UNDER A NEW LAW: WALTER BENJAMIN’S “LITERARY MONTAGE” AND THE COLLAGE POETICS OF SUSAN HOWE AND ANNE CARSON

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By

Hannah M. VanderHart, M.F.A.

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Hannah M. VanderHart, M.F.A.

Thesis Advisor: Carolyn L. Forche, M.F.A.

ABSTRACT

Beginning with Walter Benjamin’s notion of “literary montage,” as touched upon in Convolute N of Benjamin’s The Arcades Project, this thesis examines the collage poetics of Susan Howe’s collection of poetry That This and Anne Carson’s book-length elegy Nox, focusing on the two texts’ engagement with the material object (particularly manuscripts and extratextual artifacts) and collage as a method of historiography. The fragment’s form (and its poetic, historical, and philosophic significance) as well as the elegy’s form figures prominently in the discussion, as both poets are interested in postmodern form in poetry and its relation to history, and both texts are poetic acts in memory of the dead—Howe’s husband and Carson’s brother. Chapter I compares the origin of collage (visual arts Vs. cinematography) in Howe and Benjamin’s work, respectively, while Chapter II examines the “surface” of collage: collage techniques and strategies, and collage’s relation with scrapbooking techniques. Texts in conversation with Howe’s That This and Carson’s Nox include Benjamin’s The Arcades Project, Theses on the Philosophy of History, The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, The Task of the Translator, and On Some Motifs in Baudelaire.
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INTRODUCTION

Of the discreet roles of the historian and the poet, Aristotle writes:

For the historian and the poet do not differ by speaking either in meters or without meters (since it would be possible for the writing of Herodotus to be put in meters, and they would no less be a history with meter than without meters). But they differ in this: the one speaks of what has come to be while the other speaks of what sort would come to be. (1451b)

In distinguishing between the poet and the historian, Aristotle creates the figure of a Janus: the historian facing the past, and the poet, the future. It is a difference of what is seen, not how it is seen—content, rather than form—that separates the one from the other. And according to Aristotle, an art that deals with the future, as poetry does, gains a Delphic quality over the art that deals with the past. For what belongs to the past exists in actuality, while the events of the future exist in potentiality, in possibility—the future as the not-yet seen. In light of poetry and history’s difference, Aristotle concludes that “poiēsis is more philosophic and of more stature than history. For poetry speaks rather of the general things while history speaks of the particular things.” By Aristotle’s definition, poetry is an abstraction of life, and in its ideal form should deal with the persons and events that could possibly be—humans and actions in the full glory of their potentiality—whereas what has actually happened and how events have actually played out, the names, dates, and circumstances involved, are the (implicitly lesser) particulars of history.
Walter Benjamin, in his iconic *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, imagined a figure similar to that of the Aristotelian historian, eyes turned also towards the things of the past. Once again, history and art meet, inviting contrast and comparison. Benjamin describes how

A Klee painting named *Angelus Novus* shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress. (257-8)

The tragic perplexity of the angel of history is his inability to turn around—the stasis of his wings blown open by the storm, the constant propelling forward into the future and the inability to “stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed.”

Benjamin’s angel of history must witness the violence of historical events without the possibility of lending aid. But in using Klee’s *Angelus Novus* as inspiration for the angel of history, Benjamin implicates the water-color *Angelus Novus*, as a work of art, in the
helplessness of the angel of history before the face of the “storm…we call progress.” One as history’s angel, the other as the angel of art, are both, in the final analysis, static figures.

Aristotle and Benjamin both cannot resist linking history and art (specifically that of poetry): in Aristotle, they comprise a (complementary) division of past and future content, and in Benjamin the two diverge over a difference of representation and symbol. For all their differences, the relationship between the historian’s process and that of the artist attract comparisons and contrasts. And where better to look for a continuation of the historian and poet’s relationship than in the work of two contemporary poets working with the form of collage and the content of the material, historical object: Susan Howe and Anne Carson.

In their critical and creative work, Howe and Carson are both involved in the process of locating a historical “stay” amid the “storm…we call progress.” Both Howe and Carson’s work is intrinsically concerned with the “particulars” of life, with naming the names of real people in their lives, citing genealogies and dates—thus by Aristotle’s definition, they are both historians. They also both write, and rewrite, the elegy in contemporary language and context—the irony, of course, being that elegy is another backwards-facing figure, its eyes bent on things and persons that no longer exist. In Howe’s most recent work, *That This*, she writes towards the form of elegy for her husband Peter Hare, and relies on a multiplicity of objects, from emails to art exhibits, from an autopsy report to Jonathan Edward’s manuscripts, as a means of accomplishing a work in the living present of the poet. Likewise, in her book-length elegy *Nox*, Anne
Carson investigates the genre of elegy via her translation of Catullus’ poem 101, the letters of her dead brother Michael, family photographs, finger paintings, and more.

The “pile of debris…grow[ing] skyward” before Benjamin’s angel of history bears some relation to the collage process that Howe and Carson employ in *That This* and *Nox*. Indeed, the debris pile of history partially serves to describe Benjamin’s own process of *The Arcades Project*—that of the “literary montage.” Describing the method of literary montage as a mode of historiography, Benjamin writes, “I needn’t say anything. Merely show. I shall purloin no valuables, appropriate no ingenious formulations. But the rags, the refuse—these I will not inventory but allow, in the only way possible, to come into their own: by making use of them” (460). To “not inventory but allow,” not to curate but to permit, opens wide the content that is available to the artist. For Benjamin, the idea of literary montage was (literally, in light of his anti-fascist, pro-historical materialist context) a revolutionary philosophy for re-thinking history itself. History not as a smooth, streamlined process or perfect chronology, but history as that which is defined by what Benjamin variously refers to as the moment of “danger,” the “flash,” “interference,” and “catastrophe. It is the “constellation of dangers,” Benjamin argues, that the materialist presentation of history “comes to engage” (*Arcades* 475).

Benjamin, in introducing the concept of the “literary montage,” borrows from the language of film—a new and exciting metaphor owed to the burgeoning film industry of the early 20th century. Benjamin lifts the notion of montage, the act of cutting and splicing film in order to create the appearance of continuity and the passage
of time, and applies it to *The Arcades Project*, his catalogue of citations and notes for an eventual work in the style of a “literary montage.” But *The Arcades Project* manuscript was incomplete at the time of Benjamin’s tragic and early death in September 1940—and as such, *The Arcades Project* is more collage, and less edited montage, than Benjamin intended it to be. Even so, the concept of “literary montage” that Benjamin both describes and enacts in *The Arcades Project* not only posits a radical method of historiography (history defined by its places of rupture, gaps, 475), but also provides a touchstone text for considering the contemporary collage-poetics of Susan Howe and Anne Carson.
CHAPTER I. THE ORIGIN OF COLLAGE: SUSAN HOWE’S THAT THIS

Susan Howe’s That This is, in several key ways, a text exploring origins—particularly those origins of little or no trace that demand a multiplicity of informing sources and investigative approaches. The narrative of That This, an elegy and a meditation for the absent beloved, Howe’s husband Peter, manifests itself by way of the polyphonic medium of collage. Howe articulates her poetic process early in the text’s opening essay, The Disappearance Approach, as “Starting from nothing with nothing with everything else has been said” (11). The poet’s need is to locate new voices by which to interrogate the “nothing” left in death’s wake. Howe’s aim, in composing an elegy for Peter via collage, coincides with Benjamin’s declaration: “I needn’t say anything. Merely show” (Arcades 460). Both writers speak to an inadequacy of spoken language as a material and artistic medium, turning instead to the demonstrative aspect of collage and a reliance on particulars over generalities. And yet the two approaches of collage demonstrated in Howe’s poetry and the “literary montage” of Benjamin’s work stem from disparate heritages in the arts and are worth distinguishing.

Howe’s work with collage had its genesis in the visual arts. In a 1995 interview with Lynn Keller, Howe recalls her transition from purely visual to verbal collage:

Before we moved out of New York I had started making environments—rooms that you could walk into and be surrounded by walls, and on those walls would be collage, using found photographs (again a kind of quotation). Then I started using words with that work. I was at the point where I was only putting words on the walls and I had surrounded
myself with words that were really composed lines when a friend, the poet Ted Greenwald, came by to look at what I was doing and said to me: ‘Actually you have a book on the wall. Why don't you just put it into a book?’ (6)

The visual space that literally becomes linguistic (Harris 451) is intriguing because even the heritage of the collage is hybridity: Howe began with walls and photographs (notably referred to by Howe as “quotations”), and slowly the rooms in her New York apartment became walls and words—literal quotations existing in a visual space. Howe comments, “I've never really lost the sense that words, even single letters, are images. The look of a word is part of its meaning—the meaning that escapes dictionary definition, or rather doesn't escape but is bound up with it. Just as a sailboat needs wind and water” (6-7). Howe’s critics and readers are equally struck by the position of her poetry on the page, the space around the language and the concrete nature of the poem’s form. But Howe has a visual connection to language from the letter up—thus every word is a small collage in itself. What Howe’s poet friend Ted Greenwald did for her was refer her art from the space of the wall to another accommodating plane of hybridity: the text. And to begin thinking about the collage nature of the text (from intertextuality to extratextuality), leads in turn to Walter Benjamin’s development of the literary-montage from cinematography.

In opening pages of The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, Benjamin explains to his readers “For the study of [the standard of technical reproduction] nothing is more revealing than the nature of the repercussions that these
two different manifestations—the reproduction of works of art and the art of the film—have had on art in its traditional form” (220). Developing technologies of reproduction (mechanical mimesis) in the early 20th century were no longer simply a means of reproducing art, but capable of manifesting, as Benjamin states, “among the artistic processes” (219-20). Benjamin’s enthusiasm for the marriage of technical reproduction and the production of art culminates in his admiration of film production. He writes, “The shooting of a film…affords a spectacle unimaginable anywhere at any time before this” (232). It is the equipment necessary for film production, the “extraneous accessories” of cameras, lighting, and technical assistants that fascinate Benjamin—for, like the diminishment of the work of art’s “aura” by means of mechanical reproduction, film production involves a diminishment of perspective in regards to the spectator’s viewpoint; the “unique phenomenon of distance” (222), vital to the preservation of the work of art’s “aura,” is a quality also diminished by the mechanical-assisted, camera-laden production of film. This scene of mechanical production is countered by the “illusion” produced by montage in the studio. Yet montage is responsible for both the production of “illusion” and a magnification of “reality.” Benjamin comments on the role of montage:

In the theater one is well aware of the place from which the play cannot immediately be detected as illusionary. There is no such place for the movie scene that is being shot. Its illusionary nature is that of the second degree, the result of cutting…in the studio the mechanical equipment has penetrated so deeply into reality that its pure aspect freed from the
foreign substance of equipment is the result of a special procedure, namely, the shooting by the specially adjusted camera and the mounting of the shot together with other similar ones. The equipment-free aspect of reality here has become the height of artifice; the sight of immediate reality has become an orchid in the land of technology. (233, emphasis added)

The cinematographic illusion of “the second degree, the result of cutting” not only penetrates and cuts film scenes and tape, but also according to Benjamin actually penetrates and cuts into reality’s “pure aspect.” How does the studio “artifice” its way into the spirit of reality? Via the splicing of multiple shots, captured by multiple cameras. In the film studio, the mechanical procedure of montage produces a creation so lifelike that Benjamin calls it “an orchid in the land of technology.” And the greatest irony is that the orchid is, in terms of the production of the “immediate sight of reality,” the greatest artifice of all.

To underscore the figurative importance of the literal cutting involved in film production and montage, Benjamin introduces a surgical analogy,

The surgeon greatly diminishes the distance between himself and the patient by penetrating into the patient’s body, and increases it but little by the caution with which his hand moves among the organs. In short…the surgeon at the decisive moment abstains from facing the patient…rather, it is through the operation that he penetrates into him (233).
Benjamin sets the figure of the surgeon in opposition to the “magician” (comparable to the “medical practitioner”), who heals by an exterior laying on of hands; the magician being like “the painter [who] maintains in his work a natural distance from reality” (233), and the surgeon like “the cameraman [who] penetrates deeply into [reality’s] web” (233). To take the paired analogies even further, the pictures produced by the painter and the cameraman are as different as holistic healing and surgery, and Benjamin significantly notes, “That of the painter is a total one, that of the cameraman consists of multiple fragments which are assembled under a new law” (234). Benjamin concludes,

Thus, for contemporary man the representation of reality by the film is incomparably more significant than that of the painter, since it offers, precisely because of the thoroughgoing permeation of reality with mechanical equipment, an aspect of reality which is free of all equipment. And that is what one is entitled to ask from a work of art.

(234)

Benjamin’s “new law” allows for a new representation of reality in art—like Susan Howe’s “environments,” comprised of photo and language collage and assembled under the “law” of the wall, acting as canvas. The “entitlement” of art, Benjamin promises, is “an aspect of reality…free of all equipment.” Thus the artist takes the viewer, reader, and listener past the place of the production equipment and to the place of the new creation, assembled under the new law. Or, as Thomas Brockelman, author of The Frame and the Mirror: On Collage and the Postmodern, says of collage: “[the]
gathering of materials from *different* worlds into a single composition…depends upon a new kind of relationship” (10-11). Also according to Brockelman, in providing its audience with a collision of worlds, collage “promises a new sense of truth and experience” (11). For Brockelman, as for Benjamin the montagist/collagist historian, the aesthetic phenomenon of collage provides a foundation for asking philosophical questions of reality, to include the past and present realities of the physical, cultural world (Brockelman 5). There is a link between not only the form and content of collage and how it represents the world, but in the very *process* of collage, the act of assembling many parts or fragments into a whole. As Susan Howe states, “The content is the process, and so it changes” (*Birth-mark* 166).

A characteristic of collage that will immediately strike the reader of *That This* is the dynamic nature of collage’s hybridity; the pieces that have been moved into place by the artist keep moving, the juxtapositions keep juxtaposing. The function of the work of art as a whole is always that of relationship—the “that” and the “this” interacting with one another. To the reader/viewer of collage, one of the first ways collage will present itself is in a difference of styles. And indeed it is the stylistically unpredictable nature of the collage text that offers illumination to not only how one thinks about writing, but to how one writes and thinks. As such, Howe’s opening “essay,” *The Disappearance Approach*, is a text that challenges genre, provoking various classifications as prose, poetry, essay, criticism and biography. But it is the multiplicity of Howe’s mediums that actually challenges genre as they exist under the “new law” of collage.
The Disappearance Approach opens with a description of Howe’s husband’s death day: January 3, 2004. In the January bleakness and the pressure of absence, Howe names a number of mundane objects—her instant oatmeal, Peter’s missing slippers, The New York Times in the driveway—before she introduces her discovery Peter, deceased in his bed with his CPAP mask still “breathing.” Howe immediately turns to the language of Sarah Edward’s letter, written April 3, 1758 to her daughter Esther, upon hearing of their husband and father Jonathan’s sudden death in Princeton: “Oh that we may kiss the rod, and lay our hands on our mouths! The Lord has done it. He has made me adore his goodness, that we had him for so long. But my God lives; and he has my heart…we are all given to God: and there I am, and love to be” (12-13). To which Howe responds: “I admire the way thought contradicts feeling in Sarah’s furiously calm letter” (12-13). The placement of Sarah Edward’s letter shifts the reader from Howe’s loss to Sarah’s loss, from Peter’s death to Jonathan’s death, from 2004 to 1758. Disparate lives and women joined by one of Sarah’s few surviving letters—a letter that functions as a means of placation if not consolation.

And, as with Benjamin, a discussion of history is ever just around the corner: “History intersects with unanswered questions,” (19) Howe writes, and of language she says, “Somewhere I read that relations between sounds and objects, feelings and thoughts, develop by association; language attaches to and envelopes its referent without destroying or changing it—the way a cobweb catches a fly” (13). The unanswered questions can be seen to be answered in part by the associations—the cobweb and the fly posing a lyrical description of the collage process. The past offers a
ghostly architecture to Howe as writer, and the material object her work intercepts and
enfolds a spidery catch. Speaking of her husband Peter “lying with his head on his arm,
the way I had often seen him lie asleep” (13), Howe’s mind moves to Charles Dickens:
“I thought of Steerforth’s drowned body in David Copperfield, also the brutality of
sending young children away to boarding school in order to forge important ties for
future life. Though Steerforth is a sadistic character his perfect name forms a second
skin. Something has to remain to rest a soul against stone” (13). Is it a body or a name
that Howe envisions as commemorating a person’s death? And what kind of
“something” must remain behind as material marker for life?

One stay against disappearance for Howe arrives in the form of a seven-page
“Autopsy Report from the Department of Pathology.” Howe provides her reader with
“Extracts”:

    CAUSE OF DEATH in caps. EMBOLIC OBSTRUCTION OF THE
    RIGHT VENTRICULAR OUTFLOW TRACT.

Pathologist, Demetrios Braddock, M.D.

—Report Electronically Signed Out.—

‘Eyes: The body is received with the eyes previously removed.’ (25)

Howe does not miss the irony inherent in the report’s final note, and in return she notes
that the etymology of the word “autopsy” stems from the Greek roots for “self” and
“sight”; an objective, ocular view of the self. In a mock response to the report’s
pathologist, Howe writes

    Dear Dr. Braddock:
If you die in your sleep do you know you are dead? Your clinically precise word order is a failure of dream-work. It gives an effect of harmless vacancy. Why this violent tearing away?

Sincerely, (25)

Many critics have noted Howe’s pursuance of history’s ignored, silenced, and banished figures. David Clippinger writes, “[Howe’s] poem attempts to unearth repressed or forgotten history and to write against the silence by focusing upon the ‘Cancelations, variants, insertions, erasures, marginal notes, stray marks and blanks’ that mark the site of repression and are cultural ‘memories in disguise’” (“Between the Gaps” 196-7), while Anne Vickey observes “Howe seeks, more than anything, to free up literary history, to open up spaces in which women’s voices, as well as other marginal voices, may begin to speak and take up a community” (93), and Paul Naylor describes Howe as advancing “a critique of the narrative of progress that dominates modern historiography…animated by…desire to explore history’s elisions for evidence of the ‘anonymous, slighted’ voices silenced by ‘progress’” (“Writing Historical Poetics” 324). Forgotten history, history as needing to be “freed,” and history’s elisions converge as ideas in these critics’ writings to outline a creative philosophy that questions historical and cultural conventions of absence—little surprise to Howe’s reader, then, that she carries the same investigatory spirit with her into her own texts, her own life, and her husband’s death. “Harmless vacancy,” while a phrase of Howe’s, is not a notion she believes in as a literary critic or historian.
Howe states, “Voices I am following lead me to the margins…I know records are compiled by winners, and scholarship is in collusion with Civil Government. I know this and go on searching for some trace…through all the paper in all the libraries I come to” (Birth-Mark 4). Howe follows the “trace”—but specifically the “trace” that is attached to a “voice.” Understanding Howe’s research and creative motives is central to understanding the tone in which she writes the above letter to Dr. Braddock, that is, Howe writes as one who has not only specialized in filling what may appear in history as a “harmless” vacancy, but she has specialized in the recognition of the “violent tearing away” (25). The coroner’s report is a record, and an insufficient one according to Howe, failing in “dream-work” (a phrase from Freud’s clinical work)—and yet, via Howe’s interrogation, it becomes part of the fabric of Peter’s elegy. In writing a response to Dr. Braddock, and in decrying “harmless vacancy,” Howe creates relationship with the document, miming the liturgical form of call-and-response and creating her own process of “dream-work” in the rupture constituting Peter’s death and absence.

As a collage writer and artist, “dream-work” continues for Howe by way of the (collaged) material object—for the material object transcends time and circumstance and creates a web of relations between history and the contemporary life that Howe says “possesses” humanity (19). Looking over Peter’s computer desktop, Howe describes finding “a short essay he was writing on poetry and philosophy but never showed me. There’s a letter to his first wife’s brother, signed ‘Peter and Sukey.’ I wish we were Hansel and Gretel with pebbles as a hedge against the day before and the day after”
(15). But of course, without being Gretel in the fairy tale, Howe is enacting the breadcrumb trace as she discovers Peter’s computer files and incorporates them into her essay. As a poet working with collage, she has a hedge “against the day before and the day after,” whether her reader wishes to call it the fly in the cobweb, or the breadcrumb, or the act of dream-work.

“The historian today,” writes Benjamin, “has only to erect a slender but study scaffolding—a philosophic structure—in order to draw the most vital aspects of the past into his net” (Arcades 459). The art and act of montage would not be too radical a scaffolding for the task Benjamin proposes: the selection, the capturing even, of the “most vital” aspects of history into the historian’s “net.” As Howe writes her and Peter’s personal history in The Disappearance Approach, small things take on the value and title of “most vital aspects.” For instance, Howe recalls the catchphrases of the beloved:

‘At any rate.’ Time and again you repeated this phrase. Often you had a hard time touching down in conversation—waving your arms and going off on tangents before coming the long way round to where you started. ‘Bang for the buck.’ I was impatient with your verbal tics. ‘All squared away.’ Now I would turn to listen with elation… ‘You can save money—it’s to save you.’ (16)

Critics frequently cite the definition Benjamin provides in The Arcades Project of “the art of quoting without quotation marks” (458). Reality, in Benjamin’s reimagining of
historiography, is an object composed of many pieces, a series of dramatic leaps, a
process of highlighting. The quotation marks are unnecessary due to the quality and the
tenor of the quotations and the citations themselves—the phrases set themselves apart.
One can hear how Peter’s repetitious sayings affected the ear of the poet—with
“impatience”—and yet Howe catalogs each one, catches Peter’s flies in her net of
language, preserving and displaying the only materiality left of the beloved’s body, his
words.

Peter had planted paper whites, small relative to the daffodil, in the living
room, and they continued to thrive after his death, appearing at several points in The
Disappearance Approach. Howe writes

The paperwhites are blooming wonderfully…alone with the tremendous
silence of your absence, I want to fill this room between our workspaces
with flowers because light flows through them—their scent is breath or
spirit of life against my dread of being alone—of being cheated by
people—today the electrician—next week Greco and Haynes for the well
water filter. (19)

The life filled with objects, objects that act as the stay against life’s “storm,” overflows
into the text and emerges as collage. The paperwhites fill the living room, Howe’s
meditation on absence and light, and the m-dash heavy paragraph where, haltingly,
loneliness and fear butt against the figure of the electrician and well maintenance. Howe
could have photographed the paperwhites, sketched them, pressed their leaves into the
pages of her text and recorded their physical presence with physicality, but instead she
relies on language to be the collage of the visual—the “quoting without quotation marks” is the living room phenomenon of the paperwhites, slipping into the text and filling the empty room, the empty paragraph, with a bright solace.

On the heels of the appearance of the paperwhites in the essay, a genealogical list fills the page. Above the list, Howe write: “Sometimes, introducing himself to people, he enjoyed adding, ‘Peter Hare as in Peter Rabbit’” (20). After the paperwhites and the fear of loneliness and fraud because of loneliness, not only does Howe shift to a memory of Peter making introductions, mixing with other people, but also she moves to a Beatrix Potter children’s character, and then follows with a list of siblings:

- Esther (1695-1766)
- Elizabeth (1697-1733)
- Anne (1699-1790)
- Mary (1701-1776)
- Jonathan (1703-1758)
- Eunice (1705-1788)
- Abigail (1707-1764)
- Jerusha (1710-1729)
- Hannah (1713-1773)
- Lucy (1715-1736)
- Martha (1718-1794)

Why does Howe list the Edward siblings? Howe write, “All that remains of the 18th-century family’s impressive tradition of female learning are a bedsheet Esther Stoddard
Edwards probably spun and embroidered herself, Sarah’s wedding dress fragment, and several pages from Hannah Edwards Wetmore’s private writings” (21). The list of daughter’s names is nearly all history has left of them; the list is long, and Howe notes that the ten sisters were unusually tall and that their minister father jokingly referred to them as his “‘sixty feet of daughters’” (20). The Edwards family, their names, their birth order, fills Howe’s text. And they fill a space meant as elegy. One way to understand how the placement of the list into the essay works in Howe’s mind, as a poet, is to consider Howe’s explanation of Emily Dickinson’s handwritten manuscripts: “This space is the poem’s space,” Howe states, “Letters are sounds we see. Sounds leap to the eye. Word lists, crosses, blanks, and ruptured stanzas are points of contact and displacement. Line breaks and visual contrapuntal stresses represent an athematic compositional intention” (Birth-mark 139). An “athematic compositional intention” is definitely one facet, the misrelation facet, of collage. It is a breaking that disrupts the reader from the writing’s “theme,” and yet it is an intended disruption, orchestrated by the artist.

“There was a curtness to the way he left” (23) Howe states—and the structure of The Disappearance Approach argues a mutual curtness, interruption, disruption, as Howe pieces together memories with Peter that inevitably lead her even further into history. Howe finds a mirroring project in the Edwards’ family manuscript remains, in the impetus of their projects and the materials employed. The gap of time between Howe and the Edwards seems to act as a temporal salve for Howe as poet and historian,
as she reaches across time to the large family, via manuscripts. Of the manuscripts themselves, Howe writes

The folio-size double leaves Jonathan, Sarah, and his ten tall sisters wrote on were often homemade: hand-stitched from linen rags salvaged by women from worn out clothing. Grassroots out-of-tune steps and branches, quotations of psalms, dissonant scripture clusters, are pressed between coarse cardboard covers with frayed edges. The rag paper color has grown deeper and richer in some. One in particular, with a jacket he constructed from old newspapers then tied together at the center with string, looks like a paper model for a canoe. The minister or possibly some later scholar has christened his antique paper vessel ‘The Doctrine of [the] Justice and Grace of God, Explained and Defended, and the Contrary Errors that Have of Late Prevailed, Confuted…’ (22)

Howe is writing about and describing collage (and scrapbooks) within her own collage essay, inside a book built out of many different texts. The layers are multiple, and the poet’s mind keeps delving after the beautiful, the mundane, the interesting, and the intellectually titled theological treatise in the boyish shape of a paper canoe. The Edwards’ family manuscripts are not only a reflection of Howe’s creative and critical process, they are a part of it: the manuscripts enter in, not as justification or provisional evidence that lives and personalities can be preserved via manuscripts/material objects, but because of the poet’s collage they are entertained in the text. Like the rag-paper
pages that “grow deeper and richer” with time, Howe’s essay builds on the historical shades and depth of the Edward’s family.

Howe notes, “Poetry, false in the tricks of its music, draws harmony from necessity and random play” (*That This* 24). “Necessity and random play” could well be the mantra of a historically realized “literary montage”—for it contains both elements, necessity (content) and play (the form of montage). Interestingly, Howe posits the “tricks” and “necessity and random play” of poetry against what she terms “this aggressive age of science” (25). “Sound-colored secrets,” writes Howe, “unperceivable in themselves, can act as proof against our fear of emptiness” (24-5). Science, entering into the essay in the metonymy of Peter’s CPAP sleep-apnea mask and the coroner’s autopsy report, offers a “harmless vacancy” but leaves, behind, a fear of emptiness. Science has a “precise” mode of explanation for physical phenomena that montage and collage never attempt, or if they do, attempt in a manner more filled with byways, “tricks,” and play—assembled as they are out of so many parts, not unlike the supernatural figure constructed by young Dr. Frankenstein.

A poem of Howe’s manages to slip into the collaged text. Howe describes the poems conception:

I wrote this poem on a winter day in 1998 when my mother was still alive, and I hadn’t met Peter. I had been reading Xerox copies of the last journal pages from the microform edition of the manuscripts of Charles Sanders Peirce. If you take immediate environment into account, during the winter of 1904 things were threadbare for the putative father of
Pragmatism. No peace in projects—no firewood for warmth—a few crotchety word lists used as ornaments or phantom limbs. (24)

The above description could have been paraphrased—or could it? A paraphrase would seem to occur to the detriment of Howe’s project. Every letter in its space upon the page, every m-dash as it sets apart a clause, e.g. “no peace in projects,” more than a paragraph, creates a distillation of events, objects, persons—all parts and pieces that have been re-formed into a collaboration. Such as the poem itself:

C.O Milford Pa. 1994

The way bleak north

presents itself here

as Heraclitean error

driving and driving

thought and austerity

nearer to lyricism

Often as black ice

In her essay Form and Discontent, poet and critic Rosmarie Waldrop offers the observation that “The blank page is not blank. No text has one single author. Whether we are conscious of it or not, we always write on top of a palimpsest…the slate is never clean” (204). Howe, as evidenced by the above poem (simultaneously born out of Howe’s wintry environment, Charles Sanders Peirce’s manuscripts, Heraclitus and Nietzsche’s commentary on Heraclitus) agrees with Waldrop’s assertion, and yet carries the notion of consciousness on the writer’s side to that of the reader’s. In The Birth-
Mark, Howe comments that the editors of the Frankfurt Holderlin: “by presenting Holderlin’s texts as events rather than objects, as processes rather than products, convert the reader from passive consumer into active participant in the genesis of the poem, while at the same time calling attention to the fundamentally historical character of both the reader’s and the writer’s activity” (19). Thinking about the reading, as well as the writing, as event and process, as activity, enlivens the consideration of the collage text, making the collage not merely a project completed by the artist but a process participated in by the reader. In the above poem, the reader is invited into the creation and construction via the experience of reading. As poet Adrienne Rich states, “And all this [the poem] has to travel from the nervous system of the poet, preverbal, to the nervous system of the one who listens, who reads, the active participant without whom the poem is never finished” (emphasis added). Rich’s statement is especially true for the reader and viewer of collage, who reassembles the work constructed into relation by the artist.

In the following introduction by Hannah Arendt on Walter Benjamin’s Theses on the Philosophy of History, Arendt employs the analogy of the sea—a place of living, dying, and change—to illustrate the nature of the historical object, as well as the object’s retrieval by the historian:

What guides [Walter Benjamin's] thinking is the conviction that although the living is subject to the ruin of time, the process of decay is at the same time a process of crystallization, that in the depth of the sea, into which sinks and is dissolved what once was alive, some things "suffer a
"sea-change" and survive in new crystallized forms and shapes that remain immune to the elements, as though they waited only for the pearl diver who one day will come down to them and bring them up into the world of the living. (*Illuminations* 51)

Susan Howe and Benjamin both, as collage artists, take their readers and viewers down with them to the “crystalized forms,” bringing their readers into the process by which pearls are retrieved from “the depth of the sea.” If the sea is the great amassment of human history, then the “pearls” in Arendt’s analogy are the great, interruptive moments of history that comprise the “constellations” that Benjamin speaks of as being the historiographer’s concern. These moments of rupture are great in their very negativity, however—in how they break the normal flow of historical narrative in absence and disappearance (to use Howe’s terms) and flashes and danger (to use Benjamin’s). Such places in history’s narrative are pearls among the general wreck, and yet formed from the wreck and debris themselves—and overlookable, according to Howe at her poem’s close, “Often as black ice.” They represent the danger that cannot be seen and that *can* be looked through, and remain unperceived. Russell Berman, writing on collage in Thomas Mann and T. S. Eliot’s work, notes that juxtaposition in collage is utilized “not in order to construct a museum of literary giants but rather in order to display the simultaneity of their thought in the present” (22). The pearls can be brought up to the surface of the sea, then, in order to be seen in relation to the present time and not merely in the context of the sea’s depths, where history resides. Not as a museum, but as the present itself: “driving and driving / thought and austerity / nearer to
lyricism” (5-7) says Howe’s poem. Out of an old space and into a new that bears a new proximity to the reader.

In many ways *The Disappearance Approach* is itself a linguistic sea: many parts, brought into a new relationship by collage. It is purposeful contradiction, utilizing misrelation as a form of relation, unlike as a form of like, freely bowing to what David Clippinger terms “the inherent partiality of human knowledge” (108) involved in the process of naming and including objects and persons via language, as well as employing the philosophical phenomenon that of not-naming as an indirect form of naming (109). In the negation of the essay’s subject (e.g. Howe’s husband), and in speaking of absence—“every poem breaks a silence that had to be overcome,” writes Adrienne Rich (Poetry Foundation)—Howe evokes presence and infers the proposition of the beloved.

And what if, as Howe wonders, the “trace” of the material object, embraced by the collage text, “become[s] the thing it traces, secure as ever, real as ever—a chosen set of echo-fragments?” (29). If the trace *does* succeed in recalling the former whole, then the collage artist and reader are both enlisted in acts of recreation and redemption. The idea of historical and creative re-enactment is a notion readers must bring to *That This*, as to all texts of a fragmentary or vestigial nature. What Howe actually demonstrates in *The Disappearance Approach* is a creative process by which it is possible to find an object that stands in the place of *nothing as something*, her incorporating the material world into a present narrative an act of historical reconstruction. Even a connection of color in objects offers her the possibility of not only collage, but a philosophy of collage. Howe asks:
Outside the field of empirically possible knowledge is there a property of blueness in itself that continues to exist when everything else is sold away? I keep going back in my mind to the tiny square remnant of Sarah Pierrepont’s wedding dress. This love relic has lasted over two hundred years in the form of a Prussian blue scrap. It says nothing at all to an outsider who can look at it without being seen. Could it be an illusory correlation that causes my brain to repetitively connect this single swatch with the oblong royal blue plastic throwaway sheath—protecting the early edition of The New York Times as it lay on our driveway on the morning of January 3rd, and again with the bright cyan book jacket on the complimentary copy of Richard Rorty: The Making of an American Philosopher that arrived for Peter in the mail a month later? (32)

Material objects incorporated via collage offer Howe the possibility of narrative: out of the coroner’s autopsy report, Sarah Edward’s letters, Peter’s paperwhites, a pair of shoes silk shoes “‘worked by Miss Hannah Edwards daughter of the Rev. Timothy Edwards, wife of Seth Wetmore, Esq. of Middletown’” (21) materializes a work of becoming, open to both the present and past. Thus the collage itself locates Howe in unique places at unique times—in a windowless room at The Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, or touching the black jacket she and Peter bought together on a Barney’s sale rack—and creates a new thing out of the old pieces.

The notion of “nothing” repeatedly enters Howe’s meditation in The Disappearance Approach, indicating to Howe’s reader just how little she has in terms
of personal possessions to offer her collage text. Howe tells how “An official in the faux-Gothic-gatehouse at the Delaware Avenue entrance to Buffalo’s Forest Lawn Cemetery politely insisted he knew Mr. Hare had a wife, but I wasn’t her. ‘We’re together, we’re together,’ I told myself. All I lack is your personal name on a tilted stone” (29). The problem is one of being with someone who is completely absent—speaking of a subject when all that is available to the artist are disparate pieces, brought into relationship by the artist. But concurrently with having “nothing,” Howe has a deep understanding of nothing: “I don’t pretend to be saying,” she writes, “God had promised any new grace concerning our scheme being brought to pass via parables of lost sheep. No, not the least shadow association even in the realm of wishes. Art is a mystery; artifice its form” (33). In Howe’s words is the confession that collage as an art form—a formal euphemism, a substitute expression, a mode of “better” speaking—is the artifice used to catch after mystery. That Howe as a writer has both mystery and a form to place it in, as well as traces of it in objects, endows the many pieces and textures of The Disappearance Approach with both “limit and…freedom” (33), and enables the presence of the beloved even when his body has been reduced to dust.

Critical scholar Craig LaDriere also offers an interesting critical read of Howe’s collage process in his analysis of poetry as speech whose form is determined, not by the linguistic-social norms of grammar with its ideal of correctness, and not by the more general social norms of rhetoric with its ideal of eloquence and its goal of effective communication…but by norms derived from a principle which,
though it may operate in linguistic materials, is not itself linguistic, and,

though it may operate within a framework of social communication, is

not itself social. (31, emphasis added)

LaDriere argues that “the aesthetic impulse may choose any kind of relation as the
ground of its construction; it may elect a plurality of relations and work with several at
once or in succession. But it must make a choice of some kind” (32). In terms of the
prose in which The Disappearance Approach (also Howe’s My Emily Dickinson, The
Birth-Mark, et al) is written, Howe continually disregards stylistic convention, opting
for plurality in place of a linear narrative. LaDriere concludes: “there is no a priori
prediction of this choice where the aesthetic principle is in control. It is for this reason
that each individual work of fine art provides the only relevant norms both for
apprehension of its form and judgment of its value” (32). LaDriere’s conclusion agrees
fundamentally with the unique piecing and placement of materials in collage.

An intriguing facet of That This taken as one complete manuscript is the
inclusion of six photograms by the contemporary photographer James Welling. As a
film technique, photograms are unique in that they are referred to as “cameraless
photography.” Objects and textures are placed directly onto the surface of a light-
sensitive material, such as photographic paper, and then exposed to light. Thus the
resulting image is a negative shadow that shows extreme variations of tone, light and
shadow depending on the transparency of the objects used. Welling’s photograms
included in That This resemble black-and-white photographs of water or water-stained
windows. But although the images express a fluidity and movement, the result is
definitely that of a negative, which adds an element of the static and still. As part of Howe’s collage on the level of the manuscript, the interspersal of Welling’s photograms act as visual waves among the pages of Howe’s textual arrangements—a washing and a rain of light and shadows, negatives. And between the photograms, Howe’s linguistic collage is its own stay against the storm.

Benjamin’s metaphor of storm is not far from the inspiration of the next section in Howe’s That This, Frolic Architecture, which opens with an epigraph by Emerson: “Into the beautiful meteor of the snow” (37). Emerson’s image of “meteor,” the visible path of a meteoroid as it enters earth’s atmosphere, recalls once again Howe’s language of “trace” and of an object’s becoming. “Meteor” is another word for a falling, or a shooting, star as well, and the inherent directional ambiguity of the meteor is a fitting symbol for the poetry that follows in Frolic Architecture. In fact, as of November 2011, Howe has taken Frolic Architecture on tour with composer David Grubbs. Howe and Grubbs’ presentation has been advertised by Harvard University’s Woodberry Poetry Room as “a multidisciplinary performance that merges Howe's uncanny vocalizations with Grubb's ambient soundings” (Frolic), which demonstrates not only the aural quality, but the aural integrity of Howe’s collage poetry. In some cases it is a matter of new and improvisational order, as in Howe’s first collage in Frolic Architecture:
Howe varies her reading of the right-hand column of words, and how they pair with her reading of the left hand column. She often ends her reading of this poem by reading the right hand column in its entirety: “Then / was / ever / for they / ever / had.” The easy way the words and phrases interweave, slipping in and out of each other, illustrates, in part, the slippage of language taken out of a historical context and entering into a new context. Each consonant and vowel, clipped or halved or partially-erased, is vocalized. What seems like an impossible reading becomes possible by the poet’s performance of the piece. The vulnerability of the collaged text (in the case of the above poem, Psalm 55:6 as taken from the manuscript of Hannah Edwards) manifests both aurally and visually, but also not to be missed is the syntactical elisions occurring in the poem—the phrases lacking nouns, verbs, objects. In essence, Howe has taken a forgotten and ignored voice of history, here Hannah Edwards, and by mirroring the forgetfulness of history creates a form that both brings back and partially hides the historical person. Psalm 55:6, “And I said, Oh that I had wings like a dove! for then would I fly away, and
be at rest” (King James Bible) occurs in its entirety in Edwards’ manuscript, but Howe’s collage both unpieces it and brings it into a new light by way of a new order, a new “law.” To hear Howe read the above poem is to hear both the breaking down of language and the beauty of the syllable on the page.

To show more vocally and visually dramatic examples, consider the following two collage poems. In the first, Howe begins by reading, “in profile, finally / leaves in lower left ha / [only] arching for the pieces of / paper / pattern.” The words are what survive the process of elision, the copying, cutting, splicing (and even taping) process that Howe employs during her collage work.

Sometimes, it is just a single line of text that Howe reads from the collage. In the below poem, it is every line of text which is read:
The end result is a reading heavily reliant on repetition and a commitment to every mark on the page. Howe notes in *The Birth-Mark* that marginalia is “another kind of writing” (9)—and another kind of writing is simultaneously another kind of reading. Howe’s “performance”/reading of her collage poetry demonstrates a philosophical consistency between her criticism and her creative work—any reader who thinks they are simply viewing a poem can attend a reading by Howe and hear the visualization read—the form is the content, and the sound and the image are inseparable.

Two couplets open *Frolic Architecture*:

That This book is a history of

a shadow that is a shadow of

Me mystically one in another

another another to subserve. (39)

In *My Emily Dickinson*, Howe writes, “The future will forget, erase, or recollect and deconstruct every poem…the conditions for poetry rest outside each life at a miraculous reach indifferent to worldly chronology” (13). The transcendence of the text is a motivating influence for Howe—the condition for the text, for poetry, “outside each life” to the point that a shadow constitutes another shadow. *That This* reaches the height of its confession in the lines: “*That This* book is a history of / a shadow that is a shadow of / me.” Howe’s collage poems encapsulate the complexity of both language use and the language user: that language has been used before and will be used again, and that
although signs and signifiers link in arbitrary relationship, language users attach real significance to them, remembering and misremembering, “another another to subserve.”

The material object—the manuscripts and letters of the Edwards families, the autopsy report for her husband Peter, Hannah Edwards’ shoes, Peter’s paperwhites—is one way Howe, as a poet and critic, catches after the “shadow of a shadow.” When she wonders whether a trace can “become the thing it traces” in The Disappearance Approach, disappearance is the backdrop against which her collage work takes place as it works with not only material remains but the remains of language itself (e.g. the broken/clipped/erased consonants and vowels in Frolic Architecture). Howe is decidedly conscious of her place as a poet working in the past’s future, but as more than a curator of the past. Although Walter Benjamin asks “when shall we actually write books like catalogues?” (Arcades Project 457) for Howe, a comprehensive text is not the sole way to provide for the gaps and silences of the past. Rather, history brings Howe, as a poet, to the library stacks and the special collections, and after exhuming texts from their boxes and binders, Howe brings them into the present in a manner reflective of their forgotten past: in pieces, and shards, and fragment. For Howe the “trace,” as the moment of “danger” and “flash” is for Benjamin, is the important unit of creative construction and investigation; the “trace” brings her to the past, and the past to her writing and collage work.
CHAPTER II. THE SURFACE OF COLLAGE: ANNE CARSON’S NOX

While an engagement with Susan Howe’s collage work necessitates a discussion of content—specifically in light of the initially inspiring material object, or manuscript—Anne Carson’s collage poetry focuses rather on the formal surface of collage. A discussion, therefore, of edges, fragments, and textures is especially in the interest of Carson’s reader. In an interview with the Paris Review, Carson notes,

In surfaces, perfection is less interesting. For instance, a page with a poem on it is less attractive than a page with a poem on it and some tea stains. Because the tea stains add a bit of history. It’s a historical attitude. After all, texts of ancient Greeks come to us in wreckage and I admire that, the combination of layers of time that you have when looking at a papyrus that was produced in the third century BC and then copied and then wrapped around a mummy for a couple hundred years and then discovered and put in a museum and pieced together by nine different gentlemen and put back in the museum and brought out again and photographed and put in a book. All those layers add up to more and more life. You can approximate that in your own life. Stains on clothing.

The idea of approximation, rather than perfection, envelopes the project of Carson’s Nox, book-length elegy, all its pieces and scraps and episodes folded into a box, scrapbooked. It is an accumulation, a layering, and results in a collage whose whole is greater than the sum of its multiplicitous parts. And yet, still, an approximation that says something true about life and the life lived (thus Nox touches elegy). In thinking of the
many that constitute the one, Walter Benjamin’s reflection in *On Some Motifs in Baudelaire* seem more than applicable: “The meaning of the hidden configuration…probably is this: it is the phantom crowd of the words, the fragments, the beginnings of lines from which the poet, in the deserted streets, wrests the poetic booty” (165). “Wrest[ing] poetic booty” from a visual landscape (the streets of Paris, for Baudelaire) is precisely the creative model that Benjamin uses for *The Arcades Project*—named for the Paris Arcades, but filled also with references to train stops and crowded streets. The richness and variety of the “masses” inspire not only the text but also the fragmentary nature of the text. For Carson, the mimesis possible by way of fragmentation is that of the single body, rather than the crowd—and yet a single body composed from a crowd of fragments. Critic Ian Rae, in his essay ‘*Dazzling Hybrids*: *The Poetry of Anne Carson*, describes Carson’s written subjects as “the…Osirian body that Carson must summon all her poetic and academic craft to revive” (27)—drawing a comparison between Carson and Isis, gatherer of assembler of Osiris’s far-flung body parts. Rae’s analogy seems particularly apt as a description, as the recovered body in *Nox* is that of Carson’s estranged brother Michael.

Brockelman’s proposal, referenced earlier, of “investigating aesthetic phenomenon as a way of raising philosophical questions” is highlighted in Carson’s *Nox* by the words of poet and critic Czeslaw Milosz, who, in *The Witness of Poetry*, wrote,

> The poetic act changes with the amount of background reality embraced by the poet’s consciousness. In [the twentieth century] that background
is, in my opinion, related to the fragility of those things we call civilization or culture. What surrounds us, here and now, is not guaranteed. It could just as well not exist—and so man constructs poetry out of the remnants found in ruins. (97)

The representational potential of collage, and Milosz’s idea that the “poetic act” is under the direct influence of “the amount of background reality” absorbed by the poet’s consciousness, is an interesting philosophical reading to bring to Carson’s writing—for Howe and Carson see quite different representational potentiality in the form of the poetic “fragment.”

As opposed to Howe, who looks to the “trace” of the fragment in order to locate (or recreate, rather) the material whole (“secure as ever, real as ever,” *Disappearance Approach*, 29), Carson tells the *Paris Review*:

…this is the magic of fragments—the way [the] poem breaks off leads into a thought that can’t ever be apprehended. There is the space where a thought would be, but which you can’t get hold of. I love that space. It’s the reason I like to deal with fragments. Because no matter what the thought would be if it were fully worked out, it wouldn’t be as good as the suggestion of a thought that the space gives you. Nothing fully worked out could be so arresting, spooky.

Both Howe and Carson are, as collage artists and poets, invested in the pursuit of a text’s “spirit” and the fragment’s ghostliness. But where Howe sees the vestigial, graspable nature of the fragment, Carson sees the negative space above, below, and
between the fragment—the possibility of what can be imagined in the space as opposed to what can be reconstructed and found.

*Nox* opens with a striking title page indicative of the work at large: “michael michael michael michael michael michael” scrawled down the page in what looks like black finger-paint. The farther down the page the reader looks, the darker, larger, more dramatic the letters and the writing becomes. Over this script, a long, narrow piece of white paper; on it printed, in a vertical column, “NOX FRATER NOX”—in translation, “night brother night.” The several layers of this page, pre-text, alert the reader to the richness of the text: Carson is gathering in, rather than selecting. She is bringing all the richness of her brother Michael that she can lay her hands on together, into one place; “I had a need to gather up the shards of his story and make it into something containable,” says Carson (*Paris Review*). The reader turns the page and sees that the darker, left sides of the scrawled “m’s” in the “Michaels” have bled through the page and reached the other side. Carson’s painted lettering has literally, physically, permeated the text.

The next page advances (as *Nox* is a fanfold book, the pages are united as a whole, and yet Carson still refers to Nox as having a “left” side and a “right” side). On it is a darkened square of paper, its edges torn. On that piece of paper is printed a poem, titled “CI,” and printed in Latin. It is poem 101, a song of lament by the Roman lyric poet Catullus, written for his own brother who died in Troy while Catullus was living in Italy. If you turn the next page, another photograph of another piece of paper with torn edges and the bold header “multas.” Underneath the header, “multus multa multum” appears in italics, and across from declensions is simply typed “adjective.” The first
word of the Catullus’ poem on the previous page is “multas,” and it is with a start that Carson’s reader realizes the project of Nox: the translation of a poem, word by word; Carson will carry the Latin to her reader. The entire entry for “multas” reads:

[cf. Gk μαλα, MELIOR] numerous, many, many of, many a; many people, many many women, the ordinary people, the many especially in phrase unus de multis: one of many; many things, much, to a great extent, many words especially in elliptical phrases e.g. quid multa? ne multa: to cut a long story short; an abundance of, much, large, multum est: it is of value; appearing or acting on many occasions, assiduous, regular, used many times; (of persons) too much in evidence, tedious, wearisome, verbose; occurring in a high degree, full, intense, multa dies or multa lux: broad daylight, multa nox: late in the night, perhaps too late.

The sense of largeness pervades the lexical entry for “multas,” as does Carson’s deft hand, interweaving her own text into the dictionary’s text, providing extra senses, meanings, and phrases. For instance, “late in the night, perhaps too late” clearly
incorporates the poet’s voice as well as references to the Nox’s title and the “too late” element of elegy, written after the beloved’s death. But of course, the elaborations are also tied to the purpose of translating Catullus’ poem 101 and the death of Catullus’ brother is not merely implicated by, but actually instigates, the entry. Walter Benjamin, in his essay The Task of the Translator, writes, “It is the task of the translator … to liberate the language imprisoned in a work in his re-creation of that work. For the sake of pure language he breaks through decayed barriers of his own language” (80, emphasis added). In the fraternal tie between Catullus’ poem and the project of Nox, Carson not only liberates the language of Catullus, but she liberates the poetic subject of Catullus: the brother and the lament.

In the first square of prose written by the poet, section 1.0, Carson explains: “I wanted to fill my elegy with light of all kinds. But death makes us stingy. There is nothing more to be expended on that, we think, he’s dead. Love cannot alter it. Words cannot add to it. No matter how I try to evoke the starry lad he was, it remains a plain, odd history. So I began to think about history.” Carson employs the same language of emptiness, loss, and lack that Howe does in That This—on the one hand, this coincidence seems the most natural language in the world for two poets writing elegies for their husband, brother. But the significance of the shared language of emptiness is amplified by the fact that both Howe and Carson are collage artists: they fill things, they arrange disparate parts into a whole, they make a new creation out of old bits and scraps that no one else is paying attention to. In this way, collage is certainly one formal answer to the “stinginess” of elegy, for it can physically give to and fill the emptiness
that elegy must sustain merely by voice. Writes Carson, “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” (Paris Review). Collage offers its multi-media self to the emptiness of loss.

Throughout Nox, Carson is also thinking about collage as form for elegy, as well as for history. Indeed, Carson looks to examples of ancient myth and narratives for vehicles of metaphor in Nox: the historian Hekataios and the Skythian bowl. Carson cites Hekataios as he describes the mythical phoenix: “He makes out of myrrh an egg as big as he can carry. Then he tests it to see if he can carry it. After that he hollows out the egg and lays his father inside and plugs up the hollow. With father inside the egg weighs the same as before. Having plugged it up he carries the egg to Egypt to the temple of the sun.” Thus Carson’s reader enters the many layers of collage: Carson searching for a metaphorical vehicle for her elegy, quoting the fragmentary writing of Hekataios the (pre-Herodotos) historian who is describing the phoenix. Story within story. The Phoenix’s egg is one metaphor for Carson’s collage: the text that must be tested for weight, to see if the author “can carry it,” but also the text that, filled and plugged up, weighs the same as before. Carson, and Howe’s, collage is like Benjamin’s “literary montage”: still a text to be filled.

Herodotos and his narration of the Skythian bowel come next. His person sounds strangely parallel to the role Carson as a collage artist. In sections 1.3 Carson writes,
Herodotos is an historian who trains you as you read. It is a process of asking, searching, collecting, doubting, striving, testing, blaming and above all standing amazed at the strange things humans do. Now by far the strangest thing that humans do – he is firm on this – is history. This asking. For often it produces no clear or helpful account, in fact people are satisfied with the most bizarre forms of answering, e.g. the Skythian who, when Herodotos endeavours to find out from them the size of the Skythian population, point to a bowl that stands at Exampaios. It is made of the melted down arrowheads required of each Skythian by their king Ariantes on pain of death. Herodotos describes the bowl, what else can he do?

Carson seems both amused and sympathetic to the historical quandary confronting Herodotos: his answer is not an answer as such, but a representative object. It is an answer both more objectively true than a verbal reply and yet unquantifiable by the outsider, the non-Skythian. “History can be at once concrete and indecipherable … ‘Overtakelessness’ is a word told me by a philosopher once: das Unumgängliche – that which cannot be got round. Cannot be avoided or seen to the back of. And about which one collects facts – it remains beyond them,” writes Carson. And yet Herodotos relates the story, tells his readers about the Skythian bowl, and in the end, incorporates the bowl into his historical narrative—just as Carson incorporates the Skythian bowl and Herodotos into Nox. Object-borrowing is part of the collage narrative: the phoenix, the bowl, the historian, enter into and carry the text.
But Carson’s readers must not be too hasty to confine *Nox* to a merely receptive function. As Bartholomew Brinkman writes of the practice of scrapbooking in *Scrapping Modernism: Marianne Moore and the Making of the Modern Collage Poem*, “…scrapbooking is an important productive practice in addition to being a receptive one. The scrapbooker is not simply a passive conduit for information, but an active participant in reshaping and re-presenting content” (47). Benjamin employs the image of a surgeon, “cutting” into the body of the patient in order to heal—likewise, the collage artist is incisively involved in the page and canvas before her: “She provides a key heteroglossic site,” comments Brinkman. Another way in which scrapbooking scholarship informs collage is in the way its form mimics poetic form, for example: the use of enjambment with images and photographs. In Brinkman’s article, he discusses how the poet Marianne Moore would position her images, one over the other:

[Moore] would literally ‘enjamb’ one edge of the new image, pasting only the top, bottom or a side, so that both images are still available for consideration—the clipping swinging open as a door does on its jamb. Recognizing this process as enjambment reminds us that a term generally reserved for the carrying-over of poetic meaning, allowing a word or phrase to be read in relation to both the preceding line and the subsequent line, is etymologically rooted in a material process. (58)

Brinkman’s discussion of Moore’s scrapbooking techniques are extremely insightful in considering the seven-page spread in *Nox* of one of Michael’s letters to his mother,
given to Carson by her mother on her deathbed. The letter has been torn in several parts, and below the strips of letter with their blue cursive script, Carson’s section 2.2 repeats:

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.

Section 2.2 repeats four times, always below the parts of Michael’s letter—the enjambed letter that “hinges” between Nox’s pages, each part hung between relation with the page preceding and the page following. On the one hand, then, is the letter’s physically suspended text, in which specific lines are highlighted by the torn edges, such as “six days later she was dead” and “I went crazy” and “I’ll never know how she met them.” And then on the other hand is the suspension of Carson’s prose, repeating itself. Repetition is a form of liturgy: the repeated text is the remembered text, the text worth remembering. But it is also the self-returning text, the cyclical text. Collage and elegy meet in the formal significance of enjambment and repetition.

Brinkman further writes that “…strategies of pasting-over and enjambment promote…concealment, multiplicity, and contradictory readings…it becomes difficult to stabilize the text and, as it were, adhere to definitive meaning” (59). Material strategies of dislocation (as Howe views Dickinson’s extra-textual artifacts) in Nox
mirror once again the absence and negativity that confront the writer of elegy. Section 3.1 reads simply: “My brother dies in Copenhagen in the year 2000 / a surprise to me.” Over again, then, the text of Michael’s letter repeats, as though an answer will reveal itself if only the collage will arrive at the perfect permutation of the letter’s text. The reworking of the text, and the repetition of Carson’s prose paragraph below the letter, is both a formal gesture of frustration and interrogation. The poet wonders at the text, and repieces it—possibly in the hope that a new ordering will reveal something new. On the page where the scrap of paper containing section 3.1 is photographed, charcoal coloring runs down the left margin of the page. The charcoal coloring is on another torn and photographed strip of paper. To its right, half on the text of 3.1 and half on the field of the page behind 3.1, a rough square of charcoal has been rubbed onto the page and “DIES” scratched, or erased, into it. “DIES”—the rubbing accentuates, declaims, shouts from its charcoal field. It might be, as Brinkman posits, “difficult to adhere to a particular meaning,” but Carson seems to be attempting adherence. As she remarks later in section 3.3, “We want other people to have a centre, a history, an account that makes sense. We want to be able to say This is what he did and Here’s why. It forms a lock against oblivion.”

Another way Carson counters oblivion is in the inherent friction of collage: the touching of edges and the interaction of disparate materials. Fragments of Michael’s letter reappear, circulate throughout the textual body of Nox. On one page shortly after the main parts of Michael’s letter appear in sequence, a new fragment turns up: asymmetrical, cream-colored paper and blue ink like the other scraps. It is turned
sideways on the page and read: “I have never know […] / […] like that. like wind in […] / […] she had epilepsy. Her l […] / sometimes. Flipping like a fi […]” On the white background of the page, behind the letter, the word LIKE is scratched into the page, in all caps, staggering letters that grow the further down the page they go. On the next page, a typed transcript of the missing portions of the letter, in bold, all caps, reads:

LIKE WIND IN YOUR HAIR SHE HAD
EPILEPSY HER LIFE WAS HELL SOMETIMES
FLIPPING LIKE A FISH I GOT USED TO IT
SHE LOST HER FEAR STARTED TO LIVE SHE
MISSED A LOT AS A KID FELT SO
DIFFERENT FROM OTHERS ANNA WAS
TRULY A GIFT SHE DIED MARCH 24TH

Earlier, before the appearance of Michael’s letter’s parts in Nox, in section 2.1 Carson records her mother’s version of events:

My mother on her death bed (three years ago
now) stops, raises her finger. There’s a box at home
with all your letters in it do you want it?
she asks (hard blue stare) – astonished I fumble, didn’t
know she kept them –
Where? I ask.
In the big bedroom (closing her eyes) you can have
them all just one I want.
I wait.

The one your brother wrote from France you know
that winter the girl died.

Recall the page (both front and back appear in *Nox*) with the string of incised LIKE’s running down its front. The LIKE’s echo the similes appearing in Michael’s letter: “like the wind in your hair” and “like a fish flipping.” The letter and the letter writer are searching for comparisons for the “girl who died,” even as the collage of *Nox* is searching for a narrative between the poet and the brother lost. Similes are less complete than metaphors—they draw attention to one similarity, one likeness. Nothing need be entire when a simile is employed. So *Nox* plucks at the subject of the collage: Michael. It looks for what is “like.” Two pages prior to the “LIKE” page, a scrap of paper—identified as transcription of the handwritten letter by way of the bold caps—contains a single sentence, “I HAVE NEVER KNOWN A CLOSINESS LIKE THAT.” It is Michael, talking about his lost love Anna. But it is also the poet, wishing after her lost brother. The blurring of the lines between source texts in *Nox* is one way the artist can find a voice for emptiness, a song as elegy. Little may have been given, but the collage artist demands much, and will accept any small bit, or scrap. “I will withhold nothing,” says Benjamin.

In including Michael’s letter, both the original and a transcription, and an interview-like transcription from a conversation Carson had with her mother on her deathbed, as well as Carson’s prose summary of the events, Carson is both creating a single narrative out of multiplicitous voices (such as in Wilkie Collins *The Moonstone*)
and calling attention to the separateness of the pieces, their distinctive edges. In considering the “friction” between the various sources Carson includes in her collage, Roland Barthes’ metaphor of textual edges illuminates the space Carson creates in *Nox*. Writes Barthes in *The Pleasure of the Text*,

> Two edges are created: an obedient, conformist, plagiarizing edge (the language is to be copied in its canonical state, as it has been established by schooling, good usage, literature, culture), and another edge, mobile, blank (ready to assume any contours), which is never anything but the site of its effect: the place where the death of language is glimpsed.

> These two edges, *the compromise they bring about*, are necessary…the seam between them, the fault, the flaw… (6-7)

Barthes’ diction is an apt description of collage, locating the text’s potential in the “compromise” brought about by the “edge” between the text of convention and the text of “blankness.” Particularly striking is Barthes’ note of the two edges’ place of compromise as constituting the site of where “the death of language is glimpsed.” *Nox* is, after all, a meditation on the death of the distant beloved, and thus a text looking towards both the geographical and the metaphorical place where death is glimpsed. And the seam between the various pieces of the collage—the fault, the flaw—is that mysterious place of rupture, gap, and blankness that Carson sees on either side, and above and below, the fragment. The space *in potentia*. Barthes even goes so far as to heighten the language of promise involved in a discussion of a textual space in “potential” to the realm of the erotic:
Is not the most erotic portion of a body where the garment gaps? In perversion (which is the realm of textual pleasure) there are no “erogenous zones” (a foolish expression); it is intermittence, as psychoanalysis has so rightly states, which is erotic: the intermittence of skin flashing between two articles of clothing (trousers and sweater), between two edges (the open-necked shirt, the glove and the sleeve); it is this flash itself which seduces, or rather: the staging of an appearance-as-disappearance. (9-10)

While seduction is hardly the aim of Nox, described by Carson as an “epitaph” for her brother, Barthes’ description of edges calls attention to the attractive quality of collage: the many parts of collage, and the many edges created by the many parts—the “flash” that “seduces.” Barthes’ language notably intersects with that of Benjamin’s in describing the ruptured moments of history that, in actuality, define history. Furthermore, the “staging of an appearance-as-disappearance” as a phrase offers a lens of interpretation to both Howe and Carson’s collages as both poets engage the form of elegy and construct their collages around the material object (manuscripts, stamps, letters, reports, etc.). That is, both Howe and Carson interrogate and utilize the gaps and edges existing in their collage work. Barthes compares the “text of pleasure,” what he terms “a comfortable practice of reading,” against the “text of bliss,” which, according to Barthes, “imposes a state of loss,” “discomforts,” and “unsettles the reader’s historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language” (14). Thus, if Barthes’ theory of
the “two texts” is employed besides a reading of Nox, the formal structure of Nox, its fragments and various source texts and media, is reflective of the text’s subject: the loss of the beloved, the unsettling event which is the elegiac event. The crisis belongs to both the form and the content.

Thus Carson incorporates multiple narratives in Nox (her mother’s, Michael’s, and her own) in order to confront the narrative of Michael’s letter. Michael’s letter essentially concerns the death of his beloved, Anna, but it is also a foreshadowing of Michael’s own death. The death of “Anna” is recorded by both Carson and her mother as a season rather than a subject, “that winter the girl died,” but for Michael Anna is “SO / DIFFERENT FROM OTHERS ANNA WAS / TRULY A GIFT.” For Michael, Anna’s death is the crisis of the personal, an experience of human, individual loss. That Carson records Michael’s response to Anna’s death so thoroughly via repetition and in so fragmented a fashion demonstrates a kind of artistic wonder at Michael’s feelings on Carson’s part. The collage explores Michael’s emotions, presses them, spells them out in multiple ways (in fragment, transcription, photography of original letter) in order to pursue an inscribing of the beloved’s (Michael’s) person. “My pleasure can very well take the form of a drift,” writes Barthes, “Drifting occurs whenever social language, the sociolect, fails me” (19). Nox pursues the drift of material objects surrounding the figure of Carson’s brother in order to search out the failure: “Places in our bones, strange brother,” writes Carson, underneath a portion of a family photograph showing a backyard and a swing. The lexical entries composed for each Latin word in Catullus’ poem “Cl” are also a clear demonstration of the drift that
Howe’s collage practices: an elaboration and investigation of synonyms and connecting phrases, a movement of denotations, connotations, idiosyncratic expressions. A dictionary infinitely open to the creativity of the poet, as in Carson’s entry for “ut,” the entry’s end lines reading, “in indignant questions, rejecting an idea as preposterous, ut nox!” An impossible night is a possible variation of the drift.

In *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard writes: “…if we want to go beyond history, or even, while remaining in history, detach from our own history the always too contingent history of the persons who have encumbered it, we realize that the calendars of our lives can only be established in its imagery” (8). Bachelard argues for the centrality of the image as growing from the physical and metaphorical house of memory, the childhood house as emblem of an individual’s psychological and poetic life, a body of images, of imaginative, concentrated being (17), the place of origin for psychological and organic habits, the keeper of memories (14). Bachelard’s focus on centrality and depth (via the house) offers Carson’s readers an analytical foil to *Nox*, for although *Nox* has a center, it is not about centrality. But, as Barthes’ theory of the “two texts” elaborates, the importance of borders, edges, and boundaries—and where they meet—is a text’s own kind of phenomenological centrality. Of the family photographs placed throughout *Nox*, Carson writes, “I found that the front of most of our family photos look completely banal, but the backgrounds were dreadful, terrifying, and full of content. So I cut out the backgrounds, especially the parts where shadows from the people in the front fell into the background in mysterious ways. The backgrounds are full of truth” (*Paris Review*). Thus, whereas *Nox*, as an epitaph for Michael, is about the
pursuit of a clearer image of the subject Michael, how the collage goes about
reconstructing the subject is along the highways and byways of the material object, such
as photographic backgrounds.

Bachelard reflects in *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*, “We have only to speak of an
object to think that we are being objective. But, because we chose it in the first place,
the object reveals more about us than we do about it” (1). The first photograph to appear
within *Nox*’s fanfold pages is almost completely photographed shadow. Two small
figures sit nearly in the center of the photograph; light falls on them through two
curtained windows behind them. But the silhouettes of the curtains are dark, as is the
front of the photograph—light solely enters the photograph through the two windows
and the two figures the windows illuminate. It is the kind of obscure photograph one
expects to find in a shoebox of similar specimens. The shadowed setting offers Carson’s
readers a visual confirmation of the poet’s confession only a page earlier: “No matter
how I try to evoke the starry lad he was, it remains a plain, odd history.” The
photograph is also later confirmed by the poet’s definition of the verb “prowl” in
relation with Catullus’ poem 101:

Prowling the meanings of a word, prowling the history
of a person, no use expecting a flood of light. Human
words have no main switch. But all those little
kidnaps in the dark. And then the luminous, big,
shivering, discandied, unrepentant, barking web
of them that hangs in your mind when you turn back to
The photograph, like Catullus’ poem 101, expresses a quality above and beyond literal meaning. As Walter Benjamin notes in *The Task of a Translator*: “For what does a literary work ‘say’? What does it communicate? It ‘tells’ very little to those who understand it. Its essential quality is not statement or the of information” (71).

The evocative quality of “prowl” and the translated text is further seen in a photograph with (coincidently, considering Bachelard’s *The Poetics of Space*) the Carson family house in the center. This photograph is the opposite of the earlier, shadow-filled image of the Carson children: the scene is blindingly filled with light: the house is white, the foreground covered with snow, the sky light in the black-and-white photograph. The light-filled scene makes the shadow in the picture that much more conspicuous: the figure of the father (the viewer assumes) from the perspective of the cameraman, overcoat and bowler hat towering as shadow against the snow. Far in the back right of the photograph, the mother and son and daughter appear as winter-bundles, hats and coats and scarves, dark figures and small. The father is nothing but shadow, and as such, can be seen to represent the poet constructing *Nox*: existing outside of the frame of the picture, and yet participating in the photograph by being behind the camera (Carson’s readers must also remember that the entirety of *Nox*, and indeed the genius of *Nox*, is that of being a completely photographed work, a facsimile version of the personal, original book that Carson wrote for her brother). On the previous, reverse side of the page, Carson has sketched and shaded in the outline of the
father’s figure: coated arms at the figure’s side, bowler hat on top, foreshortened in perspective: a single shadow on the page.

But those are just two examples of whole photographs constituting Nox. On other pages, only the smallest portions of the photographs appear. For example, on the page with Carson’s prose paragraph 3.2, only the upper border and the lower, right-hand corner of a photograph accompany Carson’s prose, which is framed by the parts of the photograph in the center of the page, and reads:

I go to Copenhagen. My brother’s widow gives me some old diaries she found. From his wandering years, filled with photographs that he developed himself in hotel rooms of Hyderabad, Bangalore, Amsterdam, Kathmandu, Paris, Deinze, of the girl who died, usually naked except for some jewellery, a blonde delighted girl. She was the love of his life, his widow says calmly.

The fact that the center of the photograph, as well portions of the right and left-hand and lower border are missing (notably the entirety of the bottom left-hand), and that the photograph portions are accompanied by Carson’s description of Michael’s photographs of an unclothed Anna suggests a redaction. The upper border shows two landscape photographs, framed and hanging on the wall. The lower right-hand corner shows what looks to be a small table and chest, or possibly part of a chair. The center is missing. The center does not matter for what Carson pursues in Nox—it is the borders and the
edges, the material that frames the person of her brother Michael, which interest the poet and constitute the collage.

Just two pages later (Nox has no page numbers—a fact that adds to the impression of the work as a visual, spatial event rather than a numerical, linear construction) a slim strip of a photograph sits in the center of the page. Tree foliage fills the upper part of the photograph, and in the grass occupying the lower middle; a white-rung kitchen chair sits by either a shed or a house corner. In the background, part of a clothesline appears. A single chair, sitting empty seems to be the subject of the strip Carson has collaged. Carson’s reader never feels that an object is included in Nox as a means of achieving objectivity, but evocation.

Indeed evocative subjectivity is both the beauty and the virtue of collage, particularly in Nox, where lexical entries—usually considered “authoritative”—are altered and informed by the artist’s individual experiences and language. Also the inclusion of numerous finger paintings by Carson contributes to a narrative of subjectivity. In the Paris Review interview, Carson is asked if the photographs and painting helped her to understand her brother. She replied,

No. I don’t think it had any effect whatsoever on my understanding. Another failure of the personal, I guess. I finally decided that understanding isn’t what grief is about. Or laments. They’re just about making something beautiful out of the ugly chaos you’re left with when someone dies. You want to make that good. And for me, making it good means making it into an object that’s exciting and beautiful to look at.
Thus Carson’s reader encounters a page with two painted golden eggs, a smaller egg floating above a larger, following Carson’s description in section 5.4 of the church where Michael’s funeral was held (Sankt Johannes), which she describes as “white and clean as an eggshell inside.” Carson’s description of Sankt Johannes cleanliness is then followed by the confession, “I like cleanliness. My brother didn’t care so much. When he came to stay with me in 1978, two weeks before he ran away, the apartment got dirty, cigarette butts everywhere and at last I was glad he moved on. One morning he butted a cigarette in a frying pan on the stove, sunny side up.” The clean and the messy are here juxtaposed, and yet Carson describes both with the form of the egg—a symbol intrinsic to Hekataios’ mythical-historical narrative of the phoenix, bearing its egg with its father inside to Egypt. After the painting of the two eggs, in section 5.5, Carson writes,

What comes to me now, as I kneel in a church in Copenhagen listening to long Danish gospels and letting the sheets of memory blow on the line, is that both my parents were laid out in their coffins (years apart, accidentally) in bright yellow sweaters. They looked like beautiful peaceful egg yolks. I have always admired the design of the egg—yellow circle within a white oval.

The “admira[tion] of design” pervades Nox, the “exciting and the beautiful” in combat with “ugly chaos.” The neatness of the egg, yellow and white, circle and oval, two parts neatly fitted, pieces together Carson’s narrative of mother, father, brother—all lost and all mourned, essentially, in Nox. A photograph of what looks to be a chicken egg in a
straw nest shortly follows section 5.5—one wonders if it belonged to Michael’s photographs. The lower half of the photo has been cut into strips, and the strips folded back upon themselves. The strips resemble stylized rays of the sun: wider at the bottom, narrower the closer in they are to the egg. Another interesting characteristic of the photographs in Nox is that some of them appear to be transparencies, and when they are folded back upon themselves, as in the egg photograph, or overlapped and layered, other parts of the picture show through the folding. In itself, the egg photograph cut into radiating strips is not terribly special, in fact, it is a little odd—“a plain, odd history,” Carson states early in Nox. But it its participation in the wider narrative arc of the egg in Nox, it is indeed something beautiful, and exciting—a reimagining of the egg of history born by the sacred phoenix.

Benjamin’s rhetorical question in The Arcades Project, “when shall we actually write books like catalogues?” (457) finds its answer partly in the pages of Nox, where Catullus’ poem 101 is catalogued, word by word, and accompanied by numerous other photographic, lyrical, visual (finger paintings) and epistolary entries. In fact, Carson seems to propose entering a territory much like the space growing in front of Benjamin’s angel of history as the angel is pushed, backwards, towards the future: “I have never arrived at the translation I would have liked to do of poem 101. But over the years of working at it, I came to think of translating as a room, not exactly an unknown room, where one gropes for the light switch. I guess it never ends. A brother never ends. I prowl him. He does not end.” A building, an accumulation Carson describes as a “prowl” in the dark, occurs among the pages of Nox as Carson proceeds with her
translation of Catullus’ poem 101. Carson then asks: “What if you made a collection of lexical entries, as someone who is asked to come up with a number for the population of the Skythians might point to the bowl at Exampaios.” What Carson refers to is the impossibility of a summation, a catalog, even. Like the pile of debris constantly building behind Benjamin’s angel of history.

How to account for history by pointing at the pile is the question of Nox: is a catalog enough to inscribe the lines of a life, particularly the not-known life, or is it simply what one gets by on? Or is the pile merely a rendering of “ugly chaos” into the “beautiful and exciting”? This is the central question of the elegy that is Nox. “In one sense,” writes Carson, “it [translation] is a room I can never leave, perhaps dreadful for that. At the same time, a place composed entirely of entries.” The entry for the Latin adjective “tamen” illustrates the complexity of the problem. An adjective that has the general meaning of “nevertheless, yet, notwithstanding, however, still,” the close of the entry is nuanced with the phrases “(strengthened by nihil minus) yet none the less; (strengthened by night) tamen nocte deadly all the same.” A strengthening occurs but the occurrence is, possibly, deadly all the same. Elegies represent something beautiful that may come out of death—“ugly chaos,” as Carson calls it.

To continue with the idea of the beautiful out of the ugly, the life of the text (or of collage) beginning in a place of chaos and reaching a place of creative order, is to think along the same lines as Benjamin in The Task of the Translator. Benjamin speaks of a translation of a text as issuing “not so much from [the life of the original] as from
its afterlife” (73)—adding, “the original undergoes a change” (74). Carson’s analogous image and narrative is that of Lazarus. Section 8.3 states:

More than one person
has pointed out to me a
likeness between my
brother and Lazarus.

On the following page, a finger painting of orange hands, stretching skyward, appears. The painting is stapled to the page, and the paint layered thick enough to cause a change to the painting’s texture: the page waves behind the hands. Section 8.4 states “You can think of Lazarus as an example of resurrection or as a person who had to die twice. An historian will take the latter view. I don’t know how Lazarus saw it.” Does Michael die again in the pages on Nox, or does he live again? Does an elegy sustain both the living and the dying? And does this question return to Aristotle’s distinction of the past-facing historian and the future-facing poet? “As in some cave may lie a lightless pool” Carson inscribes below a pen-and-ink sketch of a man lying on the ground, a Lazarus. The sketch is drawn on a crumpled piece of white paper that threatens to fold over the image itself; the paper blocks half the figure’s silhouette face and shoulder from view. In the last third of Nox, with greater frequency, drawings and paintings, scrawls and scribbles appear. Section 8.5 has been shaded over in charcoal. Through the shading, the text reads:

There is no
possibility I can
think my way into
his muteness. God
wanted to make
nonsense of
“overtakelessness”
itself. To rob its
juice, and I believe
God has succeeded.

Section 8.5 is pasted over another section, of which one can only read the “8” in its title and a line of consonants uncovered by section 8.5. The collage itself mimes “mak[ing] nonsense of ‘overtakelessness’” as it overtakes its own text. The following page’s entry for “accipe,” a Latin verb for “to take in one’s grasp” combats Carson’s proposal of divine robbery, however, with synonyms and phrases of conquering, receiving, and achieving, e.g. “to give access to, let in, admit, admit of; to receive, greet, welcome, entertain; oculis aut pectore noctem accipit he lets in night at the eyes and the heart; to deal with, handle, take, to accept the jurisdiction of a court; to accept as valid; to apprehend, grasp; to interpret, construe; ad contumeliam omnia accipere to read everything as an insult.” Carson does, in actuality, think her way out of her brother’s muteness via collage founded and inspired by Catullus’ poem 101.

Carson has translated the entirety of the poem at the close of Nox:

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.
Now that Fortune tore you from me, you
oh poor (wrongly) brother (wrongly) taken from me,
now still anyway this – what a distant mood of parents
handed down as the sad gift for burials –
accept! soaked with tears of a brother
and into forever, brother, farewell and farewell.

All the scraps along the way, described by one critic as “a brilliantly curated heap” (Anderson), together in chorus become the poet’s “last gift owed to death.” Silence is met with lyric and history’s gap filled with the material (edges, borders, fragments, etc) of a life lived, however distant. The “sad gift” offers reply to the “burial” as the material object(s) stands in the place of the rupture, offering a “trace” both of and to the lost beloved. The last line in Carson’s entry for “atque” reads “similiter atque ipse eram noctuabunda just like him I was a negotiator with night.” Nox enters into the shadows and engages the night, and walks back out of night with a gift in hand.

Nox, Carson’s farewell to her brother Michael, offers readers a visual and linguistic catalog of items, in range from childhood trivia of the brother-sister relationship (“He called me professor or pinhead”) to mortally significant events—e.g. Michael’s funeral. In his third thesis in Theses on the Philosophy of History, Benjamin asserts “A chronicler who recites events without distinguishing between major and minor ones acts in accordance with the following truth: nothing that has ever happened
should be regarded as lost for history. To be sure, only a redeemed mankind receives
the fullness of its past—which is to say, only for a redeemed mankind has its past
become citable in all its moments” (254). Carson’s poetry, as well as Howe’s, looks to
the un-citable moments, the gaps and the fissures of the past, and provides a collage
space (the wall and in turn the page for Howe, the unnumbered, fanfold book for
Carson) as a mode of citation for the places of absence and loss. Both poets find the
“fullness of the past,” if not an outright impossibility, then a negotiable value answered
in part by the creative act and the historical imagination.

Carson and Howe are the finders and the keepers of the contemporary poetry
scene. Reminds Benjamin in thesis V, “every image of the past that is not recognized by
the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably” (255). The
material phenomena of history, for Benjamin represented by way of the single “image,”
must be reincorporated into the present by the author-historian. And yet in thesis VI,
Benjamin also states, “To articulate the past historically does not meant to recognize it
‘the way it really was’” (255). Bringing historical objectivity into question, even
dismissing it, echoes the subjectivity that concerns Howe when she writes of the
“remnant of Sarah Pierrepont’s wedding dress.” States Howe, “This love relic has lasted
over two hundred years in the form of a Prussian blue scrap. It says nothing at all to an
outsider who can look at it without being seen” (Disappearance 32). That is, the
historian herself discovers individual relevancy when considering the historical
object—the object that offers itself in subjectivity and beholds its beholder. It is the
nature of historical-creativity that leads Carson to perhaps the greatest confession in
Nox: “just like him I was a negotiator with night.” Carson and Howe both act as mediators, intercessors even, between the material world and the creative narrative—a narrative ultimately for readers and viewers.

In *The Task of a Translator*, Benjamin differentiates between the poet’s role as spontaneous, primary, and graphic, and the translator’s role as derivative, ultimate, and ideational (77). Howe and Carson work in the space between these two descriptions: creating texts out of a meeting of the spontaneous and derived, the image and the idea, the historical and their own lives; they are both poets and translators, creators and conveyors of context. And they allow their readers to trace the process via the ever-changing textures of their collage.

In terms of collage, Carson, Howe, and Benjamin each demonstrate a unique aesthetic. Where Carson works primarily with surface textures (tea stains for a patina of age on the Catullus poem, photographs and transparencies, torn paper and finger paint), Howe’s main concern is space (the page as a field, the text as image and sound in placement, arrangement, containment), and for Benjamin, place (the social montage of the railway station, the arcades, the city streets, the metropolis, the fragments of the crowd in all these places). But Benjamin’s notion of “literary montage” transcends these several focuses, creating a sense of language and film, verbal and visual space. Benjamin explains the “principle of montage” in *The Arcades Project*, “That is, to assemble large-scale constructions out of the smallest and most precisely cut components. Indeed, to discover in the analysis of the small individual moment the crystal of the total event…to grasp the construction of history as such. In the structure
of commentary” (461). One generative way of viewing the collage work of Howe and Carson is to consider the writing of collage as not only citation that is historiography, but historiography that resides in the “commentary,” both verbal, visual, and most of all, material. And the commentary is brought about by the historian’s asking. In the early pages of Nox, Carson explains

One who asks about things - about

their dimensions, weight, location, moods, names, holiness, smell - is an historian. 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. (1.1)

Collage, like the phoenix’s egg in Nox or Thomas Edward’s canoe-shaped manuscript in That This, is a form of artifice that carries itself. Carson and Howe’s poetic investigation of the past proves, as Walter Benjamin notes in his Theses on the Philosophy of History, to be the truest form of participation in the present, resulting in the knowledge of what to do in the “now” and how to enter the future. One need not, as Aristotle proposed, divide the affairs of the past and the future between the historian and the poet after all.
WORKS CITED


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