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# Classical Absences (1896–2017)

Laura Jansen\*

*When we consider classical receptions in terms of presences, we often think of how antiquity materializes visibly and/or substantially in the fabric of our histories, whether as physical remains or concrete traditions. Yet the search for the classical as a solid, conspicuous phenomenon reveals only one side of the fascinating story of how we can conceive its status and circulation across space and time. This article investigates some key examples across the period 1896–2017, from Argentine author J. L. Borges to British poet-translator Josephine Balmer, which disclose the flip side of this story—that of antiquity’s existence on various levels of dispersal, silence, and occlusion at the intersections of poetry, mythopoeic biography, legend-making, and creative translation. It argues that, in their engagement with the Greco-Roman past, these examples both advance our understanding of absence as a critical idiom and question our sense of how antiquity makes its impact on our world as a ‘classical presence’.*

Everything we see hides another thing . . . There is an interest in that which is hidden and which the visible doesn’t show us. This interest can take the form of a quite intense feeling, a sort of conflict, one might say.

*René Magritte, radio interview with Jean Neyens, recorded in 1964–65*

Money is something visible and invisible at the same time. A ‘real abstraction,’ in Marx’s terms. You can hold a coin in your hand and yet not touch its value. That which makes this thing ‘money’ is not what you see.

*Anne Carson, Economy of the Unlost: Reading Simonides of Keos with Paul Celan (1999: 45)*

In the field of Classical Reception Studies, the word ‘presence’ has become something of a commodity. It is a term often used to narrate how Mediterranean antiquity materializes visibly and/or substantially in the fabric of our histories, whether as a physical remnant or a concrete tradition. Here, the search for a classical presence is

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indicative of a reading practice that tends to put a high premium on demonstrably *tangible* content, and thus to a sense of tradition that is valued for its weighty and sizeable impact on the surface of things. To be sure, multiple studies have benefitted from this approach with great success, offering rich accounts of how antiquity emerges ubiquitously and in full form in authors' works, intellectual, artistic, political, and historical movements and thought, regions, and/or performance and adaptation studies, amongst others. Yet, this approach is also symptomatic of a mode of thinking that can set certain boundaries on what is possible for the enterprise of reception — and of reading — itself. It can have the effect of oversimplifying the question of how the classical (or any other period) exists and operates as a presence in our modern world, as well as occluding, even erasing narratives that can amplify our understanding of tradition and its makings. I opened this article with two epigraphs that cast conceptual light on this issue, and which I invite my reader to re-read at this point. While the quotes refer to different objects (the artistic visual field in Magritte and the monetary system in Carson), they both stress a sense of simultaneity between that which is openly visible or tangible and that which is hidden or invisible. That sense of simultaneity also points to 'a sort of conflict' for Magritte, as we realize that 'everything we see hides another thing'. Most of his paintings illustrate this idea, from his famous 'The Treachery of Images' (1929) to 'The Blank Signature' (1965). In *Economy of the Unlost*, Carson takes the conflict described by Magritte to the point of paradox — the coin that we tangibly hold in our hand does not give us a grasp of its actual value. Instead, what we are left with is 'an intense feeling', as Magritte puts it, of a material substance whose matter is hidden elsewhere. A similar sense of simultaneous ambiguity can be experienced with the concept of a classical presence. We may think of it as a critical value to convey the substantially visible or materially graspable instantiation of antiquity's past. Yet there exist multiple narratives of the classical tradition that disclose the flip side of its sense of presence — that of its existence on various levels of abstraction, dispersal, silence, and occlusion. As we shall see, each of these manifestations not only points to a modern fascination with the notion of absence, but also puts pressure on our deep-seated narratives about how the distant past *presents* itself in our world and why.

This article is, of course, not the first to shed light on the issue of absence vis-à-vis presence. Indeed, reception theory and praxis are but one significant area in the potentially open field of Absence Studies. For instance, absence has been the focus of social anthropology, sociology, history, creative writing, and literary thought, to mention a few. Below, I would like to mention a few prominent examples, each of which direct our attention to different manifestations of absence in human experience, cognition, and expression. Social Anthropology has made a crucial step in the field, focusing specifically on the question of what absence entails in social and cognitive experience. In *An Anthropology of Absence: Materializations of Transcendence and Loss* (2010), Bille, Hastrup and Sørensen explore the corporeality, philosophy, and agency of absence, arguing that absence exists, however intangibly, as a cultural, physical, and social phenomenon which deeply influences how we understand the

world in which we live. Their study is amongst the best in showing that presence and absence are not antithetical but betray an ambiguous interaction of what is there and what is not. Some of their illustrations are highly vivid, such as the phenomenon of ‘phantom pains’, the experience of sensing an amputated limb, which, as the volume editors point out, prompts René Decartes to propose that the senses are ultimately unreliable in the case of various corporeal phenomena. Contributions explore how the dynamics of presence/absence emerge in the social realm, in cases like homesickness and nostalgia for a place, or the obliteration and/or disappearance of people, places, and things, which is also a focus of my discussion. As the editors put it, ‘in all of these cases, the absent elements are sensuously, emotionally, and ideationally present to people, and are articulated or materialised in various ways though narratives, commemorations, enactments of past experiences, or visualisations of future scenarios’ (3). Scholars of the Black Atlantic have been equally instrumental in the theorization of absence in the history of racialization and slavery. Most prominently, building on W. E. B. Du Bois’ elaboration of ‘double consciousness’, Paul Gilroy has uncovered stories of Africans in the diaspora, showing how the multifaceted character of black identity in Europe and the New World has been occluded by the narratives of western nationalism.<sup>1</sup> This sense of double consciousness hidden beneath the surface of dominant narratives is the subject of Saidiya Hartman’s outstanding creative piece ‘Venus in two acts’ (2008). Through an archival encounter with an enslaved ‘dead girl’ named Venus, who was on board a British slave ship in 1792, Hartman tracks the erasure of black girls and women subject to racial violence from public memory. Here, Venus functions as a dual point of absence for the corporeal death of black enslaved people and the social death that the archive reveals in its failure to document black lives.<sup>2</sup> One last example I would like to mention at this point is a project about to be published at the time of writing: *Unspoken Rome: Absence in Latin Literature and its Reception* edited by Tom Geue and Elena Giusti. The blurb on the publisher’s site already anticipates a significant exploration of a particular thread in the study of absence within Ancient Roman Studies. Namely, the uncovering of ‘holes and erasures’ in Latin literature such as the ‘repression of . . . names, places and historical events’ that ‘only the reader’s consciousness can make present’. The volume ‘treat[s] texts as silent types, listening out for what they do not say, and how they do not speak’, while also tracing how ‘scholars and modern authors are legitimized to fill in the silences around which they are built’.<sup>3</sup> Clearly, the studies mentioned above have markedly different goals in mind: some of them focus on absence in histories of social trauma and injustice, while others concentrate on the mechanisms by which absence

<sup>1</sup> Gilroy (1993). For ‘double-consciousness’ as the effect of ‘life behind the veil of race’, see Du Bois (2018).

<sup>2</sup> Hartman (2008).

<sup>3</sup> For more details, see here <http://services.cambridge.org/us/academic/subjects/classical-studies/classical-literature/unspoken-rome-absence-latin-literature-and-its-reception?format=HB&isbn=9781108843041>.

articulates aspects of human cognition and expression.<sup>4</sup> Yet all of them conceive absence as a constituent part of the discussion of presence, whether explicitly or otherwise. Indeed, the concept of presence itself has a considerable tradition (too long to delve into detail here) in existentialist and post-structuralist philosophers such as Kierkegaard, Schopenhauer, Sartre, Barthes, Derrida, and Lyotard, to name a few Western thinkers who build on the history of the ‘production of presence’ and its hermeneutics.<sup>5</sup>

With this theoretical framework in mind, my specific focus will be on an archive of classical absences as they emerge in the poetics of poets, writers of fiction, mythopoetic biographers, and creative translators from Argentina, France, Greece, and the UK: Jorge Luis Borges, Marcel Schwob, Katerina Anghelaki-Rooke, and Josephine Balmer, respectively. I have selected these authors because they powerfully convey the nuances at play in the makings of presence and absence discussed above, and because, through their example, they propose compelling routes of plotting the reception of the classical as an absence in their modernity. In their keen interest in antiquity as an incorporeal, displaced, erased, forgotten, and/or voiceless idea, they draw attention to what exists (quasi)intangibly and why, as well as how absence operates in certain ways, occluding certain stories/histories but also revealing some unknown ones. And they do so while offering a vocabulary and tools for conceiving the classical as an absent phenomenon with an impact on questions of modern identity and experience. In the subsection ‘Cultural objects of absence: the classicizing mask’, I complement these narratives of classical absence with a comparative example from the turn of the nineteenth century — the compelling story of the classicizing mask of ‘L’Inconnue de la Seine’ (author unknown).

### The index of absence: Borges’ Greek anthology

Where now is the memory  
 Of the days that were yours on earth and wove  
 Joy with sorrow; and made a universe that was your own?  
 The river of years has lost them  
 From its numbered current; you are a word in an index.                   5  
 To others the gods gave glory that has no end:  
 Inscriptions, names on coins, monuments, conscientious historians;  
 All that we know of you, eclipsed friend,

<sup>4</sup> Aside from the works highlighted here, the question of absence has received various treatments in, for instance, arts and media (Werner, Balestrini and Bernhart 2019). French literature (Murphy 1982) emerges in potentially productive dialogue with aspects of the concept of absence investigated here.

<sup>5</sup> Gumbrecht (2004).

Is that you heard the nightingale one evening.

J. L. Borges, 'To a Minor Poet of the Greek Anthology' (1964: 167)

I take as my first cue a short poem by Jorge Luis Borges (Argentina 1899–Switzerland 1986), whose writings and intellectual thought on antiquity encapsulate succinctly what I identify here as a poetics of classical absence emerging in the period under investigation. A thinker like Borges offers an apt point to begin thinking about this theme. Throughout his oeuvre, Borges shows a keen interest in the question of how authors, themes, and other phenomena from Greco-Roman antiquity can become eclipsed, dispersed, forgotten, or almost imperceptible in the course of space and time, and how this narrative of loss can also tell us a different story of their past in modernity.<sup>6</sup> At the centre of this vision of antiquity and its spatio-temporal dissemination is the concept of absence, namely, what is no longer or barely tangible either physically or in our memory, and the particularly productive angle it brings as a medium disclosing occluded understandings of the classical tradition in and beyond Borges. The excerpt of the poem cited above relates exactly this process and approach to the notion of absence. It addresses the now minimal, intensely abbreviated existence of an Alexandrian poet in our cultural memory. The poet has no name or a poetry to be attached to his floruit. In contrast with the numerous authors whose lives and works have been engraved in coins, carved in inscriptions, or recorded by historians through the centuries (6–7 and 4–5), Borges tells us that all we know is that this poet sang 'The Nightingale' (9). We also learn that his identity has been reduced to 'a word in an index', an entry-point to be found on the last pages of Borges' edition (5), but which the author anonymizes for his readers. Most crucially, Borges characterizes this poet's existence as an eclipsed figure (8). In Borges' Spanish, 'oscuro' points to the astronomical metaphor implied in the poem, as well as the notion of a 'shadowing' or loss of fame, if one contrasts the destiny of those figures recorded in literary and material culture in ll. 6–7. Far removed from the success of the surviving classics, the minor poet cannot thus be recalled by following the usual routes of interpretation offered by textual transmission, records, archives, and literary histories to reconstruct a solid memory of him. All we have is a hint of an existence that has been occluded by the flux of time. In other words, what we do have is a recollection of the vaguest of classical presences or, perhaps more accurately, of the most concrete example of a classical absence.

While 'To a Minor Poet of the Greek Anthology' is centred around the dramatization of an irrecuperable loss, it also invites consideration of Borges' attraction to the notion of absence in the shape of occlusions, dissipations, or dematerialization, and the part this idea plays in his reading of the past as it emerges in his modernity, whether composing from Buenos Aires or, later in his career, from his trips and lectures around the globe (North America, the UK, Scandinavia, continental Europe, the Mediterranean, and Japan). In this sense, this poem is not an expression of

<sup>6</sup> Jansen (2018).



fervent archiving of antiquity's materials, in his description of ever-lasting Oblivion, the poet's final destination, where he listens to Theocritus 'without end' (12) in the same unchanging twilight (11). Perhaps most incisively, Borges plots the poet's absent presence through a clever interplay of emptiness and fullness. As a dematerialized existence, the minor poet now barely occupies a space amongst the surviving classics (note that in the Spanish original the poet's shadow is '*vana*', whose core meaning is 'empty'). Yet, this empty space turns out to be filled with new unexpected biographical content: the detailed image of his eternal landscape, his companions, his activities, and pleasures. 'The gods . . . were more considerate with you, brother' (6 and 10): more than an empathetic reflection, these lines become a subtle commentary on the fragility of antiquity's materials in our perishable world. But perhaps more subversively, they offer a critical comment on a worldview that puts an exclusive high premium on tangible physical presence. In this sense, Borges' poet-as-index figure, disclosed through the constantly adjusting lens of absence, comes to represent a contrasting aesthetics of reading the classical tradition, one that places a value on the interpretative possibilities that emerge at the heart of infinitesimal survival. How this version of antiquity survives as a tradition, as well as the intellectual place it occupies as such amongst the inflection of classical presences, forms the core and directions of my discussion below.

### Classical absence beyond Borges

Beyond Borges, the motif of classical absence in all its levels and forms — a minimal fragment, a forgotten idea, an occluded phenomenon, or an irrecoverable loss — becomes a significant poetics of reading the past, whether classical or otherwise, in several late nineteenth and twentieth and twenty-first century authors. One can think of the narratives of suppressed memory encoded in Marcel Proust's madeleine, of Sigmund Freud's appeal to an archaeologically deeply buried Rome in his presentation of the subconscious,<sup>8</sup> or Derek Walcott's representation of epic memory as a reconstructed vase in his multicultural Caribbean, to name a few.<sup>9</sup> The motif of absence furthermore continues to be the central preoccupation of contemporary writers engaging with antiquity. For instance, anglophone authors as different as Anne Carson (Canada, 1950) and Simon Armitage (England, 1963) dedicate substantial portions of their writings gesturing at absence, whether this emerges in the 'visible invisibilities' found in archaic Greek lyric poets such as Simonides of Ceos,<sup>10</sup> or in the occluded existence of Homer's Underworld in, for instance, the highly commercial environment of the British shop Poundland.<sup>11</sup> With this rich landscape and set of narrative perspectives in mind, my focus will be on a selection of examples which

<sup>8</sup> Butler (2016: 1–20) takes this as a starting point of the 'Deep Classics' project.

<sup>9</sup> Walcott (1998: 69).

<sup>10</sup> Carson (1999: 49–71) and Kelsley (2015: 88–93). On Carson and absence as viewed from the concept of residue, see Jansen (2021: 89–104).

<sup>11</sup> Armitage (2018) 'Poundland'.



further amplify the directions of my initial example of Borges' landscape of classical absences. Below, I investigate representations of the classical and classicizing as unknown, untrue, forgotten, incorporeal, and dematerialized forms in different verbal and visual media. These are concerned with the part that absence plays in conveying ideas of how we understand reality, history and fiction, biographies of the silent and unknown, and the routes of reading absence in the face of presence and vice versa. For each case study, I draw particular attention to configurations of absence as a hermeneutic and didactic agency guiding classical figures and modern readers into unknown knowledge and new ways of rethinking reality.

Absence as educator: Katerina Anghelaki-Rooke's 'Penelope Says'

Modern Greek poetry's long-standing engagement with the theme of *nostos*, or 'homecoming', in Homer's *Odyssey* opens a fruitful mode of conceptualizing absence in (near)contemporary classicisms. One can cite Cavafy's 'Ithaka' (1911), Seferis' 'The Return of the Exile' (1938), Yiorgos Chouliaras' 'Odysseus at Home' (1992), or Phoebe Ginnisi's 'Ithaca', 'Nostos', and 'Penelope' in her recent collection *Homerica* (2017). In this poetry, the motif of absence is implicitly woven into the central motif of the return, in narratives detailing a de-rooting from one's home, the idealization of a home that no longer exists as such, or voyages of the mind, rather than a physical return. One Greek poet who focuses more exclusively on absence and its key function in life experience is Katerina Anghelaki-Rooke. In 'Penelope Says' (1977), absence takes the form of a pivotal education for Penelope, as she tries to come to terms with what Odysseus means to her, while she cyclically waits for him, suffers in solitude, and attempt to forget him. I cite key parts of the poem in English:<sup>12</sup>

*And your absence teaches me  
what art could not*

—Daniel Weissbort

I wasn't weaving, I wasn't knitting  
I was writing something  
erasing and being erased  
under the weight of the word  
because perfect expression is blocked                   5  
when the inside is pressured by pain.  
And while absence is the theme of my life  
—absence from life—  
tears and the natural suffering

<sup>12</sup> I introduce line numbers 1–25 for convenience. For the complete poem in English, see Anghelaki-Rooke (2009). For the original Greek, see (1997) and <[https://www.greek-language.gr/digitalResources/ancient\\_greek/anthology/mythology/browse.html?text\\_id=1](https://www.greek-language.gr/digitalResources/ancient_greek/anthology/mythology/browse.html?text_id=1)> (last accessed on 15 September 2021).

of the deprived body                    10  
appear on the page.  
I erase, I tear up, I stifle  
[. . .]  
You will never be here  
[. . .]  
will always be elsewhere  
and I will cut                    15  
with words  
the threads that bind me  
to the particular man  
I long for  
until Odysseus becomes the symbol of Nostalgia                    20  
sailing the seas of every mind.  
Each day  
I passionately forget you  
[. . .]  
It is a hard and thankless job.  
My only reward is that I understand                    25  
in the end what human presence is  
what absence is  
or how the self functions  
in such desolation  
[. . .]  
the body keeps remaking itself                    30  
[. . .]  
hoping that what it loses in touch  
it gains in essence.

‘Penelope Says’ by K. Anghelaki-Rooke (1977), tr. K. Van Dyck (2009)

When compared to Homer’s Penelope, this poem features some noticeable shifts in the heroine’s characterization. In Anghelaki-Rooke’s version, Penelope is not a weaver, or at least she is not weaving but writing, and her task is not to weave and un-weave her tapestry so as to trick the suitors while she waits for Odysseus’ return, but to write and erase her page as she attempts to learn what ‘human presence and absence’ means to her (44–5). Readers familiar with Anghelaki-Rooke’s poetics may also be detecting in this narrative another recurring motif in her oeuvre — her appeal to the body as a medium and interpreter of everyday experience.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, the body in this poem has a dual function. On the one hand, it is the vehicle with which Penelope connects her emotional and intellectual self to the page (2–7 and 9–13) and, on the other, it is the medium communicating a series of psychological symptoms,

<sup>13</sup> Van Dyck (2009: x).

such as her writer's block and interior pain (5–6). Yet, it is the motif of absence running through the entire poem that gradually conveys the cause of these symptoms, as well as the narrator's increasing understanding of the meaning of Odysseus in her life. A linear citation of key lines shows that this motif makes up the backbone of the poem, from the programmatic beginning in the epigraph to the two central messages that punctuate the middle and the end:

*And your absence teaches me  
what art could not*

—Daniel Weissbort

[. . .]

And while absence is the theme of my life

—absence from life—

[. . .]

My only reward is that I understand  
in the end what human presence is  
what absence is.

Within this overarching structure, absence is the theme organizing two main narrative threads in the poem: (i) Odysseus as a non-presence in the narrator's physical space and sensuous experience and (ii) the cyclical erasure of the narrator's page and self. On a conceptual level, however, absence guides the narrator towards her conclusive education ('and your absence teaches me'), equipping her with knowledge of what Odysseus should mean to her, as she tries to 'cut with words the threads that bind' her (physically) to him (29–31). After the teachings of absence, Odysseus will turn out to be not man, life, or touch (31), but an idea or 'essence' (32) of his physical *nostos* which, in this poem, will never happen. A close reading of the poem points to this interpretation as early as lines 13ff., in which Odysseus' presence is distant and intangible ('you will never be here') but also imprecise as to its location ('will always be elsewhere', 13–14). Furthermore, this sense of intangibility gains a climatic point in line 20, when we are told that the process of cutting words (15–16), of editing him out of her page, will eventually transform Odysseus into an incorporeal entity: 'until Odysseus becomes a symbol of Nostalgia' (20). Absence therefore teaches Penelope a lesson on Odysseus' symbolism: on his essence, not as man returning to Ithaca, but as the personification of *nostos* itself.

We have seen that Borges appeals to the figure of the index as an entry point into the story of how a once-known Hellenistic poet became the dematerialized figure listed on the index of *The Greek Anthology*. Anghelaki-Rooke instead stresses the paramount role of absence as life's educator. As such, it becomes a concept that leads Penelope out of her misreading of Odysseus as flesh and blood and into the reality of his symbolism as *nostos*, as well as a notion that places her hero far-removed from her physical and emotional world. Whichever way one arrives at these concepts, both the index and the symbol ultimately function as agencies that mediate narratives of

presence and absence, in this case, from the illusion of a physical existence to a fuller understanding of its utter abstraction.

Aetiologies of absence: the unknown parts of classical lives in Marcel Schwob's *Vies imaginaires*

Agencies of this kind acquire a highly focalized status in Marcel Schwob's *fin-de-siècle* masterpiece *Vies imaginaires* (1896). In these biographical essays, Schwob draws on the absence of concrete factual knowledge to construct unknown fragments of the lives of twenty-two historical figures. The collection features classical and modern lives, from the early Greek philosopher Empedocles to the nineteenth-century Edinburgh murderers William Burke and William Hare. In this genre of speculative fiction, known as mythopoeic biography, the author engages with several sources and, substantially, with the biographical poetics of Diogenes Laertius' *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, which builds on both reliable and unreliable ancient accounts.<sup>14</sup> Instead of indices or symbols, Schwob brings to the fore objects or striking images which function mnemotechnically at the end of each biography. They operate as visual and/or abstract memory points which, for the close reader, trigger the recollection of the imaginary life retold to a dramatic end. With this focal point in mind, Schwob offers condensed portraits of gods, incendiaries, enchantresses, mad poets, 'impure' women, pirates, princesses, and assassins, amongst others. The portraits are highly hybrid, blending fact, legend, and myth, and building on a plethora of literary, historical, and mythical materials pertinent to each biographed figure. They also combine levels of focalization, as the narratives move from the vaguely familiar and factual to the heavily fictional. In his Preface, the author details a programme for reading his oeuvre as an art form which, as he sees it, is diametrically opposed to the concerns of history, by which Schwob surely means biography written as history:

The science of history leaves us uncertain as to individuals, revealing only those points by which individuals have been attached to generalities . . . Contrary to history, art describes individuals, desires only the unique. It does not classify, it unclassifies.

M. Schwob (1924), 'Preface' to *Imaginary Lives* (tr. L. Hammond)

For Schwob, biography taps into untold parts of a given life, no matter if they happen to be historically inaccurate, as long that unknown fragment of the story stresses unique traits of the profile upon the reader. History instead works scientifically, capturing universal truth and keeping minutiae out of the narrative sight. Examples of this contrast include the precise way a Thales or Socrates scratched their legs before

<sup>14</sup> For a full discussion of Schwob's text, including its genre, style, narrative structure, and central themes, see Bertrands and Purnelle (2004: 7–44). For Schwob as a reader of Diogenes Laertius' *Life of Empedocles and Life of Crates*, see Fabre (2006: 37–52). For Schwob's self-referencing aspects of his own life in his classical biographies, especially his imaginary lives of Empedocles and Crates, see Ziegler (1994: 158–75).

drinking the hemlock. Here, the former is the concern of Schwob's biographical style and taste for mythopoeic detail, while the latter is generally regarded as a fact. Thus, we know principally from Plato's *Phaedo* 117e–118a that Socrates drank the hemlock.<sup>15</sup> Yet, as Schwob would contend, do we know the bit of his life that tells us how exactly the philosopher scratched his leg before he did so? Like the teguments of a leaf, these details may not be immediately knowable or visible, yet they also form part of a 'common heritage', or tradition of Socrates and Thales:

There is no science for the teguments of a leaf, for the filaments of a cell structure, the winding of a vein, the passion of a habit, or for the twists and quirks of character. That a man's nose is broken; one of his eyes higher than the other; an arm shrunken . . . Thales might have exclaimed philosophically as well as Socrates, but he would never have scratched his leg in precisely the same manner before drinking the hemlock draught. Great minds and their ideas are humanity's common heritage . . . On such individual facts, history is silent.

M. Schwob (1924), 'Preface' to *Imaginary Lives* (tr. L. Hammond)

With this conceptualization of his art in mind, Schwob unfolds his imaginary lives, as he attempts to uncover hidden, silenced, or untold details that give each life a 'voice' and a place in the biographical tradition. His first seven biographies are classical: Empedocles, 'supposed god'; Herostratus, a fourth-century BC notorious incendiary; the Cynic philosopher Crates of Thebes; the enchantress Septima (a character from a curse tablet), Lucretius; Clodia; and Petronius. These profiles speak of Schwob's substantial knowledge of the Greco-Roman classics, as well as of the scholarly narratives, references, and hearsay that have survived as supposed biographical truths, e.g. Empedocles' suicide in Mount Etna or Lucretius' love suicide.<sup>16</sup> The biographies also operate within the spectrum of 'nothing and all'. Thus, for instance, Empedocles is portrayed as a 'transient omnipresence' who comes close to the incorporeal figure of a god, while Crates' life is marked by increasing

<sup>15</sup> It is instructive to revisit Plato's *Phaedo* 117e–118a after a reading of Schwob. Plato's passage features plenty of detail that blends the historical and fictional in the format of the philosophical dialogue and that could be understood to have affinities with Schwob's mythopoeic biography. For levels of accuracy in Plato's account, see Gallop (1983: ix–xii). For a broader consideration of this question, see Gill (1973: 25–8) and Kofman (1998).

<sup>16</sup> Schwob creatively builds on two sources already opened to speculation, Diogenes Laertius and St Jerome. In his life of Empedocles, Diogenes Laertius 8.66–76 cites different accounts on Empedocles' death, amongst them those reporting his suicide on Mount Etna (Hermippus), his 'divine disappearance' after a banquet (Heraclides and Pausanias), his withdrawal and disappearance in the Peloponnese (Timaeus), and his death at the age of 60 (Aristotle) or 109 (various other sources). In his *Chronicon*, St Jerome reports that Lucretius was 'driven mad by a love philtre' and, having composed between bouts of insanity several books (which Cicero afterwards corrected), committed suicide at the age of 44.

destitution, dispossession, and withdrawal from society, until his image is reduced to be almost nothing at all.<sup>17</sup> *Mutatis mutandis*, each of these classical biographies is organized around the motif of *eros–thanatos*, as the figures fall in love and die because of that love. Crucially, each life closes with an object that becomes a focal point of recollection for the linear reader. In order to illustrate this mnemonic effect, I cite the last sentence of the biographies of Empedocles, Lucretius, Crates, Septima and Clodia. For each ending paragraph, I give the title of the biography and enter the object(s) in question in capitals:

‘Empedocles, Supposed God’

In the porous lava on the brink of the burning abyss, they found a BRAZEN SANDAL written by the flames.

‘Crates, Cynic’

We know he ended his days squatting among bales of goods in a SHED.

‘Lucretius, Poet’

Lucretius drank and his reason left him as quickly, so that he forgot all the Greek words from the PAPYRUS SCROLL. Then, being mad, he learned real love for the first time, and in the night, being poisoned, he learned death.

‘Septima, Enchantress’

The words of Septima’s enchantment are inscribed upon a leaden PLAQUE which the enchantress lowered into Phoinissa’s TOMB through the little hole intended for libations.

‘Clodia, Impure Woman’

He threw her body, with her LARGE EYES STILL OPEN into the yellow waters of the Tiber.

One pattern of reading these lives is linearly, naturally from beginning to end, as a first-time reader would do. Here, readers follow the mythopoetic biography as they negotiate Schwob’s blend of historical data, known to be true, and the mythical details that make up unknown parts of the life narrated, in particular those concerning love and death. By the time readers reach the end of the narrative, they encounter objects which stand out powerfully for their visual closure, e.g. the brazen sandal of Empedocles emerging in the hot lava of Mount Etna, where the philosopher commits suicide because of love; a shed with scattered objects and bits of food left behind by an emaciated Crates in love; a papyrus scroll belonging to a Greek professor detailing the scientific knowledge of the atoms, whose contents Lucretius forgets when he falls in love with an African woman; a plaque detailing the love spell that Septima casts over her dead sister Phoinissa’s tomb; the large eyes of Clodia, killed for her impure love, still wide open as her dead body floats aimlessly down the Tiber. The linear reading towards this visual endpoint is repeatedly consistent in each biography to suggest the following pattern of interpretation of each mythopoetic classical life:

*Linear reading: fragments of factual and imaginary classical life → love → death → visual object closing the narrative*

<sup>17</sup> Zierger (2009: 164–65).

Empedocles here serves as a good example. Once readers reach the brazen sandal bent by the lava's flames, this visual object calls for a focal moment of reflection: now deceased, this happens to be the last visual trace of Empedocles' life. This kind of pause also allows readers to come to terms with the previously narrated fragments and/or facets of the early Greek philosopher's biography which, in fact, they did not fully know existed. With this final point of the narrative internalized, the sandal can furthermore acquire a mnemotechnical, even aetiological function for the closer reader. It can operate as the object that reminds us not only of the biography of Empedocles' death according to Schwob, but also of parts of his Schwobean life absent from our records or memory, whether they happen to be fact or myth. From this retrospective effect, it is thus possible to trace an alternative, or subsequent, pattern of reading the classical lives as absent phenomena. This plots the classical biography aetiologically from the mnemonic visual object backwards, and towards capturing the emergence of a classical absence in the form of unknown classical fragments:

*Aetiological reading: mnemonic visual object → death → love → hidden aspects of a classical life → emergence of a classical absence*

Like the aetiologies in Ovid's oeuvre which explain the causes of the month of April, an echo, or a laurel tree, so do indices, symbols, sandals, etc. here function as agencies that mediate cultural and literary phenomena otherwise 'unclassified' or untold by history. These agencies, however, do not simply mediate or work to reveal absent forms retrospectively. They come to represent a pivotal landmark, or site, of absence itself, whether one traces them forwards, backwards, or through more erratic modes of reading.

Cultural objects of absence: the classicizing mask

Objects performing these functions vis-à-vis narratives of absence are not exclusive to poetry, mythopoeic or fantastic literature — they feature in equally intriguing ways in forensic history and its dialogue with the cultural imagination. This is the case with the story of a captivating figure known as 'L'Inconnue de la Seine'. While this is not a classical life per se, it nevertheless has acquired the status of a classic broadly defined, not least because she is visually recognized through one object: the classicizing mask of her dead face. The details of this unidentified young woman, believed to have drowned after committing suicide in the river Seine in the 1880s, are a blend of fact, legend, and hearsay. According to the story, while her body was held at the morgue, the pathologist on call was so captivated by her facial image that he decided to cast a mask of her face. Even less is known if or how this mask first comes to be copied and widely distributed.<sup>18</sup> What we do know, however, is that the object soon became a verbal and visual phenomenon which spoke closely to

<sup>18</sup> Saliot (2015: 2–7).

modernity's fascination with the absent and unknown, as well as the possibilities that this presented for artistic processes and representation. The mask of *l'inconnue* has furthermore prompted investigation of its possible 'pre-histories.' One notable example is a fifteenth century wax bust known as 'La tête de cire' (Fig. 1), thought to be the work of a Renaissance Florence artist,<sup>19</sup> and possibly based on the face and upper body of a dead girl whose identity and location of death are thoroughly unknown. As for the cultural history of *l'inconnue* herself, explicit and allusive engagements with her mask include Vladimir Nabokov's poem 'L'inconnue de la Seine' (1934), the beginning of Argentine author Julio Cortázar's experimental novel *Rayuela* (*Hopscotch*, 1963), allusions in Belgian-born director Agnès Varda's documentary on Jane Birkin's *Jane B par Agnès* (1983), and representations of the mask in the classicizing works of Ukrainian photographer Albert Rudomine (Fig. 2) and French painter René Magritte (Fig. 3).<sup>20</sup>

In *The Drowned Muse: Casting the Unknown Woman of the Seine across the tides of Modernity* (2015), Anne-Gaëlle Saliot outlines the subject and directions of her compelling study:

This book . . . narrat[es] the fascinating aura of a cultural object that crosses epochs, geographical and linguistic frontiers, and new fascinations embodied in the various cultural forms it has produced in return. It tells of a figure's power to return, to survive, to reappear—to haunt. The cast is something or someone you cannot forget, but that you have difficulty identifying or locating. [It] charts the trajectory of this cultural artefact—at once object and image.

A-G. Saliot, *The Drowned Muse* (2015: 2)

This study shares clear affinities with my discussion of agencies of classical absence thus far. Objects, whether physical, like the mask of *l'inconnue*, figurative, like an index of a dematerialized Hellenistic poet or a symbol of a disembodied Homeric hero, or narrative, like a sandal, tomb, or a papyrus scroll connected to mythologized real lives, come to represent cultural landmarks or sites of absence. These landmarks are not just powerfully memorable, as Saliot contends, but they perform the role of a monument to absence, as it were. They inscribe memories and give a voice to the unknown, lost, silenced, or heavily fragmented, as I have argued in my analyses of classical absences in Borges, Anghelaki-Rooke, and, especially, Schwob. Furthermore, while these monumental objects unlock histories of absence, classical, classicizing and modern, the origin of these histories remain difficult to locate and identify, as Saliot explains. In the case of Empedocles, the sandal leads us back to an inaccurate origin that is only one thread in an equally inaccurate 'web of origins' of his life. This reading finds support in Diogenes Laertius' own struggles to construct a solid and historically verifiable biography of the philosopher as he refers to the broadcasting of hearsay accounts such as those of Aristotle, Pausanias, *et al.* In this case, it is the

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 18–9.

<sup>20</sup> For a substantial list of examples, see *ibid.*, pp. 8–19.





Fig. 1. *L'inconnue de la Seine*, unknown author (c. 1900)

absence of factual origin that serves the foundation of the biographical composition, as opposed to the foundation of surviving verifiable parts. Furthermore, masks, indices, sandals, scrolls, etc. here function as objects that map out routes of plotting the



Fig. 2. *La mémoire*, René Magritte (1948)

circulation of the unknown, inexistent, forgotten, or voiceless entities in cultural and literary history, routes which rarely obey linear reading. In my last example below, I explore how the notion of ‘survival’ can be plotted in a contrastingly dual direction: the path which marks the survival of a classical fragment, on the one hand, as a presence and, on the other, as a continued, irrecoverable absence. What one can make of these forking interpretative directions will be the focus on my concluding ideas.

#### Trajectories of absence: Aeschylus’ *Myrmidons* in Josephine Balmer’s *The Paths of Survival*

*The Paths of Survival* (2017) by classicist, translator, and British poet Josephine Balmer is a case in point when it comes to this dual trajectory. In this poetic collection, Balmer explores the various ways in which the minimal fragments of Aeschylus’ lost tragedy *Myrmidons* have survived in space and time. Balmer brilliantly recreates the paths of this Aeschylean survival through a cast of rarely explored fictional and quasi-historical characters. This is one way in which her collection gestures as much towards narratives of absence, as it does towards those of presence. She pursues a set of mostly unknown Aeschylean receptions by introducing characters from a ‘history from below’, rather than well-known voices in the established traditions of Aeschylus. A glance at her table of contents gives a strong sense of this feature in the collection. Each page presents a member of a cast of what may be interpreted as secondary actors. Collectively, this cast articulates an ongoing obsession

with a series of issues in Aeschylus' fragmentary play such as textual gaps, loss, untranslatability, lack of context, ignorance of the original, and lexical slipperiness. Amongst these unknown figures are custodians, excavators, editors, scavengers, translators, victors, believers, anthologists, scribes, annotators, bureaucrats, copyists, as well as the figures of the comedian and the tragedian. While the cast forms the structural core of Balmer's volume, the first and the last poems, 'Proem: Final Sentence' and 'Aeschylus' Revision', respectively frame the collection as bookends. The first piece is narrated by Balmer's own poetic first person, who speaks in the present time at the Bodleian Library, Oxford. The last piece, instead, recreates the voice of an Aeschylus at his deathbed in Sicily 456 BCE, as he goes over his life and oeuvre. From beginning to end, each piece moves from our present down the centuries to the time of Aeschylus' death, while their geographical settings move across different points in modern and imperial Europe to the ancient Mediterranean world, with Oxford and Sicily at beginning and end points.<sup>21</sup>

*The Paths of Survival* furthermore includes Balmer's creative translation of the few surviving fragments of Aeschylus' play.<sup>22</sup> The play roughly corresponds to books 9 and 16–18 of Homer's *Iliad* and is reconstructed from Oxyrhynchus Papyri 2163 fr. 1, 11 and 2256 fr. 55. The remaining gaps have been filled with references found in Aristophanes, Plato, Atheneus and Pothius, amongst others.<sup>23</sup> The rest of Balmer's translation is accompanied by scene descriptions and tentative reconstruction in consultation with commentaries and other sources.<sup>24</sup> From what can be gathered from this amalgamation of parts, gaps, and conjecture, the plot begins in *medias res* at Achilles' hut in the Greek army camp at Troy, after Achilles argues with Agamemnon over the Trojan captive Briseis. Achilles sits silently and still, with his face obscured from the audience. Meanwhile, the chorus of the Myrmidons pleads him to return to battle and lead the Achaeans who are still fighting (fr. 131–2). But Achilles remains immobile and reluctant to talk, and the Myrmidons warn him that, if he does not take action, the Achaeans will stone him on account of treason. In fr. 132 b, possibly by the middle of the play, Achilles breaks his silence to speak to his former tutor and advisor, Phoenix. He tells Phoenix that he is not concerned about the threat of the Achaeans since he remains their irreplaceable leader (fr. 132c). Achilles next learns that the Achaean ships were set on fire (fr. 134) and, afterwards from Antilochus (fr. 138), son of Nestor, that his lover Patroclus has been killed in battle by Hector, the leader of the Trojans. The play ends with Achilles lamenting over Patroclus' dead body (fr. 136), blaming himself for sending him to his death (fr. 139).<sup>25</sup> This is, at best, the narrative that can be feasibly reconstructed from the

<sup>21</sup> For a discussion of the beginning and end of *The Paths of Survival*, see Balmer (2013).

<sup>22</sup> Frs. 131–39 in Sommerstein (2008: 143–49).

<sup>23</sup> For the complete sources, see *ibid.*, (2008).

<sup>24</sup> Balmer (2017: 78–85).

<sup>25</sup> For studies in the play, its fragmentary reconstruction, themes and characterisation, see Sommerstein (2008: 135).

survival of two fragments, as well as from a series of citations and scholarly interventions that give us what we now know as Aeschylus' *Myrmidons*.

In a blog post written soon after the publication of *The Paths of Survival*,<sup>26</sup> Balmer comments on the fragile survival of the infinitesimally small fragments of Aeschylus' play. She refers in particular to Oxyrhynchus papyrus 2256, containing nearly ninety scraps of papyrus and including fragment number 55, which preserves what is believed to be the last words of line 2 of fragment 136 of the *Myrmidons*<sup>27</sup> which, after editing, give us *κατα σκότου*, 'down into darkness' (Fig. 4). Put together, fragment 136 (μηρῶν ... κλαίω, 1–2) and fragment 55 ([κατ]α σκότο[ν]), make up a poignant moment of the play, as Achilles laments in erotic vein over Patroclus' body the death of his lover. Below I cite Balmer's creative translation of lines 1–2, which includes the appending of *κατα σκότου* at the end of line 2, together with Balmer's addition of a few contextual words ('[for...you]' in between. The lines and Balmer's translation look thus:

μηρῶν τε τῶν σῶν ἠὲ σέβησ' ὀμλίαν  
κλαίω [κατ]α σκότο[ν]

... let me honour

Our passion, such sacred communion  
Between the thighs, let me mourn

[...]<sup>28</sup>

[for soon I will follow you *do*] *wn*  
*into darkn[ess]*.<sup>29</sup>

In the same post, Balmer further reflects on the fortuity of the recovery of these two words, and the part they can play as evidence that, when it comes to classical fragments, not all is textual loss:

*A tiny scrap of barely legible papyrus, now preserved in an Oxford library, has endured the long centuries since its inscription . . .*

It is, of course, heart-breaking that, along with a handful or so of similar fragments, this is all we have left of Aeschylus' tragic masterpiece. It is also a warning that our own cultures might be far more fragile than we think. Yet in each small miracle of survival, there is always something to celebrate. For somehow, by judgement or by error but mostly through happenstance, something of the written text, of literary culture, however damaged, however minuscule, has managed to escape all those centuries of ignorance, war, persecution

<sup>26</sup> Balmer, blog on 'Final Sentence' (2017): <https://thepathsofsurvival.wordpress.com/2017/03/23/final-sentence/> (last accessed 15 September 2021).

<sup>27</sup> Sommerstein (2008: 146–47).

<sup>28</sup> Balmer here enters 'All the bliss we knew together', quoted by Lucian, *Erotic Tales* 54, which is supposed to be citing Aeschylus. I have not found this addition in other editions, however, hence my omission of the line.

<sup>29</sup> I follow Balmer's interpretation of [κατ]α σκότο[ν], for which see Balmer (2017: 82).

and destruction. Like the lined faces of the old, each crease and blemish tells a unique story of experience and endurance. Proof that words can – and do – thrive where all else is lost.

J. Bamer (2017), blog on ‘Final Sentence’

In terms of the interplay of presence and absence, Balmer’s post betrays an almost imperceptible yet telling point of tension. On the one hand, ‘a tiny scrap of barely legible papyrus’ featuring two incomplete words survives through an unexpected path and helps reconstruct a minute gap in Aeschylus’ highly fragmented play. In other words, the find makes the play slightly less of a lost phenomenon and more of a concrete physical object. On the other hand, however, the survival of this tiny fragment is described as a ‘miracle’, even more so on account of the ‘fragile’ character of ‘our own cultures’. This miracle of Aeschylean survival has made it through the centuries and offers ‘[p]roof that words can—and do—thrive where all else is lost’.

Balmer’s reading is by no means incorrect or tendentious: however allusively and subject to interpretation, *κατα σκότον* does give readers of Aeschylus’ lost play one more piece of the challenging puzzle. I even venture to suggest that the sense of tension between survival and loss that I detect in Balmer’s comments does not need to — and perhaps should not — be resolved or reconciled. Rather, I propose that it opens the way to a productive reconsideration of how and why we tend to narrate the distant classical past that survives minimally around us more exclusively through the lens of physical and sensuous presence. In other words, we rarely consider the often-fragmentary presence of antiquity in terms of the narrative of ‘the size of all that’s missing’ or lost.<sup>30</sup> This narrative need not lead us to a pessimistic or nostalgic outlook. On the contrary, as we have seen with Borges’ minor-poet-as-index, it can produce a new cultural memory, even a new archive of antiquity as an absent form. When it comes to Aeschylean fragmentation (and classical fragmentation more broadly), what new understandings of this phenomena may emerge if we applied instead the lens of absence? The word ‘ruin’ offers some initial pointers towards this conceptual and methodological preoccupation. In Classical Latin, *ruina* denotes two main semantic directions: (i) as the action of *ruo* (‘to rush to ruin’, ‘to fall down’, ‘to tumble down’), which points not to preservation but to dereliction; and (ii) as an example of the physical remains of a building or construction.<sup>31</sup> The two semantic directions are indeed interconnected, yet the former points to ideas of dematerialization, while the latter paves the way to modes of interpreting remains in terms of survival. The semantics that we select will therefore give us contrasting ways of capturing the meanings and effects of a fragment such as *κατα σκότον*: is this an illustration of the size of all that remains or all is that is missing, or lost? And in the case of a fragment revealing lexica denoting movement ‘down into darkness’ and

<sup>30</sup> I borrow this phrase from Johnson’s recent study of the ruins of classical theatre and broken memory (2018: 1–17).

<sup>31</sup> *OLD* i and ii.

death,<sup>32</sup> that is, implying the end of Achilles as he eventually faces death and joins Patroclus in the afterlife, does the theme not also take the reader further into a discussion of Achilles as absence as much as of presence? As we shall see, Balmer interprets the words along this latter framework not only to great intellectual effect, but also contributing to the archive of narratives of classical absences explored in the present study.

In the course of considering these questions, I interviewed the poet, who generously responded to the challenge of rethinking her collection in terms of narratives of Aeschylean absence. Below is an excerpt of a longer conversation, with the poet's kind permission to publish:

LJ – In your blurb, you describe *The Paths of Survival* as a collection that ‘unravels the intricate serendipity of what time corrodes and what it spares’. In this sense, your poems on the few surviving fragments of Aeschylus’ *Myrmidons* could be interpreted as recreating stories that point not just to survival but emerge somewhere between presence/survival and absence/loss. Your narratives also introduce characters from what we could call a ‘history from below’ (unknown scribes, pagans, tricksters, madmen) who, in their bizarre engagement with the materiality of Aeschylus’ text (scrolls with holes, partially erased tablets, smudged copies, etc.) disclose untold stories of literary history and its transmission. Considered from this perspective, could *The Paths of Survival* also be interpreted as a narrative, even a dramatization of overwhelming absence? Which poems speak more directly to this motif?

JB – That is an intriguing question which I had not considered before. Yes, indeed, all the poems speak to absence in one way or another, with ‘Final Sentence’ I suppose the most obvious, as it explores the physical absence of a material object, that is, the complete papyrus text. But as you point out, there are other absences that are just as urgent as the physical, such as the degrading of comprehension, of the ability to understand the cultural nuances and significance of the original, whether wilfully or not. In this context, we have those such as the Christians and pagans, or even the scribe and the Victorian editor, who can no longer fully process *Myrmidons*’ cultural context, and yet somehow minute shards of enlightenment still break through, mirroring the physical survival of the tiny pieces of papyrus. For me a crucial poem in this process is ‘Charon’s Roll’, where we see the physical absence of the text, seized and then held illegally by the Alexandrians, but also, in the ferryman’s puzzlement, the beginnings of the breakdown of a ‘high’ classical world as Aeschylus’s cultural references no longer speak to all. This is a process we have seen earlier in ‘Margin’, where Scholiasts are now required to ‘digest the refs’. ‘Itch’ and ‘Diple’ are also quite crucial here too – mirror poems, centuries apart – in which absence becomes a deliberate act of war (fortunately reversible in the former), a space created by Caesar’s ambition in order to be filled by ‘his own mark’. And yet through these fires, maybe because of them, something always remains, however small, however fragile, like hope glowing in Pandora’s box.

LJ – Indeed, my own study is initially preoccupied with the sense of tension at the heart of presence and absence – it seems that whenever one concentrates on one of these notions and its effects separately, the shadow of the other emerges somehow. In the article in

<sup>32</sup> *LSJ*, s.v. *σκότος* 2. ‘the darkness of death’.

which I will include this interview I cite painter René Magritte, well-known for his exploration of hidden absences within the panorama of visual presence, both of which he sees in a ‘sort of conflict’. Both ancients and moderns have thought of this ‘sort of conflict’. One can think of Anne Carson’s discussion of ‘Visible Invisibles’ in *The Economy of the Unlost* (1999). In this chapter, Carson reminds us of conceptions of absence and presence at the time of Simonides of Ceos, who regarded painting as a medium revealing untapped dimensions and realities. She cites a famous line attributed to Simonides and preserved in Plutarch’s *Moralia* 4. 346f., in which painting is regarded as a silent form of poetry and poetry as a verbal example of painting:<sup>33</sup>

Πλὴν ὁ Σιμωνίδης τὴν μὲν ζωγραφίαν ποίησιν σιωπῶσαν προσαγορεύει, τὴν δὲ ποίησιν ζωγραφίαν λαλοῦσαν.

Simonides, however, calls painting inarticulate poetry and poetry articulate painting.

Each medium then encodes dimensions that become visible, if considered from the perspective of invisibility. There is also the example of Derrida’s wordplay ‘*différance*’, which in French means both ‘difference’ and ‘deferral’, and which Derrida uses to explain the notion of the written trace as a mark of one thing always already at work in another. So, in the survival of a tiny fragment with the letters [α σκότο []], there is always a trace of what is physically absent from our reading, in this case, the letters [κατ]– [v]. The theme of absence is vast, like that of presence, or sublimity, desire, place, time. It can take one into labyrinthine thinking and directions because it moves between the physical and metaphysical, factual and mythical, and so on. There are a plethora of manifestations and semantic layers, and any study of classical absence necessarily needs to keep a highly controlled focus on the topic. . .

JB – I agree. Yet it remains a fascinating and timely topic because it can unlock new ways of thinking about how we relate and conceive the classics as they emerge in our time – their fragments, their survival – and disintegration! I would venture to say that absence can be intellectual, cultural and spiritual as well as physical, which chimes with art and also your study. There is indeed so much. . . and this now offers much food for thought for some of my work ahead.

The first poem in *The Path of Survival*, ‘Proem: Final Sentences’, offers an excellent illustration of how the directions explored in this section and my interview with Balmer work in practice. Below, I place two images of Oxyrhynchus Papyrus 2256, one containing over 60 fragments (Fig. 3) and the other fragment 55 ([κατ]α σκότο[v]) (Fig. 4), together with Balmer’s first poem in the collection, titled ‘Proem: Final Sentence’. The juxtaposition of the two, image and text, offers a way of reading the trajectory of classical survival through absence:

Still I am drawn to it like breath to glass.  
That ache of absence, wrench of nothingness,  
stark lacunae we all must someday face.

<sup>33</sup> Carson (1999: 46).



Fig. 3. Oxyrhynchus Papyrus 2256. Courtesy of the Egypt Exploration Society and the University of Oxford Imaging Papyri Project



Fig. 4. Oxyrhynchus Papyrus 2256, n. 55. Courtesy of the Egypt Exploration Society and the University of Oxford Imaging Papyri Project

I imagine its letters freshly seared;  
 a scribe sighing over ebbing taper,  
 impatient to earn night's coming pleasures  
 as light seeped out of Alexandria.

5

But in these hushed corners of Oxford  
 Library afternoon, milky with dust,  
 the air is weighted down by accruing loss.

10

And this displaced scrap of frayed papyrus  
 whose mutilated words can just be read,  
 one final, half sentence: *Into darkness...*  
 Prophetic. Patient. Hanging by a thread.

The opening lines of this poem have points of contact and departure with the narration of Anghelaki-Rooke's Penelope discussed above. In this instance, absence also guides the speaker into identifying a growing symptom ('that ache of absence', 2) but it does so in a more wilful manner. It presents itself as an inevitable form of attraction 'like breath to glass' (1), as well as a rather violent pull ('wrench of nothingness', 2)



towards the vision, even prophecy of the ‘stark lacunae we all must someday face’ (3). The middle of the poem (ll. 4–10) next follows with a sharp contrast between senses of presence and absence. This is powerfully illustrated by the markedly different atmospheres of the library of Alexandria and the Bodleian Library at Oxford. Alexandria is described as the site of presence *par excellence*. It represents the buzz of busy scribing, producing, and circulating fresh classical texts. By contrast, the Oxonian library, which houses Oxyrhynchus Papyrus 2256, is subsumed by a stagnant atmosphere. This library is heavily associated with images of imposed silence, a light accumulation of dust, and a deep sense of ‘accruing loss’, all of which give the narrator an even deeper sensation of the absence of Aeschylus’ text, as she attempts to make out words amongst lacunae. The final stanza (11–14) then engages with the very object of absence: the barely surviving fragment 55 (Fig. 4), containing two ‘mutilated words’ (12): ‘*Into darkness . . .*’ (13). Here, the description of the ‘displayed scrap of frayed papyrus’ (11) takes the reader almost to a cliff-point, as the narrator prophesies a further dematerialization: the fragment is soon reaching a breaking point, as it ‘hang[s] by a thread’ (14), and the mutilated words [. . .] α σκότο[. . .] patiently (14) await disintegration. The poem ends at this unresolved point, marked by a strong sense of dramatic tension between survival and corrosion.

‘Proem: Final Sentence’ can indeed be read through the paths of survival. Yet, both thematically and rhetorically, the poem consistently points to the paths of textual lacunae and nothingness, trajectories in which the Aeschylean play ends up being recalled as a deeply distant and incorporeal phenomenon. Furthermore, the poem offers pointers as to how absence operates as a framework of investigation. It invites readers to observe the tensions and opportunities highlighted as the poles of presence and absence come unexpectedly into slight contact. This point of contact can produce certain hermeneutic effects. It sometimes stresses ‘what is’ and sometimes ‘what is not’ visible, readable, graspable, or comprehensible, thus challenging fixed ideas of antiquity as a culture whose survival depends solely on its physical and/or sensuous recuperation and preservation. In her blurb, Balmer notes that ‘*The Paths of Survival* unravels the intricate serendipity of what time corrodes and what it spares’, perhaps defying the possibility of stable interpretation of her collection and central theme. Yet, in representing fragment 55 as ‘hanging by a thread’, the narrator’s overall message implies a different inflection of a classical presence. This recalls Aeschylus’ lost play as an increasingly incorporeal presence, whose ‘survival’ is more fully supported by narratives of nothingness, loss, stagnation, and corrosion. Balmer’s other poems will fluctuate between corrosion and sparing, as she puts it, depending on the narrators’ hopes and frustrations, but also, as Balmer explains above, their ability to comprehend the contexts, cultural nuances, and significance of the original play, as they attempt to piece together its minimal fragments.

From Borges to Balmer, absence guides readers into a different understanding of how classical lives, ideas, and texts also survive in our modernity and intellectual and creative consciousness. Likewise, it shows that the classical world is often at the heart of twentieth and twenty-first century’s obsession with the unknown, incorporeal, erased, displaced, or forgotten. In some cases, absence is encoded in highly

condensed images and symbols that trigger or create new memories as to what has disappeared, is located elsewhere, or turns up to be plainly untrue. It can also take up a didactic role in the guise of an ache or symptom, directing narrators to self-knowledge, when everyday experience fails to deliver truth. Through absence, we can equally explore the paths which lead us into an image of antiquity ‘at a breaking point’, when the connecting thread of survival suggests loss rather than recuperation. Accepting this vision ought not to be seen as a pessimistic prospect. Rather, it invites to think about how the Greco-Roman past equally exists as an absence in our modernity. Absence can furthermore uncover aspects of ancient lives whose traces have been occluded and or obliterated. Indeed, it can potentially uncover archives of past lives which continue to be occluded by our modern narratives.<sup>34</sup> In the examples introduced in this discussion, which can only hope to present a preliminary picture of classical absences and their dynamics of disclosure, occlusion, and erasure,<sup>35</sup> absence is consistently an intrinsic aspect of presence, and vice versa, sometimes pointing to a sense of tension or conflict, and sometimes taking this tension to the point of paradox, as Anne Carson suggests in her observations about the ancient and modern monetary system in my second epigraph. Antiquity and modernity have plenty of examples of this kind. One can think of the two faces of Janus, which cannot be viewed simultaneously yet link the years together, or Heraclitus’s stream, which is always the same yet different, or the cenotaph, a monument commemorating the life of someone buried elsewhere, or Magritte’s *The Human Condition* (1933 and 1935), which superimposes interior and exterior realities into one single image. These images compel us to question how we view the world around us, what aspects of it we take for granted, and how we may expand our interpretative horizons if we turned our close attention to what we cannot perceive as much as what we do. In this discussion, my focus has been unapologetically on the side of absence as a critical idiom and value which seems to reveal as much as the practice of seeking classical presence itself.

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<sup>34</sup> As the pioneering work of Saidiya Hartman shows, on the erasure of black girls and women subject to racial violence from public memory (2008).

<sup>35</sup> This is the aim of my current work-in-progress, a monograph provisionally entitled ‘Classical Absences: Traditions of Occlusion, Erasure and Loss’.

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