XI. Catullus, *c.* 38

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The theory that this poem was written "near the end of the poet's life" (Heyse, Schwabe, Baehrens) and even "on his deathbed" (Ellis, Merrill, Duff [*Lit. Hist. Rome*,[3] 233]) has persisted for a long time, in spite of occasional protests (e.g. from Kroll and Friedrich). Like much that has been written about Catullus, the theory has no basis in objectively demonstrable fact. It is pure conjecture, sprung probably of someone's desire to have a "last poem" for the collection, and pieced together out of Simonides' reputation as a writer of dirges and the expression *male est . . . Catullo*, which could mean "Catullus is ill," especially to one who was looking for a deathbed poem.

If the theory had confined itself solely to the matter of approximate dating, it could have been dismissed as interesting and possible, but not especially significant. Unfortunately, the very process by which it was pieced together has led to misunderstanding, and even to grotesquerie: we are asked to believe that Catullus, the least egotistic of all the Roman poets, thought to lighten his last hours by reading a eulogy upon himself, composed by Cornificius. Even Propertius never indulged in such Trimalchionics; he at least wrote his *magne poeta iaces* himself. As if this were not enough, the excessive concentration upon detail that has muddied the stream of Catullan criticism at many another point has done its work here, too, with the result that even so perspicacious and sensitive a scholar as Kroll has given the poem up as only partially comprehensible.[1]

Let us put aside all thoughts of last poems and dying poets, forget all minutiae, and read the poem through as it stands, all by itself. We need make only two assumptions: (1) that the poem, like any good lyric, is a unit, centered on some single thought and con-

[1] "C. ist in tieftrauriger Stimmung, deren Anlass das Gedicht nicht verrät; denn es ist ein wirklicher Brief, dessen Anlass Schreiber und Empfänger wohl kannten und der von dem Rechte, nur anzudeuten, starken Gebrauch macht" (*c.* 38, intro. note).

fined within the range of that thought; (2) that it contains within itself all that we need to know in order to understand it.[2]

Reading it like this, and with these assumptions, we can hardly miss the central thought, for it is entirely clear: Catullus is in deep distress, and is bitterly disappointed because his friend, Cornificius, has not sent him the *consolatio* that was customary in such cases. In order to have complete understanding we need only to know what the nature of the poet's distress was.

The opening lines do not make this immediately clear, for the expression *male est* is ambiguous: it may refer either to physical illness or to emotional stress.[3] At this point we might concede Kroll's contention[4] that the poem has the onesided character of a true letter, for no doubt Cornificius knew at once what was wrong, and we do not — at once.

But let us look again at the whole poem, and see if clarification cannot be found. It should be axiomatic in the lyric — at least in the Catullan lyric — that when meaning is obscure we should look to the concluding line or lines for help.[5] Here, if anywhere, the poet makes his point; here he closes the circle that circumscribes his poem. *C.* 38 ends with the line *maestius lacrimis Simonideis*; a correct understanding of these words should give us the clue that we need.

To turn the line into English is simple enough: Catullus asks for something "sadder than the tears of Simonides."[6] The "something" (paulum nescioquid locutionis) is a *consolatio*, as vs. 5 shows (qua solatus es adlocutione). That a *consolatio* should dwell on themes of sadness should not surprise us; we need only recall Cicero's remark to Caecina, commemorarem non solum veterum, sed horum etiam recentium vel ducum vel comitum tuorum gravissimos casus, etiam externos multos claros viros nominarem; levat enim dolorem communis quasi legis et humanae condicionis recordatio,[7] and to

[2] I should not wish to be misunderstood here. Catullus writes for the Roman world of the fifties, B.C., and naturally assumes that his readers know that world. Obviously we must learn of it, too, as far as we can, if we are to become competent readers of his poetry. But *beyond this* the poems are self-contained: Catullus' contemporaries did not need notes to comprehend them.

[3] See Kroll, *ad loc.* There are abundant parallels for both meanings: see the dictt. s.v. *male*.

[4] Above, note 1.

[5] See my remarks on *c.* 35: *AJP* 74 (1953) 152–53.

[6] It seems almost incredible that anyone should have proposed any other meaning for the line, yet see Baehrens *ad loc.*

[7] *Ad fam.* 6.6.12.

put with this Sulpicius' famous letter to Cicero himself[8] and such passages as Lucr. 3.1024–45 and Hor. *Od.* 2.9.9–17. The idea that we have no right to grieve, when other and greater men have suffered as much or more than we, is one of the commonest themes of the ancient *consolatio*.[9] It is in this sense and for this reason that Catullus asks Cornificius for "something sad." He hopes to lessen his own suffering by comparing it to the greater suffering of others.

But what kind of suffering was meant? The answer to this question is to be found in *lacrimae Simonideae*. Here the key word is not *lacrimae*, which may or may not be Catullus' imperfect translation of Θρῆνοι.[10] *Lacrimae* is as ambiguous as *male est*, for either physical suffering or emotional stress might be the cause of "tears." The key is rather to be found in the name of Simonides himself. If this name was to be anything but confusing (and is Catullus the man to deliberately confuse his reader?) it must convey a clear-cut and unequivocal idea; to put it in psychological terms, it must elicit an instant and single response, as *Shakespeare* would elicit "plays," *Keats*, "lyric," or *Milton*, "Paradise Lost." Now there seems to be no disagreement as to the idea that the name of Simonides would suggest to the ancient reader: it is the idea of death and of songs of lament for death.[11]

The occasion for the poem and the nature of Catullus' distress are now quite clear. Catullus is not ill; he is not suffering from *Liebesgram*,[12] for the name of Simonides suggests neither of these kinds of pain. Rather, it is death that has caused him to remark *male est . . . tuo Catullo*. Could it then be the poet's own (impending) death, as has been so often conjectured? If, as I proposed earlier, we rule out the mawkish picture of Catullus gloating over his own eulogy, and think of him rather as fortifying himself for death by meditating on the courage of other, greater, dying men, this remains a possibility. Yet somehow the idea seems far-fetched, and

[8] *Ad fam.* 4.5, esp. paragraph 4.

[9] See the article *Consolatio ad Liviam* in *RE*, esp. col. 938.

[10] Baehrens *ad loc.*: "per 'lacrimas' C. ad verbum vertit graecum Θρῆνοι, non nimis feliciter. . . ." I have been tempted at times to wonder whether an anthology of Simonides' Θρῆνοι, under the title Δάκρυα Σιμωνίδου, might have been in circulation in the ancient world: cf. the Ἀηδόνες of Heraclitus: *A.P.* 7.80.

[11] The editors almost universally quote Quintilian 10.1.64, Praecipua tamen eius in commovenda miseratione virtus, ut quidam in hac eum parte omnibus eius operis auctoribus praeferant; and Aristides the Rhetorician 1.127, ποῖος ταῦτα Σιμωνίδης θρηνήσει; τίς Πίνδαρος; see also Ellis, intro. note.

[12] So Kroll and Friedrich.

not quite the one that the name of Simonides would have suggested. Simonides' songs were for the *survivors* of the dead, to console them for their loss.[13] It would seem then natural, logical, and above all simple, to conclude that Catullus is suffering at the death of someone who had been close to him, and that he wished Cornificius to send him a *consolatio* for his loss. The theme of the poem may then be partially expressed in the following paraphrase: "Cornificius, Catullus is broken-hearted and heavy with a sorrow that increases with every passing hour. Have you — so little a thing! — no word of solace for me? Please: one word; sadder than the tears of Simonides!"

One matter yet remains to be cleared up. This is the phrase *sic meos amores* (vs. 6). Here again it is over-attention to detail and failure to view the poem as a whole that have caused trouble. If we look at *mei amores* in isolation, we are of course reminded of passages in Catullus in which these words mean "my beloved," "my darling";[14] some editors, with a conscientious eye on parallels, have accepted this meaning and conjectured that Catullus was referring to Juventius or to Lesbia.[15] Yet we dare not disrupt the unity of the poem by injecting a third party, such as Lesbia or Juventius, here: the reader has not been prepared for it; the theme of the poem does not suggest it — all this quite apart from the fact that no relation between Cornificius and either Lesbia or Juventius has ever been so much as hinted at in any other of the poems. If Catullus had meant *mei amores* to mean either of these two individuals, or for that matter, any other person, he would have had to add a note to his poem to that effect; otherwise the ancient no less than the modern reader would have been led astray. As for taking *mei amores* to mean Catullus himself, or Cornificius himself, somewhat as *amicus suus meusque* (35.6) means Catullus himself,[16] this would inject a light, ironic touch which would violate the emotional, if not the logical unity of the poem.

But if *mei amores* does not mean "my beloved" then it does mean "my love," "my affection" — sc. for you, Cornificius. Parallels for this meaning are rare in Catullus — in fact, no exact parallel is to be found. The nearest is 13.9, at contra accipies meros

[13] See note 11.

[14] E.g. 15.1; 21.4; 40.7–8; cf. *sui amores* 10.1–2; 45.1; 64.27, and *tui amores* 6.16–17.

[15] See Baehrens and Ellis *ad loc.*

[16] See Friedrich, *ad loc.*; cf. *AJP* 74 (1953) 159.

amores, where *amores* clearly means "love" or "affection." But examples are not lacking in other authors,[17] and a study of the word *amor* in *ThLL* makes it certain that this meaning is entirely normal and natural. The singular is of course far more common than the plural, and we may be tempted to wonder why, in this apparently isolated instance, Catullus chose the plural. One obvious reason at once suggests itself: *Meos amores* at this point is metrically possible; *meum amorem* is not. There may have been other reasons as well, such as euphony, or the fact that there was some subtle difference, which now escapes us, between the meaning of the singular and of the plural, and which was of significance at precisely this point.

However, the final arbiter must be the poem itself, and here the meaning "love," "affection" is demanded as the only one that lies within the compass of the poem and does not violate its unity. Its theme is Catullus' sorrow and his chagrin at Cornificius' apparent lack of sympathy. These two ideas, which are really two aspects of one idea, are the only ones that are expressed anywhere else in the poem, and they find their most intense single expression in *irascor tibi* (vs. 6). After this outburst, what else can *sic meos amores* mean but "(is it) thus (you repay) my love?" Any other meaning would be illogical, disruptive, and — what would probably have been worst in Catullus' eyes — clumsy and tasteless.

One final point: who was it that had died? To this we can give no answer. The poem is not concerned with the identity of the deceased, but with Catullus' grief and Cornificius' failure to respond properly to it. We are bound to think of Catullus' brother, and perhaps it was indeed he. Also, perhaps not. It could have been any one of the many people for whom Catullus felt deep affection. If he had wanted us to know who had died, he would have told us. As things stand, it simply does not matter.

[17] *Meos amores*: Tib. 1.2.59–60; 1.3.81; *amores* alone, or with other modifiers, in the required sense: Hor. *Epod.* 15.23; Prop. 1.8.45; 1.9.1; 1.15.19.