

Albertine in Carson's Queer Journeys: from Stesichoros to Proust

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Abstract:

The queerness of Anne Carson's poetics relies on her understanding how the process of queering language and therefore of *being* itself operates when contingency enables distant characters, myths, artworks to resurrect, connect, transmigrate, inform new paradigms without aiming at the establishment of new orders, canons or identities. This paper examines how Carson's queer imagination brings together Stesichoros and Proust through the latter's character Albertine, a paradigmatic queer figure of defiance. If in *Geryoneis*, Stesichoros rewrites Hercules' tenth labour from the point of view of Geryon, in *Autobiography of Red*, Carson rewrites *Geryoneis* transforming the imperialistic drive into a passionate love affair that leaves the red-winged monster in desperation. The two characters, renamed and middle-aged, meet again in *Red Doc*, a sequel explicitly "haunted by Proust." As Carson herself suggests, G, the adult version of Geryon is the actual author of her next published book, *The Albertine Workout*, a retelling of Albertine's story. Analyzing the three works along with their Proustian intertext, this paper examines how the mythical figure writes *The Albertine Workout* instead of his own autobiography in the precarious form of a school notebook rejecting any definitive reading. Resembling the scattered, numbered pieces of an ancient papyrus, *The Albertine workout* suggests a new definition of writing as only a possible reading of the innumerable versions of Albertine's uncontainable story, of one's always unstable identities and the artificial linearities of every story.

Keywords: Queer, adjective, plant, kimono, Contingence

Some scattered pieces of damaged papyri compose the now fragmentary image of an ancient poem. In order to translate its isolated remainders, philologists reorder these pieces, recontextualize the poem and restore its linguistic, generic and metric particularities. Still, the cracks in the poem's image are to the eyes of an artist like Anne Carson as intriguing and compelling as the imagined fissures of the unknown narrative. In her 1998 *Autobiography of Red*, Carson likes to think that ancient lyric poet "Stesichoros had composed a substantial narrative poem, then ripped it to pieces and buried the pieces in a box (...). The fragment numbers tell you roughly how the pieces fell out of the box. You can of course keep shaking the box" (Carson, 1998, pp. 6-7). Carson's pseudo translation of *Geryoneis*, preceded by a pseudo-introduction to Stesichoros' work and three self-declared explanatory appendices, is therefore the translation of a random poem consisting of an aleatory ordering of the initial poem's remaining pieces. In her effort to materialize this procedure, she published in 2016 her work *Float* in the form of a box, inviting the reader to experience the randomness and creativity of reading. Carson mocks the philological conventions in the same way that Virginia Woolf mocks the biographical conventions in her *Orlando: a Biography* in order to submit to the reader the erudite literary result of multiple generic confluences, interlocked intertexts and crossed boundaries.

According to Carson's pseudo introduction, the importance of Stesichoros lies in his extra-ordinary use of adjectives: "Nouns name the world. Verbs activate the names. Adjectives come from somewhere else. (...) These small imported mechanisms are in charge of attaching everything in the world to its place in particularity. They are *the latches of being*" (Carson 1998, p.4). Having inherited from Homer the codified adjectival forms, "Stesichoros began to undo the latches. / Stesichoros released being. All the substances of the world went floating up" (Carson 1998, p. 5). By liberating nouns as the names given to things from their normative adjectives and thus from their particular placing in the world, the ancient poet liberates being. This liberation enabled Stesichoros to rewrite Hercules' tenth labor from the point of view of Geryon, a three-headed red-winged giant. Around a century before the inception of tragedy – a paradigmatic genre of myth rewriting –, the myth of a hero embodying the image of the Greek settler is deconstructed and thereby his labor is transformed into an act of injustice

that leads to the death of Geryon, a now sympathetic and ennobled monstrous creature.

The same passage, somewhat rewritten, is to be found in Carson's 2014 little pamphlet *The Albertine Workout*, a list of 59 reflections (plus some randomly numbered appendices) on Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*, emphasizing the pathologies of the Albertine cycle (vol V. *The Captive* & vol. VI *The Fugitive*) and repeating platitudes of Proustian criticism. The beginning of the "appendix 15 (a) on adjectives" reads: "Adjectives are the *handles of being*. Nouns name the world, adjectives let you get hold of the name and keep it from flying all over your mind like a pre-Socratic explanation of the cosmos" (Carson, 1998, p. 25). Suggesting that Proust, like Stesichoros "undoes the latches" and releases being, Carson provides a list of the adjectives that are supposedly given to the air in the different volumes of *La Recherche* in order to deal with what she calls "the desert of After Proust" (Carson, 1998, p. 25).

Liberating the substances of the world from their expected places, both Stesichoros and Proust indeed *queer* language, not to say *being*. Carson's work seems to articulate a new definition of queerness that enables characters, myths, artworks to resurrect, connect, transmigrate, inform new paradigms without aiming at the establishment of new orders, canons or identities. Firstly, her work initiates unexpected philosophical, poetic, generic and formal dialogues without the specific aim of assigning the substances of the world a definitive place. Secondly, acknowledging the mutability of forms, she understands the liberation of being as a constant placing and replacing in space and time. In this way, every queer work is the bearer of the freedom that precedes it, of the undoing of latches that precedes any new, precarious, redoing that the work necessarily proposes. Carson's queer imagination brings together Stesichoros and Proust through Albertine, a paradigmatic queer figure of defiance.

In the Proustian world, Albertine is an athletic young woman associated with motion and speed, who appears for the first time on Balbec's seashore, as part of a girl's group. This *garçonne* who does not hide her scorn for social norms is to the eyes of Marcel a protean, shape-shifting figure that constantly escapes his efforts of appropriation. His desire is aroused by Albertine's unreachability, all the more so when he suspects her of sapphic relations. His possessive jealousy will lead him to sequester her in his Parisian apartment, but she eventually leaves him and dies thrown by her horse

against a tree. During their life together, Albertine's art of lying will save her from Marcel's constant interrogations, while his post-mortem investigations will not succeed in revealing anything about his lover's past. Changeable and ungraspable, Albertine is the Proustian narrator's major representational challenge: ungraspable, she often escapes critical interpretations; changeable, she finds refuge in unexpected fictional worlds, such as Carson's myths and more precisely Hercules' myth to which the poet constantly returns.

To accomplish his tenth labor, Heracles travels to Erytheia and kills Geryon in order to steal his red cattle. If, in *Geryoneis*, Stesichoros rewrites this story transforming a marginal monstrous figure into a noble protagonist, in *Autobiography of Red*, Carson rewrites *Geryoneis* transforming the Greek imperialistic drive of the era into a passionate queer love affair whereby the leather-jacketed popular Heracles leaves the contemporary Geryon, a homosexual, deformed and marginalized red-winged adolescent in desperation. *Red Doc*, the 2013 sequel of the novel, resumes their story as adults. Geryon, now a herdsman of musk oxen, becomes G, and Herakles, a war veteran, presents himself with his army name Sad But Great. Returning from war with PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder), Sad travels with G and Ida, their common artist friend, on a road trip interrupted by the presence of the characters at the hospital where G's mother must face her death. As far as it follows a similar plot-line to *Autobiography of Red*, *Red Doc* is in a way a less coherent and more abrupt rewriting of its prequel. Its intrigue seems to defy causality as much as its structural and graphic form is, according to Carson herself, the product of "error and chance," sometimes prosaically generated by hitting the wrong computer buttons. Contrary to the *Autobiography of Red*, *Red Doc* is not wrapped up within a pseudo-theoretical apparatus, and it is divided into three different forms "left aligned, deeply indented dialogues" (...); "center-aligned, chorus-like commentaries titled "Wife of Brain;" and predominantly, narrow columns of justified text" (Scranton, p. 209).

Returning to the questions of Eros and Thanatos, time, memory and loss, *Red Doc* is, according to its publisher, Knopf, "haunted by Proust." There is perhaps no more appropriate place for Proust to emerge than the conversation of G with his dying mother with which the work begins. Having just finished his seven-year reading of Proust's novel, G has to deal not only with the end of the reading experience and the "desert of after Proust," but also with the tribulations of the read: on the one hand, around

the death of the Proustian protagonist's grand-mother, the narrator develops his theory of "the intermittencies of the heart"; on the other hand, his grief after Albertine's loss intertwines the deaths of the two women.

Midway through their journey, the ex-lovers are joined by Ida, with whom Sad, a self-declared homosexual (Carson, 2014a, p. 41), engages in a sexual relationship triggering G's jealousy or, as he says; "not exactly. But comparison is involved." Thus jealousy, the main question that pervades the Albertine cycle, introduces the Proustian captive in Carson's narrative. In *La Recherche*, at least according to the narrator's categories, sapphism epitomizes sexual difference: Albertine is a woman whose desires and pleasures exclude men, a woman who defies both sharing and identification. Marcel's question is therefore: what does a woman give to Albertine that I cannot? In an interesting reversal, G does not wonder what a woman gives to Sad, but rather what Sad gives to Ida ("he wonders how Ida finds Sad as a lover") (Carson, 2014a, p. 85), before he falls asleep: "Men fall asleep after sex and girls get used to it. G never did," (Carson, 2014a, p. 85) but "G could never bear to watch Sad sleep" (Carson, 2014a, p. 90). While G is interested in Sad being awake, Ida is interested in him when he is asleep, as she compares her encounter with G to a "pie without a fork." Thus, G's humorous identification with Ida blurs the male/female gender binary and destabilizes sexual categories such as homosexuality.

The incident with Ida watching Sad asleep, brings to G's mind Marcel's infamous somnophilia in *The Captive*, i.e. the moments when the protagonist takes sexual pleasure while playing with Albertine's unresponsive body. Not only Carson, but various renowned female re-writers of Albertine's story, such as Angela Carter (*The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*), Jacqueline Rose (*Albertine*) and Chantal Ackerman (*La Captive*) are appalled by this episode. Humorous, doubtful and ironic, Carson denounces, as if innocently and colloquially, the implausibility of the incident. Wavering between his desire for the fugitive and his will for the absolute knowledge of the other, the Proustian narrator believes that "one only loves that which one does not entirely possess," as the 52nd aphorism in *The Albertine Workout* reads (Carson, 2014b, 18). Thus, Albertine's imprisonment becomes nothing more than a constant succession of jealous anxiety and boredom that only the pleasing moments of her sleep can interrupt. Paradoxically, Albertine's sleep seems to provide to the protagonist the strange possibility of really possessing her without her losing her otherness. On the one hand,

Marcel can see Albertine without being seen and thus exposed: he can hide, lie, act on his desire without being revealed. On the other hand, seeing Albertine when she is most incapable of escaping through language or her gaze, the narrator believes that he subjects or even colonizes her body – a body that now shelters all her plurality, all the different beings that she can be when awoken.

Decontextualized and stripped of the numerous Proustian adjectives, the incident emerges in all its crudeness (Carson, 2014a, p. 88):

THINKING ABOUT
PROUST to pass the time.
What a scamp that Proust.
That Albertine. Does
anyone really believe the
girl stays asleep for four
pages in volume V while
Marcel roams around her
prostrate form and
stretches out beside it on
the bed. He touches her
lips strokes her cheek
presses his leg to her leg
then spends a long time
staring at the kimono
flung on a chair with all
her letters in the inside
pocket. *Albertine
continuait de dormir.* He
says he likes her better
asleep because she loses
her humanity and is just a
plant. A sleep plant that
cannot tell him lies or
escape his knowing. Poor
Marcel. What is there to
know.

Humorizing with Proust's lost and regained time, G thinks of Proust to *pass* the time. Writing beyond the constraints of scholarly discourse, Carson

can assign to “that” Proust in particular the predicate of “scamp,” but no attributes are attached to “that” Albertine who is nothing but his sexual object. I will focus on G’s emphasis on the leitmotifs of “kimono” and of “plant” that also reappear in *The Albertine Workout*. In a preview reading of this work, Carson declined authorship by saying that this little text is actually G’s first academic treatise. *The Albertine Workout* is a development of G’s three-page thoughts on Albertine in *Red Doc* denouncing in fact sexual power, lies, dissimulations, illusions and self-deception.

Carson’s or G’s opusculum starts with a series of statistical, and certainly random, details, concerning *La Recherche* that could have resulted from a digital humanities’ approach:

2.

Albertine’s name occurs 2,363 times in Proust’s novel, more than any other character.

3.

Albertine herself is present or mentioned on 807 pages of Proust’s novel.

4.

On a good 19% of these pages she is asleep.

(Carson, 2014b, p. 2)

Once she numerically establishes the importance of Albertine’s sleep or the overwhelming presence of her silence in the work, she comes back to the character’s transformation into a vegetal being.

24.

The state of Albertine that most pleases Marcel is Albertine asleep.

25.

By falling asleep she becomes a plant, he says.

26.

Plants do not actually sleep. Nor do they lie or even bluff. They do, however, expose their genitalia.

(Carson, 2014b, p. 10)

Her dehumanization while asleep eliminates one of Albertine's "problems," as Carson names them, namely, lying or even bluffing. Albertine as a sleeping human changes species: she becomes a plant, and as such she does not actually sleep. Viewed as a plant, Albertine is neither awake nor asleep, but she exposes her "genitalia." Paradoxically, as a plant she is exposed in her human nakedness and becomes manipulatable in her intimacy. Albertine asleep evokes Ophelia, and as Carson specifies, the similarity is neither with Shakespeare's character nor with Ophelia as a narrative structure, but with Hamlet's presumed object of desire. This kinship is firstly inscribed, as Carson suggests, in "the sexual life of plants," which, as she states, "Proust and Shakespeare equally enjoy using as language of female desire" (Carson, 2014b, p. 11). This remark brings to mind the lengthy commentary that inaugurates the fourth volume of Proust's novel, *Sodom and Gomorrah*, inspired by the sexuality of plants that constitutes a rather conservative understanding of human sexuality based on clichés around male homosexuality. However, as Sedgwick suggests, Gomorrah in *La Recherche* embodies "a modern, less mutilating and hierarchical sexuality" (Sedgwick, 1990, p. 235) than Sodom. Without referring to queerness, Sedgwick argues that Albertine's sexuality, unlike Proustian representations of male homosexuality, seems to represent "infinity, indeterminacy, contingency, play, etc." (Sedgwick, 1990, p. 236) Nevertheless, Carson neither refers to the Proustian narrator's botanical sexology, nor to the "female desire" as she claims, but rather to the male gaze's tendency to vegetalize female desire, in order to avoid facing its double nature as both inviting and threatening and thus to deny it expression. While the second point of paragraph 27 states that "Sometimes (...) Marcel's possesses her" (Carson, 2014b, p. 11), he, in fact, only believes that he does, for he actually never engages in sexual relations with Albertine.

29.

(...). Ophelia takes sexual appetite into the river and drowns it amid water plants. Albertine distorts hers into the false consciousness of a sleep plant. In both scenarios the man appears to be in control of the script yet he gets himself tangled up in the wiles of the woman. On the other hand, who is bluffing whom is hard to say.

The Proustian protagonist feels himself compelled to confess: "If Albertine's lips were closed, her eyelids, on the other hand, seen from where I was placed, seemed so loosely joined that I might almost have questioned

whether she really was asleep” (Proust, 2012) Driven by the narrative, Carson restores the agency of sexual objects over their neglected desire. Curiously, Marcel’s gaze does not objectify Albertine; rather her vegetalization subjectifies her: she is the one who distorts her desire into the false consciousness of a sleep plant. Considering the Marxist undertones, this false consciousness translates into the blindness regarding her own oppression or exploitation, a blindness that she can fake by being a plant in the eyes of Marcel. Albertine as a plant becomes for Carson a sleep plant, a plant that not only does not sleep, but induces sleep. Thus, Albertine outwits the presumed master of the situation by distorting her own desire in such a way as to seem ignorant of the oppressive nature of Marcel’s pleasure. Nevertheless, the question remains unresolved: who is bluffing whom? Marcel who believes he controls or Albertine who believes that she escapes? In “appendix 53 on the bluff,” Carson writes that for Proust:

“the difference between bluffing in poker and bluffing in love” is that “a card game is played in the present tense and all that matters is victory. But love reaches into past and future and fantasy; its suffering consists in positing to those realms all that the bluff conceals” (Carson, 2014b, p. 37).

If Albertine’s sleep was a card game, then victory goes to Marcel for his enjoyment. But given that the incident is emblematic of Marcel’s love for Albertine, his suffering is a placing of the bluff in space and time; it is a narrative in a box, and therefore interpretation depends on how the pieces fall out of the box; it is subjected to error and chance, to unexpectedness.

Marcel does not only stare at Albertine’s sleep, but “spends a lot of time staring at the kimono flung on a chair with all her letters in the inside pocket.” This kimono that Albertine throws off sometimes in her sleep so that she lies naked exposing her genitalia may contain the truth that Marcel is looking for or not. For the truth of her non-vegetal state, namely her presumed sapphic relations, is not to be found in her female nakedness but in what actually covers it. “Appendix 29 on kimonos” reads:

Knowledge of other people is unendurable. Japanese kimonos were in style in Paris in the ’20s. they had been redesigned for the European market, with less sleeve and more pocket. Albertine keeps all her letters in the pocket of the kimono that she carelessly tosses over a chair in Marcel’s room just before falling asleep. The truth

about Albertine is *that close*. Marcel does not investigate. Knowledge of other people is unendurable (Carson, 2014b, p. 31).

It is note-worthy that even for seemingly unimportant de-tails, Carson changes her narrative within the same work. Albertine throws off her kimono “in her sleep” in paragraph 27, but here “she carelessly tosses it over a chair before falling asleep.” Is it Albertine as a sleep plant who gets rid of her kimono or is it this other unpossessable Albertine who is careless? Is she really careless or is it that the letters in her pocket do not in fact include any revealing details? Introduced in Paris in the 20s, the kimono, a garment of rich history, becomes paradoxically a symbol of women’s emancipation and body liberation. Whether it gained “more pocket” due to westernization or Carson’s humoristic imagination, it is hard to say. In any case, “more pocket” translates into more privacy and therefore more autonomy, and in Marcel’s case into temptation. His inquisitive jealousy, unstoppable investigations and entrapment in the multiple layers of his own lies as well as Albertine’s presumed ones is satirized and trivialized by the retelling of this trifling kimono incident. The twice repeated “knowledge of other people is unendurable” is in dialogue with G’s rhetorical question: “what is there to know.” Marcel does not dare to know what he actually does not want to know and what in fact he cannot know.

Albertine’s story is retold by G, the adult version of a red monster, queered by Carson who retells his story. I do not have time here to develop the relation between queerness and monstrosity, brilliantly analyzed by Jack Halberstam. As a mythical figure, Geryon is shape-shifting as far as different cultures, eras and artworks change his features. As a hybrid figure of liminality, he has a propensity to change. But let us not forget that in Dante’s *Inferno*, to which Carson does not refer, Geryon becomes the monster of fraud, the figure of duplicity *par excellence* and thus Albertine’s ancestor. *Autobiography of Red* is not Geryon’s autobiography but the history of a non-written autobiography, that as we read in *Red Doc*>, he abandoned because nothing was happening in his life. *The Albertine workout* takes the place of this non-written autobiography. The paragraphs of the work are numbered as if they were fragments of an ancient text in a box. Along with the randomly numbered appendices, it is published in the precarious form of a school notebook defying any definitive reading. Every time we shake the box, different versions of Albertine’s life, of Geryon’s autobiography, of Carson’s work, of Steisichoros’ poem emerge, remapping identities, mythologies, literary landscapes and reshaping space and time.

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