

JOHN ROSENWALD

Books in Brief: Good Night

Anne Carson, *NOX* (New York: New Directions, 2010), unpaginated, \$29.95.

Christmas, 2010: the final days of the first decade of the new millennium. One present remains. Given its size and shape, almost certainly a book. A thick one. A first touch seems to confirm that suspicion: three of four edges protrude slightly, suggesting a hardbound volume.

Wrapping paper removed, the object retains book characteristics. A spine: ANNE CARSON NOX NEW DIRECTIONS, with the iconic horse and rider of that publishing house. An attempt to duplicate in light gray paper a linen quarter-binding. A front cover: ANNE CARSON again and underneath the name a boy in goggles and bathing suit, his slim photograph superimposed on a jagged stripe of yellow. Dark gray boards meeting the faux linen, though all is high-quality paper, the seam an illusion. A back cover with a note from Carson, printed in white ink: **WHEN MY BROTHER DIED I MADE AN EPITAPH FOR HIM IN THE FORM OF A BOOK. THIS IS A REPLICA OF IT, AS CLOSE AS WE COULD GET.**

But it's not a book. It's a box. Precisely crafted from heavy cardboard, it opens easily. Inside lies another cover: same photo, same yellow stripe, but no name. This sheet lifts left to a traditional title page, followed by an accordion-fold stack of paper two inches thick. Weighty.

What is a book? Carson implies. And how does *this* replicate *that*? Past the title and copyright information arrives another challenge: a sheet with six iterations of "Michael" scrawled in cursive, covering the paper from top to bottom with pen strokes becoming increasingly thick as the eye moves down the page, the last one smudged slightly in the lower left corner, as if a fingerprint left in haste or anger. In the middle of the sheet, superimposed on the six signatures, dimming but not obliterating the handwriting, printed on what seems a slender strip of paper glued in a position similar to the previous photo and yellow stripe, lie three words:

NOX

FRATER

NOX

Night, brother, night. That much high-school Latin remains. Flip the fold and the unexpected continues: the left side of the next sheet reveals a ghost of the cursive “Michael,” though it can’t be authentic, since the actual back side remains blank. The right side gives the illusion of another piece of paper, this time a small sheet—faint yellow, slightly wrinkled—pasted two-thirds down the page. On this scrap occurs the first artifact that might open a conventional book of poetry—ten lines of italic printing in a serif font, every other line indented, with what might be a title printed at the top: “CI.” To be sure, the “poem” is not in English, but by now, who would expect it to be? It looks again like Latin, and like a poem. The printing, however, is blurred slightly, rendering some words almost illegible. Still, it’s a start:

Multas per gentes et multa per aequora vectus

My Latin stopped with Vergil, so I flip the accordion page rather than struggle with what has been offered. More surprises. On the left side, the word *multas* as title, followed by what appears a dictionary entry: identification as adjective, relationship to a Greek cognate, numerous examples of appropriate usage, ending with “*multa nox*: late in the night, perhaps too late.” As on previous folds the entry appears to be printed on a wrinkled smaller piece of paper and then pasted onto the accordion-fold sheet. On the right side another pasted scrap, now printed in a plain sans-serif font, headed by a simple “1.0” and for the first time what seems a recognizable text in English:

I wanted to fill my elegy with light of all kinds. But death makes us stingy. . . . 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.

Flip the accordion page, again an apparent non-sequitur. No thoughts about history, no immediate attempt at elegy, no words. Instead a photograph: dark, again with the illusion of being pasted to the sheet, showing curtains split open to reveal a fuzzy outdoor scene, and below them, inside, heavily shadowed, what looks like a young boy sitting in front of someone older—a man, perhaps, but scarcely clear.

■
Thus begins Anne Carson’s courageous new work. Courageous in that she confronts the aesthetic assumptions and limitations that have dominated the past twenty-five centuries of Western

culture. Implicitly she asks her audience to reconceive the notion of verbal art. In *NOX* she addresses questions that have concerned her since her earliest publications. By introducing formal changes, she creates thematic shifts that enable her to treat compellingly emotional material usually absent from her work.

How does this happen? Let's look back. In *Eros the Bittersweet* (1986, 1998) Carson investigated the shift in seventh-century BCE Greek literature from a poetry heard to a poetry read, and theorized the relationship between oral and written cultures. This shift results from what she called "an accident of technology," the adoption of an alphabetic language. She claimed the Greeks subsequently entered a period of "contraction and focus" whereby individuals moved from "complete openness to the environment" to "individual self control":

As an individual reads and writes he gradually learns to close or inhibit the input of his senses, to inhibit or control the responses of his body, so as to train energy and thought upon the written words. He resists the environment outside him by distinguishing and controlling the one inside him. . . . The poets record this struggle from within a consciousness—perhaps new in the world—of the body as a unity of limbs, senses and self, amazed at its own vulnerability.

In a chapter of *Eros* called "Folded Meanings" Carson explores effects of the alphabetic innovation. "From the time of its earliest use the technique of writing and reading was appreciated by the ancients as an apparatus of privacy or secrecy. All communication is to some extent public in a society without writing." "Words that are written . . . may fold away and disappear. Only the spoken word is not sealed, folded, occult or undemocratic. . . . The written word fixes living things in time and space, giving them the appearance of animation although they are abstracted from life and incapable of change. . . . As communication, such a text is a dead letter."

In the face of what Carson regards as an inevitable tendency toward privacy created by the shift to written texts, one role of poets remains to "take seriously their own function of counterbalancing private emotion with communal reasoning," operating as a "hinge" between public and private worlds. Carson discusses this role at length in her comments on the Greek Simonides,

whom she identifies as the first “paid” poet, one who understood early and fully the implications of the transference of the spoken poem to the page, and even more lucratively to the tombstone. In her *Economy of the Unlost* (1999), she compares Simonides to the twentieth-century European poet Paul Celan, whose exploration of the relationship between speaking his native Romanian, writing in German, living in France, and confronting World War II and the Holocaust provoked him to create a poetry as transformative as that of his Greek predecessor.

Significantly for Carson, both Simonides and Celan did not work in traditional forms but created instead “indeterminate genres.” To some extent, Carson has for years done the same, moving across time zones in her juxtaposition of Simonides and Celan in *Economy of the Unlost* or of Herakles and Clint Eastwood in *Autobiography of Red* (1998); crafting that entire work as a “novel in verse”; creating in *The Beauty of the Husband* (2001) “a fictional essay in 29 tangos”; mingling translations, essays, conventionally shaped poems, and opera in *Decreations* (2005), her most recent book before *NOX*. As Joyelle McSweeney stated in her comments on that volume in the *Boston Review*, “Anne Carson is a mental pentathlete.”

Many critics besides McSweeney have heaped accolades on Carson. Michael Ondaatje calls her “the most exciting poet writing in English today.” The *Village Voice* called her book of poems *Men in the Off Hours* (2000) a “breathtaking . . . work of gorgeous innovation.” Many stress this novelty, but even a quick glance at those items presented in her volumes as poetry reveals only minimal formal exploration of the poem as visual text. Her prose has challenged and interested me more than her poetry, her “indeterminate genres” more than her verse.

■

In *Autobiography of Red*, *Men in the Off Hours*, and *Decreation*, Carson explores visual poetic space in various ways—alternating short and long lines neither obviously metrical nor syllabic, lines of decreasing length, center-justified verses—but most of the poems look like the majority of twentieth-century poetry: words in a single font, mostly in English, printed sequentially on paginated paper. One major exception is the autobiographical comment on the death of her mother that ends *Men in the Off*

Hours, an anticipatory piece both in its personal subject matter and in its discovery and praise of the crossouts in Virginia Woolf's writing: "It may be I'll never again think of sentences unshadowed in this way. It has changed me." More typical, from *Decreation*, is the opening section of "Nothing For It":

Your glassy wind breaks on a shoutless shore and stirs around
the rose.
Lo how
before a great snow,
before the gliding emptiness of the night coming upon us,
our lanterns throw
shapes of old companions
and
a cold pause after.

Here Carson uses traditional rhetorical structures, assonance for example, thereby producing fairly conventional music. In *Decreation* she also includes an ekphrastic poem along with its source photograph, "Seated Figure with Red Angle (1988) by Betty Goodwin," and explores its vision in the key of anaphora, each line beginning with a conditional "If." Like the comment on her mother's death, this work perhaps prepares for what will follow in *NOX*, but in general Carson's earlier poems represent formally for me mere spatial manipulations of words on a page; they do not visually require the reader to question fundamentally the nature of literature, of semiotic structures, of communication.

■
NOX changes all that, asks precisely those questions. And answers them as well. Ursula Le Guin, in her essay "Reciprocity of Prose and Poetry," suggests that all texts are translations, implying some Platonic existence of experience only secondarily captured in words. In *NOX* Carson interrogates the concept of poetry, again from the standpoint of a technological revolution, but this time neither the alphabetic transformation Simonides and his contemporaries confronted, nor the moveable type press in the print shops of Gutenberg and others, but one much more diverse. Texts on the page, Carson demonstrates, no longer inhabit a strictly alphabetic culture. Poets in the exquisite corpse tradition, or even e. e. cummings, might argue they transcended simple printing at the beginning of the twentieth century, but digital electronic technology enables Carson and her publisher

to produce visual effects unimaginable a century earlier. Photographs, scraps of paper scrawled with messages, collages, ribbons, paint, postage stamps, staples, marks etched on a second sheet by a pen pressing on the one above, dictionary entries, the list goes on and on. Perhaps in the “form of a book” mentioned on the back of the “NOX box,” these different elements were real—actual staples, scraps of paper, ribbons—and are now “replicated” in facsimile by photographic reproduction. Or perhaps in what Le Guin calls “the other text, the original,” they may have had no physical existence at all. In the text offered by New Directions, however, technology has made possible this trompe l’oeil effect, the illusion that what we hold is a compilation of numerous artifacts, all of them combining to make the “poem.” And the illusion is impressive: the crossouts, the smears, the wrinkled paper “stapled” to the sheet below with a photographic reproduction of the bent staple ends on what looks like the reverse side of the same sheet. But the illusion is scarcely the point. For Carson, reading words on a page folded carefully into a container is not enough. She demands that her audience no longer focus *in* but *out*, become again aware of all that is around us, not private but public, globally public, both spatially and temporally.

One implication of this shift becomes a return to “communal reasoning” and an implicit reduction in “private emotion.” In the past Carson has consistently attempted to minimize the personal and private dimension of her writing, or at least the autobiographical element of her poetry and scholarship. In her “Note on Method” that introduces *Economy of the Unlost*, she begins, “There is too much self in my writing. . . . My training and trainers opposed subjectivity strongly, I have struggled since the beginning to drive my thought out into the landscape of science and fact.” Twenty years later, in the middle of “Stanzas, Sexes, Seductions,” a poem that may or may not be autobiographical, the speaker asserts, “My personal poetry is a failure.” Most publicly, Carson attempts to reduce the significance of biographical detail in the minimalist “author notes” that grace the jacket of many of her books: “Anne Carson lives in Canada.” Any reader of the *BPJ* should anticipate our appreciation for deemphasizing the contemporary authorial cult of personality. In her essay on Simone Weil, Carson ironically outlines one current model: “To be a writer is to construct a big, loud, shiny centre of self from

which the writing is given voice and any claim to be intent on annihilating this self while still continuing to write and give voice to writing must involve the writer in some important acts of subterfuge or contradiction.”



Given this reticence, how could Carson approach the material that lies at the core of *NOX*, for that material is extremely personal. It is stunning that “Spring Break,” the poem in *Decreation* that follows “Stanzas, Sexes, Seductions,” treats directly those family relationships about which on the surface she so rarely writes. Even here, however, Carson interrupts each narrative line with a lyric “swallow song,” and ends with a thrice-repeated and inconclusive “open up or I” that leads to a final mundane and opaque comment by the mother: “Fish sticks for supper? she said to no one in particular.” Although the poem seems autobiographical, as “personal poetry” it is a “failure,” except insofar as it maintains the distancing, the refusing to reveal, that characterizes most of her early poems.

How could she? The answer, of course, lies right here on the table. In this box. This *NOX* box. Revelatory yet disguised. Direct yet oblique. One of Carson’s favorite words is *paradox*. The use of technology to refute conventional concepts of “a book of poetry” directs the reader into a poetry that embraces convention even while rejecting it. The box, the photo, lead us to a Latin poem of Catullus, his poem mourning the loss of his brother, allowing that text to begin to carry the burden of Carson’s own loss.

So now I, like Carson earlier, want “to think about history.” I have to. She makes me. Her basic historical method is comparative, asking us to place the death of her brother in the context of other deaths, other comments on death, other past perspectives of the relationship between living and dying. And because I have finished reading *NOX*, because I’m approaching the end of this review, I want to work backward as I glance at the ways in which Carson uses history to shape this poem and our response to it.

In her final historical comparison she writes, “More than one person has pointed out to me a likeness between my brother and Lazarus. . . . an example of resurrection or . . . a person who had to die twice.” For Carson the parallel relies on Lazarus being,

much like her brother in their relationship, “mute.” And there is “no possibility I can think my way into his muteness.” Earlier there is the parallel with Catullus, accentuated by the “vocabulary lessons,” which (I slowly realized) form a sequence of all the words in the Roman poet’s elegy, numbered “CI” or 101. Earlier still, both in the poem and in time, comes Herodotos, who both concludes the poem and initiates Carson’s exploration, for it is he “who trains you as you read,” who initiates the “process of asking, searching, collecting, doubting, striving, testing, blaming and above all standing amazed at the strange things humans do . . . including by far the strangest thing . . . history.” First, however, comes the prehistorian Hekataios. Carrying an egg containing his father, he mythically flies to Egypt, perhaps coming “to see the immensity of the mechanism in which he is caught, the immense fragility of his own flying.” This realization of the complexity, the paradox of time and history, of *asking* (the function of historians) guides Carson through her quest.



So why is this poetry?

Carson is erudite. In her prose she can quote Lacan or Derrida in such a way as to make pertinent Abby Millager’s parody of contemporary theory that opens this issue of the *BPJ*. Yet though the concept of *NOX* remains complex, the actual language is not. *NOX* is poetry because Carson’s observations on “blush,” “ashes,” “entry” become mini-poems in their own right, lexicographical equivalents of Williams’s treatment of a cat or a red wheelbarrow.

Poetry because some visual images work as well as words, become part of the poetry in the same way Kenneth Patchen’s drawings become part of his “picture poems.” A photo of an empty swing, of a landscape overcome by the shadow of the photographer. At the middle of the accordion occur two ovals, painted the same yellow as the stripe on the cover. On the next fold Carson notes, “both my parents were laid out in their coffins (years apart, accidentally) in bright yellow sweaters. They looked like beautiful peaceful egg yolks.” This image takes her back to Hekataios and his egg. And then to Herodotos and his “explanation of the old wise saying *Custom is king of all*,” his relativistic comment on diverse customs—shall we eat our dead parents or burn them and reduce them to ashes?

Poetry because it is memorable, “news that stays news” as Pound insisted. As the narrative develops, the language itself becomes increasingly epigrammatic:

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. . . .

Human words have no main switch. . . .

But all those little kidnaps in the dark. . . .

No one makes a funeral with wailing. . . .

Just like him I was a negotiator with night. . . .

Poetry finally because of her skill with narrative. Reviewing *The Best American Poetry, 2010* for the Winter 2010/2011 issue of the *BPJ*, I turned as my final task to Carson’s “Wildly Constant,” which had attracted me through its slow revelation of a complex and fascinating story. In *NOX*, times ten. Here the narrative contains not only details from Michael’s life, deliberately taking their place against the scrim of the family and its history, but also the sequential recognition of the role of Herodotos, Catullus, and Lazarus within his story, within this history. Herodotos teaches us to read; Carson shows us how to write.

In *NOX* Carson weaves a tale of her brother, the circumstances of his dying, their mother, their complex family relationships, the girl Anna he loved who also died, his widow, his travels, the funeral, his infrequent communications to mother and sister, the parallels between Anne Carson’s situation and that of Catullus traveling to visit his own brother’s tomb and between her attempt to capture that experience and the Roman poet’s attempt to do the same. The intensity of her search, her desire to know and understand, compel both our attention and our emotional involvement. And yet Carson remains diffident: “Nothing in English can capture the passionate, slow surface of a Roman elegy.” She can only “prowl” her brother, achieving at best “those little kidnaps in the dark.” She returns to Herodotos, in the voice of the historian: “I have to say what is said. I don’t have to believe it myself.” Two folds later we see again the scrawl of Michael’s cursive and his signature, but the scrawl, though clear, is almost illegible, “at once concrete and indecipherable,” as she says earlier. Is it “love you, love you” as he signs off at last or “have you, have you” in reference to Herodotos’ statement

on belief? The final vocabulary entry, for *vale*, concludes with “the Greeks have no precise word for this (but we call it ‘night’).” Which returns us to the title, *NOX*. Beneath the pasted quote from the Greek historian appears a photo of an empty staircase, an image that recurs at least half a dozen times, leading to the final English words in the text: “*He refuses, he is in the stairwell, he disappears.*” As the box empties itself of sheets, we move to no resolution. One last photo, fuzzy, of what seems to be an empty swing. And the famous conclusion of Catullus’ poem, *ave atque vale*, receives almost no commentary, while the final sheet of the accordion reproduces a portion of his elegy, in translation, but blurred.

Not that conventional contemporary poetry might or must or should disappear, but that some circumstances transcend convention and demand different formal solutions to aesthetic problems. *NOX* is erudite, complex, demanding—perhaps not for everyone, but for me immensely stimulating as well as moving. As I write, it has become the new year; we begin the second decade of the twenty-first century. Anne Carson at least, though looking backward, is moving forward. Like its folded pages, *NOX* both remains private and becomes public, creating the bridge, the hinge, the urn in which we turn the pages of Michael’s ashes and our own. This box, holding both ash and egg, lies before me, unfolding.