Introduction

One of Catullus’ best-known poems (*Carmen* 4) begins like this:

> Phaselus ille, quem uidetis, hospites,
> ait fuisse nauium celerrimus...

That boat which you are looking at, strangers, says that it was once the fastest of ships...

Three elements leap out at the reader at once: there is a boat endowed with the power of speech, a group of ‘strangers’ (or ‘guests’) who are viewing the boat, and someone who addresses the strangers, delivering the ‘speech’ of the boat through indirect discourse. The rest of the poem comprises an account of the boat’s ‘biography’, from its origin as a tree through its many nautical adventures and up to its final resting place, the shore of the ‘limpid lake’ (*limpidum lacum*, 24) at which the strangers now find it moored.

The point in space occupied by the docked vessel has a special status in this poem: it is not only the place where the boat happens to be, but a shared space in which the strangers’ act of viewing, the boat’s act of ‘speaking’ (whatever we take this to mean), and the address to the strangers converge. The narrative which emerges out of the reported speech of the boat employs this shared space as both starting point and endpoint, concluding as it does with the account that the boat made its way here to the lake-shore at the end of its long travels to dedicate itself to Castor and Pollux (22–27). The physical presence of the boat in the here and now of its moorage is thus both the initial prompt which gives rise to the narrative and the setting of its final act.

Catullus conjures up this presence through deixis, one of the most basic and most powerful tools of language.1 The deictic pronoun *ille* (‘that’, 1) works like a pointed finger gesturing linguistically towards the boat, a gesture which implies a shared field of vision between speaker and addressee. Deixis returns to centre the field of vision towards the end of the poem with the pronoun *hunc* (‘this’, 24), which informs us that the lake where the boat made its final stop is the same one which the strangers see now in front of them. This final *hunc* marks the point at which the narrated past of the boat’s youthful adventures comes full circle to

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meet the lived present of the strangers’ viewing of it on the lake-shore. This second deictic signal thus bespeaks not only a shared visual field but the shared knowledge of the boat’s history which our storyteller imparts to the strangers in a gesture of hospitality.

Up to a certain point, it is unproblematic to claim that the experience of the strangers named in the first line of this poem resembles our experience as its readers. We begin the poem ignorant of the boat’s past journeys, and we learn about them at the same time and in the same way as the strangers do. But while we share in their journey from ignorance to knowledge, it is less easy to claim that we share in the field of vision which they purportedly share with the storyteller. The strangers are given an opportunity which is not extended to us, the opportunity to refer the story they have just heard back to a physical presence which lies before them. Feeney remarks that ‘the mimetically vivid invitation to “see” the boat which is being pointed out simultaneously reminds readers that we cannot see it even as it teases us to imagine that we can.’ Following on this suggestion, we could say that behind this overt invitation to ‘see’ the boat lies a tacit invitation, issued directly to the reader, to produce a substitute for the boat’s missing presence.

One way to produce substitute presences is through narrative. Current theories of narrative advance the view that readers understand narratives, whether factual or fictional, by situating themselves imaginatively within the world of the story. This account privileges the role of the body and embodied cognition in the experience of narrative worlds. In order to make sense of a story, this account holds, we have to be there with the characters, navigating their environment and inhabiting their world as if it were our own, using many of the same cognitive tools we use when undergoing similar experiences in the real world.

Readers of Catullus’ poem find such an opportunity in the reported story of the boat. Its anthropomorphic characterisation permits us to understand the history of this object in accordance with the patterns of human experience. Rather than being built by human hands to be the instrument of human endeavours, this boat was born and went on adventures of its own, with each of its destinations representing a milestone in an ongoing life story. Making the boat relatable in this way grants it a kind of presence to the reader which could be said to compensate for the absence of the bodily nearness enjoyed by the hospites. Before being brought to life as a humanlike figure, the boat is just a ‘that’ (ille) whose very

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2 Feeney 2012: 31–32.
3 Davis 2002: 118 discusses how the reader is ‘included’ in the hospites’ act of viewing.
4 See e.g. Caracciolo 2011, Galbraith 1995, Fludernik 1996.
‘thatness’ is utterly unreal to the reader, unable as she is to relate even to the perspective of someone for whom the boat is a ‘that’. Once transformed into the hero of its own story, however, the boat becomes narratively knowable irrespective of its situation within (or in relation to) the factual world. The bond of shared knowledge and experience we form with the boat while reading its story substitutes for the direct visual contact with which the poem ‘teases’ us.

This even modifies the status of the deictic pronoun *hunc* (24) which indicates the lake that serves as the backdrop for the strangers’ encounter with the boat. Outside of the context of the story, the deixis here only foregrounds the epistemic gap between the audience of *hospites* and the readers of the poem, a gap which has long exercised scholars concerned to pinpoint Catullus’ lake on a map.5 Within the story, however, the ‘here’ of the lake-shore represents the last stop in the boat’s lifetime of sea-voyages, and consequently the meeting point between the past time of the narrative and the present of its telling. The sequential temporality fundamental to narrative discourse renders the otherwise empty shifters *ille* and *hunc*, ‘that there’ and ‘this here’, pregnant with meaning.

Immediately following the reference to ‘this lake’ is another form of the same deictic pronoun, *haec*, which refers by way of conclusion to the events just related in the story:

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sed haec prius fuere: nunc recondita
senet quiete seque dedicat tibi,
gemelle Castor et gemelle Castoris.
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But this was before: now he grows old in peaceful seclusion and dedicates himself to you, twin Castor and Castor’s twin.

Referring to the events of the story as ‘this’ (lit. ‘these things’) implies that they are present to the addressee just as referring to ‘this lake’ implies the presence of a lake, but in the case of *haec*, there is no longer any epistemic gap dividing the reader from the *hospites*; both parties become acquainted with the boat’s past life only through the medium of the story. It was noted above that, for the *hospites*, the conjunction of *hunc* and *haec* marks the point at which the past reality of the story comes full circle to meet the present reality of their act of viewing the boat. For the reader, however, the ‘thisness’ of the story and of the boat itself are of the same order; both are presences made present by the poem, experienced in the act of reading.

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5 See e.g. Putnam 1962.
The term *enargeia* is sometimes used to describe the faculty of language to make absent things present. In ancient rhetorical theory, this was typically considered an element of style essential for crafting an engaging story or a vivid description. Modern narrative theory, as we have seen, elevates *enargeia* to a fundamental principle of narrative comprehension; summoning things into what Elaine Scarry calls ‘imaginary vivacity’ is not just something that skilled writers know how to do well, rather it is something we have to do in order to make sense of narratives. What is it that is brought into imaginary vivacity, into presence, in Catullus c. 4? The obvious answer is: the boat, as a preternaturally animated object. But where exactly does this calling into presence happen?

I suggested above a conceptual link between the boat’s animation and its possession of narrative agency. Imagining the boat as humanlike is the enabling conceit which makes possible its weaving into story. But the most conspicuous feature of the boat’s animacy is its power of speech, its capacity not only to be the hero of a story but to tell that story in its own words. This consideration adds another dimension to the question of presence raised above. What is made present by the poem — what is revealed to the eyes of the *hospites* and to the imagination of the reader — is not only the content of the story delivered by the boat, but also the phenomenon of the boat’s speech itself. The speech of the boat is announced in v. 2 as if in answer to an implicit question posed by the strangers’ act of viewing. The content of the boat’s speech satisfies their questioning gaze by providing them (and us) with an origin story or aetiological myth, but the speech itself satisfies a different desire, the desire to be in the auditory (as well as the visual) presence of the boat.

Feeney emphasises how many layers of mediation separate us as readers from the direct perceptual experience of the boat’s speech, noting, ‘[the] poem does not straightforwardly represent a boat, nor does it represent a boat speaking […] it represents the speaker presenting the boat speaking, i.e. presenting the self-presentation of the boat.’ This is apt if we are concerned above all with the epistemic dimension of storytelling; each additional layer of representation separates us one step further from the ultimate ‘truth’ which the story purports to relate. If taken too far, however, this approach risks misrecognising the poem as a (quasi-) historical document, a collection of true or false facts about a real or fictional boat.

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8 Feeney 2012: 31–32.
As a factual statement, the fiction of the boat’s voice has no value whatsoever; but for the poem, this fiction is foundational. If we were ‘really there’ with the hospites viewing the boat, we would immediately discover the truth: the boat cannot of course ‘really’ speak. While the content of the story can be rightly thought of as mediated through multiple channels, the act of speech performed by the boat is not mediated at all; it exists only for the poem and only within the poem. Only by means of the poem’s language, through its texture, form, and style, can we hope to enjoy the aural presence of the boat’s voice. The boat’s speech, moreover, provides direct evidence of the lifeliness to which its biography only indirectly attests. We might say, then, that the poem does not make the boat speak just so that it can tell its story; equally, it gives it a story to tell so that we can hear it speak.

My initial argument here is that the fiction of the boat’s act of speech takes priority over the narrative as a device for making absent things present. Unlike the fiction of our being able to ‘see’ the boat, which threatens to violate the boundaries of textual representation, the fiction of the boat as a speaking object is inextricably bound up with the linguistic nature of the text. We can take this further by saying that the fiction of the boat’s speech is also the fiction of the production of the poem as a piece of language. The fiction of the boat as speaker grants the story determinacy in space and time; the fiction of the audience of hospites then makes this act of speaking into a particular event. As readers, I suggest, we are obliged as part of our experience of the poem to imagine ourselves in some way as participants in this localised event. But this event, crucially, is not just something represented by the poem and therefore separable from it; it includes within itself the originating event of the act of language which is the poem, in this case, the ‘speech’ of the boat. The event of the boat relaying its story through its spokesperson before the hospites is therefore what I propose to call the poem’s occasion.

The term occasion has been used in the study of classical literature in a few different ways without ever graduating to the status of a technical term. Citroni uses the word in its most traditional sense, referring to an interpersonal situation or sociopolitical state of affairs which prompts the writing of a given poem.9 ‘Occasion’ by this definition points to something more specific than ‘historical context’; it also implies a communicative context in which the poem presents itself as participating, such as when Catullus or Horace addresses a poem to a named

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Introduction

individual and presents this address itself as an act of social cohesion. In order to speak of the ‘occasion’ of Catullus c. 4 in this sense, we would have to consider the boat as an artefact with a history bound up with the genesis of the poem in which it appears. To this end we can try to piece together a historical narrative that fits the details of the boat’s itinerary, supplies the identity of the boat’s unspecified ‘master’ (erum, 19), and matches the ‘limpid lake’ to a point on a map.\(^\text{10}\) In doing so, we can imbue the boat with a substantiability it did not have before, and thus partially compensate for its missing presence.

But no matter how detailed a picture we end up with, our reconstructed scenario must necessarily exclude the most important fact of the poem, the boat’s power of speech.\(^\text{11}\) In order to come into contact with the boat’s historical reality, we have to persuade ourselves of the unreality of its voice, which we can do by suspending our disbelief and writing off its voicedness, its animacy, as a mere ‘device’.\(^\text{12}\) We might have come closer to standing in the presence of our hypothetical historical boat, but in the process we risk losing sight of that which engendered the desire for this presence in the first place. Any attempt to look beneath or behind the poem to find something underpinning it is also necessarily an engagement with the poem, and belongs no less to aesthetic experience.

‘The poem is the cry of its occasion, | Part of the res itself and not about it’, cries Wallace Stevens metapoetically.\(^\text{13}\) ‘Occasion’ means: the time for something; something which needs time to be set aside for it, an event; or, the enabling circumstance of something. Talking of a poem as having an occasion thus grants it eventhood, the sense of being or belonging to a happening.\(^\text{14}\) If we accept that this sense of eventhood or occasionality is a product of the poem and of reading, we ought to ask what there is in Catullus’ poem that produces it. Leaving aside appeals to vague impressions of authenticity or sincerity — which only lead us back around to the role of the text in fostering those impressions — the best candidate, I would argue, is the poem’s use of sense-perception.

The relative clause quem uidetis, ‘which you are looking at’, immediately follows the introduction of the boat itself into the text in the first line, as phaselus ille, ‘that boat’. In terms of pragmatics, this relative clause can be thought of as

\(^{10}\) See e.g. the very different approaches of Putnam 1962; Williams 1968: 192–93; Courtney 1997; and Davis 2002.

\(^{11}\) I discuss the boat’s power of speech in greater detail in Gramps forthcoming.


\(^{13}\) ‘An ordinary evening in New Haven’, stanza XII (Stevens 2006: 414).

\(^{14}\) See further Gadamer 2013: 144–48.
an attempt to persuade the addressee that the boat is a relevant topic of discourse, meriting the attention of listeners.\textsuperscript{15} The viewing of the boat is thus made into the occasion of the act of speech which comprises the poem. From the perspective of the \textit{hospites}, that is, the boat’s story is told to them because they are already there with it at the lake-shore, looking at it and perhaps wondering about its past.

From the reader’s perspective, the causality of looking and telling is reversed; for her, the boat comes into being only once the word \textit{phaselus} is read, and she can only come to ‘see’ the boat after the text’s powers of description have worked on her. The \textit{hospites}, as spectators of the boat and audience of its story, mirror the reader and model for her the imaginative act of perception she is invited to perform, but they invert the logical order of the experience so that the perception comes first, prior to the mediation of language. Language as such is introduced into this world in the second line, with the fantastic event of the boat’s animated testimony. Rather than language mediating visual perception (\textit{enargeia}), visual perception is made into the background of ordinary experience against which an extraordinary event of language comes to pass. Identifying with the perspective of the \textit{hospites} thus allows the reader to experience the speech of the boat as a dynamic presence, an event, which is disclosed to her by the poem.

My name for what happens between poem and reader to produce this effect is the fiction of occasion. The phrase is borrowed from Benjamin Acosta-Hughes, who uses it in passing (his topic is Callimachus’ \textit{iambi}) to refer to the habit of framing poems with invented scenarios.\textsuperscript{16} In my usage, the term ‘fiction’ is not meant to indicate feigning or falsehood, but rather a creative engagement of the imagination. It is also meant to suggest both a connexion with and a departure from ‘fiction’ considered as a category or property of narrative. The argument behind this is that poems like Catullus \textit{c. 4} produce effects which belong to the realm of fiction and fictionality, but which cannot be properly understood in terms of a dichotomy of truth and falsehood and equally cannot be considered as subfunctions of narrative discourse.

The aim of this book is to formulate and develop the concept of the fiction of occasion and explore its possibilities through readings of a small selection of poems written in Latin and Greek between the 3rd century BCE and the 1st century CE. The central texts for discussion are Callimachus, \textit{Hymn to Apollo} (chapter 1); Bion, \textit{Lament for Adonis} and Propertius \textit{4.6} (chapter 2); and a series of poems from

\textsuperscript{15} On pragmatics and relevance, see Levinson 1983; Sperber and Wilson 1995; Walsh 2007: 13–37.

\textsuperscript{16} Acosta-Hughes 2002: 266.
books 1 and 4 of Horace’s *Odes* (chapters 3 and 4). I selected these poems above all because of the problems they pose: each of them follows Catullus c. 4 in affecting to involve the reader intimately while also building a world which is manifestly not her own.¹⁷

This book aims to address this problem — the problem of involvement or presence — from two perspectives which may at first seem to conflict. The first perspective is informed by the scholarly discourse in the study of Hellenistic and Roman poetry, and takes its cue from the ongoing debate about ‘performance’ and the relationship between oral and written language, a debate which I will argue needs rethinking. Within this perspective, the problem of presence is a problem for literary theory, and bears directly on overtly academic questions such as genre and periodisation. But the experience of literature also belongs to literary theory, and the problem of presence is something we experience in the act of reading as well as an intellectual puzzle. Rather than try to draw an arbitrary line between literary theory and the experience of reading, I propose to use the fiction of occasion to address the problem of presence in a way that involves both of these perspectives equally.

This means that the ‘reader’ whom I invoke for the purposes of my argument is intended to stand in for a wide range of different actual readers belonging to different reading communities across time and space, for whom ‘reading’ certainly means different things. The most pressing of these differences is the gap between ancient and modern, between the contemporary reception of texts and their curation by philologists. Throughout this book I will be talking about texts in terms of the experience of reading, and I will not draw hard distinctions between ancient and modern experiences, or those of any other group.¹⁸ This is not based on a conviction that the two can be reconciled under the banner of universal human experience, but rather on the recognition that they cannot be separated. Philology is a form of reading, and trying to see ancient texts through the eyes of ancient people is one of the tasks of philology. The best work in the field embraces the recursive nature of its practices rather than distancing itself from it.

The term ‘presence’ as I use it here is meant to keep this recursivity prominently in view. This usage derives from the work of Hans Gumbrecht, who argues that aesthetic experience cannot be reduced to a search for meaning, but is also

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¹⁷ As McCarthy puts it in a related context, each of these poems as we read it appears as both ‘for-us’ and ‘not-for-us’ (McCarthy 2019: 4).

¹⁸ See Grethlein 2015 for ancient and modern perspectives on aesthetic experience.
driven by the desire to simply be in the presence of the things of the world. Gumbrecht uses ‘presence’ to designate the bare materiality of the encounter with the aesthetic, which he sees as prior to and separable from ‘meaning’, the dimension of interpretation. These two dimensions of aesthetic experience, he argues, express themselves through ‘presence effects’ and ‘meaning effects’, which manifest themselves in an oscillation which itself produces aesthetic tension.

When brought to bear on literature, this approach allows us to see a text for its surface as well as for its depths. What we take away from reading a work of literature — worldly insight, social awareness, technical appreciation, emotional resonance, etc. — only accounts for part of what we do when we read; we also read in order to be reading, to be in contact with texts. For Gumbrecht, philology is in service of what is fundamentally the same impulse, ‘the desire to make the past present again by embodying it.’ This book is an attempt to re-evaluate its small corpus of Hellenistic and Roman poems in a way that leaves room for the working of presence effects, in the hope that this will allow them to be something more than receptacles of meaning which challenge readers to draw out their hidden contents.

The first chapter will offer an introductory discussion of Callimachus’ Hymn to Apollo. Firstly I will make a case for rejecting the label of ‘mimetic poetry’ for this poem and, by extension, for other poems that are grouped under this heading. Next, I will challenge narratological approaches which attempt to solve the poem’s enunciative ambiguities by attributing sections of text to various fictional speakers; I argue that the question we need to be asking is not ‘who is speaking?’ but rather ‘what kind of experience are we presented with?’ I will offer the following answer: the poem ties the hic et nunc of its performance to a ‘space of inclusion’ which is also the space in which an epiphany of Apollo is about to occur, and in this way the poem presents itself as an epiphanic experience.

Chapter 2 will expand on the claim that the fiction of occasion makes possible a spatial or spatialised experience which goes beyond the mimetic. In order to do this, I will look at two poems which bear a noticeable debt to the Hymn to Apollo and exhibit some of the same features: Propertius 4.6 and Bion’s Lament for Adonis. The first section of this chapter will focus on Propertius 4.6 and how that

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20 Gumbrecht 2004: 2, 104–11.
21 See Best and Marcus 2009 (with Purves 2016) on ‘surface reading’ as opposed to ‘symptomatic reading’.
22 Cf. Fitzgerald 1995: 1–4 on ‘aesthetic positionality’ in Catullus, i.e. the aesthetics of the reader’s positioning in relation to the text.
poem uses the metaphor of the ‘path of song’ as an experiential schema to guide the reader through the poem. The next section will turn to Bion’s *Lament for Adonis* and its employment of the verbal gestures of address and refrain to construct a resonant space of sympathetic communion with the mourning Aphrodite. Both of these poems will serve as examples of how poetic occasion takes its shape from poetic figures and from effects of rhythmic pacing and metre, a conclusion which allows us to cut through the dichotomy of text and performance space.

The third chapter will move on to Horace’s *Odes* and will consider the problem of presence more directly than the previous two. Through a reading of *cc. 1.9, 1.12, and 1.20*, I will explore how Horace not only produces the fiction of occasion but also actively negotiates the occasionality of his poetry by way of the philosophical themes and ideas raised therein. In so doing, I argue, Horace works out a dialectic between two competing modes of poetic presence, the metaphysical and the material, in which the latter wins out over the former.

The final chapter is concerned with a more specific topic in Horace’s *Odes*, namely the new predominance of the choral voice in the fourth and final book. Here, I will draw on Steven Connor’s essay ‘Choralities’ to explore how Horace creates fantasy visions of choral song in poems 1, 2, 5, 6, and 15. In imagining the choral mode of poetry, I will argue, Horace takes the ideas of poetic presence and occasion to their furthest limits. This chapter is written so as to stand on the borderline between the current project, on the fiction of occasion, and future trajectories for the project which lead into new territories.