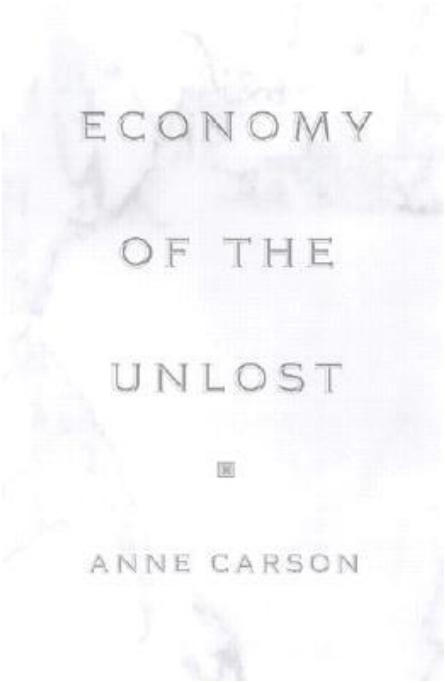

Economy of the Unlost

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The ancient Greek lyric poet Simonides of Keos was the first poet in the Western tradition to take money for poetic composition. From this starting point, Anne Carson launches an exploration, poetic in its own right, of the idea of poetic economy. She offers a reading of certain of Simonides' texts and aligns these with writings of the modern Romanian poet Paul Celan, a Jew and survivor of the Holocaust, whose "economies" of language are notorious. Asking such questions as, What is lost when words are wasted? and Who profits when words are saved? Carson reveals the two poets' striking commonalities.

In Carson's view Simonides and Celan share a similar mentality or disposition toward the world, language and the work of the poet. *Economy of the Unlost* begins by showing how each of the two poets stands in a state of alienation between two worlds. In Simonides' case, the gift economy of fifth-century b.c. Greece was giving way to one based on money and commodities, while Celan's life spanned pre- and post-Holocaust worlds, and he himself, writing in German, became estranged from his native language. Carson goes on to consider various aspects of the two poets' techniques for coming to grips with the invisible through the visible world. A focus on the genre of the epitaph grants insights into the kinds of exchange the poets envision between the living and the dead. Assessing the impact on Simonidean composition of the material fact of inscription on stone, Carson suggests that a need for brevity influenced the exactitude and clarity of Simonides' style, and proposes a comparison with Celan's interest in the "negative design" of printmaking: both poets, though in different ways, employ a kind of negative image making, cutting away all that is superfluous. This book's juxtaposition of the two poets illuminates their differences--Simonides' fundamental faith in the power of the word, Celan's ultimate despair--as well as their similarities; it provides fertile ground for the virtuosic interplay of Carson's scholarship and her poetic sensibility.

Economy of the Unlost Details

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From Reader Review Economy of the Unlost for online ebook

Christopher says

Anne Carson's *Economy of the Unlost* promise to juxtapose two poets separated by a vast distance: the ancient Greek poet Simonides of Keos and the 20th-century figure Paul Celan, a Jew who continued to write in German after the Holocaust. Unfortunately, I found this very disappointing as both a fan of Celan, and as someone with a Classics degree.

Let me make one thing here: this is mainly a book about Simonides of Keos. Celan is rarely brought in, and when he is, it doesn't really follow on Carson's observations about Keos. I was reminded of the scene in Don DeLillo's novel *White Noise* where a professor of "Elvis studies" drops in on a class taught by his colleague, a professor of "Hitler studies", and the two alternate in making statements about their respective fields that have nothing to do with one another. Furthermore, nearly all of Carson's citations for Celan are from English sources, which suggests she lacks the essential German-language background for that famously polysemic poet.

Now, there is *some* value to Carson's lecture in introducing one to Simonides of Keos, a fascinating figure that I missed out on during my studies of Greek. Simonides was active just as a monetary economy was replacing Greece's earlier gift economy, and his financial relationship with his patrons gained him a reputation as something of a miser. However, Carson chooses to continually name-drop Karl Marx, citing him in a way that doesn't elucidate Simonides much, but seems to display the author's liberal arts street cred.

I read a great deal of literary criticism and have often found that it has expanded my appreciation, but *Economy of the Unlost* was simply an exercise in frustration. I just don't get the other, positive reviews.

Megan says

Read intently, read with respect and at times, astonishment. AC, deep bows.

Antonio Delgado says

This is a must read book on the economy of poetry and its vacuum written by one of the best living poets. From antiquity to Marx to Celan (the twentieth century), Carson reveals the importance of the archaeology of poetry.

Bryant says

'Economy of the Unlost' is a daring and rare book, a close reading of the ancient poet Simonides juxtaposed with a close reading of the 20th-century poet Paul Celan. This is the sort of idea that comes to you in the shower. Most Celan scholars don't read Simonides, and I bet you all the endowments of every classics department that most classicists don't get around to Celan very often.

Shame. But maybe it's better all the same that they don't, for who knows how many of them could yoke these

difficult and seemingly very different poets as harmoniously as Carson frequently does.

Based around a series of lectures Carson gave at Oberlin for their annual series in classics, the book quizzes the Simonidean corpus with a series of fairly basic questions--how does he talk about exchange, money, virtue, death, nothingness?--that yield not very basic answers. She elucidates the persistent yes-and-no of Simonides' poetry--yes: life flees as quickly as a fly moves its wing, no: life does not, thanks be to poetry, lack recourse to immortality. But along the way she challenges us to think carefully about some other things classicists don't generally talk about with such readable acumen: money, friendship, war, even the physics of getting words etched onto stone.

Paul Celan spent most of his life trying to figure out whether language, specifically his own German, could hold any value. He famously claimed* that German had both gone through the "thousand darknesses of death-bringing talk" but, while passing through, had been unable to comment. Language had survived. It was also incapable of describing the things that nearly killed it.

Carson’s svelte sentences handle weighty themes like these with legible dexterity. Given the vast cultural differences apparent between the 5th-century Greek Simonides and the 20th-century Romanian Celan, who was Jewish, lived in Paris after losing his family to the Holocaust, was married to a Christian, and wrote in German, the marvel of this book is the consistent magic Carson puts before us in relating these poets through their poetic technique, their biographies, and their attempt to figure out whether poetry had any value for answering questions about day-to-day living.

But I use the word magic mindfully, for Carson is on several occasions guilty of crafty legerdemain. The primary flaw of this study is the biographical treatment of Simonides. Biographical criticism works well for Celan but not for Simonides. There’s too much we don’t know, and the attempt make him fit the argument leads often to carelessness (see Steven J. Willet’s review in the archived Bryn Mawr Classical Review online). Carson’s argument would be stronger and possibly more interesting if she conceded the shakiness of the scholiastic attributions to the Simonides biography. What she could then compare would be the actual life of Celan with the traditional “life” of Simonides, for so much of what Simonides might have been is likely to be what tradition wants “Simonides” to have been.

All the same, this is a book to celebrate, if not necessarily for the success of its product then for the ingenuity and originality of its mode of inquiry. In the moments where she does get the ingredients right, Carson unveils an unexpected and stimulating kinship between Simonides and Celan. And even when she’s off the mark, her effort is worth a thought-filled taste test.

*("Aber sie [die Sprache:] musste nun hindurchgehen durch ihre eigenen Antwortlosigkeiten, hindurchgehen durch furtchbares Verstummen, hundurchgehen durch die tausend Finsternisse todbringender Rede. Sie ging hindurch und gab keine Worte her fuer das, was geschah; aber sie ging durch dieses Geschehen." -- "Language had to go through its own lack of answers, had to go through its own terrible muteness, had to go through the thousand darknesses of death-bringing talk. It went through and gave no words out for this, for what happened; but it went through this happening.")

Charlotte says

This is one of my favorite books of all time.

Laurie Neighbors says

I don't know what more you could want, really. Paul Celan, Simonides, and Marx. I suppose if you are study for your qualifying exams or whatever this book won't help you much. But if you are a poet, you will find just what you are looking for here.

Genese Grill says

This beautiful book by Anne Carson is about Paul Celan and the ancient Greek poet Simonides of Keos. It is about poetry, and about the extent to which language can or can not approximate experience. It is a beautiful and subtle apology for sustained power of poetry in the face of current skeptical deconstructions of communication and language. Celan, she tells us, once described the poet's task as "measuring off the area of the given and the possible," which in the context of this discussion means measuring out what one might possibly approach, approximate, suggest with language, despite an awareness of langauge's limitations. Of Simonides, Carson writes: "The poet's metaphorical activity puts him in a contrafactual relation to the world of other people and ordinary speech. He does not seek to refute of replace that world but merely to indicate the lacunae, by positioning alongside the world of things that we see an uncanny protasis of things invisible, although no less real... wakefulness is a metaphor for the philosopher's epistemic distance from a world of sleepwalkers. These sleepwalkers are the generality of men, who fail to make sense of their experience and live at odds with their own life, lost in what Heraklitus calls 'idiot thinking'...Idiot thinking is a matter of mistaking the visible surface of things, the world of appearance and seeming, for the true, underlyinng nonapparant [Greak word!] that Heraaclitus calls 'invisible harmony'" (59-60).
Speaking of Celan, who found in German a language "stuffed with falsity and gagged with 'the ashes of burned-out meanings," Carson asks us how we might "use the void to think the full," a kind of poetic economy of what has been--and must remain--lost. She writes that "everytime a poet writes a poem he is asking the question, Do words hold good? And the answer has to be yes" (121).

Leif says

To be sure, this is an amazing study by any terms, whether those of poetic analogy, biography, or classical scholarship. In the epilogue to *Economy of the Unlost* Anne Carson takes as her subject some lines poet Paul Celan wrote weeks before his suicide by drowning, lines from which she derives her epilogue's title ("All Candled Things"):

> Die Ewigkeiten fuhren
> ihm ins Gesicht und drüber
> hinaus,
>
> langsam löschte ein Brand
> alles Gekerzte
>
> [The eternities drove at
> his face and
> beyond it,

slowly a fire extinguished
all candled things]

This is how Carson responds, in brilliant and quick sentences that begin to summarize some of her central concerns:

> We cannot assimilate this despair but we should study it. For a poet's despair is not just personal; he despairs of the word and that implicates all our hopes. Every time a poet writes a poem he is asking the question, Do words hold good? And the answer *has to be yes*: it is the contrafactual condition upon which a poet's life depends. We have looked at the ways in which this condition informs ancient Greek attitudes to poets and poetry--build into Homer's blindness and Simonides' avarice, sleepshaped in the story of Danaë, deathcoloured on the ship of Theseus, quickchanged as a longwinded fly, sudden as a collapsed roof. We have seen Simonides estranged from his fellows on account of this condition; we have seen him recognize, resent and negotiate his estrangement; we have seen him transform it into a poetic method of luminous and precise economy. We have not seen him despair.

There isn't much I can say about this book to convey my wonder at its effortless, trustworthy collusion of Greek and German poets through the fierce prism of Carson's poetic eye. A paragraph of hers has more wisdom in it than books, let's say even shelves, of other authors.

Kelly Neal says

As with all Anne Carson's books, a deeply nuanced study. Absence, presence, grace in life and death. The comparison of Simonides and Paul celan, an amazingly brilliant bond of humanity across centuries. All three poets, Simonides, celan and Carson are illuminated with this read.

Mike Koen says

Well well...what do I think of Anne Carson? I would never presume... ;)

Rick says

The classics scholar and poet presents an engaging set of lectures on the work of the Greek poet Simonides and the modern poet Paul Celan. Carson is a gifted intellectual who, like Guy Davenport and few others, makes reading about art and literature an inclusive pleasure. She shares her erudition and her enthusiasm. I may not always follow her thinking or understand the arguments (or even all of the words!) but she makes you want to read Simonides and Celan and the many others she references. Her essays are the wardrobe that opens up on Narnia—you leap through their open spaces convinced that curiosity and wonder at words, their meanings, and the power of art to educate and uplift is an adventure beyond question.

Yifot says

"They say that Simonides had two boxes, one for graces, the other for fees. So when someone came to him asking for a grace he had the boxes displayed and opened: the one was found to be empty of graces, the other full of money. And that's the way Simonides got rid of a person requesting a gift"
From Anne Carson's Economy of the Unlost
the given and the negation of the given started many moons ago, indeed.

Rodney says

These lectures mesh Celan, Simonides, and Karl Marx with a grace that makes their union seem inevitable. The way Carson folds together money, language, and memory reminds me of Ezra Pound without the shouting. Her insights have a math-like clarity that bring two extreme ends of our history--pre-Socratic and post-Holocaust--into the same economy. You'll never mistake negation and loss for modern inventions after reading this book.

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john steven says

simonides made money as a poet.

...

imagine that. that's fucking **crazy**. shame you can't do that anymore.

Robin Doran says

Brilliant, nuanced, incisive

This is a masterpiece of connecting and creating a web of meaning among apparently different silk threads. It is impossible not sit at her feet and expand one’s mind.
