



ANNE CARSON'S *RED DOC*>

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by DREW CALVERT

Ever since *Eros the Bittersweet*, the quirky academic thesis that launched her career in the mid-1980s, Carson has moved through literary forms with the relentlessness of a bounty hunter. She has written essays, translations, elegies, screenplays—even, somehow, an opera. Deeply rooted in the origins of Western philosophy, her work is also exhilaratingly intimate in the way it explores the borders between rhetoric and spirituality. Those immersed in her work discover that etymology is thrilling, social constructs are arbitrary, and logic itself is nothing but a fragile form of solace. In works such as *Glass, Irony and God* and *The Beauty of the Husband*, she taps into the primitive urges that underlie every literary pursuit—from the straight-laced scholarly thesis to the delirious prose of Gertrude Stein. In her translations of Sappho and Euripides, she salvages the crises still lurking in our myths, giving form to a chaos that never settled.

Her primary subject is love: the haunting love we experience as grief; the erotic love we experience in our youth; twisted love; violent love; mute and hopeless love. For Carson, this is not a whimsical fascination; rather, the quest for art and the travails of love are inextricable. In *Eros the Bittersweet*, she treats romantic love as a serious philosophical problem:

There is something uniquely convincing about the perceptions that occur to

you when you are in love. They seem truer than other perceptions, and more truly your *own*, won from reality at personal cost. Greatest certainty is felt about the beloved as necessary complement to you. Your powers of imagination connive at this vision, calling up possibilities from beyond the actual. All at once a self never known before, which now strikes you as the true one, is coming into focus. A gust of godlikeness may pass through you and for an instant a great many things look knowable, possible and present. Then the edge asserts itself. You are not a god. You are not that enlarged self. Indeed, you are not even a whole self, as you now see. Your new knowledge of possibilities is also a knowledge of what is lacking in the actual.

Carson's poetic-scholarly treatment of love is not without its precedents. A.E. Housman expressed his desire through the study of Roman poets. Shakespeare challenged the idea of love as a straightforward legal contract. Even famously cerebral poets—from John Donne to T.S. Eliot—allude to all-consuming passions. As Philip Larkin once wrote, in a poem called "Faith Healing":

In everyone there sleeps
 A sense of life lived according to love.
 To some it means the difference they could make
 By loving others, but across most it sweeps
 As all they might have been had they been loved.

What sets Carson apart from most contemporary poets is that her inquiry into the meaning of love is at once personal and scholarly. This is especially true in "The Glass Essay," a work that weaves together a study of Emily Brontë with Carson's own account of a doomed love affair:

Perhaps the hardest thing about losing a lover is
 to watch the year repeat its days.
 It is as if I could dip my hand down

 into time and scoop up
 blue and green lozenges of April heat
 a year ago in another country.



The new work, *Red Doc*, like its precursor, *The Autobiography of Red*, is a genuine love story. In the original myth, a red-winged monster named Geryon is killed by Hercules for his cattle; Carson tells their story as a disastrous sexual affair. The two meet as teenagers at a bus station in New Mexico ("two superior eels / at the bottom of the tank / they recognized each other like italics"); Geryon is smitten, then overwhelmed. When Hercules grows impatient with his red-winged lover (a sensitive photographer with a history of abuse

and a strong attachment to his mother), the relationship ends and Geryon grows reclusive. The two meet later in Buenos Aires, where Hercules has taken a Peruvian lover. What follows is bizarre: a love triangle ensues on a journey through the Andes, where Geryon is ultimately led to discover art's transcendent power.

In *Red Doc*, Carson tests the reader's credulity-threshold with an even weirder storyline. Geryon (who goes by 'G') is now a self-pitying, middle-aged cattle-herder who spends his free time reading Proust ("was like having / an extra unconscious") and worries that he is "turning into one of those / old guys in a ponytail and / wings." Through a mutual friend, G is reunited with Hercules, who is now a war veteran named Sad But Great:

[...] just got out of
the army / wounded /
messed up / are they giving him care / a guy shows
up with a padded envelope
of drugs every night I
guess
it's care

Together with a strange artist named Ida, G and Sad take a trip to a glacier and visit a psychiatric clinic. Along the way they pick up Hermes (trusted messenger of the gods, recast here as a hitchhiker), and the foursome enter a dreamscape that is only vaguely defined (though it does include a volcano and a therapist sporting overalls). If *Autobiography* is about the self-altering effects of teenage passion ("To feel anything / deranges you"), *Red Doc* is more concerned with everything that follows: regret, jealousy, justification, and the consolations of memory. To read it strictly as a sequel is to set oneself up for disappointment. But as with each of her previous works, Carson makes a serious attempt to capture the estranging essence of love and the potential for art to preserve it. The picaresque journey ends with the death of G's mother, which leaves him in a cloud of grief. Going through her kitchen drawers, he finds a photograph of her when she was young, and what follows is one of the book's most poignant moments:

One leg forward like a
Greek *kouros* a cigarette
in the other hand she
glows as a drop of water
glows in the sun. She looks
sexually astute in a way
that terrifies him he puts
this aside and all at once
the grainy photograph the

early marvel of her life
 flung up at him a thing
 hardly believable! knocks
 him to his knees.

Carson is no stranger to the theme of grief. In 2000, following the unexpected death of her brother, Michael, she began assembling *Nox*, an elegiac scrapbook commemorating the loss. In *Antigonick*, her recent take on Sophocles' classic play, she explores a similar theme through a more traditional prism (though the text, a cross between a comic book and an absurdist screenplay, is anything but traditional). In *Red Doc*, Carson again engages with her stockpile of classical material, and it is fascinating to witness how the brutal self-discovery of *Autobiography* has morphed into broader existential concerns. One new thread running through the work is the modern concept of hope, which resembles love in the sense that it is a method for overcoming death: "And yet hope turns / out to be let's face it / mostly delusional a word / derived from Latin *ludere* / meaning to play a game / with oneself or with others." Carson explores this further through allusions to Prometheus, whom she uses rather playfully to address a serious problem:

chorus
 should we discuss your
 philanthropy
 prometheus
 I went a bit too far
 chorus
 how do you mean
 prometheus
 I stopped them seeing death before them
 chorus
 how
 prometheus
 I planted blind hope in their hearts
 chorus
 why
 prometheus
 they were breaking
 chorus
 you fool

For Carson, the marrow of our culture is still essentially mythological. However advanced our models of thought, we live our lives for the most part in a swarm of confused emotions. Whatever else we pretend to be, we are creatures surviving on love in one of its myriad forms. This is something vital we share with every hero and monster of our making, and Carson is not done

seeking it out.

