

Introduction

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Unspeaking Volumes

Classicists are nothing if not experts on absence. A large part of our day job is filling gaps and breaking silences, to make something of the textual wrecks and material ruins of our favourite lost world. The practices and conceptions of archaeology underpin the work of classical philologists and literary critics alike, as we deal with unfinished, unpreserved, unattributed, unrecognised texts and their equally unrecoverable contexts. The fragmentary state of antiquity, both as a whole and in its specific manifestations, is the recognisable feature of Classics as an academic discipline – so much so that the work of the critic and his or her positioning in hermeneutic, epistemological or aesthetic terms can never be disjoined from the perception of that unsatisfactory distance that keeps us separated from, and thus ever-desirous of, the unattainable and incomplete object of our study.

Our relationship of absence with respect to the classical past is twofold, since – as Duncan Kennedy via Joseph Brodsky points out in this volume – we are more absent to the ancient world than the ancient world is to us. As in the case of our reception of Pompeii (analysed here by Joanna Paul) or of our treatment of famous textual lacunae (in the chapters of Ábel Tamás and Erik Fredericksen), the promise of *our* reconstruction and restoration, combined with a Lacanian economy of desire as lack,¹ turns our longing for the lost classical world into a desire for survival, for the very essence of being – our necessary re-inscription into a story that did not initially involve us. And yet at the same time the gaps in our knowledge of both texts and contexts, and our role as readers and critics, allow the play of the texts to come into fruition in a continuous process of contestation and renewal of ‘meaning’² – an

¹ See Lacan 2013.

² See Iser 1978: *passim* on narrative gaps as a central feature of literary texts and their ‘plays’ (on ‘the play of the text’ see Iser 1989).

incessant transformation of textual presence into absence, into presence-as-illusion, into further absence-becoming-presence – that forms what Victoria Rimell calls in this volume the ‘groove’ of our desire as pleasure and production in our encounters with the ancient literary world.³

Absence as a scholarly opportunity is by no means a special feature of Classics, but is quite frankly a common condition of academic practice as a whole. Much scholarly work, as well as academic careers, start with the promise of a gap that needs to be filled. And Greek and Latin textual and literary criticism, standing as it does on the shoulders of Aristarchus and his followers, has its own special ‘gap-complex’, a longing for Callimachean untrodden paths. In a field so old and ‘done to death’, the praise of ‘it hasn’t been done yet’ is our holy grail. Most of our projects are framed in such a way as to sell the gap before anyone can mind it: an intertext that had escaped even the most comprehensive *Quellenforschungen*; a newly discovered lacuna in a text that has so far been regarded as sound; a hitherto unexplored methodological perspective, borrowed from some other academic field. In this academic model, as much as we may lament the maimed and incomplete status of our texts and sources, every lacuna becomes an opportunity, every lost source a blessing. But Classics is by no means the only academic field that has turned absence into profitable convenience. English literature in particular has long noticed how the model of the (Freudian) ‘critic-as-archaeologist’, who digs deep into the literary strata of the text in order to diagnose its unconscious pathologies, has given rise to a fever of neurotic ‘interpretosis’ whose basic hermeneutic principles are a struggle to counteract.⁴ And silences waiting to be filled are no less detectable in contexts, since Marxist and suspicious readings are also predicated on the principle of unmasking invisible networks of power dynamics by attentively discovering clues that have been supposedly hidden in the unspoken undergrowth of literary texts.⁵

We editors of this volume have no intention of arguing against the importance of singling out the gaps in our knowledge of the discipline, nor do we seek to displace Freudian or suspicious readings in classical literature (which continue to be critical to the discipline)⁶ – although we would like to

³ On desire as production, against Lacan’s conception of desire as lack, see Deleuze and Guattari 1983. As a companion piece to her chapter in this volume, see also Rimell 2019.

⁴ See Felski 2015: 52–69; on ‘interpretosis’ as one of the two ‘humankind’s fundamental neuroses’, see Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 133: ‘the best interpretation . . . is an eminently significant silence’.

⁵ See especially Ricoeur 1970, Jameson 1981.

⁶ Especially since we have both made use of them in our most recent academic work (Geue 2018, Giusti 2018), just as some of the contributors to this volume do (Winter, Edwards, Del Giovane).

see a more self-critical deployment of them. Rather, we hope that the present collection of essays will serve Latin literary scholars in refocussing our attention towards our practices and responsibilities in handling textual absence. For if scholarly practice has long been devoted to reading ancient texts in view of their enigmatic qualities, whose mysteries it has often been the interpreters' work to enlighten, much can be said by and about the texts themselves once we start reading their lacunae as active producers of meaning rather than empty vessels waiting to be filled by speculation. At the same time, we would like our readers (here and now, and as they read) to reflect upon who gets to handle the rules of the game of filling these gaps, especially as regards Latin intertextual studies. For handling absence with care is more than a scholarly obligation. With the risk of revealing straightaway our debt to ideology critique, we wish to emphasise that complex academic power structures lie behind the regulations of who is allowed to distinguish meaningful against meaningless absences, tendentious against courageous arguments. The label of scholarly 'reconstruction' marks the most authoritative as well as the most criticised works in the field, but which reconstructions are stamped 'authoritative', and which criticised, has a lot to do with which institutions they come from. The hierarchies of our academic publications are defined in turn by a maze of conscious and subconscious academic biases and recognisable erasures of marginalised voices that we trust are facing a new wave of pressure and scrutiny, especially in the United States.⁷ The most prestigious works of classical philology have all been in some way about overcoming absence, but only certain profiles have been allowed unlimited – and enduring – access to the game.

Based and building on a stimulating and cohesive conference held at the University of St Andrews in June 2017 (*Unspeaking Volumes: Absence in Latin Texts*),⁸ the volume aims to showcase a mixture of old and new approaches to the field of Latin literary studies, all of which will be refracted through this prism of 'absence'. One of our major points is to show how absence functions as a fundamental 'generative' force both for the hermeneutics and the ongoing literary aftermath of Latin literature; in other words, the discipline of textual criticism cannot eventually be disjoined from the field of classical reception. Many of these texts' lacunae (broadly conceived) produce significant literary and political effects, but also supply the gaps that later receptions must mind or fill. In underscoring

⁷ We think especially of the public-facing online journal *Eidolon* (<https://eidolon.pub/>), as well as organisations such as the *Women Classical Committee* (<https://wcc-uk.blogs.sas.ac.uk/>) or *Classics and Social Justice* (<https://classicsocialjustice.wordpress.com/>).

⁸ See Giusti 2017b for the conference's chronicle.

and probing these various absences for their intrinsic qualities, and for the reception they produce, the book seeks to reflect upon and gesture towards some possible futures beyond the influential approaches to textual absence that are still dominant in Latin literary studies, especially intertextuality and new historicism. In other words, instead of Alessandro Barchiesi's landmark *Speaking Volumes* (2001), which takes Latin texts as garrulous creatures always talking to their companions in a holistic system of echoes and presences, *Unspoken Rome* treats them as silent types, listening out for what they do not say, and how they do not speak, while also tracing the ill-defined borders within which scholars and modern authors are legitimised to fill in the silences around which they are built.

The Game and Its Rules

While all ancient texts are buoyed and rocked by their own uplift of omission and amnesia, Rome in particular has left a literature that is a hotbed of holes and erasures. Its sensitivity to politics leaves it ripe for repression of all sorts of names, places, historical events, while its dense allusivity appears to hide political messages and interpretative clues in a network of texts that the reader's consciousness is suddenly allowed to make present. Its reception history, too, is often built upon the readers' desire to fill in these textual gaps. In all of these ways, the Latin corpus is remarkably energised by its own perforations.

Scholars of Latin literature have already come up with a formidable arsenal of ways to attack such absences. The generation of loosely post-structuralist critics tied to the 'New Latin' in the nineties and noughties was galvanised by Derrida's focus not just on absence as a theme, but as a general condition of writing *per se*. As Kennedy reminds us in his chapter, Derrida famously pitched the myth of writing in Plato's *Phaedrus* as one of the founding moments of Western phonocentrism, an ontological hierarchy bundling speech with presence, and writing – the unfathered, mute child unable to vouch for itself – with absence. That sense of writing as a substitute for something not there became the standard of a critical generation particularly enamoured of Ovid. To take a prominent example, Philip Hardie's *Ovid's Poetics of Illusion* (revisited by Hardie in this volume) made the Ovidian world into something marked all over by 'absent-presences',⁹ the efforts through writing to 'conjure' things not there,

⁹ Hardie 2002; Hardie's more recent magnum opus (2012) also engages with *Fama* as a kind of absent-presence personified, which he builds on in his chapter for the volume.

a game of tease with images that evaporate as soon as you fancy them caught. This was and is an indispensable and rewarding framework with which to read Latin poetry, a corpus of verse shot through with issues of image and fictiveness. Absence as writing/writing as absence has in fact been a critical point of reference across the board for Ovidian studies, especially concerning the epistolary mode, which makes special use of the paradoxes of writers and readers separated in space and time.¹⁰ Moreover, Ovid was ripe for the silent treatment because of the way he tends, especially in the *Metamorphoses* and *Fasti*, to flag stories he won't tell, 'roads not taken'.¹¹ This poster-child of poetic self-consciousness became such a focal point for the textual turn of postmodern Latin also because he responded spectacularly well to certain modes of reading, and critical concepts, predicated on neat textuality: persona, genre, intratextuality, metapoetics.¹² The last of these – differently tackled in this volume by Stefano Briguglio, Giuseppe Pezzini and Victoria Rimell – could be figured as a kind of traumatised disavowal of the absent things 'outside' the text, in preference for explaining textual phenomena by reassuring reference to the terms of the text 'itself'; an inward turn as a coping mechanism, if you will. Ovid seemed born for this kind of clever and intricate 'explaining Homer from Homer' style of exposition, because his systems of metaphor and networks of self-reference are so elaborate, and so *there* at the critic's fingertips. Finally, in a very different sense, the holes of the Ovidian life and death have proved to be particularly fruitful 'generative' absences, whether they motivate obsessive speculations over the mystery of his exile,¹³ or encourage Indiana Jones-style questing after his tomb.¹⁴

If deconstructing the absent-presence dichotomy of western metaphysics somehow became a game that Latin studies could play, especially with its totem toy-boy Ovid, its most common idiom could also be thought of as a form of tracking absent-presences: intertextuality. 'The presence of Virgil in Ovid' *vel sim.* is a type of formulation we read, write, speak and hear all the time. By that, we mean something like this: for every fleeting yet recognisable verbal echo tunnelling back to a textual predecessor, 'targeting' it perhaps, that text can be thought to suddenly *be there*, supplied largely from the competent reader's mind. But it is also, in obvious ways, *not there* – an absence which can only be glimpsed, then imagined. Intertextuality relies heavily on the reader or critic to import the

¹⁰ On the textuality/epistolarity of the *Heroides*, see Farrell 1998, Spentzou 2003, Fulkerson 2005 and especially Kennedy 2002; for the exile poetry's use of absent-presence, see Hardie 2002.

¹¹ See Tarrant 2005. ¹² See Orrells and Roynon 2019. ¹³ Thibault 1964.

¹⁴ Trapp 1973; see also Goldschmidt 2018.

absent text to make meaning, but there is always among cautious classicists an anxiety over the proportions: how much is ‘there’ in the text? How much is ‘not there’? How much of one text can another text ‘bring with it’? Or, more to the point, how much can it ‘leave behind’? This last question has been firing the intertextuality debate more and more lately, as scholars have started to move beyond the pinning of verbal echoes, and more towards other forms of ‘interaction’ – a form of which can be occlusion or silence with regard to an intertext, rather than direct engagement.¹⁵ Stefano Briguglio in this volume shows us clearly how intertextual behaviour can be silent in form, and exclusive in purpose: in the case of Statius’ *Thebaid*, it can be marshalled to block out certain genres and texts, while somehow still ‘bringing them in’ – aposiopesis as *praeteritio*. Francesca Bellei, too, gives us an example of intertextuality as silence – for Elena Ferrante, it is a way of pointing to ‘what Virgil never said,’ while her choice of authorial self-erasure that allows her to exist solely as textuality triggers a powerful inversion of the directionality source > target text of the kind long heralded by postmodern readers of Latin.¹⁶

A galvanising strand of recent scholarship in Latin studies that has also proved ‘generative’ for this project lies somewhere between intertextuality and reception studies (which by their nature overlap anyway): that is, the notion of the ‘supplement’. Irene Peirano Garrison’s work on Latin pseud-epigrapha makes use of the framework of the ‘creative supplement’ to understand phenomena of literary fakes such as those of the *Appendix Vergiliana*; in that case, the career and poetry of Virgil leave certain gaps, hints and roads not taken, to be chased up by later authors trained in the art of writing as someone else.¹⁷ Further down the centuries, Leah Whittington is writing on Renaissance continuations and supplements to fragmentary classical texts, which are a later version of the same basic readerly/writerly impulse to ‘fill in the blanks’.¹⁸ In this volume, Ábel Tamás’ opening chapter very much works in this crystallising tradition, as he writes about the famous lacuna in Catullus 51 producing readerly responses and other sounds within its (not so) blank space – and how these lacunose poetics shuttle right back to the Sappho of which the poem stands as translation, as well as the previous poem in the collection (50), to which it stands as supplement. Tamás exploits the terminology of the supplement directly; Viola Starnone doesn’t, but her chapter on the reception of

¹⁵ König and Whitton 2018 devote a whole section to such a subset of intertextuality (see Section 3: ‘Into the Silence’, with chapters by Marchesi, Geue, Uden and Gibson).

¹⁶ See Martindale 1993 and Fowler 2000. ¹⁷ Peirano 2012. ¹⁸ Whittington forthcoming.

Aeneas' absent gaze on Dido in their first meeting in *Aeneid* 1 could be seen as yet another way of thinking about the readerly desire to supplement absence, in the scholarly tradition's painful scouring for an erotically charged look that simply isn't there. Similarly, Philip Hardie's chapter on allegory and personification exposes Prudentius' and Claudian's attempts to transform the textual and conceptual gaps in Virgil's and Ovid's texts into potential vessels for the unspeakable *par excellence* – that which 'transcends the limits of human understanding'. In all these cases, the gaps are no defects, but they themselves become the productive and generative forces of both literature and scholarship.

One theoretical framework which has found a tight crossover with intertextuality in Latin studies – and is sensitive to absences by definition – is that of psychoanalysis. Freud's system always had a strong basis in literature; indeed, some have seen it as a form of literary interpretation itself. So it's unsurprising that scholars of Latin literature have made use of it. Ellen Oliensis and Alessandro Schiesaro are two practitioners of the method, doubling, no coincidence, as leading lights in Latin intertextual studies. Oliensis' 2009 book *Freud's Rome* showed us just how productive psychoanalysis can be at reading between the lines, or beyond the text, to the 'textual unconscious' lurking just offstage. But the critic-as-therapist model, which posits the text as a kind of repressed subject revealing snatches of underlying truth through slips, glitches and fissures, has come under its own interrogation from other recent work in literary studies: Rita Felski in particular has spotlighted the dangers of letting psychoanalysis 'take over literature by translating it into the categories of its own hermeneutic code'.¹⁹ Although the work of psychoanalytically informed classicists such as Oliensis and Schiesaro remains judiciously modest, and would never seek to squeeze its objects of study exclusively into a single code, Felski's points resonate for Latin literature as much as for any other field of literature. When the patient is so silent, perhaps the method has to change; it may be no accident that the chapter in this volume which comes closest to Freudian-Lacanian psychoanalysis is also the one that seeks to move beyond it, inspired by Felski's warnings. Instead of understanding Ovidian desire in negative terms as lack or frustration, Victoria Rimell springs us forward, via Nancy, to show that the intervals are 'an integral part or stage in the undular *propulsion* of desire'. Absence is allowed to become truly crucial to desire in a productive and already fulfilling way, rather than something blocking the way of its consummation.

¹⁹ Felski 2011: 226, explaining the argument of Felman 1982. See also Felski 2015.

Psychoanalytic critics understand repression as internalised, something the personified textual subject does to itself; but historicist scholars of Latin literature have been following the many forms of *external* repression visited on Latin texts for a long time now. Ever since Shadi Bartsch revolutionised the way we treat imperial literature by extending the insights of Frederick Ahl (locally, from Classics) and James C. Scott (globally, from anthropology),²⁰ we have become habituated to thinking with the modes of political domination which lead more or less directly to phenomena of censorship and self-censorship.²¹ Texts directly engaged with power often present a ‘public transcript’, the face of ideological acceptability; but ancient authors, well-trained in the art of figured speech, could always gesture ever-so-gently to the subversive world of the hidden transcript down below, something that Catharine Edwards shows extensively in Seneca’s attitudes to Nero in this volume. Whether the metaphors imply an ontological hierarchy (cf. Hardie) where the ‘submerged’ meaning is the real one (cf., say, Lyne 1987, *Further Voices in Vergil’s Aeneid*); or whether they are more egalitarian, allowing a text to speak different languages to different audiences simultaneously (e.g. Bartsch’s doublespeak, or strictly ‘ambivalence’), the search for political valence has been as strong a wing of the ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ in Latin studies as any. As with intertextuality, so with subversion: the attack from the reactionary wing has always been that these things are simply ‘not there’; that we are imagining them; that they are not present *in the text*.

Newer historicisms in Latin studies have also perched themselves on the lookout for certain forms of absence. In this case, you could understand the search as a quest for absent contexts to supply and surround the inherently deficient text; to plug it back into the discursive and material realities of a world from which it stands oddly severed. Here Latin and its surging (mostly new) historicism have perhaps partly fallen into line with the current state of literary studies elsewhere, which are, as Joseph North has recently argued, completely dominated by the ‘historicist-contextualist paradigm’.²² Though North’s account needs to be adjusted heavily to fit the idiosyncratic history and epistemological challenges of a discipline such as Classics – not to mention the fact that the actual workaday practice of a discipline happens a long way from the theoretical and methodological navel-gazing that takes place at its self-appointed ‘vanguard’ – it is undoubtedly true that much recent scholarship in the field would fancy

²⁰ Bartsch 1994, Ahl 1984, Scott 1990. ²¹ On which, see Baltussen and Davis 2015.

²² North 2017.

Introduction

9

itself historicist or new historicist in some measure. At its most reductive – and here, of course, we caricature for clarity – such scholarship tends to treat literature as a subset of an overlapping and completely inter-communicative sphere of ‘culture’, operating synchronically; literature becomes a way of knowing, just another kind of ‘evidence’ to throw into the mix, and a means of ‘diagnosing’ culture. It is our conviction, however, that literature does its own thing in the cultural field, and creates epistemologies that are about logging the unknown and helping us feel what it’s like to *not* know (as James McNamara shows in his chapter on *Germania*), as they are diagnostic tools to access a knowable world. New historicism has seen ‘contexts’ proliferate (even if they are often themselves highly ‘textualised’ contexts), but it has also often fallen short in ignoring contexts of reception; as per below, we editors believe this attention to reception should be a *sine qua non* of Latin now, as well as Latin next. In that sense, new historicism’s quest to fill certain absences has come at the cost of creating others.

The chapters in our second section take these historicist and new historicist traditions in new directions. The important task of tracking imposed silences is still very much a priority, in the spirit of the most sophisticated political historicism. Catharine Edwards tackles *parrhesia* head on as she deals with Seneca’s politically necessary strategy of talking about Nero by *not* talking about him. In Edwards’ reading, Nero does enter Seneca’s *Epistles* via oblique avatars and back-door channels, e.g. the dig at luxury building in 90, or the famous critique of Maecenas in 114. If Edwards handles a case of prose satire fudging its target, Barbara Del Giovane scrutinises an overlooked brand of poetry that covers up its *source*. She gives us a history of anonymous lampoons in the early Principate, which runs in tandem with imperial legislation trying to tie the slippery culprit down. At the same time, she shows us how the elite could appropriate the popular power of the anonymous for their own political ends; anonymity is not just a way of evading power, but also a means of exercising it. While both of these cases deal with power squeezing literature into certain shapes even as literature pushes back, John Henderson handles a case of a self-censoring emperor who is very good at not talking about himself by talking about himself; Marcus Aurelius cuts out a big chunk of his particular first person, and the cargo of history it inevitably shoulders, by refusing to talk politics, and holding tight to a stripped down philosophising self. We also have examples of a more cultural historicism, plugged into contemporary modes of making sense (or not) of the world. James McNamara shows how a text can make a dark world represent the

epistemic shortcomings of a whole culture: for him, the vague rumours about Germania in *Germania* constitute ‘small bright spots of knowledge amidst a vast expanse of thicket’. Ellen O’Gorman complements McNamara by homing in on embodied and embedded (lack of) knowledge in Tacitus’ historical works: she understands Tacitus’ Principate as a kind of impoverished sensory world compared with the ‘lost plenitude’ of the Republic, and ventures thought about the literary ways those lost senses might be brought back. If O’Gorman tracks a historical loss through Tacitean eyes, i.e. largely through the sense of sight, Kathrin Winter measures a similar distance between (the end of) Republic and Principate via *speech*. In Winter’s reading, Tacitus’ *Dialogus* folds out from the eloquent but circumscribed silences of Cicero’s *Brutus* onto a world of failed speech acts, unanswered questions and broken promises – but the silence still generates a strange form of plenitude.

On the other hand, the volume draws inspiration from the other political forms of historicism, such as Marxist ideology critique, which both editors consider central to their own intellectual formation – and, for better or worse, perhaps a silent and unacknowledged presence in the recent history of Latin literary scholarship. These critical historicist readings look for the gaps or blips in the text which show the ideological contradictions of the societies under which they were produced. They have ways of making reluctant texts talk; as Rita Felski has spotlighted in her challenge to the approach, ‘[for the Marxist critic] even silences can be made to speak; that certain topics are not mentioned only confirms the ubiquitous denials and disavowals of capitalist ideology.’²³ Marxist critics often talk of a text’s blind spots, but sometimes they can be a little insensitive to their own. Fitzgerald’s chapter, a highly evolved form of ideology critique, moves us beyond this problem by paying heed to both the blind spots of the poem and the blinkers of the critic; he asks whether our own ‘misreadings’ can form part of the absent stratum of a text, what it doesn’t or can’t say about slavery. He also throws down an important challenge to historicist readers of Latin texts by hinting at the end not just towards what the texts don’t talk about, but about what they *never* talk about – the free poor. That historically transcendent occlusion could well be the most shocking of all: ‘Perhaps the most scandalously unspeaking volume is the one that does not speak of its own time.’ Unlike the truly passed-over free poor, much has been made of slaves as the paradigmatic absent-presence of Latin literature. Giuseppe Pezzini twists on this

²³ Felski 2015: 99.