CATULLUS 8: ARIDA...PUMICE EXPOLITUM?[1]

Sjarlene Thom, Department of Latin, University of Stellenbosch

> Miser Catulle, desinas ineptire,
> et quod vides perisse perditum ducas.
> fulsere quondam candidi tibi soles,
> cum ventitabas quo puella ducebat,
> amata nobis quantum amabitur nulla.   5
> ibi illa multa tum iocosa fiebant,
> quae tu volebas nec puella nolebat.
> fulsere vere candidi tibi soles.
> nunc iam illa non vult: tu quoque, impotens, noli,
> nec quae fugit sectare, nec miser vive,   10
> sed obstinata mente perfer, obdura.
> vale, puella, iam Catullus obdurat,
> nec te requiret nec rogabit invitam.
> at tu dolebis, cum rogaberis nulla.
> scelesta, vae te! quae tibi manet vita?   15
> quis nunc te adibit? cui videberis bella?
> quem nunc amabis? cuius esse diceris?
> quem basiabis? cui labella mordebis?
> at tu, Catulle, destinatus obdura![2]

"Poor Catullus, stop being silly
and count what you see lost as a loss.
Once blazing suns burned for you,
when you used to go where the girl led
loved by me as no girl will ever be loved.
Then - when many of those fun things happened,
which you wanted and your girl didn't refuse.
Indeed, blazing suns burned for you.
Now she doesn't want to anymore: you too, shouldn't want to -
and not pursue her who flees, nor live miserably,
but endure with mind set, be firm.
Farewell, girl, now Catullus is firm,
he will not look for you, will not ask after an unwilling woman.
But you will repent, when you are not sought after at all.
Wretch, damn you! What life is left for you?
Who will come to you now? For whom will you appear beautiful?
Whom will you love now? Whose girl will you be said to be?
Whom will you kiss? Whose lips will you bite?
But you, Catullus, be resolved, be firm."

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[1] In the spirit of Copley's article on Catullus 1 (1951) I have taken *arida...pumice expolitum* not quite literally. I understand *expolitum* to refer to the same type of literary "polishing" Horace required of poetry. See also Grimaldi 1965:90 who states that "his [Catullus'] poems may seem to be trifles but...they have been worked over thoroughly" (*expolitum*). In that case *arida...pumice* would refer to the physical labour or poetic effort required for the poetic idea to become the poem.

[2] I have used the text established by Goold (1983).

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Much has been said about Catullus 8. There still seems to be no agreement about the basic tone of the poem.[3] Was it meant seriously or was it a jocular attempt to persuade a recalcitrant mistress?[4]

This poem does what truly great poetry often does. It describes as well as embodies a given situation. No paraphrase of the situation has the poem's ability to persuade, since only the poem reflects its meaning directly in its form. I would then argue that both structure and style reflect supreme control of poetic material. The subject matter, however, suggests the exact opposite. In my reading of the poem, the tone is serious,[5] since such perfection of form somehow suggests that the poem set out to achieve more than merely interest a wayward mistress.[6] This article further proposes that even in this poem where the content of the poem seemingly threatens to overwhelm the speaker, the poet Catullus[7] is firmly in control. The poem is in the first place a *created* work of art, not an exercise in self-control or even personal relations.[8]

In several respects this poem comes very close to drama.[9] The internal dialogue of the speaker reflects the dramatic conflict of the situation. The action of the poem is portrayed in five separate, but closely interrelated acts. At the end of the poem nothing has changed except for the insight gained into the situation; the catharsis for poet and reader alike lies in the regaining of another beginning. In its nineteen verses the poem makes a complex and profoundly true statement about the human condition.[10]

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[3]   See Skinner 1971:298 and Dyson 1973:127-131 for good summaries of different perspectives on this poem.

[4]   See e.g., Wheeler 1934:227-230; Swanson 1963; Akbar Khan 1968 and Skinner 1971 for emphasis on a humorous interpretation of the poem, and e.g., Havelock 1938:52; Quinn 1959:77; Fränkel 1961:52-53; Commager 1965:90-92; Rowland 1966; Moritz 1966; Dyson 1973; Wiseman 1974:60-62; Kresic 1981:299-316; Burck 1983 and Syndikus 1984:104-111 for a more serious reading.

[5]   See previous note. See especially Dyson 1973:131 who gives the best objection against a comic interpretation of the poem.

[6]   Contra Wheeler 1934:229, who stated that "the motive of the lover apparently resolved to break away from the girl but secretly hoping (sic) a reconciliation and so trying to browbeat or wheedle her into it appeared in the Greek New Comedy." I believe that the Catullus-*persona* here has much more in common with the lover as portrayed in the poems of Sappho (see Thom 1990) than with any comic lover. The Sapphic lover aims to make sense of experience and where experience does not make sense, to transcend experience via poetry. That a poem could also function as a highly sophisticated intellectual *billet doux* is immaterial--in Sappho's poetry as well as in Catullus 8. See also Syndikus 1984:106 and Commager 1965:92.

[7]   For the important distinction between poet and speaker see Kresic 1981:304 n.10.

[8]   See Swanson 1963:193: "For Catullus art is the means by which he objectifies his subjectivity".

[9]   Havelock (1938:52) refers to "form converted to the service of tragedy" and Kresic (1981:304) bases the dramatic tone of the poem on the emotional charge associated with the repetition of *miser* (vv.1 and 10) and *obdura* (vv.11, 12 and 19).

[10] See Quinn 1972:131-203 for an interesting hypothesis for the course of the Catullus-Lesbia affair and especially for an exposition of how Poem 8 fits into the broader background of the whole collection. See also Wiseman 1985 for a different perspective.

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The structure of Poem 8 is straightforward:[11]

Section *A1*:   Introductory statement of the situation in which Catullus finds himself (vv.1-2)

Section *B*:   Reminiscence of times past (vv.3-8)

Section *A2*:   (1)   Abrupt return to the present (Catullus as addressee) (vv.9-11)

                     (2)   Abrupt return to the present (*puella* as addressee (vv.12-13)

Section *C*:   Projection of the future (vv.14-18)

Section *A3*:   Abrupt return to Catullus' untenable position in the present (vv.19).

The dramatic structure of the poem is firmly supported by the verb tenses of the various sections. The verbs in the *A* sections are either some form of imperative or in the present tense. The future tense verbs (*requiret* and *rogabit*) of v.13, function as bridge between section *A2* (vv.9-13) and the *C* section (vv.14-18). They smooth the transition between the "now" (vv.9-12) and the time to come (vv.14-18). In the *B* section the verb tenses are either perfect or imperfect. The *C* section describes a projected time to come. Future tense verbs, as could be expected, predominate. The basic dramatic action of the poem (*A-B-A-C-A*: now, then, now, in future, now) is firmly rooted in the present. Both past and future, however, influence this present. A closed circular or repetitive series of events is clearly suggested by the ring-compositional structure of the poem.[12] There is no escape from the present.

The metre, limping iambics (since Greek poetry associated with negative or injurious statements), supports the basic theme of the poem.[13] All lines are end-stopped. This increases emotional tension in the poem. A large number of the verses even have heavy caesurae or internal stops.[14] Each individual verse as it were comments prosaically on the situation described by the poet (Syndikus 1984:107; Burck 1983:10).

A detailed analysis of the poem demonstrates how closely form and meaning are interwoven. The poem introduces the theme of the poem immediately: *miser Catulle* (v.1). We know that *miser* often occurs in Catullus' poetry describing the rejected lover. At the end of this poem though, *miser* is no longer a stock characteristic of the unhappy lover. The word has taken on meaning in terms of the rest of the poem. It no longer describes one aspect of the rejected lover, it instead reflects an unchanging way of being.

The vocative *Catulle* (v.1) suggests that Catullus is addressing himself. A dialogue between what should be and what is, reflects the tug of war within the poet. At the same time it portrays an effort to objectify the issue at stake (Burck 1983:10). Two colloquial subjunctive

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11   See especially Burck 1983:17-18; also Rowland 1966 and Moritz 1966.

12   See Fränkel 1961:53 and Wiseman 1974:62. The latter further suggests a "double ring construction": *miser* enclosing vv.1-10 and *obdura* vv.11-19. See Connor 1974:96 for an opposite view.

13   See Loomis 1972:105-106 for a summary of the different uses of limping iambics. More specifically see Ross 1969:171: "The polymetric, within an artistically tight form, seems to suggest continually changing and expanding possibilities of mood and expression".

14   See especially v.9 with its nine individual words, stating the basic problem of the poem slowly and emphatically.

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imperatives *desinas* (v.1.) and *ducas* (v.2)[15] confirm that the battle is being fought internally. These unassertive commands seem to imply that they need only to be acknowledged to be accomplished. No special effort is needed. The informal tone further underlines the meaning of *ineptire*. Common sense should avail easily.

In the light of what follows *ineptire* (v.1) becomes deeply ironic. *Ineptire* might be appropriate for a realistic situation where the observer can *see* that he has made a mistake, where "mistakes" are miscalculations. In other words *ineptire* (as well as *vides* and *ducas*, v.2) would apply to a judgement based on intellectual assessment of a situation. Even the repetition *perisse perditum* (v.2) suggests a calculable loss.[16]

In the first two verses of the poem the poet has introduced his topic. The impression created is that of a realistic eyewitness assessing the situation. *Miser* (v.1) at the beginning of the poem, however, suggests that the poet's emotional reaction does not quite tally with this assessment. *Quod* (v.2) too, remains unspecified. The importance attached to *miser*, therefore, remains to be established by the rest of the poem.

In the next 6 verses definite content is given to *quod*. That what has been lost has nothing to do with objective intellectual assessment. It will be difficult to apply the verbs *ineptire*, *vides*, and *ducas*, (vv.1-2) to the situation described in vv.3-8.

Vv.3-8 refer to the past. The reality of this past is much more "present", however, than the reality represented by *vides* and *ducas* (v.2). In v.3 there no longer exists the possibility of clear vision. *Fulsere ... candidi soles* (v.3) reflect overwhelming and dazzling light. No witness could "see" or look at this light; no witness could be unaware of the impact of this light either. *Ducebat* (v.4) echoes *ducas* (v.2). The same word suggests a contrast between what the poet should be doing in the present (v.2) and what his *puella* (most probably Lesbia, Quinn 1972:75-76) used to do in the past (v.4). Ironically the poet's "testimony" of the past prevents him from assessing the present situation objectively. Instead of supporting the "eyewitness" report of vv.1-2, these verses (3-8) underline the emotional and therefore incalculable content of the situation.

The change from second person addressee (*destinas*, v.1, *ducas*, v.2, *ventitabas*, v.4) to an implied first person (*amata nobis*--the only direct reference to the poet-*persona*) underlines that this emotional involvement is the crux of the matter. No intellectual insight into his position can affect *amata nobis* (v.5). Understanding of this situation simply does not counterbalance the results of *amata nobis* (v.5): *ibi illa multa tum iocosa fiebant* (v.6). Self-criticism and intellectual understanding operate on a totally different, even alien level.

The last two lines of this *B* section sums up the situation between the poet and his *puella*.[17] This assessment (*multa iocosa...quae tu volebas nec puella nolebat*, vv.6-7) is surprisingly realistic. The poet recognises that even in the blissful past, there was an inequality of commitment to the relationship between them--he wanted to and she didn't mind. But even so, compared to his present situation, *fulsere vere candidi...soles* (v.8). This direct repetition of v.3 (except that *quondam*, v.3, is replaced by *vere*, v.8) creates the impression that this reminiscence of past happiness is self contained; that no further "repetition" of this happiness could be possible.

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15 See Commager 1965:91: "The language of the poet, as it were, in the *colloquium* is flat and prosy." See also Syndikus 1984:106-107 and Fränkel 1961:53 for examples of parallel colloquial usage, as well as Burck 1983:10.

16 The affair is now to be regarded as a bad debt, to be written off. See Quinn 1972:89.

17 See Quinn's discussion (1972:66-70) on Catullus' use of the word *puella*.

In the first eight verses Catullus has demonstrated his internal conflict. The intellectual assessment of the situation (vv.1-2) simply does not apply to the emotional contents represented by vv.3-8. Catullus has suggested that this conflict could be resolved because of insight into the situation (*quod vides perisse perditum ducas*, v.2). "Insight" into the situation, however, makes clear just how much the past has meant. There is no solution, only ongoing internal conflict.[18]

The change to the present in section *A2* is abrupt: *nunc iam illa non vult* (v.9).[19] *Nec puella nolebat* (v.7) has changed into the adamant *nunc...non vult* (v.9). Implications for the "*tu*" are disastrous. The suggested *noli* to complete v.9,[20] seems to work exceedingly well. The chiasm *tu volebas* (v.7) -- *nec puella nolebat* (v.7); *nunc non vult* (v.9) -- *tu quoque...noli* (v.9), underlines how dependent the poet's reactions are and have been on the girl's behaviour.[21] Independence after such "responsiveness" seems unlikely. The next four imperatives (*sectare, vive, perfer, obdura*, vv.10-11) strongly suggest internal conflict. It is as if the poet-*persona* attempts to reformulate his instructions to himself in order to clarify their meaning. If only he could respond to one of these commands! But by contrast *quae fugit* (v.10) evokes *puella ducebat* (v.4) and the *candidi...soles* (v.3) of the *B* section (vv.3-8), which has just been negated by *nunc iam illa non vult* (v.9). *Miser* (v.10) echoes *miser Catulle* (v.1). With *vive* (v.10), however, the descriptive tag acquires a deadly continuity. *Vides* (v.2) as an act of witness to a certain situation has revealed itself as inappropriate. *Vides* (v.2) must become *vive* (v.10). Therein lies the pain of *miser* (v.10). V.11 reads like a mental exercise, especially with the repetitive *obstinata...obdura* and *mente perfer*. But we have previously seen that the poet's will has played no significant part in his relationship.[22] Mental excercises seem therefore to be doomed to failure.

In the last two lines of this section, Catullus addresses the girl: *vale, puella* (v.12). She must know of his intention. Her knowledge might help him keep to his resolve. She is the addressee instead of Catullus.[23] He describes himself, as an external observer would see him, in the third person. This implies that the internal conflict is over. Catullus is no longer *miser*. The solution to the problem stated in vv.1-2 is that Catullus should keep the situation "external". He should be a witness to, not a participant in the drama. The *obdura* (v.11) / *obdurat* (v.12) echo, however, suggests that the implication of *vale, puella* (v.12) have not been thoroughly grasped. The subsequent future tense verbs *requiret, rogabit* (v.13) underline the fact that *vale, puella* (v.12) has continuous implications for the future.

This second *A* section (vv.9-13) responds directly to the first *A* section. The introduction (vv.1-2) recommended cutting one's losses. The second *A* section (vv.9-13) shows the poet in action. In both sections there is a preponderance of commands: *desinas, ducas* (vv.1-2); *noli,*

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18   *Soles fulsere*, referring as it does to a natural occurence, echoes poem 5 (vv.4-6) where the human and the cosmic are so closely parallelled:

> *soles occidere et redire possunt;*
> *nobis cum semel occidit brevis lux,*
> *nox est perpetua una dormienda.*

Poem 8 reflects this *nox perpetua*.

19   Nine individual words compared to five in the previous verse cause an abrupt change in poetic mood.

20   This reading was suggested by Avantius and is generally accepted.

21   For a different interpretation of the chiasm, see Burck 1983:12.

22   Either it was the girl who didn't mind (*nec puella nolebat*, v.7) or "good" things just happened (*ibi illa multa tum iocosa fiebant*, v.6).

23   This does not imply that she is suddenly present! See Syndikus 1984:106.

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sectare, vive, perfer, obdura (vv.9-13). The situation is assessed mainly on an intellectual level in vv.1-2 (*vides, ducas*). The response in vv.9-13 is also mainly intellectual (*obstinata mente*, v.11).

The difference between knowledge and experience, however, was hinted at in the introduction (*miser Catulle*, v.1, as well as the unspecified *quod*, v.2). *Quod* (v.2) is echoed by *quae tu volebas* (v.7) with this difference: the *B* section has embodied this *quae* with the power and radiance of dazzling sunlight and overwhelming joy. The *miser* of v.10 echoes the *miser* of v.1 but with the fundamental difference made by the *B* section. *Obstinata mente* (v.11) seems too localized and cerebral to combat the onslaught on the senses and emotions as described in section *B*.

The *C* section seems to echo different aspects of the preceding verses. The *tu dolebas* (v.14) applies not to *miser Catulle*, (v.1), but to the girl. He projects his own sorrow onto her. *Rogabit* (v.13) becomes *rogaberis* (v.14). She is the unfortunate who is cursed: *scelesta, vae te* (v.15), just as the whole situation implicitly dooms the unfortunate speaker by threatening to destroy him. He asks what life remains for her. *Miser vive* (v.10) remains for him if he cannot combat the situation or resist his longing for a return of the past.[24]

This section (*C*) also refers back directly to the *B* section. Instead of two people sharing an experience the girl will be alone. This is the irony of the entire section. Catullus is not capable of imagining the girl alone. When he thinks about her it is in terms of either his own pain (vv.14-15) or their shared experience (vv.16-18).[25] The fleeting *amata nobis* (v.6) of section *B* becomes the step by step description (vv.16-18) of how he used to approach her: *ibi illa multa tum iocosa fiebant* (v.6). Poetically, section *C* repeats section *B* as it were. This destroys any resolutions taken by Catullus in section *A2*, since both section *B* and *C* eventually lead to *nunc iam illa non vult* (v.9), the pivot of the entire poem.

In section *A3* the poem is back to where it started (*miser Catulle*, v.1) with this difference: Catullus has obtained the insight to realize that *obstinata mente...obdura* (v.11) is not enough. A single resolve to remain firm in his reaction to the situation is insufficient, inappropriate even.[26] He wil have to continue fighting this internal battle. The poem will repeat itself with all that that implies if he wants to be able at all to say: *at tu, Catulle, destinatus obdura* (v.19). Form and contents have merged perfectly in the sense that the ringcompositional structure of the poem underlines the poet-*persona*'s ongoing struggle.[27]

The poem as a result of human effort can be "polished to perfection". But the very contrast between perfection of form and perpetual imperfect or unfinished content, emphasizes this "recommencement éternel" (Kresic 1981:309) which is the essence of Catullus 8. It is perhaps

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[24] See Allen 1950:260 who defined the meaning of *miser* as being "subject to that passionate love which makes the lover its helpless victim." The whole point of the poem, however, is that Catullus is not acting like a helpless victim. He is trying to understand his experience.

[25] The questions asked in vv.16-18 are rhetorical in the sense that no answer is expected at all. See Burck 1983:14. The crux of the poem lies in Catullus' inability to imagine any answer to these questions; for him they point to the past, not to the future. The poem reflects the perpetual effort to cross the border between what has been and what will be.

[26] He has already needed to replace the objective third person *Catullus obdurat* (v.12) by the more directly commanding *Catulle...obdura* (v.19). See Rambaux 1985:23.

[27] "It is not the outcome of a process of thought, but a record of the process itself" (Quinn 1959:93). See also Kresic 1981:300 who argues that the relationship between structure and meaning is indivisible, since structure is meaning.

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the final irony of the poem that such perfect mastery of form and structure should reflect emotions which threaten destruction and refuse to acknowledge restraint.

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