

Re-vision as Remediation

Hypermediacy and Translation in Anne Carson's Nox

Kiene Brillenburg Wurth

A novel, by a genius or a third-rate author, is a book where nothing happens.

Ulises Carrión

Abstract

This article explores Anne Carson's *Nox* (2010) in the light of remediation. *Nox* is a book about death and the recording of loss: lost time, a lost brother, and lost presence. It conveys this loss through the logic of hypermediacy and a word-for-word translation of Catullus 101. *Nox* reworks the materiality of an original notebook, yet hides its paper materiality in the very act of displaying it. It translates every word of Catullus 101 in a separate entry so as to make us aware of the impossibility of a full retrieval of meaning, and ends up making the integral translation entirely illegible. Both hypermediacy and translation, I argue, function as metaphors for the inability of the speaker to represent her deceased brother Michael. Both effectuate a deferral, or screening-out, of presence. This screening out of presence at once affirms the *visuality* of textuality in *Nox*: Carson's book revolves around the *image* of a paper-based text. This dimension of the imaginary in a literary work like *Nox*, I conclude, forces us to reconsider the practice of comparative literature as an intermedial practice in an age of digitization.

Résumé

Le présent article propose une lecture de *Nox* d'Anne Carson (2010) à la lumière de la notion de remédiation. *Nox* est un livre sur la mort et l'enregistrement de la mort: le temps perdu, un frère perdu, une présence perdue. Il communique cette perte par une logique hypermédiatique et une traduction mot à mot du poème 101 de Catulle. *Nox* retravaille la matérialité d'un cahier original, mais dissimule sa matérialité de papier par l'acte même qui l'affiche. Le texte traduit chaque mot de Catulle 101 dans une entrée séparée afin de nous faire sentir l'impossibilité d'une véritable reconstruction du sens, et finit par rendre la traduction intégrale complètement illisible. Tant cette démarche hypermédiatique que la traduction, je pense, fonctionnent comme des métaphores de l'incapacité de l'auteur de représenter son frère décédé, Michael. L'une et l'autre effectuent une suspension, un effacement, de la présence. En même temps, cet effacement affirme aussi la *visualité* du texte de *Nox*: le livre de Carson tourne autour de l'image d'un texte sur papier. Je conclus de l'analyse que cette dimension de l'imaginaire dans une œuvre littéraire comme *Nox* nous oblige à repenser la littérature comparée comme une pratique intermédiaire à l'ère numérique.

Keywords

Carson (Anne), intermediality media theory, remediation, translation, visuality

Introduction

From two different disciplines—media theory and literary criticism—Marshall McLuhan and Adrienne Rich have made us aware of the inevitability and critical necessity of turning round. Turning round, looking back, what David Wills has called the dorsal orientation, constitutes our self, our present, and our future.¹ McLuhan, who was trained as a literary scholar by I. A. Richards and F.R. Leavis, taught us that our vision of the future is obstructed by our rearview mirror-perspective. As *The Medium is the Massage* shows us, we are looking *back* while we think we are looking and moving forward. We use our new media as if they were the old. Once we used the tram as a horseless carriage, just as we are now using the screen and pad as a semblance of the book. In our future, all we can envision is the specter of our past. Mediation is always already remediation.

For Rich, re-vision is not something we do because we cannot do so otherwise. It is a critical revisit of the established forms and styles in literary writing. In “When We Dead Awaken” we *have* to look back and consider the constraints of the traditions we are writing in, in order to change and move forward.² This is what McLuhan wants us to do in order for us to *at all* become aware of the constraints of our rear-view perception. As a condition of possibility of critical thought, turning round in Rich and McLuhan also becomes a condition of possibility for “another way.” McLuhan’s rearview image with the horse carriage serves precisely this purpose: a wake-up call to our critical senses.

This article will use the specter of re-vision as a starting point to bring together literary practice, translation, and the idea of remediation in a new materialist reading of Anne Carson’s *Nox* (2010).³ New materialism, Dolphijn and Van der Tuin put it in *New Materialism* is “a cultural theory that does not privilege meaning over matter, or culture over nature. It explores a monist perspective, devoid of the dualisms that have dominated the humanities and sciences, by giving special attention to matter” (85). In comparative literature, scholars like Katherine Hayles and Johanna Drucker have already mapped the territory of a new materialist approach to literature that takes us beyond a print aesthetic focused on abstract texts and meaning, rather than the concrete stuff of paper and books.⁴ At once text and texture, verbal and visual, memoir and artists’ book, an object to be read and an object to behold,⁵ *Nox* warrants

1. David Wills coins the term *dorsality* in *Dorsality* to analyze the affect of being technological. Rather than the other of the human, the technological is always already folded into the human.

2. Rich’s “When We Dead Awaken. Writing as Re-Vision” (1972) can be accessed at <http://www.nbu.bg/webs/amb/american/5/rich/writing.htm>. Last visit 14 January 2013.

3. One of the most multi-faceted writers of our time, Anne Carson is a lyrical essayist, poet, translator, librettist, and critic, whose work has always been shaped and framed by classical literature. *Eros the Bittersweet: An Essay* (1986) explores the concept of Eros in classical philosophy and literature, while *Autobiography of Red: A Novel in Verse* (1998) reworks the legend of Herakles, his tenth labour, into a homosexual love story of a red monster called Geryon and a teenager called Herakles. *Autobiography of Red* includes Carson’s free translation of the *Geryoneis* fragment, just as *Nox* is a book about Carson’s remembrance of her brother Michael as much it is about her translation of Catullus 101. Carson is also the translator of *Electra*, the fragments of Sappho, four plays by Euripides, a triptych translation of *Electra*, *Orestia*, and *Agamemnon*, and *Antigone (Antigonick)*. *Nox* can thus be seen as part of a writing history that integrates creation, invention, and translation, in so far as invention connotes dis-discovery: the uncovering of dead languages.

4. Consider for instance Hayles’ *Writing Machines* (2002) and *How We Think* (2012) or Johanna Drucker’s *The Century of Artists’ Books* (2004) or *Figuring the Word* (1996).

5. Excerpts from *Nox* can be viewed at Poets.org: <http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/21379> and through Youtube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2hBDitYQC-s>

such a materialist reading. It comes as a [screenfold in a grey box](#), with text, pictures, stamps, and letters spread on its pages. The fold reproduces a hand-made memory book, yellowed pages, Xeroxed staples and all. It pays tribute to Carson's brother Michael who died in Denmark, and whom Carson had not seen in twenty years when she learned of his death. The tribute takes place through a word-by-word translation of [poem 101](#) of the Roman poet Gaius Valerius Catullus and the scattered traces of Michael's pictures, letters, and written notes.⁶

Catullus' 101 mirrors Carson's book project: it is a poem about the death of Catullus' brother who died and was buried far away, on distant shores.⁷ The elegiac poem is addressed to the "silent ashes" of the brother, and pictures Catullus at the tomb bringing death offerings and mourning the deceased brother. If *Nox* is a book about Carson's remembrance of Michael, it is as much about her translation of Catullus 101. Remembering and translating: two related gestures that revolve around incorporation and re-creation. *Nox* thus immediately appears as a re-vision, a specter—in so far as specters always return with a difference⁸—of the Catullus poem. Indeed, I will argue here, a re-vision of Catullus 101 and Carson's original memory book in one, *Nox* makes us aware of the specter of *the book* as a material object in the digital age. It foregrounds *images* of text, texture, and bookishness. Or, to be more precise, the foregrounding of the book as a material, visual object here strangely boils down to its dematerialization: in *Nox* the paper page unfolds as a screen that displays visual impressions of "analog" inscriptions.

Within this framework of imagism, *Nox* emerges as a souvenir of the work of memory and mourning in the present—both of the brother and of "the" book in a digital age. It is a strange souvenir that recovers the materiality of the trace, as souvenirs do, but at the same time shows us that this is an impossible recovery. As we will see, the trace is kept at bay here through a double mediation. Firstly, through a "material" mediation (the simulating of the paper materiality of Carson's notebook) that I refer to as hypermediacy, secondly through the act of translation that frames the entire fold. *Nox* encircles

6. Carson is a poet, but also a classic scholar and a renowned translator of classic literatures: *Electra* (Oxford University Press, 2001); *If Not, Winter: Fragments of Sappho* (Knopf, 2002); *An Oresteia* (Faber and Faber, 2009). She is also the author of *Eros the Bittersweet* (Princeton University Press, 1986).

7. Poem 101 by Gaius Valerius Catullus (c. 84-54 BC) is an elegiac poem addressed to the "silent ashes" of his brother, the only remaining traces of his body. The poem pictures Catullus at the tomb bringing death offerings and mourning the deceased brother. The brother died in a faraway land, just as Carson's brother died in Denmark. Michael's ashes, already scattered into the sea, some pictures of him as a boy and a letter are all that she has left as *her* mute objects of elegiac address. Catullus 101:

Multas per gentes et multa per aequora vectus
advenio has miseras, frater, ad inferias,
ut te postremo donarem munere mortis
et mutam nequiquam alloquerer cinerem.
Quandoquidem fortuna mihi tete abstulit ipsum.
Heu miser indigne frater adempte mihi,
nunc tamen interea haec, prisco quae more parentum
tradita sunt tristi munere ad inferias,
accipe fraterno multum manantia fletu,
atque in perpetuum, frater, ave atque vale.

8. For a comprehensive and in-depth analysis of ghosts in Western and postcolonial cultures, see María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren, *The Spectralities Reader: Ghosts and Haunting in Contemporary Cultural Theory*.

the death of Michael, hardly known, deceased in a far away land, *through* the translation of Catullus. “Because our conversations were few (he phoned may be 5 times in 22 years) I study his sentences the ones I remember as if I’d been asked to translate them” (Carson 8.1).⁹ Thus, Carson re-shapes the book into the folds of memory and forgetting: for all its material plenitude, for all its “presence,” this is a book about absence and alienation.

The Screenfold: to read visually

Before the codex replaced the scroll between the third and seventh century C.E., there was the folded book. To some scholars, therefore, the folded book marks an intermediate stage between the scroll and the codex. Others regard the screenfold as an alternative to the codex used in other than African and Western-European cultures. The Mesoamerican screenfolds, those few that survived the Spanish invasion, date back to 1050-1150. For centuries they were stored as “libros,” as codices, in Spanish and European libraries, but their specific materiality and use warrants a different categorical framework. Screenfolds were made from very long, single sheets of skin or paper folded back and forth in concertina style. They were hand-painted, with varying directionalities of reading, designed to be displayed in full, or to be hand-held and read as a book. Sometimes their surfaces were covered in a clear varnish that gave them a shine of sacredness.¹⁰

Today, these pre-Hispanic screenfolds have rematerialized in the work of painter-print maker Enrique Chagoya as a mixed image in the rearview mirror. In his work, such as *Tales From the Conquest/Codex* (1992), he mimics the Maya and Aztec screenfolds in a blend of American pop culture, pre-Columbian mythology, Catholic icons, and Western art. Chagoya’s screenfolds are part of his “reverse anthropology” that interrogates the past as it never happened: What if the Spanish conquest had failed and the normative culture had not become Anglo-American, what if the Aztecs had conquered Europe?¹¹ What kind of history would have been told—and erased—in that case? Chagoya’s book-work is made with the same kind of bark paper as the Mesoamerican screenfolds. As a result, the surface of *Tales* looks worn and has depth—something we will encounter in *Nox* as well. Chagoya cooperated with Guillermo Gomez-Pena, and Felicia Rice for *Codex Espangliensis: From Columbus to the Border Patrol* that appeared as a unique artists’ book, accordion-folded, in 1998 and in mass production in 2001. Like Chagoya’s other codices, *Codex* reworks a lost past but also shows a way forward for the book and book-reading. It explores the potentiality of the book as a non-linear, multimodal, and rhizomatic structure, stimulating an associative, imaginative engagement in the reader.

In *Nox* the screenfold is likewise used to interrogate the past—a personal past. As in the work of Chagoya, we will see in this section, form and materiality here have a distinct, metaphoric quality. Carson’s text, her cut-and-pasted pictures of Michael in his youth, and the particular appearance of the

9. Anne Carson does not provide page numbers in *Nox*. Indications are only given for sections. Accordingly, I indicate section numbers when I quote from *Nox*.

10. For more on these screenfolds see: <http://www.mesolore.org/tutorials/learn/10/Mesoamerican-Screenfolds/122/Writing-and-Materiality>

11. For more on the work of Chagoya, see: http://artinprint.org/index.php/articles/article/visual_culture_of_the_nacirema_enrique_chagoyas_printed_codices

paper pages resonate with each other, cannot be seen apart. On opening the fold, this becomes immediately apparent. “Nox, frater, nox,” it says on a shard of paper pasted over the title page that reads “Michael” six times over.¹² His name is hand-painted, in a disquieting manner, as if to summon and implore him. “Night, brother, night.” A farewell, resigned. Yet underneath, the hand-painted name suggests the exact opposite of resignation. The naming is like an incantation, repeated over and over, as if to resurrect the brother who disappeared. The names, varying in size and density, betray a forceful gesture. This is a haptic writing that renders visible—the names shining through “night, brother, night”—a will to remember. Notably, these names do not simply refer to Michael. They also bear the imprint of their author. From the start, this writer is there, writing her presence into the surface of remembering. This is her notebook, re-imagined through the scanner and Xerox machine, simulating a paper materiality that, we will see below, makes present the privation of time.

There is no trace of Michael outside of this book that Carson has created. The title page bearing his name six times over may be *in lieu* of a tombstone. Nothing else is left: Michael was cremated and on his instruction his Danish widow cast his ashes into the sea. The tomb Carson has made for him is the [grey box with his picture as a boy](#) that encases the folds of *Nox*.¹³ Carson only heard of Michael’s death two weeks after he died. Just before, he had contacted Carson to meet, after more than twenty years of barely interrupted silence. In 1978, Michael fled Canada after a troubled youth, to escape detention for dealing drugs. He traveled India and Europe under assumed names, and met a girl. She was called Anna. The girl got killed. The one letter Michael sent home was about the death of the girl, and how he suffered (2.2). His mother eventually died without hearing from him again. She had always wanted to send him a box for Christmas.

[Michael’s letter](#) constitutes the centerfold of *Nox*. It is [spread out in pieces](#) over three panels, along with Carson’s printed text. This text is reproduced three times (“He was travelling on a false passport... This isn’t hard to arrange. It’s irremediable... The postcards were laconic. He wrote only one letter, to my mother, that winter the girl died”). A fourth time only half of the text remains, shifted to the right. The letterhead now appears in full. This shifting makes us aware of the panels as *spaces* out of which text emerges. Ulises Carrión already referred to the book as a “sequence of spaces,” rather than a “bag of words” in “The New Art of Making Books” (1975). Books are more than containers of text: they are the spaces within which written language “expands” (31). *Nox* has Michael’s elegy for his lost girl, folded into Carson’s elegy for him, unfold in this blank space. In its repetition, Carson’s text becomes an organic part of the panels. It is no longer the words, but the place of her text in the white space, in its contrast to the letter shards that directs our reading experience. This reading becomes spatial. It is a reading of patterns, positions, blanks, and their possible meanings. We “figure out” these panels in section 2.2 not as lettered pages but as constellations, loosely held together by the pieces of Michael’s letter that extends across the blanks and gutter of the pages, and even across the limit of the book, into

12. Consult the Youtube film on *Nox* for this passage: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2hBDitYQC-s>

13. The history of the book in the box can be traced all the way to Marcel Duchamp and Stéphane Mallarmé. In the 1960s, the book in the box was revived as a literary form. Duchamp’s *La Mariée mise à nu par sa célibataires meme (Boîte vert)* (1934) can be viewed in full at: <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/duchamp-the-bride-stripped-bare-by-her-bachelors-even-the-green-box-t07744/image-141692>. Last visit December 12, 2013.

the darkness of another technology: that of the scanner and the Xerox machine (I will get back to this later).

The letter appears as driftwood in a sea of mystery, a mystery that Carson encircles with the Heideggerian notion of the *Unumgängliche* (1.3). What is *unumgänglich* is “that which cannot be got round” but also cannot be accessed or penetrated. The *Unumgängliche* is the unavoidable but also the unencompassable—what we keep bumping into and cannot resolve. Whatever it is, it is resistant to understanding. The blanks in *Nox* visualize this resistance. Against these blanks, the fragments of Michael’s letter and Carson’s text appear no longer as “bags of words” but as pieces of a puzzle that cannot be resolved. This is what *Nox* conveys performatively as what I call a “spatial text,” a text that “works” and signifies by means of spatial and visual manipulations of the page: a puzzle that cannot be pieced together. We will later see that this irresolvability is doubled in Carson’s translation of Catullus 101.

The Open Book: Nox, artists’ books, and zines

Blanks, shards, and fragments remember Michael well. They render apparent his absence. Belatedness and repetition contributes to this mode of remembrance. For example, fragments of Michael’s letter recur in 3.3, 5.1 and 10.1. Transcriptions of that letter only appear in 3.3 in portions, while Carson’s (provisional) translation of Catullus only comes in 7.2. All this contributes to the impression of something hard to grasp, something that cannot be immediately overseen, that can perhaps only be intimated as it unfolds. The fact that *Nox* conveys this problem of understanding by spatial-visual means, through a re-imagining of the book as a work of art, aligns it with the practice of the artists’ book.

Artists’ books, according to Drucker, are hard to capture in a single definition. What artists’ books do is that they experiment with the limits and potentialities of the book in a zone of activity that intersects the visual with the verbal and (typo-)graphic arts (1).¹⁴ Artists’ books can be traced to the eighteenth and nineteenth century, to William Blake’s illuminated books, and Stéphane Mallarmé’s *Un coup de dés* (1896), but for Drucker they are a quintessentially twentieth-century art. Artists’ books are books created as works of art, although “works of art” suggests much too static and distanced an object for works that can, and should, still be touched and held. Interrogating the “conceptual or material form of the book as part of its intention,” the artists’ book still provides an experience associated with the book and with reading (3). Yet the link with art works is there, as creators of artists’ books are in control of the entire production process.

Like another recent work, Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Tree of Codes* (2010), or Graham Rawle’s *Woman’s World* (2006), *Nox* is an artists’ book made available for mass production. Such works illustrate a recent development that signals the (modest) commodification of artists’ books, and, in turn, the integration of artists’ books and literature as part of—what Hayles often refers to as—the aesthetic of the age of print.¹⁵ The result is a book product still meant to be read, as part of a literary practice, not just an object to be seen, but that questions the commonsensical structures and metaphors of the book. Such hybrid books, hovering between the verbal and visual, use value and aesthetic value, show us what the

14. And many other arts can be included in this mix, from sculpture to cinema, photography to digital design.

15. See for instance: Katherine N. Hayles, *How We Think* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

book still has to offer us today as a bearer of the literary.

The use of ephemera, handwriting, and other personal items in *Nox* also suggests a link with another writing mode that, like the artists' book, has the aura of the singular and authentic: the personal zine. Personal zines are self-made, often hand-written, self-copied, and -distributed life writings in limited editions that contain visible traces of its production process and the ephemera of the life written of.¹⁶ Thus, zines typically contain pictures, pieces of cloth, copied letters, notes, tickets, or any other printed matter that provides a tangible trace of the self featured in the zine. This is a form of self-writing with a very pronounced, material dimension. *Nox* presents precisely such a mode of self-writing that Anna Poletti has referred to as "autographic" in her analysis of personal zines. "Autographic" refers to the material imprint of an author—from the handwritten texts to the crumpled paper in *Nox*—made through the foregrounded constructedness of such a zine. According to Poletti, in zines this "concept of constructedness refers to the presentation of text and images, layout, and photocopying quality, and how they effect, interact with, contradict, or interrupt the narrative" (88). Zines offer a layered textuality that is explicitly composite and "paperish" in its materiality and deliberately clumsy or amateurish in its photocopying quality to contribute to, or contrast with, the narrative.

Nox partakes of the paper aesthetics of the zine. Only consider its self-made materiality, its pages folded together, its staples, and its montaged paper ephemera. Most of all, the zine aesthetic is apparent in the Xeroxed texture of the panels. Zinesters typically use the "old" technology of the Xerox machine to effectuate a grainy feel in their work.¹⁷ For *Nox*, a combination of scanning and Xeroxing was used to reproduce the sense of decay and lost time in the pages. As Carson says in an interview with Teicher (2010): Robert Currie [Carson's partner] "thought of scanning it [the original notebook] and then Xeroxing the scans...he fooled around with [a Xerox machine] at night, scanning and Xeroxing and lifting the cover a bit so a little light gets in, so it has three-dimensionality." The scan, Carson continues, "is a digital method of reproduction, it has no decay in it, it has no time in it, but the Xerox puts in the sense of the possibility of time".¹⁸ Like the zine, *Nox* uses a layered materiality to convey its narrative of loss.

And yet. As I will show in the following section, all this "show" of materiality, authenticity, and autography in *Nox* points, precisely, to a material presence that is staged, screened, derived or second-hand. The traces and ephemera it presents can be *seen* but all such ephemera are able to convey is their very artificiality, despite, if not because, of their faithful rendering of a "prior" materiality. Consider the simulation of the transparent paper of Michael's letter pasted on a print fragment, of crumpled, treated, wasted paper, or of charcoal scratching. *Nox* rewrites itself, its own "original," by revealing itself as its own semblance. Its paper pages are always already the *images* of the paper page and the ephemera pasted onto it. This imagism, I show in the next section, indicates a peculiar link between the logic of remediation and kitsch.

16. See the contribution of Sara Rosa Espi in this issue.

17. For more on zines and zine materiality, see Gundelroy and Goldberg, Bailey and Michel, Brillenburg Wurth, Espi, and Van de Ven.

18. Craig Morgan Teicher's interview with Anne Carson can be accessed at: <http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/authors/interviews/article/42582-a-classical-poet-redux-pw-profiles-anne-carson.html>. Last visit January 12, 2013.

Screenfold to Screen: remediation, hypermediacy, kitsch

Nox stages the materiality of the page as a materiality behind glass. It *archives* and *preserves* its own paper materiality as a hand-made memory book. A medium within a medium, *Nox* is a book about *remediation*—the reworking of old media within the new media, and vice versa—just as much as it is about memory. It is a book about looking back. If, according to McLuhan, the content of media are other media, remediation is the material rewriting or repurposing of media forms and conventions: a refashioning of media by means of and within each other. Media can incorporate each other, just as Carson's *Nox*, digitally produced, includes her hand-made notebook. In "Remediation" (1996), Bolter and Grusin locate remediation in the interaction between immediacy and hypermediacy, between transparent and reflexive interfaces (329). If, they argue, "the logic of immediacy leads one to erase or automatize the act of representation, the logic of hypermediacy acknowledges multiple acts of representation and makes them visible" (329). Hypermediacy offers a "heterogeneous space" that features windows not as windows onto the world but as windows that "open onto other representations or other media" (329). As a self-reflexive logic that, incidentally, does not exclude the simulation of immediacy, hypermediacy is a defining feature of digital media. *Nox* participates in this logic of the multiplied screen. While repurposing the antiquated form of the screenfold, it recalls new media interfaces in its hypermediacy: on its pages we constantly encounter representations of paper, pictures, folds, or staples.

Of course, hypermediacy is not an exclusive dimension of the digital screen. Trompe-l'oeil, photomontage, and collage are obvious anterior examples, just as René Magritte's *La condition humaine* (1933) presents the instance of a painting that creates a false illusion of "looking *through*" while revealing the paintings within the painting—allowing us to "look *at*" the representation of a medium. Still, the foregrounded presence of photo-imaging in *Nox* makes the connection with the digital screen all too evident.

It may be obvious that *Nox* is also designed to conceal this connection. What it sets out to do is to reproduce the intimacy of the original notebook, even if, as we have seen, the reproduction immediately and inevitably undermines that very intimacy. But resistance to the digital goes even further than that. In an interview with Sehgal (2011), Carson remarked that she was very pleased with the fact that *Nox*, its publication accidentally coinciding with the appearance of the Kindle, turned out "un-Kindle-isable." She had made a book that can ostensibly not exist on screen without losing something significant in the experience of reading it. Authors like Mark Danielewski have made similar claims with regard to the materiality of the book as a bearer of the literary: the Internet is just another productive constraint for the book to reinvent itself materially.¹⁹ *Nox* is part of this new "current" of material reinvention in literary writing. Its shape, as if hand-folded, its box, as if a personal item to collect memories (like a shoe box), its thick pages and unruly form, all this appears to be designed to resist digital usurpation and digital simulation (and more particularly simulation as "smooth," encoded reproduction).

19. Danielewski has remarked in view of his novel *Only Revolutions* (which can be read both ways): "The experience of starting at either end of the book and feeling the space close between the characters until you're exactly at the halfway point is not something you could experience online. I think that's the bar that the Internet is driving towards: how to further emphasize what is different and exceptional about books". See: <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/06/05/books/05digi.html>.

Yet *Nox* does become *a screen* in its hypermediated reproduction of the notebook. It becomes a screen in that it puts the paper page on display, like the Kindle and iPad put the book on display, gutters, dog-ears, and the illusion of depth included. *Nox*'s combination of scanning and Xeroxing may have given a timely edge to its pages, but what these pages in the end yield is a sense of the virtual and spectral. As "new" media, Drucker says, e-books have tirelessly reiterated the icon of bookness in their "grotesquely distorted and reductive idea of the codex as a material object."²⁰ *Nox* may expand the idea of the codex and literary writing as hybrid writing. Yet if the e-book is an epitome of the book as cliché with its augmented pages, *Nox* reveals itself as an object of kitsch. Its logic of hypermediacy partakes of the logic of the souvenir as an object of kitsch.

Kitsch, Celeste Olaquiaga has suggested, "is the attempt to repossess the experience of intensity and immediacy through an object" (291). This experience of intensity in the past is impossibly sustained in the present. Kitsch is by definition a failed attempt at capturing lost time. Distinguishing between different kinds of kitsch objects, Olaquiaga points to the souvenir as the product of a "fragmentary remembrance" that revolves around precisely such a desire for repossession (292). However, this desire is attended by the felt awareness of its impossible realization: the recovery can only be "partial and transitory, as the fleetingness of memory well testifies." Kitsch is therefore a kind of "debris", a leftover (291). At least, it is so in its melancholic, rather than nostalgic, form. Melancholic kitsch objects testify to the inaccessibility of the past (292).

Nox possesses and expresses in its object-ness, its mode of presentation, the intensity of the souvenir as the "commodification of remembrance" (80). It recovers the fragmented materiality of the trace—of notes, letters, pictures, and of an authorial imprint—but at the same time keeps this recovery at bay. For as we have seen, *Nox* does not simply *present* the materiality of the trace, it *reflects* on it through an act of mediation: an act of re-vision that recasts the page and the book as an image at once in and out of the rearview mirror, at once reproductive and transgressive as an instrument of reading. Clement Greenberg alluded to kitsch as a "vicarious experience" (102). This is the vicarious experience of the new turned hackneyed, of handicraft turned mass product. Presenting a vicarious experience of the book in a book, *Nox*, however, recharges the new with an image of the book as it might have been: a continuous fold that materializes Carson's unresolved remembrance of her brother, a book whose augmented pages screen out his living presence. This is what these scanned pages bring home to us: a sense of distance, disconnectedness, and, as such, a purposively feigned accessibility.

Re-vision and Translation: rewriting

This tension between accessibility and inaccessibility is reinforced by the way in which Carson translates and literally over-writes, word for word, Catullus poem 101. Her literalist translation is part of the logic of hypermediacy in the book: the logic of presenting windows not onto the world but onto other windows of representation—in this case: words (Carson's) opening on to other words (Catullus'). However if, we have seen, hypermediacy is part of the logic of kitsch—of the failed attempt to capture a loss—the

20. Joanna Drucker, *Speclab. Digital Aesthetics and Projects in Speculative Computing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), p. 168.

process of translation in *Nox* is likewise part of a process of working through the loss of someone who eludes understanding: an unresolved puzzle. Michael is a specter from the past that cannot be fully archived or recorded in the past. He remains as lack. The translation mediates this lack and thus lends a structure to the scarce and fragmentary recollections captured in the book. As I show, the translation is part of the logic of the screen in *Nox* that at once invokes and displaces the presence of an original materiality.

If we follow a line of thinking that leads back to Walter Benjamin, we can say that translation and loss, translation and leave-taking, always go together. Translation is about the (transformed) *afterlife* of a text, not about the (exact) *preservation* of this text. In “The Task of the Translator” (1923) Benjamin argues that translations that are poetic instead of informational testify to this afterlife, this fame or “living on,” of a work. Poetic translations are “free” translations, such as Carson’s translation of Catullus 101 in *Nox*, in which the original comes to maturity, a maturity that Benjamin alludes to in terms of *Entfaltung* or unfolding, of “erring” and renewal (*Wandlung, Erneuerung*) (Benjamin IV.I : 11). A poetic translation, itself the sign of an afterlife, thus marks a survival that is *by implication* a process of loss: the translation is becoming *in* its erring or unfolding.

The conception of translation as a productive loss has led Paul de Man to famously conclude in *Resistance to Theory* (1986) that translation in Benjamin attests to the *death* of the original. The “translation belongs not to the life of the original, the original is already dead, but the translation belongs to the afterlife of the original, thus assuming and confirming the death of the original” (de Man 85). *Dichterisch* translation is not about conveying the message of the original in another language, as if to preserve or embalm that message in another coating. It is not about making copies, it is about *overwriting*, erasure, and fragmentation. As Carol Jacobs has literally translated Benjamin in “The Monstrosity of Translation” (1975):²¹

Just as fragments of a vessel, in order to be articulated together, must follow one another in the smallest detail but need not resemble one another, so, instead of making itself similar to the meaning [Sinn] of the original, the translation must rather, lovingly and in detail, in its own language, form itself according to the manner of meaning [Art des Meinens] of the original, to make both recognizable as the broken part of a greater language, just as fragments are the broken part of a vessel. (762)²²

In Benjamin’s perspective, each original work is a broken part, a fragment, of the great vessel of the

21. Interestingly, Carolyn De Meyer discusses this “literalist” translation of Jacobs—in contrast to the well-known and popular translation of Henry Zohn—as part of her doctoral dissertation on James Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake* within the framework of Benjamin’s conception of translation and his “cabbalistic” notion of a Pure Language of which all languages are a fragment. See for this De Meyer’s description of her project “Translation/Fragmentation” <http://www.arts.kuleuven.be/cetra/papers/files/de-meyer.pdf> The link with Joyce is interesting in relation to Carson, whose literalist translation of Catullus—and her subsequent erasure of it—likewise revolves around the illegible.

22. In German, the text reads: Wie nämlich Scherben eines Gefäßes, um sich zusammenfügen zu lassen, in den kleinsten Einzelheiten einander zu folgen, doch nicht so zu gleichen haben, so muß anstatt dem Sinn des Originals sich ähnlich zu machen, die Übersetzung liebend vielmehr und bis ins Einzelne hinein dessen Art des Meinens in der eigenen Sprache sich an bilden, um so beide wie Scherben als Bruchstück eines Gefäßes, als Bruchstück einer größeren Sprache erkennbar zu machen (IV.1:18).

“greater language” that all languages intimate, ever incompletely. Indeed, only *as* potsherds can they be rendered “recognizable” as the fragments of the greater language, the pure form without meaning.²³ The task of the translator is to prowl—a word that Carson also uses for her brother (7.1)—these shards of the original language. In this way, by bringing languages in touch with each other, the translator reveals each of them to be “just one partial, imperfect ‘selection’ from among the total expressive potentialities that an ideal Pure Language would in principle embrace” (Rothwell, 261).

Carson’s translation of Catullus 101 in *Nox* exemplifies this revelation of the fragmentary. She uses the process of translation, and the inability to convey “the message” or “the meaning” of the original, to frame the inaccessibility of another person, the failure of getting to know this other person, just as translations fail—by implication—to capture the other language. Translation, in other words, is a metaphor for Carson’s relation with her brother. Significantly, I have noted, she translates 101 word for word, overwriting the original, breaking down the text into particles and putting the process of translation on display. On the left-hand pages, every single word of 101 is given its separate entry of translations and associations. Thus, for “et” we read: “and, and what is more, too, also: and in fact, and indeed, and yes, and quite true! and even, or rather, and on the contrary, rather than; well I for my part and so too; in addition, likewise, also, too, as a matter of fact...(*et nocte*) (you know it was night)” (1.1). Like the interlinear translations of the Scriptures, with every word translated separately into the text, *Nox* offers a purely literalist translation of 101. This literalist translation, free *in* its literalism, is the kind of translation that Benjamin preferred as a translation that tracks the poetic patterns of a text rather than imitating its meaning (IV.1: 21). Carson *probes* the plurality of meanings of every single word of 101 so as to show that a final result cannot be had:

I have loved the poem [101] since the first time I read it in high school Latin class and I have tried to translate it a number of times....No one (even in Latin) can approximate Catullan diction, which at its most sorrowful has an air of deep festivity, like one of those streets that turns all its leaves over, sliver, in the wind...I never arrived at the translation I would have liked to do of poem 101. But over the years of working at it, I came to think of translating as a room, not exactly an unknown room, where one gropes for the light switch. I guess it never ends. (7.1)

It never ends, and it is also never all that pure. Carson plays with the text in the glosses, inserting “darkness,” “death,” or “night,” *nox*, in most entries while *nox* never appears as such in 101. She also makes up translations. But her translation is very precise as a metaphor for the unbridgeable gap between her and her lost brother: “A brother never ends. I prowl him. He does not end” (7.1). He cannot be approximated. He is other.

Just as, Paul de Man has suggested, translation in Benjamin affirms the death of the original, so in *Nox* translation revolves around death. It makes death explicit not only thematically, by weaving the

23. For more on fragments and the afterlife of texts, see Emily Apter, *The Translation Zone. A New Comparative Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); Samuel Weber, *Benjamin’s -abilities* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), especially p. 65-68; Michael Steinberg, *Walter Benjamin and the Demands of History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), p. 71.

death of Michael through the death of Catullus' brother, but also materially. Reproduced on yellowed, crumpled paper, Catullus' poem marks the beginning and the end of *Nox*, first in Latin, then in English. The latter is rendered almost illegible, as the translation has been drained in liquid, its words smudged and overwritten. *Nox* thus makes us aware of rewriting as a material, destructive act: an act of erasure that cancels out the original it seeks to convey. It renders *visible* the impossible task of the translator who may collect potsherds—Carson's separate word-translations—but cannot produce a full and definitive translation of meaning. That Carson's English version has been liquefied only tells us that the ultimate consequence of the act of translation, in Benjamin's terms, is an unreadable text in the target language. This illegibility mirrors the screen and the gesture of "screening out" that I have described in the previous section: both tactics, that of remediation (hypermediacy) and of translation, serve to make us aware affectively, in the mere act of looking, of presence deferred and presence lost.

Conclusion

Nox is a book about the recording of loss: lost time, a lost brother, lost presence. As we have seen, it conveys this loss through a re-visioning of the paper page and a translation of an ancient poem. Translation is at issue in *Nox* in so far as it concerns the textual afterlife of an original that can never be fully captured. Catullus 101 is taken apart, its every word tried and translated in a separate entry, while the notebook is overwritten in a process of remediation that displays but also hides its paper materiality. Such overwriting makes us aware that there can be no easy distinctions between the digital and analog in our time, no matter how much contemporary authors try to reinvent the book as a body of the literary in its paper contrast to the digital screen. As we have seen, *Nox* precisely presents the paper page as a screen, an *image* of the paper page: the image in the rearview mirror. Unlike works like *Codex Espangliesis*, *Nox* does not employ this image to explore non-linear modes of reading that destabilize textuality, yet it does transform literary analysis into a reading of spatial configurations rather than "just" words on a page. As a spatial text, *Nox* warrants a reading that takes stock of its layered, altered materialities (cf. the page as screen, the page as a space to be explored), and is able to integrate such materialities in a literary analysis. Consequently, the challenge of works like *Nox*, *Tree of Codes*, or *Woman's World* is that they force us, as literary scholars, to reconsider the practice of comparative literature as an intermedial practice in an age of digitization.

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