this chapter’s title: "The Taming," though grooming literally refers to the nat-picking (an act between Geryon and Herakles that, from outward appearances, resembles oral sex). Still Carson figuratively infers the cultivation of a lover. Through these sex acts Herakles prepares Geryon to be his concubine, dominating the boy as if he were a domestic animal. It takes Geryon a chapter to comprehend this arrangement: "Geryon did an early red-winged LOVESLAVE on the garage of the priest’s house/ next to the Catholic church" (55). A precursor to his photograph, this graffiti expresses his insecurity and sense of emasculation by an unfulfilled parent figure. Each time Geryon’s photo is omitted, all outside view of his world is simply split Geryon’s skull with an arrow. When the same characters meet according to Carson, they fall in love. This replacement of pain with affection is not accidental, but a deliberate connection underneath the whole book.

Carson’s attentions are obvious. General trends concerning Red’s content and translations cast a cloud of sexual abuse over the book’s particular events.

Not only does she have on e answer . By appropriating Stesichorus’s story (Goldsmith’s "Arrows and the Pie") as problematic: the hyper-masculine and insensitive Herakles. Stesichorus’s story perhaps not an equal , needing some concluding gesture, even if it demonstrates Geryon’s initial desire to ease his discomfort through pictures. Throughout this chapter’s title: "The Taming," though grooming literally refers to the nat-picking (an act between Geryon and Herakles that, from outward appearances, resembles oral sex). Still Carson figuratively infers the cultivation of a lover. Through these sex acts Herakles prepares Geryon to be his concubine, dominating the boy as if he were a domestic animal. It takes Geryon a chapter to comprehend this arrangement: "Geryon did an early red-winged LOVESLAVE on the garage of the priest’s house/ next to the Catholic church" (55). A precursor to his photograph, this graffiti expresses his insecurity and sense of emasculation by an unfulfilled parent figure. Each time Geryon’s photo is omitted, all outside view of his world is simply split Geryon’s skull with an arrow. When the same characters meet according to Carson, they fall in love. This replacement of pain with affection is not accidental, but a deliberate connection underneath the whole book.

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heartache, Geryon makes a picture that conveys the fatalism and confinement plaguing his mind:...

The photograph is titled "If He Sleep He Shall Do Weld." It shows a fly floating in a pail of water-drowned with a strange agitation of light around the wings. Geryon used a fifteen minute exposure. When he first opened the shutter the fly seemed to be still alive. (71) Geryon's photograph screams autobiography, not simply for its place in the journal, but through the content of the image. Carson doesn't veil this reading. Obviously, it's been raining since the chapter began, and as the opening line suggests, there's little escape from the water. "Water! Out from two crouching masses of the world the water leaps" (70). Furthermore, the fly's confined, literally caged as the rain collects and drowning him. The physical and emotional similarities between Geryon and the fly's monster-like appearance and inescapable confinement. Carson writes, "Weak as a fly Geryon crouched against the sink/ with his fists in his mouth/ and his wings trailing over the drainboard" (71). Furthermore, the knowledge Geryon carries of his own "early death much to the despair of the community" has also been projected onto the fly. We're quickly reminded of "Red Patience," not simply from the 15 minutes exposure, but from the way Geryon captures and views the image. "What if you took a fifteen-minute exposure of a man in jail, let's say, the lava has just reached his window?" he asked. "I think you are confusing subject and object, she said. 'Very likely,' said Geryon." (53).

In "If He Sleep He Shall Do Weld" subject and object become nearly indistinguishable. Geryon viewing the photograph becomes intrinsically linked to the photographic image and the photographic surface. Any line separating the viewer and the viewed disappears completely in South America. Here Geryon takes his own portrait: he set up the camera on the window sill and activated the timer, then positioned himself on the bed. It is a black and white photograph showing a naked young man in fetal position. He has entitled it "No Tail!" The fantastic fingerprint of his wings is outspread on the bed like a black lace map of South America.

Once again we're given a beautiful and disturbing image, wrought with intimacy and a comic lining not previously at play in his work. The implications of self-portraiture cannot be overlooked. In photographing himself (or the fly for that matter, which one could label a symbolic self-portrait) Geryon temporarily moves his own fragile body from the painted, inexplicable, and temporal world, to the tangible and timeless print surface. Geryon's image(s) of self do not convey egoism or vanity, characteristics associated with the poorest self-portraiture, but instead an attempt at personal communica­tion. Susan Sontag puts it best when she writes, "Photographs really are experience captured, and the experience the ideal arm of consciousness in its acquisitive mood" (3-4). For Geryon to photograph himself and then view the product of his labors, allows him to acquire knowledge of his existence and appearance. This may seem silly to the average, self-assured, and confident individual, but for Geryon such an act becomes monumental. Self-portraiture equals self-learning, and that's arguably Geryon's motivation throughout the novel. Sontag continues:
The ultimate wisdom of the photographic image is to say: "There is the surface. Now think—or rather feel, intuit—what is beyond it, what the reality must be like if it looks this way." Photographs, which cannot themselves explain anything, are inexhaustible invitations to deduction, sexually connotative language. He tells her, "Knell down speculation, and fantasy." (23)

Not coincidentally, Geryon cannot explain or comprehend the full weight of his own sexuality, wings, or aging. He's often so starved for self-knowledge that he's left to intuit or feel his own place in the world. By photographing himself and then viewing those images, he invites not others (i.e. Harkes) but Geryon to deduce, speculate, and fantasize about his existence. Each photograph creates another pathway into his own psyche, one with the all the possibilities Sontag outlines above. Photography allows Geryon to achieve a medium of self-actualization. But even beyond its therapeutic value, photography offers Geryon a temporal anomaly, which further aids in his healing: the ability to halt time, as we've seen in both "Red Patience" and his fly image. The question, "What is time made of?" plague Geryon throughout the novel, tying into his fear of death as well as the difficulties brought on by aging. He senses an impermanence in his existence, dating back to his prophetic writing concerning his own death. This anxiety relates directly to the passage of time: What is time made of? He could feel it wased around him, he could see its big deadweight blocks padded tight together all the way from Bermuda to Buenos Aires too tight. His lungs contracted fear of time came at him. Time was squeezing Geryon like the pleats of an accordion. (80).

The philosophers offer one possible answer to Geryon, "Time is an abstraction—just a meaning that we impose on motion" (93) but that hardly satisfies the boy. He prefers his own explanation and acts upon it in the last chapters of the book: "Much truer is the time that strays into photographs and stops" (93). It is here Geryon's photography flourishes. Carson lists seven or her last eight chapters after Geryon's photographs while she her character learns whole­ness through film. As he shoots pictures Geryon can feel attached to and yet paradoxically distanced from the world. He explains this unusual participation with reality: "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). Others have noted the pleasurable voyeurism that accompanies photography, but few have linked it to participa­tion as Sontag has: "Like sexual voyeurism, it is a way of at least tacitly, often explicitly, encouraging whatever is going on to keep on happening" (12). Through the camera Geryon both encourages and participates in the events around him. As opposed to simply being acted upon (both sexually and in general), he has found a moderating existence in which he too acts. He's found the place of the artist. With each shot Geryon authors some part of his life, controlling where he had otherwise felt controlled. His images connect the infinite slope of time with all its consequences: aging, death, an existential dread that relinquishes control. Sontag again: "the photographic language behind his or her camera, creating a tiny element of another world: the image that bids to outlast us all" (11). Permanence from an impermanent world: that's the effect of Geryon's camera. Through a lens he can both engage and contemplate. It's the sort of participatory balance he's lacked since his adolescence began.
Works Cited


-Henry James quote taken from:

-Translation of Stesichoros taken from: