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DISERTISSIME ROMULI NEPOTUM

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Disertissime Romuli nepotum,
quot sunt quotque fuere, Marce Tulli,
quotque post aliis erunt in annis,
gratias tibi maximas Catullus
agit pessimus omnium poeta,
tanto pessimus omnium poeta,
quanto tu optimus omnium patronus
[Catullus 49].

THIS little poem is one of the most tantalizing literary documents which have come down to us from antiquity. The only evidence of direct communication between Cicero and Catullus, it tells us nothing about the date or the occasion of its composition, and scholars have been sharply divided as to what, if anything, it tells us about the mutual feelings of the two men toward each other. Naturally, it has provoked many and varied theories, and Fordyce, after referring to some of these, contents himself with saying: "These theories, some wilder than others, are only guesswork, and guesses can be multiplied. Cicero and Catullus were moving in the same society . . . but nothing whatever is known of the relations between them. In default of this knowledge it is useless to build hypotheses."[1] In refraining from adding any conjecture of his own, Fordyce has shown himself more self-denying than most previous editors of Catullus, even when they have uttered warnings about the uselessness of speculation. Thus, Baehrens in his edition of 1885 (pp. 252 f.), after magisterially dismissing a number of theories, remarks: "coniecturis de rebus nobis incognitis plane abstineamus perversis et per se improbabilissimis tantumque ea scire velimus, quae carmen simpliciter enarratum nobis suppeditat." But having said this, he immediately goes on to propound the idea that Catullus is thanking Cicero for keeping his name and his association with Clodia out of the *Pro Caelio*. Even Kroll (Commentary, p. 88), though he describes such speculation as "auf Sand gebaut," nevertheless makes his own suggestion, that Catullus may be acknowledging a presentation copy of Cicero's *In Vatinium* (56 B.C.).

The temptation to try to unlock the secret of the poem is natural enough, and curiosity about the occasion of it is sharpened by its unusual extravagance of expression, which cannot but raise doubts about the sincerity of Catullus' admiration and gratitude. Even those who firmly maintain that the sentiments are genuine admit that the tone is high-pitched: "persiflage" (Ellis); "etwas übertrieben" (Kroll); "without being sarcastic, Catullus may have his tongue in his cheek" (Fordyce). Perhaps, therefore, despite Fordyce's salutary warning, a fresh look at this problem is justified, even though no

1. C. J. Fordyce, *Commentary on Catullus* (Oxford, 1961), pp. 215 f.

kind of certainty can be reached. Conjecture, suitably disciplined, has often played a useful part in filling out our picture of the ancient world. It is true that nothing whatever is known about the relations between Cicero and Catullus, but we do know something about the relations of each of these men to Calvus; and I shall suggest that it is in the context of these relations that a possible key to the mystery is to be found.

First, however, it may be well to remind ourselves of the solutions which have hitherto been proposed. Once the identification of Lesbia with the Clodia of the *Pro Caelio* had become generally accepted, it was natural, perhaps, to assume that the Clodia affair is in some way behind poem 49. The simplest view is that represented by L. Schwabe (*Quaestiones Catullianae* [1862], p. 127), according to which Catullus, having received from Cicero in 56 B.C. a copy of his *Pro Caelio*, is thanking him for his successful attack on Clodia. Baehrens endorses this view, but considers that the special reason for the warmth of Catullus' gratitude is that Cicero has kept his name out of the scandal. As Fordyce points out (p. 213), it is psychologically most improbable that Catullus should have thanked Cicero for vilifying Clodia on his behalf. A more tenuous link with Clodia is offered by the suggestion of R. Westphal (*Catulls Gedichte in ihrem geschichtlichen Zusammenhang* [Breslau, 1867], pp. 241 f.) that Catullus is expressing his thanks to Cicero for having introduced him to Clodia, perhaps in 62 B.C. We have grounds for believing that Cicero knew Clodia and had dealings with her in that year,[2] but none whatever for supposing that he introduced Catullus to her. These theories all depend for their possibility on the correctness of the assumption that Catullus' Lesbia and the Clodia of Caelius and Cicero were one and the same person. They also have in common the belief that Catullus is expressing genuine and sincere thanks for services rendered. The same belief is held by Robinson Ellis, who, in his Commentary of 1889, without going so far as to connect the poem with Clodia, regards it as an expression of Catullus' gratitude to Cicero for defending him in some cause unknown. The probability of such a hypothesis is supported, he thinks, by (1) the emphasis laid on Cicero's powers as a pleader and (2) the prominent antithesis of the two personalities, Cicero as orator, Catullus as poet. These observations, particularly the second, are just and significant, but, as I hope to show, they admit of a quite different explanation.

Let us ask ourselves whether the language of the poem suggests genuine gratitude, for important professional aid, to a distinguished advocate twenty years older than the poet. Can we believe that this extravagant praise, underlined, as it is, by self-abasement, the falsity of which is almost guaranteed by the repetition, reflects Catullus' real feelings at any time, either about Cicero or about himself? Merrill, in his edition, remarks on line 5: "Catullus also speaks of himself with excessive modesty in addressing his patron Nepos in 1," but a glance at Catullus' dedicatory poem only serves to emphasize how differently Catullus spoke when he wished his expressions of modesty to be credible and acceptable. Kroll suggests that "die Gegenüberstellung des schlechtesten Dichters und des besten Sachwalters besagt vielleicht nicht mehr, als dass C. eine Freundlichkeit des Redners als unverdient und unerwartet empfindet," but such profound respect would be totally unlike the Catullus revealed to us

2. Cic. *Fam.* 5. 2. 6. Plutarch's highly colored account of the relations between Cicero and Clodia (*Cic.* 29) must be treated with suspicion.

in his other poems (e.g., 29 and 93). The last three lines of *c.* 49 seem to me to proclaim, beyond any shadow of doubt, that the poem is not intended to be taken seriously, or, at least, not wholly seriously. That being so, we need not scruple to recognize that there is a light-hearted touch in the phrase *Romuli nepotum* and in the hyperbolical expression *quot sunt, quotque fuere . . .*, etc., which occurs in two other Catullan contexts (21. 2–3, 24. 2–3), both nonserious.

This evident lack of seriousness has been interpreted by some scholars as irony, and an occasion for it has been found in Cicero's antipathy toward the *novi poetae*, amongst whom Catullus was a leading figure. Thus, B. Schmidt, in *Rh. Mus.*, LXIX (1914), 273 f., imagines that in 54 B.C. Cicero, by criticizing his poetry, has provoked Catullus into an ironical acknowledgment, including a recondite sneer (*omnium patronus*, "advocate for all and sundry"), obliquely referring to the fact that Cicero had recently defended his former victim Vatinius in a lawsuit in which Calvus had appeared for the prosecution. This ingenious theory, to which Lenchantin (Commentary, p. 88) gives cautious support, must be rejected. The formal address and the expression of thanks must surely imply some *direct* communication from Cicero to Catullus, and we can hardly suppose this to have been a disparaging letter, even if we knew that Cicero was hostile to the "new poets" in 54 B.C., which we do not.[3] The alleged *double-entendre* in *omnium patronus* is out of the question; apart from the cheapness and obscurity of the gibe, no literary craftsman in the ancient world, least of all Catullus, could have allowed a carefully sought antithesis to be ruined by the intrusion of deliberate ambiguity at a crucial point. It is unthinkable that *omnium* in line 7 is intended to have any other function than in the two preceding lines, namely, to sharpen the "polarity" of the contrast between *pessimus poeta* and *optimus patronus*. G. Friedrich, in a long and imaginative discussion (Commentary [Leipzig, 1908], pp. 229–32), which contains a good deal that is illuminating and suggestive, argues that there must have been some friendly gesture on Cicero's part to justify a formal expression of thanks, and that this gesture must have concerned Catullus' poetry. He supposes that Cicero, having perhaps read poem 64, has sent Catullus a note of commendation, but in terms so condescending as to provoke from Catullus a mischievously obsequious acknowledgment. This is an agreeable fancy, but it would carry more conviction if the voluminous extant body of Cicero's correspondence contained specimens of similar condescension. On the contrary, whatever human weaknesses that correspondence reveals, Cicero's manner of writing to his younger contemporaries seems to be remarkably free from pompousness or superiority.

We may legitimately regard the light and exaggerated tone of poem 49 as a pointer, not to the personal relations between Cicero and Catullus, but to the comparatively trivial nature of the occasion. We may infer that it concerns nothing so serious as a lawsuit involving Catullus personally, but that, like other hendecasyllabic pieces of his, it is an immediate reaction to some ephemeral and perhaps commonplace event in the poet's social or literary environment.[4] In this context, therefore, what can we suppose

3. Cicero's first reference to them in 50 B.C. (*Att.* 7. 2. 1) seems to reveal satisfaction with his own ability to write a *spondeiazon*, rather than any particular antipathy toward the *νεώτεροι*.

4. Cf., e.g., poems 12, 14, 35, 42, and 50.

Cicero to have sent to Catullus, that could deserve so elaborate an expression of thanks? Not merely a letter, surely, but a gift (cf. *c.* 14), and if so, undoubtedly a literary gift. Kroll's suggestion that it may have been a copy of the *In Vatinium* would be quite satisfying, if one could find sufficient reason why Cicero should have thought Catullus a suitable recipient. Catullus doubtless took pleasure in the discomfiture of Vatinius at the hands of his friend Calvus, but there is no evidence that he had any interest in oratory as such. He was utterly a poet, as Cicero well knew, and therefore the gift (if gift it was) can only have been poetry—and poetry written by Cicero himself.

The likelihood of this assumption will become more apparent if we consider the career of Calvus and his relations with Cicero. Born in 82 B.C., he had seen his father, C. Licinius Macer, driven to suicide in 66 by a trial for extortion over which Cicero had presided as praetor.[5] This event must have had a traumatic effect on the sixteen-year-old Calvus, and may well have influenced his later attitude to Cicero. Cicero, writing to Atticus at the time of the trial (*Att.* 1. 4. 2), shows no personal dislike of Macer, but equally no regret for his fate, and he expresses satisfaction that Macer's condemnation has improved his own public image. Little more than ten years later, Calvus had become not only a serious challenger to Cicero's supremacy in the courts, but also leader of a stylistic reaction which Cicero evidently felt to be directed against himself. The period of Calvus' prominence as orator and as standard-bearer of Atticism can hardly have begun before 56, when he was twenty-six years of age, nor, in view of the shortness of his life, can it have begun much later. In fact, his reputation as an orator seems to have been established by his speeches against Vatinius in the middle fifties. Testimony to his achievement is to be found not only in the poems of his friend and admirer Catullus (53 and 14. 3), but in Tacitus (*Dial.* 34) and in the Elder Seneca (*Contr.* 7. 4. 6), who preserves the anecdote of Vatinius being provoked by the effectiveness of Calvus' delivery into jumping up and protesting: "rogo vos, iudices, num, si iste disertus est, ideo me damnari oportet?" It is generally assumed, and is indeed probable, that, during part at least of the proceedings against Vatinius, Cicero and Calvus appeared on opposite sides. If so, even though Vatinius was acquitted in 54, Cicero cannot have been wholly pleased at the oratorical success of his young adversary, especially if, as seems likely, Calvus was already becoming known as leader of a movement which rejected the style which Cicero had made his own, and claimed to go back to "Attic" purity and plainness of expression. Cicero's formal polemic against Atticism, in the *Brutus* and the *Orator*, was published in 46 after Calvus' death.[6] How long after, is not certain, though it is generally assumed that Calvus had died quite recently, probably in 47. Münzer believes that, when Cicero wrote *Fam.* 15. 21 and the *Brutus*, Calvus had been dead for some years, basing his belief on the grounds that a personality so forceful would otherwise have left some visible mark on the Roman literary and political world after 54.[7] However that may be, we cannot doubt that the controversy between Cicero and Calvus was being pursued, probably with acrimony, for some time before his death. It is well known that, during Cicero's

5. Val. Max. 9. 12. 7 and Plut. *Cic.* 9. The two accounts differ considerably in detail, but agree on the main fact.

6. *Brut.* 279 and *Fam.* 15. 21. 4, where the implication that Calvus is dead seems evident from the imperfect tenses; the letter (to Trebonius) dates from the end of 47.

7. *RE*, XIII (1927), col. 433. 18 ff.

lifetime, there was published, between Cicero on the one hand and Brutus and Calvus on the other, correspondence in which there appears to have been a shrewd exchange of criticism.[8] The publication may have taken place in 47,[9] but the correspondence itself is probably to be dated appreciably earlier. Moreover, when the Elder Seneca (*loc. cit.*) says of Calvus: "diu cum Cicerone iniquissimam litem de principatu eloquentiae habuit," he must mean by *diu* a matter of years, rather than of months or weeks. Finally, although in the *De oratore* of 55 Cicero makes no open attack on the Atticist movement—the dramatic setting of the dialogue precludes it, in any case—his glorification of the ornate style may well have acted as a challenge to that movement, and have provoked the first open skirmishes in the quarrel.[10]

We do not know how strongly Cicero disliked Calvus as a person. In the *Brutus* (§§ 283—84) he criticizes him with generosity (as indeed he could afford to do), and from *Fam.* 15. 21. 4 it is evident that his politeness in a letter to Calvus had surprised Trebonius. Perhaps, however, Trebonius should not have been surprised. His whole correspondence reveals Cicero, in his private relationships, as an essentially amiable man, who found it difficult to be downright uncivil to anyone. Nevertheless, the evidence which we have considered makes it probable that, as early as 54 or 55, Cicero was finding Calvus a tiresomely formidable rival in the courts, and the chief exponent of stylistic theories which, even if they were not inspired by hostility toward himself, he regarded with hearty disfavor.

There was, however, an additional reason why he may have felt toward the younger man, if not jealousy, at least a sense of pique. By the middle fifties Calvus had become no less celebrated in Rome as a poet than as an orator. He and Catullus were regarded as leaders of the group of young poets to whom, it is thought, Cicero was later referring when he spoke of *novi poetae* (*Orator* 161). That Calvus was a leading figure can be inferred not only from the special affection which Catullus obviously felt for him (the warmth of tone in poems 14 and 50[11] is unmistakable), but also from the fact that later generations linked the two names together.[12] Now, Cicero too had a strong interest in poetry, both as a reader (*Q. fr.* 2. 10. 3) and as a practitioner. The fact that his first recorded comment on the "new poets" dates from 50 does not mean that he first became aware of them in that year, as Kroll (p. 89) appears to imply. Indeed, it seems perverse to imagine that one of the best-read Romans of his age should not have been among the first to become acquainted with new literary movements in Rome. He would have read the poetry of Catullus and Calvus in any case; the fact that Calvus, at an early age, was achieving fame in this field as well as in oratory can only have tinged Cicero's natural interest with an element of personal chagrin. For he too knew how to write verses, and would have been much gratified to be recognized as a poet; indeed, during the previous few years, while Catullus and Calvus had been establishing their reputations in literary circles, he himself had been engaged on the most serious poetic activity

8. Quintil. *Inst.* 9. 4. 1 and 12. 1. 22. Tac. *Dial.* 18. 4 and 25. 5.

9. *Fam.* 15. 21. 4: "ego illas Calvo litteras misi non plus quam has, quas nunc legis, existimans exituras." The fact that Trebonius has inquired about the correspondence suggests that its publication is recent.

10. J. F. D'Alton, *Roman Literary Theory and Criticism* (London, 1931), pp. 224 f.

11. Friedrich (p. 231) suggests that the juxtaposition of poems 49 and 50 may not be accidental.

12. Hor. *Sat.* 1. 10. 19, Prop. 2. 25. 4, and Ov. *Am.* 3. 9. 62.

of his life. In March of 60 he had sent to Atticus his Greek *commentarius* on his consulship, at the same time promising to send a Latin version of it and also a poem on the same subject: "tertium poema exspectato, ne quod genus a me ipso laudis meae praetermittatur" (*Att.* 1. 19. 10). Before many months had passed, the poem on his consulship must have been completed, for in a letter of December he is quoting the concluding three lines of the third book in such a way as to imply that it was already known to Atticus, and perhaps to others: "sed me κατακλεὶς mea illa commovet, quae est in libro tertio" (*Att.* 2. 3. 4). Years later he included a long extract from the second book in the *De divinatione* (1. 17–22). Soon after his return from exile, Cicero seems to have begun another poem on a similar theme, *De meis temporibus*, probably a continuation or an expanded revision of the poem on his consulship. A letter to Quintus in February 55 refers to his brother having praised the second book of what is evidently a new poetical composition (*Q. fr.* 2. 8. 1); in September of the following year he tells Quintus of an episode which he proposes to include "in secundum librum meorum temporum" (*Q. fr.* 3. 1. 24). If he is speaking of the same work, we can infer that it had not yet been published, and indeed we are told as much explicitly. In a letter written to Lentulus in December 54 he replies to a request from the latter for copies of works produced by Cicero since Lentulus' departure from Rome (i.e., to Cilicia as proconsul in 56). After mentioning *orationes quaedam* and the three books of the *De oratore*, he says: "scripsi etiam versibus tris libros 'de temporibus meis,' quos iam pridem ad te misissem, si esse edendos putassem" (*Fam.* 1. 9. 23). He adds that he has refrained from publication through consideration for the feelings of the many who might take offense, because they had, or had not, been mentioned in the work. Nevertheless, he promises that he will try to send a copy, and we know that, before this time, the poem, or parts of it, had been seen by at least one other person, apart from brother Quintus. In August he asks his brother what Caesar thinks of his verses, and refers to some criticisms which Caesar had previously sent him after reading the first book. He begs Quintus to tell him candidly whether Caesar finds either the content or the style objectionable, and then he adds: "nihil est quod vereare; ego enim ne pilo quidem minus me amabo" (*Q. fr.* 2. 16. 5).

We can guess what Caesar really thought. All ancient criticism of Cicero's poetry fastened upon this phase of his poetic output, and is well summed up by Quintilian's remark: "in carminibus utinam pepercisset quae non desierunt carpere maligni: 'cedant arma togae, concedat laurea linguae' et 'o fortunatam natam me consule Romam' et 'Iovem illum a quo in concilium deorum advocatur' et 'Minervam quae artes eum edocuit'" (11. 1. 24). The real target of criticism was not inadequate technique. The notorious jingle in "o fortunatam natam me consule Romam" seems to have been an isolated infelicity. The way in which Quintilian refers to the line in another context implies as much,[13] and there is nothing comparable in the rest of the extant fragments of Ciceronian poetry. The reason why this line lent itself so perfectly to Juvenal's satire was that, apart from the verbal ineptitude—and any poet might be forgiven an occa-

13. 9. 4. 41: "videndum etiam, ne syllaba verbi prioris ultima et prima sequentis consonet: quod ne quis praecipi miretur, Ciceroni in epistulis excidit: 'res mihi <invisae> visae sunt, Brute,' et in carmine: 'o fortunatam natam me consule Romam.'"

sional lapse, it typified the atmosphere of complacency and self-praise which permeated the whole work in which it occurred. This characteristic might in a speech be tolerated occasionally as a harmless foible, but, as a main theme of a full-scale epic poem, it became tasteless and repugnant, and, when interwoven with the conventional divine machinery of primitive poetry (see Quintilian's references above to Jupiter and Minerva), its effect was ineffably grotesque. Hints that these features were open to criticism seem to have been conveyed to Cicero by Quintus and Atticus, but too gently to cause him any real misgiving. It happened that he was the central figure in his story, and therefore must be put in the foreground: "non ἐγκωμιαστικὰ sunt haec, sed ἱστορικὰ quae scribimus" (*Att.* 1. 19. 10). It seems, in fact, that we might apply to Cicero the remark which was made of a later Roman poet: "non ignoravit vitia sua, sed amavit." The three lines quoted in his letter to Atticus (2. 3. 4) from the end of the poem on his consulship are part of an exhortation by Calliope to himself: "Interea cursus, quos prima a parte iuventae / quosque adeo consul virtute animoque petisti, / hos retine atque auge famam laudesque bonorum." The long passage which Cicero chooses to insert in the *De divinatione* is likewise addressed by a Muse (this time Urania) to himself, and contains similar, if less obtrusive, touches of divine commendation. The episode which Cicero tells Quintus (3. 1. 24) he is thinking of introducing into his poem *De temporibus meis*, and which he describes as a *mirificum embolium*, is to be a speech in the council of the gods by Apollo about Gabinius and Piso.

It almost looks as if Cicero genuinely believed that he had succeeded in bringing the primitive Roman epic up to date. Instead of an objective narrative of historical events, with the divine machinery superimposed to provide poetic ornament, the story is told by one of the chief characters, whose thoughts, feelings, and purposes give it an authentic unity, and enable divine participation, in the form of advice and encouragement, to be introduced with less obvious artificiality. For the first time in Roman literature autobiographical epic had appeared, a new kind of poetry, which deserved to be brought to the notice of those who thought of themselves as modern poets.

If Cicero thought thus, and if, moreover, he felt a desire to prove that he was no less ambidextrous than Calvus, he could have been prompted, perhaps in 54, to send a specimen of his most recent poetry to Catullus, now the acknowledged leader of the young poets and a close friend of his "rival." This is the hypothesis which I have tried to develop; it is quite incapable of proof, and is therefore, to that extent, fruitless. But it seems to fit the known circumstances well, and if we can believe that this is what happened, how adroit is Catullus' acknowledgment! There is no trace of overt rejection; the decencies are more than observed. Cicero is addressed with all the respect due to his age and rank, and his supremacy as an orator is fully recognized. On the surface, the language can give him cause for nothing but satisfaction. But the implicit sting is in the tail, and its message could surely not have been lost on Cicero. The last two lines, as Ellis rightly saw, create the strongest possible antithesis between *poeta* and *patronus*; the apparently honorific use of the contrasted superlatives actually serves to widen the gulf. Catullus and Cicero belong to different worlds; Cicero has no more claim to call himself a poet, than Catullus to call himself an orator. So much for Cicero's poetry!

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