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## Nox: Anne Carson's Scrapbook Elegy

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**Résumé en français** : Dans son récit *Nox*, Anne Carson compose une élégie à son frère disparu autant qu'une élégie à l'histoire de la reproduction de l'œuvre d'art, depuis la tablette de cire jusqu'à l'ère digitale, en passant par la reproduction du stencil, afin de susciter une réflexion sur le contemporain. Elle invite ainsi ses lecteurs à une lecture créative, qui envisage la perte et la mort.

**Summary in English** : In the narrative *Nox*, Anne Carson composes an elegy for her deceased brother, as much as an elegy to the reproduction of the work of art, from the wax tablet to the digital age, by way of the stencil reproduction, to sustain a reflection on our times. She thus invites her readers to a creative reading, that encompasses loss and death.

**Mots clé** : Anne Carson ; *Nox* ; élégie ; journal de deuil ; art ; reproduction ; facsimile ; communauté ; digital ; aoriste ; latin ; fragment ; figuration ; réception.

**Key words** : Anne Carson ; *Nox* ; elegy ; mourning diary ; art ; reproduction ; facsimile ; community ; digital ; aorist ; Latin ; fragment ; figuration ; reception.

### *Nox: Anne Carson's Scrapbook Elegy*

"An elegy is a lament. It sets out the circumstances and character of a loss. It mourns for a dead person, lists his or her virtues, and seeks consolation beyond the momentary event." Mark Strand and Eavan Boland explain that this type of poetry goes beyond private mourning and stands for "cultural grief", and that although recent elegies have tended to turn inward, the long-standing tradition of public utterance makes it "one of the forms that can be said to be co-authored by its community."<sup>1</sup> This paper examines the way Anne Carson turns a private elegy for her brother into a cultural elegy to the history of printing and communication, assessing the revolution of technology in her lifetime.

In the tradition of the 18<sup>th</sup>-century mourning diary<sup>2</sup>, Anne Carson has published *Nox*, the reproduction of a scrapbook<sup>3</sup> she made after the death of her brother. Thematically, the

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Strand and Eavan Boland, *The Making of a Poem, A Norton Anthology of Poetic Forms*, New York, Norton, 2000, p. 167.

<sup>2</sup> For an example of such a diary, see « Un journal de deuil : Mme de Genlis, 1788 », introduced and edited by Philippe Lejeune, *Orages* n°12, *Sexes en révolution*, mars 2013, Atlande, p. 191-206.

book recapitulates not only elements from her brother's life, but more importantly, the void he left in her own life and in her mother's after he disappeared from their hometown in his youth, and led his life abroad until his death in Europe at a mature age. The medium in which the book is published carries the message. It comes in a box set, and unfolds as an accordion-folded scroll. In its published form, it recapitulates the history of publishing, from the hand-made doodle, drawing or inscription, to the scroll, and to the codex. The box, encapsulating the history of publishing, stands as a sarcophagus for the dead brother, not holding his physical remains, but bearing witness to his elusiveness. It bears the traces of his long absence, such as the few letters he wrote over the years, that the mother passed on to her daughter, his sister, the poet Anne Carson. The box and the elegy for the brother contain the pain of his disappearance, his refusal to share their lives as they were living it. It is a box of mourning, mourning for the adult brotherhood he refused to share with his sister, mourning for the life of both siblings that has passed now that one is dead, and the other aging, after a life built over a form of deprivation. The box holds the questions the poet asks of her family life, of herself, and most of all, of her times, when she states in the first section that "History and elegy are akin." (section 1.1) and when she explains that etymologically both words originate in "ask[ing] about things": "It is when you are asking about something that you realize you yourself have survived it, and so you must carry it, or fashion it into a thing that carries itself." (section 1.1)

The narrative voice is autobiographical in its guises. It begins as the learned voice of a professor of classics, who tells of her admiration for an elegy Catullus wrote on the occasion of his own brother's death, many centuries ago. By the end of the mourning scrapbook, Professor Carson has translated the poem from Latin into English, a task she set herself to doing throughout her career, she writes, revising and honing her translation to get to the version she provides in this book. From a dead to a vernacular language, she mourns the passing of a language as well as she revives it in her homage. In this learned pursuit, she gradually breaks the mask of academic discourse to reveal another voice, that of a sister who sounds melancholy because she found it difficult to mourn the brother who was actually alive, but dead to her. In that sense, the box set is her mourning diary, as she describes the way she learned about his death, how she

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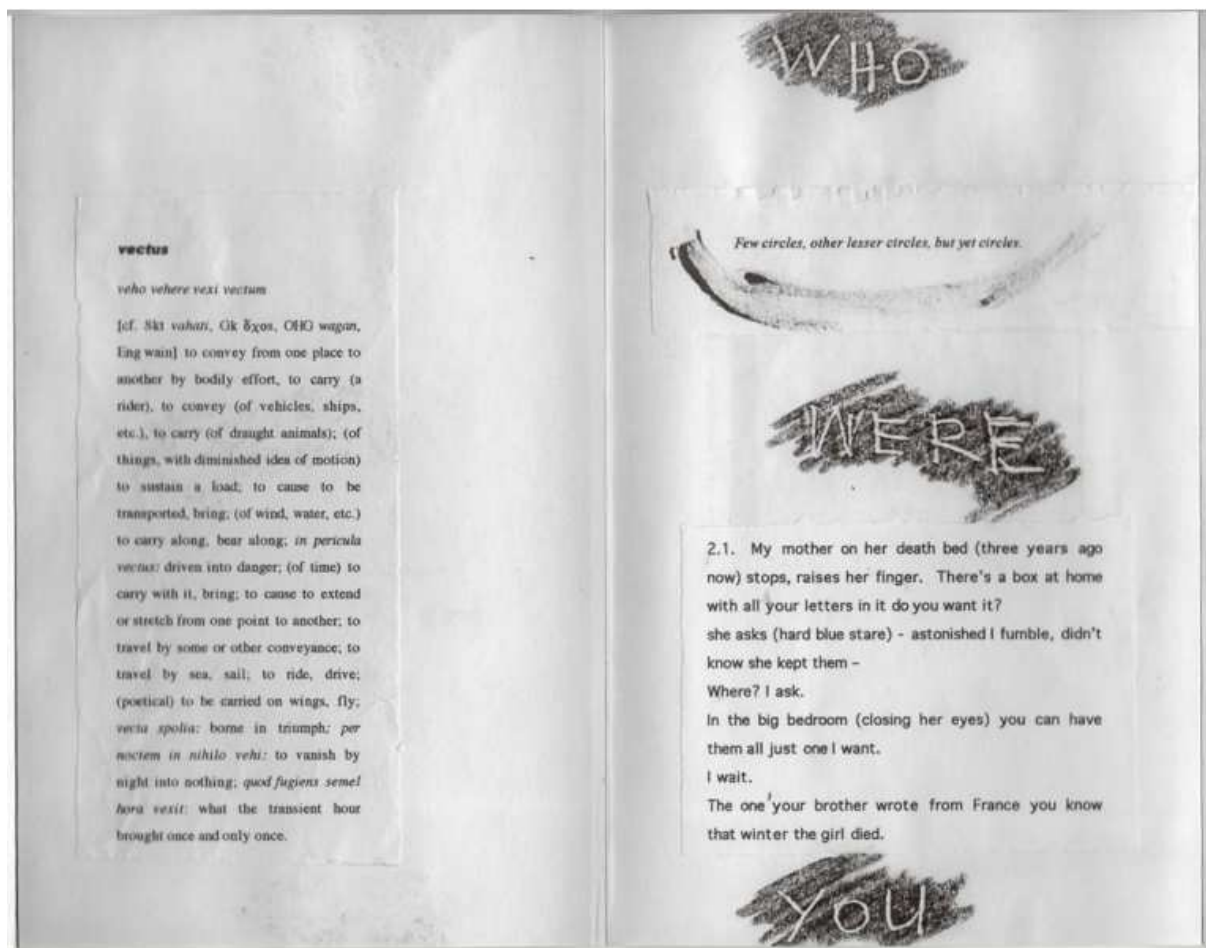
<sup>3</sup> The scrapbook pages bear no page numbering, so I will reference them by the section number in which they appear, such numbers being given in the text.

coped, visited his widow in Copenhagen, attended a memorial service, and learned to come to terms with his disappearance.

But this book also has a broader scope than a private mourning diary, because it encompasses general history in the process: not only the history of publishing, but also the history of languages and more generally, of cultures. Anne Carson takes the form of the elegy not only to bury her brother in a box, but also to assess the state of her culture. She takes stock of how a culture thinks through the way it leaves traces, and of how it publishes its productions, from Roman times to our contemporary times, by discreet parallelisms between life from the 1970s, and life in Antiquity.

### **1. Inscription, on wax or on paper as a malleable surface.**

Just as in Antiquity, a stylus was used to inscribe words on a wax tablet, the narrator doodles words on paper with a point working as a dry stylus, in the way children encode secret messages in their spying games. One needs to blacken the surface to reveal the message hidden invisibly in the dry print engraved without ink on the paper surface. This early form of inscription reproduces the illusion of actual inscription in a mass-produced printed work. Nostalgically, it glorifies the gesture of the writer, just as much as it reveals the absence of the brother to play along in the game. The remaining sibling signifies the repression of her loss, and her estrangement from her brother, by inscribing it as a secret message. Thus, on the page describing her mother's bequeathing her correspondence to her on her death bed, the secret message "WHO WERE YOU" (section 2.1) comes out of the blackened page in capital script, revealing to the narrator what had escaped acknowledgment so far, what she had not dared ask out loud or in plain writing before: that one may not fully know a sibling, no matter how close one feels to a brother because of a childhood spent together. Making invisible writing legible by gentle use of a soft graphite pencil was also a traditional technique of the detective in mystery fiction—and this reflects one of the complications in ascribing a genre to *Nox*, which unravels a psychological mystery by uncovering something supposedly hidden and dragging it into the light.



The inscription of the word “WHO” in “WHO WERE YOU” (section 2.1) is still visible on the next four pages, on the verso pages in a mirror image, and on the recto pages as on the first inscription, but getting fainter on each successive layer of paper. The facsimile edition reproduces the pages of the scrapbook so convincingly that one constantly feels the need to touch the pages, to feel the volume of the three-dimensional inscription, only to experience frustration, as the pages are flatly photographed from the original scrapbook, not actually mauled over by a hand holding a dry stylus with the energy of grief or anger, and inscribing its emotions on the page. After the four pages bearing the encrypted question “WHO ARE YOU”, the core of the revelation comes four times as well in the successive four pages:

My brother ran away in 1978, rather than go to jail. He wandered in Europe and India, seeking something, and sent us postcards or a Christmas gift, no return address. He was travelling on a false passport and living under other people’s names. This isn’t hard to arrange. It is irremediable. I don’t know how he made his decisions in those days. The postcards were

laconic. He wrote only one letter, to my mother, that winter the girl died.  
(section 2.2)

After four mentions of the same text, each with a slight displacement to the right on the page, another encrypted dry print reveals the following verb, in capital script as well: “DIES” (section 3.1).

This may be read as the center of pain, the utterance that required preambles and preparation, bracing for the harsh fact of death, conjugated in the present tense, inscribed in hidden writing, and revealed through pencil blackening. Finally, the last use of the wax tablet principle, or here dry stylus engraving principle, comes on a full page, with the capital script spreading large, with one word per line, three lines on the entire page, inscribing: “I HAD TO” in vertical layout. From the narrative, we may gather that the assertion was the brother’s, probably during his very rare phone conversations with his sister, five over twenty-two years. For Carson, the invisible doodle in dry point thus emerges over time, from the conversation to the scrapbook composition, mimicking the emergence of ideas from preconscious to conscious, then mediated by writing, which functions as a third party between the two instances of the same consciousness, one repressed, the other acknowledged. Once the writer has moved on, from a doodle to actual writing through the blackening of the previously secret message, the text decoding the message may be passed on, from writer to reader, because the writer herself has turned into a reader of her own inscription, setting it at a distance. Surfacing script emerges from dark context, engraved from the front to the verso page, ponderous and liberating at the same time. The revealing black pencil is so thickly applied on the page that it blackens the opposite page by contact. Thus, the scrapbook bears all the traces of the deciphering hand at work in its production, cancelling the history of the printing press, reverting writing to the immediate and unmediated action of the ancient scribe, but with the memory of the loop. Other techniques reveal a similar return to the past, to ponder on the meaning of print reproduction and transmission throughout history.

## **2. Stencil duplication, between private and public transmission**

The poem of mourning by Catullus is given on what looks like a stencil duplicator, or a spirit duplicator. This technique was used to duplicate documents in schools and colleges throughout the seventies and eighties, and was replaced by digital technology.

“A stencil, a waxed sheet attached to a carbon sheet with a paper backing, held in place by a perforated strip at the top, is used especially for typing on prior to the duplicating process. Once the master stencil has been typed, it is placed on the drum of the stencil duplicator to transfer an ink image onto paper. Multiple copies can be made at a time.” The process is similar in spirit duplicators, which require “a special type of carbon paper used for spirit duplicator known as Hecto sheets or spirit carbon paper.”<sup>4</sup>

What matters is that the technique is obsolete, and bears witness to the classics professor’s mode of transmission to students in the past.

She provides several versions of the poem, framing her narrative scrapbook: the first opens the book in Latin.

The second occurrence is a translation into English in section 7.2.

The last version closes the book with the same English translation, but now made almost illegible by tears smudging the scrap of paper, which also looks burnt around the edges, as if it was burnt by the dark background of the page it was glued onto.

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<sup>4</sup>Duminy et al., p. 43-44.



The translation was made in the pain of loss, of mourning, and came down to the scrapbook publication in 2010 from the past history of reproduction, which makes it look antiquated.

In section 8.5, across from the definition of the word “fraterno,” the same scrap of paper is cut into vertical bands, glued together in an artistic layout that renders it illegible, but it is recognizable in its sepia tint, unmistakably a stencil reproduction dating back before the digital age.



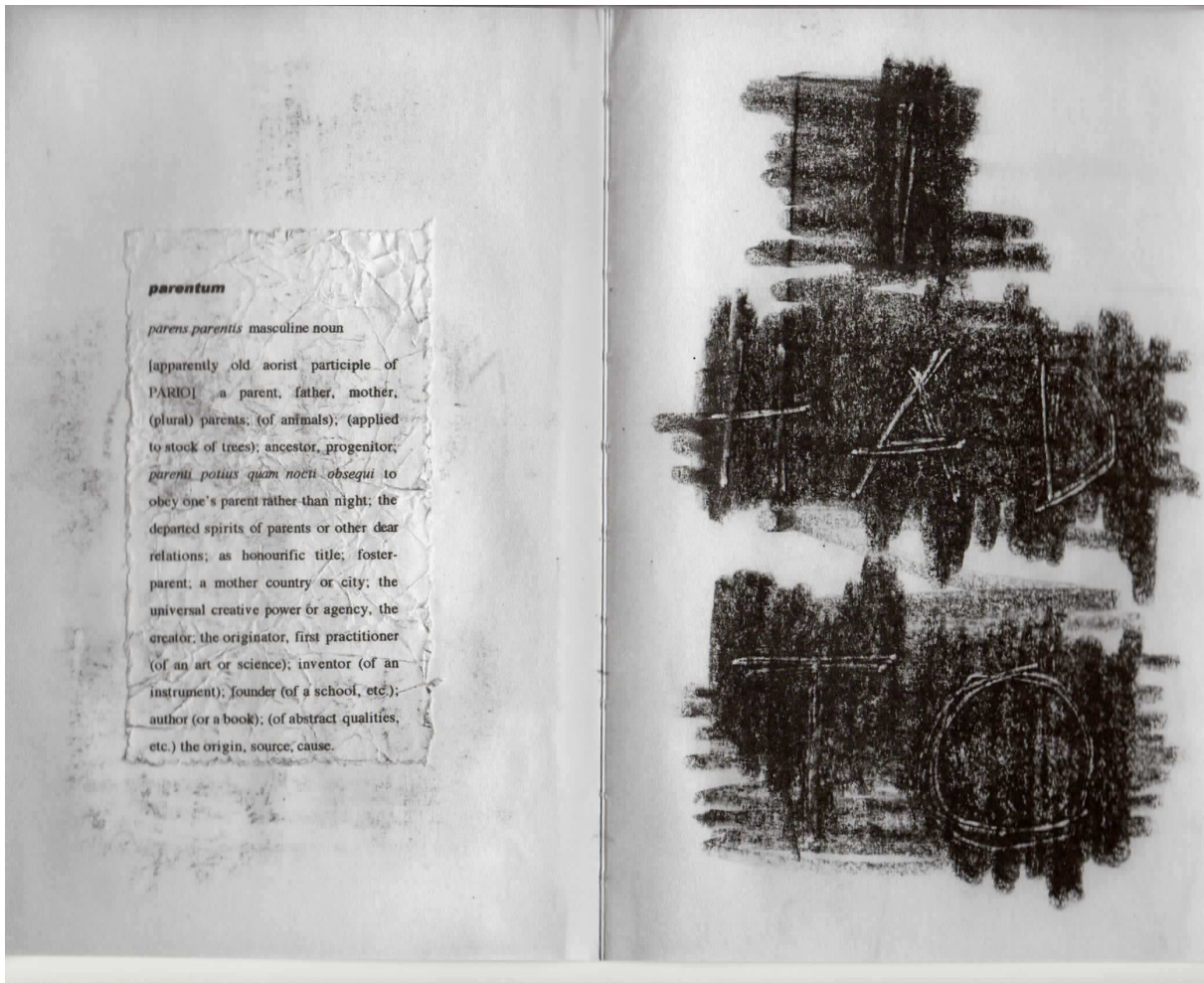


**fraternal**

fraternal fraternal fraternal adjective  
[FRATER+NUS] of or belonging to a brother, proper to a brother, brotherly, fraternal, honourific term applied to allies.

By limiting the reading process through the fragmentation, attention is drawn to the medium as a signifying tool. This duplicating process limited mass reproduction and transmission, because each use of the master stencil held less ink than the previous one; it was therefore less contrasted, fainter and less legible with each turn of the rotor for each printing from the master copy. The transmission still mimicked the copies one could almost have drawn in longhand, as a medieval amanuensis, but not quite, because the numbers of reproduced copies were too high for human patience. In the history of technology, such means of duplication stands for a transition between the wax tablet in its uniqueness and digital mass reproduction in its unlimited outreach, via web transmission. However, it was still a direct transmission from a teacher to a limited group of students, in a hand out, passing from the teacher's hand to that of the student, with minimal machine intervention (which itself was entirely done by hand), again, directly from the teacher's hand. The stenciled poem is thus a transition between the brother's letter, addressed only to his mother, and the mass-produced paper reproduction of Anne Carson's scrapbook published by New Directions, which is widely

distributed and which anyone can buy. It is the open letter of mourning that Professor Carson sent to her students during her teaching career, without making it a personal issue, but in the hope of getting them to relate to the way Catullus expressed his emotion for his deceased brother (section 7.1). The stencil copies stand in a middle ground also between the words of justification, "I HAD TO" (section 8.1) engraved on paper and recovered through blackening the page with a pencil, and the publication of that message in digital photo-reproduction.



Like previous messages discovered through graphite pencil, "I HAD TO" is a very private message surfacing at a given time, widely differing from the later mass reproduction of the book, which may extent to later times through reprints, for example, in a more open timeframe and print life.

### 3. Aorist, or time unmoored.

By inscribing her brother's justification on the page, the narrator arrests time to his decision and justification, as inside a tomb time has stopped and transmission has been cancelled. The message stays on against a black background, symbolically imitating stasis and death. One may liken this text to the tense called aorist, a tense that arrests time, indeterminate between continuous and momentary, between perfect and imperfect, as in a tomb, a mummy no longer decays, being impervious to the degradation of time. Through her use of inscriptions and her insistence on the materiality of writing, as though it cancelled the history of mass reproduction it actually uses, the poet (or maker, creator etymologically) insists on the parenting act of creation, which stands outside of time. Walter Benjamin makes the point that the original work of art has its own "aura" in his essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction": "Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be." (p. 214). Parenting a work of art gives it unique existence, but the act of creation itself stands outside of time. In Carson's dictionary definitions of Latin words, which she regularly provides on the left hand page of the accordion scroll at each folding, the definition of "parentum" begins with the aorist origin of the word:

**parentum**

*parens parentis* masculine noun

[apparently old aorist participle of PARIO] a parent, father, mother, (plural) parents; (of animals); (applied to stock of trees); ancestor, progenitor;

*parenti potius quam nocti obsequi* to obey one's parent rather than night; the departed spirits of parents or other dear relations; as honourific title; foster-parent; a mother country or city; the universal creative power or agency, the creator; the originator, first practitioner (of an art or science); inventor (of an instrument); founder (of a school, etc.); author (of a book); (of abstract qualities, etc.) the origin, source, cause. (section 8.1)

Although it takes the form of a dictionary entry, this item is not as authentic as it seems. For example, the quotation given in italics has been tampered with, to fit the title of Carson's book. In Terence's comedy *Hecyra*, Pamphilus's line reads: "Nam me parenti potius, quam amori, obsequi / Oportet." (act III, scene 4, line 34), "for obedience to a

parent ought to take the place of love.” (p. 286-7, trans. S. Patrick): Carson has turned “amori” (love) into “nocti” (night) to suit her subject.

The fictional dictionary entry thus provides much more than translation information, and manages to be lyrical in an unexpected way through the form it takes. It connects the story of the family to the writing of the book entitled *Nox* (night in Latin), through the aorist form of the verb meaning to give birth, generate. Just as Anne Carson chose to look after her mother, “to obey one’s parent rather than night” in the example given in Latin and translated in the entry, her brother chose to “obey night” by disappearing and letting their mother die without giving her any news of him. Just as the brother is the “origin, source, cause” of the loss Anne Carson writes about in *Nox*, she is the poet, the “author” and progenitor of the book upon such *night* as the brother chose, the book of mourning also being a creation shared with all her readers. In turn, the poet invites her readers to create through reading, to put the fragments together, to translate not only the Latin poem from the sum of its words, but to connect the pieces of information into a story thus made private, as in any reading, but more actively so when the reading material is fragmented. The aorist origin of the noun thus covers the past events, the present of the poet’s creation, as well as the future creations of readers in the present of each reading. Tellingly, in this pseudo-dictionary entry, Carson uses an adverb of uncertainty to connect the noun to the aorist form of the verb, which she gives between brackets: “[apparently old aorist participle of PARIO]” (*ibid.*). The adverb “apparently” shows that she explores the ancient language, which eludes certainty, just as much as her mourning scrapbook looks for a language of expression, between English and Latin, as well as between text and image, while it pretends to define and classify the mess of experience we call life. In an essay, Carson has written a beautiful definition of the aorist, which seems to apply to her vision of “parentum” in *Nox*:

The Greek verb system includes a tense called aorist (which means “unbounded” or “timeless”) to capture that aspect of action in which, for example, a man at noon runs directly on top of his own shadow. So in fr. 13 (a) Mimnermos uses an aorist participle to describe how men move in war. Like acrobats of the psychic misdemeanor we call history, warriors qua warriors live hovering above the moment when action will stop. They are the receptacle of a charge that shoots itself toward the night side, spoor of its own explanation.” (*Plainwater*, p. 16)

By extension, the last sentence also defines *Nox*, which may be read as “the receptacle of a charge that shoots itself toward the night side, spoor of its own explanation” because of the reflexivity of the creative process, the work taking form and figure as it unfolds on the band of paper before our reading eyes, like the potential messages waiting to be discovered through the graphite pencil.

#### **4. Active reading, or parenting the fragments.**

As often, and in this book more than in any other, Anne Carson presents a hermeneutic quest for her readers. She likens translating and writing “the history of a person” to a “web”:

Prowling the meanings of a word, prowling the history of a person, no use expecting a flood of light. Human words have no main switch. But all those little kidnaps in the dark. And then the luminous, big, shivering, discarded, unrepentant, barking web of them that hangs in your mind when you turn back to the page you were trying to translate. (section 7.1)

Carson does not make an explicit analogy to digital webs of information, but the metaphor of electrical circuit seems to invite the comparison. As in a web search, information is not put into a coherent whole. Likewise, in *Nox*, each Latin word is defined in succession, but the syntax is missing. To understand the poem, we must understand more than the sum of its words. Like the printing technology and the media that are presented visually but not as objects of discourse, we need to understand a process, a set of functions at work, syntax in language as well as in technology. We need to connect. In the narrator’s mind, the page under translation is one in a web of words available “in the dark” that each branches off to other sets of connections, a web revealing an arborescence of connectivity rather than a linear, hermeneutic progress. The translator gropes with translation hurdles as she assembles her scrapbook on her brother. Her scrapbook, that includes her translation, suggests possible links like a web page, but unlike a web page, it freezes the possibility of the click and leaves any further connections to the reader’s active reading.

Anne Carson likes to invite her readers to fill in the blanks and does not provide any hypertext, the better to stimulate our creative imagination. When she translated Sappho’s fragments, she explained her use of brackets in her translation to show the

missing or illegible parts of texts in an invitation to a thrill: “Brackets are exciting. Even though you are approaching Sappho in translation, that is no reason you should miss the drama of trying to read a papyrus torn in half or riddled with holes or smaller than a postage stamp—brackets imply a free space of imaginal adventure.” (p. xi)<sup>5</sup> Her scrapbook invites to share in such a thrilling “imaginal adventure” because we too are hermeneutically gathering the fragments, engaging in uncovering the discreet changes from the standard Latin definitions, and generally participating in the mysteries of life by figuring absence. We are invited to create further text, in a metafictional experience, as Carson invited her reader of Sappho’s poems: “As acts of deterrence these stories carry their own kind of thrill—at the inside edge where her words go missing, a sort of antipoem that condenses everything you ever wanted her to write—but they cannot be called texts of Sappho’s and so they are not included in this translation. (xiii)

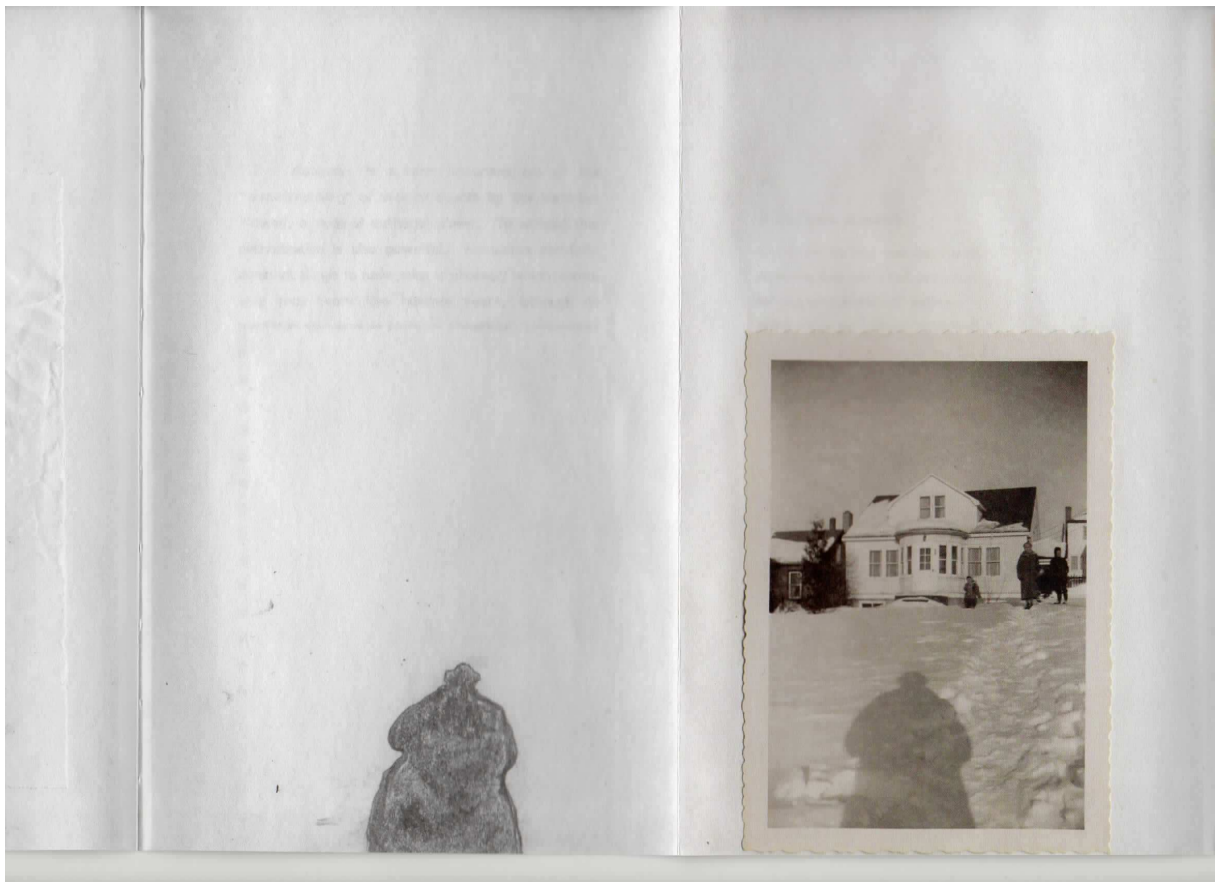
*Nox* emphasizes the continuity of the reading pact, from writing to reading, the latter being the reader’s creation. The band of the scroll can be deployed laterally in the reader’s space, unfolding its meaning in the reader’s idiosyncratic syntax that puts the fragments together. We become experts in metaleptic leaps, our exercise of syntax including deciphering text and image, recognizing recurrences and patterns, and acknowledging various disciplines such as psychology (with the explanation that the brother was isolated as a child among his friends), Latin (to read Catullus), history (to understand the criticism of Thucydides), etc.

Carson also insists on what is lacking in the information, on what impedes transmission and understanding: the lack of communication between brother and sister, or brother and mother, the stilted and rare phone conversations, the few letters, one being shown in reverse, on the retro page, as if its recto page was not enough. When the narrator learns of her brother’s death, she sees the information as a flux on the waves, coming across the Atlantic, literally and metaphorically in waves of news: “While I swept my porch and bought apples and sat by the window in the evening with the radio on, his death came wandering slowly towards me across the sea.” (section 6.1) The news of his death reaches her like a message in a bottle launched on the ocean. Such slow transmission of information holds the mystery of the relay between transmitter and

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<sup>5</sup> “On Marks and Lacks” (introduction) in *If Not, Winter. Fragments of Sappho*, trans. Anne Carson. New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 2002, p. xi-xiii. My warmest thanks to Clément Oudart, who suggested this connection between Carson’s translation of Sappho and *Nox* at the AFEA Conference in Paris, on May 24, 2014.

receiver, and the hurdles in space and time, throughout the many years of separation that the information needs to overcome. The metaphor to express such problematic news is that of “wandering” in an erring way, almost without a purpose, while the radio, with its well-established technicality, stands as a counterpart to such haphazard, lackadaisical transmission. This translates the difficulty, even the impossibility, of understanding death. Such “wandering” reaches the mystery of the reader’s own empathy with loss and mourning, to the point of fascination, or possibly, even fetichism. We want to put our fingers into the wounds Carson has inflicted on the page, because the excellent reproduction of the scrapbook simulates the piercing of paper by a stapler, the staple’s recto or verso sides appearing on either side of the page of the scrapbook being reproduced on two consecutive pages in *Nox* (section 7.1, for example), or with a stain smudging through to another page (in simulation), as is the case of the shadow drawn in soft pencil over the photographic shadow at the end of section 1.1.

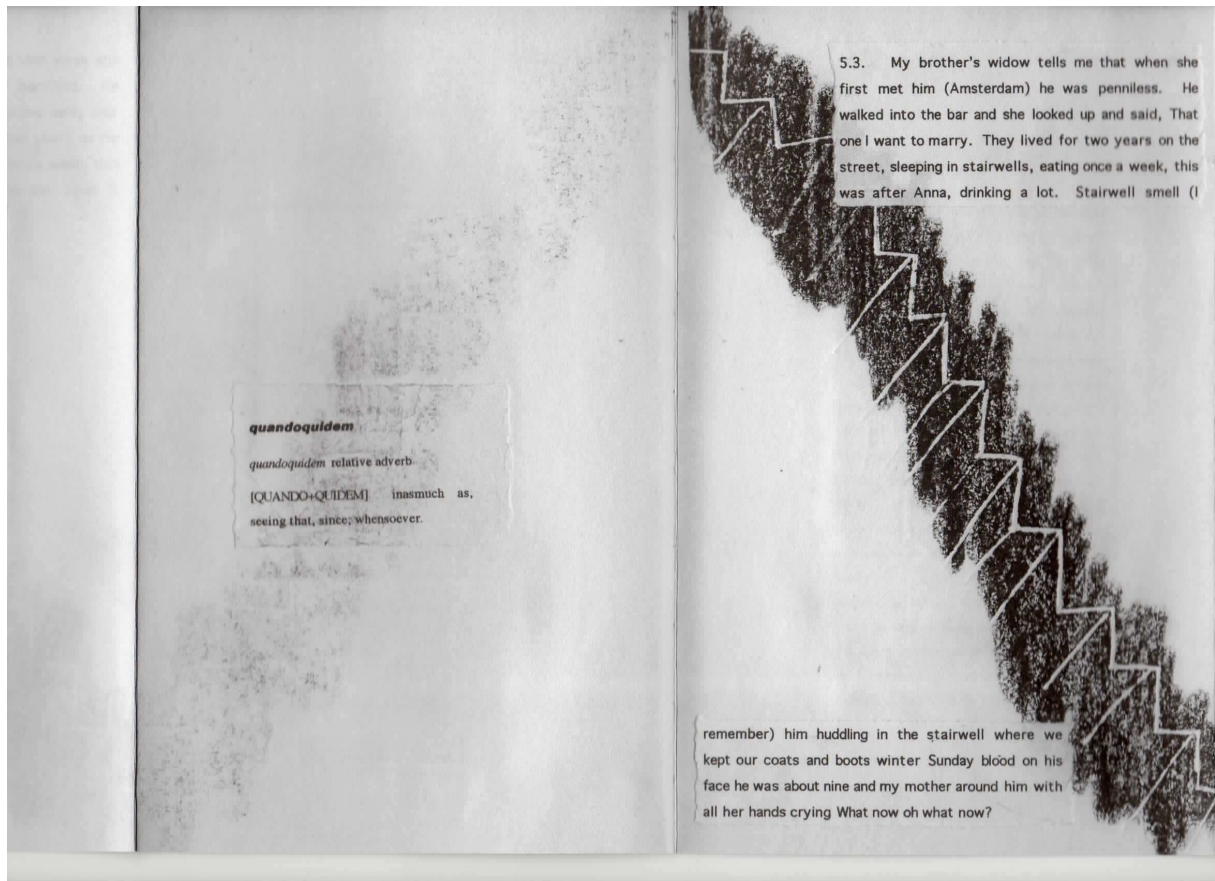


## 5. Figuring absence

Such passages give the uncanny impression that we are touching the unique object produced by the writer’s hands, while we know that the scroll is a photographic

reproduction. This provides both a comforting illusion and an unsettling sense of frustration, common to the issue of representation in art. The work offers the illusion that one may touch absence, emphasizing the gaps between the fragments, before any connective reading. Ultimately, by alluding to the history of printing from the scroll to the codex, to the stencil copy, to photography, and even to the interconnectivity of the web, *Nox* plays with the illusion that the sign could bridge the gap to the referent by the sheer cumulative power of all the reproduction modes into the same work, in a magical sense of presence that art has suggested and eschewed at the same time throughout the centuries. *Nox* is not only an elegy on the loss of her brother, but also to the modes of reproduction of our culture in art and craft. It is an elegy to the dark arts of magic, once we have lost faith in icons and do not believe they incarnate the absent figure represented as an image. In that sense, *Nox* is a process, a figuration in *passing* (the word is used three times in section 9.1, before a photograph of a stairway) by means of absence. Such absence is best captured in the image of the stairwell represented in several photographs, drawings or passages of prose (see sections 5.3, and 10.1, text and image alike). The stairway/stairwell pairing, like the proverbial sides of the same coin, comes to exemplify the nexus of *Nox*, its gathering of apparent opposites, its moot point, and its method.





A stairwell under the stairway, like the regular folding of the scroll into pages that are as many steps of reading, obverse and reverse of the facsimile reproduction, one perfecting the illusion of the scrapbook, the other blank and as unreadable as absence; a stairwell under the stairway, on Carson's page (section 10.1) carrying text above and below, as in engraving a plate and its reverse image on paper both carry ink, one side and the other together during the printing moment but each invisible to the other, at all times, in the blind mirror image, like brother and sister in the final explanation of the conjunction "atque" ("and," in Latin): "*similiter atque ipse eram noctuabunda* just like him I was a negotiator with night." (section 10.1) Like the other pseudo-dictionary entries, this translation of the conjunction contains autobiographical portraying. As an author and a poet, the melancholy narrator has been "a negotiator with the night" of the sign, with its conventionally established relationship to the real, and its semiotic split from the real. Or, in T. S. Eliot's words from *The Hollow Men*, she has written about the "shadow" of obscure discrepancies and discontinuities:

Between the idea  
 And the reality  
 Between the motion

And the act

Falls the Shadow. (p. 91-92)

In setting a greater distance from the writing hand to the reading hand and eyes, mass reproduction has made the contact between the minds more abstract. By retroactively giving figuration to the page as contact, Anne Carson bridges the gap of abstraction and reaches out broadly, in the webbing, random contact of our times, but with renewed historical sense and consciousness. She thus enables us to come, ourselves, closer to an understanding of loss, which is impossible to express directly.

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