

## II. Catullus c. 4: The World of the Poem

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Editors and students of Catullus have found in the *phaselus*-poem a host of puzzling, unanswered, and unanswerable questions. What kind of ship was a *phaselus*? How big? If big enough for a sea-voyage, how did Catullus get it up the Po and the Mincio to Lake Garda? Is the *limpidus lacus* indeed Lake Garda, or is it some other lake; and if so, what lake? Was the *phaselus* not an actual ship but only a model or picture or carving? Whose ship was it: Catullus', or somebody else's? Did Catullus come home from Bithynia in it? If so, then why in c. 46 does he seem to be talking about a return by land? How many trees is a *silva*? Was the ship built of one tree or many? If we are to believe the commentaries, these and many similar questions must be answered before we may be sure of having grasped the meaning and intent of the poem.<sup>1</sup>

But a poem is itself. It presents its own world to its readers and demands that they accept it as true for the purposes of the poem and not for anything else. The world so created may be factual, but equally it may be completely or partially fictitious. We have no trouble with those poetic worlds that are patently made up out of whole cloth; we are—at least I hope we are—never so foolish as to ask the geographical location of Coleridge's "Xanadu" or to inquire why the caverns of the river Alph were "measureless to man." Our trouble comes when the poet, especially if he writes in the first person, tells of experiences and places and persons that seem to have been "real" and speaks of them as if they had been "real." For then if the world of the poem does not seem to square with external facts as we know them, or think we know them, we are tempted to break the law of the poem and to ask

<sup>1</sup> For a typical discussion of these and other similar questions see Friedrich's notes (G. Friedrich, *Catulli Veronensis Liber* [Leipzig and Berlin 1908]). See also W. Kroll, *Catull* (Leipzig and Berlin 1929), R. Ellis, *Commentary on Catullus* (Oxford 1889), E. T. Merrill, *Catullus* (Boston 1893, now reprinted by Harvard), A. Baehrens, *Catulli Veronensis Liber* (Leipzig 1876–85), M. Lenchantin de Gubernatis *Il Libro del Catullo Veronese* (Turin 1953).

improper questions about it. And unless we can get answers to these questions that satisfy us of their objective validity, we begin to twitch and pull at the poem, to interpret the poet's words to make them fit our view of the world, to say to ourselves, "The poet *says* thus-and-so, but he must be wrong, because we know that thus-and-so does not fit the facts; therefore he must have meant to say thus-and-thus."

By all the laws of poetry this is a felony. Every poet has a right to say anything he chooses about himself or his world, to present in his poem any set of assertions that will enable him to say what he wants to say, and to present them as facts, whether they are or not. And we as his readers have no right whatever to question the validity of the facts so presented: the world of the poem is what it is, and only if we accept it as such will we ever find out what the poet wanted us to know. Only when a given text presents patent impossibilities may we raise questions about the validity of its factual content, its "world." This is obviously an oversimplification of the critical problem, but this much, at least, I believe we can accept: we must start our criticism with the assumption that our poet meant what he said and that the world of the poem is *for that poem* a real world. Now what is the world of Catullus' *phaselus*-poem? What facts does he ask us to accept? First: there is a ship present before our eyes (*quem videtis, hospites*). It is a ship, not a model or a picture or a piece of sculpture, for this is what the language of the poem requires us to see. Secondly, the ship has sailed through the Adriatic, the Aegean, the Propontis, and the Black Sea. Thirdly, her timbers came from Mt. Cytorus, and she was launched at or near Amastris. Fourthly, she was a fast, seaworthy ship that successfully rode out many storms, handled nimbly under oars, and was a good sailer, either before the wind or on port or starboard reach. Finally, she is now moored in a clear, quiet lake, where she is being dedicated to Castor and Pollux. This is the world of the poem, and there is not one single impossibility within it. Impossible to get a sea-going ship up to Lake Garda? Does the poem say anything about Lake Garda? The world of the poem contains only a *limpidus lacus*, quite unnamed. And if we insist that it must be Lake Garda because Catullus had his villa there, and insist further that no sea-going craft could possibly have been gotten up there, either *via* the Mincio or overland, and that

therefore Catullus must have been talking about a model or a picture of his ship—let us grant it all. Let us imagine Catullus sitting before such a model or picture in his villa on Sirmio and deciding to write a poem about a ship, his or someone else's. Or let us assume that there was a ship on Lake Garda that attracted the poet's attention—just a ship, any ship, about which he knew nothing at all. Perhaps it was just an old hulk, rotting and half-full of water. Somehow the sight stimulated him to write a poem about a ship. But poems are not written about ships; they are written about *this* ship or *that* ship, a particular ship, and so Catullus particularized this ship by ascribing to it things he had seen and heard and imagined about ships, linking them together in such a way as to create a believable set of circumstances.

In actuality, of course, we have no way of knowing what Catullus saw or did not see or of what it was that prompted him to write his poem. What we do know is what he wanted us, his readers, to see; we do know the world of his poem, the world that he created for it. The incident, the ship, the lake, the whole story, may be completely fictitious or made up of a combination of fact and fiction.<sup>2</sup> For the world of the poem it is all real; and since it contains neither follies nor impossibilities, we are required to accept it and to see in it what our author has put there for us to see. It requires no additaments on our part to make it either believable or understandable. In fact, if we try to add anything to it, we are all too likely to obscure its meaning and lacerate its structure. Was the poem written about Catullus' journey home from Bithynia? It may have been, but it does not say so, and we do not need to know; nor, if we did know, would the poem be one whit better as a poem. Was the ship Catullus' own? It may have been, but the poem does not say so, and we do not need to know; nor if we did know, would the poem be one whit better as a poem.<sup>3</sup> When was it written? The poem gives no hint

<sup>2</sup> De Gubernatis (above, note 1) *ad loc.*: "a dire il vero, la lettura del carme insinua il dubbio ch'esso sia tutto frutto della fantasia possente del poeta . . .;" cf. R. Wellek and A. Warren, *Theory of Literature* (New York 1956) 64-5: "One cannot, from fictional statements . . . draw any inference as to the biography of a writer. . . . The relation between the private life and the work is not a simple relation of cause and effect."

<sup>3</sup> In spite of these facts, the commentators and literary historians persist in speaking as if the poem were evidence of Catullus' trip and of his ownership of the *phaselus*: see e.g. Merrill (above, note 1) p. 35; J. W. Duff, *The Literary History of Rome*<sup>3</sup> (London 1953) 228.

whatever of its date. It may have been written after Catullus came back from Bithynia, either immediately thereafter or after a lapse of years; equally well, it may have no connection whatever with Catullus' Bithynian adventure or even with Catullus at all or with any of his friends or anybody else he knew. In short, it is a poem, a skillful and graceful poem, written by a poet of taste, sensitivity, and imagination; it is not a piece of biography, auto- or otherwise. In fact I will go one step further: it is not a piece of autobiography even if it is autobiographical.<sup>4</sup> That is to say, it was not written to recount an incident of the poet's life, even if its data were drawn from his experiences. It is written wholly, simply, and entirely, about a ship, and its poetry is the poetry of ships. This is what Catullus wrote it for; this is what he wanted us to see and understand and enjoy.

And what is the poetry of the ship? The ancient ship was by our standards a clumsy craft, none too seaworthy. It was flat-bottomed and of shallow draft; it had no deep keel or center-board; it had no hinged rudder but was steered by long oars lashed to the rails near the stern. Travel by sea was hazardous and uncertain; it must also have been cold, wet, and uncomfortable.<sup>5</sup> It may well be that the scarcity of poems about ships among the ancients is due not only to their fear of the sea<sup>6</sup> but to the unpoetic clumsiness of the ships themselves and the risks and miseries of travel in them. The double handful of epigrams in the *Anthology* that deal with ships<sup>7</sup> are without exception chilly, mannered performances. In fact, I will hazard a guess that ships are "she" in antiquity solely by linguistic coincidence, and not because the ancients were generally aware of the paradox, so vivid to us, of the inanimate fabric that had life and personality.

It is precisely this paradox that Catullus does see and on it that he builds his poem. His *phaselus* is very much alive, and in a curious and subtle way, her life is made more real to the reader by the poet's device of having her tell her story not in person—for this would have recalled too vividly the speaking tombstones and

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Wellek and Warren (above, note 2) 64–7.

<sup>5</sup> The best account of a journey by sea is St. Paul's: *Acts* 27–8. For the ship itself, see Cecil Torr, *The Ancient Ship* (Cambridge 1894).

<sup>6</sup> O. Hezel, *Catull und das griechische Epigramm* (Stuttgart 1932) 11.

<sup>7</sup> Hezel (above, note 6) 10, and notes 1, 3, and 4.

other similar objects of the *Anthology*—but through a narrator, thus suggesting that her language was not one to be heard and understood by everyone but only by those who had lived on and with her. In other words she is not an inanimate object, conveniently but temporarily granted quasi-human personality, but a creature in her own right, of her own kind, with her own peculiar life and her own special language.

She is alive now; she was alive when she sailed the *impotentia freta* and without a single wasted prayer skirted the reefs; she was alive even before she was a ship, when she was trees on Mt. Cytorus and “talked and whispered when the wind blew in her hair.”<sup>8</sup> This is the poetry of Catullus’ ship; this is what his poem is about. It is for this that he created the world of his poem; and only if we accept that world, seeing and hearing exactly what the poet’s words require us to see and hear, adding nothing to it, inferring nothing from it, will we grasp the meaning of the poem and know its delights.

<sup>8</sup> Loquente saepe sibilum edidit coma.