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Material Loss: Multimodality and Mourning in B.S. Johnson's *The Unfortunates* and Anne Carson's *Nox*

Abstract: B.S. Johnson's *The Unfortunates* (1969) and Anne Carson's *Nox* (2010) are among the most formally inventive and materially unique literary responses to personal loss. The first novel-in-a-box in English literature, *The Unfortunates* is a poignant account of the premature death of Johnson's best friend Tony Tillinghast. Also contained in a box, Carson's elegy is printed on a 25-metre-long concertinaed scroll, which contains a collage of textual and visual fragments of various artefacts connected with Carson's dead brother.

This article considers the implications of certain visual and tactile properties of both works for their representation of loss and the work of mourning, as theorized by Sigmund Freud and Jacques Derrida. It argues that both the card-shuffle structure and the scroll format accentuate the ongoingness of mourning and convey scepticism about the possibility of any closure. The article also examines the significance of encasing the contents of both elegies in coffin-like boxes and the importance of their extensive use of fragmentation.

Keywords: loss, mourning, melancholia, multimodality, materiality, collage, book-in-a-box

Abstrakt: *Nieszczęśni* (1969) B.S. Johnsona i *Nox* (2010) Anne Carson należą do najbardziej oryginalnych pod względem formalnym literackich reakcji na doświadczenie straty. *Nieszczęśni* to pierwsza anglojęzyczna powieść w pudełku w literaturze angielskiej, a zarazem relacja z przedwczesnej śmierci najlepszego przyjaciela pisarza, Tony'ego Tillinghasta. Elegia Carson również zamknięta jest w pudełku, w którym znajduje się 25-metrowy harmonijkowy zwój zawierający liczne elementy tekstowe i wizualne, w tym artefakty związane ze zmarłym bratem Carson.

Autor artykułu analizuje implikacje konkretnych wizualnych i dotykowych właściwości obu dzieł dla ich reprezentacji straty i żałoby na podstawie teorii Zygmunta Freuda i Jacques'a Derridy. Stawia tezę, że zarówno struktura talii kart (*card shuffle*), jak i format zwoju podkreślają ciągłość żałoby i wyrażają sceptycyzm w odniesieniu do możliwości jej zakończenia. W artykule przeanalizowano również symboliczne znaczenie przypominających trumny pudełek oraz wykorzystanie poetyki fragmentaryczności.

Słowa kluczowe: strata, żałoba, melancholia, multimodalność, materialność, kolaż, książka w pudełku

Despite being forty years apart, *The Unfortunates* (1969) by British avant-garde novelist B.S. Johnson and *Nox* (2010) by Canadian poet and academic Anne Carson present a considerable overlap in their application of experimental multimodal means to convey the experience of personal loss. Both works are intimate and candid meditations on the recent death of a dear person – Johnson’s best friend and Carson’s older brother. Besides considering their own response to bereavement, the authors revisit the past, portray the deceased and commemorate their existence by turning them into literary monuments in the Horatian sense. Johnson and Carson do so by resorting to highly unconventional form, which challenges the notion of the codex as the default structure for a literary work. They both favour the form of a book-in-a-box and a non-standard arrangement of pages; the placement of text on the page is also far from conventional. In both instances, the material aspect of the work is emphasized and invites metaphorical interpretations. In this article, I shall consider the implications of the tactile and visual properties of *The Unfortunates* and *Nox* for their representation of loss and the work of mourning. I will argue that Johnson’s adoption of the card-shuffle structure and Carson’s of the scroll format accentuate the ongoingness of mourning and convey scepticism about the possibility of its completion. I will also examine the significance of encasing the contents of both elegies in coffin-like boxes and of the consistent use of fragmentation.

The Unfortunates

B.S. Johnson’s fourth novel – he always insisted on this label despite the overtly autobiographical content of much of his writing (Johnson 1973, 14) – was published in the form of a box containing 27 unbound sections, which the reader was encouraged to shuffle like a pack of cards and read in any order they pleased. There is one limitation: readers are expected to start with the section marked as “FIRST” and save the one headed “LAST” for the end. Published seven years after the first recognized novel-in-a-box in any language, Marc Saporta’s *Composition no. 1* (1962), *The Unfortunates* was the first such experiment in Anglophone literature. Whereas the French novel tends to be regarded as formally daring but otherwise rather dry (Coe 2011), Johnson’s work is imbued with emotion and makes for a moving reading experience. In addition, it offers a lyrical account of the author’s friendship with literary scholar Tony Tillinghast from their undergraduate years to Tony’s death of cancer in 1964, at the age of 29.¹

The idea of representing his experience of loss in the form of an unbound book came to Johnson in 1965 during a visit to Nottingham, where Tony lived when they became friends. Seeing the places he associated so closely with his dead friend unleashed a torrent of intense memories, which confronted him “in a completely random manner, without chronology.” Johnson sought to find a literary vehicle for

¹ I shall refer to the protagonists of *The Unfortunates* and *Nox* by their first names (Tony and Michael, respectively), because that is the way they are referred to by the authors, whom, in turn, I shall call by their surnames.

this sensation of acute “randomness,” and he ultimately settled for a structure that refuses to arrange the unruly flow of memories into any sequence (Johnson qtd. in Coe 2004, 22).² The result was a set of loose sections varying from half a page to twelve pages, each of which contained a description of a remembered scene connected with Tony (there are eighteen of them in total) or of that day spent in Nottingham, during which Johnson had to attend a football match and write a report on it for *The Observer* (Johnson’s account of the match is printed on the inside of the box encasing the contents of the book). The composition of *The Unfortunates* posed, in Jonathan Coe’s words, “a formidable technical challenge not just for his publishers but for the book trade in general” (Coe 2004, 238). Some libraries in Britain are known to have decided to bind the loose sections in order to prevent them from being lost (Coe 2004, 239). In 1973, the novel was released in Hungary in the form of a bound book for economic reasons. Johnson wrote a special note to Hungarian readers urging them to cut out its sections, put them into a hat and take out one by one (Coe 2004, 343).

In its unbound form, *The Unfortunates* is one of the prime examples of what has been called interactive, ergodic and aleatoric literature. The first two labels stress the active part allotted to the reader, whose role is greater than merely turning the pages and often involves choosing one out of many paths through the text. The term “aleatoric” derives from the Latin word *alea* meaning “dice,” which points to a literary text’s “enactment of chance” (Jenner 2014, 72). In an article devoted to *The Unfortunates*, Sebastian Jenner defines aleatoric literature as “a conscious engagement with the concept of chance ... an ‘open work,’ or one that invites the audience to become the instigator of the chance procedure” (Jenner 2014, 72). As in the case of a roll of dice, the options are limited by the number of pages or sections that can be shuffled. In *The Unfortunates*, there are 25 shuffleable elements if one omits sections meant to be read as first and last. That leaves the reader with over 15 septillion (10^{24}) possibilities, which is a near-guarantee that each reader’s trajectory is going to be different, unless they are presented with a bound copy or fail to shuffle the sections after taking them out of the box.

The novel’s unique form has elicited several perceptive academic analyses, particularly after the publication of Coe’s *Like a Fiery Elephant: The Story of B.S. Johnson* (2004) – a highly unconventional biography of the author that won the Samuel Johnson Prize for Non-Fiction (now the Baillie Gifford Prize) and led to a resurgence of interest in B.S. Johnson’s life and work. Kaye Mitchell (2007) has examined *The Unfortunates* through the lens of Wolfgang Iser’s idea of “concretization” and considered the applicability of the notion of the hypertext to the book’s structure. Vanessa Guignery, who has also translated *Like a Fiery Elephant* into French, has discussed Johnson’s book as an epitome of his sustained interest in formal disorder and randomness, as well as of his pursuit of what Samuel Beckett, one of Johnson’s heroes and champions, called “a form that accommodates

² Johnson’s achronological presentation of memory content predates Joe Brainard’s *I Remember*, whose first edition came out in 1970, one year after *The Unfortunates*. Brainard’s experimental autobiography is composed of 1,504 radically brief and arbitrarily arranged entries, each of which signals an individual memory.

the mess” (Guignery 2011a, 112). Greg Buchanan (2014), in turn, has surveyed the differences in the reader’s perception of the main characters (Tony, the narrator and his girlfriend Wendy) depending on the order in which the reader learns specific facts about them. Judith Mackrell (1985) and Krystyna Stamirowska (2006), in turn, have pointed to the more conventional aspects of the book’s form: to its affinities with a traditional novel that employs flashbacks and to the possibility of reinstating the chronological order to *The Unfortunates*.

Nox

The original handmade manuscript of *Nox* was created by Anne Carson in 2000, but it was released, in the form of a facsimile, only in 2010, by New Directions – an independent publisher specializing in poetry and new experimental writing. It was prompted by the sudden death of Carson’s estranged big brother Michael, whom she had not seen since 1978. He was a secretive and elusive figure who spent much of his life under a false identity. It appears that he had been involved in drug trafficking in the 1970s and was forced to leave Canada permanently in order not to be apprehended. In the intervening decades, he phoned home five times and wrote several letters, never leaving a return address. The reader learns that Michael was once very much in love with a girl who died young. He seems to have married twice, the second time to a Danish woman with whom he lived in Copenhagen until his untimely death in 2000. The widow only notified Carson about Michael’s passing two weeks later, when his ashes had already been scattered in the sea near Kronborg Castle (called Elsinore in *Hamlet*). A scrapbook composed of fragmentary notes, drawings, cut-outs and photographs from the family album, the original manuscript – encased in a box – served as an offering to the dead brother: a testament to, and a commemoration of, his existence and his body, of which no physical trace remained. It appears that it was also, for Carson, a much-needed element of closure, which was denied her on account of having missed Michael’s funeral (Fleming 2016, 64).

Nox was released as a work of poetry, but its classification became a subject of academic debate. Joan Fleming called it “at once an elegy, a translation, a textual object, and a therapeutic biography” (2016, 64). The genres of elegy and epitaph were considered applicable by Tanis MacDonald (2015) and Christine Wiesenthal (2020). Katarzyna Bazarnik referred to *Nox* as a “liberatic elegy,” subsuming it under the term liberature, defined as an attempt to “fuse text with its physical form into an inseparable whole in the space of a book” (Bazarnik 2016, 141, 13). Both Liedeke Plate and Kiene Brillenburg Wurth examined the extent to which *Nox* could be regarded as an artist’s book. Plate observes that despite being “mass-produced,” it “looks like” one, “enticing the reader to treat it as if it were unique, auratic, and thus requiring delicate handling of its pages” (Plate 2015, 98). In one of the very few unfavourable critiques of Carson’s book, Wurth calls it a symptom of “the (modest) commodification of artists’ books;” she also proposes the categories of the personal zine and the handmade memory book as appropriate generic labels for

Nox (Carson 2014, 25–27).³ The great number and variety of the proposed critical labels prove the hybrid nature of the work.

One could distinguish several major components of *Nox*. The first is a sequence of lexicographic entries devoted to every consecutive Latin word that constitutes Catullus's "Poem 101" – an elegy for the poet's brother, who, like Michael, died a premature death. Although written by Carson, who is a classics professor and has translated ancient poetry into English, the notes are modelled on formal entries in a Latin-English dictionary.⁴ They testify to Carson's attempt to translate the elegy and thus to perform a rite of mourning. The second major component of *Nox* are numbered sections, which always appear on the recto page (as opposed to the dictionary entries, which are invariably placed on the left). They are mostly concerned with Michael's story, which is interspersed with longer passages about ancient Greece. Carson also includes in the book several cryptic lines, such as "Why do we blush before death?" or "I love the old questions" (an unacknowledged quotation from Beckett's *Endgame*), which tend to be surrounded by a blank page.⁵ *Nox* also contains a handful of black-and-white photographs, some of them of Michael, some of them cut into pieces, none of them accompanied by explanatory captions. Carson also includes several simple drawings in pencil, crayon or paint. Finally, there are many collages composed of a variety of materials. In an interview for *Paris Review*, Carson (2004) explained, "I used some photos of our family life, bits of text from [Michael's] letters, actual pieces of the letters, some of my mother's answers to his letters, paint, plastic, staples and other decorative items."

Not only does *Nox* include individual instances of visual collage but the work as a whole could be interpreted as a work of literary collage. As I have argued elsewhere, collage is a literary technique relying on fragmentation, multimodality, appropriation and juxtaposition (Drag 2020). The first two formal requirements are met by Carson's use of minuscule textual and visual components: brief passages of text, surrounded by white space and mostly disconnected from one another, as well as multiple photographic cut-outs. *Nox* owes much of its rich visual dimension to Robert Currie's meticulous attempts, involving combinations of scanning and Xeroxing, to create the illusion that the reader is holding a time-worn, faded manuscript – the illusion of a Benjaminian aura (Wurth 2013, 26). Carson's extensive use of materials not created by herself, such as old photographs, handwritten missives of other family members and stamps torn out of Michael's postcards and letters, points to the appropriative poetics of *Nox*. Instances of the compositional logic of juxtaposition can be found on the many pages featuring images and text, which are mainly combined in an arbitrary way. For instance, the earlier cited

³ Wurth has criticized the book's "'show' of materiality [and] authenticity," which signals "a material presence that is staged, screened, derived or second-hand." She also speaks of its "artificiality" and "feigned accessibility" (Wurth 2013, 26–28).

⁴ The title word, *nox* (Latin for "night"), does not appear in Catullus's poem, but Carson finds a way of including it in almost every lexicographic note.

⁵ Because *Nox* is unpaginated, quotations from the book will not be accompanied by a page number in parenthetical references. However, when a quoted passage comes from one of the numbered sections, I shall provide that marker (e.g., 7.1).

passage “I love the old questions” is accompanied by a black-and-white photo of a little boy waving at the seashore. The principle of placing dictionary entries on the verso pages of the book and the mostly unconnected textual or visual content on the right is another manifestation of juxtaposition as a formal principle.

The formal uniqueness and multimodal exuberance of *Nox* is greatly reinforced by its daring challenge to the codex. Carson’s work is, in effect, a 25-metre-long scroll composed of 27 sheets of paper (of 21 × 93 centimetres each),⁶ which have been finely glued together in a way that makes it very difficult to identify the seams. *Nox*’s form has therefore been referred to as an “accordion” (Foster 2011, 37; MacDonald 2015, 57; Rapatzikou 2017, 80), a “concertinaed scroll” (Fleming 2016, 65) and a “fold-out” (Rapatzikou 2017, 80). The enormously long sheet, of which only one side has print over it, and the other remains blank, has been folded so that *Nox* can be experienced like a book with pages to turn. In place of a set of covers, it is locked in a hefty box. Like *The Unfortunates*, Carson’s work is not the first experiment of its kind. In 1913, poet Blaise Cendrars and painter Sonia Delaunay had created *La prose du Transsibérien et de la petite Jehanne de France* – a fusion of literature and the visual arts which also relies on the form of a fold-out, except of a considerably smaller size.⁷ Despite that inspiration, *Nox* was largely received as a highly original work, and its radical multimodality was seen as a response to the crisis of the print book precipitated by the recent arrival of e-readers such as Kindle and iPad. In an interview by Parul Sehgal, Carson (2011) admitted that she was “so pleased” that *Nox* was “un-Kindle-isable.” In the face of the physical book’s uncertain future, *Nox*’s multimodal lavishness – far greater than in *The Unfortunates*, which did not have to intervene on behalf of print – could be interpreted as an instance of hypermediacy, which was defined by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin (2000, 272) as “a style of visual representation whose goal is to remind the viewer of the medium.” Every reader of Carson’s work must realize that the visual and tactile experience of *Nox* could not be translated into a digital medium, no matter how advanced.

The ongoingness of mourning

The unique composition of *The Unfortunates* and *Nox* is essential to their representation of the process of mourning. Through their formal choices, Johnson and Carson assert the persistence of grief and the elusiveness of closure. In *The Unfortunates*, that sense is evoked primarily by the employment of the aleatoric principle, which could also be interpreted as a metaphor for the randomness of memory, the accidental element in the aetiology of cancer, the general absurdity of human

⁶ In effect, both *The Unfortunates* and *Nox* are composed of 27 components: bound sections and sheets of paper, respectively. The sections in Johnson’s book are stapled together, whereas the sheets in *Nox* are held with glue.

⁷ In *Liberature: A Book-bound Genre*, Katarzyna Bazarnik (2016, 49) considers other examples of fold-out works, such as Zenon Fajfer’s poem “Balcony,” Radosław Nowakowski’s *Sienkiewiczza Street in Kielce* (2003) and Adam Thirlwell’s *Kapow!* (2012).

existence and “physical disintegration due to terminal illness” (Drag 2017, 320; Bazarnik 2016, 50–51). The connection between the card-shuffle form of the book and its representation of grief has been examined by Julia Jordan in her article “‘For recuperation’: Elegy, Form, and the Aleatory in *The Unfortunates*.” Jordan argues that this relationship is “antagonistic” because the randomness of the structure “challenges the very linearity needed for literary acts of mourning.” As a result, the novel “calls into question its own elegiac status, and refuses the traditional products of elegy: consolation, compensation, and the temporal wisdom that is an implicit benefit in ‘getting over’ something” (Jordan 2014, 748). Jordan adds that by denying the linearity and causality of a narrative, it rejects its capacity for – in the words of Anne Jurecic – “mak[ing] sense of or contain[ing] the sense of being at risk from disease, accident, or death” (Jordan 2014, 748). Instead, Johnson “cancel[s] any consolations that inhere in narrative construction” and “allows Tony’s disease its full terror” (Jordan 2014, 749). Jordan relates this strategy to Johnson’s often cited maxim that “telling stories is telling lies” (Johnson 1964, 167): by dismantling the chronology of an illness narrative, he demonstrates his distrust of “such a naïve curative impulse” (Jordan 2014, 749).⁸

According to Jordan, what Johnson enacts through dismembering the account of Tony’s struggle with cancer is a “refusal to mourn,” which she traces to Jacques Derrida’s conceptualization of mourning as informed by “a defiant subversion of its implicit agenda of recuperation” (Jordan 2014, 748). In order to transcend Freud’s distinction between mourning and melancholia – the “successful” and “unsuccessful” outcome of working through one’s loss – Derrida proposes the term “semi-mourning” (also translated as “half-mourning”). The paradoxical logic of semi-mourning relies on the coexistence of the desire to mourn and the unwillingness to complete one’s mourning (Derrida 1995, 151–152). Instead of gradually letting go of the dead, the mourner incorporates them, turning their own self into what Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok (1994, 130) have called the “crypt” or what Derrida (1986, xxxv) has called “a cemetery guard.”

In *The Unfortunates*, the refusal to complete the act of mourning can also be gleaned from individual statements by the narrator, such as the following: “I remember so clearly, have played it enough times, his voice, or the last vestiges of it, it’s not that clear, a new slur, too, but his voice, his voice I still have, yes, and what he said, what he was” (Johnson 1994, “Then they had moved...” 7).⁹ His insistence on “having played” Tony’s voice many times could be read as an attempt to resist the gradual and – according to the logic of mourning – inevitable waning of the hold that the deceased has over the mourner. One could also interpret the

⁸ In “B.S. Johnson’s *The Unfortunates*: Celebrating Chaos,” Vanessa Guignery interprets the aleatory form of the novel as a celebration of randomness and situates the book in the context of Johnson’s long-standing distrust of any ordering patterns. She quotes, among other works, his experimental film *Fat Man on a Beach* (1973), whose protagonist (played by the author himself) states, “Let’s celebrate chaos, let’s celebrate the accidental!” (Guignery 2011b, 112).

⁹ Because *The Unfortunates* lacks regular, continuous pagination, parenthetical references will contain not just the page number but also the opening words of the first sentence of a given section (since sections are neither numbered nor titled).

narrator's declaration that he "still ha[s] ... what [Tony] was" as a symptom of the incorporation of the dead by the living along the lines theorized by Derrida.¹⁰ The novel's final sentence is another testimony to the incompleteness of mourning and the persistence of loss: "Not how he died, not what he died of, even less why he died, are of concern, to me, only the fact that he did die, he is dead, is important: the loss to me, to us" ("Last" 6). In place of an indication that the mourner has accepted the finality of their loss and "moved on," the narrator emphasizes its continued presence. The statement "he *did* die, he *is* dead" suggests that death belongs to the present as well as the past – it has present consequences; it "*is* important" and "of concern, to me" (emphasis added). The lack of closure at the end of *The Unfortunates* is asserted most forcefully by the lack of a full stop after its final sentence, or, more specifically, the words "the loss to me, to us." The ensuing blank space of the page can express the potential limitlessness of grief – the lack of a guarantee that the acceptance of loss is merely a matter of time.¹¹

Johnson's decision to place the contents of the novel in a box can also be read as a formal solution aiming to assert the ongoingness of mourning. Vanessa Guignery has drawn a parallel between the lack of the final full stop and the box structure of the book: she argues that this lack of closure could mean it is "impossible to close the lid of the literary coffin" that is *The Unfortunates*" (Guignery 2021a, 20). Kaye Mitchell has also referred to Johnson's "box/coffin" which "demands to be re-opened and its contents re-read;" such re-readings "prolong the duration of the work, proving that it is inexhaustible in the way that a life cannot be" (Mitchell 2007, 63). Krystyna Stamirowska has described the act of opening the "coffin-like box" to "bringing back to existence" an otherwise "closed book of life" (Stamirowska 2006, 106). Although coffins are rarely meant to be reopened and its contents re-examined, several critics have asserted this metaphor's relevance to Johnson's insistence that "the process of mourning, remembering and celebrating Tony can never be complete" (Guignery 2011a, 20).

Although the rectangular box encasing the scroll of *Nox* has also been likened to a coffin (Hetherington, Atherton 2020, 213), it has elicited a greater variety of metaphorical interpretations, such as a "Roman sepulcher," an "urn" (Foster 2011, 37), a "tomb" (Wurth 2013, 24), a "sarcophagus" (Palleau-Papin 2014), a "headstone" (MacDonald 2015, 58), a "stone-tablet" (Hetherington, Atherton 2020, 213) and a "gift" (Wiesenthal 2020, 195). While most of them also carry strong funereal connotations, some point to objects associated with the commemoration of the dead. Whereas coffins (to which Johnson's box¹² tends to be likened) are typically made of wood and lie buried underground, tombs, sarcophaguses, headstones and tablets

¹⁰ The notion of still "having" Tony's "voice" could also be interpreted through Derrida's idea of *prospopoeia* – the attribution to a dead object of the power of speech – as a "shorthand for [an] ethical relationship with the dead" (Rae 2007, 17).

¹¹ Guignery points out that the empty space on the final page "transcribes both the terrible gap opened by Tony's death and the limitations of language in its capacity to communicate the pain of the survivors" (Guignery 2011a, 20).

¹² The box for the original edition of *The Unfortunates* is almost square-shaped, its size amounting to 8.5 by 7 inches. The 1999 edition follows the standard rectangular book size of 8 by 5.3 inches.

are traditionally made of stone and placed where they can be seen, often accompanied by the name and a likeness of the deceased. This difference between the interpretations of the two box structures lies partly in their physical features and partly in the biographical context of *Nox*. Carson's book comes in a sturdier, larger and considerably heavier box than *The Unfortunates*. In addition, it features an oblong strip of a black-and-white photo showing Michael as a boy. Although the image is very informal and shows him with barely any clothes on, it inevitably evokes associations with a tombstone image. The original cover of Johnson's work also carries deathly associations: it features a blown-up blurry image of cancer cells in shades of purple.¹³ The reading of the body of *Nox* as Michael's tomb is reinforced by the fact that, as Carson has stated both in the book and several interviews, no other commemorative structure devoted to his life exists. As Wurth has noted, "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*" (Wurth 2013, 24).¹⁴

Whereas the design of the box points to the desire to commemorate Michael by creating a physical remnant of his elusive existence, the arrangement of the contents into a twenty-five-metre-long scroll could be interpreted as a metaphor for the persistence of loss and the endlessness of mourning.¹⁵ Marc-Alexandre Reinhardt argues that the accordion structure of *Nox* is a material incarnation of "anachrony," understood as "the fold of time endowing mourning with a certain duration." The critic considers how Carson challenges conventional temporality by creating a work whose pages can be examined all at once¹⁶ and by constantly seeking parallels between a contemporary experience of loss and its archetypal depictions in ancient culture (Reinhardt 2016, 234).¹⁷ Carson's act of weaving her personal grief into Catullus's elegy for his own brother, achieved through interspersing pages about Michael with linguistic commentaries on each consecutive word of the poem, is a formal gesture suggesting the timelessness, and thus the interminableness, of mourning. The accordion shape of *Nox* has been interpreted by Tatiani G. Rapatzikou as a device that "lessens the impact of linearity, creating

¹³ Blurry images are also featured in *Nox*, which concludes with two out-of-focus photographs: of a tree (on the penultimate recto page) and of a smudged printout of Catullus's elegy (on the last recto page of the accordion). This visual shift towards obliteration is paralleled by verbal references to darkness and disappearance: the last dictionary entry – on the word *vale* ("farewell") – ends with the word "night" (a nod at the title), whereas the last textual fragment is the isolated sentence: "He refuses, he is in the stairwell, he disappears."

¹⁴ On the subject of the box's analogies with a tomb, Tanis MacDonald has noted, "Comparisons of the box to a headstone have been noted in several reviews, but whose headstone is the text meant to be? While the cover of the box shows a slice of a photograph of Michael at the age of nine wearing swimming trunks and goggles, the name that appears so starkly above the photograph, and apparently 'on' the headstone, is that of the author" (MacDonald 2015, 58).

¹⁵ During a seminar discussion of *Nox*, my MA students Zofia Pigoń and Natalia Zajac proposed that the foldable scroll could symbolize the attempt to unravel the mystery of Michael's character and life or the act of collecting the fragments of his absence.

¹⁶ In an interview by Sehgal, Carson (2011) comments on the experience of extending the entire scroll of *Nox*: "Do you have a long staircase? Drop it down and watch it unfold. I did."

¹⁷ Reinhardt's article is in French; hence, the quoted passages are offered in my translation.

instead a feeling of circular motion that allows for the smooth flow from one sheet of paper to another, offering a spatial rather than a text-bound sensation enhanced by the lack of compound binding” (Rapatzikou 2017, 62). Although Rapatzikou does not make that point, the sense of a “circular motion” could be related to the circularity of the process of mourning – the experience of failing to advance in one’s grief work, reminiscent of Derrida’s notion of semimourning as a resistance to the “normal” progression and closure of coping with loss.

The persistence of loss is also evoked in the images and collages included in *Nox*. One of the very few double-page spreads with a blank page on the left features a large cut-out with a painted outline of two yellow ellipses next to one another. Those figures could be interpreted as alluding to the circular logic of mourning or, given their proximity, to the symbol of infinity. Elsewhere, Carson juxtaposes five cut-outs from black-and-white photos of stone steps. The rectangular and triangular patches are arranged in a way that suggests continuity but shows no beginning or end. The stairs lead upward but to no discernible destination.¹⁸ As such, they could stand for the ongoingness of mourning and its Sisyphean dimension – all labour and only illusory progress. Finally, the page accompanying the lexicographic note on the word “*perpetuum*” displays seven small photographic cut-outs stapled together to form a primitive chain. Several of the phrases on the neighbouring page – “having an unbroken extent or expanse,” “continuing without interruption,” “continuing for an indefinite period, lasting permanent” – are clearly in dialogue with that image as well as with the book’s commitment to what Joan Fleming has called “a ceaseless farewelling of the brother” (Fleming 2016, 70).

Towards the end of the said commentary on “*perpetuum*,” Carson inserts the phrase “*nox perpetua*” followed by “the debt owed to death; lifelong, held for life ... chronic ... always true or valid, invariable.” To be a mourner, she implies, is to live in a perpetual night, constant in its darkness. “A brother never ends,” Carson writes in an earlier section, “I prowl him. He does not end” (*Nox* 7.1). And neither, in a sense, does *Nox*: when the reader reaches the end of the accordion and turns the last page, a new vast expanse opens up – the back side of the fold-out scroll, composed of just as many pages but all of them empty. “Because the backs of the pages are blank,” Carson (2011) has told Parul Sehgal, “you can make your own book there.” According to Tanis MacDonald, this implies that “one grief will awaken another: that elegies will beget elegies so that the ‘books’ generated by this single book are potentially infinite” (MacDonald 2015, 57). The idea of *Nox* as a trigger for other elegies is also signalled by the accordion’s resemblance to a set of dominoes.¹⁹

Of the formal devices conveying *Nox*’s resistance to closure, the last one I wish to address is the reliance on fragmentation.²⁰ Most notably, the main building blocks

¹⁸ On the four consecutive recto pages, Carson also places photographic cut-outs of stone steps.

¹⁹ I am indebted to my MA student Zofia Pigoń for this observation.

²⁰ Fragmentation also plays an important role in *The Unfortunates*, where Johnson uses multiple blank spaces, which occupy up to a third of the line, between arbitrarily chosen words and sentences. For an analysis of the relationship between fragmentation, grief and friendship in *The Unfortunates*, see Drağ 2017.

of the manuscript are cut up images and textual fragments, as well as irregular slips of paper. This stands in contrast to *The Unfortunates*, which is composed of bound sections, the longest of which amounts to twelve pages of continuous text (occasionally punctured by peculiar caesura-like empty spaces, which can occupy up to a third of the line). The longest sections in *Nox*, on the other hand, extend over merely two pages. With very few exceptions, the entire text included in *Nox* has been placed on paper slips whose edges are rough, which emphasizes that they have been torn out of a larger sheet. Most of the thirteen incorporated snippets of Michael's letter to his mother have been arranged in such a way as to show the reader merely a tantalizing fragment, such as "...have no choice...", "...and...", "... mother.... cent..." or "...and with u... fear ... starte... cid be..." The emotional crux of the letter – the sentence "Six days later she was dead" – is, upon its first appearance, broken down between the words "was" and "dead," the latter only appearing on the consecutive verso page. Cut-up images also tend to present incomplete objects: a fragment of a swing, of a house, of a wall, of a staircase or of a shadow on the ground (photos of shadows are among the visual leitmotifs of *Nox*). Carson's strategy to break down Catullus's elegy into individual words is also part of her poetics of fragmentation. Gillian Sze (2019, 76) sees it as a "melancholic gesture, utterly fragmenting the coherence of the poem." For the critic, *Nox*'s oscillation between the elements of narrative coherence (the story of Michael's life) and the manifestations of its atomizing impulse (which she relates to Lev Manovich's conception of the database as the main rival of the narrative) can be interpreted as a struggle between mourning and melancholia.²¹

Melancholic mourning?

Many of the formal devices employed by Johnson and Carson situate their representation of loss closer to the pole of melancholia understood not as a "pathological disposition," which is how Sigmund Freud described it in "Mourning and Melancholia" (310), but rather as an "ongoing and open relationship with the past," which involves "bringing its ghosts and spectres ... into the present" (Eng, Kazanjian 2003, 3–4). In *Modernism and Mourning* (2007), Patricia Rae proposes the term "resistant mourning" to denote attitudes that "leave mourning unresolved without endorsing evasion or repression" and "that resist the narratives and tropes that would bring grief through to catharsis" (Rae 2007, 18, 22).²² Johnson and Carson could both be regarded as resistant mourners in Rae's understanding. Their literary

²¹ In an interview by Eleanor Wachtel, Carson (2014) made a remark suggesting that her use of fragmentation may also be interpreted as symbolic of the instability of the self: "most of us, to be honest, are just a collection of bits that don't make sense. It's a nice idea that there's a coherent self in each of us with a story that another person could tell but it's a fiction."

²² Rae speaks merely of the resistance towards cathartic narratives, but it should be noted that both *The Unfortunates* and *Nox* reject any narrative patterns. They both favour the principle of the archive, which depends on selection, processing and storage rather than on arranging the material into a coherent and logical plotline. Archival poetics is more apparent in Carson's work, whose reliance on incorporated artefacts makes it resemble a family album or a scrapbook.

projects are strong testimonies to their determination to confront themselves with the reality of their losses. In their pursuits, they are not after feeble illusions, lasting consolation or therapeutic closure. They could be said to “exhibit hostility toward consolation and its therapeutic imperative to finish the work of mourning” – an approach that Tammy Clewell (2009, 3) attributes to “postmodern writers” and “their modernist precursors.” Johnson and Carson also fit into David Kennedy’s argument about modern elegists’ “unwillingness or refusal to give up their dead” and to sever their “relationship” (Kennedy 2007, 57). This can be illustrated by Johnson’s insistence on the pronoun “us” in the book’s final statement (“the loss to me, to us”) and by Carson’s remark (also already cited) that “a brother never ends.” Finally, the lack of consolation or closure in *The Unfortunates* and *Nox* could be interpreted as an illustration of what Jahan Ramazani has called “‘melancholic’ mourning” – the kind of mourning that is, at once, “unresolved, violent, and ambivalent” (Ramazani 1994, 4).

The sustained presence of Tony Tillinghast and Michael Carson – their “refusal” to be confined to the past – appears to have different origins. *The Unfortunates* bears witness to the intimacy of Johnson’s friendship with Tony – their shared passion for literature and their unwavering personal commitment to each other. The continued resonance of Tony’s life (“his voice I still have, yes, and what he said, what he was”) results from his importance to Johnson, who, just before the onset of his friend’s cancer, had dedicated his first novel, *Travelling People* (Johnson 1964), to Tony and his wife. Michael, on the other hand, was more of an absence than a presence throughout much of Carson’s life. She had not seen him even once over the last two decades of his life and had spoken to him on the phone only a couple of times. Tony’s voice is contrasted with Michael’s silence. “I am looking a long time into the muteness of my brother,” Carson admits, “It resists me” (Carson 2010, 1.3). She speaks of a “likeness between my brother and Lazarus” (8.3), as both of them “had to die twice” (Michael’s first “death” being his escape from Canada in 1978) and Lazarus has been consistently described in the Bible and represented in art as “mute” (8.4). Michael remains mute in his final appearance in *Nox*, either remembered (in a scene that would have had to occur two decades earlier) or imagined, which amounts to a mere image: “He refuses, he is in the stairwell, he disappears.”

Michael’s silent absence in life and the elusiveness of his death left Carson with an intense feeling of incomprehension. On one of the pages of *Nox*, she has placed a large carved inscription “WHO WERE YOU,” whose features evoke a sense of mystery and whose visual remnants come through on five consecutive pages of the scroll. In interviews, she referred to Michael as “such a puzzle” (Carson 2011) and attributed her motivation for writing *Nox* to “grief partly, but more the puzzle of understanding” (Carson 2014).²³ Her words echo a statement from *The Unfortunates*:

That this thing could just come from nowhere ... I still do not understand. Perhaps there is nothing to be understood, perhaps understanding is simply not to be found, is not applicable

²³ Christine Wiesenthal (2020, 211) observes that in Michael’s photograph on the cover/box his peculiar goggles make him look like an “alien.”

to such a thing. But it is hard, hard, not to try to understand, even for me, who accept that all is nothing, that sense does not exist ("For recuperation..." 2).

Although Johnson is bemused by a very different aspect of his struggle with loss – not by Tony himself but by the fact that he could die of cancer at such a young age – the central place of incomprehension in both works is among the greatest obstacles to “successful” mourning, which hinges on acceptance. “In Carson’s therapeutic biography,” Joan Fleming argues, “there are motions towards understanding ... but there is no end, no final cure – no definitive interpretation that can evaporate the need for therapeutic exploration” (Fleming 2016, 78). The search for understanding – and the work of mourning – continue, the lack of healing precluded by the inability to assimilate what the lost object was and the mere fact of his loss. “By mourning, I keep it inside me,” Derrida states in *Points*... (1995, 152). The box in which Johnson and Carson locked their works can, in this light, assume yet another interpretation – a casket where, instead of jewellery, they have set aside their grief, neither ready nor, perhaps, willing to let go of it.

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