

Catullus in Verona

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A Reading of the Elegiac *Libellus*, Poems 65–116

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D. M.
parentibus carissimis

Edwin John Berglund, 1903–1993
Marie Michalsky Berglund, 1905–1993
hoc vobis quod potui

Ghosts

Those houses haunt in which we leave
Something undone. It is not those
Great words or silences of love

That spread their echoes through a place
And fill the locked-up unbreathed gloom.
Ghosts do not haunt with any face

That we have known; they only come
With arrogance to thrust at us
Our own omissions in a room.

The words we would not speak they use,
The deeds we dared not act they flaunt,
Our nervous silences they bruise;

It is our helplessness they choose
And our refusals that they haunt.

—Elizabeth Jennings

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Preface

Quare, quod scribis Veronae turpe Catullo
esse, quod hic quisquis de meliore nota
frigida deserto tepefactet membra cubili,

id, Manli, non est turpe, magis miserum est. (Catullus 68.27–30)

27 vetone O, corr. O¹ catullo ζ: -e V 29 tepefactet Bergk, -fecit γ, faxit Lachmann:
tepefacit V, al. -factat R² cubilli O 30 manli ε, Ric. 606, mali β, Mani Lachmann,
mi, Alli Schoell: mali V¹

Accordingly, as for your writing that it's “disgraceful” for Catullus to be in Verona, because here anyone who is of the better class habitually warms his chilled limbs in an abandoned bed—that, Manlius [?], is not disgraceful but, instead, sad.

This study is the product of several decades’ engagement not only with Catullus but also, inescapably, with the difficulties of interpreting a badly preserved ancient text. From the time I began serious work on the poems as a doctoral student I have been thinking off and on about the passage above, the most notorious extended *crux* in the entire Catullan corpus.²

Poem 68a is an epistolary *recusatio* in which the speaker denies a request for poetry from a correspondent (variously designated by scholars as Manlius, Manius, Mallius, or Allius) owing to grief over his brother’s recent death. Here, amending a statement purportedly made by that addressee in an earlier letter, he rejects *turpe* as an appropriate word to describe his presence in Verona, substituting *miserum* instead. So much seems clear. Everything else is strenuously contested: the extent of direct quotation from the addressee’s letter, if any; the reference of *hic* in line 28; emendations for V’s unmetrical *tepefacit* in the following line; the implications of the phrase *deserto . . . cubili*.³ Major interpretive issues—including Catullus’ attitude toward the person addressed and, following one line of exegesis, his feelings for his mistress Lesbia—hang on the various ways in which these lines have been construed.

Even as I was grappling with the philological evidence for the first time, I wondered whether larger questions of meaning might be involved here. Was the addressee's comment on Verona to be taken as a joke? If so, what conclusion would an audience be expected to draw from the speaker's blunt correction? In such a context, *miserum* seemed permeated by remorse, perhaps also by nostalgia. Beyond the fact of Catullus' return to northern Italy in the wake of a family tragedy, then, might there be some further element of significance attached to his current sojourn there—as contrasted with Rome, the site, he emphatically insists, of his true *domus* and *sedes* (68.34–35)? In that age of New Criticism, it appeared reasonable to propose that Verona was serving as the “objective correlative” of the speaker's despondent emotional state, a zone of spiritual isolation⁴ barren of creative and erotic pleasure, while far-off Rome, on the other hand, had become in recollection the symbolic center of his lost artistic life (Skinner 1972: 506–7).

Once formulated, that figurative reading of “Verona” and “Rome” as opposing markers of a crisis in poetic subjectivity expanded each time I came back to the elegy. Gradually I perceived its relationship to a broader, more complex theme of artistic commitment subordinated to filial duty, arguably central to 68b as well as to its companion piece 68a. Contemporary readers, in the context of Roman cultural values, might well have interpreted Catullus' return to Verona under the putatively autobiographical circumstances presented in this *recusatio* as a permanent removal: the bereaved speaker had chosen between two lifestyles, acknowledging a primary obligation, as sole surviving son, to take his brother's place in managing the estate and continuing the ancestral lineage.

As I pursued this line of thought, Catullus' reference to a *domus* in Rome, plausibly identifiable with the house lent him by Allius in 68b, acquired self-reflexive nuances. Without losing its overtones of familial stability and its pregnant links to the psychological tensions of the Lesbia cycle,⁵ his Roman *domus* came to represent for me his personal identity as poet, alleged to have perished like his creative inspiration upon his brother's death (*tecum una tota est nostra sepulta domus*, 68.22 and 94). Further reflection raised the question of whether this complex of meanings surrounding the *domus* should be extended more widely—initially to the situation of the speaker in poem 65, another *recusatio* related thematically to 68a, and then, through programmatic assertions made in 65, to all Catullan elegy. For I had already begun to think of 65 through 116, the complete group of poems in elegiac meter, as a *libellus* arranged by the author himself, which had once circulated independently before it came to occupy its present position at the end of the *liber Catulli*. On that

hypothesis, the elegiac collection would have been released to the public after Catullus' return to Verona as a valedictory to his public and a retrospective pronouncement upon his completed body of work.⁶

Like some other books brought forth at the end of a poetic career,⁷ this *libellus* theoretically could have been framed as a strong affirmation of art, a testimony to the expansion of humanistic awareness rendered by the poetic product as well as the aesthetic pleasure it affords. That would surely have been motive enough for compiling it, and poem 68 has in fact lent itself to such a reading. Catullus' elegies and epigrams, however—at least as I have now come to understand them—seem instead to enact throughout, and sometimes openly to profess, a deep unease over the representational claims of poetry, its promise of immortality, and, even more, its fundamental truth value. Perhaps such misgivings are not uncommon in a literature informed by absence; certainly the poignancy of Ovid's exilic elegy is underscored by tensions between the speaker's stubborn faith in verse as a medium of self-expression and his ostensible anxiety about the deterioration of his skills. Political turmoil at Rome in the late 50s B.C.E. may have affected the mood of Catullus' collection, as it palpably shaped the content, eliciting a sense of inarticulate helplessness in the face of external events. In similar fashion, T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*, also composed in a time of war, obsessively interrogate the efficacy of language: "words strain, / crack and sometimes break, under the burden" ("Burnt Norton"). Aware on looking back of what his craft had apparently failed to accomplish, the poet in representing the very experience of creative defeat could have sought one last time to get it right. "Many aging poets require that form of liberation," notes Lawrence Lipking. "Before they take leave of their ghosts, they must put their affairs in order" (67). The speaker who corrects his correspondent's flip remark at 68.27–30 is not old, but he already thinks of his youth as vanished. And he is taking leave of many things, ghosts among them.

During the same period in which I was reaching such conclusions, fellow classicists were making corroborative discoveries. Observing the emphasis in all three texts, 65, 68a, and 68b, upon poetry's conditions of production and commemorative uses, several attributed that intensified artistic self-consciousness to Callimachean influence, which had prompted a radical "exploration of the parameters of creativity" (Hunter 182).⁸ Fraternal grief would have precipitated a change in the author's sensibility and the corresponding development of a more melancholy textual voice (Block 48). In a procession of poetic statements emulating the format of Callimachus' *Aetia*, the gradual emergence of that voice also furnishes an "aetiology" for the bleakness of the elegiac epigrams, largely concerned with faithlessness and public misconduct (King 390–92).⁹ Recently it has been suggested that the poems in elegiacs are infused with a tension between the high Roman

valuation of marriage and family as institutions and the private relationship between the speaker and his mistress—a primarily sexual liaison, yet one in which the speaker nevertheless demands of his partner a quasi-spousal fidelity (Holzberg 55). I firmly agree with all of those perceptions, but my interpretation goes to greater lengths. Preoccupied not only with death and erotic betrayal, as is evident, but also with the futility of an artistic vocation, the thematics of the *libellus* are to me even more darkly introspective than others have found them. Tracing out those thematics, as they are disclosed through serial reading of the textual sequences composing the elegiac *libellus*, is consequently my present objective.

When I do so, the reader, finding the word “I” turning up more often than is wont in academic prose, will suspect that the authorial self-consciousness in this autobiographical preface (where by convention it is permitted) has relentlessly seeped into the entire argument. Correct, and there are reasons why. Those who bear in mind that my current views evolved over many years, during which the discipline, along with the entire field of humanities, witnessed a major paradigm shift, may be in a better position to sympathize with unvoiced assumptions about the contingency and “embeddedness” of all critical practice.¹⁰ Again, I am making no claim that the interpretation of the *libellus* put forth in this monograph is exhaustive. My investigative goal does not extend beyond the production of a *plausible* reading of these poems as a unit, a reading that tries to remain faithful to my understanding of Roman cultural mores even as it attempts to account for the presence of textual and structural features in keeping with accepted standards of expository proof. Saying “I” at regular intervals should be a helpful reminder that I am only telling a “story of reading.”¹¹ Lastly, the recurrent presence of the *biographème*—Roland Barthes’ term for an extraneous factual detail that seemingly connects head-on with the uniqueness of the now long-dead author—has, as I will argue, a signifying function in such a presumably “confessional” elegiac collection. What I consequently address is the peculiar degree to which the “Catullus” of the scholarly imagination hovers, as a construct, halfway between fiction and historiography. If a few *biographèmes* of my own are sprinkled through this monograph, it is to indicate that clues to the author’s one-time presence dropped by the authorial persona may be vehicles of genuine insight. Or they may be red herrings.

In any case, I hope that the hermeneutic self-appraisal demanded by the irruption of poststructuralist theory into our discipline will have led to a productive reconsideration of two tried and true philological questions—the unity, coherence, and ultimate meaning of Catullus 68 and the likelihood of authorial editorship for the Catullan corpus. It is worth bringing contemporary models of analysis to bear on old issues, if only to test the applicability of the former and the ongoing relevance of the latter.

Acknowledgments

During so many years of working with Catullus' poetry, I have benefited from an extraordinary amount of professional and personal generosity. I cannot possibly express my gratitude to everyone who aided me during the course of my academic career, but let me at least thank the people and institutions who assisted the progress of the book you're now holding. Without their help, it would not be in your hands.

First, I deeply appreciate the enthusiasm with which Eugene O'Connor, Managing Editor of the Ohio State University Press, greeted my proposal and the time he subsequently spent with me discussing how the project might suit his own prospective new list in classical studies. The two referees chosen to review the manuscript brought to the task an impressive expertise in the field. Furthermore, they readily applied the insights gained through their own prior critical engagements with Catullus to refining and strengthening what may have seemed a highly unorthodox argument. My indebtedness to them is manifest throughout.

Let me express my special thanks to the Press copy editor, who gave the manuscript scrupulous attention, and to the production staff for its contributions to the physical appearance of the volume. Once more Jeffrey S. Carnes performed a superior job of indexing; I'm only sorry that it couldn't be done on site.

I am grateful, too, to Matthew S. Santirocco, editor of *Classical World*, for permission to reprint material from my article "Transactions with Catullus," originally published in *CW* 95.4 (2002): 435–38; to David Higham Associates for permission to reprint Elizabeth Jennings' poem "Ghosts" from *New Collected Poems* (Carcenet, 1986); and to the Art Renewal Center and its chairman, Fred Ross, for permission to reproduce the cover image of Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema's painting "The Discourse." The Provost's Author Support Fund of the University of Arizona supplied funds to offset fees for use of copyrighted material. I warmly appreciate the assistance tendered by my institution in this and other ways.

I began working on this book during a sabbatical from the University of Arizona from 1995 to 1996 and completed the manuscript in the fall of

2002, partway through another year-long sabbatical. Being able to give all my concentration to it during those two crucial periods was invaluable; I cannot thank the Department of Classics and the College of Humanities enough for that privilege. Having the services of a research assistant during my second sabbatical was also a unique luxury, and I am pleased beyond measure with Holly Cohen's dedication to the project and her willingness to go the extra mile. Undergraduate and graduate students in my courses on the poet at the University of Arizona have constantly kindled my thinking with imaginative questions and observations. (Just to reassure them, none of them was the model for my implied reader.)

The greatest part of my research and writing was conducted at my home institution, whose library staff was always prepared to assist me. Still, a considerable share was done abroad. My warm appreciation to the library staff of the American Academy in Rome for their specialized skills; to Franco Sgariglia, Director of the Intercollegiate Center in Rome, for the Centro's abundant hospitality; and to Mina Sgariglia and *la famiglia Sgariglia* at the Villa Vergiliana in Cuma for providing an idyllic scholarly retreat—and, more important, for being *la bella famiglia Sgariglia*.

Niklas Holzberg did me a great favor by sending me a copy of his monograph *Catull: Der Dichter und sein erotisches Werk* (Munich 2002) before my manuscript was in final form, which allowed me to take several of his thoughts on the poet into account.

Again, my thanks to all those colleagues who listened to presentations based on the work-in-progress and offered suggestions for improvement. Papers later incorporated into the manuscript were delivered at the annual meetings of the Classical Association of the Midwest and South in 1993 and 1994; parts of draft chapters were given at the 1999, 2000, and 2001 annual meetings. During the fall of 1999, an early version of the second chapter was presented to my colleagues at the University of Arizona and also to the Classics Department of Indiana University at the kind invitation of Eleanor Leach. Meeting with Professor Leach's Catullus students the next day was an energizing experience. Paul Allen Miller read another version of the same chapter and provided several cogent critical observations. In the fall of 2000, I shared thoughts on Catullus' poetry as performance script with attendees at the joint meeting of the Classical Association of the Atlantic States, the Pennsylvania Classical Association, and the Philadelphia Classical Society; I am indebted to Judith Hallett for that invitation. Finally, in the spring of 2002, a request to present my ideas on Catullus 68 to a graduate seminar taught by Thomas Hubbard at the University of Texas provoked one more stimulating and lively discussion. (Perhaps I should take it back—all the students who ever exchanged ideas with me about Catullus went into the making of that implied reader.)

Lastly, a very special thank-you to Madeleine Henry of Iowa State University, though she may not remember why. In an e-mail back in 1995, just when I was first realizing the hopeless magnitude of the project I'd undertaken, she wrote, "I can't wait for *Catullus in Verona!*" That endorsement kept me going through the first and second chapters. Mady, you've waited a long time: here it is.

INTRODUCTION



The Hermeneutics of the Libellus

Under the lingering influence of nineteenth-century Romanticism and its cult of artistic genius, and in the absence of much factual information about the author, the charisma of “Catullus,” the voice heard in the Catullan corpus, brought into being a void demanding to be filled by speculation if nothing else. In 1862 Ludwig Schwabe rose to the occasion. Scrutinizing the poems for biographical content, he produced a *Catullroman* accepted unconditionally by many later readers.¹ This is the familiar story of the talented young provincial C. Valerius Catullus, born in 87 B.C.E., who becomes entangled with the beautiful but vicious noblewoman Clodia, wife of Q. Caecilius Metellus Celer (*pr.* 63, *cos.* 60) and afterward the mistress of M. Caelius Rufus, among others. Catullus’ affair with her, which began a year or two before her husband’s demise (c. 83), enjoyed a period of happiness (cc. 2, 3, 5, 7, etc.) interrupted by his brother’s unexpected death in Asia Minor. Upon his return to Rome from Verona, relations became strained, as Clodia had meanwhile taken other lovers (a large number of Lesbia epigrams; attacks on Gellius, Caelius Rufus, Egnatius); a brief reconciliation (cc. 107, 109) was followed by a final rupture in 58 B.C.E. (c. 76). From 57 to 56 the poet served in Bithynia as a member of the *cohors* of its governor, C. Memmius (cc. 4, 10, 46, 101). While he was abroad, Cicero in defending Caelius on criminal charges had laid bare the extent of Clodia’s depravity, and her public infamy put the last touches on Catullus’ disillusionment (c. 58). Her offer to resume the liaison, conveyed through her intermediaries Furius and Aurelius, provoked a violent denunciation (c. 11); mention of Caesar’s invasion of Britain dates it to 55, approximately a year before the poet’s own death. Into that temporal framework Schwabe then fitted the remaining texts, with varying degrees of plausibility.²

This reconstruction, which, with occasional modifications, underlay Catullan criticism for generations, has now been displaced from its

supporting position. Contemporary scholarship instead stresses both the scarcity of our information and its tenuous nature. Suetonius would have included a life of Catullus in his *De viris illustribus*, but all that remains are two fragments extracted by Jerome and inserted into his expansion of Eusebius' *Chronicle*.³ Under his entry for 87 B.C.E., Jerome writes *Gaius Valerius Catullus scriptor lyricus Veronae nascitur* ("Gaius Valerius Catullus, writer of lyric, is born at Verona") and under 58 B.C.E. he puts the corresponding entry, *Catullus XXX aetatis anno Romae moritur* ("Catullus dies in his thirtieth year [or, "at the age of thirty"] in Rome"). The year given for Catullus' death is incorrect, because, as indicated above, internal references in the poems establish that he was certainly alive in 55 B.C.E. and even later.⁴ Wiseman (1985: 188) thinks the latest assignable date in the corpus is August 54, for Calvus' prosecution of Vatinius (53.2–3). Arguably, this terminus could be pushed down to December of the same year, since poem 14, purportedly sent to Calvus around the time of the Saturnalia, also alludes to Vatinius' enmity (*odio Vatiniiano*, 14.3). However, Calvus' plans to prosecute Vatinius were already a matter of public knowledge in 56, so bad feelings between the two men may well have existed much earlier.⁵

Jerome's inaccuracy about the date of death has called all his other facts into question. One hypothesis is that Suetonius gave only Catullus' age at death; both the birth and death dates consequently involve mere guesswork on Jerome's part (Wiseman 1985: 190; Thomson 1997: 3–4). However, the truth of the claim that the poet died *XXX aetatis anno* is itself not irrefutable: numbers in ancient manuscripts are easily misread or subject to textual corruption. While the brevity of Catullus' life seems to be supported by testimony from Ovid that he died young, the latter evidence may be misleading. At *Amores* 3.9.61–62, Catullus is pictured in Elysium, youthful temples (*iuvenalia . . . tempora*) crowned with poetic ivy; but Romans could refer to a man in his forties as technically a *iuvenis*, and Ovid, who of all Roman authors was most conscious of the artificiality of the poetic persona, may be speaking only of the character projected in the *liber Catulli*.⁶ The fact of the matter is that we have no reliable external evidence for Catullus' life span, save only Nepos' confirmation that he was dead by 32 B.C.E. (*Att.* 12.4). While the absence of any comment on political events at Rome later than 54 has been thought to point to the poet's death shortly thereafter, such a silence can be accounted for in other ways.

Although Catullus' verse seems intensely subjective in its frank censure of leading personalities and observations regarding the current political and social scene, it tells us surprisingly little about its author. There is no reason to doubt his military service in Bithynia under Memmius, alluded