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In Focus: The Exact Word

PAUL MAGEE

HOW CAN EACH WORD BE IRREPLACEABLE? IS COLERIDGE'S CLAIM ABSURD?

Abstract. This article considers Coleridge's comment that in the best poetry one cannot change a word. It compares Kant's seemingly opposed insistence that ideas of perfection have little role in our judgments of beauty. The article proposes that these positions are actually compatible, due to the "thingly quality" (Heidegger) that pertains to the best work, its mysterious sense of finish. We have no ultimate idea what such a thing is or might do, such that it could be perfect at it. Or changed. But is the presence of this irreplaceable, thingly quality any less a matter of taste than beauty itself?

Who will I offer this witty little book
its polish further smoothed
with a parched volcanic rock
just moments ago? Cornelius,
it's for you. For you used to weigh
the stuff I wrote as something great
back then, when you alone
among Italians dared unfold
the history of our whole age
in three papyrus rolls that were
Iuppiter! so painstakingly

informed. So have this little
thing of a book whatever it may be
and Holy Virgin Protectress,
may that last beyond our age.

—Catullus, poem 1¹

ONE OFTEN HEARS A version of the following: “A poem is never finished, just abandoned.” I have always found this proposition irksome. The fact that Paul Valéry seems to be the source of it, in something like the above form, makes me feel a certain trepidation in writing this. But I do find myself thinking, when I hear people say that their poems are never finished, only abandoned: why don’t you just finish them?

I want a poem to be finished. But is this the same as demanding it be perfect? This article is resolutely opposed to perfection, whether it comes in poetry or any other art. I start by citing a passage from Kant, as a way of offering an initial sketch of that opposition. I then turn to two brief passages in Coleridge’s *Biographia Literaria* that concern the necessity for poetry to be finished, all the same.² My point is that the two stances are compatible; indeed, Kant’s may well have been influential on Coleridge’s. It may have been influential on Heidegger as well, whose writing against perfection in art, and in celebration of the thingly qualities of a work’s surface, I address in turn. Anne Carson’s book-length elegy *Nox* is cited at moments throughout in illustration—and, at the end of the article, as a challenge.³

I

Kant’s *Critique of the Power of Judgment* has an interesting argument against the idea that we should demand perfection of the objects we judge beautiful.⁴ What is interesting is that Kant rejects perfection not, as we might imagine, on the grounds that there is no such thing.⁵ His argument is rather that if perfection were really an aesthetic criterion, it would make beauty *all too predictable*. As he puts it, in order for something to be judged perfect “a concept of what sort of thing it is supposed to be must come first” (*CPJ*, p. 112). Perfect, for Kant, is always perfect *for* something. A can opener, for instance, can be perfect because one has a concept of what it might be perfect *for*, and one can assess how well it meets that aim.

Compare the following description, which concerns beauty in nature, and insists there is nothing “perfect for” about it: “if I encounter in the

forest a plot of grass around which the trees stand in a circle, and I do not represent a purpose for it, say that it is to serve for country dancing, then not the slightest concept of perfection is given through the mere form" (*CPJ*, p. 112). Kant is suggesting that if I come upon some such naturally given space and call it "perfect," it is because I have some use for it in mind (such as staging that country dance), or some category in which to slot it, e.g., among examples of pristine nature, according to preestablished criteria for such. Whereas if I find it beautiful, I am not dealing with it in terms of its satisfaction of a prior concept. Rather I am reporting on how that space, whatever it is, induces in me the effects we associate with beauty. I make that judgment regardless of what the space might be good, or even perfect, for. It is not a matter of use.

We can always call that Kantian argument fallacious on the Barthesian grounds that we have no experience of nature outside of received concepts and prevailing interests.⁶ That would be to ignore the fact that we consistently reject people's aesthetic judgments when we feel they are imposing prior criteria (for instance, that landscapes require mountains to be beautiful) upon the phenomena now in front of them. This much, in other words, is clear: that we uphold as an ideal the need to be open-minded toward the properties of whatever we might judge beautiful.⁷

Things become more complex when we turn, as Kant himself does, from judgments of beauty in nature to judgments of beauty in the arts. Now it is true that over the twentieth century we have come to deploy words like "great" (as in the phrase "a great artwork") in the place of Kant's "beautiful," in line with the fact that for us the ugly and the strange have entered the field as well.⁸ Actually, this historical shift is very much to Kant's point. For the implication of his argument, albeit conducted in terms of "the beautiful," is that judgments of artistic value occur in a field in which objects have no *necessary* properties at all.

The question is rather whether these things, whatever they are, make us think and feel a "free play of the imagination and the understanding" (*CPJ*, p. 103), something Diarmuid Costello glosses as "a kind of freewheeling, associative play," that which takes us as our minds spin to grasp the phenomena before us.⁹ Concern with this overarching factor of impact does mean that there is something of a "perfect for" potentially in play, as does the fact that works come to us in historically received forms and genres. But unlike the case of the can opener, we have no notion of what properties an artwork will *necessarily* need so as to ensure that outcome: rhythm, enjambment, imagery, and so forth may, for any specific poem, be vital to achieving it—but they just as well may not.

The implication of Kant's argument is that we can at least ideally create works free of anything other than this one criterion of impact, which is not even internal to the work, and whose consequences beyond the work remain in any given case unknown. What is such "free play" itself perfect for? Further, and perhaps most vitally, the implication is that we as artists can demand a judgment from others commensurate with such radical openness.

That is why the perfect poem will not cut it. It is not open enough to the radically new.

That this field is a space of immense possibility is apparent when one turns to the way artistic judgment has inspired all sorts of projects in political theory. Catherine Malabou has, for instance, recently resurrected the late Louis Althusser's "materialism of the encounter" to conjure up a space in which difference might emerge prior to any concept of it, and be actually recognized as such.¹⁰ She gives an analogy for the sort of openness this might involve; the way our institutions of creation and judgment operate in relation to new art.

II

I will cite two short passages from Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* to further the argument I have begun to advance through Kant: that a finished poem is by no means the same thing as a perfect poem. But what then gives it its sense of finish?

The first passage comes from early in chapter 1. Coleridge comments there upon the exemplary aesthetic education he received at the hands of his schoolmaster, the Reverend James Bowyer. "In truly great poets, he would say, there is a reason assignable, not only for every word, but for the position of every word" (*BL*, p. 3). That is my first passage, a single sentence. It might seem to militate against my argument to this point: for if reason must be assignable not only to every word but to the position of every word as well, this would seem to promote a poetry that does *nothing but* satisfy prior concepts. Coleridge adds that his schoolboy compositions would be subject to Bowyer's severe judgment on just these grounds. But is he not then describing an education in perfect poetry?

Actually, when one takes in the context of the chapter as a whole, something more interesting emerges. My second passage, about ten pages later, draws on Bowyer's critical maxim and amplifies it. Coleridge, some years out of school, is discussing his growth as a critic, and now publicly voicing the implications of that early learning (not to mention

his reading of Kant): “I was wont boldly to affirm that it would be scarcely more difficult to push a stone out from the pyramids with the bare hand, than to alter a word, or the position of a word, in Milton or Shakespeare (in their most important works at least), without making the author say something else, or something worse, than he does say” (*BL*, p. 12). The possibility is again here for us to take these comments as to the literal *irreplaceability*—they can neither be swapped nor rearranged—of the words in the best poetry as attributable to some notion of that poetry’s perfection.

But the broader context does, as I have intimated, give pause. For just a few lines prior to this second passage, Coleridge describes his youthful and related discovery that the best poem will be that which not only “we have read, but that to which we return with the greatest pleasure” (*BL*, p. 12). This problematizes the idea that irreplaceability is a function of each word having perfectly fulfilled some prior requirement. The possibility of going back again and again to a poem seems rather to be grounded in the fact that each time one returns, a new set of reasons for the poem’s excellence emerges. Those reasons are not prior to the work, but in its future. But that is as much as to suggest that those “most important” works of Shakespeare and Milton remain to this day unknown quantities, and that what we are really faced with, when encountering any such work, is a poem that has assumed something of the alienness of a thing.

In other words, I think we should take quite seriously the metaphoric resonances of Coleridge’s reference to pushing “a stone out from the pyramids with the bare hand.” This does not signify perfection, not even connotatively. Who talks about objects as strange and profligate as the pyramids in terms of perfection? Again, our Kantian point arises: you don’t have an idea of perfection without some sense of what a thing might be perfect *for*. Rather, what Coleridge’s metaphor conveys is an intractable and even quite alien “thingness” about the best poetry. It is like stone.

Anne Carson captures something of this thingly finish in her description of Catullus’s poem 101 (“*Multas per gentes et multa per aequora vectus . . .*”), the discussion and glossing of which are pivotal to her book-length elegy, *Nox*. *Nox* is an unusual book. It comes in a hard, cardboard box. The box contains one long sheet of paper, concertina-folded to create one hundred ninety-two page-like sides. The text is unusual too. Carson dedicates a page each to the sixty-four words of the Catullan poem I just mentioned. So a page to “*Multas*,” a page to “*per*,” a page

to “gentes,” a page to “et,” a page to “multa,” and so forth. Each such page comprises a dictionary entry to the word, with copious definitions and examples of usage. *Nox* also features short passages of theory or memoir, replicas of family photos, scraps of letters. This other set of writings, interspersed through the sixty-four page-length glosses, tells the story of Carson’s passage overseas—much like the “I” in Catullus’s poem—to the shore where her brother died, and visit to the church in which his funeral was held weeks before Carson even knew of his demise.

As for the way Carson describes the relation of poem 101 and thingly finish: roughly in the middle of this multiply folded, single sheet of loss, between entries to the words “indigne” and “frater” (so in the very middle of her slow, steady glossing of the sixth of the poem’s ten lines: “Heu,” “miser,” “indigne,” “frater,” “adempte,” “mihi”), we find the following comment:

I want to explain about the Catullus poem (101). Catullus wrote poem 101 for his brother who died in the Troad. Nothing at all is known of the brother except his death. Catullus appears to have travelled from Verona to Asia Minor to stand at the grave. Perhaps he recited the elegy there. I have loved this poem since the first time I read it in high school Latin class and I have tried to translate it a number of times. Nothing in English can capture the passionate, slow surface of a Roman elegy. No one (even in Latin) can approximate Catullan diction, which at its most sorrowful has an air of deep festivity, like one of those trees that turns all its leaves over, silver, in the wind. (*N*, n.p.)

There is something impervious about the surface of a finished poem, but also something compelling. Carson fell in love with Catullus’s elegy, and remains so. Its words have the being of a definite, but also strangely mute, thing. And yet they afford an infinity of interpretation in their folding and unfolding, “like one of those trees that turns all its leaves over, silver, in the wind.”

The fact that one can keep returning to such a poem, that one can do so “with the greatest pleasure,” is one of the more celebrated insights of the *Biographia Literaria*. That it no longer seems entirely verbal, so much as rock, or tree, is rather less celebrated, but there to be read in the Coleridge, as in this comment of Carson’s. Neither passage concerns perfection—the satisfaction of some prior criteria to a predetermined end. But they are describing works that are finished all the same, works as having finish. So our languages appear transformed, from indifferent and substitutable means of communication into something more

radically untranslatable, which inspire our repeated attempts at translation all the same. Thus my attempt at Catullus's poem 1 ("Cui dono lepidum novum libellum"), above. May it have finish.

III

I will now turn to Heidegger's "The Origin of the Work of Art," a text first delivered in the form of a lecture in 1935.¹¹ Now Kant's influence upon Coleridge is well attested, including by Coleridge himself. The "clearness and evidence" of Kant's work, he writes in chapter 9 of the *Biographia Literaria*, "took possession of me as with a giant's hand" (*BL*, p. 84). But Kant's argument against perfection's relevance to beauty bears parallels to Heidegger's "Origin" essay as well. A précis of the latter's claims will help me make my case that the maxim "a good poem is never finished, just abandoned" only trivializes poetry's potential.

According to Heidegger, "great art—and only such art is under consideration here" ("OWA," p. 39) brings the materiality of its medium to the fore, to the point that "medium" no longer seems a very satisfactory name for it. Even "the much-vaunted aesthetic experience," Heidegger writes, "cannot get around the thingly aspect of the artwork. There is something stony in a work of architecture, wooden in a carving, colored in a painting, spoken in a linguistic work, sonorous in a musical composition" (p. 19). This thingly aspect is "irremovably present" (p. 19) in any artwork that merits the name.

The point, it seems to me, is that in a poem that has been finished, rather than simply perfected or abandoned, the words' sonic and otherwise sensate properties come to the fore to inhabit and provoke the work's meanings. Examples of this might be the way the speech rhythms that contour our each and every statement assume a palpable presence in a finished poem, so we can hear them and even feel our bodies sway in time accordingly; we notice the play of pitches among syllables, how one resonates off another, their timbre; we feel the cut of the lines as a physical phenomenon, framing for us the nuances of spoken timing. Hence Derek Attridge's insistence that only when we read a poem at an actual speaking pace, and with respect to the line breaks, can its words "be said to function as *poetry*."¹² Attridge advises us to read accordingly.

But is it not also the case that in the best poetry (Shakespeare and Milton, certainly; but I would be happy to add Catullus and Coleridge, as well as C. D. Wright and Anne Carson, to that list) something in the work's texture seems to demand your attention, even as you try to skim

it? Something will feel unacknowledged, resistant, and to slow down is to confirm that is the case. Such poetry feels finished in the Kantian/Coleridgean sense I am advancing here. By which I mean, none of the specific features I have just mentioned are determinable in advance as necessary for such a poem to feel “spoken,” nor is it clear what the upshot of its feeling so will be. But it has a “spoken” finish all the same.

In pointing out the “irremovably present,” “thingly” aspect of “great art,” Heidegger is taking issue with the widespread notion that such works can be adequately grasped in terms of a form/matter distinction. He refers to form/matter as “*the conceptual schema which is used, in the greatest variety of ways, quite generally for all art theory and aesthetics*” (“OWA,” pp. 26–27). And he repudiates its value there utterly. Actually, Heidegger insists, this way of speaking comes not from the experience of “great art,” but rather from our experiences of equipment. “As determinations of beings . . . matter and form have their proper place in the essential nature of equipment” (p. 28). In making a tool we take a preexisting form, for instance the form of an axe, good for chopping wood, and fashion matter until it embodies that purposeful form. Similarly, people talk about the “medium” of a given artwork, as if it were used for nothing other than to express a prior set of ends.

Heidegger’s argument against this way of thinking contains an insight of acute relevance to our consideration of what it might be to finish a poem, to give it finish. I am referring to his assertion that when one is contouring one’s materials into a prior form with a specific end in view, the matter one works with gets “used up”: “Because it is determined by usefulness and serviceability, equipment takes into its service that of which it consists: the matter. In fabricating equipment—e.g., an axe—stone is used, and used up. It disappears into usefulness” (“OWA,” p. 44). The more that material disappears into the form for which you intend it, the better suited it is to the task—indeed, the more perfect. You want this to be an axe, not a stone that does some service as an axe but in which other stony properties insist. You want to get to the shop, not notice the traces of sand in the concrete path you’re on. You want to use this money, not dwell on its shining qualities as it takes the light. Matter does not impinge upon us when we are thinking in this equipmental, use-oriented manner. Heidegger takes the point so far as to suggest that it is doubtful whether equipment can even be said to consist of matter (p. 46). Maybe it is too perfect for that.

And wherever one stands on whether equipment consists of matter or not, a stark distinction is to be made with what happens in artistic production.

To be sure, the sculptor uses stone just as the mason uses it, in his own way. But he does not use it up. That happens in a certain way only where the work miscarries. To be sure the painter also uses pigment, but in such a way that colour is not used up but rather only now comes to shine forth. To be sure the poet also uses the word—not, however, like ordinary speakers and writers who have to use them up, but rather in such a way that the word only now becomes and remains truly a word. (“OWA,” p. 46)

This reference to a case of failure in the production of art is intriguing, and makes a certain normative sense, as far as our projects of criticism go. For what characterizes poor poetry if not that the words offer no resistance to one’s skimming them? One can imagine putting synonymous words, phrases, whole lines even, in their place, with no overall impact on the work. Its words do not feel like resistant things but rather as if their verbal matter has been used up to serve some forming purpose: the desire to be seen as a poet, to get another book out, whatever. The poem is a piece of equipment to that end, with nothing thingly about it.

Earth is Heidegger’s term for the material properties the work does not use up, but rather causes to come forth. The effect of “great art—and only such art is under consideration here” is that it “*lets the earth be an earth*” (“OWA,” p. 45). A key and confounding point here, it is worth reiterating, is that for Heidegger matter is not, in fact, all around us. Matter “shows itself only when it remains undisclosed and unexplained” (p. 45); whereas we, with aims incessantly driving us, tend to use it all up. But Heidegger also undermines the idea that matter preexists a work. One of his preferred examples of an artwork is a temple built upon rock. It brings into our view that very rock. So, too, the “temple’s firm towering makes visible the invisible space of air” (p. 41). Indeed, “men and animals, plants and things, are never present and familiar as unchangeable objects, only to represent incidentally also a fitting environment for the temple, which one fine day is added to what is already there” (p. 41). It is rather that the temple, when erected, “first gives to things their look and to men their outlook on themselves” (p. 42). What artworks thus give us, alongside “earth,” are worlds: “the paths of birth and death, blessing and curse,” worlds are anywhere “those decisions of our history that relate to our very being are made, are taken up and abandoned by us, go unrecognized and are rediscovered by new inquiry” (p. 43). The artwork holds such worlds and earth in tension: “The world grounds itself on the earth, and earth juts through world” (p. 47). God will come through the earth.

Recall Coleridge on the imperviousness to changes, “without diminution of their significance,” of the best passages in Shakespeare and Milton. No other words can fulfill their function because the words in these passages from a certain angle have no function other than to be themselves, with this particular jutting finish, something alien and impenetrable about it, irremovably so.

IV

Heidegger’s 1951 lecture “Poetically Man Dwells” will help us to see how, for him, such thingly qualities take on something of the divine, how for Heidegger, as I put it just now, God comes through the earth.¹³

That essay is an exegesis of one of Hölderlin’s late poems, including the lines

Is God unknown?
Is he manifest like the sky? I’d sooner
Believe the latter. It’s the measure of man. (“PMD,” p. 217)

Hölderlin would sooner believe that God is manifest like the sky, that which gives us our measure, than that he is unknown. Heidegger formulates the taking of such measure as the poet’s task, clarifying as he does that measuring is by no means necessarily numerical. For a poet, measuring is much more in the nature of a “letting come of what has been dealt out” (“PMD,” p. 222). If there is a resonance here with the idea we have already encountered in the “Origin” essay—that great artwork “lets the earth be an earth”—what also resonates with that earlier work is the idea that “what has been dealt out” is, as earth itself, on some level inscrutable. And “it is just *as this Unknown One* that he”—God, partaking in things—“is the measure for the poet” (p. 220).

Crucial here is the idea that unknownness manifests in everyday things, like the sky we see all the time. “The measure consists of the way in which the god who remains unknown is revealed *as* such by the sky. God’s appearance through the sky consists in a disclosing that lets us see what conceals itself, but lets us see it not by seeking to wrest what is concealed out of its concealedness, but only by guarding the concealed in its self-concealment. Thus the unknown God appears as the unknown by way of the sky’s manifestness” (“PMD,” pp. 220–21). In the terms I have considered above, in relation to the material properties of the artwork, this is as much as to say that what is evoked as a beyond in the poem

appears by way of the poem's thingly qualities, its earth, those everyday verbal phenomena we in the purposeful moments of our speech rush to use up. Here they become alien and mysterious.

And in this same movement, Heidegger's strange, metaphoric, enigmatic and maddening thinking of poetry links up to some cogent themes in European poetics. A contemporary reference would be Walter Benjamin, in his insistence that "we penetrate the mystery only to the degree that we recognize it in the everyday world." So we perceive "the everyday as impenetrable, the impenetrable as everyday."¹⁴ But a Coleridgean reference would be apposite too. I have in mind the passage in the *Biographia Literaria* where Coleridge explains Wordsworth's project in the *Lyrical Ballads* as being to "give the charm of novelty to things of the everyday, and to excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural" (*BL*, p. 162).

One might bring to the table similar themes in Shelley's *Defence*,¹⁵ and perhaps point back to the discussion of reversal and wonder in Aristotle in the process.¹⁶ But there comes to be a depressing formalism about these things, the more one instances them. At such moments it is refreshing to recall Kant's insistence that the beautiful has no objectively necessary elements, such that another might observe them for you in your stead. As Kant puts it: "Whether a garment, a house, a flower is beautiful: no one allows himself to be talked into his judgment about that by means of any grounds or fundamental principles. One wants to submit the object to his own eyes" (*CPJ*, p. 101). I will return to this shortly. But my point for the moment is that Heidegger, in his description of the sort of work that brings the world into being, earth jutting through, runs parallel to certain other, celebrated versions of what art does to the everyday. In his case, such estrangements are trained on the very texture of the words, that something "spoken in a linguistic work" ("OWA," p. 19). It becomes thing.

V

The single-paper sheet making up Carson's *Nox* is, as I have intimated, sparsely worded: short reflections on Herodotus; brief descriptions of adult contact with a lost, now dead brother; replicas of old photos; solitary, enigmatic remarks. I also mentioned that Carson intersperses these with sixty-four page-length dictionary entries to each of the words in Catullus's poem 101, in sequence. One slowly traverses the poem, another word every few pages. Here is the ninth word of the poem, some twenty-eight pages in:

*advenio**advenio advenire adveni adventum*

[AD+VENIO] to come (to), arrive (at), reach; to come on purpose; to come from outside, be imported; (of ships) to arrive, put in; (of other things) to reach, be brought, come into the hands of; (of physical conditions) to set in, arise; develop, supervene; (of dates and times) to come, arrive, to come (in time); *interea dies advenit* meanwhile it was day; *advenientes ad angulos noctis* reaching to the very corners of the night. (N, n.p.)

Each entry offers, in this fashion, multiple definitions, followed by examples of usage with translation. The effect, as one reads through the glosses on this ninth word of the poem, then those on the tenth (“*has*”), then the eleventh (“*miseras*”), is of whole worlds of speech opening up from each.

Among the interspersed passage of memoir one finds the following: “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” (N, n.p.). Then another gloss:

*inferias**inferiae, inferiarum feminine plural noun*

[INFERIUS but influenced by association with INFERI-ORUM] offerings (of wine, honey, flowers, night, etc.) made to a dead person’s *manes* or to the dead collectively; rites in honor of the dead; a tomb, sepulcher. (N, n.p.)

One reads on, unfolding. In between entries for the thirty-sixth word of the poem (“*adempte*”) and the thirty-seventh (“*mihī*”) the single sentence appears, “Take the word ‘entry,’ as used of the arrangement of the contents of a lexicon” (N, n.p.).

Somewhere around this point it dawned on me that Carson’s elaborate materialization of Catullus’s elegy, this concertina-ed sheet with its one hundred ninety-two sides, its reproduction of faded notes and photos,

its gnomic content and its glosses, was all platform for that polyvalent word “entry,” as that word becomes thing and shines.

Carson states, a little further on, with indeterminate reference: “In one sense it is a room I can never leave, perhaps dreadful for that. At the same time, a place composed entirely of entries” (*N*, n.p.).

VI

I read *Nox* two years ago. Or rather, that is when I stopped, somewhere around “*interea*,” the fortieth of the sixty-four words in Catullus’s poem:

interea

interea adverb

[INTER+ea] in the meantime, meanwhile (in sentences with adversative force); (in narrative, passing to a new subject) meanwhile; nevertheless, however; *contra ius interea solum nocte* against the law yet only at night. (*N*, n.p.)

The work had started to lose me.

The reason was quite specific and had to do with these same glosses, specifically their examples. Consider this last one: “*contra ius interea solum nocte* against the law yet only at night.” What I finally grasped by that point in my reading was that almost every one of Carson’s glosses to the words of Catullus’s poem had an example featuring the word “*nox*” (night). So within the otherwise dictionary-standard gloss to “*advenio*” one finds “*advenientes ad angulos noctis* reaching to the very corners of the night.” Almost buried in the entry for “*nunc*” you espy “*nunc nox!* night now!” The examples given for “*adempte*” include “*nox dies adimat* the day would not be long enough [night confiscates day].” And so on.

Something in these artifized examples deflated the almost mystic sense I described above of feeling whole worlds of lost behaviors objectively emerging from the sinews of each of Catullus’s words. The book had seemed in those moments to memorialize not just Carson’s grief but the Latin language itself, the sheer ancient givenness of its worlds, the stone-like quality and earthiness of that. Their irreplaceability. Carson’s staged examples felt like a diminution of that quality.

Two years on, I find these same staged examples the most compelling aspect of *Nox*.

But how can one change one's mind on such a thing? Can a work be thingly at one point in time, but not at another? To have finish now, where it lacked that before? Or there now, but then gone. *Nunc nox.*

VII

"When we call something beautiful, the pleasure that we feel is expected of everyone else in the judgment of taste as necessary, just as if it were to be regarded as a property of the object that is determined by concepts; but beauty is nothing by itself, without relation to the feeling of the subject" (*CPJ*, p. 103). Might Kant's insistence on the ineradicable (and therefore individually, and epochally, variable) intersubjectivity of our judgments of the beautiful pertain to our intimations of the thingly character of the work of art as well?

Paul Eggert's discussion of "the dilemma of the scholarly editor" of literary works is apposite: "to stand," he writes, "between the reader and the often confusing evidence of multiple or incomplete versions of works can be like vertigo."¹⁷ Eggert's comments put pressure on Coleridge's admittedly youthful affirmation that "it would be scarcely more difficult to push a stone out from the pyramids with the bare hand, than to alter a word, or the position of a word, in Milton or Shakespeare." Consideration of the textual history in the latter case makes clear that the decision to base an edition on folio or quarto involves much more than changing "a word, or the position of a word." Yet scholarly consensus on which comprises the genuine article has swapped a number of times in our lifetimes (*SP*, pp. 131–53). "There can be no definitive edition of any work," Eggert writes (p. 195). The notion that there is, among the plethora of options, any such a thing as *the work* is, at best, "a regulative idea" (p. 232), one recalibrated with a historical frequency disturbing the moment one decides to notice it. It is particularly disturbing if one has become used to responding to the insistent, thingly quality in the finish of one specific edition. The effect "can be like vertigo."

I return to Carson's strange, lexicographical project of writing in a dead language buried within the examples of dictionary entries to a brother also dead. The creative act of coming up with "*ad noctem tradere* to consign to night" in an entry on "*ad*"—"parenti potius quam nocti obsequi to obey one's parents rather than night" in an entry on "*parentum*"; "*similiter atque ipse eram noctuabunda* just like him I was a negotiator with night" in an entry on "*atque*"; "*nunc nox!*" under "*nunc*," "night now!" (*N*, n.p.)—now seems to me the very image of what it is to encounter

the “thingly character” of matter, jutting through the very words of our books. To find it there is to write it.

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1. Catullus, *Carmina*, ed. R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958), p. 1 (my translation).
2. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria; or, Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions* (London: Dent, 1962), hereafter abbreviated *BL*.
3. Anne Carson, *Nox* (New York: New Directions, 2010), one folded sheet, no pagination; hereafter abbreviated *N*.
4. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); hereafter abbreviated *CPJ*.
5. Ferdinand de Saussure seems to have predicted this move in his early (and until relatively recently, unpublished) “On the Dual Essence of Language,” in *Writings in General Linguistics*, ed. Simon Bouquet and Rudolf Engler, trans. Carol Sanders and Matthew Pires (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006). There he ponders the fact that “words like *crime, passion, virtue, vice, lie, deception*” and so forth ultimately have to be “relegated to simple negative and transitory categories.” Can we thus say, Saussure wonders, “that there is truly an immorality in linguistics or language?” He responds, “I do not see how morals are any more affected than any other aspect of thought by the fundamental shortcoming of which language can never be rid” (p. 20). How can we identify anything as a perfect instance of any category, given that the latter’s identity can only but be “negative” in relation to all the other elements of the language system, and thereby “transitory” (for whenever the elements change value, the language will too)? Who can ever say for sure what the elements of a sonnet are, or indeed will be, after the production of the next one? But that successful revolution in thought should not blind us to the fact that there are other problems with the concept of perfection when it comes to aesthetic judgment, as Kant shows.
6. Roland Barthes, “The Blue Guide,” in *Mythologies*, trans. Richard Howard (London: HarperCollins, 1972), pp. 81–84.
7. I use the word “ideal” in a different sense than Kant (see *CPJ*, p. 117), of course. My purpose is simply to underline, with Stanley Cavell, that Kant’s analysis concerns the “grammar” of our aesthetic judgments, a rather different matter to whether those judgments are actually disinterested, in any given case, or not. Stanley Cavell, “Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy,” *Must We Mean What We Say?* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 93.

8. Thierry de Duve, *Kant after Duchamps* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996).
9. Diarmuid Costello, “Kant after LeWitt: Towards an Aesthetics of Conceptual Art,” in *Philosophy and Conceptual Art*, ed. Peter Goldie and Elisabeth Shellekens (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), p. 103.
10. Catherine Malabou, “Whither Materialism? Althusser/Darwin” (lecture, Central Saint Martins, University of the Arts, London, May 2, 2013). <https://backdoorbroadcasting.net/2013/05/catherine-malabou-whither-materialism-althusserdarwin/>.
11. Martin Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: HarperCollins Perennial, 2001), pp. 15–85; hereafter abbreviated “OWA.”
12. Derek Attridge, *Poetic Rhythm: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).
13. Martin Heidegger, “Poetically Man Dwells,” *Poetry, Language, Thought*, pp. 209–27; hereafter abbreviated “PMD.”
14. Walter Benjamin, “Surrealism, or the Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia,” in *Reflections : Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writing*, ed. Peter Demetz, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Schocken Books, 1986), p. 190.
15. Percy Bysshe Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry*, in *The Selected Poetry and Prose of Shelley*, ed. Bruce Woodcock (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 1994), pp. 635–60.
16. Aristotle, *Aristotle's Poetics*, ed. John Baxter and Patrick Atherton, trans. George Whalley (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997).
17. Paul Eggert, *Securing the Past: Conservation in Art, Architecture and Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 11; hereafter abbreviated *SP*.