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A Companion to Roman Love Elegy

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CHAPTER 2

Catullus the Roman Love Elegist?

David Wray

Quintilian (10.1.93) and Ovid (*Tristia* 4.10.53–5) seem to think not. In a pair of regularly quoted passages, they agree on a list of four canonical Roman elegists: Gallus; Tibullus, whom Quintilian likes best, “for his special polish and elegance”; Propertius (some do like him better, Quintilian admits); and Ovid, who, writing from the long view of exile, could claim his own place on the roster without arrogance or false modesty. These two strong pieces of evidence urge the conclusion that just about any reader of Latin poetry in the early empire would have told you that Roman love elegy was a genre initiated by Gallus, the only one of the canonical four whose poems are all but entirely lost. And Catullus? Despite having been born only about fifteen years before Gallus, despite being one of the most carefully studied and imitated poets in later generations, and despite having written long poems in elegiac metre on love themes, Catullus, from the view on the ground, the view of Latinity itself, somehow seems not to have counted as a Roman love elegist.

Does this mean it is a mistake to describe him as one? The editor of an influential early twentieth-century American college textbook on the subject named Catullus as “the first Roman elegist whose works have endured to our own time” (Harrington 1914, 25) and included twenty-five of his poems as examples of the elegiac genre. A more recent editor of a similar textbook, updating Harrington for the millennium and writing at about the same temporal remove from him as separated Quintilian from Ovid, likewise includes Catullus in his list of “surviving erotic elegists” (Miller 2002, 2). Here the representative selection includes only one, or part of one, poem whose claim to the status of elegy looks unassailable, Poem 68B. Like Harrington before him, Miller rounds out his sampling of Catullus with a number of shorter pieces in elegiac metre taken from the final third of the corpus (Poems 69 through 116). These poems are all traditionally designated as epigrams, with one possible exception (Poem 76), and duly

recognized as such by both commentators. Are they also in some sense examples of elegy, as their inclusion seems to imply?

The seven shorter poems Miller anthologizes, freighted as they are with intense, complex, and characteristically Catullan emotions, do seem to press a claim to the status of miniature elegy, at least at the level of thematic content. Each of them however also manifests the formal pith, the drive toward neat encapsulation through symmetry and pointed antithesis, and above all the relative roughness of diction (Ross 1969) that distinguished Latin epigram, one of the most widespread and popular poetic genres of the language, from elegy. Latin elegy, conversely, was marked at the height of its development by an aristocratic disdain for linear progression at the level of theme coupled with a no less aristocratic commitment to relentlessly elegant polish at the level of diction. This latter quality, the mirror sheen of their exquisite surfaces, is what Quintilian picked out (in Tibullus especially) as a chief excellence of the Augustan love elegists. The former quality, the fuzzy logic of their propositional content (here again Tibullus leads the pack), is what makes them, for modern readers at least, often hard to construe for sense and even harder to come to grips with as poetry.

So does Catullus get to count as a Roman love elegist or not? On the one hand, we can acknowledge that Catullus gave the world some genuine examples of subjective-erotic elegy. Poems 65 and 66, a translation from Callimachus on Berenice's lock with a dedicatory letter, clearly belong in this category. And whether we count it as one poem or two, Poem 68, a shimmeringly intense poetic meditation in which the major emotional preoccupations of the Catullus we get to know throughout the corpus find their correlates in the heroic mythology of the Greeks, realizes so many of the potentials of love elegy so fully that it might feel odd to call it a mere precursor of the genre. Propertius and Ovid explicitly acknowledged Catullus as a formative model (Miller 2007). Their poetic practice, and Tibullus' as well, points to an apprenticeship that included diligent study not just of the full-length elegies but of everything Catullus wrote. The genres of Latin poetry, interrelated, were always open to influences from outside their own permeable generic boundaries, and all the surviving elegy collections have moments, for example, where they riff on the traditions of Roman epigram. Ovid even rewrites Catullus' unforgettable single-distich epigram *odi et amo* ("I hate and I love," Poem 85) in the first couplet of *Amores* 3.11b, and spends the rest of the poem amplifying it in a decidedly epigrammatic, if distinctly Ovidian, vein. For these reasons and others, Catullus has a place in the history of Roman love elegy, and studying that history involves studying more than just those two or three of his poems that come closest to being full-blown examples of the genre.

On the other hand are some strong reasons for saying that while Catullus did write poems that are properly called Roman love elegies, he did so without thereby becoming a Roman love elegist properly speaking. For one thing, the Roman love elegists, unlike Catullus, all shared the sense of a poetic commitment to devote their careers exclusively to writing in the elegiac form. This they seem to have allegorized in the claim to have devoted their lives to a sole and unique love object, a mistress (we owe this meaning of the word chiefly to Roman elegy [Wyke 2007]) whose beauty and faithlessness obsesses and torments them. Catullus does share with them the ethical claim to have devoted himself to a love object that both obsessed and disappointed him. But Lesbia, in the fictional world of Catullus' poetry, has always struck readers as a real person with specific

traits, at least too much so to serve merely or principally as an allegory for things like poetic writing, the genre of elegy, or the book of poems itself, as Cynthia so often does in Propertius. Further, within Latin poetry it is Catullus who has given us our great surviving example of restlessly experimental variety (what the Greeks called *poikilia*) at the level of form, through a very wide range of speech genres as well as metres and themes. By contrast, if Gallus, Tibullus, or Propertius ever wrote other kinds of poetry besides elegy, we do not know of it.

Ovid is of course the exception, since he went on to graduate from elegy into what he and his tradition regarded as more ambitious genres, starting with his (lost) tragedy *Medea*. And the characteristically Ovidian wit of the *Amores* can make his elegiac commitment look half-hearted, even inside the logic of that poetry collection's imagined world. More often than not, Ovid – whether that name refers to the lover inside the world of the poems or to the poet standing outside that world and making it – just seems to be having too much fun to count as obsessed and tormented. Still, even Ovid portrays himself at the opening of his elegiac collection as wounded by Love's arrow and bound by the god's cruel command to live only for love and write only elegy (*Amores* 1.1). Even more instructive in this regard is his depiction, at the beginning of his third and final book of “Loves,” of Elegy and Tragedy personified as female beings competing for his exclusive devotion and not satisfied until he promises serial monogamy to both (*Amores* 3.1). This scene, for all its wit, also clearly shows just how thoroughly Ovid could count on his contemporary readers to recognize, as a cultural given, an implicit but clear and striking claim about Roman love elegy as a poetic vocation, one with more than merely writerly implications for the poet called to it. Ovid is implying, and expecting his readers to understand, that being a Roman love elegist had come to mean something comparable on some level to what it meant in this culture to be a philosopher (Hadot 2002). That is to say, the choice to be a Roman elegist could be held up as not just a choice to mold written language under the constraints of a certain literary form on a given day, or to have a particular kind of poetic career, but rather a once-for-all decision, forced on the poet more than taken by him, to be a certain kind of human being and live a certain kind of life. Catullus, whose poetry gives as strong a sense of poetic vocation and poetic ambition as any poet who ever wrote, never hints that he thought of being a love elegist in this way or had even heard of the possibility of doing so.

Another salient difference between Catullus and the Augustan elegists, as I read their poetry, is that Catullus gives us more, by a wide margin, of what Paul Veyne (1988, 31–49) calls “classical illusion.” By this I mean the strong impression that the speaker of Catullus' poems is a man in the world, or at least a character in a realist drama, talking – maybe to someone else, maybe only to himself – but just talking, the way people talk in the world. While it may be hard to put a finger to the precise causes of this impression of directness and authenticity, the entire modern reception history of Catullus testifies to its power and presence. Extant Latin poetry offers no other reading experience that has felt to so many readers like the experience of getting close to another human being. No amount of talk on the part of us scholars about things like performativity and ironized self-presentation has yet succeeded in making Catullus walk that way for most of his readers, especially when coming to his poems for the first time.

By contrast, arguing hard for self-consciously performative artifice in Roman love elegy feels like belaboring the obvious. The speaker of a Roman elegiac poem is often as

hard to place in a world as a Senecan tragic protagonist. His words seem to travel through a medium that has all the viscosity and circularity of song, and very little of the transparently linear discursivity of talk. “Semiotic game” and “self-pastiche” are among the concepts Veyne (1988, 9, 28, and *passim*) famously, or infamously, applied to the discursive system of Roman love elegy and the self-presentation of its speakers. While finding much to disagree with in Veyne’s book, I also find these formulations taken by themselves so intuitively apt as descriptors of Roman elegy that the resistance they provoke in some Anglophone scholars leaves me puzzled and wondering if something got lost in translation. For Veyne, neither Catullus’ “sincerity” nor the elegists’ *jeu sémiotique* (*jeu* means “mechanism” as well as “game”) has anything to do with the measure of fidelity or fickleness in love we might impute to the poets or their poems’ speakers. What makes the Catullan speaker “sincere” in this sense more kin to Roland Barthes’ (1986) “reality effect,” and *ego* in Catullus’ poems is never so “sincere” as when he allows himself to be caught in a lie or an act of self-deception, as he often does. As for “semiotic game” and “self-pastiche,” I take it that Wheeler (1915, 157) had already put a (less threatening) finger on more or less the same generic features when he spoke of an “erotic system,” something he found only hinted at in Catullus but fully formed in the elegists, and noted that the elegiac speakers talk about themselves and their loves in an ironizing, objectifying tone that Catullus uses sometimes to talk about other men’s loves but never his own.

At least some of these are differences of degree rather than kind. Still, it may turn out that the sum of these contrasts at the level of literariness points to a deep underlying difference in the range of relations between fictional world and lived experience available to a given poet or set of poets. This is a claim that, if accepted, puts Catullus on the other side of a fairly bright line from the Roman love elegists and has a fair shot at being a general assertion about Latin literary history. To evaluate it, or begin to, more needs saying about the literary as well as the historical. Literary space feels like a realm apart, an element apart, from the space of mere language. If a signifying act in its instrumental, communicative use is like a physical object (a rock, say) surrounded by air, then the appearance of that signifying act in a literary utterance can be likened to the event of the rock being dropped into a pond. There is no end to the things we can find to say about the “physical object” constituted by a word-meaning-referent nexus located in the “air” of ordinary language use, just as there is no end to the “contextualizing” things a literary historian or philological commentator can find to say about the origins, properties, and interrelations of all the items in the world a literary text referentially points toward and incorporates. But once we set about describing the rock’s fall into the water, what takes center stage in our description, after the splash of initial contact, is the pond itself, the rhythmic surges pulsing through it as it works its way from the shock of excitation back to a state of relative calm. Developing the analogy, we can liken the concentric ripples across the water’s surface to the widening complex of metonymic associations that spread out from the point of (signifying) contact across a textual surface. And we can liken the zigzagging descent of the rock toward the pond’s bottom to the deepening complex of metaphoric significances psychically activated by the interaction of text and reader in the act of reading.

The analogy as set up is being asked to serve at least double duty, by describing what a poem might be doing and what reading the poem might be like for a reader. I want to

put it to yet a further service by holding it up alongside some elegiac verse texts of Catullus and Propertius, as a way of comparing and contrasting, if only in the limited way a sampling can achieve, these two poets' available modes of relation to the lived experience and the historical events their poems reference and imply. In both passages, the shock of excitation, the splash on the surface of the psychic pond that is the poem-world, comes from the displacement power of the one linguistic signifier on which the whole massive heft of history during the writing life of all the poets here under discussion can be said to have ridden: the name Caesar.

The verses of Catullus I have in mind stand as a complete poem. Decidedly an epigram by its theme and diction as well as its form, and admittedly a strange candidate on its face for comparison to Augustan love elegy, this elegiac distich is nonetheless one of the selections Harrington included in his anthology of Roman elegiac poetry (1914, 109):

Nil nimium studeo, Caesar, tibi uelle placere,
nec scire utrum sis albus an ater homo.
(Catullus, Poem 93)

I have no particularly eager wish to please you, Caesar,
or to know whether you are a white man or a black one.

As an utterance this is a choice example of what I have elsewhere called Catullus' "poetics of manhood": a conversation-stopping performance of outrageous verbal aggression that invites readers to enjoy and cheer it as such (Wray 2001). At the same time and above all it is a poem, and it does a poem's work, however quietly and unobtrusively, in a way that the pond analogy allows us to describe with a measure of adequacy. The shock of excitation that sets up the vibrational system of the poem has its center of gravity in the vocative *Caesar* lodged in the first line's metrical navel. This excitation, the poem implies, has its origin in an attempt, on Caesar's part or another's, to persuade or compel the speaker to adopt a willed (*uelle*), not feigned, resolve to accommodate his words and actions to Caesar's wishes. The process of working through that excitation, what the poem enacts, consists in the representation of a man groping for an appropriately zinging squelch to rebuff what he takes as an attempt to unman him into submission. The release of excitation that restores relative equilibrium comes from the speaker's victorious pleasure (and confidence that we will share it) in having produced from out of his linguistic community's cultural storehouse a received proverbial utterance that, in context, hits the bullseye of perfect aptness. Not knowing if a man is *albus an ater*, "white or black," as Cicero (*Philippics* 2.41) and other prose writers use the phrase, amounts to not knowing the first thing about him, not being able to predicate a single descriptor of him. By closing the epigram on this homely, prosy, but vigorous and vivid locution, the speaker responds to his own first-verse assertion, that he doesn't care in the least about cultivating a wish to please Caesar, in a way that pleurably subsumes, libidinally releases, that assertion into a broader claim, that Caesar stands outside the circle of persons the speaker has even the faintest wish to get to know or learn about.

Poem 93, while not very ambitious or impressive as a literary artifact and not very representative of its author's talent, is characteristic of Catullus' poetic practice in some

important specific and general ways. If we take a Latin elegiac poem as a literary artifact susceptible of being read as the representation of a subjective “working through” of the problem of a painfully exciting stimulus, then it is fair to say that Catullus’ characteristic mode of working through consists in working his way to a sharp point and using it to jab hard. Leaf through the corpus and see how many Catullus poems you think end with a line that packs a punch, hones the point of an aggressively purposive linear rhetorical thrust. The dedicatory epistle, Poem 1, closes on a poet’s stark bid for his book’s immortality: “may it last, perennial, longer than an age” (*plus uno maneat perenne saeclo*, 1.10). The more famous of the two kiss poems, Poem 5, ends by encapsulating its speaker’s boastful expression of a gargantuan appetite for kisses inside an expression of the hope that his stratagem of mixing up the tally of kisses will prevent an enemy’s envious evil eye from taking effect, “should he come to know how many our kisses are” (*cum tantum sciat esse basiorum*, 5.13). The equally famous Poem 11, delivering its speaker’s bitter message of dismissal to a lover proved false, closes on a literal cut inside an unforgettable figure. When he likens his love to a flower that falls after “it has been touched by the plow” (*tactus aratro est*, 11.24), the speaker has plowed his own utterance straight down its furrow to an untoppable and unanswerable closure, by hitting on a poem-final phrase that manages to nail, with overweening aptness, no fewer than three things at once: the steely brutality of the heartlessness he imputes to his beloved; the slashing intensity of his own retaliatory anger; and the wilting pathos of the self-pitying aggrievement that underlies that anger as the source and secret principle of it, and that a psychologically subtle poet lets us discern through and beneath the words of his poem’s speaker.

Again, what I am describing is a matter of degree, and Catullus in his elegiac writing does have less the feel of an aggressively linear plowing toward a pointed thrust than my own reading, at least, finds in the shorter poems of the first and last thirds of the corpus. But even Catullus’ longer elegiac poems manifest a level of classical discursive linearity and realism of presence, a sense of a talking voice, that set them distinctly apart from what I am calling the circularity and liquid viscosity of song. This latter pair of qualities are a large part of what gives the love elegies of the Augustans their special feel and mood. They bespeak a markedly different situatedness not just in their imagined world but also the world inhabited by their poets.

The lines of Propertius I have chosen to set alongside Poem 93 deliver, like Catullus’ poem, a message to Caesar (by way of Maecenas, the poem’s direct addressee) consisting in a refusal to give him what he is presumed to want. The Caesar in question is of course a different man living in a different world. The refusal, no less different, takes its place in the long tradition of *recusatio*, or programmatic refusal to compose a full-length heroic epic. For Propertius this was a tradition that stretched, through the “proem in the middle” (Conte 1992) that opens Virgil’s sixth Eclogue, back to that passage’s direct model in the prologue to Callimachus’ *Aetia*, and from there back to Hesiod’s encounter with the Muses at the start of the *Theogony*. Yet Propertius’ refusal, while taking its place within the *recusatio* tradition, sits in it oddly, to say the least:

sed neque Phlegraeos Iouis Enceladique tumultus
intonet angusto pectore Callimachus,
nec mea conueniunt duro praecordia uersu
Caesaris in Phrygios condere nomen auos.

nauita de uentis, de tauris narrat arator,
 enumerat miles uulnera, pastor ouis;
 nos contra angusto uersamus proelia lecto:
 qua pote quisque, in ea conterat arte diem.
 laus in amore mori: laus altera si datur uno
 posse frui: fruar o solus amore meo!
 si memini, solet illa leuis culpae puellas
 et totam ex Helena non probat Iliada.
 (Propertius 2.1.39–50)

But neither would Callimachus intone, from his slender chest,
 the Phlegraean roils of Jove and Enceladus,
 nor are my own lungs fit, in steely verse,
 to set down Caesar's name among his forbears.
 A sailor's tales are of winds, a plowman's of steers,
 the soldier counts his wounds, the shepherd his sheep;
 my business is battles that rage in a slender bed:
 let each consume his day in what art he can.
 Dying in love is something to praise, another is being granted
 to enjoy a one and only: O let me alone enjoy my love!
 If I remember right, she often dispraises fickle girls
 and dislikes, on Helen's account, the entire *Iliad*.

Odd enough already, though not the oddest thing here, is that the poem's speaker could hardly have hit on a fulsomer message of praise to send Caesar's way than the one implicitly encoded in his outward withholding of praise. In comparing himself to Callimachus, the speaker sets up a complex analogy that maps Rome's new *princeps* onto the monarch of Olympus, likening his long and bloody march toward one-man rule through Philippi and Actium (and politics and propaganda) to the mythological battle of gods and giants that ended with cosmic rebellion quelled and the establishment of Jupiter's Olympian rule. The poem by this point has already situated itself in the historical moment of its own composition by rehearsing the names of those two great civil battles, among others. And "the allegorical use of Gigantomachy to allude to Augustan supremacy" (Hardie 1983, 312), especially in the context of a *recusatio*, puts Propertius squarely in the company of Virgil and Horace, in whose poems that mythological theme is a recurring motif. So far, then, by his range of historical and mythological reference, by his declaration of allegiance to Callimachean poetics, and by the always potentially ambivalent gesture of *recusatio*, Propertius, we can say, looks as characteristically and thoroughly Augustan as it was possible for a Roman poet to look.

If we look back at Catullus' Poem 93 from the vantage point of these lines of Propertius, what stands out starkest in these two poetic messages of refusal addressed to two different Caesars is the fierce outspokenness of Catullus' speaker in contrast to the sly indirection of Propertius'. The contrast is one that still holds true by and large, I find, when its terms are expanded to take in the entire Catullan corpus on one side and what survives of Augustan love elegy on the other. And once we view these two sets of poetic utterance together at the distance of a synoptic view, it feels frankly artificial not to consider the ways in which the historical and political circumstances of their composition may plausibly

be thought to have conditioned their different modes of poetic voicing and fictive worldmaking. Instead of or in addition to describing the modes of psychic energy represented in Catullus' poems in terms of cultural and anthropological concepts like performative self-fashioning and poetics of manhood, we might describe them, for example, in terms of a combination of political and psychological theory derived from Aristotle. Viewed from this perspective, what becomes salient in Catullus' outrageousness is not its performativity – which after all explains nothing by itself, if all human social behavior has an element of performance to it – but rather the fact that, excessive as the Catullan speaker's outbursts are, they consistently manifest the excess of a thing that, once modulated and matured, could look a lot like the republican virtue of spiritedness. The man Catullus' poems make us think we are getting to know is one who voices his feelings with the heraldic intensity of an aristocratic spirit that brooks no constraint because it has never been broken, never been taught to curb or dissemble its passionate nature across the whole range of human emotion, from love to hate, from joy to grief, from anger to fear and shame. The seat and wellspring of the Catullan speaker's emotional life seems in this regard to function a lot like the *thumos* of a Homeric hero (Casswell 1990, Koziak 1999), albeit in the unheroic social setting of an urban metropolis.

The represented subjectivity of Propertius' speaker, by contrast, is pretty clearly that of an imperial citizen-subject, for more reasons than the obvious fact of his submission to an autocratic ruler enacted in verbal kowtows that presumably would have sickened a Roman man like the one who speaks the poems of Catullus. Modern readers, as citizens of liberal democracies, have often responded with revulsion and condemnation to what looks like servile flattery of Augustus on the part of Augustan poets, especially Virgil and Horace. Latinists for the most part now tend instead (unless they are open apologists for empire) to come to the rescue of the poets they value by finding ambivalence in their political sentiments, through a hermeneutic teasing out of veiled resistance and resentment beneath the surface of their apparent encomia. If both positions are understandable, neither feels fully satisfying. The act of damning those poets who thrived under an empire has always afforded the reliable pleasure of righteous indignation. Perhaps it is predicated on a confidence in political institutions that is hard to summon in times when modernity looks like a thing of the past. In the specific case of the Augustan poets, perhaps it constitutes a failure not just of empathy but also of historical imagination, a distaste for thinking and feeling one's way into the lived experience of a generation of poets formed not just by Callimachus and Catullus but also by civil wars, proscriptions, and massacred towns: a generation making poems in a world with no recourse to an "international community," no escape but death, and governed by a power that, while it might give any of its subjects cause for pride and optimism or at least relief, had also procured the suicide of the eldest of the canonical love elegists and would exile the youngest.

I have quoted more couplets than scholars usually do when referencing this first example of a *recusatio* in the poems of Propertius (see e.g. DeBrohun 2003, 5). The complexity of the passage does make its unity easy to miss. But when the speaker gets around to referencing by name the epic of all epics, he turns out to have been, all along, on the same subject as when he was aligning himself with Callimachus' refusal to try his hand at songs of kings and battles. In terms of the pond analogy, we can locate the rock-irritant whose impact breaks the pond-text's surface tension in the pressure to write Caesarian-Homeric epic, a persuasive or compelling force experienced by the speaker as coming

from someone outside himself and his love relation's community of two. And we can say that the rock is still scuttling across the floor of the pond, the shock of excitation still being metabolized throughout its vibrational system, all the way to the point where the speaker finds a way to reframe his resistance toward that external (or projected) urge as a lover's declaration of lifelong fealty – a wheedling, masochistic, needy, manipulative declaration, and one that presents a sphinx-like opacity to the question of its speaker's own precise level of self-complicity – directed at someone or something he calls simply “she” (*illa*). By this reframing, he seems almost to have recast his utterance as an act that takes place in a world inhabited only by two, or no more than two.

It is not easy to account, at least not by the logic of waking consciousness, for the process by which the Propertian speaker manages to digest and naturalize his refusal to please Caesar into an event in the drama cycle of his love relation. Tempting as it might be to invoke the logic of dreams, this all too easy solution is inadequate as well (here and elsewhere) in that it fails to respect things like alertness of wit and elevated rhetorical tone. Those characteristic elegances of Roman love elegy serve here as the chief motors driving the passage forward, or rather downward and back to the obsessive kernel to which the discourse of the genre recurs. The middle pair of couplets (line 43 ff.) seems at first to launch off in a new direction with a single-couplet priamel on different subjects of talk (and poetry) that correspond to different walks of life. But when the speaker resolves his foresong into a claim of predilection for the life (and poetics) of love, he does so in language that, while metaphorizing sex acts as “battles” (*proelia*) fit for heroic commemoration, also metonymically links his slender bed (*angusto ... lecto*) to the slender chest (*angusto pectore*) of Callimachus. The bed of love is thus not only ethicized by being held up as a walk of life on a par with farming or sailing, aestheticized by the application of a descriptor redolent of Callimachean and Neoteric exquisiteness (sheathed in the aggression of its insolent claim to take self-satisfaction in impoverishment), and heroized by the likeness of sexual congress to clash of arms, it is also figurally raised in dignity from the status of a piece of furniture to that of a cognitive and affective faculty, a living and singing sense-organ, through a kind of spiritualization of its function as the physical site of erotic acts and a resonant container of surging, pulsing, poem-making energies.

This figural complex is a familiar one, in which poetry and love are made each to figure the other, with the heroic economy of death in war and glory in epic serving as the third term of comparison. It has already been activated in similar terms earlier in the poem, when the speaker boasted of long naked wrestling bouts with the beloved in which “we set down (i.e. ‘compose’ or ‘found’) long Iliads” (*longas condimus Iliadas*, 2.1.14). When he returns to it here, on the far side of *recusatio*, he presses the point still deeper. The following couplet's ethical assertions (lines 47–8) offer a kind of lover's credo framed in a fiercely rhetorical tricolon that comes close to tracing an instance of what philosophers call the practical syllogism, a picture in words of the soul's passage to action. If “dying in love” (orgasm is one referent here, but not the only one) is praise(worthy), then the lover's pleasure can match the warrior's honor in valuation, and a Paris is not outdone in glory by an Achilles (or an Antony by an Augustus?). But if dying a lover's death is a commendable *telos*, then a life organized by that *telos*, through a steadfast devotion to – or more precisely a steadily reliable enjoyment of – a one and only, must necessarily participate in that same commendability as well. And so, rounding out the syllogism: “O let me alone enjoy my love!” The couplet's fierce rhetoric is no less fiercely

songful: the anaphora of *laus* marks the movement from the first premise to the second; the anadiplosis with polyptoton of *frui/fruor* stands at the threshold of the third; and the echo of *amore mori* in *amore meo* rings home what was to be proven, namely the equivalency asserted by the lover, with pressing urgency (*O!*), between a hero's beautiful death and a lifelong access to the beautiful satisfaction of his own pressing want.

Before we pass to the final couplet of the passage, a moment of stocktaking. The figural moves executed by Propertius in these dozen lines are, on the one hand, sufficient by themselves to exemplify the operation of a "semiotic game" in Roman love elegy, comparable in many ways to the "erotic system" of the courtly religion of love that passes from the troubadours, through poets like Dante and Petrarch, into the poetic (and popular song) traditions of the modern European languages. It is love, these poets sing, that confers worth and honor on a human life; yet love is madness and pain; and yet that pain is sweeter by far than any pleasure. These and similar tenets of love's religion, rules of its game, are perhaps so familiar to us, so conventional, that we take note of their presence or absence in a given poetic discourse of love only by a special effort of attention. But the figural systems that pervasively and specifically mark Roman love elegy – like love's servitude and soldiery, and like the wordplay on *Amor/amor* that promotes desire (and its object) to the status of a ruling, besetting, triumphantly commanding divinity – are either absent entirely from Catullus' poetry, or present only in embryonic germ, or foisted ironically onto other people, like Poem 45's Septimius and Acme (with *Amor* sneezing approbation left and right). However complex, however painful the feelings he conveys, the speaker of Catullus' poems, compared to the elegists, never stops doing just that: speaking, in a relatively contained, if often impassioned, tone of wakeful ego-consciousness – hovering, of course, over a ground of represented psychological depth (the "classical illusion" in action) – that never stops drawing in readers and making them want to be friends with Catullus. It is in this sense that the bluntness, the pure speakerliness, with which he blows off Caesar in Poem 93 can be called paradigmatic of his entire oeuvre. Catullus, in a moment of intense feeling, may compare himself to a nightingale, by talking about one, albeit in exquisite verse. We could say that the Augustan elegists, by contrast, are trying to sing like one, trying to voice intensities that go beyond the human, and not just at the level of form.

On the other hand, if we make the attempt to pierce the elegiac figural system, it is also possible to hear, in the words of Propertius we have read so far, and the thoughts and feelings they croon, a particular kind of zany boyishness, exquisite and brutal, that marks their genre as well. This too represents a set of qualities that Catullus, for all his thousands of kisses, never approaches. The situation these lines, and most of the verses of Roman love elegy, imaginatively conjure is that of a relation between an elite young man, tenderly raised and brilliantly talented (not unlike Catullus) and a woman who (very unlike Lesbia) is of a kind the young man would never under any circumstance marry. Both parties, as we are invited to picture them, have every interest in complexifying the nature of their relation so that it escapes looking like a mere exchange of payment for services, or even of gifts for attention, though the young man may sometimes hurl this latter construction in the woman's face as a reproach, especially when her door is locked and she is behind it with another man. Their reasons for keeping the high drama stoked and thereby maintaining the complexified model of their relation are of course different on the two sides, as the elegists allow us to glimpse (and James 2003 brings into clear

focus). What makes their reasons different, we might say, is that they have to do with different kinds of power and different kinds of want. But their reasons also overlap, and are also at least potentially complicated on both sides by things like feelings, and the elegists let us see this as well. In our own therapeutic vernacular, we might call their relation codependent. In the more precise terminology of a post-Freudian psychoanalytic model like Heinz Kohut's self-analysis, we could say that the elegiac speaker casts his beloved in the role of a selfobject – an external object experienced by the deficient self as necessary to its own functioning as a self – while bringing to the relation a modality of wanting that Kohut would call (in his specialized sense) narcissistic, in that it partakes of the untamed grandiosity of infantile need (Kohut 1971).

Returning now to the Propertian speaker at the penultimate couplet quoted, we can say that his soul's passage to action, the resolution of his practical syllogism, consisted precisely in his pentameter-splitting "O!": an exclamatory expulsion of breath bodying forth what a medieval scholastic would call an "act of love" (*actus amoris*). What the action of his sigh was hankering after was the assurance of ever-ready access to intimacy with an always available selfobject, through a communion so intense as to blur the boundary between self and other, life and death, by drowning need and the self's perception of itself as needy in ecstasy. When we arrive at the final couplet, however, something new has happened. The speaker, as if suddenly feeling the sting of mortified narcissism upon catching a glimpse of his own abject neediness and the utter impossibility of that need's getting fed anywhere, least of all in the situation he has procured for himself, has now passed from breathing a lover's sigh to mounting a kind of preemptive strike on his love's object. This he achieves through an act of wit-driven passive-aggressive manipulation that deserves to be called sublime for two separate but related sets of reasons.

First, by resorting to the fictional (whether really experienced or no) memory of some literary critical remarks about the *Iliad* made in passing (or never) by a woman who is (or is not) referenced by the name Cynthia in Propertius' poems, the elegiac speaker recharacterizes his generically-determined abnegation of Homeric epic, and all the modes of manly efficacy for which it stands, as his own sacrificially faithful maintenance of a love pact, a predated contract in which *he* agrees to eschew the Homeric and remain forever elegiac because *she* dispraises Homer, on account of Helen's fickleness. The *puella's* dispraise of Homer and the ethical condemnation of infidelity that motivates it are thereby deemed by the speaker to have had, all along, the value of sworn and solemn entry into that contract. In other words, he has aggressively recast a real or imagined stated literary opinion on her part as an implicit promise to compensate his status as an elegiac lover whose beautiful soul stands apart from all things heroic – the irresistible charm, that is, of his infantile dependence – with a steady stream of faithful love in the idealized maternal mode of constant and exclusive availability.

Striking as this bid for preoedipal bliss in union appears, even more striking is the fact that it remains always open to being read as a sally of wit engineered to raise a smile on the faces of his addressees both inside and outside the poem's world. This crucial move is characteristically elegiac as well. By risking the exposure of so intimate a need to cold laughter while hinting that his bid for that need's satisfaction might, even in the logic of the poem, all be based on a wishful lie ("if I remember right"), he appears, on one view, to be adding the spice of masochistic thrill to the sweetness of the (impossible) bliss he envisions. At the same time, by casting this cry for the fulfillment of a need beyond desire

in the apparent form of an amusing stroke of urbanity, he has reserved for himself an out, an alibi, a guaranteed access to full deniability. The Roman love elegists have an iron-clad defense against any reader so importune as to take seriously what they say about the horrors of love. Catullus had found himself in the position of hurling the foulest threats of sexual aggression against readers who had put a finger to his tenderness as a lover and pronounced it unmanly. That is a position from which the elegists were protected (and barred) by all the perfections that made them, in the literary sense, Augustan: a perfection of hauteur and poise founded on the confidence of a poetic tradition whose language and forms had ripened (thanks to poets like Catullus) into a fullness of perfection and prestige that, in turn, both befigured and rested on the perfect imperial dominion those poet-subjects enjoyed and suffered. In this sense, the subject position of the Roman elegist is one around which the (new and improved) patriarchal power of his historical moment is ever ready to close ranks and keep his stance of perfect helplessness perfectly unassailable.

The second aspect of sublimity in this final couplet, with its intricate projection of an ethical disapproval of Homeric epic onto the speaker's love object, is simpler to name. It cuts to the heart, the traumatic kernel, of Roman love elegy and defines it as a genre, at least in terms of its speaker's subject position. It is what chiefly makes this poetry a treasure of world literature and a predecessor to the great love poetry traditions of the European languages. By recharacterizing his (however ambivalently) submissive refusal to Caesar and grand disavowal of Homeric song – by reframing, that is, the Callimachean *recusatio* that grounds his entire project, his poetic vocation and ambition – as an act of (however aggressively) submissive fealty by which he hopes to assure the continuance of a love relation that remains as hopeless, and as cruelly humiliating, as it is endless, the elegiac speaker declares himself not only a faithful follower of the religion of love but also a knower of the truth that love is a force more hostile to us, more inhuman, than death. It is this knowledge, of which he is master and teacher, that gives him the sense of himself as simultaneously, and to a sublime degree in both directions, heroic and degraded. Further, by flaunting (he cannot flaunt it enough) the miserable tawdriness of the relation he may never achieve and must always ache for, and by broadcasting in every poem the “written” (Wyke 1987), the “manufactured” (Sharrock 1991) insubstantiality of the (no) one he lacks, he declares his commitment to make poetry that is as monstrous as love itself.

Obsessive recursion to unbearable lovepain unquenched is elegy's burden and theme. Elegy's form – the droned and intoned liturgical monody of its ebb and flow, the mercilessly elegant sheen and tinkle of its semiotic gearworks – serves as a soundboard and receptacle for psychic energies too searing for ego consciousness and language to contain. Catullus, whether he is being a nice guy or a mean one, writing in whatever poetic form, whether he is exuberantly joyful in love or disappointed in love or just plain sick of love, never crosses the line into elegy in this sense, never stops talking his feelings with the psychological consistency and cohesion we like to think we have, and that we love Catullus for making us think maybe we do have. It is true that he approaches the elegiac position, in this sense, in places like the moment of fulgurous epiphany in Poem 68 when Lesbia's foot flashes across the threshold (68.70–2), and it is true that moments like these, at least as much as his formal achievements, make Catullus a genuine predecessor and prototype for the Augustan love elegists. But it is also true that he stops very far shy

of elegy's potential for enacting the horror of erotic obsession. Catullus shows us a lover taking himself seriously with the perfect seriousness of adolescent manhood, and he depicts that modality of desire with a sunlit intensity that never cloys. The Roman love elegists perfected the art of not taking themselves seriously as lovers to a degree that allowed them to sound the archaic depths of the thing in love that is deeper than desire, and to put sung words to its terrible wisdom.

FURTHER READING

Catullus' poems are quoted here from Mynors' 1958 Oxford Classical Text, Propertius' from Fedeli's 2006 Teubner. Translations are my own. For further reading on Roman love elegy (beyond the sources mentioned in this chapter), Luck 1959 is still the best introduction to the history and prehistory of the genre. Lyne 1980 describes in fuller detail than the present chapter the ways in which Catullus set a precedent for the "life of love" that elegy depicts, and is overall an excellent study of Latin love poetry. Greene 1998 offers a feminist, Miller 2004 a Lacanian, reading of Roman love elegy. Major literary studies of Catullus' entire oeuvre include Quinn 1972 and Fitzgerald 1995, while Skinner 2003 draws a richly imaginative setting for the composition of his longer poems.

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