

CATULLUS 76

The paramount feature of this elegy is its changing tone, which is first pietistic, then bravura-like, and finally sincere. By changing the tone in a controlled way the poet manipulates the audience reaction so as to lead to a climactic and sympathetic response at the end.

This elegy falls into three parts¹. The first, to verse 9, is a confused and ineffective attempt to use good deeds as a relief of the agony of unrequited love; the second, lines 10-16, is an equally ineffective attempt to relieve the agony by bravura; the third, a humble prayer to the gods.

The first part:

*Si qua recordanti benefacta priora uoluptas
est homini, cum se cogitat esse pium,
nec sanctam uiolasse fidem, nec foedere in ullo²
diuum ad fallendos numine abusum homines,
nulla parata manent in longa aetate, Catulle,
ex hoc ingrato gaudia amore tibi.
nam quaecumque homines bene cuiquam aut dicere possunt
aut fecere, haec a te dictaque factaque sunt.
omnia quae ingratae perierunt credita menti.*

¹ R. Freis, *Agon* 2, 1968, pp. 39-58, although he recognizes that structurally there are three parts to this poem, argues that its content is logically divided into only two parts, that from v. 14 on the speaker is «unwaveringly committed to his resolution». Such violence to the unity of form and content is unacceptable. Moreover, Freis himself admits that the speaker experiences a «rising tide of helplessness», which is scarcely compatible with the resolution which Freis imagines the speaker to possess. Moritz also recognizes three parts, but see note to verse below.

² I accept the reading of 9 against that of V, not because I have such confidence in any independent value for 9, but because the reading of V at this point is probably wrong and that of 9 is at least possibly right.

The tone of this passage is pietistic¹. The poet recounts his good deeds and his trustworthiness. He suggests that he is a man of deep religious convictions and refers to himself as *pius*. And he says these things by way of demonstrating how much *meriti* he has accumulated: *nulla gaudia manent in longa aetate*. All of this is repugnant to the reader. It might be possible, if the poet had a humble and objective attitude, for him to elicit a sympathetic response from his audience, but as it is the response is merely stereotyped. It is the stock response to moralizing self-righteousness and religiosity. We may feel a little condescending pity for the man, but surely no sympathy.

The conventional nature of the passage is indicated by the number of clichés it contains. In fact the passage is built of such phrases: the man's *benefacta* are a source of *voluptas* to him; he himself is *pius*²; he has never violated *sancta fides* nor abused the *numen* of the gods by breaking a contract guaranteed with an oath³; the thought of his goodness is a source of *gaudia*; and so on. Each and every one of these phrases is trite. As images they are generalizations and the poet does nothing to make them specific, to visualize them for the reader, to invest them with imaginative power. Rather than striking us with freshness and vitality the phrases dull our interest.

The stereotyped language is matched by equally ineffective argument. The poet asserts, in fact insists (by repetition), that because he has been a good man, done good deeds and never broken faith, he should in thinking about these things find relief from the pain of unrequited love. He also suggests that because he has shown goodwill to other

¹ Freis is ambivalent about the tone of the opening lines. At one time he finds in them a 'stone of gratitude' (*op. cit.*, p. 42), at another a 'stone of bitter irony' (p. 43). Gratitude it certainly is not. Irony is always possible but Freis fails to provide any compelling reason why it is so here. In any case he fails to account for what is much more obvious, the flagrant pietism of these lines.

² H. A. Khan, *Athenaeum*, 1968 and L. Pepe, *GIF*, 1950 have suggested that the speaker's *pietas* is a reference to his fidelity in his illicit relationship with 'Lesbia'. The idea is certainly attractive and persuasively argued but contradicted by the text itself which specifically mentions *homines* as the beneficiaries of his virtue.

³ There is nothing in the text to substantiate R. M. Henry's claim, *Hermathena* 76, 1951, p. 50, that the *foedus* refers to a 'solemn pledge of fidelity' between Catullus and 'Lesbia'. Indeed *ad fallendos homines* contradicts it. Moreover, in *Carmen* 87 Catullus contrasts *foedus* and *amor*:

*nulla fides ullo fuit unquam foedere tanta,
quanta in amore tuo ex parte reperia mea est.*

men, his mistress owes him her affection. But there is no rational connection between his *benefacta* to others and the necessity that his girlfriend be true to him or that he should not experience pain in being jilted by her. If anyone has an obligation to respond in kind to his *benefacta* it is the recipients: the litigant who prospered because Catullus did not perjure himself, the friend who deposited his money with him or whose will he executed (for these are the situations the words suggest), but not the girl who surely was involved with the poet in quite another matter, an affair of the heart, not in matters of law and finance¹. The poet even goes so far as to say that he did his good deeds, not because they are good in themselves, but so that they might be recognized as good by his girl: *omnia quae ingratae perierunt credita menti*. Such an attitude cannot engage the sympathy of the audience.

The second part:

*quare iam te cur amplius excrucies?*² 10
quin tu animo offirmas atque istinc teque roducis,
et dis inuitis desinis esse miser?
difficile est longum subito deponere amorem;
difficile est, verum hoc qua lubet efficias.
una salus haec est, hoc est tibi peruincendum, 15
*hoc facias, siue id non pote sive pote*³.

¹ Some commentators imagine that the *benefacta* have been bestowed on 'Lesbia' in spite of the repeated use of *homines* in the text to suggest a much more general context.

² I. A. Moritz, writing in *Greece and Rome*, 15, 1968, pp. 53-58, also sees a three part structure to this poem, but he would attach this line to the preceding section, thus effecting a symmetrical 10-6-10 formal arrangement. There is a strong predisposition to accept this perfectly symmetrical structure, particularly since so many poems are written that way. But the first law of criticism is to obey the text and the text of c. 76 requires 9-7-10. Moritz fails to account for the period at the end of 9. He says: 'The whole of this opening section [1-10] is essentially concerned with the relations between human beings...' but he fails to show how *quare cur te iam amplius excrucies?* belongs to that characterization of the section. To insist on 10-6-10 and try to explain away the abrupt change in verse 10 would be as silly as to try to force c. 51 or Horace's Odes into sense units corresponding exactly to the stanzaic form.

³ Moritz, *op. cit.*, imagines that the unity of the central section consists in the fact that verses 15-16 and 11-12 'expand' the meaning of 13-14. But it simply is not true; the verses

quin tu animo offirmas atque istinc teque roducis,
et dis inuitis desinis esse miser?

The attitude of these verses is abruptly different from that of the preceding. The poet seems to get hold of himself. He begins by acknowledging the futility of his argument. 'Why go on torturing yourself this way any longer', he says, 'Get hold of yourself' (*animo offirmas*); 'abandon this impossible longing' (*istinc reducis*); 'the gods are not going to help you anyway' (*dis inuitis*). The manly courage of these verses, however, is only thinly veiled bravura. In the first place instead of simply stating the need for resolution, he frames it as a rhetorical question (*quin*). This detracts somewhat from its force. Secondly, he proceeds to answer the question, which should need no answer. The answer moreover is an excuse: *difficile est subito deponere amorem*. *Subito* is the word that gives the lie to his pretended confidence: 'perhaps some day I'll be able to put her out of my mind altogether, but right now it is very hard'. *Qualibet* in the next line again betrays his lack of confidence. Instead of saying: 'You have got to do it', he says, 'You have got to do it somehow or other'.

The last two lines of this passage convince us altogether that he is right back where he started from.

*una salus haec est, hoc est tibi peruincendum,
hoc facias, siue id non pote siue pote.*

The repetition is too much. We may paraphrase *Hamlet's* Gertrude: «Methinks the gentleman doth protest too much».

The third part:

*o di, si uestrum est misereri, aut si quibus unquam
extremam iam in morte tulistis opem,
me miserum aspiciate et, si uitam puriter egi,
eripite hanc pestem perniciemque mihi, 20
quae mihi subrepens imos ut torpor in artus
expulit ex omni pectore laetitia.
non iam illud quaero, contra me ut diligit illa,
aut, quod non potis est, esse pudica uelit:
ipse ualere opto et tactrum hunc deponere morbum. 25
o di, reddite mi hoc pro pietate mea.*

do not «contain a fuller version of what in the next couplet is 'summed up' as *longum subito deponere amorem*. 'It is difficult to put aside a long love' is not a periphrasis for 'why don't you take courage, forget her, and stop beating your head against a wall?' It is the answer to the question.

The lines are humble and sincere. No more argument, no more bravura; just «Oh God, help me». The poet has tried in two different ways to pluck this *pestis* from his heart: by assuring himself in the first passage that his good life has merited happiness, and by a show of resolution in the second. He now concedes that both have failed and he is left destitute. His only recourse is to throw himself on the mercy of the gods.

The artificial barriers which he had earlier tried to construct to hold his emotions in check now give way and the poet pours out his soul in genuine anguish: *me miserum aspiciate, eripite hanc pestem*. We get the impression that he is on the verge of tears as he confesses his life is altogether without happiness: *expulit ex omni pectore laetitia*. The poignancy of the passage lies in his admission of the ineluctability of his situation. The imagery of this passage comes to life: *subrepens imos ut torpor in artus* and *laetrum morbum* are dramatically articulated and easily visualized.

In his nakedness, he is humble. He does not ask that the things which have made him so miserable be taken away — the fact that she does not return his love and that she is a slut — but only that he may recover himself and be able to reject her.

When he closes with the prayer *O di, reddite mi hoc pro pietate mea*, the poet has captured our imagination and our sympathy. When we see this poor wretch with his head bowed to the ground, broken and calling upon the gods to help him, for he knows he cannot help himself, our response is no longer stereotyped and conventional. The genuineness of his humility and his pain has brought about a correspondingly genuine sympathetic response.

Much of the effectiveness of this poem results from the careful manipulation of audience reaction. By first eliciting repugnance in the opening section and then disappointing our expectation of fortitude in the middle section, the poet has prepared his readers to welcome the sincerity of the last lines. Our attitude toward the speaker changes from passage to passage as his own attitude toward himself changes.

The poem's effectiveness also results in large measure from its unexpectedly dramatic nature. The first passage is altogether lacking in dramatic quality. Far from presenting any development, the passage is as static as it is dull. But it is this very quality against which the speaker himself reacts, and we react with him because his repugnance is matched by ours. When the poet cries *o di* he does so because he knows that his argument has led nowhere. He thus develops from a

selfpitying, insincere pietist, through a fake and ineffective man of resolution, into a sincere and humble wretch.

The structure of the poem is not fully revealed until the last line and this is a point of some importance. The last line, by repeating *o di*, closes the frame around the final part of the poem. By so doing it also casts outside the frame the first two portions. Framing is such an obvious structural device that when we have seen it here we almost feel that the poem really begins at verse 17, that the preceding lines were a sequence of unsuccessful fits and starts. Framing suggests control, control for the last part of this poem and control for the speaker of the last part. We are disposed then to believe that the speaker of the last lines is the real Catullus and we are disposed to reject the speaker of the other lines as not really representative of the man. Just as Catullus had ensured by the deliberate use of trite and conventional language in the initial lines that we would not sympathize with their speaker, so here by the use of control he ensures that we will sympathize with this speaker. In other words, the structure of the poem supports the tone, which changes from part to part, and engages our sympathy only in the concluding section.

Finally we need to observe the difference between *cum se cogitat esse pium, | nec sanctam uiolasse fidem, nec foedere in ullo | dium ad fallendos numine abusum homines* and *si uitam puriter egi*. Logically they amount to the same thing, but they function altogether differently: the former is not a condition¹, like the latter, rather it states in fulsome terms the reasons why the speaker in his pride imagines himself *pious*. The latter, by contrast, is very short and modest. It makes no grand claims, but simply and humbly says: «if I have deserved your help, (please give it)». The contrast operates powerfully here to reinforce the difference in tone already observed².

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¹ It is true that the first passage falls within a condition, but the statement of his *pietas* is not there itself conditional as is *si uitam puriter egi*.

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