

*MUNERE MORTIS: THE AGON BETWEEN ELEGIAC DUTY
AND POSTMODERN TECHNIQUE IN ANNE CARSON'S NOX*

A Project Submitted to the
College of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Master of Arts
In the Department of English
University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon

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ABSTRACT

Nox by Canadian author Anne Carson represents a development in poetic composition and associated philosophical thought grounded in postmodern techniques yet which moves towards what some have called a *metamodern* or *post-postmodern* structure. The work is an assemblage that compares the difficulties Carson faced while investigating the life of her deceased brother to those she encountered while translating a similarly-themed elegy by Catullus. The approaches to history and language that result are informed by postmodernism, but complex elements of the text, such as its theological component, suggest a classification distinct from postmodernism as often understood. The relationships of *Nox* and others of Carson's works to the writings of major postmodernist Jacques Derrida and those of Idealist G.W.F. Hegel reveal Carson's awareness of the significance of *Nox*'s dilemmas not only the personal level, but to the history of culture and writing in the Western context. Carson's *Nox* stands as a profound and deeply moving example of a metamodern poetic artifact.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my supervisor, Prof. Wendy Roy, for her patience and diligence, as well as my secondary reader, Prof. Lindsey Banco, for his encouraging comments and helpful revisions.

I would also like to thank my family for their support, perpetual in every sense.

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INTRODUCTION

*Der Verlust des Bruders ist daher der Schwester unersetzlich, und ihre Pflicht gegen ihn die höchste.*¹

–Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (par. 457)

From readings and quotations at funerals, to amateur obituary or *in memoria* poems, and, of course, published poetry, elegy is perennially relevant, common, and paradoxically alive. Such poetry, particularly elegies for ordinary people published in newspapers, bears a critical untouchability: though lacking what we might think of as compositional refinement and philosophical substance, the heartbreaking sincerity of even the simplest elegy is palpable. The psychological and cultural reasons for the effect and significance of elegy are both universal in the feelings involved and complex in their particularity. The divide between the living and the dead has been momentarily breached and an air of memorialization has charged language with a certain permanence, often carrying with it the audience society's most fundamental structures of belief. As Priscila Uppal writes in *We Are What We Mourn: The Contemporary English-Canadian Elegy*, “an examination of the elegy tradition may uncover the most expressive revelations of shifting responses to death” (4).

When elegy is put in the context of theory, it takes on a different significance or, controversially, lack thereof. In certain poststructural idioms, elegy becomes both a prime example as well as a lead problematizing instance of the issues of death, inscription, presence, history, authorial identity, and transcendence. It is due to this importance, both scholarly and commonplace, that the concept of elegy is a complex field of states of play. Quoting Uppal again:

¹ “The loss of the brother is therefore irreparable to the sister and her duty towards him is the highest.” Trans. A.V. Miller.

As for the poststructuralist theory that language itself is essentially an inscription of absence, perhaps exemplified best by Robert Hass' famous statement "a word is elegy to what it signifies" (4), numerous studies of the elegy have taken issue with such a pronouncement, especially in terms of how it relates to the understanding of poetic grief and its literary expression. Applied to the elegy, the theory holds that by using language as an expressive mode in the mourning process, the poet admits from the very outset failure to invoke the presence of the loved one. (18, quoting Hass, *Praise*)

The works analysed in *What We Mourn*, Uppal says, avoid this problem by simply not subscribing to poststructural linguistics. Certain elegiac literature, however, addresses the problematics of postmodern elegy more directly and in the process provides space for new modes of interpretation.

Anne Carson's *Nox* (2010) is one such work. It is a reprinted assemblage that deals with the death of her brother Michael, an event after which Carson says she "began to think about history" (1.0), although the book also marks a turning point in the longer development of Carson's philosophical and historical thought. Among other possible labels, Carson is a scholar and philologist primarily of Ancient Greek and draws on a vast stockpile of knowledge to make her provocative comparisons. In *Nox*, considerations of Herotodus and Hekataios are foremost amongst deconstructive meditations on history and the subject. Carson's own knowledge as well as memories are being continually re-appraised as the text's object, in a process of poetic auto-psychoanalysis.

Nox is also an account of the author's struggle to translate Catullus's 101st poem, the one beginning "Multas per gentes" and concluding with the famous phrase, "ave et vale."² The left-hand side of *Nox*'s accordion layout features passages that form a Latin dictionary, one that Carson seems to have written herself based on unsourced OED-like definitions. Most of these entries challenge the possibility of a simple translation through the abundance of choice and nuance, and each array of possible interpretations integrates a phrase or sentence including the word *nox* – "night." In this way, *Nox* – the book, as I will refer to what might be better called a pseudocodex³ – presents creative uses of Latin rather than relying exclusively on pre-existing (and presumably ancient) sources. As night creeps into Catullus's poem through each word's unpacking, the reader may also begin to get a sense of how these definitions, which surround the issue of familial Roman burial rites, are used to disassemble psycho-social concepts.

In addition to its other aims, this essay reads *Nox* through the retrospective lens of Carson's play *Antigonick* (2012), which in turn must be understood in the context of Antigone's

² Daisy Dunn's translation (*The Poems of Catullus*):

Carried through many nations and
over many seas,
I've come for this sorrowful
funeral, brother,
To give you the final gift of the dead
And to address your mute ashes.
There will be no reply.
Since fate has stolen you from me
Poor brother snatched away from me
unworthily.
But accept these sad offerings now,
which are handed
To the dead, in the ancient custom
of our elders,
Much moistened by a brother's tears.
For now and forever, brother,
farewell.

³ The term "codex" denotes a book of normal shape, a collection of bound pages as opposed to a scroll. *Nox* has the appearance of a codex but also has characteristics of a scroll — hence my term.

appearance in G.W.F. Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. *Antigonick* suggests that during the time period *Nox* describes, Carson was aware of, and struggled with, the broader significance of the role of burial and elegy as described by Hegel, a connection also suggested by the prose piece "Merry Christmas from Hegel." In Hegel, the archetypal role of Antigone, who must bury her brother in accordance with the laws of the gods, stands at the core of major social and cultural change. This connection to Hegel, however, stands in contention to postmodern elements that *Nox* also employs, particularly those reminiscent of Jacques Derrida. These postmodern connections are consequences of its possible status, *per* Linda Hutcheon, as *historiographic metapoetry*,⁴ a categorization based on its use of techniques regarding history, writing, presence, and the subject that have their origins in postmodernism. This description of the essay's structure is accurate, but might insinuate that Carson is fully embracing traditional elements of Hegel's System in an effort to overcome postmodernity, a hazardous over-simplification. Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* describes the progression of self-consciousness, both on the level of the individual and on the isomorphic level of society, continuing through a chain of *Aufhebung* towards Absolute Knowing.⁵ Some may be familiar with the term *synthesis* as a convenient way to understand this in dialectic terms, but Hegel never uses that language.

The metadramatics of *Antigonick*, especially the self-referential moments regarding the sister's Hegelian role in the burial of the brother, express the dilemma of *Nox* perfectly and lead

⁴ My use of this terms builds on her notion of "historiographic metafiction" (*The Canadian Postmodern* 13).

⁵ *Aufhebung* is notoriously difficult to translate, incorporating at once the sense of raising something up and removing it. In contemporary vernacular usage, the word means "repeal" as of a law or "cancellation" as of a meeting ("Aufhebung"). To approximate Hegel's double meaning, one might use the word "lifting," including the sense of lifting a ban.

to a more resourceful unpacking of this work and its philosophical implications, a movement that goes far beyond the individuality of Carson and her family. My goal, then, is to approach *Nox*'s metapoetry through the hyper-discursive – yet still playful – lens that explores the very Hegelian categories of family, ritual, ethical action, and underworld psychology without being, to put it in a way that is now almost colloquial, entirely postmodern. *Nox* addresses the pressures that come with encountering death and tradition after confronting the lessons of postmodernity, thereby participating in an important poetic breakthrough. The translation of Catullus 101 represents a disassembling and re-assembling of much more than a poem, but also a world and a subconscious, and Carson includes a complex mixture of the traditional and the postmodern to achieve this – a form of composition that can be likened to other works labeled *metamodern*. The discursive play that *Nox* entails manages to engage and then abandon many poststructural tropes, sublating in a way that is and isn't ironically Hegelian. This sublation is at the core not only of the Catullus translation and the depiction of the brother's death, but also of Carson's considerably *metamodern* project.

In *Nox*, Carson faces a struggle, an *agon* in her much-used ancient Greek context, between the traditional duties of the elegist and the postmodern techniques that the work also exhibits. A consequent reading of *Nox* as a conversation with Hegel, so overtly suggested by the surrounding works, reveals Carson to be using the grieving and elegy process to make far more eloquent points about death, truth, and God, with the sister's symbolic burial of the brother not only a significant personal event but also a major step in the progression of consciousness and culture. Masterfully playing on the tension between these two conflicting conversations, between

the disassembling of world and history and the movement towards truth and the sublime, *Nox* is a profound and innovative poetic artifact.

First, I will look at *Nox* as a material art object unto itself, outline the work's basic structure and themes, and then begin a reading of the work's numbered sections. I explore the concept of history – or, more properly, historiography – through which Carson discusses Herodotus and others while piecing together what little she can find pertaining to her brother's missing years. This analysis, in conjunction with a reading of the Catullus translation and exploration of the difficulty of understanding Michael as a subject of inquiry, leads to the suggestion that *Nox* is *historiographic metapoetry*, postmodern-influenced poetry that is concerned with its own composition and questions the historical sources that form its context. This categorization is suggested by the book as artifact as well as the fact that the text employs techniques similar to the fiction Hutcheon classifies as postmodern. Hutcheon was influenced by Derrida in her theorizations, but Carson's work has a more complex, even innovative, relationship to that writer, effectively distancing herself from the postmodern label.

To argue against the reading of *Nox* as a postmodern work, I will be detailing the trajectory of a key part of Carson's philosophical project, beginning with *Eros the Bittersweet*, which marks Carson's distinct but parallel stance to Derrida's deconstruction. At this juncture, Carson opted for a metaphysics of writing in which desire is proposed as the fundamental substance of self, of being. Other elements of *Nox*, such as its theological element, make the comparison to Derrida problematic. Carson turned to a source, Hegel, that is antithetical to readers' assumptions about her theoretical position. The prose piece "Merry Christmas from Hegel" (2016) plays with an intertextual association with the philosopher, while the play

Antigonick is a metadramatic confrontation of the problems of this association. Both pieces reveal *Nox* to be a similar conversation with Hegel.

The result is a picture of the interplay of the historic, the spiritual, and the personal as instanced in *Nox*. This interplay is exemplified by the dilemma of the Catullus poem and its translation, which relate to the themes of the *Phenomenology* but escape previous readings of Hegel on death, memorialization, and history. The oscillatory movement between deconstruction and tradition mirrors what Robin Akker and Timothy Vermeulen have discussed as a defining feature of *metamodernism* which, as the Greek *meta* and Platonic *metaxy* implies, involves being “with or among, between and after” (8) other stances, particularly postmodernism. This position allows Carson to imbue her poetry with some of its most profound and timeless elements, suffusing the work with implications of the sublime and eternal without falling back into the confinement of the categories unpacked and confronted by postmodernism. Accordingly, for *Nox*, the “reader” (if one at the limits of language can still be so called) is left with only the ineffable.

IMPRESSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

My first approach to *Nox* is from a primarily material perspective. The book is contained in a cardboard box whose photographed book spine suggests simulation, while the faded, yet artistically-cropped photo of a young boy in old-fashioned swim goggles on the front cover suggests nostalgia. A brief description of Carson as a Canadian-born teacher of Greek (the mini-bio found in all of her books), along with a short bibliography, are found on the inside of the box. Robert Currie, Carson’s partner and artistic collaborator, whom she calls “the randomizer” (Anderson), is described as having “assisted in the design and realization of this

book” (inside cover). The primary substance of the book is a stack of papers: when one lifts the first, it is revealed to be a long, single sheet folded accordion-style. On the long sheet is a reprinted mixed-medium assemblage of old photographs (the snow, emptiness, clothing, and Carson’s descriptions indicating mid-fifties Canada), letters, stamps, and telegrams from places such as Denmark and Kashmir, various streaks of vibrant paint and what appears to be rubbed charcoal, and, the book’s main substance, dozens of cut-out and pasted typed pages and scattered phrases. The ideas of a fragmented world and self-conscious writing are already apparent.

The written sections are primarily divided into two types. On the left-hand “pages” – as I will refer to them – are entries from a Latin dictionary (or so it seems) and on the right are numbered passages of a reflective and philosophical nature. In fact, the numbering system of 1.0 to 10.3 makes these written sections look more like Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (visually at least) than anything usually called poetry.

The first page features the name “Michael” six times in thick black cursive with a vertical strip of paper reading “NOX FRATER NOX” – “night brother night” in Latin – laid over or pasted on top. Subsequently, the names’ ink appears to soak through the back of the page and onto the next page containing Catullus’s poem, canonically numbered his 101st, presented in the original Latin. In elegiac couplets, this famous poem describes Catullus’s arrival at his brother’s funeral rites, some components of which – both real and metaphorical – he has borne with him “through many nations and over many seas” (1). The poem’s themes are travel (or, more properly, distance of all kinds), tradition, futility, and eternity. *Nox*’s two apparent subjects – this Michael figure (perhaps the begoggled boy) and Catullus’s elegy – are thus immediately evident.

Next, on a left-hand page, are definitions for *multas* (“numerous” or “many” to use the first two), the first word of Catullus’s poem and, opposite this, written section 1.0. “I wanted to fill my elegy with light of all kinds,” a first-person voice beginning to sound like Carson’s tells us. The voice continues,

But death makes us stingy. There is nothing more to be expended on that, we think, he’s dead. Love cannot alter it. Words cannot add to it. No matter how I try to evoke the starry lad he was, it remains a plain, odd history. So I began to think about history. (1.0)

Now formulated is the *prima facie* arrangement of Carson, Michael, Catullus – importantly, along with his unnamed brother – and history. For the rest of the book, the reader is taken along with Carson in piecing together her brother’s life and its “plain, odd mystery.” At first, this seems like a relatively straightforward subject for Carson, so well known for her bending and blending of genres and historical figures, but complications ensue.

The tenth-place numbers continue (1.1 and so on) as do the complex arrays of possible definitions, many of which begin to have the word *nox*, or some declined form or another, as part of the cited (or constructed) instance. While each definition begins with a few standard meanings, some of the instances are idiomatic in a way that suggests composition, rather than citation. A few of the smaller, more basic instances (such as “*miserrima Dido*” under “*miseras*”) do occur in famous examples of Roman literature, but others (“*nocte fratris quam ipso fratre miserior*: made sadder by the brother’s night than by the brother,” also under “*miseras*”) seem to be original creations of Carson’s and often beautiful, heartbreaking ones at that, rendered even more effective by being consistently correct Latin. The entries undermine the assumptions of

translation and language to a degree, but it is the struggle between this undermining and the desire to nevertheless elegize that forms the heart of the book.

Carson launches into a meditation on history using lesser-known or lesser-understood ancient Greek writers as her reference points, by far one of her most frequently occurring techniques.⁶ In this case, she begins with Heketaios, a Greek writer who “composed (about 500 BC) a ‘*How to Go Around the Earth (with map)*’” (1.1). In an inset copy of a quotation that appears to be photocopied from another text, a “He” subject

makes out of myrrh an egg as big as he can carry. Then he tests it to see if he can carry it. After that he hollows out the egg and lays his father inside and plugs up the hollow. With father inside the egg weighs the same as before. Having plugged it up he carries the egg to Egypt to the temple of the sun.

Only then are we told that “Heketaios is describing the sacred phoenix” and its every-500-year burial flight from Arabia to Heliopolis (1.1 cont’d). Aside from the quotation’s immediate features – its mythical, mystical, and even alchemical elements – it manipulates the idea of a subject beginning with the literal subject of the sentence. Carson has set up the instability of subject as a metaphor for the historian’s activity and, in the course of *Nox*, we are lured to insert Michael into this peculiar and mythic chain of signs. Subject, history, and writing have emerged as prominent and inseparable categories. The reader joins Carson in her destabilizing of historical assumptions, but this collaboration means that the memory of Michael and the possibility of elegy are ever more distant.

⁶ Consider the treatment of Stesichoros in *Autobiography of Red*, Mimnermos in *Plainwater*, and Simonides in *Economy of the Unlost*, among others.

To parse Heketaios, Carson deftly explores a few etymologies. She begins with *autopsy*, from the Greek for “eye witness,” a good introduction to the book’s use of photography. Preceding this is a photo of a white house, the dark figures of a woman and two children on its snowy walkway. It seems likely that the photo is of Carson with her mother and brother, and that her father is behind the camera, casting a shadow in the snow. On the page before that (on the reverse side of the photo), the shadow is filled in with pencil or charcoal. Carson’s filling in the absence of the father with this medium is remarkably poignant psychologically and positively seismic in a poststructural sense, but Carson gives us absolutely nothing more related to her father in *Nox* except for what may be implied in Catullus’s poem.⁷ The phrase “*prisco quae more parentum*” (7) specifically, which Daisy Dunne’s translation accurately renders as “in the ancient custom / of our elders” (13-14), still applies to the parents’ generation in Carson’s book: in her translation, she calls it “the distant mood of our parents” (*contra* “*prisco*”).⁸

The section concludes with a few Carson trademarks: first, blending one’s external life with the interior reading life, particularly in reference to Virginia Woolf (Michael’s dog reminds her of Flush) and then ending on a paradoxical note: “I wonder what the smell of nothing is. Smell of autopsy” (1.2). The description is vivid, but it is the experience of involuntary intertextuality that makes up *Nox*’s primary substance, with the connections to other literature seeming less like research and more like automatic associations.

⁷ Readers of Carson’s works will feel an additional biographical sadness when comparing the filled-in space to “The Glass Essay” and other accounts of her father’s battle with Alzheimer’s, which challenge postmodern assumptions by a return to feeling rather than patricidal semiotics.

⁸ I use the notation *contra* to cite pages that lack section numbers but are found across from (*contra*) a dictionary entry that I specify.

The majority of the prose text is dedicated to an intriguing yet saddening investigation into who this estranged brother was and what his life abroad was like behind and in between his rare points of contact with his family. Accompanying section 2.1 is the blunt (question mark-less) question, written in reverse in charcoal or a similar medium, “WHO WERE YOU.” What readers learn, to summarize the scant biographical information, is that Michael “ran away in 1978, rather than go to jail” (2.2, a notation that is duplicated several times under different fragments of a handwritten letter apparently from him). Michael, it seems, had a somewhat troubled life spent mostly in travel, accompanied by complicated relationships with women (including the death of Anna, the “love of his life” according even to his widow in 3.2), alcohol (5.3), and general unhappiness (*contra* “*alloquerer*”). Some time before or after the painful loss of his long-term girlfriend, he settled in Denmark where he married and – leaving little more information than that for Carson and her readers – died in Copenhagen in 2000. Readers may know slightly more about Michael from “The Wishing Jewel: Introduction to Water Margins” found in *Plainwater*: he dropped out of high school to study martial arts, had an interest in Eastern philosophy, and gave Carson a two-volume thesaurus. The information stops there, so as in “The Wishing Jewel,” Carson reminisces or, in terms in conflict with much postmodern work, reconstructs the subject through nostalgia.

The relationship between the young Carson and Michael seems to have been more or less positive, but also involved a certain amount of intellectual teasing that, described in *Nox*, sits rather comically with Carson’s other writing. Both severe critics and steadfast advocates of Carson’s work will especially appreciate his remembered comment “**So, pinhead, d’you attain wisdom yet?**” (5.2), amongst other barbs. But, Carson tells us, Michael only called her “maybe 5

times in 22 years” (8.1). Additional correspondence was vague and similarly infrequent and, eventually, “no more cards came” (*Plainwater* 247). Because of this dearth of material, the challenges of biography and elegy, joining those of translation, reach a beautiful yet painful confluence of realization:

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, discandied, unrepentant, barking web of them that hangs in your mind when you turn back to the page you were trying to translate. (*Nox contra “Frater”*)

This passage summarizes the vivid emotion at the root of *Nox*. It also demonstrates the text’s overall suggestion of the indivisibility between life, thought, and writing. The material means of piecing this life back together are few and far between and no-one’s memory, neither that of Carson, nor of Michael’s widow, can fill in the blanks.

Within a poetry book about a poem (its self-reflexivity) in which the writing of history is perpetually contemplated (its historiographics) and in which the subject and his narrative have been utterly lost, comparisons to postmodern literature and its criticism arise. Above all, *Nox* seems to mirror certain features of the category of writing known as “historiographic metafiction,” formulated most famously by Linda Hutcheon in such works as *The Canadian Postmodern* (13). Hutcheon refers to authors including Leonard Cohen, Chris Scott, Margaret Atwood, and Robert Kroetsch (when focused on the Canadian context) to investigate fiction in which history and historiography, while prominent themes, are perpetually and self-consciously broken down, reassessed, and deconstructed. Historiographic metafiction is “fiction that is

intensely, self-reflexively art, but is also grounded in historical, social, and political realities” (Hutcheon 13). In such works, “the aesthetic and the social, the present and the past, are not separable discourses” (14). Hutcheon argues that these texts demonstrate “the lessons of the postmodern,” which are that “the only way we can know the past today is through its traces, its texts” (14) and that history is a “construction” “*made* by the historian through a process of selecting, ordering, and narrating” (15).

As a work of historiographic metapoetry, *Nox* participates in a similar field of historic and linguistic meaning through its intertextuality and its construction of Michael and his past through fragments and traces. However, *Nox* moves well past these techniques, and thus away from a classification as postmodern. Where this movement leads is complicated, paradoxical terrain, yet the term *metamodernism*, as explored in Akker, Gibbons, and Vermeulen’s *Metamodernism: History, Affect, and Depth After Postmodernism*, has perhaps the best critical currency. *Metamodernism*, in that collection’s context, denotes hermeneutics and techniques that take into account the lessons of postmodernism, such as those delineated by Hutcheon, but also confront the conflicts that thereby ensue. The agon of *Nox* demonstrates one such hermeneutic.

For Carson, this movement away from postmodernism conveniently begins with her earlier works’ differentiation from some of the readings and techniques of Jacques Derrida, one of the thinkers most commonly associated with postmodernism. Hutcheon, like others, attributes the development of many postmodern techniques to the work of Derrida:

To make problematic such issues as gender, authority, facts, and subjectivity, can obviously lead to a paralyzing scepticism about basic values and the categories of belief in literature and in life, but it can also offer a new impetus to questioning in

many areas of art and theory today. For instance, French philosopher Jacques Derrida's general project of a subversive questioning of the Western philosophical tradition and its metaphysics has opened up new areas of study that no longer take for granted such basics as the definition of 'Man' as a rational being, in control of everything. (18)

While Derrida is certainly relevant for these and other reasons, his work's relationship to Carson's writing is somewhat more complex than what Hutcheon is describing.

CARSON AND DERRIDA

In terms of its treatment of presence, history, language, and death, *Nox* echoes many of the main topics of Derrida's writing. Aside from its complex and ever-revising contemplations of histories both global and personal, part of *Nox* consists of a translation and dictionary that might come off as a textbook on undecidability and the trace. That is, by taking the Latin elegy apart word by word and digging deeply into both etymology and polysemy, Carson finds little certainty and thereby parallels the difficulty of investigating the lost subject of Michael. The linguistic uncertainty connected with a historical and psychological uncertainty is a powerful example of an approach that is literally Poststructural in the sense of its distance from Ferdinand de Saussure and Structuralism. Traces of the ancient world, particularly those of the funeral rites, underlie Catullus's poem, and the similarity of such traces to Carson's situation is a reminder of how the contemporary "world" is constructed in the Western context, linguistically and psychologically. The same line of distinctly postmodern thought, however, puts all the more pressure on the concepts of memory, elegy, and even accompanying questions of the afterlife, eternity, and so on that inspire *Nox*'s other scraps of poetic thought and inform its atmosphere.

To understand the theoretical significance of the paradox, one needs to return to Carson's earlier work, in which she sets a certain distance between herself and postmodernism as often understood or practised. This occurs most notably in her first non-fiction book, *Eros the Bittersweet*. Here Carson first exhibits her own metaphysical and linguistic approach to the categories of "desire" and "being" that feature so prominently throughout her creative work. An important example of this distance lies in Carson's reading of Plato's "Phaedrus" dialogue. This dialogue was famously also analyzed by Derrida in his immensely influential essay "Plato's Pharmacy." At the heart of Derrida's version is the retelling of the ancient myth, told in the "Phaedrus," of the Egyptian god Thoth's (Or Theuth's) creation of writing. In Plato's Greek, this writing – or Writing, *écriture*, and *arche-écriture* in the Derridean sense – is called a *pharmakon*, a word denoting both poison and cure. The myth, and/or Derrida's treatment of the myth, became a central depiction of speech's privilege over writing.

Carson, in *Eros the Bittersweet*, sets herself apart from Derrida by grounding many of these same phenomena in the body, in sensuality, and, most importantly, in the complexities of romantic psychology. She begins: "Damage is the subject of this dialogue. Plato is concerned with two sorts of damage. One is the damage done by lovers in the name of desire. The other is the damage done by writing and reading in the form of communication" (290). While this point is very similar to Derrida's, it also sets up what will become a differentiation between their work. In the chapter that answers didactically the heading question "What is this Dialogue About?", Carson explains:

As Phaedrus reads what Lysias wrote, as Phaedrus listens to what Sokrates says, something begins to come into focus. You begin to understand what a *logos* is and

what it is not and the difference between them. *Eros is the difference*. Like a face crossing a mirror at the back of the room, Eros moves. You reach. Eros is gone. (166, my emphasis)

Unlike Derrida, Carson concludes that romantic desire, particular as conceived as Eros, is the major force behind the *logos* and being, specifically by way of absence and desire for the unattainable. Like in the later *Nox*, her approach is undeniably related to postmodernism, but it also stands as an alternative to many postmodern pronouncements. It is not surprising that *Nox* represents a similar relationship and corresponding differentiation.

The primary distancing factor between Carson and postmodern approaches to history, such as Derrida's, is the certainty of her historical voice. Carson's delineation of ancient historical facts sometimes borders on what might be called a time-traveller's certainty. When dealing with a historic issue, especially one rooted in the ancient past, Carson often asserts a fact with little, if any, doubt. Additionally, the personal aspect of what Carson describes about these figures makes the dimensions of the reference extremely intimate compared to many of Carson's contemporaries. Consider alongside this her treatment of voice:

Nothing in English can capture the passionate, slow surface of a Roman elegy. No one (even in Latin) can approximate Catullan diction, which at its most sorrowful has an air of deep festivity, like one of those trees that turns all its leaves over, silver, in the wind. (*Nox, contra "indigne"*)

Where did Carson hear this voice that cannot be recreated (no less than the voice of the dead)?

What is the trace of Roman "festivity" behind the shaping of this voice? These are the

postmodern questions that *Nox* frustrates and turns back upon themselves. In the lack of answers on both sides, Carson enters a different discursive space, one inherently difficult to name.

In relation to *Nox*'s theological aspect, one can locate a few similar themes and, more importantly problematics, in Derrida's *The Gift of Death* (1992). In this work, Derrida explores the implications of death in the Western context, the notion of responsibility to the dead, and related approaches to history. Derrida's text turns into an indictment of the hidden "economy" of Christianity and the ethical responsibility towards the Other in contrast with the responsibility towards the Abrahamic God.⁹ Carson's theological writing acknowledges but does not indict the oppressive God of postmodernism: it plays with such a notion, but does not eliminate God. The notion of God found in Carson's work is often of a dark, Old Testament variety,¹⁰ but He is nevertheless alive and undeconstructable.

Section 8.5, in which Carson writes that she believes "God has succeeded" in making nonsense of "Overtakelessness," is seemingly deconstructive in its use of *sous rature*, putting the theological "under erasure." The original passage is still packed with transcendent reference, however: Carson is here using the word "overtakelessness," from Emily Dickinson's "The overtakelessness of those" (Poem 1691)¹¹ to translate the German term *der Unumgängliche*, that

⁹ This turn is particularly evident in the collection's gnomic final chapter "*tout autre est tout autre*" as well as the connected essay "Literature in Secret."

¹⁰ For example, see "The Truth About God" and "Book of Isaiah" from *Glass, Irony & God*.

¹¹ The overtakelessness of those
Who have accomplished Death
Majestic is to me beyond
The majesties of Earth.

The soul her "Not at Home"
Inscribes upon the flesh —
And takes her fair aerial gait
Beyond the hope of touch.

which cannot be gotten around. God is crossed out, but it is such a deep and relevant theological treatment of the issue that it cannot be abandoned. Additionally, using Dickinson's word in this alternate context creates metaphysical complications that are generally contrary to a project like Derrida's. Much like the other textual connections in *Nox*, the use of the word "overtakelessness" also points to the remainder of the referred text, in this case the notion of "accomplishing Death" and the vague metaphysics of the second and final stanza. Though it cannot be found overtly, the feeling of the "fair aerial gait / Beyond the hope of touch" (7-8) lies in *Nox*'s intertextual background.

The most hidden, yet important, theological component of *Nox* in this regard has to do with the transcript of the funeral Carson receives from Michael's widow. The biblical reading for the funeral was from Romans 8, and behind the passage describing this is scratched in the negative of charcoal, "AS IT IS WRITTEN" and a few less legible words. Even though covered up physically and seemingly suppressed, Paul's words from Psalm 44:22 are significant: "For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered" (*Bible* ESV). "FOR" and that "KILL" are visible on Carson's page. Dark stuff from the Sons of Korah to be sure, but Paul is using the extreme nature of the poem to make a point about the temporality of the flesh and the eternal essence of Spirit. Recontextualized again here, there is a desperation, almost a violence, carved into *Nox*'s background. I categorize this desperation as a struggle between the relevance of the biblical passage and the impetus, even onus, to deconstruct it. *Nox* addresses the agony that comes with what might be called the revenge of metaphysics. Carson's book posits that we are as much under the auspices of the gods or God, fate, and the world of Spirit as our ancestors were when a time of extreme sadness and confusion comes upon us.

Derrida's project is an unstitching of the fabric of Western metaphysics and does not aver a simple "Death of God" in the Neitzchean sense. As Derrida argues, "it would not mean a single step outside of metaphysics if nothing more than a new motif of 'return to finitude,' of 'God's death,' etc., were the result of this move. It is that conceptuality and that problematics that must be deconstructed. They belong to the onto-theology they fight against" (*Of Grammatology* 68). The treatment of the God subject in section 8.5 of *Nox*, in which God "succeeds" even though erased in a way reminiscent of Derrida's use of *sous rature*, does not subscribe to this central tenet of deconstruction. As much as one may have a postmodern suspicion about what is behind the language and the structure of belief it is associated with, something like this biblical passage remains painfully relevant despite our modern defences. To deal with these problems, Carson turns to a source that is rather ingeniously contrary to our assumptions about postmodernity: G.W.F. Hegel.

HEGEL AND *ANTIGONICK*

Just as he is characterized as "L'aigle" or "The eagle" in Derrida's *Glas*, the figure of Hegel looms over philosophy and criticism. Contemplations of history's intertwining with spiritual patterns and personal lives – especially in conjunction with psychological re-readings of classics like Carson's translations – almost inevitably circle back to Hegel. What Hegel organized as a system finds its greatest challenge, and difficulty of verification, when confronted with personal dilemmas and real-world events, and while the parallel to Hegel's work is not an explicit part of *Nox*, its consideration is difficult to avoid and the comparison to Hegel's relevant passages is highly revealing. Carson's work is not a faithful expression, implementation, or supplement to Hegel's System: as is evident in "Merry Christmas from Hegel," the relationship

is complex, and it is more accurate to say, as Carson does herself, that she is thinking *about* Hegel in a multi-faceted way. However, Carson’s work, without appealing wholly to the methodologies of deconstruction as such, breaks out of the Hegelian loop.

Critical language surrounding Hegel often uses derisive imagery of what Vanessa Place terms the “Hegelian mountain” (166) built upon stern value judgments coming rudely and endlessly from beyond the grave. Parts of his grandiose-seeming System are remarkably short-sighted in regards to gender and non-European cultures, but Carson seems to have a less critical interest in the writer. Hegel was someone using mythopoeic and dramatic elements to explain the structure of self-consciousness and its growth, both individually and historically and this seems to be his relevance to Carson.¹²

Carson’s most overt interaction with Hegel, and the instance which most closely links the Hegel-related line of thought to *Nox*, occurs in “Merry Christmas from Hegel,” a one-page prose piece found in her collection *Float* (2016). Beginning with the line “It was the year my brother died” (1), a connection to *Nox* is immediately apparent. The prose piece describes a moment on Christmas Day (the Carson investigator can locate the precise date to December 25, 2000) during which Carson, “wretchedly lonely with all my family dead” (1), is occupied with reading an unspecified passage from Hegel concerning the limitations of grammar, such as the misunderstanding of the consummately Hegelian formulation “Reason is Spirit” (*Phenomenology* Section C). Pondering the passage and Hegel, Carson goes into the woods to do some “snow standing,” an activity that leads to a moment of therapeutic stillness and presence – thus the title and concluding line, “Merry Christmas from Hegel” (2).

¹² Sources for my own reading of Hegel include Terry Pinkard’s sympathetic *Hegel: A Biography* and J. M. Fritzman’s *Hegel* from the Critical Thinkers series.

The piece opens with a *caveat* of sorts, important to understanding Carson in general, but essential to my own argument. Carson begins by saying, “You will forgive me if you are someone who knows a lot of Hegel or understands it, I do not and will paraphrase badly [...]” (1), before explaining what she sees as the gist of Hegel’s passage. Despite this claim of ignorance, what Carson describes is a very Hegelian moment. Going out “into the middle of a woods,” the focus of her attention shifts to increasingly more minute elements: “Outer sounds like traffic and shoveling vanish. Inner sounds become audible, cracks, sighs, caresses, twigs, birdbreath, toenails of squirrel.” In contemporary parlance, we might call this “mindfulness” or what Eckhart Tolle would term “Presence” or “Being” in his own extremely non-poststructural idiolect. The narrator of the piece tells us, “It has nothing to do with Hegel and he would not admire the clumsily conventional sentences in which I have tried to tell about it,” but reading Hegel’s reflection on his own writing has led to this moment. While I am making an effort to not link Carson’s project too closely with Hegel’s, and the piece seems to frustrate an attempt at such a line of inquiry, the resonance of a Hegelian combination of nature, art, s/Spirit, and culture is felt. Most importantly, Carson is looking at Hegel not as an enemy – as he is so often conceived, especially in a postmodern context – but as a fellow writer, criticized for his difficult and idiosyncratic style.

Accordingly, comparisons between Carson’s situation at the time and related passages in Hegel, especially the source of this “Reason is Spirit” phrase, suggest that she saw her position, with no little irony, as a modern version of Antigone’s. Hegel places the story of this figure from Greek mythology, as told in the *Antigone* of Sophocles, at the core of the writings that diagram his System. A central text of the System is *Phenomenology of Spirit* and, in it, *Antigone* is

presented as the archetypal example of the turning point from “Reason” to “Spirit,” more properly conceived and growing in self-awareness, entering and shaping the world and becoming History by negotiating with established law. In *Antigone*, the eponymous heroine is compelled by ancient law and tradition to properly bury her brother, Polyneikes, but to do so would mean to break the newer laws of the current king, Kreon. This, to Hegel, was the epitome not only of ethical consciousness, but of consciousness – the Spirit of the individual, the state, and the world – itself.

In Carson’s version of the play, *Antigonick*, her first published work after *Nox*, Antigone several times discusses with her sister Ismene her significance in Hegel’s writings, but the most meta-cognitive exchange runs as follows:

ANTIGONE: Hegel says I’m wrong

ISMENE: But right to be wrong

ANTIGONE: No ethical consciousness

ISMENE: Is that how he puts it [?]

ANTIGONE: So I wonder, let’s say my unconscious while remaining unconscious could also know the laws of consciousness by which I am condemned for disobeying them I mean can a person be so completely conscious of being unconscious that she is guilty of her own repressions, is that what I’m guilty of [?]

ISMENE: We all think you’re a fine girl

Carson’s scene refers to par. 437 of the *Phenomenology* in which Hegel uses Antigone’s declaration of the eternal nature of laws (that is, burial “laws,” or customs) as the launching point for explaining how Spirit enters the world through ethical action:

Thus, Sophocles' *Antigone* acknowledges them as the unwritten and infallible law of the gods.

They are not of yesterday or today, but everlasting,

Though where they came from, none of us can tell.

They *are*. If I inquire after their origin and confine them to the point whence they arose, then I have transcended them; for now it is I who am the universal, and *they* are the conditioned and limited. (par. 437)

In Hegel's formulation, the order of things will be affected by Antigone doing what she *must* do in terms of her brother's burial. Piety to family spirits and household gods depends on the sister properly enacting the heaven-decreed laws of burial. Although this kind of structure of society and its metaphysics is precisely the sort of thing the majority of postmodern works deconstruct, Carson acknowledges a pressure to embody this traditional role. *Nox* is not the declaration of the inevitability of this traditional problem. Instead, it shows the breakthrough that comes with directly confronting the frustrating issue.

Accordingly, *Antigonick* is more influenced by *Nox's* situation than may be apparent. What critics such as Place miss about the Hegelian significance of *Antigonick* and how this retroactively reflects on *Nox* is that Hegel continues to use Sophocles' *Antigone* as the prime – virtually sole – example of how Spirit begins to take shape in the ethical substance of the world and form the different modes of consciousness that become historic moments, states, and cultures. The *Antigone* scenario is at the very core of Hegel's System and, especially in the *Phenomenology*, depends upon the role of the sister in the ritual burial of the brother.

What Hegel calls “The Family” throughout this phase in the *Phenomenology* is far more than blood-relatives; it includes the “passage of blood-relations into mere being” (par. 452):

The Family, as the *unconscious*, still Inner Notion [of the ethical order], stands opposed to its actual, self-conscious existence; as the *element* of the nation’s actual existence, it stands opposed to the nation itself; as the *immediate* being of the ethical order, it stands over against that order which shapes and maintains itself by working for the universal; the Penates stand opposed to the universal Spirit. (par. 450)

It is this contradiction that Sophocles’ *Antigone* works through to the point where “The ethical shape of Spirit has vanished and another takes its place” (par. 475). This dynamic is an example of *Aufhebung*, the “up-raising” that is also a “cancellation” of the previous term. The established order needs to contend with the universality behind actions like Antigone’s. Hers is not simply a dramatic plot, but one of the main dynamics of social and eventually historical change. If Carson is in the role of Antigone in *Nox*, her situation can be seen as the centre of a similar change.

Further connected passages in the *Phenomenology* support this comparison.

The role of death in Hegel is complex and inherently counter-intuitive, connected as it is with “negativity” in Hegel’s idiolect:

The dead individual, by having liberated his *being* from his *action* or his negative unity, is an empty singular, merely a passive being-for-another, at the mercy of every lower irrational individuality and the forces of abstract material elements, all of which are now more powerful than himself. (par. 452)

Here, Hegel is talking about the body of Polyneikes, but one can see how it might apply to the situation of Michael in *Nox*, with its own “abstract material elements.” In her essay “Anne

Carson's Stereoscopic Poetics," Jessica Fisher aptly called these fragments "*remains*" (14). In Hegel's scheme, the brother embodies the Spirit of the community, but it is the sister, who as a woman is "associated with these household gods [Penates] and beholds in them both her universal substance and her particular individuality," who effects the real ethical action that the burial, or mourning in general, entails. The relationship of brother and sister has "reached a state of rest and equilibrium" (par. 457), by which Hegel means the woman is not bound to the roles of daughter or wife. It is up to her to make the brother's death meaningful. As Hegel's pronouncement at the beginning of this essay states, "The loss of the brother is therefore irreparable to the sister and her duty towards him is the highest" (par. 457). *Antigonick* is where Carson lampoons the sexist, Eurocentric, and overall prescriptive nature of these pronouncements; *Nox* is where she confronts the ghostly pressure that the Spirit of the family nevertheless exerts. To confront the familial and spiritual structures found in the pattern presented in Hegel's approach to *Antigone* is to involve oneself in a dialogue between postmodernity and the colossal, archaic structures that Hegel's hermeneutics and techniques unpack. The result of this confrontation, however, is a radical reassessment not only of Hegel's nineteenth-century writings, but also of the categories of the ancient world to which they allude.

Awareness of Hegel's relevance to the situation greatly recontextualizes the Catullus translation. While it is true that Carson expresses having had a long-standing interest in translating the poem (*Nox* 7.1), there is a sense in which the pressure of the traditional role of mourner and elegist leads Carson simply to relate to the predicament of an ancient Roman man in the person of Catullus. Her situation seems restrictive and even backwards in the postmodern and, moreover, feminist contexts, but Carson's ability to enter the predicament of Catullus and

unpack it from within highlights her poetic ability. The multifaceted and unfixed perspective allows Carson to explore the most profound, even sublime, components of Catullus's poem. As much of her work similarly demonstrates, these are some of the most beautiful – and lost – concepts of the ancient Mediterranean-centred world. In *Nox*, such concepts can be found in the metaphysical implications that close Catullus's elegy when he frames his final address to his brother "*in perpetuum*" (10). Carson's range of definitions for "*perpetuum*" circle around practical, spatially-based meanings of the word rather than the common "forever" found in Dunne's translation above. Much like section 8.5 that directly follows it, this range of tangible definitions is an attempt to confront the problem of the transcendent, in this case to define it away. For *Nox*, however, the presence of timelessness cannot be gotten around: though the word is not found in her own array of definitions, Carson too opts for "forever" (*contra* "*prisco*") in her translation. The pervading trace of the eternal remains and returns us to the work's physical form.

With the accordion sheet of *Nox* laid out in its entirety, one has the option of flipping it over and reading deeply into what is found there. It is, of course, a very long, blank sheet of folded paper. It is also the converse side of the "life" that *Nox*'s more immediately discursive side is concerned with: it is a glaring and eternal blankness. The unfolded ladder of *Nox* leads, in a negative version of the Hegelian ladder, to its blank side, what Eleni Sikelianos calls "a white darkness the words do not seek to illuminate but guess within" (*Ecstatic Lyre* 149). *Nox* is an "epitaph ... in the form of a book" (back cover), yet to see how *Nox* diagrams a transition from the subject's mortal life towards the suggestion of the afterlife, as in an ancient epitaph, requires one to see *Nox* as a whole and as a memorial of a particularly contemporary variety.

NOX AND METAMODERNISM

In the collection *Metamodernism: History, Affect, and Depth After Postmodernism*, a number of essays approach dilemmas similar to that of *Nox*. In the first chapter, “Periodising the 2000s, or the Emergence of Metamodernism,” two of the book’s editors, Akkers and Vermeulen, define the title term. One of the definitions maintains that *metamodern* works “do not offer a solution to the problematics of postmodernism” (5). Such works, instead, take into account the three meanings of the Greek *metaxy*, being “with or among, between and after” (8) other stages or movements, particularly modernism and postmodernism. “The metamodern structure of feeling,” they continue, “is also characterised by an oscillating in-betweenness or, rather, a dialectical movement that identifies with and negates – and hence, overcomes and undermines – conflicting positions, while never being congruent with these positions (keeping *with or among* in check)” 10). *Nox* is an excellent example of a work that exhibits such a movement: it is an oscillation between deconstruction and tradition, between Derrida and Hegel, between absence and presence, and it generates a profound spectrum of feeling.

Other works have been said to represent a similar movement. Josh Toth’s treatment of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* as “Historioplactic Metafiction” makes a similar formulation and also includes a return to Hegel: “The novel returns us to the possibility of an ethical account of history by *sublating* its own postmodern skepticism (in a strictly Hegelian sense)” and this is done this by Morrison “*negating the negation*” (53) of postmodernism. Jessica Fisher makes a similar point about Carson’s work. “Carson prefers a dialectical approach,” Fisher tells us: “she argues instead that ‘to undo the self one must move through the self, to the very inside of its definition’ (15, quoting *Decreation* 179)”. Much as Toth argues about Morrison, this approach is

a “negating [of] the negation,” but for Carson it is also a “double negative of light” (as Fisher quotes *Decreation* 149). *Nox* “functions stereoscopically” in this regard: the superimposition of Michael and Catullus’s brother means that they effectively erase each other, represents a profound negation of the living self, and suggests to the reader an ineffable field of selflessness. Stripped of self, we are left “in the shimmering silence” (Fisher 15).

This paper’s examination of *Nox* began with a consideration of its fascinating physical form. From the scattered material elements, the reader forms an incomplete picture of a man’s life, yet the incoherence perceived from these “remains” is also related to that of history and the world. Alongside this impossible reconstruction of a life is the similarly baffled attempt to satisfactorily translate an ancient elegy. The techniques used to display the problems of the intersection of world history and linguistic theory have their bases in postmodernism, but this association is limiting and does not take into account the author’s play on philosophical themes. The term *metamodernism* has gained currency for describing works that, like *Nox*, take into account struggles between the lessons of postmodernity and events that represent perennial challenges to those lessons. In *Nox*’s case, the struggle is no mere bookish addition to the grieving process, but rather an expression of a demonstrably modern structure of feeling. Though based in frustration and paradox, the result is anything but confining: in the end, readers are given the freedom to gaze upon the eternal without either falling back into oppressive semiotic structures or feeling the onus of having to disassemble the world at an already painful time. This freedom is *Nox*’s achievement and the grace with which it is achieved the marker of Carson’s genius.

The Latin word *munere*, as found in Catullus's poem, is the ablative singular of *munus* meaning "gift" but a gift that is owed, that one is obliged to offer, thereby giving the word its other sense of "duty." Carson's range of translations for *munere* begins with the first sense, that of ancient responsibility, but goes on to include the word's more positive aspects: "something freely bestowed" and "a kindness, service, favour" (s.v. *munere*). The arc of *Nox* itself is much the same, beginning with the weight of an ancient duty and culminating in the finished book, a gift to the dead but also, to its readers, a gift of death, *munere mortis*. Although its author faces a difficult task in making it so, *Nox* is ultimately an offering to readers in intensifying their own awareness of death. The extent of this "gift," however, approaches the boundaries of expressibility.

Ludwig Wittgenstein concluded his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* with a number of famous propositions regarding the limitations of language: "the inexpressible," "shows itself; it is the mystical" (6.522). This same sense of the mystical, like that of the eternal, pervades *Nox*, but its nature is outside of language. The mystical feeling derives from the aforementioned double-negation of the self and all of the contradictions throughout Carson's text, but it ultimately and necessarily eludes the capacities of written speculation. A critical sketch of *Nox* is found to be more akin to an X-ray than to the actual body or, moreover, to the life. As for *Nox*'s immediate significance to its readers in their own processing of death, that too is beyond speculation: no doubt most readers of *Nox* will draw some parallel of grief with Carson's, but entering that experience into the contradictions and eventual sublation of *Nox* is something else entirely. This structure of contradictions, the depiction of the agon and its aftermath, has been duly delineated,

but as for its application, one can only say, as Goethe's Faust to Gretchen, "*Gefühl ist alles*" (*Faust I* 3456), feeling is everything.

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