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Unspeakable Enjoyment in Catullus (80, 16, 11, 63)

Paul Allen Miller

Acceleration, hoarding, vertiginous suspension,
 breathless looping, affective bulimia or binge
 eating, serial cutting, trying to enter or fold in
 upon oneself, autoimmune inflammation, the
 orgasm as unfinished, non-teleological pleasure:
 these are the intimations of aesthetic experiences
 that I use to articulate my model of anti-
 catharsis. I regard these potentialities as “archive
 feelings” because they all arise from the effort to
 recapture a phantasmatic *archê* that, directly or
 indirectly, points to the ultimate origin, non-
 existence.
 (Telò 2020: 4)

- 1 There are moments of shattering violence in Catullus, violence which is not just depicted but explicitly eroticized, violence and humiliation that are key to the structure of enjoyment in some of the most famous (notorious?) passages of the corpus. These moments, as a totality, are unparalleled in Latin literature. There is certainly grotesque obscenity elsewhere in Latin. Persius 4.35-48 asks us to picture Alcibiades plucking his groin and asshole in anticipation of homoerotic sex. Juvenal 9 has the gigolo Naevolus lamenting running up against yesterday’s dinner when servicing his master (42-43). Martial 2.28 begins with the poet ostensibly defending Sextillus against the charge of being a *cinaedus* and leads to the conclusion that since Sextillus is neither *fututor* (“a fucker”) nor the recipient of oral sex, there are only two options left: *fellator* or *cunnilinctor* (Parker 1997: 51; Sapsford 2012: 79-80).¹ Likewise, Martial 6.49 uses a series of tree metaphors (elm, cypress, fig) to threaten a rival with anal rape.² But as James Uden observes, there is only one other place in extant Latin literature where a speaker in his own voice threatens another explicitly with oral and anal rape: *Carmina Priapea* 35 (2007: 14). I will return to this text and Uden’s argument when I deal with

Catullus 16 below, but what I want to examine in this paper is a complex of images found not only in such aggressively masculinist and comic poems as 80 on Gellius and 16 on Furius and Aurelius, but also in poems with more tragic or pathetic tones such as the final strophes of poem 11 and poem 63 on Attis.

- 2 The question I want to pose to these images, and to others like them, is what is their structure of enjoyment? While I will go into this in more detail in section “I” below, what I mean by “structure of enjoyment” is the way these images present themselves as at once integral to the aesthetic experience the poems seek to produce and yet not reducible to a calculus of pleasure versus pain or of rational utility. That is to say, while these poems are no doubt about many things—poetic rivalry, aristocratic homosociality, metapoetic commentary, etc.—I want to argue that there is an irreducible element in the eroticized violence of this imagery that makes these poems function as aesthetic structures, and that this irreducible element is both integral to our enjoyment and not able to be metabolized or exchanged for a rational equivalent or some form of social good.
- 3 Thus while it is perfectly possible and probably even accurate to argue that when Catullus in poem 80 accuses Gellius of parading around town with semen on his lips, he is producing an allegory of his own power-position relative to Gellius (Fitzgerald 79-81: 1995), dramatizing a “Mediterranean Poetics of Aggression” (Wray 2001: 156-58), and/or embroidering on his own poetry’s salacious wit and charm relative to Gellius’s silence (Stevens 2013: 58-65), each of these readings also sublimates the image into a moment of clarity and rationality in which Catullus achieves mastery over a rival lover, politician, or poet (Curran 1966; Quinn 1973: 404-5, 415, 455-56; Wiseman 1985: 171-72, 183-86). Each of them on some level says that when Catullus accuses Gellius of walking around Rome with semen dripping off his lips he doesn’t *really* mean it, that this is just a metaphor, an over-the-top insult in a battle of wits. None of these readings, however, confronts the image in itself. None of them confronts the way in which this image qua image structures our enjoyment, the way in which its savagery and abjection are integral to that enjoyment. The poem would be simply less successful if we were to substitute for these images the abstract meanings that extraordinarily perceptive critics advance as their true or actual referents. Thus, Sarah Culpepper Stroup argued in response to a query I posted asking for analogues to the opening of Catullus 16, “where the poet personally threatens to rape another man” in extant Latin literature, “Well, 16 isn’t actually a threat of sexual assault of course” (Facebook, March 4, 2021), and she is right. This is a poem not a bar fight or a prison scene. But if we remove the graphic image of oral and anal rape, which starts the poem, and we substitute a notion of competitive machismo between aristocrats, of poetic rivalry between friends, etc., the poem no longer works. It becomes just another piece of documentation: the ancient equivalent of an email or a memo. The structure of the poem, and hence the structure of our enjoyment, depends on the image of the poet fucking Furius and Aurelius in the mouth and in the ass, and that opening image only then allows for a secondary more rationalizing, more sophisticated poetic frame to be built around its obscene kernel and to contain it. There is no figurative meaning without the literal.³ And this is why I emphasize the unique nature of Catullus: for while images of phallic aggression abound in ancient poetry, as we have known since Richlin’s *Garden of Priapus* (1992), and while it is easy to allegorize the eroticized violence of these works—as in the case of Persius, Juvenal, and Martial—as the assertion of phallic power, that is to say as a crude but

rational example of the pleasure principle in action, when the poetic ego or its avatar asserts his dominance, nonetheless the radical image of the poet's humiliation and castration at the end of 11 and of Attis's self-emasculation in 63 are not so easily assimilated to a model reducible to power. They are far closer to the shattering images, sensations, and paroxysms that Mario Telò argues lie at the center of tragedy and its enjoyment, not to the exclusion of civic engagement or even of an Aristotelian cleansing and distancing catharsis, but beyond, within, and after all these other engagements and rationalizations are accounted for, a form enjoyment that Telò identifies with Freud's death drive. The totality of these images in Catullus makes clear that the structure of enjoyment lies beyond the pleasure principle (Telò 2021: 26).

- 4 In what follows, I will first define what I mean by "enjoyment" beyond the pleasure principle, through examining the work of Freud and Lacan. I will then discuss briefly the relation of cognate concepts such as the grotesque, the abject, and the sublime. I will finish by offering readings of Catullus 80, 16, 11, and 63.

I

- 5 The pleasure principle is the bedrock of most psychological theories. Whether behaviorist, Freudian, or cognitive, the basic assumption is that people do things that give them pleasure and avoid things that produce pain, discomfort, and anxiety. These same psychological assumptions underlie utilitarianism, classical economics, and almost all of our normative conceptions of rationality: people pursue behaviors that maximize pleasure and avoid those that cause pain, resulting in trade-offs and substitutions as one often accepts a lesser or deferred pleasure in return for being able to avoid a potentially painful consequence. Freud calls these two poles, the pleasure and the reality principles. They are not so much opposites as complements. The reality principle is a limit placed on pleasure to ensure that we are able to continue to pursue it in an unmolested fashion. In an ideal environment, where each of us possessed the same opportunities, the same information, and the same calculative ability, according to this model, we would all make the same choices.
- 6 And yet, we all know that this is not the case. People engage in all sorts of behaviors that neither procure them pleasure (at least not in the normative sense) nor maximize utility. They do so often with full knowledge of the consequences. Entire swathes of cultural production are predicated on our fascination with sexualized violence and death, from tragedy to opera to horror. Indeed, as Telò argues, the entire Aristotelian theory of catharsis is a rationalization for our fascination with the unspeakable. At the same time, people develop compulsions they know are self-destructive: abused spouses move from one abuser to the next; people knowingly engage in high-risk sexual behaviors; children of abuse compulsively afflict that abuse on others. We have an insatiable need for spectacles of violence: from gladiators, to mixed martial arts, to splatter films. It's the horrific auto accident you can't look away from. It's the millions of people in the United States who, all while claiming to be horrified by pedophilia, spend countless hours obsessing over internet fantasies of pedophiles and child cannibals secretly ruling the world (Q-Anon). It's the thrill of the rampaging, murderous mob. This set of phenomena, their traumatic origins, the search for control through repetition, and the ultimate inability of these compulsions to be accounted for by any rational, utilitarian calculus of pleasure are the focus of Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1961).

- 7 *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is written in 1920, in the aftermath of the World War 1, at the same time as Freud is composing his famed essay on “The Uncanny” and “A Child is Being Beaten.” What all these essays ask us is how do we explain uncanny and horrific cultural productions if the imaginary is governed by the pleasure principle? “Why would the subject repeat nightmares that show him harassed, with no recourse, the object of cruelty and abuse?” (Braunstein 2020: 39). Freud names this force the death-drive (*Todesantrieb*). It is not a desire in a normal sense. It cannot be satisfied. It is not like wanting a bowl of ice cream, having one, and feeling better. Nor is it a desire that remains merely empirically unsatisfied; it an unending obsession (Žižek 1992: 48; Žižek 2006: 62). It is a movement toward a form of subjective dissolution and reconstitution, like the moth drawn to the lamp: a threatening, violation of the boundaries of the self, a form of paroxystic suffering and enjoyment that leads through repetition to a reconstitution of the self in its identity, when it does not actually result in self-destruction (Braunstein 2003: 103; Nasio 2019: 36-38).

If life is defined beginning with an inscription in the structures of subjectivity, which are transactions with the Other, that is, starting from the flesh becoming body due to the interference of the signifier in the vital processes, the movement of the drives can be seen as the force that propels the recovery of a state before the word, or the recovery of the Thing as the absolute object of desire; a *jouissance* of being, from which the subject comes to ek-sist. (Braunstein 2020: 56-57)

- 8 At its simplest level, it is the story of Freud’s nephew little Hans compulsively re-enacting his own fear of abandonment through the *fort-da* game, and feeling comfort in the repetition (Freud 1961: 8-11; Ragland-Sullivan 1986: 81).
- 9 The drive’s essence is insistence and repetition, an aim that is never reached. That aim is denominated by Jacques Lacan *jouissance*, which I translate here “enjoyment” to distinguish it from pleasure, with a sideways glance to the Latin *gaudium* that possesses a similar sexual ambiguity. Where pleasure operates within the law, respects decency and moderation, *jouissance* is always a form of ecstatic transgression that by definition knows no satisfaction and cannot be reduced to rational expression. It is literally unspeakeable, a kind of shudder (Braunstein 2020: 20-23, 53, 127; Mellard 2006: 163).
- 10 For Lacan, like Telò, enjoyment beyond the pleasure principle finds its archetypal expression in tragedy, more specifically in the figure of Antigone (Leonard 2019: 87-88). Lacan devoted a large portion of his seventh seminar on the *Ethics of Psychoanalysis* to a reading of the *Antigone*.⁴ The *Antigone* is for Lacan the ultimate psychoanalytic text: it poses a question only psychoanalysis can answer. Why does Antigone refuse to accede to Creon’s decree forbidding the burial of Polynices? Why she does knowingly and willingly embrace death? Our everyday bargaining between the pleasure and the reality principles can neither account for her action nor its continuing appeal.
- 11 When the play opens, Antigone confronts her sister Ismene with the news that Creon has decreed their brother’s body is to be left unburied. She and Ismene are conceived in this speech as a unit: not separate individuals, but one substance from a common womb (*autadelphon*, 1), the womb that is the origin of Oedipus’s evils (Lacan 1986: 306; Wohl 2009: 128-29). The experiential reality of that unity, however, is characterized by the presence of *atē* (3) defined paratactically in lines 4-5 as “pain,” “shame,” and “dishonor.” *Atē* appears fourteen times in the play. It denotes both a limit and a space beyond, “the horrifying, lethal, and at the same time fascinating borderline that we approach when the reversal into bliss is imminent” (Žižek 1991: 25; Žižek 1993: 115-16). According to the chorus, it represents an inhuman desire that causes one to

misrecognize good and evil, to misrecognize pleasure. It represents a border upon whose crossing greatness is predicated, but beyond which one cannot live:

Far-ranging hope is a source of pleasure for many, for others the trickery of nimble desire creeps up on the man knowing nothing, before he should burn his foot on the hot fire.

From this, in wisdom, a small saying appears: “the bad then seems good to one whose entrails the god turns toward *atē*.” He acts only a very short time beyond *atē*. (615-25).

- 12 Antigone directs herself “towards *atē*.” Her desire is outside, *ektos*, the limits of the human (Lacan 1986: 270): a return to the oneness of the flesh. For her the *philoī* or the “dear” are those who share the bonds of the flesh. She will lie *philē* with *philos* in Polynices’ grave, not because his cause was just, but because he is who he is (72-75). A husband or a son can be replaced, but a brother is irreplaceable (909-12). In this world, there is no possible exchange or substitution, no bargaining, no way to fill the gap caused by the death of her brother within domains sanctioned by the pleasure and reality principles. This self-enclosed world is beyond the law Creon seeks to instantiate by forbidding the burial of Polynices (Lacan 1986: 277-80). In her choice of death, Antigone rejoins the incestuous beyond that submerges individuality, a region whose economy cannot be measured by the calculus of the pleasure principle (Lacan 1986: 307).
- 13 This implacable insistence, this drive, Lacan argues is the source of her beauty and the beauty of tragedy generally (Lacan 1991: 154). Lacan refers to this beauty as Antigone’s “*éclat*” or “splendor.” “It’s she who fascinates us, in her unbearable splendor, in the ways she holds us and forbids us, in the sense that this intimidates us, in the way she is disconcerting—this so terribly voluntary victim” (1986: 290). Her beauty is both endlessly fascinating and horrifying, like the death drive itself (Lacan 1986: 327). It is a form of unspeakable enjoyment that speaks to our alienation and separation, our desire for the illegal, the excessive and traumatic. It is a tear or hole in the symbolic fabric of world that would render our separate, subjective existence impossible. It is something we desire and despise. It threatens our existence and, as recognized individuals in a law-bound community, it endlessly beckons as the possibility of absolute transcendence and the end of desire (Braunstein 2020: 23, 58; Žižek 1992: 134). “Trauma is paradoxically a drug, and one who is traumatized is addicted to the drug. **Trauma engenders trauma**” (Nasio 2019: 23, bolding his).
- 14 While strictly speaking enjoyment beyond the pleasure principle is unspeakable, one of the ways it manifests itself within symbolic structures is as the abject or the grotesque. While the grotesque is often associated through the work of Mikhail Bakhtin with the carnivalesque, as Bakhtin himself acknowledges the grotesque in satire, rather than leading to celebratory regeneration in the form of carnival gaiety, leads to the dissolution and destruction of the intended target. In this, it is closely related to the concept of the abject developed by Julia Kristeva, who was among the first scholars to introduce Bakhtin’s thought to the West and a psychoanalytic thinker working in the wake of Lacan (Miller 1998; Miller 2013). The abject is that which repulses us. It reminds us of our material contingency, the unsealed and threatened natures of our bodies: blood, semen, excrement (Kristeva 1980: 65). It is a source of fascination and aggression (Kristeva 1980: 9-10).⁵ It is not an object per se but the evocation through *jouissance* of a pre-objectal world, a world before our existence as autonomous beings operating within the bounds of laws and norms. It manifests within the normative world as

something beyond and hence threatening it, as something fascinating and repugnant (Kristeva 1980: 17, 20, 79-80). A proper identity cuts us off, separates us from an unlimited *jouissance*, from a paroxystic enjoyment that has the power to dissolve the bounds between self and other. Such unspeakable enjoyment threatens to destroy the possibility of a regulated exchange between the pleasure-motivated ego and the world that enfolds and threatens it (Kristeva 1980: 66). Abjection is the process of separation that creates defined subjects and objects, selves and others, and the abject is a return of the repressed, a moment when what had to be expelled returns. “Abjection is a resurrection that passes through death (of the ego). It is an alchemy that transforms the death drive into a surge of life, of new meaning” (Kristeva 1980: 22).

- 15 The ironic pendant or complement of the abject is the sublime, which at first blush seems its opposite. Nonetheless, the sublime in both Kant and Burke is an experience that exceeds and threatens the bounds of subjective existence, producing a fracture or moment of ontological rupture that does violence to the imagination (Black 1991: 69-70; Steele 1997: 15). The sublime, as Henry Sussman observes, in its “unmediated Being-there anticipates the Lacanian Real,” a register of existence beyond both symbolic norms and imaginary identities (Sussman 1993: 29). The sublime is a moment beyond the law and beyond the pleasure principle that can be both erotic and criminal. It “simultaneously terrifies and thrills ... with an awareness of the close proximity of life to death” (Black 1991: 109). There is a level of analysis, then, in which the tragic, the sublime, and the abject coincide in their eroticization of the boundaries of subjective existence and of their transgression. Even in as conservative a reader as Burke, the sublime produces “a disconcerting mixture of pain and pleasure” (Lloyd 2018: 57). It is this phenomenon of unspeakable enjoyment in Catullus’s most unsettling images that we must now explore.

II

Quid dicam, Gelli, quare rosea ista labella
hiberna fiant candidiora nive,
mane domo cum exis et cum te octava quiete
e molli longo suscitatur hora die?
nescio quid certe est: an vere fama susurrat.
grandia te medii tenta vorare viri?
sic certe est: clamant Victori rupta miselli
ilia, et emulso labra notata sero. (Catullus 80)

How shall I explain it, Gellius? Those rosy lips of yours
are whiter than the winter’s snow,
when you leave the house in the morning,
and rise from a soft nap in the long afternoon?
I certainly don’t know. Or are the whispered rumors true?
You gobble up the stretched-out greatness of a man’s middle?
That’s it for sure. Poor little Victor’s ruptured loins scream it!
As do your lips, dabbed with milky whey.

- 16 The bibliography on Catullus 80 is understandably slender. Many either pass over it in silence, or they quickly move on to other topics, such as the studies cited in the introduction or Holzberg (2002: 195), who while noting that the theme of the unclean mouth is a common one in Catullus (compare 79), quickly moves onto the “agricultural” metaphor in the final line and a possible parallel passage from Ovid unrelated in theme or sexual content. A search of *L’année philologique* turns up at most a

handful of hits since 1930, and yet I would wager that few who have read poem 80 and understood the final image (some dictionaries and commentaries are positively obfuscating) have forgotten it. Only Curran (1966) undertakes a full poetic reading of the text.

- 17 In some ways, this poem is pretty standard fare, a satirical epigram aimed at a poetic and amorous rival. It deploys a grotesque image to tag the target with an indelible stain. Nonetheless, the poem possesses a certain finesse. It begins with a standard contrast between red roses and white snow applied to the poet's lips. As Curran observes the lover's pallor is a truism of ancient erotic poetry and the reader of the first distich feels on very familiar, even clichéd ground. The next couplet raises a bit more suspicion by focusing our attention on Gellius's mouth when he rises from bed in the morning and after his siesta. The emphasis on the *mollis* quality of his "nap," while not necessarily sexual, given that it refers to sleep, nonetheless *mollis* is a word often used in the context of effeminacy and could suggest passive homoeroticism (Cairns 1979: 102; Kennedy 1993: 31-34; Edwards 1993: 63-66, 93).
- 18 If the first half of the poem states a problem, "why are Gellius's rosy lips suddenly now white," the second half offers a solution. At first the poet protests his perplexity. But then *fama* offers a whispered solution. The mock-epic periphrasis of *grandia ... tenta* is dramatically deflated with the alliterative *vorare viri* (Lorenz 2012: 80), as we shift from vague extensions to metaphors of eroticized cannibalism. Still the color shift on Gellius's lips has yet to be fully explained. The poet no longer hesitates. Victor's exhausted loins⁶ and Gellius's lips do not whisper like *fama* but shout from the rooftops. Gellius's lips are white because they are covered with Victor's semen. The purity of the first couplet's snow has been transformed into the sticky liquid of "milked-out whey" (*emulso ... sero*), an abject image in which semen, sexual pleasure, and cannibalistic devoration combine to complete the aesthetic structure of the poem. Indeed, the metaphor of whey for semen brings the reader up short for just a moment as the recognition of what that white substance must be sinks in, the riddle is solved, and the poem's structure snaps shut. Yet the final impression, what lingers with the reader, is not the beauty of aesthetic completion, but the unforgettable image of the aristocratic L. Poplicola Gellius, consul in 36,⁷ leaving his home twice a day, semen dripping from his lips, neatly emphasized by the hissing sibilants of *emulso ... sero*.

III

Pedicabo ego vos et irrumabo,
 Aureli pathice et cinaede Furi,
 qui me ex versiculis meis putastis,
 quod sunt molliculi, parum pudicum.
 nam castum esse decet pium poetam
 ipsum, versiculos nihil necesse est;
 qui tum denique habent salem ac leporem,
 si sunt molliculi ac parum pudici,
 et quod pruriat incitare possunt,
 non dico pueris, sed his pilosis
 qui duos nequeunt movere lumbos.
 vos, quod milia multa basiorum
 legistis, male me marem putatis?
 pedicabo ego vos et irrumabo. (16)

I will fuck you in the face and ass
 faggot Furius and perverse Aurelius,
 you who think, from my verselets,
 because they are soft,
 that I am less than decent;
 for it is fit that the poet himself be upright,
 his little verses, not so much.
 In the end, they have wit and elegance,
 if they are soft and less than decent,
 and can get a rise from what ought to itch,
 I'm not talking about kids, but even hairy old men,
 who can't move their calcified loins.
 But you, because you read about many thousands
 of kisses, do you think me less than a man?
 I will fuck you in the face and ass.

- 19 The bibliography on 16 is more substantial, and this is unsurprising. Furius and Aurelius play major roles in other poems (11, 15, 21, 23, 24), and 16 alludes to the famous kiss poems (5, 7, 48). These facts have led to speculations about both the identities of Furius and Aurelius and the nature of their relationship with Catullus. Answers have ranged from they are fellow poets engaged in a colorful but essentially friendly literary feud (Stroup 2010: 224-26) to literary creations with speaking names, "Thief" and "Goldfinger" (Holzberg 2002: 26-27; Lorenz 2012: 74), to genuine enemies (Skinner 1981: 61; Sweet 1987: 524-25). The answer is impossible to know and much depends on the angle of attack. Where Holzberg is interested in the function of the poems within a collection, Stroup is sustaining a thesis about literary production between elites, drawing analogies from contemporary popular music (Stroup 2010: 223n.14). The locus classicus, however, for modern interpretations of the poem is Fitzgerald (1995). His argument is that 16 above all needs to be read in terms of power relations. Roman sexuality is famously characterized by what Foucault terms isomorphism (Foucault 1984: 82-83, 88, 96, 237; Foucault 2014: 82-83, 94; Parker 1997; Boehringer 2016: 42; Ormand 2016: 65; Lorenzini 2016: 141), in which social and sexual relations are ideally understood to have the same form. The dominant male in both should occupy the same position. Thus, social and even literary relations can be figured in terms of sexual penetration. Furius and Aurelius have accused Catullus of being soft and hence effeminate (like Gellius) because his poetry recounts countless kisses given to Lesbia and Juventius. Any form of sexual excess was understood as potentially unmaning and hence Catullus responds, I'll show you who the real man is and silence you in the process. Try speaking with my prick shoved down your throat. The final line offers a neat twist as *vos*, while in the first instance referring to Furius and Aurelius as it does in line 1, becomes *nos*, since to be effective we must imagine Furius and Aurelius as readers. It then becomes possible to substitute ourselves as the addressees, and the threatened sexual violence become generalizable to the audience as a whole. If we make the same mistake as Catullus's poetic antagonists, then he will "fuck us up." He is not under our power, he says. His reception is our penetration, and that subjection is integral to our enjoyment (Fitzgerald 1995: 51-55).
- 20 All subsequent interpretations of 16 take this jockeying for sexual and social domination for granted and offer potential refinements within this framework. Richlin's *Garden of Priapus* lies behind many of these assumptions (cf. Fitzgerald 1995: 64). There she famously argues that the poetic male in Roman poetry often adopts a

“Priapic pose,” based on the Roman Garden god, who, as portrayed in the collected *Carmina priapea*, a set of poems by various hands, threatens thieves and interlopers, with oral and anal rape. Richlin suggests that poem 16 is one such poem (1992: 58). Holzberg similarly claims that in poem 16 Catullus proposes to be a Priapus in relation to Furius the thief and the greedy Aurelius, who elsewhere tries to steal the poet’s *puer delicatus* and whom the poet threatens to penetrate anally with radishes and mullets (15.19) as well as orally with his own phallus (21.7-13; Holzberg 2002: 27). James Uden rightly argues that we should take care lest we simply assimilate Catullus to the priapean pose. While in some poems, like 16, he may seem to adopt this version of male aggression, in other poems, such as 5 and 7 he is less focused on a crude sexual ethic of penetration, and in still other poems such as 11 and 72 he is at least as much the aggressed as the aggressor. The central proposition of poem 16 is that Furius and Aurelius make a grievous mistake in identifying the poet with the sexual content of his poems,⁸ and this must apply at least as much to 16 as it does to those other poems. As such, Uden argues, poem 16 is better read as an elaborate ironic reflection on the priapic genre than a simple instantiation of it (2007). As with poem 80, the poem itself demonstrates a sophisticated aesthetic structure that is inseparable from the obscene enjoyment at its core.

- 21 That said, it is all too easy to say this is *really* a poem about poetry, or this is *really* a poem about power, because in the first instance, on the literal level, it is inescapably a poem about anal and oral rape. If you substitute a term like “dominate” you or “write a better poem” than you in line 1, the poem does not work. Central to our enjoyment, whether we choose to acknowledge it or not, is a moment of shattering sexual violence and violence committed by the poet. As Uden observes, there is no other extant poem in the Latin corpus, except for one instance in the priapean corpus where the convention is the speaker is the phallic god himself, in which the poet asks you to picture himself performing anal and oral rape on another, and this is one of the main differences between 16 and 80. Where the abject image in 80 functions as an assault on Gellius largely separate from the poet himself, in 16, the first thing we are asked to picture is the poetic speaker performing the act, and since the first person is a shifting position, as we articulate the poem, we too momentarily become the “I” occupying that subject position. We pronounce it, at least in our minds, “I will” Any recuperative gesture, any allegorization of the poem, any shift to a figurative level can only come after this initial identification, can only be predicated on the existence of the poem on the literal level. Indeed, integral to our enjoyment is this moment of splitting, in which at once we identify with the poet and then recoil. That moment of recoil is itself allegorized within the poem when the poet claims that our mistake is to believe that the poet behaves like his poetry, a moment that allows us as well as to separate from that initial identification and allow for a figurative dimension to enter our reading, a dimension in which we can all breathe a sigh of relief and say, well what the poet really meant was X. The genius of the poem is the way in which it directly allegorizes that separation of the poet from the poem and hence of the reader from its literal meaning and then immediately turns back to the readers in the final lines, threatening them with the very same oral and anal rape, if they do not recognize that the poet himself is not to be identified with his poetry and hence with the sexual violence he threatens to perform (Selden 1992; Wray 2001: 185). There is a kind of perfect circularity in which the poem demands to be thought of in terms beyond its obscene literal level and at the same time insists on only allowing that thought to occur within the structure of the

literal level. The reader thus identifies with the poet in the act, separates from the act with the poet, and then, as reader rather than poet, becomes the audience that receives the act, and this reading process continues in an infinite loop as we become the subject of violence, its allegorized double, and then the object of violence.⁹ But without the act and the sexual violence it asks us to imagine, there is no poem and no metaphorical or ironical reading through which that unspeakable enjoyment is redeemed. As Fitzgerald himself reminds us, “Priapus’ threats reflect a type of revenge that was in fact taken by aggrieved males in the ancient world” (Fitzgerald 1995: 64; Edwards 1995: 56, 94; cf. Cameron 1995: 101). It may be a joke, but it is not *just* a joke.

IV

pauca nuntiate meae puellae
non bona dicta:
cum suis vivat valeatque moechis,
quos simul complexa tenet trecentos
nullum amans vere, sed identidem omnium
ilia rumpens;
nec meum respectet, ut ante, amorem,
qui illius culpa cecidit velut prati
ultimi flos, praetereunte postquam
tactus aratro est. (11.14-24)

Say a few not kind words
to my girl.
May she live and prosper with her fuckers,
whom she embraces three hundred at a time,
loving none truly, but rupturing repeatedly
the loins of them all,
nor should she count on my love, as she did before,
which has fallen by her fault, just like the flower
at the edge of the field, after it has been touched
by the passing plough.

- 22 Poem 11 is the first poem in the collection to feature the hapless Furius and Aurelius. The poem begins with the pair swearing to be Catullus’s loyal companions, willing to follow him from the where the sun rises in the east, with the Indus river, to its setting in the west, among the *ultimos Britannos* (“the far distant Britains” 11.12). The poem appears to open in an ideal world of male companionship where Roman dominion stretches across the known world. Catullus, however, asks his boon companions (*comites*, 11.1) for a far more modest service: to take a message to his lover, Lesbia, who, while she may be as voracious as Caesar (11.10) crossing the Alps and conquering Gaul, her sexual violence takes place within a narrower compass. The flower of Catullus’s love, like the bloom that represents the virginity of the bride-to-be in poem 62 (39-40), marks the distant edge of the field ploughed by Lesbia’s lust (*prati/ultimi* 11.22-23). The echo of the word “ultimus” at the end of the third and sixth strophes effectively places Catullus’s emasculation in parallel with that of the conquered Britains (Putnam 1974: 79-80; Sweet 1987: 520-21; Fitzgerald 1995: 181).
- 23 Being a courier for such a message is hard to envision as a pleasant task, and this is sometimes taken as evidence of the poet’s enmity toward his ostensible companions (Quinn 1973: 126). At minimum, there is a strong temporal and interpretative shift between the poem’s opening geographical excursus and the last half’s vivid

imagination of obscene sexual violence, followed by a moment of lyrical pathos and self-confessed emasculation. As readers experience the poem, they move from a sense of the grandeur and even majesty of conquest (and hence also its brutality), to a bathetic narrowing of scope and focus on Lesbia's sexual enormity, before a final moment of powerlessness and castration in the image of the flower cut down by the plough, a moment that is also a reassertion of mastery on the aesthetic level through the poetic capacity to frame and transmute the abject into a moment of the sublime (Ferguson 1985: 44; Sweet 1987: 513-18, 522; Fitzgerald 1995: 179-81). The initial invocation of masculinist *bonhomie* is swept away as Furius and Aurelius become engulfed in the three hundred lovers Lesbia is said to embrace and rupture their loins, before the poet himself is then transformed into the very emasculated figure he warns his audience against assuming he is in poem 16, the next time these "friends" appear together (Fitzgerald 1995: 181-82).

- 24 As Holzberg observes, the penultimate strophe requires us to imagine an impossible feat. Lesbia becomes a conquering sexual Caesar. For the scene to work, we must imagine her both reduced to a machine compulsively and convulsively repeating the same acts again and again (*identidem*), what Holzberg terms a *verschlingende Vagina* ("a devouring vagina"), and as a conqueror at the head of her army of three hundred men, their wounded bodies wasted with excess (*ilia rumpens*; Holzberg 2002: 92-93). We become spectators looking on from a distance like Catullus himself, the flower at the meadow's far edge. Here, in the final strophe, the crumpled loins of Lesbia's adulterers are transmuted into the delicate blooming flower of Catullus's love, but where in the penultimate strophe the flaccidness of the lovers' ruptured loins point to a moment of postcoital exhaustion, in the ultimate strophe the poet is castrated, cut by the passing plough of Lesbia's phallic conquest, and this is the moment of the poem's aesthetic triumph, in which Caesar and his female analogue are sublimated into a final image of paroxystic suffering and transcendence that looks forward to Attis and Cybele in poem 63, our final example (Rubino 1975: 294; Martin 1992: 59; Janan 1994: 107; Holzberg 2002: 128).

V

Super alta vectus Attis celeri rate maria,
Phrygium ut nemus citato cupide pede tetigit,
adiitque opaca silvis redimita loca deae,
stimulatus ibi furenti rabie, vagus animis,
de volsit ili acuto sibi pondera silice,
itaque ut relictis sensit sibi membra sine viro,
etiam recente terrae sola sanguine maculans,
niveis citata cepit manibus leve typanum,
typanum tuum, Cybebe, tua, mater initia,
quatiensque terga tauri teneris cava digitis
canere haec suis adorta est tremebunda comitibus.

.....
"ego nunc deum ministra et Cybeles famula ferar?
ego Maenas, ego mei pars, ego vir sterilis ero?
ego viridis algida Idea nive amicta loca colam?
ego vitam agam sub altis Phrygiae columinibus,
ubi cerva silicultrix, ubi aper nemorivagus?
iam iam dolet quod egi, iam iamque paenitet."

.....
dea, magna dea, Cybebe, dea domina Dindymi,

procul a mea tuos sit furor omnis, era, domo:
 alios age incitatos, alios age rabidos. (63.1-11, 68-73, 91-93)

Attis was carried over the deep seas by a swift vessel,
 when he touched the Phrygian wood, with a foot hastened by desire,
 and approached the dark places of the goddess, wreathed with forests,
 there, driven by raging madness, wandering in his soul,
 he lopped off the weight of his loins with a sharp flint.
 Then when he felt himself manless, his member left behind,
 still sprinkling the earth's soil with new blood,
 hastened, she grabbed the light drum with snowy hands,
 your drum, mother Cybele, your initiate,
 shaking the hollow bull hide with tender fingers,
 trembling, she commenced to sing to her companions.

.....
 "Will I now be called a servant of the gods and slave of Cybele?
 Will I be a Maenad, a mere part of myself, a sterile male?
 Will I tend the cold places wrapped in the snows of green Ida?
 Will I live my life under the high peaks of Phrygia,
 with the forest-dwelling doe, the wood-wandering boar?
 Now, now I am pained at what I have done, now, now, I regret it."

.....
 Goddess, great goddess, Cybele, mistress goddess of Dindymus,
 may all your madness, mistress, be far from my home:
 go drive others in a frenzy, drive others mad.

- 25 The four poems we are examining trace a kind of arc. In poem 80, there is the transformation of the abject into a form of aesthetic enjoyment. The image of Gellius's semen-covered lips is objectified. It is distanced from the poet and the reader and appended to the other as an object of ridicule. In 16, we are still dealing with a recognizably iambic lampoon, in which the moment of obscene enjoyment is polemically aimed at the other (Wray 2001: 167-86). The structure of the poem, nonetheless, calls upon us to imagine both the poetic speaker and ourselves performing the act named in line 1, insofar as through the act of reading we assume the position of the poetic I, we literally say "I." At the same time, the reader potentially becomes the target of the poet's sexual violence, since, as readers, like Furius and Aurelius, we can equally become the *vos* of the final line. This is a much more sophisticated structure of enjoyment than that found in the common lampoon, as we become potentially both the subject and the object of enjoyment, both the person who suffers abjection and inflicts it on others. With poem 11, however, the moment of unspeakable enjoyment is fully assumed by the suffering subject. Lesbia's unbounded sexuality is at once the specular object of our enjoyment and the unstoppable force of a transfiguring castration. With poem 63, the internalization of this moment of enjoyment and suffering beyond the pleasure principle becomes complete. The protagonist of the poem is first depicted as performing an ecstatic act of self-castration and then as coming to a belated recognition of his/her transformed status and regret. The poet in the apotropaic closing of 63 both recognizes the possibility of his, and thus our, identification with Attis, and hence the possible obliteration of our identity, and he prays to keep this madness at bay. The arc sketched by this trajectory could be filled in with passages from many other poems in the collection, but together they depict a range of aggression, suffering, and ecstatic enjoyment, paired with a highly polished poetic and aesthetic sophistication, that is all but unparalleled in ancient poetry, outside of

tragedy itself, and is unparalleled, I would argue, in first-person verse that invites the reader to assume the position of the subject.

- 26 The poem opens with repeated participles emphasizing speed (*citato* 63.2, *citata* 63.8) and emotional intensity. Attis has barely arrived on the Phrygian shore, surrounded by the dark woods that mirror the opacity of his madness, when he picks up a crude stone tool and sheers off his masculine appendages. There is an ejaculation of blood as he fertilizes the earth in a form of ecstatic marriage (Wiseman 1985: 181; Holzberg 2002: 128-29; Oliensis 2009: 113-15). We hear the drumming, the shouting of him and his companions. Our attention is drawn to the pale hands (63.8), the tender fingers (63.10), the shaking (63.10), the trembling (63.11), as the gender of the adjectives shifts from masculine to feminine in a moment of orgasmic death and seeming rebirth (Rubino 1974: 157; Janan 1994: 105). Attis then leads the ecstatic chorus of his companions into the Phrygian wood of Mount Ida until he collapses from exhaustion (63.35-38). When he wakes the next morning, the frenzy has fled, and once more we, like the poet, as readers say “I.” We identify with the speaker as he/she struggles to reconstitute a self, to determine what it means to be a self after this transformational experience. The word *ego* occurs fourteen times in ten lines (63.62-71). What does it mean to be a subject now, to be free or slave, to be male or female, to live beyond the limits of a law-bound community in the wilds of Phrygia, with the beasts of the forest? There is pain. There is regret (Janan 1994: 102-03), before the goddess looses her frenzy upon Attis again, and “mad she [Attis] flees into the wild woods” (63.90; Rubino 1975: 63).
- 27 The moment of separation in which Attis recognizes his transformation and has a moment of lucidity and regret before succumbing once more to the frenzy of enjoyment and self-annihilation is then re-enacted in the poem’s closing, when the poet who produced the vision we have just experienced, the poet who pictured himself as the fallen flower, recognizes the power of the goddess. He calls her *domina* and *era* (63.91.02), two words for a mistress to her slaves, words the poet uses for Lesbia in 68 (68.68, 68.136, 68.156), whom he also calls a “shining goddess” (*candida diva*, 68.70). Thus, the attentive reader who has knowledge of other poems in the collection, will quickly recognize that the poet’s prayer is too late, that the madness has already come to the poet’s house, a moment which is metonymically signaled by the word *incitatos* (“roused, excited, put into rapid motion”) in the final line, which appears in its uncompounded form *citato cupide* (“hurried, summoned with desire”) in line 2¹⁰. Thus, in the very action of conjuring away the madness that afflicts Attis, the poet rejoins it on the level of diction, as well as thematically and imagistically in relation to castration and ecstatic submission to the domination of a sinister goddess.

VI

In this distinction also tragedy stands apart from comedy: the latter wishes to imitate those who are worse, the former those who are better, than people now. (Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1448a16-18)

Tragedy is the imitation of an action possessing seriousness, completion, and magnitude, with pleasing language in each of the kinds in its various parts, performed through action not narration, effecting through pity and fear the purgation (*katharsis*) of such emotions. (Aristotle, *Poetics* 1449b24-28)

- 28 Aristotle tell us that the protagonist in tragedy must be someone of high station, someone who is better than the average person today, on the one hand so that their fall does not occasion comic ridicule and on the other so that the hero is not like us, so that we do not completely identify with the protagonist. Hence our pity and fear are aroused, but they are also held at a distance from us, and thus our emotions can be purged through catharsis. Tragedy remains for him a hygienic activity through which our suffering (*pathēmata*) can be evacuated in an ultimately pleasing fashion. In the opening chapter of *Lyric Texts and Lyric Consciousness*, I argued that lyric poetry is the opposite of tragedy, that it precisely focuses on character, and that our identification with a complex, internally dialogized speaker rather than with a single-completed action was the essence of the lyric genre in our modern understanding (1994). The revolutionary character of Telò's argument with Aristotle is to say, "wait, not so fast." *Archive Feelings* make an anti-cathartic argument: that the essence of tragic enjoyment is the activation, rather than the purgation, of forms of suffering, like pity and fear. Indeed, the argument is that what makes these plays so effective and so moving is precisely those moments where the distance collapses. This I would argue is a *fortiori* true in Catullus.
- 29 What Telò argues for is an aesthetics of "non-existence" as the peak of existence. For him as for Lacan, what a character like Antigone offers is an image of the possibility of an existence that occupies the line separating life from death, pleasure from pain, humiliation from exaltation. This is the line that Lacan refers to as the veil of *atē*, a line that marks a form of existence in which a kind of greatness is possible, a kind of beauty, precisely in the refusal of calculation, in the refusal of any cost-benefit analysis of my action. Antigone becomes the ultimate ethical figure because she does not cede on her desire, and this refusal to bargain, to negotiate, to exchange, leads to her destruction, leads to a life beyond the law (Lacan 1986: 319). It is an ec-static existence, much like that of Attis in Catullus 63, a poem that both evokes such an existence and the pity and fear it represents. Of course, on the level of plot Antigone and Attis are far apart, but both figures demand that we picture a life beyond the social norms that rule our exchanges with one another. In both cases, this existence can only ultimately be conceived as forms of violence and death, whether in Attis's self-castration and ecstatic union with the goddess or Antigone's suicide with Haemon's final bloody ejaculation (Antigone 1236-41; Griffith 1999: ad loc). These moments of suffering and aggression are not purged by these works, as Aristotle would have us believe, they are sublimated and monumentalized.
- 30 There is then always a moment of the abject in the sublime, a moment of that which speaks to us of our material contingency, of the incompleteness of our separation as autonomous law-bound egos. The aggressive force of this denial of separation can be primarily other-directed as in the case of Gellius, who walks about bearing the signs of his own abjection literally upon his lips, even as the poet contains that destructive force through an aesthetic frame, rendering it palatable to reader, coating it with a veneer of good taste. Poem 16, however, while able to be allegorized in a variety of ways that seem to blunt its aggression, to make it acceptable for admission in polite society, in fact, forces us both to picture ourselves performing and suffering acts of sexual violence as the price of admission. It not only enacts this double-identification, but it also enacts and thus allegorizes our attempt to separate ourselves from the *ego* and the *vos* depicted within it, by demanding that when the poet says "I" we do not

believe the “I” to be him (or us), and if we refuse or fail to make that separation, then suddenly that “I” will in fact coincide with the subject of the verb and we shall become the abjected object in a kind of endless loop (Telò 2020: 27-28). This joining of the abject and the sublime in the suffering and unspeakable enjoyment of the ego reaches its lyric height in the final strophes of poem 11, as the world of masculinist conquest and homosocial *bonhomie* is subsumed in a striking evocation of paroxystic sexual excess and castration, which scholars since at least Rubino and Putnam in the seventies have seen as anticipating Attis in 63.

Goddess, great goddess, Cybebe, mistress goddess of Dindymus,
may all your madness, mistress, be far from my home:
go drive others in a frenzy, drive others mad.

- 31 But it is too late, we have crossed the border to the site of our unspeakable enjoyment. The only questions are how long we stay, can we resume our identities, and can we speak of how we have been transformed.? Can we look at this enjoyment, this drive, or must we always retranslate it into the terms of the pleasure principle, into a form of exchange value and rationality, in which we deny its power not only aesthetically, but ethically and even politically.

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NOTES

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Many thanks to Sarah Culpepper Stroup for bringing this poem to my attention.

2. I owe this reference to Karen Sara Myers.

3. This is not to argue for the existence of a level of absolute literality, which can be rigorously distinguished from the figurative, but rather for conceiving figurality as always already dependent on a prior level of meaning that then functions as the literal in that specific context.

4. I have covered this in more detail elsewhere. See Miller (2007: chapter 3); Miller (2015); and Miller (forthcoming).

5. Compare Telò on the “sticky imagery of liquid emissions” in the death of Antigone and Haemon (2020: 246-49).

6. *rupta ...ilia* clearly echo 11.20’s *ilia rumpens*, which we will discuss shortly. Campana (2012: 7993) argues that the reference is to auto-fellation and *victor* is not a proper name. While this is not a common view, it does not change the basic thrust of my argument.

7. Campana argues that the consul could instead be our Gellius’s son (2012: 39-42).

8. The contrast between the alliterative line endings at 4 (*parum pudicum*) and 5 (*pium poetam*) drives the point home nicely.

9. See Telò (2020: 26-27), “The endless repetition of the fort/da game, revolving around the child’s ‘reel,’ is a supreme example of this jouissance, a masochistic pleasure whose primary image is the loop.”

10. Cf. 8 *citata*, 18, *citatis erroribus*, and 26, *citatis tripudiis* (Quinn 1973: 285).

ABSTRACTS

There are forms of enjoyment in Catullus that cannot be understood within the norms of pleasure as opposed to pain or unpleasure. This is an enjoyment that Freud would claim is beyond the pleasure principle, and thus integrally related to aggression, violence, and death: an enjoyment that is at once abject and sublime. Taking off from Mario Telò’s *Archive Feelings*, this paper examines these forms of enjoyment and how they function within the aesthetic structure of four poems by Catullus.

INDEX

Keywords: Catullus, Gellius, Furius, Aurelius, Lesbia, Attis, Freud, Lacan, Antigone, Abject, Sublime

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