

II THE BOOK OF CATULLUS

This business of survival is far more precarious than the reader may think.

—Yvor Winters

AT PRESENT THE BOOK OF CATULLUS CONSISTS OF 116 POEMS, plus a number of fragments and unfinished drafts of poems, minus three pieces admitted to the canon during the sixteenth century but now generally regarded as spurious; the lacuna left by their passage has been preserved in the numbering of the poems as a part of the history of the text. That history begins with the period in which Catullus wrote his poems, a span of some ten or fifteen years before his death, most likely in the year 54 B.C. During this time or very shortly afterward, his poems found their way into books, and those books—or whatever remained of them—eventually found their way into another book that became, in the absence of competition from any other source, the Book of Catullus, the body of his work as we have it now.

We very nearly did not have it: sometime during the early Middle Ages, books and Book likewise disappeared, went underground; and for the better part of a millennium these poems were a buried presence, a light hidden under a bushel. It has only been for about the last six hundred years that the Book of Catullus has been a text that could be copied and re-copied, bringing his work back into circulation.

Catullus tells us more about his habits of composition and about the circumstances in which he worked than any other ancient writer. He is very much like Ernest Hemingway in his self-conscious fascination with the process of his own creativ-

ity, as well as in his assurance that his readers will find the subject no less enthralling than he does. In the beginning, he tells us, his poems were jotted down on scraps of used papyrus or on the waxed tablets he carried with him as a kind of notebook. In addition to those poems in which we see Catullus offering to write verses for friends or against enemies, we are also given two very different scenes from the life of a neoteric poet. In poem 50, Catullus describes an afternoon spent in the company of his friend Calvus, drinking wine and playfully collaborating on the improvisation of erotic verses; in poem 68, however, a solitary, sober, and cerebral Catullus regrets that he must decline a friend's request for some poetry, apparently because he does not have at hand the library of Greek authors he uses either as models or for inspiration.

No matter how unbuttoned Catullus wishes to seem, neoteric standards of craftsmanship, as well as the poems themselves, suggest that his idea of poetic composition would ordinarily have entailed a small mountain of palimpsestic papyrus or a waxed tablet worked right down to its wooden backing. Catullus would hardly wish to be seen belaboring trifles—or anything else—in public, but he surely gave his poems a great deal of private attention before he set them loose to find their first audience.

That audience would have learned of them by word of mouth, for the longer ones such as poems 63 and 64 might have been performed in public, either by the poet or by professional actors. The shorter poems would have been recited at banquets, passed on like the good jokes that many of them are, or as exemplary expressions of erotic refinement or deliciously savage wit. Both were important to cultivated Romans, who labored under the perpetual necessity of proving to themselves that they could rival the Greeks in the arts of civilization. In the *Attic Nights* of Aulus Gellius, there is an account of a dinner party that took place about two hundred years after Catullus' death, where he and his friend Calvus are mentioned—by some Greeks, of course—as the only Roman poets

able to rival their Hellenic counterparts in the expression of tender feelings in pliant numbers.

But poetry was also a way of lashing out at one's enemies, of making public, and—who knows?—perhaps even terminating their aberrant behavior. One of the recurring motifs in Catullus' poetry is the threat of abuse by iambic verse; in classical times, the iambic meter was the meter of choice for poetic assault. "*At non effugies meos iambos,*" he says in a line from an otherwise lost poem: "But you will not escape from my invective!" A poem could be made out of nothing more substantial than the threat of such an attack. Thus, in poem 40, a certain Ravidus is warned against taking an inappropriate interest in the poet's lover:

Poor little Ravidus! What madness drives you
on to be shafted by my sharp iambs?
What god offended by a faulty prayer
makes you provoke this quarrel so insanely?
—Or are you only eager to be noticed,
a famous man, no matter what the cost is?
You will be, since you choose to love my darling,
and for a great while after you'll repent it! [1-8]

But when innuendo failed to warn off a rival or opponent, only a direct attack could sustain one's credibility, typically, *chez Catulle*, a hair-raising accusation of social impropriety supported by sordid specifics and spelled out in a handful of lines—a scant mouthful of air that wafted its helpless victim up into the dazzling light of publicity. Poem 57 is for Julius Caesar and his lieutenant Mamurra:

How well these two bad fairies fit together,
this queenly couple, Caesar and Mamurra!
—No wonder, for they're like as two like smutches
(one is from Rome, a Formian the other)
sunk in too deeply to be gotten rid of:
a pair of twins with all the same diseases,
they lie entangled on one couch to scribble,

adulterers both, equally voracious,
sharing nymphetoleptic inclinations:
how well these two bad fairies fit together! [1-10]

This sort of thing worked, according to the historian Suetonius: "As [Caesar] himself did not hesitate to say, Catullus inflicted a lasting stain on his name by the verses about Mamurra. Yet when he apologized, Caesar invited the poet to dinner that very same day, and continued his usual friendly relations with Catullus' father."¹ That anecdote argues both for the poet's charm and for the politician's shrewd judgment in dealing with a troublesome satirist.

It also offers us the only view we have of a contemporary of Catullus responding to his poetry, and since a poet's reputation is usually made by his or her contemporaries, our ignorance of the beginnings of the critical tradition leaves us much in the dark about such matters as his relations with the other neoterics, the popularity and circulation of his poems in and beyond the coterie of his associates, and the nature of the influence his work had on other neoterics. We may assume that his poems quickly achieved a reputation for brashness, sensuality, and elegance among the relatively few people at Rome for whom such qualities were important. This would have no doubt led to their first appearance in books, and once in books the poems would have circulated extensively in their author's lifetime and for many years afterward.

There was at Rome no Benevolent Society for the Preservation of the Literary Remains of the Neoterics, and so the very survival of Catullus' poems indicates that someone was looking out for his interests. Yet if the prestige and popularity of his poems in certain circles worked in some mysterious way to preserve them for us, other forces not only limited the kind of influence they would have on subsequent generations but also made their mere survival problematic. In this regard they were perhaps their own worst enemies: Romans were not used to subjectivity in their literature. While it may have been all

very well to create a poetry that would rival the Greeks in delicacy of feeling, the other side of the Romans' cultural inferiority complex was a defensive arrogance: after all, the Greeks were little better than slaves! Many of them, in fact, *were* slaves, writing a slavish, unmanly verse altogether unsuitable for the descendants of Romulus and Remus.

As a result, the shutters of opportunity that Catullus and the neoterics had flung open were quickly closed by those who came after them. In the next generation, Horace and Virgil both had the chance to study Catullus and to learn at first hand from Philodemus, who was still alive when they were young men. It would be inaccurate to say that the younger poets rejected the neoterics entirely, for the concern with craftsmanship and technique they introduced would permanently alter Roman poetry, and the need to reconcile the traditional Roman concepts of civic and martial obligation with the pleasures and refinements of the newly discovered erotic sensibility would become a constant theme: Mars fuming as Venus washes out her nighties in his helmet.

Nevertheless, the age of Augustus demanded a tilting toward Athens and away from Alexandria. Augustus sponsored a return to the old notions of a public poetry that would advance his new agenda: a generation after Catullus' death, the social conditions that had permitted his kind of poetry no longer obtained.

Given the traditional Roman concept of poetry as a didactic instrument, a poet's survival depended in large part on whether he was included in the curriculum: the poetry of Horace and Virgil survived because their values supported the aims of the imperial state. However, a good many of Catullus' poems are enthusiastic celebrations of erotic practices that schoolmasters tend to regard as subversive rather than supportive of public order; our poet would not easily have found his way into the curriculum. Despite the eminent propriety of some of his poems Catullus must have remained a guilty pleasure among the relative few, even up to our own day, when one of his recent editors has seen fit to delete about a third of

the poems from his edition on the understandable if contestable grounds that "they do not lend themselves to commentary in English."²

During the early years, the poems of Catullus circulated in books that were actually rolls of papyrus like those he describes in poem 22, those

good new rolls
wound up on ivory, with red parchment wrappers,
lead-ruled, smoothed with pumice [6-7]

As a means of storing and retrieving information a roll of papyrus leaves much to be desired: aside from the inherent fragility of the material, the rolls were large and cumbersome to hold and read. Even a collection as short as Catullus' would probably have required at least three separate rolls, any one of which might have gotten lost, burned, or, worse, used to wrap mummies in Egypt or mackerel in Padua, the fate Catullus predicts in poem 95 for Volusius' boring *Annales*.

During the third and fourth centuries A.D., the book form we are familiar with today began to supersede the papyrus rolls. The codex, as it was called, was superior to its predecessor in a number of ways; for one, the parchment used in making it was far more durable than papyrus. It was also a good deal more compact: Catullus' poems would now fit easily into a single volume. Its size made the codex more convenient to use and store, factors that would have substantially increased its chances for survival. And the poems of Catullus did find their way, at some time in the late Classical period or early Middle Ages, into at least one codex. If there were others, they have left no trace.

It must have been a descendant of that single volume, containing all of the poems that we now have and in the order in which we now have them, that surfaced in Verona in the year 1300, discovered, it may have been, by Dante's great patron Can Grande della Scala. Its reappearance was commemorated by a certain Benvenuto Campesani in a set of Latin elegiac

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verses; it had been found, he said, *sub modio*, under a bushel—more likely a reference to Matthew 5:15 than to its real hiding place.

Two copies were made of the *Codex Veronensis*, known as *V*, before it disappeared once again. *V* has not since come to light, and if it were not for those two copies and the copies that were made of them, only poem 63, preserved independently in another manuscript, would have escaped oblivion—unless, of course, that manuscript had also been lost. In that case nothing would have survived of Catullus but his name, a few scraps of verse, and a reputation for wit and tenderness.