

Catullus and the Structure of the Poem

One might wonder what an ancient Roman poet, known chiefly today for his love poetry and his obscenity, could possibly contribute to poetry of place in the Pacific Northwest in 2016. Indeed, in his poetry Catullus rarely evoked actual places at all, except for three poems: one set in his home town of Verona, one in his villa at Sirmio on Lake Garda, and one at his brother's grave at Rhoteum in the Troad. Most of his poems are set in Rome, though place itself is not relevant to most of them—they are poems addressed to individuals about their human foibles and qualities, and they are devoid of specific settings. Poem 10 begins by meeting his friend Varus while idling in the Forum, a public setting. Otherwise, in that poem and in the poetry of Catullus generally, Rome, as such, exists only in the mind.

Rather than Catullus' relation to place, what we have to learn from him is techniques that can support a poetry of place in the Pacific Northwest. Most importantly, we can relearn from him the ways that poetry works as an art form in its architecture. Scholarship in our time has shown how subtle and complex the poems of Catullus are, in spite of their apparently casual, tossed-off tone. The art of Catullus, in other words, shows how poems can embody interrelatedness, not only in social terms, but in our relation to dwelling on earth.

Though we know little about his life, we do know that Gaius Valerius Catullus was born in Verona in Cisalpine Gaul in about 84 BCE, and he died in Rome in about 54 BCE, so he lived about thirty years. Catullus was the son of wealthy parents in colonial Verona, and he, like them, belonged to the Roman equestrian class, just below the wealthiest and most influential ruling families. They were wealthy enough to be idle or to dabble in government or business and to mingle among the upper echelons of Roman society.

As the newcomer from Verona, Catullus had to adapt to Roman *urbanitas*, which can be translated as “urban sophistication.” Julia Haig

Gaisser reports that *urbanitas* was an ambiguous term, which included markers such as tasteful (*elegans*), witty (*facetus*), charming (*lepidus*), attractive (*venustus*), nice (*bellus*), and humorous (*festivus*). All of these terms appear in the poems of Catullus, either in praise or in blame of some particular individual.

Another marker of status in Roman society, at least among ruling class males, consisted of one's capacity for *negotium*, or gainful employment in business, government, or military affairs. Catullus presents himself and his friends in the opposite light, that of *otium*, which is not "leisure" nor "idleness" exactly, but *lack of negotium*. That is, Catullus and his class could opt out of public business and instead let themselves be preoccupied with private life, in the case of his group, a preoccupation with poetry: writing it, reading it, criticizing it. Except for a few lines, all of the work of Catullus' fellow poets is now lost, and the poets would go largely unknown except for poems addressed to them by Catullus.

The work of Catullus and his friends was highly influential on the Roman poets of the next generation: Virgil, Horace, and Ovid. However, that generation lived in a different time, after the civil wars which elevated Augustus Caesar to the imperial throne. Augustus wanted society to return to the ancient Roman values of hard work and proper behavior, the serious business of life, so he banned the kind of poetry that emerged from *otium*, not to mention *otium* itself. Augustus personally censored the work of poets, so Virgil turned to earlier forms of Roman poetry in epic style (resulting in the *Aeneid*), while Horace wrote praises of his rich patrons and the farm he was granted. Ovid, who continued to write from the perspective of *otium*, was exiled by Augustus to Tomis on the Black Sea, where Latin was not spoken and where he died.

Catullus' own poems survived only by the most unlikely circumstance. The poems would have filled three papyrus rolls, and they were converted to a codex (a book) sometime in the fourth century and copied numerous times thereafter, each copyist adding errors of his own. However, copyists aside, the book of Catullus disappeared

entirely for a thousand years. His work remained unknown throughout the Middle Ages. In 1300 a manuscript turned up in Verona, and it was copied twice. Then the original Verona manuscript again disappeared, and the copies of it are the ancestors to the book we now have. After Renaissance scholars edited the very corrupt text, the book of Catullus was published in 1472. It consisted of 113 poems divided into three groups, possibly corresponding to the three papyrus rolls in which they originally appeared. In fact, much scholarly debate has been expended over the question of whether the poems appear in the order that Catullus originally intended. The long poems of the middle section (61 to 68) most likely do.

According to Paul Allen Miller in his book *Lyric Text and Lyric Consciousness*, Catullus and his friends were the first lyric poets. For Miller, the much earlier ancient Greek poets, such as Archilochus and Sappho, belong to the tradition of choral poetry, poetry meant to be recited or sung to a public and expressing public values. Writing was irrelevant, and when such poetry was written down, anonymous scribes, rather than the poets, were the likely writers.

What made the difference in Rome was poets doing their own writing—first on wax tablets which were circulated among friends and critics for comment and then finalized on papyrus scrolls. For the first time, poems could be read in relation to each other in a dialogic way, and they could be given a particular order to be read in sequence. As Walter Ong points out, writing gave rise to an new kind of personality in which interior life began to matter more than public life. The work of Catullus exemplified this new interiority, which rose on the fortunate confluence of *otium* and a particular social ambience in the last decade of the Roman republic, before the demands of empire almost snuffed out individualistic lyric in favor of state-affirming epic.

Catullus and his fellow idlers, who much later were known as *neoterics* (“new poets”), were much influenced by the work of the Alexandrian poets writing in Greek about a hundred years earlier, especially the work of Callimachus (ca. 305–ca. 240 BCE). The *neoterics* adapted Alexandrian stylistic devices and themes to Roman forms,

essentially reinventing Roman poetry. Like the Alexandrians before them, the *neoterics* were devoted to expressing *urbanitas* in their poetry. The quality of the *neoterics* most admired by later poets was *doctrina* (“learning”), and among poets of antiquity and the Renaissance Catullus was known by the epithet *doctus* (“learned”) for his adept use of meters, his translations from the Greek, and his exquisite deployment of mythology and history.

Though of great interest themselves, these qualities in the work of Catullus are not applicable to poetry of place. Granting these dimensions of learning in Catullus, we want to give fuller attention to what Julia Haig Gaisser calls the architecture of his poems (chapter 5 in Haig Gaisser’s *Catullus*). A single poem (6) by Catullus illustrates the structural considerations of many of his poems. Haig Gaisser says that Catullus had revived structures that prevailed in oral poetry of the past:

All of Catullus’ ordering methods are very ancient, some going back as far as the orally composed and aurally received poetry of Homer, where they helped both the oral poet and his audience to keep their place in a complex narrative. Catullus, unlike Homer, wrote his poems down; he did not need oral mnemonic devices. But his various techniques would still have indicated structures and sense units for his audience, many of whom were listening to his poetry, rather than reading it silently. Even the silent readers would have perceived such structural cues as they did Catullus’ other sound effects, not only visually, but also aurally, with their well trained inner poetic ear.

What are these “ordering methods,” these “various techniques”? Perhaps the most intriguing is known as “ring composition.” This technique originated in texts that were close to oral sources, such as the flood story in Genesis or the balanced structure of Homer’s entire *Iliad*. The technique consists of a sequence of parallel structures, usually building up to and away from a center (an episode, line, or verse).

Catullus used the structure frequently in his very short poems, as well as in his longer “little epics.” Consider the ring structure in poem 6 (section breaks are added to facilitate discussion):

Flavius, about your girlfriend to Catullus
if she weren't uncharming and inelegant,
you would tell and wouldn't be able to keep quiet.
For you're not lying alone at night:
silent in vain since the bedroom shouts it

with blossoms, fragrant with Syrian olive oil,
and the couch rubbed this way and that, here and
there, and the brandished argument and
the walking-about of the tremulous bed.
For nothing is able to keep these things quiet.

Why? You wouldn't parade about your thoroughly
fucked-out flanks if you weren't up to no good.
So, whatever you've got, good, bad,
tell me! I want you and your lover:
to call you both to the heavens in witty poetry.

—translation by Benjamin Eldon Stevens

Stevens points out that the speaker of the poem (Catullus) asks Flavius to tell him about his girlfriend; however, Flavius says nothing in the poem, nor does the girlfriend. The poem illustrates Stevens' overall point about the way silence can prevail in the poems of Catullus. Since the humans are silent, the only “speakers” in the poem are the sensory details of Flavius' bed-chamber, as well as his own “fucked-out” appearance. To see how the structure of the poem demonstrates these relationships and their significance in the poem, we must consider its ring composition. For this, we need the original Latin (again, section breaks are added to facilitate discussion):

Flauī, delicias tuas Catullo,
ni sint illepidae atque inegantes,
uelles dicere nec tacere posses.
uerum nescioquid febriculosi
scorti diligis: hoc pudet fateri.

nam te non uiduas iacere noctes
nequiquam tacitum cubile clamat
sertis ac Syrio fragrans oliuo,
puluinusque peraeque et hic et ille
attritus, tremulique quassa lecti
argutatio inambulatioque.
nam nihil ista ualet, nihil, tacere.

cur? non tam latera ecfututa pandas
ni tu quid facias ineptiarum.
quare, quidquid habes, boni malique,
dic nobis. Uolo te ac tuos amores
ad caelum lepido uocare uersu.

Ring composition relies on two principles that work in tandem to structure the poem: parallelism and balance. The poem consists of seventeen lines, an odd number, a common feature in ring composition. To see how balance works in the poem, we first need to locate the middle point (a line or set of lines or stanza) of the poem. In this case, that would be the ninth line: “the bed all about, here and there” (*puluinusque peraeque et hic et ille*). Since Flavius and his girlfriend aren’t speaking, and since the speaker Catullus doesn’t already know the details about which he is inquiring of Flavius, the bed becomes the major speaker in the poem. The movements and creaking of the bed betray the truth of Flavius’ sexual activity with his girlfriend. Hence, the middle line of the poem carries the main theme: the evidence of Flavius’s secretive dalliance is clear.

But there is more to ring composition than the center line. Poem 6, traditionally printed as a column of lines with no section breaks, in fact breaks down naturally into three balanced sections of five, seven and five lines. The first line of the middle section (an internal ring) begins with the word “For” (*nam*), and the last line of it begins with a parallel “For.” The seven lines so enclosed by “For” show signs of the sexual activity of the bed chamber: blossoms, Syrian olive oil (the very best), and the perambulations and noise of the bed itself (the word *argutatio*, “creaking,” is not translated as such by Stevens, but Haig Gaisser argues that it may well be an original coinage by Catullus). The lines beginning with “For” emphasize two conclusions derived from the details: Flavius is “not lying alone at night,” and “nothing is able to keep these things quiet” (ironic in a poem where no human except the poet speaks). Flavius won’t speak, but his bed chamber does.

Further parallelism is evident in the first and last sections of five lines each, the outermost ring of the poem. Here parallelism takes a specific form that Catullus often uses in his poems, called chiasmus. Chiasmus is a balancing device whereby the second of two juxtaposed phrases or clauses is syntactically or thematically inverted. Consider: the first five-line section begins with terms characterizing the girlfriend such as “uncharming” and “inelegant” (*illepidae, inelegantes*), which we may designate element A. The poem then raises the question of desired speech and actual silence (“you’d want to speak and couldn’t keep quiet”; *uelles dicere nec tacere posses*), which we may designate element B. The section finishes with a vulgarity, “feverish, skinny little whore,” *febriculosi / scorti*), which we may designate element C.

Shifting to the last section of five lines, we find the order of presentation reversed. The lines begin with an explicit vulgarity, Flavius’ “thoroughly fucked-out flanks” (*tam latera ecfututa*), which we may designate element C in parallel to the vulgarity at the end of the first five lines. Then the speaker’s desire for speech becomes a command for speech (“tell me!”; *dic nobis*), which we may designate element B in parallel to the element about speech in the first five lines. Finally, the section recapitulates element A of the first five lines, coming back to

Flavius and his girlfriend: “I want to call you both to the heavens in witty poetry” (*ad caelum lepido uocare uersu*). In the elements designated A, Catullus contrasts the wittiness of his poetry with the assumed lack of charm and inelegance of the girlfriend (unless Flavius can convince Catullus otherwise). Chiastic inversion is thus completed in terms of our designations of the order of elements: A B C, and C B A.

The structure of the poem is completed with its first and last lines, the outermost lines of the outer ring. Recalling that one of the qualities that constituted *urbanitas* to the Romans in Catullus’ circle was *lepidus*, which means “charming” or “witty,” we see that the poem valorizes this quality. Catullus proposes to write poetry whose wit and charm will elevate Flavius and his girlfriend to the skies. In fact, one could say that this very poem fulfils its own promise! We modern readers are encountering the immortality of Flavius and his girlfriend in a poem that has survived more than twenty centuries.

Much has been made of obscenity in the poems of Catullus. In poem 6 vulgar language like “feverish skinny little whore” and “fucked-out flanks” seem striking in a poem that otherwise avoids such language (Catullus’ interest in the details of Flavius’ sex life notwithstanding). Compared to other poems of Catullus, these are mild examples of obscenity; others are quite hair-raising (see poems 16 or 80). Did he really mean it? Were the friends and others he slurred offended? Of course, we can’t really know, but imagine Flavius reading (or more likely hearing) the poem we have just examined.

Certainly having his sexual activities made public might be embarrassing—or not, if Flavius took pride in his sexuality, and maybe everyone already knew all about his dalliances in what Catullus’ contemporary Cicero called “a viciously gossipy city.” Having his activities displayed in a poem of such elegant dexterity would be both disarming and flattering, shocking in its artistic flair. We have not even touched upon the element of poetry that Catullus was so adept at deploying and that we intentionally set aside for the purposes of this essay: Latin meters. Poem 6 is considered remarkable for its use of hendecasyllables. A poem of such artistic elegance integrates any

vulgarity quite seamlessly, and Catullus obviously assumed that candor about sex helped make his poetry “witty and charming.” Apparently his readers thought so, too.

Stevens provides a further insight into the function of vulgarity in poem 6 and in other poems of Catullus. Stevens defines vulgarity or obscenity as “what *can* be said, linguistically, as distinguished from what *may not* be said according to social or cultural tradition.” Catullus regards such terms as *latera ecfututa* (“fucked-out flanks”) witty or charming or even poetic, precisely because they ordinarily go unsaid. For Catullus, what *can* be said but *must not* be said means that it *must* be said. Though Flavius and his girlfriend do not speak, everything about the bed chamber and Flavius’ appearance announces what must be said or exposed. Vulgarity, in other words, performs exactly what many poets seek to have happen in their poetry: to say what cannot be said. If today in poetry we are somewhat jaded by the overuse of vulgarity or obscenity, we might then ask, what today in cultural or social terms *may not be said*?

For instance, many poets, like the society they live in, may be reluctant to face the seriousness of the threat of climate change. Likewise, the sixth extinction of planetary species (potentially including our own) seems beyond contemplation in poetry. Also remote to imagination is the collapse of a complex society under the weight of its own complexity—the opposite of “exceptionalism” or “progress.” Poets would need to work out the specific means to reflect such conditions and how we dwell within them in our Pacific Northwest poetic watersheds. But poets also need a vision of interrelatedness that will enable us to tell the truth about the human condition, that humans flourish only when we are not isolated individually or as a species, but integrated with all forms of life on earth. Interrelated poetic structures of balance and thematic parallelism could by their overall form embody this kind of meaning.

As fundamental prosody, lines and stanzas offer infinite possibilities for structural symmetry, echoing the ancient default sense of balance in the poetry of Ancient Greece and Rome, and also in the mythtelling of

Native America, especially in the Pacific Northwest. Few poets today utilize thematic parallelism in poetry, but thematic parallelism can be adapted very effectively in contemporary lyric poems. The poet John Haines (1924-2011) made artful use:

THE TUNDRA

The tundra is a living
body, warm in the grassy
autumn sun; it gives off
the odor of crushed
blueberries and gunsmoke.

In the tangled lakes
of its eyes a mirror of ice
is forming, where
frozen gut-piles shine
with a dull, rosy light.

Coarse, laughing men
with their women;
one by one tiny campfires
flaring under the wind.

Full of blood, with a sound
like clicking hoofs,
the heavy tundra slowly
rolls over and sinks
in the darkness.

In the first and last stanzas the tundra, a living entity, frames the human hunters in the middle stanzas. The poem seems to turn on its middle line: “with a dull, rosy light,” shining on the gut piles, which appear like the pupils in the “tangled lakes,” which are the eyes of the tundra. In the last stanza, the tundra is exponentially larger than human scale, and it exacts a kind of retribution upon the coarse hunters (guilty apparently of excessive killing and waste) by turning over like the ghostly “clicking hoofs” of dead animals. The poem raises questions in the reader’s mind about our dwelling on earth. “Tundra” is mysterious, but the poet does not need to explain or “add meaning”—the balanced structure and imagery of the poem *embody* its meaning.

Making meaning is perhaps the poet’s primary obligation. Poetry, or perhaps any kind of art, brings order to the fluidity of experience, so that meaning can be seen and experienced anew. As Irish poet Patrick Kavanagh put it, “We must snatch out of time the passionate transitory.” In one of his “Signposts,” Kavanagh expands this thought, which has long been a theme of the European tradition of poetry:

Immortality is not in the future; it is in the timeless now. A blossom is immortal within its moment. A flash of summer sunlight is immortal. Moments of happiness, grief, or joy are immortal. A man is immortal when his ideas are exciting to the young.

Thematic parallelism and balance seem like ideal principles of organization for this purpose. There are countless ways that such principles can be put to work in lyric poems. Drawing on sources such as Homer, Native American myth-telling, and Catullus, Bill Siverly has developed a particular 21-line form that demonstrates one such possibility. Repurposing the ancient techniques, we can still aspire to build a house that will outlive us:

THE HOUSE ON LANCASTER ROAD

Blackberry vines, broken laurel, and Scotch broom
surround the peeling house set on a slope above the road.
Built in '53, added onto in '74, the place has seen three families
passing through like generations of crows and blue jays.

Tall firs and cedars shadow the roof, and moss grows deep.
An ancient pear tree still bears fruit, or it doesn't.
One year a young man drives up to call on the woman living
there.
He sees what needs to be cleared away and built.

They inhabit the house together, and smoke rises like the moon.
The pendulums of antique clocks swing more slowly here.
Dwelling there is who they are, and they are always learning
to dwell
in this house, to occupy its wooden bed, table, and chairs.
They stoke a hearth where bitter winter branches burn.

In March the old man spades and rakes to build
mounds of composted earth to host lettuce and potatoes.
The woman delights in growing things and plants
seeds of cosmos that will tickle the blooming granddaughter.

One year the rain will find them gone. The garden
will go back to blackberry vines, broken laurel, and Scotch
broom.
The energy of God, coiled in dark earth,
awaits the human work of care to spiral into waiting sky.

“Balance” means that the poem has a center, such as a central stanza of an odd number of lines (in the present case, five), the middle line of which is the center of the poem in terms of overall theme. The center or fulcrum line is “Dwelling there is who they are, and they are always learning to dwell.” This statement summarizes the dynamic that drives the rest of the poem.

“Thematic parallelism” means that the rest of the poem is structured in parallel terms around the central line. In the central stanza itself, the first two lines refer to inhabiting and burning (as in a hearth), and the last two lines of the stanza show how inhabiting means to occupy, and again the hearth is burning. That is, the first two lines and the last two lines of the stanza expand or illustrate the statement of the central line.

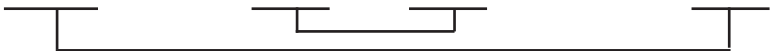
Parallelism also governs the relationship of the remaining stanzas to each other. The first stanza parallels the fifth stanza, most obviously in terms of language: “blackberry vines, broken laurel, and Scotch broom.” Thematically, however, the first stanza presents the past history of the house, while the fifth stanza presents its “future history,” as it were.

Meanwhile, the second stanza presents the young man arriving and starting to build where the woman already lives; in parallel fashion, the fourth stanza advances in time to when the young man is now an old man, and the woman is pleased with what has been built. Their aging in place is underlined by the presence of the granddaughter.

In this poem parallelism functions in terms of analogy (or similarity), so the poem basically ends where it began, with a house waiting to be inhabited. While the poem moves along in linear fashion, it also gains density by its internally self-referential static structure.

One further twist on parallelism: When it happens, especially within a line, as a balancing device, it is called chiasmus, whereby the second of two juxtaposed phrases or clauses is syntactically inverted. Chiasmus is not easy to deploy in English because inverted word order sounds unnatural. But sometimes it can happen like a bonus, all the better in the central fulcrum line, reinforcing the principle of balance:

Dwelling there is who they are, / and they are always learning to dwell.



The poems by Haines and Siverly demonstrate how the structure of a poem can express and support an overarching theme of interrelatedness between people and the places they inhabit. Perhaps no theme is more critical in our time of climate change. Following Martin Heidegger, we can say that the only question before us is how we dwell on earth:

The Old English and High German word for building, *buan*, means to dwell. This signifies: to remain, to stay in a place. . . . The way in which you are and I am, the manner in which we humans *are* on the earth, is *Buan*, dwelling. To be a human being means to be on the earth as a mortal. It means to dwell. The old word *bauen*, which says that man *is* insofar as he *dwells*, this word *bauen* however *also* means at the same time to cherish and protect, to preserve and care for, specifically to till the soil, to cultivate the vine.

As Heidegger says, “Only if we are capable of dwelling, only then can we build.” When we ignore or abuse these basic conditions, the earth turns over and sheds us, as in Haines’ poem. When we acknowledge the ancient verities of dwelling on earth, the outcome proves more sustainable, as in the poem by Siverly. Exploring how we dwell on earth brings us as poets and readers back to the basics, which revives the ancient function of poetry. Popular culture cannot do this, because it distracts us from our purpose of learning who and where we are. We need poetry that evokes our failures and successes at dwelling, whether violating landscape with shopping malls or working a garden all the way to harvest. We need poetry that embodies the interrelatedness of all things, employing techniques of the sort Catullus shows us. And we need that poetry in local terms, especially in the Pacific Northwest, with its openness to nature but also with its influx of more and more climate refugees, who also need to dwell. Send *Windfall* your poems on how you already dwell—an inexhaustible source of poems if only we allow ourselves to apprehend the profound resonance of the place where we live.

—Bill Siverly and Michael McDowell

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