



Economy of the Unlost: (Reading Simonides of Keos with Paul Celan) (Martin Classical Lectures)

Anne Carson

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

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

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