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Mourning Remains: An Impossible Elegy

María José Navia¹

The present article deals with the idea of mourning as an (im)possible act of translation in the book (box) of poems: *Nōx*, by Anne Carson. It analyzes the way in which that particular literary artifact serves the purpose of both remembering and mourning the death of a lost brother through offering hospitality (in Derrida's take on the term) to other languages: the language of foreign poetry, the language of pictures, of souvenirs, of remainders and reminders. The body of the dead brother (Michael) is replaced by a corpus (of works, of letters, of language) and as such it is mourned by the poet/translator, thus revealing how mourning remains an impossible elegy no matter how hard one tries to fill it with light.

KEYWORDS: MOURNING, TRANSLATION, MEMORY, HOSPITALITY, ELEGY.

“I wanted to fill my elegy with lights of all kinds.”
Anne Carson/*Nōx*

1. Traces of Survival

Anne Carson wants light. She wants to fill her elegy with light. Moreover, she wants to fill her poem *Nōx* (meaning “night” in Latin) with light. She wants to infuse night with the lucidity of light.

And she succeeds.

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She writes about death while gently weaving signs and traces of survival. Yes, her brother Michael is dead, but the poet survives, the writer is alive and she is here to tell a story: the story of an impossibility. The poet is alive for she asks questions. She questions death, fate and faith; she questions history, memory and poetry. She questions the very possibility of translation.

That is how the elegy begins: as a question. Carson writes: “History and elegy are akin. The Word “history” comes from an ancient Greek verb...meaning “to ask”....But the asking is not idle. It is when you are asking about something that you realize you yourself have survived it, and so you must carry it, or fashion it into a thing that carries itself.” And that is exactly what she does. She fashions her own questions, her own mourning process, into “a thing that carries itself”. She fashions a box to contain sadness and despair, a box to contain night and death.

(But she fills it with light).

And the light speaks of many survivals, of many traces of survival. There is the poet who asks, who keeps on asking questions (who keeps on surviving), who tries to recollect through the process of collecting: the collection of remains, remainders and reminders of her brother’s life. All objects which outlive their owner, Michael Carson. All objects which were witnesses to Michael’s life... All objects which come to represent a certain kind of helpless witnessing, just as the one Anne Carson herself performs in *Nox*. (She was there (some times), she saw...but did she understand? Will she ever?)

All traces speak of death as well as of survival; they become impossible synecdoques of Michael’s life. The traces included in *Nox* are, first, family photographs and, second, Michael’s only handwritten letter, a letter that is shown as a torn piece of paper which reveals its secret in a quite obscure way. Both types of traces speak of survival: they are contained in *Nox*, they re-present Michael, they remain and remind at the same time. But they both also speak of death.

According to Susan Sontag and Roland Barthes in their studies on photography, pictures are always already pointing to death or the possibility of death. Taking a picture symbolizes the possibility of both freezing an instant, and acknowledging the mortality of that same instant. Once taken, the picture captures what can no longer be captured, an instant that will never return, a person who will continue to grow old and eventually will die, leaving that picture as nothing more than an uncanny remainder. A photograph is always already a paradox, the sheer reflection of

impossibility, the container of both life and death at the same time. As Marita Sturken comments: “[t]he photograph of personal value is a talisman, in which the past is often perceived to reside so that it can be reexperienced. It evokes both memory and loss, both a trace of life and the prospect of death” (178). In *Nax*, pictures also work as talismans in which the past resides. However, they are not explained to the reader in any way. They are juxtaposed to other traces of survival: dictionary entries, fragments of letters, Carson’s own reflections. There is no legend under the photographs, no way of knowing how old Michael was in certain picture, or if the moment depicted was particularly cherished by the poet. Images here work as interruption and pauses. They are other enigmas, and enigmas of the Other, of Michael as an Other.

The handwritten letter also speaks of death, It does literally so for the letter is said to be written after the death of Michael’s true love. Carson refers to the letter as the one written / received “the winter the girl died”. Furthermore, the letter was addressed to the mother who, in her turn, gave it to Anne when she was about to die. Moreover, the letter is a handwritten one, that is, it bears the imprints of Michael’s fingers, and thus it may be considered unique. It was not written in a computer, there are no copies of it, only a single letter addressed to the mother, but offered to the reader in fragments, as if unwilling to unveil its secret. It is a letter which also contains death, for it speaks of the death of Michael’s true love. A girl neither Anne nor her mother came to know, and thus it both blooms and disappears in that only letter.

Interestingly enough, that letter is replied by the mother. In her reply, she insists on asking for an address to which she could send that reply. It is an impossible letter, written to Michael but never sent. A letter that reaches his addressee only through *Nax* (when it is already too late) for it is contained there. The letter is typewritten- or is transmitted in that way by Carson- and it is signed: Mother. This is the same way in which the reader gets to see Michael’s signature at the bottom of his letter.

Carson’s signature is nowhere to be found. There are no letters written by her. (Or are they? Are Carson’s letters, arranged into little paragraphs, the letters she never sent? If, for Gaston Bachelard, every word is a house that may be inhabited...can we consider every letter as a letter/ a postcard addressed to the Other?)

There is also another sense in which survival is present in this work. That is, the presence of translation as a practice and an impossibility. On the one hand, translation is another means through which survival may be granted: the translation of a text means that that text will have a life, will endure... However, it is going to be a different type of life: a life in a different language. As Derrida posits: “In this contract it is a question of neither representation nor reproduction nor communication; rather, the contract is destined to assure a survival, not only of a corpus or a text or an author but of languages” (emphasis added, 122). Michael, the memory of him, survives in *Nox* through different languages: the language of poetry, the language of photography, the language of translation too.

On the other hand, we know that an absolute translation is never possible. Carson refers to this herself in two different senses. First, she brings about Catullus’ elegy to his dead brother, and how she felt unable to truthfully translate that poem. Second, she refers to her brother in terms of a work of translation. She says: “Because our conversations were few (he phoned me maybe 5 times in 22 years) I study his sentences the ones I remember as if I’d been asked to translate them”.

The phrasing here is meaningful. Carson says “I study the sentences the ones I remember as if I’d been asked to translate them”. She doesn’t say “I cherish the sentences” but “I study” them. Furthermore, she only studies the ones she remembers (we don’t know how many of them might have been lost in the way) as if she’d been “asked” to translate them, that is, as if it were a command, or a particular duty. It is not that she wants to translate them but she does so as if she had been asked to do it. And for this particular poet, the task of the translator seems to be a very respected and respectful one.

In the beginning of her book, Carson does not yield to the idea of actually translating Catullus’ poem in its entirety, but leaves it in the original while providing the reader with the entries for every word, thus giving him/her the (im)possibility of translating the elegy. Moreover, by showing the different meanings of each word, and by analyzing the etymologies of some of them, Carson is recuperating a sense of permanence, of family, in language.

Instead of rearranging words into a hasty translation, Carson seems to exhume the body of each of the words that make up the poem, with infinite respect (and probably infinite responsibility too), digging up their roots, their history, looking for words as little anchors to give stability to a

complicated reality. At the same time, she treats her brother's life and texts with the utmost respect: the letter is never revealed in its entirety. However, we, as readers, do get to see his handwriting. The letter is not paraphrased, it is not translated into the poem, but remains there as a fragment, as an Other to whom respect is due. She doesn't try to reconstitute the letter in its entirety, or explain the enigma of that letter. Is it torn to pieces? Did she tear the letter to pieces? Are we witnessing a sign of violence to the letter? Did the mother attempt to destroy it? The fragment seems to be a question that no one can answer but a question that is worth asking nonetheless.

(A question to be kept alive in the poem).

In his famous elegies, Jacques Derrida also recurs to the others' words as a way of keeping them in mind. He quotes them respectfully, many times, without even trying to examine their meanings much. In the introduction to *The Work of Mourning* this gesture is explained in the following way "...it would seem that citation is actually being used here as a form of textual interiorization, that the words of the dead are being incorporated not merely to become part of the text, to be "in it", but to act as that point of infinite alterity "within" the text, to act as its law."(21)

The reality of loss, survival, and infinite alterity, is present (and re-presented) in this part of the book. Michael's letter is offered to the reader at the top of the page in a quite realistic way: it seems as if it had been pasted there. As readers, we get to see Michael's handwriting- as remnant and survivor- and also we get to read Carson's attempt at explaining her brother's life. It reads:

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

This paragraph is repeated four times in the following pages in the same way: the reader is offered a fragment of the letter (always a different fragment) and the poet's explanation (always the same explanation). A little gesture of repetition compulsion, maybe? For Freud, there are only two ways of dealing with the loss of a loved one: mourning or melancholia. In mourning, the person eventually learns to "let go" and invest his/her libido in another love object. In melancholia, however, the

subject is not able to remember the lost person (that is, assuming that person as gone) and is doomed to repeat facts instead of remembering them. This particular section of the book seems to be a little interruption in the process of working through, a little moment of resistance in which the reality of loss cannot be possessed and remembered, but has to be repeated. This is not necessarily pathological. Theorist Dominick LaCapra argues that, in order to work pain through, sometimes it is necessary to act out and repeat, until a certain sense of mastery over the past is regained.

The idea of infinity is also present in Carson's depiction of translation. She writes "...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. A brother never ends. I prowl him. He does not end". There are three important and recurrent images present in these lines. First, the idea of a certain poetics of space associated to translation. Second, the notion of infinity. She insists upon the idea that "a brother never ends". That is, there is no end, there is no closure in sight. And, third, the idea of darkness and light as presences. All these concepts merge in the idea of impossibility: if translation is a room then it is also container, therefore, it should have an end...however, in this case, this room is not meant to have an end, it is infinite. Also, translation should illuminate, should make a message clear to other audiences, but, again, in this case, there is no light switch at hand. This translation seems to rejoice in its darkness, in its obscurity.

She further writes in *Nox*: "Prowling the meaning of words, 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".

It is interesting how Carson uses the verb "to prowl" in both occasions. It is an aggressive verb: it is not the mere detective-like curiosity of "to search for"; prowling means an aggressive attempt at finding something, as a hunter runs after his prey. If we return to Derrida's ideas on translation and hospitality we would find how, for him, translation is always a violent gesture. Again, we have the idea of impossibility or paradox: the confluence of the aggressiveness and intent of the act of prowling with the delicacy or subtleness to leave things obscure, open-ended .

And the impossibility continues: "In one sense it is a room I can never leave, perhaps dreadful for that. At the same time, a place composed entirely of entries." Language, translation, her

brother, is depicted as that room which she can never leave. Is it because it is a prison of sorts? Or is it because it exerts a special fascination over the poet herself? Carson plays with the meaning and plasticity of words by saying that this is a place “composed entirely of entries”. She is referring to the entries in the dictionary, the ones that signal the different meanings a word can have. However, this idea of “entry” gets further complicated by its proximity to the idea of translation and the mourning of the brother. Thus, “entries” are no longer ways to “enter” something. It is true that they do offer an entrance into language, into the prison or labyrinth that language has become, but they never offer the possibility of an exit. There seems to be no way out of language and with this, the very possibility of mourning is thwarted.

Carson is showing how death (and life) is always already untranslatable: no matter how hard she tries to translate her brother’s life into words, into an artifact, it remains out of reach. In a way, she can “move” that death from one realm to the other (from words, to pictures, to quotations) without ever being able to translate/transmit its true meaning. However, her translation is still a relevant gesture, and it can be regarded as a promise. As Jacques Derrida states in *Otobiographies*:

A translation never succeeds in the pure and absolute sense of the term. Rather, a translation succeeds in promising success, in promising reconciliation. There are translations that don’t even manage to promise, but a good translation is one that enacts that performative called a promise with the result that through the translation one sees the coming shape of a possible reconciliation among languages (123)

The act of translation in *Nox* aims at that promise, at that (im)possible reconciliation of languages and memories. When we think of promise we think of fidelity, of being faithful/true to that promise. In the same vein, when we think of translation, we think of fidelity, of being faithful to the original. In the introduction to *The Work of Mourning*, the author states that: “Fidelity thus consists in mourning, and mourning- at least in a first moment- consists in interiorizing the other and recognizing that if we are to give the dead anything it can now be only in us, the living”. (9) Or, in Carson’s words: “The responsibility of the living to the dead is not simple. It is we who let them go, for we do not accompany them. It is we who hold them here- deny them their nothingness- by naming their names. Out of these two wrongs comes the writing of epitaphs.” (85 Economy)

Can translation then be considered a work of mourning? It certainly involves dealing with a loss (the loss of some of the meaning), as well as an act of memory and transformation. Mourning also involves the possibility of survival. As Derrida in *The Politics of Friendship* says: “Philia begins with the possibility of survival. Surviving- that is the other name of a mourning whose possibility is never to be awaited” (qtd. *The Work of Mourning*, 1). Translation also deals with the idea of time, delay and temporality (a translation always comes after the original). Translation also means dealing with the Other, dealing with the Foreign, and as such it may be regarded under the light of hospitality. *Nōx* also speaks of arriving to an Other... and arriving late.

2. Antigone’s Cry: language as the ultimate hospitality.

“Writing an epitaph for things that actually can't die interests me.”
Anne Carson/ Interview

Anne Carson was notified of her brother’s death two weeks after it happened. Even though she traveled to where he was living, she didn’t get the chance to bury him properly (his ashes had already been scattered) so *Nōx* can be read as that Antigone-like gesture; the possibility for the poet to finally offer her brother a burying place.

Derrida refers to the figure of the stranger, the foreigner, who comes, who arrives to a foreign place in order to destabilize its organization. Michael Carson dies as a foreigner, for he dies in a foreign land, as well as he dies as a foreigner to his own sister (who doesn’t have any idea of who he is anymore). In a way, he also arrives (his death arrives) as a foreign presence to Anne Carson’s life (she writes “...his death came wandering slowly towards me across the sea.”), and thus *Nōx* could be read as a hospitable gesture, a gesture that gives the foreigner a home, a place, to rest. It is no surprise then that, in his book, Jacques Derrida utilizes the figure of Antigone to refer to the idea of hospitality and its complications. Antigone (previous to the classic episode of her wanting to bury her brother) leads her father Oedipus to a foreign land where he is to die as a foreigner. The task becomes even more burdensome for Antigone since Oedipus, when he is about to die, commands his daughter not to see or learn where he is to be buried, thus making her mourning impossible.

“For in death, the visibility of the tomb would have been able to reappropriate the foreigner, it would have been able to signify a sort of repatriation for him. No, here, the dead one remains all the more foreign in a foreign land in that there is no

manifest grave, no visible and phenomenal tomb, only a secret burial, an ungrave invisible even to his family, even to his daughter.” (*Of Hospitality* 113)

Carson is not allowed to properly mourn her brother. She arrives, in the same way that Catullus arrives, late to his brother. Both poets decide to repatriate their brothers' bodies through language and in language. They write an elegy to offer them roots made out of words, they offer them the type of survival that literature can offer. It is no wonder, then, that Catullus' elegy begins as follows: “Many the peoples many the oceans I crossed-/ I arrive at these poor, brother, burials/ so I could give you the last gift owed to death/ and talk (why?) with mute ash.”

It is interesting and revealing the way in which the translator here (Anne Carson) questions her own translation, by including that parenthesis “(why?)” in the middle of the sentence. It is interesting for it questions Catullus' will to speak for his brother. It is a parenthesis signaling both an interruption and a question, as if to delay the delivery of Catullus' last message. It is also relevant how Catullus refers to his elegy as a “gift”, an impossible gift for it is “owed to death”. A gift, according to Derrida should always go beyond calculations, a gift can never be owed for that would make it into a debt . At the same time, by being this gift owed to death it becomes even more impossible. An elegy becomes the impossible gift.

Carson, in her own elegy, attempts to build a coffin, she makes a coffin out of her poem. She makes a coffin out of words. Words matter. Antigone's defiance was made out of words. Nobody saw her burying her brother, no one could have accused her for certain, but she acknowledged her guilt through words. That is probably why Judith Butler's so famous book is entitled *Antigone's Claim* and not *Antigone's Act*, or *Antigone's Doing*.

Furthermore, Antigone's defiance in burying her brother can be/ should be read through her past and the impossibility of burying/mourning her father. Carson seems to repeat the same gesture. She writes: “5.6 When my parents died I chose not to eat but to burn them. Then I buried the ashes under a stone cut with their names. For my brother I had no choice, I was a thousand miles away. His widow says he wanted to be cast in the sea, so she did this. There is no stone and as I say he had changed his name.” Carson's mourning is difficult. When her parents died she says she “chose” not to eat but burn them. When her brother's death arrived, however, she •”had no choice”. She says “there is no stone”. No fixity, no anchor, but only scattered ashes, unlimited ashes . Even more,

Michael dies as a foreigner for he was carrying another's name; he had changed his name. In a sense, Michael Carson never died. Not officially, at least. Mourning becomes even more complicated. He dies as a foreigner, in a foreign land, using an Other's name. And his ashes are scattered. There is no "visibility of the tomb" in Derrida's terms. There is no resting place. There is no stone.

Only words remain.

In the past years, Michael had transformed himself into words. Words uttered during a tense phone call, words written in laconic postcards. He had become language and thus Anne Carson needs to mourn him as language. Even more, she needs to mourn him as a foreign language, a language that is not completely graspable or clear, a language to which she has to offer hospitality, to which she has to give/offer an "entry". A language that, revealingly enough, has become cryptic.

Words in *Nax* are cryptic. They don't seem to reveal their meaning, they do not want to share their secret. The word cryptic comes from the word crypt: the coffin, the burial place which keeps the secret. *Nax* is full of secrets unwilling to be unveiled. Even ordinary language, the language of phone calls, is rendered different. Carson, in *Economy of the Unlost* states that "translation makes ordinary language strange" (28). Reading this alongside Derrida, we could say "translation makes ordinary language (a) foreign", for, in French, the word "étranger" comes to mean both strange and stranger.

Carson also deals with death and translation in her essay *The Economy of the Unlost*. In that opportunity she read one contemporary poet through an ancient and classic one. She tries to understand Paul Celan through Simonides. She says "(f)ace to face, yet they do not know one another, did not live in the same era, never spoke the same language. With and against, aligned and adverse, each is placed like a surface on which the other may come into focus. Sometimes you can see a celestial object better by looking at something else, with it, in the sky." (viii) In *Nax* Anne Carson seems to be repeating the same gesture: she is reading her own mourning in the words of Catullus, through Catullus' words. She is reexperiencing her own elegy through Catullus' poetic work. She is coming into focus.

However, in the case of Carson, and in contrast to Catullus' situation, she is mourning words rather than a real person: that is, the words left by Michael and by those who surrounded him (her mother's letter, his widow's little text). She mourns words in space, assigning a special texture

and materiality to them. Her elegy becomes her brother's epitaph: an elegy made to last, an elegy written in stone: "Epitaphs create a space of exchange between present and past by gaining a purchase on memory." (85). She even follows her own advice: "...to make a mental space memorable, you put into it movement, light and unexpectedness." (85). Carson's elegy is one that moves: it is contained inside a box but it is never totally imprisoned by that box; the reader can take it out and unfold it: it is unexpected, it has movement. It is filled with light.

(Light of all kinds).

However, the cryptic crypt is never enough to contain Michael. As Carson states in *Nox*: "A brother never ends". And so the last words we read in the poem are "He refuses, he is in the stairwell, he disappears." It is a quite meaningful last sentence. It says "he refuses". He refuses to what? Does he refuse to be contained? To be explained? In order for something to be refused, something has to be proposed first. Does he refuse Antigone/Anne's last gesture of hospitality?

It then says, "he is in the stairwell", that is, a space in-between. He is not inside a room, he is not contained, but in permanent transit. Finally, "he disappears". He doesn't "die", but "disappears"; we don't know where he is, he just vanishes, (leaving no trace?) just as his ashes disappeared when scattered into the sea.

The last image we get as readers is that of Catullus' poem, in Latin, just as it was shown in the beginning of *Nox*. This time, however, the text is blurry and it is very difficult to elucidate the different words. Words disappearing, words that are not meant to last either. The elegy is finally over and, if you take it out of the box, it offers only blank pages.

Cathy Caruth in her works on testimony, refers to the act of bearing witness and coming to terms with trauma as the process of "listening to the other's wound." For her, a person can not deal with loss in an individual way, but must engage into a dialogical process: "one's trauma is tied up with the trauma of another...trauma may lead, therefore, to the encounter with another, through the very possibility and surprise of listening to another's wound" (8).

Carson, in *Nox*, seems to be doing just that: listening to Catullus' wound and from there on engaging into her own mourning process. Or, in Paul Celan's own words: "The poem becomes conversation- often desperate conversation" (50).

Is an elegy a desperate conversation? Or is poetry always already haunted?

Derrida's answer to this question is yes. He states: "...one writes for a specific dead person, so that perhaps in every text there is a dead man or woman to be sought, the singular figure of death to which a text is destined and which signs" (53).

Perhaps every poem carries in itself a little elegy.

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