“QUESTION IS HOW THEY USE IT – GIVEN THE LIMITS OF THE FORM”:
THE INVENTIVE AUTOBIOGRAPHIES OF FRANK O’HARA AND ANNE CARSON

by

CAROLINE DANIEL RAMSEY

(Under the Direction of Susan B. Rosenbaum)

ABSTRACT

This project analyzes the content and form of autobiographical poems by writers Frank O’Hara and Anne Carson. The paper situates both O’Hara’s and Carson’s poetic autobiographies within the larger contexts of period and genre, as well as within the scope of the authors’ poetic oeuvres. In addition to making substantial comparisons between the two poems, this paper asserts larger claims about O’Hara, Carson, and the generic parameters of poetic autobiography. Specifically, “Question is how they use it – given the limits of the form” argues that each of these experimental poems forges new ground for the poetic autobiography, offering new models for conceiving of selfhood and describing subjective experience. This thesis identifies how and why these innovative works confound preconceived notions of autobiography and poetry by disrupting conventions of gender, space, and number and offering fresh takes on the numerous potential of selfhood.

INDEX WORDS: Anne Carson, Frank O’Hara, Sincerity in Literature, American Poetry – 20th Century – History and Criticism
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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this project to my husband, Chuck Ramsey, without whose support I could never have completed this degree.
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This thesis could not have been successful without the kind and diligent guidance of my major professor, Susan Rosenbaum. I am so thankful to have had her support and advice throughout my coursework and thesis project. I would also like to express my sincere gratitude to the other members of my committee, Tricia Lootens and Roxanne Eberle, for their patience and supervision, and to our Graduate Coordinator, Kris Boudreau, for advising me throughout the process of this degree.
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The Inventive Autobiographies of Frank O’Hara and Anne Carson

The conception of the masque barely suggests the sordid identifications.  

(“In Memory of My Feelings” 141-2)

I. INTRODUCTION

The generic parameters of autobiographical writing include an expansive array of personal narrative and subjective reflection. Traditionally, autobiography tells the history of the self, giving a written account of the author’s experience. The search for truth within one’s life fuels autobiographical investigation, and the written account documents these findings. Within the gamut of self-writing, there lies as great a potential for creativity and complexity as exists in subjective experience itself, proving autobiography a genre rich with insight, ingenuity, and heterogeneity. The impulse to write one’s life – to “find the words that signify the self and its history” (Olney 2) – derives from the desire to translate the myriad impressions of personal experience and consciousness into a memorable mosaic of comprehensive veracity. A dual gesture, self-writing requires the ability to explain personal history and subjective reactions: “the language of autobiography points both outward to the world of remembered experience and inward to a reflective consciousness,” so it is “simultaneously fact and fiction” (Stone 7). Also, “[a]utobiography is about change; it narrates a series of transformations”: as “a text of life” it “presents the “before” and “after” of individuals who have undergone transformations of some kind” (Barros 1). The autobiographical experience, then, is tantamount to seeing and transcribing the world through multiple lenses: one must account for the subjective eyes that peer

1 from Autobiography of Red (Carson 67).
within, the observant awareness that records one’s environment, and the acute memory that orders these impressions and explains their connections.

To decipher personal history into autobiography is a truly monumental task, as it seeks to create a written shrine to one’s entire life and being. When combined with poetic form, autobiography becomes intensified by artful composition and effusive expression. The intensity of lyric verse elevates autobiography to harmonize its elements in pursuit of the sublime. Poetic autobiography, then, allows a writer to engage in the business of self-writing by appreciating subjectivity of expression most completely. In this openness, autobiographical poetry maintains the multiple self-accounting procedures while abandoning bland narrative and discouraging oversimplification. When it fully appreciates and articulates the complexity of the subject, autobiographical poetry finds, after all, that “place for the genuine”\(^2\) and infuses it with the essentials of self. This poetic monument to one’s own life can take many forms, but successful ones must account for the difficulty of accounting. That is, the autobiographical project must not only achieve the complex exposition of self, but success depends on acknowledgement of the abstruse, arduous, and multifarious qualities of the task. Because postmodern poetry is already self-aware, the postmodern poetic autobiography necessarily engages on multiple planes of meta-awareness, making the project as much about self-writing as it is about the self. Moreover, these planes of meta-awareness must infer those planes that discourage elucidation, as the autobiography includes its confounding unknowable aspects and mysterious dark selves.

For Frank O’Hara, autobiography and poetry intermingled throughout his poetic career, as he often offered provocative glimpses into his personal thoughts with poetic sensibility. O’Hara delighted in the personal experiences that enriched his poetic verse with refreshing

\(^2\) from “Poetry” (Moore 267).
candor and vibrant particularity – the “suggestions and temptations of everyday” made O’Hara’s spirit palpable in the “living” poetry he wrote (Ashbery ix). As he writes in “Meditations in an Emergency,” O’Hara finds it his “duty to be attentive,” and he applies his attentiveness to his own sensibilities. He realizes, though, the difficulty of this predicament, as he writes, “I will my will, though I may become famous for a mysterious vacancy in that department, that greenhouse” (197). The “Emergency” of O’Hara’s autobiographical quandary is bound in the urgent imperative to create an indelible monument to the self and the knowledge that a “vacancy” occupies that fertile space. The urgency of the emergency, then, lies in writing a life that allows the “mysterious” blank spaces to thrive peacefully and harmoniously in the greenhouse of autobiography. One might argue that O’Hara’s response to this autobiographical imperative – or his answer to the question “How am I to become legend, my dear?” (197) – can be found in his collected work, understood only as a total life’s project. However, O’Hara writes his own version of the autobiographical poem in the innovative, elegiac “In Memory of My Feelings.” In this poem, O’Hara writes his process of continuous drafting and redrafting in which the only true autobiography is the one that exposes the fraudulence of presenting a single, coherent self. Instead, O’Hara positions the self as an assemblage of numerous selves and feelings, always changing and threatening chaos. As he dramatizes his introspective journey, O’Hara calls the reader to travel the channels within his teeming greenhouse, appreciating the progression through thoughts, feelings, moods, likenesses, memory, and mystery.

Written decades later, Anne Carson’s Autobiography of Red seeks to tackle some of the same autobiographical challenges portrayed by O’Hara. Even more experimental in form and content, Carson’s hybrid verse-novel annihilates the constructs of space and time and the boundaries between self-reflection and the outside world. Her autobiography is also an
assemblage, but this one incorporates the elements of autobiographical advances into a complex system of symbolic representations and intangible states of being. The abstract procedure compiles words and sounds with photographic references and sensory apparitions – in Carson’s autobiography places and things tell their own stories as well. Also deeply invested in the blank spaces in autobiographical explorations, Carson’s project distances the autobiography from its author, capitalizing on that need O’Hara articulated to include multiple selves and scenarios. Heavily invested in blankness, with an “aesthetic of blindness,” Carson uses autobiography to explore the quest for the unknowable, the perception of the imperceivable. And while O’Hara’s poetic autobiography travels through the multitudinous channels of his secluded inner jungle, Carson’s interweaves snapshots of all the materials excavated from the ruins of experience. The photographic representations capture the blankness in various ways, and the lines of demarcation between feelings, beings, and objects are muddled and confounded. For Carson, as for Geryon, the autobiographical process is less a progressive journey and more an invitation to dive into the slippage between multiple perceptions and realities. Carson’s only certainty is in fluidity: autobiography is “the developing solution” (93) that shows the “slipperiness of different kinds” (97).

Both Frank O’Hara and Anne Carson succeed in depicting the impossibility of their tasks and maximizing the applicability of their autobiographical endeavors. They expand the potential for autobiographical writing by destroying the limitations of form and genre, creating vibrant works with lives beyond their authors. In each case, the poet writes a masterpiece of self-discovery that gazes within and without and tracks the transformations of imaginative engagement. With “In Memory of My Feelings” and *Autobiography of Red*, O’Hara and Carson confound preconceived notions of autobiography and poetry by disrupting conventions of
gender, space, and number and offering fresh takes on the numerous potential of selfhood. More than clever portraits of the artists, these works narrate the follies of self-awareness, the facades of the self, and all murky spaces that bubble up and rush around the autobiographical eye(s).
II. OPERATION “BECOME ART”: FRANK O’HARA’S AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL TRIALS

With a poetic energy dominated by ambivalent self-representation, Frank O’Hara’s often-playful manipulation of autobiographical intentions is amplified and disrupted in the enduring poem “In Memory of My Feelings.” Crafted to simulate a five-act poetic drama, this massive exploration of consciousness, cognition, and self-definition engages generic implications far beyond the scope of poetry, or even literature, in order to wrestle with the unknowns/unknowables studied by philosophers, logicians, scientists, mathematicians, and other “theorists” of the mind. Upon confronting the vast horizons of humanistic thought and discourse, this project offers a truly remarkable dramatization of the philosophical investigation that emphasizes the processes of cognition as necessarily indeterminate, and binds autobiography within these processes. Not simply progressive – or programmatic, for that matter – the poem describes the mind’s potential to imagine the infinite, and succeeds in creating a self-reflexive account that, in the end, seems only possible in the space and time of this poem. Exploitative of deductive methodology, O’Hara’s method can hardly be reduced to mere phenomenology: the poem pointedly approximates the vast and complex phenomena of selfhood by considering many different like-nesses. This complicated staging of the drama of consciousness finally turns the terms of formal logic against themselves, as the interrelated counterparts, comparisons, and emphases give only a “scene of my selves” that remains forever unseen.

O’Hara begins the poem with ambiguous self-division – “My quietness” contains the “man” who carries “me” (1-2). These opening lines alert the reader to the uncharted territory
being implied by immediately muddling the boundaries between a poetic persona, its disparate parts, and the autobiographical “I” who must have written these words. Marjorie Perloff describes the poem’s “syntactic ambiguity” and the “enigmatic, elliptical” nature to prove this to be (in her opinion) “not only one of O’Hara’s best autobiographical poems, but one of the great poems of our time” (141). This “surreal autobiography,” Perloff believes, makes O’Hara’s actual biography “subordinate to a series of hallucinatory visions and memories”: “the implication all along is that what matters is not what happened but how one felt or feels about it” (146). While Perloff’s sentiment in this statement can hardly be denied, it seems that the poem decidedly articulates something much different than “how one felt or feels” about anything. Rather, a proliferation of “likenesses” parade across the pages as each word appends another variable to the equation, “like stars and years, like numerals” but not those things at all (3).

Moreover, even by line three – before allusion to the “number of naked selves” (4) – the poet’s silence and withholding dominates the lines, as the personified “quietness” is likened only to symbolic representations (stars, years, numerals) of concrete or natural phenomena. The unspecified “number of naked selves” contained in “my quietness” are variously described as “transparent” and “transparencies” (27, 38); so the dramatic players presented are theoretically ingenuous, open, and recognizable, but they are also mediums through which we are encouraged to see. The many “one of me” characters depicted in just the first section contain, represent, and reflect the poetic self-awareness, and they are at once conflated and deflective. The paradoxical “transparencies” are necessarily hidden: they “flail about like vipers in a pail” – vibrant, vital, but trapped within the consciousness of the *poet/poem*, only conceivable to a reader though contrived images. Hazel Smith argues that the “great poet” is “constituted of differences,” “solid
and transparent, single and multiple, and has ‘likenesses’ which may be, or may not be, the poet’s selves” (Smith 69). She continues:

The quietness suggests the Lacanian real, the raw inaccessible continuum of the psyche. But the man inhabits the poet’s quietness and so do the poet’s selves: the real dissolves into the Lacanian imaginary in which each term becomes its opposite and is lost in the play of reflections. The selves totter between being “likenesses” – that is, aspects of the poet which resemble each other – or “identifications,” the poet’s assimilation and transformation of external models.

Therefore, she argues, the poem “consists of an interface between mind, body and city in which each can mould the other because each is multiple, divisible, and penetrable” (69). While Smith persuasively describes the dizzying effect of these intersections and divergences, she falls short of accurate documentation of the exploration. Namely, from the beginning, Smith’s (like many other critic’s) argument depends on “an” interface, an apparatus that accounts for the common ground between two spaces or stances of the poem. The binary nature of the discussion cannot appropriately explain the approximations of the selves contained even in this first scene of the poem, as the planes of content are neither congruous nor compatible.

The poem’s opening section seeks to describe, after all, the moment when the “I” attempts to articulate the “imponderable world” he gazes out upon “with simple identification” (12-13) – and the resounding sound is “imperceptible” because “I am underneath,” buried far from exposition (30). If this poem is indeed a “study in fragmentation” that converts the “American myth of discovery” into a “highly personal hymn to shifting identity,” as Russell Ferguson believes (128), then the melody must incorporate the cacophonic yet indistinct sounds of the “open mouths gasping”; the nightmarish, buried “covered breathing”; the hunter who “crackles and pants / and bursts”; and the “whistling” and “hissing” that seem to culminate in chaos. The sounds that close the first act of the drama supposedly compose a “certain justice of
response” (40), but what O’Hara actually gives dissolves into the “Terror” of blindness and white noise (28, 40-41).

In *Homage to Frank O’Hara*, Joe Brainard explains that O’Hara’s poetry reflects how he “happened to feel at the moment” (Berkson and LeSeuer 167). If “In Memory of My Feelings” shows anything about the nature of feelings, it is that many, many representations of feelings are possible (and perhaps unavoidable) in any single moment. The second section of the poem begins by enlivening “the dead” as they make the “alive, ahunted” (253). The syntax jars notions of life and death, as the syntactical agency lives in these zombies, “hunting” the “alive” who are rendered passive, or acted-upon. Blasing argues that these lines apply “to more than the relationship between the living speaker and his familial, literary and autobiographical predecessors”; “the process of hunting and being hunted describes his compositional method itself” (57). If one supposes that this is the case, the thematic intention of the composition must be violent to the core. But the violence is confounded by line 50, and something new emerges:

> like the invaded, but blue like mine
> an atmosphere of supreme lucidity, humanism,
> the mere existence of emphasis, a rusted barge
> painted orange against the sea
> full of Marines reciting the Arabian ideas
> which are proof in themselves of seasickness
> which is a proof in itself of being hunted.
> A hit? ergo swim.

With the new “atmosphere of supreme lucidity” one expects clarity of vision, perhaps a view that the transparent transparencies of the preceding section wouldn’t allow. Instead, O’Hara dangles the loaded “humanism” at the end of the line, following a clear, blank visual space that begs the question of whether apparent “lucidity” is only erasure, omission, or silence. The “mere existence of emphasis” offers a similarly hollow promise. That is, emphasis depends on
substance to be, well, substantive, so the mere existence of the thing doesn’t necessarily prove anything.

Which brings O’Hara to the subject of proof itself, historically crucial to humanistic philosophies: teetering on the brink of Wittgenstein’s territory, O’Hara dips his toes into the troubled “sea” of logical theory. That is, the tautological/reflexive “proofs” (“proof in themselves” / “proof in itself”) O’Hara offers could be truth-functionally sound statements, but their soundness offers no real truth at all. Tautologies are valuable models for understanding logical processes, but unconditionally-true propositions do not necessarily help in answering difficult questions. Nonsensical or not “in themselves,” the “proofs” O’Hara provides depict mostly the nonsensical implications of truth-derivations that purport to describe reality. These implications are humorously compounded by the jokey ergo swim, which really must be a pun on “Cogito Ergo Sum.” This jab at Cartesian philosophical (and mathematical, for that matter) thought hones in on the crucial element of the stanza: the ever-colloquial “I think, therefore I am” is the emptiest proof possible. It offers us nothing about “I” or thinking/thought or existence – it only provides an obvious tautology to ease our troubled thinking, existing minds.

Contemporary scientist/linguist/philosopher/mathematician Douglas R. Hofstadter has devoted significant work to the tautological strangeness of selfhood, and his book *I am a Strange Loop* addresses the very issues O’Hara raises about provability and knowledge. He summarizes his “Mathematician’s Credo” as follows:

\[
\begin{align*}
X & \text{ is true because there is a proof of } X; \\
X & \text{ is true and so there is a proof of } X.
\end{align*}
\]

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3 I’ll not delve deeply into the more contemporary Schiller/James philosophical humanism(s), or the W.T. Harris (“Five Windows of the Soul”) educational humanism, though it’s probably worthwhile to consider those and other implications of the word, as I’m sure O’Hara did.

4 I mean to say that this thematically reminds me of *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, not that Frank O’Hara intends a connection with Wittgenstein.
Notice that this is a two way street. The first half of the Credo asserts that *proofs are guarantors of truth* and the second half asserts that *where there is a regularity, there is a reason.* Of course we ourselves may not uncover the hidden reason, but we firmly and unquestioningly believe that it exists and in principle could someday be found by someone.  

(Hofstadter 120)

Even when we agree, which we must, that these statements are in fact the case, the “Long Search for Proofs, and for their Nature” yields only the simple conclusion:

Mature human brains are constantly trying to reduce the complexity of what they perceive, and this means that they are constantly trying to get unfamiliar, complex patterns made of many symbols that have been freshly activated in concert to trigger just one familiar pre-existing symbol.  

(Hofstadter 277)

Hofstadter “proves” the same conclusion that O’Hara infers: “Cogito Ergo Sum” only reinforces the “Strange Loop” of self-reflexivity. This is not to say that either thinker advocates removal from philosophical quandary, of course. Both prefer to dive into the strangeness – “ergo swim.”

The exploration of strangeness continues with:

My 10 My 19, My 9, and the several years. My 12 years since they all died, philosophically speaking. (60-62)

The blank spaces that surround the “My [numeral]” characters give them the atmosphere of supreme lucidity, which is of course troubled by the fact that the numbers seem either disordered or arbitrary. The “several years” stand enigmatic…undefined, before the philosophically-explained death of the speaker’s “they” (the numbers? or the selves?). Rather than enumerate the particularities of this “they,” the speaker retreats into consciousness and turns poetic progress inside the mind. O’Hara likens the “coolness of a mind” to “a shuttered suite in the Grand Hotel” (64-65). The selves come and go within the walls of the mind, while “my incognito” self is disguised behind a fluid and mobile “façade” (66-74). The volume of selves, the overwhelming number of characters portrayed still cannot accurately unmask the “incognito”
one. The imagery here is comforting, though, for it emphasizes the “coolness of a mind” as a private, impenetrable haven from the violence that surrounds experience.

The “shuttered suite” may seem safe and comforting in one breath, but each passing moment upsets any certainty or security we sense in the poem. O’Hara undercuts the option of cool domicile with concerns of mutability and mortality, inserting anxiety just when he seemed to have momentarily left it behind. Section 2 ends with the question:

   But who will stay to be these numbers
   when all the lights are dead?

An initial reading of these lines sees straight-up self-elegy here: the selves are “these numbers” wondering who will follow after they die. However, the lines say something much more delicate, and do so sneakily. The “lights” are doing the dying, not the selves or the numbers – the elegiac longing is for the spotlight. The effect here, then, cannot be equated with a simple fear of personal mortality. Rather, O’Hara complicates the anxiety about death by adding a layer of experiential interplay as the crucial concern. The speaker concludes his second act with a meditation on what happens when the performance ends, acknowledging his personal desire to be within the gaze of an audience, illuminated, as his “façade” is always sought out (and always elusive)⁵.

After considering this need for performance and attention, O’Hara continues by giving imagery of basic and intense desire. Perhaps afraid to explore the end any further, the performance turns to depict those most vibrant moments of life – vital, uncontrollable human

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⁵ The effect feels very similar, in my opinion, to the stanza that concludes Bishop’s “The Man-Moth” – “If you catch him / hold up a flashlight to his eye” etc (EB CP 15). It’s differently framed, of course, but the image of the spotlight, and the conflicting feelings about being watched/seen – the anxiety that “you’re not paying attention”! – resonates as a key tension of performativity/authorship.
The “most arid stretch” is “often the richest” because it forces intense longing, “from hunger” and thirst and heat:

The most arid stretch is often the richest,
the hand lifting towards a fig tree from hunger
digging
and there is water, clear, supple, or there
deep in the sand where death sleeps, a murmurous bubbling
proclaims the blackness that will ease and burn

(76-81)

The movement in these lines from desire to fulfillment to a complicated combination is both impressive and troubling. The richness of desire shows the “hand lifting” and dwells a moment on the more-violent “digging,” then the “and” adds a release into “water, clear, supple” (78-79). However, the peaceful, lucid, tender (“supple”) water is disrupted with the disjunct: “OR” (emphasis mine) “there / deep in the sand where death sleeps, a murmerous bubbling / proclaims the blackness that will ease and burn” (79-81). The digging hand, then, could find EITHER the comforting, comfortable water OR the “murmurous bubbling” in close proximity to lurking, sleeping death. O’Hara preserves the ambiguity here by allowing for each option and by creating the suspicion that the latter, scarier “bubbling” has redemptive qualities, to be found surely in its unarticulated “murmurous” proclamations of “the blackness” (81).

In her chapter “Watchman, Spy, and Dead Man,” Marjorie Perloff asserts that “for O'Hara, death and petrifaction (as in the Medusa’s stare in In Memory) are omnipresent, threatening at every moment to dissolve the fragile self” (Perloff 42). Another “omnipresent” theme related to death and petrifaction is the dramatization of movement and standstill – motion and stasis infiltrate the flow of the poem with often jarring effects – these moments of “death and petrifaction” upset those moments of “coolness” or serenity almost as soon as the poem delivers them. While this strategy has an undoubtedly disruptive effect, one must also consider that
O’Hara does this to further replicate the mind’s constant, often erratic, movement from feeling to feeling. Sometimes one enjoys comfort and ease, safe from worry and stress, while another moment brings one to a state of agitation and angst. Perloff maintains that “however much he can laugh at his own past and present inadequacies and postures, the driving force of the poem is anxiety, a free-floating fear whose object, death, is never far away” (Perloff 42). The previously discussed opening of the third section surely supports these claims. Namely, one cannot deny that “anxiety” drives the lines, and that “death” is nearby associated.

However, O’Hara does something slightly trickier than allow this anxiety to be the only driving force of the poem. The poem’s movement cannot be so simply reduced, that is, for the sections driven by anxiety (and death-anxiety) are connected with those of comfort, lightheartedness, and even humor. One driving force of the poem is death, but the primary aim is exploration of the unknown, as O’Hara travels through currents of emotional unrest to question the nature of human quandary into selfhood at every turn. This journey requires that the poem accelerate by means of the gambit of emotions and concerns O’Hara’s selves experience. Ever the “great debunker” (Ward 40), Frank O’Hara upsets his own pretensions, removing his own sentiments from their pedestals, by following “the blackness that will ease and burn” with “You preferred the Arabs?” Here, O’Hara gives a line that interrupts the somber tone without negating it, referring back to the “Arabian ideas” and all that they entailed. This action moves the poem away from the blackness, out of the stasis, ensuring that no poetic moment wallow too deeply in horror. This is not to say that O’Hara spoils his serious meditations – he merely tempers them with a healthy dose of “Frank-ness.”

The variety of driving forces enacts the variousness O’Hara emphasizes at every turn. Talk of number arises time and again, as the poem dwells on what it means to count, and
subsequently what counts. The poem’s speaker rebuts the preference of the Arabs by arguing that “they didn’t stay to count” (82). An essential thrust of the poem, it seems, is to simulate the numerousness of Whitman, and to emphasize the awareness of numbers as key to understanding the multitudes (101) contained in one person. Simply numbers, as related to and distinct form numerals (their symbol representations), fall short of explaining completely, of course, but they symbolize the vastness of selfhood that begs to be accounted for. The “sentimental longing for number” (92) comes when one considers the territory beyond numeration (even physical body parts [“wrists”] become innumerable here!), beyond “mere ideas” (91): the incalculable scope, the “imponderable world” both outside and within (13). The fear and anxiety of the “new land… where one feels nostalgic for mere ideas” and “where truth lies on its deathbed like an uncle” drive the poem into the realm of the unknown once again⁶, where even the most complex systems of ordering cannot create a unified theory. In Giving an Account of Oneself, Judith Butler delves into these kinds of questions of self-accounting. She writes:

   Giving an account of oneself comes at a price not only because the “I” that I present cannot present many of the conditions of its own formation but because the “I” that yields to narration cannot comprise many dimensions of itself: the social parameters of address, the norms through which the “I” becomes intelligible, the non-narratable or even unspeakable dimensions of the unconscious that persist as an enabling foreignness as the heart of my desire. (135).

I argue that this poem’s central aim is to speak of the “unspeakable dimensions” in the most honest and sincere way available. The “moments of unknowingness,” as Butler calls them, arise in the poem precisely to document their existence.

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⁶ While this could be related to death, but this unknown seems to have more to do with theories of chaos, mathematics, and relativity than religion or mysticism, I think.
As the “hero” of Section 3 sleeps, rises, “wraps himself in the burnoose of memories against the heat of life” and takes “an algebraic position in re / the sun of fear shining not too bravely” (99-108), the poem delves once again into a hidden solace from outside dangers. The self-accounting continues by complicating notions of number and distancing the narrator from the poem. The “hero” may be one of the first-person selves, but the narrator refuses to bind them explicitly here. The third-person account in this third section leaves (our?) hero unsatisfied by his ability to designate an appropriate equation through simple operations, reiterating the limitations of rational methods to derive constant, irrefutable solutions. Moreover, the atomic components of the formula(e) cannot be determined (“innumerable wrists”), as the section ends by generally questioning potential for structural-soundness on any level. The unaccounted-for mathematical position marks the epistemological crisis that cannot seem to determine exactly what counts, how, or why.

As the poem obscures so much from the reader, it dramatizes the game hide-and-seek for the audience.

4
Beneath these lives
the ardent love of history hides,
    tongue out
leaving a globe of spit on a taut spear of grass
and leaving off rattling his tail a moment to admire this flag. (117-122)

The penultimate section begins with the subject in hiding once again, manipulating our understanding of the trajectory of action and the dramatic players. This time, we see, the subject is the (“ardent lover of history”) snake. O’Hara gave us the vipers and Medusa in the first

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7 One could probably argue that “he is all dead” would “prove” his death/resurrection, but I don’t want to stretch in that direction, necessarily. Relatedly, I’ll not cover the numerous Christian/biblical possible readings of this poem, but I don’t deny that they’re there.
8 I sometimes also think of these sections as five companion poems. I think many generic metaphors could work to explain what O’Hara’s doing with structure.
section, and now he revisits the semiotic complex that is the Serpent, which has lurked in hiding, unseen and unheard from in the previous two sections, and sits here, poised to act. But the snake doesn’t act now – O’Hara just points to the snake, hiding in the grass, “leaving off rattling,” to silently witness the scene, before moving away to what “I’m looking for” (123). He inserts some personal anecdotes (“true” biographical material), followed by:

Beards growing, and the constant anxiety
over looks… (135)

… which emphasizes the passage of time as well as the multiple meanings of “looks” for the poem (the gaze, appearance, appearances, etc.). Still dedicated to pursuits of variety and catalog, the section takes care to offer these images of multiplicity without recognizing their individual components. Also, the poem fails to explain the relation between the variety being explored and the self or selves it portrays. A curious disjunctive proposition is notably left un-syllogized:

One of me is standing in the waves, an ocean bather
or I am naked with a plate of devils at my hip. (137-8)

Followed (famously) by:

Grace
To be born and live as variously as possible. (139-40)

The variousness O’Hara ultimately champions is preserved in such multi-perspective moments as these, and the poem capitalizes on the inference of solutions that never come to fruition. Like Dickinson before him and Bishop since, O’Hara manipulates the operations of formal logic to allow for the maximum number of meanings to remain within the spaces of the lines.

When O’Hara returns to the first-person nominative, he offers a variation on the one-of-me catalogs of previous sections. That is, the later catalogs give overt “I am a” statements:

I am a Hittite in love with a horse. I don’t know what blood’s
in me I feel like an African Prince I am a girl walking downstairs
in a red pleated dress with heels I am a champion taking a fall
I am a jockey with a sprained ass-hole
I am the light mist
in which a face appears
and it is another face of blonde
I am a baboon eating a banana
I am a dictator looking at his wife
I am a doctor eating a child
and the child’s mother smiling
I am a Chinaman climbing a mountain
I am a child smelling his father’s underwear
I am an Indian sleeping on a scalp
    and my pony is stamping in the birches,
and I’ve just caught sight of the Nina, the Pinta, and the Santa Maria.
    What land is this, so free? (142-155)

Significantly, these selves are as various as possible, transcending gender, place, and time, and
allowing the reader to span the horizons of interpretive potential. Also, these enjambed
declaratives populate the poem with many new “selves” – but this time “I” explicitly owns them.

(Un)like Kurt Godel’s “subjectless formula fragment” (Hofstadter 142), this subject defends
itself vehemently as sincere self-writer. Butler argues:

> The one story that the “I” cannot tell is the story of its own emergence as an “I”
who not only speaks but comes to give an account of itself. In this sense, a story
is being told, but the “I” who tells the story, who may well appear within the story
as the first-person narrator, constitutes a point of opacity and interrupts a
sequence, induces a break or eruption of the non-narrativizable in the midst of the
story. So the story of myself that I tell, foregrounding the “I” who I am and
inserting it into the relevant sequences of something called my life, fails to give
an account of myself at the moment that I am introduced. (66-67)

O’Hara’s streams of “I am” statements certainly create an eruption in the text, and perhaps add
opacity (as opposed to the troubled “lucidity” discussed earlier), but a key distinction exists that
allows O’Hara to write himself out of this problem: his words do not compose a story – they
compose a poem. And he lets his poem take him and leave him as he sees fit. In the meditation
“Borges and I,” Jorge Luis Borges “capitalizes” on a similar aesthetic/generic opportunity:

>The other one, the one called Borges, is the one things happen to. I walk through
the streets of Buenos Aires and stop for a moment, perhaps mechanically now, to
look at the arch of an entrance hall and the grillwork on the gate; I know of
Borges from the mail and see his name on a list of professors or in a biographical
dictionary. I like hourglasses, maps, eighteenth-century typography, the taste of
coffee and the prose of Stevenson; he shares these preferences, but in a vain way
that turns them into the attributes of an actor. It would be an exaggeration to say that ours is a hostile relationship; I live, let myself go on living, so that Borges may contrive his literature, and this literature justifies me. It is no effort for me to confess that he has achieved some valid pages, but those page cannot save me, perhaps because what is good belongs to no one, not even to him, but rather to the language and to tradition. Besides, I am destined to perish, definitively, and only some instant of myself can survive in him…

…I do not know which one of us has written this page.

(Hofstadter and Dennett 19-20)

“In Memory of My Feelings” seems in many ways to be the poetic equivalent to this meditation, if generic distinction is necessary. Hofstadter writes, in his reflection of Borges’s “page”:

You read your name on a list, or see a candid photograph of yourself, or overhear others talking about someone and suddenly you realize it is you. Your mind must leap from a third-person perspective – “he” or “she” – to a first-person perspective – “I.” Comedians have long known how to exaggerate this leap: the classic “double-take” in which, say, Bob Hope reads in the morning newspaper that Bob Hope is wanted by the police, casually comments on this fact, and then jumps up in alarm: “That’s me!”

(Hofstadter and Dennett 20)

Hofstadter’s explanation of Borges’s meditation sheds light on O’Hara’s shifting pronouns and perspectives in a really helpful way. As Borges and O’Hara show, the only way to “give an account of oneself” is through aesthetic exploration, where truth and falsity become irrelevant terms. Whether considered as “from inside the structures” or “outside the box,” consciousness simply cannot be translated into pure, cool, accurate logical sequences. “In Memory of My Feelings” also engages the issues of appropriation and debt that Borges raises, as the fourth section leaves that “ardent lover of history” in the subtext while ending with the all-powerful symbolic “frieze” (161).
The conclusive section begins, dramatically, with yet another complication of self, perspective, and number:

5
And now it is the serpent’s turn.
I am not quite you, but almost, the opposite of visionary.

Ever so carefully, O’Hara writes “you” into the poem. Of course, the lines benefit from O’Hara’s pronominal ambiguity, as the serpent, the speaker, and the reader are all implicated together, and in close proximity to whatever “the opposite of visionary” might be. Then, he masterfully situates you within the body of the snake, “coiled around the central figure,”

the heart
that bubbles with red ghosts. (64-66).

By directing the reader to focus on the words “the heart” on the page, O’Hara demonstrates a double move9 that draws the reader’s eye to the heart while symbolically coiling the reader’s “I” (and, of course, eye) around it: he forces the reader into a double-bind, of sorts, in preparation for:

since to move is to love
and the scrutiny of all things is syllogistic
(166-67).

In Professing Sincerity, Susan Rosenbaum points out that “[a]t the center of O’Hara’s poetry is the figure of the poet himself: O’Hara, who loved Hollywood film, stars in the ongoing drama of his life” (Rosenbaum 64). In these early lines of the final section of “In Memory of My Feelings,” O’Hara draws the reader of the poem into the that center with every ounce of poetic energy and intensity, and turns all “scrutiny” to “the heart,” and “to love.” Blasing says, of O’Hara and this poem:

9 One not dissimilar or unrelated to the transcendental-isms of, for example, Kant or Emerson.
Since poetic figuration always has an agenda and operates within a larger text, such text, such nakedness is not innocent; it is not “sincerity” but, in fact, the opposite – a lie. Like the “frankly” O’Hara is so fond of, is only a rhetoric of sincerity, as in the figuration of a proper name (“Frank”) as a generic marker of a proper name. “Honesty,” however, is something else; it acknowledges this necessarily powerful insincerity and rhetoric. (Blasing 59)

Speaking of agendas, while Blasing hit the proverbial nail on the head in pointing out “poetic figuration” as “always” having “an agenda” and operating “within a larger text,” it seems inappropriate, dismissive, and reductive to use the words like innocent, a lie, and insincerity to describe this poem. I do not mean to say that Blasing doesn’t speak convincingly, and at length, about many aspects of this poem. On this one, however, she seems to miss the boat. Of course it is “a rhetoric of sincerity” – in the sense that rhetoric is artful language and O’Hara is writing a poem. But to dismiss the “rhetoric” as a “lie” overlooks the monumental point O’Hara is trying to make with these lines (and his general “Frank”-ness): he brings the reader into the poem at this late juncture to make us pay attention to him. He wants to “bend the ear of the outer world” (173) so that all will listen to his words, that tell that the “central figure” is “the heart” and that “to move is to love” (166). Perloff writes that O’Hara gives us art forms that “capture the present rather than the past, the present in all of its moving, chaotic splendor” (Ellege 174). Jim Ellege, in his essay “Never Argue with the Movies: Love and Cinema in the Poetry of Frank O’Hara,” hones in on O’Hara’s awareness of “the transitory nature [of love] and on our desire, even need, to believe in the possibility of its permanence, even while knowing better” (Ellege 351). To summarize, O’Hara’s rhetoric (of whatever label) delivers his homage to fluid, chaotic passion and love, as the central figure, of the present moment. As he writes in “Meditations in an Emergency,” “All I want is boundless love” (CP 197); perhaps that line seems more rhetorically sincere?
Moreover, “and the scrutiny of all things is syllogistic” serves the many-faceted purpose of anticipating the many criticisms available to his project and admitting his own participation in such critical stances. A calculated overdetermination, this line considers all aspects of logical, theoretical, philosophical, and mathematical machinations considered to this point, and admits that such “scrutiny” is neither pedantic nor pertinacious. Syllogistic thinking is natural, of course, because it makes good sense to order experience in that way. Also, as an expert of cognitive suppositions notes, “the power of a simple syllogism” can override subjective meditation (Hofstadter and Dennett 31). One such syllogism:

\[
\text{All human beings are mortal} \\
\text{I am a human being.} \\
\hline
\text{Therefore \ldots I \ldots am \ldots mortal.} \quad \text{(Hofstadter and Dennett 31)}
\]

The syllogistic truth or falsity of such a construction may be helpful to consider at times – indeed, it must be – but this bare-bones logical derivation cannot encapsulate all, or arguably any, of what “humanism” or “I” or mortality means. Much like the “tight closed loop” of the “self-referential paradox ‘This sentence is false’” (in which “truth implies falsity, and vice versa”), Frank O’Hara’s explicit focus on scrutiny and syllogisms situates his poem among age-old philosophical debates about the nature of truth and being that, of course, have no singular conclusion.

If taken on his terms, as he begs to be, O’Hara’s “rhetoric of sincerity” drives the poem and the reader to consider all of the perspectives given, in precisely the manner he asks. He admittedly falls short of telling “you” of the “most beautiful things in my lives” in his attempt to “bend the ear of the outer world”: 
When you turn your head
   can you feel your heels, undulating? that’s what is is
to be the serpent. I haven’t told you of the most beautiful things
in my lives, and watching the ripple of their loss disappear
along the shore, underneath ferns,
   face downward in the ferns
my body, the naked host to my many selves, shot
by a guerilla warrior or dumped from a car into ferns
which are themselves journalières.

The best he can hope is that the reader can empathize, as the “most beautiful things / in my lives” are sacrificed in the space of, and for the sake of, this poem. He collapses the divide between his “body,” “the naked host,” and its perceptions, memories… “many selves” to demonstrate the exquisite pain of autobiographical exploration. The pain does not originate from fear of exposure, though that may be an element of it. What the poem shows is that the fear of the poet stems from the violence he imagines he enacts upon himself at his vast omission of what he believes himselfs to be. The journalières, the day laborers, who witnessed all of it, everything, and cannot possibly be rendered into several sentences or pages, will be used and discarded in the creation of this, or any, poem. In the end, one resounding theme is the failure of language to represent all that the poet wants to show. Despite all syllogistic scrutiny and all operations to seek the truth, the poet’s words cannot convey all that he wishes them to, and he knows it.

The last embrace formulates the final loving gesture between the heroic figure and the poet, and between all the figures contained within those two: the selves, the memories, the moments, and the reader:

   The hero, trying to unhitch his parachute,
   stumbles over me. It is our last embrace.

   “And yet,” he says:

   I have forgotten my loves, and chiefly that one, the cancerous
statue which my body could no longer contain,
against my will
against my love
become art,
I could not change it into history
and so remember it,
and I have lost what is always and everywhere
present, the scene of my selves, the occasion of these ruses,
which I myself and singly must now kill
and save the serpent in their midst.

Rosenbaum writes that O’Hara demonstrates “an understanding of poetry as a habit of sincere
feeling that not only accommodates the pressures of commercial culture but, in so doing, charts
new paths for the lyric” (90), and:

Although O’Hara struggles against Wordsworthian memory, poems such as “In Memory of My Feelings” suggest that feelings and poems inevitably become subject to the past: ‘against my will / against my love / become art’ (CP, 257). Similarly the title “A Step Away From Them” refers to the necessity of this separation; to write about his walk is to distinguish the poem from the experience of walking and eating, to take a “step away” from purely spontaneous desire.

(Rosenbaum 74)

The lyric performance that O’Hara gives indeed dramatizes the “seer’s prophecy” (Mattix 124) as Micah Mattix puts it, but it does not simply “kill” the poet, or the serpent, or the selves. John Vanderslice offers a “firm conclusion” that attempts to answer the “still unresolved question” of “exactly what the actions taken against the speaker’s ‘selves’ at the end of the poem represent” (Vanderslice 5). His conclusion, which he offers as a defiant rebuttal to “the curious interpretations of [James] Breslin and [Marjorie] Perloff” is a “profoundly negative, even tragic, resolution”: the speaker of the poem has “at least accommodated, if not participated in, his own psychic murder” (Vanderslice 7). As the many analyses in this paper have hopefully shown, the “panorama of attitudes” of “In Memory of My Feelings” (Shaw 62) follow a logically chaotic trajectory through poetic exploration of consciousness. To reduce that journey to a “firm conclusion” is more violent than any sacrifice/suicide/murder O’Hara symbolizes with words. In
The Scene of My Selves, Terrence Diggory notes that “O’Hara’s phrase [“the scene of my selves”] questions the singularity of ‘selves,’ and recognizes any attempt to represent subjectivity as necessarily a constructed ‘scene’” (Diggory and Miller 9). Of the final lines of the poem, Andrew Epstein writes:

With this conclusion, O’Hara recognizes that to capture the theatrical performance of his selves, as he has done throughout the piece, would mean his identity had been “converted into statuary,” as the poem puts it earlier (254). To do so would be to reify the self, to make it all present, which is to destroy its vital motion and to deny its incurable slipperiness. To do so would be to turn the protean into a poem…

…Written against a backdrop of hyper-conformity at a time when authoritative eyes were keen on pigeonholing and labeling “deviants” and marginalizing those confirmed as “different” from the status quo, “In Memory of My Feelings” deliberately sheds all forms that would contain the self and reaches after formlessness at whatever cost to the poet. (Epstein 101)

As these several critics have noticed, the “forgotten loves” or ‘selves’ or journalières, “become art,” as opposed to “history,” and all the speaker asks is that the performance be remembered. The “occasion of these ruses” cannot be preserved outside of the space of the poem, so the poem preserves it. The words are chosen so precisely that one wonders how anyone could argue with Marjorie Perloff that “the poem concludes triumphantly” (146). For the poem succeeds in all it explicitly set out to do, all it describes, in its many lines so painstakingly chosen10.

The “triumphant” conclusion preserves the self-reflexive paradox, it allows the snake to continually eat its tale, and so saves “the serpent in their midst” (196). On “The Quandary” and being a strange-loop, Hofstadter concludes his book:

10 This is one of many ways to refute Dan Chiasson’s New Yorker claim that “O’Hara didn’t introspect or recollect much” (Chiasson 1).
I am a Strange Loop

In the end, we self-perceiving, self-inventing locked-in mirages are little miracles of self-reference. We believe in marbles that disintegrate when we search for them but that are as real as an genuine marble when we’re not looking for them. Our very nature is such as to prevent us from fully understanding its very nature. Poised midway between the unvisualizable cosmic vastness of curved spacetime and the dubious shadowy flickerings of charged quanta, we human beings, more like rainbows and mirages than raindrops or boulders, are unpredictable self-writing poems – vague, metaphorical, ambiguous, and sometimes exceedingly beautiful.

To see ourselves this way is probably not as comforting as believing in ineffable other-worldly wisps endowed with eternal existence, but it has its compensations. What one gives up on is a childlike sense that things are exactly as they appear, and that our sold-seeming, marble-like “I” is the realest thing in the world; what one acquires is an appreciation of how tenuous we are at our cores, and how wildly different we are from what we seem to be. As Kurt Godel with his unexpected strange loops gave us a deeper and subtler vision of what mathematics is all about, so the strange-loop characterization of our essences gives us a deeper and subtler vision of what it is to be human. And to my mind, the loss is worth the gain.

(Hofstadter 363)

Though categorized as generically dissimilar to the poetry of O’Hara, this contemporary book of “Philosophy/Science” echoes the sentiments of “In Memory of My Feelings” beautifully.

O’Hara does not allow the “I” to “ruin its own story, contrary to its best intentions” (Butler 67). Instead, he achieves what few thinkers can hope for: he writes his own elegy, celebratory and honest. He wrote many of his own elegies, of course, but lines from this one provide his literal epitaph. The poem begins to answer the question of “How am I to become a legend, my dear” (CP 197), but it certainly and characteristically gives no conclusive, reductive answer.
III. ON PHOTOGRAPHS NOT TAKEN: ANNE CARSON’S PORTFOLIO OF MEMORY

While Frank O’Hara explores the process of self-writing by dramatizing the numerousness, vastness, and ambiguity of self-perception, Anne Carson turns the autobiographical eye into a poem/bildungsroman/romance hybrid that shies from acknowledgement of the author herself. She chooses the novel form to stage her poetic drama, also offering a complex and often troubling exploration of consciousness and the process of self-writing. Like O’Hara, Carson writes an *Autobiography* with a complicated progression of dramatic players, but she creates a great distance between her actual self and the author/autobiographer she depicts. With *Autobiography of Red*, she offers a novel that manipulates readerly expectations and capitalizes on the potential for experimentation in form. A “Novel in Verse,” Carson’s text performs the possibility of the novel genre by combining the “cause and effect momentum of narrative” and “the cherished luminous moments of poetry” (Halliday 123), supplementing them with academic framework and commentary. Moreover, she appreciates the existence of indistinguishable elements and gaps in meaning, noting the instances in which “the space” for “meaning remained there but blank” (26). An “odd assortment of generic pieces” (Rae 55), *Autobiography of Red* contains layers of autobiographical exploration as it portrays multiple artists attempting to fashion consciousness. In this production, however, artistry exists in all facets of life, so that the autobiography writes itself as many elements within and around the artist participate in the action – the story of self in *Autobiography of Red* narrates the amalgamation of representations as the entire world writes itself.
Explicitly aware of the reader’s ostensible blindness to all but the print on white paper and deafness to all but the sound of turning pages, Carson emphasizes the power of poetics to ignite vivid images and distinct sounds within the imagination. *Autobiography of Red*, decidedly, suggests that a novel should deliver the new: freshness of content, novelty of form, and, most importantly, the imperative to uncover and discover new ways of considering old things – to see the world, and the realm of art and of the self, as inexhaustible and unending. Carson leaves no image unproblematized in her archaeological excavation of the documents, corridors, moments, words, stuffing, sandwiches, colors, and photographs, (among other things,) that compose and comprise the exquisite beauties and monstrosities of the self, until the final lines of the novel promise only the inexhaustibility of the quandary. Moreover, her authorial voice commands the reader to assume an interactive role in solution-creation of the autobiography – to read this novel is to reassemble the fragments and impressions to develop a coherent personal experience.

Carson relies upon the fact that a novel bases itself upon the utmost contrivance: even the most accurate or realistic of experiences is literally contrived when translated to assume the packaging of words on pages. As Borges puts it, “all of it would be converted to words” (Borges 475) – all of the author’s experiences, impressions, and inventions must be transposed to accommodate textual design. Like O’Hara’s “In Memory of My Feelings,” Carson’s *Autobiography of Red* considers whether the basic authorial move to write is essentially a lie, as it uses words to create a fiction that stands in opposition to temporal reality. Carson addresses this conundrum early on in the novel, also turning to formal logic for assistance. With her numbered list of syllogisms in the beginning of the book, she not only articulates the undeniable liar-status of Stesichoros but also her own and her reader’s willingness to construct lies about
reality. The first section of the book, “Red Meat: What Difference Did Stesichoros Make?” ends with Carson’s voice telling the reader what to do, implicating each reader as accomplice in her text. While O’Hara invited the reader into his poem to participate in its conclusion and pick up where he leaves off, Carson commands the reader’s presence from the start. Her imperative “Here. Shake.” tells the reader that to achieve meaningful experience from the text, one must follow the authorial lead to infuse new energy into old words (7). This straying from the “red meat” or “barebones” of the “Matter,” this deviation from the facts of eyewitnesses or History or ancient Greek, is the contrivance, the lie, inherent in any account that describes the primary source. The palinode of Stesichoros proves just this scenario:

No it is not the true story.
No you never went on the benched ships.
No you never came to the towers of Troy. (17)11

In the logical priority of the appendices, Carson ensures the reader’s knowledge of Stesichoros as “an admitted liar” (Murray 104):

Either Stesichoros tells the truth about Helen when he first characterizes her as a whore, or else he lies about this and later tells the truth in his palinode, thereby attesting to is having lied in the first place. We ought to be distrustful of the man who tells us, “truthfully,” that he has lied, because by admitting he lied, we are certain of only one thing: we know he is a liar. But we do not know how or when he has lied, either he lied before and now tells us the truth about his having lied, or else he lies now about having previously told what was true. (104).

11 In this and subsequent block quotes of Carson’s verse, I opted to space the lines at 1.5, in an effort to maintain the spatial effect of the poetry. All block-quoted prose (i.e. criticism/theory) will be single-spaced, as expected.
In framing her story (the Romance) with this self-awareness of the poet as liar, Carson questions the truth-functional determinacy of the creative written word. Any derivation from the “barebones” inserts the corruption of personal subjectivity. “There were many different ways to tell a story like this” (5); no fixed meaning can be attached to such a story. The palinode suggests another thing about lying, however – the original lie of contrivance may be inevitable, but the second lie is absurd. The palinode does not exonerate Helen’s morality in her Trojan War deeds; it only removes her from the scenario entirely. In other words, the only way to avoid the (possibly dangerous) lie of imposing personal perspective on observations is to negate the subject entirely: to say “There is no Helen” (149) is the only way to avoid misrepresentation of her, or any poetic subject. As we embark upon the textual journey in Autobiography, we realize that in any direction we travel, Carson describes a literary progression in which all writing is autobiographical, as we cannot write of anything without writing with personal subjectivity, the writing of the self.

The material of Appendix C further complicates the truth/lie register: the numbered list of syllogisms seeks to construct an ordered derivation “clearing up the question of Stesichoros’ blinding” (18). A far cry from logical proof, this syllogistic exploration leads only to the conclusions that we are traveling (in some unknown direction) to find some evidence, that we are now bound to this ambiguous task, and that we may or may not be required to lie. As the disjunctions become “increasingly suspect,” “muddying the “truth-lie boundary,” we realize that the ride we’ve apparently been taken on will require us to be “eyewitnesses” of something that we cannot verify with our eyes (blindness), and to either lie or “not” (20). The final “not” seems to imply the same kind of negation required when truthfully describing Helen: given a situation in which a true answer could never be given to “clear up” the question “once and for all,” by us
or any “eyewitnesses,” the only incorruptible truth is to not speak of the subject at all or to ignore the question. The equally poignant application of this metaphor extends to connote the impossibility of describing accurately and with completeness any kind of complex, as we see in the final interview’s treatment of “the war”: “The world went ahead much as before let’s talk about something else now” (148).

No discussion of this novel fails to mention its hybridity – but the hybrid nature extends beyond generic experimentation to underline the thematic thrust of the book that hybridity dominates all autobiographical endeavors. This project is “the autobiography of autobiographical writing itself” (Murray 102), and it seems to argue that all writing, all artistic expression, is autobiographical by nature. Moreover:

Autobiography and its proper author-subject – if it indeed has one – float indiscernibly through the text, suspended by the text’s seductive voices, which seem to claim a life of their own. (Murray 102)

Bahktin described the novel “as a whole” as “a phenomenon multiform in style and variform in speech and voice” (Bahktin 261). Inherently a hybrid construction, then, the novel’s hybridization achieves the “erasing of the boundaries between authorial speech and the speech of others”: in it “the instigator is confronted with several heterogeneous stylistic unities, often located on different linguistic levels and subject of different stylistic controls” (Bahktin 261). Within this genre, this “imprecise and variable concept” (Hirsch 21) with such inclusive potential, the question arises of how a novel might vary so greatly and include so much in a cohesive, coherent package. Carson offers her thoughts on this question variously, of course, for the bulk of the project wrestles with the ability of art to contain great truth and the ability of an artist to render that art. The desire, it seems, for Carson, for Stesichoros, for Geryon, for artists is to determine the composition by translating feelings, images, and impressions into the proper
medium. For the poet-author, the medium – the instrument of compromise – that delivers the desired message is language. Barthes writes that “ideally culture should be nothing but a sweet rhetorical effusion, an art of using words to bear witness to a transient moistening of the soul” (Barthes 35). In Autobiography of Red, rhetoric undergoes literal effusion as Carson bears witness to its liquidity that begs containment, as the blood-substance of the text must be fixed onto pages to avoid excess spillage. The anxiety over permanence, space, and erasure pervades the text, which makes its spatial layout especially poignant in its irregular delineation of words and letters that show susceptibility to the wide surrounding margins.

“Words,” Carson says, in reference to Gertrude Stein’s idea, “will do what they want to do and what they have to do” (3), but words do not do any one thing in this novel. The conflict for the artist, as Carson seems to demonstrate it, is how to capitalize on the potential for words to “bounce” and slip, to “effuse” and flow, without losing form or meaning, and without getting lost within the vast space of textual form and meaning. She appreciates Stesichoros’ use of adjectives as the “latches of being” “attaching everything in the world to its place in particularity” (4), but she also suggests no permanent attachment. If “you let them” (3), words dissemble quite easily:

The word each blew towards him and came apart on the wind. Geryon had always had this trouble: a word like each, when he stared at it, would disassemble itself into separate letters and go. A space for its meaning there but blank. The letters themselves could be found hung on branches and furniture in the area.

(26)

If Stesichoros used his poetry to “expand the communicability of language” by showing fixed particularity with “contradictory qualities that risk canceling each other out” (Tschofen 40),
Carson’s bouncing words imply a “bi-directional image” that plays with particularity and placement (Tschofen 41). “Bits of words” drift “past Geryon’s brain like ash” (30) – words in this novel are endangered by fire as well, so that one feels the immediacy and quality of the fixed words on the page. The images of broken/disintegrating words bestow by contrast the surviving strength of the words we read, but they also create the uncanny suspicion that these words are not safe. In Plainwater, Carson says “I watch a sentence come into me like a lost tribe” (120); the recycledness of language enriches the artist’s awareness of her tools as imbued with genealogical import, redirected for new materials. “All the sentences mixed around in Geryon’s drifting drowsing head” – the fluidity of language is both a cause of and the inspiration for new expressions (63). If “the fear that words will no longer adhere to their objects haunts the poetics of modernism” (Perloff 31), Carson utilizes that fear, acknowledges its source, and embraces it.

The structure of this novel, and of any novel for that matter, traps language in its printed characters; the type literally sets words into the specific context. In the attempt to translate the materials inside the artist into a recognizable outside incarnation, the fluid thoughts must be transfixed onto the page. The metaphorical violence of this entrapment pervades Carson’s verse. When asked his favorite weapon, Geryon answers “Cage,” a response mocked as impudent by his brother. The novel relies on Geryon’s claustrophobic concerns to convey the fear of being contained indefinitely, pinned down on a chart, buried alive. In the section called, appropriately, “Walls,” Geryon and Herakles go out “painting” words on buildings:

There’s some paint left – another LOVESLAVE? – no
let’s do something cheerful.
All your designs are about captivity, it depresses me.
Geryon watched the top of Herakles’ head
and felt his limits returning. Nothing to say. Nothing. (56)
Captivity is at once desired and feared; Geryon wants Herakles to possess him but fears being actually contained. The image in Geryon’s autobiography reflects the day of Herakles’ rejection of him: “a photograph of some red rabbit giggle tied with white ribbon” (62). Lava Man in prison (waiting for the slowly approaching lava to trap him) and the Beluga Whales trapped in tanks are two projections of Geryon’s terrified fascination with confinement. Of the whales, “in tanks, in captivity just floating,” Geryon wonders how the Tango singer could possibly “be alive and think about nothing” when considering the whales in tanks:

[...] But I look into their eyes and I see them thinking

Nonsense. It’s yourself you see—it’s guilt.

Guilt? Why would I be guilty about whales? Not my fault they’re in a tank.

Exactly. So why are you guilty—whose tank are you in? (103)

Juxtaposed with the images of Red Patience and Lava Man, and the implications of being trapped forever in the mold of lava and “Hades” and “bitumen” (63), Carson deposits “AA,” the ever-important Scrabble play and crossword gem. This image contains and suggests exactly the metaphorical weight and variety, the muddling of cause and effect, Carson so enjoys. First, the word’s literal denotation, defining the “rough, scoriaceous” type of lava, symbolizes the worst terror Geryon imagines in Red Patience: the lava that will bury a person alive, exacerbated by the violence of the scoria that rends the flesh as it entraps its victim. AA is more than that, though: it is a word constantly imprisoned in the blocks of crosswords, the double-voweled dream of enigmatologists, detached from its substance and used for the convenience of the letters it comprises. The use of these letters as confined in crosswords is its introductory purpose for the text:
… in crossword puzzles. It’s the word for blocky lava in Hawaii.

How do you spell it?

Just like it sounds –aa.

AA is both the subject and object of imprisonment. If “under the seams runs the pain” in Geryon, imprisonment would seal any release (98).

In the study of complicated containers, one could hardly ignore the body/mind/soul as somehow containing self-hood. Autobiography attempts to forge the substance, the “red meat,” of the self into a different package while preserving the self in reality. Geryon’s struggle, of course, is to identify just what lives inside before he determines the proper representation of “The Geryon Matter” (5). His “body” feels like a “locked box,” his “brain box” closed off from excavation, but Geryon desires self-expression from the beginning (80). From sculpture to words to photographic essay, Geryon’s autobiographical explorations document the various words, images, sounds, and situations he uses to define his current states of being. Often, he struggles with the nature of states of being, appropriately:

[...] At what point does one say of a man that he has become unreal?

He hugged his overcoat closer and tried to assemble in his mind Heidegger’s argument about the use of moods.

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. Something else than what?

Geryon leaned his hot forehead against the filthy windowpane and wept. (98)
This passage challenges the notion of ‘human beings” being an understandable entity. Carson expands this point indirectly when Geryon searches through philosophy, prose, and poetry seeking guidance from books to pinpoint his “mood”. He finds “a self-help book”:

whose title (Oblivion the Price of Sanity?) stirred his ever-hopeful heart.

“Depression is one of the unknown modes of being.

There are no words for a world without a self, seen with impersonal clarity.

All language can register is the slow return
to the oblivion we call health when imagination automatically recolors the landscape and habit blurs perception and language
takes up its routine flourishes.” He was about to turn the page for more help when a sound caught him. (107)

As far as writing of the self goes, this passage tells nothing verifiable of selfhood. In the first place, is there any known, agreed upon “mode of being”? The constructions of worlds with words naming the self does not logically entail an undeniable truth of selfhood, a “mode of being” – it merely satisfies the rhetorical enigma with linguistic signifiers. Apropos of this, it seems that neither Geryon nor anyone can write himself unequivocally. Murray argues:

If Geryon works on his autobiography, so we might say that it is his, Geryon’s, it is equally the autobiography of “red,” of the ghostly subjectivity that might be said to claim him more than he can claim it, an apostrophization that magically breaks the silence of the humbly modifying adjective, letting it speak, letting it claim a subject position, compose its autobiography, live its life. Autobiography moves; it is a verb. (Murray 112)

This explanation of the movement of autobiography as explanatory of selfhood asserts the priority of language without arguing for its dominion over being. Subject and object, subjectivity and objectivity, cannot be considered fixed or mutually exclusive in this text.
“I think you are confusing subject and object,” Herakles’ grandmother says to Geryon, when he questions her photograph. “Quite likely” is his natural response (52). If *Autobiography* teaches anything, it is the slipperiness and abtruseness of all matter(s) inside and outside of form.

In the movement of the book, negation and absence are employed carefully, true to the philosophical ambiguity thematized in the novel. The aforementioned negation of Helen was one such example: denying her existence only reaffirms her presence in the text. Lyotard writes, in *The Postmodern Condition*, “allusions to the conceivable which cannot be presented” put forward “the unpresentable in the presentation itself” (81). Descriptions of voids and vacuums in this text tend to contain the most powerful of substances. In the first pages of the Romance, Geryon traverses his mind to find a blank:

*Just take me once more I’ll get it this time,*

Geryon would say. The eyes terrible holes. *Stupid*, said Geryon’s brother and left him.

Geryon had no doubt *stupid* was correct. But when justice is done the world drops away.

He stood on his small red shadow and thought what to do next.

Main door rose before him. Perhaps–peering hard Geryon made his way through the fires in his mind to where the map should be.

In place of the map of the school corridor lay a deep glowing blank.

Geryon’s anger was total.

The blank caught fire and burned to baseline. Geryon ran. (24)

Clearly, the “blank” Geryon feels is not vacuous – it is the substitution of a thing he cannot articulate (represses, perhaps) for a less-overwhelming, more docile thing in his consciousness.

The *blank* may include anger, but *anger* cannot necessarily describe the unidentifiable
composition of this igniting enigma. Relatedly, when the word each disassembled, the “space for its meaning remained there but blank” (26). Given the loadedness of his self-concept and the violent intrusion by his brother onto his physical body, the concrete meaning of each as distinct and individual would certainly be similarly corrupted and confused. The “blank desertion of his own mind” that “threw him into despair” occurs at times when he feels his mind slip away into something he cannot explain (84). Decidedly not “ataraxia,” “Emotionlessness,” “Absence of disturbance” (85), Geryon’s blankness contains the unfathomable. “Like an olive off a plate”: the image of Geryon sliding “off the surface of the room” to “vanish into his own blankness” (95) sounds like his nightmare of confinement projected onto these blanks that euphemistically dash out the terrifying/unspeakable.

Lack of vision and sound are employed to similar semiotic ends in the novel. Geryon’s photographs are the central source of imagery, yet they compose the autobiographical images that we never see and that never include Geryon. As Murray points out:

> Significantly, Geryon the photographer author-subject is never in his pictures; his subjectivity is placed on the camera’s point of view, caught in a web of speculations about his choice of “autobiographical” subject-matter, conscious or not… [for Geron] the photograph strives to capture living memories and the extendedness of time. (116)

Moreover, Tschofen argues,

> Many of Geryon’s autobiographical photographs are technically impossible; framed by evocative titles and descriptions they appear to picture things that cannot be seen with the eyes. […] Situated just past the limits of the visual, Geryon’s photographs refuse to show merely what has been seen… [so that] the portraits’ synesthetic qualities and the way their meaning emerges from a mediation of word and image guarantee that their meaning climbs up inside and vibrates through the whole body. (46)

In his (unseen) photographic autobiography, Geryon can explain how “the opposite of blindness” is when “the world poured back and forth between their eyes once or twice” (39) or what it feels
like to dislike “a room without rows” (91) as he pictures it. The “small red person” (102) can tell about the photographs “LIKE AND NOT LIKE” (142), can explain a “photograph of the future” (144), and memorize “the zebra so he could make the photograph later” (115). In response to the “simple direct question” “How does distance look?” the text suggests that “it extends from a spaceless within to the edge of what can be loved.” “It depends on the light” – the way individual subjectivity perceives a moment in time. These photographs show – at once – “simplicity untranslatable” and simple conundrum (Ferrucci 14). The images Carson employs describes the emergence of the visible as imagined in the mind, like “watching likeness come groping out of the bones” (144).

The fragments that “withhold as much as they tell” are most puzzling when they deal with silence. “Question is how they use it – given the limits of the form” (67): Carson uses silence in much the way she uses the glowing void – to mark a space of significant texture.

Does your mother live on the island? I don’t want
to talk about my mother.

Ah well. Silence then. (67)

In the margin that follows “my mother” Carson infuses space with emotion, marrying the visual and the aural blanking-out of feeling. When “Huge wads of silence stuffed the air” (70), silence becomes impenetrable cotton stuffing – dry, thick, rough, and white. When Ancash unveils Geryon’s wings, the clear cold night is blanketed with the stuff of silence: “All of a sudden the night was a bowl of silence” (127). George Steiner wrote in Language and Silence “[…] and there are actions of the spirit rooted in silence. It is difficult to speak of these, for how should speech justly convey the shape and vitality of silence” (12). Another way in which Carson suggests the space of silence is in the multiple depictions of muffled voices. Often the unheard
voice, most always Geryon’s, is toned-down due to timidness; time and again we hear “Pardon?” with Geryon’s response “Nothing” (89, e.g.). “What did you say?” she asked / “Nothing.” (103) More peculiarly, Geryon obstructs the soundwaves purposefully, as if he has to emit the words from his mouth but needs to deposit them somewhere safely unheard. He speaks into the fruit bowl (a bowl of silence?), his collar, or Herakles’ arm at times when his words are humiliating or hurtful: “I wonder what percentage are born with wings, said Geryon / into the collar of his overcoat” (97). In Autobiography silence is depicted synesthetically, as other sense words, physical space, and objects act as earplugs to simulate deafness.

The fragments that conclude Geryon’s Photographs have a curious effect: one fragment imagines Geryon’s flight toward death or immortality inside the volcano, while the other leaves him safely on the ground observing the fire from without. The pairing illustrates the potential and the limitations of autobiography: one can imagine one’s death or flight into an afterlife, but it cannot be included in the writing of the living. “The Only Secret People Keep” is the one that they cannot tell on Earth. Autobiography makes this distinction clear by showing Geryon’s visions for his death/rebirth flight and qualifying them as unrecorded, unrealized. Unnamed, only numbered, “It is a photograph he never took, no one here took it” (145). The only way to give “something to remember me by” is to give artifacts of life. “The photograph, like the biography, is a receptacle of being. It preserves life by entombing it, serving as a premonition of death” (Murray 14). Geryon’s photographs, and autobiographical explorations in general, preserve some substance of living. If they truly premonish death, they likewise validate life by contrast –elegy cannot be self-written without theatrical posing (or the autobiographical “lie”).

In the final “Interview” section of the book, a first person narrator reenters the text. The “interviewing ‘I’ speaking in first person” closes off the book with a final Q&A with
Stesichoros, who is also given a voice. The interview highlights “the very instruments of deceitfulness and lying that the poet must use” (Tschofen 34). Ferrucci explains: “A truth that depends upon its way of being presented always contains a degree of deception, especially when one sets out to describe the indescribable, the supernatural world beyond sensory experience” (Ferrucci 76-77). Beneath the “veracious surface of a story is concealed the fraud of a lie,” he continues (77). Borges recounts another explanation for “when fiction lives in fiction”:

Arthur Schopenhauer wrote that dreaming and wakefulness are the pages of a single book, and that to read them in order is to live, and to leaf through them at random is to dream. Paintings within paintings and books that branch into other books help us sense this oneness.

(162)

Seen in this light, the apparent contrivances of this book only emphasize its oneness, its ability to transcend temporal and structural incoherence. Also, the genealogical ties to Stesichoros’ fragments and the myths that informed him infuse Carson’s prose with the great weight of timelessness. Images in this book may be “as still as a word in a book” (91), but they slip and slide into “enormous pools” of moments. (136). Opposed to the documents in the library, “Tall and hushed in their ranges as veterans of forgotten war” (72), novels like this one bear “real news” (Rasula 188) that addresses the “question of seeing and seeing anew” (Murray 116). Carson allows the “matter” to “stumble out of its forms” (Short Talks 38); the fragments that “withhold as much as they tell” (Rae 25) leave the gaps that suggest further consideration. “In every story I tell,” Carson says, “there comes a point where I can see no further. I hate that point. It is what they call storytellers blind – a taunt” (13). Perhaps that point allows for continuation of stories, the development of new novels from points of inspiration, the genesis of new autobiographical writing. The “secret pup,” for example, that haunts the Romance with its omission – that “little red dog” seemed beyond the scope of these writers’ visions. He may be

12 Though it is admittedly collapsed with Gertrude Stein’s imagined voice.
discovered “Next Time” the story gets told – there are still many different ways to tell stories like these.

Both autobiographical experiments end by emphasizing the future lives of their projects. In some ways, one might imagine that Carson’s project picks up where O’Hara’s left off, attempting to recast the selves into the different likenesses she imagines and allowing them to pick up where they left off. Though differently articulated, these impressive works of self reflection show the logical processes of self-writing as oscillations within consciousness that will not be completed or contained. O’Hara and Carson share the common goal of portraying the beauties and monstrosities of the self through the powerful potential of poetics, and both writers note the role of the ineffable as vibrant and vital. Though words are unable to fully articulate the vastness of selfhood, each work emphasizes the necessity of poetic involvement to maximize the potential of autobiographical endeavors. With these works, O’Hara and Carson deliver masterful accounts of autobiographical investigation that trouble generic conventions while strengthening imaginative capacity. *In Memory of My Feelings* and *Autobiography of Red* leave lasting impressions on readerly sensibilities, creating solid memorials of the emotions, scrutinies, and insights of their respective authors.
Works Cited


187-189.


